



Enchanter of Dragons: An MM Shifter Romance (Bonded Hearts)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A unicorn shifter is the last of his kind. Can a royal dragon shifter save him from being hunted?

Captured by a cruel king, Fersen is close to succumbing to the shadows of despair. But hope flickers to life when General Jaega is his unexpected savior.

After Jaega's mate was murdered during the Necromancer War, the dragon prince had given up on love. The last thing he expects to discover is his new fated mate is the last living unicorn shifter.

Fersen is finally free, but the danger isn't over yet. The sudden arrival of his heat makes a bad situation even worse.

Jaega knows he should keep his distance like a gentleman, but how can he resist his instincts demanding they consummate their mating bond?

Enchanter of Dragons is the prequel to the Bonded Hearts series and part of the Talwyn Saga universe. It is a complete story that can be read as a standalone.

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“Leave me alone!” The fear in the young man’s distant voice sent icy dread through Jaega. His army had captured the castle in Shadron after a fierce battle, and it sounded like one of his men was about to commit a heinous crime that the general couldn’t abide. “Don’t touch me!”

He sprinted toward the disturbance, arriving to discover a disturbing scene of a naked man cowering against a wall next to a bed from an aggressive jaguar shifter who was part of Jaega’s ranks. “Torval!” He withdrew his sword, ready to use it if need be. Jaega wouldn’t tolerate anyone in his army breaking his strict moral code of ethics.

The corporal flinched at the booming voice and from being caught in a compromising situation. “General, I was just?—”

“About to make a huge mistake?” Jaega glared at him with an angry fire burning in his amber eyes. It did not pay to anger a powerful dragon shifter who controlled an entire army. “Agreed. Return to camp to await your punishment. Now.”

The command in his voice left no room for negotiation. Torval hung his head with a defeated sigh. “Yes, General.” He bowed, then exited before his commanding officer could change his mind about letting him live.

The naked man standing in front of Jaega was fearful but defiant. “You may as well kill me. I’d rather be dead than be your whore.”

He was dirty and shackled, with both his hands and feet bound with heavy chains. His long white hair was badly matted. There was the faintest trace of shifter markings on his pale skin, but they were a dull silver and not vibrant like they should be. Even

under the filth, he appeared to be very handsome. What was strange was that Jaega could smell the taint of neglect on him, but there was no hint of the man's scent. It was an oddity, considering dragon shifters were renowned for their powerful sense of smell.

"I did not save you from one beast to inflict myself upon you in such a dishonorable way." Jaega sheathed his sword to put the man at ease. "I am Jaega Ariake, the head general of Valzerna's army, under the command of my oldest brother, King Tatsuki Ariake. You have nothing to fear from me."

The man watched him warily. "So you say. Everyone knows military men rape and pillage as they please."

"Not in my army. I would sooner strike one of my men down than allow that." Jaega held his hands out in surrender. "Will you let me help free you? Now that King Decius of Shadron has been dethroned, you can return home."

The man's brow wrinkled with distrust. "You're not going to keep me for yourself as a war trophy?"

Jaega shook his head. "I have never claimed any person as a war trophy, and I am certainly not about to start doing that now." He sensed the man wavering in his resolve to stay distrustful. "What is your name?"

The man hesitated for a moment. "Fersen Rohesia."

"Please allow me to undo the grievous wrong that has been done to you by a cruel king."

"You can't." The despair in his voice tugged at Jaega's heart. "These are enchanted to electrocute me if anyone tries to use magic on them."

“Then I will not use magic.” Jaega took a step closer to Fersen, who stood his ground.

The chains between the wrist shackles were also connected to the ankle ones. Jaega made quick work of breaking off the adjoined chains and the ones that bound Fersen to the wall. However, the cuffs themselves were impossible to pull apart, even with Jaega’s considerable brute strength. He frowned with frustration as he came up with a different plan.

“Since I cannot remove these, I would suggest you come back to camp with me so that one of our lock pickers can free you from these.”

“So you are taking me as a war trophy,” Fersen said in a flat voice.

“No, I am merely suggesting that you accompany me as a guest to my quarters. You will be fed, clothed, and you can bathe. After a good night of rest, you will be better prepared to start your journey home tomorrow.” When Fersen still didn’t seem convinced, Jaega spoke more directly. “On the honor of my royal family, I will not lay a hand on you, nor will I allow anyone else to. You will be treated the same as any honored guest of the royal clan of Ariake.”

“Why would you do that for me, though? You don’t know me or owe me anything.”

Jaega took off his jacket and draped it over Fersen’s thin shoulders. It dwarfed his smaller body, but it at least covered his dignity. “Because it is the right thing to do. No one deserves to be kept like a caged animal, especially not you.”

Fersen looked down at the floor as he held the coat tighter around him. He was clearly struggling with what decision to make.

But Jaega was good at waiting. He didn’t know what drew him to Fersen, but something told him the young man would be worth the effort.

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It felt like a trap. What the general was offering seemed too good to be true. Fersen feared putting his trust in the hands of such a ferocious-looking dragon shifter, but what other choice did he have?

“Thank you.” He took a steadying breath before speaking again. “I would appreciate your help if it’s not too much trouble.”

“It is no trouble at all.” Jaega scooped Fersen into a cradle hold. He was careful to make sure the jacket preserved Fersen’s modesty.

The suddenness of being so high in the air made Fersen give a startled yelp as he instinctively steadied himself by wrapping his arms around Jaega’s neck. “What are you doing?”

“The castle is not in a state that is safe for a barefoot person to walk. Therefore, I will carry you back to camp.”

Fersen’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. “You don’t have to do that.”

Jaega walked out of the room, carrying Fersen as if he weighed nothing. “Based on the scars under your manacles, you have been held captive for quite some time. That would make it difficult for you to endure the long walk, even if the conditions were ideal.”

Fersen’s cheeks burned with shame. He had spent months in the captivity of King Decius, a scorpion shifter who had kidnapped him to use as a personal sex slave. Every day, he had prayed for death, but somehow, he had found unexpected freedom

instead.

As if sensing Fersen's upset, Jaega hugged him a little tighter. "You are safe now. That foul creature can never hurt you again." There was something soothing about Jaega's deep, rumbling voice. He was a man who was meant to be feared, but Fersen felt safe in his strong arms.

When they rounded the corner, Fersen gasped at the scene of bloody carnage. Lifeless bodies were strewn everywhere, cut down by Jaega's army. The violence made Fersen's stomach turn. It reminded him of things he saw in his childhood that were best left forgotten. He would have thrown up if he hadn't been starved for days. Once Decius caught wind that Valzerna's army was coming for him, he'd abandoned Fersen.

The sight of warfare was more than he had been prepared to handle. It made him feel pathetic to hide his face against Jaega's broad chest, but he did it anyway. He couldn't help but breathe in deep. Underneath the smell of blood and death that clung to Jaega, he smelled like a burning campfire in the woods. It was a comforting scent that relaxed Fersen on a primal level, despite all his worries.

Jaega gave him a soothing pat. "Good. It is better if you do not look. Civilians like you are not meant to see the aftermath of a battlefield."

Fersen didn't bother explaining it wasn't the first war he had been witness to. "How did it come to this?"

Jaega continued making his way through the winding maze of the castle hallways. "King Decius attacked the neighboring kingdom of Elyenbell, intent on taking it over as part of Shadron's lands. As Valzerna has a treaty with Elyenbell and a stronger army, it was our duty to defend them."

Fersen did his best not to look at all the dead bodies. “What happens now?”

“Since King Decius had no children, his next living relative is his uncle, Prince Balbinus, who will take the throne. My brother has dealt with the prince in the past and assures me that this will be the best thing for the good people of Shadron.”

“The good people of Shadron?” The phrase surprised Fersen. “You don’t hate them?”

Jaega shook his head. “There are very few people in this world whom I hate. And rest assured, those few I have hated in the past earned that hatred and paid the consequences with their lives. But the citizens of Shadron have no control over who their king is. They were suffering from his tyrannical reign, so I only feel pity for their burdens.”

The question was out of Fersen’s mouth before he could stop it. “Why are you so kind?” Everything about Jaega screamed dangerous warrior. He was the tallest shifter Fersen had ever seen, with a broad chest and massive muscles. His fiery orange hair and amber eyes made him look like a deadly predator. But under all of that, there was an unmistakable gentleness that didn’t make sense to Fersen.

Jaega chuckled, causing Fersen to blush hard. “I cannot blame you for expecting me to be the harsh warlord my oldest brother is known to be. While I am a fierce warrior, I am also compassionate. I will never be the kind of person who can stand by and do nothing while bad things happen to good people.”

Fersen didn’t want to admire Jaega, but it was hard not to be impressed. He was about to respond when they exited the castle. It was the first time since he had been kidnapped that Fersen had felt sunlight on his skin. He looked up at the beautiful blue sky with tears in his eyes, hardly able to believe that he had finally won his freedom after so many months of misery. He had almost given up hope of ever seeing the sun again. The majesty of it promised everything would be okay now that his captor was

dead.

Fersen was startled from his thoughts when enormous dragon wings sprouted from Jaega's back. The edges burned with an orange fire that matched the swirling color in his once amber eyes. The bright glow and color shift signified his dragon was in control, which sparked Fersen's fears. But despite being scared, the sight of magnificent dragon wings up close awed him.

With a powerful flap, Jaega launched them into the air. He flew them high above the treetops and away from the hell Fersen had been trapped in for far too long. It gave Fersen an exhilarating rush as they soared through the sky. "How can you partially shift? I didn't think that was possible!"

"It took a great deal of practice to master, but it has proven an invaluable skill."

Fersen dared to look down at the world below them. Instead of terrifying him, it was thrilling to see everything looking so small beneath them. It made his problems feel a million miles away. But his body shivered as the air breezed by them while they flew.

The military camp came into view. The sprawling mass of thousands of tents made Fersen's jaw drop when he realized the scale of the assault on Shadron Castle. It astounded Fersen that Jaega oversaw all those people.

Jaega landed outside of one of the largest tents in the camp, then carried Fersen inside it.

Fersen had expected a bare-bones accommodation, but it was furnished nicer than his own house. There was a small office set up, with maps and papers neatly organized on a large desk. In the center, there were four wooden seats around a fire pit, which burned with the same orange dragon fire that rimmed Jaega's wings.

Off to the side, there was an enormous bed that looked cozy and inviting. Fersen couldn't help but long to sleep in it. After months on the uncomfortable straw mattress, it would be like heaven to rest in a nice bed. It certainly was better than the simple military cot he had expected to see.

There was a door off the bedroom, giving Fersen a glimpse of what appeared to be a bathroom. It boggled his mind that the general would have that in a tent in the middle of the forest on lands so far from his home.

Jaega set Fersen down, careful not to move away until he was steady on his feet. His wings disappeared.

Fersen startled at the sight of an elderly dragon shifter in a well-tailored suit, who appeared as if out of thin air.

He bowed deeply. "Welcome back, Your Highness. Congratulations on your successful campaign."

"Thank you, Grisden," Jaega said with warmth in his voice. It wasn't the way Fersen expected a general or a prince to speak to a servant. "It is always a pleasure to come back to you waiting for me."

Grisden bowed again. "It is my great honor and privilege. Who is your guest?"

"This is Fersen. He needs our help, so I expect him to be treated to the same high standard as any Ariake guest."

Fersen was oddly grateful that Jaega hadn't explained how they had met. The fewer people who knew about his time in captivity, the better.

"Of course, I will personally see to it. How may I be of assistance?"

“First, I will need you to summon our best lock picker to free him from these enchanted cuffs. He will need a fresh change of clothes and boots, as well as a hearty dinner. Perhaps a filling meat stew if it is available.”

“Umm...”

Jaega glanced over at Fersen. “Do you prefer something else?”

Fersen rubbed the back of his head, feeling awful for having the audacity to make any demands when so much was being offered. “Sorry, it’s just...I’m an herbivore, so I don’t eat meat.” He held his breath, waiting for the fallout from a meat-eating dragon shifter, who surely wouldn’t understand.

But Jaega continued to surprise him. “Would you prefer I also refrain from eating meat?”

Fersen waved a hand in front of him. “No, please eat whatever you please. It’s a personal preference. I can’t stomach meat, but I have no problem with anyone else eating it. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“It is no trouble at all.” Jaega returned his attention to Grisden. “Please make Fersen’s preferences known to the cooks.”

“As you wish, Your Highness. Is there anything else?”

“Have a healer summoned once the lock picker has finished.”

“Actually, that won’t be necessary,” Fersen said. “I’m a shifter, so once these magic-suppressing manacles are removed, I should heal.”

Jaega’s expression was filled with intrigue. “Interesting. I can tell you are a shifter

from your markings, but I cannot tell what kind because you have no scent.”

“The cuffs suppress that, too. King Decius didn’t want any of his men finding me.”

Jaega frowned with concern. “Then I am even more grateful that I came across you. I would hate to think about the alternative.”

A shudder ran through Fersen. “I’d prefer not to think about it as well.”

Jaega returned his attention to his servant. “Oh, Grisden, one more thing. Have Torval sent to the brig for the night. Inform him he will still be paid for fighting in the campaign as he put his life on the line for our kingdom, but he has forfeited his victors’ bonus because of his egregious behavior. That will instead be given to Fersen.”

“Me?” The single word came out as a squeak of disbelief.

“It is not enough for what he wanted to do to you, but it will at least give you some money for your journey home and to help you rebuild your life.”

Fersen’s eyes welled up with tears again. “Th-thank you, that’s so considerate of you, General Jaega.”

The dragon shifter’s gaze softened. “You are not one of my men, so you do not have to refer to me by my military rank. Calling me Jaega will suffice.”

It seemed wrong somehow. “But shouldn’t I at least address you as ‘Your Highness’ since you’re a prince?”

Jaega chuckled. “Just ‘Jaega’ is fine.”

“I will leave to begin preparations at once,” Grisden said with another formal bow. He disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

Jaega gestured for them to take a seat in front of the fire. Although it wasn’t terribly cold out, the heat still felt nice when all Fersen had on was a coat.

“Why didn’t you tell him the truth about how you found me?” Fersen asked.

“Because that is your story to share, but only if you wish. It is not my place to say anything. Grisden would keep your secrets, though. There is no one more loyal than him.”

The show of consideration touched Fersen deeply. “I can never thank you enough for everything you’ve done for me.”

“No thanks are required for doing the right thing.”

“I still appreciate it more than I’ll ever be able to express,” Fersen insisted.

A voice from outside the tent called out. “General Jaega, it is Lieutenant Norkon, reporting for duty.”

“Excellent, come in,” Jaega replied.

A raven shifter came in, carrying a toolkit. He gave a formal bow when he reached the edge of the seating area. “How may I be of assistance to my general?”

“Please remove the four cuffs from Fersen.” It surprised Fersen that Jaega requested rather than ordered his underling to help. He would have expected a general to bark orders instead. It was another unexpected aspect of Jaega that Fersen found appealing. Why was he so drawn to his savior?

Norkon knelt in front of Fersen. He gestured at Fersen's right arm. "May I?"

"Yes, thank you," Fersen mumbled as he stretched out his arm. Although there was no judgment in the raven shifter's eyes, Fersen still felt painfully self-conscious. "I apologize for my smell. I've been unable to bathe for some time."

Norkon chuckled. "I can assure you there are many men in this camp who had access to baths and yet smell far worse. You're fine as you are. It doesn't bother me in the slightest." His touch was featherlight as he assessed the cuff around Fersen's wrist. There was a wrinkle of sympathetic concern on his brow. "I don't know who put these on you, but they're a special kind of evil."

"Thankfully, that evil is no more," Jaega said. There was an edge of hardness in his voice that surprised Fersen. "If I had the ability to bring him back from the Beyond Realm, I would do it just to have the pleasure of sending him back there a second time."

Norkon dug in his bag and pulled out a few lock pick tools. It took him several attempts, but he finally unlocked the cuff with a sound of triumph. "Great! One down, three to go."

Now that he had figured out the secret to picking the locks, the others came off easily. When the last was removed, Fersen felt a rush of emotions as his powers returned to him. His shifter markings flared to life, changing from the dulled silver to shifting pastels that ran the gamut of every color under the rainbow. His eyes changed colors every time he blinked. The scarred wounds on his body healed, making him feel better already.

"Whoa, what kind of shifter are you?" Norkon asked in amazement as he leaned back to see better. "I've never seen markings like that before."

Fersen smiled wanly. “You’d never believe me if I told you.”

“Thank you for your service, Norkon. You can expect an extra bonus for your assistance.”

“As always, you are ever so kind, General Jaega,” Norkon said as he stood up with a bow. “I’m glad I could be of use. I wish you both a pleasant rest of your day.” With those words, he left.

“It has been centuries since I last saw a shifter with markings like yours.” Jaega studied him with curiosity. “But it should be impossible, even though I can see you with my own eyes.”

“There’s a reason for that.” Fersen’s heart hammered in his chest. He always did his best to keep his heritage a secret. King Decius had somehow found out the truth, which was why Fersen had been originally captured. Having others know what he really was put him in very real danger.

“Your secrets are yours to keep. But if you were to confide in me, know that I would not tell anyone else.”

