



The Dragon at the End of This Pregnancy (The Monster at the End of His Pregnancy #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Betas dont have fated mates, especially not ones from another species!

Beta kobold Mac has a crush on a dragon. Unfortunately for him, nothing can come from it. If Galen tried to mate with Mac, their size difference alone would end him, but what a way to go!

Galens final molt grants their greatest magical ability. They can shape-shift into any creature theyve seen, including humans from Macs favorite movies. Human media enthralls Galen, but they want to visit Earth to see if Macs human side could mesh with their dragon. After all, dragons are violent enough on their own, and they worry hybrid offspring could be worse.

A dragon on Earth sounds like a terrible idea to Mac, but hell do anything for Galen. To prove hes a worthy mate, Mac will even confront Galens family the very dragons who once tried to burn all kobold hybrids like himself to a crisp.

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Chapter One

Galen

Once, dragons ruled Ignitas, and kobolds worshipped us.

I hatched in the northeastern mountains on the largest continent. My dragon parent, or paragon (a combination of parent and dragon, but the word also meant a person viewed as a model of excellence, which all dragons believed they were) loved me and my siblings and raised us to respect kobolds. I couldn't remember my kobold father, my paragon's fated, but I knew he was born and raised in the village at the base of the mountains.

We called it The Pavilion once. It had been spacious enough for all dragons to meet every five years for a family reunion.

At one of those gatherings, the other dragons noticed a shift in our kobold population. They'd been getting bigger. They were still so small! I didn't know how anyone could tell the difference, or why they would care. Larger kobolds meant larger dire weasels, dragonets, and bovinji to feed us. They tended the animals for us, after all.

On rare occasions, they would give me seasoned meat from somewhere called Earth, which made my paragon angrier than I'd ever seen them.

"Don't taint our baby with food from that polluted world! You don't know what it will do to them!"

"It's perfectly safe," the kobold priestess said. "This is laboratory-grown beef from Ignitas. It's not contaminated. It's meat, plain and simple. It's so much simpler to grow without all the grain and water resources."

I didn't understand how it was possible. As interesting as it was to hear her stories about experiments and theories, I was stuck in my dragon form until my final molt. No lab coats and tiny test tubes for me, but beef was delicious. Especially when they covered it with fancy herbs and spices that made my mouth water just thinking about them.

I didn't know what had changed. Over the decades, our relationship with the kobolds of increasing size grew frostier. Then one day, without consulting my siblings and me, my paragon burned their village to the ground. They left a crater of obsidian where our dragon pavilion once stood and tumbled our old temple into a pile of rubble reaching for the sky.

Dragon magic was stronger than kobold magic, but there were more of them than us. Their coordinated clean-up resulted in a well-designed obsidian fortress with a spike pointing toward the sky. I didn't need to ask my paragon what the spike was for. It was a weapon they could easily aim toward incoming dragons.

Paragon referenced the design as proof the kobolds intended to fight back, and they left me alone at what we dragons now called The Spike. I was their youngest child, far from my final molt. They and my siblings left me to watch over the village.

"We will burn every kobold village from here to the sea," my paragon said. "Then we'll travel to planes where kobolds didn't combine their genes with those of humans. We will find one of those places and make it our own. Then, we'll come back for you and bring you a traditional kobold mate."

Dragons could mate with other dragons starting with our fourth molt. Sometimes,

food was scarce, or we warred with other dragons. During those lean times, young dragons mated with each other to ensure the continuation of our species.

After their final molt, adult dragons mated with kobolds: specifically, beta kobolds. My final molt was approaching fast, and already I felt the desire to seek my mate. I didn't want to wait for my family to bring me someone, but I thought I had no choice. I'd been left alone with the orders to observe, not interfere.

That's how the kobold priestess who had angered my paragon had built the horrid magical contraption called the changeling circle under my nose without any pushback. Well, that, and they drugged me with a giant bovinji, a blue-furred grass-eating creature of the plains west of the mountain range. The kobolds' dire weasels and dragonets kept the animals out of The Spike's valley, so I should have been leery of such a delicious treat prepared for me. It was the last time I'd trusted kobolds to cook my meat.

While I was incapacitated, dozens of kobold mages sacrificed themselves to build the changeling circle, the place where all kobold parents across Ignitas transported their alpha and omega children. There, the priestesses wrapped the hatchlings in their changeling spells and transported them to Earth as humans.

I'd posed no threat to their alpha and omega children since my paragon left. My family, all dragons, would see such a brazen move as an act of war, and I was sad. I missed the betas coming to my cave to sweep away the uneaten bones.

Afterward, only the new priestess came, and with her, a child apprentice, Alma. They claimed sweeping away my refuse was beneath them, so I left it there. They also said I must go to the temple to meet with them instead. "We wouldn't want you to create more dragons, now would we?"

I'd been so furious. I almost incinerated her on the spot, but Alma stepped in front of

her and bowed. "I'm so sorry, little dragon."

I was not little. By that time, I was already five times her size, maybe more.

The small priestess patted my lip with her tiny hand. "Please come visit us. It is a beautiful place for us to worship you."

Afterward, I visited the temple to the east of their main building, but there was nothing for me there but sadness. The betas feared me.

Then came the day Priestess Alma called Reemergence Day. That day, and the events that led up to it, changed my lonely life forever.

A month earlier, I'd scented my beta mate on pregnant omega Punky of the purple stripes and his purple-haired alpha Lark. Even the dragonet they rode to my cave smelled of my mate, but I had to focus on the matter before me. The alpha and omega pair wanted the freedom to roam in the daylight again. The breeding kobolds had been hunkered underground in the steaming caves left behind by Paragon's fire. The fire couldn't live forever underground, and neither could kobolds.

Thankfully, my mate had survived the poor conditions. I longed for him in an unfamiliar and almost overwhelming way.

I was ready to grant Punky and Lark anything, if only I could meet with the beta who belonged to that scent. On Reemergence Day, I got my wish.

I breathed his glorious aroma while I talked with the alpha with red hair and matching stripes, Coz, and his omega, Grindl. Coz and Grindl were older than Punky and Lark by a few seasons and had already lost two clutches of eggs. Their luck had changed when they'd moved into one of the nearby cabins they'd built to watch for me. Three beta hatchlings ran across their shoulders as evidence.

"Three betas. What a boon for your family," I said. I wondered if they would have dragon mates. "Will you agree to worship us at our cave, to bring your young to listen to the old stories and learn to be our dragon servants again?"

My paragon had told me to speak as though they were still here with me, so I used the plural, "we."

"Anything for them," Coz said.

"What are their names?" I asked Grindl.

"They don't have names yet." Grindl's voice wavered as he addressed me. "We didn't know if they would need names, or if you planned to kill us all."

I had no intention of hurting them, but an angry dire weasel and the same dragonet who smelled of my mate were trying to flank me. I couldn't have that. I knocked them away. When the dire weasel wouldn't stop, I commanded her, "Don't."

I did not want to hurt my new friends' pets. They were only being protective, which I understood. I would protect my mate with my life.

I turned my attention to Lark, who had arrived on the sable dire weasel. He smelled like slick, and admitted his omega had laid four eggs, as I'd predicted. I explained the deal I'd offered the red pair, which I'd planned to extend to Lark and his omega.

"What does that mean, your dragon servants?" Lark asked.

I hid my embarrassment with a plume of smoke. "You will roast our food over fire pits."

The alpha laughed at me.

"It tastes better when you do it," I admitted.

"As you say."

I scented my mate even closer, but I couldn't stop now. I'd made a full list of demands for the kobolds.

"You will listen to our stories and laugh at our jokes. You will return joy to our days. We have been so lonely here with no kobolds beyond those who come to the temple."

I spent my days following the same routine, each repetition more bleak and depressing. Spending time with these kobolds, or at least with my mate, would change that.

"You could have told the priestess you wanted company," Lark said.

"No." I growled at that, and another puff of smoke rolled over the kobolds before me. "They never leave the temple," I sulked. "They won't even send the betas. We've tried to talk to your betas. They are boring. Worse, they don't know where they fit in your society because it is fractured."

That was an assumption based on fleeting contact with the betas in the temple, but I was feeling sorry for myself. "Your betas serve no dragons, raise no children, and have few alpha companions. Betas are the true dragon kin. They worshiped us, and in turn, we coddled them." We mated with them, but I doubted these Earth-raised alphas and omegas knew that. "We destroyed your village when you took them away from us."

"We ... what now?" the red-striped omega, Grindl, asked.

"The priestesses said your betas had too much work raising the young. There were

more eggs after your infraction with human genes, and they chose the betas to pick up the slack. They would no longer have time for dragons. We were angry. We destroyed your villages with fire." I couldn't contain my own anger, unleashing a large volley of smoke over their heads.

"Where are the betas now? They rarely come to the temple with your priestesses, but I know they aren't taking care of your children if you send them to Earth until they come of age. This is not the way it should be."

"We'd like it very much if we could raise our own children," Grindl said. "We don't need the betas' help. We can raise them on our own. Look at how fast they grow in the sun. They'll reach physical maturity long before twenty-five Earth years, and then they can have clutches of their own."

I nudged Grindl with my snout. "Yes. This would be an acceptable compromise. Do you agree the betas can return to our service?"

The red couple nodded, but Lark intervened. "We'd need to talk with the mature betas," he said. "It's not fair for us to make a decision for our friends without their consent."

A contingent of betas armed with long spikes moved toward us, their magical metal armor making virtually no noise until they stopped three feet behind my conversation partners. The betas were fools if they thought their weapons could pierce my scales.

Before I could finish them with a gout of flame, Lark shouted, "Hold your fire! Please, hear them out."

I was grateful I hadn't spit fire at them when my mate stepped through their ranks and lowered his spear.

"We heard them," he said.

He was everything I'd hoped he would be, as handsome as his scent was alluring. He wasn't wearing armor like the others, so I could see the tousled brown locks between his pointed ears and the brown stripes marking his arms. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and long pants, but his feet were bare, exposing his gleaming black talons. He glared at me with fierce determination, but all I noticed was his intense gaze.

"They want us to be slaves to dragonkind again," he said.

"Not slaves." That word rankled. Slaves could not consent. "Servants. Those who choose to serve would be cherished. Those who do not could continue their current daily chores, whatever they may be."

"Why would we choose to serve the creatures that left us to die almost a century ago?" A green-haired alpha stepped through the line of armored betas, full of bluster until he saw Coz's red hair, or maybe the beta kobold hatchlings on his shoulders.

"This does not concern you, alpha," I told him. "I have already spoken to your better." I nudged Lark with my snout. He and his mate Punky were the ones who had approached me about a deal, after all. Now it was my turn to collect, and I wouldn't bargain with anyone else. My deal was with the new parents, Coz and Grindl, and soon-to-be parents Lark and Punky.

The alphas continued to talk among themselves, but my mate caught my attention instead. He strode forward and placed his hand on Grindl's shoulder. A beta hatchling curled around Grindl's neck, and my mate let the tiny kobold sniff him.

"I'll serve you, dragon," he said. "I don't know how many more of us will. Is one of us enough?"

My mate wanted to serve me! Of course, he was enough. He was braver than I'd hoped.

I motioned him closer with the tip of my wing and drank in his scent with the deepest breath I could muster. I exhaled, claiming him with my smoke.

He fell to his knees before me. The scent of his arousal, something I'd expected to take years of courting, already mingled with the tang of his fear.

It took everything I had not to exclaim he was my fated mate. I had an urge to lick him, to mark him from head to talons with my scent, but I resisted. Until I reached my final molt, I couldn't claim him the way I wanted. Only then would I tell him.

"You will do," I said instead. I hoped I sounded nonchalant, even though my heart thudded against my chest and rushed in my ears. "And any who wish to accompany you," I added, so I didn't sound too eager.

I couldn't hold in my smile, though. My mate had volunteered to be my servant! I launched myself into the air, hoping to hide my joy from the kobolds.

I wanted to take my mate home, but first, I had a changeling circle to destroy. My family wouldn't be happy if they returned to find the kobolds still sending their alpha and omega babies to Earth as human changelings.

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Chapter Two

Mac

A dragon. A freaking dragon!

It had been over a century since anyone but the priestesses and temple workers had seen a dragon at this distance, close enough to marvel at their gorgeous glowing eyes like purple embers and the smoke rolling out of their nostrils as they exhaled. Their sleek black scales rippled with each breath, reflecting a sparkling blue sheen in the sunlight. They were the most magnificent creature I'd ever seen.

When they spoke, the ground shook. When they asked for a beta to volunteer, I couldn't resist the call, even when they used the word, "servant." I had been serving our village for years by raising dragonets. If any of us were ready to serve a dragon, I was.

I had to brace into the wind when the dragon launched into the sky beside me. I thought they had forgotten me, but when they finished razing the changeling circle, leaving the stones in a pile of mundane rubble, they returned.

"You." They brushed their snout across my chest. "Come to the foothills with me. We have much to discuss."

The next events passed in a blur. The dragon helped me scramble onto their back and secured me with a spell so I wouldn't fall off for the short ride to their cave.

It was dark and stank of decay near the entrance, but then they helped me dismount and showed me the cozy fire burning in the back, a natural (or dragon-made) vent letting the smoke escape through the ceiling. They had a huge nest by the fire and a few chairs fit for kobolds much smaller than me.

"I apologize for the lack of decor," they said. "You may sit wherever is comfortable. The old bench might be more to your liking?"

The bench was long enough for my ass, at least, but only as wide as my hand. "That will do," I said, keeping my rhythm slow and even the way they spoke. "What may I call you?"

"Oh!" Their head was suddenly very close as I shifted the bench toward an even spot on the cave wall and sat down. "You have far better manners than the priestesses. They call me 'Dragon' and do not care to know my name."

"You destroyed their entire village and killed most of their friends," I reminded them. "You're lucky they don't call you worse names."

The dragon snorted, and a puff of smoke rolled from their nostrils. "I like you. Yes, I like you very much. Unlike your alpha and omega counterparts, you are brave and foolish."

"I am not foolish!" I was brave enough to say it with the dragon breathing down on me. Okay, maybe I was foolish.

"That was a compliment," they said. "It was Galena, the last time anyone called me by my name."

The sheer loneliness in their tone spoke volumes. "How long ago was that?"

"Around the time your village burned. My family left to destroy the rest of the kobold villages."

"You said it was Galena," I said, sensing their earlier hesitation over the name. "Has it changed?"

"Now, I prefer Galen. I have molted several times since then and have grown accustomed to my body. Galen suits me better."

"It's nice to meet you, Galen."

"Thank you."

They stared at me for several long moments. I didn't mind silence most of the time, but I couldn't tell if Galen was trying to think of something to say, or maybe they were wondering if I would taste better roasted or smoked.

"My name is Mac," I added when they didn't ask for it.

"It is wonderful to meet you as well, Mac." They said the hard "C," like it was its own syllable. "You look uncomfortable." They nodded and pointed to the narrow bench seat. "I will steal you a new chair. I have seen the benches they have on the cabin porches. The chains are weak."

I laughed at their serious tone. "No, please. I will bring my own folding chair next time."

"Next time?" They pressed closer to me and sniffed my chest. "You will not go back. You are mine now."

Magic swirled around us, and a rocking chair my size appeared beside the fireplace.

"I have to go back," I said, unable to resist raising my hand to touch the delicate skin of their snout. They were soft, warm, and smelled of wood smoke. I'd been expecting something like coal or the harsh factory smells on Earth.

"I raise dragonets," I said. "We're about to have a clutch of hatchlings." I needed to be there, to be the first person the dragonets bonded. I was the only kobold in recent memory who could bond an entire clutch and then pass off those bonds to new riders when the time came.

"But you agreed to serve me!" Galen sounded petulant, which reminded me of their whining to Coz and Lark earlier. They must have been a very young dragon when they were abandoned.

They snapped their teeth, and I pulled my hand away from their snout.

"I did, and I will, but you can't keep me prisoner here. I need to return to my job, my cave, my life."

"This is your cave now," they insisted. "I want you to live with me."

"Yes." I bowed my head slightly. I didn't want to break my agreement, but I needed to return to my cave for supplies. "I want that, too, but I have amenities that would make this space more comfortable, like some camping gear and a cook stove." Not to mention a few hundred scented candles to overcome the stench of decay. I would stop by the cathedral to borrow as many as Alma would let me. I added a shovel to my growing list.

"Cook stove," they said. I thought that would get their attention. They'd mentioned they missed cooked meat. "Yes. I will take you back to your village so you can get your things."

They hunkered down on the floor of their cave the way they'd done in the field. I had an easier time climbing up their scales, and then I was seated above their shoulder blades. Their long neck allowed them to turn and stare at me even while I was seated on their back.

"Is it rude to ask a dragon their age?" I wondered aloud.

"I am less than a decade over two hundred years old."

"You've been alone since the village burned?"

"Yes," they answered. "I was a youngling then. Now, I am a full adult, one molt shy of mating." Something in their gaze shifted, and I couldn't deny my attraction to them.

"What do you mean, a full adult?" Kobolds weren't adults until we lost our tails. Then, we were ready to mate, or have sex, at least. I'd bedded my share of unmated alphas, but the instant attraction I had to Galen was new.

"I am an adult capable of impregnating another dragon, if I chose, but I won't be able to claim my mate until my final molt."

I tried to hide my disappointment at their words. They expected to mate with another dragon, but the irrational part of my brain that had always desired someone larger than an alpha kobold wished I could be their mate.

"We know so little about dragon aging and anatomy," I told them. "Was it unusual for your family to leave you behind?"

"No. They said they would return when I reach full maturity. Until then, they are searching for a portal to another plane where kobolds haven't combined their fate

with the humans."

"I'm sorry the kobolds of old hurt your feelings by splicing genes with humans," I said, remembering another of Priestess Alma's lessons.

"They didn't hurt my feelings." Galen shook their neck and shoulders, and the spell holding me on their back settled over me like a warm blanket. "I am grateful for creatures your size. Otherwise, I think I might crush you when we copulate."

"When we ... what?"

Galen snorted again. "You promised to serve me, Mac. Stop being so obtuse. I like them brave and foolish, but you test my patience."

Oh, I knew what copulate meant. Galen wanted to put one, or maybe both, of their as of yet hidden sex organs inside me. At least I wasn't an omega, and I couldn't get pregnant. I couldn't imagine something the size of a dragon egg pushing its way out of my cock, the way omegas laid their eggs! Speaking of cock, theirs had to be massive. I loved alpha dick, don't get me wrong, but dragon dick was another level of gargantuan, or so I imagined.

Unfortunately, it would be three more years before I had my fill.

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Chapter Three

Mac

Three years later

I was so glad to be home. I loved visiting the other kobold villages, but we'd been gone for six months. Every time we returned, it was nice to skip the bustle of the fortress and slip into Galen's cave to relax.

I dropped my travel backpack by the massive nest at the back of the cave and sat down on the stone floor to yank off my hiking boots, extra careful not to jar my talons. Once my sore feet were free, I leaned back on the soft pile of blankets and throw pillows Galen had amassed over the years and huffed a happy sigh.

Home, yet after the last several months of travel across Ignitas with Galen, I knew the truth. Galen was my home. I was falling more in love with them by the day, and they were oblivious.

They expected to be worshipped. They damn near demanded my complete devotion. They didn't recognize my actions as love, only obedience.

"Mac?"

The way Galen growled my name had always made my stomach feel light, like it was going to float out of my body. After a few years by their side, I could now tell when my dragon was happy. They were glad to be home, and they'd practically begged me

to stay the night with them.

They found me already in their nest and let out another happy sound deep in their throat. "There you are. I thought you'd left."

"I told you I would stay. I meant it."

"Yes. You are always true to your word." They curled around me, tightening the circle until they had flattened the ring of blankets and pillows around me and replaced the bedding with their body instead.

They protected me from their sharp scales with a thin magic shield while they moved. They dropped it once they settled, allowing me to rest my head against their warm and pliant scales. It never ceased to amaze me how comfortable and comforting it was to lie with my back pressed to them.

"Tell me about Earth again," Galen rumbled. They'd stopped asking about it while we visited the other villages, but dragons were creatures of habit, and our familiar surroundings must have refreshed their memory.

"Well, it's more populous than Ignitas, by far." Overcrowded, in my opinion. I'd enjoyed my trips to Earth with Lark and his dire weasel, Odessa, and even with another alpha, Weld, and my dragonets in training, but I would never want to live there. Our alphas and omegas had lived there from the time they were newborns until their twenty-fifth birthdays. I'd only visited to bring our alpha and omega changelings home.

"I don't really know any humans," I shared. "I've visited Lark's adoptive parents several times, but they knew about us, so they didn't freak out."

"Is freaking out a thing humans do often?" Galen knew what I meant by the term

"freaking out," because they claimed that's what many of the kobold omegas had done when they'd first been introduced. Galen had higher esteem for Punky and Tuft, omegas who had both stood their ground and not wet their pants at the sight of my hulking black dragon.

My dragon, who was not as large as usual, and shrinking by the second. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Testing my magic." They rocked their head on their long neck, rolled it around once, and shrank further. I had no other way to explain it. They shrank until they were a little taller than me, and broader. My back was now propped against two kobold feet, though the talons were longer and sharper than mine. Their horns had shrunk, too, but they remained on top of their head, angled backward in an aerodynamic way for a dragon but conspicuous on a kobold. We didn't have horns.

"What do you think?" they asked. "Would I pass for human?"

I laughed. "Absolutely not."

Their face had much more expression in this form, and the way they scrunched their nose made me think somehow I'd insulted their parents. Had they been making that face at me all these years, and I'd unknowingly hurt their feelings?

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"How can I pass for human?"

"You'd have to know what a human looks like first. I'm not human."

Galen leaned toward me and gave me a full-body sniff that put us face-to-face. "You're not a kobold, either."

I chuckled. We'd been over this. "Kobold/human hybrid."

They flipped their feet out from under me and lunged, pulling themselves onto my lap, straddling my legs, and pinning me to the flattened pillows. "What do humans look like? Show me."

The tips of their blunted nails dug into my scalp behind my ears. It reminded me of the Vulcan mind meld.

I didn't grow up on Earth, but I had watched every human movie I could find. If it was science fiction or fantasy related, I'd seen it, even parodies like Space Balls. I'd seen them all, and I'd loved them.

I wished I had my phone and tablet with me, but I'd left them behind in case the kobold villages we visited didn't have human technology. I shouldn't have been concerned. Most had their own version of magic-powered media. Their alphas and omegas had been to Earth, too, thanks to the old changeling circle.

Galen snorted, which wasn't nearly as intimidating in their kobold form. My cock reacted to their proximity, same as always.

This was the first time I held them in my lap, though, and very naked, and looking every bit like an adult kobold alpha with an extra appendage between their legs. Beside their large but flaccid cock lay their ovipositor. They were usually contained in a veil of magic for aerodynamics. Now, with them shrunk down to kobold size, it took all my willpower to keep my gaze on Galen's face.

They sniffed me again and grinned. "You smell aroused. I want that, too, but first, you need to show me what humans look like. Close your eyes and imagine them clearly."

I shouldn't even like the dumpster fire human who popped into my mind, but I couldn't stop myself. He'd played my favorite character of all time, a swashbuckling, conniving space pirate. In real life, his actions were far from attractive, but on my tablet, he was a god among men.

"Ooh. You like the look of this human, but you dislike them as a person."

"How are you able to read my mind?" I asked.

"I can always smell your thoughts when I am a dragon. It's harder now. I must touch you like this. Or maybe you want me to touch you the way he touches his partner?"

"Maybe not?—"

Yes, it was exactly like this. The dashing young hero had hurled an insult at the space pirate, and the pirate had responded with a silencing kiss.

Galen's kiss was chaste, a soft press of lips like the one I'd memorized from too many rewatches of the same movie.

The difference was, Galen kept kissing me, and it turned into so much more. It felt different, like our faces had changed shape, flattened so we could press our mouths together more deeply, and so Galen's tongue could easily glide across my bottom lip, demanding entrance. I opened for them, falling back even further against the pillows as they plundered my mouth.

They tasted like smoke and amber, and they were liquid flame in my arms. I wanted more of this, more of them, all of it. This was far more than I'd ever thought possible. I'd been dreaming of fucking a giant dragon for years now, and to think, they'd had the ability to morph into a kobold-sized creature this whole time.

Galen broke the kiss with a sharp laugh. "Not this whole time." Their lips moved against mine as they spoke. "I had my final molt while we were away."

I'd noticed their scales flaking on our last trip from The Grid, our nearest neighbor to the west, to The Drawbridge farther southwest. When we arrived, they shut themselves up in a cave with the resident dragon, Elder, while I worked with their priestesses for a few days. I assumed they were ill. When they emerged, they looked the same, though their scales had been glossier. We never spoke about it afterward.

"What does that mean, exactly?" I asked.

"I am ready to mate with you now."

I nearly choked on my tongue. "What?"

"I have known you were my fated mate since the first time I smelled you on Lark and Punky."

I'd been nowhere near the pair on the day they'd first visited the dragon cave.

"You raised the dragonet they rode to see me."

It was uncanny how Galen kept answering my unspoken thoughts. It made the hairs at my nape rise.

"You made several trips to Earth with the alpha," they continued, "and you were part of the extraction team for the omega. My sense of smell is far stronger than yours, my little kobold. I knew you were my mate before I met you."

"And then I agreed to serve you."

Galen wrapped their arms around my shoulders and squeezed me with far more strength than a kobold alpha would have. "Yes, and then our mate bond began in earnest."

They weren't wrong. My stripes had darkened over the years, from beta brown to black, and now the black scales glowed a deep blue like my dragon in the sunlight.

"We are fated mates," Galen said.

"Mates?" My voice cracked.

That was news to me. As a beta, I'd been raised to believe I wouldn't have a fated mate. Once, betas were the only males of our species, but then we'd evolved into alphas and omegas to further the race. With our females infertile and fewer born each birth cycle, betas had become obsolete.

By the time I was born, it was my duty to serve the rest of kobold kind as best I could. I'd fallen into my career when I'd stumbled on a baby dragonet clutch as a child. I bonded with all five of the cute little babies, no bigger than pigeons, and led them to our home in the grotto. I'd worked in the dragonet barn ever since, my only time off when Galen asked me to accompany them on trips to our neighboring villages.

I'd wanted Galen since I met them. I didn't know what to think about the prospect of fated mates, though.

"Now that I have molted, and we have returned home, I want to mate with you." They pulled back farther, and I got a good look at their purple eyes in my former celebrity crush's face. Their words seemed too good to be true. "But only after I see how the other half of your kind lives. I must visit this Earth plane to see humans for myself."

There it was. My elation turned to dread so quickly, I tasted bile in the back of my throat. Not only did I need to prove myself to my dragon, I also needed to show them all of humanity was worthy, too.

Galen returned to dragon size, then, curling around me and releasing the spell that had made me look human.

I nestled against their side and pulled my knees to my chest in an attempt to calm my fears. "I'll meet with Priestess Alma in the morning to make arrangements."

I didn't know enough about Earth to take Galen there by myself. I hoped the priestess could spare an alpha or omega, anyone who had lived there for longer than a few days.

* * *

Priestess Alma greeted me with a hug. "Mac! It's been months! It's so good to see you."

Her sleeveless dress matched the brilliant white of her scales. Unlike Olaf, an elder beta at The Grid, she didn't look her age. She'd been our head priestess for half a century, and alive for at least twice as long. Her skin remained supple and firm over her muscular frame, her gaze shone with the vibrancy of youth, and her mind was sharper than mine on most days.

As the fortress's oldest female kobold/human hybrid and head priestess, Priestess Alma was revered among the betas. I'd never crushed on her the way my littermates did. Instead of going to the brothels to lie with the females there, I'd offered myself to unmated alphas to scratch the itch instead.

Never the same one twice, though. I knew better than to get attached. At least I knew

now why I'd gotten so attached to Galen. We were fated mates. How was I supposed to bring that up in conversation with someone I'd always thought of as my grandmother?

I took a seat by her desk at the back of the classroom. I guessed it was there for students who needed one-on-one help.

I hadn't spent much time in the omega classrooms. Ours were on the opposite side of the fortress. Now, those classrooms thrived, when before they had been dwindling. It was wonderful to see betas integrated with alpha and omega children when I walked by. The contrast of bright and dark hair with all the brown was a welcome sight.

