



His Feral Omega Mate

(Sweetwater Pack #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Dragons have come to Sweetwater! With their help, can the pack finally put an end to the attacks by the Northharbor aviary?

Deke never imagined he would find a fated mate, much less a dragon like Ozyn, a species thought to be extinct.

He has to wonder at fates plans not only for him, but for the pack he protects.

Could his omega be the key to turning the tide in the war with the aviary?

Or should he step down as Head Enforcer and help Ozyn heal from a century trapped under the fae?

His heart tells him to covet his omega, but Ozyn is fiercely protective of his alpha and has other plans.

Finding Deke gave Ozyn the strength to break free of the fae and heal from his imprisonment.

Ozyn wants to be the perfect omega for his wolf mate, give him all the babies he wants, and just live at peace.

If only the humans and aviary would let them.

After so long shut in the dark, all he wants is to be free to fly in the light, and hell do anything to make that happen.

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Hopefully all the named characters of the Sweetwater Pack that are of importance for this book!

The Sweetwater family

Deke: Wolf shifter. Alpha. Head Enforcer. Former temporary pack Alpha. Cousin to Blake, Chase, and Axel. Axel: Wolf shifter. Omega. Former beta. Former Second for the pack. Now runs the security in the omega compound. Twin brother to Chase, big brother to Blake. Mated to Prince Teárlach of the elves. Papa to Rieka, Crown Princess of the elves of Abrocaelum. Chase: Wolf shifter. Beta. Twin to Axel, big brother to Blake. Extra ability to detect lies. Aroace. Blake: Wolf shifter. Alpha. Sweetwater pack Alpha. Younger brother to Axel and Chase. Mated to Kade. Dad to Greyson, Felix and Elliotte. Extra ability to anticipate moves during a fight. Triplets: Greyson (M) and Elliotte (F) are both wolf shifters and alphas. Felix (M) is a wolf shifter and omega. Both parents of Blake, Axel, and Chase are deceased.

The Hayes Family

Rincoln Hayes: Deceased. Wolf shifter. Alpha. Former disgraced Hayes pack Alpha. Father to Kade, Angelica, Rune, and potentially others. Kade Turner/Sweetwater, born as Ryder Hayes: Wolf shifter. Omega. Eldest child of Rincoln and Jasper. Mated to Blake Sweetwater. Papa to Greyson, Felix, and Elliotte. Extra ability to sense things coming, a variation of Jasper's precognition. Jasper Hayes/Brown/Flemming: Fox shifter. Omega. Former mate of Rincoln Hayes. Mate to Dakota Flemming. Papa to Kade and Angelica from his first mating and Hayden from his fated mates match to Dakota. Has a precognition ability in the form of visions. Angelica Hayes/Brown/Flemming: Fox shifter. Beta. Will be an alpha when she is old enough

to change. Kade's and Hayden's sister. Precognition in the form of dreams.

The Flemming Family

Aldrin Flemming: Bear shifter. Alpha. Healer/doctor for the Sweetwater sleuth and now the pack. Has extra healing ability. Mated to James. Father of Dakota. James Flemming: Bear shifter. Omega. Nurse for the sleuth and then the pack. Mated to Aldrin. Papa of Dakota. Dakota Flemming: Bear shifter. Alpha. Blake's assistant. Mated to Jasper. Adoptive father of Kade and Angelica. Father of Hayden. Kade's former boss and best friend. Hayden Flemming: Bear shifter. Alpha. Son of Dakota and Jasper.

The Stewart Family (Xavier has adopted them all as Stewarts in his heart at least)

Xavier Stewart: Wolf shifter. Alpha. Former acting Alpha of the remaining Hayes pack. Nanny to his grandchildren. Father of Roan. Father-in-law to Hiroshi. Dad to Tate and Asher. Joins the series at the end of book 2. Roan Stewart: Wolf shifter. Alpha. Alpha Mate Kade's assistant. Former betrothed of Kade. Acted as protector secretly. Fated mates with Hiroshi. Former mates with Tate and Asher. Father of Jewel, Noah, and Maddox, though only Jewel is his child biologically. Hiroshi Stewart: Rare Japanese tiger shifter. Omega. Healer to the pack. Fated mates with Roan and Tate. Former mate to Asher. Papa to Jewel, a Wolf shifter and Alpha, Noah, a Japanese Tiger and Alpha, and Maddox, a White Lion cub and Omega, though Maddox is not his biological child. Special strong healing ability. Tate Stewart: Raven shifter. Omega. Former beta. Flies in the wing guard as an enforcer. Fated mates with Asher and Hiroshi. Former mate to Roan. Papa and biological parent to Noah, a Japanese Tiger and Alpha, and Maddox, a White Lion cub and Omega. Papa to Jewel, a Wolf shifter and Alpha. Formerly of the Northharbor aviary and then the Northharbor pride when mated to Asher for the first time. Asher Stewart: White Lion shifter. Alpha. Former beta. Works at the factory. Fated mates with Tate. Former mate of Roan and Hiroshi. Dad and biological parent of Maddox, a White

Lion cub and Omega. Dad to Noah, a Japanese Tiger and Alpha, and Jewel, a Wolf shifter and Alpha. Formerly of the Northharbor pride.

The Rest of the Pack

Melody: Raccoon shifter. Beta. Enforcer. Sister of Cadence. Cadence: Raccoon shifter. Omega. Mom to Riff. Mated to Hakeem and mom to their baby girl, Harmony, an owl shifter omega. Sam: Unnamed shifter type. Beta. Enforcer. Dalton: Raccoon shifter. Omega. Former beta. Chase's assistant and best friend. Cousin to Melody and Cadence. Mated to Larken. Papa to Bima and Brayan, both Raccoon shifters and Omegas, and Reid and Raiden, both Komodo Dragons and Alphas. Winter: Wolf shifter. Beta. Cook at the mansion/pack house. Larken: Komodo Dragon shifter. Alpha. Enforcer. Roan's best friend. Mated to Dalton. Dad to Bima and Brayan, both Raccoon shifters and Omegas, and Reid and Raiden, both Komodo Dragons and Alphas. Georgia: Wolf shifter. Omega. Runs the omega part of the compound, including the community center. Surrogate mom to Blake and his brothers after their mom died. Grady: Wolf shifter. Omega. Former beta. Jasper's former protector. Mated to Trey and Mateo. Remained in the pack once it broke from the shifter council. Developed a healing ability post change. Trey: Wolf shifter. Omega. Former beta. Jasper's former protector. Mated to Grady and Mateo. Remained in the pack once it broke from the shifter council. Developed the ability to see bonds post change. Mateo: Yellow-headed Caracaras. Alpha. Mated to Grady and Trey. Fled from the aviary when his sister mated her fated mate, a shifter not of their kind. Nova: Yellow-headed Caracaras. Omega. Fated mate to Ricky, a Raven shifter from the aviary. Sofia: Yellow-headed Caracaras. Omega. Mate to Rudi. Mom to Nova and Mateo. Former aviary member. Rudi: Yellow-headed Caracaras. Alpha. Mated to Sofia. Dad to Nova and Mateo. Former aviary member. Damaged wing after fleeing. Can no longer fly. Assistant to Chase while Dalton is on parental leave. Jake: Raven shifter. Omega. Former beta. Part of the wing guard. Tate's cousin. Mated to Sebastian. Papa to Matthew, a Peregrine Falcon Alpha. Refugee from the Northharbor aviary after they punished him for mating outside his shifter type. Sebastian: Peregrine Falcon shifter.

Alpha. Former beta. Part of the wing guard. Mated to Jake. Dad to Matthew, a Peregrine Falcon Alpha. Fled the Northharbor aviary after they locked Jake in his raven form. Micah: Dingo shifter. Alpha. Enforcer. Michaela: Witch. Midwife and nurse. Works for Aldrin. Engaged to ívarr and pregnant with his child. Now formally a member of the pack. Shelby: Nymph. Worked with Kade and Dakota at Mercury Delivers before coming to manage the factory in the pack territory.

The Elves

ívarr: Lead scientist. Engaged to Michaela. They are expecting their first baby. Teagan: Scientist and researcher. Hakeem: Eagle Owl alter. Specialist in shifter behavior. Helped rescue shifters from the fae. Mated to Candace. New dad to Riff and a little girl, Harmony, an omega. Teárlach: Snowy Owl alter. Alpha. Former Crown Prince of the elves of Abrocaelum. Guard for the team. Mate to Axel. Father to Rieka, Crown Princess of the elves, an alpha wolf shifter. Cryabell: Athena Owl alter. Nanny for Greyson, Elliotte, and Felix. Kelda: Scientist. ívarr's youngest sister. Ingal: Guard and nanny to Dalton and Larken's brood. Alyalsha Skanicudal: Snowy Owl alter. Alpha. Queen of the Elves of Abrocaelum.

The Northharbor Coven

Poppy: Witch. Former coven leader. Wife of Zinna. Mama to Sage. Friend to Kade. Helped Roan protect Kade from a distance. Zinna: Witch. Married to Poppy. Mom to Sage. Oak's sister. Oak: Witch. Zinna's younger brother. Married to Thyme. Dad to Jasmine and Calix. Thyme: Witch. Northharbor coven leader. Damon's brother/dad. Married to Oak. Daddy to Jasmine and Calix. Damon: Witch. Former hitman and coven leader. Thyme's younger brother but thinks of him as his dad. Brother to Parker. Mated to Mori. Dad to Barr and stepdad to Cody. Mori: Demon. Owns Heatwave, the heat club in Sweetwater. Formerly in contract to Cody's grandfather. Cody's bio dad and Barr's adoptive father. Damon's mate. Cody: Half witch/half demon. In partnership with the pack to grow hell-spice apples to make cider. Mated

to Toth. Toth: Demon. Works with the Sweetwater pack to make hell-spice cider. Formerly in contract to Basil. Mated to Cody.

The Greenbriar Pack

Leith: Alligator shifter. Alpha. Pack Alpha. Mated to Jenny. Parent to grown children and a young alligator shifter alpha, Jack. Jenny: Alligator shifter. Omega. Pack Alpha Mate. Mated to Leith. Mom to grown children, not named, and Jack. Reggie: Unnamed type. Alpha. Head Enforcer. Finds a mate from Sweetwater but remains in Greenbriar. Tucker: Unnamed type. Alpha. Second in command. Robin: Polar bear. Alpha. Fated mates with Levi. Dad to Rune, a wolf shifter alpha and bio dad to Isla, a polar bear omega. Listed under Greenbriar but they are now members of the Sweetwater pack. Robin teaches at the community center. Levi: Binturong. Omega. Fated mates with Levi. Papa to Rune, who is biologically Rincoln's son, making him Kade and Angelica's half brother. Papa to Isla from his mating with Robin. Now part of the Sweetwater pack and teaches pre-k.

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Prologue

Ozyn

The Darkglade castle loomed ahead as my companions and I neared. The sky above us was overcast, with ominous gray clouds clinging to the towers. Down below, barren fields waited for us to land.

Sire, are you sure you want to do this? Surely there has—

I loved my brother, Miraghan. He was the best advisor I could ask for, but we had been over this too many times now. I had made my decision. There was no one else to go in my place. No one I could have asked to take on this task.

If what I suspected King Glorin Darkglade wanted was true, there was no other substitute for me. He wanted a dragon king. He'd get a dragon king, even if he had to bring my people to the brink of extinction to do it.

No. We have exhausted all other avenues for peace. Signing a treaty with the fae is necessary for our survival.

This close, it was easy to see his deep blue wings twitch in frustration. Even the wind could not hide his rumbling growl. I knew my words had hurt him. I knew I sounded too resigned to my situation. We were going into this in a weaker position than any of us would have liked.

We should sign the treaty in neutral territory, not at the fae king's stronghold. The

elves should have been present as witnesses when I knew they were not. The flavor of their magic was not hanging in the air. Unlike the fae, they did not mask themselves. If they were there, they would allow themselves to be scented.

I could not help but feel anger towards the elves. They had forsaken their dragon allies in recent years, too afraid of losing their tenuous hold on their lands. The fae had grown too strong for them to stand with us.

Now we had run out of time, options, allies, to do anything but bargain with the fae.

The castle drew ever closer as my heart sank. When would I be free to fly again? My thoughts returned to my beloved sons and the last flight I'd had with them before I left. We had played hide and go seek like we used to when they were much younger. The worst part of this was being away from them. At least I had two of my brothers with me for comfort.

Signaling we had been spotted, horns blared, announcing our arrival. Between them, the fae warriors in their finest regalia, and the cheerful banners posted all around the castle, one would almost assume this was a joyous event.

Too late now, Valethar said, using our connection and echoing my thoughts. He and I were always close. The closest of my clutch mates. We were so accustomed to using our mental connection that even in human form, we rarely spoke aloud. His mental voice was as familiar to me as my own. When would I get the chance to hear it again?

Landing in the courtyard, I quickly shifted, clothing myself once more in the rich fabrics which suited my station as the king of the dragons. I was grateful our clothing shifted with us, unlike with our shifter cousins. Dragons naturally carried more magic than shifters did, allowing us to do more than take our Draconic forms, or perform magic. I would have hated to be vulnerable under the lecherous eyes of King Glorin.

“Welcome,” a fae male said. “Please follow me. His Majesty has been expecting you for some time.”

Oh, no! We’re late! Vale sniped. How dare we make His Majesty wait for us!

Mira had to work to hide his smirk in response to our brother’s mental words.

“Our apologies. The wind was not in our favor.” Mira spoke aloud, his words polite but cold.

I glanced at my brother in approval of his pointed reply to the barb. My heart felt much too heavy to joke with my beloved brothers. It was still recovering from leaving our first hatched clutch mate behind to protect my boys.

Laeros had a much more important job than this visit. He was to guide my heir, Rezoth, and his four brothers to lead our people. Fresh from his leadership challenge, Rezoth was acting as regent in my absence. I had taught him for over half a century how to rule over our people with compassion. Working with his brothers and his court, he had successfully soared through the challenge, completing the tasks. His fight with our best fighters left scars on his golden scales to prove he was a worthy dragon to lead our people while I was gone.

We did not know how long that would be. If my worst fears came true, I might never be free of Glorin Darkglade.

The throne room was elaborate and vast. Our footsteps echoed on the marble as we marched to my doom, following our companion. The fae did not speak or even deign to look at us, believing he was far superior.

Barely into the room, Glorin’s voice booming out a welcome made my steps pause. He was confirming the secret worries of my heart. He was much too smug.

“King Ozyn! Miraghan. Valethar. Good to see you. Where, may I ask, is Laeros?”

As a group, we halted at the foot of the dais.

I sketched a bow before answering the question. “My brother sends his apologies. He is needed at home.”

Glorin was a cold, if not beautiful man. He had blue-black hair worn straight and hanging around his shoulders. Atop his head, he wore a circlet of gold leaves with gems for flowers. The crown was stunning. A true work of art, yet it did not distract from Glorin’s form. He was taller than me, most were. Fae, like the elves, were tall people. Unlike the elves, he was not lean; he had wide shoulders and thick, muscular arms. His wings were massive things, black, like his heart, and looked like they were made of raven feathers. He had delicately tapered ears. His scorpion-like tail twitched, the wicked sharp barb tipped with metal. His eyes were ice blue and fixed on me.

I was not ashamed to admit the fae king scared me since I knew in the depths of my heart what lay ahead for me.

“Of course! Rezoth will have his first heat soon, will he not?”

The mere mention of my omega child, my heir, was a bolt of ice to my chest. My lungs seized for the briefest of moments. I recovered quickly, hopefully giving no outer sign of my distress.

Why is he asking about Rezoth? Vale demanded. With his purer soul, I knew he had not guessed what I had come to this castle to do.

I did not answer my brother, wanting to end the talk of my child as soon as it was possible. With our weakened bargaining position, I could ill afford to hand more

power to Glorin.

“That is correct, Your Majesty. However, he is many years from being able to carry a clutch.”

“Of course he is. Have you named him as regent?”

“I have.” I kept my words clipped.

“So you know why I summoned you here today?”

“I have my suspicions.”

His grin was victorious. I had known, yet I had still come. He knew he held all the power and would make me pay for it dearly.

He called out for the fae to return with the document, though I was not listening properly. My blood was roaring in my ears, telling me to flee this cursed place.

The fae handed it to Mira, who read it aloud. “This treaty proclaims the Darkglade Kingdom to be allies of the Drakon Kingdom upon the signature of both kings. As king of the dragons, King Ozyn agrees to a—“ His words came to a halt. He glanced at me. Surely this must be a mistake? His eyes begged me to tell him it was.

“A marriage pact? Is that correct?” I said, my voice calm.

“Yes.” Glorin’s eyes gleamed with triumph. “You are to stay here as my consort. Agree and your people will be our treasured allies. Deny me and I will kill your clutch. My people already surround your lands. With you here, they have very little chance of survival.”

He was right. We did not know how long they had been there. There was little chance we would arrive in time, the distance too great. Could they have poisoned our food, our water? They had done it before. We had lost many a young dragon to their magic and schemes. If they escaped, where would they go? We could not fly forever. Abrocaelum was only so large.

“So do you agree? Will you marry me and stay here as my consort?”

“I—“

Perhaps my brothers could see the resolution I had come to. This was necessary for my people’s survival.

“Hold on!” Vale interjected. “Do you vow for his safety? You promise not to harm him? If he becomes your consort, he and our people will be treated as allies?”

“I swear to treat King Ozyn as a beloved consort and the dragon people as allies as long as he fulfills the conditions of the bargain.”

My hands reached for the swath of silk onto which the words had been etched. In the rules of engagement, I was to stay at Darkglade castle. I was not to have any other lovers and would perform my duties as I should, as a consort. Glorin, for his part, was not to use force to gain my agreement, nor also bed another. My people were to live as they had always done, without the interference of the fae unless they wanted to trade.

My time was to be spent as a pretty jewel. A symbol of the strength of the fae’s trickery.

“I accept this bargain. I will become your consort.”

Glorin's smile was full of teeth, sharp and deadly. "I look forward to calling you my husband, dear Ozyn. We will hold the ceremony today."

I knew when I came to Darkglade castle I would not leave it for some time. I did not expect it to be for over a century, or the suffering I would endure within its walls.

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Captive

Ozyn

Though not of my choosing, my union with my new husband was amicable for the first few years at least. Being well treated made it easier to be away from my family, though I thought of my sons daily. Often I would be reading and think of the discussions I would have about books with Nhil and Gedith. While playing music, I would think of Rezoth's talent with the violin. Every little thing reminded me of either my brothers or children.

Perhaps naively, I had assumed it purely to be a political marriage, that Glorin would get around the terms in our contract to have liaisons with others. That we were a marriage on paper only. Imagine my surprise when he embarked on a campaign to woo me into his bed.

Glorin was not as cold as I had thought him to be, or maybe he was just that good at lying. He allowed me a measure of freedom inside the castle, yet I was never to fly in my dragon form, I was always to repress my other form. Though most fae could fly, they had little hope of keeping up with a determined dragon. Thus I was grounded. It chafed to see my brothers take their twice yearly visits, knowing I could not join them in the sky.

We got to know each other like I supposed people in arranged marriages did. I had an impression of the fae which was quite different to the facade he wore in those early years.

There were dates. We traveled the kingdom together when it was safe to do so. The fae were often at odds with the elves, making it difficult to visit the border towns. When Glorin went there, he did not allow me to come, pacifying me with promises of other trips, and excuses about keeping my people out of his conflict with the elves.

Long, romantic dinners, walks, shows, flying with me in his arms. The fae did it all to make me feel something for him.

Then there were the gifts. Dragons are known for their covetous natures. We, like magpies, adore shiny trinkets. Many hoard things, gems, gold, art, to appease their inner nature. As the king, I was no different. Glorin plied me with jewels and finery until I needed another room to hold the wealth I'd amassed. My brothers sometimes took smaller pieces home with them when they came to see me, to give to my boys.

Allowing my brothers to visit was another way to weaken my resolve not to fall for the fae king. If he had cut them off from me, then I would never have bought any of his lies. Though seeing them was sometimes a barb to the heart, I did love our visits. Hearing about my people, my children, made it easier to bear being away from them.

Never once did I think of inviting any of my boys even though it cut into my heart to go so long without them. They were safer far away from the machinations of Glorin. Truthfully, I did not want them to see me as a trophy. To be brought low was a blow to my ego.

Glorin was an attentive husband. No need of mine was too small for him to attend to me. Lavishing his attention on me did more than anything else.

When I woke the morning after our first night together, still naked in his bed, I found myself in cuffs.

Each metal bracelet was welded shut with magic. The runes on each one ensured I

could not perform even the most basic of spells. While I still had my strength, I was basically human.

I could not summon my other form.

My husband had taken my body, my freedom, then everything from me.

Without the ability to shift, I was diminished. Dragons, unlike shifters, do not have two souls intertwined inside of them. We are dragons, always. We are one soul. Taking away my ability to shift was removing a limb, a sense, half of myself.

How I raged! I tore the room apart. I longed to tear Glorin to shreds. He waited to face me until I was utterly spent, hopeless after days of trying everything I could do to remove them.

“Why?” I had begged of him, desperate to understand why the person I had grown feelings for had betrayed me in such a cruel manner.

He cupped my face, swept away my tears, and whispered honeyed words into my ears as he wrapped me in his embrace.

“Oh, my sweet husband. My dear Ozyn. You are my treasure. These foul things are only to ensure you cannot be stolen away. Why would anyone want a dragon who cannot fly? Who has no magic?”

“Please!”

“Shh, it is not forever.” He allowed me some modicum of space, watching me with those ice-blue eyes as if I would turn on him at any moment, when he was the one who had turned on me.

“What must I do? I signed the contract. I have been a dutiful husband.” Clasp ing his hands, I pleaded for him to be merciful, when, deep in my heart, I knew better. Glorin had betrayed me. He had lied. All his kindness had been a trick.

His gaze turned shrewd, calculating. “Ah, but there is one thing you have not provided.”

“Tell me what I can do. If it is within my power—“

“An heir. You must give me an heir.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. How could I possibly have a child with such a monster? He had shown himself to be entirely without care for me. How could I inflict such a parent on an innocent child?

When I had my precious children, I chose their alpha parent carefully. He was a man of honor, one of principles I respected. I was grateful to him for my boys.

“Why me? Why not any of the hundreds of pretty courtiers who flutter around you constantly? Any of them would be grateful to carry an heir for you.” I tried to get him to see reason. Surely there was an easier way for him to get what he wanted.

He did not tell me then. Did not admit his failure. He had tried. Glorin had bedded a thousand of his fae without one heir to show for his abuse of power. The elves, too. I would learn about his crimes against them later. Their animosity made more sense in the greater context. The fae king was a monster.

“What could be more powerful than a child borne of the union between a dragon and the king of the fae?”

It struck me then how he had diminished me with his words. I was no longer the king

of the dragons, nor his beloved husband. I was just a nameless, faceless dragon. A thing to be used. A commodity he owned until he had no use of me. He had no feelings for me like those he had carefully cultivated in me.

“What if it is impossible for us to have a child?”

Glorin stroked his smooth chin, mocking an expression of thoughtfulness I knew to be a lie. This man, this liar, was cold, calculating, and several moves ahead of me in this chess game.

“We will find a way. Your people’s future depends on it.”

There was the threat I expected. I had to warn my brothers. This far away, there was no possibility of them hearing me. I resolved to tell them at their next visit.

However, still a step ahead of me, there was no visit. My brothers were forbidden from seeing me ever again. They raged. They tried to rescue me, yet Glorin held our lives in his hands. Our marriage pact had never included visits, and until that point, he had kept to the terms. Glorin threatened my family with war if they tried to rescue me again. Unable to put our people at risk, my brothers stopped trying.

My feelings, the tender bud of love I held for him, withered and died.

For months, then years, Glorin kept me by his side as his trophy husband. I played my part, letting him use my body for his enjoyment, though it seemed like neither of us took much pleasure from our couplings.

An unfortunate side effect of losing my magic was my inability to maintain my own heat schedule. As a dragon with plentiful magic, I could choose to go into heat unless I had a consensual mating bite from a dragon. Without the power to push my heats back, I suffered with two a year for two decades. Each of them attended to by my

husband.

The fae king tried everything to make me pregnant, unaware I was conserving what little magic I could store into blocking conception. A few times, I had to force my body to end an early pregnancy. It was heartbreaking, but I could not in good conscience bring a child into our union. Not just because I feared my life would end when theirs began outside of my womb, but for the child themselves. No one deserved to have Glorin as a father.

When those incidents happened, it emboldened Glorin. He rightly believed we were compatible enough to create a baby. It made him treat me better, as his mask had truly slipped.

My husband had become incredibly controlling. I could not speak to another man. My attendants were all women or fae who presented as female. Whenever he was in the castle, I was to be directly by his side or in his line of sight. When he was away from home, he did not take me with him. He confined me to my rooms with only books and music for company. No one was to enter. They passed my meals through a hatch in the door. All very undignified for a king consort.

All of this was to ensure I was faithful to him and that any child I bore was his. Not that he was faithful in return. It took me some time, but I finally found proof of his infidelity.

When I presented my ironclad witness statements and other evidence to the court as I stood, humbled, by Glorin's side, he truly broke character for the first time.

He struck me to the ground. His fist flew out and connected with my jaw. I cupped it as I stared up at him. The shock of the motion kept me still as he raged above me. I was still trying to make sense of things as he ranted and raved that he was divorcing me, ending our marriage there and then, in front of the stoic witnesses. None of them

moved to help me.

He then pronounced me a prisoner of the fae kingdom.

Guards dragged me to a freshly constructed cell. I knew then that Glorin had been preparing for his next move. I had denied him a child for three decades of marriage. His patience had run out.

I took to my imprisonment peacefully, hoping, without real hope, that Glorin would leave me alone.

Of course, he did not. He was king. If he willed it, even a bastard child could still be declared an heir. He had no other spouse, after all, to contest it.

Glorin soon learned a lesson: do not cross a cornered dragon. I still had my strength and made sure to use it. I beat him bloody, almost to the point of death, before they could get me off him. He did not visit me alone again. It was too risky for him to try to impregnate me, so I won that victory, at least.

Of course, I had to be punished for harming the king. After they were done with me, I almost wished to die, but somehow I knew I could not. The fire in my soul was still a flickering ember. I would not let it go out.

It came to me in a dream. A voice told me to hold on. She said in a whisper that sounded like the wind across my wings to hold on. My mate would need me. There would be a time in the years to come where his survival relied on me getting to him.

So I pulled my strength inwards, held all the magic I could for that far off day. All while slowly losing my sense of self, becoming more beast than person.

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Unsettled

Deke

Something in me changed the day the permanent portal between our world and Abrocaelum was established. As Head Enforcer, I was there watching the elves do their spell work, ensuring there were no costly mistakes, even if I was useless with magic. It was still cool as fuck to watch.

One of my biggest secrets I'd kept in my nearly thirty years on the planet was my ability to sense magic. As abilities went, it was pretty useless, like really fucking useless. Not at all like Hiroshi's healing or my cousin Chase's way of telling the truth from lies. Hell, even Blake's strange fighting skill would have been better. He could sense where an attack was coming from which would have been handy in my job. Being able to track punches would have saved me a few hits.

No, all I could do was sense magic and the people who used it. A completely shit ability. So imagine my surprise when the portal opened, became fixed in place, and I had to work to stay on my feet. The sheer power coming off it, those around it, and the people on the other side, was so overwhelming I struggled to keep my awe off my face. I was sure one of the elves heard my whispered, "fuck!"

While the feeling finally settled, only becoming a buzz when I was stationed near it, there was an itch under my skin, a tug on my heart I couldn't explain. It was fucking weird. Whenever I could, I avoided being near it.

The portal had been open for nearly two years, but still the feeling nagged at me.

Never leaving me alone, pulling me out of sleep some days. I kept it a secret, though, even when I hated it. The situation made me feel abnormal and the pack was going through enough without me worrying my cousins. All of them, even Chase, had too much on their plates to deal with my shit too.

Over the time the elves had been with us, our betas had come out of the sickness, Kade and Blake had their triplets, including a female alpha, the first in hundreds of years. More babies were born. Then Tate and Asher changed designations, no longer betas, they both became something else. More than that, Tate got pregnant!

I thought the shocks were done when Hiroshi figured out the reason for the beta sickness, but no, our goddess was not done. I'd have bet money that it was all down to Blake. She'd been absent when I was in charge.

My father had been wrong to abandon the pack. He'd been too lost in grief for his sister, my cousin's mother, to do what was necessary to get the pack back in the black and thriving. I'd failed, too, when I'd tried. There had been so much to do, and I'd just not been the leader they wanted.

Blake was the Alpha of the Sweetwater pack, the one everyone loved even before he came of age to ascend to leadership at twenty-one. Seeing him find his fated mate, become a dad to the first alpha female in centuries, really told me how special my cousin was. He had done things I thought were impossible.

It was my job to make up for my failures as Alpha by making sure Blake had all the support he needed as he healed the pack from his own father's leadership.

Through him we had more alphas and omegas than ever because The Luna had gifted us the chance at change for the betas. We had more alliances with our friends, the witches in the Northarbor coven, the Northarbor pride of shifters, and now Greenbriar, another pack hours from us was connected by a portal. We even had

demons working in partnership with us!

Thanks to Blake's solid leadership, we had more young than any other pack I knew of. We were the envy of the shifter world with our regular contact with our goddess. It gave us enemies, though. So many damn enemies. They were everywhere, at least that's what it felt like.

The Northharbor aviary was our closest and most pressing issue. They were constantly trying to get to our people, to steal the alpha females even though they were just babies. Fucking savages. None of them deserved their animal form. They had the council against us, bunch of alphahole bastards. Both were a constant headache for me. It was a daily job keeping the pack safe from them.

Being Head Enforcer was a great sign of trust from Blake considering I'd been the one in his role for a year before he came of age. I'd been relieved to step aside, but I knew plenty of Alphas who would have been hesitant to put me in such a close working job. His trust in me was absolute, as was mine in him. My cousin was the best of men, and his mate, Kade, was special to me.

Being their family was enough for me, even if it made me wish for something more. For the last couple of years, since Kade had joined the pack, really, I'd noticed a hole in my life. I wanted what they had. A mate of my own.

Seeing all the couples, or throuples, forming in the pack made me realize how lonely I was. The pull I felt towards the portal nagged at me harder as time went on. It was so fucking distracting I could barely focus on what I needed to do. Dangerous, considering how badly the aviary was coming for us. They'd even gotten the mayor onside. He was a shit-head with a face I wanted to punch.

"Deke?" Chase wrapped his arms around me from behind, startling me. How long had he been lurking like a weirdo?

One of the twins and Blake's older brother, Chase, was the only one of them unmated. Just the way he liked it. I knew he could feel something was off from me. I worked really hard to hide just how much I wanted to ignore everything in the pack and launch myself through that damn portal to Abrocaelum.

I gave a grunt in response.

"Is everything ready for going to register Dally's babies?"

Once I would have considered Dalton and Axel to be closer friends than Dalton and Chase were. Since finding out his true omega nature, Axel had pulled away from his friend, making Chase fill that void for Dalton. Axel was also so in love with his husband, Teárlach, prince of the elves, that he had little time for anyone else. Not that I blamed him, he was building a family, like Dalton was now doing with Larken.

"Yeah. I've got plan a, b, and c ready to go, with backups for our backup. All the exits are covered." I sighed and covered my face with my hands, exhaustion clawing at me. Our appointment was in a few hours. I'd have to nap, but sleep often eluded me these days. I was so fucking tired.

"I hate this," I muttered.

Chase squeezed me tighter. "Me too." He pulled away and stroked my hair. "Wanna shift and get some sleep? I could do with some wolf time."

Yeah, I knew he was doing it for my benefit since he could feel my exhaustion, I just didn't care. My wolf needed out as much as I needed sleep. Dalton said he slept better in raccoon form while pregnant. Maybe it would work for me, not that I was carrying a baby. I couldn't. I was an alpha without a mate, no babies were in my future. Probably for the best, I'd be a shit dad, like my own. Rest in peace, asshole.

I'd never told my cousins their uncle was gone. After Blake became Alpha, Dad just sort of gave up on living. He had always blamed himself for his sister's death at the hands of her mate. Having left the area when I took over as Alpha, I wasn't with him when he passed. Instead, the council sent me a letter announcing his death. As harsh as it sounded, he'd died to me the day he walked away from the pack. He'd abandoned us. Me. I couldn't forgive him for that.

Shaking myself out of the moody ass spiral I was heading down, I nodded. "Sure."

There was a pallet in the corner of my office that was perfect for taking a nap on while in shifted form. We stripped out of our clothes quickly, both used to seeing each other naked. Chase was my family, far closer than a mere cousin, I felt like another brother.

His wolf was more charcoal than black like his twin and baby brother. He had patches of white like my wolf. Side by side, our wolves looked like brothers, our alters fought like brothers, too. It was soothing to my wolf to have Chase next to me. My alter gave a pleased rumble. If I couldn't have what was waiting for me at the other side of the portal, family would do.

Come on , Chase urged, padding towards the corner. We can get a couple of hours of sleep .

What about everything—

They know we're resting up. They'll deal with it all.

Sleep had never come so easily to me as it did then.

Chase was staying behind, ready at the spot we'd picked out for an emergency portal. He would have a team ready to fight if shit hit the fan, which was the most likely

outcome of this lunacy.

Who knows what the fuck the mayor thought he was doing by making us register the babies in person, especially with the Sweetwater office closed. Going into Northarbor with the aviary gunning for blood was ridiculous. All my alpha instincts told me this was a trap, yet there was fuck all I could do about it.

Larken was in full on alpha mode, guarding his pups as he shielded Dalton. Constantly checking on the guards, assessing they had the kids in hand, he didn't stop moving. We had the couple, the nanny, Ingal, Melody, one of my best fighters in human form. The woman was lethal.

Hakeem was an unknown quantity to me. Sure, I'd seen the massive elf spar, but fighting shifters and potentially witches was something different.

Farryn was a badass. I knew she'd have my back, which is why I'd insisted we take her over Chase. Plus she could do the portals like nobody's business. I'd thought about asking her to take me around Abrocaelum more than once to find the source of the magic that was constantly pulling at me.

The appointment went well with the babies all behaving. They were super cute, taking features from each of their parents. Except I couldn't relax, a rising sense of dread tightening my gut. Something was wrong.

When the registrar admitted people were coming, we got the hell out of there. Too late. Far too fucking late.

The attack was swift and brutal. My people did their jobs exactly as trained, focusing on getting the babies out of there. We had to run to get out of the way of the portal blocker. My heart was in my throat as I ran behind Dalton and his precious cargo. My only thought was getting my friends and the babies to safety.

When the portal went up thanks to Farryn's quick work, I could finally breathe again. Right as planned.

The tiger attacked just as they went through, all of them safe, just me, Hakeem, and Melody holding our own until help came.

Larken, against orders, came back for me when the portal reopened, bringing a mix of elves and shifters to fight with us. As the only other shifter with a mate and a baby to think of, Hakeem fled back to Sweetwater, sending our backup in. I'd never been as grateful for Larken's loyalty and friendship as I was when I faced down that tiger. Fucking Jared just wouldn't let it go. Hiroshi had mates, babies, a life free of the tiger shifter. Jared had backed the losing side by working with the aviary.

We swiped and snapped at each other. Jared took more hits than he gave, but he was powerful, fast. I'd been running on too little sleep, it was catching up to me. The nap had helped, but wasn't enough.

With Melody providing a distraction, I managed to leap onto Jared, getting my teeth around his throat. I held on, trying to tear him open to end the fight faster. The bastard had to die for what he'd done to Hiroshi.

Jared tripped and rolled, pinning me under him.

His weight was suffocating as he crushed me into the sidewalk. I felt bones creak and snap under the pressure. I lost my hold on his throat and yelped.

It only could have been for less than a minute, but I couldn't move. No part of my body would respond.

I was so fucked.

Jared snapped at my leg, adding more pain to my agony. I wanted to scream, just couldn't.

Blackness drew in around me. I struggled to stay awake.

For a long while, all I knew was pain while the fight ended around me. Jared was dead. One enemy gone at least.

The pain was immense. I wanted to stay in the darkness, to give up. My alter urged me to stay.

Mate , he told me. He's waiting.

He?

My wolf was so sure. All I could do was trust in him and hold on for the omega of my future.

I was carried through the portal where the healers got to work straight away. With their magic I was quickly stabilized and the pain vanished. Magical pain relief was the good shit.

The few hours after the attack were a blur of more healing. Aldrin insisted I would be in the clinic for a while since the crushing injuries would take some time to heal.

Things seemed to be okay, so why was I filled with dread?

All I remembered was joking about being godfather before Aldrin made me sleep. Then there was the brief memory of friends and family coming in to see me, telling me how grateful they were that I'd made it.

Machines started to beep. Hiroshi rushed in, checked me over before injecting me with something. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but his panic was clear. This was really fucking bad if he looked like that.

Remember, hold on , my wolf told me before I was sucked into the darkness.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am

Escape

Ozyn

Glorin liked to relish in my suffering. It fed him like the parasite he was. Often he would parade me through the halls of the castle, dirty and dressed in rags, just to show how low I'd fallen.

With our marriage pact broken, skirmishes had resumed between dragons and the fae. Not full on war, though, neither side had the numbers.

This time, they weren't going in the fae's favor. We were too evenly matched, the rage of my people for me added strength to their forces. Yet, we still lost dragons.

Some were stolen young, brought to this forsaken place and made to fight for entertainment, usually to the death. Lives over before they could truly begin. They reminded me of my children, adding further pain to the torment. I took those memories of my family and tucked them away to preserve them.

The games he played with the young dragons made it truly unsafe for Glorin to visit me for my heats, even with a retinue of guards to watch. Adding to that, the danger of me being in heat, unmated, around alpha dragons, Glorin finally decided to alter the spell work on my cuffs, giving me control over my heat cycles once more.

A reprieve from him, but I could not help losing more of myself with each of my people, dragons I had never had the chance to meet, dying for the entertainment of a monster.

I thought, at one point, I had gained an ally in the court. The youngest of the Darkglade siblings, Safilix. He would sit with me, trying to communicate when I was so far from the person he'd met at my wedding to his brother.

He spent a lot of time with me, hiding from his brother who hated him almost as much as he hated me. Safi would tell me gossip from the court. It was from him I learned what I knew about my people.

For my shame, I used Safi, though I was sure he knew what I was going to do and maybe hoped it worked.

I nearly got free.

After the beating I got on being discovered, I almost broke my promise to that unknown voice. They begged me once more to hold on, my alpha was coming, he would need me.

I drew further into myself for my protection, becoming the feral beast in the dark.

There. Something was different. I felt my mind sharpen, becoming lucid after so many years.

I was alone. Always alone. My meals were pushed along the floor by magic, or perhaps someone invisible put them there. I never saw another soul. Never spoke to anyone.

For who knows how long, I stayed lost in the dark, pacing my cell, until agony flooded my system, taking me to my knees. I clutched my head, fingers tangling in my matted hair.

My mate! Something was wrong with my mate.

Out. Out. Out. I have to get out!

Pain. There's so much pain.

I feel him. He needs me.

Out. I need to get out.

Mate.

My mate needs my protection, my magic. I could lose him before I even meet him.

Close. I feel him close.

Out.

I have to get out of here!

Anything! Please, anyone, help me get to him. I'll do anything to save him. It's me he needs. I can protect him.

Let me out!

My roars shook the castle as I let out all my hopelessness, rage and fear I would lose my mate before I could leave this damned place.

On and on I voiced my pain until, at last, Glorin sent the guards and his best magic users to silence me.

Even through my panic for my mate, I still felt pleasure for the looks of fear on the court's faces.

They needed to fear me, because one day soon I would destroy them all.

When I woke, I stayed quiet, working on my plan to escape. My best option was getting out of the cuffs, melting the bars, and slipping out.

The chains weren't suppressing my magic like they used to, a fact which worked in my favor. Either that or the constant buzz of need in my brain was overpowering the ancient spell work.

"Push it down. Save it. Save him," I chanted to myself, speaking the words aloud in a raspy voice, as I stored the magic deep within, preparing for the moment I could let it burst free. Unleash its devastating power and get out.

"Save some. A crumb. For your fire," I reminded myself. There was no one near to hear my croaky words as I spoke.

It had been so long since I breathed fire I almost worried I wouldn't manage. The longing I felt to be in my dragon form was enough to steal my concentration. No, I had to store the magic. I would breathe fire.

A blaze so vast it would scorch everything in my path. I would burn it all. For him.

My wrists bled where I had pulled at the spelled metal. They didn't matter. I could suffer such a small injury if it meant I could get out. The blood could be useful, slicking the way for my hands to slip free.

Free.

After being a prisoner for so long, I hardly knew the meaning of the word. Now my fated mate was near, I knew things would be different if I could just get away.

Close. My alpha was so close to me. He was my every thought. Nothing mattered but him.

Hurt. I felt his pain more than my own. Recently, I'd felt flickers of him. I knew why and where he was.

The portal.

The guards had gotten sloppy, allowing me to hear them gossiping. They had said the elves had opened a permanent portal to the human realm sometime ago. Time was pretty meaningless to me, stuck, imprisoned as I was.

Yet, I had felt that change and begun counting, tallying the hours by the passage of the sun and moon by how the darkness lightened and deepened in increments, though I was sure there was still time missing. My mind felt fractured, broken by years of abuse, loneliness, and being stuck in the dark.

On the other side of the portal, that was where my mate was. I was sure of it. I would find him near it on the human side. At least, I thought so.

Regardless, he was nearly within my reach. As a dragon, I would find him quickly.

I could feel him desperately needing me to go to him.

Frustrated, I growled low as the blood failed to allow my fingers to pass through the cuffs.

The need of my mate sharpened my logic, returning me further to my senses. For so long, I'd been lost to the constant ache of hunger, the pain of the torture Glorin had subjected me to by making me hear my dragons die. Being unable to stretch my wings.

“Ozyn?” came a whispered voice. It had been so long since he’d last attempted to speak to me. I was surprised his brother let him live after last time. I’d nearly gotten free, would have escaped if I hadn’t been so damn weak.

“Safi?” my voice was as rough as the sound of two rocks grinding together.

The fae tiptoed around the corner. “Shh!” he chided, still barely speaking over a murmur. “You’ve got the entire castle on edge. My brother’s advisor...”

I let out a growl at the mention of the cursed fae who had trapped me in this godforsaken castle.

“Hush! Please!” Safi pleaded, speaking louder now. “Glorin doesn’t know I’m here. The court, they thought I could calm you before you bring the place down on us.”

He lit a sconce with a match, his magic too unpredictable to use himself. A shaft of light illuminated the dank room where I was held, allowing me to see the fae.

“You’re talking about treason, going against your king’s orders. Don’t you remember the last time?” There was no point in begging the fae to help me escape. I would have to wait until he left to resume my attempts as much as it chafed at me to stay still.

My mate needed me. My suffering meant nothing next to his. The pain he was in needed at my skin constantly. A burr I couldn’t shift.

The fae glanced at his butterfly-like wings, a beautiful shade of violet, the same color as the morning sky before she gave way to the sun. His eyes matched his wings. He slumped, defeated, before finding resolve and straightening.

It was then I took a closer look, the anemic light from the sconce allowing me to see his formerly beautiful wings. He was the treasure of the royal court once. No longer.

Not with the scars marring his wings.

“Did he—?” I couldn’t bring myself to ask what Glorin had done to his youngest sibling. He saved all his cruelty for Safilix, just never leaving a permanent physical scar. Well, not before.... Seemed that, like so many other things, he had changed.

“It does not matter,” he said, this time in an almost normal tone. His spine was straighter, like he was siphoning off my defiance of his king and using it to fuel his courage.

“Why are you here, Safi?”

“I am to assist you.”

My heartbeat picked up. Hope, a foreign emotion for so long, swelled within me. “You’re letting me go?”

Safi shook his head. “All I can do is unlock those cuffs.” His head tilted towards the magic soaked metal coated in my blood from my efforts to get free. “Everything else you will have to do yourself.”

It was more than enough. With the magic I’d been storing, I would level this castle. Not before I made sure Glorin died. I would eat him myself if I didn’t have somewhere else to be.

“They’ll come once I let out the signal,” I warned. “They won’t be far. Get yourself and whoever else you want to live, out.”

“No guards are to come here for the next hour. It is all I can give you. Send your signal, bring the other dragons, put an end to this.” Safi looked resolute.

“Are you so ready to die?”

“For what my people have done to yours? Yes.”

He reached through the bars to my waiting arms and unlocked the cuffs, the ones that had kept my powers dampened for decades. Not my strength, though, which Glorin learned to his cost. I wish I'd ripped his head off instead of going for his wings. The cuffs clattered to the stone floor.

Then Safilix handed me a bundle.

“Here. Some food. I cannot tell when they last fed you. Clothes too.” I tried to hide my disgust. There was no chance I would clothe myself in fae fabrics. My mate would have to excuse my nudity.

“Thank you. Please run, Safi. For all you have done, I owe you the chance to run.”

“Where will you go?”

I looked towards the wall, feeling the call of my mate. He was blocked from me suddenly. Not gone. No, my soul would feel his loss. Perhaps he slept.

“Not to my people. They have no need of me now. Rezoth is king. I have to go to the portal.”

He looked torn for a moment. His hands suddenly clasped the bars. “Let me come with you.”

I jerked, surprised. “What?”

“Take me into your service as payment for some of what has been done to you. My

life is yours. Take me with you. I can help.”

My eyes met his. For once, Safi did not look meek. He was resolved in this.

Perhaps having him with me would be a good thing. He would be a decent hostage if nothing else. Or I could eat him if I got hungry. No, I couldn’t eat Safi. It was not his fault I had been stuck in the dungeon for decades.

“Fine. You will come with me to the portal. I am not wearing these.” I dropped the bundle to the ground before spotting a leg of lamb. Scooping it up, I bit into it with a moan. I had not realized just how hungry I was.

“Stand back,” I said once I swallowed a mouthful of the tender meat.

Safi moved away, his eyes locked on me as I took a breath and let out a stream of fire. Not wanting to waste it, I concentrated it on the lock, melting it until it dripped onto the dirty floor.

With a kick, the door blasted open, ricocheting off the wall.

“Shh!” Safi whisper-yelled, looking alarmed.

Sending out as much power as I dared, I pushed my thoughts towards the bond I had with my brothers, hoping our deep bond had them nearby as they likely felt my fear and pain for my mate. I dared not think of my children, lest my resolve falter. The mate I had been waiting for relied on me getting to him swiftly. There was no time for anything else.

Vale? Mira? Laer? I’m free!

I hoped they were close because our bond would only work within a few miles. Still,

I used what magic I could spare to push the boundary of our connection out further. I needed them to do what I could not.

Without waiting for a response, I left the cell, took Safi by the arm with my filthy hand, and ran for the stairs.

Now that the cuffs were off, the magic in my blood was working to heal the damage of years of captivity. I struggled to move with my usual fluid grace while muscles which were atrophied rebuilt themselves.

By the time we reached the top, both of us were breathless, I was more like my old self, just very thin and covered in dirt.

Ozyn? Three very familiar voices reached me. Relief nearly took me to my knees. They were close!

We're nearly there. That one was Laeros. Wait for us, brother.

I cannot, I sent back to them all, regret in my mental voice. As much as I was desperate to see them, to hear about my boys, I was needed elsewhere. My mate is waiting.

"Once we get outside, I will shift. Can I carry you? My brothers will be here soon. I do not want to leave you behind at their mercy."

"Please let me warn who I can. You can carry me if you would like. My life is yours."

His bravery was admirable. I knew Safilix was terrified, yet he wanted to do what was right by the people paid to protect the king and kingdom.