Why did Fersen want to tell Jaega the truth? The man’s honesty made him feel like he could trust the dragon shifter. And trust was something that Fersen had precious little of because the world had shown him so much cruelty. He took a deep breath before he admitted the truth. “You’re not wrong about me. I’m a unicorn shifter.”

Jaega’s eyes went wide with shock. “But they were all killed during the Necromancer War. It was one of the worst tragedies of that awful time.”

The unicorn shifters had been hunted down by the evil necromancers led by Ishibiya during the war. They were killed for their horns, which had the magical powers to

amplify any spell. Fersen's parents had been murdered in front of his own eyes when he was a child. But his hiding spot had not been discovered, so he had been spared. He spent his life as an outcast, trying his best to avoid people so he didn't meet the same fate as the rest of his kind.

"I hid in the forests of Morven with a kindly owl shifter, who took me under her wing," Fersen explained. "She helped me hide from those who sought to end my life for my powers."

He hadn't expected Jaega to reach over and give his hand a gentle squeeze. "Fersen, I am so sorry for what you have suffered through. I can only imagine the horrors you saw during those awful times."

His words may as well have been a vise around Fersen's poor, battered heart. "Thank you," he whispered, feeling choked up from emotions he hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"I am sure you would like some time alone before dinner. Please, follow me." Jaega led the way into the bathroom area.

Fersen was stunned to see a toilet and a full-sized bathtub that was already full of steaming water. A plush, white washcloth and towel hung on a metal rack beside it. There was even a small sink, which held a toothbrush, toothpaste, and an ornate black comb in the shape of a dragon. He could hardly believe what he was seeing. "How is the water hot enough to steam?"

"Our Enchanters are skilled at creating objects to make life easier. This is one of their many amazing talents—water that is always hot. When you finish, you can use the comb over there to dry your hair."

Surely, Fersen had heard wrong. "How will the comb dry my hair?"

“Because it is enchanted to do so. Just brush like normal, and it will take care of the rest. It will also untangle any knots without pain.”

Fersen really hoped that was true because his matted hair would be a nightmare to detangle otherwise. “Wow, I knew dragon shifters were powerful magic users, but that’s incredible.” It gave Fersen ideas he wanted to try once he was in the privacy of his own home.

Rather than being cocky about it, Jaega merely tilted his head in acknowledgment. “If you need anything, I will be on the other side of the tent. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you.” Left alone, Fersen finally shrugged off the coat, placing it on the sink. He gratefully got into the steaming bath. A sigh of relief escaped him as he settled in, sinking deep into the comforts of the tub. It was the best kind of heaven after being denied a bath for so long. He closed his eyes and savored the divine moment. Fersen knew he should hurry, but he didn’t have the heart to do it when it felt so amazing to have access to heated water. It was a luxury he didn’t even have at his own home.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but he eventually reached up to grab the washcloth. There was a small table next to the bath that had soap, shampoo, and conditioner. He used the soap and took his time washing off. Every swipe of the washcloth made Fersen feel more like himself as the grime of neglect came off him. It left him smelling woodsy and clean, which was a welcome change from the awful scents that normally clung to him because of the deposed King Decius.

Once he finished, he used the shampoo next. He couldn’t hold in his moan of pleasure as he worked the suds into his hair, scratching at his scalp. It smelled like a fresh rain in the forest, which made Fersen homesick. He could hardly believe that he would be back in Morven in a few days’ time.

Fersen took his time washing his hair, luxuriating in the water that never cooled off,

no matter how long he was in the tub. He wondered if Jaega could teach him the secret of how to accomplish that. Fersen only had cold water in his home since he lived deep in the forest, far away from the people and towns that had heated water access.

“Permission to enter?” Grisdén asked, startling Fersen. “I have clothes and boots for you to change into after you finish.”

“You can come in. Thank you for finding that for me.”

Grisden bowed to Fersen as he entered. “It was my pleasure. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do for you. As you are Prince Jaega’s honored guest, I am at your full command.”

“Thank you, but you both have already done so much for me. Asking for anything more would be selfish.”

Grisden left with another formal bow.

When Fersen finished rinsing his hair, he mourned his bath time was over. He had already lingered long enough, and the food would arrive soon. The last thing he wanted to do was make Jaega wait on him to eat, so he got out of the tub with a sad sigh.

The towel was the single softest thing Fersen had ever used on his body before. He wrapped it around him and snuggled against it, enjoying the fluffy comforts. It was a sharp reminder of how different royalty lived compared to his meager means and threadbare towels at home. Rather than feeling sad about it, he savored the moment.

Unfortunately, Fersen wasn’t sure if he was supposed to drain the tub or not. He hated having to ask, but he didn’t see any way around it. “Should I let the water out?”

Fersen asked loud enough to be heard by Jaega.

“There is no need,” Grisden said, making Fersen jump at his sudden appearance. He walked over to the tub and waved his hand over it. The dirt that had washed off Fersen in the bath drew together into a small ball in the palm of Grisden’s hand. “As I am an earth dragon shifter, I can command it to leave the water.” He tossed the ball of dirt into a nearby trash can.

Fersen marveled at his abilities. “That’s incredible.”

“Is there anything else I can assist with?”

“No, but thank you.”

Grisden took his leave once more. Fersen hesitated a moment before he went over to the sink and picked up the black comb in the shape of a dragon. It was a beautiful work of art that Fersen almost felt bad about using. But true to Jaega’s word, the dragon comb glided through Fersen’s hair without catching on a single knot or mat. He marveled at how it dried his hair with only a few passes through his silver-white hair. It was impressive enough to make him wish he could take it with him when he left. But Fersen couldn’t bear asking for anything more than had already been generously given to him.

To his surprise, the clothes and boots Grisden provided fit perfectly. He wasn’t sure how the servant had assessed his size so accurately, but his attention to detail was impressive. Fersen felt more like himself with clothes on, especially since the breeches and white shirt were close to what he normally wore. He had never had the money to be someone who preferred fancy clothes. The black boots were plain but surprisingly comfortable.

Fersen took a deep breath before he returned to the other side of the tent. Jaega was

reading in front of the fire. He looked up with a smile when Fersen entered. It made butterflies flutter in Fersen's stomach.

"Did you enjoy your bath?" Jaega asked as he set his book aside to give Fersen his full attention.

"I did, thank you." Fersen hoped the flush in his cheek was written off as being a side effect of the hot water. "I appreciate you letting me get clean."

"Of course." Jaega gestured for Fersen to join him by the fire.

Fersen self-consciously ran his fingers through his long hair. "That comb is amazing. I can't believe it really detangles and dries your hair so easily."

"It makes having long hair a less arduous task," Jaega said with a chuckle. "You may take it with you if you wish."

Fersen shook his head. "I couldn't possibly. You've already done more than enough for me."

"It is no problem to have them enchant another comb once I return to the castle. I would be glad to know it had a good home."

"You really are too kind."

"There is no such thing as 'too kind.' You deserve to be taken care of," Jaega said.

His words brought another blush to Fersen's cheeks. It was impossible not to find the general charming. "I appreciate it. It's been a long, long time since anyone has taken care of me."

“The water has been purified if you wish to bathe, Your Highness,” Grisdén said, once again catching Fersen off guard. It was amazing how silent his approach was.

“Thank you, Grisdén. I will do so.” Jaega stood up, making Fersen feel even smaller as the large shifter loomed over him. “Please excuse me, Fersen. If the food arrives before I finish, please help yourself. You do not have to wait for me to start eating.”

Fersen bowed his head in acknowledgment. When Jaega left for the bathroom, Fersen glanced over to see Grisdén arranging things on Jaega’s desk. Feeling uncomfortable in the silence and wanting to take his mind off the naked general on the other side of the tent, Fersen tried to make small talk. “May I ask how long you’ve worked for Jaega?”

The servant stopped what he was doing and came over to sit around the fire with Fersen. “I have been with him since his boyhood. It has been the greatest privilege of my life.”

Fersen couldn’t imagine serving one person for what was likely thousands of years. But given how kind Jaega was, it likely was not as arduous a task as someone who was forced to serve a cruel master like King Decius. “It must be nice to work for somebody so kind.”

“I am indeed fortunate.” Grisdén bowed his head. “My older brother serves as King Tatsuki’s personal valet. We are treated very well in Valzerna.”

“Is King Tatsuki as fearsome as they say?” Fersen had heard rumors, even though he lived far away on the west side of Talwyn in Morven.

“He is, but he is also fair. He values integrity, loyalty, logic, and honesty above all else. So long as you are on the side of right, he has no qualm with you.”

“What’s Valzerna like? I’ve never been that far east before.”

“It is a beautiful country. Our people are happy and well taken care of by our generous king. We are very fortunate that we do not suffer the same burdens of gross taxation like the poor people of Shadron.”

“It sounds a lot like Morven in that regard.”

“Yes, Morven is a wonderful kingdom as well. Your king is also very kind, according to my cousin, who serves one of his princesses. It has been some time since I last had the pleasure of visiting there.”

Fersen ran his fingers over his wrists that no longer bore the scars of King Decius’s torture. “I’ve been away from Morven for far too long. It will be good to return home.”

While Fersen was excited, he also couldn’t help but feel a small pang of regret that returning to his regular life would mean the end of his time with Jaega. He lived alone in the forest, so the company of someone so warm and kind had been a nice change of pace.

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Although he was a fire dragon, Jaega was fond of bath time. After a hard day's battle, coming back to a hot bath was the highlight of his day after winning a victory. But his mind was preoccupied by thoughts of the mysterious shifter he had saved from King Decius.

Seeing Fersen fresh out of the bath, with his cheeks flushed and smelling like Jaega because of the soap and shampoo, did things to the general's heart he didn't understand. It made his dragon stir in a way it hadn't done since the first time he had met his mate. His dragon whispered, "Ours," like they had any right to claim Fersen.

It was hard to ignore his dragon's certainty that Fersen belonged to them as their fated mate. Since Caprina's death, no one had captured Jaega's attention. Sure, he had enjoyed dalliances with both men and women in the centuries since his mate's untimely death. But none of them had ever made his dragon react in quite the same way. Jaega didn't know what to make of it. Wasn't it too late for him to have a second fated mate?

The lingering scent of Fersen in the bathroom was enough to stoke the flames of his dragon's lust. But Jaega would not act in such a shameful manner. Although Fersen hadn't disclosed the capacity he had served King Decius, it wasn't hard to imagine it was in an abusive, sexual nature. Jaega refused to add to his trauma. He was much happier as Fersen's protector.

Jaega hurried through the rest of his bath, not wanting to dwell on thoughts best left alone.

While it was poor form to eavesdrop on the conversation happening on the other side

of the tent, it pleased Jaega to hear Fersen taking an interest in Grisden. The elder shifter had served Jaega as long as he had been alive. Because of that, Grisden had always been more like a second father to Jaega than a mere servant. He would do anything for the man who had dedicated his life to taking care of him.

Once he finished bathing, Jaega got out of the tub. He quickly made himself presentable before returning to the other side of the tent. “My apologies for taking so long.”

Grisden stood up with a bow. “I hope you had an enjoyable bath. I will go check on dinner now that you are ready.”

“Thank you, Grisden.” Jaega nodded in acknowledgment before he sat down next to Fersen by the fire once more.

He subtly inhaled, enjoying Fersen’s unique scent. It cycled the same way as the colors on his shifter markings, which was utterly entrancing.

“Grisden is so nice,” Fersen said once the servant left the tent. “You’re really lucky to have someone like him taking care of you.”

“I am indeed fortunate. I would be bereft without him.” It was not an understatement. “He has been with me through everything. I have come to rely on his sound judgment and wisdom as much as I do my lieutenants, if not more so.”

“King Decius used to bark orders at his servants and throw things at them when they displeased him,” Fersen said with a frown. “I’m glad to see they’re treated much better in Valzerna.”

“Thankfully, my brother is of the mindset that you get what you pay for. If you are generous with paying your servants, you will receive exceptional service and loyalty

in return. As such, we have very little turnover in staff at the castle. It is shocking more rulers have not figured that out.”

Fersen looked at the general with a sense of awe. “Your people are really lucky.”

“My oldest brother may be a warlord, but at his core, he is a protector. He would sacrifice himself if he thought it would save the people of his kingdom. Few rulers can say that and mean it.”

“I hope it never comes to that,” Fersen said with a concerned expression.

“That is why he has me to help him protect our citizens and lands, along with my son, who is captain of the castle guards.”

“I’m surprised he doesn’t serve in the military with you.”

“I know it is selfish and hypocritical of me to keep him off the front lines when I ask so many others to make that same sacrifice, but?—”

Fersen interrupted. “There’s not a single selfish or hypocritical thing about you. He is still serving his country and king by protecting him and the castle. I’m sure it’s not without its risks.”

“This is true, although it would take a damn fool to attack my oldest brother, who is more than capable of defending himself. But it gives me peace of mind that my son makes sure the castle is safe, not just for our king, but for everyone inside.”

“I’m sure he’s as remarkable as his father.”

Jaega chuckled at the compliment. “I would say even more so. He has always made me proud. And knowing he is at the castle waiting for me is the best incentive to

make sure I come home from battle.”

Fersen smiled wanly. “That must be nice.”

Jaega’s heart hurt for the unicorn shifter. “From that comment, I take it you do not have anyone waiting for you in Morven?”

“No, I live alone in the forest, far away from the town. The owl shifter who took me in when I was a child found her fated mate a little over a century ago, and she moved to Kunushi to be with him. I’m happy she found her partner, but I miss her companionship. And it’s too dangerous for me to go visit by myself.”

Fersen wasn’t wrong. Given his status as the last remaining unicorn shifter, it put him in a great deal of danger to travel the treacherous roads alone on such a journey. It helped Jaega decide. “Agreed. That is why I will accompany you to Morven, to make sure you get home safe and sound.”

Fersen’s beautiful, color-changing eyes went wide. “You will?”

Jaega nodded. “You are right. It is unsafe for you to travel such a great distance alone, and it is even farther from Shadron to Morven. I will feel better knowing I can protect you on the way home.”

“But that’s asking for too much!”

“You do not have to ask when I freely offer.” Jaega sincerely hoped Fersen would accept his help. He wasn’t ready to give up Fersen yet. “It will give me peace of mind to know you arrived home safely.”

Tears welled up in Fersen’s eyes. “Thank you. I don’t know how I can ever repay you for any of this.”

“No repayment is necessary.” Jaega instinctively reached out to brush away Fersen’s tear before it could fall. The small touch sent electricity zinging through the dragon shifter. “Knowing you are safe is payment enough.”

Fersen brought his hand up to cradle Jaega’s hand against his cheek. “Thank you. I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I’m grateful for your help.”

Jaega brushed his thumb against Fersen’s high cheekbone. The gentle touch made his dragon go positively feral. He rattled in his cage, demanding they make Fersen theirs. But Jaega drowned out his dragon’s demands by focusing on the mesmerizing, shifting colors of Fersen’s eyes. It was beautiful beyond compare.

For now, it was enough to know that he would get to enjoy Fersen’s company a little longer on the journey back to Morven.

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Jaega's touch made Fersen's heart race so fast he was certain the dragon shifter would be able to hear it. It sent heat searing through his body, making him tingle all over in a way he had never experienced before. He was in danger of losing himself in the depths of Jaega's warm, amber eyes.

The moment between them was broken when Grisden appeared with another servant, both carrying trays of food. "Dinner is served."

Jaega hesitated before he moved his hand away. Fersen immediately mourned the loss. While Jaega gracefully rose from his seat, Fersen all but scrambled out of his to follow as they moved to the table to eat.

"Here is your vegetable stew," the other servant said as he set a bowl in front of Fersen while Grisden served Jaega.

"I confirmed that no meat stock was used in its creation," Grisden added.

Fersen bowed his head in acknowledgment. "Thank you for making sure." The delicious smell of it was enough to make his stomach rumble with approval. "I'm sorry for the hassle."

"It was no trouble," Grisden assured him. The two servants then disappeared in the blink of an eye.

When Jaega used his left hand to lift a drink, it drew Fersen's attention to a vicious scar and his ring and pinky fingers not being able to bend. Because shifters had healing abilities, it was rare to see a shifter with a permanent injury.

“I was stabbed by a Divine weapon about a century ago,” Jaega explained, although Fersen hadn’t asked anything. “Any damage created by a weapon from the Divine Realm is impossible for any shifter or healer to cure.”

“That’s awful.”

Jaega waved away his concerns. “It was a long time ago. I barely notice anymore.”

As starved as Fersen was, he wanted to inhale the stew. Instead, he took his time eating so that his stomach didn’t revolt at the sudden arrival of a hearty meal. It warmed his soul as he savored each bite. He did his best not to coo his way through eating the savory dish. “Wow, I never would have expected a military camp to have such delicious food.”

Jaega chuckled as he continued to eat. “I am a firm believer that if my men are willing to put their lives on the line to fight, they deserve for their food to be the best it can be. If it is to be their last meal, it will be one of the best they have.”

It was a sobering thought, but Fersen admired the sentiment. “You’re really good at taking care of people.”

“I am a protector, through and through.” Jaega smiled before he took a sip of wine. “I always have been, and I always will be.”