There weren't enough females, though. Punky and Lark's daughter Clementine was the first born in the last thirty years.

Priestess Alma's frown deepened the longer she stared at me. "You look like an omega."

I shook my head. "My stripes are too dark."

"No signs of slick?"

"None."

She frowned. "Our records on dragon reproduction were destroyed in the fires. Has the dragon mentioned mating to you?"

Gods, I'd been back all of twelve hours, and already I was getting the same mating talk our unmated alphas and omegas received when they started showing signs of imprinting on a mate. Did she think of nothing else? It was even more embarrassing to admit that was exactly why I was here, and this was the segue I needed to broach

the subject.

"They have. That's why I needed to meet with you. They want to travel to Earth."

That stopped her line of questioning. "Earth? Why?"

"They want to see how humans live, to determine if we have adequate breeding stock."

She blinked. "Do you think?—"

"They mentioned I'm their fated mate."

"Oh, Mac." She leaned forward over her desk. "That's wonderful!"

"It is?" I wanted Galen, but mating was altogether different. Did we want another dragon in the world? They'd already tried to destroy us once. What if our child, my child, finished the job their ancestors started?

"We worried your love was unrequited."

"We?" I hated the thought of other kobolds discussing my relationship with Galen behind my back. It wasn't any of their business.

"Lark worries about you. He worries about Weld, too."

I'd traveled to Earth on extraction missions with both Lark and Weld and considered both alphas my friends. Friends could worry about me, I supposed.

The priestess might also be worried about Weld, I realized. The green-striped alpha had moved from the fortress for some distance from his fated omega, Robin, another

of Lark and Punky's clutch.

"Weld has moved on to the village Galen calls The Valley," I said, taking the opportunity to steer the subject further from mating. "He's teaching them how to grow crops with magic the way we do here."

She nodded. "We've had a few emails from him already."

Right. I probably should have sent emails, but I'd left my tablet at home. "I'm so sorry," I said.

"You sent the important news through the new teachers you found."

She was still hunched over her desk. It was only a few more inches for her to reach out and pat my hand where it rested on the edge. "Lark will be overjoyed to hear Galen is your mate. You and Galen can tell him all about it when you travel to Earth with him. He and Punky are taking the children to see Punky's family in Iowa tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." I chuckled at the sheer serendipity. Not only were we operating within Galen's timeline (everything always right now), we were also going with my two favorite villagers and their adorable family. "That's perfect."

She grinned. "Our resident dragon is impatient, I take it?"

"You could say that. They would take offense, but it's true."

She stood and walked me to the door of her classroom. "Lark will break for lunch soon. Do you want to ride with them, or do you want to take a dragonet?"

"Are there any available?" I asked. "I don't want to frighten Odessa." While Lark's

dire weasel had put up a brave front on the field on Reemergence Day, dire weasels and dragons did not mix well. Dragonets, like kobolds, had evolved from dragons. It would be easier to convince a dragonet to let us ride on their back in our human forms.

"You can check the stables after we talk with Lark."

I needed to visit my coworkers, anyway. I'd stayed away too long already, and now I had to plan another absence.

Everything was moving along so quickly, I worried I wouldn't have time to plan for the trip to Earth. Before I met Galen, I had planned everything down to the smallest detail. Since then? Not so much.

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Chapter Four

Galen

I was not as impatient as Mac implied. I was not! He was my fated mate, and I waited three years to tell him. See? I had some patience.

Young dragons could mate with dragons, but adult dragons mated with kobolds. That had always been the way of it. I was not reinventing the wheel or breaking it. I was following tradition, fate, and my cock. Only one of my genital appendages counted as a cock, but both wanted Mac. One wanted to fuck him senseless. The other wanted him to put a baby in me already, so I could give birth to the next generation of human/kobold dragons.

Or was it kobold/human dragons? Either way, it gave me pause. I knew nothing about actual humans. When I recognized the ones from Mac's favorite movies, shame rolled over me like a tidal wave. I had known Mac was my fated mate, and that he was part human, but at no time in the past three years had I tried to learn what that meant.

I assumed I would learn his past with time, but then I saw the images he had memorized from human media. My Mac had not lived a human experience himself. The priestesses saved that privilege for the alphas and omegas. Now, I was asking him to travel to a foreign plane so I could learn firsthand how unaltered humans behaved.

I trusted Mac. He was sweet, caring, and honest to a fault. Though he feared my fiery rage, he told me the truth. Even when he tried to hide facts from me, his scent gave

him away. I always knew when he was lying, and it was never to deceive me on purpose, merely to curb my temper.

He would be angry, too, if his parent had run off to who knows where looking for a mate for me without asking what I wanted. Granted, until I met Mac, I didn't know what I wanted, but now? They'd been off searching for a kobold I didn't even want, which meant I'd spent the last century alone for no reason. If my paragon showed their face at The Spike again, I now understood why dragons greeted each other with fire.

I trusted Mac with my whole being, but I didn't know what to expect from his human genes. I'd never met a human. I worried they were as devious as the cinema characters Mac shared from his memory.

I knew Mac was my mate, but that was only biology, a suggestion. From the moment he had volunteered to serve me, I wanted to learn everything there was to know about him.

Years. I'd had years to get to know him. All I'd learned was how he handled new situation after exotic setting after unique experience. Mac was still as much of an enigma to me as the rest of Ignitas was to him.

He'd been born at The Spike, and his job as dragonet trainer was important to him. I flew him to the barn every day when we stayed at The Spike, even weekends and holidays. He taught me the importance of a daily schedule for my routines. Before I had moped in my cave until I was hungry, then hunted, then ate, and finally slept until it was time to mope again.

Mac brought his cookstove to my cave at the top of my mountain, and then everything changed. He was my favorite cook by far. He used seasonings I'd never tried before. I distrusted them at first, based on my previous experience, but he

promised they wouldn't make me sleepy. I learned to trust him, and everything he cooked for me was delicious. He prepared bite-sized portions for me, called "cutlets," with varying blends until we found my favorites. I had yet to taste anything I didn't like, even when Mac went shopping for exotic foods on Earth.

I wanted to try everything again when I was human sized on Earth. I also wanted to try things I'd only heard of. I especially wanted a mint julep. I liked mint, and I liked jewels. Drinking them might be a little strange. When I asked Mac how they tasted, he said he'd never had one, and I would have to see for myself. Well, now I could!

I had only a few more hours to think about it. Mac and I would be leaving Ignitas once Punky and Lark had secured their four children with glamour spells strong enough to last the week.

Our purple-striped friends were still fiddling with the spell when we arrived at the dragonet barn. All four of the kobold children were taller than I'd expected them to be. They'd molted while we were gone.

Mac was already in his human glamour, and now it was my turn, since my wings were no longer needed. I shrank down to the strange human form I'd seen in Mac's head. The hardest part was binding my horns inside the glamour. Even squeezing into the strange clothes Mac gave me didn't feel as confining as hiding the part of me that made me feel most like a dragon. I used my horns to judge air currents and steer into them. Putting them away, even for a week, meant I couldn't be who I was. I hated it, but I would do anything for Mac.

"We're staying with my parents," Punky whined. He shoved his purple-tinged black hair back from his face. "The kids' glammers have to be perfect. You know how fussy my mom is when even one hair is out of place."

I didn't know the alpha boys by name, but one had orange hair and the other's was

blue. Neither would fit well on the human plane. Their omega, Robin, had black hair like Punky's, and their daughter Clementine had her white hair pulled back into a braid. At least their hair colors were natural human colors. Punky and Lark could change the color and affix their hair so it didn't move to satisfy Punky's mom.

Or maybe Punky's comment wasn't about hair at all. Sometimes, I confused myself regarding kobold word choices because I didn't know what they meant.

"It'll be fine." Lark pulled Punky into a hug.

While the three boys wrestled for control of a tablet, Clementine approached me with a scowl on her face. "Why can't we stay with Mac and Galen?"

"You know it's me?" I asked.

"I watched you transform from a gigantic dragon into ... this." She scrunched her nose at my human form. "Pretty sure it's you, Galen."

I laughed. She had me there.

"We could stay at the hotel," Punky pleaded. "That would be so much easier. The kids could sleep in their own beds, and we could drop the glamours at night."

Lark sighed. "We could, but we don't have that kind of money."

This was the first I'd heard of a money shortage. "Do you need financing?"

"It's nothing," Lark said. "We had to settle with some of the human parents when their children returned to Ignitas early, that's all. The fortress is a little short on cash, but we'll be fine."

I instantly felt guilty. This was why dragons didn't make rash decisions and burn changeling circles on a whim. There were always consequences to our actions, and now Lark, Punky, and their children were suffering for my foolish decision.

"Will they take jewels or gold?" I asked.

"Will they!" Clementine walked over and took my hand. "I knew I liked you."

I met her shrewd gaze and couldn't help but smile. She was everything I wanted in a dragon child.

I wanted a baby. My gut ached from the realization, or maybe it was just squeezed too tightly inside my glamour.

"Galen, you don't have to fund our trip," Lark said. "We can stay with my in-laws like they've asked. Right, Clementine?"

Clementine did not look happy, which made me feel even more guilty.

"I destroyed the changeling circle," I said. "I'll pay for your stay, since it's my fault you can't afford the hotel on your own."

I knew what a hotel was from a comedy show about a bellhop. Mac said our hotel wouldn't have bellhops, but we would have a room of our own, and now we could have our friends next door if I worked my magic.

For Clementine's entertainment, I weaved my hands around like a magician I'd seen in an Earth movie, thanks to Mac. Voila, a hefty chunk of gold appeared in my palm.

"Where did you get that?" Clementine asked, her voice low with suspicion.

"If I told you, I would have to eat you, little kobold."

I dropped it into her outstretched hand, and she scampered back to her parents, handing the gold off to Lark before hiding behind Punky's legs.

"What do you say to Galen, Clementine?" Lark asked.

"Scary Galen," she said. "He said he was going to eat me!"

"He was joking!" Even while leading a high-strung dragonet out of the barn's bay door, Mac tried to cover for me.

"I was joking, little Clementine," I reassured her. "I wouldn't tell you where I got the gold because I don't want to eat you."

She stepped out from behind Punky and gave a sharp nod of her head in my direction. "Good."

"Are we all arranged?" Mac asked. "You all still look like kobolds to me."

"We'll only need a sixteen-hour spell," Lark said. "There's enough gold here to pay for a world cruise, Galen. Are you sure?"

It was one nugget from a cave lined with gold. If I wanted more, all I had to do was knock a chunk off the wall. "I'm sure."

I had a feeling my kobold father had stolen some of my paragon's gold to pay for trips to Earth behind our backs. Without either party available to confirm, I had no way of knowing. I didn't know if I was fixing past mistakes or making them worse.

* * *

Punky and Lark combined their power into a spell strong enough for their family of six for sixteen hours. Their glamour spell was powerful, but I could see through it. I was glad. I wouldn't have been able to tell my friends apart. Human families all looked alike, according to Mac. To me, that only made it harder to tell them apart with my human sense of smell.

Finally, it was my turn to travel to Earth to see what all the fuss was about. We hopped on our respective mounts. Mac directed the dragonet to follow Lark's dire weasel, Odessa, since she knew where we were going.

This wasn't my first time to another plane besides Ignitas, but I had been a young dragon then. My family and I had gone to a world filled with islands and clear water teeming with fish. It had been the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

I hugged Mac to me as the sky seemed to brighten with the light of a million stars at once, and then it dimmed to the deepest black. I stared into nothingness, and it stared back, finding my loneliness and exploiting it. I couldn't feel Mac against me anymore, and I panicked.

I opened my eyes to find the dragonet had turned into a large vehicle like the van the cartoon ghost hunters used. The spell was complex, similar to my shape changing spell. I wondered what it looked like on the outside.

"The dragonet's name is Rapture," Mac said. He stared at me, waiting for my response while our mount sped into unknown territory.

I had fallen asleep during the magician movie last night, curled around Mac to keep him warm. Rapture sounded like a spell. I didn't know what kind of spell, so I admitted defeat. "I don't get it."

"During the rapture, Christians believe they'll be transported to a place called heaven

immediately when their savior returns. That's where all the good people go."

"You've named our interplanar vehicle after a religious transportation term," I guessed.

Mac chuckled and nodded. "Yes. You've been raptured!"

I shook my human head on my very short neck and sighed. "You are silly."

"Is that what the kids are calling brave and foolish these days?"

"I am not a kid." I chafed every time he hinted at my youth. I was almost two centuries older than he was, after all. Who was he to call me a kid?

"It's a saying, dearest. I meant no harm."

He sat so far away on the opposite end of the bench seat. I couldn't smell him with my inferior human nose. I unbuckled the belt at my waist so I could scoot closer to him and sniffed the side of his neck. "You're telling the truth."

"I am." He barked another laugh. "Is that why you're always sniffing me? Is your nose some kind of lie detector?"

"Yes."

Instead of being angry that I had been using secret intelligence tactics on him, Mac grinned. "Good. You should know by now. I could never lie to you."

Now that he'd said it aloud, and I smelled the truth in his words, I did.

I turned my head to hide the heat in my face. I glanced out at the land flying past us

and grabbed for the belt still over my shoulder. I returned to my place and buckled in. "We're going too fast, and too low to the ground!"

"We're on a road," Mac said, pointing out the front window.

I'd heard of roads, but we didn't use them on Ignitas. Why have a road when one could fly or bounce around the countryside on a dire weasel? "Humans don't have a means to fly?"

"They do," Mac reassured me. "They fly in large metal tubes designed to carry many at once. The rest of the time, they use land vehicles."

A vehicle shimmering with kobold magic passed us.

"Lark must have bribed Odessa with a burger or two," Mac said.

I watched as the half-dire-weasel, half-van sped to an intersection, slowed to a crawl, and then turned right after a non-magical vehicle crossed in front of them. Then they followed the other vehicle to a shorter road that curved into a strange alcove.

"See? They're going through the drive-thru to grab her a snack. Do you want a snack, Rapture?"

Our vehicle growled and followed.

Mac talked the entire time we were in line, but I wasn't paying attention. I tried to make sense of the shifting symbols on the board before us. Mac had walked me through preparing my own language spell like the one the kobolds used to understand humans, but this language was unlike any I'd read before. It changed into words I didn't recognize. Burgers. French Fries. Sweet potato fries. Onion rings. Jalapeno poppers.

"What is this?"

"It's a menu," Mac said.

"For food?"

"Yes."

"Why have I never heard of these foods?"

"You've had a burger," Mac said. "You didn't like the bread."

"Right. But what are fries?"

"We have our own tuber chips on Ignitas. You like them better."

I loved tuber chips, but, "I want to try them. I want to try everything."

Mac tapped on his phone and laughed when it chimed with an answer. "Lark says to get you whatever you want. There's a park nearby. We can share whatever you can't eat with their kids."

I didn't want to share, but it made sense. This body was far smaller than my usual size. The mass of paper bags covered in grease stains was smaller than an appetizer back home. Still, I needed to be on my best behavior on Earth. I thanked the human who handed the bags to Mac. My mate pulled away before I could ask any questions about Earth, their employment, or what a straw was, since I thought it was a type of hay.

"Straws are hollow," Mac said when I asked. "We stick them through the tops of the cups and drink through them."

I watched as he pulled two paper-wrapped tubes of plastic from the last bag the human had given him. He unwrapped them and stuck them through the crosscut squares in the middle of the plastic lids.

"Strange," I said.

Trying to suck through the straw was even stranger. Once Mac and I were seated across from each other at an outdoor picnic table large enough for all of us, I tried to mimic how the children drank from theirs. I ended up choking on the sweet liquid before I swallowed. After several attempts, I finally had it down.

"I understand now," I said after a second successful sip. "It's like sucking marrow from bones."

Punky and Lark stared at me like I was a horror movie villain.

"Mac, do you feel safe in your relationship with Galen?" Lark asked.

"Blink twice if we need to rescue you." Punky blinked his eyelids shut in an exaggerated fashion.

"Don't worry." Mac handed me a burger and a sampling of each of the sides we'd ordered. "They're a fast learner."

"What am I learning?" I asked.

"Later," Mac whispered in a conspiratorial, "Not in the presence of children," tone I remembered from my youth. I'd never been on the adult side of those conversations before. I couldn't wait to discuss my adult education with Mac later.

First, I ate everything he offered me. I didn't like the jalapeno poppers. They burned

my human tongue and most of the way down my throat. I was sucking up air from the bottom of my cup before the pain went away. Thankfully, the rest of the items were a balm, and the tub of ranch dressing dipping sauce cooled the fire in my mouth so I could enjoy the fried mushrooms, potatoes, and sweet potatoes.

Rather than let his children eat them, Lark threw the peppers away. "I don't like them either," he said.

"They smell bad." Clementine's little button nose scrunched halfway up her face at the declaration. "You're brave to try them, Galen."

Punky glanced down at his watch. "Crap. We're late." He ushered Clementine back to the van with the others. "We still need to check in at the hotel and slip over to my parents' place to say hello."

It was my fault we'd taken a short break to try all the food. I'd also had a hand in the extra stop at the hotel.

"He's just nervous about seeing his adoptive parents again," Lark said. "Will you two be all right tonight? They invited us for dinner."

Punky rolled his eyes and climbed into the front passenger seat. "Thanks for the reminder."

"We'll find something to do," Mac promised.

The kobold family left the park while we were still cleaning up all the paper bags and plastic containers.

"Humans are wasteful," I said as I filled a third bag with our refuse of paper napkins, plastic sauce containers, and cardboard boxes.

"Convenience and food safety practices come with a hefty price," Mac said. "I'm sorry you didn't like the peppers."

"I am here for the sensory experience," I reminded him. "Not everything will bring me pleasure, nor do I expect it. I would like to speak to some humans, though."

"I understand," he said slowly, "but we can't risk them discovering the truth about us."

"I won't tell them I'm a dragon," I huffed.

"Humans can smell the predator on us," Mac said. "You should have seen the way folks ran from us on extractions, and they knew we were coming!"

"They won't run from a child," I said, forming a plan in my head. "Clementine already understands scientific experimentation. She might be willing to interview the humans for me."

Mac tossed the rest of the rubbish into the large metal barrel near an old grill unit and pulled me to my feet. "She's busy visiting her grandparents," he reminded me.

"Not the entire time." I'd talked Lark into letting us tag along to a tourist trap called a botanical garden. Maybe Clementine could do some scouting for me then.

"They are on vacation," Mac reminded me. "They're not here to do your bidding."

"I know, but I need answers."

He turned to me and took my hand between his. It was strange having a hand with such thin, weak claws, but it felt nice when he slid his fingers between mine and squeezed. "We'll observe and research, first. If you still have questions, we can ask

Punky and Lark."

"That's a decent compromise."

I whined when he dropped my hand by the van's passenger door, but then he reached for me again once we were both inside.

I didn't know much about being a human yet, but this, I liked.

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Chapter Five

Mac

I couldn't believe our luck when I searched for things to do in Punky's hometown. West Des Moines didn't have much for dragon attractions, but Altoona had plenty, including an amusement park with a dragon rollercoaster and a casino with a horseracing track. We'd missed the Kentucky Derby by almost a month, but Galen hadn't lost interest in watching the horses go around the dirt track Punky had told him about.

The casino was no place for children, so as soon as we checked in at the hotel's front desk, I ushered Galen back to the van for a surprise.

The races started at four in the afternoon, and the sun was hot on the outdoor bleachers. We arrived just after five. I didn't know what horses would think if they caught wind of a dragon in their midst, so we sat as far up in the nosebleeds as we could. Thankfully, it was also in the shade of the building. I'd forgotten sunscreen.

"I don't have a hat," Galen complained. "I want a derby hat."

"This isn't the derby," I reminded them. "It's just a horse race. If you wear a hat, you'll draw even more attention to yourself."

They had already set the bartenders on edge by asking for mint juleps. When the cute human with pink hair shared they only served the drink during the Kentucky Derby, Galen had growled at them.

"But—"

"I will get you a hat to wear in our hotel room," I cajoled. The casino had a gift shop, and I'd noticed the row of hats was on sale. They had the current year embroidered on the hatband, along with the derby name.

The announcer called for everyone's attention for the next race, and Galen gripped my thigh as they leaned forward. "Where does it begin?"

I pointed just as the loud bang of a gun and clank of gates crashing open startled them. Their eyes flashed like stirred coals for a moment, but they tightened the spell that made them look human until their form was under control.

Galen's spell was far different from mine. Instead of a glamour I could see through, they were human in all but scent. It was so strange to feel their small hand on my knee, squeezing with excitement as the horses rounded the first turn.

The loudspeaker blared somewhere above us, calling the race as Morning Breakfast pulled into the lead.

"What kind of name is that?" Galen asked. "It's redundant. Careless Whisper is a better name."

"It's a song title," I shared.

"Morning Breakfast?" The pure disgust on their face made me laugh.

"No, Careless Whisper. That's why it's a better name."

The way Galen shook their shoulders did not resemble a human shrug. I wondered how long it would be before an unnamed human organization showed up at our hotel

and asked us to leave the plane ... or else.

Careless Whisper won the heat. We had six more races to sit through before the heat winners raced a last time for the jackpot. As I'd expected, Galen wanted to stay until the end. They also shouted themselves hoarse during the last race, when Careless Whisper pulled into the lead early but then placed third.

"So close," Galen complained as I steered them into the gift shop on our way toward the exit closest to where we parked.

"That's why they call it gambling," I said. "Look, derby hats."

"They're ugly," Galen growled.

If the approaching human was scared, it didn't show. "We have a wider selection over here." The human's name tag read "Shelby."

"Thank you," Galen said with a slight bow as they followed Shelby further into the store, away from the sale items. I knew gift shops were expensive from the way Weld used to avoid them whenever he could, opting to buy birthday gifts for extractions at discount stores instead.

These hats were more extravagant and cost a fortune. Each one had a price tag over one hundred dollars.

"These are also ugly." Galen's bottom lip slipped in front of their top one as they pouted. It was the most human I'd seen them look all day.

Even Shelby was convinced. "I'm so sorry. We have one more hat in the corner. We call it the governor's choice."

There was a tiny section of hats, handbags, watches, and accessories all under a picture of a woman in her mid-sixties whom I assumed was the governor, whatever that was.

"That hat has horses on it." Galen pointed.

They weren't wrong. Plastic horses covered in felt raced around the hatband surrounded by silk roses.

Galen handed it to me while they dug in their back pocket for their wallet. The price tag on this hat was three-hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. That was far too expensive for my tastes, but I wasn't the one buying, and I certainly wouldn't be the one wearing it. Based on the chunk of gold Galen had pulled from somewhere, they could afford whatever they wanted.

"Horses!" Galen said. "All derby hats should have horses on them. Pass that on to the retailer."

"I'll make a note to do that first thing tomorrow," Shelby said. "We close at eight."

It was now ten minutes past, but I didn't blame Shelby for trying to make a sale.

"Do you receive commissions?" I asked.

Shelby's laugh was bitter. "Not a chance. I'm very glad you bought it, though. It's the nicest thing with the governor's name on it. The rest of her bootlickers will have to buy a handbag or watch instead."

"I'm no bootlicker," Galen said. "Where is this name located, so I can take it off?"

"No one back home will even know," I reassured them.

"I will know. Shelby?"

A quick snip of a pair of shears, and the tag bearing the governor's name slipped into a small waste bin behind the cash register. "Good as new. That'll be four-hundred-thirty-one dollars and ninety-nine cents."

Galen didn't question the price, but my heart stopped when I heard the total plus tax. I withheld judgment as Shelby grabbed a handmade hat box from a shelf, lined it with tissue paper, and placed the delicate hat inside.

It even came with its own canvas bag, marked "Governor's Choice," with an illegible signature scrawled over the top of the state seal.

Galen glanced over their shoulder as Shelby pulled a steel gate across the gift shop doorway after we left.

"That is a strange contraption," they said. "How will other shoppers get inside?"

"They're closed for business until tomorrow morning."

Galen frowned, and their scowl turned even darker when we walked outside. "The sky is still light," they said. "Why are they closed?"

"Humans set their time by their clocks, not their hours of sunlight," I reminded them. "It's almost summer, and these are the longest days of the year, but in a few months, it will be dark around this time." I didn't try to explain daylight saving time. We were only staying for a week.

"May I wear my hat now?"

"Wait until we get to the hotel," I said. "I don't want to cause any traffic accidents

when someone sees you."

"It's a hat," Galen huffed. "Humans must see them all the time."

"Have you seen any humans wearing hats today?"

"Yes."

I must have missed them. "Describe them."

"There was a man wearing a baseball hat in the bleachers." Galen recognized baseball hats and visors thanks to our new outdoor sports facility. "Another wore a furry hat that only covered the top of his head."

"That was a toupee."

"To pay? I bet he paid too much," Galen quipped. "And a woman wore one of those sun visors the tennis players wear."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Galen was far more observant than I gave them credit.

"Hats like yours are rare," I said. "It's a fabulous item for your hoard, but not so great to wear in public."

They grinned. "It will shine among my treasures. Thank you for reminding me."

Appreciation was far easier to read on their human face, and I had to look away, pretending I needed to focus on the road. Now that I knew their sense of smell was weaker as a human, I hoped they couldn't tell how much I wanted them.

It was inevitable. We had a hotel room to ourselves, and only one queen bed. Lark had said it was cheaper. I believed him, but now that I knew Galen had plenty of money to cover our trip, I wondered if they would prefer a separate room.

"We could upgrade our room, if you'd like," I said as we approached the front desk in the hotel lobby.

Galen frowned at me. "Upgrade?"

I approached the young human behind the counter and asked, "Do you have any rooms available with two beds?"

"Sorry," they said. "We're booked for Pridefest this weekend."

I grabbed Galen's arm and whisked them away toward the nearest elevator so the clerk wouldn't hear them ask, "What is a pride fest? Is it like an infestation of lions, or what the Christians call a sin?"

A pair of teenagers sitting on a couch in the lobby burst out laughing, and my cheeks burned even hotter.

"No," I said. "It's a celebration. Fest, like festival."

"Pride is one of the seven deadly sins," they said.

They'd been paying attention to the documentaries I'd watched before bed for the last three years. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. I thought they fell asleep almost immediately after curling around me.

"Pride can become arrogance," I said, "but that's not how they mean it here. It means self-worth."

"I don't understand," Galen said. "They should have self-worth all the time, not only during this festival."

"I agree." Thankfully, we were the only ones waiting by the bank of elevators. Our room was on the third floor, and the lurch of elevator cars always made my stomach queasy.

Galen didn't seem to mind. They were familiar with the sensation of taking off and landing, I supposed.

When the doors closed, Galen pulled me close and sniffed my neck. "You wanted to get rid of me," they said. "That's why you asked for another room."

"Never. I only want you to be comfortable."

"You're my mate," they said. "I'm only comfortable with you."

Galen rested their forehead against my chest, and I was struck by our size difference. In his human form, the top of Galen's head fit snugly beneath my chin. I felt strangely protective of them as I wrapped my arms around their waist. Galen could have burned down the world, if they chose, yet here they were, cuddling against me because I didn't want to send them away.

I hoped I could protect Galen from the harsh realities of the human world, including how they treated anyone LGBTQ+. To Galen, being nonbinary was simply who they were. There were still some, okay, too many, humans who would assume Galen had a choice, that they had been assigned a specific gender at birth.

That was the coolest thing about dragons. They were all nonbinary at birth. They had only one intersex gender. In some cases, they could fertilize their own eggs. The practice would allow continuation of their species, if it came to that.

Like the other kobolds, I always assumed dragons mated with each other.

"Am I the first beta kobold to mate with a dragon?" I asked.

"Of course not," they said. "Most dragons came from kobold and dragon unions."

I stepped sideways for enough distance to tip their chin up and meet their gaze. "Did you?"

They nodded, and I nearly passed out from the shock. No wonder the dragons hated us so much. We hadn't involved them in a decision that would ultimately affect both of our species. Galen's previous non-answer, that betas no longer served dragons, now made more sense. It wasn't hard to deduce. Our genetic meddling must have caused the adult dragons to set fire to our kobold settlements. The village priestesses had different guesses for the dragons' reasons for wanting us dead, but none had suggested that we'd put their reproduction at risk.