“Alright. Do what you must.”

We burst out of the dungeon into the guards’ courtyard. There they stood, frozen with fear.

My shift, the first in possibly a century, was effortless. My other form was just as emaciated as I was, yet powerful enough to end these men.

“Flee if you want to live!” Safi yelled from my side. “The dragons are coming!”

They turned and fled. Smart.

With his broken wings, Safi managed to flutter high enough to get on my back. There he clung on to my secondary scales around my neck. They formed a band which I could flare to protect a passenger or the joints of my wings.

I took flight, relishing the feeling of the wind under my wings, the stretch of muscles as they worked to get my body into the air. My tail flicked, crashing into a tower and bringing it down.

On top of my back, Safi continued to shout his warnings.

Brothers, burn them all, kill the king, and meet me on the other side of the portal. My mate needs me or I would eat Glorin myself.

Ozyn— Vale protested.

I do not think he has long left. Please, let me go.

They each gave their acceptance.

We will follow.

Up into the clouds I flew, relieved to be leaving that hell behind, and hopeful I would make it to my mate in time.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am

Arrival

Ozyn

Delighted at flying for the first time in so long, I may have gone higher and much faster than was wise with a passenger. It may have also taken me longer to understand he was not shouting at me to slow down, but to land, because he wanted to talk to me.

We landed in the clearing of a forest; the trees towering even above my dragon form. With my expanded senses as a dragon, I could hear the waves of a lake nearby lapping at the shore. The trees rustled with a fragrant breeze, bringing my stench to my attention.

Safi, seeing my dragon nose wrinkle in disgust, laughed. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! I know you have to get to your mate, but surely you can spare a few minutes to bathe?”

First impressions did count. Perhaps Safilix was right, and I needed to wash the filth from my imprisonment off my skin and scales before meeting my mate. There was a chance I would be denied the right to see him if I looked as feral as I felt.

Besides, there was nothing pretty about my dragon form at that moment. My usually gleaming white body blended with fluffy white clouds on a summer’s day. The gray on my wings was like streaks of smoke from my fire. I was the only one of my color in my flight. My brothers were all shades of blue, gray, and green. My omega son was the palest gold from his father’s people.

Rather than shift back to speak to Safi, or use a mental bond, I changed my vocal chords to allow me to talk to the fae prince.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

His smile was sweet, but otherwise he did not react to a massive dragon speaking aloud to him.

“Just before we landed, I spotted a house on the shore of the lake. We should ask them if they have any soap, or anything for you to wear.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He appeared to understand what I was thinking. “These are elven lands. From what I remember, the portal is only a few miles northeast from here.”

“Have you seen it?”

He shook his head sadly. “No, I was kept at the castle. Many of the court talked about it though, I...”

“What?”

“I wondered sometimes if they were telling me indirectly, so that I could escape,” Safi said quietly, as if his brother would hear the treasonous words. “Truly escape Glorin’s reach, like Ulrian did.”

Safilix had never been given the magical training his brothers had, so would not have been able to form a portal alone. Their sister, Pluma, had the most magical talent, but had left for the human realm as soon as she was of age, some three hundred years ago. Well before Safi would have been ready for tutoring.

Pluma had been determined not to live under Glorin's reign when he had taken the throne from their aging father and escaped Abrocaelum, leaving a baby Safilix behind.

The last prince was born among this turmoil to his father's young low-born mistress, making him ineligible to rule unless he was formally recognized and likely lessening the power he held. It was possible he had never been seen as important enough to train by his remaining family.

Before I married Glorin, Ulrian was already long gone, exiled to the human realm for daring to defy his brother's decree he marry an elf for an alliance. His influence in Safilix's life before Ulrian left was unknown to me. It was a crime to mention Ulrian in front of Glorin, thus we had never talked about Safi's older brother.

"Wait here. You will terrify the inhabitants," Safi said, putting some distance between us and heading for the simple, yet beautifully crafted home.

I looked down at my once beautiful form, and with barely a thought, I shifted to follow behind him. My tunic was torn, caked in dirt, and hardly covered me, but it was that or nudity. I would shed it before meeting my mate in order for him not to be distracted by trivial things such as my former captivity. Now that I was free, I would not dwell on what had happened to me.

Glorin would be dead soon, my revenge complete. His kingdom would fall to ruins before some other royal could take his place. We could put our own monarch on the throne.

The elves in the dwelling were wary, naturally so, yet they still allowed us some soap. They offered me the use of their shower, but I was too dirty to trespass on their hospitality. Besides, I longed to go to my mate. Every moment we delayed with niceties was a moment he suffered.

Washing in the lake would have to do. Safi braved the cold water to wash my hair, running a comb through the pale blond strands before cursing.

“We need to cut your hair.”

“No time.”

I walked out of the lake, discarding my ruined clothes on the shore before using magic to dry myself.

“Please!” Safi ran towards me with a dagger in hand. “Let me cut the matted parts out at least.”

Inclining my head, I allowed him that much. My mate would not like me with unkempt hair. It was important I made a good impression.

The fae’s eyes avoided my nudity carefully while he hacked at my hair, taking far too long at the task with his too blunt dagger.

“Done.” I pushed him off me with as much gentleness as I could. Once I was far enough away, I took to my dragon form once more. “Get on.”

Safi had been correct. We were nearly at the portal. The closer I flew, the more the mate bond tugged on me.

Shouts of alarm went out as I flew overhead. I wanted to fly straight through, but the elves bravely blocked my way.

“Land! Let me talk to them!” Safi yelled over the rushing wind.

Doing as he asked, I found an empty spot to set down.

“I will talk.” Shifting, I approached the elves, all of them armed. “My mate is through there.” I pointed at the portal.

The elves stared at me, then at each other, the seconds passing with aching slowness. My mate urgently needed me to go to him. I could not be delayed much longer.

“I will go to my mate,” I growled.

They flinched. Again, they looked at each other before coming to some agreement. One stepped forward.

“We cannot let you pass, dragon. You cannot harm the people of Sweetwater. They are our allies.”

“Sweetwater?” I shook my head at the strange name. It felt right on my tongue. “I am Ozyn, former king of the dragons, father of Rezothe, the reigning king of the dragon people. My mate is through the portal. I will bring no harm to the people there as long as they allow me to find my mate.”

This time, the elves huddled together to discuss their options in low voices.

Brother? Vale asked. I feel you close by. Can you hear me?

I can. We are at the portal.

We?

The fae, Safilix, I own him.

Turning, the same elf spoke. “We cannot let you through with the fae.”

“I am going!” I roared, unable to take being so close to the portal. So near my mate. My dragon form dropped over me, my gleaming white scales glinting in the light. Without having to ask, Safi climbed on my back, clinging onto me.

With a jump, I was in the air once more, barely off the ground. The draft from my wings toppled elven soldiers, hopefully leaving them embarrassed but not harmed. I had no argument with people performing their duties.

I shot towards the portal, following the pull tugging me to my mate. His life thread felt so fragile. Did his people not know how close they were to losing him?

My magic, the precious magic I had been storing, stretched the portal, expanding it to fit my dragon form. It was all the magic I could afford. The rest I had to keep for my mate’s sake. My brothers, who I could feel growing closer, would have to expand it again if they wanted to join me in Sweetwater, wherever that was.

Breaking through the portal, I found myself in the air over a green lawn, a large building close by. There were metal carriages. Everything looked so strange. The clothing the shifters wore was form fitting in unusual fabrics. The scents were almost overwhelming. Safi slipped from my back, using his damaged wings to glide to the ground out of sight. He slipped into invisibility, his only usable power.

All eyes were on me.

I let out a roar, feeling my mate so damn close to me, his life a flickering candle on a breezy night.

Then I landed, taking a human form. Scanning each of the shifters and elves around me, I could tell none of them were the man I sought.

“Where is my mate?” I growled.

Silence followed my words. I stalked towards two men, one shifter, the other elf, the prince if my memory was correct. Both of them wore a look of responsibility. Others were glancing at them, encircling them protectively.

“My mate, where is he?” I asked once more, failing to curb my frustration at being kept from him.

“Lark!” an elf called. “We didn’t let him through. The others say there are more of them!”

“It’s fine, Farryn. He just wants his mate, right?” He looked at me. “You and the others aren’t here to harm us, are you?”

I scoffed. “No. My brothers want to check on me. I just want my mate. He’s hurt. Dying.”

With my words, the shifter’s skin paled. “Deke is dying?”

“Deke? Is that his name? I felt he was hurt a few days ago.” I rubbed my chest. His name felt wonderful in my mouth.

Lark, the shifter had been called Lark, looked at the elf prince. “I want to take him to Deke. Something is telling me to trust him.”

Surprisingly, the elf smiled. “Then that is what you must do, Larken. I will wait here for the other dragons. Welcome, King Ozyn. It has been such a long time since I last saw you. I am prince Teárlach and I am mated to a shifter here, my dear Axel.”

My footsteps paused. “You know of me?” The rest was too much to process. All my thoughts were of Deke.

Prince Teárlach smiled. “We met once. Ulrian was to marry my mother. We can talk once you have seen Deke.”

Shouts rose once more as the portal expanded to fit my brothers flying through, one after the other. Laer dropped a head at my feet. It rolled before showing me just who it was.

King Glorin was dead.

Present for you, brother!

“Ah, I see Glorin is dead. Mother will be pleased.”

The clinic, as Larken called it, was a squat, white, clean building not too far from the portal. My brothers stayed behind to discuss our arrival with the Alpha, a shifter called Blake. He and the elf prince looked amused at the head dropped on the ground. I thought I might like them given time to get to know them properly.

Larken must have used his pack bonds, similar to what dragons used, to alert everyone we were coming. I was handed soft pants to cover my nudity, though I knew shifters did not mind me being naked. The pants were stretchy and very comfortable, made of a light blue fabric.

I was led to a room where a man lay prone in a bed, his head was covered in white bandages, his limbs hooked to strange contraptions which made beeping noises. They irritated my ears.

“Sorry, I’ll turn these down,” a bear shifter, if my nose was right, said. He gave me a tentative smile. “I hope you can help him. We don’t know what’s wrong. There was a bleed on his brain—“

“He sleeps deeply. He is stuck. My magic will pull him out.”

My eyes never left him. His hair was the same black as the raven’s feathers of Glorin’s wings, though I found I liked the shade on Deke. I wondered what color his eyes would be when he finally opened them.

Unable to resist, I walked to the bed and took his hand, the one free from the strange things poking at his skin.

I was finally touching my mate. “Mate,” I rumbled. “Come to me.” Without even thinking about it, my magic flowed into him, looking for injuries, healing as it went.

Deep in his mind, Deke was curled up, a dark gray wolf with small patches of white acting as his pillow and protector.

“There you are. Wake now.”

In this dreamscape, I was in my dragon form. Careful of my claws, I lifted both the man and the beast and took flight upwards towards the light.

I opened my eyes and waited.

Stunning silvery-blue eyes met mine. Deke smiled.

“Mate,” I rasped in wonder.

He nodded, his smile stretching wide. He was so beautiful. “Mate.”

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Mate

Deke

How I went from asking to be godfather to all four of Larken's kids to absolutely nothing I have no idea. Literally just blackness until I felt myself come back to consciousness.

"There you are. Wake now." I heard the words in an unfamiliar but soothing voice.

No, that was wrong. I knew them. They were the one who belonged to me. The one who had been calling me all this time since the portal had opened. Whoever they were, they were who I'd been missing this entire time.

Their voice was warm, loving, welcome, after so long in the dark with no awareness. I knew time had gone by. My wolf was frantic now that I was gathering myself.

A feeling of being weightless, being carried, followed me out of the dark and into the light, not The Luna, someone better. My mate.

I opened my eyes to the most unusual, yet beautiful, eyes I'd ever seen. They had slitted pupils, like on a cat or a reptile, except unusual to those kinds of animals, they were cerulean blue. Stunning eyes. The blue of a tropical sea. I could barely take my eyes off them to see the person who had become my whole world.

He had blond hair in desperate need of a decent cut, it honestly looked like someone had hacked at it. He was only wearing some blue pants that brought out the color in

his eyes. His form was slight, shorter than my six-two for sure, maybe five-five? Lean, more underweight than I suspected was natural given how his skin stretched over his cheekbones. His pale skin made me think he avoided the sun.

There was just something about him which suggested he needed careful handling. A fragility to him, not necessarily his body, but his mind. He was focused on me, but I could tell it wouldn't take long for him to launch into action. In my job as Head Enforcer I'd learned to see shifters on the brink, and he was one of them.

"Mate," he said the word with wonder. There was an intensity about him which should have alarmed me, but didn't. The Luna wouldn't have given me more than I could handle. She was cool like that.

Instead, I felt myself smiling, a grin pulling my lips wider than it had in a long time. "Mate," I agreed.

Thank The Luna for finally blessing me with an omega of my own. A secret part of me had wondered if she had forgotten me while she blessed the rest of my family. If that was the price to pay for their happiness, then sure, I'd pay it. I was relieved as fuck she hadn't left me out, though. My mate was perfect.

My wolf took this moment to tell me something was wrong with our omega. I prickled at the thought, defensive over my mate. My wolf wasn't having it though, he said the omega smelled strange. Then there were his pupils to consider. He registered as having magic, most shifters did to some degree. He had more than most. Had the magic made him partially shift in his agitation over me being hooked up to machines? I glanced around myself. Shit! I had to have been in a bad way.

After seeing Kade partially shift to protect his daughter, I knew it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that an omega could let some of their alter out when under intense stress. Maybe that's what'd happened with him after seeing me in such a

state. Omegas were just as protective over their alphas after all. Hiroshi had proven that with Roan.

Machines were still attached to me. They itched. My head ached something fierce despite whatever the omega had done to get me to wake up.

“Can I check Deke?” James asked, breaking our stare off. I hadn’t realized anyone else was there. Then I noticed Larken stood in the corner looking one part relieved, one part awed, with a little fear thrown in.

Hang on! Was he afraid of my omega?

My mate growled as James approached me, his palms wide, showing he was no threat.

“Behave,” I chastised, as I squeezed his hand. “James just needs to stop the machines beeping now that I don’t need them.” Keeping his attention on me, I asked, “did you fix me? Are you a healer?”

James worked quickly to unhook me. “The spell to monitor you is done, which suggests the brain injury you sustained, the bleed and pressure, are all gone.” James gave a sunny smile tinged with what I thought was relief.

I tried not to flinch as he pulled the IV out. The omega’s eye twitched. His hand tightened on mine before my question to him registered.

The omega looked affronted. “Dragon.”

“What?” Shock forced the word out. Impossible. They were extinct! He frowned. “Dragon,” he repeated. “Ozyn.”

I looked at Larken for help. My mate had to be joking, right? My friend shook his head, answering my unspoken question. I could have used the pack bond, but I didn't want to risk it while I still held my omega's hand. I didn't know what magic he had.

"Ozyn?" I drew it out like he did. Ohh-zin. "That's your name?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "I am a dragon." His eyes stayed the same. I didn't feel any extra pheromones coming off him, so he wasn't under stress making him show his animal side. My senses weren't fully back online though.

"You're fucking with me, right?" I blurted, without thought.

Ozyn frowned. "No."

Swallowing hard, I glanced at Larken again. This time, Ozyn let out a snarl. My eyes snapped back to my mate. Chastened, the rumbling subsided.

None of this made sense to me. A mate who claimed he was a dragon with a strange smell, odd eyes, and an attitude problem. What the fuck was up with him growling all the time?

"He's really a dragon! You should have seen him fly through the portal and shift in midair!" Larken sounded like he was in shock or something.

"How? Dragons have been extinct for what, thousands of years?" I wondered aloud.

"Meh, who knows?" Larken moved into my eyeline. I watched him shrug. "Alpha females didn't exist to us until Elliotte was born. I bet the elves are behind this."

Ozyn watched Larken from the corner of his eye. I could see how my mate moved so his back wasn't completely to Larken's. Huh, if Larken was right, they were both

types of dragon. My wolf huffed an unimpressed sound.

I had a brain injury , I reminded my alter. He rolled his eyes.

“Dragons used magic to hide themselves away in Abrocaelum. Too many humans, not enough land.”

Made sense to me. “So the elves and fae let you come when they made—“

“They did not make Abrocaelum!” Ozyn’s face reddened with anger. “The dragons created it. We invited the races to come. Most did not. The Luna promised to help us when it was time.”

That went against all we had been told about the creation of Abrocaelum. Which version was the truth? Maybe they were all right. It must have taken vast amounts of magic to form a whole new world so close to ours, which likely meant they all took part in it. I couldn’t wrap my brain around the concept.

“Huh. Figures she knew something about it.” I wanted to sit up, to get to know my omega better, but my body was weighing me down.

“Mate, you are still hurt.” Ozyn’s warm hand tightened on mine.

James went to the door, admitting Aldrin. When the bear alpha and healer approached the bed, Ozyn turned protective. His eyes flashed, his claws extended, making me believe for the first time that Larken and Ozyn were telling the truth: my mate was a dragon.

“Ozyn?” I waited for my mate to meet my eyes. “You want me to leave this bed, right?” He nodded. “Then Aldrin will have to check me, maybe heal me some more—“

“I will heal you!” he protested. “I saved my magic for you. Felt your pain. Saved it.”

“Why did you have to save it? Is there something wrong with your magic?”

I knew dragons were made of magic. Legends told us they could do awesome things with their powers. They had the ability to create and destroy.

He flinched and hedged. “Nothing is wrong with my magic.”

“You just said you had to save it. Like ration it?”

Aldrin, who had paused at the foot of the bed, spoke up. “Perhaps this is not the time for this conversation. Deke needs an examination, and Ozyn, is it?” My mate narrowed his eyes at the bear shifter, but nodded. “You need to deal with the other dragons. The ones waiting outside for you.”

More dragons? What the fuck was going on?

Ozyn kept a hold of my hand, but moved enough to allow Aldrin to examine me. His sharp gaze watched every movement the healer made.

“Dragon magic is fascinating. I’d love to ask you some questions if you’d be willing,” Aldrin said cheerfully to my mate, ignoring the death-stare he was getting from the dragon.

My mate’s lip curled with distaste. He was still beautiful, maybe even more so for his lack of manners. He was so real, unburdened by niceties. The way he was guarding me was too hot.

Hoping that giving Aldrin some sort of answer would get me out of this damn bed, I hedged and pushed the pain away. Worked, too, since the healer gave me a checkup

and pronounced me perfectly healthy.

“You might feel some weakness, or be tired for a day or two, but other than that, it’s like you weren’t injured. Are you sure I can’t take some blood or do some tests?”

“No!” everyone said together.

“My brothers wait. We must go.”

Guess I was meeting more dragons.

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Dragons

Deke

Between them, and while working around Ozyn's grumbling, Aldrin and James got me fully unhooked and dressed in some scrub pants and a thin robe.

"Wouldn't want to meet your future in-laws naked now, would you?" James teased, a grin on his face.

I really liked both Aldrin and James, but the nurse and Kota's omega father just had that extra sweetness which drew people to him.

My omega, though? He was not sweet, not at all, or at least not so far. I was blaming the stressful situation for his prickly attitude and rude behavior. Not that I really cared that he was a menace to other people. He was gentle and caring with me, or at least, he had been so far. He watched every movement I made, as if it was the most important thing in the world to him.

Same, though. I watched him like he was my new religion. He was my very reason for breathing my next breath. I still couldn't wrap my head around having a mate of my own. All I wanted to do was take him home and get to know every inch of that compact body, then earn a place in his heart.

"Are you okay?" I asked him as we led the way to the main house. Aldrin hadn't wanted me to leave the clinic, but there just wasn't the room for everyone to talk.

“I am. Are you ready to be walking so far?” His concern was touching.

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to meeting your brothers. I want to know all about you.”

Honestly, I was still reeling from everything since I’d woken. It was a lot. Not only did I have a mate, he was a dragon. A being we thought was long extinct.

The male part of it wasn’t a problem for me. I’d been with a couple of guys before. Usually I preferred women. My wolf paced inside me, worried I was going to reject my mate. No chance of that. While he wasn’t a she, I wasn’t about to turn down this gift.

Ozyn was beautiful, with delicate, regal features. In the sunlight, his hair was pale gold with streaks of honey. His eyes were even more captivating, and I was obsessed with his lips. The cupid’s bow was pronounced, each both his top and bottom lip were full and inviting. Were they as soft as they looked?

Ozyn’s cheeks pinked. Utterly adorable. I didn’t care that he was apparently this ferocious dragon. He was fucking cute! And mine. So mine, he’d burst through a portal to get to me.

The necessary players were in the library when we arrived. Blake, Kade, Dakota, Roan, Teárlach minus his mate Axel, which was unusual, and the representatives from the Greenbriar pack, Alpha Leith, and my counterpart for their pack, Reggie.

Chase arrived moments after us while I was trying to get a seat that wouldn’t upset Ozyn. I couldn’t sit next to anyone who was unmated or the other alphas. Maybe I should have been irritated by his behavior, but I loved how possessive he was over me already. I’d never had this before.

“Right. Are we ready?” Blake called the meeting to order. “Bring in the others,

please.”

Melody, Sam, Micah, and Mateo all escorted three rather large shifters into the room. My wolf was instantly on alert. I felt the massive amounts of magic they held inside them. It was strange, almost like there was more magic than there should be for the three dragons.

Rather than go to the men who had to be his brothers, Ozyn sat still beside me, his hand in mine. His gaze flicked to his brothers. I guessed, like us, they could communicate mentally through a sort of pack bond, but he gave no sign of it. Instead, he just watched them.

“Reports say,” Blake began, “that a dragon flew to the portal site, was denied passage, then without discussing it with either side, the dragon forced the portal open wider before going through. Once on the other side, the portal returned to its usual size. No one was hurt, just startled. Not long after, three more dragons expanded the portal to go through. They did not ask for permission to cross.”

Blake almost looked amused by the situation. Kade was definitely trying not to laugh.

“I’m told they also...” Now I knew he was trying to hold his laughter in. “Um, they also threw a head through the portal?”

Kade was laughing openly now. “A head? Why? So random.” He leaned into his mate while both chuckled.

“It was the head of our enemy. The fae who had kept our king prisoner for a century!” one of the dragons spat.

“He deserved to die,” another muttered.

“Why here, though?” Kade asked once more, confusion scrunching his face. The amusement was gone from his expression.

“He was a gift for our king,” the last of the brothers said, as if it was obvious.

“Who is your king?” Blake looked thoughtful. Teárlach was staring at me like I should know something completely obvious.

“I am,” Ozyn answered, his fingers flexing against mine.

Turning in my seat, I stared at him. “Seriously?”

Ozyn stood, taking his hand from mine, leaving my palm feeling empty.

“I should explain myself. I am Ozyn Drakonvar. Until a treaty with the king of the fae, Glorin Darkglade, I was king of the dragons. In the treaty, I agreed to be married to him, to ensure peace between our peoples. My son, Rezoth, is regent. He should be king now. I was gone for a long time. They,” he aimed a glare at his brothers, who all flinched, “were to crown him when I didn’t come back.”

“How long?” I heard myself asking in a small voice.

My mate turned to look at me. “Too long. No more, please. I can’t—“

The speech seemed to sap all the remaining energy from him. He crumpled before my very eyes. I wasn’t quick enough to catch him.

Something blurred into action. I felt a surge of magic move from next to the dragons, hiding in their shadows. A shape formed in front of my very eyes. A pretty fae with butterfly wings, dark hair, and purple eyes, was cradling my mate to his chest.

“Ozyn! You’ve done too much!” The fae looked devastated.

Jealousy surged within me. Who was this, touching my mate?

On the chairs they had been given, the dragons strained to stay seated. It was clear they wanted to go to their brother. Were they really brothers, as in related, or just what they called other dragons of their clan? There weren’t many common features between them.

I landed on the floor next to my mate without even realizing I was moving.

“Who are you? What’s wrong?”

Aldrin joined me on the floor, checking Ozyn’s vitals. I took him out of the fae’s hold, still anxious, yet marginally happier to have him in my arms.

Our healer frowned. “He has overextended himself. His body is similar to shifters, except he holds more magic, like witches. From what I can tell, he is malnourished and his well is very depleted.”

“Oz just had to shift, fly across Abrocaelum, and heal his mate after a century in a dungeon!” One brother remarked sardonically. “You, the fae traitor, did you feed him at all? He’s skin and bones!”

The fae was hunched in on himself, his wings sagging to the floor. “Of course!”

“Vale, leave the fae. Safilix got Ozyn out. Ozyn trusts him.”

So a brother was called Vale. That was a start. I assumed the fae was Safilix. I looked at him.

“Safilix is it? What can we do to heal him?”

“Please, call me Safi. In getting Ozyn out, I committed treason. I knew what I was doing and had help. My brother, the king, deserved to die—“

“Look,” I interrupted him, “I don’t care about all that. You helped get Ozyn here. Help us help him now. What does he need?”

“What he needs is a skin to skin connection to you.” The quietest dragon so far crouched down to tenderly brush Ozyn’s hair from his face. “That and a lot of food. His magic will replenish quickly once he has more energy. I’m Laer, by the way.”

“Thanks, Laer, I’m Deke, Ozyn’s fated mate. Will he really be okay with some rest and once he eats?”

“Absolutely. My brother is the omega, meaning he is the strongest of us. I know he was feeling overwhelmed from the magic in the air here. It has told us much about your world.”

“Explain, please?” Aldrin asked Laer.

The dragon gazed into the distance. “It is like your computers. We have had an upgrade in information. We now understand the more common vernacular, your technology, and so on.”

“Handy.” Aldrin looked like he really wanted to be studying the dragons.

In my arms, Ozyn stirred. I stood, holding him against my chest, then resumed our seats. I struggled to get my robe open so my mate could lie against my skin, soaking in our bond.

“Here,” Chase muttered. Reaching over, he pulled the robe apart.

Ozyn’s hand snapped out, grasping Chase’s wrist in an iron hold. “No.”

Chase wasn’t bothered. He withdrew his hand with a grin. “No touching your mate. Got it Ozzy dragon.”

“No,” Ozyn repeated, earning another smile. “Ozyn.”

“You’re the boss. Or king. Oooh, does that make you queen, Deke?”

Laughter broke out all over the room. Trust Chase to lighten the mood.

Over the next half hour, while Winter made a feast fit for a starving dragon, we all talked about what was next for us all. The dragons would have to return to Abrocaelum. All but Ozyn. My mate nearly pitched a fit at the thought of us being separated. I offered to go there. He wouldn’t have it, knowing all my family were in Sweetwater.

Still, the others had to return. There was no way the humans would appreciate all these dragons flying about the place. We’d have to speak to the authorities and assure them that the dragons meant no harm. This would be another reason for the aviary to attack us.

Speaking for the elves, Teárlach said his mother was pleased Glorin was gone. He was the last barrier to peace between them, especially now the fertility crisis was being solved. The fae had a similar problem, but also a curse. Glorin was their curse. As long as he tried to impregnate my dragon and elves, then his people were doomed to have no children.

I was glad he was dead.

Ozyn quietly pleaded Safi's case. The young prince was ineligible to rule as a bastard child. He'd turned traitor along with the dead king's advisor, all of them unable to put up with the crimes Glorin committed any longer. Ozyn said Safi had pledged his life to him and he wanted to give the fae a new life in our realm after what had happened to his wings.

"Heard there was a dragon in need of feeding in here!" Winter called as the wolf shifter pushed a cart into the room.

Everyone sat up to take in the feast the chef had prepared. The smells coming off the food were heavenly. Ozyn tried to stand to go to the food, the siren song of the scents luring him forward. His legs shook too much. He didn't get far.

Whisking him off his feet, I put him down on the seat once more. "I'll fix you a plate, okay?" He nodded, his cheeks rosy once more. Fucking adorable. "Anything you don't like?" He shook his head.

I approached Winter with a friendly smile. "You are amazing, Winter. Thanks for doing all this for my mate and our guests."

He grinned in return. "Since you have the manners, your cousin," he coughed a fake sound with "Chase," in the middle, "clearly forgot, then of course you may fix a plate for your dragon."

Ozyn grumbled when I smirked at Chase. I let it slide. He just wanted my attention, which he'd get in spades once I had a decent amount of food for him. I'd feed him while he sat on my lap, then I'd take him home once the other dragons were gone. We wouldn't bond anytime soon, so I'd have to get used to my feral omega. Ozyn would settle when our bond did.

Sure enough, Ozyn was as meek as a kitten when I returned to our shared sofa. I

settled him between my legs so I could hand feed him. His strange cerulean eyes were alight with happiness as I gave him each morsel. His brothers watched us with what I hoped was approval.

Day one of dragons in Sweetwater, and I was killing it as a dragon mate.

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Return

Ozyn

Being with my mate worked on soothing the fractured pieces of my soul. Little by little, his attention, his care, melted my sharp edges, softening me from the feral creature, the beast I had become.

Deke's gentle service, as he fed me tasty morsels, made it easier to push everything that had happened to me into a box in my mind, to be opened at a much later date. There would be time in the weeks, months, years, to come for us to work through the events of the last century. For me to make my peace with all that had been done to me. I might never be completely whole, yet I sensed with a surety I would stake my life on, that Deke would never hold my past against me.

It was not quite that time to be dealing with my issues. I sensed there was much wrong in the Sweetwater pack. There was an air of being on guard I had not noticed at first. Their careful observation of us suggested a former betrayal. The entire property was covered in guards, both shifter and elven alike. These were people under attack. They were at war.

Once my mate settled on the sofa with me, I sort of zoned out. Our bond pulled at me. I felt his firm body against me, a siren song, tempting me to find somewhere quiet where we could consummate what we were to each other. It was far, far too soon for that. I knew the bond was willing, perhaps even my heart, but my mind was leagues behind.

I found the way people spoke in this era was strange as I listened to their conversations. I would adapt. There was enough in what they said, which told me these people had an enemy.

It meant I had a new enemy to fight. One I could destroy after being denied the chance with Glorin.

As if sharing my thoughts, my brothers' voices began their chatter in my head.

Who do we need to hurt so Ozyn can have some peace? Valethar was always so bloodthirsty!

No idea, but we'll find out once we check on things at home. Do you think Rez can come visit with his brothers? Mira's determination came through our bond clearly.

Yes! I wanted to see my children. To see the changes a century had wrought on them. Would they still love me the same? Did they understand why I had given myself to our enemy? It had bought them decades of peace. For me, it was worth it. I hoped they would agree. Balon would, I was sure of it. He was the most levelheaded of them.

I have a mate to get before I return with you.

"What?" When Deke jolted behind me, I realized I'd spoken aloud, the word more like a growl than anything else.

"You aren't the only one with a mate on this side, brother," Laer said with a smile. Everyone in the room watched him speak. "I let him be for a while. Let him sow his oats, figure out who he was out from under his brother's control, but it's time for him to come home and take his place at my side."

“I thought you’d decided not to claim Ulrian when—“

“Ulrian?” Deke’s cousin, Chase gaped. “As in the freaking mayor? Ulrian Darkglade is your mate?”

A buzz went through the room as we waited for Laer to reply. I already knew it was true. My enigma brother had been brokenhearted when Ulrian left. The fae had denied their bond to concede to his brother’s wishes in pairing him to an elf, the queen, then he had broken the match and fled Abrocaelum altogether.

Part of why Laer had not come to the castle with me that fateful day was his fury at Glorin for being the reason Ulrian fled where Laer could not follow. The humans, shifters, the supernaturals left behind in the human realm when we formed Abrocaelum just were not ready to know we dragons still existed, still thrived, away from them.

Humans had nearly hunted us to extinction, after all. They were the reason Abrocaelum was made in the first place. If they became a threat to us once more, I would not hesitate to steal Deke away for his safety. I’d take his entire family if it was necessary.

I hoped with only me remaining behind in Sweetwater, we could focus on our bond before I needed to speak to human authorities and ensure my people’s welcome this side of the portal. They had to know there were permanent links between our two worlds already. Perhaps they could finally see us as allies instead of a threat. There was much we could provide to humanity, to other supernaturals.

“Uh, not to be rude, but the guy escaped here instead of mating with you. What makes you think he’ll come now?” The Alpha Mate was similar to me in height and build. I knew from snippets I’d picked up that he had borne the Alpha three children already. My senses told me he had a heat coming, and he was likely to conceive

again.

Laer only grinned. “Because this time he won’t be powerless. He will be king as next in line. Our mating will do what his brother failed to do: unite the dragons and fae.”

My brother was insufferable. He looked incredibly smug about this, as if he wasn’t about to chase his mate down and likely kidnap him back to Abrocaelum to clean up his brother’s messes.

I did not envy Ulrian. He would have much to do in order to restore faith in the fae’s leadership. There would be many things to rebuild, including most of the keep and castle, infrastructure, and so on. Some dragons had caused damage.

“Do you truly think the fae will accept it this time after...?” Prince Teárlach blushed. “I am sorry. The last attempt caused much harm.”

Again, the comments didn’t appear to phase Laer. He was cheerful, brushing aside the last century, which I appreciated.

“No. Glorin did not want an equal. He abused the trust gifted to him by my brother. I have learned how to be a good mate from the dragons around me. When Ulrian gives in to fate, he will find his fears over bearing our children—“

“How?” Kade cut in. “He’s not an omega. Fae do not have a secondary gender like shifters.”

“They do,” I said, quietly. “Many of them can unlock it with their magic.”

“Like our soulbonds?” the prince asked.

“Perhaps.”

“Or they could admit they need dragons for that, brother.” Vale looked irritated. “Not that they would.” At the puzzled looks, he added. “Our magic can unlock their potential.”

“So you’re saying the mayor, Ulrian, is an omega?” Chase chuckled. “There’s no way I could see him carrying a baby and being all caring!”

“As if he’d give up his fancy suits for paternity wear like Dalton did. Remember his face when he saw Dalton?” Kade’s grin was edged in malice. “No, he lacks a certain quality to be an omega. He’s not one of us.”

The others of the pack all laughed. I gathered Ulrian had hardly endeared himself to the pack. Once you offended one of their members, you were an enemy of them all. Packs, rather like flights, were communities, families.

“Why do they dislike Ulrian?” I asked my mate in an undertone. Being so close to him, our skin touching, was heavenly after so long thinking I would never get this. I feared I would be trapped with Glorin for the rest of my life. With Deke near, I felt more present than before.

“He’s the reason the aviary could attack us.” I could see Deke was choosing his words carefully. “The mayor made a rule that we had to register new births within a couple of weeks of the babies being born. In person, with the babies there. We had to take vulnerable babies into danger outside of the compound! The office in Sweetwater was closed, so we had to go to Northarbor, where the aviary was waiting to attack us.”

“When did this happen?” I was aghast! How could Ulrian be so reckless with the lives of children?

Deke struggled to answer, probably sensing I wasn’t going to like it. “A few days

ago.”

“NO!” The single word came out with enough fury and magic that it blew everyone back.

Brother! The chorus came in my head. All three of them wanted to know why I was so upset. It was Deke who calmed me most.

“Hey, I’m here. I’m okay. He didn’t know how far the aviary would go. He’s sorry.”

“Sorry?” my voice shook. “It’s not enough. He cannot be your mate,” I told Laer, using more power than was perhaps wise. It felt like the last of my magic was draining out of me.

“Fate will not be denied, my king.”

“I am not your king. Not any more. I say this as your brother. He is not worthy of you.” I shook with the effort of staying in Deke’s arms, wanting to go to Laer and shake some sense into him.

“Is it not up to fate to decide if we can be worthy of each other? Perhaps I am to help him grow.”

He was being far too reasonable. Was the pull to his mate that strong it overrode sense?

“I still can’t get over the fact he’s an omega,” Chase remarked, breaking the stare down I was having with Laer.

“He’s not.” It came out sharper than Chase deserved. I saw his role in the family clearly. He had the potential to be an enigma like Laer, but presented as a beta.

Looking around the room, I spotted another, the Alpha Mate's friend. Or rather, they had the potential to be enigmas. The pathway to the magic was blocked, less so with the alpha.

"Huh?" Deke straightened behind me, tightening his arm around my waist. "I don't get it then. Is this a dragon thing?"

My brothers shared a look, then settled their eyes on me, leaving it up to me to explain.

"There are other designations than alpha, beta, and omega," I began.

"What?" Kade's mouth hung open. "Seriously?"

"Yes. I see three enigmas in this room alone."

"Enigmas?" the Alpha asked.

"There are two more designations," I warmed into educating the shifters and the elf. "Firstly, there is the enigma: they often present as an alpha and have the ability to impregnate alphas and betas as well as omegas. Then there are deltas. They present as omegas and are able to impregnate other omegas where usually omegas cannot do that."

Everyone in the room hung on my words. After so long alone and in the dark, it was gratifying to be the center of attention in this bright, sunny room. The situations could not be more opposite.

"To answer your question about how Ulrian can bear Laer's children, as an enigma, Laer can alter Ulrian's physiology to carry their young, because in his current state, Ulrian is a beta. However, as a fae, he will only carry the eggs for a few weeks,

barely a full month like a dragon. He and Laer will be jointly responsible for roosting.”

“Not going to ask about roosting,” Kade said, “but I am curious about who the other two enigmas are, since Laer is one. Are your other brothers enigmas too? They smell like alphas.”

“No, Vale and Mira are both alphas. Your nose is correct there. The other two with the potential to be enigmas are your friend there—“

“Roan?”

The man in question cocked his head. “Me?”

“Yes. Chase is the other. However, he is presenting as a beta, which is unusual.” I worried my senses were playing tricks on me. Yet I had never been proven wrong before.

“Huh,” Chase appeared nonplussed. “So that’s what the beta sickness would have turned me into.” He shrugged it off quickly. “Wonder if we have deltas... Oh, Tate has to be one, right?”

Perhaps sensing my confusion, Deke squeezed me. “I’ll explain all that later.” Louder he said, “It would make sense if Tate was one. He fathered one of Hiroshi’s twins, didn’t he?” He then changed the subject. “So, are you just going to steal the mayor and take him home?”

“If I have to,” Laer said around a smirk. “My mate is a tricky one and may need convincing. However, he’s had his playtime, now it is time to, what is it you say? ‘Act his age?’ Now he must return for the good of his people.”

“Need us to come with you?” Vale asked. He and Mira looked eager to be moving.

“No. I feel like this is something which I must do alone.” He stood. “I must take my leave. After his recent grave mistake, I worry about Ulrian’s mental state. I will portal home and visit as soon as things with Ulrian allow.”

Used to Laer taking off for weeks or even months at a time, I nodded. “Be safe, Laer. Good luck in your mating.”

“Good luck, Deke, with keeping my brother in line. I wish you many eggs!”

Laer left Deke sputtering while the rest of the room laughed.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the gathering to break up, especially now that everyone was fed and they had the explanations necessary to feel safe. They understood we weren’t about to take over the pack. My dragons just wanted peace to live their lives.

“Please bring my children to visit soon,” I begged Vale and Mira as they prepared to return to Abrocaelum through the portal. “I miss them dearly.”

“They miss you too. Rezoth left space for you at his coronation. They mourned your absence all this time. All our people will rejoice in your freedom and mating to your fated mate.” Mira scanned the crowd, perhaps looking for his own mate. Vale stood talking with the elves, who hung on his every word. He was always the charismatic one.

“Even though he is a shifter?”

“Maybe because he is a shifter. The Luna and her shifters were always allies of the dragonkin. She is the Great Drakon’s sister, after all.”

“True. I wish I could return with you, but my place is here with my mate,” I said, torn by my need for my mate and duty to my children.

“It is,” Mira agreed. “They have battles ahead. They need your strength.”

I sighed, so very tired of war. “What if all I want is peace? I don’t know if I have the spirit left to keep fighting.”

Mira’s smile was sad. He knew as well as I did that any fight the pack had was one I would help with. It was who I was deep inside.

“I know, but you were never one to watch others struggle,” he said, showing how well he knew me even after so long apart. “You will fight because it is the right thing to do. This is where you are meant to be, Ozyn.” Mira reached for Deke, taking his hand in a firm grip. “Take care of my brother or feel the wrath of the dragons, understand?”

“Understood.”

Home

Deke

M ind buzzing with far too much new information, I led Ozyn away from the portal and mansion towards my little home. Before I got too far, Blake stopped me.

“I think you should take the next house available near us. One is nearly ready.”

“But—“

“No, Deke. As Head Enforcer, you deserve a larger home, especially now that you have a fated mate.” He gave Ozyn a welcoming smile. “Please. You’ve done so much for the pack, allow us to give you this.”

I glanced at my mate, wishing we had the mental connection of the pack, or our mating bond, to ask him what he thought. Instead, I got a blank stare in return. Not even a buzz of his magic. Guess I was making this decision for us both. For a former king, Ozyn was far more submissive than I thought, though only with me.

“Um, I dunno...”

“Deke, seriously. We’re family. The only one you have—“

How did he know? “But—“

“Did you think the council didn’t send me the same letter they sent you?”

He gave me a sympathetic look. I could tell he wanted to reach for me, just with Ozyn so close, he didn't want to overstep.

My mind was reeling. I'd held this secret for years now. "How long—?"

"Basically when you were told." Blake shrugged. I could tell, though, my silence had hurt him. Blake needed to be needed. Me not confiding in him probably stung.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Our eyes met and locked. We had the same eyes, they came from his mom's side of the family. From her mom before her. The same side of our fucked up family my dad came from.

"Probably because you didn't. We talked about it. Me, Chase and Axel. We kept waiting for you to tell us. The longer you went without talking about your dad, the easier it was to forget. Besides, we had enough going on here."

"Right." I shook my head, a million memories flashing in my brain. I felt a pressing urge to explain myself to my baby cousin because that's who I was speaking to. Not my Alpha.

"He just... he let us down, y'know?"

Blake grimaced. "Yeah. Uncle Ian was so lost after Mom... he tried."

"No. He really didn't," I snapped. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I sighed. "Sorry." I caught Ozyn watching the exchange with interest. He had to be confused.

"The short version," I explained, "is that my aunt Iris was an angel of a woman and when she died, her brother, who was my dad, couldn't cope. He was the Alpha, doing

a shit job of it, too, until he made me take over. As soon as I did, he fucked off to parts unknown, then died.” My tone was brittle, harsh.

“Deke...” Blake’s finger’s flexed with his need to comfort me. Ozyn stared him down in challenge.

Blake was understandably wary of the dragon, not realizing my mate was basically powerless. Even after a meal and lots of skin contact, his magic was pretty much gone. It would return, but who knew when.

“This is why I didn’t want to talk about him, Blake. He gave up. He left us to suffer, to drag this pack from the brink, so no, I didn’t tell you when he died, because I refused to grieve him for what he did to us.

“Fair enough.” He shook his head. “We were talking about a house. You need something better. As Head Enforcer and now with a mate, you need something that reflects your standing in the pack.”

“Chase doesn’t have a house and he’s Second.”

“He’ll take over your place when you move. Actually make it a home if he wants to. You know what Chase is like. He loves having a room everywhere so he can wander between places.” He smiled fondly at the thought of his brother.

“Yeah, that’s Chase.”

“Stop changing the subject, Deke. Take the house. You need it.”

“Okay,” I agreed reluctantly. In all honesty, my house was small and if I was going to be mated to Ozyn, who was likely used to luxury, then I needed an upgrade. Stat. Shit, my place was a dump in comparison to where he likely lived before.

Maybe he was reacting to a change in scent, or my cousin just knew me, but he gave in to his instincts and reached out to put a hand on my arm.

Ozyn bodily blocked the touch with a growl. I encircled my mate, calming him.

“Ignore him. He doesn’t like other people touching me.”

“Mine,” Ozyn snarled.

“Right,” I agreed. I rested my chin on his head, soaking in the connection. Our bodies were flush against each other, the only way which seemed to soothe my strange mate.

Blake frowned, then his expression smoothed. He ignored Ozyn’s display of possessiveness. “I’ll make sure there’s some new furniture in the house. Make it more of a family home than a bachelor pad like you’ve got going on.”

I winced because he was right. I’d been living the single life for far too long since my arranged mating fell through. Sure, I’d hooked up here and there, I was so not mentioning the fling I’d had with Melody to Ozyn, but there had never been anyone serious, not like Ozyn was.

He was my forever someone. I knew it with all of my soul.

Ozyn tilted his head, probably feeling the wince. He struggled to meet my eyes. Taking pity on him, I repositioned us, tucking him under my arm. It hit me then: my mate was touch starved. It was why he needed to be close to me all the time.

His flush when he looked at me was gratifying. I enjoyed knowing I affected him as much as he affected me. I’d have to go slow with him, though. There was no knowing all he’d been through or what could trigger him.

I'd waited this long for him, I didn't mind waiting longer. Just knowing he was mine was enough for now, pull or not.

Protect, my alter urged. Touch. Defend. My wolf was so bossy!

Like I was going to do anything else, I chided the beast. He's our dragon. I'll look after him like the treasure he is.

"Are you doing okay?" Blake asked, pulling me back to the moment. "With," he circled a hand, "everything?"

Shifting to hold Ozyn closer, I smiled at my Alpha. He was asking the question less like my family, more as the Alpha he was, the one who wanted every shifter in his pack to be happy and healthy.

"Not gonna lie, it's been a wild day. Fuck, I woke from a coma to this gorgeous being hovering over me." I squeezed Ozyn affectionately. "Found out dragons never died out, and my fated is one." I laughed. "Not only that, he's the fucking king!"

"Was," Ozyn piped up. "I'm not the king anymore. My son is."

"Apparently I'm a step-dad too!" I might have giggled nervously. The situation suddenly felt enormous. A step parent to a king! What even was my life!

Ozyn broke away from me, tension lining his body. "Is that a problem for you? Me having children?"

"You've got more than one?" I could hear how high my voice got with my panic.

"Yes. Dragons rarely have one child. It is considered unlucky to have only one egg."

Deke? You need to chill out. You're freaking Ozyn out, and we can't cope if he goes full dragon right now.

My eyes must have been broadcasting my growing panic. Blake tried to use our pack bond to calm me down before I had a meltdown in the middle of the yard.

What had I expected? Ozyn was hundreds of years old. Had to be. He'd been a prisoner for a century. When he'd gone to the fae, he'd left his son behind. Rezoth couldn't have been a child. There was no way an omega would leave a vulnerable child to rule.

As the king, Ozyn couldn't have been young. Of course, he had a life before me. It was ridiculous to think anything else.

Mate is sad . My alter was angry with me, enough that it sobered me.

Time to get it together, I chided myself.

I plastered on a smile. Blake grimaced. I dialed it down a notch. "Can't wait to meet them! You'll have to tell me all about them. In shifter culture, it means I'm their dad now, so I need to know all about them."

Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?

Ozyn missed Blake rolling his eyes at me. He was too busy giving me the sunniest of smiles. Fuck, he was beautiful. His face was my favorite thing to look at even with his strange slit pupil eyes. I found them fascinating.

Fuck off!

I started leading Ozyn away from my cousin without another word. Blake deserved it

for being a dick.

“Really?” Ozyn asked hopefully, also ignoring Blake. “I hope my brothers can bring my boys to us soon!”

Looking back, Blake was grinning and shaking his head at us. He’s perfect for you.

“Are all dragons male?”

“Yes, it is why we have five designations.”

Looking at my home with fresh eyes, I was kind of ashamed to have Ozyn in my space. I’d have to order some shit, fast. Every room screamed a single guy lived there. The living room was sparse, only a TV cabinet, coffee table and a black leather sofa. No cushions, rug, or even drapes. Just hardwood floors and plain cream walls. Sure, there was a blind for when the sun was blazing, but I was barely home, preferring to spend my time in my office.

The kitchen wasn’t any better. I hardly had any food, or probably pots to cook with, something I’d have to rectify quickly since my dragon had been starved for attention and food. There was a coffee maker, a toaster, and a microwave. So basic. I wasn’t even sure if the stovetop worked, let alone the oven.