“You really are nothing like what I would have expected the head of Valzerna’s army to be like.” Fersen couldn’t help but be impressed by Jaega’s thoughtful kindness.

“You can thank my mate for that.”

The comment confused Fersen. Jaega only had shifter markings belonging to him; the intertwining lines for his mate were absent. “Your mate?”

“She was a wonderful woman.” Jaega’s pride was tinted with sadness. “Caprina was as wise as she was tough.”

Fersen had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Was?” It was unusual to hear a shifter talk about their mate in past tense when shifters lived such long lives.

The light in Jaega’s amber eyes dimmed. “Unfortunately, my beloved and our two daughters were killed while I was away fighting Ishibiya on the front of the Necromancer War.” That explained why his mate’s shifter markings were missing from his skin. They faded when she passed to the Beyond Realm.

Tears welled up in Fersen’s eyes. “I’m so sorry to hear that. That’s awful.” Although he didn’t have a mate or children, he couldn’t imagine losing them in such a horrible way. How could anyone go on after that?

“Their loss still pains me to this day.” Jaega stirred his stew before he took another bite. “Caprina was a commoner when we met, so she always kept me grounded in reality.”

“Is she the reason you don’t act like royalty?”

Jaega chuckled. “Indeed. She had no patience for the high-and-mighty approach to life. No one had ever cut me down to size quite like her. It was why I fell in love with her.”

The romantic sentiment made it even sadder that Jaega had lost such a wonderful mate. “She sounded amazing.”

“She was certainly that.” Jaega smiled fondly at her memory. “So were our daughters. Thankfully, our son I mentioned earlier still lives. But their loss is why I could not bear to have him fighting on the front lines with me anymore.”

“I’m glad you have him, at least.” It would have been too sad otherwise.

“He kept me going in the darkest of times. If it were not for him, I would have joined my girls in the Beyond Realm.” Jaega shook his head with a rueful sigh. “I am grateful that part of Caprina still lives on in this realm through him.”

“And through you.” It was obvious how much of an influence she had on his kindness and thoughtfulness.

He smiled. “I suppose so.”

“Speaking of which, thank you again for offering to take me home. I’d really appreciate not having to make that long journey alone.”

“Given how your kind was hunted down, I would not feel right with you traveling all the way to Morven without an escort to keep you safe. The roads are too dangerous. It would be my pleasure to make sure you get home safely.”

In truth, Fersen would feel better having somebody as strong as Jaega protecting him on the long journey. “Are you sure you don’t mind? It’s so far out of the way from Valzerna.” Morven was one of the most western kingdoms of Talwyn, while Valzerna was the farthest east.

“I would not offer if I did not wish to accompany you.” There seemed to be no limits to Jaega’s kindness.

It filled Fersen’s stomach with butterflies. The more time he spent around the dragon shifter, the more attracted to him he became. And now that he had washed the scent of the battlefield off him, he smelled downright divine. Fersen’s unicorn lay dormant most of the time, but Jaega’s appearance had clearly piqued his interest. They were drawn to the kind general in a way they had never experienced before. It was enough

to bring heat to Fersen's pale cheeks.

Those were thoughts best left alone, so Fersen focused on eating instead. He was less likely to get into trouble that way.

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Once dinner was over, Jaega and Fersen sat by the fire again. Fersen heaved a contented sigh as he settled back into the comforts of the chair. “Thank you for the delicious dinner. You’re really spoiling me.”

Jaega chuckled as he settled himself. “It is my pleasure.”

Fersen’s smile was tinged with a hint of sadness. “It made me realize how much I miss having meals with Olina.”

“Is she the owl shifter you mentioned earlier?”

“Yeah, she found me when I was a child and took me in. When she moved to Kunushi with her mate, she was kind enough to let me continue to stay in her house. I miss her terribly. I guess I got so used to the loneliness that I forgot how nice it was to have company and someone to talk to.”

“Does she ever come back to visit?” Jaega asked.

“She did a few times. But once she had kids, it became a lot harder for her to make the trip since she lives almost all the way north in the town of Kalindi. I understand, but I still miss her. She’s the closest thing to family I have left in this realm.”

The situation tugged on Jaega’s heartstrings. “Would you like to go visit her before we return to your home?”

Fersen’s jaw dropped. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly ask you to take me all the way north to see her in Kalindi. You’re already doing enough as it is taking me to Morven.”

“After everything you have been through, a visit with her might do you good,” Jaega suggested.

Fersen shook his head. “Honestly, it might make going back to my empty house without her even harder. I think it’s best for me to go straight home. But thank you so much for such a generous offer.”

“In that case, I will offer you a promise. After you have had the proper time to recover, send me a letter whenever you wish to see her in the future. I will come to escort you myself.”

“But—”

Jaega held up his hand to stop Fersen’s protest. “No buts. You deserve to spend time with those you love.”

“Why would you do that for me, though?” Fersen looked genuinely baffled. “Rescuing me is one thing. But offering to drop everything so I can take a trip to spend time with my friend is above and beyond any duty you have to me.”

“Fate never acts without reason. Perhaps the reason the Fate Power brought me into your life was so that I could bring you and Olina back together once more.” The Powers were the deities who lived in the Divine Realm. They controlled everything within the Living Realm.

“But you’ve already done so much! I couldn’t?—”

Jaega gently talked over him. “That is why it is no trouble for me to offer to do a little more.” When Fersen continued to struggle, Jaega tried a different tactic. “If it makes you feel better about accepting, you could consider it more restitution for the harm Torval inflicted on you.”

“He didn’t actually harm me, though.”

Jaega shook his head. “I disagree. Even the mere threat of what he was intending to do was harmful enough. I will not abide by such depraved behavior.”

Fersen tilted his head as he silently regarded Jaega for a long moment. “You’re genuinely upset by what he did, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. I hold myself and my men to a higher standard. Such actions are abhorrent and against everything I believe. It is distressing to realize I have such an odious creature in my ranks. And he will be dealt with accordingly.”

“What will happen to him?”

“When we return to Valzerna, he will be put on military court-martial for his crime. A conviction is guaranteed since I witnessed the incident myself. He will summarily receive a dishonorable discharge from the army following the guilty verdict, most likely along with some jail time.”

Fersen toyed with his lower lip, drawing Jaega’s attention to how plump it was. “You don’t think he’ll hunt me down and try to get revenge because I ruined his life, do you?”

Once again, Jaega felt compelled to offer Fersen physical comfort. He reached out to squeeze Fersen’s hand in reassurance. “I would sooner kill him myself than let that happen. But you can rest at ease. He does not know your name, where you live, or what kind of shifter you are.”

Fersen seemed appeased by that. “Do I have to testify at his trial?”

Jaega shook his head. “Since I was a witness to the incident, you will not have to

appear. My word is enough to have him convicted.”

Fersen sighed with relief. “I’m glad I don’t have to face him in court.”

“You will never see him again.” Jaega patted Fersen’s hand before letting go. “In Morven, you will be beyond his reach.”

Fersen gave a humorless laugh. “I thought I was beyond anyone’s reach since I lived so deep in the forest and have minimal contact with anyone. I was wrong about that. King Decius and his men obviously found me after hearing a rumor somewhere.”

“At least you can rest easy knowing he can never hurt you again. I assure you, I personally sent him to the Beyond Realm. There is no coming back from that.” That was where the spirits of the dead spent their afterlives.

“Thankfully.” Fersen shuddered. “If I never thought about him again, it would be too soon.”

“Then do not think of him one more second. You are forever free from his tyranny.”

Fersen flashed a small smile. Jaega thought it was beautiful. “That actually helps, thanks.” He hid a yawn behind his hand. “Sorry.”

“If you wish to sleep, you may do so. I know today has been an eventful day.”

Fersen snorted in amusement. “That’s putting it mildly.” His shoulders slumped a little. “But you’re right. It’s been a long day. Where should I go?”

Jaega gestured to the bed off to the side. “Please make yourself comfortable. Rest easy knowing you are well protected here.”

There was a slight furrow in his eyebrows. “But where will you sleep?”

“I will stand guard while you rest.”

The answer seemed to upset the unicorn shifter. “But I’m sure you’re also tired after a long day of fighting.”

“Your comfort is more important. I do not wish to give you the wrong impression by making you uncomfortable sharing a bed.”

Fersen looked up at Jaega with lowered lashes. “It’s okay. I trust you.”

In truth, Jaega was tired. Sleeping in a warm bed with someone to snuggle against was the ultimate temptation. But he refused on principle. “And I value that trust. But I still do not wish to make you nervous. I am sure sharing a bed with a bigger male is the last thing you wish to do.”

Fersen hesitated a moment before speaking. “If you were literally anyone else, that would be true. But I think knowing you’re close to keep me safe would actually help.”

Jaega’s resolve weakened. “Only if you are truly sure it would help. I do not wish to cause you any distress. The last thing I want is for you to awaken in the night in a panic because a strange man is close to you.”

Fersen lowered his gaze. “That will probably happen, whether you’re in bed with me or not. My time in King Decius’s captivity gives me regular night terrors. I’m sorry in advance if that happens tonight.”

Jaega’s heart panged with sympathy. “It is understandable after everything you’ve been through. You do not have to feel badly about it. If it happens, I will help in

whatever way I can.”

“Thank you.” Fersen stood up. “In that case, I will use the bathroom and get ready for bed, if that’s okay?”

“It is more than fine.”

Left alone, Jaega’s dragon was practically purring at the prospect of sharing a bed with Fersen. He argued it was a sign that Fersen trusted them as his fated mate. But Jaega refused to listen to such nonsense. He would never be the same kind of scum as Decius, who had done so much harm to someone so undeserving.

He wanted to make Fersen feel safe. That meant his dragon would stay locked in his cage, no matter how much it roared in anger at being denied access to Fersen.

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Maybe Fersen was making a mistake. His heart pounded at the thought of sharing a bed with Jaega—and it wasn't because of the trauma that came from Decius. It had everything to do with Jaega being the man of his dreams he had spent his entire life hoping he'd be lucky enough to find one day.

But Jaega would surely never be interested in damaged goods like Fersen. He was a respected general who could have anyone he wanted. Why would he look twice at Fersen? The idea that Jaega would settle for Fersen was laughable. He would never.

Fersen's heart skipped a beat when Jaega exited the bathroom. The dragon shifter was magnificent in every respect. Fersen's unicorn reared up inside of him, urging him to offer himself to the man who had given them so much. But Fersen didn't want Jaega to think he threw himself at everyone. That was the furthest thing from the truth.

For such a big man, Jaega got into bed with Fersen gingerly. "Please let me know if I make you uncomfortable at any point. I will not take offense if you change your mind. It is no problem for me to sleep in a chair by the fire if it makes you more at ease."

Fersen took a steadying breath. The heat of Jaega made his heart practically gallop in his chest, but from lust and not fear for once. "Thanks, but I'm fine." He hesitated before adding, "I feel safe with you."

"That is because you are. I will protect you from all harm."

Jaega's promise filled Fersen with wild ideas about a future together that could never happen. He needed to stop thinking like that because those kinds of thoughts could

only lead to hurt.

Ever the gentleman, Jaega kept as respectful of a distance from Fersen as the bed allowed. It was almost disappointing. The thought of being embraced by Jaega's powerful arms filled Fersen with complicated emotions. He felt a very real longing for something he knew he'd never be lucky enough to experience. It was an unexpected reaction when he assumed his awful experiences in King Decius's captivity would have turned him off sex and men forever.

But Jaega was the opposite of that bastard in every single way. He wouldn't dream of making sexual demands that made Fersen uncomfortable. Jaega was undoubtedly a thoughtful lover. It was something Fersen had no experience with, but he desperately wanted to with Jaega.

Fersen forcibly stopped those thoughts in their tracks. The last thing he needed to do was get aroused so close to a dragon shifter who had a keen sense of smell. Jaega would be able to detect Fersen's arousal in an instant, which was enough to make his thoughts settle down for the evening.

Instead, Fersen focused on the miracle of feeling safe for the first time since his ordeal began months ago. Jaega's steady breathing was a calming influence. Fersen knew with certainty that nothing could harm him, so long as Jaega was by his side.

* * *

Waking up to the morning sun disoriented Fersen. He hadn't even noticed he had fallen asleep. It took a moment for him to piece together where he was. He tensed at the feeling of being held by someone but relaxed when he remembered it was Jaega and not King Decius.

Fersen closed his eyes with a sigh, focusing on the warmth of being embraced by

Jaega. The sense of security it gave him to be held by such strong arms was something Fersen never wanted to give up. He would be the luckiest man in Talwyn if every morning started that way.

It took a moment to realize that if it was morning, that meant he had slept through the night for the first time in months. He hadn't had a single bad dream or night terror about his captivity and abuse. Jaega's presence was so reassuring even Fersen's mind had surrendered its fears to him. It was a miracle Fersen had assumed would never happen.

Fersen had never felt so safe in his life. Jaega's massive body dwarfed his as it curled around him. Since Jaega was a fire dragon shifter, heat radiated off his body. It seemed to go straight to the pit of his stomach, which burned with a burgeoning need for the remarkable man holding him. He wanted Jaega to show him the difference between the brutal sex he had endured with Decius and gentle lovemaking. But the very idea was ridiculous when Jaega had no reason to love Fersen.

Rather than indulge in a pity party, Fersen refocused his attention on how incredible it felt to be held in comfort for the first time in his life. He wanted to memorize every moment so he could wrap the memory around him later like a warm blanket on those lonely nights when his bed was so empty.

He was pulled from his thoughts when he felt Jaega tense behind him. "Sorry, I—" Jaega apologized, pulling away.

Before Fersen could even process what he was doing, he guided Jaega's arm back down to hold him once more. "Please."

"You do not wish for me to move?" Jaega asked, his voice thick with sleepy confusion. It was surprisingly endearing to Fersen.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m being horribly selfish,” Fersen whispered, tears gathering in his eyes. He was pathetic. “But this is the first time I’ve felt safe in a very long time. I’m just not ready to give it up yet.”

The tension melted from Jaega’s body at those words. He pressed his body against Fersen’s once more, holding him even tighter. It was the best feeling in the world to Fersen.

“If it brings you comfort, then I am happy to remain,” Jaega said in a rumbling voice that made the fires of lust stir within Fersen.

He was playing a dangerous game. “Thank you. I’m sorry?—”

Jaega shushed his protests. “There is no need for apologies. I moved only because I worried I would cause you distress.”

It took a moment for Jaega’s words to process. “You don’t want to move because I disgust you?”

“Disgust me?” Jaega repeated in confusion. “How could you ever disgust me?”

“Because even though I haven’t told you what King Decius did to me, I know you know.”

“That was not your fault,” Jaega said with firm conviction. “The only disgusting thing is him. You are the single most resplendent person I have ever come across. Nothing he did could sully you.”

Fersen wrapped Jaega’s compliment around his heart. It healed a lot of hurts. “You really think so?”

Jaega guided Fersen onto his back to make eye contact. Somehow, when Jaega gently manhandled him, it was sexy. It had only inspired terror when Decius threw him around like a rag doll.

“Fersen, listen to me.” Jaega held his gaze. Fersen was powerless to look away. “You are as beautiful as you are kind. Nothing he did to you can ever take that from you.”

The unicorn shifter desperately wanted to believe in Jaega’s convictions. “I’m damaged goods and?—”

Jaega gently interrupted him. “You are no such thing.” He caressed the side of Fersen’s face. “You are the most stunning person I have ever seen, which is saying something when my mate was so gorgeous. But even she would agree with me you are beautiful, inside and out.”

Fersen’s stomach did flips at the sincerity in Jaega’s voice. “You really mean that.”

“I do.” Jaega caressed Fersen’s cheek once more, sending his butterflies into flight. “You are a treasure. No one should ever make you feel like anything less than the most glorious gift someone could hope to receive.”

Fersen stared at Jaega in awe. How could somebody so wonderful feel that way about him? “But?—”

Jaega put his finger over Fersen’s lip to silence his protests. “I will not listen to you disparage yourself. You deserve to be loved and treasured.”

“But someone like you would never be interested in me.”

It confused Fersen when his comment made Jaega smile at him fondly. “My mate told me the same thing. And yet, we had many centuries of happiness together despite

that.” Jaega chuckled. “I believe in the rule of law, but I live my life according to my own wishes. I have never let society tell me how to live, and I am not about to start now.”

It felt like Jaega was on the verge of a confession, but that surely couldn’t be right. There was a big difference between assuring Fersen he was beautiful and wanting to be with him.

Grisden interrupted them by clearing his throat. “Breakfast is served.”

Fersen expected Jaega to startle and put distance between them, but he merely looked over his shoulder. “Thank you, Grisden.” He refocused his attention on Fersen. “If you do not believe in yourself, then trust in my conviction. I am not a man who is often wrong.”

It was reassuring in an unexpected way. But Fersen was too tongue-tied to speak. He could only stare up at Jaega with wide eyes. His breath hitched when Jaega once again caressed his face but this time added in a brush of his thumb against Fersen’s lower lip.

Jaega was out of bed before Fersen could process what happened. He could only blink in surprise as Jaega held his hand out to help Fersen stand.