Galen pressed himself to my chest again. "I much prefer a mate your size. I can't imagine trying to shrink even smaller. This is uncomfortable enough."

That was what he worried about? I tried to cover a laugh, but he felt my chest moving against his cheek and glared up at me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Stop laughing."

I couldn't help it. The thought of Galen shrinking down to a tiny gobliness creature who could fit in the chairs he'd first offered me in his cave ... that was too much for my frazzled vacation brain to handle.

I patted their head, which made them even more angry.

"You'd be adorable."

"I could still burn every inch of skin from your body," they reminded me. "How 'adorable' would you think me then?"

The elevator jerked to a stop, and a bell rang as the doors slid open. Galen spun away from me and nearly plowed into a couple who were trying to enter the elevator at the same time they exited.

"Excuse you," the woman called after them.

It wouldn't take much to burn them to cinders, especially in a toasty metal elevator box. Either Galen didn't hear them or didn't understand they'd tried to insult them. Either way, it was a blessing. I offered a tiny shrug as an apology and followed Galen down the long corridor.

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Chapter Six

Galen

Mac called me adorable and laughed at me. Me!

Dragons were the most formidable creatures on Ignitas. From what I had seen of Earth, we could dominate their plane, as well.

"Why were you laughing?" I asked when he finally stopped and removed the key card from his pocket.

"I'm worried the other dragons might try to kill me for being your fated mate," he said, "and you're freaking out about shrinking a little smaller."

The door latch popped, and he cranked it open and stepped out of my way. He gave me plenty of room for this smaller body, but I brushed past him into the room. His chest was still pleasantly warm where I'd been leaning against him, but I didn't want to think about that now. I was still angry.

"A little? Kobolds of old would come up to a human's knee. Punky and Lark's children are twice as tall."

I let my horns pop back into existence, and the world seemed to right itself around me. The breeze from the air vent beneath the window rushed past them, centering me in a way I hadn't felt since I'd first morphed into this human body.

It was bad enough to force my greatness into such a tiny package, and then I had to clothe it! My magic made it easy, but nothing about holding this form felt right. I wanted out.

As soon as I heard the door click shut, I released the spell for my clothes.

Mac sucked in a breath. "What are you doing?"

"Do you know how uncomfortable clothes are to someone who has never worn them?"

"Yes," he said. "I hated wearing them as a child. I still do, sometimes."

Yet he wore them around me. "Why do you wear them when we are alone in my cave?"

He kicked off his sandals. "Tradition?"

The word smelled wrong. I closed the gap between us to sniff again. "Don't lie to me."

"Embarrassment," Mac admitted. "I'm a mess around you, and it would be really obvious without clothes."

"A mess?" That word smelled ... confusing.

"I'm attracted to you." He blushed and looked at the floor.

"Obviously. You're my fated mate."

I relaxed my tight hold on my form, letting my shoulders expand and lifting me a few

inches taller than Mac. It was far from my dragon form, but being larger than Mac felt more appropriate. Mac was struggling with his emotions, and I wanted to hold him and make him feel safe.

Instead, he glared up at me. "I didn't know I was your fated mate until two days ago!"

"But I knew. I have always been grateful for your attraction to me. I don't understand the problem."

He tugged at the buttons on his polo shirt and pulled it over his head. Once the shirt was off, so was his glamour. There was my gorgeous kobold beta mate without the shimmering human facade.

"You made one comment about copulation that first night, and then you ignored me for three years." Mac untied the drawstring of his shorts and pulled them off.

"I did not ignore you! I very much enjoyed having you near and scenting your growing attraction for me. I was thrilled."

Mac growled in the back of his throat.

I grabbed him gently by the neck. "You are unhappy."

"I'm—" he took my free hand and dragged it along his side, over his smooth skin, coarse scales, and downy soft hair between his legs. He wrapped my fingers around his hard cock. "I'm so turned on, it's not even funny. Even when you've got me by the throat and I know you could kill me with a squeeze."

"Why would I do that?" My neck was far shorter in this form, so I adapted, tilting my head to listen to the steady beat of his heart. His heart wasn't scared of me, at least. I remembered a time when he had smelled equally of fear and arousal, but his scent

had shifted to pure arousal over the years.

"Why are you grabbing my throat?"

"To wrap my arms around you?" I'd heard the words before, but without having arms, I had no way to practice before now.

Mac chuckled. "No. That's how you choke someone, if you're strong enough to do it with one hand, which you are."

He pried my hand away from his throat and dragged his fingers up my chest. When he reached the strange boxy shape of my shoulders, he slipped his arms around my neck and behind my head, pulling me closer. "This is how you wrap your arms around someone."

"Mmm." I couldn't say anything more because Mac pressed his lips to mine. His kobold snout felt strange against my human face. I wanted to be more like myself, so I relaxed my form even more, returning to the kobold/human form I'd taken in my cave.

Mac tightened his grip around my neck and wrapped his legs around my waist, grinding our cocks together as he continued to kiss me. It felt divine, but also like we were moving too fast. All I'd wanted was to hold him and confirm he wasn't angry with me.

I walked him over to the bed and sat him on it, extricating myself from his legs.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I think we need to talk. You were angry."

"I'm sexually frustrated as fuck," Mac said. "You've been cock teasing and cockblocking me simultaneously for three years. I am not angry, Galen. I am beyond ready to share orgasms with you. I don't even care if you participate or watch."

"I want to participate." I did. "I just don't know what I'm doing."

He blinked up at me. "What?"

"This body is new to me, and you aren't a dragon." When dragons fucked, our ovipositors docked together to add pleasure to the experience. I still had both, but Mac did not.

Mac blinked up at me. "You've never had a hand job!"

I stared at him a moment, trying to figure out how those words went together, and what they meant.

"You've never had hands!" He waved his hands toward my face.

That, I understood. "No, I haven't."

He reached for me, but hesitated. "May I touch you, Galen?"

I loved when he was so polite. "You may."

His hand on my cock was both too much and not enough. "Ooh." I couldn't resist making noise as he continued to stroke me. "I need to sit down."

"Come lie down."

He scooted across the bed and lay on his side with his head propped on his arm. I

eased onto the bed beside him as near as I dared. It wasn't close enough. He tugged at my waist until his cock once again nestled against mine.

I felt a burst of magic, and then Mac's hand was on me again, this time coated with a product that smelled like water but didn't feel like it on my skin.

"What is that?"

"Personal lubricant. It's a human invention."

"It's glorious," I said. I had nothing to compare it to. "Is this what kobold omega slick feels like?"

"I wouldn't know," Mac said. "I've never fucked an omega."

I had questions, but I forgot them as he continued to move. I lost myself in the sensations of his hand gliding over my cock.

My ovipositor reached for him, wanting in on the action, and I howled when he brushed the tip with his thumb. He continued to circle it slowly and stuck his thumb inside the opening. When he grabbed onto it and pumped them both with the same rhythm, I couldn't hold myself up anymore. I rolled onto my back, and he followed.

"Do you like this," he stroked my ovipositor, "or this better?" He ran his thumb around the opening and pressed it inside.

"Your thumb," I said, unable to find more words in my addled mind. I lost track of everything but the sensation of his hands on me, working me into a frenzy.

"Wait," I said. "What about you?" I motioned for him to straddle me, and he was there, his solid weight pressing down on me as he took both of our cocks in one hand.

He added more magical lubricant, and I sank further into the pillows, thrusting my hips upward with each stroke.

I dripped with sweat, something I didn't have in dragon form. When I reached the highest summit of pleasure, I thrust up into his hand, impaling myself on his thumb while my cock jetted cum like a fountain over my chest and abdomen.

My ovipositor clenched around Mac's thumb, and he moaned as his cock spurted over mine and added to the glorious mess.

"Fuck, that's so hot." He dropped to one elbow over me and kissed my jaw. "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are when you come?"

He must have been able to tell from my confusion that no, I did not know how I looked when I came. We didn't have mirrors lying around our caves, unlike the abundance of them in the kobold villages.

"Next time, I'll show you," he said. "There's a huge mirror in the bathroom."

Thank all the gods, he wanted there to be a next time. If he wanted me to stand before a mirror, who was I to stop him?

* * *

Once I could breathe again, my mind returned to my earlier questions. "Why couldn't you copulate with omegas? Weren't there omegas at The Spike without mates?"

"Yes, but we make it a priority to find their mates as soon as possible. That's why we have the meetups. We host the one for the fortress, and then we put the unclaimed omegas on dire weasels to the next village over."

The dire weasels could travel long distances the same way they traveled to other planes. The distance from the village to my cave was too short for accuracy, and they might fall off the mountain. Longer distances, like a village two hours away, were easier for them to navigate.

"Your grotto has been cold for some time," I said, thinking aloud. "Why did you not move all your alphas and omegas to another village?"

"We didn't want to draw your attention with so many dire weasel trips," Mac said. "If a couple failed three times to produce live hatchlings, we sent them to another village, but not before."

"You would have been sending all of them in another year," I said.

"I suppose that's true."

"You keep all your betas?"

"All those born here, yes. Someone has to do the work."

That statement rang false, not because Mac didn't believe it, but because I knew it wasn't true. "Your alphas and omegas do their own work and raise their children."

"We grow the food, clean the fortress, raise the animals?—"

If we continued this discussion, I would be raging mad on Mac's behalf. He was so much more than a servant to me.

I growled, and Mac changed the subject. "We should get cleaned up. Maybe do that again in the shower?"

"What is a shower?" It sounded like rain, which I liked.

"You're going to love it." He rolled off the bed and offered me his hand.

I did love it. The focused droplets cleaned the sweat from my brow and ran in rivulets down my horns, making me shiver.

"May I touch?" Mac asked.

This time, I didn't know where he wanted to touch me, but I nodded. I trusted him with my body, even this weaker alpha kobold one.

His hand tentatively stroked my horn, tracing the path of cascading water to my scalp.

"Gods, you're so beautiful. I don't get a chance to touch much of you in your dragon form, but I've always loved your horns."

I grunted as he wrapped his fingers around the base and stroked my horn the way he'd massaged my cock earlier.

"They're sensitive?" he asked.

"Incredibly. I use them to gauge the wind."

"What does this feel like?" He gripped my other horn and stroked them both at the same time.

"Like I could orgasm without a touch to my cock." I'd never felt anything like it, but I wanted more. "Keep doing that."

I didn't want to leave him hanging. I turned toward him and almost tripped. The tub basin wasn't very large, and I was clumsy in this body. Mac was there, holding me,

guiding my hands to his hips to hold myself up. Once steady, I grasped his cock, and he raised his hands to my horns again.

The water cooled as we stood, rocking against each other, hands moving at the same time, breath coming in harsher and harsher pants. In no time at all, he had me back on the edge. I collapsed against him as my untouched cock spilled on his abdomen.

"Fuck," Mac groaned as he leaned against me, pressing our mouths together. His hot cum was a welcome contrast to the cool water pelting against my back.

He broke the kiss, laughing. "So much for a hot shower, but it was worth it!" He turned me around again and began scrubbing at my back with soap and water. I didn't mind the cold, but I yelped when he spun me around and grabbed my still-sensitive cock. He soaped the rest of my body and spun me around again to rinse. Then, he guided me to the back of the tub while he finished cleaning himself under the cold spray.

"Someday, we'll stay at a hotel with plenty of hot water," he said.

I had something else in mind. I could heat the waterfall near my cave using my magic. I'd never thought of it before. I was afraid to try it here, where I didn't know how much heat the human construction materials could handle. Back home, the obsidian stone beneath the waterfall could withstand any temperature we wanted.

Already, I'd learned so much to take back to Ignitas.

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Chapter Seven

Mac

After we climbed into the hotel bed and I turned the light off, Galen tossed and turned.

"Are you all right?"

"This bed is too big," they grumbled. "Or I am too small. I don't know."

"Come here." They were larger than me in their kobold alpha form, but it felt comforting to snuggle my snout between their shoulder blades and curl my arm around their chest. I tucked my legs against theirs and held them until their breath evened out in sleep.

I kissed their shoulder blade, and a swell of happiness washed over me. My cheeks ached from the stretch of my smile. I'd smiled so much in the last eight hours, all because of Galen.

We'd had the best day, from our picnic to the racetrack. Then, it happened. After three years of blue balls, they'd finally shared orgasms with me. Amazing orgasms.

My head was still reeling. I'd been dreaming of touching their sex organs for so long, and now I knew how their cock and ovipositor felt in my hands. Well, in their kobold form, at least.

Their cock was enormous. At full dragon size, it rivaled the ocean buoys in shark attack movies, the ones the heroine used as a resting place before launching the final attack on the shark. I could wrap my arms and legs around it, but there was no way it was going inside me. Still, I would try, if given the chance.

Their ovipositor was the same length but remained soft when I stroked it. It acted like a prehensile appendage, curling around like an elephant's trunk. It had sought my touch, and gods, how it squeezed my thumb. I wondered if it could stretch, and what it would feel like wrapped around the head of my cock.

If I continued that line of thinking, I would never get to sleep.

What surprised me more than anything was how Galen seemed to want me as much as I wanted them. Until we'd arrived home from our travels across Ignitas, I thought they were completely oblivious to my desire. Now, not only did they want me, they wanted offspring with me. I felt like I was dreaming.

Galen was my fated mate. As a beta, I valued our village society over individual family. I wasn't supposed to want a family of my own. Now that I'd imagined having a child with Galen, I wanted it more than anything. I wanted to help raise them, even if dragon children were nothing like ours.

Exhausted from the long day, I sank into dreams of babies. Through the night, they kept me company. By morning, they were large enough to run around our cave. The last thing I remembered, they set our woodpile on fire and laughed.

The sound of children next door woke me. I didn't hear Punky, Lark, and their kids return last night, which meant they probably got in late. This morning, though, I could hear Ernie and Robin fighting over who got to play with something "Grandma" got them, all while Clementine scolded them that if they were any louder, they would wake the entire hotel.

"If you wake Galen before they're ready ..." she threatened, and the boys were instantly quiet.

"Are they really afraid of me?" Galen whispered.

"They're children," I said. "Children often have irrational fears."

"I don't think they're irrational," they said. "I have tried to make friends with Clementine, since she might become a priestess someday. If she doesn't, that means I've scared her away."

Galen sounded so sad. I turned toward them and squeezed their shoulder. "If she chooses to become something other than a priestess, it's because she can." I'd watched many omegas fight against societal norms of what they were expected to do and be. It had to be even worse for females since there were so few. There were none my age. Clementine was the first female born in our village in three decades. In the past, she would have chosen between priestess and prostitute, but now that we didn't have to worry about keeping up appearances for Galen's sake, she had more choices.

Besides, "What do the priestesses do that I can't do?" I asked.

I watched as different emotions played across their expressive kobold face. They would think of something, open their mouth to say it, and then stop with a frown.

"Nothing."

"Exactly." I knew they would reach the same conclusion I'd reached years ago. "They lead our villages, but betas could worship and honor you just as well. You could have priests instead of priestesses."

Galen frowned. "My paragon used to threaten the priestesses. Said there would be no

more females if they stopped worshipping us."

"Dragons didn't change our birthrates," I reminded them. "We did, by combining our genes with humans."

"What if that's not true?" they asked. "What if it's a magical curse?"

"It wasn't enough to destroy our village with fire so hot it burned underground for a century?" I asked. "You think your elders cursed us, too?"

They frowned. "I don't know. I wasn't included in their discussions. I was too young, they said."

I leaned toward them and kissed their cheek. "Don't worry about it. We've got a fun day ahead."

"We do?"

"Yes." I prodded their hip, where I'd learned they were ticklish. "Time for another shower, a quick one this time, and then we'll switch back into our human selves for another day as tourists."

"I don't think I like cold showers," they said.

"If we hurry, it won't be cold."

That got them moving. I had never seen anyone take a faster shower in my life. Back home, we still had one hot spring that fed into a pool in the grotto. The water moved so fast, if you stayed under the stream too long, you could suffocate.

The flow from the hotel's shower head wasn't nearly as strong, and the water heater

was infinitely smaller than our hot spring. The water cooled before I finished rinsing shampoo from my hair, and it was completely cold by the time I'd rinsed the soap from my body and got out. I shivered in the room's air conditioning while I toweled off.

I pulled on my clothes before shrinking to my human form. The spell trimmed them so they still fit.

When I stepped into the main room, I found Galen sitting at the edge of the bed. They had once again taken the human form they'd used the day before. My childhood crush stared back at me with my mate's deep purple eyes.

I took their hands in mine and pulled them up. "Are you ready?"

They frowned, and I pressed a kiss to the wrinkles on their forehead.

"I would like to see our friends, so I can tell if they're joking," they said.

"What did they say?" I asked.

"More child's play. It's nothing."

It didn't look like nothing, to me. One of Galen's favorite pastimes was teaching the young kobolds about our history. If Lark and Punky's offspring had hurt their feelings, I was the one they should fear.

Lark waited for us in the hall. "Punky took the kids out to the van already. They want to go to The Machine Shed."

"The what now?" I asked.

"What is a machine shed?" Galen asked.

"It's a place to store machines?" I looked to Lark for confirmation.

"My friends, prepare for a feast," he said. "They have the best biscuits and gravy you've ever had, for starters." He turned around and led us to the elevator.

"It must be a restaurant." I took Galen's hand, and they gave my fingers a reassuring squeeze.

"I didn't know either," they said. "I understand the words, but not the concepts behind them. Everything here is so foreign to me."

It was strange to me, too. I didn't understand the need for multiple-story buildings completely at odds with nature, such as our hotel. I hated the claustrophobic boxes that hauled us up and down on thick cables instead of magic, too. Their technology seemed more lazy than efficient. At least, it did until I saw a young person in a wheelchair waiting for the elevator in the lobby. I thought I would have to pull Galen away like a young child, shushing their questions until we were out of hearing distance, but they were very gracious.

"Good morning," they said. "I like your dragon sticker."

I didn't even see the large dragon decal on the side of the armrest until Galen pointed it out.

The child smiled. "Thank you! Dragons are my favorites."

"Mine, too."

For a moment, I worried they would swoop in and sniff the child, but instead, they

gave a grand head bow worthy of royalty. "Have a wonderful day."

"You too!" The child rolled into the elevator and waved as the doors closed.

Lark noticed me giving Galen side-eye and laughed. "Galen's been doing their homework," he said.

"Some humans are differently abled," Galen said. "All are worthy of love and acceptance."

"Yes, they are."

I turned to Lark. "Thanks for teaching them."

"They wanted to learn." Lark patted my shoulder and shoved me toward the door. "They've been asking about Earth as long as we've been visiting them at their cave."

Galen leaned into my side when I caught up to them, and I slung my arm around their shoulders. "I have wanted to visit since I met you," they reminded me. "Now, we're finally here."

Bright sunlight filled the parking lot. We found Odessa and Rapture side by side at the far end. I refreshed Rapture's spell before we climbed inside. Young Rapture didn't hold his vehicle shape as well as Odessa could. He needed my help to remember what a van was. He was starting to list to one side like he had a flat tire.

Once we were on the road, I was drawn to how different human architecture was to our own. Their buildings stuck out like broken bones across the landscape, while our cabins were designed to blend in with the grassland. Their roads snaked up and over other roads, railroad tracks, and rivers. We had magic to prevent collisions or accidents at crossings like these, but they needed pathways over or around them.

I wasn't as familiar with this town, so I let Lark and Punky take the lead. Rapture followed closely on Odessa's heels. He seemed nervous to lose her in this strange place.

When we arrived, the Machine Shed loomed large over acres of parking lot. The giant red building resembled our dragonet barn back home. Inside, antique tools lined the walls. Each tool had a plaque explaining its use and the number of years humans used them before they were replaced by diesel-powered machinery.

As unfamiliar with their equipment as I was, I was even more confused by their breakfast foods. I'd had my share of fast food on Earth, but I stayed away from the strange cuisine back home. I had eaten steel-cut oats and mossberries every morning for as long as I could remember.

Some of their food sounded familiar, though. I pointed out the steak and eggs on Galen's menu, and they raised one eyebrow, once again reminding me of my childhood crush whose face he'd stolen. Thankfully, the movie was over thirty years old and no one would think he was the actor, but the resemblance was uncanny to me.

I ordered the biscuits and gravy as Lark suggested, and I was not disappointed. I wondered how anyone could eat something so rich every morning for breakfast, though. I felt full and drowsy when the server brought us our bill.

"It's a good thing we're not doing anything too crazy after this," Punky said. "If you took me on a roller coaster right now, I would probably puke."

"Toast for breakfast tomorrow," Lark said. "Got it."

The restaurant lobby also served as a small general store with knickknacks and tourist baubles. While Galen paid for breakfast and the boys tried on the different straw hats in a bin, Clementine stalked a small girl with blond ringlets and the clearest blue eyes

I'd ever seen.

Outside, I tried to take pictures for Punky and Lark while they posed with their family in front of a statue of an ear of corn. While I tried to find the best angle, Clementine replayed the encounter for Punky.

"Humans are stupid," she concluded as I snapped the first picture.

"Not stupid," Punky admonished. "Young."

"She said she's three!"

"Well, she's probably three," Punky replied, trying to turn her head toward the camera for the shot.

"We're three!" Thankfully, her shouts were lost in the stiff breeze.

"In human developmental years, you're closer to six," Punky said.

"Six?"

"Six," Lark agreed, "going on twelve."

"I'm six," Clementine said again for confirmation.

Both of her parents smiled and nodded, and I snapped another picture.

"Then I want more birthday presents," she said.

I snapped one more picture, capturing the smug faces of all four children while Punky frowned and Lark's eyes bulged too large for his human head.

"That's the best one," Galen said. "Well done, Clementine. We've captured a true family portrait."

"I'll tell your grandma about the presents," Punky said as he ushered the children toward our parking spots.

Lark fell back into step with us. "After the botanical garden, we're having dinner with Punky's parents again tonight, and then we're going to the amusement park tomorrow. His parents don't want to ride the rides, but the kids really want to go. They're tall enough to ride most of them, but we'll need a chaperone for the ones they can't. Are you interested?"

"Yes," Galen said before I could ask questions. "They have a dragon at this amusement park. I want to meet it."

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Chapter Eight

Galen

I enjoyed humidity as a dragon, but I hated it as a human. The muggy botanical garden made my human sweat glands work overtime. Once we were past the overhanging greenery and into the heart of the domed garden, I ignored my discomfort, focusing instead on the different plant description plaques along the winding paths.

While we walked, Mac told Punky my dilemma, that I wanted to learn about humans without scaring them with strange questions. Instead of offering up his children as interviewers, he led me to a platform high above the main floor. From there, I could see a bench below, where two humans sat holding hands. Their animated faces and voices carried to us, especially when I allowed my ears to flatten and expand against the side of my head like my dragon form.

"I've had the best time getting to know you," the human with short chestnut hair and scruffy beard said to the other.

"Me too," the human with longer hair on their head but no facial hair said, leaning toward the other. "Best six months of my life. I'm so glad I met you."

"I couldn't leave tomorrow without asking you this," the one with the beard said. They slid to their knees on the path before the bench and dug a small box from their pants pocket. "Will you marry me?"

The other human hopped to their feet and clapped. "Oh my god, yes! Yes, Brian, I'll marry you!" They reached down and pulled Brian into their arms, kissing them the way I'd kissed Mac several times now. I felt like I was intruding on something private, but I couldn't look away. I wanted that, with Mac.

Beside me, Punky cleared his throat.

My face burned, and I pulled back from the ledge I'd been leaning on. I turned to Punky. "What is marry?"

"It's like mating. Humans don't have fated mates, so they date and see if they like each other. Sometimes, they choose to cohabitate. If they really like each other, or they're really religious, they get married."

I didn't know what religion had to do with it. If the dragon goddess tried to come between me and Mac, I would simply find another dragon deity to worship.

"If humans don't have fated mates, is it possible we will cease to have them one day?" I asked.

"We?" Punky frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Mac doesn't think betas have fated mates, but some do, when they're mated with dragons."

Punky's frown turned to shock. "The priestess never said betas mated with dragons." He squared his shoulders. "It doesn't matter what she said or didn't say. The truth is all alpha and omega kobolds have fated mates. That hasn't changed in the last two centuries we've been mixing genes with humans. If it hasn't changed for us, it shouldn't change for you."

His logic was sound. I only wished I believed him enough to risk the future of dragonkind.

* * *

We stopped at a sorcery shop on the way back to the hotel, but instead of spell components, Mac handed me a bag that smelled like fresh bread. He pushed down on the center of the seatback to create a divide between us. I hated it, but the new furniture contained two reservoirs for the drink cups he carried.

"What kind of sorcerer is a sand witch?" I asked. "Do they make bread from sand?"

Mac stared at me for a moment, and then he laughed. And laughed. And laughed some more.

"It's not funny. Tell me!"

"A sandwich," Mac chuckled again and wiped his eyes. "Gods. Sorry. Sandwiches are food. A burger is a type of sandwich. Instead of grilled meat, these have thin slices of deli meat and all your favorite vegetables. You're going to love it."

"Sandwich," I said, cramming the two words together the same way he did.

He laughed again and nodded, and I had to laugh with him. It was an absurd play on words.

Sandwiches were delicious, I decided when we shared the tiny table in our hotel room. The hotel's touch lamp and strange handset contraption took up most of the surface area. We had little room for our paper-wrapped sandwiches, bags of chips, and drinks. I didn't need room. Once I picked up the meat-and-veggie-filled bread roll, I couldn't put it down.

"There must be sorcery involved," I told Mac when I finished. "Nothing back home tastes this good."

"Now that you can change forms whenever you want, I can bring you sandwiches from the fortress."

"You have these at the fortress?"

He laughed. "Yes."

"Why have I never had one?"

"You didn't like burgers, remember? You hated the bread."

"It was different," I admitted. I thought "hated" was too strong a word. I hadn't spit it out, unlike something called "I'll live." After I had one, I was pretty sure I wouldn't live. The nasty-tasting green thing got stuck between my teeth and I had to spit it out.

"This is wonderful," I said.

"I'm glad you like it." Mac tried to take the paper wrap from me, but it was still covered with lettuce, sprouts, and bits of other vegetables that had fallen while I'd eaten. I picked off every last scrap before I let him have it.

"Try the chips," he said. "You're going to love them."

I pulled at the sides of the bag the same way Mac did, but nothing happened. The bag was filled with air, so I reversed the technique, popping it instead. Pieces of fried potato flew up into my face. I licked them off my lips. Garlic and vinegar. Delicious.

"These taste like the tubers back home," I said.

"They're the closest I've found on Earth," Mac agreed. "I like corn chips, too, but these are my favorite."

When we finished eating, Mac grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Let's check out this PrideFest everyone is talking about."

After a quick drive on multi-lane roads Mac called freeways, we slowed to a crawl through side streets and finally parked in a strange cave-like structure Mac called a parking garage. It was cool inside, but outside, the moisture in the air made it uncomfortably muggy.

Once again, I was disappointed there were no lions. People milled about in clothes that reminded me of Tuft, the yellow-striped omega who had organized the sports park outside The Spike. He often dressed in bright colors and accessorized them with suspenders, ties, and bowties. He'd even named their children after types of tie knots.

The group of humans in front of us wore nothing but bright colored shorts, suspenders, and bow ties. Others wore beautiful ball gowns and looked like princesses from the animated movies Mac liked to watch.

We walked down the middle of a closed-off road. I was perplexed by the arrangement of temporary dwellings situated on either side. Mac corrected me, saying it was a street, and that these tents would be taken down in a few hours when the street fair ended.

I had a hard time hearing him over the noise coming from a raised platform. Some screeching feedback accompanied a person making strange noises with their mouth. The noise startled me at first. I focused on the warmth of Mac's hand in mine and

calmed my racing heart.

"What is that?" I pointed the way he taught me, with my hand instead of a finger.

"A disco cover band, I think?" Mac laughed. "Priestess Alma would love it!"

"Band?"

"It's music," he said.

Music. Dragons could sing, but this was so much more varied and interesting. Humans were good with their hands.

The thought reminded me of how wonderful Mac's hands had felt on me last night. It was probably a good thing dragons didn't have hands. If I'd been able to touch myself like that my whole life, I wouldn't have accomplished much outside my cave.