My bedroom was the worst. I winced when I looked at it. All I had was a basic bed frame and mattress. The comforter had been a gift from Kade. All my clothes were on shelves in the closet. There were no personal touches anywhere. It was like a ghost lived there.

I was pretty sure the only thing my home had going for it was that it was clean because I barely spent any time there.

“Deke?” Ozyn, sounding so hesitant, had me whipping my head around to check that he was okay. He lingered a few paces away, unable, or unwilling to go far alone.

“What’s wrong?” I took him by the shoulders to check him over. He smiled when I met his eyes.

“You looked sad. What bothers you?”

I gave a derisive snort. “Look at this dump!” I waved a hand around. “You’re a king—“

“Was.”

“Still. You’re literally royalty, and this is all I can offer you. I’m a no one wolf—“

“Head Enforcer. You are important.”

“Yeah, but I’m an enforcer in a pack with too many enemies. You’d be better off without me.”

His words cut into my heart when he spoke in a voice barely over a whisper. “Without you, I’d still be locked up in that dungeon with no hope to speak of.”

He moved to wrap his arms around my middle, burrowing into my chest. “When the portal opened, I had hope for the first time in so long. All because I could feel you. For two years, you have been the only reason I kept breathing.”

Ozyn pulled away far enough I could see his face. He was so precious to me already. Fate really was a miracle.

“So what if your home is plain? It will be different when we make our home, won’t

it?”

I pressed a kiss to his forehead. He gave me hope, something to care for when I’d thought I’d lost that ability.

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe you could help pick out the stuff for our house.”

“Ours. I like that.” He smiled easily. “I think I shall enjoy living in Sweetwater.”

“You don’t want to return to Abrocaelum?” I thought he would want to, especially with his kids, our kids, living there, but he looked so determined.

My fears surged. I worried over not being enough for Ozyn, about him wanting us to go to his lands, leaving the pack. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep Ozyn despite barely knowing him a day, but I was torn. I wanted to stay with my people, my pack. Maybe that was selfish of me. Could I give it all up for him?

“No. My home is here now. With you. With the pack.” I felt relieved for a moment until he kept speaking. “Something tells me I have to be here for what is to come.”

If that wasn’t foreboding, I didn’t know what was.

“Alright,” I said, ignoring the knot of worry balled in my stomach. “Welcome to your new home. Let’s get you settled in.”

Living With Dragons

Deke

The next couple of days passed quickly while Ozyn and I tried to find our groove. Neither of us were ready for anything intimate. I still had some healing to do despite his amazing dragon magic and he, well, had some adjusting to do.

Sure, magic was great and all, but he'd burned through a heap of it bringing me back from the brink. A couple of times he woke from a nap in a cold sweat when I'd ventured far enough from him that he thought he'd lost me. Precious for sure, also heartbreaking because it told me without words just how close I'd come to actually dying.

I was worried about how long it was taking his magic to rebound. Asking other people for advice would be admitting I had an ability to sense it. Instead, I watched him. Ozyn told me he had worn magic suppressing cuffs for a long time. I thought maybe they were the reason it was taking longer to return.

We learned a lot about each other in those first days. General likes and dislikes, things about our families and such. I knew Ozyn was perfect for me, only there were some teething problems.

Things Ozyn didn't like: loud noises, dead silence, the dark, bright light, my cell phone, visitors, anyone trying to touch me, people looking at me too much. Basically, the list was endless.

My alter coached patience. He was much more forgiving than I was inclined to be, but I really tried to cope with Ozyn's issues. All day, every damn day, I reminded myself just what he had been through and to be grateful for the gift he was.

What he liked was me, near him constantly, even if we weren't talking, just existing, and it was... sweet.

Ozyn had lived far too long as a prisoner, left alone in the dark. He told me haltingly about the methods Glorin would use to make him comply, then would completely clam up in the next second. At times he would be so open, almost resigned to his past, then he acted like it never happened.

The first thing we had to do was get the physical signs of his captivity off his body. It felt like a kick to the gut sometimes when I looked at him. Winter provided us with a bunch of calorie dense meals and snacks for Ozyn to eat so he could recover his magic faster. We all wanted him to put some weight on. He wasn't quite skeletal, but it was a close thing. I ached when I looked at the hollows of his cheeks, how tightly his skin wrapped over bone.

Feeding him was easy. The scars were harder. Aldrin came to our house twice a day to attempt healing on the marks. Some of them were made with magic, meaning we had to rely on the elves and the fae, Safi, to give removing them a try.

Safi was a complication I hadn't foreseen, not that I'd seen any of this coming! No one knew what to do with him. He was untrained in his magic, though he learned some control, with Farryn and Ozyn guiding him. We couldn't let him roam around the compound, and no one wanted to lock him up. Having him around Ozyn all the time wasn't ideal either, since the fae served as a reminder of his captivity.

Being near Safi and his damaged wings made Ozyn feel guilty, too. It was a vicious cycle with them. They only knew each other, but it wasn't healthy for them to be

together.

The first night we had him stay with us. Larken unceremoniously dumped him on my stoop and left without a backwards glance. From what I'd heard, he'd made Larken almost shit himself with the sneaky invisibility thing he did while he tried to figure out where Ozyn was.

As cool as the guy probably was, I refused to have him another night after he did that invisibility thing and appeared at our bedside when Ozyn had a nightmare.

It was hard enough dealing with Ozyn's PTSD without adding Safi's trauma into the mix. I was not the one for the job.

In a surprising move, Chase offered to take him in. He found a house and adopted Safi with one of his careless shrugs and an easy grin. His reasoning was that he wasn't going to have a mate, so why not give back to the pack by looking after the exiled fae? Until Ulrian took over, the fae were in complete disarray, except they somehow knew it was Safi's fault Ozyn had gotten out. He was banished until his brother lifted the sentence, if he was inclined to.

Knowing Ulrian, it looked like Safi was going to be with us for a long time.

The mayor was another problem. Look, I was still salty, okay? He might never have intended for the babies to be at risk, but he put them in harm's way. Not to mention the attack on me. True, I might not have met Ozyn otherwise. I would have preferred a meet-cute not an anxiety-ridden introduction.

Ulrian was still in Northarbor, somehow still clinging to power after that shit show. Ozyn's brother, Laer, had called a couple of times. His mate was resisting less than Laer thought he might, except he hadn't quite given in and agreed to go play king in Abrocaelum. We were waiting for the rest of the dragons to return with some fae

delegation so they could convince the mayor to give up Northharbor.

Really, the situation benefitted us. With the status of the mayor in flux, the aviary had paused their assaults on us. The mayor was incredibly apologetic about the attack, more so because the babies had been put in danger. Like most supernaturals, the fae valued children over everything else. They'd suffered their own fertility crisis after all. So the optics weren't good for him. Plenty of citizens in Northharbor wanted him out, especially after Kade's emotional statement.

I wondered about the move, but it was Blake who suggested it. "Watch," he'd said with a smirk. He's going to have the press eating out of his hand in half a minute."

Sure enough, Kade had them hanging on his every word. It only helped that he had Elliotte, Grayson and Felix, all being their adorable selves.

"What are you?" Kade asked, his daughter perched on his knee. She was dressed in the sweetest pink romper.

"Alpha!" she'd cheered, then clapped. I watched from my place in the corner as the press melted. If they were acting like that, then the people of Sweetwater and Northharbor were gonners.

Blake was right to spin this our way. We were lucky Larken wasn't seeing any punishment for killing Jared, since he did it to protect me. Aldrin had to give a statement outlining my injuries, but other than that, it was done.

"Deke?" Ozyn's alarmed voice broke me from my daydreaming while I made his protein shake.

"Kitchen!" Should have known he would wake from his nap before I could get back in bed. I even mashed the fruit by hand rather than use the blender.

Moments later, his skinny arms wrapped around me, his head rested on my back while he breathed me in.

“Scared.”

“I’m sorry. I was just getting you a shake. Made a banana one this time.”

Ozyn grimaced. I felt it against my skin. “No.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Doctor’s orders. You’ve gotta.”

“No.”

Fuck, he was cute. Okay, I got irritated with him. Well, not too much at him, more about the situation. It wasn’t his fault he was a clingy, panic filled mess most of the day. To be honest, I was proud of how strong he was. He’d come out of that dungeon for me. Come to a new place, filled with potential enemies without a second thought, just for me. The least I could do was be patient with him.

My wolf gave a chuff. Feed mate.

Yes, I’m feeding him his shake, then some cookies Winter made.

The cook adored my prickly mate. A feeling Ozyn seemed to reciprocate, probably because Winter paid me no attention when my dragon was around, which was every second of the day.

“Drink this,” I bribed, “and you can have Winter’s chocolate and macadamia cookies.”

“Winter baked for me?” I could picture him cocking his head in confusion.

“Of course he did. He wants to feed you up so you can take him flying.”

“You first.” I was sure he was smiling. Not a full on thing, just the corners of this lush mouth lifting.

“Damn straight. You better not fly with anyone else before me.” I’d be hurt if he did. I wanted to be among the clouds with him.

Ozyn huffed a laugh into my back. It was short-lived, but genuine.

Progress.

“Oz?” I gently shook my mate from his nap.

“No.”

I’d made the mistake of pre-warning him about what was coming, thinking it would be easier on him. Nope, I was wrong.

“You know we have to do this,” I urged him, using all my patience.

While he sat up, he didn’t look happy. “I don’t understand why. Aren’t I clean? My hair is fine.”

I perched near him, so we were touching. As always, his heartbeat slowed at the contact. “Look, I think you are beautiful, the best looking omega I’ve ever seen.”

“So why?”

“These are government officials, representatives from the shifter council.” At least ones we knew weren’t trying to kill us. “The supernatural defense force, too.” Yes,

we had a secretive group made up of supernaturals to police us. Apparently, we only knew about them because we registered as a threat.

“And?”

Desperately holding onto my sanity, I held back, rolling my eyes. “Babe, you’re the single biggest threat they’ve ever seen. We just need to prove you’re harmless.”

“I’m not.”

Count to ten, I reminded myself. “You wouldn’t hurt a stranger would you? Anyone not fae. You don’t go around eating people or setting them on fire just because you can, do you?”

“No.”

Ah, we were back to single syllables. Fantastic.

“Exactly. So you need to look... normal.”

“Normal?” His lips curled with disgust.

“Boring then. Your haircut says you’ve hacked at it with a blunt knife.”

“Safi used his dagger.”

“Right, so we’ll just tidy it up after you soak in the tub. It’s just lucky you didn’t grow a beard.”

“I chose not to. Far too itchy.”

“Good.” I pulled the comforter off him. His hands automatically reached for it, even though it was too warm in the room for it. Ozyn didn’t want the window open, preferring we use an air conditioner unit I’d bought instead in this sticky summer heat.

“Why don’t I take a bath with you? I can wash your hair for you and your back.”

Ozyn blushed. The pink on his cheeks never failed to make me feel like I was doing something right. He was so tempting. The pull to him was difficult to resist when he looked so damn cute!

“Please.”

Both of us ran on the warm side and my house was hotter than Hades, so I drew us a cool bath with plenty of bubbles. I got in first, and despite saying he wanted to bathe with me, Ozyn did require some coaxing to get in. It wasn’t that he was bashful about being naked around me. It was a vulnerable position to give me. Putting me at his back required trust on his part. So when he took my hand to climb in, I felt like I’d won gold.

We settled into the water, Ozyn giving a little sigh of happiness as he lounged against me.

“I’m sorry,” he said into the quiet of the room. “I don’t mean to be so difficult.”

“You’re not!” I protested, though it sounded weak to my ears.

“No, I am. It’s just that everything is...”

“Overwhelming?”

“Yes. My body... it was not always mine to decide what to do with.”

Fuck. I hadn't thought about it that way.

“If you don't want to cut your hair, we won't.”

He was silent for a long time. I considered the matter closed, thinking my options through instead. A hat was a possibility, but I suspected the SDF would want to examine Ozyn, another ordeal I really didn't want to go through.

There had to be something we could do. My mind was drawing a blank.

“Does it look that bad?” His fingers lifted towards the shorn parts.

I laughed. “Yes, but it also suits you. Does that make sense?”

Ozyn tried to look at me, craning his head. “How so?”

“It's as wild as you are.”

His frown was clear. “That does not sound like a good thing.”

“It is to me. Really, I don't care what you look like. If getting your hair cut upsets you, then it isn't worth it. We'll figure something out.”

The water rose in a wave as Ozyn turned, going to his knees. He fingered the ends of my hair. It was cut short on one side.

“Will you cut yours, too?”

“Yeah.” I gave a mirthless chuckle. “They really did a number on it when they found

out about my head.” My hand caught his. I loved the feel of it in mine. “Will you still think I’m handsome when I have no hair?”

He gave me an affectionate look. “It will take more than losing your hair to change how I see you.”

It was the most he’d ever said about his feelings for me. I knew he felt the pull of our bond, but he hadn’t put it into words, which I hadn’t cared about. Words were never a big thing for me.

The air grew thick with tension. Neither of us seemed to breathe, blink, until it broke. Ozyn moved back slightly. Disappointment, followed by guilt, filled me. I’d wanted to kiss him so badly. It wasn’t the right time.

Ozyn scanned my face before returning to sitting between my legs. “You may cut my hair. Only you. I will cut yours. Acceptable?”

I didn’t hide my smile. “Acceptable.”

“You may wash my hair now.” When he spoke like that, it was easy to remember he used to be a king.

“Okay.”

Like a cat, he leaned into my touches as I ran shampoo through his hair twice, rinsing it with clean water each time. Cadence loved her long, auburn hair, so I knew how to look after it. She had given me a bunch of things to use on Ozyn’s hair. I used a leave-in conditioner then soaped our bodies.

Throughout the bath, Ozyn remained quiet, only speaking if I asked him a question. He didn’t fight me on anything and I found I didn’t like him to be so submissive. I

loved his abrasiveness. He let me dry him before we went to the kitchen to try a haircut.

Cadence arrived with some clippers, scissors, and other tools I didn't have the name of. She smiled gently when I explained she would observe the process.

To give her props for effort, Cadence tried to distract Ozyn with talk of babies. He loved seeing how round she had gotten with Hakeem's child in the photos she showed us. He cooed over the baby photos. Little Harmony was with her dad, having owl time.

I knew Ozyn was as happy as we were that the elves were having babies again.

"Sit still," I urged as I snipped at the golden strands, making them even once more. In the corner of my eye, I could see Cadence straining with effort not to intervene.

Cutting someone's hair was incredibly intimate, even with an onlooker. This way of caring for him, with Ozyn allowing it, showed me we would be okay. Step by step, we were getting more comfortable with each other, building a solid foundation of trust between us.

Ozyn's breath puffed against my chest as I carefully cut around his faintly pointed ears. Huh, I hadn't noticed them before. They weren't the elongated tips like the elves or the fae. Adorable. Everything about him was cute.

His hand covered mine. "I would like to try Cadence finishing the haircut. Is that alright?"

"Of course." I stepped back, handing the scissors to Cadence, who beamed at us both.

"Thank you for trusting me," she whispered to Ozyn as she efficiently tidied up the

mess I'd made.

He bore the touch of someone else rather well. "You did great," I praised as I took his place for my cut.

Cadence tried to begin on me, but was interrupted by Ozyn growling. He looked horrified when he realized what he was doing.

"No, it's quite alright," Cadence reassured him. "I overstepped a boundary there. Should'a asked." She moved out of the way, passing the scissors to Ozyn.

"Sorry," he muttered before taking her place and starting work. His expression was sad as he neaten up my hair, giving us matching cuts.

"Hey." I waited for him to pause. "I prefer you doing it. All's good, okay?"

He nodded, but was less downcast.

Truthfully, I did like his hands on me more than Cadence's. It felt disloyal while our bond wasn't settled, even though she was a mated omega herself. I always wanted to be a place of comfort for him, not stress. If this was a simple way to make life easier for him, then that's what I'd do.

In a massive show of trust, Ozyn let Cadence check over what he'd done, even allowing her to snip a few pieces.

"I'll make a stylist out of you yet," she joked, proving all was forgiven. She really was a sweet woman. Hakeem was good for her, bringing her out of her shell after her terrible mating to Riff's bio dad.

My mate now had neatly cut sides, with longer hair at the top. I had almost shaved

sides, leaving plenty on top. I was grateful the surgery scar was at the side, so I didn't have to buzz it all. Ozyn hadn't reacted well to the clippers, so had to cut it as short as he dared with scissors before using a razor.

"Gorgeous," I pronounced once Cadence was gone with her kit.

"Not wild?" His cheeks were rosy with a blush.

"Only on the inside."

Best Behavior

Ozyn

Deep down, I knew I should have felt insulted that I was being coached on how to behave in the presence of government officials. I was, after all, a king. Or a former king. I was used to matters of diplomacy, though my last attempt had me married to a monster for a century, so perhaps I had things to learn. It could be argued that after my imprisonment I was rusty at communicating well. Things with Deke were effortless, others not so easy.

After the apparently necessary haircut, which matched Deke's, making my heart happy, I received new, better-fitting clothes in richer fabrics.

As an omega, I had the slender build designed to entice an alpha to protect me. My current state was far beyond slim. I remained emaciated from my imprisonment and subsequent magic use. My magic reserves were still low enough that I would struggle to sustain a shift for any length of time.

Even my senses were limited. Almost at the level of an ordinary human. It grated at me. Made me feel useless. Defenseless. Pathetic.

Worse than that, it made me remember my days locked in the dark. I struggled to hold on to sense, to not become that feral creature who lived alone, trapped, mostly forgotten. I was here, in the light, with my mate by my side.

As if he could feel the brewing storm, Deke held tightly onto my hand after he helped

me dress in the strange outfit he called a suit.

We were to meet the government people at the main house where most of the daily pack activities were held, though the Alpha and his family no longer lived there. They had one in a series of houses in a more defensible area of the compound they called home.

“What do you want me to say?” I asked Deke as we walked to the mansion together. The weather was sunny, the rays bouncing off Deke’s shiny hair in a way it almost gave him a halo. I found him incredibly distracting to look at. He had a strong, square jaw, with slightly thin lips and a pointed nose. His eyebrows were thick with an arch. His eyes were undoubtedly his best feature. He was my favorite thing to look at.

“Just answer their questions honestly. They’ll probably have someone with a lie detecting power like Chase’s.”

“Your cousin has this ability?”

“Yeah. Axel has never confirmed it, but in wolf form he sorta melts into shadows. I don’t think anyone has checked to see if it was an ability. Blake has an ability, too. He can sense attacks, predict a fight. Makes him dangerous. Not foolproof, though. We’ve learned that the hard way.”

Deke fell silent, probably pondering past instances where their abilities had been tricked. Relying on one sense was a fool’s game, so for that reason, I was glad they had learned that lesson.

“Do you have a gift?” I asked him.

“Me? No. If you asked my father, being an alpha was enough.”

I felt like he was lying to me. I decided not to push it for a moment, too curious about his father after the conversation I witnessed with Blake.

“How so?”

“I was born a couple of years before the twins. My dad was so pleased when they were born betas.” He glanced at me, judging my expression. “He was happy for his sister, their mom, when Blake came along, just because life was easier for her.”

“Why?” I thought I already knew the answer.

“My uncle was an abusive asshole. Still, my dad was disappointed I wouldn’t be named as my uncle’s heir. He was broken when he finally gained control of the pack. He’d lost his sister in the worst way: at the hands of the man he trusted to look after her.

“Your uncle killed his mate?” I heard the horror in my voice. I shook with it. How could anyone hurt their mate in such a way?

“They weren’t fated. There wasn’t anything to protect her.”

“Even so! Being bonded, fated or not, you should respect your partner. They are your world!”

Deke smiled sadly. “They’re supposed to be.” He paused, his steps close to a side door into the mansion. “Look, I know you don’t need to be told how to behave. You’re good. You wouldn’t have married—“

“Please don’t say his name.”

“Sorry.” Deke pulled me into his arms, holding me close.

For days, this was all he had allowed. Some forehead kisses, one to the tip of my nose. Nothing further. The pull of the bond urged me to take him to bed, allow him to bite me, mark me as his, put babies in me. He had to be feeling a similar insistence, yet he knew what my body did not: I was not ready. Physically or mentally.

“Just tell the truth in there. We’ll deal with whatever happens.”

We still clung to each other. The comfort of being so close to my mate made the thought of what was about to come easier to bear.

“What if they want me to leave?” I voiced my secret fear.

He answered without hesitation. “Then I’ll go with you.”

“What about your war?”

“We’ll find other allies. The elves will send more people. I don’t do that much. Besides, Larken is being trained to be my second with the pack getting so big. He can take over.”

“Would you not miss your job? You’re important here.”

“Not if it was at the expense of your safety. You are all that matters to me. Whatever happens, I’ll be by your side.”

Instantly, my fear evaporated. “Let’s go inside.”

The room was full of people. The Alpha pair, their assistants, Larken had come as Head Enforcer, Chase as Second. He had a shifter I did not know the name of with him as his assistant. The healer and his mate were there to speak of my physical and possibly my mental condition.

Ulrian and Laer arrived first.

“Hello little brother, are the shifters treating you well?” I had forgotten how smug my brother could be. I loved him as much as he irritated me.

“They are. Is your mate allowing you to sleep in the same building yet?” I sniped.

Did I imagine the little smile the mayor gave? “I have allowed Laer the use of a spare bedroom.”

“Progress!” Laer was cheerful.

“Apologies for intruding on your meeting,” Ulrian began. “However, I was given warning that the authorities were visiting and felt a more united front would be beneficial. I can attest to dragons being civilized and unwilling to harm humans.”

“That might be helpful,” Alpha Blake agreed.

“I am also giving them notice of my intent to leave Northarbor. My replacement is ready to take the reins after the recent debacle. Abrocaelum... it has not been my home for a long time, but I owe it to my people to return and take up the mantle of king.”

“Will you mate with my brother?”

Ulrian glanced at Laer before fixing his gaze on me. “I am undecided. Politically, it is the best move. Uniting our two peoples properly. Not the farce you were subjected to.”

I could feel the disdain Ulrian had for his brother. My respect grew for him at that moment.

“Is it wrong not to want a political marriage?” Ulrian said the words so quietly, I wondered if he even meant for the rest of us to hear them.

“No,” I answered automatically. Honestly, too. Even Ulrian, who had hurt my mate egregiously with his politics, deserved to feel loved by his mate.

“I would prefer you had at least some affection for me before we took that step. The fated mate pull is strong, but I will not take your choice from you.” Laer’s words were slightly teasing, yet completely honest.

My eyes did not deceive me that time. Ulrian had fallen under my brother’s spell. His cheeks colored with pleasure as Laer sat closer. He did not shift away from him, holding steady. He cared about Laer. Perhaps only a small amount, yet it was something.

“Alpha Blake,” Larken interrupted, “the delegation is here.”

Blake nodded at him to send them through. As they filled the room, the assistants arranged space and seating for several people.

Each of them were in uniforms befitting their station or suits. They had severe expressions which quickly cycled through a range of emotions as they looked over the scene.

No witches were present, since the pack feared having them close would suggest they planned to fight. The same went for the elves. They had tried to argue to have some presence. Prince Teárlach had made them see sense.

The gathered shifters, two dragons, and one fae were likely intimidating enough.

The strangers did not introduce themselves, nor ask for our names. They took their

seats before a female wearing a sharply tailored outfit spoke.

“Which of you is the dragon seen flying above the pack territory?”

“Technically, I am one of the dragons,” Laer said easily. “I followed my brother through the portal.”

She shifted her gaze towards him. “Do you plan to stay on this side of the portal?”

“I do not.”

“Laeros is my fated mate,” Ulrian stepped into the conversation with his smooth, cultured voice. “He and I plan to return to Abrocaelum once the transition is complete for my mayoral duties.”

The woman looked at one of her companions. “Note that, please.” To Ulrian, not Laer, she asked, “Do you have a timeline?”

“Some time in the next month. There are things to wrap up with my estate. We will spend some time going back and forth to help stabilize the fae before my coronation.”

“Coronation?” one of the men in the group asked.

“I am to be king of the fae now that my brother is gone.”

“We were not aware there was a change in leadership. Though we did not know about dragons at all.”

I could tell the woman was suspicious in nature. Likely what made her good at her job. I felt a measure of respect for her despite how cold and dismissive she was towards the dragons in the room. That, I understood, we were an unknown quantity to

her. By attempting to rile us, she could gain a sense of how we reacted.

“Neither were we.” Alpha Blake smiled genially. “Imagine our surprise when Ozyn came through the portal looking for his mate.”

“Which of you is Ozyn?” Her eyes scanned us all.

“I am.” My voice was clear and strong. She would not intimidate me. I meant the humans no harm. All I wanted was to get to know my mate and live in peace.

“You came to claim your mate? Have you done so?”

“Yes. I have felt his presence since the portal was opened between our worlds. Before the attack in which he was seriously hurt, I did not have the ability to get to him. I—“

“Why?” Her eyes narrowed on me.

“That’s none of your—“ Deke began.

“The former king of the fae imprisoned me some time ago.”

“For what crime?” Her questions were causing alarm among her people.

“My crime?” My laugh was a bitter thing. “For not giving a monster a baby to poison and shape into a thing of cruelty. I went and formed a political marriage. He charmed me into believing he cared for me. When he thought he had gotten me subservient, pliant, he ripped the mask away.”

“Ozyn—“ Deke looked troubled.

“For a century, I lived at the mercy of a mercurial beast. He hunted my people when I

denied him what he wanted. I could have given in. No one would have blamed me.”

“They wouldn’t,” Laer agreed. “You suffered so much. I’m glad he’s gone.”

“As am I,” Ulrian echoed. He shared a moment with my brother.

“Instead, I stuck firm, too afraid of what we would create together. My pain was better than what he would inflict on our world. Then I felt Deke’s pain. It brought me back to myself. I gained allies in the court, they allowed me to escape and get to Sweetwater via the portal.”

“You could not make one yourself?”

I did not like this woman. All respect was gone. Where was her humanity for what I suffered? Even Ulrian, the beast’s brother, felt pity for me, shame for what his kin had done.

“Dragon magic is great, however portal making is a skill best left to the fae and elves. I can extend an open one to allow for my greater size in dragon form. In my haste to get to my mate, I used a lot of magic to reopen the portal. Someone had already laid the spell work, otherwise I would not have managed it. Once through, I shifted and went to heal my mate, using the last of what I had saved for that purpose.”

“What is the status of your magic?”

“At present, it is too depleted to sustain a shift,” I answered honestly, as Deke had directed.

Aldrin, the healer, stood to come to my side. His healing light went over me. “It will be a few days yet before he has enough magic to shift. Even then, he might not hold it for long. His physical condition is improving with plenty of rest and a proper diet—“

“Alright. We’ve heard enough. As long as you stick to Sweetwater territory, you are permitted to stay on this side of the portal. You must keep us up to date about your plans. You have a mate, you say?”

“I’m his mate,” Deke confirmed.

“You are to inform us when you bond so we can assess any new threat resulting from the bond. If a pregnancy occurs—“

“Excuse me, you do not have jurisdiction over the pack. We consider dragons to be shifters; therefore, Ozyn will become pack when he takes the oath and mates with Deke.”

It surprised me to have Ulrian jump in to my defense.

“We will also consider any babies pack members. The Alpha will be responsible for controlling his pack members. Not any of the government agencies unless one commits a crime.”

His interference did not impress the woman. Her expression was close to a sneer.

“Know that we will be keeping a close eye on the Sweetwater pack and the dragons within it. We owe it to the humans in the area to ensure their safety.”

My heart sank. I was bringing trouble to the pack. Would it be better for me to leave?

“Ozyn has been here for days with no issues. He came to us under incredibly stressful circumstances, where he feared for the life of his mate, but he hasn’t harmed a soul. He just needs the time to heal from his ordeal at the hands of the fae. Here, surrounded by shifters is the best place for that. Somewhere where he can have a fresh start.”

I rose, understanding what I must do. Shifting a claw, I made a cut at my wrist. Blood trickled slowly, sparking with what little magic I had. “I Ozyn Drakonvar, former king of the dragons—“ I heard many of the uniformed people gasp. “Vow to do no harm to any civilian on this side of the portal.” My words needed to be careful. “I will only defend those under my protection and use my magic to help them. My promise is binding.”

Alpha Blake stood. “Ozyn, in front of these witnesses, I would like you to take the vow and become a member of the pack properly.”

Proudly, I went to my new Alpha to perform the rite. I swore again in front of these people, my new family, to protect them from whatever came next. They would not regret allowing me to claim my mate.

“Welcome to the Sweetwater pack.” Alpha Blake smiled as the pack bond, similar to the mental bond I shared with my brothers, snapped into place.

A similar call echoed through it as those nearby acknowledged and welcomed me.

“Alright,” the woman stood. “I will leave you to the supervision of your Alpha.” There was a wistfulness I hadn’t seen before in her eyes. “It might not seem like it, but we are glad the dragons have returned. People are naturally just cautious. Please prove us right to allow you to stay.”

Baby Steps

Deke

Blake admitting Ozyn to the pack was a move I hadn't seen coming. My youngest cousin was careful with who he let in his pack, especially recently after so many betrayals. He'd learned the hard way to be cautious. I figured he'd wait to test Ozyn's mental state before he extended the offer to join.

Maybe it was the government forcing his hand, but Blake appeared to be happy with his decision. With Ozyn glued to my side, I hadn't had the chance to ask him.

Not that I resented the closeness I was sharing with my mate. In fact, I preferred having him close. It made both of us, the man and wolf sides of myself, happy to have him near me. I got as anxious as Ozyn having him too far away from me.

Work was going to be a problem. I needed to go back into the office, especially now there had been attacks again. Whatever reprieve we'd gotten after the news interview Kade did was well and truly over. Twice a team of birds had tried to get within our territory boundaries. We'd had delivery routes discovered. I needed to be working.

With such young babies at home, Larken couldn't be expected to do it all himself. Some godparent I was, stealing their daddy from them so soon after they were born! Going back in was the right thing to do. Besides, I was getting bored at home now that I was mostly healed. I missed solving problems for the pack and keeping everyone safe.

Ozyn was napping, so I stole a moment to myself to call Blake.

“Hey, Deke. How are you feeling?” Blake’s voice was always warm and soothing. My dad would have hated seeing me be submissive to Blake, yet he’d never seen Blake come into his power like I had. He was a different level of Alpha. There were few who could stand up to him when he unleashed his alpha gift.

“Like I should be doing more than resting at home,” I admitted. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I sighed.

“Feeling up to returning to work?”

“Yeah. It’s not as straightforward as that, though.” I cast a glance at the bedroom.

“Why?”

“Ozyn,” I whispered. Part of me, the wolf mainly, felt bad that we were talking about our mate. We didn’t want to upset him or set his progress back.

“What about him?”

I checked the bedroom to see if he was still sleeping then wandered to the back door, as far as I could go without leaving the house. He always seemed to sense me if I went outside.

“He can’t be left alone.”

“So take him with you.” Blake said it simply, like it was obvious, or should have been clear to me what to do.

“Are you sure?”

“I made him pack to keep him with you, Deke.” Oh, I heard the “duh,” in there without him saying it. “You need him as much as he needs you right now. Take him to work with you. Who knows, he might have a different perspective on how to deal with the aviary, what with being a dragon with centuries of life experience.”

Huh, I hadn't thought about it that way.

“Goddess knows I could do with some help making Michael see sense.”

“Still won't take your calls?”

Blake grunted. I smiled in response to his frustration, not at all surprised about how the aviary Alpha was acting.

“Emails, texts, letters, petitions from the council. Nothing. He won't listen to reason.”

“Fanatics like him never do,” I said ruefully.

“Yeah. Ozyn might have some fresh ideas. Take him with you. Keep him close until your bond settles, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I will. Tomorrow though.”

“Yeah, that's fine. Larken can have the afternoon off.”

“I bet he needs it with the babies.” I couldn't help but smile at the thought of the little ones.

“For sure.”

Even though his were nearly two, they were still a handful. There were three of them

getting into everything they could get their little paws on.

“Blake?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for making Ozyn pack. I know you kinda had to with the government breathing down our necks—“

“Deke, I did it for you. Now that he’s here, your mate belongs with us. Of course I’d make him pack.”

“What about...” I couldn’t put it into words. Ozyn was decades of trauma in an incredibly powerful being. I wasn’t scared of him. He was my fated mate, he couldn’t harm me. Still, I couldn’t help but worry about those who got between us when Ozyn wasn’t feeling himself.

“You’ve got to have faith that The Luna put him on your path for a reason. He needs the love and guidance of the pack to keep him... not stable, that’s the wrong word.” There was a moment of silence. “Keep him present.” I had a feeling Kade was involved there. Like he’d fed the words to Blake through their connection.

“I’m sure you’re right, or rather Kade is.”

Blake chuckled. “Kade says thank you.”

Ha. Knew it.

We ended the call, and I returned to the sofa just as Ozyn exited the bedroom and crawled into my lap.

“You are smiling. Good phone call?”

I tensed a little. “Were you listening?”

Ozyn smoothed a hand over my chest, quieting my worry. “I tried not to. Alpha Blake is a good man. He cares about everyone, even me.”

“Of course he does.”

“I will try to be worthy of that gift.”

“Mate, you already are. I just worry it was too soon.”

“Our Alpha has faith. We should too.”

He laid his head on my chest with a smile on his face. I kissed the top of his head.

“You’re right.”

“Are you ready to tell me about your ability now? I sense something within you now that my magic is returning.”

It was. I could feel the well within him filling slowly.

“I—“

“If you are not ready to discuss it...this requires trust.” Even without a full bond, I could feel his disappointment. Ozyn wanted, no, needed me to trust him with this secret.

“I’ve never admitted it to anyone, but I can sense magic. Like I could sense that Safi

was hiding in the room when we spoke to the government. He slipped out before it got too heated.”

Honestly, I’d found it funny that Safi had pulled it off. Somehow even his scent was masked in that invisible state.

“He wanted to see his brother. Ulrian left so long ago…”

“Ah, makes sense.” I pitied Safi sometimes. He didn’t have anyone aside from the pack now. “I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to put Safi in danger. The government would love someone sneaky with that kind of power.”

“Just like they would use you, with yours. Sensing magic is a useful gift,” Ozyn said, proudly.

“Never felt useful before. Not until you.”

“Maybe it was meant for me. Another way you can look after me as my mate.

Sleeping next to Ozyn wasn’t always restful. It was a struggle sometimes, usually when I was exhausted, to remember all the shit he’d been through and be understanding. Patience wasn’t a virtue I had a lot of, alright?

Most of the time, it was easy just to hug him back to sleep, reminding him he wasn’t in that dark place any longer.

It helped that my place was still shy on comforts. Look, I’d been focused on feeding him, okay? There were no drapes to keep out the light of the moon or the early morning sun, meaning the room was never fully dark like the place he’d been kept in for so long. I think it helped him get to sleep, so I left it like that instead of putting up the curtains someone had dropped in.

The pack was welcoming to Ozyn. He was like a celebrity, an oddity, I guess. Dragons were still with us after we'd been told they were extinct. Pack members liked to stare at him or try to engage him in conversation when we went out for walks. I knew he found it stressful and limited our exercise, wanting him to heal more instead of taxing his body and his mind.

“Are you ready to come to the office with me?” I asked him after a broken night of sleep.

There were dark circles under his eyes. “Do you want me to come? I worry—“

“What?”

“That you would prefer to have some time alone.” He burrowed harder against my chest.

“Ozzy...”

“Say that again, please.” When he lifted his head, his eyes were lit with happiness.

“Ozzy?”

“Yes. I like that.” He smiled a satisfied grin at me before growing serious once more.

“You may call me Ozzy. No one else, though,” he warned. I was pretty sure he wasn't joking.

I tugged him close once more to kiss the top of his head. “Ozzy, I want you next to me, so I know you are okay. I didn't want to go back to work and leave you alone.”

“Are you sure?” I wished everyone could see this soft and sweet marshmallow side to my mate. They wouldn't be nearly as afraid of him otherwise.

“Yeah. There’s a really comfy nest in my office where you can have a nap. There’s a ton of blankets. Sometimes, before you, I preferred sleeping there than in my house.” I ran my hand up and down his back, enjoying the feel of him in my arms. A few days of a calorie rich diet and he wasn’t nearly as frail as he had been. “We can get some books from the library so you won’t be bored, or I can get you a tablet to learn to use. I know your magic has taught you some stuff about technology and life now, but actually using tech is different.”

“I think I would like to learn. Sometimes it does not feel...”

“Real?”

“Yes. As if this is a dream.”

“Is that why you sometimes wake through the night?” I didn’t want to call them nightmares, though that was what they felt like.

“There are times I cannot tell if things are real or a dream. When I wake I am confused. I have so little magic, it takes me longer to understand.”

His words hurt my heart. I badly wanted to be the one who soothed all his pain and helped him forget all the shit he’d been through. That wasn’t possible. All I could be was a comfort to him. A safe place for him to work through things in his own time.

“We better get ready. Winter messaged me to say he’s making us breakfast sandwiches. We’ve got to stop by the kitchen to get them before we head to my office.”

“I like Winter.”

“The feeling is mutual. He’s never gone out of his way to feed me before work like

this. I think if he'd chosen it, he would have been a fantastic alpha."

"It is strange to see so many betas. In dragon flights, betas are rare. From what I understand, The Luna gave each of the betas a choice. Winter and Chase—"

"And Melody," I added, thinking of the raccoon shifter.

"They all chose to remain as betas."

"That's right. They didn't know they could be anything else. Melody didn't know there were alpha females. Winter and Chase didn't know about enigmas and deltas."

"Do you think they would change now if they had the choice?"

"No. Well, not Winter and Chase. They like their lives as is, at least I think so. I can't answer for Melody."

"When I have my magic back, I could offer them the chance if you think they'd appreciate it."

"It's amazing your magic can do that. Do dragons worship The Luna too?"

"She is the sister of the Great Drakon, the first of our kind. We were always taught to think of her kindly because she helped our god and our people. We owe her a debt. If I can repay that by changing her shifters, then that is what I must do."

The more I learned about Ozyn and dragons, the more in awe I was. The Luna had given me the greatest gift in a fated mate, but to have one so powerful was beyond anything I could have hoped for.

"Come on, we better not keep Winter waiting."

“It smells divine in here,” Ozyn remarked as we entered the kitchen hand in hand.

“Ozyn!” Winter called. He approached with arms open, as if going in for a hug before he paused. “Is it okay to hug you?”

My mate glanced at me, asking for permission. “Your body, your choice.” I let go of his hand, letting him know I was alright if he wanted physical affection from someone else. When it was his brothers and Safi, I’d handled it fine. I could cope with my pack mates touching him. The problem was Ozyn watching others get close to me.

He went and hugged the cook. “Thank you for feeding me so well. I already feel better.”

Winter held my mate at arm’s length. “You’re filling out some. Got some color on those cheeks too. You’re a cutie, aren’t you?” Winter looked at me for approval.

“He really is. Gorgeous. I’m a very lucky wolf.”

Ozyn blushed at our compliments. “I am a very lucky dragon to have such a handsome and caring mate. He looks after me so well.”

“Glad to hear it. Our Deke has always had his head screwed on right. Now, you better get to the office. I’ve packed you breakfast.”

Sure enough, there was a basket waiting for us. I took it in one hand, reached for Ozyn’s hand with the other, and led him to my office.

Larken was behind his desk. Since promoting him, I felt it was best that he have his own workspace.

“Hey, glad to see you both. Damn, that smells delicious. What are the chances there’s one in there for me?” Larken crossed the room to my space. He peered hopefully into the basket. “Yes!” He pumped his fist. “Winter’s the best!” He retreated with his prize, leaving Ozyn smiling at him.

“I hope you don’t mind that I have followed Deke to work. I won’t get in the way.”

Larken frowned at him. “Why would I mind? I figured you’d come with him. Axel and Teárlach were practically inseparable until they bonded. Even now, it’s rare to find one without the other. It’s just how mates are.”

“Your mate is at home? With the babies? Are they alright after the attack?”

It was sweet Ozyn thought to ask about Dalton and the babies.

“They’re fine. Young enough, they won’t remember. Dalton was shaken, but he wasn’t hurt. We were more worried about Deke, but you fixed him up. We’re so grateful you burst through the portal.”

I’d never get enough of Ozyn blushing.

A couple of hours passed by while Larken caught me up on everything. Ozyn occasionally added some insight to the conversation, but mostly looked at the tablet I got him and ate breakfast and then a snack delivered by Winter. He came under the guise of reclaiming his basket. I knew it was just to feed Ozyn some more.

Seemed like Ozyn had made his first friend in Sweetwater. Winter was a good choice of shifter to befriend, not only for his cooking skills, but as the cook he was at the heart of things. He always had the latest tea.

Mid-morning, Larken felt like I was caught up enough that he could go home and

help Dalton and Ingal with the babies. He showed Ozyn pictures of them playing with Spice and Priscilla in the yard. They had a sandpit for them to shift in, which was super cute. Their ferret pet loved it.

“May we visit so I can see the little ones?” Ozyn asked before Larken left.

“Sure. If you convince Winter to make dinner for us, you’re welcome anytime.”

My mate didn’t understand that Larken was joking and frowned. “I think that is unfair to Winter.”

Larken just smiled. “Nah, you’re right. Besides, Dalton is a fantastic cook. You two need to come over for dinner sometime.”

“Maybe next week?” I suggested.

“Sure. If you’re okay with things here, I’m going to take a couple days off.”

“Sounds good to me. You’ve earned them.”

He left soon after. The room was pretty quiet as Ozyn looked at whatever he was reading on the tablet. I’d found him a reading app and downloaded a broad selection of books. He seemed content to read while I worked.

Winter called and insisted we come to the kitchen for lunch. Ozyn thoughtfully stacked the plates and leftovers from his snack and tried to carry them back to the cook, but I took them off him. When he glared, I explained.

“I’d get in so much trouble for leaving you to carry everything.” Handing him back the sack of food, I earned a smile. “You don’t want me in trouble, do you?”

“Of course not.” He playfully bumped me. I relished each and every time he made physical contact with me, knowing it was a sign of his trust.

Our lunch was amazing. I joked with Winter that he was trying to steal my man, which sort of backfired when Ozyn pulled away from the cook.

“Hey,” I said softly to Ozyn, who had retreated into himself. “I didn’t mean anything by it. It was a poor joke. If you decided you wanted someone else, I’d be sad, but I’d understand.”

That lit a fire in my mate. His eyes blazed as he looked at me. “There is no one else for me but you.”

“Same, but you know you don’t have to accept the bond, right? You have free will if you decide someone is better.”

“There is no one better. No one else would hold me in the night even when I disrupt your sleep. Only you make sure I drink the shakes even when I complain because you want to see me healthy.”

“I’m sure other people would do that.” I edged my seat closer to his.

“No, I only feel safe with you.”

The small admittance broke me. I went to him and pulled him into my arms. “You will always be safe with me. Ozyn, I’ll wait forever for you to be ready for the bond.”

“What if I’m ready now?”

I kissed the top of his blond head. “Soon. Not now. You’re getting there.”

Building Fire

Deke

The mood between us was different when we returned to the office. Sweeter in a way. Ozyn took the spare chair and put it next to me so he could sit close. Later, he ended up in my lap, his compact frame folded to fit.

Having him nearer soothed my alpha instincts after the scare with Ozyn in the kitchen. Honestly, admitting I'd let him go if it was what he wanted was harder than I thought. I wasn't lying either. If he wanted someone else, or just didn't want me, I'd live with it. After everything that'd been done to him, I'd never force him into something he didn't want. That included a relationship with me. Fated mate be damned.

We stayed that way for the rest of the day. Ozyn seemed content to watch me rather than read or use the tablet. He showed he was present by asking questions.

Eventually, he fell asleep. I would never get sick of holding him. Having him trust me while he slept was so important to me. Each time he did it, I could feel the bond between us growing.

I loved Ozyn already. It was hard not to. He was smart, kind, principled, strong, cute as a button, and feisty. Literally everything I'd ever wanted in a mate, in the fierce dragon who forced his way through a portal to save me.

His mood was still there when he woke. I carried him home. He tried to protest, but I

refused to put him down until we got into the house. Once there, he helped me make a simple dinner of omelets. I didn't want to upset Winter after what had happened in the kitchen by asking for something more. He would have done it, though.

"We should apologize to Winter." Ozyn didn't meet my eyes. Shame soured his pear and rain scent. I could feel it pressing down on him.

"Already done. He says he's sorry for overstepping." Winter was good about it when I'd messaged him.

"Did he overstep a boundary?" Ozyn asked out of sheer curiosity. He made an effort to look me in the face.

"For plenty of alphas, yeah, he did. We're pretty chill here, so he probably forgot." Unable to bear the distance between us, I moved closer. Cupping his face in one hand, I stroked his cheek. "With us unbonded, an unmated shifter shouldn't interfere. Even a beta."

"Should I not be friends with Winter until we bond?"

Ozyn was more like a cat with the way he leaned into the touch. I wondered vaguely if dragons could purr.

"That's not... no," I hesitated briefly. The way things were, with Ozyn beside me constantly was great, but only for me. It wasn't healthy. I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I want you to have friends. It's important for you to have other people outside of me to speak to. You need the support of others."

Friends outside a relationship were vital to a healthy mating. I saw that everyday with plenty of the omegas in the pack. They went to each other, but they also had alpha and beta friends who would advocate for them if they needed it. Not that they should.

Relying on one person to be all your support, provide everything you needed, was too much pressure.

“Should I look only to omegas, then?”

“No, because you might need an alpha to advocate for you if I piss you off, or do something you don’t like.”

“Do you plan on that?” Ozyn raised his eyebrows at me.

“I never want you to be angry or upset at me. Ever. It’s bound to happen, though.” I’d been a single alpha for too long. I was far too used to having my own way.

His lips twisted in a wry smile. “So make friends with mated couples?”

“You should do that anyway so you have lots of friends here. One day the bond will allow us to do things alone.”

Ozyn pulled away from me. “Is that what you want?”

I reached for him, tugging him back to me gently. “Not really. Why would I want you away from me when I can have you asleep in my lap?”

His blush was too adorable for words.

The next day our breakfast was waiting for us in my office next to a cheerful Larken.

“Winter wants you to know there’s no hard feelings about yesterday. He’s looking forward to spending time with you both once you solidify that bond.” Larken winced. “Until then, he kind of wants to keep his distance, in order to not give anyone the wrong idea.”

He sat down heavily. “I don’t know what went on, but Winter feels bad about it.”

I tucked Ozyn under my arm. “I spoke to him,” I assured Larken. “All sorted. No harm done. Me and Ozyn talked about the importance of friends outside the relationship.”

“Yeah, that’s really important. Like Dalton has Chase and Axel. Hell, he’s friends with most of the pack. I’ve got you, Roan, even Teárlach. As much as I love my mate, we need other people around us.”

Larken was looking at Ozyn, really trying to involve him in the conversation. I appreciated the offer as well as the dinner invite we had. Dalton would be a great friend for Ozyn. He was so smart like my mate but wouldn’t let Ozyn’s former role intimidate him.

“In a lot of packs we wouldn’t have people living with us to help with the babies. They would be raised by all the omegas. I think the way we do it is better. All the alphas I know are involved with every stage of raising the pups. How do dragons work?” Larken was asking the real questions. I didn’t like to ask Ozyn too much about his life in Abrocaelum because I worried about making him sad.

Ozyn slipped from my side and went to the pallet in the corner, finding it stocked with some snacks and books.

“Well, omegas rule the flights and families. Or deltas do if there isn’t an omega. Alphas are naturally protective, as are enigmas and betas, though betas are rare.”