Could Fersen have been wrong? Was it possible that Jaega was interested in him after all?

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Confusion swirled inside Jaega. Waking up curled around Fersen had been the greatest pleasure life had offered him since his beloved mate had been so cruelly taken away from him centuries ago. The enchanting smell of him, which fluctuated alongside his ever-shifting color spectrum of shifter markings, was intoxicating. Jaega's dragon was more than ready to claim Fersen as theirs.

But Jaega had no right to mate Fersen. It was fortunate that Fersen hadn't been upset or distressed by Jaega taking such liberties with his person in his sleep. When was the last time Jaega had slept so soundly and awoken with such a warm glow in his heart?

They were thoughts best left alone. Jaega acted normal during breakfast, before he led Fersen outside of the camp. Once they were in a wide enough space, Jaega transformed into his dragon form. He was mindful to stay small for Fersen to mount with ease. Once he was certain Fersen was secure, Jaega expanded into his bigger size and took flight into the sky.

He relished Fersen's excited whoop of joy as they ascended high above the trees. Jaega rarely gave others the pleasure of riding him in his shifter form, so he savored each of Fersen's awed reactions.

With his dragon in full control, there was no place for conscious thoughts. It was cowardly for Jaega to admit he was relieved that he didn't have to dwell on what had happened that morning, but it didn't make it any less true.

They flew for a few hours before Jaega's dragon sensed Fersen's hunger. He landed them near the mountains, close to Arenvale. Once Fersen had safely dismounted, Jaega shifted back to his normal form. "Did you enjoy the flight?"

“It was amazing!” Fersen said in a rush of words. His excitement was palpable. “I thought running through the forest freely was the best joy life offered, but flying is the most incredible thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“I am glad you found it so exhilarating and not scary.”

“Why would I be afraid? Even if I fell, I know you’d catch me.” The certainty in Fersen’s voice made Jaega’s dragon purr in his cage. It pleased them that Fersen had such explicit trust in them as a protector. “There was nothing to fear.”

“Indeed.” Jaega’s dragon continued preening, but there were other things to focus on. He summoned a bag of food and two canteens Grisdén had prepared for them earlier.

They both made themselves comfortable under the shade of a large tree. Jaega passed the bag to Fersen to let him have the first pick of what he wanted to eat and his own canteen.

“Where did you get this from?” Fersen asked as he pulled out some bread and fruit before passing the bag back to Jaega. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Jaega took out meat jerky Grisdén had included for him. “Our Enchanters can make anything magical. At the castle, we have enchanted armoires, from which I can summon anything I can picture in my mind. The servants at the palace refresh the food daily while I am away on my travels.”

Fersen blinked in astonishment. “Wow, I didn’t even know such a thing was possible!”

“I have no idea how it works myself, but our Enchanters are clever at making the impossible possible.” Jaega took a few more bites of his lunch. “I also have a private armoire that only I can use. Not even Grisdén has access to it, although I trust him

with everything.”

“Your Enchanters really are amazing.” Fersen leaned back against the tree trunk as he continued eating. “I thought I was good at magic, but they make me realize I don’t know very much of anything in comparison.”

“I imagine you are self-taught since you lost your parents so young,” Jaega said.

“Most of what I learned was from Olina, but she wasn’t the strongest magic user. Once she left, I learned a lot from trying things on my own to see if I could manage it.”

Jaega pulled another stick of jerky out of the bag. “How long ago did she leave for Kunushi?”

It took a moment for Fersen to do the math. “A little over a hundred years ago. It seems like it’s been a blink of an eye and an eternity, all at the same time.”

The dragon shifter chuckled. “Yes, time is funny like that.”

Fersen’s expression turned serious. “I’m just glad Olina wasn’t there when King Decius’s men grabbed me. I don’t want to imagine what horrible things they would have done to her.”

“Then do not dwell on such awful things,” Jaega encouraged him. “Today is too lovely for such heavy thoughts.”

Fersen smiled, making him even more beautiful in Jaega’s eyes. “You’re right.” He sighed in contentment. “There were some dark nights when I thought I’d never see the light of day again, so it’s the best kind of heaven to enjoy such a sunny day outside. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for rescuing me.”

“Your happiness is thanks enough.” While Jaega meant those words, his dragon rattled in his cage at the thought of leaving Fersen alone and unprotected in the forests of Morven. Who would keep him safe from harm if another evil person found out about his heritage and wanted to kidnap him? They were disquieting questions that Jaega had to push from his mind. He had no claim on Fersen, so he had no right to insist that the unicorn shifter come back to Valzerna, where he could keep an eye on him. Under Jaega’s watchful protection, nothing bad would ever happen to Fersen again.

“How far away are we?” Fersen took a sip of water from the canteen. “I can’t really judge from that high in the sky where we are.”

“We should reach the Reflorna and Morven border by nightfall. I would suggest we stop for the night and continue to your home fresh in the morning.”

“Would you mind if we set up camp in the forest and not in one of the towns?” Fersen rubbed the back of his hand with an anxious expression. “Being in a city with so many people makes me really uncomfortable. I’m too scared someone will notice what kind of shifter I am and cause problems.”

It was an understandable concern. “It was actually what I was planning to suggest we do.”

Relief washed over Fersen’s expression. “Good. I’ll feel a lot safer that way.” He hurried to correct himself. “Not that I don’t think you can protect me! I just prefer not to tempt fate.”

Jaega’s dragon preened once more at hearing Fersen praise their prowess at protecting him. But Jaega did his best to ignore it. “I have no desire to put you in harm’s way, even if I can defend you from anything. I will seek a cave for us to rest in tonight.” It would be easier to guard Fersen that way. Being out in the open was

too dangerous, especially when Jaega's instincts feared something ominous was lying in wait for them at Fersen's home.

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The world looked so different from high above the clouds. Fersen felt on top of the world as he looked down at the landscape rushing by beneath them. He felt untouchable and safe from any harm.

But would that be the case when he reached home? It had always been a safe and sacred place, but King Decius's men had shattered that illusion when they kidnapped him. How would Fersen ever feel safe there again, especially once Jaega left to go home to Valzerna? When the dragon shifter was with him, Fersen felt like nothing could harm him. Losing that sense of security scared Fersen.

He would have plenty of time to dwell once he was alone. Fersen wanted to enjoy what little time he had left with the magnificent dragon shifter before he left, never to be seen again. Why did that thought hurt Fersen's heart so much?

It was a disappointment when they landed again. Fersen was quickly becoming addicted to the joys of flying high in the sky.

The sun was beginning to set as Jaega led them to a small cave. It amazed Fersen how the dragon shifter had spotted it from so high in the air. Along the way, they collected wood to use for a fire to keep them warm at night. There was just enough light for them to see into the cave to set up the wood, which Jaega ignited with his orange dragon fire.

To his surprise, Jaega summoned a bed roll that was large enough for them both to use. "Oh!"

Jaega chuckled at his shock. "It is a great deal better than sleeping on the hard cave

floor.” He gestured for Fersen to join him in sitting on top of it.

Fersen sat in front of Jaega, running his hands over the plushest fabric he had felt in his life. “I’d say so. It’s so soft!”

Jaega once again summoned a bag filled with food out of thin air. He passed it to Fersen, who pulled out a few things to start with first. It amazed him how fresh the bread and fruit were. It beat having to forage for small berries and going to bed hungry because he couldn’t find enough.

Jaega summoned a second bag, opening it to peer inside. “We have dessert as well, which I think you will be pleased with.” He passed it over to Fersen.

It delighted Fersen to see an array of small fruit tarts inside the bag. “Those look delicious!”

“I have a weakness for Alsarian berry tarts, so the servants are good about packing quite a few of those for me when I travel.”

“I’ve never had that before.” Fersen was excited to try, though. He set the dessert bag to the side to focus on eating dinner first. “I don’t go to the markets in town, so I can only have what grows locally around my home.” Alsari was a small, island kingdom south of Valzerna, on the eastern side of Talwyn.

“Alsarian berries are as wonderful as the country itself. My family has a summer palace on the shores of Fordani there because we love it so much.”

Fersen could only imagine the luxury of a summer palace fit for the king of Valzerna’s family. It was well known, even as far away as Fersen lived, that Valzerna was one of the richest nations in Talwyn. “I’m sure it’s beyond beautiful.”

“It is indeed. We overlook a private beach and the bluest ocean you have ever seen in your life.” Jaega sighed as he continued eating. “It has been some time since I have had the pleasure of visiting. My brother keeps me quite busy with his military campaigns.”

“I’ll forever be grateful to him for sending you to Shadron.” Fersen couldn’t bear to think about what would have happened if Jaega hadn’t been assigned to dethrone the dangerous King Decius. “Am I allowed to ask where you think you’ll go next?”

“I shall return home to Valzerna for the time being.” Jaega rubbed his chin. “If the rumors of unrest in Galinor are true, then I will be back out on the front sooner rather than later.”

The thought of Jaega being at war again made Fersen’s stomach twist uncomfortably. “What rumors?”

“The snake shifters are close allies with the scorpion rulers of Shadron. There were rumors they were ready to join the war in King Decius’s name. Now that we have dethroned that bastard, I suspect the snake shifters will seek vengeance. I hope for all our sakes that they are smarter than that. It would not be wise for them to push the limit of my brother’s tolerance, especially when their kingdom is so close to ours. But they have not always been known for doing intelligent things.”

The unicorn shifter didn’t enjoy thinking about Jaega off fighting in dangerous wars, even though he had been doing it longer than Fersen had been alive. “I really hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“If it does, we will defeat them soundly. Of that, I have no doubt.” Jaega waved the subject away. “Let us not dwell on such things. What do you plan to do once you return home?”

“My poor garden will be so overgrown,” Fersen said. “I’m sure fixing that will take up a lot of my time at first. I’d love to go for a swim in the waterfall lagoon that’s not too far from my home. After that, who knows? I live a quiet life, so there’s not much to do.”

“I am happy to help in whatever way you need,” Jaega offered. “I am in no rush to return to Valzerna.”

“Won’t your brother want you back to talk about what happened in Shadron?”

Jaega finished his jerky. “Yes, but I have entrusted the details to Grisden to give my brother a proper debriefing. He will have everything he needs without me being there. This is more important to me right now.”

Fersen’s cheeks tinged pink at the idea of being a priority to Jaega. “I hope you don’t get in trouble because of me.”

“Even if I do, it will be worth it.” The confident way Jaega stated that filled Fersen’s heart with overactive butterflies. “Thankfully, my brother and I have always been extraordinarily close. If he thinks me unreasonable now, he will understand once I explain to him the importance of this later.”

Fersen blushed, hardly able to believe that Jaega was willingly picking him over returning home to his royal duties. But Fersen didn’t want to make too much out of what was likely only a kind gesture and not romantic in any sort of way.

Once Fersen finished eating, Jaega took out one of the Alsarian berry tarts and handed it to him. Fersen took a tentative taste. The bright flavor exploded on his palate with sweetness. It was the best berry anything he had ever had before. He moaned as he took another bite, savoring the tart for as long as he could. “Oh, this is incredible.”

“There are many reasons Alsari is well known for its culinary achievements. A lot of our castle chefs are from there.” Jaega took a tart for himself and hummed with pleasure as he enjoyed it. “Valzernan cuisine is delicious, but Alsarian is a different level.”

Fersen took smaller bites of the tart to make it last longer. “I’ve never had food from either kingdom, so I’ll take your word for it.”

“At the castle, we have at least one chef from every kingdom in Talwyn, so my brother can enjoy all his favorite dishes.”

That was a level of extravagance Fersen could hardly fathom. He shook his head in amazement. “I can’t even imagine being so well versed in the culinary arts. My little world is too small.” The information made Fersen realize something. “Wait, if you have chefs from all over Talwyn, then you would have chefs and probably servants from Shadron. What do they think of your brother sending his army to fight their homeland?”

“As they are refugees from King Decius’s cruelty, they supported our mission. I had a small tactical team dedicated to finding their families to get them to Valzerna safely while we fought. Even with a kinder ruler in place, it will still give our chefs peace of mind to know their families are safer on our lands.”

Would the limits of Jaega’s generosity ever be found? Fersen was starting to think it was boundless. “That’s incredible that you could find and rescue them, even with all the fighting going on.”

“My oldest brother and I are united in the belief that you take care of those you protect. Even our chefs and servants fall under that.”

“Which is fascinating to me since King Decius probably didn’t know the name of a

single servant, let alone care where they were from or if they still had family there.” Fersen was sad he finished his delicious tart until Jaega passed him a second one. The unicorn shifter had to make a concentrated effort not to squeal with joy.

“King Tatsuki is nothing like that. He takes pride in knowing every detail about his palace. He never wants to be caught unaware about anything.” It was clear how proud Jaega was of his oldest brother. Although Fersen had never met the king, if he was anything like Jaega, he was sure to be one of the most remarkable men in Talwyn as well.

The stories filled Fersen with the urge to go back to Valzerna with Jaega, but he didn’t have the heart to ask. Besides, what would he do in a kingdom with no place to live? He wouldn’t know the first thing about where to find a solitary sanctuary like his home in the Morven forest. Dreams of the riches Valzerna offered would be the closest Fersen would ever come to experiencing them.

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They continued talking long into the night, but eventually, Fersen smothered a yawn behind his hand. "Sorry."

"There is no need to be sorry. It has been a long day," Jaega said. "You should get some rest now. We have an early start in the morning."

"What about you?" Fersen asked.

As tempting as it was to join Fersen in sleep, Jaega did the honorable thing. "I will stand guard."

Fersen shook his head. "You need sleep, too."

"Dragons do not require as much rest. I shall be fine." Jaega gestured for Fersen to make himself comfortable. "Do not worry about me."

Fersen bit his lower lip as he seemed to struggle with something. It was a surprisingly endearing gesture. "But what if...what if I feel safer when you're sleeping beside me?"

Jaega's resolve wavered. It was his last night to spend with Fersen since they would part ways after he got the unicorn shifter settled back at home. The temptation to share the bed roll with Fersen one last time was strong. But Jaega tried to do the right thing. "You will be safe no matter where I am."

"By your logic, I'll be just as safe with you here beside me, right?"

He had Jaega on that point. “I have no desire to make you uncomfortable.”

Fersen rubbed the back of his hand, unable to meet Jaega’s gaze. “Last night was the first time in months I haven’t had night terrors about what happened to me. I think it’s because I felt so safe in your arms. So...”

The last of Jaega’s resolve left him. His dragon urged his body into action before his mind could protest. “If that is the case, then I will join you.” Jaega stretched out on the large bed roll, then summoned a blanket to cover them both. It took effort not to curl up behind Fersen, the same heavenly way he had woken up in the morning.

“Thank you for humoring me,” Fersen said. “I know I’m being unreasonable.”

“I am happy to do whatever makes you feel safest.”

“Then...would you...would you hold me like you did this morning?” Fersen hesitantly asked. “If it’s too uncomfortable for you, or?—”

Jaega didn’t give Fersen the chance to finish his protests. He rolled onto his side, curling his body behind Fersen as he held him close. “Is this better?” Jaega asked, his voice dropping lower, thanks to his dragon struggling to rise to the surface. It was roaring at Jaega to claim Fersen as their fated mate, but the army general fought off his dragon’s desires. They were offering sanctuary only.

Fersen pulled Jaega’s arm tighter around him. “Yeah,” he said in a small voice.

Why did it feel so right to hold Fersen? Like the younger man’s body had been made to perfectly fit against his?

Because he is our fated mate, Jaega’s dragon insisted in the depths of his mind. It is meant to be. He was made for us.

When will you quit being such a coward and claim him as ours?

It was a question Jaega didn't have an answer for yet.

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Once Fersen had a general idea of where they were, he told Jaega where to land. He needed to be on the ground to get his bearings on where they were in the large Morven forest. Since it was such a nice day out and the tree cover was so thick, they walked the rest of the way to Fersen's house, because there wasn't enough room for a dragon to land.

The closer they got to Fersen's home, the more excited he became. There were nights he feared he'd never see his beloved home again. Olina had left him her house inside a massive, hollowed-out Elysian tree. It was cozy but comfortable. It was such a relief for his ordeal to almost be over, even if it meant the end of his time with Jaega. But thinking about that was too sad, so Fersen pushed it from his mind.

When they emerged into the clearing where his home was, Fersen gasped in horror as he stopped dead in his tracks. King Decius's men who had kidnapped him had burned the once magnificent Elysian tree. The verdant leaves were gone, and the tree bark was blackened and splintering. Everything had been destroyed.

Tears fell from his eyes as he sobbed. The only thing stopping him from collapsing on the ground was Jaega's muscular arms embracing him from behind. Fersen turned into the comfort, weeping for everything that had been taken from him. Not only his home but his sense of safety, his virginity, everything that mattered most to Fersen—it had all been taken by the awful man who wanted to control his unicorn powers.

Fersen didn't know how long he cried, but Jaega never let go of him. He rubbed soothing circles on Fersen's back, letting him work through his emotions in silence. Fersen appreciated Jaega didn't placate him with false platitudes about how

everything would be fine when it felt like nothing would ever be normal again.