Not that I'd accomplished much as it was. I had a feeling my paragon would chastise me for letting the kobolds rebuild, among other things.

I grunted, and Mac turned to me with a question in his gaze. I shook my head. That was a problem for the future, if my paragon returned at all.

We walked closer to the stage, what Mac called the raised platform, as we progressed along the row of covered tables and smiling faces trying to talk us into buying their goods. It reminded me of the dragon festivals we had when I was a child, with our relatives from afar hawking the shiny baubles they'd collected on their journeys.

Not all humans sold merchandise. Some wanted us to sign petitions. Others wanted us to buy a membership, and they would give us merchandise in return. After some address confusion, Mac completed a form for me, and I became a proud member of

the Human Rights Campaign. I ended up with a tote bag, a t-shirt, and a rainbow heart-covered mug for my hoard.

By the time we reached the stage, I could feel a deep vibration in my chest as sound pounded from the large black boxes positioned on either side. The people on the stage had changed, and now one crooned about celebrating while the crowd bounced to the beat. Mac bobbed with them, a smile on his face.

I didn't have to understand it to enjoy being part of the crowd. I danced to the music, too, and Mac slid his arms around my waist.

"This is fun," he shouted, the only way I could hear him with human ears.

"Yes!"

"Let's look at the offerings on the other side of the street, and then we can find somewhere quiet."

As exciting as this was, quiet sounded better.

At the first table, we had to explain we weren't from the area to another petitioner. I wandered to the next table while Mac explained we wouldn't be able to vote on their bond referendum in November.

I didn't know what a bond referendum was, any more than I knew what the strange harnesses on the next table would do. They wouldn't fit our dire weasels or dragonets, that's for sure.

"Oh, this would look lovely on you." The young man with a metal ball pierced beneath his bottom lip sauntered over to me with a strip of leather with four holes on one side and a metal tongue on the other. "Would you like to try it on, honey?"

"No." Mac's voice was firm behind me. "Thank you," he added belatedly. He draped his arm over my shoulders and dragged me away from the glowering man.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A collar. It means you belong to someone." Mac glared over his shoulder.

"I only belong to you."

I'd hoped it would calm him, but he walked faster, urging me past the remaining tents to the gate. When we reached the van, I pulled my door open, but he pushed it shut again and pinned me against it.

"You don't belong to me," Mac said. "We're partners. Equals."

We were most certainly not equals. I could crush him beneath my foot in my true form. Still, I understood what he meant.

"Partners," I said, choosing the word that best fit us. "Mates."

He dropped his head, and I clasped my fingers behind his neck, still not sure how this was different from grabbing under his chin, like I'd done before. It brought him even closer to me, and I pressed my lips to his.

He shuffled me to the side and opened the door without breaking the kiss, but then he lifted me into the van and shut me inside. I was still panting when he joined me in the driver's seat.

"It's too early to take you to bed," he said. "Also too soon to eat dinner, but there's a lake nearby. Want to take a walk with me?"

I wanted more kissing, but walking sounded fun, too. "Yes."

After a short drive, we parked in the shade of a large grove of trees that bordered the lake on one side. The trees reminded me of the conical evergreens around my cave, but their scent stung my nose. After two deep breaths, I sneezed.

Mac handed me a paper napkin from his pocket. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." Thankfully, we were soon away from the trees and walking toward a structure that reminded me of the dragon pavilion Tuft and his mate Axel had built for me. I ached for home. I wiped at my runny eyes with the napkin, this time for a different reason.

Mac had longer legs than I did in this form. I soon fell behind, and he waited for me in the middle of the bridge. The sun through colored panes of glass painted the walkway in a rainbow. I enjoyed the view as I approached. I needed to stay present and enjoy the moment. There was no reason to go home, anyway. My mate was here with me.

He held his hand out to me, and I slotted our fingers together. I nudged him with my shoulder as I leaned against the railing, matching his posture. Below us, fish shimmered as they swam.

"I wanted to apologize," he said.

"For what?"

"Back there, at the bondage tent. I had no reason to be jealous."

My mind was reeling over "bondage" but then it bounced to, "Jealous?" I'd thought that was the emotion Mac displayed, but I still didn't understand. "Why?"

"That human was hitting on you."

"I don't know what that means. He didn't touch me."

"He wanted to touch you."

Mac started walking again and pulled me with him. He returned to his long strides. I had to take two steps to his one to keep up.

"I don't want to touch him." I didn't know what else to say. I'd already told Mac he was my partner. I gripped his hand tighter, and he slowed. "I only want to touch you."

At the base of the bridge, a concrete path led off into the woods. We followed it to an empty picnic area. I headed for the table, but Mac tugged me toward a bench that overlooked a fast-flowing river.

Some tension seeped from Mac's shoulders as I sat beside him.

"Do dragons mate for life?" he asked.

"Yes. Once we've found our fated mates, that's it for us. If they die, we don't take another mate."

"You'll outlive me," he said. "I don't want you to be lonely."

"I won't outlive you. Remember Olaf?"

He grinned. "Yeah. The old geezer from The Grid."

"He's mated to Bale." My great-grand-something-or-other was one of the oldest living dragons. "A dragon's mating mark extends their mate's life."

"But you said?—"

"Dragons war with each other, and sometimes our mates are killed. Mating marks don't make you immune to fire."

"Oh." He squeezed my hand again. "So I could live as long as you do?"

"That's the plan." I rested my head against his shoulder, and he pulled his hand free of mine to wrap his arm around me. I didn't like our size difference in my human form, but I felt cherished and safe by his side.

I only hoped I could show him how cherished and safe he would be for the rest of our lives.

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Chapter Nine

Mac

We walked back to the main path, continuing our stroll around the lake until we arrived back at the parking lot where we'd left Rapture. He sniffed at me as I walked past. I'd given him a hefty roast beef sandwich for lunch, but he would need a full meal tonight. I hoped the restaurant boasting Iowa's best southern comfort food would have a rack of ribs or giant tenderloin.

When we finally found a place to park downtown and made our way inside the restaurant, Galen's nose wrinkled at the smell of grease. The greeter asked us if we'd like to sit on the back patio, and I jumped at the chance.

We sat in the shade of a tall building in an area cordoned off from the street by a black cast-iron fence. It reminded me of the cemetery near our hotel, and I shivered at the thought.

Galen sniffed the air and studied everything from the stone tile to the potted plants.

I was still lost in thought, mulling over what Galen had said about dragons' fated mates. Once Galen marked me, my lifespan would match theirs. I wanted that, of course, but dragons lived such a long time. I wished I'd known about Olaf and Bale when we last visited. I had so many questions for them.

I still wondered what I had to offer Galen. I hadn't questioned our compatibility for a single moment before I'd learned we were fated mates. We had fun together, both at

their cave and traveling to other parts of Ignitas.

I suddenly felt unworthy, and I didn't know how to stop my negative thoughts.

A waitress dropped off two glasses of water for us and asked if we wanted anything else to drink.

"Two mint juleps," Galen said. "Please." They even remembered their manners.

"Sure thing. I'm going to need to see some ID from you, handsome." She patted Galen's shoulder, and a hint of smoke puffed from their nostrils. They pulled their wallet from their pants pocket and displayed the photo identification card they'd spelled to look like their human form.

"Thanks. And you?" she asked.

I pulled my driver's license free of the wallet and handed it to her.

"Perfect," she said, snapping it down on the table. "I'll be back with your drinks in a moment. Mint juleps are our specialty. You are in for a treat."

Galen shook their shoulders as she walked away. "That human touched me."

"Yes."

"No wonder they spread so many diseases." They pointed to my card, still sitting on the edge of the table. "You need to disinfect that before you put it back."

"Relax. We can't get human diseases." I hoped. Alphas and omegas didn't get human diseases, but betas didn't come to earth as often and didn't stay as long. I didn't want to be the first to bring home a horrible strain of kobold influenza. I touched only the

edges of the card and slid it back in my wallet.

The server returned with two clear tumblers filled with ice, yellow liquid, and a sprig of mint. There was something green buried beneath the ice. More mint, I guessed, hence the name.

Galen lifted the glass to their nose and sniffed. "What is this?"

"It's a mint julep."

"It smells like the rock candy you gave me for Christmas." They wrinkled their nose. They hated rock candy. I'd tried to warn them they would hate mint juleps, too, but they'd had their heart set on watching horses and drinking mint juleps.

"It tastes worse," they said after a sip. "Sweet and sharp."

"Sharp?"

"Like it's stabbing my tongue."

I laughed and sipped at mine. It was a little too sweet, but the burn of the whiskey made it all better.

"I'll drink yours," I said. "Do you want to try something else?"

"Water is fine, thanks." They wiped the condensation from the water glass and downed it in two gulps. "Gods. That was awful. When we return to the hotel, we must find Punky and tell him he has horrible taste."

I had a feeling Punky wouldn't take the news well. I also doubted he'd tasted a mint julep. He hadn't even known what was in the sugary alcoholic drink.

"I think we should take him one, to go," I said.

Galen's eyes lit up. "Yes."

Our server returned to take our orders, and I hadn't looked at my menu once. I'd been so preoccupied with watching Galen observing the people on the street, in the little patio area, and inside the restaurant through the glass windows. His eyes sparkled as he noticed every movement.

Galen surprised me by asking the server, "What do you have that's romantic?"

Without missing a beat, she rattled off, "Rotisserie chicken for two. You get a whole fried chicken with your choice of batter. And we have five kinds of dessert to share. Peach pie a la mode, peach cobbler, vanilla bean or mint chip ice cream, and our world-famous strawberry-peach tarts."

"World famous." Galen blinked. "We'll have that."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." I handed the menu back to the server. "Let's start with the chicken for two. Then, if you're still hungry, we can order dessert."

After a discussion of batter types, we decided on buttermilk. I knew butter and milk came from the same animal, but I didn't know how they would taste together.

Once the server left, Galen returned to gawking at passersby and listening to the conversations around us. I was still overwhelmed by the crowds at the street fair, and to a lesser extent at the lake. Punky had said the weekend would be busy, but busy for our village was not on the same level with the city. There were people everywhere. The only place we could get away from them was inside our hotel room.

Galen met my gaze, and their eyes widened. "Is everything all right?"

"How are you not overwhelmed by all the people?" I asked.

"I like people." They shrugged. "I miss the days when your village was this populous. I hope it will be again someday."

"You must be mistaken," I said. "Our village never had this many."

"There were at least two million kobolds living in and around the pavilion area before my paragon killed most of them."

Two million. I couldn't even wrap my head around that number. Our tiny village was still below ten thousand, even with the explosion of hatchlings over the last three years.

"The largest part of your village was below ground."

"That explains so much," I whispered. "Some of the tunnels in the grotto have tool marks. Priestess Alma said they'd been dug out after the collapse, but I didn't understand what had collapsed."

"You thought you were safe below ground," Galen said. "Now, you want to be aboveground because you are warm blooded like dragons."

"Warm blooded like humans," I corrected.

"If my family returns, I will protect you," Galen whispered.

The wind whipped up. Our tablecloth barely moved, but an icy shiver ran through me. "They plan to return?"

"They said they would after my final molt, to help me find a mate, but I already have

you."

Galen's final molt had only been a few weeks ago. I hoped we had time to warn everyone in the fortress when we returned.

"What if they arrive while we're here?"

"They will wait for me," they said. "They will want to know why I allowed you to rebuild. If they agree with the reason, they will allow you to continue. If they don't ..."

"They'll burn everything we've built to ash."

Galen reached across the table and took my hand in theirs. "Maybe they won't return right away. I molted a year early. Meeting you must have sped it up."

"Me?" My voice squeaked an octave higher than usual.

They grinned, and I recognized the open hunger in their gaze. I'd been staring at them with the same look for the last three years. "You."

* * *

Back at the hotel, Punky growled at us when we knocked on their hotel room door, and he refused the mint julep we brought him.

"Don't mind him," Lark said, sipping at the to-go cup's straw. "Damn, that's strong whiskey."

"There's whiskey in it?" Punky returned and sucked down half of the cup at one go. "Tastes terrible, but I needed that."

"So terrible." Galen nodded. "Glad you agree."

Lark laughed. "Don't blame Punky. He's never had a mint julep before, either, and he's pouting tonight."

A cursory glance around the hotel room showed it was empty except for them. "Where are the kids?" I asked.

"Staying with my parents." Punky hissed the last syllable with vehemence and crossed his arms over his chest. "They said we let them watch too much television. My mom is taking them to bible camp tomorrow, so the amusement park has to wait."

"They'll be out by noon, and then we'll head to the splash park as a consolation prize. Want to come along?"

"What is a splash park?" Galen asked.

"I don't know," Punky confessed. "They were just building it when I left. It involves swimsuits and standing in water fountains, I think."

"I love standing in water." Galen reached for my hand, and I blushed as they twined their fingers with mine. "Warm water."

"I also have a chicken for Odessa." I handed Lark the bag in my hands.

"She will love that." Lark took the bag and dashed out the door behind us.

"Did you do anything fun today?" Punky asked.

Galen and I told him about the street fair, and the park.

"I took canoeing lessons at that lake when I was twelve." He smirked. "If the splash park is a bust, we might go there, instead. They have a little beach for swimming."

"I don't know how to swim," I said.

Galen frowned at me. "You are a kobold. All kobolds know how to swim."

I shook my head. "I've never tried."

Lark returned empty-handed with a big grin on his face. Odessa probably liked the chicken as much as Rapture did.

"That's it, then," Punky said. "We're going swimming at the lake tomorrow after the splash park."

"But first," Lark said, pointing an accusing finger at Punky, "We're going to sleep in until noon." He turned to us with chagrin. "You're on your own for breakfast."

Galen started to protest, but I pulled them to the door. "Sounds good!"

"I will be hungry before noon," they grumbled.

"We can order room service. Remember the menu you asked me about this morning?" They'd found it tucked between the dresser mirror and the coffee machine. "We'll get whatever you want."

I had a feeling I was going to regret saying that.

I let Galen take a shower before I did, to wash the grime of the day away. At home, I only showered in the mornings, but here, even the air felt heavier with the humidity. My human sweat glands kicked in when we spent more than a half-hour outdoors.

Galen stepped out of the bathroom without a towel, and my brain almost shorted out. They were gorgeous in their naked human form.

They caught me staring and grinned. "Do I look good as a human?"

My brain still wasn't quite online, and I misheard their question. "Not exactly."

"What?"

"You don't look human."

I stripped out of my clothes and showed him my single, circumcised cock. "Human males only have the one."

"Like kobolds."

I nodded.

They frowned at their genitals. "You don't like them?"

"I love them." I sauntered up to him and let my cock speak for me as it slid between his two appendages. "Last night was fun, yeah?"

They nodded.

"Tomorrow will be even better," I promised.

"What about tonight?"

I tried to ignore the whine in their voice, though I felt the same way. "You look dead on your feet. You need to sleep."

They nodded, pulled me into a hug, and then snorted. "You need a shower."

After running the shower cold, I wasn't surprised to find them curled up in the middle of the bed, already asleep. They were still in their human form, though their horns were visible. I wanted to trace them with my fingertips, but I also didn't want to wake them. It had been a long, loud day, and they needed to rest.

I'd heard the term "spooning" before, but I didn't know how perfect it would feel until I climbed into bed behind Galen and wrapped myself around them. I tucked my chin against their shoulder and wrapped my arm around their chest, pulling them tight to me.

It was the opposite of how we usually slept, with Galen curled around me, their body at least twenty times my size. I wondered if they felt the same way as I did now. I wanted to protect them from the world, to love them the way they deserved. I wanted to make Galen happy and keep them safe.

Yes, I knew their true form was an apex predator with no enemies besides other dragons, while my true form was a kobold beta, nothing special. That didn't change how I felt about Galen and the world. They were precious, and I needed to protect them with my life.

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Chapter Ten

Galen

I woke with Mac's hot body pressed to mine. Too hot. Gods, why was it so hot?

I shoved the covers off me, and the cool air hit my bare skin.

"Air conditioner's not working," Mac mumbled. I felt his magic caress my skin, and then the cool air blasted from the window vent. I shivered and wriggled back against Mac, yanking the covers over me again.

He hummed in my ear, and I trembled for a different reason. I felt small, like prey, in his arms. I liked it.

"What do you think of humans so far?"

His question distracted me from the press of his hard cock against my back. Remembering the ease with which sound passed through the walls, I cast a privacy spell around us. I didn't want to offend Punky and Lark, if they were already awake.

"They seem to have lost a sense of community," I said. "The street fair was fun, but the petitions and lobbyists made me sad. Trans people shouldn't have to beg for a list of signatures asking their governor to stop targeting them."

I was glad we'd cut the governor's label from my beautiful hat, but she'd earned a profit from the sale, which made me angry. "I should burn down the casino and

destroy the rest of her merchandise."

Mac kissed the back of my head. "Don't you dare."

"I'm still not sure what Punky meant last night, either," I said. "What is wrong with television? Why do Punky's parents think the kids shouldn't watch?" Everything I knew about humans before we'd arrived on Earth, I'd learned from watching Mac's tiny tablet screen.

"Punky's mom isn't the best example of a good human," Mac said. "She's a bit of a Christo-fascist."

"What's that?" I knew about Christians from watching Christmas movies, and I knew about fascists from watching Schindler's List , but I didn't think the two should go together.

"Some humans think their religion and the color of their skin make them better than other humans," Mac explained.

"Wait until they meet a dragon."

Mac chuckled and kissed down the side of my neck.

"But not right now," I said. "Now, I want more kisses."

"I want that, too."

Careful of my horns, I rolled to face my kobold mate. I cupped his jaw in my hand, loving the feel of the scales along his neck beneath my fingers. "I like touching you like this," I said, following the scales to the soft flesh where I would one day leave my mating mark.

His breath hitched. "I never dreamed we could do anything like this," he said. "I thought you would always be dragon sized."

"I love my dragon form, but I enjoy being with you like this, too."

I traced the shell of his pointed ear and brushed his shaggy brown hair behind it, exposing another trail of muted scales along his temple. I followed them to his forehead, dropped over the bridge of his nose, and leaned in to kiss the tip of it the way I'd seen a mother kiss a child in one of Mac's movies.

I expected him to shove me over on my back and take control, but he let me continue stroking his cheek. I knew his skin was soft from all the times he'd snuggled up beside me but touching him like this was so intimate.

"I thought you wanted more kisses," Mac whispered when I traced his neck to the divot between his collar bones.

"I want to explore you, all of you. Is this not enjoyable?"

"It's killing me. I want to touch you back."

"I never said you couldn't touch me." I wished I could read his mind better in this form. "Where did you get that idea?"

He swallowed, and I traced the lump in his throat as it bounced back into place.

"I want to take it slow, as slow as you need."

Ah. "I need to communicate better. I want you to touch me, Mac. When I'm ready to kiss you, I want you to kiss me back. When I'm ready for more, I will tell you." Except I already knew. "I am ready for more, if you are."

"What do you mean, more?"

"Penetrative sex."

He looked like he was about to panic, so I continued. "I've fucked other dragons. I would love to fuck you."

He leaned his head against my chest and groaned. "Gods, yes."

That was better than panic, at least. I wanted to know what had worried him, but now was not the time to ask.

"Do you like this form, or would you prefer my kobold form instead?"

"Kobold alpha, if you don't mind." Mac grimaced as he leaned back.

I understood his mixed feelings about the human form I'd assumed. I loosened my hold on my form and altered it into the alpha kobold I'd used when we'd first explored our pleasure.

He caressed my cheek. "You still look like yourself in this form," he said. "More dragon than kobold."

I couldn't hide my grin. "Thank you."

I roamed further down his body, teasing along the sensitive skin bordering his scaled stripes. He touched the tip of my horn, and I paused, closing my eyes to feel him bump along the ridges to my temple.

"You like that," he said.

"You know I do." I'd come from his touch on my horns alone.

"I'm the only one who's touched you like this," he whispered.

"Yes."

"I'm glad."

I remembered his earlier bout of jealousy. I planted my hands against his chest and leaned in, feeling for his lips, eyes still closed. My whole body tingled when we made contact.

The ferocity of Mac's return kiss caught me off guard. There was the passion I'd expected earlier. I rolled onto my back from the force of it, and he chased me. He planted his knees on either side of my hips, and his cock brushed against mine.

I lowered my hands to grasp us loosely, loving the heft of his cock as it nestled between my cock and ovipositor.

"I want to take them both," he said.

"My ovipositor wasn't designed to go inside you." Still, now that he'd given me the idea, I wanted to be inside him, as much of me as he could take.

"The humans have plugs to help me stretch," he said. "There's a sex shop on the south side of town. That would be better than having someone order it for me online." A pretty blush darkened Mac's cheeks.

"Someone else has to order for you?"

"There's no reason for me to come to Earth now that all changelings have returned.

Besides, I've never had a bank account or my own shopping cards. I'm borrowing Lark's logins for his banking and food delivery apps, but I think he would be a little suspicious if I started ordering sex toys with his bank information."

It was my turn to be jealous. "I like your friends, but I don't want them to know what you shove up your ass."

Mac collapsed to my chest, and his laughter rumbled through me. I loved making him laugh, but I had a feeling he was laughing at me, not with me.

"Oh, my darling dragon, I will not share any sordid details with my friends, I promise."

He sat back on his heels, and I saw the mirth in his gaze, and his kindness. "The shop will be open late this evening. We'll stop there before we return to the hotel." He lay flat against me again and stretched his legs out along mine, pressing our cocks together in this new position. "I'm ready for your cock now, though, if you still want to fuck me."

How could I resist? I felt the tickle of magic over my skin again, and Mac ground against me as he worked his fingers into his ass.

"May I help?" I placed my hands at his hips. He rose up on his knees again, taking my hand when it slipped from his hip and coating my fingers with the slick stuff.

"It won't take much," he said. "I stretched myself out in the shower last night."

I'd fallen asleep waiting for him last night. I was grateful for the lazy morning ahead of us. I didn't mind the wait now that we could take our time.

"I don't want to hurt you," I whispered. My cock was bigger than an alpha kobold's in

this form. I'd made it that way, so Mac would still find me attractive. I knew from reading his mind that he loved my dragon anatomy, both my cock and my ovipositor. That was the main reason I'd chosen to keep both in kobold and human forms.

"I don't mind a little pain," he said. "Not if it means finally having you inside me."

Still, I didn't want to hurt him. I ran a slick finger around his entrance while he continued working two of his fingers inside. Then, he pulled out and aligned his fingers with mine, nodding when we slid inside together as one. Gods, he was so warm, tight, and already slick.

"This stuff is wonderful," I said.

"Human ingenuity." He rolled his hips and moaned when my finger brushed across something spongy. "There. So good."

I pressed harder, and he squirmed. "Need you inside me, Galen."

We removed our fingers, and I wiped the remaining slick stuff on my cock. I held myself in place, and Mac lined up over me. He rotated his hips as he descended, loosening himself more with each cycle. When he bottomed out, I grasped his hips to hold him in place. I'd never felt anything so tight and glorious. I squeezed my eyes shut, so I didn't come from the sight of my mate taking me for the first time.

His cock tapped against my ovipositor, pulling me back to the present. I wanted to make this good for him. This wasn't a quick fuck to get off. This was my mate.

My ovipositor had a mind of its own sometimes. It wanted to pull Mac's cock head inside, but it wasn't long enough for that. The eggs came out that way, but dragons got pregnant the same way kobolds did, through the internal channel between our rectum and testicles. On one side, I created sperm, but the other held an egg sac

waiting to be fertilized.

Not today. Today, I wanted to pleasure my fated mate.

I held my palm open, and Mac frowned.

"More slick, please."

He snorted and waved his hand over mine until a liberal dose of the stuff filled my palm. "It's called lube."

"Lube." The word sounded comical on my tongue, but I took my work seriously. I wrapped my hand around his cock and dragged my palm over his tip until he was covered. Then, I took both his cock and my ovipositor in hand.

"Fuck me," Mac groaned.

"I am!" I thrust my hips up, since he hadn't moved yet.

He laughed and grabbed my shoulders. "You are." Using me as his anchor, he shifted, lifting off me and then plunging back down with the full force of his weight. Gods, he stole my breath each time he dropped down on me. I admired the strength in his legs as the muscles rippled beneath his scaled stripes. He was gorgeous. I was lucky to have him as my mate. He was strong like an alpha and as stubborn as my favorite omegas, but he was all beta, and all mine.

I needed both hands to hold his cock against my ovipositor while he bounced, head thrown back, sweat beading on the skin of his neck. I wanted to lick it.

I sat up and pulled him backward, shoving pillows behind me until his chest rubbed against mine with each movement. He snaked his hands into my hair, and then he

went for the kill shot, latching onto my horns with a firm grip.

"So close." His words mirrored my thoughts. I tightened my grip, and he dropped his head to my shoulder, licking and sucking my neck. I wanted him to bite me, to complete our mating mark, but not like this. I wanted him inside me when we bound ourselves forever.

"Look at me, Mac."

He lifted his head, and I kissed him. All he needed was the invitation to devour my longing and desire. He sucked on my tongue the way his hole squeezed my cock.

He growled into my mouth as he came, his hot cum spurting onto my abdomen and dribbling over my hands. His channel squeezed my cock, and I came with him, grateful for the pile of pillows holding me up. I needed to be close to him, to wrap my arm around him while I licked lube and cum off my other hand.

Lying on my back with him above me, I'd felt like nothing but a disembodied cock. Here, with him in my arms, I was a part of something larger than myself and more imposing than my dragon form.

It felt huge and dangerous, this emotion. I would burn entire villages to the ground if I lost it. Perhaps my paragon and I had more in common than I thought.

Chapter Eleven

Mac

Bottoming for Galen was both less and more than I thought it would be. Less because they were in their kobold form, which was good, since their dragon form would kill me. More because my every movement reminded me how much I loved them already.

Galen had wanted to come to Earth to learn more about humans. I hoped they had progressed beyond thinking humans were inherently evil. We'd watched a horror movie with that premise a year ago. I'd thought Galen would like the winged demons and the enormous explosions, but their takeaway had been that humans couldn't be trusted.

Galen would break my heart if they decided I wasn't good enough to mate a dragon. Already, I wanted to place my mating mark on them, to show the world they belonged to me, but they'd stopped me with a command, and a kiss.

Gods, what a kiss. I was still trembling from it.

Galen stroked my back with both hands. Something latched onto the underside of my cock, making me yelp.

"I told you," Galen said, "my ovipositor has a mind of its own. It wants you to be inside it. I keep telling it, that's not how it works."

I laughed. "It feels weird, but in a good way."

My oversensitive cock twitched at the attention, and Galen's ovipositor snaked alongside me.

"You're still hard?" I asked Galen.

"Not."

"Yes, you are," I corrected. "I can feel it." Not only that, but their cock was also expanding, becoming more.

"Knot," Galen said again, and I finally understood.

"Gods." I pulled them closer and bussed a quick kiss across their lips. "I'm slow on the uptake."

"You are not slow," Galen said. "This is my first knot."

"Mine, too." The alpha kobolds I'd fucked always pulled out before they came, jutting cum on my face or abdomen. Some had never scented their omega mates, and didn't knot, but a few of them did. It looked uncomfortable, and I always tried to help with my hands and plenty of lube.

Now, I had Galen's knot buried deep in my ass. The more it expanded, the more I wanted it to continue. The pressure on my prostate was exquisite. They would make me come without moving a muscle.

They palmed the back of my head and pulled me to them, adjusting the angle on my prostate. The kiss was slow and sweet while the pressure exploded into bliss inside me. I moaned into their mouth as I came.

Their ovipositor twitched along with their cock as they came again, too. The motion ramped my orgasm to another level. Tremors shook me to my core. I'd felt nothing like it before, and I never wanted it to stop.

I rode the waves of bliss, head tucked against Galen's chest, until their knot diminished and their cock slipped free. Cool air across my wet hole brought me back to my senses.

"Was that acceptable?" Galen asked. "I didn't hurt you?"

"Gods, that was perfect," I said. "I've always wanted to be knotted by an alpha."

"I'm not an alpha," they said.

"No." My voice wavered with tenderness. "You're a dragon, which is even better."

* * *

We spent the rest of the morning in bed. Kissing and cuddling were quickly becoming my favorite pastimes. After a room service breakfast of scrambled eggs and pancakes, a quick shower, and a glance at a few different swimwear options in my search browser and Galen's powerful magic, we were ready for the splash park.