Ozyn threw a smile in my direction. I sat, never taking my eyes off him. He looked confident for a change. It was a startling difference. This time I could see the king he used to be.

“With more alphas than any other type of dragon, they do the bulk of the work. They farmed our fields, raised the children, and looked after the home. Omegas were there to love the little ones, take care of the details, to manage and guide the alphas.”

“Huh, that’s pretty cool. You must miss it,” Larken said.

“Sometimes. I miss my children more than anything. Hopefully they can visit soon.” He looked wistful. “The boys would love it here. The lake, the orchards, how everyone works together. Ryoko would like the community feel. Gedith would be perfectly at home there. He has a lot of friends.”

Thinking of his children made Ozyn melancholy. He retreated into a book, staying quiet while me and Larken went about our day.

Eventually, Larken decided to take some work home to see if Dalton and Ingal needed any help. He picked up our lunch for us.

After it was delivered and Larken was gone for the day, Ozyn returned to my side. He appeared restless, picking up and putting down his book repeatedly.

“Come here,” I patted my lap.

He came to me easily, slotting as if my body was formed to fit around him. Given how much older he was than me, that was probably the case.

“I miss my family,” Ozyn finally admitted as he stroked a hand over my chest. “But there is nowhere I would rather be at this moment. You make me feel at peace. You make me feel things I think I had forgotten I could feel.”

“Like what?”

“Love.” He kissed my throat. “Happiness.” Another kiss, on my chin this time. “Desire.” His kiss landed on my lips. Those soft, pillowy lips brushed against mine in a question.

He initiated, I answered, parting my lips a little to take the kiss deeper.

Inside my wolf howled in triumph. This was everything we both wanted: Ozyn making the first move. Feeling confident he could trust me not to take it too far.

The kiss went on and on. It was a perfect, tender exploration. His tongue peeked out to brush my lips, so I opened, to let him dip inside.

Ozyn groaned when our tongues brushed. He pushed closer to me, kissing me harder while his fists clenched in my shirt.

I so badly wanted to cup his neck, control the kiss, touch him everywhere, but this was all for him.

The heat that rose between us was scorching. I’d never felt so much from a kiss.

“Please,” he begged, his face in my neck. “Touch me. I ache.”

My hands went to his ass with a questioning look. I was scared to misstep and undo our progress. He looked up and nodded. I adjusted him so his cute little butt was over my aching cock.

“Just because I’m hard, doesn’t mean we’re having sex. If all you want is over the clothes action, then that’s what I’m down for. You set the pace, okay?”

Communication, consent. I had messages from Kade telling me to take it slow with Ozyn, not that I needed them. I knew how to handle my omega. He was leading this

show.

“Yes. I want to feel your hands on my skin. I want to touch you in return.”

“Touch away, but I’m not going to knot you, okay? That’s where the line is. My body is yours to explore, but we’re not bonding or knotting, alright?”

I could almost see the love in his eyes along with his gratitude. We were beyond words.

“Yes. Please touch me.”

My hands slipped up his shirt, over the planes of his stomach, further up to his nipples. I tweaked each one as I stole his lips in another kiss. I loved the sounds he made as I explored his body.

Ozyn rocked over my cock while his hands worked on the buttons of my shirt. He broke the kiss to lick and suck each of my nipples. He explored not only with his long fingers, but his teeth and tongue until he got frustrated with me. Taking my hands, he put them at the hem of his sweatpants.

“Touch me,” he ordered.

“Sure thing, sweet Ozzy.”

The tip of his cock was leaking when I reached in to stroke him. Ozyn moaned loudly, rocking harder as I drew him out of his pants and worked his precome over his length. He was probably slick, but I didn’t want to push things. Instead, I spat on my hand, adding it to the precome there. I loved the feel of him, hot and hard in my hand as I tugged and twisted, wringing more sounds from him.

It didn't take him long to come over my hand. His head rested against my chest for a moment before he wriggled back, opening my pants and freeing my cock. He took his release from me and used it as lube to stroke my length.

Just the sight of him, lips kiss swollen, cheeks flushed with pleasure, his hair rumpled from my fingers, brought me to orgasm.

We shared a tender kiss. Inside, I thanked The Luna for the wonder that was my mate.

"Okay?" I checked in with him. It was further than I thought was safe. Only Ozyn could set the pace for the physical side of our relationship.

"Yes. I would like to do more of that soon. At home. Where we have fresh clothes."

Him using the word home to describe my house shot a pang to my heart. Fuck, I loved him so hard.

"Feeling uncomfortable?" Between his slick and our come, he was a mess.

"A little."

"Hold on." I moved Ozyn from my lap to my desk, and stood, peeling my open shirt from my shoulders.

The door opened. "Looking fine for your mate there!" Chase called as he entered.

I didn't see him move. Ozyn launched himself across the room and had Chase by the throat in the blink of an eye.

"You do not look at him!" he snarled. "He's mine!"

“Woah!” I cried. “Ozyn, it’s fine.” I grabbed for a spare shirt, thinking if I covered myself, it would halve the problem.

Chase had to open his big mouth. “Smells of sex in here. Damn!”

Ozyn shook him. Chase was only slightly shorter than my six-two. He was several inches taller than the dragon, but Ozyn used his strength to shake him by his neck. His cerulean eyes glowed bright with blue flames.

“He is mine,” he growled once more.

I went to my mate to try to peel his fingers off Chase before he really hurt my cousin.

“Hey! We’re related, remember. He’s like my brother.”

“He was looking at us!”

“What’s—“ Blake rushed into the room. Using massive amounts of alpha power, he shoved it into an order for Ozyn. “Release him!”

My mate wavered, then let go. He stood stock still, looking horrified.

I spared a glance for my cousins. They were fine. Ozyn needed me. I went to him and took him into my arms, holding him tight. He sagged against me, letting his tears fall.

“It’s alright. I’m here.”

“I’m sorry!” he wailed.

Instead of dealing with Chase, who was rubbing his throat with a thoughtful look, I walked us to the pallet and drew him down, still in the safety of my arms.

“You didn’t mean it,” Chase said, trying for a soothing voice. “It was my fault. You’re not bonded and I caught you—“

“Enough,” Blake interrupted. “I think once you get yourself under control, a demonstration is in order. Meet me at the training room in half an hour.

Fight

Ozyn

Panic and shame had overtaken my senses. I could hear myself repeating apologies to Deke, yet I could not hear his soothing words, only the tone. He held fast to me, rocking me in the corner, hiding Chase from my sight.

I'd hurt someone, scared them. For what? How had that feral part of me escaped? I knew Chase didn't want his cousin! Firstly, because they were related, and second, because Chase was something called asexual and aromantic. Deke had explained Chase rarely felt sexual desire and had no want for a romantic relationship. He had only been teasing us playfully!

My reaction was completely unwarranted!

"Hey," Deke soothed. "He scared you. It was an accident. He gets it, don't you, Chase?"

"Right." Chase nodded his head empathetically. "I dunno what I was thinking, just coming in like that." He winced. "Teasing Deke is good, but you don't know me very well. We're not in that place and with all the shit you've been through. It was wrong of me. I'm sorry."

That shocked me back to myself. I created some distance between me and Deke to look at Chase properly.

“Why are you apologizing? I’m the one who attacked you.”

“It was dangerous to get between an unmated alpha and omega who’d just been... intimate.” Chase was the color of a tomato. “I mean, I’ve seen him naked and you’re not wearing very much...”

Without me controlling it, a growl slipped free.

“Sorry!” Chase cried, though there was laughter in his eyes. “See! This is me being a brat and provoking you. I should take half the blame for what happened here.”

“Chase—“ Deke began, tightening his hold on me.

“Maybe, but I should have done better to control my temper. I ruled—“

“Ozyn,” Deke stopped my words. “You’re not a king right now. You’re an omega who’s gone through unimaginable things. No one expects you to act like a king after all that. Not me, not Chase. You’ve got to give your mind time to heal, too.”

“Deke’s right. Maybe you should speak to Georgia,” Chase said, adding to my confusion. Then he straightened, apparently brushing the entire incident off. “I better give you a minute. Meet you at the training room. Best not be late. Blake is in a mood. Kade’s not feeling great.”

He left without explaining who Georgia was. This was one of the times Chase most reminded me of my brother Valethar.

“You know, he’s right. Georgia would be good for you. She’s the one who used to run the omega section of the compound.”

My mate had explained that the compound had an area purely for omegas. Both the

single ones and those with their bonded mates. No unmated alphas were allowed in there, except for Blake, before he bonded with Kade. The young Alpha was the exception because he had a close relationship with the omegas there.

“What does she do now?” The way Deke spoke about this Georgia was fond. Still it did not provoke jealousy within me.

“She’s training to be a therapist. Even without the certification, she’s seen some shit in her life. I think she’d be really good for you to speak to. Omega to omega.”

“If you think that’s for the best, then I will.”

“No.” Deke was firm on this. “We’re not doing that. You get to decide. We’re a partnership, okay? If you want to speak to her, then I’d be happy, but I’m not going to order you to do anything with your body or feelings, alright?”

He left me feeling so confused. I needed his guidance in this.

“I don’t understand. Alphas run the home. Even as a king, I would defer to you in matters of our bond and household. Only in our flight would I overrule you.”

“Ozzy, babe, we’re not in a flight,” he told me with patience. “I’m a big bad wolf shifter, and I say you get equal rights in our home. Which means you decide if you want to speak to our trainee therapist.” He grinned, letting me know he wasn’t angry.

I gave it a few moments’ thought. It wouldn’t harm me to speak to someone, particularly another omega, would it? If I didn’t like it, I could stop going to see her.

“Alright. Later, I would like to speak to her.”

Deke kissed my forehead and stood with me still in his arms. My mate was very

strong. He liked to carry me often. It kept me close to him, so I allowed it.

“Good. Now we better go before we end up late.” He left his office at an easy pace.

People were watching us.

“Put me down then. We will be faster if I run alongside you.” Though I said the words, I didn’t really want him to. All I wanted was to stick close to him. My hands wrapped around his neck.

“Can’t. My wolf is too on edge after seeing you so upset. Let me have this.”

Deke nuzzled my throat as he walked through the mansion to a set of stairs heading down, sending shivers down my spine. Even after what we had done in his office, I wanted him again. This lack of proper bond was playing havoc with my libido.

“At least put me down before you walk into a wall or fall down!”

His laugh into my hair settled me more than anything else had.

The training room must have covered most of the floor-plan of the mansion, barring a sectioned off area. The well-appointed room had numerous machines and mats covering much of the floor. There were some lockers along a wall and an open shower. Shifters did not care about nudity, much like dragons. I just did not care for my mate’s body to be on show. He was mine.

Assembled in the room were many of the guards I had grown used to seeing, along with both of Blake’s brothers. Axel was very similar in appearance to Blake. He stood holding a baby, with his mate, the elf, Teárlach, next to him.

The Alpha Mate and his assistant, Roan, were missing. I assumed since Kade was

feeling unwell, Blake had charged Roan with looking after him. Blake's assistant, Dakota, was there with a grin on his face.

Even the healer was there with his mate, James. I liked them both and hoped that neither had a bad opinion of me after my attack on Chase.

Aldrin ran his healing light over Chase quickly, then pronounced, "maybe you'll learn some patience and wait before walking into a room."

I was surprised he was so easily on my side.

"Unlikely," Chase teased. "No harm done."

"I beg to differ," our Alpha said with a somber expression. He met my eyes, only speaking to me, not everyone watching the exchange.

"We're here to explain something to our newest member of the pack. Here in Sweetwater, we do not tolerate anyone attacking anyone else. Alpha on alpha, beta on alpha, omega on beta." Blake raised an eyebrow at me. "We are all equals here. When there's an issue, there's a process."

"Is this where you say 'use your words' like Mama did?" Chase questioned with a smirk.

"Yes, it is." Blake moved to address his brother before turning back to me. "We have a chain of command for a reason. Ozyn, I completely understand why you reacted like you did. When Chase interrupted you, you were in a vulnerable position. However, that doesn't give you an excuse for pinning him like you did."

"I'd have paid money to see that," an enforcer remarked.

“Same,” another added. “An omega his size taking on Chase? Awesome!”

Blake didn’t even raise his voice, just continued speaking. “What you should have done was tell Chase to leave, then brought the matter to me since he is my Second. I don’t expect you to defer to your mate on things. Ever. Because what he will tolerate is different from what you can cope with.”

I glanced at Deke, who still held me. He shrugged. “Put me down, please.” He complied, yet held my hand.

“Alpha Blake,” I began tentatively. “I’m sorry about my actions. How I behaved is out of character for me. There is no excuse.”

“Ozyn, you’ve been through a lot. Chase said you were told about Georgia?”

“Yes. I plan on seeking her out soon.”

“Good. There’s something else I wanted to do here today. Not just remind everyone how to handle an inter-pack conflict.”

Blake’s gaze roamed the room, meeting the eyes of many of his pack mates. “We’ve been dealing with a lot recently. Attacks on us have increased since the news broadcast. Mainly Northarbor, but some independent shifters have gotten involved.”

Spending time with Deke in his office, I’d witnessed the fallout from those attacks. He’d been called to fight twice, making my heart rise into my throat until he’d sent someone else. Even though he hated it, he obeyed Aldrin’s decree. Mostly, it was the wing guard who handled the aviary attacks. The birds of the Sweetwater pack were kept busy defending the vulnerable members.

“We are a pack at war for our right to exist. Every day we have to protect the pack

from people wishing us harm.”

Those gathered shifted uncomfortably. I got the impression this was out of character for the alpha to talk so openly.

“There’s been a lot of talk in the pack, rumors, gossiping,” he continued. “I want to put them to bed. Most of them are clearly not true. Just because we have relied on allies does not mean the pack is weak. Our fighters are some of the best out there, but even they can be overcome by sneak attacks, people using magic which we can’t fight against, or just be overwhelmed by numbers.”

Blake began unbuttoning his shirt sleeves and rolling them up.

“Word has spread that I’ve gotten soft since I found my mate. They say I’m always ready to hide behind my omega mate and omega brother rather than fight.” His eyes practically glowed with his wolf. “So, if you think you can beat me, give it a try.”

Everyone stood still. No one moved a muscle.

Our Alpha grinned wolfishly. “Come on, now. I thought someone would like to spar with me. Test if I’ve gotten weak.” He dropped into an easy fighting stance.

“To be fair, Alpha, I’ve fought with you before. I don’t recommend it.” That was Larken. I caught him grinning, his arms crossed over his wide chest.

“I’d try, but I’m not allowed to do any high-impact sports for a while,” Deke said from beside me. With his free hand, he tapped his head. “Concussion.”

“There goes your love life!” someone called.

My head whipped around to find the source. I didn’t recognize the guard. He rocked

back at my glare.

Taking my hand from Deke's, I stepped forward. "I'd like to try."

Blake's grin widened. "Never fought a dragon before."

"I've never fought a wolf."

"Careful," Deke urged. "Blake has his tricks."

We circled each other for a moment before Dakota called us to fight. I saw how Blake watched my movements and tried not to telegraph where I was going before I sprung.

I darted forward, trying to land a punch. Blocked. Another attempt, only to be stopped once more. Deke was right, each time Blake anticipated how and where I was going to hit him.

I took a strike to my thigh as I tried to center myself, allowing my dragon senses to expand. Blake got another hit in to the same spot, leaving a bruise, before I struck back.

Closing my eyes, I just let the feeling of air moving over me, like it would my wings, tell me where my opponent was. Deke hadn't given me a fair warning. Blake was much harder to pin down than I thought.

Even with what little dragon magic I had, I still couldn't get a return strike in. It took all my concentration to just block more hits.

"That's enough!" Deke called. He got between the two of us, barely missing my fist.

Blake stood, panting. “Damn, that was a workout! I’ve never tested my ability that hard. If you’d be up for it, I’d like to try that again one day.”

It had been freeing to use my magic that way. Stretching muscles I forgot I had felt good too. “I’d like that.”

“How do we even know he can fight?” the same guard who’d made the comment about Deke’s love life asked.

“You fight him, Will, if he’s up for it,” Blake suggested. “See if it’s as easy as it looks.”

Will’s friends hooted and cheered, encouraging him to take the ring.

“Do you want to fight him?” Deke asked, a hand on my shoulder.

I looked up into those pretty silver-blue eyes, grateful for such a caring mate. “I want to.”

“Alright. I’ll be over here watching you knock the stuffing out of him. Leave Will in one piece for Aldrin, would you?”

Blake’s grin was almost as feral as I’d felt when I first got free. I’d never underestimate my Alpha again. If I ever needed him, I knew he’d be able to protect me.

“And, go!” Chase called, signaling the start of the fight.

Will immediately went on the offensive, trying to strike out at me with a combination of punches and kicks. I was too quick for him, dancing away lightly, laughter bubbling up.

His fury was his undoing. He hated seeing me laugh and miss his punches. Will charged forward, aiming straight for me.

I ducked and came up swinging. My attacks all found their mark. His cheek, his jaw, under his chin. Lights out.

He was unconscious before he hit the mat.

“Less than sixty seconds for a complete knockout!” Chase came to me, raising my arm. “Ozyn wins!”

Cheering rang around the room until it was filled with a different sound. Blake went to a locker and picked up his phone.

“Shit! Kade’s in heat!”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:25 am

Visitors

Deke

Watching Ozyn fight with Blake had been terrifying. I knew my cousin wasn't about to go easy on my mate for what he'd done. While I understood, I didn't like it. Ozyn needed to figure out the hierarchy and his place within it, despite Blake saying we were equals.

Sometimes my cousin spoke a bunch of bullshit. He was the Alpha, so his place was at the top. We all had to fall in line under him.

After they ended their match, it was clear Blake had the edge. He was the Alpha for a reason and he'd just shown it. I wasn't sure if Ozyn had held back any. He still wasn't fully recovered magically, so it was possible. Wasn't going to ask where people could overhear the answer.

His bout with Will? Well, it showed my mate hadn't been pulling his punches with Blake. They'd clearly been more evenly matched than the enforcer was with Ozyn.

My mate wiped the floor with him. Not going to lie, it was hot. Ozyn was powerful, deadly, and all mine.

There wasn't even time to celebrate or for Blake to say anything before we had the next crisis on our hands: Kade was in heat.

Omegas usually got a break between heats and having babies. Kade was coming up

on the two-year mark since his last heat because of the triplets. After his fertility worries, I wondered if it would be longer before his heats returned.

“Go!” Chase urged his brother. “We’ve got the pack. Go make more babies or whatever! I want more niblings.”

Blake paled, his footsteps paused. “I’m not sure we’re ready for more babies.”

“Your mate is very fertile,” Ozyn took Blake’s elbow. Our Alpha allowed the friendly touch. It showed a thawing in their relationship if Ozyn was initiating contact. He trusted Blake. “If you do not want another child, I might be able to help with my magic.”

Blake took Ozyn by the shoulders. “No, you need to get better so you can show my babies your dragon form,” he teased. “I’ll get a potion, if that’s what Kade wants. If he wants another baby, then we’ll cope. Cryabell would be delighted.”

The Alpha left to go deal with his mate.

“Who is Cryabell?” Ozyn asked.

“She is an elf. The guardian of my niblings. Gatekeeper of visits. Protector of nap time,” Chase proclaimed to a smiling Ozyn.

“Cryabell is their nanny. The Luna knows they need one with three babies under two,” I said dryly. “How about we leave Chase to deal with the pack and we go see Georgia?”

The omega compound was a section I hadn’t been into often. Never had the need, and I wasn’t really welcome as a single alpha. Now that I had a fated mate beside me, they allowed me a day pass. If Ozyn was going to return for more therapy, it was

likely he would do it alone. Maybe I'd get another pass, but those were rarely given out.

Honestly? The place was kinda cool. They had a ton of facilities the greater compound didn't, like a community center, school, gym, and a pool. Made sense to have those things in the area with the most children. It meant the kids didn't have to leave the safety of the compound for their necessary schooling. Jasper taught classes there around looking after Hayden.

This part of the compound held both single and mated omegas in family houses. Not all of them lived in the larger houses surrounding Blake's new place. Our transplants from Greenbriar lived here.

The idea behind this area was creating a community within a community because a lot of the omegas were single parents usually after being abandoned by their alpha. The omegas often ate meals together, pooled childcare so they could work, stuff like that. Kade had been pretty impressed by it when he first visited. I know he missed them during the beta sickness when he couldn't come see them because of the babies.

Someone must have warned Georgia that we were coming. She was waiting by the gates to guide us to her office in the community center.

"You must be our new fated mate! People tell me you're a dragon," Georgia greeted Ozyn warmly with a gentle hug. It surprised me that he let her.

She led us while telling Ozyn about all the features of the compound. I heard her tell him he was welcome to one of the single person homes if he would rather have one. It made me happy when he looked offended and told her he was staying with me.

Her office was comfortable with a desk, a decent sized blue sofa, and a couple of armchairs. Ozyn took a seat on the sofa, holding his hand out for me to join him.

We sat close together; the nerves ramping up. I wasn't sure what they were going to talk about, but I knew I'd have to listen while Ozyn detailed some really heavy stuff.

He lived it, so the least I could do was hear what he went through so I could help him.

“Okay, Ozyn, I'm still learning. I don't want to go too deep and re-traumatize you. That's not what today is. I'd prefer to hear what issues you've been having with adapting to life here. We can talk more in detail at another time, hopefully with a colleague there to guide me. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

“Yes, it does,” Ozyn answered with some relief. “Though I have forgotten much of what happened to me. A side of me took over.” He spoke so earnestly. “I think of it as becoming feral. When I was beastly, it gave me some protection.”

“Ah, yep, the brain likes to do that, and honestly, if you have repressed memories, unless they are giving you trouble in the form of waking flashbacks and panic attacks, then sometimes it's better to leave them the hell alone. Make sense?”

Ozyn nodded. It made sense to me, but my input wasn't needed. I stayed quiet, happy to just listen in on this session.

“Sometimes I have nightmares,” he admitted.

“Dreams are a way of the brain processing what has happened. Do you feel you get enough rest? Are they affecting your day to day life? Are they daily?”

“Deke helps me with them. They aren't every night and I've usually forgotten about what happened in them by the time I'm going about my day.”

Georgia nodded approvingly. “We'll monitor the situation.” She noted something down. “So, what are the main problems?”

My mate glanced at me. “I am territorial over Deke.”

Georgia looked over at my mate with a neutral expression. “Not necessarily a bad thing as such, though it can drive a wedge between you two and your other healthy relationships. Once you bond, it will be easier to deal with that.” She tapped her pen against her notebook. “Most of the problem there is your lack of solid bond. Right now there’s the push towards each other, making you more unstable than you’d be normally.”

“Deke does not think I’m ready for the bond.”

I wanted him to be ready. Wanted to bond with him badly. It hurt to hold back at times. I just didn’t want to push him into something he wasn’t fully onboard with.

“Have you been intimate?” Georgia wasn’t watching us closely, instead writing notes.

Ozyn spared me a glance before answering. “Yes. Deke waited for me to initiate things. Just some touching and kissing.”

“And how did that make you feel?”

“Good,” he answered immediately with a faint blush. “I hardly remember the times I was forced. It was so long ago that it happened now. When the beast side of me took over, it was too dangerous...”

“Do you feel healed enough mentally to try bonding with Deke?”

“Yes, but he is not sure.”

Georgia met my eyes. “You can’t decide things for your partner. If he says he is

ready, then you should be open to trying.” She continued before I could interrupt. “I’m not saying there won’t be issues. The best thing you can do is communicate. Check in with your partner. Let Ozyn take the lead.”

I tried not to sound like I was pouting when I said, “that’s what I’ve been doing.”

The smiles both Ozyn and Georgia gave me made me feel better. I felt validated, like I’d scored high on a test.

“Ozyn,” Georgia began seriously, “you are remarkable. You are resilient, strong, capable. Coming here to save Deke just showed that you’re still in there, you aren’t that feral beast. Okay, you’ve had a couple blips. I heard about Chase, but honestly? That was kinda justified. I know Chase doesn’t hold it against you.”

“Thank you,” Ozyn murmured.

“I would like to continue the sessions. They might be beneficial to you both as you settle into your bond.” Georgia scribbled something down. “I wonder if your dragon magic has done something with your memories, to safeguard your mind from the trauma your body suffered.”

“He... I... There were cuffs. I did not have access to most, if not all my magic.”

“Well, maybe there’s something about your brain physiology that protected you. Either way, I’m proud of how you are adjusting to life in Sweetwater.”

“Even with what happened with Chase?”

“Yep, even then. That boy has been the bane of my life since he was born. He and his brothers had a tough upbringing though, so I can deal with some bratty behavior. Chase is sweet really. You should see him with all the babies.”

Georgia had been like another mom to Blake when his mother, my aunt, died when he was a teenager. Her death at the hands of her mate, led to my father taking over the pack. He was supposed to hold it until Blake was ready. He couldn't handle it. We had a couple heated conversations over it, then he handed it over to me.

I was still ashamed of how I'd run the pack. Being a pack Alpha wasn't for me.

"We are going to have dinner with Larken, Dalton and their family soon," Ozyn said proudly. "I am looking forward to meeting their babies."

"Oh you are in for a treat!" Georgia beamed. "All four of them are as cute as buttons! Dalton rescued a cat and a ferret and they treat the babies like their own. It's simply adorable."

"I'm looking forward to seeing it. May we go now?" Ozyn stood, still holding my hand as if ready to pull me out the door. "My sons have just arrived."

"You have sons?" Guess it wasn't common knowledge. Georgia's eyes were wide.

"Yes, five of them. They have just exited the portal and are waiting for me."

"Then you'd better go. We'll pick this up next week, okay?"

Ozyn spared her a nod before he tugged me behind him.

Next to the portal were seven figures. I guessed they were the five sons and two of Ozyn's brothers.

It surprised me that there weren't more of them. Dragons were plenty deadly, though, so maybe they didn't need a ton of guards. Then I remembered their numbers suffered during Ozyn's imprisonment. It was possible they didn't have dragons to

spare.

“You said Rezoth is the king because he’s an omega. What about the others? What do they do?”

I had to admit to being curious about Ozyn’s sons. Most of the time I avoided asking about them, since he would be sad. I knew he missed them badly. He loved them dearly to sacrifice himself the way he did. When we bonded, they would become my sons and they were much older than me, which would make things interesting.

“Like in my court, Rezoth would have chosen his brothers to be his advisors. Ryoko, who is the delta of the group, would be his heir until Rezoth has his own clutch with an alpha or alphas. Dragons are often polyamorous.”

I tucked that away to question another time. It would explain why he and his brothers looked so different if they only shared an omega or delta parent.

“Does every clutch have an omega?”

“It is very rare that they don’t. Like with single eggs, it is considered unlucky not to have an omega. A delta is not considered as special as an omega.”

“Why? They can still carry babies.”

“Yes, but it is more common for a delta to want to create rather than carry. We see the act of giving birth as sacred. Drakon was an omega himself.”

“Okay, so what are their names? Rezoth, Ryoko, and I remember you saying Nhil, he’s an enigma, right?”

“That’s right. I had an especially rare clutch with all five designations. Rezoth the

omega, Ryoko the delta, Nhil the enigma, Balon is an alpha and it is likely he and Nhil are Rezoth's main advisors. Lastly, my beta son is Gedith. He will be Rezoth's companion until he finds a mate and will run the castle."

"Is that seen as lucky, having all five? Because omegas are rarer and you have three sons capable of carrying young?" Three because if the beta found an enigma, he could carry. Technically the alpha could, too, I guess.

Ozyn's smile was brighter than the summer sun. "Yes! It was a charmed day when they were born."

There was a part of the conversation I hadn't dared approach before, but the worry churned my stomach.

"What about their other parent, or parents?"

"Oh." Ozyn's footsteps paused. "There was just one. Though I tried several times to give my heat to an alpha. Their father died in a skirmish with the fae when the children were small." While he sounded a little sad, he wasn't devastated, though this had to have happened a few hundred years ago.

"Taurak was a soldier in the army. We weren't a love match, if you are concerned I harbor feelings for him." Ozyn looked up at me thoughtfully. "He spent a heat in my bed to secure my legacy, not out of affection. I was sad when he died because I lost a friend and my children's father. They barely remember him now, which makes me unhappy. He was a good dragon."

Taking Ozyn's hand, I pulled him into a hug. "Thank you for telling me. I'm looking forward to getting to know your sons."

"Let's not keep them waiting any longer." Ozyn pulled free of my embrace, but kept

my hand in his.

“Papa!” the boys yelled as we came closer.

Ozyn let go to run to them. They surrounded him, all talking, hugging, and kissing his face. The amount of love they gave him and the joy on his face made me smile. Each of them looked a little like Ozyn, though their hair colors were shades of blond and brown.

The alpha, Balon, or maybe this was the enigma Nhil, approached with an outstretched hand. He had the same color eyes as his papa.

“You shake hands here, right? The magic says so. I am Balon.”

“We’re going to be family, so we can hug. Wolves like to hug.”

He stepped closer and wrapped me in a hug. “This is better!”

Okay son number one was cool. I hoped the others would be as welcoming.

“Hello,” a quiet voice said next to me. “I am Gedith. Do I hug you too?”

“Yeah, I’m going to be your dad and family hugs, right?”

Gedith smiled, he moved into my space, welcoming me into the family. Two down, three to go.

Nhil and Ryoko weren’t quite as warm, but they did allow me to give them brief hugs. It was only when I faced Rezoth, I realized there was going to be a problem. He looked the most like Ozyn, his hair a few shades paler than Ozyn’s honey blond. His eyes were a darker blue.

Rezoth's uncles stood guard, watching me process the scene with sly smirks. They were enjoying this.

"So, you are the wolf who has been keeping Papa from us."

"And you are his son who has been keeping the kingdom safe while he was away. Your papa is very proud of you." Rezoth's hard expression twitched. "I'm sure you can understand him needing to be here, far from Abrocaelum, for a while. When we were bonded and he was ready, I was going to ask him to take me to your kingdom."

My words left the dragon king looking stunned.

"You were?" Ozyn looked amazed. He nestled into my side once more, making my wolf relieved.

"Of course."

"But what about the attacks?"

"What attacks?" Rezoth demanded to know, the fierce expression back in place.

"We have enemies nearby," I told him before turning to my mate. "They can handle things without me. It's not so dire that we'd lose just because we visited your people, Ozyn. You have to know you're not stuck here. I can leave any time. Just say the word and I'd give it all up for you."

"They are your family."

"And here is your family." I gestured at the gathered dragons. "Even if we decide to stay here with the pack, we can still visit."

“You are not keeping Papa from us?” Rezoth asked in a sharp tone.

“No. His magic was very depleted.” It was returning. He could probably hold a shift for a while but he was a long way from full strength.

“I can manage to shift now. Not for long, though,” Ozyn said, confirming what my ability already knew. He looked up at me, those pretty eyes sparkling. “Can we fly a little? I want to show you the skies.”

“I’d love that.”

As if he’d given a signal, all the dragons separated, making way for their larger forms. Beside me there was a shimmer and Ozyn changed. Gone was the tiny omega. In his place was a huge white dragon, scales gleaming in the sunlight.

Each of the other dragons, their colors as varied as a rainbow, all dipped their snouts to Ozyn. They came forward to breathe air over his head.

They are sharing magic, Ozyn’s voice said in my head using our pack bond. They want me to be able to fly for longer if you allow it.

“Just remember the boundary,” I made sure to say it loud enough so the others would hear. “The humans want us to stick to our territory. We have a lot of land so it should be okay for you all to fly.”

We will. Step onto my leg. He lay close to the ground. See the ridge? Sit behind it and hold on tight.

I climbed onto his back. Before I took hold, I whipped my phone out to send a photo to the group chat.

Deke

Off flying. I have the coolest mate.

Axel

Fuck no. I'm married to a prince.

Chase

Wait for me! I want to fly too.

Deke

Don't you have work to do?

Are you done? I felt some of Ozyn's amusement in his tone.

"Yep." I tucked my phone away and held onto the spiked ridge. My heart thumped in my chest. My wolf whimpered with fear.

Don't worry, I assured him. Our mate has us.

Ozyn launched into the sky, surprising a yelp from me. In seconds we were high above Sweetwater with seven other dragons.

They flew over the compound and orchard in a formation, putting Ozyn and Rezoth in the middle. His sons played in the air, performing tricks for their Papa.

We dipped low over the lake, spraying water behind us.

Further and further we flew until I felt Ozyn getting tired.

Circle back, I urged him.

His brothers turned back towards the grounds of the mansion and the portal.

One by one they landed, shifting seamlessly. Lucky bastards kept their clothes.

My mate let me down before he shifted back.

“Deke!” Melody called. “There’s humans at the gate. Police too. There’s been a complaint.”

Well, shit.

Unwelcome

Ozyn

I followed my mate to the gate where several vehicles were waiting instead of going to spend time with my sons, or going home with Deke, like I really wanted to. Dealing with unwanted visitors was not on my list of tasks for the day, but it was Deke's job. He had to. Where he went, I followed.

My visit with Georgia hadn't left me feeling as raw as I thought it would. Her comments made me feel more healed than I'd initially thought. It was true I'd spent two years waiting to get to Deke, slowly coming back to myself. My healing had started long before I came to Sweetwater.

When we arrived at the gate, many of the humans were out of their cars, shouting and screaming for us dragons to go back to where we came from.

The problem was, we were from this realm. We might have lived in Abrocaelum for the last couple of millennia, but like all supernaturals, we came from the human realm. Dragons were around before humans were. I would not point this out to them. It would not help matters, only muddy the waters.

"Can I help you?" Deke asked in a reasonable manner when he neared a police officer who was waiting not so patiently at the closed side gate.

"There's been a complaint about dragons flying over the town." The officer looked ready to use the weapon at his side, though on who, I was unsure. He did not strike

me as unreasonable.

“Well not over the town, but there were dragons flying. My mate was reunited with his family today. They celebrated with a flight over pack land.”

“How do you know where they went?” the same officer questioned. The other police officers were pushing the humans back towards their vehicles. The people didn’t look keen to move.

“I was on my mate’s back.” Was that pride I heard in his voice? Had he enjoyed flying that much? I wanted to preen!

“So you know exactly where they flew?”

“Yes.” My mate had endless patience. He stood firm while exuding calm. “We were given permission for dragons to fly in the area as long as they stuck to our land. I reminded them of the boundary before they took flight.”

“He did,” I agreed.

The officer stepped away to speak into his radio. When he returned his gaze landed on me. “Which dragon are you?”

“I’m his mate.”

“No, which color?”

“I was the white dragon.”

“Why did you fly over the school and scare the little kids?” The officer looked angry. Did he truly believe I would do such a thing?

“There was no school.” I tried to stay as serene as Deke at the accusation. “We flew over the lake, the orchard, and the factory where the pack makes their cider. We did not see any humans on our flight.”

That was a small lie. We saw people, but they were shifter children in the community center when we flew by it. They looked so excited to see us! I had to resist the urge to show off for them with my precious cargo aboard.

The officer turned to Deke once more. “Where is your Alpha?”

“Unfortunately, he is unavailable.” The officer’s face darkened with anger. I believe he thought we were not taking this matter seriously enough for him. Deke explained further. “His mate is in heat. Our Alpha is with him. Our Second is on his way. I am the Head Enforcer.”

“Right. That’ll do, I guess.” He stepped away once more to speak into the radio again. I did not try to listen in. Somewhat happy with the response, he returned.

“So you swear they did not fly over the human areas?” He looked mildly frustrated now. Clearly he’d figured out he was on a pointless errand.

“We stuck to pack lands as we promised we would.” My mate was so unflappable. I wanted to return to our home and demonstrate how that made me feel.

A sigh escaped the officer. “You dragons planning to stay for a while?”

Are you? I asked my family.

Not if the humans are going to be like this. We’ll visit a little longer but return today, Rezoth set down the law.

Agreed, the others affirmed.

“My family are only visiting for the day. They will return to Abrocaelum later.”

“Alright.” The officer fished into his pocket, pulling out a white rectangle which he handed to Deke. “Here’s my contact details. The precinct would appreciate a heads up before you all go flying again if you could. Then we can save time and not drive all the way out here.”

“Sure,” Deke agreed easily, a friendly smile on his handsome face.

“Move everyone out of here!” the officer barked at the remaining cars. Most had driven off when it was clear the complaint was false.

We waited until everyone had left, checking in with Melody, a raccoon shifter, before turning to go back to the house.

Chase rushed up when we were nearly there. “Sorry! I couldn’t get off the phone with the mayor to speak to the police. You obviously had it handled.”

“What did the mayor say?” Deke asked.

“Just that he’s looking forward to going home now. He thinks the aviary got some humans to complain.” Chase caught my arm. I allowed the touch. “You’ll have to lie low for a bit. Maybe only fly around the lake?”

Touched by his concern, I patted his hand. “I will, thanks.”

He perked up. “It sucks I missed you flying! Does anyone want to carry me over the lake?”

Valethar approached Chase, he slung an arm over his shoulders. “How about you come through the portal with us later and I’ll take you on a short flight. I’m sure the elves won’t mind.”

“They won’t if I ask them first. That’d be awesome! Thanks, Vale.”

We might have been unwelcome with the aviary and humans, but the shifters in Sweetwater seemed happy to have dragons in their pack.

Safely inside the mansion, Winter served us tea in the library. It hurt, though I understood, that he kept his distance. He was another reason to push for a bond with Deke. Once the beastly part of me felt secure and Deke knew I only belonged to him, I could have a friend. My mate was right, having friends was important, yet we were too fragile for it just then. I’d only been free a couple of weeks. There was plenty of time.

We spent some time catching up on matters of the kingdom, which felt odd. I was torn by wanting to know everything, and also not caring at all. These issues were not mine now. It had been too long for me. My people felt like strangers. Not my sons, though. They were my beating heart.

Seeing the changes in them brought both pain and joy. Rezoth was more confident, poised. Ryoko was, as always, his shadow. He had grown bolder. Nhil was quieter, not unhappy, just at peace with life, though he kept looking around, appearing unsettled. Gedith, my sweet boy, had clearly been pampered a little too much. His brothers never said no to him, even if it meant giving the last bite off their plates. Balon... he was harder, stricter with everyone aside from Gedith. As their alpha, he likely took on the burden of keeping them connected. Life would not have been easy for him.

Vale? I used our bond to speak to him alone. I was grateful I still had access to it

considering my new pack bond.

Yes, Ozyn?

We need to help Balon. I worry for him.

Ah, picked up on that did you? He's had his heart broken recently. Do not worry, he'll be fine. Maybe he'll see a shifter here who catches his fancy.

Something as easy as heartbreak was a relief. Time would heal that wound.

While I would love my boys to be closer, I fear we are not welcome here. Perhaps it will settle.

Everything will work out as it is meant to. We have the Great Drakon and The Luna on our side. Now pay attention. Your wolf is getting worried about you.

I tuned back into the conversation, snuggling closer to my mate, who kissed the top of my head affectionately. It was so sweet I couldn't help the swell of love I felt for him. Deke could not have been more perfect for me. He was handsome with his lightly tanned skin, pretty silver-blue eyes, sharp features, and strong body. To his core, he was a protector.

He took a small sandwich off the platter and added it to my plate. Then, proving he really did know me, he picked up the cupcake I'd kept an eye on, also adding it to my pile of food. He was wonderful.

Deke had told me tales of his time as the Alpha of the pack, seeing it as his shame. Not to me it wasn't. I saw it as him learning where his true role lay, and that was as the protector, or Head Enforcer, as his title was. The role was ideal for him. He did not need to take the spotlight, just watch over his family, his pack.

I did worry about him being hurt. He'd nearly died thanks to his job before I got to meet him. I must have broadcast some of that over the pack link.

If my job is a problem, I'd give it up for you without thinking. Our bond, what we have together, our future family, is all more important than a title. Larken is nearly ready. He could replace me .

No, I protested. It's part of who you are. I just need to be there to protect you in return.

All too soon, the boys had to leave. We walked with them to the portal. Hugs were exchanged along with promises that we would visit. As long as things with the humans stayed quiet I had hope I could steal Deke away for a night or two. After Kade was done with his heat, though.

"Are you sad you aren't going with them?" Deke asked me as we walked home hand in hand. His touch was always grounding. It reminded me I was free, I had a future filled with love and happiness.

"Not really. Sounds terrible, doesn't it? Yet to dragons our years apart aren't an issue. I missed them dearly but... promise you won't get upset?"

"I'll try."

"Well, there was a time I accepted I would never leave that dungeon." I focused on the distance ahead, not my mate beside me, who'd stiffened. "Glorin was done with me. He kept me only as a trophy. I knew the only way I'd get out of there was when I was dead." I heard his sharp intake of breath. "So you see, I'd already mourned my boys. I never thought I'd see them again. Getting to see them now, even just for a few hours at a time, being able to fly with them, it's worth everything to me."

“Right, that’s it.” Before I knew it, Deke was hoisting me over his shoulder and running for home.

I let out a shriek of laughter which attracted the attention of everyone nearby. They laughed and pointed at the picture we made.

“Love hearing you laugh,” Deke said, not even breathless as he carefully moved me from his shoulder to the cradle of his arms as we entered the house.

“You make it easy to laugh.” I pressed my face into his neck, loving his scent. He always smelled like the mountains of home and the aniseed candy my papa fed me in my youth. Desire for more of his touch, his taste, his scent filled me. My cock filled. Kissing up his throat, I sighed. “Will you touch me again?”

“What would you like me to do, my dragon?”

“Anything, everything, as long as you touch me, my wolf.”

Deke laid me on the bed, stripping me out of my clothes before he let his fall on the floor. He covered my body with his, the weight of him so arousing and soothing at the same time. This wolf was my home, my soul. His touch set a fire within me. I burned only for him.

His lips were soft and warm when they met mine. He kissed me deeply as he used my slick to coat our cocks. His hand wrapped around us both, stroking as his tongue entered my mouth.

Neither of us took long to find our release. Now that I’d had a taste of what it was like to be with him, I wanted him even more. I reached for his hand, licking our spend from it, reveling in the taste of us combined.

“Let’s do more of that,” I sighed into his shoulder when he pulled me on top of him to cuddle.

“As often as you like.”

Our Bond

Deke

Pretty much the day after we moved into our new home, I knew I was going to have to ask Ozyn if he was ready to bond. I couldn't take it any longer. Sure, we'd been doing stuff, but the constant tugging on the bond was becoming overwhelming.

The last month with him had been great. We'd moved on from handjobs to daily blow jobs. Frotting happened on occasion. My mate was open to touching and being touched. I loved every minute with him, even if we had shit to deal with in the pack.

Kade was pregnant, which was fantastic news. Truly it was. This time we were all relieved to hear it was just one baby. He and Blake were excited to bring their little one into the world. Ozyn had said Kade was fertile, they had chosen not to believe how easy it would be for Kade to get pregnant again. The Luna had blessed them once more. It did have Larken panicking about Dalton's upcoming heat.

Our meal with them was put off with one disaster after another. More calls to the police about us. The new mayor got involved, too. Luckily the new mayor was part of the supernatural community herself. The nymph was Shelby's cousin.

This was good news at least since it meant she was probably good. Shelby was well liked in the pack because she ran the cider factory like a dream. She had previously worked with Kade, coming to step in when the betas were asleep with the sickness, and kept things going smoothly. If her cousin was anything like Shelby then things were golden.

Amara, Shelby's cousin, had reached out to us to ensure a smooth takeover. I liked the woman. She wasn't one for bullshit and compliments. I had a folder of evidence against the aviary sent to her office. The aviary were sent a notice they were being audited in return.

Should have been the end of it. They should have scaled down, or even stopped their attacks. Instead they got more violent, sending more shifters to attack us and steal the babies. All unsuccessful, but stressful to live through.

Once more I offered to step back from my job because I was worried for Ozyn. He was making great strides in his therapy sessions with Georgia and her colleague, but it was a lot. I worried the stress would trigger a backslide.

I shouldn't have doubted him though. He took it well, often supporting me alongside enforcers while we dealt with the issues.

A few times Ozyn had to take to the skies to scare off flocks of birds ready to descend on the pack! Of course, no sooner was he in scales than the police were calling to check he was still in our territory. Me and that cop, Hernandez, were getting pretty friendly. We were speaking more often than I talked with some of my friends!

Honestly, it was exhausting, but like Blake said, life had to go on for us. We couldn't put things on hold until the aviary decided to play nice.

Hence the move.

It was needed. We had to have a space that felt like ours, not my sad bachelor pad. Dalton and Kade had both helped Ozyn pick out new clothes and stuff for our house. He was determined for it always to be light and airy inside. No one questioned him on it. His sons had brought jewels and gifts to celebrate our upcoming mating, so he could afford anything he wanted.

Watching Ozyn dress in a slim fitting shirt and nicely tailored slacks, I couldn't help but appreciate the gift The Luna had given me in my mate. On the outside he was fully healed from his imprisonment. He'd put on weight, his skin had a healthy glow, his curly hair shone in the afternoon light.

He was a vision.

After we went to dinner with Larken and Dalton, I was asking Ozyn if he wanted to bond. I couldn't put it off any longer. My wolf longed to sink our teeth into Ozyn's neck, mark him as ours, making sure everyone knew he was taken. I'd proudly wear his mark. Did dragons mark?

"Ozzy? Do dragons bite their mates?"

Instead of answering, he rolled his eyes at me.

Okay, fine, it was probably a stupid question. He hadn't said anything about bonding being different between dragons and shifters.

"You look nice. You ready?"

He looked me up and down. "Is that what you're wearing?"

I resisted a laugh. It was good he was getting snippy. It was a sure sign he was comfortable with me and the lack of solid bond was affecting him too.

"Don't you like it?"

His eyes roved my form, his cheeks flushed. "I prefer the other shirt. It brings out the color of your eyes."

Maybe I pretended I couldn't undo the buttons. "Could you help?"

Ozyn's breathing picked up as he undid each button. The color on his cheeks and the way he couldn't take his eyes off my chest was gratifying. The thrum of need pulsed between us. If it wasn't for the dinner party, we would be staying home for the next few days.

Once my chest was exposed, Ozyn had to step away to adjust himself.

Still half naked, I came up behind him, encircling him with my head on his. "How about we take things further when we get home?"

"Further?"

Better to give him time to get used to the idea.

"I want to bond with you later. We have the next couple of days off. People will deliver food if you go into heat."

"Do you want me to?"

"Huh?" His question confused me.

"Dragons can use their magic to stall a heat. I go into heat when I choose to."

"What?" I tightened my hold on him in my surprise. He let out a little grunt. I let go, but he held fast to me. "Even with a mating bite?"

Ozyn frowned. "Have I not said this before?" I shook my head. "Dragons control their heat cycles. Though, I am not sure if a mating bite between a shifter and dragon will have the same effect. It's possible I will still have control on whether I give you

my heat or not.”

“No.” Mind blown! They could control it? “I’m sure Aldrin doesn’t know either. He’s literally looking for a safer way to repress heats for shifters.”

“Oh. He has asked for my blood before. Could that be why?”

“No, Ozzy. If he knew you could do this, he’d be beating down the door trying to figure it out with your help. Kade nearly lost his wolf, hell, his life because of heat blockers.”

“Oh!” I watched him process that information. “Well, after we bond... or do we have time to give a sample before our dinner?”

“I’ll give him a call and ask, okay?” I rocked Ozyn in my arms, moving him towards the bedroom where the shirt he wanted me to wear was waiting on the bed. “But I need to check. Do you want to have a heat? It isn’t necessary for us to bond. I think we’ll both feel better once we do, but a heat isn’t needed.”

“Do you want children?”

My movements stilled. Did I want them? I imagined Ozyn round with my babies. There would be at least two because one was unlucky, right? In my mind he was massive, his stomach so big he couldn’t see his feet! He glowed with health and happiness. Then there were the babies. They all looked like him except for one, they looked like me.