When Fersen's sobs quieted to sniffles, he stepped back to wipe his eyes. Jaega kept a firm hand on his shoulder, grounding the emotional unicorn shifter. "Will you help me get inside?" Fersen asked when he finally found his voice.

"It is too dangerous for you to go in there."

"I know, but there's something in there I can't live without. I have to find it."

Jaega's voice was gentle, but his words cut deep. "Fersen, nothing would have survived that fire. It is not worth risking your life. What little is left of the tree could collapse with one strong gust of wind. It is not safe for you."

Fersen looked up at Jaega with tears in his eyes. "Please. I need this. I can't let him take this from me, too. I can't."

Jaega visibly softened. "Very well. But I will go with you."

"Thank you." Tears gathered in Fersen's eyes as he approached the burnt remains of the door to his home. Jaega had to force it open, making the remaining limbs on the tree creak ominously.

The destruction inside was even more devastating. All the books and trinkets from Olina had been reduced to piles of ash and cinder. The lingering smell of smoke made Fersen cough, but he walked through the wreckage to the back of his house, where his bedroom had once been.

Part of the ceiling had collapsed where Fersen needed access to. He tugged on it but wasn't strong enough to move it. Before he could ask for help, Jaega used his massive muscles to remove it.

Fersen pulled up some of the burnt floorboards. Jaega once again began helping without being asked, revealing a metal box below that had miraculously survived the fire. But Fersen wouldn't be okay until he saw what was inside of it was safe.

Jaega used all his strength on the silver box, but the top didn't budge. Fersen stopped him. "Even with your huge muscles, you'll never be able to remove it. I enchanted it so only I can access it." To prove it, he lifted it off without any effort. He almost cried with relief when he saw the item that meant the most to him in the world had survived the fire undamaged.

He pulled out the leather-bound book, which had the golden flower crest of his family on the cover. Fersen hugged it close to his chest as he rejoiced. "Thank all the Powers that be this survived. They didn't get to take this from me, too."

A powerful gust of wind made the remains of the tree groan as more wood fractured. There was urgency in Jaega's voice. "We must leave before it's too late."

Fersen took a last look around the place he had called home for centuries. His heart broke that there was no way to restore it to its former glory. He was homeless now, but at least he had protected his family's most prized treasure. Between that and being alive, Fersen was grateful for the two miracles.

Fersen allowed himself to be guided by Jaega out of the damaged tree. He couldn't bear to look back at the husk of his home again. "Can we go to the cave behind the waterfall near here?" Fersen asked. He needed some time to process everything that had happened before he could figure out what he was supposed to do with his life.

Fersen never stopped hugging the book close to his chest as they walked the familiar path to his beloved waterfall. When they reached the edge of the lagoon, he frowned at his dilemma. He couldn't get the book wet, but there was no way to access the cave behind the waterfall without going through the water.

Jaega's dragon wings sprouted from his back. He gathered Fersen in his arms, cradling him close. "I will use a shield to protect the book from the water," Jaega said, almost as if he had read Fersen's thoughts.

With those words, Jaega flew them across the lagoon and through the waterfall. As he promised, his protective shield kept them and the book dry as they landed in the cave on the other side. When Jaega set him down, Fersen sank to the ground with another sob. How had it come to this?

Jaega sat near him in silence, letting Fersen work through things in his own time. He never once huffed with impatience. It made Fersen even more grateful the dragon shifter had stayed with him.

Instead of cycling through unanswerable questions about what he was supposed to do now, Fersen looked down at the book in his lap. It had been years since he had last taken it out of the box. But it hadn't changed at all. The dark blue leather and gold floral emblem of his family crest stood as a testament to his family's refusal to let the necromancers win during the awful war.

Fersen spoke. "When I was a kid, my mother hid me and this book when the necromancers came to find her and my father. She had just enough time to enchant the space to hide my scent so they wouldn't find me, too." Fersen fell silent as the awful memories from that day replayed in his mind. "The necromancers killed them to steal their horns, then left once they had them. I stayed in my hiding spot until Olina arrived. She had been a friend of my family's, so she took me in since I had nowhere else to go."

Jaega covered Fersen's hand with his own larger one and gave it a squeeze. "I am glad she was there for you."

"This book has all of my family's magic secrets in it, so Olina helped me create that

metal box that only I could open to keep it safe.” Fersen hugged it tight to his chest once more. “I don’t know what I would have done if this was destroyed in the fire, too.”

“The important thing is that it is still safe.”

“But I’m not.” Fersen’s fear clawed at him. “I have nowhere to go now.”

Jaega shook his head. “That is not quite true.”

“I’m not going to Kunushi and putting Olina’s family at risk by associating with me,” Fersen said in a firm tone. “I would never forgive myself if something happened to them because someone wanted me.”

Jaega’s expression was sympathetic. “That was not what I was going to suggest.”

“Oh.” Fersen was taken aback. “Then what?”

“Come back to Valzerna with me.”

It wasn’t a solution as simple as that. “I have nowhere to go, and the victors’ bonus money you gave me isn’t anything close to what I would need to make my own home in a forest away from people.”

“I know you do not care to live around people, but you would be safe in the Valzerna castle. You could work as one of the Enchanters, which would let you earn your own money. That would give you the freedom to not depend upon me or anyone else.”

As much as Fersen felt he should protest, the offer was the best option he had for not only finding a place to live safely but also having money to take care of himself. “But I don’t want to be a burden?—”

“You would not be a burden. It would give me great peace of mind knowing you were safe within our walls where I can protect you, instead of out in the woods by yourself, at risk from anyone who hears a rumor about a mythical unicorn shifter and wants to take you for themselves.”

It was a valid and very real threat Fersen faced when alone. “You would still want to protect me?”

Jaega’s expression softened. “Of course. It is my honor to protect you, although you will obviously be in no danger at the castle.”

“What would I do without you?” Fersen asked, tearing up again. He had too many emotions swirling within him.

Jaega reached over and caressed Fersen’s cheek. “Thankfully, you will not have to find out the answer to that question.”

Fersen didn’t have the wherewithal to figure out what Jaega meant by that statement. But he really hoped the dragon shifter was interested in him as more than a mere ward. It would be too heartbreaking if Fersen was the only one feeling the pull of attraction between them.

* * *

When Fersen awoke in the morning, he realized two important things: his heat had begun, and Jaega was on the opposite side of the cave instead of curled around him like they had been last night. Was it because Jaega was disgusted by him? Fersen couldn’t judge from Jaega’s expression, but his amber eyes were rimmed with the glowing orange of his dragon.

“I-I’m sorry,” Fersen stammered, feeling like he had failed Jaega somehow. It was

ridiculous when he had no control over his heat, but it was unbearable thinking that Jaega was keeping his distance in distaste.

“There is no need for apologies.” Jaega’s voice was a dark rumble, even more so than normal. It sent shivers down Fersen’s spine as heat pooled in his belly and spread all over. “You are fine.”

“Am I?” Fersen asked with a borderline hysterical bubble of laughter. “Because my heat is the last complication I needed right now. And now you’re over there in disgust and?—”

“Do not mistake my distance as disgust,” Jaega said, the orange glow in his eyes brightening as more of it overtook the amber. “We—I am over here for your protection.”

The comment baffled Fersen. “Protection? From what?”

“My dragon. He is quite taken with you, so I separated myself to keep him in check.”

Fersen’s flushed cheeks weren’t only because of his heat. “He is?”

“Very.” The single word came out as a sensuous purr that made Fersen ache for Jaega.

It was a difficult question to ask, but Fersen had to know the answer. “He’s interested in me, but you’re not?”

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The hurt in Fersen's voice pained Jaega and his dragon's heart. It frustrated him that Fersen was mistaking his restraint for repulsion when that was the furthest thing from the truth.

Jaega didn't want to confess and burden Fersen with his feelings, but he didn't see any other way of making the unicorn shifter feel better. "It is not just him."

The color in Fersen's cheeks deepened. "Oh?" He looked almost coquettish in an all-too-tempting manner.

"I do not wish for you to think I am selfishly taking advantage of you or your heat, so?—"

Fersen interrupted. "I don't think that at all. There's nothing selfish about you."

"Still, I am quite certain you would find the current thoughts running through mine and my dragon's mind objectionable at best, offensive at worst."

The unicorn shifter bit his lower lip as he looked up at Jaega with a vulnerable expression that made Jaega want to gather Fersen into his arms and never let go. "What if I said I don't object?"

"After everything you've been through, the last thing you need is?—"

"You're what I need," Fersen said in a rush of words. Before Jaega could respond, Fersen continued. "You would actually treat me well and not care only about your personal pleasure. You would take care of me in every way."

See? He wants us as much as we desire him, Jaega's dragon insisted. Stop being so cowardly and show him what a real man can do for him.

"While that is true?—"

"I know you could have anyone you wanted, and there's no reason for you to be interested in me, but I—" Fersen took a deep breath before continuing. "It's not just my heat talking. I've been drawn to you from the very beginning. And being your mate?—"

"Our mate?" Jaega's dragon repeated as he took a stronger hold. "Is that what you truly wish?"

"I know it's foolish when I have literally nothing to offer you. But I want more days like these last two, where I've felt safe and at ease for the first time in my life because I'm with you."

"We would always protect and cherish you." In that, Jaega and his dragon were united. "If you were our mate, we would do everything in our power to make you happy."

"Then why don't you start by coming over here first?" The coy invitation was almost too much to resist.

Jaega struggled to get back in control. "Because if I go over there, my dragon will claim you as our fated mate. You are almost too much temptation normally, but combined with your alluring heat, I would be powerless to resist his urges when it is what I also desire."

He breathed deep, enjoying the spicier notes of Fersen's altered scent from his heat. It was the best thing he had ever smelled since his mate's passing. He wanted to bury

his nose in Fersen's neck to drown in his scent. But the temptation to place his mating mark there was too strong. Jaega had to do the honorable thing. "I do not wish you to make a decision influenced by your heat and then regret it later once your calm has returned."

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It was admirable how honorable Jaega was. His desire to protect Fersen was touching but also highly frustrating when Fersen had no doubts about being with the general. Since his words weren't working for him, Fersen acted instead.

He stood up and walked over to where Jaega sat against the wall. Every step Fersen took toward the dragon shifter, the more orange bled into his eyes, until his dragon was almost in full control. It sent an exhilarating thrill through Fersen as he straddled Jaega's lap. He boldly looped his arms around the dragon shifter's neck and looked deep into his glowing orange eyes.

"I'm not scared of you or your dragon," Fersen said. "If you'll have me, I'm yours."

It was fascinating watching the last of Jaega's resolve crumble. Fersen had expected his dragon to surge forward and devour him, but Jaega stayed in control. He claimed Fersen's lips in a gentle but searing kiss that sent explosions of lust rocketing through him. It kept memories of King Decius's awful, punishing kisses at bay.

Everything was heightened because of his heat. Fersen kissed back as best he knew how. His fingers dared to reach out and stroke Jaega's soft, short beard. It was so masculine compared to Fersen's baby face.

He wasn't sure how long they kissed, but Fersen never wanted to come up for air. Jaega's strong hands caressing his body heightened his pleasure further, making his cock stiffen in the confines of his black breeches. It was a pleasant surprise when he had always stayed flaccid during captivity with the disgusting man who had imprisoned and used him.

But there was none of the harsh abuse he had endured. Jaega was gentle and kind yet commanding with his kisses. The huge difference between the two experiences stopped Fersen's mind from flashing back to the awful times in his captivity. His unicorn was ready to stay in the present moment and find out what they had been missing with a lover they cared about deeply. Fersen gave a startled yelp when Jaega stood up without warning, picking up Fersen as if he weighed nothing.

Jaega walked them over to the bedroll, then gently lowered Fersen onto it. He pinned Fersen under his much larger body, looking down at him with orange eyes glowing bright. "It pleases us so much that you wish to be ours." His dragon's kiss was more insistent, more demanding, more thrilling.

"Make me yours," Fersen whispered against Jaega's lips in between kisses.

Jaega stripped Fersen of his white shirt, sending the unicorn shifter's heart galloping wildly. Fersen had always felt horribly exposed and ugly when naked in front of King Decius, but Jaega looked down at Fersen as if he was the most beautiful creature in all of Talwyn. Every caress on his pale skin sent shivers racing through Fersen. There was no place for those awful memories when he was living in such a wonderful moment. Fersen stayed focused on what was happening in the now rather than the misfortune of the past. He refused to let memories of King Decius's abuse ruin something so wonderful.

Fersen shivered as Jaega's hands caressed his bare skin. It was so masculine and made Fersen feel small in the best of ways. He felt safe with Jaega in a way he never imagined he'd be able to feel after what he had been through in captivity.

Jaega paused long enough to tug off his own shirt. Fersen couldn't help but be awed at the sight of Jaega's impressive muscles and orange shifter markings that covered his body. It emboldened Fersen to reach out and run his hands over Jaega's strong pecs. His arousal grew as his hands traveled up to Jaega's broad shoulders. He could

hardly believe he was allowed to take such liberties with the general.

Jaega's hand confidently reached for the buttons of Fersen's breeches before hesitating. The glow in his eyes dimmed as he wrestled back some control from his dragon, but it didn't disappear completely. "Are you sure this is what you want? A mating bond is eternal. It cannot be broken."

"I'm completely sure." Fersen held Jaega's gaze to convince him of his sincerity. "I want to have a family again, and there is no one more caring and loving than you. I know I can trust you with anything."

That was all Jaega's dragon needed to hear to act. He made quick work of the rest of Fersen's clothes, leaving him completely bare before the dragon shifter's eyes. Fersen would have been self-conscious if not for the look of utter awe and adoration in Jaega's eyes. How could anyone feel ugly or unwanted when looked at with such reverence? Certainly not Fersen.

To Fersen's surprise, Jaega didn't immediately seek his hole. He took his time kissing and touching Fersen all over, making Fersen's heat burn so hot he thought his heart might give out before it was over. He ached to feel Jaega inside him, to fill that painful emptiness his heat caused. But as much as he wanted to move on, he also enjoyed being the center of Jaega's full attention.

It came as a complete shock to his system when Jaega leaned forward and took Fersen's cock into his mouth. He had never expected a respected, high-ranking general, who was also a member of the royal clan of Ariake, to pleasure him orally in such a way. It was a first for him, and he loved every second.

His body arched up as his fingers sought purchase in Jaega's wild mane of orange hair. He could only hold on as Jaega's talented tongue took Fersen to new heights of sexual pleasure he had never imagined existed.

Fersen wanted to warn Jaega he was close, but his orgasm hit before he could form the words. The intensity of it left Fersen dazed, his heat momentarily receding in the aftermath of unexpected ecstasy. Jaega's dragon smiled in satisfaction, stroking Fersen's hips as he let the unicorn shifter bask in the afterglow.

"I didn't know it could be like that," Fersen whispered in shock, still reeling from his intense climax.

"And the pleasure is only getting started," Jaega promised. His fingers drifted over Fersen's pucker, making the unicorn shifter swallow hard. "Can you handle more?"

It was impossible to think when Jaega teased such a sensitive spot. But Fersen bravely nodded, knowing that if anyone could make him forget about the horrors of his sexual exploitation in captivity, it would be Jaega. "Please."

Jaega used magic to slick his fingers before sliding one inside Fersen's tight hole. Fersen tensed at the intrusion but forced himself to relax his muscles. Jaega wouldn't hurt him in search of pleasure. Fersen trusted Jaega would make sure it was an enjoyable experience for them both.

Anticipation overtook nervousness as Jaega used his fingers to stretch Fersen. He had never been prepared in such a way before. The lack of pain gave Fersen more confidence about being in good hands with Jaega.

"Breathe," Jaega said as he continued working the unicorn shifter open.

Fersen drew a shuddering breath, his body tensing as Jaega added another finger. Jaega didn't move until Fersen relaxed once more. His fingers ghosted over something inside Fersen that made his body jerk from the sudden flash of intense pleasure. "Oh!" He had never experienced that before.

“Good. Just like that,” Jaega encouraged him. “Let go and enjoy.”

The dragon shifter’s words may as well have been a magical spell. Fersen’s body surrendered to Jaega’s masterful touch as he gave himself over fully to the experience. He almost cried out in pain from the loss of Jaega withdrawing his fingers. But the sight of Jaega stroking his massive cock sent Fersen’s heat into overdrive. It was the single sexiest thing he had ever seen. He couldn’t believe he was responsible for Jaega’s arousal. Excitement had replaced all traces of fear. Fersen wanted Jaega more than he had wanted anything in his life.

Instead of shoving into Fersen and pounding him hard like he was used to, Jaega eased into him with a surprising amount of patience. It allowed Fersen to enjoy the slow spread of his body welcoming Jaega. He had never been so full before, but he loved the sensation.

As the pleasure intensified, Fersen surrendered control to his unicorn as they moved in unison with Jaega. It was the best kind of heaven, with no place for awful memories of the past.

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In the centuries following his mate's passing, Jaega had been with plenty of men and women. But no one had captivated him and his dragon so completely like Fersen. It was a great honor to show Fersen that there was a difference between King Decius's brutal assaults and Jaega's gentle lovemaking. As Fersen gave himself over to the experience, it was like watching a blossom blooming into the most beautiful flower in the world. The trust Fersen had placed in Jaega was something he would always treasure for the gift it was.