"Where are your shirts?" Punky asked when we met them at their door.

"The pictures didn't have shirts," I grumbled. We walked into their room and shut the door before using our spells to create t-shirts.

The children laughed at our mishap, and then we headed to our separate vehicles. Odessa left us behind at a yellow light. I'd programmed the splash park's address into my phone for this reason. Galen freaked out when a female computerized voice

started talking us through turns, but we made it to the parking lot unscathed.

"Thank you," Galen answered after she told us we'd arrived at our destination.

"She's not real," I said. "She's a phone app."

Galen frowned at me. "I've seen too many movies about the robot apocalypse to think she can't hear us."

"She's not Skynet," I promised as we climbed out of the van. I gave Rapture a little snout rub as we passed. To humans, it would look like I was patting the hood.

The children loved the splash park. The brightly colored pads, murals, slides, and the fort in the middle held their attention long after the splashes of cold water bored us adults. I dragged Galen to a bench, and we watched the kobold children interact with a handful of human children.

The boys played with a group of human boys, but when Clementine tried to join them, they made fun of her and told her it was a boys-only place.

I started to stand, but Punky was on his way over.

Robin stunned us all. "Clem can play, or we're leaving. This isn't a game for boys or girls. It's a game for people."

Punky took a step back toward the tree he'd been leaning against with a smile on his face.

"Yeah," Ernie agreed. "Games are for people. They aren't gendered."

"We're leaving," Grover said. "We can play by ourselves on that slide."

As a group, they walked away from the humans, the smallest of whom was now crying.

"But I want to play with them!" the little one shouted.

Clementine returned to the child and held out her hand. "You can play with us. We're not mean, like some kids."

"Don't go with her! She's a girl." The boy with the original objection to Clementine stuck to his argument, and soon he was alone. The two older boys took their floating toys with them to the new slide where Clementine was showing the littlest how to slide down feet first.

"How does she know how to go down a slide?" Galen asked. "There are none of those slide contraptions in Ignitas."

"They've watched videos of children on playgrounds," Lark said from behind us. He'd gone to the concession stand to get bottled water for everyone and missed most of the argument. "What did Clementine do now?"

Punky joined us at our bench and filled him in on how well their children had reacted to the bully.

I could tell Galen wanted to talk to the sulking child, but too many other humans hovered nearby. Most of them were parents of other children, though the bully's parents were nowhere to be seen. After a few minutes of watching with a pout on his face, the bully slinked away toward the washrooms.

"We should go for another picnic," I suggested. "Once the children are ready for lunch, of course."

"They already ate at bible camp." The look on Punky's face was so venomous, I scooted away from him on the bench, placing me in Galen's lap.

"Sorry," Punky muttered. "My mother decided they should eat cotton candy and s'mores instead of a nutritious meal. What did I expect from the woman who thinks ketchup is a vegetable?"

"Shh," Lark said, placing his hand on Punky's shoulder. "It's fine. We'll let them play for a few more minutes, and then we'll stop off at the grocery store on the way to the park."

Punky and Lark's brood had no problem saying goodbye to their new friends, but the littlest boy hugged Clementine so tightly, even Punky looked like he wished he could bring the kid with us.

"He's the bully's little brother," Clementine said on the way to our vehicles. "He's so little. I want to stay here and protect him."

"He'll have to learn how to protect himself," Punky said. "You taught him a way to do that today."

"I taught him how to get his ass beat when he gets home," Clementine corrected. "His brother said his parents would take care of it, and Billy wouldn't stop crying."

She looked back over her shoulder at Billy, who was now in the arms of a beautiful human woman who held the mean boy's hand. They were also heading for a vehicle.

"Don't," Lark whispered, but Punky paid him no mind.

"I can get us food," I said to Lark. "We'll meet you at the park."

"Thanks." Lark rolled his eyes. "This might take a while."

"I don't understand," Galen said once we merged onto the highway that would take us back toward the lake. "There are more female humans than there are female kobolds, right?"

"Just over half of all humans are female, yes."

"Why—"

"That boy wanted to display power over the smartest child there, is my guess."

"Hmm." Galen twisted their shoulders against the back of the seat until their spine popped. "He doesn't know the origin of true power, then. Only the smartest dragons survive, not the strongest."

"I have a feeling Punky's going to have a heart-to-heart with the child's mother." In the meantime, we'd return to the large grocery store we'd passed earlier.

The spacious store layout confused me from the start, but I followed Galen, who followed their nose to the bakery section. They had freshly baked sandwich rolls, which I grabbed. Instead of following the aisles, I walked around the back of the store, picking up lunch meat containers, potato salad, and refrigerated pickles. Galen carried the two gallons of milk for me. We passed a display of cookies on the way to the checkout, and Galen was drawn to the bright colors.

"You'll be disappointed," I warned them. Store-bought cookies were nothing like what the fortress cafeteria baked for us.

"The children will love them," Galen said, as though I didn't know they had the largest sweet tooth of all.

When we arrived at the lake, we parked by the large pavilion. There were a few people using the space to stretch out before a walk, and then they left us alone with our picnic. I helped Galen lay everything out on the table.

By the time I'd made myself a sandwich and filled my plate with all the delectable food, Punky and Lark drove up. Instead of sitting at one table, Lark let the children make their sandwiches and scamper to a table a few feet away to eat on their own.

"Sorry we're so late," Lark whispered when he finally sat down to his own sandwich. "We had to take the mother and her children to a shelter."

"She's leaving her husband," Punky said as he slathered butter on his sandwich roll. "Today's incident was the last straw. She doesn't want her children growing up to be like their dad."

Galen cocked their head, something they'd done a lot over the last few days. I wondered if they were thinking, or only trying to emote in their human form. I still wasn't sure what they wanted to emote, though.

Finally, they spoke. "Humans leave each other when they don't like how their children are being raised?"

"That's correct," Lark said. "There's a fifty percent divorce rate."

"That's only for couples who get married," Punky added.

"I'm glad I have a fated mate," Galen said. "I feel bad for these humans who do not."

Punky nodded. "I feel bad for that one, that's for sure."

"They're not all bad," Lark said. "My parents are happy together."

"But if they are unhappy, they can leave," Galen said.

"Men can leave," Punky huffed. "It's harder for women. She was terrified her husband would find and kill her and her kids."

"Kill?" I tried to imagine an alpha, or an omega for that matter, so angry with their mate that they'd murder them and their children. I couldn't do it. The most violence I'd ever seen between two kobolds had been when Weld bit Lark's ear in a tournament.

"Dragons kill each other sometimes," Galen said, "but never the children. Why would they kill their own children?"

"If they can't be controlled, some parents think death is better for them." Punky shrugged. "I'm not saying that's good or right, I'm just saying what I heard growing up."

"Is it societal?" Galen asked. "Or genetic?"

"If it's genetic, it hasn't passed to us," Lark said.

"That kid learned the vitriol he spouted at Clementine today," Punky said. "It's not genetic."

"You don't know that for certain," I said. "What if we're only a few generations away from kobolds murdering each other?"

Punky shook his head again. "I was downright murderous before I came to Ignitas. Our culture is so different."

"The endless classes on how to be a kobold focus on sex for a reason." Lark laughed.

"They keep you entertained and wanting to know more, and then at the end of six weeks, most of that human rage has refined itself into seeking your fated mate."

"Priestess Alma was worried about aggression, though," I reminded them. "That's one reason she approved the sports pavilion."

"Humans are competitive by nature," Punky said. "I thought kobolds were, too."

"Dragons compete with each other," Galen said. "We passed that on to kobolds long before you forged hybrid genes with humans."

I couldn't hide my excitement. Galen was making my case for me. Dragons, kobolds, and humans weren't all that different at their core. It was our culture that seemed to define us more than our genes.

My joy faded as Galen continued.

"I will be expected to challenge my paragon when they return to my lands. If I don't, I forfeit my right to them. The only caveat is pregnancy. If I were pregnant, they couldn't challenge me."

"What does a dragon challenge look like?" I asked.

"Fight to first major burn. If the burn is bad enough, the injured dragon might die."

"I won't let you die." I couldn't keep the growl from my voice. I was only one kobold, but I would stand against an army of dragons for Galen.

"We'll do everything we can to help," Lark said. "Your parent tried to kill us all, while you've been nothing but kind to us. You've helped us in more ways than you know. We owe everything to you, Galen."

They blushed so prettily in their human form, though most of it was hidden by their beard. "I can take care of myself. Thank you, though."

The children rushed us for dessert, and Galen broke open the plastic container full of cookies. They were fresh, at least. The frosting was still moist, and the cookies were soft enough to fold without breaking. I turned mine into a frosting sandwich and gobbled it down.

"Do kobolds need to wait a half-hour before swimming?" Punky asked Lark when the kids finished their second cookie each.

"I doubt it," he said. "We've gone swimming right after dinner before."

We cleaned up our picnic space, tossing everything we could into the recycling and compost bins before throwing the rest in the trash. Thankfully, most of the food was gone. Only a handful of pickles remained at the bottom of the jar. Galen unscrewed the lid and drained the rest in one gulp and then deposited the jar in the recycle bin.

The delay meant we walked alone on the path back to the main trail to the beach. I took Galen's hand and slid my fingers between theirs. "If there's anything I can do to help you against other dragons, I will."

Galen gripped my fingers tighter for a moment and grinned up at me with my former crush's face. "You're my mate. Your very existence has helped me immensely."

With only two sentences, Galen had returned my earlier elation. They were right. I had found my mate, something I hadn't even known was possible.

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Chapter Twelve

Galen

Once Mac was in the water with the children, he was a natural swimmer, as I knew he would be. He'd always balked at joining me in the quarry, and I hadn't pushed. Without arms, I had only my teeth and claws to pull him out if anything happened. Now, I could guide him into a float with my arms beneath his back or pull him to where his feet didn't touch and show him how to dragon paddle.

I could tell the moment his brain kicked in and he started to flail.

"Don't think about it. Let your instincts take over."

I swam behind him and balanced him on my lap, continuing to kick between his legs to keep both of our heads above water. "Kick like me."

He stared at my feet and matched my movements. Once he had the hang of it again, I moved back to where I'd been in front of him.

He noticed I wasn't holding him up anymore, and he laughed. "Thanks. This is fun."

"You'll come swimming in the quarry now?"

"Yes."

He already accompanied me and lounged on the stones at the water's edge, but his

confirmation pleased me. We would be closer now, treading the same water, bobbing on the same waves.

A swell of homesickness caught me off guard, and I accidentally swallowed a sip of lake water. It tasted of gasoline and algae, nothing like the lube I'd lapped up earlier in the day.

"This water can't be good for the children," I said. "We should get out."

Mac helped me corral the kids toward the beach, where Punky and Lark waited with giant towels for each of us. I hadn't thought to bring anything like that with me, so I thanked them both. I also told them what I'd tasted in the lake, and Punky nodded. "We'll shower before we leave and then shower again when we get to the hotel. Thanks for the warning."

"You are all welcome in my quarry," I said. "All kobolds should know how to swim."

"Mac watched too many horror movies as a child," Lark teased. "Remember when you thought sharks lived in the water treatment plants? And farm ponds?"

"You'll never let me forget." Mac tried to frown but ended up laughing when Punky bent over and did his best impression of a shark, one arm raised up from his back like a fin.

"I don't remember sharks being scary," I said. I'd liked the movies we'd watched about the great white sharks hunting around a tourist island, but the creatures didn't look real. Mac had also played documentaries of the animals on his tablet. While they had sharp teeth like mine, they couldn't leave the water, and they couldn't breathe fire. Boring.

"I'll protect you from sharks," I promised Mac. I glanced out at the lake with my

superior vision. Even in the dirty water, the largest creature I could see was a bottom-feeding fish on the far side of the lake, hiding in the shallows beyond the bridge. "There are no sharks here, though."

"Glad we got that settled," Mac muttered.

I started to walk away, hesitant to be near him and make him even more uncomfortable, but he ran to catch up to me and grabbed my hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "You didn't mean to hurt my feelings. Lark and Punky didn't, either. They don't understand. They grew up here. They know the difference between fresh and salt water. They know where sharks live and where they don't. I still don't know if that was fresh water or sea water, and we were swimming in it."

"After tasting it, I can tell you it was supposed to be fresh water, but it is contaminated. That isn't the same as sea water, though." I grinned. "I will take you east of The Spike sometime. You can swim in the great sea and taste the salt on the air without fear of sharks."

I didn't tell him about the water dragons. It wouldn't have helped.

* * *

I expected the sex shop to be a dank cave with crevices full of toys, bottles, and other supplies meant to be hidden away. I did not anticipate bright purple-white lights and wide aisles with hanging wardrobes on each end-cap. Their leather aisle rivaled the harness selection in the dragonet barn. When Mac explained humans used riding crops and whips on their sexual partners, I ran for the door, nearly tripping over my feet in my haste.

Mac stopped me with both hands on my shoulders. "Not all humans. It's a kink."

"Appreciating dragon cock is a kink. Hurting someone else is abuse."

"Not if it's consensual."

"Why would someone consent to being hurt?"

"They like the pain." He leaned in and whispered, "The same way I liked the burn when you fucked me. Your cock is huge, but I'll take it again and again."

"I didn't mean to hurt you!" I tried to keep my voice to a whisper, but I drew the attention of the clerk standing behind the cash register near the door. I'd almost made it back outside, away from this uncomfortable conversation.

I felt the heat rising in my chest. I was a tiny meltdown away from releasing smoke into a building equipped with ceiling sprinklers. I didn't want to set them off and ruin all the fine leather and lace.

"You like pain," I said, starting over with the facts.

"Yes."

"You want me to hit you with a riding crop?"

"No."

I nodded. Good. That was good. "You will tell me if I'm hurting you in the future, so I can stop."

"Also no." He rolled his eyes. "I don't know how to tell you this, but it doesn't hurt. Not really. It's huge, it burns, and I have to accommodate it, but it's not like you're trying to hurt me. And once we get going, it only adds to the pleasure."

I still didn't get it, but maybe I would when it was my turn to take his cock. He wasn't a dragon, but in this form, he would be a lot to handle in my tight human ass, or even in my alpha kobold form until I adjusted for it.

I swallowed hard as we walked back through the leather aisle. I wanted him inside me. I wanted him to mark and claim me as his. I wanted to have his dragon children, human genes be damned, or blessed, however it went.

I still feared the unknown, but humans, kobolds, and dragons weren't as different as I thought. We all had our issues. Learning about humans had helped me realize my own misguided contributions to kobold culture and tradition.

I was going to abolish my temple when I returned to The Spike. Priestess Alma would be free to teach the kobolds, but she no longer had to worship me. I certainly didn't want little Clementine tied to me for the rest of her life. She would be free to do whatever she wanted.

"Is it wrong of me to think about our priestesses and religion while we're shopping for butt plugs?" I asked Mac as he led me to the next aisle. This one was full of long, veiny dildos resembling everything from sea dragon tentacles to large animal cocks and everything in between. None looked like Mac's cock, though.

"Our priestesses are very sex positive." Mac grinned. "I think Priestess Alma would approve."

"What if I'm thinking of firing her as my priestess?"

He snorted a laugh. "Why?"

"I want to disband them. All of them, if the other dragons agree. We don't need temples. I don't deserve to be worshipped. Dragons are another species, not your

deities."

Mac's reverence for me started as worship. I sucked in a startled breath. "You don't worship me anymore, do you?"

He frowned at me, and the hurt in his eyes made me wish I could take the words back. "Of course I do. You're magnificent."

"I'm your mate, not your god." I hoped he understood. I didn't want to be worshipped as something more or better. I wanted to be loved for me.

"I know that." Mac dragged me to the next aisle. He picked up a starter kit of three progressively wider plugs.

"Too small," he decided. The next set were long and thin on the ends but widened to the width of my knot in the middle. "Better."

He moved on to more bulbous plugs. Among some novelty items, he found a device meant to wrap around both penis and testicles, giving them the firmness needed for penetration.

"I can work with this," Mac said. I felt a whisper of magic around my cock and ovipositor, and then the item in Mac's hand stretched and shifted until it would fit nicely around my parts. Another burst of magic glamourised the item to look like the original until we got it back to the hotel room.

"If I have to wait until we get home to try on my hat, you have to wait until then to try this."

"You can try it on in our hotel room," Mac said. "You just can't wear it out on the town. Those hats are meant for one day a year, and we missed it by a month."

"Thank you. Now I understand." Human culture seemed to allow for fun, but only in tiny increments. One day a year to wear a horse hat was silly. Horse hats were meant to be worn until the toy horses fell off and you needed a new one. "I thought Tuft was the rule for humans, but it seems he is the exception."

Mac grinned. "We're lucky to have him."

"I want to be more like him when we return home." I was going to wear my derby hat to the dragon pavilion every week when I watched the recreation leagues play. Now that I could shift into a kobold, I could even play while wearing my hat. I couldn't wait.

Mac paid for his items with cash, and we returned to Rapture. The sun had set while we were inside, and ours was the only vehicle in the parking lot. The little dragonet sniffed at the plain paper bag and snorted smoke at Mac.

"I know. I'm sorry. You'll have to wait for breakfast tomorrow."

I was excited for our trip to the amusement park with Punky, Lark, and their children tomorrow, but I'd realized something else while helping Mac choose his items.

"We need to talk," I said once we were back on the highway.

"That sounds ominous."

"Momentous," I said. "I want you to fuck me before we return home."

Mac snorted. "You couldn't tell me that before I spent all that money on toys?"

"We have two more nights," I said. "Plenty of time to do both."

Mac shook his head. "Not both. I'll gladly fuck you when we get back to the hotel, but I won't be ready to take your cock and ovipositor until we're home." His cheeks bloomed with pink. I didn't need to smell his arousal to know the thought turned him on. "And only if you help me prepare."

"Yes, anything."

This was going to be fun.

* * *

Once again, my body failed me. I took a quick shower before Mac, but by the time he joined me in bed, I was too sleepy to keep my eyes open.

"I want you inside me." My plaintive growl sounded more like a whine with my human vocal cords.

"It was a long day," he reassured me. "Tomorrow will be a lot of standing around. After dinner, we'll call it an early night."

That meant an entire day of anticipation. It would test my limited patience to the brink, but I was willing to withstand it for Mac.

"Does this mean you've decided kobolds are still worthy to sire dragons?" He whispered it, like he thought I was already asleep.

"Yes," I answered. "You are part human, but you are still kobold. We failed you by making you so small and cold-blooded. You are better equipped to withstand dragon fire now. I wouldn't take that away from you."

"You don't think we're too violent?"

"As a species, no more than dragons." Humans had us both beat with their wars and backward ways of raising their children to desire violence over sex. I didn't understand it, but I was grateful my kobold friends still taught their children to honor sex before violence.

Weld, the green-striped alpha who had attempted to mate with Tuft, had chosen violence. He had been reprimanded for biting Lark. He had also kicked another kobold pair from their cavern in the grotto, but only to protect his disastrous first clutch. Now that he knew he would be mated to Lark and Punky's son Robin when Robin came of age, Weld strived to be better. Mac and I had accompanied him to several kobold villages over the last two years in his attempts to stay busy and teach other kobolds efficient uses for their magic.

I respected kobold culture far more than I did these humans. They weren't the same, even with their shared genes. I was willing to bet my future hatchlings on that.

I was too tired to say all that to my beloved mate. Instead, I relaxed against him. He anchored me in place with his arm across my chest while we slept.

Chapter Thirteen

Mac

A knock at our door roused me from a sound sleep. I needed to learn how to set an alarm. I curled around Galen. I wanted to stay there, wrapped around their warmth.

"Uncle Mac?"

Shit. I couldn't tell their voices apart, but I didn't want to strand one of Punky and Lark's kids in the hallway waiting for us. I hopped out of bed, magicked some sleep pants to cover my nakedness, and opened the door.

"I had a nightmare about Galen," Robin said. "Are they all right?"

"I'm fine, little one."

Galen sat up in bed. They'd magicked a t-shirt to cover their delectable chest. When they held their arms open, Robin launched himself on our bed and fell against them, sobbing.

"It was so real," he cried. "You were chained up and these other dragons were so mean to you." He sniffled. "Weld was supposed to save you, but no one knows where he is."

"Oh, Robin." Galen propped themselves up with pillows and smoothed the blankets between them before cuddling Robin in their lap. "I know where Weld is. If I needed

him, I could reach out to him, and he would be here in time."

I'd expected my dragon to think they were the center of the nightmare, but they'd instinctively understood Robin's fear.

"Weld didn't leave to hurt you," Galen continued. "He wanted to give you the same chance Ernie and Grover have of growing up without their fated mates."

"But why? If I know he's mine, why can't I spend all my time with him?"

"Sometimes, when mates spend too much time together, especially when they're young, they stop developing as an individual and only know themselves as part of the relationship. He wants you to know who you are first."

"I don't want to know who I am without him."

Galen snorted. "I didn't say that. You are never without him. He's your mate."

Robin frowned up at him. "He's not here now! Of course I'm without him!"

"He's in here." Galen tapped Robin's chest. "Always. You can feel him there, yes?"

Tears filled Robin's eyes, and he nodded. "Yeah."

"I know you're sad because you can't see him, but he's always with you, even now while you're on another plane. You can still feel him."

Robin nodded. "But why?"

Galen shook their head. "That is a secret between you and Weld. You forged a connection so deep nothing can break it, not even the distance between planes. I don't

know of any other kobold pair who has a bond like that, not even your parents."

Robin's eyes grew round. "Really? Not even Papa and Dad?"

I felt my own longing for Galen deep in my chest. I hoped he wasn't gaslighting the little kobold into thinking their bond was special.

Galen's words did the trick, though. Robin flashed his sweet smile at Galen and hopped off the bed. He gave me a quick hug and ran past a worried Lark in the hallway.

"Hi Dad! Weld is always with me!" He slipped through their room door and left Lark staring after him in the hallway.

"I've told him that a million times." Lark yawned, then waved. He pulled our door shut, leaving us blissfully alone and painfully awake. The sun wasn't even up yet.

"Come back to bed," Galen said.

"No. Might as well get up and face the day."

"If you're too tired for sex later, I will set this building on fire." Their purple eyes flashed red for a moment, and a hint of smoke ghosted from their nostrils.

I laughed. "Point taken."

I set an alarm on my phone this time. We still had a good two hours before we needed to be awake.

Once I curled around Galen, the conversation with Robin wouldn't let me sleep. "Can you sense the bond between them, or were you only filling his head with stories so he

would go back to sleep?"

"I would never lie to a child," Galen said. "He and Weld have a dragon bond between them. I've never seen it between kobolds before, but you and I have the same type of bond. I always know where you are when you're at work, even when you're flying around the countryside on a dragonet."

I frowned. "That's news to me. Why am I just now learning about this?"

Galen laughed. "You didn't know we were fated, and I didn't want to scare you away."

"I can feel it, too," I said, touching my breastbone above my heart. Somewhere alongside the beating organ lay my connection to Galen.

"It has grown stronger since we've been here together," Galen whispered. "It will be hard to let you go back to work with the dragonets."

I chuckled and pulled them tighter against my chest. I both desired and dreaded the trip home. Our connection had grown stronger. I hoped our dragon bond wouldn't impact my ability to bond with the dragonet hatchlings.

While we'd traveled to the other kobold villages, Coz and Grindl's son Sunny had bonded two wild dragonets. When we returned, I needed to train him to manage their bonds. Once their training was complete, I would prepare him to pass those bonds to their chosen kobold caretakers. He would take my place as head dragonet trainer one day.

I slipped into sweet dreams about dragonet training. When my alarm went off, it took me another moment to remember where I was. The dream wouldn't let me forget the most important part of our trip. I needed to feed Rapture and Odessa before we left

for the amusement park, and again tomorrow morning before we returned home.

After a quick shower, I drove to the local butcher's shop. I'd asked them to quarter a cow. Both Odessa and Rapture would get a quarter of beef a day to ensure they had enough energy to transfer us back to Ignitas.

Asking rapture to carry the frozen cow back to the hotel was almost more than the little dragonet could handle. He wanted to gorge himself, but I talked him into saving half for tomorrow. Each quarter was packed separately in ice, making it easy to divide. To any human passersby, I looked like I was checking under the vehicle's hoods while I fed them.

After I fed Odessa, she let me tuck her remaining quarter into her storage for safe keeping. Thankfully, the spaces were part of the vehicle spell. They couldn't break into it and eat the rest until we removed the meat and fed them.

I hadn't bought a cow for my mate, but they craved the scent of the meat chilling in the back.

"You had a whole plate of scrambled eggs," I reminded them.

"Beef smells so good, though!" They sighed. "But I remember what happened the last time I had a huge chunk of it."

Real beef in large quantities didn't sit well with my sweet dragon. They'd been sick after I'd given them a quarter for a Christmas present. Lark had looked at me like I was crazy when I asked him to bring it back for me, and then he'd given me a look that said, "I told you so," when Galen couldn't handle it.

"You should probably stick to a hamburger at lunch today," I said while we waited for Lark and Punky in the parking lot.

"And onion rings. And fries. And fried pickles and mushrooms."

Punky had been filling their head with tales of the state fair, but the amusement park had some of the same fried foods on a stick.

Finally, the family of six piled out of the hotel dressed in blue jean shorts and orange t-shirts. It would be hard to miss them in the crowd. I supposed that was smart, so they could find each other. I wore beige shorts and a white t-shirt, but Galen had copied a pair of orange and navy floral print shorts they'd seen on Tuft and topped it with a baby blue t-shirt. The kids loved the bright colors as much as they did.

We piled into our separate vehicles and got back on the interstate that ran through the heart of the city. Our destination was near the casino, and the parking lot was already almost full. I parked beside Odessa at the back of the lot, and then we got ready for the long walk toward the main gates.

A man in a red hat drove up to us in a motorized cart while the kids were still piling out of their van. "Do you need a ride to the front gate?" He tapped a glass jar filled with large bills on the dashboard.

"No, thank you," Punky said. "We'll walk."

"Suit yourselves." The man waved and drove off.

"We might want a ride back out here," Lark said. "We'll be tired."

"We can have Odessa pick us up at the gate," Punky countered. "The walk will teach us all that we need to stay in our rooms at night, even if we have a nightmare."

"Don't punish Robin on my account," Galen said.

"Oh, it's not just Robin." Punky glared at Clementine, who blushed and hung her head down to her crossed arms.

"I wanted a bucket of ice."

"I told you, no more experiments until we're home."

"But they don't have these kinds of insects at home and I want to study them."

"Clem, if you bring mosquitos back to Ignitas because you want to study them, I swear to god?—"

"I won't," she huffed. "It's fine. I'll learn about them online."

Galen walked ahead with her, taking her tiny hand and telling her about the different insect species she could find in other parts of Ignitas. "You can travel and study them when you're ready."

"Really?" She looked up at Galen as though seeing her freedom for the first time. "You don't want me to be your priestess? Alma's so old?—"

"She deserves a break, too. You all do. I don't require priestesses or worship. I'm a flesh-and-blood dragon. I want you all to be happy."

She glanced back at her parents, who heard them as well as I did.

Punky slid his arm around Lark's waist and grinned up at him. "I think we have a future entomologist in our midst."

"You can be whatever you want, my little friend," Galen said to Clementine. "If bugs bore you in a few years, you can change your mind. My only request is that you won't

grow giant mosquitos like the ones in the dinosaur documentary Mac made me watch."

I laughed and jogged the few paces to catch up with them. "It's a movie, not a documentary. It's supposed to be funny."

"It wasn't funny," Galen insisted. "Bugs that big would bother me, and they almost killed that human."

Clementine slipped back to where her brothers walked beside their parents. Robin and Ernie dropped their hands to let her between them. I couldn't stop grinning at how cute they looked together.

I took Galen's hand as we walked. My mind wandered to a future trip, when we'd be bringing our own offspring. Once again, my cheeks ached from smiling so much.

A large billboard inside the park's gates displayed a map. I didn't see the dragon roller coaster I'd found online. Confused, I led Galen to the information kiosk a few hundred yards from the gates.

"Where's The Dragon?" I asked the attendant wearing a conductor's hat.