Babies, my wolf agreed. We want babies.

Sure thing, I said to both Ozyn and my wolf using the pack link and my soul-bond. Babies.

“Then I will give you my heat.”

“Aldrin has agreed to meet us here,” I said, putting my phone away to knock on the door. “Hope they don’t mind.” Larken and Dalton’s house was only a little down the street from us. When we had babies, it would be useful for Ozyn to have friends nearby when I was at work.

Unless he wanted to work and I stayed home. Something we needed to discuss. We were talking about having kids, our priorities were shifting. My injury had made me more cautious. Maybe not cautious enough. What if I got badly hurt again? Maybe it was time to seriously think about not being Head Enforcer anymore. Not just the vague offers I’d suggested to Ozyn. Really think it through. Put my family first.

Either way, with multiple babies, a nanny would be a good idea. I wasn’t sure if he would like an elf one. Maybe Safi since Ozyn trusted him and they had history.

I liked that idea. Safi was taking guard duties, but he struck me as someone who didn’t like to fight. With the regular attacks and inter-pack issues which always came up, he might not be suited to that job. I’d take a moment to ask him after I broached it with Ozyn.

Ingal, Dalton’s friend and their nanny, opened the door to us with one of the raccoon babies in his arms. “Hello, dinner is nearly ready. Come through, please.”

Ozyn automatically put his hands out for the straining baby. Ingal handed him over readily. My mate looked even sweeter with the little kit in his arms. To think he could be holding our own baby in a few short months was astounding.

My mate was a miracle. To go from the hell he had been in to offering to have children with me in only a few short months... I couldn’t wrap my head around his resilience.

I needed to show him how much I loved him.

We followed Ingal into the open kitchen-dining area where Larken was already plating up food at the stove. Dalton was wrangling the other babies, his ferret, Spice, on his shoulder. Priscilla watched everything from a cat tree in the corner one of the babies was trying to climb.

Dalton smiled at us both. “Hi. Gimme a sec to put these little ones in their playpen.”

“I forgot to ask, sorry, but Aldrin is coming over.”

“Um,” Dalton shared a look with his mate.

“Not to eat! He’s coming to take a blood sample from Ozyn.”

“I am not ill,” Ozyn assured our friends when their eyes widened. “Deke tells me Aldrin has been looking for a way to block heats without the side effects Kade suffered through.”

Dalton winced. “Yeah, that was bad. He looked like you did when you first arrived.” Another wince. “Fuck! that was rude. I’m sorry!”

Larken dropped what he was doing to come to his mate’s side. He rubbed his back and whispered too low for us to hear. The babies took that as their chance to scatter. Ingal scooped each one up and put them in the playpen.

I realized why it had a roof when the raccoon babies climbed to the top. The pillows also made sense when they fell. Were dragon babies this hard work? Would ours be shifters or dragons?

Ozyn’s smile was reassuring. “No. It gives me a point of reference. Kade must have

been very ill.”

“He really was,” I said, taking Ozyn’s hand and leading him to the table. “Any seat?”

“Yeah,” Lark returned to the food. “Anywhere is fine.” He added a heaping serving to a plate before he asked. “Aldrin thinks you’ve got a way of stopping heats, Ozyn?”

“That’d be so handy. I can’t take blockers because they’re so bad and won’t work on me because of my super healing. I’m due to go into heat in a couple weeks already!”

“Yeah. We don’t know how potions will work either.”

The doorbell rang. “Probably Aldrin now.” Ingal went to open the door. He returned with the healer and his mate in tow. I should have known they’d both come.

“Ah, you’re just about to have dinner. We’ll keep this short, but I do require an explanation.”

Ozyn launched into it while Aldrin and James drew out the materials they needed to take his blood.

“Dragons, deltas and omegas, have always had the magic to gift their heats to their chosen partners. A heat usually has a more successful outcome when given freely. Yet, it can take a few heats with a partner until we become pregnant.”

The healers listened to every word with interest.

“We hold them back with our magic. It’s literally in our blood. From maturity we learn how to bring it forward or hold it back. Without magic we are forced to endure a cycle much like shifters. Forced heats are nowhere near as successful. Their pregnancies often end before roosting.”

“I badly want to ask about roosting, but dinner is waiting,” James said cheerfully. “Dakota is cooking for us, too. I need to check that you’re giving this blood freely and you consent to us testing it?”

“I do.”

“Would you be willing to provide other samples at a later date?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. This shouldn’t hurt.” James was skilled with a needle. I knew this first-hand. Ozyn didn’t even flinch when the needle slid into his vein. He watched them take four vials of blood.

“Thank you.” Aldrin laid his hands on Ozyn’s shoulders when it was done. “This is remarkable. I hope we can find something in your blood to help our shifters have control of their cycles. It would be revolutionary for omegas everywhere.”

They left soon after, letting us eat. The food was delicious and Ozyn looked radiant. Conversation was easy with our friends. Ingal, while still shy, slowly came out of his shell around my mate, but more often than not, he stayed with the children.

“Your animal soul is forming,” Ozyn whispered to the elf as they held the Komodo dragon babies, they were much more chill than the raccoons I was play wrestling with into diapers. “Your bond with the babies is so pure.”

“You can see it?” Ingal’s eyes filled with tears when Ozyn nodded.

“There’s a light around you I can see with my dragon sight. It’s your owl. They are nearly ready for your change. It could be some months yet, but it is coming. Continue as you are.”

Ingäl wrapped an arm around Ozyn, smooshing Ozyn's face into his chest. Smaller than some of the elves, Ingäl was still considered tall by human standards. He was slightly taller than me.

"Thank you so much!" I could smell his tears.

"Now that I have made Ingäl cry, I think we should go home or we might not be invited back!"

"Here!" I brandished a baby at Larken. "I'm taking a few days off."

He took the child with a grin. "Finally bonding? Hope it all goes well!"

Dalton hugged Ozyn goodbye. "Hopefully you'll be announcing a baby next."

"I think I would like at least four babies. The largest clutch was eleven."

"Eleven?" Larken cried. "Hell no!"

My thoughts exactly.

Ozyn was serene walking beside me on the way home. "We do not have to have that many children. I can focus on keeping our clutch small if you prefer." Clearly, he had picked up on some of my worry. My mate was intuitive like that.

"Um..." What was the right answer here? I wanted babies with Ozyn, just not a soccer team's worth of them! "Maybe we should let nature take its course. The Luna and your Great Drakon have been pretty kind to us so far."

"My mate is wise. I look forward to our bonding."

“Me too. Do you want a shower first?” I unlocked the door and entered the house, leaving the early evening light to illuminate the space.

He didn’t answer, just pushed me against the wall, went to his tiptoes, and kissed me soundly.

When we broke apart, he started stripping there in the doorway. “I don’t want to wait any longer. I want your bite and for you to fill me up.”

“Demanding. I like it.”

My clothes landed next to his.

“Come here, mate.”

He came into my arms easily. Our lips met once more, the passion between us building. I hiked him higher, so his legs wrapped around my waist, and carried him to our bedroom.

There, I laid him down on the bed. “I want to bite you first, is that okay?” I pressed kisses along his throat and jaw.

“Hmm, yes, please.”

“Good.” Kissing and licking the spot, I let the tension build before I spoke the words to bind us together. “I, Deke Sweetwater, take you Ozyn Drakonvar as my fated mate. To protect and love until my dying day.”

My fangs extended, parting the flesh of his neck easily. His rich, hot blood burst on my tongue. The magic in that mouthful was incredible. My wolf howled at his first true glimpse of the dragon.

Ours.

The bond formed, waiting for Ozyn's mark to complete us.

The Gift

Ozyn

Deke's bite wiped my brain of everything I wanted to say at this most special moment. Like him, I never thought I would have a fated mate. I truly felt like I would die alone in that dungeon. When I'd felt him for the first time, he became my lifeline. I survived it all for him.

The pleasure singing through his part of the bond pulled me back into the moment. Our bodies were pressed against each other, not a stitch of clothing between us. He felt amazing next to me, strong, warm, mine. Soon I would get to feel Deke inside me for the first time. My hole was slick just thinking about it.

Was I really ready for this step? If not, it was too late now. No, I wanted this like I needed the skies. Deke was my love, my soul, and being joined to him was an honor. Sharing my body with him wasn't a duty as it had been when I was married, it was something I wanted to do just for how good he would make me feel.

Letting my teeth extend, I said the words needed for my half of the vow. "I, Ozyn Drakonvar, take you, Deke Sweetwater, as my bonded mate. Giving myself to you freely to love and protect, I vow to love and protect you in return. Once our bond is complete, I will give you children to carry on your legacy."

Biting my mate, completing the bond with our magic, felt unlike anything I'd ever experienced. With my dragon magic, I'd already had a sense of him. With the pack link, I'd heard him, but it was like everything was distorted. Now I could feel his love

for me, his awe at our bond. I could hear his unrestrained thoughts about how beautiful he found me, how lucky he was.

When our lips met once more, I could feel everything from his side as well as my own. It was almost overwhelming in its intensity.

My hands traced his wide shoulders and strong back. I opened my legs wider to bring him closer to where I needed him most. I ached with a need to be filled.

“Do you want my heat?” I whispered, clawing at his shoulders as he made his way down my body, licking and sucking as he went. As I’d suspected, I hadn’t been thrown into one. In this, I was given a choice, one I offered to him in return.

“Yes, it would be a gift to have your heat.”

I closed my eyes, looked deep within me to that integral part of what made me a dragon: my magic. There, I dropped my hold on the spells keeping my fertility locked down.

It’s okay, I soothed the altered magic. It had changed under the pressure of my imprisonment. We can trust him to take care of us.

The long forgotten prickle of heat washed down my body. More slick leaked from me. I would have been embarrassed at how wet I was, but Deke’s groan of approval when his fingers met my entrance caused shivers to run down my spine. My alpha loved how I reacted to his touch. He loved how well my body prepared itself to take him.

One finger circled my hole before slowly pushing inside. I felt so ready for him, yet Deke wasn’t in a rush to speed to the main event. He kissed down my body, then took my length into his mouth, tracing around the head with his tongue. He dipped into the

slit before pulling back to tap my cockhead on his lips.

“Gonna make you come by sucking you and fucking you with my fingers. You’re going to soak the bed, you’ll be so wet for me. Only then will I give you my cock.”

I shuddered at his words. Desire for my mate, the heat in my veins had more slick soaking the sheets. I felt a surge of panic at how out of control my need to be filled felt like. After so many heats where my choices were taken or limited, I was lost, consumed with a need unlike anything I’d experienced before.

In response my magic flared, pushing much needed clarity into my mind.

My mate’s head rose since he had noticed the magic with his gift. “You okay?” He laid his hands on the mattress, watching me carefully.

“I... uh... the heat, it was too much.” My cheeks flushed with shame. I was ruining this special moment.

“Hey,” Deke stroked my legs in a soothing touch. “It’s fine. We can slow down.” I shook my head. He studied me. “Do you still want this?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “I just needed to feel clearer. Not be out of my mind with lust. That’s all my magic did.”

His eyes met mine. I let him feel everything inside me. My need to be filled by him, how present I was in the moment thanks to my magic, how I wanted to give him a chance at eggs.

“Okay, Ozzy. You use as much magic as you need to feel safe, okay?” I nodded. “We can stop at any time. Just tell me, alright?”

Deke was so precious to me. With him I was safer than I'd ever been in my long life. He was the perfect mate for such a damaged omega. I longed for him to fill me, give me his knot more than I wanted anything.

With a final look, he rose to kiss me. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

I sank into his kisses and touches, enjoying the feelings my mate's caresses elicited. After some time, he worked his way down my body once more until he was grinning up at me, his lips brushing the tip of my cock.

Deke licked down my shaft, sucked each of my balls and teased my taint before moving back up once more to suck me deep. He opened his throat to me while he added another finger. He crooked them both, making me see stars as he hit my prostate.

This was going to be over embarrassingly soon. It had been so long since I had felt the true and honest gratification that came from being in a given heat. It made everything more pleasurable. Every nerve sang with joy even as my magic kept me coherent. I wanted to let him see me come, to show him how much I desired him.

His throat constricted against my length at the same time he pushed a third finger inside me.

I came. It was glorious. The dual sensation of Deke sucking and filling me took it to the next level. I feared I'd die on his knot from how good it felt.

My mate's expression was smug as he eased his fingers free from my ass. He gave my cock another lick before working his way up my body.

“Love that sound you make when you come,” Deke muttered against my chest. He nipped at a nipple, making me yelp. He laughed and slumped back on the bed.

We had learned there were many positions which did not work for us. Once Deke had crawled up me to fuck my face while holding the headboard. I’d panicked so badly he had not touched me sexually for days after. When we talked about bonding, he suggested I was on top at least at first, so I was in control.

Once I recovered from my orgasm, a heat wave rising once more, I moved to straddle him.

“Are you sure? We don’t have to do this.” Deke held my hips with gentle hands. “I love how you’re using your magic,” he assured me. “This way I know it’s you, not heat hormones.”

I laughed. “It’s a bit of both. You are very sexy, Deke.” He grinned up at me. “I want this. No, I need it. Need you more than anything. I’m choosing this.”

Taking his cock in hand, I slowly sank down onto it until my ass met his thighs. Watching him, I set a slow and steady pace, rocking and rising a little over him.

“Take what you need,” Deke panted. He placed his hands on the bed, careful not to trigger me by holding too tightly.

Now and then he thrust up into me, making me moan as he hit me just right.

My wolf had a nice cock, the perfect size to fill me completely. He was made for me, after all.

Together we moved, both sweating and panting as the wave of heat broke over me. I became desperate for more of his touch as I let go of some of the magic.

I took his hands and settled them on my hips. "Guide me." I was so out of practice.

Deke reached up to thumb a nipple as he planted his feet and thrust up into me. He held me in place while he pumped his hips, rolling and pinching at the raised bud. The contrast of pleasure and pain had me falling off that cliff, spurting over him untouched.

Another orgasm came when his knot expanded and I felt the first of his hot release inside me.

Breathing heavily, I slumped forward, my head tucked into his neck where his bite was. I licked it, enjoying his shudder..

"Can you try on top next time?"

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Deke looked me in the eyes while he made love to me. It was slow, gentle, perfect. Something about how his gaze was filled with his adoration healed a fractured part of me. If I'd ever believed Glorin actually loved me, he could have gotten what he wanted. His first betrayal was breaking my heart.

My mate, the one chosen for me by fate, The Luna or the Great Drakon himself, loved me, cherished every inch of me. Truly did. Right down to my bones. He knew my flaws and loved me in spite of them.

We rocked together, coming at the same time in a blissful tangle of limbs.

Over the course of a day, a short heat by shifter standards, we made love in every

room of the house. We were never far apart from each other. When Deke needed to get us some food, he carried me on his back to the kitchen. He sat me on the counter and fed me like he'd heard Dakota did with Jasper. We weren't knotted, though.

In the shower, under the spray, we came together once more, none of my magic keeping my heat from clouding my mind. I gave over complete control to my mate, trusting he would protect not only my body, but my heart. The water was long cold before Deke's knot went down. I used my magic to keep us warm.

"Hmm," Deke said, nuzzling my healed bite as we lay in bed. "I love being mated to you. Have I said that already? I love you, Ozyn. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

"And I love you, Deke. You are the best gift. I'm honored to be your mate."

My body was trembling so much, my words shook. I needed him to understand just how deeply I felt for him. Unable to voice it properly, I poured it into our bond. My mate had saved me, that was true. Not only my body by giving me the will to escape my prison, but my mind. My sanity was intact from knowing he existed. He had been worth waiting for. I loved him so dearly, I could not see an end to it.

Though my heat had broken, I still desired my mate. I would always want him. Coming together was a demonstration of our love. Unable to resist, I wriggled my ass against his hardening cock.

"Again? Aren't you sore?"

"Not really." I wasn't. Deke had been more than attentive. He'd called for a salve to use on my entrance after we got particularly vigorous.

He teased around my hole, finding plenty of slick there. After an entire day of sex I

didn't need much in the way of preparation.

Deke slid inside me in a fluid movement. I stayed on my side, surrounded by him, yet not pinned down. We knew it didn't work for me. He raised my leg to my chest to get a deeper angle, hitting my spot. I moaned loudly.

"That's right. Let me hear you."

It felt like it went on forever, but still not long enough. The morning light filtered over the bed, trapping us in a sunbeam as I climaxed and Deke followed after. His knot stretched me in a now familiar and soothing way. There were no ravages of heat making me desperate, just us expressing our love with our bodies.

"I don't want to go to work today," Deke complained later while running his fingers through my sex mussed curls.

"Then don't. No one else knows my heat is done, do they?"

"No, they don't."

"Even if they did, they wouldn't mind you taking the day, would they?"

"I guess not." He was quiet for a while. "Why don't we have a lazy breakfast then shift for a while? If we'd planned better we could have gone to see your sons."

"Let's go when we know if we're pregnant."

"Do you think that will be soon?"

"A few days, perhaps."

“You know it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t happen this time. I’ll just enjoy having you to myself for a little longer. Babies can wait, not that I won’t be delighted—“

I kissed him to shut him up. “Deke, it’s fine. I understand what you mean. Truthfully, I am excited to be pregnant again. A second pregnancy is rare with dragons.”

“Why? Because you can’t get pregnant? Or don’t want to?”

“Well, because usually we’ve had our clutch and fulfilled our duty. I had my heir so there was no need to have another clutch with their father. We control our fertility, which allows us to have lovers when the mood strikes without the consequences of pregnancy.”

“But you want another clutch with me?”

“Yes. I want to see our love represented in our children.” A worry rose within me. “You understand they may all be dragons? It is very rare for a dragon not to birth a dragon.”

Deke smiled. “I really don’t care what they are because they will be ours. Your other sons are mine now too. We’ve not had the chance to properly bond, but one day I hope they’ll call me dad.”

Just thinking of them crowding around Deke brought a grin to my face. “I look forward to that.” I sobered and took his hand. “Are you going to be alright outliving your family? Now that you are mated to me, your lifespan will match mine. Dragons can live for thousands of years. I am a little over six hundred years old.” Deke gasped. “The boys are nearly three hundred.”

“Wow. That’s...”

“I understand it might be difficult for you. Perhaps we should have discussed this before.”

“No.” Deke was firm. “Wow, I knew we had an age gap.” He gave a nervous laugh. “I’m only thirty, and you’re much, much older, but look just as young as I do. Magic, I guess. I’m okay with it, honest.”

Deke’s birthday celebration had been subdued thanks to my arrival and convalescence. When things were easier, I wanted to do something special for him.

His laugh was slightly frantic this time, then he sobered. “We’ve got so much time to look forward to together. I like that.”

“Are you sure? Saying goodbye to your family...”

He clutched me to him. “I don’t regret bonding. Besides, I’ll have you, our children, and my memories. That will be enough.” He changed the subject. “Now, how about a bath before breakfast?”

We lounged together in the fragrant steaming water until our skin became pruned. He helped me out of the bath first, handing me a fluffy towel. Deke’s eyes filled with heat while I dried myself off. I dropped the towel, inviting him closer.

“Want something?”

“You.”

His kiss stole my breath, he clutched me to him, one hand in my hair, the other on my hip.

“Deke,” I panted when he released my mouth to suckle at my mating bite. “Need

you.” I felt slick running down my thighs.

He had me bent over the bath in an instant, his tongue probing my ass. He lapped at my slick while I moaned his name loud enough for our neighbors to hear. On and on he licked and sucked until I was begging for his cock.

There on the cold tile of the bathroom, he fucked me until I couldn’t think. Then knotted, we showered off sweat, come, and slick with smiles on our faces.

I hoped I was pregnant, but if I wasn’t, I was happy to have another heat with my mate soon.

Waiting

Deke

P laying hooky with my mate was the best feeling in the world. I wanted to prove to him there was more to our bond than sex, even though the sex was really fucking good. If I'd known how much better it was with your fated mate, I'd have charged through that damn portal on the day it had opened.

Not that I'd known the pull was Ozyn. Suspected, sure, but known? No. I should have spoken up. There had been quieter times when the elves could have helped me with what I was feeling. I spent plenty of time with Teárlach and Hakeem, they might have had an idea about what the pull was.

Beating myself up over it wasn't going to change the last two years. Besides, Ozyn needed that time to come back to himself. Maybe I could have figured shit out sooner, and it's possible he would've been fine. We'd never know. Things happened like they were meant to.

The Luna was a huge part of our lives in the Sweetwater pack, we just had to trust her to guide us down the right path at the right time.

We took a walk and shifted together. I loved his other form. As a dragon he walked side by side with me to the lake, then took to the skies while I watched him from the ground. He skimmed over the surface of the water, scaring some ducks, making me laugh. In the air, he looked so damn happy I hated to remind him to stick close by.

Someone was going to make a stink about Ozyn being shifted. They just couldn't stand to see him happy.

Sure enough, Micah, one of our enforcers, came running in his dingo form, a phone in a pouch around his neck. I could guarantee it was about Ozyn. I shifted but stayed sitting in the grass.

Cops called again. Just gotta get eyes on Ozyn to say I've seen him.

He shifted, baring himself to me because most shifters didn't give a shit about nudity. My mate knew about that. Still, the move got a reaction out of him.

Ozyn snarled at Micah who smirked.

"Get a grip!" I called to my mate. "He came here in fur."

"He could at least cover himself."

His ability to speak out loud and not via the pack link while still being a dragon was trippy.

Micah shrugged. He gave zero fucks about Ozyn's mood. He started a call, ignoring the dragon circling over his head. "Hey Hernandez," he said when the call connected.

Ah, our friendly neighborhood police officer. He was my newest bestie, the main cop we spoke to about reports of Ozyn. The man had my number, not that I had my phone on me. Bet I'd return to a ton of missed calls.

"Yeah, Ozyn's here. Deke too." He was quiet for a moment then brandished the phone at me. "Here, he wants to speak to you."

“Hey,” I greeted him warily.

“The phone you’re on, does it take video calls?” Hernandez sounded utterly done. Could hardly blame him there.

I looked at the device before I gave him an answer. Why did he want to know?
“Yeah?”

There was a beep as the call dropped then a video call began. I answered. “Um, I’m hoping you can’t see all that much. Left my clothes under a tree.”

“Can’t see much aside from your face and the sky,” he muttered dryly. “Where’s that mate of yours?”

Took me a second but I figured out how to turn the camera. Nearly showed the officer too much. I moved it away from Micah’s junk, to catch Ozyn lazily flapping above the lake once more, not threatening his pack mate. His gaze was still fixated on Micah, who was doing nothing to cover himself to bait Ozyn.

“Ah, at the lake, which is?”

“Right in the middle of the compound.” I stood, making Ozyn growl again until I used a hand to sort of cover my dick. Swinging the phone around, I didn’t care if Hernandez got a look at Micah that time, I zoomed into the buildings in the distance. “See that there,” I pointed, “that’s the pack mansion. Over there,” more moving, “right in the distance? The factory.”

“Point made. Don’t think I didn’t catch that other guy standing there.”

Micah shifted back into his dingo form and began nonchalantly cleaning himself, listening in on the conversation.

“Are we really going to do this every time Ozyn shifts? Isn’t this harassment at this point? He didn’t even fly that high. The only thing he’s scared today is ducks, unless you’re telling me those are aviary spies? But then they shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m with you on this. Ozyn hasn’t done a thing to warrant this treatment.” He rubbed a hand over his face with a tired expression. “I don’t give a fuck that he’s a dragon. We’ve got lions, tigers and bears roaming the streets with the full rights of everyday citizens as they deserve. Some of them are walking loaded weapons. Don’t see us chasing them down every time they shift. Vampires literally drink blood, but they pay for it if they want human stuff. Hell, we’ve got humans walking around with guns and nothing is done. Until he’s a problem we shouldn’t be treating him like one.”

Well, wasn’t that the most positive thing the officer had said about us. Here I was thinking he was a bigot. Plenty of cops were. Not this one, though.

“Right.”

“Yeah, so you guys have a spy in your midst, otherwise the aviary are using drones or something, because the way I see it, there’s no chance they could have seen him from outside your territory unless they are using binoculars or some shit.”

“He was barely above the trees!”

“Look, I get paid to deal with this crap, but this is a waste of resources. While they’re dickin’ us around there’s actual crimes being committed. I think you need to talk to your Alpha and maybe petition the shifter council to get involved again. I saw this isn’t the first time you’ve had to petition them.” The police and mayor had records of previous complaints on file. Not that the council did much, especially with some of the alphaholes in league with the aviary.

“From the outside, you guys are just trying to live your lives. I think most people

have figured out you aren't the problem here..."

Yeah, the aviary was the boy crying wolf in that old fable for sure. The situation was ridiculous.

I folded into the grass, aware of Ozyn's annoyance through our bond.

"The aviary just won't let it go." I sounded defeated to my ears. Ozyn shifted and landed on two feet nearby. He had the ability to keep his clothes at least. He wrapped himself around me, his head on my shoulder.

"Hey, Ozyn."

"Hello Officer Hernandez."

"You can call me Rafael." Was he blushing?

Oh, he liked my mate did he? I pushed back a growl of my own. With our bond this behavior was supposed to have settled. Yep, the officer couldn't peel his eyes off my mate.

"You think the aviary was behind this complaint?" Ozyn asked.

"Had to be," Rafael answered in a softer voice than he'd used with me. Fuck this guy.
"I don't get what their problem is with the pack."

"The usual." My tone was harder than I'd normally use, irritated by Hernandez. Ozyn mentally preened at my poorly hidden jealousy.

"They don't like how we run things, that we're more powerful than them, we've got more omegas, more fated mate pairs, more kids being born. Oh, and we've literally

been visited by our goddess several times.”

I heard Hernandez take a sharp breath.

“She’s marked people to speak through,” I continued. “Then there’s our tight link to the Northarbor coven, an alliance with the pride, link to Greenbriar, not to mention the demons we work with—“

“Okay, I got it. You guys are the popular kids and they’re jelly about it.” Hernandez rolled his eyes. “You’d think they’d be smarter and make friends. Keep your enemies closer and all that.”

“You’d think, but you’ve got to remember, this is some of the shifter council too. Not just the aviary. They don’t like how we center omegas in our pack.”

“My mama was always jealous that male omegas only existed in shifters.” The dude had a blinding smile. “She wished my papa could’ve been the one to carry the kids.”

“In dragon culture, omegas rule over the others.” Ozyn was rightly proud of his culture.

“That so? Pretty cool. So you were the boss, then?”

“I was the king.”

Hernandez’s eyes bugged out.

“On that note, we better go speak to our Alpha.” I ended the call.

Blake was in his office, Kade resting on the sofa, their assistants at their desks. The noise of children was suspiciously absent.

“Where are the kids?” I asked when we entered hand in hand. Micah had scampered off for a late lunch, probably wanting to escape Ozyn’s ire.

“Hello to you too,” Kade sassed. He remained lying down.

“Is your sickness bothering you?” Ozyn wondered. He let go of my hand to go to Kade.

“Yeah, a little.”

“Here.” Ozyn breathed a little magic over the pregnant Alpha Mate who visibly relaxed, color returning to his wan face.

“Oh my goddess! That felt so good!” Kade sat up. “Dragon magic is amazing!”

Ozyn set a hand on Kade’s shoulder. “Please, don’t overexert yourself. The magic won’t last long with your shifter metabolism. Perhaps a day or so. If you become very unwell, call for me, and I will repeat it.”

“Does it hurt you? I don’t want it if it causes you pain.”

Kade’s concern touched my mate. I felt the ache of affection deep within him. As king he had been surrounded by his family, yet still had been lonely. He had few friends he could trust, which was why Safi was so important to him. I needed to take Ozyn to see the fae soon.

“No, it uses very little magic, however I do not want you to rely on it and miss a warning sign with the babe. It may shorten your pregnancy. She appears to be growing well—“

“She?” Kade’s eyes welled with tears.

“I’m sorry, did you not want to know the baby’s gender?”

Kade glanced at Blake who was grinning. “No, it’s a relief to know, actually. We hoped for a girl to even it out. Thanks, Ozyn. For telling me and for making me feel so much better. I’m going to take a walk down to the kitchen to get a snack. Anyone want anything?”

My mate checked with me first then requested a couple of Winter’s oat and raisin cookies. We would head home for lunch after our meeting with Blake, so I shook my head. I wanted Ozyn to eat to continue building up his strength. Particularly important if he was pregnant. We were just waiting on his magic telling him if the heat was fruitful.

“So,” Blake began when Kade left for the kitchen, Roan by his side as always. I was glad The Luna had ensured a place in our lives for Kade’s ex. Roan was a good guy. He deserved the happiness he’d found with Hiroshi and their family.

“You’re gonna love this.” I took a seat on the other side of the desk to Blake. Ozyn perched himself on my knee, earning a fond smile from Blake.

“Before we start, I wanted to say congrats on your bond. I’m happy for you both.”

“Thank you,” we said together. Ozyn rested his head against mine, content to let me control the meeting.

“Ozyn shifted again. Over the lake this time, and there was another complaint put in. Hernandez thinks we have a spy.”

“Again?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Look, we’re never going to have everyone be happy with what we’re

doing here. There's always going to be a pack gunning for our members, our territory."

"You're right. I've got a feeling there's a but in there."

"The aviary is out of control. If it's not running us off the road, causing thousands of dollars of damage not to us, but Sweetwater and Northharbor, then it's them wasting police time, holding up the mayor's office with red tape."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"You petition the council to take over the aviary. They'll probably not go for it since they're in their pockets. We need to take the aviary by force then."

"You're not suggesting..."

"I think you should challenge their Alpha."

New Life

Ozyn

D eke was tense when we left the disastrous meeting with Blake. He ended up yelling at his younger cousin, warning him he was putting too much faith in his pack and the council.

Blake didn't want to go to war with the aviary unnecessarily. He believed in diplomacy over fists, which made his fighting gift a tad ironic. He adamantly refused to challenge the Alpha of the aviary, not wanting to be perceived as a tyrant. A challenge would be a last resort.

I understood this, he had no reason to believe they would stop at submission, believing they would fight to the death instead. He had three young children and a pregnant mate, Kade could fade away and die, too if anything happened to him. The odds were that he would win, being much younger than the aviary Alpha, yet I could not blame him for avoiding the risk, however small.

For me, with no experience with the council, I had no frame of reference. From what I'd been told, they were a bunch of alphas who'd become bloated with the power over shifter kind. They had allowed omegas and betas to join their ranks shortly before the reason for the beta sickness was revealed. Once Sweetwater and many other packs broke ties with them, they had ejected all but the alphas and closed ranks. Some who were sympathetic to omegas and betas clung on to act as the voice of reason, though they were drowned out by the shouts of the power hungry.

The council had, by all accounts, bought into the rhetoric the aviary were spouting about Sweetwater: that the pack was an abomination, led by those perverting The Luna's true message. We, since they were my pack now, were too involved in other races, diluting shifter bloodlines by allowing omegas to mate with whomever they pleased. The council also believed the babies born to the pack were there by using demon magic, not down to The Luna's blessing.

It took all of my self control not to just take to the skies and burn the aviary's compound to the ground. I could find all their leaders, the council included, and just eat them. It wouldn't even take me long to end their reign of terror.

Unfortunately, it would cause bigger problems for the pack once the smoke cleared. The humans would never trust me again. I would be hunted until I either died, risking Deke's life, or I returned to Abrocaelum. Deke would likely have to return with me and we would never be allowed to visit. I believed if it got so dire, the authorities would demand the portal be closed permanently cutting elves like Teárlach off from their families. A disaster all around.

There had to be a way to end this without putting everything at risk.

Shifters chuckled at the sight we made going through the house. I clung to Deke, legs around his waist, arms around his neck, his hand under my ass supporting me. Well, they were amused until they saw his expression. It was stormy, showing all his frustration.

I tucked my head against his neck, occasionally kissing his mating mark to soothe him. I didn't care about the indignity of a centuries old former dragon king being carried by his mate like a child. My mate needed me and the comfort carrying me like that gave to him. If it was in my power, I would do it for Deke. It was as simple as that.

Deke didn't head straight for our new home, instead going to the portal. I realized why when we approached.

"Hey, Safi!" Deke called out. My friend was on duty with a mix of elves and shifters around the portal.

Safi spoke to an elf before he came running over. "Hello, Deke, Ozyn. Is there something wrong?"

"Come to dinner tonight. Seven, okay?" Deke didn't give me time to even say hello but the offer of dinner to Safi made me smile. I had not seen much of him in the last few weeks.

"I'd like that. Thank you." Safi returned to his post. Perhaps he thought Deke would change his mind if he lingered.

We did not stay there. Deke took the path home saying hi in a less and less terse voice the closer he got. Still he did not put me down to walk. He did pause once or twice to nuzzle me or just kiss my hair. Never had I experienced love like that.

Finally in the house, Deke put me on my feet. "Thank you, I needed that."

"Anything you need, always."

He pulled me close, slotting his mouth over mine. I went to my tiptoes to kiss him back hungrily. Through our bond I felt his need.

I broke the kiss, going to my knees to tug at the fastening of his jeans. Deke smirked, but helped me free him.

There in the doorway where anyone could pass by, I pleased my mate with my

mouth.

Deke paused my movements with his hand tugging lightly in my hair. “People can see. Someone’s coming.”

Once I pulled away, he ducked down to hoist me over his shoulder. He smoothed a hand over my ass, then tapped it lightly. “Besides, I want this. That okay?”

“Yes!”

He ran up the stairs with me in his grasp and had me knotted soon after. I felt his happiness in the bond. The simplicity of his love for me was beautiful. He loved me without conditions or expectations. Despite my snarling at his friend, he was more than content in our bond. It gave him a constant source of comfort.

My mate ensured I was not squashed by his much larger frame as we lay panting and tied together after our love making. The feel of his cock stretching me, his come pushed deep inside, smoothed the ruffled feathers from Micah putting his body on display to my mate.

They thought I did not know, but since the incident with Chase, the enforcers had made a game of getting me to bite. I fell for it each time, unfortunately. One day they would tease too far and learn a lesson: never mess with a dragon.

Being knotted always made me sleepy. I roused briefly when Deke slipped free of my body. He returned from the bathroom with a cloth to clean me up, then tucked the sheet over me. It was too warm outside for a blanket, but I liked to be covered up.

“I’m just going to start dinner.”

He wasn’t gone long, there were sounds of the kitchen as I floated in that half-asleep

phase, when he returned.

“Babe, I’m going to head to the main house to pick up some stuff for dinner. I forgot to order groceries.”

“Need help?” I asked almost fully awake.

“No, you relax.” He kissed my nose.

The doorbell rang. I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Safi had brought it because I enjoyed the sound of ticking after so long in silence.

“Back in a sec.”

He hurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs where I heard him open the door.

Winter’s voice filtered up to me. “Thought you might need supplies.”

Not all of the replies could be heard over the sounds of them moving through the house, but I did hear Deke kindly ask Winter to stay for dinner too. He accepted and even offered to cook, which Deke rightly declined.

I felt a rush of love for my perfect mate.

Deke was pretty good in the kitchen. Luckily, since I was... a danger to all foods. They were either raw or burned. No in between. I had grown up with cooks after all.

I rose from the bed, dressed in a nice pair of jeans since we were having company, and found one of Deke’s shirts to wear. Being surrounded by my mate’s scent was divine.

Get your cute ass down here , he sent to me along with a mental picture of the steaks he was preparing to grill outside.

Descending the stairs, I caught sight of Winter and Deke laughing over beers. They looked comfortable around each other once more.

“Congrats on your mating!” Winter called when he heard me approach.

Is it okay to hug him now? I asked Deke.

It is. I’m sorry I made it an issue before. His shame was easy to sense and completely unnecessary considering some of my behavior he never commented on. Truthfully, I felt like he enjoyed my displays of possessiveness.

I went to my friend and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, tipping my head against his. I let out a happy sigh. “Thank you for bringing food.”

Winter patted my hand. “You’re welcome. It’s like a night off work having someone else cook for me.”

“Just be glad it isn’t Ozyn. He can barely cut a tomato!” Deke’s laughter was so sweet, even when directed at me.

With Winter catching us up on the tea, as he called it, Deke assembled dinner until we were just waiting for Safi’s arrival. Winter had heard talk about us inviting the fae and figured after my recent heat we didn’t have groceries. He was so thoughtful.

At exactly seven, the doorbell rang once more.

“Go let your friend in,” Deke said, picking up the plate of steaks. Winter was transferring plates and bowls to the dining table.

Safi stood with a handful of wildflowers tied in a sweet posy. “For you both, to say congratulations. I am glad you have found your forever mate here, Ozyn.”

“Thank you, come in.” I took the offered flowers with a smile. Their fragrance was lovely.

My friendship with Safi was not as physical as with Winter. He and I had been through too much to feel comfortable with touching when unnecessary.

He followed me to the dining area, looking at everything. The others greeted him warmly. I saw him relax somewhat in Winter’s presence.

There was small talk while Deke finished making our meal. Winter helped him plate it with a fond smile. They talked and joked easily while I tried to get an idea of how Safi was feeling in his current job. I believed Deke was right, Safi was unsuited to being a guard.

Over dinner I felt the spark I’d felt once before nearly three hundred years ago. My scent would have changed, yet Deke would not notice it for a few hours or even a day. His wolf senses were not as strong as a dragon’s.

I feel them! We’re pregnant.

Really? His hand squeezed my thigh. I’m so happy right now. Do you want to tell them?

Our guests at the other side of the table were staring at us.

“Talking via the bonds is strange.”

“You see why it’s considered impolite in company?” Winter asked Safi pointedly.

“We’re pregnant!” I announced with the widest smile.

Both their faces lit up. It was wonderful to have friends who shared in our joy. They congratulated us warmly with Winter rounding the table to hug us both.

“The flowers were a splendid idea then. You should press a bloom to remember the day you knew you were pregnant,” Safi suggested.

“A good idea,” Deke agreed.

We settled back to eating our dinner. Talk turned to the meeting with Blake where Winter sympathized with both, giving Deke greater context. Also reminding him he was going to be a father, and asking if he would take such a risk with our lives now.

Properly chastened, we moved on to other topics, including our last dinner party experience where we met the nanny, Ingal.

Can I ask him? Deke inclined his head towards Safi. We had discussed his idea.

Please. I think he will take the request more seriously from you. There is time for him to think it over. I will lay the eggs in a few weeks.

So soon?

Then we need to roost them. One of us or my kin will have to be with the eggs constantly until they hatch. That takes about a month, give or take. It is all dependent on the magic they hold. With you being a shifter, it may take longer.

“They’re doing it again.” Winter was grinning.

“Safi,” Deke started, “we were wondering if you would like a change in jobs.”

“It is possible there is something I am better suited to,” he hedged.

“We,” Deke took my hand, “would like you to be our nanny when the time comes. You would stay with us—“

“Yes!” Safi didn’t even think about it. He sat straighter in his chair. “It would be my honor to help you with your family.”

“Would you be available during the roosting? To help with the house, bring us food and the like?”

Safi’s smile was blinding. “I can do that. You have made me so happy. I—It’s a good job to be a guard—“

“But it isn’t you, Safi. You don’t have a warrior’s heart,” I said gently.

He stiffened. “Are you calling me a coward?”

Fuck, Deke mentally cursed.

“Not at all. There are not many who would relish the challenge of dragon hatchlings or a prickly roosting dragon who is bored. You have different strengths. You saw me in that place and made me your friend. I think you have more courage than most.”

Safi blinked. “I’m sorry, you’re right. It is just—“

“The past affects us all. We have a new life here, where we can choose what suits us, not what tradition dictates.”

“Very true. I am looking forward to being your nanny. Should I meet Ingal, learn more about what the job entails before roosting begins?”

Deke's pride was clear. "Absolutely. The dude has his hands full, though. Four babies and maybe another if Aldrin doesn't get a new heat blocker in place soon."

"The healer is studying my blood to see if he can replicate the magic I used to control my fertility. He hopes there is a hormone or chemical that will work on the shifters."

"Oh, we used moonroot," Safi said dismissively.

We stared at him in shock. How had I forgotten? Was I so lost to my feral side, I missed what they were doing to my dragons?

"What?" Deke asked, his mouth agape.

Safi frowned, glancing between us all. He took a moment then explained, giving us new hope of a solution.

"When Glorin had the shifter fighting rings, he had the shifters fighting over omegas. He had to control their heats, so moonroot was used to suppress them and I... I have forgotten the one we used to stimulate a heat. They did not work so well on dragons because they sensed them in the food and the doses needed were much larger, but they would do in a pinch where magic was impossible."

Progress

Deke

Dinner ended not that long after Safi dropped that bomb. The Luna was really working her magic by handing us a ready-made solution right when we needed it most. Judging by her recent interference, we really were her chosen pack. I was ready to accept it for the massive gift it was. What had we done to be so generously guided? No clue. Didn't care. I was just damn grateful for it.

Maybe we needed to make a statue for her, really honor her properly. I'd ask Dalton about it. He'd know if we could afford it. He'd also know someone to make it.

After we cleaned the kitchen, I made sure to burn an offering for The Luna out in the yard to give my thanks. She had done so much for the pack, giving all the betas the sickness and opportunity to change, guiding so many mates here, talking to us, visiting us, letting my cousins see their mom. Now there was one more thing to add to the pile. She deserved more than pieces of the meal I'd enjoyed with my mate and friends. I lit a candle for her, too.

"To our goddess, I give my thanks—"

"We give our thanks." Ozyn joined me by offering up a couple of his flowers from the posy Safi had brought. I knew he treasured the sweet gift, so the act was more poignant.

"Right." I squeezed his hand approvingly. "We give these to you for your continued

guidance.” I looked up at the crescent moon. “For seeing your shifters and protecting them. We love and appreciate you for your continued support. Dalton and Larken were worried about bringing another life into their family soon after their babies. We tried to help, but it might take too long. You showed you are always listening by giving us a simpler solution through our friend. That way, they can choose to add to their family if they want to. Thank you for always guiding us and for the gift that is my fated mate.”

Ozyn added a dinner roll. “Thank you for never forgetting your promise to your brother and for my Deke. He saved me and I saved him. You gave me an equal in my mate. I am so grateful.”

The simple speech nearly brought tears to my eyes with how heartfelt it was. Our bond was wide open, meaning Ozyn could feel how much it affected me.

“Take me to bed?”

“Yeah.” Together we checked that everything was put away, switched off lights, and ensured the doors were locked. While we were in a heavily guarded area of the compound, we didn’t need to make it easier for anyone trying to get in.

I led Ozyn up the stairs, his hand in mine. My heart was full of joy. Our family was growing! My bond with my mate had settled enough for us to have friends over without incident.

Some of what I was thinking about must have hit the bond, because Ozyn laughed.

“No growling for a change. I’m glad you invited Safi over and that Winter came too.”

“Maybe next time we could have Chase join the party.”

“I’d like that. Chase has been kinder to me than I deserve.”

None of the lamps were lit in our bedroom. The only light was from the moon through the thin drapes. We only had the damn things because Kade didn’t want our home to look so barren. I’d insisted we have ones which let in the light, knowing how much Ozyn needed it to feel safe. Kade, understanding completely, had found the right ones.

My mate stripped and climbed into bed naked, beckoning me with a crooked finger and a smirk. He looked so perfect bathed in moonlight.

Eager to join him, I dropped my clothes on the floor and jumped in next to him.

Ozyn’s giggle was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard. I wanted to do anything to make him laugh again. Instead, I captured his mouth with a deep kiss, pouring all my love and joy into it. He’d made me the luckiest wolf ever when he’d flown through the portal to find me.

Soon I had Ozyn writhing under me as my hands explored his lithe body. He’d really developed a healthy shape. I was so proud to call him mine. I followed my hands with my lips and tongue next until I was pushing my tongue into his soaking wet hole.

“Ah! So Good!” Ozyn cried as I ate at him, loving the taste of his slick. I nosed at his balls, licked over his cock, then suckled the head, making him squeal.

I laughed against his entrance. He wriggled. “This okay?” I held his thighs apart. Confining him in any way could be a trigger to him. I wanted to ensure his comfort. He was the love of my life, he deserved that and more.

“Yes.” I felt his gratitude for checking.

Holding my prize, I worked him open more with my tongue, then slowly with a couple fingers.

Eventually, I felt Ozyn get restless. "Please! I need you." Ozyn looked frantic.

"What if I just want to please you like this? Would you come on my fingers with your cock in my mouth?" I licked the drop of precome at his crown.

"No! Your knot! I want it!"

Now that he had made his demand, I couldn't think of anything better than giving him what he wanted.

I slid inside my mate slowly. Wrapping him in my arms, I pumped my hips when he let out a long breath and relaxed around me. He felt amazing.

We moved together under the light of the moon for a long time, kissing, touching, enjoying each other's bodies until Ozyn's release pulled mine from me. My knot forming prompted another, smaller orgasm from Ozyn.

Rolling us, I carefully adjusted my sleepy mate, so he was draped over my chest. "I'm so proud of you. The way you let me hold you felt awesome." It had been a risk. I was worried he would panic about being boxed in, but he'd just held my eyes, letting his love show. He'd sunk into the pleasure of the experience rather than let bad memories win.

"Thank you," he whispered. Then, in a stronger voice, he changed the subject. "Tomorrow we should visit Aldrin and ask how he is coming along with the blood sample I gave him."

My laugh jostled him. "It's only been two days."

“Exactly. It will take him a long time to isolate what he needs in my blood if he manages it at all. Should we not take the pressure off and tell him about the moonroot?”

“We can do that. I’m sure James will appreciate Aldrin having the extra time to do what we thought was impossible until you. Having more than one source of heat control gives omegas and deltas options, which can’t be a bad thing.” Speaking to Aldrin would be good for another reason. “Can he check you and the babies over?”

“Hmm? Yes, though it’s unlikely he will see anything at this early stage,” he said dismissively.

“No, probably not, but I want to check that you are doing okay. You are more important right now.” I stroked the hair off his face. I loved his messy curls.

“Alright. We can ask him when we visit.”

“Good. Larken can cover me for a bit.”

Ozyn was silent for so long, I thought he was asleep. “I think we should go to Abrocaelum to get the moonroot. We can have my family meet me at Ulrian’s castle.”

“Are you sure you want to go back there? Can’t we send someone else?”

“We would be faster than anyone else. Also, while I don’t want to go, I think I have to. It will give me... closure, perhaps. Abrocaelum was my home, it is somewhere our children will need to see, connect with. It is possible they will never be allowed to fly here without issues.” He was quiet for a moment, but I sensed he wasn’t done. “I need to make my peace with the fae now Laer is living there.”

“Good point. I’m not sure I like it.”

“I know. It is for the best, though.”

“It’s alright to be selfish and protect yourself. If you aren’t ready—“

“The longer I leave it, the harder it will be.”

I felt his resolution then. “You are strong, Ozyn. The strongest of us all.”

Proving he never held grudges for long even though I was right, Blake came with us to the meeting with ívarr and Aldrin in the science building next to the clinic. I hated both places on principle. The false cheer inside, along with the smell of antiseptic, was enough to turn my stomach.

Ozyn caught my trepidation and gripped my hand. Just being closer to him made me feel better. I wished we could have done the meeting anywhere else.

On my other side, Blake clapped my back. “Let’s do this.”

The goddess knew I loved Aldrin. The man had saved my life, the lives of my friends. He’d been there for births and for the death of Janet. He was a healer and father I admired.

He could talk, though. On and on he went about things I just plain didn’t understand. Ozyn and Blake were nodding along. Maybe they understood some of it.

Not a word, Ozyn confirmed. Just being polite. Aldrin has seen me at my worst too many times.

I felt a pang of sympathy for him. Never mind my issues with the place, Ozyn’s were

worse.