Jaega wanted to stay in the moment as himself, but his dragon took hold as the pleasure spiraled out of control. Their pace sped up, pleasing them both when Fersen continued to move to the powerful rhythm dictated by Jaega's hips. They were in heaven as Fersen's hands wandered over their shoulders, then dug his nails into his skin when there was a particularly pleasurable thrust.

The emergence of Fersen's unicorn was an intriguing surprise for Jaega. The colors still cycled with every blink of his eyes, but the pastels had grown to a vivid intensity. Jaega never wanted to look away from the mesmerizing sight. And soon, they would be mates, so he wouldn't have to.

If there had been any doubt left in Jaega's mind about Fersen being his fated mate, it would have disappeared in that moment. Their bodies fit together so perfectly, like they had been made for each other. Although they had known each other for only a brief time, Jaega and his dragon were certain that Fersen was the only one for them. Jaega offered a silent prayer to Sophina, the Fate Power, for bringing Fersen into his life. He wished it hadn't begun in such tragic circumstances for his beloved, but the important thing was that they had found each other, and Jaega could protect Fersen from any harm.

Jaega reached between them to stroke Fersen's renewed erection, which had returned quickly, thanks to being in heat. Fersen made the most delicious noises that Jaega reveled in as he pushed them both to their limits.

At the height of his sexual euphoria, Jaega's dragon leaned forward and sank his fangs into Fersen's neck. It caused the unicorn shifter's magic to surge to the surface, calling to Jaega's to form a mating bond. The powerful sensation of magic pulsating between them drew both of their orgasms. It sealed the mating bond, which burned brightly in a testament to their newfound love.

Jaega looked at his arm, in awe at seeing Fersen's color-changing markings now intertwined with his own. The only thing more beautiful was seeing his distinctive orange markings gracing Fersen's body. It was a delight to see instead of the steady single-color glow, they cycled through the spectrum of oranges. It was the most magical thing Jaega had seen.

"Our mate," Jaega's dragon purred as his knot expanded inside Fersen.

"Oh!" Fersen's fingers dug into Jaega's biceps as he held on tight. "Oh, what is that? It feels so good!"

It pleased Jaega that Fersen enjoyed the experience so much. "Knotting." For the first time since losing Caprina, Jaega experienced genuine joy, thanks to his new mate. He delighted in being able to feel Fersen's emotions as if they were his own now. Jaega tested to see if their telepathic bond had fully formed. "It is the way of dragons."

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Fersen was overwhelmed in the best of ways. He could feel Jaega inside of him, on both a physical and mental level. Jaega's knot spreading him wider sent Fersen soaring to new heights of nirvana as he rocked against it in search of more pleasure. But it was the echoing euphoria through their bond that pushed Fersen over the edge.

"So good," Fersen whimpered. Ecstasy exploded through their connection, drawing another orgasm from Fersen from the intensity of the experience.

The beauty of the moment was enough to bring tears to Fersen's eyes as he stared up in awe at his new mate. He didn't have the words to express how incredible the experience had been for him, so he hoped their newly formed bond would convey the depths of his feelings to Jaega.

It was disappointing when Jaega's knot finally released, and he pulled out. Being so full of his beloved was the best feeling in the world. Fersen had never felt so close to someone or so loved. Now that he could sense Jaega's emotions and thoughts, it was so obvious that the dragon shifter had a deep sense of affection for him. How had Fersen gotten so lucky? If he had known Jaega was waiting for him, he wouldn't have spent so many nights in captivity in despair, wishing he were dead.

Jaega lay down beside Fersen, then guided the unicorn shifter to rest on top of him. Fersen melted into a satisfied puddle in Jaega's warm embrace. His heat had abated for the time being, so Fersen could fully enjoy being held by his mate as if he were the most precious treasure in the world.

"We were not too rough, were we?" Jaega asked in concern, brushing the hair from Fersen's face. "Was it too uncomfortable or?—"

Fersen shushed Jaega's concerns. He wasn't sure how to convey that to Jaega, so Fersen did his best to focus on the deep sense of satisfaction their union had brought him. "Surely, you can feel how perfect that was. I didn't know it was possible to feel so much pleasure. Wow."

Jaega nuzzled against his new mate. "Then I am glad. We wanted it to be a wonderful experience for you."

"It was the best experience," Fersen assured him. He let out a contented sigh. "I've never felt this good in my life."

"We feared our touch might bring back unwelcome memories."

"I worried about that too, but your touch was so gentle and different from how King Decius used me that there was no room for those awful thoughts when I felt so good." It was a huge relief for Fersen.

"We are glad to hear it." Jaega caressed Fersen's back, sending little skitters of shivers through him with each touch.

Fersen looked at his arm resting on Jaega's chest, marveling at their entwined markings. The cycles of orange colors representing his mate brought him more joy than he knew how to handle. He could hardly believe that two days ago, his life was at its lowest point, and now he was at an unfathomable high.

They remained in companionable silence, enjoying being near each other and indulging in their newly formed mating bond. Fersen's mind roamed. He wanted to imagine their life in Valzerna together, but without having ever been to that kingdom before, he wasn't sure what to envision other than a life of happiness with a loving mate.

It made Fersen realize something important. “If I’m your mate, does that mean I need to stop using contractions when we get back to Valzerna?”

Jaega chuckled. “Given that my previous mate aggressively refused to stop using contractions or swears, it will not surprise any member of my family that you use them.”

The comment raised an interesting question for Fersen. “Why have you been drawn to two commoners instead of an aristocrat, who is actually on your social level?”

“The court and the courtiers bore me. All that political jockeying for my brother’s favor is exhausting. I am much happier in the barracks with my men, where I do not have to worry so much about decorum or an overly flirty aristocrat taking umbrage with my refusal to accept their pushy advances.”

Fersen nuzzled against Jaega. He could only imagine how quickly that court game would grow tiresome. “Is there a reason the royal court refuses to use contractions? Because it’s not just your family, according to Olina.”

“The founding rulers of the kingdoms of Talwyn decreed that, due to our long lives as shifters, we had the luxury of time to speak in full words. It is a stuffy, old tradition, but I am so accustomed to it now that I would find it hard to change.”

Fersen stroked his thumb against Jaega’s broad shoulder. “You don’t have to change for anyone, and certainly not me. But I would unlearn the habit if I needed to.”

“Tatsuki found Caprina’s rejection of the court rules humorous, so you have nothing to fear in that regard. They would even get into competitions for who could come up with the most creative swears.” Jaega chuckled at the fond memory. “Speak as freely as you wish.”

“That’s a relief. Despite my best efforts, I’d definitely screw up,” Fersen said with a laugh. “The last thing I want to do is embarrass you in front of your family.”

“I cannot be embarrassed of someone I am so proud of.”

Jaega’s words were a balm to Fersen’s battered heart. “But what happens when they find out about how we met?” Fersen wouldn’t want Jaega to keep any secrets from his family, but the thought of them knowing the truth of his captivity was humiliating.

Jaega guided Fersen’s chin up so they could make eye contact. “I told you before: your secrets are your own. I will tell them we met during my Shadron campaign, but they do not need to know the exact circumstances.”

Fersen frowned. “I don’t want you to lie to your family, though.”

“It is not a lie since that is how we met,” Jaega pointed out. “I respect your need to keep the truth of your captivity to yourself. I will guard your secret, even from my oldest brother.”

“But isn’t that treason or something?”

Jaega smiled reassuringly at Fersen. “While my allegiance will always be with my dear king and the Ariake clan, my loyalty to you will always take precedence.”

Fersen hugged Jaega as best his position allowed. “You really are the best. I’ll never understand how I got so lucky.”

“I consider it a reward from fate for surviving a life of such painful sorrows. It is fortunate for us that Sophina is a generous deity.”

“The Fate Power?” Fersen had never paid much attention to the echelon of deities

that controlled life in the Living Realm, but he remembered her because Olina had been an avid believer in Sophina.

“Yes, she is best friends with my niece, so Sophina has always been very kind to the Ariake clan.”

Fersen grew more confused. “How does your niece become best friends with the deity who controls fate?”

“Because my niece is the daughter of King Tatsuki and Arenthia, the War Power.” Fersen’s jaw dropped in shock as Jaega continued. “Since Kizoshi lives in the Divine Realm most of the time, she and Sophina are extremely close and have been since childhood.”

“I didn’t realize you had a relative who was half-Power. That’s so impressive.”

“Impressive is a good way to describe Kizoshi. So is mysterious. You have never met a more enigmatic person in your life.” Jaega laughed again. “She told me before I left for the campaign that I would find a special treasure, but I did not realize at the time she meant you. I suspect she will enjoy her ‘I told you so’ when she meets you.”

“Are there any other relatives I need to know about before we reach Valzerna?”

“You will most likely become friendliest with Kitaro, my brother’s youngest son. He inherited his mother’s kind disposition, but he is a fierce warrior when needed. Kisano is also a gentle soul, but he does not leave the library.”

The information struck Fersen as odd. “Is there a reason for that?”

Jaega carded his fingers through Fersen’s hair. “Tatsuki is a warlord at heart and does not see much value in those who prefer peace. Kisano is shy and bookish, so he does

his best to stay out of his father's sight to avoid his wrath."

Fersen's heart went out to Kisano. "That's awful."

"It is, but Kisano is also much happier with his books than he would be anywhere else, so it is not as tragic as it sounds. Especially since it allows him to avoid his eldest brother, Mitsuki."

The disapproval in Jaega's tone surprised Fersen. He wouldn't have expected his mate to feel that way about any of his nephews. "What's wrong with Mitsuki?"

"He is cruel, tempestuous, impudent, arrogant, and utterly disagreeable in every way." Jaega's description made Fersen want to keep his distance from Tatsuki's oldest son. "The good news is he is self-involved, so he will probably pay you little attention."

"I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or not."

"Should he give you an ounce of trouble, he will earn the beating he deserves." It was a shocking thing to hear Jaega say. "Sadly, it will not be the first nor the last for such an occasion. Violence is the only way that brute learns."

It sent a shiver of fear down Fersen's spine. "In that case, I hope our paths never cross."

"You will find an excellent ally and friend in Kitaro, though. He is nothing like Mitsuki."

It would be nice to have someone else in the castle to be on good terms with besides Jaega. "Was he on the campaign with you?"

“No, I try to keep Kitaro off the front lines. While he is an extraordinary warrior, his heart is not in warfare. Despite having Tatsuki as a father, bloodlust is not in his nature the way it is with Mitsuki.”

“Does that mean Mitsuki’s close to Kizoshi since her mother is the War Power? That probably means she enjoys fighting, right?”

Jaega’s sharp bark of laughter startled Fersen. “No, if Kizoshi could get away with killing Mitsuki, she would do it in a heartbeat. She loathes him with every fiber of her being. He hates her just as much because she beats him every time, at any game, in any battle.” Jaega chuckled again. “I cannot tell you how many times Kizoshi has sent Mitsuki sailing through the training hall wall and the Enchanters have had to come repair it. I would be lying if I said I did not enjoy it every time it happens. He is a foul, odious creature.”

“I can’t tell if I’m supposed to admire or fear Kizoshi after hearing that.”

“Both. She is fearsome, but you do not have to fear her. She will have no qualms with you. Her issues are solely with Mitsuki and his mistreatment of her beloved brothers. But she is not around very often since she prefers staying in the Divine Realm, as I said.” Jaega patted Fersen’s back. “It will take some adjustment, but I promise you will be happy in Valzerna.”

“As long as I’m with you, I’d be happy anywhere.” The truth in his words made Fersen’s heart glow with a warmth that had nothing to do with his heat.

* * *

While Fersen enjoyed being marked by Jaega’s seed, he also was experiencing some discomfort as it dried. “Do you think we could go for a swim in the lagoon?”

“That sounds like a fine idea. Is it deep?”

“Deep enough to dive into safely,” Fersen replied as he stood up with a satisfying stretch.

Jaega gestured for him to go ahead. “Lead the way.”

Joy filled Fersen’s heart as he finally indulged in one of his favorite things to do. He ran before diving through the waterfall and into the deep lagoon. It was an exhilarating rush that made him feel more like himself after everything that had happened the day before.

He swam back, giving himself a great view of Jaega’s magnificent dive. It was as graceful as his flying. Despite his large body, he landed with barely a splash.

Fersen laughed when Jaega swam over and embraced him from behind. “Surely, not even the Divine Realm has places as beautiful as this.”

“It’s hard to imagine.” While leaving his favorite relaxation spot was sad, Fersen finally felt ready to move on to the next phase of his life, with Jaega at his side as his beloved mate.

Fersen turned in his arms, then wrapped his legs around his mate to support himself. Jaega embraced him once more, indulging in a kiss. It stirred Fersen’s lust once more, stoked by the feedback loop between him and Jaega’s arousal.

He whimpered into another kiss when Jaega stroked Fersen’s erection. Fersen had done that alone in the lagoon before, but having his mate take care of him in such a way made the experience that much more enjoyable.

Their position made it too difficult to return the favor, but Jaega didn’t seem to mind.

Fersen contented himself with running his hands over Jaega's muscles, loving the smooth glide of skin against skin.

Fersen's body tensed up as the pleasure escalated. He buried his face against his mate's neck, reflexively kissing it as he rocked into Jaega's tight grip. With the echoing feelings between him and his new mate, it didn't take long before Fersen came with Jaega's name on his lips.

To Fersen's great surprise, Jaega climaxed, despite neither of them touching his hardness.

Jaega chuckled as he wrapped his other arm around Fersen. "To clarify your confusion, experiencing your pleasure was so enjoyable I did not need to touch myself to come."

"That's incredible!" Would Fersen ever stop being amazed by the benefits of their newly forged mating bond? He hoped not because everything was amazing so far.

* * *

Once they returned to the safety behind the waterfall, Fersen hesitated.

"What is wrong?" Jaega asked, gesturing for Fersen to come closer to him.

Fersen walked over to accept a hug. "I feel like I should share my unicorn form with you since you're my mate, but it's been a long time since I've shifted."

Jaega gave him a warm smile. "Please do not feel you have to do something that will make you so uncomfortable."

"I want to share this with you." It was important to Fersen to let Jaega know all of

him. He took a deep breath before shifting into his unicorn form. It felt like coming home.

Jaega's eyes were full of love as he took in the view. "Wow," he breathed in awe. He reached out and stroked Fersen's muzzle. "You are glorious."

It pleased Fersen's unicorn to hear the admiration in Jaega's voice. He nudged his mate's hand to encourage more petting.

Jaega obliged, stroking Fersen's white hair. "Utterly magnificent." His boundless love echoed through their bond. "I did not realize your horn would also change colors like your eyes. It is beyond beautiful."

It was something Fersen had always been self-conscious about, but Jaega's appreciation for that trait made him feel better about it. He wanted to go for a run in the woods with his mate riding him, but it was enough for now that he had shown Jaega his true form. Fersen shifted back to his person form. "Thank you for your kind words."

Jaega pulled his mate closer and gave him a sweet kiss. "I will happily spend the rest of our long lives singing your praises."

Fersen's heart overflowed with love. He never thought he'd be happy again, but he was so grateful to Jaega for proving him wrong.

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They enjoyed the rest of Fersen's heat in the cave before Jaega and Fersen made the long trip back to Valzerna. Jaega was helping Fersen settle into their room in the royal wing when there was a knock on the door.

It didn't surprise Jaega in the least to see his niece standing there with her always enigmatic smile. "Welcome home, Uncle." She gave him a warm hug before he moved aside to grant her entrance. "Looks like I was right about you finding that hidden treasure after all."

"I told you she would stop by to say, 'I told you so,' to me," Jaega told Fersen, making him laugh. He projected calming vibes to reassure his nervous mate. "Fersen, this is Kizoshi, my dear niece. Kizoshi, this is Fersen, my new mate and the treasure you foretold."

She clasped Fersen's hands in hers and gave them a squeeze. "And what a precious treasure you are. Welcome to the family, Fersen."

"Thank you," he said with a slight blush. It was understandable when Kizoshi was a stunningly beautiful woman, with long, flowing red hair that was done up in a series of intricate braids. She looked as divine as her deity heritage in a shimmering, pink dress that was gathered on one shoulder with a gold brooch made of a glittering pink stone. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Thank you for restoring my beloved uncle's happiness." She gave his hand another squeeze before letting go. "I have already called a family meeting to introduce you."

Fersen's eyes went wide with fear at the news.

She grinned in response. “Judging by that reaction, I am assuming Uncle has warned you about how awful Mitsuki is?”

Fersen could only nod his head.

“That is why I am here to make sure he does not step a single foot out of line. Should Mitsuki be as disagreeable as normal, please know I will greatly enjoy punishing him on your behalf.” Her smile was downright sadistic, making Jaega laugh at his niece’s antics. “Everyone will be there except for Kisano because I never allow Mitsuki to be near him. But I will take you to meet Kisano in the library later. Please do not think ill of him for not being there.”

“With everything I’ve heard about Mitsuki, I barely want to be there,” Fersen said with a nervous laugh. “I don’t blame Kisano for wanting to stay in the library. I’m ready to hide there myself.”