"Sorry. Tore it down to build another ride." They pointed to the tall rollercoaster behind us.

"Let's ride that instead," Galen said.

They loved the ride. To be fair, I loved it, too, but my stomach didn't. I called it quits on the bigger rides, and Galen stayed with me out of loyalty, even when they could have gone with the others.

It was late afternoon by the time we'd explored the park. Ernie and Grover wanted to go on the big rides again, but Lark reminded them they had dinner with their grandparents in an hour.

"One more meal before we leave tomorrow." Punky's smile looked more like a grimace.

"We can entertain ourselves," I reassured him over the kids' whines and cries.

We parted ways in the parking lot. On the freeway, they exited in the direction of Punky's parents, and we took the next exit for our hotel.

I had a hard time containing my excitement. If Galen was as ready as they said they were, we were going to have a wonderful night.

Still, I wanted the evening to be perfect. Instead of ordering room service, I ordered carry-out from the Italian restaurant down the road and drove to pick it up while Galen took a shower. On the road, I wondered if I was crazy. I was about to make love to my dragon, possibly to fertilize an egg that would grow into another dragon.

Was I even worthy to be a dragon's mate? I was nobody, a dragonet trainer, a beta. My life had been one of service to my village, and now to my dragon. I wasn't anything special, but Galen thought I was.

I felt warmth in that place beside my heart where my dragon bond lay. We would be parents to a dragon, and our shared efforts would keep them safe and loved. We wouldn't leave our child alone to navigate the tensions between our species. We would raise them together.

Once we bonded, I would live just as long as Galen. Our child would have the love and support of both parents, just as Galen would have all my love and support as their

mate.

My fear shifted into excitement. We would bond tonight! Galen was my everything, and I intended to show them how much I loved them.

Chapter Fourteen

Galen

I loved spending time with Punky and Lark's children, but it was even more fun riding the rollercoaster with Mac. Afterward, he looked like he was going to be sick. I took the occasional turns with the children so he could keep his feet on the ground.

After a few rides, I returned to his side with a bottle of water. "Are you feeling better?" I asked.

"Yes. It was weird, that's all. I've never had motion sickness before."

I stood closer than was appropriate and sniffed his neck. He didn't smell sick. I sniffed Clementine and then sniffed Mac again. "You smell different."

"Different, bad?"

"Different. I can't explain it." I could, but it didn't make sense. He smelled pregnant.

Beta kobolds couldn't get pregnant, could they? Where would they even eject their eggs? Their cocks didn't double as ovipositors, and even if they did, they didn't have slick to nourish eggs. For the first time in ages, I wished my paragon was around so I could ask them.

When we returned to the hotel, I let my horns loose and tried to push my worries from my mind. Mac would be fine. He had to be. Once we bonded, his life force

would be tied to mine, and I could survive just about anything. Now that I'd had my final molt, the spike atop the kobold fortress was no longer a threat to me. I was also resistant to fire, so my paragon would have a difficult time subduing me if they returned.

None of that mattered now. I couldn't focus on the future. My mate was in the present, still unmated and worried he wasn't good enough for me.

While I showered, I felt him questioning our bond. I reached out to him through it. I hoped he sensed all my love. His response felt like a cool breeze through my cave on a hot summer day, a welcome reprieve from my own burning desire. He was my opposite in so many ways, and yet, he was perfect for me. I couldn't wait to mark him and make him mine.

I hastened my ablutions and hurried to the bed. I shifted to my kobold alpha form, since Mac preferred it to my human one. If he wanted me to be more like an omega, I didn't know how. I didn't create my own slick, and I didn't know if their cocks were always split open at the tip, or only when they laid eggs.

I shuddered. It was much better to be a dragon with a cock and a stretchy ovipositor. Instead of messy slick, dragon eggs needed only our magic once laid.

We had a special cave for egg laying and hatching, far from the villagers' prying eyes. I would take Mac there when it was time. He would nourish me so I could keep our egg's magic strong.

I chuckled as I heard and smelled him approach. He was already nourishing me with wonderful food. I cast a spell to clothe myself in lounge pants and met him at the door, opening it for him so he didn't fumble the paper bags.

With no room on the table, he resorted to setting the bag on a chair and piling the

cardboard containers one on top of the other until we each had a food mountain before us. Pasta, salad, soup, and breadsticks.

Instead of diving in, I cupped his cheeks and pulled him to me for a slow, sensual kiss. He melted against me and groaned.

"Food first," he said. "Then we can do the rest."

"The rest?" I sat down.

Mac set the empty bag on the floor and took its place. "You should tell me what you want, so there's no confusion."

I chomped on a breadstick while I thought about it. Bread was still weird to me, but I didn't mind it when drenched in garlic butter.

"Won't that make it weird?"

"Galen, I'm a kobold mated to a dragon. It's already weird."

"I suppose you're right." I took a deep breath. "I want you to mate with me, you inside me. When we've joined, we can complete the mating mark to bind our lives together. And then we'll come and you will fertilize the egg inside me."

"Oh shit," Mac glanced at the wall between our room and the other kobolds. "You spelled the room?"

"I put up a privacy spell the morning we slept in late," I confessed. "I never took it down."

Mac laughed. "Good. This wouldn't be considered polite conversation for our young

friends."

I nodded and dove into my salad next. I could do without vegetation, but I loved the tang of the vinaigrette. It wasn't as good as Mac's homemade marinade, though.

"You were really good with them today," Mac said. "Robin and Clementine, especially."

"I like children," I confessed. "I never had the chance to be around younger dragons." Since the return of the changelings, I had surrounded myself with young kobolds. I loved telling them stories and sharing my knowledge.

"You've always been a dragon, though, right? Kobolds don't somehow molt into dragons?"

I laughed. "Yes, I was born a dragon."

"Thanks to our fixation on mating, I know entirely too much about alpha and omega kobolds," Mac said. "I don't know much about dragons. How long will your pregnancy last?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "When I asked Bale, they said, 'too long,' and that was the only answer I got from them. I have a better estimate for the weeks in our hatching cave. It will take thirty weeks for the egg to mature and hatch."

"Unless human genes complicate things," Mac said.

"We will find out." I tried a smile for reassurance, but that only made Mac smell more nervous.

We ate the rest of our meal in silence, though neither of us took more than a few

bites. The pasta was cooked al dente for the perfect amount of crunch, but I still couldn't enjoy it, not when Mac looked so worried. I should have told him what I smelled on him earlier, but I didn't want to scare him even more.

I'd wanted tonight to be perfect, and now I was ruining it.

* * *

After we gave up on our unfinished meals, we delayed further by sharing a delicious slice of strawberry cheesecake. I ate slowly, savoring every bite Mac forked into my mouth.

I couldn't explain why I stalled. I wanted Mac, and he wanted me. This felt momentous, like our lives would change once we made our marks and connected our lives forever.

This was Mac, though. I loved him and wanted to be with him as long as I lived. He was no longer a random stranger with whom I felt a mate bond. He was my everything.

With a shimmer of magic, I removed my clothing spell. Mac had his back turned to toss the paper bag into the waste bin. I heard his breath catch when he turned around, but I was already on the bed, on my knees, ass up and waiting for him.

"Gods, Galen, you're a dream come true."

There was my wonderful kobold mate. I hadn't lost him to worry, after all. I felt his gaze on my back.

"Is this the form you'd like me to take?"

I glanced over my shoulder and caught him staring while he swallowed. "Yes. Prepare yourself for me. I want to see what you like."

With a spell, I coated my insides and three of my fingers with a liberal dose of the human lube. "Wait until I share this gift with the other dragons." Before, we'd taken baths together in pools of oil, the slick stuff coating our cocks and filling our orifices until we glided together. I hated smelling like the stuff for days, but it couldn't be helped.

Until now. I would take this human slickness to Ignitas and share it with all my dragon friends. If anything could make my paragon lighten up, it was this.

Nope. No thinking about parents in this moment, or friends, or children. This was between me and Mac.

Once I was as stretched as three fingers would make me, I flipped onto my back and beckoned him with my still-slicked fingers. I smeared them over his cock, and he added more with a spell.

"I want you to enjoy this," he whispered.

"I will." Mac's cock was a decent size for a beta kobold's, but I was a dragon. I could change my form to make the fit more comfortable for both of us if the lube didn't work.

That wasn't necessary, though. Mac's flared cock head and glorious sheath bumped along my entrance in the most wonderful way. I closed my eyes to better enjoy it. Gods, he was the perfect fit.

I loved the feel of his cock as it pressed against my prostate. I didn't have one as a dragon, but I'd made it part of my kobold alpha form when I noticed how much Mac

enjoyed his. I was already too close, and he hadn't bottomed out yet, still working his way inside me with shallow thrusts.

We both groaned from the pleasure when he was fully seated inside me. He kissed me, and the world shifted. No longer were we dragon and kobold. We were melded together as one.

"Is it wrong for me to want to bite you now?" Mac asked. "Do we need to wait?"

"The magic already recognizes our union." I could feel it swirling around us, binding us together without the mating mark. "Bite me, Mac."

My stubborn kobold frowned at me. "I don't want it to fail."

I laughed. "If it does, we'll have the rest of our lives to get it right."

Instead of biting me, he continued to rock against my prostate with slow, smooth strokes. I grabbed my cock and ovipositor in hand. I was already so close, but I needed something more to push me over the edge.

Mac sped up, his movements fast and erratic. He shoved my knees out of his way and leaned into each thrust, driving his cock against my prostate and bringing me even closer to the edge.

When I approached the fine line between desperation and bliss, he dropped down to his elbows. His body skimmed over my cock with the perfect amount of friction. He dipped his head to my shoulder. His mouth was hot and his teeth so sharp, I didn't feel them break the skin when he clamped down on my sensitive flesh.

He released me and stretched his neck over my mouth, giving me the perfect angle to bite and claim him, too. The magic swirling around us entered through our bites and

tangled in our shared orgasms. I groaned around the flesh in my mouth as his seed filled me. At the same time, the magic consumed us both, rending us apart and melding us together. For a moment, I was Mac, and he was me. I was a beta kobold, and he was a dragon.

The magic worked its way out of us, leaving us both exhausted and overjoyed.

Mac fell on top of me, panting. He licked the already healed bite on my neck and chuffed a laugh. "Mine."

I grinned. "Yours, as you are mine."

I kissed and licked over the bite I'd pressed into his skin, too, loving the smooth texture of the healed skin over my tooth marks. To Mac's kobold friends, it would look like any other kobold mark, but it would flare with my magic whenever another dragon was near, showing them Mac belonged to me. Any who tried to hurt him would die a fiery death.

"I don't have a knot," he whined when his cock slipped out of me.

"You are perfect the way you are," I said. "I can already feel my balls growing."

They weren't, not yet, but the change in my magic told me the egg had fertilized. Once it started to harden inside me, I wouldn't be able to hold my kobold form. I needed to be my full dragon self to give the egg room to grow.

Our child would be roughly the size of a kobold hatchling when their egg dropped from my ovipositor. Then they would continue to grow outside my body, using my magic and my bond with Mac to form until they were ready to meet us. I couldn't wait to meet our baby dragon.

I also couldn't wait to meet the baby kobold still tangled in Mac's scent as he drifted to sleep beside me. I hoped I didn't need an appointment to speak with Priestess Alma when we returned home. I hoped she wouldn't shoot at me with the spike for sharing our good news.

Chapter Fifteen

Mac

I thought feeding Odessa and Rapture their cow quarters would be the most dramatic part of my morning, but I was wrong. All four of Punky and Lark's children tried to run from them when they announced it was time to go home.

"I want to go to the park one more time!" Ernie said. "We met a tadpole, and I wanna see it turn into a frog!"

"I didn't get to ride the underground rollercoaster," Grover whined. It was indoors, not underground, but it was the closest thing to the grotto we'd seen on Earth. It had been undergoing repairs while we were there.

"I haven't studied enough mosquitos!" Clementine shouted.

Punky and Lark locked gazes, and both rolled their eyes at the same time. "If she only knew how much I hated mosquitos growing up," Lark said. "They're the worst bugs on the planet."

"I don't get it," Punky whined. "They haven't bitten her, not once."

"I haven't gotten another mosquito bite since I turned twenty-five and they reversed the changeling spell," Lark said. "Mac, have you ever been bitten by a mosquito?"

I tried to recall my earlier trips to Earth. "I don't think so."

"It's the body temperature difference," Punky said. "We're spelled to look human, but we're not. Galen, have you been bothered by bugs?"

Galen laughed. "Anything that tried to bite me would ingest fire from my veins."

Lark laughed. "In other words, they don't know because whatever bit them turned into a tiny pile of ash."

"Yes." Galen's grin was almost feral beneath their bushy mustache.

"A well-deserved pile of ash," Punky said. "Come on, kids! It's time to go!"

Robin ran with Grover to the far end of the parking lot, but he was the first to return to the van.

"I want to go home," Robin said. "I'll be closer to Weld there."

Galen nodded. "You'll feel closer to him once we cross planes."

"How do you know so much about our bond?" Robin asked.

Galen shrugged and pointed to me. "It's the same kind of bond I have with Mac. You have what dragons call a dragon bond."

"Does that mean one of us is a dragon?" Robin's hopeful grin vanished when Galen shook their head.

"Sorry, little one. I'm more inclined to believe it's the number of years between your births. I am centuries older than Mac, and Weld is decades older than you. I knew even before I met Mac that he was my mate." Galen wrapped their arm around my waist. "It made my final molt easier."

"My final molt is forever away." Unshed tears filled the little boy's eyes. "He feels closer when we're at home, though. When I'm old enough, I'll go looking for him."

Galen nodded. "I'm sure he would like that."

Punky had Clementine clutched over his shoulder and Lark had death grips on the other boys' wrists as they crossed the parking lot to us. "Sorry for the delay," Punky said.

"Can I ride home with Uncle Mac?" Clementine asked.

"Only if you promise no shenanigans." Punky stared at Clementine until she crossed over her chest with an X.

"Fine. I promise, cross my heart and hope to die."

"Nobody's dying," Punky said, "but no shenanigans. No mosquitos. No begging Mac to stop somewhere before we leave, nothing."

"Fine!" She stamped her foot and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Three, going on six, going on sixteen," Lark said. "Is that all right with you two?"

"Yes!" Galen held their arms out, and Clementine rushed to them, launching into their arms. "You sit in the middle."

"Aw. I was hoping to sit in the back, maybe check around in the interdimensional space."

"Shenanigans," Punky warned. "You'll sit in the middle and buckle your seatbelt."

"Fine." This time, instead of being defiant, her tiny voice sounded defeated.

There were no shenanigans on the way home. Rapture launched us between planes before we reached the edge of the parking lot. The wheel vanished from my grip and the saddle returned with three seats. Clementine's was tucked between Galen and me so she wouldn't topple from our mount upon landing.

Rapture wheeled down from the sky, and Galen whooped. "I've missed this!" they shouted. "Would you like a ride home, Clementine?"

Rapture nose-dived toward the barn, and she screamed in delight. "Yes!"

I still had to unsaddle our little dragonet and scrub him down after a week in the human realm. Once I was satisfied he was clean and had gotten enough to eat and drink, I secured him in his enclosure.

He seemed upset to be caged after so much freedom. "I'll let you into the pasture tomorrow," I promised.

Outside, I saw my dragon still circling above Punky and Lark's cabin. One of the boys was saddled in. They must have already dropped Clementine off.

We'd been walking for our entire vacation, but I enjoyed the walk to Punky and Lark's cabin in my own skin without the human glamour hanging over me.

Galen landed as I arrived, and Ernie laughed when the harness disappeared, and he slid to the ground. He landed on his feet and grabbed Galen's wing, laughing. "That was so fun! I want to have my own dragon when I grow up."

"That's not how dragons work." Lark flashed Galen an apologetic grin. He fell to one knee and held his arms open. Ernie ran to him and squealed when Lark picked him up

and carried him away.

"Thanks for the ride, Galen!" Ernie yelled and waved over Lark's shoulder.

My giant dragon surprised me when they morphed into their kobold alpha form, complete with horns and clothes. "You're welcome!" They waved.

I held my hand out to them, and they took it. Instead of leading me to the woods between Lark's cabin and their cave, they led me back toward the fortress instead.

"I thought you wanted to go home."

"I want to meet with Priestess Alma right away." Galen sniffed the air and bristled. "Except that will have to wait. Get on my back."

They dropped to the ground and shifted in one smooth motion, almost knocking me off my feet. A shadow darkened the surrounding grass, and I clambered up Galen's side to their back. As soon as I was seated, they leaped from the ground, jarring my bones. I leaned forward over their neck and held onto the blunt scales between their shoulder blades.

They roared and twisted away from a spout of flame. A blanket of magic pressed me closer to their scales and held me in place, or I would have dropped to the ground, now alarmingly far away.

We spun and twirled through the air, putting distance between us and the fortress. Soon, we reached the summit of Galen's mountain, and their cave. Instead of climbing inside with me, they puffed themselves even bigger than the cave opening.

"Go inside, my heart. I need to speak with my paragon and siblings alone."

I knew better than to argue with them. I also had the perfect hiding place.

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Chapter Sixteen

Galen

My paragon had returned. I knew they would be back after my final molt, but I hadn't expected them so quickly upon our return.

"Where have you been?" Chance asked. They were my oldest sibling, still larger than me by the size of one of the kobold cabins below. We were both larger than Paragon now. Chance's black scales had lightened to a bright blue with their final molt, while mine remained black.

"We have been traveling," I said.

"You stink of Earth." My paragon dropped onto me from above, the thick claws on their wing shoving my neck to the ground. They held me there with a hind foot. I tried to look up at them, but they snaked their head down to me. "You ..." They glared at me for a long breath and then released me.

I shoved myself back to full height with my wings. I'd expected their return to be fiery, but the pain in my chest brought stinging tears to my eyes. They were still my paragon, and their actions hurt.

"You are already pregnant?" Paragon asked. "How can this be?"

My grief hardened into bratty indignation. "I found my fated mate here, in The Spike."

"The Spike." My paragon scoffed and spat a gout of flame in the village's direction. "They aren't worthy of you."

"He's my fated," I insisted. "Please. I need to know more about fated mates."

"It's a good thing you found them," my other sibling, Lux said. They now had a maroon tinge to their black scales. They shimmered in the sunlight like coals. "We didn't find any kobolds on the other planes."

"None?" I asked.

"They've been destroyed by disease," Paragon confirmed. "We found entire communities in mass graves."

"Why were you gone so long, then?" I asked.

"Their dragons demanded we stay and mate with them." Lux shuddered. "It was horrible."

"Against your will?" I asked.

"No. We wanted to help," Chance said. "At first. Then, they wanted us to stay and raise the children."

"I didn't even get to touch mine after they hatched." Lux glared at our paragon. "We left them behind!"

"We had to leave, or you would have stayed forever," Paragon said. "You did what was best for you. Now, you'll have a chance to find your fated mate like Galena has."

"Galen," I said.

They bowed their head, their dark eyes glittering. "Galen fits you."

"Where is your mate?" Chance asked.

I spread my wings before my cave door and made myself as large as I could. "None of your business."

"Galen," Paragon said. "I know I said you stink of Earth, and you do, but you are in far better shape than the dragons we left. If your mate is responsible, I want to thank him."

"If you hurt him, I will destroy all of you."

"Hurt him?" My paragon's teeth were suddenly at my neck, but they sniffed me instead of biting. "I mean it, child. I never thought these hybrid kobolds would amount to anything, but they alone survived the disease that decimated the other planes."

"You caused the disease," I said. "You made their females infertile."

"That was a curse." Paragon chuckled. "I sense you have found a way to defeat that, too. Where is your mate? I must meet him."

"You will not meet him as dragons. You will shift into kobolds."

"Fine." Lux was the first to shift into a true kobold form far smaller than Mac and the other human hybrids. They barely came up to my ankle in dragon form. Chance and Paragon dropped down to that size, too. My paragon took the female form, while both my siblings were betas.

"Thank you," I said. I transformed into my alpha kobold hybrid form. My siblings

looked at me with interest, but my paragon still frowned in contempt.

"Mac?" I asked as we entered my cave. I sensed him in the kitchen area. He'd dug a pit to keep meat cold when we needed it, and that's where I found him. He'd flipped the prep table over on top of himself like a makeshift hatch.

"Are they gone?"

"No. They are in their kobold forms. They want to meet you."

"Is that safe?" Mac crawled from the hole.

"You smell like meat," I whispered. We hadn't stocked the cooler for months, but it didn't matter. The scent lingered. I wanted to lick Mac all over so my family knew he was mine, but I used my magic to pull him to the hot spring in the back. I shoved him in the pool with my magic. He was still spluttering and coughing when I dried him off with more magic.

"Much better."

"A little warning next time?" He asked. "I could have held my nose or taken a deep breath."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Galen?"

I spun to face my paragon, who had followed us through the main room, into my private area. Mac tried to hide behind me, but I grabbed his hand and tucked him to my side. "This is Mac, my fated mate."

"Hello, young beta." My paragon grew before our eyes, taking a hybrid female form that still looked far more dragon than kobold. "You are also pregnant." She sniffed Mac's belly. "As I suspected."

Perhaps I should have left him smelling like meat.

"That's ... impossible," Mac said as I crushed him to my chest in a hug.

"It's not," I whispered. "I smelled it before we left. That's why I wanted to talk to Priestess Alma."

Mac looked up at me in my kobold alpha form. "It's real? We're both pregnant?"

I nodded.

"Holy shit!" Mac gripped me around my middle. "That's wonderful!"

I still didn't know what was holy about shit, but he smelled happy.

"He's pregnant?" Chance asked.

"He'll break the curse." My paragon deflated, crossing their arms and rounding their shoulders in a sulk.

"What is the curse, exactly?" I asked. "I know you had something to do with making their females unable to bear children."

Mac turned to face my family, but I kept my hands at his waist, holding him against me, ready to transform around him and protect him with my wings if needed.

"I was angry with them for using human genes," my paragon said. "Have the alpha

and omega bonds continued, or have they faded?"

"They still feel the pull to their fated mates," I answered, "even when they are children." I thought of Robin and Weld.

"They haven't been mated to humans, instead?" Lux asked.

"No." I was still angry at my paragon for leaving, but I understood their worry of the unknown. We had over a century of mating data on the kobold/human hybrids now. The only danger to their species was the eventual extinction of females, which had no rhyme or reason, except, "The curse."

"Right." Paragon continued their story. "We only needed enough of them to become priestesses, so I made a deal with the goddess. Only a female kobold born of a kobold beta and a dragon can break the curse, and only if she lives to see her first molt."

I cringed at the threat to our baby, but before I could ask what she meant, Mac waved his arms before his flat abdomen.

"But how? I'm not an omega! Where, how is the egg supposed to come out?"

"Magic," Lux said.

"Magic," Mac and I repeated.

"Magic," Paragon confirmed. "When it's time, the egg will let you know it's ready to join the nest. Until then, you will gestate it like a human child, safe within your body."

Mac took a deep breath through his mouth and exhaled through his nose. "I'm carrying a child?"

"A girl," Paragon confirmed. "A sweet girl to break the curse."

"And we'll have two eggs, one kobold and one dragon?" I asked.

"You will." My paragon perked up at the mention of my dragon egg. "And you will have family around to help you raise them."

I didn't want my family around. I wanted to hold my mate and talk through everything we'd just learned about our combined fates and the fate of both our species.

"We've been staying at our ancestral caves," Lux said. "We'll return there and let you think through everything Paragon has said. We know it's a lot."

"What? No." Paragon tried to resist as both of my siblings grabbed their arms and tugged them toward the cave entrance. "We're staying here, with Galen."

"No, we are not." Chance shifted into a kobold alpha form like mine and took Paragon's hand. "We will let Galen come to us when they're ready."

"Well, you must come to the ancestral egg cave when it's time to lay your egg. That's where you were born. That's where our family was born."

"I will," I reassured them, mostly to get them out of my cave. "When I'm ready."

"Good." Paragon broke free of Chance's grasp. I thought they would claw me, but instead, they clutched me to their chest in an awkward hug. "It is good to see you, Galen. I am sorry for scaring you and your mate earlier. That is the way of dragons. We are never sure how to greet each other."

"The way you left might be to blame for that."

I no longer felt the ache of sadness and its partner, anger, which surprised me. I understood their desire to restore the way of life the kobold/human hybrids had destroyed. While it should have made me even angrier to know they'd run off without me for nothing, it only further proved my truth. Mac was my mate. He and the other kobold/human betas were the future of dragonkind.

"I'm sorry we left you behind, my sweet." My paragon hugged me even tighter before letting me go and taking both Chance's and Lux's hands.

We followed them to the cave entrance, Mac gripping my waist as tightly as I clung to his.

"I daresay," my paragon said, "you are even more magnificent because you grew up without us."

"Speak for yourself," Chance said. "I missed you, little pipsqueak. Wish we could have seen you grow up."

"We scried, though," Lux said.

Chance hissed at them to shut up.

I didn't want to imagine them spying on my worst, or even best, moments. I needed to rush them outside before I died of embarrassment.

"Wait here until they're gone," I told Mac before I entered the light pool at the cave entrance. I took my dragon form again and pushed myself large enough to block the door once they were out.

"I will come to you," I said. "If I see you anywhere near my cave before we speak again, I will attack."

Paragon nodded. "You will have no need to attack us. Thank you for inviting us into your home."

"It's much cleaner than I remember," Chance said, ever the diplomat. They were the first to shift back to dragon form and take flight. Lux and our paragon followed. Paragon circled once and then disappeared from the sky.

I wheeled to face the entrance of my cave and crouched down so Mac could climb onto my back. He did so without question, and once again, my heart filled with joy. He was my mate in every way, and we were going to be parents!

I still needed to process all the new information my paragon gave us, but we needed to share with Priestess Alma and the kobold village as soon as possible. I needed to set the priestess free to find her own mate once we broke the curse.

* * *

Priestess Alma stared at me with a blank look. "What do you mean, you no longer wish to be worshiped? We all saw the other dragons in the sky! Maybe they want our love instead. You can't decide to disbar an entire profession on a whim!"

"It's not a whim," I said. "You deserve your freedom."

"I am free! I chose this profession when I was a child! I have always wanted to be a dragon servant."

"What choice did you have?" Mac asked. "You were too young to know what prostitutes did. Your parents probably claimed they were unsavory. Fated alphas and omegas often think less of them."

She nodded. "My parents did not want me to work in the brothels. However, I talked

with the brothel workers before I committed to the dragon temple. They were witty and kind, but they knew as well as I did, I wouldn't fit in there."

"You have a choice now," I said. "Like Clementine, you can do whatever you want. Learn something new. Take up a hobby. Travel. Anything."

Priestess Alma frowned at me. "I suppose it would be fun to see more of the other temples, unless you're disbanding them, too?"

I shrugged. "I need to send word to the other dragons, but both Elder and Bale have questioned whether the temples are for us or for you."

Priestess Alma scoffed. "For me?"

"For kobold females who don't want to work in the brothels," Mac said. His voice was far softer than mine, and she relaxed a little.

"I don't want little Clementine confined to the same choices I had," she admitted. "I want her to do whatever she wants when she grows up."

"That's what I want for you," I said. "It's not too late."

She met my gaze with unshed tears in her eyes. "Am I that bad at my job? This is my life's work, and you're disbanding us like we've meant nothing to you."

"You have been a wonderful priestess," I reassured her. "For the longest time, I thought you were necessary for my happiness as a dragon. However, that's not fair to you, and it's not fair to little Clementine or the others. Now, there will be many others. Eventually, you may even find your fated mate, and I wouldn't want you to think this vocation should stop you from mating."

"I'm too old for a mate." She scoffed. "We're infertile, remember?"

"It's a curse," Mac said. "A curse that's about to be broken." He patted his flat abdomen, and she frowned.

"No." She shook her head. "Betas can't get pregnant."

"I am," Mac said. "Galen's paragon confirmed it."

"How will you give birth?" She seemed as skeptical as I had been.

I rolled my eyes, remembering how ridiculous it had sounded when my entire family chimed in with one word. "Magic."

"It better work, too," Mac said.

"Wait ..." Alma grabbed Mac's hand and sniffed from his wrist to his elbow. A low growl rumbled from my throat.

"I can smell the child on you." She frowned. "We don't have anything about beta pregnancies in the archives."