“Aldrin, sorry to interrupt, but I’m sure you want to get back to your research. Can you summarize what you’ve learned so far?” Blake was always the diplomatic one.

“Ah, I am anxious to get to it. Not a whole lot is the answer. There are a number of things which are dragon only traits. Not unexpected. Between shifters and dragons there will be overlap, I’m sure of it. I just need time, which I don’t have a lot of before Dalton’s heat.”

“We have another solution,” I said smugly. Blake sat up straighter, his head whipping round to look at me. Aldrin, ívarr, and James stared at me.

“Do tell,” Blake’s tone was dry.

You do it, I sent to Ozyn.

“We were talking about it at home when Safi and Winter were over for dinner.”

“Heard you had a dinner party. Kade had a bit of a pout about not being invited,” Blake teased.

“Next time,” I drawled. “Now, Ozyn was talking.”

“Yes we were talking about dinner at Dalton’s home and how I interrupted it with your visit. I said you, James, had taken a sample and you and Aldrin were examining my blood for a solution. It was Safi who knew what we needed. He reminded me they had a medicinal plant to control the heats of shifters the fae had stolen for their fighting rings.”

“Of course!” ívarr breathed. “I do not remember the name, but it was effective. Once

use was discontinued the heat cycles returned very quickly.” His eyes were lit with his enthusiasm. As usual he blundered along. I liked the elf but he didn’t have much in the way of social graces. He was a man of science above all things. “Hakeem told me about it. There were times I had to attend to recovering omegas, you see.”

Aldrin nodded. “Your stories of their treatment were harrowing. So what is this plant and how do we get some to try?”

“It is called moonroot,” Ozyn answered.

“Moonroot! Of course!” ívarr gave a laugh. “How did I forget that?”

My mate continued, ignoring the interruption. “We will have to return to Abrocaelum and visit the fae. There, we will petition Ulrian to allow us to take samples home.”

Ozyn’s simple use of the term home to mean the pack brought smiles to many faces, Blake’s especially. Despite the sparring match, I knew Blake liked my mate.

“Alright,” our Alpha said easily. “A trip will take a few days to a week, do you think?” Ozyn nodded at him. “You’ll need Safi of course, your mate, Chase maybe? To act as my proxy. Aldrin?” He glanced at the healer. “Do you want to go? Of course, James will go with you. We’ll still have healers here.” Turning back to Ozyn he asked. “Is that too many or too few?”

I enjoyed Ozyn’s puzzlement over Blake deferring to him.

“These are your people, Ozyn, your land. You choose what and who you need to get us a few samples of the plant. We will need a few with roots to see if we can grow it here and still have it be effective,” Blake carried on. Aldrin and ívarr were nodding along, so clearly Blake knew what he was talking about.

“If we are taking so many, which is the right thing to do because they will know more about the science, I will need a couple of days to get in touch with my family. I can fly with two passengers. More is dangerous, so we will need others to fly them to fae territory, otherwise our trip will be much longer and the plant could die on our return.”

Blake obviously agreed. “Good thinking,” he praised, making Ozyn blush and grin. Goddess he was fucking cute.

“Flying on a dragon?” James whispered, an excited gleam in his eyes. “Oh yes!”

“Oh no,” Aldrin muttered.

“You’re about to be Chase’s favorite. He’s been bragging about going flying since Vale took him,” I told my mate. His pleasure over the proposed trip sang along our bond.

Blake groaned. “Chase is going to be insufferable.”

Face the Past

Ozyn

The very idea of returning to Abrocaelum, even though it had been my suggestion, filled me with such fear it yanked me from sleep several times a night in the days running up to us departing on our journey.

Deke knew enough about my willful nature that he did not try to convince me to stay back. We both had to go. The longer I went without facing the ghosts of my past, the harder it would be for me to step foot in Abrocaelum. With a clutch on the way, I couldn't afford to cut off half our children's heritage. They would need to be in touch with both parts of themselves.

Still, I knew he worried it was affecting me mentally, causing stress on our babies. Their sparks were so new it was difficult to tell how many there were. I had a rough idea. A teeny part of me wanted to be a tease and not say anything to Deke about their number until they were being laid. That was the bratty side which had only emerged under my caring alpha's watch. Once I was sure, I would tell my mate so we could prepare properly.

Being with Deke had brought out aspects of my personality I hadn't thought existed. Never would I have considered letting any of my former partners carry me around like he had. I was a king! Or rather, former king. It would have been degrading! Deke, though? He could carry me anywhere if it gave him comfort.

In my culture, we did not defer to alphas for matters outside of the home. Here, in

Sweetwater, I knew things were different to the outside world where many groups of shifters still let alphas lead their families. Sweetwater contained matings that were true partnerships.

I thought about how Kade and Blake orbited around each other as if each was the moon. I had seen Jasper, Kade's papa, how he was with Dakota, always treating each other as equals.

From what I knew about the poly bond Roan's mate Hiroshi had with his mate, Tate, they lived a lifestyle more like dragon kind, yet there was not an alpha leading the home and an omega making the larger decisions. They did everything as a unit.

Axel had a more outside world type traditional relationship being naturally more submissive to his alpha husband. I suspected it was because he had longed to be an omega for so long. Teárlach was royalty, too, hence more dominant naturally.

If anything, the relationship which demonstrated more dragon-like tendencies was Larken and Dalton's. The omega absolutely ruled their relationship but Larken was not above using his alpha influence on their children, which it was supposed to be used for.

It somewhat bothered me that omegas were still affected by alpha power outside of their Alpha, which was a natural benefit to their rule and all designations were supposed to fold to it. In dragon culture we stopped being controlled by it when we reached sexual maturity. As the leader of my flight, I had my own influence to wield over my people much like the power an Alpha would inherit when they took power in shifter groups if things worked the way they were intended to.

The Luna had changed the rules I knew to live by. Was it a test on her part? Was that why Sweetwater had so many betas changed to their chosen designations? It was reasonable to suppose she tested the mettle of alphas and clearly had found many of

them wanting. Until Blake and shifters of his generation, that is. Ones so disillusioned after witnessing abuses their predecessors afflicted on those they should have protected.

My mind worked overtime thinking about my life in Sweetwater rather than what I was about to do: return to the Abrocaelum that haunted me.

I wondered if dealing with the fae and the castle where I'd been held for a century would allow me a measure of peace. Would I be able to sleep in the dark once more?

Our party was gathered at the portal waiting for us when we walked up, hand in hand. Deke was carrying our bag. We had a couple of days of clothing with us. I wanted to be there and back as soon as possible, but it was better to be prepared. Unlikely I would get my wish, but it paid to be hopeful.

"I heard from Vale! He's waiting on the other side for us. Your sons, Gedith and Nhil are going to come with us." Chase was practically bouncing on his toes in his eagerness to take to the skies once more.

The rest of our party did not look so enthused.

Safi stood slightly apart from the rest. Aldrin and James were conferring with each other. Only Chase looked excited.

"Let's get going," Deke said, nodding at the elves guarding the permanent portal to a town in Abrocaelum which stood firmly in the elven area of the realm.

We were travelling east to the fae territories. Specifically to the seelie fae castle. The unseelie had played a part in the war with us dragons and the fae, but their numbers had suffered far more greatly than the seelie fae. Thus they had pulled away from everyone to protect their people. We left them alone. Extinction was not what any of

us wanted for any supernatural species. As long as they did not fight, we had no reason to hunt them.

Abrocaelum was warm and bright when we passed through the portal. As Chase had said, my brother was waiting with my sons. Vale greeted Chase like an old friend. I smelled trouble.

We're splitting them up, Deke said dryly through our mating bond.

Good idea. Perhaps Gedith? Beta to beta?

"Alright," Deke said aloud, "Vale could you take Aldrin and James? Gedith take Chase please, and finally, Nhil, would you mind taking Safi?"

"I wanted to take our new dad," Nhil argued.

"No." I glared at my son. "Only I will carry my mate."

Nhil exchanged a look with his brother. "Told you it wouldn't work. C'mon, Safi. Laer promised us a banquet for lunch if we made it there quickly."

The dragons moved apart to shift. Once they made the change, each of their assigned passengers climbed on. The way Chase was whispering to Gedith made me reconsider the pairing.

More than once I saw Nhil looking through the portal. Had he wanted to see someone on the other side? I remembered his behavior before. Had he sensed something?

Everything alright? I asked my son privately.

Of course Papa, there's just this feeling...

Like you need to be somewhere?

Yes. Is it what I think it is?

Your mate? Yes. It's possible you have a mate bond in the human realm.

I think he's in Sweetwater.

How do you know it is a male? There could be a pretty omega female waiting for you.

I felt his scoff. No, Papa. He just feels male. He will not be easy to convince we belong together.

Always trust your instincts. I have learned this the hard way.

When we return to the portal, may I visit for a day or two? Maybe I can find him in the pack.

We would love that. I know Deke would like a chance to get to know you better.

My son brushed by me affectionately, his head rubbing against my flank. Safi looked nervous sitting on his back.

"Everyone settled?" Deke yelled to the assembled dragons. Chase was laughing now, petting Gedith's scaly neck while my son preened.

Aldrin nodded while looking pale. James wore a tight smile. I hoped they were up to the journey. Valethar would fly straight and true for the healer couple.

"To the skies!" I ordered, using magic to speak aloud for all to hear me.

Elves scattered, some fell as the backdraft from our wings blew them over. We lifted quickly, shooting higher and higher while our charges held on for dear life.

You're as bad as Vale was with Chase, Deke was full of dry amusement. Competitive much?

I just want to get there so we can go home.

Right.

Up ahead, Gedith was in a race with us closing the gap. Mindful of his less enthusiastic passengers, Vale dropped back some. At the very back of our party, Nhil and Safi flew at a leisurely pace.

You better leave me something tasty for this, my brother said ruefully.

Of course.

Are you waiting for Uncle Vale? Gedith asked. Is that why you're so far behind? Nhil, come on!

Are you letting Gedith bait you again? Deke was laughing.

Maybe.

I allowed Gedith to pull further ahead. He used some magic to ensure Chase would stay attached to him and performed some acrobatics with loud encouragement from the shifter on his back.

Dropping back more, I was wing to wing with my brother. Nhil closed the gap some.

This is lovely. Flying with you, Nhil, and Gedith that is, I told him.

Even flying slowly, I'm enjoying it. I've missed Laer. It will be good to see him.

Yes.

Are you alright about going back there?

Not exactly. Deke stroked my scales and ridge, feeling my anxiety. It is for the best. For the little ones.

Ah, I was wondering when you were going to tell us. Gedith! Nhil! He is pregnant! You're going to be big brothers!

Congratulations, Papa. I cannot wait to meet them.

Congratulations, Papa. Safi told me he is going to be your nanny. Nhil's words were warm, though I sensed his mind was still half in Sweetwater.

The castle loomed ahead. The courtyard was tighter than memory told me it was. Perhaps it was due to the re-building of the towers. We had to land one by one, shifting as soon as our passengers were down to have room for us all.

Standing next to the doors side by side, arm in arm, were Ulrian and Laer. My brother looked far too smug, so I knew his mating was going well.

"Welcome, all!" Ulrian greeted us far more warmly than I expected. "Please, come inside. Lunch awaits you."

Inside the great hall the transformation was startling. All around the room the outside had been welcomed in. There was ivy curled around pillars, flowers sprouted in the

cracks of bricks or plaster. It was like a reclaimed building. In fact, there was even a stream running through the room with tiny fish!

“Remarkable!”

“Thank you, Ozyn. I appreciate how difficult it must be for you to come here. I gather you had something to ask of me?”

The new fae king in waiting had dropped his human glamor. His long dark hair was loose save for a few braids around his tapered ears. Each of those ears was adorned with silver and gold. His glorious wings were the color of peacocks feathers. The jewel tones sparkled in the afternoon light.

Glorin had hated Ulrian for his savage beauty, which was why he had tried to marry him off to the elven queen away from his fated mate. Oh, I was sure Glorin knew Ulrian was to gain what he wanted most: a dragon child. I was glad for my brother and Ulrian that he had escaped an unhappy marriage though I had not.

Being back in the castle made my skin crawl. I did not want to linger if possible.

Getting to the heart of the matter seemed to be a talent of my future brother-in-law's. Gratitude swelled within me at Ulrian's efficiency. Rather than draw things out with a long meal, lots of speeches about uniting our people, he got right to the heart of the matter.

“I do. It's good to see you in this place. You have made so many changes already.”

“Thank you. Anything I can grant you, if it is in my power to do so of course, then I shall grant it.”

Perhaps we would get away with just a night away from home. I really wanted to be

back in Sweetwater with my mate.

Deke squeezed me close, my feelings open to him over our bond. I closed my family one to prevent them from worrying. I would never hide anything from Deke, though. He deserved to see my whole heart.

“We require some samples of moonroot,” I said. “Both in its form to use as a heat suppressant and also the plant form with roots. Also whatever seed or bulbs they require to grow new plants.”

Ulrian looked taken aback. “Why?”

Thankfully, Aldrin stepped closer to explain the situation to a wary Ulrian. It was natural the fae would have known their use.

“Oh, I had not thought of shifters desiring a lessening of heats. Fertility has always been low.”

Aldrin chuckled. “Not in Sweetwater. We have an omega who has a healing ability. He is due to go into heat very soon after only having babies weeks ago!”

“That is a remarkable ability!”

“It is,” Aldrin agreed. “The Luna has been very kind to our shifters. However, a heat with such young babies is inconvenient and the tonics he could use to prevent a pregnancy—“

“May be ineffective due to his ability. I see the issue. Do you think the moonroot will work?”

The two of them were joined by James. They launched into a conversation about the

properties of moonroot and how it might not be seen as an agent to expel by Dalton's ability. It was effective on dragons after all. His healing was similar to ours, so it was reasoned it would work, just in a higher dose than for a regular shifter.

"Come, eat," Laer entreated us. "Let them chat. Ulrian, my love, do I have your permission to send someone for samples?"

"Ah, lunch first, Laeros. Then I thought we could escort them to the greenhouses to see if there are any in bloom."

"You're right, the scientists need to eat before they look for the plant."

My brother was trying to be charming. Ulrian was not immune to him. I saw Safi watching the exchange with interest.

"Safilix, I wondered if we could make time for a conversation," Ulrian said gently, approaching his youngest brother. "It has been many years since I saw you last. I would like to ask for a favor if you were willing to grant it."

"Of course, my king."

"I am not king yet. Please call me brother if you would like."

Safi's smile was tentative. "Of course, brother. I would like to get to know you a little better."

"Does that mean you would like to stay? You are no longer labeled a traitor."

My friend glanced at me, war clear in his expression. "Though that is very kind, brother, I think I should like to stay in Sweetwater for the time being. However, if I can grant you anything, I shall endeavour to do it." He grinned at me, pride clear.

“Ozyn has asked me to be his nanny, you see, and I think I shall like that task.”

“Oh that is a prestigious job! Congratulations little brother! We can discuss the favor later. There is no rush on it. I felt you would be suited to it.”

“Thank you.”

Ulrian steered Safi over to the food, leaving me alone with Deke.

“Doing okay?”

“Yes. I hate it here, but I am coping.”

“I’m proud of you for telling me how you feel, for keeping the bond open, and for how well you are handling being here.”

“It is not as bad as I expected. Ulrian has made it nicer in here. I feel his magic around me, wiping the stain his brother left behind.”

“Let’s eat, okay?”

By the time we sat down to dinner we had several shoots of the moonroot ready for planting, a small sample of dried moonroot ready to use on an omega, and one slightly unhealthy plant in a pot ready for some rehab.

Chase told us there were elemental demons who could work their magic on the plants, helping them grow healthy and strong in Sweetwater.

The plant had gone out of favor with the elves cracking down on fighting rings and Glorin losing interest in the practice. He’d given up keeping dragons aside from me under duress from his court. They hated how feral I got when more were trapped with

me.

Hence the lack of moonroot. Some of the dried plants had to be disposed of, having turned. While what we got was better than nothing, Aldrin worried it might not be enough to treat Dalton. He really wanted to test it on another omega and not put pressure on Safi to remember how it was used.

Dinner was an elegant affair befitting a former king and a future one. We ate at a long table where I was close to my brother, Vale, and sons. Deke, as always, was next to me, giving me his support. He chatted easily with Chase seated across from us. Their teasing was easy and gentle, lightening the mood.

None of us were happy there was so little moonroot. With time and some magic from the demons, the coven too, it would flourish once more. Time was something in short supply.

After the meal was done, we were shown our rooms for the night. We would have a late breakfast, Safi would be brought before the court to formally receive his pardon and I would be given an apology with reparations. Once the ceremony was done, we would leave for home.

Our room was nice. Not too dissimilar to the one I was given prior to my moving into Glorin's rooms. I hated it.

Deke led me through to the bathroom and washed me in the waterfall shower. I let him guide me into bed where he held me close.

"Not long until we go home," he whispered in the low light.

"I can't wait."

Some time later, Deke drifted off to sleep. I could not rest. My entire being was on alert for every noise. My mind expected this to be unveiled as a trap at any moment.

Out. I needed to be outside.

Home. I wanted to go home so badly. To be surrounded by our friends in Sweetwater. To sleep in our comfortable bed with the sweet nightlight Kade had bought for me to help me rest when there were nights with no moon.

I slipped from my mate's arms and the bed to go to the window. The moon was covered in fluffy clouds. There would be no sleep for me.

"Hey," Deke's soft voice came at my ear as he wrapped his arms around me. "Can't sleep?"

"Not here, no."

"How about that patch of grass over the other side of the wall?"

"What?" I jerked in his arms, surprised.

"Shift, carry me there. We can sleep in the grass together until morning. My wolf is restless. He woke me up when you got out of bed."

"You'd do that for me? Sleep in the grass like some wild thing?"

"Ozzy, I'd do literally anything for you. Plus I love sleeping as a wolf. He's very keen to sleep under one of your pretty wings. Whaddya say?"

"Alright. Take some clothes and a blanket please. I do not want anyone to see you shifted."

“Okay. I’ve sent Chase a text telling him what we’re doing. He’s drinking with Vale, Laer and Ged. Nhil has gone to bed.”

Deke gathered what we needed while I climbed onto the balcony outside our window. Jumping into the air, I shifted, taking my clothes with me into it. When Deke was ready, I hovered using my magic, a wing tucked, to allow him to climb up onto my back.

We flew over the wall, scaring a couple of sentries in the process. I found an area with comfortable looking grass at the base of a hill to land. Deke slid off my back and began to strip.

Wait, I’ll shield you.

Silly dragon, no one can see.

I wouldn’t be too sure.

Covering him with a wing, I felt the change come over him. His wolf sniffed me before circling and finding a nice hollow to lie in. I curled up next to him, my wing his blanket.

It was easy to fall asleep once I set up a tiny bubble to protect us from the elements and to warn us of any attack.

There, under the open sky, I slept with my alpha who was worth his weight in gold. My love for him could not be measured. I did not have the words to express how deep it ran.

“I love you,” I murmured, curling closer to him. Loved, safe, and free.

Disaster

Deke

Fuck Abrocaelum. Fuck the fae. Also fuck everyone who waited and watched while Ozyn was a captive in that goddess forsaken place.

Seeing my mate in pain nearly broke me. There was nothing for me to fight except the ghosts of the past, and really, I couldn't do that for him, just stand with him while he battled.

Exhaustion and the rich wine had pulled me into sleep. My wolf shoved me awake announcing Ozyn had left our bed for the night. Seeing him so sad had cut into my soul. He'd needed me and I'd failed him.

Of course, generous as he was, Ozyn didn't see it like that. He welcomed my comfort, as pitiful as it was. My suggestion to sleep outside really touched his heart.

It was more peaceful outside under his wing than in the oppressive castle. I could sleep comfortably knowing I'd done my duty to my mate by making his mental health my priority. The patch of grass we had chosen was just as comfortable as the feather down bed because I knew I'd done right by him.

Waking in the cold hard light of day, I found myself in my human form with an armful of Ozyn, also back in his human guise.

"You are the best mate anyone could hope for." He pressed kisses all over my face

smiling so wide. Part of it was for me, the other because we both knew we were going home in a few short hours.

“Now,” he said, flinging my shirt at me. “Cover yourself up. I think someone is coming.”

He was right, there was a shape coming up the hill. They had wings.

Safi.

“I think he wants to speak to you, do you want me to let you two speak alone?”

“No, I want you to put clothes on so he doesn’t see you naked!” he snapped. Then he grinned letting me know he didn’t mean it. “I don’t want anyone but me looking at you.”

“Yeah, I feel the same about you.” Honestly, Ozyn being so possessive over me was gratifying. It was one of the many things I loved about him. Getting dressed took only a moment. I stood next to Ozyn, almost touching the bubble over us.

The fae waved when he got near. “I’m glad I found you. Could you please tell your sons you are safe? Everyone was worried when they went to your room and you were gone. They’re about to take to the skies to look for you.”

“Oh,” Ozyn’s face screwed up with concentration. “The bubble to protect us had blocked them. I had wanted some privacy with my mate. One moment while I make my apologies.”

“I did text Chase. Maybe they were all too drunk to remember.”

Trying the bonds didn’t work. Huh, the bubble didn’t stop us from hearing anyone

close, but it did make it so bonds didn't work. That was handy.

With a pop, the magic disappeared.

"I have told my brothers, Gedith and Nhil where we are and why we came outside."

The smile Safi gave was bittersweet. "I imagine it was the same reason why I could not sleep inside, preferring the roof."

"Yes. We each have bad memories from our time there."

Mild understatement there Ozzy , I sent dryly to him.

"Mine are nowhere near—"

"It's not a competition," I said, butting in. "Trauma is trauma. Are you okay, Safi?"

"Yes, are you well?" Ozyn asked. "I at least had my Deke to help me when it got too difficult."

"Thank you, I went out early. I had much to think about. Ulrian's favor was unexpected."

Should we ask? I fired the thought at my mate.

"Would you like to discuss it?" Ozyn asked diplomatically, reminding me he used to be a king.

"Ulrian has received permission from the court to recognize me as a prince."

Ozyn gasped. "That's—"

“My brother has a hidden generous heart. To fight for me in such a way is unheard of. I will be his heir until such a time as he has children.”

Wow. Ulrian had made many mistakes over his time as the mayor of Northarbor and essentially Sweetwater. This was a step forward to changing his image.

“He did not do it entirely without a request in return.”

Ah, there was the downside. Always a politician.

“He would like me to choose a mate from the elves. At present he is looking at potential matches for me.”

“An arranged marriage?” Okay, I could stand to sound a little less horrified. Royalty did this all the time. Except, maybe my reaction was warranted. The last political marriage I knew of was bad news.

Ozyn had gone pale next to me. I wrapped my arms around him. “Don’t worry, we’ll get Ulrian to see sense,” I assured him.

Stop him, please! Ozyn silently pleaded.

“Thank you, but no, I would like to honor my brother by choosing an elf for a mate. I will meet with Prince Teárlach next week to discuss it with him. It may mean I will be unable to be your nanny for long—“

“We still want you to be our nanny,” I interrupted him. Maybe we could talk him out of it or find him someone nice. Yeah, that’s what we would do.

Together, we’ll make sure Safi only marries the nicest elf ever to exist.

Ozyn cuddled closer to me, his side of the bond filled with love for me.

When we returned to the castle, breakfast was in full swing. I sent Ozyn to the table where his sons were eating together. I went to the long buffet table and piled two plates high with delicious looking pastries and fruit. The castle might be depressing, but they had nice food.

No one questioned Ozyn about his disappearance, which I was grateful for. We didn't linger over our breakfasts, each determined to take the win and get home much sooner than planned.

The ceremony to apologize to Ozyn was blessedly brief. The amount of jewels and gold they wanted to give him was vast. He chose a few pieces to take with us, then left the rest in Laer's care. I got the impression he would never return for them and only took some things as to not offend Ulrian.

Seeing Safi pardoned, named as a prince, and also Ulrian's heir took a little longer. I felt Ozyn's pride for his friend. My life was something else. Mated to a former king, with a prince for a nanny to my dragon kids. I couldn't wrap my head around it sometimes.

Vale stole Chase to fly with, leaving Gedith to take Aldrin and James. Nhil took Safi once more, the pair chatting easily. Ozyn stayed side by side with Gedith, the pair using their bond to chat, while Nhil guarded our rear. Not that I expected any trouble.

Ozzy spending quality time with Gedith was sweet. He kept part of the connection open so I could hear them. I knew Ozyn struggled with guilt about being away from his sons, more so now that he was pregnant again. Them having the time to re-establish a connection was precious.

The elves usually at the portal were scrambling when they came into view.

“An attack!” one cried.

We landed close by, the dragons all shifting to talk to the guards.

“Sir,” Lusha, a regular commander for this side’s forces, rushed to me. “I have sent through those I could spare. The pack is under attack! I called...” She was utterly frantic. It unnerved me to see her like that.

“But I was flying. I don’t think they expected us back today.” I clasped her shoulder, steadying her. This time Ozzy didn’t growl, too busy looking through the portal as if he could see what was happening there.

“We certainly did not, though we are grateful for it.” She gave me a relieved smile.

“Okay, gather who you can. We’re going in.” Pulling away from Lusha, I scanned my surroundings and the people with us. “Vale, can you protect Aldrin and James? We might need a healer.” He nodded. James clung to his mate. Both could fight, they were bears after all, but it went against their healing oaths to do it. I’d rather keep them out of it.

“Gedith? Nhil? Can you fight?”

“We can. Once we’re on the other side I’ll shift with Papa,” Gedith answered confidently.

“He’s pregnant, should he be fighting?”

“He,” my mate snapped, “is a capable fighter and will be safer in the skies as a dragon than on the ground in my human form.”

“Good point, I’m sorry. I’m just scared for you, for everyone.” He hugged me tightly,

telling me all was forgiven.

“Nice save,” Nhil drawled. “I’ve fought in this form, I’ll fight alongside you, Dad,” he teased with an added wink. I was not ready for these dragons to be calling me dad.

“Chase, I want you on my heels in wolf form, okay?”

“Got it. Let’s go already!”

My cousin was likely as desperate as me to see how our family, our friends were fairing under this assault.

We crossed the portal as a tight group and exited to chaos. There was fighting everywhere. Shifters, a few magic users, and strangely some humans in tactical gear.

Mercenaries.

The aviary or the council had paid fucking mercenaries to attack our compound where children lived and played! Fucking monsters! All of them.

As a group we fanned out, two of our dragons taking to the skies.

Be safe my mate. Anyone who touches you is getting roasted.

I laughed before taking to fur and charging into the mele.

Chase peeled off, seeing I had someone guarding me, to help protect the omega compound just in case.

To be honest, these guys either weren’t paid enough, or no one warned them there could be dragons because they took one look at Ozyn’s bright white scales gleaming

in the afternoon sun and ran the fuck out of there screaming.

No really. We barely had to fight. A couple of wolves, big cats like tigers, and some bears tried to press deeper into the compound but they were pushed back quickly. They took far more injuries than we received in return.

Overhead there were bursts of dragonfire singeing tail feathers as the birds from the aviary noped the fuck out. It was kind of funny to watch Gedith and Ozyn chase the birds away. For such large creatures they were pretty nimble. I loved the way they moved through the air.

“Pay attention!” Nhil barked at me, punching a lynx trying to side swipe me. “Stop mooning at my Papa. Yes, he’s glorious, but he’s going to be mad if you get hurt.”

I launched my body at the dazed lynx, tearing them to the ground. Shifting, I punched them in the head until they were unconscious.

Don’t think I can’t see your naked ass, mate. Shift! Ozyn demanded from above.

Taking fur once more I playfully howled at Ozyn. Damn dragon was always watching. I loved him so much. When we got home after this mess was over, I was going to work his body over until he was begging for my knot. Some of that may have crossed our bond because Ozyn’s wings faltered for a moment.

Nhil cuffed my head. “You’re drooling. They’re leaving. What’ll we do with this one?”

Tell Nhil— I began to Ozyn.

“He opened up the bond for us earlier. I can hear you, unfortunately.”

Oh, we have a detention center. We'll take him there.

"Great." Nhil picked the shifter up, hoisting them onto his shoulder. "Lead the way, Dad."

Everyone gathered around the front of the mansion. Hiroshi was there helping Aldrin tend to the few scrapes we had. Very few had anything that actually needed treating. I wasn't surprised to see that the prisoner Nhil held was the only one. All the other attackers had fled. Cowards.

Back in their human forms, Gedith and Ozyn got a ton of congratulations, my mate keeping a careful distance from most of the pack's hugs. He had to invite the contact and I was proud of him for drawing the boundary, not because I didn't want anyone else touching him.

"Well done, Nhil, you did a great job of guarding Deke for me."

No praise for me. To be expected since I shifted mid-fight. I held back my laugh. He was such a shit sometimes. The Luna knew what she was doing with him for sure.

Ozyn took my hand, squeezing it. "I like your prize." He toed at the still unconscious shifter.

"Me too." Oh, he was a savage thing. I dipped down to kiss him. He tilted his head up welcoming my affection like a flower tilting to the sun. He made me so happy I thought all sorts of poetic stuff about him.

"Do you think we'll get answers out of them?" he asked when we broke apart.

"That'll be up to Blake and Chase. They'll question him tomorrow. Make him sweat overnight."

“I think they waited until we were gone.” Ozyn voiced my secret fear.

“Yeah, me too. Looks like we’ll be doing another round of weeding out traitors.” I gave a long sigh.

On my other side, Nhil stiffened. “What’s that scent?” His eyes tracked the crowd. “Him.” His eyes zeroed in on one of the enforcers.

Striding forward, Nhil made an imposing figure.

“Oh, fuck!” Micah whispered. “No way. Nope. Not happening.”

“You are my mate,” Nhil said in wonder. His hand reached out to cup Micah’s cheek.

In a blink, Micah shifted into his dingo form, turned tail, and ran.

Roosting Begins

Ozyn

Nothing. We got nothing from the lynx shifter. Once they were done with him, he was turned over to the police instead of the pack killing him. Part of the deal the pack had with local law enforcement was allowing them to take any prisoners. Not something any of us liked, but if it kept the police away from the pack most of the time, then it was a small price to pay.

Life quieted in the pack after about a week. Dalton decided not to risk using the moonroot until a new batch could be made. He was fully aware he could get pregnant during his heat, yet felt a pregnancy was more tolerable than the unknown effects of the plant from another realm.

Dalton was smart.

Jasper began to feel like a heat was coming on, he was also almost two years postpartum, and he trialed the moonroot only to be knocked down with a flu like illness. It took days to figure out there was a contaminant in the dried moonroot. It was likely if Dalton had taken it he would not have been ill, but still would have gone into heat with his healing ability seeing the substance as foreign and therefore to be rejected.

I found such things utterly fascinating and was granted access to the research readily. The pack was so welcoming! Dalton's heat did end in another pregnancy, though he and Larken were happy, so that was all that mattered. Even though this baby was

growing much more quickly than the ones before had. They had the support they needed and a solution should be in place when he was next due to go into heat.

Something had settled in my bond with Deke as the eggs grew within me. I was able to go longer periods without being next to him. Therapy sessions were easier, especially since I didn't feel the need for Deke to come with me. I had lunches with Dalton, walks with Nhil who refused to go home now that he had found his mate.

Micah was avoiding him, which we understood. The idea of being a dragon's mate was not for the weak willed. I hoped if he was to reject Nhil he would do it formally soon, to allow Nhil to return to Abrocaelum and mourn their bond. In time, he would find someone or multiple someones to make him happy once more.

Being more independent of my mate allowed me to foster other friendships and allow Deke to spend time with his friends and family. I liked them all, but being too codependent was not healthy. Now that things were better with Deke, I felt I could go to the kitchen and stay with Winter for an hour or two, letting Deke get work done. There was plenty to do as the pack responded to the legal aftermath of the attack. More petitions were sent to the council. Most of which they ignored.

The cook had become my closest friend in Sweetwater after Deke, and he allowed me to make cookies in his precious kitchen to feed my cravings. He did not appreciate my love of mushroom, lemon, and chocolate chip cookies, but gave me the space to create them happily.

If it wasn't for the added tension around the pack it would have been a happy time. Peace would not last long. As soon as the police stopped watching, they would strike.

In some good news, the fresh moonroot batch would be ready for testing soon enough, giving hope to the omegas that they could control their cycles easily. The science Aldrin, James, ívarr and his team were doing was sound.

Understandably, the direct attack of such a significant force on the pack left everyone on guard. More elves and even a small retinue of fae were sent to bolster defenses. Thyme, the Northharbor coven leader, took time away from his busy quest to help demons to add more spellwork. Poppy was unable to help now that she was pregnant with her and her wife's second child, depleting her magic for the time being. She and Zinna were living full time with the elves studying the similarities in their magics.

I was enjoying this peaceful interlude. I did not doubt for a second that there would be more attacks. Like Deke, I felt Blake could stand to be more offensive rather than defensive, yet, as an omega, I also saw his need to protect the children of the pack by not starting a full scale war.

After their assault while we were gone, though, perhaps that ship had already sailed. Winter thought Blake was just preparing himself, and Kade, to go to the aviary. He believed he wanted Kade's pregnancy to be further along just in case, to give the baby a chance if it all went wrong.

With just days until I expected to roost, I looked very heavily pregnant. Almost to term, round and struggling with my mobility. I felt constantly aroused. My pregnancy with my older children I had done alone because their father had returned to the front lines. Instead, I had sought lovers when the mood struck, which was not often, however I was not constantly around my mate's delicious alpha pheromones.

Waking Deke with kisses, I reached for his cock to stroke it.

"Hmm, this is nice. Need something, Ozzy?"

"You. Just you." I'd gotten myself all worked up thinking about sucking Deke's length. Shuffling down the bed, I took the hardening member into my mouth, moaning at the tangy taste of precome. Who needed breakfast when I could have this? My stomach gurgled, reminding me I was feeding seven of us, not just my

libido.

Deke did not know the number of babies. He wanted to be surprised. I hoped it would be a happy surprise and not a shock.

Focusing on bringing my mate pleasure, I licked around his crown, dipped my tongue into the slit, while stroking the shaft and massaging his balls. I sank into the task, my eyes sliding closed while I shared his pleasure through the bond. Deke threw back the thin blanket with a moan. He pumped his hips, making his cock hit the back of my throat. I'd felt the movement coming in tiny pulses, so relaxed, letting him into my throat.

“Oh, fuck!” Deke cried. “I’m going to come.”

His release tasted salty on my tongue. I swallowed each spurt, licking him clean before kissing back up his body. He didn’t knot, never knotted when I sucked him to not make me feel trapped. I loved his thoughtfulness.

Deke shared the taste of himself with me in a deep kiss. “Your turn,” he whispered when he pulled away.

Already on edge, it didn’t take long for me to hit my peak. Deke’s grin was smug and satisfied. I could feel his cock hardening once more.

“Gonna work you open. You want my knot, don’t you?”

“Please.”

He turned me onto my side where I’d be more comfortable. I put a pillow under my belly to support the weight.

Already aroused, I was leaking slick, my rim soft against Deke's fingers. He eased them inside me slowly, allowing me time to adjust. Kisses along my neck and shoulders gave me shivers. When had I been treated like I was a precious jewel? The way Deke took care of me was everything I hadn't known I needed.

By the time he sank his cock into me, I was desperate to feel him properly. Fully seated, Deke wrapped me up in his arms. I'd grown to feel it was love not a prison. I was never constricted in his arms, only protected. Always loved.

We moved together, me rocking my hips as much as my large belly would allow, trying to work him deeper inside me.

When his knot began to fill, I came with a shout. I slumped against the mattress, sweaty but completely satisfied.

Deke's orgasm was long. His teeth nipped at my mating bite, almost forcing another spurt from me.

"Sleepy," I murmured into his pillow he'd graciously given to me.

"Then sleep Ozzy, we've got nowhere to be any time soon."

Later I would wonder if he cursed us.

I woke up desperate for the bathroom. When in there, I decided it needed a quick tidy up, which I did. Then I showered, stripped the bed, and organized some laundry.

Deke's amusement filtered through our bond. He thought I was nesting in preparation for roosting. Had he forgotten I had to do that outside? Thankfully it was late summer so I wouldn't have to waste much magic on controlling the climate inside the bubble I would make for the eggs.

Once I thought about preparing our roosting spot, it was all I could think about. I abandoned the dishes in favor of gathering all we'd need. Nhil could stand to help out, he could finish the dishes instead of moping over Micah.

The nest was far more important than some dishes. First there were waterproof sheets for the ground, a mattress, so many blankets of all sizes, colors, and descriptions. We needed a tub filled with clothes for when Deke was shifting between forms. Snacks. All the snacks. Our friends and family had already offered to help keep us fed.

We couldn't move the eggs for the first day after they were laid. Their shells would be too fragile. I would have to replenish my magic after. For the last week I'd been rationing it, cycling it into my reserves. I believed Nhil was doing something similar. It was helpful he was still around just to have him help me through the process.

Once I had everything gathered, the nesting process really began. Not only did I need the blankets, they all had to be covered in our scents. Then I also wanted treasures, I was a dragon after all. Except I required not only things we treasured, but things from our pack.

"You want me to call our Alpha and ask for a trinket?" Deke stared me down after my request.

"Yes. Kade, too, please."

Deke sighed and rubbed his face. He was sitting surrounded by blankets to get his scent all over them. It made for a rather ridiculous picture. My fingers itched for my phone to snap it.

Got it Papa, Nhil said from the kitchen.

Thank you, sweetheart. He really was a good boy. Alright, he was nearly three

hundred years old, he was hardly a boy. He would always be my baby.

Drakon help me! Papa, concentrate. Is this that baby brain thing?

I didn't answer, pulled to the present and Deke by him sighing once more.

"Anyone else?"

I thought for a moment. "Winter, Chase, Dalton." I ticked them off on my fingers. "Larken, Aldrin, James, oh and probably Axel and Teárlach because we shouldn't leave them out." An extensive list for sure, but we had a large family in Sweetwater. I really wanted scents from my boys, too. Unfortunately there wasn't time to go back to Abrocaelum to get what I needed.

"Right. Are you sure?"

"Yes. Safi will be back soon with his item."

Our future nanny was already living with us. He had gone hunting at the lake for the perfect stone to add to my collection of things for the babies. I liked having him in the house. His scent lingered in places, reminding me he was part of our chosen family, therefore he should have his scent on the blankets.

"Alright. I'll go make some calls." He got up to leave the room then changed direction towards the front door. "Actually, I'll go see them. Do you need me to do anything else?"

"No. That should be it for now."

He returned to my side to kiss me. His handsome face was lit with a smile. The light made his eyes more silver than blue. I loved looking at him.

“This means the eggs are coming soon, right?”

“In the next day or so.” I already felt my stomach tightening with the early practice contractions. Once they increased I would go outside to shift.

“Nhil is going to watch over you while I’m gone. Make him do any lifting, please,” my alpha ordered.

“Of course.”

My son waited until his new dad was out of the house before he appeared beside me. “I like him for you. For us, too, of course. Shifter culture is very accepting of children outside of the alpha’s.”

“They are. You should hear Dakota talk about Kade. It’s as if he raised him, not that other alpha.” I spoke of them fondly. As a dragon, we were slightly apart from shifters, but we did not see them as lesser. Quite the opposite. They were more tightly bonded in some ways than dragonkin were.

Gaining my son’s approval on my mate was important to me. I loved my children dearly, and valued their opinions, too.

“I have something for you,” Nhil said, a tinge of nerves in his expression.

“Ooh, what is it? Is it your item for the nest?”

“Better. I knew you would be missing the others, my brothers and yours. I sent a message to Laer and to Rez. They sent some things for the nest back through the portal. I have them outside waiting for you.”

Following him outside, I found a large box. Inside was a blanket or item of clothing

belonging to each of my family members. They had also tucked a precious item, be it a rare coin, an old book, a flower, into the box with a note from each of them.

Deke found me a couple of hours later in our nearly finished nest, crying over the notes. Each of them had heartfelt messages of support, welcomes for Deke into our family, and wishes for the babies.

“Ozzy, you’ve done such a good job!” Deke praised. He circled the nest, helping me adjust each layer. He moved the cooler closer. “I’ve got the things you asked for.”

The things in question? They were baby clothes, stuffies, little toys. Many of them had seen a lot of use. These were things they had used with their own families. As such they were filled with the scents of not only our friends, but their children, too.

Tears ran down my cheeks at their thoughtfulness. They dried as the first contraction hit.

“It’s starting! Let’s get these in place.” They surrounded the nest where I could still smell them but they wouldn’t be damaged during my shift or labor.

“Do you want Michaela? Aldrin?”

“No. Let them know I’m in labor. You better tell Blake, your cop friend, and the enforcers. I might get loud.”

Deke got out his phone. “On it.”

Once the items were in place, I stripped, unable to bear wearing clothes any longer, and shifted. It took me a moment to find a comfortable place to rest where Deke could also be close. It took barely a thought to construct a dome to protect us from the elements and provide warning of people approaching. It covered the entire house, so

Nhil was trapped until the eggs arrived.

Thanks for that, Papa. Not like I had anywhere to be.

Do you want to leave? I can open—

It's fine. I want to see my siblings when they arrive. I'll be here, but not outside. Enjoy this time with Dad.

Deke fidgeted in place, looking torn. I felt his anxiety over my suffering. "Would you like me to shift, to help with your pain?" Deke was simply adorable. It took my mind off the pain I was experiencing briefly.

Thank you. That's not necessary. Hands might be better. Alpha power doesn't work on me like it does shifter omegas.

With the pain of each contraction, I began to wish Deke's alpha power would work on me like it would a shifter in labor. Being able to take someone's pain was a thoughtful gift. Perhaps The Luna had some of the balance wrong, but in this, she was right.

"Ah. So do you want me to rub your back or your belly?"

I've never had someone rub my stomach in this form. It might be nice.

Finding the right position was hard. Exposing so much of my stomach was contrary to my nature. I needed to protect it. I huffed and panted, getting into place. Deke's side of the bond pulsed with affection. He tried to hide his grin at my irritation.

Deke's hands were warm as he stroked along the softer scales of my stomach. His touch, as always, was gentle, adoring, as he tried to soothe my pain away.

Strangely, it worked. With every pass it was easier to deal with the contractions as they pushed the eggs down my body to enter the world.

Deke was perfectly attentive, ensuring I had a bowl of water to drink from. Nhil checked on me a few times, adding magic to my bubble and feeding me some jerky.

It was peaceful under the sky. A perfect place for a baby dragon to be born.

On and on the hours passed, the sky grew dark around us. The tightening pain came closer and closer, ramping up in its intensity, until I felt the need to bear down.

The first one is coming!

“Dad, get in place to catch the egg!” Nhil shouted from the safety of the patio doors.

My mate shuffled around the nest. “Oh, I see it! The shell is a pale blue in this light.” We had lanterns lit all around the nest.

He took a blanket, one from Rezoth, I was sure, to catch the egg when it slipped free of my body. Wrapping it tightly, he placed it in the spot I’d picked out for the eggs, surrounded by their parents’ scents.

One by one, six eggs were laid in the next hour, until I was done. Deke picked blankets from my boys and brothers to wrap them in tenderly, his face awed.

Truly, I felt the same. Birth was a wonder. I was exhausted but exhilarated over it.

They’re here! Hello little ones. I dipped down to breathe a wash of magic over their shells, helping them harden now that they were out of me.

“Six!” Deke squawked. Automatically he brushed a hand over each of them in turn.

“Welcome to the world, babies. I’m your daddy!” His baby voice needed work, yet it was also perfect at the same time.

“Ozzy, you did it. You made us a family!”

I returned to my human guise. “No, we were already a family. We just made it larger.”

He took me in his arms, wrapped me in a blanket saturated in his delicious scent, kissed me soundly, then pressed his forehead to mine. “I love you so much. And the babies. All six of them. The boys, too. Even Nhil.”

“I heard that!” Nhil called dryly. “Well done, Papa. Those are beautiful eggs.”

They truly were. All of them were in shades of silver, white and blue. Each of them the size of an emu’s egg and utterly perfect.

The Next Strike

Ozyn

Nhil ushered me inside to have a quick shower, though my inclination was to stay with the babies. I didn't fight him on it, I was sweaty and felt dirty. The eggs were safe with Deke. I knew that. He was utterly mesmerized by them. The love I felt through our bond for them, and me of course, was so vast already. Smitten. That was a great word for what he was feeling.

Truthfully, I was as bad. Being away from them felt wrong. I rushed through my shower and a few mouthfuls of a rice dish Dalton had taught Nhil to make then hurried back outside to the nest.

Deke was waiting with open arms and a comfortable blanket for me. He had stripped several layers of the nest and resettled the eggs, keeping them safely tucked up. They were warm to the touch, the fire of their individual magics burning away, except for one.

I traced my fingers over the palest egg. It was the color of marble with veins of silver through it. The fire was less in this egg, which almost broke my heart until I heard how strongly the heart was beating and caught the scent of the precious life inside. No, this baby was a fighter. They would make it through the roosting process unscathed.

Gentle fingers carded through my hair. "They're fine, right? All the babies. I'm worried about this one." Of course he could feel the difference in them.

“If there was a textbook about how they should look and feel, these would be in there. Can you hear their heartbeats?”

Deke nodded and relaxed.

“Well done Father and Papa, you’ve made some pretty eggs. I bet the dragons inside them are just as cute.” Nhil kept a careful distance from the eggs. “Are you keeping the dome up for the night?”

I nodded. “Just until it’s safe to move them.”

“Want me to add my magic to them?” Nhil looked at Deke, checking for permission from him.

“This is me showing my ignorance, but would it be some sort of faux pas to let you?”

Nhil thought about how to reply. I had little energy to form words, instead choosing to doze while Deke played with my hair.

“Yes and no. It isn’t all that common for dragons to have siblings outside of their clutch, though where it has occurred it hasn’t always been safe for the older ones to be around the babies.”

“Ah,” Deke said in understanding. “This is a trust test.”

“Again, yes and no. You aren’t a dragon so you aren’t able to share in the magic needed to protect the eggs during the roosting process. It puts a lot of pressure on Papa—“

“Then do it. Whatever it takes. My ego isn’t so big I’ll pass on you sharing your magic.” Deke’s words were spoken so earnestly, my eyes began to tear up. “Thank

you, Nhil, for wanting to help your brothers.”

My enigma son was pleased. He moved aside to shift into his hulking dragon form. He was a light blue, growing darker blue underneath. I was hit with a surge of pride that I’d made him.

With care, he blew magic over his siblings, adding more protection to their shells while they were particularly vulnerable. Deke watched him in awe and with some... gratitude on his end of the bond. He was grateful his adoptive son would do this for the new babies.

I knew Nhil appreciated the trust it took for me to let him do this. While I could have managed, not needing to was a gift I wouldn’t turn down. Him staying in Sweetwater might have been for this, too, not just his mate, I realized.

Done with his task, Nhil shifted back. “Do you need anything from the house?” he asked Deke nonchalantly.

“No, I’m good, thanks. We’ve got plenty of snacks and blankets here.”

“Good, well I’m going in. Night.” Nhil left us alone with the eggs in the quiet of the night. It had to be about one AM.

“May I see them?” came Safi’s tentative voice. I started, having forgotten he was in the house.

“Of course.”

He tiptoed closer, his wings fluttering nervously. His magical control was growing, but he still preferred to have his wings on show.

Deke finished his bite of chicken. “You can come closer, Safi. These are your new charges. Best get to know them.”

“I heard The Luna lets elves bond platonically with shifters to gain their animal soul. Then they become alphas or omegas.” He took a sharp breath at the edge of the nest, gaze locked with the eggs. “They are so beautiful.”