Kizoshi wrapped her arm around his shoulders as she led him toward the door. “All will be well. You shall see.”

Once she released him to lead the way, Jaega rested his hand on the small of Fersen’s back to reassure him. “She is right. You have nothing to fear.” Jaega added through their telepathic bond, “Trust me, Mitsuki will be more focused on Kizoshi than you. The odds he will get enraged by her and storm out are very high. You probably won’t exchange a single word with him.”

Fersen still seemed unconvinced, so Jaega projected feelings of love and affection for his nervous mate. He would protect his mate, even if it was against a member of his own family.

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Nerves churned in Fersen's stomach as they approached the meeting room, where he was to be introduced to Jaega's family. He wanted to throw up and run away, but he owed it to his mate to make a good impression. But it was hard to do when he had never met royalty before and was uncomfortable around groups of people—especially when one was poised to cause problems like Mitsuki.

“Remember, you are clan now,” Kizoshi counseled Fersen. “That means you are under not just Jaega's protection but mine and Kitaro's as well.”

With those words, she gestured for a servant to open the oversized wooden doors. Fersen's heart was in his throat, but Kizoshi glided in with the confidence he could only dream about having. With the way her gown fluttered, it gave her the appearance of an ethereal being who floated effortlessly.

King Tatsuki sat at the head of the long, wooden table. Despite sitting down, he appeared to be even larger than Jaega, which hardly seemed possible to Fersen. He was bare-chested, showing off his elaborate, red shifter markings that looked like flowing lava. His expression was neutral as his glowing red eyes assessed Fersen when he approached.

To King Tatsuki's right, a dour man dressed all in black barely paid Fersen any attention. His sights were set squarely on Kizoshi, tracking her like a hunter with their prey. She didn't seem the least bit bothered by it.

On the king's left was a younger shifter with flowing, white hair. His eyes were a piercing blue but filled with warmth and kindness, as was his welcoming smile.

It wasn't hard to tell which one was Mitsuki and Kitaro. Despite Fersen's nervousness, Kitaro's friendly demeanor set him at ease.

Kizoshi sat next to Kitaro, evenly meeting Mitsuki's irate glare with an amused one of her own. But Fersen didn't miss the edge of ice in it that silently warned Mitsuki to be on his best behavior or else.

On Mitsuki's right was a shifter with a striking resemblance to Jaega. It could only be his son, Tyrian.

Jaega stood behind Fersen, resting a firm hand on his shoulder. It helped ground the unicorn shifter, as did feeling the love and support through their bond.

"Welcome back from another successful campaign, Uncle," Kitaro greeted Jaega.

"It is good that you are back, safe and sound," Tyrian added. The love in his eyes as he looked at his father warmed Fersen's heart.

"We are pleased with your easy victory," King Tatsuki added. "We knew that pathetic excuse for a king would be no match for you."

Fersen tensed at the mention of King Decius, but he kept a tight lid on his emotions. A negative reaction would all but broadcast his relationship with the dead ruler.

"Thank you for the warm welcome home," Jaega said from behind Fersen. "I am grateful Kizoshi gathered you today so I could introduce you to my new mate, Fersen Rohesia."

"How unlike you to bring home a war trophy, Uncle." Mitsuki's cruel sneer made Fersen shrink back from him.

“Do not be crude, Mitsuki,” King Tatsuki warned in a tone that was laced with a threat of violence. “We will not humor your disrespect to Jaega’s new mate.”

“And you know I would love to be the one to punish you,” Kizoshi reminded him with a playful wave to draw attention to herself. “Just say the word, and I’ll put you through another wall with great pleasure.”

Fersen had never seen somebody with so much hate and anger in their eyes as the vile contempt Mitsuki held for his younger sister. “I cannot see why you bothered to grace us with your presence at all.”

“Have you ever known Kizoshi to miss the chance to say ‘I told you so’ to someone?” Kitaro asked in an amused tone. “She predicted Uncle would bring home a treasure, and he clearly has found the most precious of treasures in a new fated mate.”

“It is literally her most favorite thing in the world to do,” Tyrian added with a laugh.

Mitsuki crossed his arms over his chest with a disdainful sniff. “It is hardly a prediction when she is friends with the Power who can tell her everyone’s fate.”

“Including yours,” Kizoshi reminded him in an ominous tone. “I have been counting down the days for some time.”

Her oldest brother rolled his eyes. Before he could retort back, King Tatsuki held up his hand to stop his son.

“Welcome to the Ariake clan, Fersen,” King Tatsuki said with a bow of his head. “What a pleasure it is to have someone as unique as you join our ranks. A treasure indeed.”

Mitsuki scoffed. “What is unique about another lowly commoner?”

Jaega’s grip on Fersen’s shoulder tightened, but he gave no other outward indication of being affected by his nephew’s words. But Fersen could feel the anger broiling inside his mate.

“Should you continue to insult my mother, I will happily finish with you once Kizoshi has had her fill,” Tyrian growled at Mitsuki. It was a reminder that he was as fierce a warrior as his father.

“Are you really so ignorant, son?” King Tatsuki asked in a disappointed tone.

“The answer to that question is always ‘Yes,’” Kizoshi gleefully said, earning her another hateful glare from Mitsuki that could have killed if possible.

“Your blind hatred will lead you to your downfall,” the king warned his oldest son. “If you are too stupid to understand what Fersen is, you do not have the right to know such secrets.”

“The only secret is he probably was a whore in King Decius’s harem who—” Mitsuki didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence.

In the blink of an eye, a giant hole appeared in the castle wall, and Mitsuki was gone. Kizoshi had moved so fast Fersen hadn’t seen her send him sailing out of his chair to the outside.

Tyrian applauded her efforts, causing Fersen to arch an eyebrow in surprise.

She looked tremendously pleased with herself. “Is there anything more satisfying than punishing him?”

To Fersen's shock, everyone laughed, including King Tatsuki. Fersen would have assumed an assault on the heir to the throne would have had severe consequences, but the king seemed genuinely delighted by what had happened to his eldest.

"Perhaps watching him sulk for days after you got the better of him yet again," King Tatsuki said, still chuckling. "Please forgive my eldest, Fersen. He is...a challenge at the best of times."

"And a worthless pain in the ass most of the time," Kizoshi added with a scowl. "I apologize on his behalf because he will never have the grace to do so himself."

"Please know that no one in this room shares his opinion of you," Tyrian added. "I am grateful that my father has found another mate. He has spent too many long years alone." It was a relief to hear Tyrian supported Fersen's new role in Jaega's life. If he had opposed their mating, it would have been crushing to Fersen and Jaega both.

"I feel like I am missing something important," Kitaro said as he tilted his head to regard Fersen. "I have never seen a shifter with such fascinating markings that cycle colors like that. My uncle must forgive me for saying you are truly beautiful, Fersen. I can see why Kizoshi described you as a treasure. It brings me great joy to know uncle has found someone like you to love."

Fersen blushed from the unexpected praise and support. "Thank you," he mumbled as he bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Do you wish to keep your secret or tell my youngest?" King Tatsuki asked, once again shocking Fersen that he was being given a choice. "He was not yet born during the Necromancer War, so he is unfamiliar with your kind. But your secret would be safe with him. Unlike my eldest, Kitaro is skilled in the art of discretion."

"And tact," Kizoshi added with a smirk, causing her father to laugh again.

Since Kitaro was so genuinely supportive, Fersen felt he could trust the younger dragon shifter with the truth of his identity. “I’m the last unicorn shifter.”

Kitaro’s blue eyes went wide with wonder. “But I thought your kind were all killed during the war?”

“They were. But my mother hid me from the necromancer who murdered her and my father, so I escaped undiscovered. A kindly owl shifter who was a family friend raised me in the forest in Morven to keep me safe.”

“How heartbreaking,” Kitaro said with genuine empathy. Fersen was relieved there was no pity in Kitaro’s blue eyes, though. “Then I am even more glad you found love with my uncle after so much heartache.”

“You both lost so much in the war and yet have found your peace with each other,” Tyrian said. “Nothing makes me happier.”

“Thank you, son,” Jaega said. Fersen could feel his fatherly pride through their connection.

The show of support touched Fersen deeply. “Thank you. I truly feel lucky to have been blessed enough to be Jaega’s fated mate.”

“I look forward to getting to know you better,” Kitaro said with a warm smile. It was impossible not to like the young prince. It was almost unbelievable how different he was from his eldest brother.

“As do I,” Tyrian added.

“Yes, but first, I must introduce him to Kisano,” Kizoshi said as she stood up from her chair. Kitaro started to stand, but she gently forced him back into his seat. “I

believe you still have some things to speak with uncle about. You can join us afterward.”

Since Kizoshi’s intentions were clear, Fersen bowed low to the king. “Thank you for allowing me the honor of being part of your family. I will do everything in my power to make you proud and never bring shame to your clan.”

“The only person who brings shame to this clan is Mitsuki,” Kizoshi said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Come, let me introduce you to my other favorite brother.”

With those words, she deftly guided Fersen out of the room, leaving his mate and the rest of his family behind. It wasn’t nearly as scary as a prospect as it would have been before meeting everyone. Jaega had been right about Kizoshi. She was fearsome, but he had nothing to fear from her.

It surprised him when she interlinked their arms as they continued walking. “Congratulations on surviving my father and Mitsuki.”

“I can’t believe you sent him through a wall!” Fersen exclaimed, still in shock that she had done it fast enough he hadn’t been able to see it. How were there no consequences for doing that to the heir to the throne?

Kizoshi giggled behind her other hand. “It is one of the few ways to teach him a lesson he will remember, at least for a little while. He lacks the common sense and intelligence of the rest of us siblings. I would be more forgiving if he was not such a repugnant creature.”

“Thank you for defending me,” Fersen said. “I really didn’t expect that.”

“My uncle’s previous mate was remarkable.” The sudden switch in topics confused

Fersen, but he let Kizoshi speak. “Losing her and their daughters was hard on all of us, even Father. He enjoyed sparring with Caprina’s quick wit and indulging in their daughters’ gentle kindness. My uncle became a different man after losing them. And who could blame him?”

“Certainly not me. I don’t know how he survived it at all.” His heart still broke for Jaega’s family being destroyed so senselessly.

“If it weren’t for Tyrian, we would have lost him, too.” Kizoshi was silent for a long moment before continuing. “But you will bring Uncle all the joy he has been missing and then some. For that, you will always have my eternal gratitude and support.”

The way she said it with such certainty would have confused Fersen if it weren’t for the fact she was best friends with the Fate Power. It made him realize something. “If you’re friends with Sophina, then does that mean you know how Jaega and I really met?” His stomach dropped at the thought of her knowing the shameful truth.

“That is a secret I will guard with my life,” Kizoshi swore to him. “Mitsuki heard nothing from me. He unfortunately has an imagination for that specific scenario since it is the cruelty he would indulge in if he thought Father or I would let him get away with it.”

“I believe you,” Fersen said. It was weird trusting in someone he had just met, but Kizoshi seemed to be a woman of her word. “Thank you.”

“There is no shame in your past. You are a survivor.” She patted his arm reassuringly. “The important thing is that you are here, and you are loved by Uncle and supported by all of us, except Mitsuki, of course. But he only supports himself and no one else.”

“Not even your father?” Fersen found that almost unbelievable.

She scoffed as they descended an ornate staircase. “Father is under no illusion. He is fully aware Mitsuki would stab him in the back if it meant getting what he wants.”

“And yet he is still heir to the throne? How is that possible?”

“Because there are things still to happen.” The cryptic comment was a reminder of Jaega describing his niece as “enigmatic.” He wasn’t wrong. “But enough with such heavy talk.”

She led them to a massive set of doors, which opened to reveal the largest library Fersen had ever seen before. There were bookshelves as far as he could see in all directions and higher than he would have thought possible for a single room. “Wow. This is magnificent.”

“See, Kisano? I told you I would bring you good company. This is Fersen, Uncle Jaega’s new mate,” Kizoshi said as she led Fersen over to where a very timid dragon shifter peered from behind a bookshelf. His blond hair was so light, it was almost white. He was as pale as Fersen, and his faint markings could barely be seen. Most striking were his soulful, yellow eyes. It looked like one gust of wind would knock him over without any effort. It made sense now why Kizoshi insisted on keeping Mitsuki far away from Kisano.

Kizoshi led them over to a table, gesturing for them to take a seat. Kisano moved without sound. He was very unassuming in simple clothes that were closer to Fersen’s normal wardrobe than what he would expect the second eldest son of a king to wear.

“Your library is so impressive,” Fersen said in awe, still looking around the massive space. “I didn’t even know this many books existed.”

Kisano tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear. “I am fortunate to have such a

collection. Do you also collect books?"

It was hard not to feel pain at the memories of loss. "Because I lived in the forest by myself without a source of income, I couldn't buy books. My friend left me hers when she moved, but they were recently destroyed in a fire."

Fersen was stunned to see Kisano's eyes fill with tears. "Oh, how awful. I am so sorry, Fersen."

His sincerity touched the unicorn shifter. "Thank you. In some ways, losing those books hurt almost worse than losing the house." He fondly remembered that Olina used to read to him when he was a child. But those were ash in a distant land now.

"I know it could never make up for such a loss, but please use my library to your heart's content," Kisano offered, wiping tears from the corner of his eyes. It was sweet how connected he felt to the books.

"That is not an offer Kisano makes lightly," Kizoshi added. "He only trusts good people with his books."

"I will treat them with the respect they deserve," Fersen promised. "Thank you for sharing your massive collection with me. This really is a paradise in the Living Realm."

Kisano tilted his head as he regarded Fersen. "It is strange. You are nothing like Uncle's last mate, and yet you seem perfect for him." He blushed scarlet. "Please forgive my rudeness."

"It's not rude at all," Fersen assured him. "Trust me, I can still hardly believe he would be interested in someone as unremarkable as me."

“How could the last surviving unicorn shifter ever be unremarkable?” Kizoshi scoffed. “Uncle will have to work hard to build up your self-confidence.”

“I’ve lived a quiet life alone in the forest for centuries. I would tend to my garden by day, read by candlelight at night. I don’t know why anyone would look at me twice.”

Kisano’s expression was sympathetic. “I feel the same way. I will surely never find a mate.”

“Why do you refuse to believe me that your fated mate is out there?” Kizoshi asked with a sigh. It was clearly a long-standing argument. “It is only a matter of time.”

“Unless I fall in love with a servant, it will never happen,” Kisano insisted. “My world is too small.”

“For now.” Kizoshi’s smug sense of satisfaction made Fersen endlessly curious.

He had certainly joined a fascinating family. It was overwhelming, but after a lifetime spent alone, Fersen was excited to have supportive people in his life once more.

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Although his dragon rattled in his cage over being separated from their mate, Jaega knew he could entrust Fersen to Kizoshi's care. He loved his feisty niece as much as his own daughters. It never failed to amuse him to see her put Mitsuki in his rightful place. Sadly, Mitsuki rarely retained the lesson she violently taught him.

"Truly, we are happy for you, brother," Tatsuki said with a rumble of approval. He was always united with his dragon, so they always spoke as one. "Fersen is as remarkable as Kizoshi promised."

"I cannot believe he survived the Necromancer War," Tyrian said in awe. "I have never heard so much as a rumor about a surviving unicorn shifter. How did he pull that off?"

"He worked very hard to stay unnoticed," Jaega said. "But once our paths crossed, I could not bear to let him go."

"He seems sweet. I hope Mitsuki did not upset him too much," Kitaro said with a frown. "I do not know why my oldest brother must always be so disagreeable."

"It is his way," Tatsuki said with a dismissive wave. "Grisden gave us a thorough briefing, Jaega, but we still wish to speak with you later about some details. For now, you should rest after your long journey home."

Jaega recognized the dismissal and stood up with a bow. "Perhaps we can speak over dinner?"

"We are pleased with that idea."

“Tyrian, would you like to talk now or later?” Jaega asked his son. He was sure he had a lot of questions about Jaega’s new mate.

Tyrian’s expression grew weary. “I would love nothing more, but we are training new castle guard recruits today. Unfortunately, I really must get back to it. They have been a motley bunch so far. Would after dinner work?”

“That would be fine. Good luck with the recruits.”

“Actually, would it be possible for me to speak with Uncle Jaega now?” Kitaro asked, looking to his father for approval for dismissal.

Tatsuki nodded. “We have other things we must attend to, so we will take our leave.” Tatsuki walked away, but not before clasping his son on the shoulder with a firm squeeze and a bear hug to Jaega. “We are so proud of you, brother. Never doubt that.”

Jaega patted his oldest brother’s back. “I missed you, too.” Tatsuki exited with Tyrian, leaving Jaega alone with Kitaro. He asked his nephew, “Would you like to stay here or go somewhere else?”

“Here is fine with me.”

Jaega sat down across the table from Kitaro. “What troubles you, nephew?”

Kitaro sighed with frustration. “Is something about to happen?”

“Such as?”

“It feels like something is about to happen, but I do not know what that something is.” Kitaro frowned. “I am unsettled.”

“Surely, Kizoshi has given you some type of cryptic clue to confuse you further.” It was one of his niece’s favorite things to do.