I would need to ask my family for more advice, but not yet. I wanted at least one night with my mate where we could celebrate our union and our future.

Chapter Seventeen

Mac

I was pregnant. Me, a beta. Holy shit!

Where was our baby even growing? I could still use my magic, so they weren't sucking it away from me the way an omega's eggs would.

Galen's paragon had said only one egg, but what if they were wrong? What if there were twins? Would they want out when they were apple-sized or dragon-egg-sized? Laying them by magic didn't guarantee it would be painless, either.

The more I thought about it, the more I panicked. I almost fell from Galen's back when they dipped toward their cave entrance. They flattened me to their scales with a spell, holding me in place. The spell reassured me more than a talk could have. Together, we could do anything, even the unknown. I trusted them.

When we landed, I climbed to the rocky cave floor. Before I had a chance to catch my breath, Galen had returned to their alpha kobold form to embrace me in their muscular arms.

They kissed my temple. "I'm so sorry. Today has been a lot."

My laugh sounded a little hysterical. I still had a way to go before I could consider myself calm. "Today is only the beginning."

"We will figure it out together," they said. "The magic, the eggs, all of it."

"I know." I sighed and tucked my head against their bare chest.

"I want tonight to be about us," Galen said. "It won't be long before the egg inside me grows too large for this form, and I'll have to stay a dragon. Until then, I want to enjoy every part of being your mate."

"I want that, too." Gods, how I wanted that. As scary as it was to be mated to a dragon, I enjoyed every moment of showing Galen how special they were to me. I loved being with them in this form.

They kissed me, and it was everything I remembered from our trip. It felt more real here in our cave with the familiar smells of smoke and damp rock surrounding us. This was our home, where we would raise our young and live together for years to come.

"I want you," Galen whispered against my lips. They tugged my shirt from my pants, and their warm fingers brushed my skin.

"I still can't believe this is real," I said. "We're having babies?"

They pulled away, but I kissed them again, nipping at their bottom lip and encouraging them to rub their tongue alongside mine.

"We should talk," they said.

"We've talked enough today," I said. "There's so much I want to do while you're in this form. I haven't tasted you yet."

"Tasted?" Galen frowned at me. "Your tongue has been all over inside my mouth."

I laughed. "What if I put it other places?"

"Other places?" I loved their frown, but I didn't want to keep them guessing.

I undressed with no finesse, almost tripping over my pant legs in my haste. Then, I dropped to my knees before them, still yards away from their bed. They watched me with wonder as I took their cock and ovipositor in one hand and their balls in the other. I fondled them while pulling their gigantic balls into my mouth one at a time. That was the only way they would fit, and even then, only partway.

Galen had a shock of black hair on their head in this form, but the rest of them was completely hairless. Their balls were covered in small scales instead, and I loved their texture as I ran my tongue over every inch. When I pulled one back into my mouth, Galen growled. My cock throbbed between my legs, reminding me to hurry up. I hadn't gotten to the good part yet.

Galen's ovipositor had already latched itself to the tip of my thumb, but I didn't want to leave it untasted. I gently tugged it off my digit and ran my tongue around the opening. It latched onto the muscle, squeezing as tightly as it had held my thumb. I sucked said thumb into my mouth alongside it, getting it wet. Galen's ovipositor knew what I was doing and latched onto my thumb before I could remove both from my mouth. I licked and sucked around the union of our bodies, and Galen made a sound like purring deep in their chest.

"Don't tease me," Galen pleaded.

I slid my thumb further inside, and Galen rocked forward on their toes.

After their balls and the somewhat spongy texture of their ovipositor, their cock felt silky smooth in my mouth. I ran my tongue along the veins and ridges, learning every movement that had my mate gasping in pleasure. With both hands, I explored their

ovipositor and the scales between both organs. Each touch brought Galen up on their toes and farther into my mouth.

Their cock fit perfectly. I loved the slide of it on my tongue and the salty taste of their precome. I licked and sucked at the base and swallowed around the tip.

Galen brought their hands to hold my head in place and used my mouth and hands for their pleasure. I knew they were close when their legs started to shake. I loved the way they stroked my hair as hot spurts of cum hit the back of my throat. They tasted bitter and sweet, my favorite combination. I hummed my pleasure around their cock.

"Gods, Mac!" They released me, but I refused to let go of their cock, still licking up every drop of their cum.

"Are you all right?" They asked. "I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have kept you from moving like that. I'm so sorry."

Satisfied their cock was clean, I let them slip from my mouth. "Never apologize. I would let you know if I needed to move."

They nodded. "I trust you."

"I trust you, too." I stood and cupped their cheek with my free hand, the one not still suctioned to their ovipositor.

They kissed me, thrusting their tongue into my mouth. At the first taste of themselves, they moaned. "I want to taste you now. May I?"

Gods, they were always so polite. "Anything for you."

Instead of dropping to their knees, Galen picked me up and placed me on their

shoulders with my cock in their face for a quick ride to their pile of bedding. They nudged me with their snout as they walked and carefully sat me against one side of their bed, which was dug into the cave floor. In their dragon form, they could lay snug against the stone and it would hold their body heat during the night.

Now, in their kobold form, the space seemed too large and cavernous. We kobolds had been trained to pass through open areas like this one as quickly as possible to avoid dragons. Instead, I felt safe in Galen's arms as they lowered me to their bedding and settled between my spread legs.

Instead of sucking me down, they teased my cock and balls with their tongue while roaming their hands up and down my sides. I relaxed into the sensation, sure my dragon wouldn't try to tickle me with their sharp teeth so close to my cock.

Galen explored lower, tasting the ticklish spots along my inner thighs. They sucked until I ached, both from needing to come and the bruises they left behind.

"Gods, yes, mark all of me. Let everyone know I'm yours."

Galen growled. "No one will see these marks but me." They placed gentle kisses over one purple mark, then the other. "These are for us and no one else."

In response, my cock bounced against my abs with a wet sound.

Galen met my gaze as they eased my cock away from my body. They slid their mouth over me, their tongue wrapping around my length and squeezing while their hot warmth enveloped my cock head.

For someone not used to having hands, they already knew what to do with them. They wetted two fingers in their mouth and then followed the line between my balls, along my taint, to my puckered hole. They massaged their wet fingers around my

entrance and I relaxed, allowing them to push inside with first one, then both.

They worked me open while their perfect mouth continued to tease my cock, and they held my hip in place at their mercy while my body vibrated with sheer need to come.

"Close." I tapped their shoulder, unable to do more as the familiar tingle started at the base of my spine. I stared down at my mate, transfixed by how focused they were on my pleasure. I'd never had a partner take such good care of me before.

Galen hummed in the back of their throat and took me even deeper, swallowing around me as their fingers pressed firmly against my prostate. I howled their name as my orgasm pulsed through me.

They licked me clean with their delightful tongue before joining me with their head propped on my shoulder. I leaned in for a kiss. They tasted like me, and I couldn't get enough.

Galen peppered kisses along my throat. At my shoulder, they licked over their mark, and my cock tried to rally.

"That feels so good," I said. "Why is that so good?"

"We're connected through our mark," Galen said. "When I touch yours, you have a direct link to everything I feel for you."

I trailed my finger from the base of their horn, down their pointed jaw, to the mark I'd placed on their neck. Galen exposed the mark to my touch and whimpered when we connected.

They must have felt how much I loved them, but it was too new for me to say it. The words wouldn't scare my dragon, nothing could, but I worried my anxiety about our

pregnancies and our future hatchlings would spike even higher if I put a name to what I would lose if I lost Galen. I couldn't think about that now.

"You are worried," they whispered.

"Yes." I couldn't keep it from them, nor did I want to. We'd made these eggs together. Whatever happened next, we would face it together.

Galen kissed my temple and urged me onto my side without words. They curled behind me, their arm clutching me to their chest.

The orgasms were amazing, but the cuddles were the best yet. Galen was an excellent cuddler in dragon form. They were even better in kobold alpha form. I loved the way they fit around me, their chin tucked against my shoulder, their breath warm on my neck as they held me against them with a beefy arm. And those hands ... Galen stroked my chest with slow, sure strokes of their blunt nails. I'd never felt so cherished.

Gods, I loved them. I wanted to shout it from the mountaintop and tell the whole world, but I was still too scared it would be taken from me.

"I want to do so much more," Galen said, "but I can already feel the egg growing too large for this form."

Their voice settled into a low rumble after an orgasm, and I wished we had more time to explore how deep it could go. "How long before you lay your egg?"

"I hope it's six weeks." They kissed the back of my neck. "Kobolds and dragons once had the same gestation time, according to the information Priestess Alma sent me."

Punky and Tuft both had their eggs sooner than expected.

"What if mine is early?" I asked.

"Then yours is early." Their chuckle warmed my insides and made my cock perk up again. "We will get you to the gestation cave before then."

"I don't think my pregnancy is like other kobolds," I said. "I don't think it's an egg." It wasn't in my balls, either. It felt more like I was carrying our baby around inside my chest.

"You think you're having a baby, like a human?"

That thought was even more terrifying. Where would a human baby be safe inside me, and where would it come out? "Gods, I hope not."

"We need someone who isn't my family, but who might have answers," Galen said. "Tomorrow, we will fly to see Bale and Olaf at The Grid. Even if Olaf has never had a child, he might have received some information about the curse."

Gods, I hoped so. Olaf was the oldest beta kobold I had ever met. He was also one of the kindest.

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Chapter Eighteen

Galen

We spent the night enjoying each other's bodies. I couldn't get enough of Mac, and I knew we were running out of time. I kept him up most of the night, waking him up to fill him with my knot or take him inside me.

Too soon, my body forced me to return to my dragon form. Our egg's shell had begun to harden inside my testicle, making it incredibly uncomfortable. In my dragon form, there was far more room for the egg to float, suspended in nourishing fluid much like an omega's slick. After a few weeks, it would become too uncomfortable to fly, and I wanted answers for Mac and myself before then.

The next morning, we paid a quick visit to the dragonet barn to make sure Rapture was well fed after our journey. While there, Priestess Alma accosted us to ask about the dragons spotted overhead.

"Will they return?"

"They aren't a threat to the village," I promised. "I will speak to them before we leave for The Grid."

"Thank you, Galen." She bowed to me. "I'm sorry for my outburst yesterday."

"Change is never easy." It would have been easier for me to reassure her in my kobold alpha form. I bumped her with my snout, instead.

She laughed. "I suppose that's true."

"Do you need a ride back to the fortress?" Mac asked. "We need to gather supplies."

In all my years knowing her, this was Alma's first dragon ride. Mac helped her climb onto my back and directed her which scales to grab. I plastered them to me with a spell before takeoff. I would never forgive myself if I dropped anyone from my back.

Once safely on the ground again, she thanked me for the ride before leading Mac inside. I curled up in the sun while I waited for Mac to return. Instead of running from me in fear, the kobolds coming from their cabins stopped to greet me. I allowed the children to scamper up my tail and onto my back, catching them in a magical net if they slid too far off my side.

Mac returned, ending their fun.

"You're so good with them," he teased once he was secured on my back.

"We will be good with our own," I reminded him.

I tucked the bags of supplies and gifts for our nearest neighbors into an interdimensional space. Rather than heading for our destination, I took to the sky in the opposite direction. I asked Mac to wait for me on the short landing strip outside the cave entrance while I went inside. "I won't be long, I promise."

My paragon was surprised to see me so soon after our talk.

"This is not a social call," I told them. "I am here to warn you. If you do anything to hurt Mac's village while I am gone, you will have to answer to Bale, Elder, and all the other dragons you left behind when you went searching for kobolds on the other planes."

"Why would we hurt them?" Chance asked. "They're our salvation."

"Your mate proves it," Paragon said. "We talked it through last night. We want to meet the beta population of your village, to see if Chance and Lux have mates here, as well."

"And if they don't?" I didn't try to keep the suspicious lilt from my voice. They didn't recognize the nuances of tone I'd picked up from Mac over the years.

"Then we will meet the betas at the next village, and the next, the way dragons of old used to search for their fated mates."

"You no longer think human hybrids are bad?" I asked.

"What choice do we have?" Lux asked. "They're the only kobolds left."

"I do not approve of you meeting them," I said, "not until after our eggs hatch and the curse is broken once and for all."

"You found your mate before the curse was broken," Paragon said. "Why should Chance and Lux wait?"

"To prove we are trustworthy." Chance's eyes glowed with determination. I knew they would understand. "We will keep our word, and then you will keep yours."

I nodded. "If you keep your word, we will hold a dragon reunion at the new pavilion." I stopped short of saying my friends built it for me. I didn't want them to burn it down out of spite.

"Don't be so angry with them," Mac said once we were safely outside their cave and out of hearing range. "They've changed their entire worldview in less than a day. It

can't be easy."

"I don't trust them," I said. "If they don't find their mates here, I worry they will burn your village and leave you all for dead again."

"We'll warn Bale and the others." Mac climbed back into place on my back.

We returned to casual conversation mixed with the occasional landmark and animal sightings until we approached The Grid two hours later.

Bale greeted us with a roar as they circled over the field of bovinji below. They dove and caught one with their back claws, tearing into its hind quarters and rendering it immobile for a trip back to the village bonfire, where Olaf waited to clean and cook their meal. Instead of a temple, their priestesses kept the fire burning for their dragon and cooked them meat every few days. I'd been jealous until Mac started cooking for me.

Still, the thought of a well-cooked meal was too tempting to resist. It had been too long since I'd had my own bovinji grilled to perfection over a roaring bonfire.

I flattened Mac even closer to my shoulder blades to keep him safe while I circled, searching for the perfect creature. I found one hobbling toward the back of the herd, young but almost full grown. It would grow weaker with age, unable to keep up with the herd. Now, at least, its meat would be fresh and tender. I dove at my mark, my movements precise for a quick and efficient kill.

"Well met, young Galen," Bale said when I deposited the carcass next to theirs. "You honor us by thinning our herd."

I bowed my head low while Mac scampered down and stood at my side. "I wish to share a meal with you and your mate, and to talk."

Bale sniffed me and turned their attention to Mac. Smoke rolled over the delicate gold scales of their nose. "You are both with child. How fortuitous for you."

"We hoped you and Olaf would have some advice," Mac said.

"You're pregnant?" Olaf's voice was high and reedy with age, but he still had a twinkle in his eye when he embraced my mate. "Congratulations! Once we get this meat to cooking, I'll tell you all about our little ones." Olaf bowed his head to me and grinned. "Not such a young pup anymore, are you, Galen? Best wishes for your eggs."

Olaf said little ones. As far as I knew, they'd only had one dragon child, Sve.

Only dragons and their mates were permitted in the bonfire circle once the meat was dressed and hung on the spits to cook. We lounged around the bonfire while two priestesses prepared the two bovinji we'd killed. They also strung up a large meat roast for Olaf and Mac to feast upon.

Once the priestesses left us, Bale and I curled on our sides, keeping our bellies toasty warm while Olaf and Mac turned the meat every few minutes. It didn't take long for it to cook, and then Olaf carved off large hunks of meat for each of us.

Mac waited until we'd taken off the edge of hunger with our first servings to ask what we both wanted to know. "You had more than one child?"

"We were afraid to tell you," Olaf admitted.

"The curse," Bale said. "We didn't tell you about our disaster because we didn't know you yet. Your paragon was so ruthless, and we didn't want it to get back to them."

"Besides, it sounds crazy. Would you have believed me if I told you I had a baby

girl?" Olaf asked.

"Probably not," Mac admitted.

"We named her Ana," Olaf said.

"She didn't make it." The way they spoke at the same time made it hard to hear the exact words, but their sadness after so many years was still palpable enough to convey the meaning.

"I'm so sorry," Mac said.

"Was it the curse?" I asked.

Bale's wings rose and fell in the dragon form of a shrug. "Only your paragon and the goddess know for sure."

"How, though?" Mac asked. "Priestess Alma didn't believe me when I told her betas could get pregnant."

"My family's only suggestion was 'magic,'" I said.

"It is magic." Bale blinked slowly. "The child will let you know when she's ready to be free of Mac's body. She'll draw magic from both of you to create her shell, and she'll continue drawing magic from you until she's ready to hatch, same as your dragon baby."

"But Ana ..." I didn't want to push, but I had to know what happened to their little girl.

"She hatched, alive." Olaf shared a sad smile with Bale and then cast his rueful gaze

at me. "She ate her first meal, played with Sve, and we put them down in their separate cribs to sleep."

"She never woke up." Bale sniffed.

"We are both so very sorry for your loss," Mac said again, and I echoed him. He always reminded me of my manners when my thoughts raced ahead without considering others' feelings.

"They should be kept together in the nest and raised together," Bale said. "Sve never forgave us. They said she died of a broken heart because we separated them." Their dragon offspring now lived in a remote area to the north, days from any kobold village.

"That's awful," Mac said.

"That's the curse." I nodded, finally understanding what my paragon's strange riddle meant after all these years. "If dragons and kobolds grow apart, they will cease to exist. Kobold females will suffer the loss worst."

"If that makes it easier for you, thinking it's a curse that can be lifted, so be it." Bale raised their head toward the sky and breathed a gout of flame. "I curse your paragon's name."

"They've returned," I said, my voice barely louder than a whisper, lest Paragon could hear me at such a distance. Our hearing wasn't that advanced, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"What did they find?" Olaf asked. "Did they bring you another mate?"

I shook my head. "No. They found the original kobold species wiped out by disease

on the other planes. Kobold/human hybrids are our future."

"It's up to you to remove your paragon's curse on our kind," Olaf said. "Betas and females are just as important to kobold society as the alphas and omegas."

"They say my pregnancy is proof the curse can be lifted, if our baby survives to its first molt," Mac said. "Yours?—"

"We didn't know to keep them together," Olaf said. "If we had, Ana would have lived."

The conversation turned to other topics then. Olaf told Mac of a dragonet shortage in the west. There were few betas who could bond full nests of them the way Mac and his young apprentice Sunny could.

"Dragons could stop eating the wild dragonets," Mac said with a shrug.

"They're too wild," Olaf said. "I have an affinity with some of them, but if they've reached their final molt, they can't be tamed."

Mac let the subject drop. I studied him in the afternoon sun, remembering our passionate night. He snuggled against my scales, dozing off while Bale and I talked.

When Olaf offered me the rest of my bovinji, I declined. "We should get home. Enjoy it tomorrow."

"Keep us posted on your paragon," Bale said.

"And the babies!" Olaf added.

Mac hopped to his feet, and Olaf gave him a quick hug. Bale leaned over the fire and

wrapped their neck around mine, the way we hugged in dragon form. With that, I bent down to let Mac onto my back, secured him with a spell, and flew home.

A pile of books greeted us at the mouth of our cave. I'd spelled the entrance so my nosy family members couldn't venture inside. I was glad it hadn't rained.

"What's this?" Mac asked as he stacked the six books in his arms and carried them inside.

"My paragon hoards information of all sorts. They will be pleased to learn of kobold advances from the last few years. For now, we must resort to their books." My paragon's hoard had been locked away from me when they left. This set contained information about pregnancy and egg laying, from the looks of them. One had the image of a tiny kobold on the cover.

Mac flipped it open to the first chapter and frowned. "What language is this?" he asked. "I can't read it."

"Draconic. I'll read it to you."

I curled around Mac in my bed, my neck angled so I could see the book page over his shoulder. When I got to the bottom of the first page, I waited for him to turn it, but he was already sound asleep. It was a good thing, too. The first chapter was all about omegas, which wouldn't help us at all.

I carefully hooked my claw under the book and scooted it off Mac's legs and along the floor until it was well out of reach. "Tomorrow," I whispered. We still had plenty of time before we needed the information, I hoped.

Chapter Nineteen

Mac

My return to the dragonet barn the morning after our visit to The Grid caused quite a stir. Many of my coworkers hadn't seen the other three dragons the day we returned. They'd only learned about them when Alma called everyone to the cathedral to warn them while we were gone.

"Are you sure the new dragons won't kill us?" Sunny asked.

How could I lie to his cute little face? "I don't know, but I don't think so."

Sunny snorted. "I knew it. They're here to kill us."

I laughed. "That is not what I said."

"I know." He grinned up at me and offered his clawed hand. "I like messing with you." He led me to the dragonet enclosure where the two wild dragonets he'd bonded shared the enclosure. Rapture was in the pen behind them. He flew to the gate and banged his snout on the bar, begging for a treat.

"Are you going to bond him for real?" Sunny asked.

"It doesn't seem fair," I said. "I'm bonded to a dragon. I don't want to keep Rapture from finding a family who needs transportation."

I still held the temporary bond with the dragonet. Through it, I could feel his disappointment, even after I gave him a sizeable chunk of dried meat from the bin by his gate.

Together, Sunny and I put the two juveniles he'd bonded through their paces. Sunny couldn't ride because his tail would get in the way, but he gave the instructions while I guided them in the saddle.

Afterward, we met with Han, the beta I'd recruited to help at the dragonet barn while I visited other kobold villages with Galen.

Both Han and Sunny took my pregnancy news in stride. Sunny wandered off to groom his bonded dragonets while I shared some additional instructions with Han.

Once I'd checked each dragonet's chart to confirm they were up to date on their magical shots and deworming and that Han was aware of their special eating instructions, I drew a blank. "You have my cell phone number. Text me if anything strange happens?"

"You got it, boss." He patted my shoulder. "Congratulations. You're going to be a great dad."

"You're taking this really well."

"Hey, you're mated to a dragon. If that isn't life goals, I don't know what is." He frowned. "One question, though."

I still felt like I was forgetting something, so I hoped Han jogged my memory.

"Should we be worried about feeding these new dragons?"

Sunny glanced at the wild dragonets he'd bonded and blanched. "No!"

"They prefer to hunt bovinji," I said. Their cave to the northeast had reeked of fresh kills when Galen and I had visited before our trip to The Grid.

"They can't have my dragonets!"

"They won't." I walked over to the enclosure to pet both, but my actions didn't reassure Sunny of their safety. "We'll find another burrow of wild dire weasels before I'll let them have your babies. They've already come so far in their training!"

Sunny's worry eased with the praise, but a frown ghosted across his brow when I bid him farewell. I wasn't good at comforting others, not when I didn't know Galen's family's eating habits. I also didn't trust them, though I tried to be brave for Galen.

Brave and foolish. That was me.

* * *

Even after Galen read all the books on kobold pregnancies to me, I still didn't know where I was carrying our little girl, exactly. The uncomfortable bloating started in my gut, but I could also feel it lower, in my balls. Most of the time, it settled in my chest. Galen tried to tell me it was heartburn from indigestion, but all I could see was a xenomorph bursting through my ribcage.

Sometimes, the pain shifted to between my hips. Every bodily function hurt worse with each passing day until I was sure I was going to birth this baby out my cock or ass any day now.

I didn't notice my belongings flying through the cave of their own accord until Galen dropped a packed bag at my feet with their magic.

"It's time to go to the gestation cave," they said.

"You think I'm about to have an egg?"

"Gods, I hope so." They chuffed a laugh, and smoke rolled over me when they bumped my chest with their snout. They dropped down so I could climb onto their back. I clutched the bag to my chest and leaned forward until it was pressed tight between me and Galen. Their spell washed over me, holding me in place for a rougher than usual takeoff and landing.

"Flying is not as easy as it once was," they admitted when we reached the birthing cave of their ancestors. "Another day, and I was afraid we would be stuck at our cave."

I saw nothing wrong with that, but the dragon pregnancy books had been adamant about following tradition. While I didn't agree with their paragon's decision to burn every kobold village to the ground for combining genes with humans, I could understand their frustration with kobolds' break from the past. I didn't always agree with Galen's insistence on tradition, either, but at least their demands were more reasonable.

This cave, for instance. It was cozy and filled with light, thanks to the bright stone at the entrance and along the walls. The mountain above us seemed to be made of the reflective stuff. Only the hollowed-out bowl in the middle of the cave floor didn't reflect the light. Upon closer inspection, I realized that was because massive amounts of blankets and pillows lined the space, most of which I recognized from Galen's stash. They'd been busy this morning while I'd been wallowing in my pain.

"Come cuddle with me." They sounded as weary as I felt. They curled into a ball in the nesting area, leaving room for me beneath their wing, close to their chest.

I snuggled in, content to be with my dragon. I had worried about laying my egg so far away from other kobolds, but they wouldn't be able to help me beyond Olaf's advice, anyway.

Magic, everyone said. Our baby girl would let us know she was ready to move outside my body, and we would use our combined magic to move her there. Unlike Galen's egg, which had already swelled the size of their right testicle, our little kobold was not yet surrounded by a shell. We would make the shell and everything she needed to live inside it from ... magic.

I'd had kobold magic since my second molt, like most betas. Thankfully, spells and skills came easily to me. I'd discovered my first clutch of baby dragonets by instinct. I hoped laying my first kobold egg would be just as easy.

I dozed off against Galen's chest. Their deep, even breaths lulled me to sleep.

I woke to stabbing pains. This time, I was certain an alien creature would poke through my ribcage. Instead, I heard a tiny voice in my head.

"It's time for me to come out."

The voice sounded both young and ancient at the same time. I didn't know what to make of it. I trembled against Galen's side, and they stirred awake.

"What is it?"

"Our little girl."

"It's time," she repeated.

"I hear her." Galen made a rumbling sound in their throat.

"I still don't know what to do," I muttered. She could probably hear me, but it couldn't be helped.

"I will guide you. Trust me, Pop."

She'd already picked a name for me, different from what I'd called my own parents. I loved the name already. I loved her already. I could not let her down.

"Paragon, you will build my shell from the same elements as this cave."

Galen seemed as awed by their honorific as I was by mine. Their magic swirled, glistening with the light from the reflective stones around us until the shell itself glowed with the same light.

"Pop, you will walk through the magic shell, making sure the area where you feel my presence passes directly through it."

Pain lanced through my chest, and I knew exactly where our little one perched behind my breastbone.

Galen helped me to my feet with their wing, and I walked toward the magical egg. It was no bigger than my fist, which surprised me. The circumference of pain was much larger than that.

I was awed to feel the hard eggshell against my palms when I cupped it over the area of shooting pain. How was I supposed to walk through something that solid? Wouldn't I push it with my body?

Once I had the egg lined up, I stepped forward, and it disappeared into my loose sleep shirt. Even if I lifted the shirt, I knew I wouldn't find the egg. It was inside me, stone shell and all, and our little girl was now inside it, as well.

"Keep walking," she urged. "I can't stay with you any longer."

I took another step forward, and Galen made a cooing sound I'd never heard before. I turned to find them with their wing claws wrapped around the tiny egg.

"She's beautiful," they said, lying her gently on the pile of blankets where I'd been sitting. "Come keep her warm."

I snuggled next to Galen once more, too stunned for words. One minute, I'd had chest pains. The next, we had an egg in our nest, and the area behind my sternum radiated with a new emotion. I loved this little baby who had helped us bring her into the world. I also loved Galen, somehow more than I had before our magic had combined to bring our egg into the world.

I'd expected to feel empty, or maybe a drain on my magic. Instead, I felt full to the brim with love for my dragon and our little ones. Someday, I would be able to tell them.

Chapter Twenty

Galen

Our baby girl was already growing inside her crystal egg. That was the only way I could describe the beautiful eggshell. We couldn't see her in there, but her shell reflected light like the stone around us. When daylight filled the room, it also lit her egg like the sun in the sky. It was beautiful.

She was beautiful. Our little girl was going to be here in a few short months. I couldn't wait to meet her.

I was surprised how quickly she drained my magic, though. Already, I was too weak to hunt.

Mac was also too weak to use his magic for more than his dragonet bond. Thankfully, I'd packed Mac's cell phone along with his tablet. He emailed his coworkers to order supplies. Once they had filled Rapture's saddlebags with everything we needed and let us know they were ready, Mac called the dragonet to us through his bond.

Instead of waiting at the entrance, Rapture rushed our nest. I roared at him, and he cowered with his belly on the floor. Still, he snaked his neck forward to sniff our egg. He made a mewling sound in his throat, and I swore I heard our little girl answer him.

It shouldn't have been real, that strange child and adult voice coming from our egg, but none of it had seemed possible. I had whipped together an egg using my magic, and Mac had walked through something as strong as stone as though it were air. I

couldn't explain any of that, so how could I explain a bond between my mate's dragonet and our unhatched egg?