“So I heard,” I said, thinking about the elves. Safi stood still, barely breathing. “I’m not sure what she has planned for the fae. Dragon magic can help, though. We can see your potential.”

“You can?”

“Yes. When you have chosen someone, I’ll tell you. I’ll even help you.”

“After everything, you’d still help me? I owe you my life, I couldn’t ask for more.”

“We’re friends, Safi. I stopped keeping score when you got me out of that dungeon.”

The emotion of the moment overcame him. With a muttered, “congratulations,” he fled into the house.

Deke wrapped his arm around me. He pressed a kiss to my temple. We sat in silence for a while, digesting the day. Becoming parents again was a big deal, as Georgia would say. We had to feel our feelings.

“I’m really proud of you, y’know,” Deke eventually said. “Having the babies after everything. You never even questioned having them. I thought you might, after...”

“You’re nothing like him. I knew these babies would be treasured, allowed to grow into good people, that you would love them with your whole heart, just the way you

love me.”

“And your boys. There’s room in there for them, too.”

“Exactly.”

Shouts woke me. Deke and I were both wrapped around the eggs, blankets carefully placed over us. Nhil must have checked on us in the short time we had slept. The early rays of the coming dawn crested over the horizon. I estimated it to be around four AM.

I heard another yell. The distant sounds of fists meeting flesh.

We were under attack once more.

Everything inside me narrowed to one thought: protect. The eggs and my mate had to be protected at all costs.

I shook Deke awake while simultaneously calling for Nhil using our family bond. Attack, there’s an attack!

“What?” Deke bolted upright, immediately on guard from a mixture of the sounds and my anxiety through the link we shared.

“No! I—Ozyn, I need to go help.” I could see his inner war written all over his face.

“You need to stay right here,” Nhil interjected, rushing outside to us. “Stay with the eggs. I’ll get in the air. Papa, you shift too. Stay right here.”

We didn’t even have time to argue. He shifted and took to the air in a blink, roaring out his fury into the coming dawn. Not contained by the bubble in his dragon form,

he was soon out of sight.

“Ozzy, I can’t—the other houses, the kids. I need—“

The pain in his eyes hurt my soul. I understood his desperate need to help everyone. They were my pack too. One look at our eggs was enough to harden my resolve. We had to stay with them.

“Call them all to come here. Get them under our protection. I can make the dome bigger.” I had enough magic. Somehow, I’d make it work.

Deke nodded. He took out his phone, texting frantically, his eyes scanning constantly between me and the eggs. I heard him call on the pack link to anyone close by. Using a trickle of magic, I expanded his reach so he could get more of the pack.

In a blink, Safi was by my side. “I’ve been into the main compound. They’re trying to get into the omega side.”

My heart lurched. Omegas. They wanted the single omegas. With my eggs and all the people coming to our home, there was nothing I could do.

I sent a thought to Nhil, asking him to do his best for the omegas. One dragon against so many was bad odds. I implored him not to do something foolish.

“They’re coming!” Deke confirmed. “Safi, go open the door. Oz, you’ll need to open the dome.”

Safi’s face crumpled. I reached for him, gripping his arm, the small contact the only comfort we could afford.

“A guard, Sam, he’s dead. I got Melody out of there, she’s hurt. I left her in the

kitchen.”

I squeezed his arm in pity for what he’d seen. “We’ll deal with her soon. If Deke got them, there should be a healer on the way. I need you to use whatever magic you used to slip out of the dome to get them in. I don’t want to drop it and raise it all the time. It’ll use too much magic.”

He nodded. “I’ll wait by the door.”

“Tell them to come through here.”

One by one, the families arrived. Dalton, Larken, Ingal, and the babies were first to arrive, followed quickly by a pale Axel supported by Teárlach. Their daughter was in her wolf form, tail down, picking up on her papa’s worry.

“Chase is out there,” the prince explained. He comforted Axel the best he could. The omega was frantic with worry for his twin.

Our Alpha and his mate arrived with their brood and nanny on their heels. The Alpha had a whispered conversation with his mate before rushing back out. I could see the resignation on Kade’s face while he rubbed his swollen stomach. He didn’t have long left before their daughter made her way into the world.

Roan and his large family were on the Alpha family’s heels. Asher kissed his mate, all the babies, hugged his bonded brothers and adoptive father, then rushed to join the Alpha.

“Hiroshi? Did you see Melody? Safi said she was hurt.”

The sweet looking omega nodded. “On it.” He entered the kitchen where sounds of an argument filtered through the open door.

“Dakota, you can’t!”

“I’ve got to, Jasper. We can’t leave Blake to deal with this alone. What would you say to Kade if Blake was hurt and I could have helped?”

Even from this distance, I could hear his resigned sigh. “Please, just don’t get hurt. I love you. We’ll be waiting here, won’t we Angelica? Hayden? We’ll wait for Daddy here.”

“It’ll be over soon, I swear.”

I felt the hole in the bubble, signifying Safi using his ability to get Dakota out.

“You can put the little ones in the nest. I’ll cover the eggs so they don’t touch them.”

“Oh, no, we couldn’t mess with it like that. The yard is plenty safe. I feel like I can almost breathe here,” Kade said. He watched his toddlers run in their wolf forms. “But my heart is still out there.”

“Our children are our hearts. Our mates, our souls. Blake will return to you soon.”

Sounds of the battle got closer. I rose into the air, ready to defend everyone under my protection until my last breath. Deke would survive and Nhil would ensure the eggs hatched.

Attackers loomed. I breathed fire over them, turning them to ash, but they kept coming. I couldn’t risk a fire breaking out and harming those trapped with me or even accidentally killing one of our allies.

They had magic users who plucked at the threads of my magic, trying to unweave the dome. I poured more magic into it while pushing back the attackers with blasts of ice

and wind. My wings beating made them fall.

I was so tired. They kept coming.

How had it come to this? Everywhere I looked shifters, elves, fae, witches, they all fought. I saw the police fighting back to back with my pack mates.

The demons joined us. The tide turned briefly, until more mercenaries poured through the cracks in our defenses.

It all felt so hopeless. I was tiring, still recovering from laying the eggs. My magic was growing low. Still, I would fight until my last drop was gone, then fight some more with Deke and the others by my side. They would not take the children.

Several roars shook the ground. A smile stretched across my face. I felt hope surge through the pack link.

“Dragons!” I heard people shout.

My family had arrived. I felt them pass through the portal. Each of them gave me a mental nudge, leaving their focus for the battle ahead. Their magic lit the air. Just a little longer. All I had to do was hold on. They were coming for me.

Each flap of my wings was difficult. I struggled to hold my form.

Just a little longer.

The fighting was getting too close. I hoped they were coming soon. Everything hurt.

Eventually, even as I shook with the effort of staying in the air, I heard cries to retreat. Seemed like our attackers were unwilling to take on seven angry dragons and

one ex-mayor. As swiftly as they arrived, they vanished. Cowards.

They left their injured and dying to their fates. Yet they believed they were in the right in this war when they could so readily discard life.

The police saved who they could without the help of our allies who refused to treat them. I understood their reasoning. Their efforts were to be saved for those of us who needed it.

Assured we were safe for now, I returned to the nest back in my human form. Deke, now home where he belonged, pulled me into his arms.

“I was so scared for you. Rest, okay? I feel how tired you are.”

One by one, my family dropped through the barrier, shifting and landing on the ground fluidly. Show offs. They surrounded me with hugs, then checked on Deke and the eggs.

Each checked with my mate before adding magic to the eggs’ shells. There had never been safer babies. Though utterly drained, I was grateful for them.

“Here,” Gedith kissed my forehead with a wash of dragonfire. His magic seeped into the empty places, replenishing me some. “Cute eggs, fathers. The battle was fun, too.”

My boys came to me after, each kissing my cheek or forehead and adding a little magic. Slowly, I felt more like myself. Still drained, still exhausted, nothing sleep wouldn’t fix.

“Papa,” Rezoth urged gently. “Drop the dome. We will watch over everyone.”

Unable to resist, I let the magic go with a deep sigh.

“Well done, Ozzy.” My mate brushed my hair from my face and kissed me gently.
“You protected us so well.”

Our shifter friends repeated the sentiment.

A buzz went through the crowd. “Hiroshi!” I heard Blake call. “Chase! He’s hurt.”

Alpha Blake staggered into view, dragging a leg behind him, everyone following, Chase limp in his arms.

War

Deke

S hock rooted me to the spot. I stood staring at my baby cousin cradling his older brother to his chest, tears running down his face while Chase lay unmoving in his arms, blood covering him.

“Chase?”

The wrecked way Axel called for his twin broke me. I lurched towards Blake, desperate to find any sign of life.

“Hiro!” I yelled as I cupped Chase’s face, my heart stopping for a moment until I felt his pulse thrumming under my fingertips. “He’s alive!”

“Outta my way!” Hiro ran to us. “Put him on the floor.”

Blake dropped to his knees. The sound of bone meeting concrete made me wince. He struggled to let go of his brother, finally placing him on the ground, but keeping a hold of one of his hands.

“Back!” Hiroshi barked. “Let me work.” The healer was all business while he used his talent to scan Chase’s body for the injuries. Chase was naked, likely post shift. Blood and grime covered him. Someone handed Hiroshi a towel so he could wipe the mess off Chase and treat his injuries.

It felt like I was barely breathing in the few seconds it took Hiroshi to scan Chase.

“Looks worse than it is, everyone. He’ll be fine,” he assured us.

A hand slipped into mine. Ozyn. His touch did more to comfort me than Hiroshi’s statement. Perhaps because I knew Ozyn was feeling the same as me, and if he could help it, nothing bad would happen to Chase. I knew Ozyn would drain what little remained of his magic to heal Chase if Hiroshi couldn’t.

It wasn’t necessary, though. Hiroshi’s golden healing light worked its miracle on Chase. The wide gashes on his legs, torso and arms soon closed to pink scars, which would likely fade with time.

“His eye,” Blake whispered, fear and grief choking the words.

“I’ve got it. Might need a little more juice.” He wiggled a hand for one of his mates. Both Tate and Roan were his fated mates. As such, they could help boost his energy to power his healing. Roan took his hand with a squeeze.

Hiroshi wiped the towel carefully over Chase’s face. The blood didn’t budge. “I need water!” Tate joined his mate on the ground by Chase’s head. He poured half a bottle of water over Chase’s face, clearing most of the blood.

My stomach nearly expelled itself at the sight. His eye was ruined. A deep claw mark bisected it, cutting the organ nearly in two. It would be a miracle if he kept it.

“Hold him still,” Hiroshi commanded as Chase roused. His limbs flailed under Blake’s hold.

Automatically, I fell to the floor to grasp Chase’s legs. Blake moved closer to me, pressing an arm across Chase’s torso. Blake’s body shook with his grief and pain. I

leaned into my cousin, silently offering my support. Kade took Blake's shoulders, rubbing them absently while he watched Hiro work. Axel took the other side, supported by his mate. He cried openly, never taking his eyes from his twin while gripping Blake's hand for dear life.

"Tate, I'm gonna need a boost from you, too." Hiroshi's light was dimmer while he worked on the intricacies of Chase's eye. "I can fix it so he'll have sight, but he's gonna scar."

"He'll love that," I said, my voice shaking. "Won't you, Chase?"

"Yeah. It hurts," he croaked. I wished we had the time to get him some pain relief. We had to prioritize healing over it. Once he was stable, we could find something to make him hurt less.

With both his mates boosting him, Hiroshi healed the worst of the damage. "Ugh!" We all could see he was struggling.

Ozyn stepped forward, only to be pushed out of the way by Valethar. "Nope. I'll do it." He breathed his weird dragon magic breath over Hiroshi, making the healer's light flare so bright I had to shield my eyes. Everyone turned away to protect their sight. When it dimmed once more, I could see both of Chase's gray-blue eyes staring up at the early morning light.

"Wow!" he gasped. "The pain is gone!"

There was still a scar on his face from forehead, down over his eye, and halfway down his cheek, except this scar looked older, like he'd had it for a decade, not a minute.

Chase raised his fingers to his face, tracing the scar. "Bet that looks wicked cool," he

said with his trademark grin. Yeah, he was fine.

Everyone in the yard relaxed. It was like we all collectively took a breath now that Chase was joking around. Axel launched himself at his twin, wrapping him in his arms while he cried. Teárlach brushed his brother-in-law's hair back off his face with a tender expression. Blake stayed kneeling, holding onto Chase's arm like the man would vanish at any second, not that I was any better, I still had my hands on his legs.

Hiroshi swept his healing light over Blake, likely seeing the gash in our Alpha's calf. It closed to a thin line. His shifter healing would do the rest.

"Alright, let me up!" Chase cried. "Deke, can I use your shower?" He shook himself free of everyone holding him, but spared a pat to the head for Hiroshi, the only part he could touch of the healer since he was surrounded by his mates. "Well done, Hiro! I feel great."

He got up on shaky legs, stumbled for a bit until I broke out of my daze and rushed to his side. "C'mon, I've got you."

"Yeah." Chase leaned into me as I helped him to the bathroom I shared with Ozyn. There were two others on this floor, one the babies would use and Safi's attached to his room. We were looking into a house for Nhil, thinking maybe he could take my old place now that it seemed he'd be sticking around.

My cousin was quiet as I started the water and found him a fresh towel. I caught him looking in the mirror in wonder.

"You look badass," I told him, putting my hands on his shoulders, looking at our reflections.

"Damn right." He let out a ragged sigh. "I was so scared I was going to die."

Unable to even think about losing Chase, I turned him and just held him. I felt his tears dampen my shirt. Stroking his hair, I shushed him. “You’ll have half the house up here in a minute.”

His tears quieted, though he still shook with his sobs. Both of us had the pack link locked down tight. I could feel Ozyn getting anxious, but he knew Chase needed me.

“Are the eggs okay?” Chase finally asked. He rubbed his face, being careful around his new scar.

“The eggs are fine, thanks to Ozzy and his family.” My smile dimmed when I thought about what we’d just been through. “What the fuck was that, Chase?”

“Sam.” He offered no other explanation.

“What?”

“He betrayed us, Deke.” His expression was haunted. “They took Georgia and Erin because of him.”

My blood ran cold. They’d stolen our pack mates? Omegas. Goddess only knew what they would do to them. They needed to pay. “We’ll get them back.”

“I had to kill him,” Chase whispered. I could feel his grief and guilt like it was my own. We both had trusted Sam. He’d said all the right things, been where he was supposed to be. We thought he was one of us.

“Why?” The question just slipped free filled with pain.

“He didn’t want to be an omega.”

I thought about all the pain and suffering he'd caused all because he had been given a gift he could have refused. My heart ached for Chase who had to kill a pack mate because of his treachery.

"You did what you had to."

It took some time for everyone to recover from the shock of the attack and injuries our friends received. Rather than have everyone return to their homes, Blake ordered us all into the community center. Except we couldn't move the eggs for almost another day.

In his wisdom, he split the group. Half staying with us, the rest going to the community center. Ozyn's brothers went to the center for that group's protection. We didn't think there would be another attack, but we couldn't chance it. My older sons, because that's what they were, stayed with us, glued to their papa's side.

Ozyn couldn't bear to be far from the eggs. I kept the bond open while I helped a still shaky Chase shower. I let Chase borrow some clothes and took him to the nest.

"Here," Ozyn took Chase's arm. "Come meet the eggs. Your brothers were just looking at them." In a shock move, he pulled Chase into the nest so he could sit close.

I love you.

My mate beamed at me. "Come sit."

"No, you should be resting, not me. You did all that." I waved at everything outside of our bubble. The fence surrounding our yard was in pieces.

Ozyn grimaced. "I made a mess."

“No,” Blake said, patiently. “You protected our families.”

The house was quieter without so many of the children running about. Acting as Head Enforcer, Larken had gone to the community center with his mate and kids, along with Roan and his brood. I was just grateful Blake had decided to stay put where he was. I didn’t want any of them out of my sight, it was bad enough the group was split. There just wasn’t the space for us all to sleep.

“Without you dragons, I’d probably be dead,” Chase admitted, his stare focused on the eggs. “You came through at just the right time. I don’t think they expected Ozyn to be able to fight, let alone everyone else arriving.”

“How did you know we needed you? It’s a couple of hours’ flight, isn’t it? How did you make it here so fast?” I wondered aloud.

Balon smiled. “We were already on our way to see you both and the babies. Nhil mentioned adding his magic and thought we might like to do the same for our baby siblings.”

Touched, all I could do was smile at the more stoic of our boys. He never really said all that much, but I liked that about him.

Blake returned from a call from the SDF. He’d been on the call for a while. His face was grim. Sharing a look with his mate, he went to him and kissed his forehead.

“It’s official. We’re sanctioned to go to war with the aviary.”

No one said anything. I guess we knew it was coming. We couldn’t continue to live as we were.

“What’s more, after the strike today, finding out who the spy was, and the

mercenaries hired in, this has given the SDF the proof they needed to get a presidential order. The council has been disbanded with immediate effect, and all assets were frozen. Any members who try to continue under the banner of the shifter council will face terrorism charges. Once the dust settles from my Alpha challenge to Michael, the head of the aviary, then we can work with the SDF and other willing packs to form part of a new supernatural species council. All supernaturals deserve to have a place.”

“Is that wise?” Teárlach asked. He had a point. It was sure to be problematic. Part of why shifters were the only group represented was our community minded nature. Vampires had clans, but other types were more solitary.

“Neither is my choice. I believe the council deserves to fall after everything. They’ve lost their way from The Luna and this is justice for us. If they could have stuck to allowing betas and omegas to join, really tried to work towards equality, and hadn’t undermined us at every opportunity, then maybe I’d be more forgiving.”

“Yeah. They’ve caused a lot of harm, not just for the pack, my family, too.” Kade took his mate’s hand.

“How they dealt with Rincoln was ridiculous. We lost years of our lives running from that monster because he had half of them in his pockets,” Jasper added angrily. “Kade suffered so badly because of him, them, and we were powerless to stop them. If Kade hadn’t met you, Blake, I dread to think what would have happened.”

“The Luna guided Kade to me.” His smile for his mate was soppy. Honestly, those two were sickeningly in love. “Then you came, Jasper, and met Dakota, who had followed Kade. Grady and Trey came to visit and never left. Because Hiroshi trusted Dakota, he came to us when he needed help and met his fated, setting off more dominoes.” Blake sat, taking his mate onto his lap.

“I believe with my whole heart that The Luna put us on the path. All we needed was faith and to trust our hearts. It’s what makes the Sweetwater pack so strong. We all care about each other, which is why we’re stronger than the aviary.”

Blake wasn’t done.

“Tomorrow, once we are all rested, we’ll decide who is going and who stays. We need a large show of force because I know the aviary will fight dirty. It’s likely the remaining mercenaries are hiding there.” He scanned the crowd, all of us listening intently. “I’m ending this for good. I’m officially challenging Michael with the right to rule the aviary as their Alpha.”

Eggs

Deke

Most of us shifted to sleep in our animal forms for a nap during the day. The dragons didn't have the space to shift with us, but they certainly got in on the big puppy pile! Chaotic, yet perfect.

Winter came to the house to check on Ozyn and see the eggs later on in the day. He also helped us cook. Ozyn making friends with him really was a blessing because I didn't have the energy and people needed feeding. There was still a lot of tension in the house, but a decent meal certainly helped tempers. No one seemed to want to leave even though we could probably do with some space to process shit.

Blake ran the pack out of our place rather than return to the mansion. I think he was struggling to deal with all that had happened. Besides, Chase was not himself, which I got. He'd just been through an ordeal, and Blake sensed it. We all did. Rather than us all separate further from the two groups we were already in, Blake kept us all together where he could watch us. I think it helped his wolf.

Even with it being tight for space and everyone being under foot constantly, it was kinda nice. I worried about Ozyn, except he was thriving on the chaos. The kids, they loved him. A couple of times, he shifted so he could be their jungle gym in the wrecked yard. They clambered all over him while their parents watched on with fond smiles. The boys helped while putting the fence back together.

My mate was stuck to the eggs like glue, though. He never ventured far from them.

Getting him to go to the bathroom was a problem! He only agreed to it if I was with the eggs. Not an issue for me, since the nest was super comfortable.

Chase still had injured person privileges. He was allowed into the nest when the rest weren't. The boys didn't even try, so it was obviously a dragon culture thing. Given how low the dragon birth rate was, we probably wouldn't experience all this again, it was better for me just to enjoy it. I hunkered down in the nest with my laptop, keeping a close eye on my cousin, the eggs, and my mate.

Later on in the day, Blake announced everyone could go home. The SDF had stationed magic users and officers around our compound to protect us. Thyme had added more wards further out, giving us more of a warning. Demon magic from our partner in the cider business, Toth, and his father-in-law, Mori, had been added in.

We were as protected as we could get. Especially considering the dragons were still with us. We'd lost Miraghan and Rezoth back to Abrocaelum. As much as both wanted to stay, they had responsibilities to their people. They had added their magic and protected the pack. Really, their work was done. Valethar was only staying because of his connection to Chase. They had bonded while flying, not in a romantic way. Kade said they were platonic soul mates. Ozyn agreed, so I guess that was that.

The rest of the boys stayed. Balon had missed Nhil while the enigma tried to convince Micah to take a chance on him. I figured we might have Balon staying with us for a while once this was all said and done. Hence why Mira had returned with Rezoth to act as his advisor in Balon's absence. Not that I minded. It would have been great to spend more time with Gedith and Ryoko, too. I hoped they would stay beyond the battle.

Vale went to the house Chase was staying in with Safi before the fae lived with us. With so many dragons in the house, not all of them were terribly fond of the fae, Safi went with them. Besides, he had bonded with my cousin. They were good friends, he

wanted to be there for Chase.

We went down to Nhil, Balon, Gedith, and Ryoko not long after dinner. Ah, almost blissful silence. Look, I was coming to love the boys, but wow, they were noisy!

“We can sleep in our bed tonight,” Ozyn informed me, his fingers running over the eggs.

“Yeah? What about the babies?”

“Look into yourself. Ask your wolf what he feels.”

I did what Ozyn suggested and found my wolf pacing.

What do you think?

Babies are ready. He nosed one, it was the same one Ozyn spent more time with than the others. The one I sensed less magic in and secretly worried about. Strong. Alpha.

Huh? So can we move them?

Keep them warm. Protected.

Convinced, I opened my eyes to see Ozyn smiling at me. He already had two of the eggs in his arms.

“Give me an egg, Papa,” Balon said, reaching out for one of our treasures. He cradled the pale blue egg in his arms.

“Here,” Ozyn passed a darker blue egg to Gedith before reaching into the nest to give one to Ryoko.

Helping, I reached in to hand an egg to Nhil, then one to Ozyn, leaving the one my wolf had touched for myself to carry.

Leading the way, Ozyn climbed the stairs to the primary bedroom, where we had another, smaller nest set up on our bed. We would wrap ourselves around it, keeping the eggs warm. We even had heating pads, spelled with magic so we could have a moment to wash or be adults without the little babies listening in or taking up all the room on the bed.

Each of the boys laid their eggs down carefully with whispered words. Then, as one, they left the room.

Gedith paused by the door. He grabbed a one way silencing ward from the dresser and slapped it on the door, activating it. "Thought you might need some privacy." Then he shut the door firmly.

I went to my mate, wrapping my arms around him from behind, I dipped my head to nibble in his neck.

"Hmm, I think we should take this to the bathroom," Ozyn said, his voice husky. I continued to kiss along his throat. "Not in front of the babies!"

We showered together, spending time washing each other, teasing with kisses and lingering touches. I'd missed the feeling of having my mate in my arms.

"Deke, I need you," Ozyn murmured, barely audible over the spray of the water.

Bending to pick him up, I leaned him against the wet wall. His legs wrapped around my waist as I took his mouth in a deep kiss. My fingers trailed down his back, over the curve of his ass to his crease. I worked Ozyn open until he could take my cock easily. When I slid inside him, we both moaned. It had only been a few days, yet it

felt like forever since we'd had time for anything more than some kisses and hugs. Just being near him had been enough. This was better.

The feeling of his passage around my length was heavenly. I pumped my hips into him while he stroked himself. We came together, my orgasm short-lived because I willed my knot back. Both of us wanted to get back to the eggs. I could feel Ozyn's growing worry.

"Thank you," Ozyn said with a lingering kiss. "I have such a caring and understanding mate."

"I love you. I'd do anything to make you happy."

"You already do. Now, let's get some sleep."

We lay on either side of the eggs, sandwiching them between us. In the room's silence, I could hear their heartbeats. They were perfect.

I sensed a fight coming with my mate. The eggs had been wrapped in their heating charms while we took care of our needs rather than carrying them around the house. I had thought the plan for their care was simple. I was wrong.

During the day, Ozyn could take them outside and shift with them when I was working, or I could take a couple with me to work. Between us, Ozzy, Safi and I could take them to the office. Then I could sit with the eggs all day and do whatever. Or so I thought.

Ozyn wanted to be more active and would not wait at home, in the safety of the pack, while I went to the aviary to potentially fight a battle for leadership with our Alpha. I hoped it would be a case of breaking in so Blake could issue the challenge, but I feared it would be bloodier than that.

My mate wouldn't like me going into danger, but it was my job. He had wanted me to stay on as Head Enforcer, telling me my job was part of my identity. He was right, of course, since he knew me better than I knew myself. Ozyn understood me, still I thought he would hate me leaving him behind.

"Where are you going?" he asked, seeing me ready a couple of knives and potions.

I strapped the knives to each thigh. We weren't going to shift if we could help it since they had an advantage, being able to fly. In my human form, I'd have better reach. I thought about getting a gun.

"We're leaving soon." I answered, feeling tension creeping into my body.

"We?" Ozyn cocked his head. "I thought you were staying here with the eggs."

"No. I've got to go." Please, please, please understand, I begged him silently. My wolf whined. He did not like upsetting our mate.

"Okay, let me get ready. I'll come with you." He moved to the closet to get a fresh outfit. "Would you like me to fly you there? It'd be faster. If our sons come too, then there will be less need for a large party." His words were spoken quickly, like he thought I'd interrupt him with objections.

He made perfect sense, but there was just one problem.

"Ozyn, you need to watch the eggs."

His hands paused on a shirt, his eyes narrowed. "I carried them. It is the alpha's responsibility to care for the eggs during roosting."

Fuck. "Maybe in Abrocaelum. Not here. We can't leave them unprotected."

I saw him mentally assessing the situation. “So it is not that you want me to stay behind?” What was he planning?

“If it wasn’t for the eggs, I’d love to fly in on your back and roast some birds with you,” I said, honestly. I really would have loved that. Sighing, I continued, “We’re parents, we have to think of the eggs.”

“You’re only worried about them being left behind? You don’t feel like I’m incapable?” He cocked his head, judging me.

“No, you can handle this. And yes, it’s only about the eggs.” I tried to keep my cool. It wasn’t his fault. This was a stressful situation. I didn’t love the idea of leaving him at home, but Blake needed me there. He didn’t know how to fight with Ozyn in my place.

“Okay. I have a way we can both get what we want.” Ozyn climbed onto the bed. He brushed his fingers over each egg. “We’re going on an adventure,” he told them in a sweet voice. He loved them so much.

Then he partially shifted. It was grotesque! His body, from the waist down, was all human. The middle upwards, including his massive wings, was all dragon. He took up most of the room! Tucking his wings, he knocked things off the dresser.

“Oops, sorry,” he said in his draconian voice.

My feet were rooted to the spot while I stared at my mate.

Talon tipped hands or feet or whatever, curled around three of the eggs, scooping them up from the bed. He lifted them towards his giant maw. He opened, tipped the clawed hand into his mouth, and swallowed the eggs!

“No!” I screamed. I trembled in place, utterly frozen, and unable to protect my babies.

Ozyn spared a moment to frown at me, a strange expression on his dragon face. “They’re fine, Deke. Trust me. I’d never harm them.”

Harm them? He fucking ate them! What did he mean, he didn’t hurt them? Three of our beloved eggs were gone.

I stumbled towards the bed, but it was too late.

He repeated the motion with the remaining eggs, devouring them in the blink of an eye until the nest lay empty.

I slumped to the floor with an agonized wail. “No!” Tears flowed freely down my face. I wondered who this monster was. How could I fight the aviary with a broken heart? How could I ever look at my fated mate again?

A knock sounded at our bedroom door. The ward was down, someone must have heard us.

“Just a minute,” Ozyn said, sounding perfectly normal once more.

“We heard a scream,” Nhil said from the other side of the door.

“A misunderstanding,” Ozyn replied.

A fucking misunderstanding? I was here, traumatized, and he thought I’d just gotten it wrong? How was this me getting things wrong here? He was broken. His imprisonment had damaged his brain. Had to be that. It was the only explanation I had for what he’d done.

His footsteps trailed along the floor. One look up told me he was back to normal. I hoped in vain this was all just a bad dream.

He crouched next to me. “Deke?” I flinched away from him. I saw sadness flit over his face. “What’s wrong?”

“You... I... how...?”

“What is it?” He cupped my face with his delicate hands. The same ones which had just picked up our eggs and eaten them. I shivered with disgust.

“You killed our babies!”

He laughed! The monster laughed. He took another look at my face and laughed even harder! Until tears were rolling down his face.

“They.... they’re... fine,” he hiccuped out between giggles.

Another knock. “Dad? Are you okay?” Nhil sounded worried now.

I assumed Ozyn used his link with the boys to tell Nhil to enter. I wished I had the same link. For some reason, it hadn’t formed. I think Dakota had one with Angelica. Maybe it was a case of both sides wanting to build that bridge. Maybe it would come in time.

Nhil strolled into the room. He took a glance at me on the floor, devastated, and then frowned at his papa.

Ozyn waved a hand at the bed and then me, still chortling away. Little savage monster.

“Oh, the eggs are fine,” Nhil said nonchalantly. He smirked when he looked at the horror on my face. “No, really. They’re fine. It’s our treasure belly. That’s where he’s hidden them. Perfectly safe.” He grinned at Ozyn. “Great idea Papa!”

“Treasure belly?” I repeated, still in shock. “Hidden? They’re not gone?”

“Of course! I would never harm my babies!” Ozyn stood, frowning at me like he was sad I had the audacity to be mad and upset at him. He rubbed his stomach. “You can’t see them in either form. It’s part of our magic.”

Nhil rounded on his papa. “You didn’t explain it to him first? Just swallowed the eggs?” Nhil was clearly horrified.

Chastened, Ozyn slowly nodded, face filled with shame. “He said I could go to the aviary and roast birds if we didn’t have the eggs to worry about!” He turned to implore Nhil for understanding. “I can’t let Deke and our pack go without me. They need me! I have to be there to fight with them, to protect your dad.”

“Papa!” Nhil sighed. He leaned down with a hand to pull me up. I took it and was soon enfolded into a bone-crushing hug. “I promise they’re safe. Let’s go outside and I’ll show you.” He drew Ozyn closer since my mate was hanging back looking ashamed of himself. “Come downstairs so Dad can see the treasure stomach in action.”

Ozyn reached for my hand. Tentatively, I took it, daring to hope this was all just a lack of communication, and the babies were fine, safely locked away in this weird treasure belly. He did suddenly hold a lot more magic. I could feel it inside him with my gift. My wolf told me to trust our mate.

We walked through the house. The others followed us out to the yard with muttering going on between them.

“Okay, Dad, let’s show you this. I’m not going to make Papa spit them back up, but I’ve got something stored away for safekeeping.”

With that, Nhil shifted, taking on his massive dragon form. He was a light blue on top and a darker blue, almost navy underneath, with his pretty blue eyes, he was quite impressive. He coughed, stretching his neck, then coughed again, made a gagging sound and spat a crown onto the ground.

The crown was shiny with massive sapphires surrounding a diamond the size of a fist.

“I thought it was pretty,” Nhil explained, now back in his human form. He picked it up and wiped it on his shirt. “Matches my scales.”

My brain went completely offline. “The eggs...”

“Stored safely in my treasure stomach.”

“Ha! I never thought of that,” Gedith cried. “The treasure stomach, of course! Great idea, Papa. Now we can all go.”

Alpha's Fight

Ozyn

As battles often went, it took a long time to organize the troops. First, we had to get permission for five dragons to fly over Sweetwater and Northharbor while the rest of our force drove beneath us. Obviously, the police and the Supernatural Defense Force had to be involved to give us the clearance, whatever that was. Second, we had to argue about who was flying with whom. Of course, I would be flying with my mate, if he ever decided to look at me with something other than fear or disgust in his eyes.

You scared him, Papa, Balon rebuked me like I was a child.

Really? You couldn't have warned the wolf first? Gedith challenged, though I sensed he was amused by the situation.

Hasn't he asked you anything about dragon hoards or what our magic does? Ryoko was the most skeptical of his brothers and also the most protective of me at that moment.

Have you asked him about his wolf soul? I replied. I felt so much guilt for what I put my mate through. If only I'd taken the time to explain instead of rushing ahead, determined to get my way.

Noted. Are you sure about this mating? Ryoko would be in so much trouble if Deke could hear this. It would crush him to know one of his new sons doubted his suitability as part of our family.

Yes. We are fated mates. There has been little opportunity to discuss our differences with attacks and my recovery. We have time to learn about each other better. This was just a silly mistake. I tried to brush it off like I hadn't given Deke a huge fright.

Dad is watching, Nhil warned.

I turned to see Deke observing us. He had already told Blake about the eggs, much to our Alpha's delight. He thought the incident was hilarious!

In truth, part of me stung because Deke had believed I could harm the babies we had made together. They were a symbol of our love, of the trust I had in him as my mate. To hurt them would be to hurt myself. They were a precious part of myself I had shared with him.

Perhaps sensing my upset, Deke pulled me aside. "I'm sorry. I should have trusted you."

Unable to let go of the pain I felt, I agreed. "You should have. They are perfectly safe with me."

Papa, Nhil admonished. You know you're in the wrong here.

I can hear you, Nhil! Deke said in wonder. Had they formed a bond? Checking, I realized I wasn't using my magic to connect them.

Hey, Dad. Sorry about Papa. He's a hothead sometimes. Nhil was grinning.

I agreed with Nhil. I was at fault. Would it have been a problem if I had taken a moment to talk to Deke about my plan instead of just acting? No. All this could have been avoided.

“They really are safe,” I repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. “I would never risk the babies.”

“I know, Ozzy. You aren’t the same feral creature who came roaring through the portal, or the dragon who pinned Chase against the wall. I understand how you feel. I should have had more faith. It scared me, is all.”

Balon, in his wisdom, had some advice for me. Never go into a battle angry.

He was right. I had to let go of what I was feeling, considering it was a mess of my own making. All I had to do was talk to my mate. We had only been together for a few months, and for much of that time we were both healing. There were still plenty of things I could do as a dragon that he didn’t know about. Things he would discover over the years to come.

“Alright,” I conceded, voicing my thoughts. “It wouldn’t have hurt for me to take a moment to tell you about the treasure stomach and how we use it.” Deke raised an eyebrow at me. Unwilling to apologize more, I changed the subject. “Let’s get ready to go.”

Most of the pack wanted to come along with us. In the end it was decided Chase, as Second, would stay behind with Larken to defend the pack in the event of another attack. Roan would guard Kade and his brood, while Aldrin and James would help Dalton and Ingal. Vale was staying with Chase to assist his friend.

Their allies from the Greenbriar pack were sending people to guard those left behind while the Alpha from the pack, Leith, went with them along with his Head Enforcer, Reggie.

Micah was staying behind, much to Nhil’s frustration. Now he had a fated mate, whether they’d bonded or not, Micah was trusted near the omega area to guard it.

Melody was running point on its protection while Axel was in charge and wanted the dingo shifter with her team.

As prince of the elves, Teárlach was coming with us. Safi would represent the fae and Toth the demons. Thyme's husband, Oak, was meeting us outside of the aviary territory to be the voice of the covenant. Logan, the alpha from the Northharbor pride, was bringing some of his shifters. He was done with the attacks in his city and how they affected not only the pack, but all shifters.

Balon asked to carry Alpha Blake, so he could arrive in style. It should have been me as the former king, except I refused to carry anyone other than my mate. The boys all wanted a chance to carry their dad, still I held onto Deke. We were still on shaky ground after the earlier... misstep.

Tate could fly himself, yet he wanted to try riding a dragon, so he and Hiroshi went with Nhil. No one really wanted to take two omegas, though Tate was indeed a delta, into a battle. They feared Hiroshi hadn't been properly trained to fight. I worked my magic to ensure alpha influence would not work on them.

Ryoko offered to fly both Safi and Teárlach. The flight was too far for Safi's damaged wing, so he had to be carried. The elf prince refused to fly on a dragon, shifting into his owl form instead. He would be useful for the battle. I spelled his clothing and that of the other bird shifters, Mateo and Sebastian, so they could remain clothed and not need to dress quickly. They also could keep a few weapons on themselves, very useful for later.

Jasper was insistent he go too. He said their goddess demanded it. His mate, Dakota, was reluctant to stay behind. In the end, Dakota went in a vehicle, while Jasper flew with Gedith. It was apparent where Kade got his spirit. In appearance, he wasn't much like his papa, I was told he'd had his face altered after an injury, but in attitude, they were very alike.

The van Dakota took was filled with enforcers. With our other allies, we presented quite the force. We were in for another shock when we assembled by the gate, ready to leave.

Hernandez was there with officers from his department, some I recognized from previous run ins. Most were sympathetic to shifters. Next to him stood a mixed squad of SDF officers. There were at least two vampires, shifters, an ogre, a gargoyle, and a few magic users.

“Alpha Blake, we are here with a statement from not only the mayor but the government, too. They have given your challenge to Michael, Alpha of the Northarbor aviary, the green light. Full backing from the police and the SDF here.” Hernandez stepped closer. “Look, we want this done with the least amount of casualties as possible, okay?”

“Of course. The dragons will follow my word. We are giving a show of force. Once inside, I will pronounce the challenge. Once done, all fighting will cease. None of us will be fighting to kill, even me.”

Was it just me, or did Blake look directly at me when he said that? I had to admit to being disappointed there would be no roasted birds in my future.

You can still singe some tail feathers , Deke soothed.

Ah, my mate was back on my side once more.

Deke climbed onto my back like he was made to be there. Perhaps he was. The Luna had created him with me in mind with a helping hand from lady fate.

I’m really sorry about earlier , I said to him using our private bond. It was difficult to express my regret at the situation I had caused. I was still frustrated that I had failed

to use my words rather than acting first.

My mate patted my neck fondly. I know Ozzy. It'll be as funny as Blake thought it was in a bit.

Once I regurgitate the eggs?

Yeah. Once I can see them for myself.

We watched the others get into place. I used some magic to connect my mate with my boys, aside from Nhil, trusting their bond was still working. It felt good to have Deke on my back once more.

Deke nudged me. "Watch Blake. He looks green."

Sure enough, Alpha Blake was sitting on top of Balon, looking unwell.

Balon, fly gently, our Alpha—

If he pukes on me, I'm gonna roll him off.

Clearly Balon meant for Deke to hear his statement, because my mate stiffened. I thought he was going to climb down for a moment.

Don't worry, mate, I will catch him.

Maybe Blake should drive.

Think of how it will look to the aviary when your Alpha flies in on the back of an alpha dragon! Nhil tried to put a positive spin on what was likely to be an unpleasant flight for our Alpha.

“Ready? Let’s move out!” Hernandez called, leaping into his vehicle and starting the journey. He led the caravan of cars and trucks through the back streets of Sweetwater towards the bustling city of Northharbor.

The aviary was on the opposite side of Northharbor from the pride who preferred the woodlands. They had chosen the cliffs overlooking the sea since the city was a harbor town that had grown over the centuries as industry and magic combined to advance technology. The port was still busy with supply ships and fishing vessels both using it.

Trucks from the coven and pride joined us part way through the city along with a unit of Northharbor’s police force. They were also frustrated with the constant attacks disrupting the lives of the people of the city.

I flew a lazy path over the line of vehicles, circling back to watch the progress of my sons. I was so proud of them. They had come to help with the eggs only to see the pack at their most vulnerable and they didn’t even question stepping in.

There was a moment of deja vu when we drew close to the compound of the aviary. In so many ways it reminded me of Glorin’s castle. It had the same oppressive energy to it. When I flew higher, I saw why.

“It is a cage!” I roared out in my draconic voice for all to hear. A bolt of panic shot through me, soothed only by Deke’s reassuring touch.

We’ll figure it out, he said.

Shouts went out. This was growing more complicated. Our plan was to fly directly in and open the gates for the others.

“There’s a hatch!” Gedith yelled over the wind.

Circle back. Let our passengers off, I told them.

They did as they were told, shifting once everyone was on the ground.

“What did you see?” Deke asked Gedith.

“Like I said, there’s a hatch. They must use it for getting in and out when shifted. Otherwise it’s full of a fine mesh, likely warded.”

“I say we just peel the lid off,” Nhil muttered, looking at his nails. “We can’t go in unless we control the roof access. It’d be too easy for them to trap us. I don’t think it’s big enough to have us shifted inside either.”

“What about the wards?” Blake asked, concerned. He wouldn’t want to risk us being hurt by the magic.

“Our scales are immune to most magic. It takes a lot to harm us. We can try peeling the roof off, each taking a section to make a large hole. Big enough for two dragons at a time.” I was confident we could do it.

“Okay,” Blake agreed. “Give it a try. We’ll start on the door to create a distraction.”

We took to the air while the force below us started ramming the gates with an armored truck both working on a way for them to enter and causing a distraction. The force beneath us was divided.

The seams of the cage were poorly constructed. I sent a thought to my boys. They each took a section in their talons as the shifters under us screamed in fright.

Pull! I ordered. As one, we all yanked on a section of the wire roof. It was barely wide enough for a sparrow to exit, the mesh was so fine.

Immediately, it came free, allowing a burst of bird shifters of various types to fly free. We tossed the metal aside. The birds left unharmed because I got the impression that these were prisoners taking their chance to escape. Any who came at me to fight caught fire, only enough to make them fall, not to burn them to a crisp, though it was tempting.

I hear you up there having fun, Deke laughed. The door is nearly down. As soon as it is, I want you all to land, okay?

Yes .

Moments later, there was a mighty crash as the gates gave way to pressure. The vehicles all rolled through and one by one, the occupants exited, waiting on Alpha Blake to call out.

Skirmishes broke out as the aviary enforcers tried to fight back the invaders. Together with my sons, I hooked a few mercenaries in my talons and tossed them into the surrounding trees. They took the opportunity to flee rather than return to what was descending into a brawl.

Blake climbed onto the roof of a vehicle, his voice amplified with magic from the witch with us.

“Michael, Alpha of the Northarbor aviary, I challenge you to a fight for leadership of your pack. You are a disgrace to shifters. We want our omegas back!”

Gasps ran out through the remaining aviary shifters. Clearly they had not known about the theft of the shifters.

I shifted and landed among our forces, my boys doing the same.

“You are not fit to lead us,” a hulking man growled out. “I accept your challenge.”

A member of the SDF stepped between them. “Clear the area,” they demanded. Everyone moved back, allowing a circle to form. On one side were the birds, the other the pack with their allies.

Blake jumped down to stand next to the SDF agent.

“This is a sanctioned fight. You will not fight to kill. The fight will be conducted in your human forms. First to shift forfeits.” They waited until both Alphas nodded. “Ready? Fight.”

I was grateful this was not a drawn out process. Both Alphas circled each other, taking measure of their opponent.

Michael was the first to dive forward, a flash of silver in his hand. A knife!

Lazily, Blake stepped outside of his reach, his wrist snapped up, his own weapon in hand. He struck, slicing a long line down the bird’s arm. He squawked in pain, sounding very much like the eagle he was supposed to be.

They continued on, Michael clutching his arm and looking for a way to strike out. Apparently bored, Blake went on the offensive. He punched and kicked out, each movement finding its mark on Michael’s increasingly battered body.

“You,” kick, “are done,” punch, “harming the ones I love,” another kick, “for being loved by our goddess.” He rammed into the man with his shoulder, sending the hulking figure flying to the ground.

“For years you’ve been a plague on your people. You are the reason your betas haven’t changed. You are the reason there are so few young in the aviary. This place

is dying because you can't admit you've lost your way!"

Blake stood over the man. He placed his boot on his chest, not budging while Michael tried to buck him off. The other Alpha tried to stab him. Blake kicked his wrist, breaking his grip on the knife. It landed too far for either to reach. Blake stamped on the Alpha, making him wheeze.

"Time and time again you have attacked my pack. You tried to take my children! This ends now. Admit it, I've beaten you!"

Blake kneeled over the fallen alpha's chest, pinning him in place. He fought flailing arms to take him by the throat.

"Yield!" he roared.

Michael shook his head even as he tried to claw Blake off him. He was losing the battle and he knew it.

Then he shifted. It happened in the blink of an eye. His clothes had been loose, so they fell off him. Eagle talons dug into Blake's arms, drawing blood, ripping flesh. Blake let go with a cry. The other Alpha flew free only to shift and charge back towards Blake.

Deke screamed, feet already in motion, charging to protect his Alpha. He took Michael to the ground, landing a knife in the Alpha's neck.

Alpha Michael died a coward's death. He had lost as soon as he had shifted.

Hiroshi rushed to Blake's side to heal him. With Oak helping, they soon had the Alpha fixed up.

The SDF agent spoke to the crowd. “Alpha Michael forfeited the fight by shifting. Your new Alpha is Alpha Blake of the Sweetwater pack!”

A New Pack

Deke

The aviary did not like the SDF announcing they had a new Alpha. Many of them began yelling, forcing their way through the crowds to get in our faces. More fights broke out, only to be pulled apart by the police. I saw some of the enforcers get arrested.

One growl from Ozyn, who had returned to his dragon form to curl around me, was all it took to send the ones closest to me back.

Another, louder rumble, and all activity halted. I hoped the cops and the SDF knew by this point that they were safe with my mate. Even the mercenaries he'd removed had been able to walk away from the situation, and they were paid killers. My mate... well, he wasn't harmless, just not harmful in general.

Jasper emerged from the back of our group. He had a strange aura surrounding him. Eyes caught on him as he made his way forward. All he did was walk to stand beside Blake. Everyone fell silent.

"My shifters, my brother's children, our witnesses, here you see the end of the aviary. I have watched. I have waited. All in vain. You refused to see the truth. Repent. Accept your new Alpha, or suffer the consequences."

Blake, understanding the situation, turned to Jasper and got onto one knee. "My lady, I ask to give someone else the role of Alpha for the aviary." He looked up at Jasper,

who still sort of glowed, letting us know The Luna was very much in charge. “You have gifted me a mate and four children once our daughter is born. I need to focus on my pack in Sweetwater. I owe them my time. These people are strangers to me. I thought Sebastian would be a more fitting Alpha.”

Sebastian’s jaw dropped. It made perfect sense to me, though. He’d been in the aviary before he fled with Jake. He was now an alpha and had sworn loyalty to Blake in order to change designation. Seb was the perfect leader for a group of birds, being a peregrine falcon. Not Blake, a wolf shifter.

Movement brought my gaze back to Jasper and Blake. It was weird to watch Jasper, who was Blake’s father-in-law, the man he called Papa, touch his face with gentleness and grace borne of an ancient being. He took on a faint glow.

“I knew your true heart would make the right choice. I trusted you would not seek power for power’s sake. Your plan to put Sebastian in charge is one founded in logic and has my blessing. Thank you for continuing to prove me right for the faith I have in not only you, but your pack. May the Sweetwater pack remain healthy and happy with my love.”

“My lady, it’s us who are rewarded for our faith in you. Thank you for all you have done.”

Unable to speak to thank her, I got to one knee and bowed my head. All around me, I felt the pack and dragons do the same. Even the police and SDF were kneeling when I glanced up to check.