Kitaro scowled. While he loved his sister and was extremely amiable, even he had his limits with Kizoshi’s fondness for enigmatic riddles. “She told me to focus on my training.”

It wasn’t the hint Jaega had been expecting. “How strange.”

“Surely, Father would not start another campaign so soon after his victory at Shadron. It would make our allies nervous.” Kitaro had always been clever with strategizing and understanding the bigger picture of warfare. “But I cannot think of what other reason she would give me to work on training in my dragon form.”

It shouldn’t have surprised Jaega that Kizoshi’s involvement made the situation more confusing. “She specifically told you to work on training your dragon form?” It took massive amounts of energy to maintain a larger form, so it was common for a shifter of Kitaro’s young age to work on growing larger for longer.

“She said my efforts to work on maintaining a larger form would behoove me in the near future. It makes me wonder if perhaps I am getting ready for battle. But I do not see one on the horizon.”

“We are nowhere close to the Galinor situation becoming actionable, nor would I put you on the front lines of that. If Kizoshi is telling you to work on dragon training, she has her own reasons outside of battle, as near as I can tell.”

Kitaro sighed. “I do not know whether to feel relieved or annoyed.”

Jaega chuckled at his nephew’s dilemma. “Kizoshi is good at inspiring that conflict in others.” He reined in his amusement for Kitaro’s sake. “While I do not profess to

know the reasoning behind her suggestion, I know better than to disobey what is an unusually straightforward command from her. If she has told you to train your dragon form, there is surely a good reason. She never does anything without one.”

“Her vagaries leave too much room for my imagination to run wild.” Kitaro tossed his long, white hair over his shoulder. “It undoubtedly has to do with something Sophina told her. And while I am aware Sophina has been very kind to our family because of her friendship with my sister, it still makes me nervous.”

“Well, if it is not to ready you for war, then perhaps it is to prepare you to meet your fated mate,” Jaega suggested.

Kitaro’s expression turned thoughtful. “So long as my mate is not Prince Nasume, I would be open to that unlikely possibility.”

Nasume was the eldest son of King Soseki of Kunushi. Both father and son were nasty, narcissistic, unpleasant wolf shifters. Nasume had an unfortunate obsession with Kitaro that only seemed to grow stronger by the year.

Jaega had urged Tatsuki in private to ban the persistent prince from the castle so he could not bother Kitaro, but Valzerna’s alliance with Kunushi was too important. Mercifully, Tatsuki at least found the wolf prince abhorrent enough to protect Kitaro from an arranged marriage by arguing their alliance was strong enough without a marriage to secure the bond between the two countries.

“Kizoshi has stated clearly and on many occasions that Prince Nasume will never be your mate, so I believe her.” Nasume was the only person Kizoshi hated as much as Mitsuki. “You know she would not lie to you about something that important. I have no doubt if she could kill Nasume without causing a diplomatic incident, he would have been dead centuries ago.”

That drew a laugh from Kitaro. “She would sooner kill him than have me suffer through being his mate.”

“And I love her for that and so much more,” Jaega said with pride. “Regardless of the reason, working on maintaining a larger dragon form for longer is sound advice. We have been lax with that kind of training of late, so I say take her advice and see where it leads you.”

“Thank you for at least giving me peace of mind that a war is not imminent.” Kitaro stood up to leave. “I will visit the library, then after dinner, I will work on training this evening since it is a full moon.”

“It smells like rain may be coming later tonight, so I would not fly too far from home unless you wish to get wet,” Jaega suggested.

“I will be mindful. Thank you, Uncle.” Kitaro hugged Jaega when the older shifter stood up from his chair. “I am so happy for you. Fersen seems wonderful.”

“He truly is the best thing that has happened to me since I lost my girls.” Jaega would be forever grateful to Sophina for bringing Fersen into his life. “Once he’s had time to rest from the journey, I will introduce him to the Enchanters. With his magical abilities and the right training, I believe he could do incredible things with them.”

“A unicorn shifter in the ranks of the Enchanters? Who would have thought such a thing was possible in this day and age?”

“Certainly not me.” It seemed almost impossible to believe, but there was no doubt in Jaega’s mind about how much he loved his new mate.

* * *

Jaega looked up when there was a tentative knock on the door to his suite. “Come in!”

Fersen seemed almost sheepish about entering. Jaega gestured for his mate to join him on the chaise lounge. “Sorry I’m late.”

“There is no need to apologize or knock to enter your own room,” Jaega said as he set his book aside. “You can come and go freely. This is your home now.”

The unicorn shifter looked around the large sitting room in amazement. “That’s going to take some getting used to. This room is bigger than my entire tree house.”

Jaega guided Fersen to sit on his lap. “How was your visit with Kisano?”

“Great, but it confused me more. I don’t understand how Kisano, Kitaro, and Kizoshi are all so kind but Mitsuki is so vile.” Fersen frowned as he mulled over the issue. “I still can’t believe Kizoshi sent him sailing out the wall. We were on the tenth floor!”

“It is not a problem when Mitsuki has wings and can fly,” Jaega said with a chuckle. “I say this with love in my heart, but Mitsuki is all the worst traits of my oldest brother and father rolled into one miserable person. He was not spoiled or coddled, nor was he treated overly harshly. But he resents the world with an anger that makes me fear for this country if anything ever happens to my brother.”

Fersen paled at the suggestion. “Honestly, the thought of Mitsuki being king terrifies me. All of Valzerna would suffer.”

“Undoubtedly. He would be a cruel king, if not the cruelest in Talwynian history. Powers willing, that day will never come.” Jaega said a silent prayer to the deities for the ongoing health and safety of his oldest brother. “But there is no sense in worrying about a day that may never happen.”

“Kisano’s library is so amazing, though. I’m glad he has a sanctuary where Mitsuki can’t mess with him.”

“Mitsuki is stupid, but he is not so foolish as to go after Kisano again.”

Fersen tilted his head with curiosity. “Again?”

“Kizoshi caught him in the library once, bullying Kisano by destroying one of his books. She punished him so severely that he was in danger of bleeding out before his body could heal itself. Healers had to be called before it was too late, which further wounded Mitsuki’s battered pride. The only reason she spared his life was because Kisano begged her to stop.”

Fersen covered his mouth in shock. “Did she get in trouble for it?”

“While Tatsuki views Kisano as a wasted effort?—”

“That’s awful!”

Jaega rubbed his mate’s back to soothe him. “I did not say I agreed with him. But because Kisano has no dragon and no interest in fighting, he is worthless as an heir, in Tatsuki’s opinion.”

Confusion tempered Fersen’s outrage. “What do you mean Kisano doesn’t have a dragon? I saw he had shifter markings, so his mother had to be a shifter and not a human.” Half-shifters with a human parent lacked a beast and shifter markings.

“She was also a dragon shifter. But his dragon does not exist despite Kizoshi implying otherwise.”

A furrow appeared on Fersen’s brow. “I haven’t known her for very long, but isn’t it

unwise not to believe her? She seems to know everything because she's friends with Sophina. If she says Kisano has a dragon, then I believe he has one, even if it's not that active."

"It is for the best that it doesn't appear," Jaega said. "I fear if it ever appeared, Tatsuki would insist we try to make a warrior out of Kisano, even though it is against his very nature. The greater kindness is to leave Kisano content in his library, away from the machinations of my brother and Mitsuki."

"I can't argue against that." Fersen frowned. "My heart breaks for Kisano that Mitsuki destroyed one of his books."

"Once Mitsuki healed enough, Kizoshi made him buy Kisano one hundred books to atone for what he had done. It cost him a small fortune, but he has never stepped foot in the library or spoken to Kisano since that day, so her methods clearly worked. It is no exaggeration to say that Mitsuki almost lost his life that day. Sending him through a wall today is actually Kizoshi showing restraint."

A shudder ran through Fersen. "Remind me to never piss her off, wow."

"Between Tatsuki's temper and Arenthia's anger, Kizoshi is the perfect blend of lethal rage. She is the fiercest ally you could ever hope to have, but cross her, and she will be the worst nightmare of your life." It was true, but Jaega didn't want Fersen to fear his niece when there was no need. "But you will never betray her, so you need not worry about such consequences. The only two who should live in fear of her are Mitsuki and Nasume."

"Nasume?" Fersen scratched his head. The name was familiar, but it took a moment for him to place it. "You mean Prince Nasume of Kunushi?"

"Indeed. Kizoshi has been very vocal about the only reason he lives and breathes is

because Sophina says there is something very important he still must do first. But once that thing is done, I do not believe there is a single person who can stop Kizoshi from sending him to the Beyond Realm.”

“What could he have possibly done to make her want to kill him so badly?”

“He has an uncomfortable obsession with Kitaro. As you can see with Kisano, there is nothing she would not do to protect him and Kitaro. The bond between those three runs deep. Nasume is living on borrowed time, yet he insists on provoking her every time they meet.”

Fersen shook his head in amazement. “He must have a death wish to tempt her like that.”

“I count my lucky stars Kizoshi is on our side. But enough of such heavy talk. Would you like to rest or perhaps take a bath?”

“The bath sounds amazing.” Fersen let out a whoop followed by a laugh when Jaega picked him up in one fell swoop. “Something tells me we’ll be distracted from getting clean, though.”

Jaega chuckled. “You already know me so well, dear mate.”

Fersen snuggled against Jaega with a murmur. Jaega couldn’t agree more. It had been a long time since he had been so happy and carefree. He looked forward to more days and nights enjoying all the pleasures his beloved mate offered.

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After leaving Kisano and dropping Fersen off, Kizoshi followed Kitaro to his room.
“Have you given my suggestion any further thought?”

“You mean working on training to maintain a bigger dragon form?” Kitaro asked, although they both knew what she was referring to.

“Indeed.”

Kitaro glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “You understand how disconcerting it is when you give me concrete, actionable advice, yes?”

She laughed behind her hand. “And here I thought I was doing a nice thing. Contrary to your claims, it seems you prefer it when I am more cryptic.”

“It would help if you would tell me why I should work on form training. Perhaps your hint would not feel so ominous.”

“What are you so concerned about?”

Kitaro resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “When your mother is the War Power, where else would my mind go but to the battlefield?”

“Come now,” she tutted. “There are more reasons to train your inner dragon than for warfare.”

“Such as?” He wished for once she would give him a straight answer.

But today would not be the day to change that. “Remember, everything happens at the right time and place.”

“Would you be so kind as to give me a valid reason for why you are being so insistent?”

They paused outside of his room. She kissed his cheek before giving him a hug. “Do not be so worried, dear brother. I promise you will thank me later.”

“You know, just once in my life, I would like to have a conversation with you where I come out with more answers than questions.” Kitaro acted somewhat annoyed, but he adored his older sister, despite all her baffling riddles.

She flashed her beautiful smile. “What would be the fun in that?” She walked away but called out over her shoulder, “Do not forget that the clearing above the Fate’s Gate Temple is lovely on the night of a full moon this time of year. It also has plenty of wide, open spaces for you to practice being as big as you can. Perhaps you will enjoy training there instead of indulging in the Day of Remembrance Festival.”

Kitaro had always found the holiday too morbid to celebrate, so her suggestion was a welcomed distraction. It was a more specific clue than she normally left him with. He watched her retreating form, shaking his head at how she always seemed to be an enigma wrapped up in a mystery. But she had been kind enough to give him a location, and one thing Kitaro had learned over his many long years was never to disobey his older sister’s hints, especially when it was so rare for her to give him concrete instructions.

He headed into his room to change before heading out to train in the forest on the edge of the capital, Tiora.

* * *

After hours of training, Kitaro succeeded in making his dragon form bigger than ever before. He had maintained it for longer than he had expected, but doing so was a huge drain on his energy. Since it was a nice night, he shrank to a smaller size that was easier to maintain. He rested under the cover of the trees in the clearing above the Fate's Gate Temple. He was far enough away from the city center that the sounds of the festival didn't reach the clearing.

Off to the side, a thin stone staircase led the way down the steep hill to the Fate's Gate Temple, but Kitaro was too superstitious to use them. At the bottom of them was the massive namesake, Fate's Gate, an old relic that hummed with ancient and powerful magic. It was said that anyone who walked through the gate would have their fate changed—but whether it was for the better was entirely up to the Fate Power.

The temple of mages who guarded the gate worshipped both Sophina and the Knowledge Power, Liros. Kitaro had never taken much interest in the mostly human mages, but then again, he had never paid much attention to humans in general. His father hated them with a fiery passion but had to tolerate their presence on his lands as their ruler.

Kitaro had little experience with the short-lived creatures. His world at the castle was isolated, and he lacked any real friends beyond Kizoshi and Kisano. But he hoped Fersen would soon become a friend as well. His uncle's new mate was exactly the kind of person Kitaro had hoped Jaega would someday end up with if fate was so kind as to let him.

Kitaro was pulled from his thoughts when there was a sudden crackle of energy. The smell of ancient magic intensified before a burst of it pulsed out from the direction of the gate. At the center was a new and most delectable scent. Kitaro wasn't sure what was coming up the staircase, but he couldn't wait to find out. Perhaps it was the reason his sister had suggested he lay in wait for whoever was about to arrive.

* * *

Want to see more of Jaega and Fersen?

* * *

Curious to find out what Fate's Gate has in store for Kitaro? Read Mage of the Dragon Prince today to find out what happens next!

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The following are short descriptions of characters, places, phrases, and words used in the text.

Alsari [Al-sar-e]: Small island kingdom of Talwyn, south of Valzerna. Famous for their berries.

Ariake [R-e-ah-kay]: Ruling dragon shifter clan of Valzerna.

Balbinus [Ball-beh-noose]: Scorpion shifter. Uncle of dethroned King Decius. New king of Shadron.

Beyond Realm: Where souls go after they die to reside for eternity.

Caprina [Cuh-pree-nuh]: Dragon shifter. Jaega's first mate. Killed during the Necromancer War, along with her two daughters.

Decius [Deh-see-us]: Scorpion shifter. King of Shadron. Dethroned and killed by General Jaega.

Divine Realm: Where Powers and other Divine beings reside.

Divine Weapon: Weapon from the Divine Realm. Only weapon with the power to cause permanent damage to shifters by negating their healing abilities.

Enchanter: Shifters with strong command of magic to enchant objects in the Valzerna castle.

Fersen Rohesia [Fair-sin?Row-hee-shuh]: Last unicorn shifter. Jaega's new mate.

Fordani [For-dawn-knee]: City. Capital of Alsari.

Galinator [Gal-eh-nor]: Kingdom of Talwyn between Elyenbell and Quintox. Ruled by snake shifter.

Grisden [Gris-den]: Dragon shifter. Jaega's personal valet servant.

Heat: The week someone's pheromones are hyperactive to attract a mate.

Ishibiya [Ish-e-bee-yuh]: Necromancer. Leader of the necromancers during the Necromancer War. Rumor has it he escaped death and is still in hiding as the last surviving necromancer.

Jaega [Jay-guh]: Dragon shifter. Head general of King Tatsuki's army. Fersen's mate.

Jetunia [Jeh-toon-e-uh]: City. Capital of Morven.

Kalindi [Kuh-lynn-dee]: Town. Located in northwestern Kunushi.

Kisano [Key-sah-no]: Dragon shifter. King Tatsuki's bookish son.

Kitaro [Key-ta-row]: Dragon shifter. Youngest son of King Tatsuki.

Kizoshi [Key-zo-she]: Half-dragon shifter, half-Power. Only daughter of King Tatsuki and Arenthia. Primarily resides in the Divine Realm.

Kunushi [Coo-new-she]: Northwestern kingdom of Talwyn. Ruled by King Soseki.

Mitsuki [Me-tsu-key]: Dragon shifter. Oldest son of King Tatsuki.

Morven [More-vin]: Northwestern kingdom of Talwyn. Where Fersen is from originally.

Necromancer War: War in the distant past against the necromancers to stop them from using death magic in evil ways. Murdered all the unicorn shifters during that time except for Fersen. Only the leader of the necromancers is rumored to have survived.

Norkon [Nor-con]: Crow shifter. Lieutenant in Valzerna's army. Expert lock picker.

Norello[Nor-el-low]: City. Capital of Kunushi.

Powers: Divine beings. Deities who control everything in the Living Realm.

Reflorna [Reh-floor-nah]: Central kingdom of Talwyn bordering Arenvale, Balsimi, Kunushi, Morven, Odatam, and Zinnia.

Shadron [Shad-ron]: Southwestern kingdom of Talwyn. Ruled by scorpion shifter King Decius.

Talwyn [Tall-win]: Continent of kingdoms in the Living Realm.

Tatsuki[Tah-tsu-key]: Dragon shifter. King of Valzerna. Father of Kisano, Kitaro, Kizoshi, and Mitsuki.

Tiora [Tea-or-uh]: City. Capital of Valzerna.

Torval [Tour-vahl]: Jaguar shifter. Corporal in Valzerna's army.

Tyrian [Tier-e-on]: Dragon shifter. Jaega's only surviving child. Head of King Tatsuki's castle guards.

Valzerna [Val-zur-nuh]: Eastern island kingdom of Talwyn. Ruled by King Tatsuki, Jaega's oldest brother.

Venrik [Vin-rick]: Ruling wolf shifter pack of Kunushi.