Movement drew my attention, halting, shuffling steps broke the silence. One of the aviary’s enforcers came to the front of the crowd. More eyes landed on him. I didn’t know the guy’s name, but I felt Sebastian go taut near me. Mateo held him back with a hand on his arm. Even Blake spared Seb a glance. Then it hit me who this was:

Sebastian's father and the Second of the aviary.

The bastard didn't even look his son's way. He charged forward, a couple of other bird shifters with him.

"What is this shit? Do you really expect us to believe you're speaking for the goddess? She abandoned us!"

"Dad, no!" I heard Seb cry.

Jasper/The Luna rounded on Seb's dad. "I did not leave you. No, you chose to listen to the voices of men, the voices of alphas who told you to continue to follow a broken path." The alphas with him shrank back from her anger. "You have no love in your hearts. Now you will have no animal in your soul."

Someone screamed. The alphas stared at The Luna in shock. I watched as they tried to shift. Sebastian's dad howled in fury. The guns leveled on him kept him in place.

"What I gave, I can take away." She turned away from them to Blake, softening back to the loving goddess we knew. "Continue as you are. I have every faith you can return these shifters to the correct path. As always, you have my blessing."

All Blake had time to say was, "thank you." She vanished from Jasper, leaving him staggering. Dakota caught him.

"Oh wow, she was mad. I've got a list of names in my head for you to exile. The police might want to check their hard drives—no, not for kid stuff, but financial crap. Paying off people. Plans of attack."

I could feel the smirk on my face. It was finally done. The former Alpha was dead, some weren't even shifters anymore. Sebastian could start the place with a clean slate

once he dealt with his family.

I saw a woman watching him with tears in her eyes as Seb's dad grabbed her arm and hauled her towards one of the shabby buildings. Looked like she wasn't ready to reach out for help to get away from her mate. It was a shame Sebastian's family couldn't change in time to play a part in their grandson's life.

“Um, Alpha Blake, do you really—“

“Yes, Sebastian. I do. Speak with your mate, but I'd really like you to do this.”

“Alpha Blake,” Mateo came forward. “With your permission, I would like to return here, to the aviary, with my family. Grady could be their new healer, perhaps—“

“You would make a fine Second in Command for Sebastian if he is willing. It's fitting since you both were in the Wing Guard.”

The two of them, Sebastian and Mateo, shared a look. “I'm going to call Jake. Maybe he can come here with Matthew.” It was clear he was seriously thinking about it if he was talking about bringing their baby there. “Could some of the enforcers stay until I can get them to swear to me?”

“Sure,” Blake said, easily. “Since I won the challenge, I'll have to get you to swear a new oath. We'll do that in private. Then I'll release everyone you need into your care.”

“Are you sure you want to make me their leader?”

“Seb, you've been loyal to me and the pack since you landed on my lawn just over two years ago. I can't think of anyone better. Think about it, you can fly, I can't. You were a beta, now you are an alpha because The Luna saw something in you. Doesn't

that make you the better choice than me?” Seb nodded slowly at Blake. “Besides, we are still tied, I will be the Alpha’s Alpha.” Blake laughed at his own joke.

Loser, I sent to him affectionately.

I’ll tell Ozyn you were hugging someone, he threatened back.

I flashed a look at my mate, who was watching the action patiently, his large reptilian eyes scanning the crowd for trouble. Within our bond, I could feel Ozyn getting restless.

Can we go now? I asked Blake. I didn’t want him to have time to tell Ozyn anything considering how chill everything had been between us recently. He was much less possessive, but he was also riled up after seeing the cage.

Sebastian was making a call. He gave the thumbs up sign to Blake, so I guess Jake agreed to be the new Alpha Mate of the aviary. Mateo was doing the same. He had two mates in Grady and Trey, both of whom had extra gifts. Trey could see bonds, Grady had that extra healing power like Aldrin and Hiroshi, making him invaluable to a pack. He grinned at Seb and Blake. Guess his mates were on board, too.

Logan, the pride leader, walked up to Blake. “Would you mind sharing your healer? Aldrin does a great job, but your pack is pretty big these days.”

“Not my decision to make.”

“Yeah, I’d be okay with that,” Sebastian said, joining the pair of Alphas.

“There you go.” Blake cupped Sebastian’s neck. “As long as Grady is open to that, of course. He’s still training, so Aldrin will be around, too.”

Next to me, I could feel Ozyn getting restless. “May we return to the pack?”

His question jolted Blake out of his conversation. “Okay,” Blake called. “I’m going to ask for volunteers to stay here with Sebastian. Someone will need to head to the pack and pick up Grady, Trey, their kids, Jake and Matthew plus any belongings they want to take.”

“I’ll send Barr,” Toth said in his usual stoic manner. “If I’m not needed anymore, I’ll return to Cody. We’re getting ready to harvest.”

Blake shook the demon’s hand. “Thanks for coming, Toth. Sorry there wasn’t more of a fight.”

I didn’t hear the rest of what they said, too engrossed in watching the police and SDF lead people out of the aviary compound.

“The cage... you won’t replace it, will you?” Ozyn asked in a quiet voice.

Sebastian answered him. “There are no prisoners here. Those who don’t want to stay can leave. I’ll give them a couple weeks to find somewhere else to live.”

“See?” Blake laughed. “Barely two minutes into the job and already he’s proving me right. Congrats Alpha Sebastian. Once I find Erin and Georgia, I’m hitching a lift. Flying is not for me! Won’t be long behind you.”

Coming close, he drew Ozyn into a one-armed hug. “Thanks for today. Take your mate home, okay? Next time you visit this place, it’ll look very different. I’m sure of that.”

With nothing for us to do and with permission from Blake, we took to the air, heading for home. Nhil was returning with us, the rest of the boys would stay a day or two

until things were more stable for the new Alpha as extra protection. I really appreciated how quickly the boys had stepped in to help the pack. I made sure to hug them all before we left. With each one, I felt a flicker of affection. Maybe we'd get a family bond after all other than the one I had growing with Nhil.

It felt strange to leave some of our people behind, but we had grown so much with little sign of slowing down. Sweetwater would always welcome shifters, of all kinds, as long as they shared similar beliefs.

May we fly a while longer? I would like to stretch my wings more.

Of course, I answered my mate.

We flew for another hour, maybe. Just touring the pack lands, watching the shifters and elves below us yell with delight when they saw us overhead.

Touching down on pack lands felt so good. I loved being in the sky with Ozyn, it was such a buzz, yet it was nice to be home. My wolf appreciated being on solid ground once more. He loved his dragon as much as I did, but being up in the air meant we couldn't shift.

It was done. It was all over.

Relief nearly made me stagger. I felt lighter knowing all the shit with the aviary was done. Nearly two years of a smear campaign, attacks, being stuck in the compound, were over. Now our people could visit outside, they could take jobs elsewhere, we wouldn't have to worry about how to get basic supplies.

"How do you feel about traveling a little once the babies have hatched?" I asked my mate once he was shifted back.

“I would like that. Perhaps we should wait until they sleep through the night and can fly themselves.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t we head to the mansion and share the good news, maybe pick up dinner from Winter? I’m sure he’ll want to see you and feed you.”

“Yes, please. I would like to tell everyone how well our Alpha fought.” The clear pride in his voice made me smile.

“Alpha Blake was impressive,” Nhil remarked, falling into step beside us.

Not sure if I imagined it, but Micah looked relieved when he saw Nhil next to me. Everyone was overjoyed to know everything would be settled with the aviary soon. Sure, there would be charges and court cases for some of the higher ups in their group. They weren’t our problem anymore. We could finally breathe.

Inside the mansion, the library and the huge dining room were undergoing a transformation. The rooms had been turned into party spaces. Most of the pack were there, ready to greet Blake and thank him for putting an end to the misery the aviary inflicted on us. Winter had even baked a cake!

It took some time for Winter to get everything how he wanted, but I knew it would be worth it when Blake saw how much his pack loved him. The call came from the gate when the gathered shifters began to grow impatient. Blake had returned.

Watching Kade rush as fast as he could to the gate to welcome his mate home was a sweet picture. I took a video of the delight on their faces so they could see how clear their love was to everyone else.

Chase and Axel surrounded their baby brother, hugging him tightly. They pulled me in with them before our mates all joined in. I kept it fairly brief, sensing Ozyn’s

growing discomfort.

Standing a little aside, I heard his quiet, wistful voice. “They are special, aren’t they? The Luna spends a lot of time here. I understand why when I see them like this.”

“Yeah, they are. Come on, I’m hungry.” I took his hand to tow him back to the party.

This was only part of my family now. I knew if I had to go to Abrocaelum with my kids and mate, they’d be okay. The worst was behind us now. They had a bright future ahead of them, blessed by our goddess.

Treasure

Ozyn

By the time we returned home, it was very late into the night. We had celebrated with the pack, welcoming Alpha Blake back with the congratulations he deserved. When he had left the aviary, some two hours after us, he had ensured Sebastian and Jake were safe and the situation legally was all in hand.

Boring stuff like the land deeds had to be transferred through Blake to Sebastian since Blake had rightfully won the Alpha position. I was still impressed by the young man. At only twenty-four, he had a fated mate, children, successfully ran a large pack and business, while committing himself to bettering conditions for betas and omegas.

I'd learned that before the sickness, beta females suffered from discrimination, and likely in some packs, they still did. They were often seen as useless because of their inability to bear children, as if that was all women were intended for. Blake and Deke before him had allowed beta women to become enforcers, seeing them as the perfect people to protect vulnerable omegas. I'd asked Melody if she wanted to change because she had the potential to be an alpha. She declined, stating it would be "too much drama," and she wanted to remain a beta in what was possibly the last generation of betas since none had been born to the pack in some time. Eventually, perhaps there would be beta babies once more. Perhaps they would all have the ability to change if they wished for it.

Both Winter and Chase, as Deke had said, did not want to change either. They liked things as they were. I had to trust The Luna had taken measure of her shifters' hearts

and knew better than I did what they needed.

“Do you think the aviary betas will have the beta sickness now?” I was fascinated by the process.

A correlation was found in the length of time each beta had the strange illness. If they woke after only two weeks, they would only have a malformed version of the gene required to unlock either alpha or omega designation characteristics. Though perhaps they should not limit their thinking to alpha and omega, as there were at least two deltas from the betas who had changed in the pack.

Those who slept a month, or more like thirty days, a full lunar cycle, would have the gene which would need activating depending on whether the beta wanted to change or not.

“Not sure. Maybe. I hope so for some of them. The aviary... it was awful. You saw it.”

The place was more like a prison than a compound designed to protect its members from the outside, where they might still be discriminated against for being shifters. A pack or pride, whatever they called it, was a place of safety and belonging. They weren't supposed to cage their members.

“It's going to take some time to change things, but I think Sebastian can do it with Blake's help.”

“Blake would not set Sebastian up to fail. I think he was right to place a bird shifter, one who had knowledge of the aviary, there as their leader. The Luna was happy with the choice at least, which is confirmation it was a good one. It is... unusual for a god or goddess to be so involved in their followers' lives.”

“Yeah,” Deke smiled. “I think we’re a special case. A sort of catalyst for change everywhere. Look what we’ve done to the council. They’re going to jail, or at least the ones behind the attacks and abuses. We couldn’t have done that without her influence.”

I could agree with that.

“Besides, I think our faith powers her to be more present. Now that the elves know who she is to them, she has even more followers, boosting her energy.”

“A mutually beneficial relationship.”

“Right.”

Our home was dark when we entered. I found I missed the light and noise from our visitors. Nhil was yet to return. He was observing his mate from afar whilst sampling the alcoholic cider the pack made in partnership with the demon, Toth. Safi was still staying near Chase, who was trying to be the life of the party.

I hoped to have some alone time with my mate, but there was something to do first.

Deke walked through the house, turning on lights, picking up discarded items like cups and dishes. Most of our guests had been thoughtful and cleared up after themselves. I fear our boys had not been as civilized. They were accustomed to servants in the castle. At least that was their excuse, I would bet. Some of which were shifters who had been rescued from fighting rings. There was a small, insular population of shifters in Abrocaelum. I wondered if they had the beta sickness, too.

Truthfully, I had barely been interested in learning about the changes in Abrocaelum after my imprisonment. I had mourned my people and my connection to them. Knowing they were in safe hands with Rezoth, I let go of my ties to protect my heart.

Perhaps I should have tried to learn more about them once I was settled in Sweetwater, but there had been little time for it.

“Ozzy? Are you okay?”

“I need to get the eggs. Will you help me?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Blankets to wrap them in so we can carry them upstairs. Then I would like to enjoy the empty house with my mate.”

“That sounds amazing. Okay, be back in a sec.”

Deke took the stairs two at a time in his hurry to get me what I needed. I went into the yard where the solar lanterns lit the night. Deke’s love and support made it easier for me to deal with the dark, yet I still preferred to have something lighting the way.

I shifted forms, letting my dragon wings stretch. In the house, I could hear Deke muttering to himself about which blankets were best. The sounds of lamps being switched on made me smile.

He returned with an armful. “Okay, ready.”

Taking them out of the magical pocket they were in took a little work and some magic. Thankfully, I’d barely used any of my power while at the aviary. Us all going had been overkill with the SDF and police there. Though it was possible things were calmer because of the excessive show of force. If it made the transition easier for Sebastian, then it had not been a waste of time.

Each of the eggs traveled up my throat to my mouth, where I deposited them

carefully on the lawn. Deke whisked each one into a blanket.

“Should we wash them?”

“No, it can cause problems for the hatchlings. We can wipe them down.”

“Okay.” Deke led the way to the kitchen, where we cleaned each egg with the utmost care. He had brought enough blankets so they could have a fresh one once we were done. “Is it just me, or are they bigger than before?”

I studied them. They had felt more challenging to bring up than swallow. It took me only a moment to realize that they were significantly bigger. I blamed lack of proper sleep for not seeing it sooner.

“They are! Let’s put the warming spells on them so you can take me to bed.” I was excited to treasure this time with my mate before the babies arrived.

“Do you want a shower before...?”

“No. We barely did anything today. I just want... I want to have this time alone with you before Nhil and Safi come back.”

“Okay then.” We each took a bundle of three eggs up to their nest. Deke moved it to the floor so we could have the space to ourselves. He sat on the edge and watched me fuss with the blankets. “We don’t have to do anything. We can just sleep.”

“I want you, though.”

“Then come here and kiss me.”

I stepped between his legs and leaned down to taste his lips. They parted for me, his

tongue coming out to meet mine.

Deke wrapped his arms around me, pulled me onto his lap and took the kiss deeper. His hands found their way under my t-shirt, splaying over the muscles of my back, pushing me closer to him. I loved the feeling of his slightly callused hands on my skin.

My fingers pulled at the button of his pants. I felt this urgent need for my mate I couldn't explain. I flicked the button and delved inside, rewarded with the feeling of his hard cock.

Resting a hand on his shoulder, I moved back and slid to the floor in a fluid movement. My mouth replaced my other hand, sucking the peeking tip of his cock until Deke became frustrated. He shoved at his pants, baring everything to me.

Gazing up into his lustful eyes, I felt powerful. I took his cock into my mouth, working him over until I could take all of him in. My nose met the neatly trimmed patch of hair at his base and I smiled at his heavy breathing, the way his fists were clenched. My mate was on the verge of losing control.

I rolled his balls with one hand while the other held his shaft so I could tease the crown. The taste of his precome was tangy, slightly bitter, but addictive.

It didn't take long for Deke to reach the edge. His hips made aborted thrusts, telling me just how close he was. My mate would never cross my boundary and go further.

“Close. My turn. When I come, I want to knot you.”

Taking his knot in my mouth was impossible for me. All I wanted was him buried deep in my ass when he came. I was glad he understood what I needed without the need for words.

I gave a final lick and smirked. Deke hoisted me up and tossed me onto the bed before he flipped me over onto my belly. He nuzzled each ass cheek, then pulled them apart to tease my hole. The first lick earned him a moan. Soon I was crying out, begging him to give me more than just his tongue. He added his fingers to ensure I was properly stretched.

He drew me onto all fours. His cock was lined up with my entrance. “This okay?”

“Yes. Please... I need.”

Deke thrust inside me on a deep groan. The stretch was perfect. His body was hot against my back. There was a brief moment of panic, which must have crossed the bond. He drew me up so I was sitting on his cock in the cradle of his lap.

He used my body, wringing pleasure from us both. Each pump of his hips hit my spot perfectly. Sweat dripped down my body. My cock leaked where it rested against my belly. Nearly. I was almost there.

“Close,” Deke panted in my ear. The sensation and a savage thrust pushed me over the edge. I spurted over myself, grunting as I tried to stay conscious.

I felt his knot expand as he pumped his seed inside me. He kissed my mating mark.

“Love you,” he whispered.

“Love you, too,” I mumbled.

“Give me a minute and I’ll get us in the shower.”

We stayed like that for a few minutes. Deke kept nuzzling my throat and stroking my stomach, extending those lovely post-coital feelings.

It stung when he climbed off the bed, me still stuck on his knot. I winced.

“Sorry, Ozzy.”

I felt his love in the careful way he washed me in the shower, letting me have the warm spray, then again in the way he enfolded me in his arms once we were no longer joined.

“You are more precious than any jewel,” I said quietly against his chest.

“High praise, my dragon.”

“No.”

“C’mon Ozzy! This is a great thing. Just think, you can fly freely over not just the compound but Sweetwater and Northarbor, too.”

“Must I go to the ceremony?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Blake sympathized. “It’s good optics for the mayor and the pack. We’re even opening the gates to let the media and some city hall officials in.”

“I heard there were some regular humans coming, as well as shifters picked from the aviary,” Kade added. He rubbed his swollen stomach, looking uncomfortable and slightly green.

Taking his hand, I breathed over him, using my magic to steal away his sickness and discomfort. He squeezed my fingers in thanks.

“The eggs...” I muttered in my last attempt to get out of this, despite knowing Nhil wouldn’t be far from his little brothers since I wasn’t there.

“Are safe with Safi, Ingal and Dalton. Larken dropped the quads off at the daycare so they can focus on watching them, though I think Dalton is busy watching Safi and Ingal. Did you see the way Ingal blushed when Safi took his hand?”

I had noticed something between them during the time everyone was in our house post attack. They constantly watched the other while never getting close. I wasn't sure they even talked! Dalton would fix that. He had whispered to me he believed the elf, Ingal, had a crush on Safi. Our fae friend was very beautiful.

Dalton already had plans to bring our nannies closer together once the eggs had hatched.

“Do I need to give you an order?” Blake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No. I will go. For the good of the pack,” I conceded. “Will I need to change my clothes?”

Kade looked me up and down. “Yes. I'm a little taller than you but I'll have something that works in my closet. Blake will get it for you.”

His mate got up immediately. “I think we left your council appropriate suits in the closet in our old suite.” He left to go look.

When he returned, there was a clothing bag over his arm. “Go home and change. Head to Georgia after. She'll pin the suit for you.”

The two omegas had been found in the detention area of the aviary. Apparently, they weren't equipped to deal with a ferocious omega wolf protecting a younger, more vulnerable shifter in her care. Georgia had raised hell. When Blake had found her, she finally broke down. He took her home, then joined the celebration, letting her come to terms with her ordeal in private. The other omega had stayed with her. I was

anxious to check on my friend and therapist. She had helped me so much. I hoped to do the same for her.

She was waiting on her porch for me. “Good to see you. Looking sharp, Ozyn.”

“Are you well?”

“Could’ve done without the experience, still I had faith Blake would come for us. He didn’t let me down.”

“He loves you.”

“And I love him like he’s my own. All three of those boys. Your man there, too. Deke, honey, you look fantastic.”

Inside her small home was cozy and warm. It was a place I could see myself visiting. “Could we do our sessions from here in future? Perhaps I could take a couple of the children with me when I come.”

“I’d be offended if you didn’t bring me those babies. Now, let me get you pinned up so you can get your award.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I grumbled.

“Honey, you took the roof off the cage that kept those poor birds trapped with those fanatics. You protected the pack. You’ve done plenty.”

Her fingers were sure and quick in their work to take up the pants and jacket Kade loaned me for the award the mayor was presenting me. She kissed me on the cheek, doing the same to Deke, and thanked me for coming for her.

“I would never leave you behind.”

“Get. You’re gonna make me cry.”

Deke led me to the front door of the mansion. There on the lawn to the side was a stage set up with chairs in front of it. Each of the chairs held a guest here to witness me getting the freedom to fly over Sweetwater and Northarbor as a protector.

The ceremony passed in a blur. There were speeches about the formation of a new supernatural council where all species would be represented. With shifters making up a larger part of the community than others, they would have a few representatives. At least one would be an omega.

My attention wandered. I tried to stay present. I shook the hands I was supposed to, said the words necessary, and tried to smile.

“What’s wrong?” Deke asked in an undertone.

“There are too many people. Will this last much longer?” My anxiety was rising with each minute.

“Just a few more photos, okay? Your medal looks awesome.”

I looked down at the shiny gold trinket pinned to my lapel. “It will make a fantastic addition to my new hoard.”

“Good. I’m proud of you, you know. This was a lot and you’ve handled it well.”

He kissed my nose while a photographer took the opportunity to take a candid shot of us. I felt my smile slip when the journalist asking us questions moved on. I wanted to go home.

“Deke? Ozyn? You need to head home.” Blake granted my wish. A smile broke across my face. It fell with his next words. “Dalton has gone into labor.”

Hatchlings

Ozyn

Despite being early, Dalton's baby girl was delivered safely in a matter of hours. His healing ability had transferred to his daughter, making her grow very quickly to a healthy eight pounds when the little alpha raccoon made her way into the world.

The couple named their new baby Carina. After Larken's aunt, though with a different spelling to differentiate between the two. This was the same aunt who had raised him alone when his parents died. I thought it was a fitting tribute to the woman who had been a beta herself, like Dalton once was, and gave her life to protect Larken. She had been fierce and apparently would have been tickled pink, whatever that meant, that there were alpha females in the world once more.

The birth had gone smoothly thanks to the return of Michaella, the pack's midwife, after her own child was born. She and ívarr welcomed a son, Nym, not long before the attacks. They had missed them, having been in Abrocaelum letting the queen meet her grandnephew.

ívarr's sister, the scientist behind the discovery of the elves' fertility issue, was introduced to her nephew and came to Sweetwater with them for a visit and to help them with the child. Seemingly, while she adored her new nephew, she was glad she would not be required to pass the bloodline on. I hoped Kelda would stay awhile because I would enjoy speaking to her, I think. People interested in science fascinated me. Had I not been in line to rule, I would have liked to pursue research.

We visited our friends a few days after the birth to bring a token for little Carina alongside Blake and Kade. Their other children were in the daycare, giving the nanny a well-deserved break!

Poor Kade looked uncomfortable in the late summer sun. He rubbed his belly absently. I understood the feeling with two eggs wrapped in a sling nestled close to my body.

“Ugh, I love Dalton or I wouldn’t be here. Is it bad I’m jealous he had his baby before me? I was pregnant first! It’s not fair!” Kade complained as we waited for the door to be answered.

I shot him a look as if reminding him what we carried. With us we had the six eggs since I couldn’t bear to leave them at home. Deke and Safi each held two eggs in slings, like I did. Our elf nanny was very eager to visit the new baby. I believed it was more to do with Ingal, who was the sweetest elf I had ever had the pleasure of knowing. If he was who Safi had chosen, then I wished for their union to be successful. I would be watchful for signs from Ingal and try to encourage Safi into action.

“Pretty sure Dalton feels bad you’re still pregnant, and he’s not,” Larken said with a patient smile when he opened the door. “He knows how uncomfortable you are.”

Kade flushed. “Sorry!”

“Don’t be. We get it.” Larken stepped back to let us in. He squeezed Kade’s hand, letting him know there was no problem between them.

“Here, come sit. I found this chair to be the most comfortable when I was close.” Dalton led Kade to the chair with a friendly smile. If he knew anything about the exchange at the door, he didn’t let on.

I took a seat on the large sectional sandwiched between my mate and Safi. We took a moment to remove the slings and settle the eggs beside us. They each had heating charms on them. I was surprised at how quickly they had grown. We really didn't have much time before they hatched.

The fae's face broke out in a beaming smile at the sight of Ingal holding Carina. Yes, my friend was smitten. I watched Safi's face, then turned my attention to the elf.

What my magic saw there gave me cause for concern. I felt my face pull down in a frown as I studied the elf harder, taking in the changes in him since I'd last seen him. Deke wrapped an arm around me, sensing my worry.

"Ingal, could you pass the baby to Dalton, please?" I asked with some urgency.

"Why?" Dalton questioned while still heading to his nanny and taking the baby.

I left the sofa and went to the elf, kneeling at his feet. Deke was at my back, ready to step in. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Are you ill?" Dalton became worried for his friend.

"Uh, I... feel strange." Ingal raised a trembling hand to his forehead.

Feeling the change come over him, I pushed away from him, giving him space. There was joy in my heart because I knew he was going to be okay.

The elf shifted. Where there was once an elf now sat a stunned little owl. Although one of the smallest species, the owl was perfectly formed. He was also an omega.

No one spoke for an entire minute, just watched the owl ruffling his feathers and moving his head around.

“Ah, aren’t you pretty!” I remarked.

“He is! Thanks for the warning, Ozyn, he would have felt awful if he’d shifted while holding Carina.” Dalton rocked his baby gently.

“You are welcome. I am glad I was here to witness this.”

“Oh wow! This is amazing!” Kade struggled to his feet to get closer to the owl, only to pause. He rubbed his belly, wincing in pain. “Blake, we need to go to the clinic.” A moment later, he stood in the ruins of his clothes in his wolf form.

Didn’t even get to hold the baby! he whined through the pack link.

I held back my laugh at the petulant tone. Poor Kade, though he was getting his wish. Perhaps it was a consolation for him.

Blake stood. “Sorry to cut things short, but it seems our daughter heard her papa was getting impatient to meet her. Congratulations Dalton and Larken on Carina’s safe arrival. She’s cute! Congrats Ingal on gaining your animal soul. I’ll ask Teárlach to visit you soon.”

With those words, he led Kade out the door, hopefully toward the clinic.

Safi was staring open mouthed at Ingal. “You are amazing! Can you fly?” He’d tucked away his own wings thanks to the magic he was learning. I knew it bothered him that he couldn’t flutter around the same way he had before he met me. There were times I wondered if he regretted his decision to attempt the escape that cost him the use of his wings.

“Here.” Larken leaned down to let Ingal climb onto his arm. “I’m going to take you upstairs so you can try to shift back in privacy. Want some help?”

Ingal gave a forlorn hoot. He had chosen the correct family to grow a bond with. They clearly loved him.

I never thought I would shift. Ozyn, you told me I would, but my family is nothing, he said using the pack bond. He and Safi were both members of the pack now. It made it easier for them to do their jobs if they could always communicate with the shifters they lived with.

We don't hold lands or titles. I questioned the queen on her decision to send me here and my mother nearly disowned me for it! The queen was very patient, explaining the goddess wanted me to go. So I went... and now... This is too much!

"Oh, Ingal! The Luna wanted this for you," Dalton cried, still rocking Carina. "Go with Lark and shift back. We need to celebrate!"

Next to me, Safi's face had paled. What was wrong? His eyes followed Larken carrying Ingal up the stairs.

Dalton and Deke both looked at Safi with frowns. Were they wondering what was wrong with him, too?

"May I hold Carina?" I asked, settling back on the sofa.

Deke sat next to me with a squeeze of my thigh. I glanced at Safi, who was still looking towards the stairs where Larken had taken the new owl shifter. I could see a number of expressions passing over his face. A longing, hopelessness, sadness. I wondered what it all meant. He'd been obvious about his feelings up until Ingal shifted. I even thought Ingal might reciprocate those feelings. Now, Safi was conflicted. I'd talk to Deke about it later, maybe he'd know if there was something I was missing.

“Sure! Wow, this has been quite the visit! A lot to process.” Dalton handed me the baby, then perched on the arm of the chair, clearly in shock.

Go make Dalton some tea, I ordered my mate.

All I felt was Deke’s amusement as he left to do my bidding.

I received a call a few days after Ingal’s shift and the birth of Kade and Blake’s newest daughter, an omega wolf called Iris. Blake and Kade chose the name to honor Blake’s mother, who died at the hands of her abusive mate. I sensed it was a healing moment for them. It helped that she also had the same silver-blue eyes her dad did, the same eyes Deke did. They were a trait from his aunt’s side of the family.

Deke was a Sweetwater by name, not blood. His uncle had allowed him to change his name when he was to be heir to the pack before Blake was born.

“Ozyn! I thought you might like to be involved after reading my research. We think we’ve found a way to block heats that even Dalton’s ability won’t get around!” Aldrin sounded overjoyed.

“Are you presenting your findings to Alpha Blake?”

“Yes. There’s a meeting at the science center in an hour. Would you like to come? I’d love it if you could bring the eggs. I would like to take some measurements if you would allow it.”

“Of course. The eggs have to come with me. Deke is at work, so I will need someone to help me carry the eggs over. They cannot be left alone.”

“I’ll head over!” James called in the background. I must have been on speaker or their mating bond was wide open. Given how connected Aldrin and James were, I believed

it to be the latter.

It took me a little while to prepare the eggs. Safi was excited to head to the center, perhaps hoping Ingal would be there. His feelings for the elf were still confusing to me. He was still discussing a match with Teárlach while his heart was tied up in Ingal.

I wondered if we would see Ingal there. Surely Dalton had been invited to attend since this affected his future. He would have another heat in three months. With the moonroot it was possible he would push the heat off, but no one knew how effective it would be long term.

James knocked on our door some twenty minutes later. “Could I measure the eggs here? I thought it would be less intrusive that way.”

“Come in,” I said, stepping aside to let him pass. “Yes, that would be better, thank you.”

With some direction, I helped James take the measurements he and Aldrin wanted. We then re-packed the eggs and some warming spells into the slings and headed for the science center.

The room was busy. Alpha Blake was there, Dakota shadowing him, Chase with his temporary assistant Rudi, who had decided to stay with the pack now that he’d lost his ability to fly. He had settled in Sweetwater with his mate. Their daughter Nova and her mate, Ricky, returned to the aviary to work under her brother, Mateo.

Also waiting for the news was Dalton, Axel, a delegation of elves and from the aviary, Grady. Alpha Logan from the pride was also present.

On a screen were several SDF agents and former council members who had been

cleared from wrongdoings. Talks were still ongoing about how this new supernatural council would be made up. It would take months, even a year before it was up and running.

I noticed some faceless government officials and realized the gravity of the situation.

If they had done it, this was a monumental discovery with implications in the medical industry. For a long time, pharmaceutical companies made the only blocker for a heat which commonly had long-term ill effects.

“Good, everyone is here,” Aldrin began once we were all seated. “We had a breakthrough finding a way to use the innate talent dragons have to block their heats. As Ozyn,” he gestured at me, “explained, he can pause his heat using his magic.”

Aldrin brought up a DNA chart. “But shifters don’t have magic, you say. That’s a lie. They do. Some more, some less. Talents like extra healing for themselves or others, the ability to detect lies. These are forms of magic. The issue was harnessing it to pause heats until they were convenient for the omega.”

He clicked on a set of gene sequences. “Thanks to samples of Ozyn’s blood before a heat, we have found a gene responsible and two new proteins which, we discovered, are an expression of magic in the blood. One pauses, the other activates. Using either of these proteins, we can turn each of the genes off or on. At first there were concerns it was only a dragon trait, however we studied prepubescent shifters and found the activated gene. One of the identified proteins is also in the saliva of a mating bite, hence why a mating bite puts an omega into heat.

“Aldrin, you’re going on a tangent,” James sweetly reminded his mate.

“Right. Puberty! During the later stages of puberty, when the shifter is nearly physically mature, they begin heat cycles, where this protein is produced by the body

to switch off this gene, thus allowing heat cycles to begin.”

No one spoke. I could feel the amazement each shifter had. The elves, some of whom might be shifters themselves, were now completely invested in this project.

“When an omega has a child, this other protein is in action, pushing pause on this gene. Thus halting heat cycles. Dalton’s super healing ability was interesting. Having gone through three heats in almost a year, it was possible to take samples from him and witness an overproduction of the on switch protein in his body. His ability consistently resets him to peak physical condition, usually with a high caloric cost, correct?” Aldrin waited for Dalton to answer.

“Uh, yeah. I’m always eating these days, especially after I’ve had to do some healing.”

“So, we can use your blood to make the protein for others, but we need to isolate one, or rather redirect it.”

“Redirect?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, this is just magic put into scientific terms. We can help Dalton unlock a new ability, or use gene therapy to suppress his talent completely.”

“I want to learn something new! Given the choice. The goddess gave me this ability. I would hate to offend her by giving it away.” Dalton looked practically giddy.

“We thought you might say that,” Aldrin said with a fatherly smile. “Since your healing looks more like dragon magic, Ozyn or Nhil would be better placed on how to teach you to redirect it.”

The meeting broke soon after with a plan to test this other protein, the pause protein,

as they were calling it, on omegas.

James walked us home with my eggs tightly fastened to his chest. He stroked them absentmindedly as he walked, talking the entire time about his delight at fixing this issue for omegas.

He was especially happy about helping Dalton in a way that his ability shouldn't be able to overcome. While Dalton had always wanted to be an omega and carry children, having so many so close together was overwhelming. Not to mention expensive.

Being able to choose when they went into heat would be game changing for omegas all over the world. The current method was poisonous long-term and most suffered through heats rather than use it. This version would likely have no side effects.

We went up to the bedroom when we returned, to settle the eggs. I wanted to wrap them up in our scents once more and enjoy a quiet evening.

"Oh, there you are," Deke said, leaving the bathroom. A cloud of a heavenly scent followed him. "I ran you a bath."

Safi made his excuses and returned to his room on the other side of the house. James grinned, made his goodbyes, and left.

"Hmm, that sounds nice. It's been a long day and I fear the eggs will hatch at any moment."

"Do you have time for a bath with me?"

I examined the eggs. "Not a crack. We have time."

He led me into the bathroom where he stripped me out of my clothes, then helped me into the sweetly scented steaming water. Once he joined me, he pampered me until the water ran cold, then took me to bed.

For hours he worked over my body, massaging, licking and sucking every inch of me, treating me like a treasure until, finally, he slid his cock inside me. Together, we moved as one until I reached my peak and Deke followed after, stretching me on his knot.

We lay in the quiet, barely illuminated room tied together until I heard a loud crack, followed quickly by five other cracking noises.

I tried to sit up, but winced at the pull on my rim. With a thought, I used my magic to expand my hole further, letting Deke's knot slip out. Another thought had it returning to its pre-sex size. I loved my magic.

Hitting the light switch, I left the bed for the nest. "They're hatching!" I cried, dropping to the floor.

Deke joined me, covering me with a blanket while we waited for the babies to break out of their shells.

Our enigma was the first to emerge. He was a silver-blue, which reminded me of his father's eyes. Twin omegas came next. They were the pale blue of a summer sky, each slightly darker underneath, like their brother, Nhil. We had an alpha who was a darker shade of blue with a gray underbelly. Then another enigma, who was most like me, white on top, silver underneath.

The last egg took a lot longer to open up. This one was the one we had both worried over. I saw why when a furry little snow white head popped out of the pearlescent shell. We had a wolf daughter. An alpha female.

“Oh!” I cried as each of the babies made their way towards us on wobbly legs. “They are so perfect!”

“Happy hatching day, little ones!” Deke said through tears. He picked up each baby for us both to kiss.

When I saw my mate with our new additions, the way he loved them and me, I knew everything I’d gone through to get here made this moment all the sweeter.

Epilogue

Deke

According to dragon tradition, naming hatchlings took place after getting to know their personalities. Like shifter babies, dragon hatchlings were more advanced than humans. They could crawl in their human forms far sooner than humans did, but spent more time in their animal forms for the first few months than as humans. This meant we got to see more of who they were than we would with a human kid.

Our wolf girl was brave. She was the first to explore in her furry form, often leading her brothers into mischief. We called her Pandora for it.

The omega twins were sweet cuddle bugs. They made our days full of sunshine, so we called them Elio and Enver and struggled to tell them apart until their scents separated.

Both the enigmas were watchful. Curious, yet also wary. They often hung back while Pandora led Elio and Enver, and Maverick, their alpha brother who was the bravest of the boys, into trouble. Ward was the eldest boy, Casper the youngest. They waited on their brothers and sister to get into trouble before making their baby roars at them.

I knew wolf cubs were cute. Pandora lived up to that but no one mentioned how adorable baby dragons were. Sure I had to be mindful of claws and sharp teeth, but the ridge around their neck was useful to hold them by when they got into scuffles. I watched Ozyn do it a few times before I tried it myself, too afraid of hurting them.

It was my turn to wrangle the babies because we had important places to be. Over the last few weeks their uncles and older brothers had visited to witness their naming ceremony. That had been pure chaos ending up with babies covered in cake and ruined clothes. This time we were heading to Abrocaelum for their first trip there.

My alpha power worked on the little ones, which was incredibly useful when trying to dress them. They had adorable outfits to wear because we had a party to attend!

Uncles Ulrian and Laeros were being crowned and getting married! Yeah, Ulrian had finally given into Laer's charm. Half the pack were attending. Hell, half of Northarbor and Sweetwater were.

Now that the babies were a little older, mostly sleeping through the night, Ozyn took a job working with the police part time as a special SDF agent now the SDF were out in the open. Apparently getting freedom of the city meant he was now responsible for it. Nhil was still in Sweetwater waiting for Micah to give him a chance. He got roped into working with the cops, too. He thrived on it, actually. I thought he would stick it out even if Micah denied their bond.

This meant we had Hernandez coming to the wedding, I thought it was in an official capacity until he turned up with Winter. As his date!

"Ah, I knew it! They make a fine pair, do they not?" Ozyn asked as he put the finishing touches to the kids' outfits.

"How?"

"Did you not see them speaking at Blake's party when he won the aviary? Hernandez drove him back and was invited to attend."

"Huh."

Baby suits were very impractical. Little tunics with leggings made of elven fabric? Worlds better. Ozyn finished arranging their tufts of hair. Each one had his curls but the shades varied from my very dark brown, on Caspar and Ward, to practically white on Pandora.

“They look happy, don’t they? I like Rafael for Winter.”

“Yeah. They look great.” If it stopped the cop lusting after my mate, I was all for it. Yes, the possessiveness went both ways, thank you.

Toth had arranged with his friend/brother-in-law, Barr, a hellhound, to open a portal for us in Abrocaelum next to the fae castle. The elves couldn’t due to centuries of ward magics that would take probably equally as long to dismantle. They were forged in blood, making the magic even harder to overcome. Barr, as a demon, wasn’t tied into Abrocaelum the same way. He had tried the route and was treated to a very elaborate banquet for him and his mate, Jorgoth. They stayed in the castle for the better part of a week when they tried it successfully the first time.

The portal would allow our extremely large wedding party to get through. As pack Alpha, Blake, Kade and the kids were coming. Vale and Chase were still doing their platonic soulmate thing, so they were matching their ties and colors of their suits.

As royalty, Teárlach and Axel were attending. They had left their daughter with the queen, who declined to attend. Her court was optimistic but wary of the new fae king. Look, I got it. Ulrian had been a terrible mayor towards the end. He’d made dangerous decisions that nearly cost me my life. Maybe it got me my mate, but it caused a lot of pain in the process. With time, we’d all get there. He had to prove himself a good leader first.

The crowd gathered around the area where the portal would go was large. We had some city hall officials, police, a chunk of our pack, the aviary and pride coming with us. We were bringing the party!

Ozyn's brothers and our sons were waiting for us. Laeros was straight over to us when we emerged. He stole Pandora from my arms while Ulrian tried to hug Safi.

Everyone oohed and aahed over the babies even as we took our seats for the ceremony to start. They had a handfasting similar to the witches' traditions, showing we were all interconnected. It was sweet, with handwritten vows. They both clearly had feelings for each other. Maybe Laer helped Ulrian get that stick out of his ass.

Ozyn must have caught my wandering thoughts, because he smirked. Behave, he chided.

After the wedding came the crowning. Ulrian's circlet was made of leaves of every color of jewel. Laer's was simpler, yet no less beautiful. They took their vows to the fae people and in a surprising move, signed peace treaties for the elves and dragons to agree to. In another shock, Ulrian made a speech.

"Here is to a fresh start. Under my rule, I am abolishing the practice of shifter and dragon fighting rings. Any fae holding another person in slavery will be held to account for their crimes. All servants are to be paid for their labor. Shifters are to be treated as equal citizens of Abrocaelum, though if they wish to return to the human realm, I have made preparations for that return."

Cheers rose throughout the courtyard. Maybe Ulrian was closer to being a decent ruler than I thought.

The reception was beautiful. They held it outside in the open air. The gates were open, allowing all to attend. The courtyard was decorated with flowers and vines everywhere. It was like something out of a dream. The castle had grown wilder since the last time we had been there. It was better for it. Ozyn and Safi were still uncomfortable, I could tell, but they were better than before. Busier, too. The babies kept trying to shift. It was taking a lot of energy to keep them in their human forms.

“Let them shift, Deke. I don’t like how it’s draining you,” Ozyn urged with concern.

I let go of the power, setting off a chain reaction. Pandora shifted first. She barked at the twins. Elios and Enver changed, their outfits thankfully shifting with them. Our little girl had that talent, too. She was a wonder. Not to be outdone, Maverick jumped into the air, completing his shift and managing a short flight. He landed into Safi’s arms with a thump. The fae was a favorite of Maverick’s.

Seeing their siblings get away with shifting, both Ward and Casper took flight. They were the best fliers of the bunch. Pandora barked at them with clear envy. Honestly, I was glad she couldn’t fly. She would be a nightmare!

The sounds of our children in their animal forms prompted the other littles with us to shift, too. The fae were enamoured with the kids. It made it easier to remember these people were trapped under Glorin’s rule. They had suffered as much as Ozyn had, just in different ways. They were all victims of a tyrant. These were changed days.

“Well,” King Ulrian called over the noise, his voice magically amplified. “I suppose this is a great time to announce I’m pregnant. Our triplets will be with us soon!”

Ozyn

Yule was upon Sweetwater. We had residents of the aviary, the pride, Greenbriar pack, and our coven friends all attending a winter spectacular hosted by our Alpha.

Due to the conflict with the aviary, the previous year’s celebrations had been canceled. They were deemed too high of a security risk. This one? Well it was attended by the police. Winter was still dating Hernandez, Rafael, as his given name was. Besides, my boys were all here, my brothers, and of course, Ulrian and their brood.

Three more dragons were in the world and wow did they make ours look tame! They

had the same tricky nature of the fae, the way with nature dragons didn't quite have thanks to their fae parent. All three were a handful, but so beautiful. Arax, the omega was in shades of pink. His alpha brothers, Siurin and Narith, were shades of lavender and lilac.

We were gathered by the lake. The pack had spared no expense by paying for the witches to freeze a section of the water for ice skating. There were plenty of seating areas and several tables laden with delicious hot food. Overseen by Winter of course, with help from Rafael, who really could cook!

Deke was with Pandora. She was usually to be found with her dad. Caspar and Ward often lingered by my side while the twins kept their own company and Maverick bothered Safi. Not for long, though. I had a feeling things were progressing with Ingal. Whatever bump had existed he was figuring out. Soon we would be looking for new help.

"I am not going to enjoy interviewing to replace Ingal," Dalton sighed beside us. Larken stood rocking Carina, who was teething. Both looked tired.

"Why?" Hiroshi asked. He straightened a hat on one child, taking the gloves of another.

"Ozyn and Deke will need someone too," Kade added. Iris was tucked in his arms, sleeping peacefully. "When those two figure out they're in love with each other."

"Doesn't Safi have to marry a high born elf?" Dakota asked, passing a plate piled high with food for Jasper and Hayden. The little boy was sitting quietly amongst the omegas quite happily. He had a soothing aura similar to Dakota's.

"I'm not sure that was part of the agreement. I do hope Safi is not under the impression he needs a high born spouse. Ingal's family may be lower ranking, but the queen sent Ingal here for a reason. He is one of the few elves who have a platonic

soulbond. That shows a strength of character which many highborn do not possess.” It did make me wonder if that was what had troubled Safi these last few months.

“Ozyn feels strongly about this,” my mate said, returning to my side. The older boys had their younger siblings in hand. I caught Balon looking around.

“Yeah, I see it. Wonder who he is,” Deke muttered, his eyes following mine.

“I just want them both to be happy,” I said, returning to the subject. “They have time to figure things out.”

“Right?” Kade gave a happy sigh, resting back into his mate’s arms. I noticed the baby wasn’t sleeping, she was chest feeding. It was something I missed now our babies were solely on formula, though I had only fed them once a day myself. It took hours!

“It’s so strange to think of how much things have changed over the last two and a half years,” Axel remarked. He was the quietest of the Sweetwaters. “It feels like everyone is pairing or paired off. There are an unprecedented amount of kids in the pack. We have allies all over the place. We’re finally at peace.”

“Don’t forget us omegas aren’t at the mercy of their heats!” Dalton added with a grin. He set off some sparks with his new magic. “I love being able to pick when I have a heat.”

“But we’re waiting at least five years before more babies, right?” Larken begged. When his mate only grinned maniacally, Larken repeated, “five years, right?”

“Of course!”

“Dimples, you promised!”

“They’re so cute though! Don’t we make the cutest babies?”

“Yeah, but I miss sleep!”

Dalton laughed. “So do I. Don’t worry, the baby factory is closed for the time being.”

We all laughed with them. Between the moonroot for those with limited magic, and the protein for those with extra talents, omegas all over could control when they had a heat without the dangerous side effects which had nearly cost Kade his wolf and fertility.

“Kade!” A little boy came rushing over. “Dad is going to shift with Isla and go on the ice! Watch! Papa can’t skate with me because of the baby, will you come skate with me?”

“Sure thing, Rune. Just gimme a minute, Iris is still nursing. Oh, nope, she’s asleep.” He passed the sleeping baby to his mate to hold.

Ah, Rune was his little brother from his biological father’s side. He was a sweet boy of about three or four, I believed. Truthfully, I didn’t know Rune or his parents, Levi and Robin, that well. They were Greenbriar transplants and lived in the omega area near where they worked in the school and community center. I believed Robin taught swimming.

One by one, our party got up to wander closer to the lake where Robin was shifted with his daughter. Both polar bears made a sight. It was like something out of a greeting card.

Are you happy you came here?

Deke’s mental voice was always laced with the love he felt for me. It was like a warm hug on this cold day. I shivered with pleasure.

I am. It's a simpler life in some respects. Yet, here in Sweetwater I am more fulfilled than ever, more loved than I thought I could be. All thanks to you.

I love you, Ozzy. You came bursting into my life when I needed you most.

He wrapped his arms around me. The little ones ran for us, circling our feet, making yipping noises.

There's never been a day that I haven't thanked The Luna for what she did by bringing us together. I look at the family we've created when I never dreamed I'd be so lucky. I thought she had forgotten me at one point. With everyone else happy, I was okay with that, but now I have you and all this. I love you all so much.

I love you, too. The Luna and the Great Drakon blessed me with the best mate I could hope for and a lifetime of love.

Suddenly my attention was pulled to the middle of the lake where a shaft of moonlight illuminated a tall, regal figure. Her hair flowed like a pale waterfall down her back. She stood proudly, an affectionate smile on her face.

"My friends, my true believers, thank you for your trust, your pure faith. I love you my shifters. I exist only for you. May you have a lifetime of love and happiness. My blessings be upon you."

The light faded away, leaving an empty space.

Somehow I knew she was right. I could see my future ahead of me filled with love and laughter as my family grew and expanded with mates of their own, children, too.

The Sweetwater pack had changed not only my life, but all of those touched by it, and led by kindness, they would thrive.

The End.