"They already have a bond," Mac marveled once he'd unpacked the bags and sent Rapture home. For his part, the little dragonet seemed reluctant to leave her.

"It's like I passed Rapture's bond to her, but I still have a hold on him, too." He laughed. "I used to tell everyone dragonets aren't pets, but ..." he trailed off.

"Our little girl already has a pet." I dipped my head lower so I could rest my head on top of her egg. At first, I'd worried my weight would crush it, but my magic buoyed me above the shell and absorbed my heat while counteracting the weight.

"Rapture is not a pet," Mac said. "He's her mount."

"She'll have a tail until she's mature," I reminded him. "Only adult kobolds have mounts."

"We'll make her a special harness so she won't fall off. Sunny's been wanting one, too."

I gave up trying to argue with my mate and laughed instead. I was sure our little girl would love to ride a dragonet to school. It would be a long way for her to walk to the fortress, as Mac called it, but I wanted her to attend school with the other kobolds.

Eventually, she and Clementine would be classmates, I hoped. They would be almost four years apart in age, but after the first five molts, Clementine's development would even out, giving our little one a chance to catch up. I hoped they would become friends.

It wasn't a guarantee, though. Clementine was very much her own person, and our

little one would be, too. I didn't want to influence her. It would be hard for me to give her space to make her own decisions, but in the end, it was best for her.

I was already a better parent than my paragon, and I had my kobold friends and Mac to thank for that. Mac and I weren't alone on our parenting journey, either, unlike Olaf and Bane. Yes, we had my family waiting in the wings, but I trusted Punky, Lark, and the other kobolds to help me brainstorm solutions, while my paragon would simply tell me what to do without any explanation.

Above all, I had Mac to help me make better decisions. He was the best partner I could want. He knew he didn't know everything, which made me question my own beliefs. I loved our conversations, and the easy way we agreed on most things. I loved him so much my chest ached.

I loved him. I'd known it before, but now, fear entwined the ache in my chest. If anything happened to either of our babies or our friends, Mac would blame me. What if I couldn't be dragon enough for the village I'd sworn to protect? What if my paragon threatened the village again over some unforeseen break with tradition?

I didn't trust my paragon, but I trusted Mac. He was all I needed.

* * *

When Rapture arrived a week later with more supplies, Mac took advantage of his willing transportation and rode him further into the mountains, to the ancestral caves. I didn't want to speak to my paragon, but it couldn't wait. I had questions about my egg-laying process. Their books were just as vague about it as they were about "magic."

While Mac was gone, I tucked blankets around our kobold egg, which was now the size of a grapefruit. I knew our little one wasn't cold inside, thanks to the magic

draining from me, but I didn't know how far Mac could travel, or for how long, before our egg would feel his absence.

I was still shifting and spinning, trying to find a comfortable way to curl around the newly wrapped egg when Mac returned with my paragon. Mac sent Rapture on his way, while my paragon approached cautiously.

"Hello, Galen. Is that your little kobold egg? Not so little anymore, is she?"

"She's growing by the hour." My wings spread with pride and banged into the hard wall at my back.

"Your beta said you wanted to see me."

"He has a name," I reminded them. "He is not my beta. He is Mac, my mate."

"Mac." Paragon bowed their head to him. "I did not mean to offend you. My relationship with your father was far different from yours with Mac."

That gave me pause. "What happened to him?"

"He ran away." They sighed. "He's still alive, somewhere to the west, on this plane."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. I'd been to the west. I'd met several kobold betas who worked the fields and tended livestock for the other villages. Had I met my kobold father and not known?

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Goff."

The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. "I don't know a Goff."

"He is shy." Paragon leaned in, and I stretched my neck out so we could rub our necks together the way dragons hugged. The action reminded me how much I missed hugging Mac in my kobold alpha form. Tears sprang to my eyes for a new reason.

"I remember all the dragon tears," Paragon said when they pulled back. "It's exhaustion from carrying the egg." They motioned for Mac to come forward, dragging a large burlap sack behind him. Mac's nose wrinkled at the smell, but one sniff told me the bag was full of my favorite treats.

"Bovinji organs?"

"They will keep you strong and aid in the delivery."

"How much longer?" I was already over my six-week gestation period by two days, and the egg hadn't budged.

"When it's time." Paragon laughed at the face I made and curled their neck around mine again. "This will help, I promise. Once you've eaten the whole bag, you will be in prime condition."

"Either that, or I'll have indigestion so bad, I'll wish I was in labor." I tried to smile, but it probably looked more like a grimace. "Thank you for the organs."

"Is it all right if we visit you here in a few days? If you haven't laid the egg by then, it might take more drastic measures." They turned to Mac and winked. "You know what to do?"

Mac met my gaze with a nod, and a deep blush darkened his cheeks between his stripes. "Yes."

"Good. I'll give you three days. One to eat, one to set things in motion, and one to rest. Then, expect a visit from us."

"Thank you," I said again.

They smiled. "I wasn't here to watch you grow up, but I raised you when it counted. I intend to help you with my grandchildren, as well." Their eyes sparkled a radiant amethyst, and they huffed a gout of smoke. "You grew into a fine dragon on your own, Galen. I am proud of everything you've done at the village. The new pavilion and game yards, and your cave is so tidy."

"That's all Mac and the other kobolds," I said.

Mac tried to interject, but I talked over him. "Mac cleans my cave every week, and a plucky kobold omega and his alpha partner built the recreation spaces."

Mac frowned at me. "You do most of the heavy lifting to clean your cave," he said. "And Tuft and Axel wouldn't have dared to build the pavilion outdoors if not for your word you wouldn't burn us all on sight."

Right. I had been the reason the kobolds had feared the outdoors for over a century.

"See?" My paragon huffed their smoke at me. I'd forgotten how calming their scent was. "I knew it. This was your doing. I worried we would return to a war, or worse, to mass extinction of both species. Instead, I find you thriving here. I am so glad, Galen. More than you will ever know."

I bowed my head, unable to think of a response.

"We will see you in three days," Mac said with finality. He always knew what to say when I was at a loss for words.

"Yes," Paragon said with a cheerful tone. "Three days. You'll have two eggs in your nest by then, I'm sure."

Gods, I hoped so. My balls ached something fierce. There was no fluid left between the hard shell and my skin. It chafed with every movement as I settled back into my nest.

Mac approached with the burlap sack almost as tall as he was. It left a wet streak of red on the floor, since it was too heavy for him to lift.

"I know you prefer these cooked, but there would be more nutrients if you ate them raw."

I nodded, too tired to argue or complain. Organs were my favorite, no matter how they were prepared.

Mac dumped them out without ceremony. One of the bloody treats rolled under my snout, so it was the first into my mouth. Even uncooked, they tasted wonderful. I made a few uncouth noises while I ate.

"Better than my cooking?" Mac grinned, and I knew he wasn't upset.

"Everything you cook is wonderful," I said around a mouthful I'd snagged from the pile.

I'd neglected our egg in my haste to eat. Mac curled himself around the nest of blankets with our unseen egg in the middle.

His grin widened the more I ate. When I finished, I swore I could see each of his sharp teeth.

"What?" I asked.

"You've got ... something." He circled his face with a finger.

That was easy enough. I licked the remnants of blood and gore from my lips and snout.

"I want that tongue wrapped around me again."

Mac's words surprised me. I didn't feel sexy with my balls swelled to twice their normal size. I carried the egg in my right, but the left seemed to be overcompensating for lack of eggs and swelling in sympathy.

Mac meant what he said, though. He thought my tongue was sexy. He wanted me to wrap it around his cock. He was thinking about sex, now? "Hush. Our little one can hear you."

He pressed his ear to the shell and whispered, "She's sleeping."

"Sleep sounds glorious right now." I licked the drying blood off the floor, grateful the reflective stone was less porous than in my cave. I didn't get nearly as much from the exchange, but the floor was far cleaner when I finished.

My quest to lick up every drop led me from my nest. Returning to it and trying to get comfortable was another challenge. Mac carried our egg a safe distance away and watched while I grumbled and whined my way through the torture of circling and finally lying down.

When he settled against my chest with our egg in his lap, I remembered it was all worthwhile. Yes, carrying our egg was painful, but Mac and our two precious little ones were worth it.

At least, that's what I thought before the real pain began.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mac

I never wanted to be the guy who received bedroom advice from his lover's parent, but that was my life now. Galen's paragon informed me I wasn't performing my mating duties for Galen.

"You must have made them come at least once, or you wouldn't have gotten pregnant," they said. "Do that again, and the egg will do the rest."

The blood rushed to my face so quickly and pounded in my ears so hard I couldn't hear the rest of their speech. Something about using my whole body and giving Galen the ride of a lifetime.

"Just to confirm, Galen's kobold father is still alive, right? He didn't die doing ... what you're suggesting?"

"Yes, he's still alive. I can feel him." They closed their eyes and pointed to the west. "That way."

Hours after they left, I still pondered their suggestion. Galen kept their genitals concealed in their magical pouch. They'd stopped hiding their balls when we moved to the gestation cave, but I missed the sight of their giant cock and ovipositor waving in the breeze like they did when Galen went swimming or took a bath in the giant waterfall at the back of their cave.

The gestation cave also had a waterfall, but the nest walls were so high, I couldn't watch them take a bath and keep our egg warm. Our little girl would be unhappy if I left her for a glance at her naked paragon.

How would I convince Galen to allow me to see and touch them before it was time to lay their egg?

Thankfully, I didn't have to worry. Their magic dropped so low, they couldn't maintain their magical sheath any longer.

"It's almost time," they said. They lay on their side, panting, with one wing curled under them. They looked miserable.

"Let me help you."

Galen shrugged with their wing. That was enough consent for me.

I created a barrier around our egg. The kobold books said baby kobolds inside could hear us if they were awake, and I didn't want Galen to worry about the noise we were about to make.

With the last of my magical stores, I coated Galen's cock with lube, pulling the water and other elements from the surrounding cave to create it since the measly little bottle in my travel bag wasn't enough.

Galen hissed at the contact, and then moaned when I caressed their tip with both hands.

"What are you doing, little kobold?"

"I'm not that little," I reminded him. I didn't know how a kobold of old could have

wrapped their arms and legs around a dragon Galen's size.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed onto Galen's exposed inner thigh. I straddled their cock on my hands and knees. I was a fair distance off the ground, and it reminded me of the carnival rides we'd ridden at the amusement park. This was going to be the wildest ride of my life, but we'd have an egg afterward!

Galen's cock was already thickening in my grip, raising me even higher above their ovipositor, which also looked a bit thicker at the base.

"Is that our egg?" I asked, pointing.

They nodded.

"This should help."

If dragons were anything like kobold omegas, they needed sexual stimulation to deposit their eggs. I locked my ankles and wrapped my arms around their cock, using my upper body strength to pull myself back up.

A low growl rumbled through Galen's chest. They rolled onto their back, wrapping both wings around me like a cocoon. I gazed up at them. Their eyes were already half-lidded with lust from a single stroke. This was going to wear me out, but it was worth it, to put that blissed-out look on my dragon's face after they'd looked so pained. Beneath their wings, I felt safe, even when they wrapped their sharp wing claws around me and helped me move along their cock.

"It's like having hands." They laughed, and I bounced along their cock's hard ridges from the movement. Galen took charge, then, holding me in place with their wings and thrusting into the channel I'd made with my torso, arms, and legs.

"So good," Galen said. "Much better than dragon sex."

I doubted my makeshift hole was better than a real one, but I couldn't argue with the intimacy of it. Galen's cock dragged along my body, turning my entire chest into an erogenous zone. My cock was hard and leaking between us, and I enjoyed every bit of contact with Galen as we rutted against each other. Even my arms and legs buzzed from the contact, adding to my arousal.

I held their gaze as we soared. Galen's eyes glowed brighter as they neared orgasm, and my heart thumped hard against my chest. They were about to lay our dragon egg, and I was helping! I glanced down at Galen's ovipositor to find the egg making good progress. It was now midway through the canal and resembled a snake swallowing a bird egg, only in reverse.

Galen moaned and shifted to their haunches. My arms already felt like rubber, and it took everything I had to keep myself attached to their cock when they dropped their wings to the ground for stability.

I'd regained a trickle of my magic after setting the soundproof incubation spell over our egg. It was enough for me to move in time with Galen's thrusts, adding delicious friction. They came with a roar and a gout of flame aimed out the cave entrance, not at me. Their cock jerked wildly as it spurted cum, and I rode it like a rodeo bull. I'd never seen so much cum. It went everywhere, even into my eyes. Galen slumped onto their side, spent, and I landed in a puddle of it.

It was only after I caught my breath that I noticed I was suddenly dry.

"Where did it all go?"

"The egg," Galen said.

I glanced up and saw two beautiful eggs. The larger dragon egg glistened in the sunlight, as though its surface was still wet.

Even in their pain and lust-filled state, Galen had placed us in the center of the nest, depositing the larger dragon egg beside our kobold egg.

I lowered the barrier around our kobold egg. One of the pregnancy books said the eggs could talk to each other, though their register was beyond our hearing.

I rested my head on my arms and tried to catch my breath. A body draped over me, alpha kobold in size.

"That was magnificent," Galen whispered in my ear. "Thank you."

"They're beautiful." I pointed to our eggs. "So perfect." They'd already drained the remainder of my magic. I wouldn't have any reserves until they hatched and could eat on their own. I'd never been dependent on my magic, but I wondered how Galen would handle it.

"How are you in your alpha kobold form?" I asked.

"I have a tiny bit of magic in reserve, and it feels more comfortable." They turned me around and placed a gentle kiss on my lips. "Unless you'd prefer me to be a dragon."

"Do we need to keep the eggs warm?"

Galen waved a hand toward the eggs and covered them with a warming spell. "This was the only useful part of the dragon parenting book," Galen said. A line of blush spread across their snout and over their cheeks. "I think I need to re-read the part about egg laying. Either it didn't mention the sexual component, or I didn't know what it meant."

I laughed. "Was it all right?"

"Gods, yes," they pulled me to their chest in a tight hug. "I would rather be inside you as a kobold alpha, but as far as dragon sex goes, that was wonderful."

"Glad I could help." I leaned back so I could smile up at them. Their eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leading them to sit beside our eggs. We lay facing each other with our eggs between us.

"Everything is right," they whispered. "Everything."

Tears leaked from the corners of their eyes when they closed them. I didn't press for an explanation. They looked exhausted, and I remembered how bone tired I'd felt after laying our kobold egg, even though it had been more like working an extensive magic spell than having a baby.

Their breath evened out, and soon they were asleep.

Gods, I loved them, all three of them. I'd never imagined I would have a mate and a family. Now, I feared losing them. My heart ached when I remembered we still weren't free of the curse.

Even after our baby girl reached her first molt, I doubted I would ever stop worrying about the curse. She would forever be my baby.

So was our little dragon, who would outgrow me in a matter of months. Would they still love me when they could toss me around like a toy?

I wished I knew more about Galen's kobold father. Why had he left, and when? Galen

had few memories before their paragon burned the villages and left Ignitas. Was that common for dragons or was Galen's memory loss due to trauma? I had so many questions, and I didn't want to hurt them when seeking answers. Their paragon hadn't been forthcoming, either.

With the eggs still nestled in the warmth spell, I crawled to my bag to snag my tablet. After a few clicks, I sent an email to all the villages I had visited, asking if Goff lived there. I brought the tablet back to the nest to wait for their responses. It would be months before our eggs hatched, but I wanted to be ready.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Galen

I'd never experienced pain like the pressure of our dragon egg entering my ovipositor. I'd read every book they gave us about dragon eggs, but nothing said to stock up on organs, and none had mentioned sex as a method to stimulate my ovipositor so the egg would slide out.

Mac had helped me lay my egg, and he did it in such a delightful way, I'd forgotten about my pain until the end. Then, the pressure along the rim of my ovipositor had pushed me over the edge. My vision had whited out with relief and bliss, and the egg dropped out as I came. When my senses returned, we had two eggs in our nest, and Mac looked like he'd run a marathon.

The books had been clear on one point. I could conserve magic by assuming a kobold shape until the egg hatched. I loved this form almost as much as my dragon form. With it, I could hold Mac in my arms. Wings were great most of the time, but my wing claws were not as effective as hands. I wondered if I could partially shift between the two forms. It would probably look ridiculous, and the other dragons would laugh, but that had never stopped me.

When I roused myself from daydreams, I found Mac on his tablet. I'd almost left the device behind at my cave, thinking we wouldn't need it.

We didn't need it, but it was nice to have. It ate up the hours while we kept our eggs warm.

I'd expected Mac to watch his usual true crime documentaries and violent action movies, but our developing babies could hear inside their shells. He found a docuseries about Earth's animals, and we watched it together with our eggs.

"This is rather violent," I said after a lioness took down a gazelle and dragged it back to her young and the rest of their pride.

"It's no different from a dragon hunting a bovinji," he said.

I wanted to argue, but he was right. Seeing our pile of carcasses waiting to be dressed and cooked didn't give me the same gut reaction as watching the light go out of the prey's eyes.

"I'm glad I don't make eye contact with my prey," I grumbled. "I would have starved."

Mac laughed and patted my thigh. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something but shook his head. "I'm glad you're alive."

We spent that first day wrapped around our eggs, the warming spell keeping all of us toasty in a corner of our nest. I gathered the bedding around us, so we weren't lying on the cold stone, and then we settled in for the long months. While the gestation cave wasn't cold, we were getting closer to the rainy season, where the clouds would hover over the mountains for days before the sun peaked out again.

My paragon and siblings visited us when promised. They entered the depression in the rocky floor made by thousands of dragons circling around their eggs in this same nest. They rummaged around in the bedding for some cushions and pillows for makeshift seating.

They seemed to enjoy their kobold/human hybrid forms as much as I liked mine. Lux

chose a beta form instead of an alpha, and my paragon continued with a priestess form. Chance was an alpha kobold, like me. I had always felt closest to them growing up, too.

I hoped my siblings would stay, even after we hosted the dragon reunion. I wanted to relearn their personalities after such a long absence. "You will stay for the dragon reunion, won't you?"

"Wait," Mac said. "Since when are you planning a dragon reunion?"

"Since we arrived," Paragon said. "You've built such a lovely pavilion for us. Why wouldn't we want to celebrate it?"

"After your eggs hatch, of course," Lux said. "We want to throw a birthday party for them."

"And meet all the beta kobolds," Chance added. "And maybe watch them dance for us on their fields."

I had told them to stay away from the village until I could return with them. From this distance, I understood how they'd mistaken the recreation league games for dances of a sort.

"If we invited all betas, even the ones from the other villages, would they come?" I asked Mac.

"We can send the invitation and see," Mac said.

Only two other villages had supervising dragons, The Grid and The Drawbridge. Bale and Elder had been my only friends after my family left. Most of the other dragons lived far away from the kobolds now. After learning about the curse, it made sense

that the villages without dragons also had no female kobolds.

"Tell them about fated mates," I said. "It will be one big mixer."

Mac grinned at me. "That would have gotten my attention." He grabbed his tablet and started a new email to all the village elders we'd visited over the past few years.

I had a hard time believing my family, the dragons who had burned entire kobold villages to the ground, were now planning to meet with all available kobold betas on Ignitas. For a moment, dread overwhelmed me. What if they intended to gather them for slaughter? It was my worst nightmare.

My paragon focused on me with their sharp glare. "Stop thinking that, this instant."

"You can read my mind, even in these forms?"

"You will, too, with time." They patted my shoulder and scooted closer to me. "Never again will I destroy what the kobolds have created. I acted rashly, I know. I was hurt when Goff left, and I didn't understand all the changes in the village. The first time I saw a motorized vehicle here, I thought they had replaced their dire weasels and dragonets, and it was only a matter of time before they replaced us, too."

"Replaced us?"

"There were only male and female kobolds before," Chance said. "When they split to alpha and omega pairings, and beta and female pairings, what need did they have for us?"

"When they said they no longer had time to worship us, I lost it." Paragon sighed. "I thought it was the end for us. And then Goff ... left, and I burned every village between here and the Midnight Sea."

They had unshed tears in their eyes. I offered my hand, and they took it, holding it in both of theirs.

"He knew I would follow. He thought I would see the beauty in their villages, and it would stop me from destroying them." Tears left shiny streaks down their face. "I've lost him forever."

"Maybe not," Mac said. "If you truly want a kobold and dragon reunion, I'll share the information with all the villages we've visited. Maybe your mate will come."

They shook their head. "I doubt it. Not for me, anyway. He might visit our children, Chance, Lux, and Galen."

I hoped so. I wanted to meet him. I had dream-like memories of a kobold beta telling me stories and flying with me when I was younger. I needed to know if I'd made up an imaginary friend, or if I remembered my father.

After my family left for their own cave, Mac burrowed into his tablet, shoulders hunched and fingers pecking at the virtual keyboard. I left him to it. I released the spell I'd used to clothe myself and snuggled down with our eggs. This was different from the hours I'd spent moping before. Now, I felt only excitement for their arrival.

* * *

Every time I woke from a nap, I found Mac typing away on his tablet.

"Are you writing a book?" I asked after a full month of watching him work while I cradled our eggs close and fed the warming spell.

"I'm looking for your father," he said. He glanced up at me and his cheeks darkened with embarrassment. "That was supposed to be a secret."

I grinned. "I love secrets! Who shall we keep it from? My family?"

He turned a deeper shade of red. "I was keeping it from you, silly."

Oh. I didn't like the sound of that. "Why?"

"So you wouldn't be disappointed if I couldn't find him."

"I will never be disappointed in you," I promised. "Once we can travel again, I intend to find him myself."

While traveling with Rapture, I'd picked up on his method of interplanar travel. I needed more magic to practice, but I would start with a trip to the village farthest from The Spike and hone my trajectory until I could hop to places as close as The Grid with a single thought. I could also turn myself into a bus or airplane to carry my family on my back for vacations to Earth.

The thought of Earth vacations made me yearn. "Let's watch National Lampoon's Vacation again."

We snuggled down in the blankets, each curled around an egg. Mac propped his tablet against the stone wall at the edge of our nest, and we propped ourselves up on pillows until we wouldn't strain our necks. I fell asleep halfway through the movie, but I woke up when it stopped.

"Good night," Mac whispered as he kissed my forehead.

We had been sleeping in this same position, each wrapped around our eggs, but tonight, it didn't seem close enough.

"Cuddle?" I asked.

Mac slipped between me and our dragon egg and pulled our kobold egg to his chest. I helped him pile blankets and pillows around us to aid our warmth spell overnight.

Then, I snuggled up to my mate. I dropped the clothing spell to remove my shorts and leave me blessedly naked against Mac.

His soft pajama shorts were not a spell. They kept my thoughts from straying too far toward kissing every inch of Mac and making him beg me to fuck him.

We didn't have enough collective magic to raise a sound barrier spell over the eggs, and neither of us had enough energy to make love. That didn't stop me from shoving my cock between Mac's legs and pulling down the back of his shorts with my ovipositor.

Mac closed his thighs around my cock and moaned. "Behave, Galen."

"I want you," I whined. "Do you think my siblings will make good babysitters?"

"I hope so." Mac's movements rubbed just right against both my cock and the tip of my ovipositor. "I already want another vacation alone with you. One where we never leave the hotel room, and we don't know anyone around us for miles."

I wanted that, too. I drifted into a dream of a fantasy world, neither Ignitas nor Earth, but maybe the water plane where we'd vacationed in our youth. Water everywhere, white sandy beaches, and shade trees lining the beach as far as the eye could see. The best part, Mac and I were alone on that beach, with the sun as our only witness.

The longer we were on the beach with no distractions, the more I felt I was missing something, or someone. Definitely someone. I tried to focus on Mac, but the feeling grew steadily worse.

In the dream, Clementine came to my rescue. She ran down the beach, grabbed us both by the hand, and pulled us back to Ignitas.

"Wake up!"

In the dream, Clementine yelled it, but as I opened bleary eyes and pulled Mac closer to me, I swore I heard the simultaneously young and old voice of our little girl calling from her egg.

I nudged Mac awake. "The warming spell."

"It's out?" He sighed. "You haven't had enough bovinji meat."

I felt bad asking for meals Mac couldn't eat, but it was worse when he scolded me for not telling him how low my magic stores had become.

"I always feel weak," I said. "It's hard to tell when I'm weaker than usual."

"No excuse." Mac tapped on his tablet again, sending a request for Rapture to visit in the morning.

In the meantime, he and I huddled together, the eggs pressed between our chests. We covered ourselves with as many blankets as we could stand.

It wasn't a spell, but the blankets and the stone held our body heat. After a few minutes, our little tent became uncomfortably warm, even for me.

Mac's forehead beaded with sweat, and his heated gaze made the temperature rise a few more degrees.

"What?" I asked.

"Thank you for waking me up," he said. "You're doing all this on your own right now with your warmth spell and your body heat."

"There is no spell," I said. "I don't have any magic left."

"We have magic," Mac reminded me. "Together."

The warmth spell around the eggs flared to life again, but I didn't move, and neither did Mac. We stayed in the tight space of our blanket fort until morning.

Rapture arrived with a young bovinji in his claws shortly after sunrise. Once I had eaten, I returned to the blanket fort with Mac and the babies.

I couldn't explain it, but somehow, I knew using both our body heat and the warming spell would help the babies hatch faster. I didn't want to rush them, but I wanted to meet them so badly.

We still had months to go, but if we took even one day off their hatching time, it was worth it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mac

A few days later, Galen's paragon and siblings brought giant cuts of raw bovinji. As loath as I was to leave our blanket fort, they asked me to cook them over my camp stove while they chatted. I couldn't refuse.

Galen tucked the blankets around themselves and the babies so all their family could see was their snout and eyes. They looked like a fluffy worm, and the blankets were their chrysalis.

I flipped the meat twice, leaving it a touch red in the middle, just the way Galen liked it. I seasoned it the way I always did for special occasions, forgetting I was cooking for Galen's family for the first time.

Galen barely moved to eat, and no one complained when they ate off their plate like a dog and chewed on the bones while we sat and ate with our fingers like civilized folk.

"What are these flecks of green on top of my food?" Chance asked after taking their first bite.

"Tastes delicious," Lux said, jabbing an elbow into Chance's alpha kobold chest.

"Mac always uses seasoning for me," Galen said. "These are my favorites, so far. He said there are many more varieties to try on Earth."

For a moment, I thought Galen's paragon would spit their food out on their plate. They swallowed hard and glared at me. "You are feeding us human spices?" Their tone implied I had given them illicit drugs.

"Basil, thyme, and rosemary," I said. "They didn't come from Earth. We grow them in our herb garden here at the fortress."

Their paragon relaxed at that, though they squinted at the hamburger I'd cooked for myself. "Where are your spices?"

I didn't usually put spices on hamburger, choosing instead to slather it with ketchup, yellow mustard, and a layer of pickles, but I made a show of dousing it with black pepper and a dash of the other spices I named for them before I covered it with my usual condiments.

Despite their concerns, the dragons ate their spiced meat and even licked their plates clean. After dinner, when I picked up the dishes, Galen's paragon leaned toward them.

"I'm surprised you can eat spiced meat, after what happened."

Galen tensed, and we both knew what the older dragon meant. Galen had told me the story many times, how the kobold priestess had brought them a bovinji roast covered in spices and sleeping herbs.

"Sorry for scrying," Lux whispered. "I had to know how you were doing. You were so small, and you looked so lost when we left."

Galen frowned at their paragon. "You knew when they raised the changeling circle?"

Their paragon reached to pat Galen's cheek, but they pulled their head inside the

blanket like a turtle.

"We were too far away to do anything about it," their paragon said. "I knew from the ingredients, they hadn't tried to kill you."

"That doesn't make your story any better," Galen said.

I hurried to the sink with the dishes, not wanting to be in the middle of a dragon fight, if it came to that.

"Thank you for the lovely dinner, Mac!" Lux shouted a few moments later.

"We will be back in a week," I heard one of the others say to Galen over the rush of water in the sink.

They were gone when I returned to the nest. "Are you all right?" I asked as I peeled back the covers and took my place on the opposite side of our eggs.

"They knew, and they didn't care." Galen sighed. "I spent so much of my life worried they would see what the priestess had done and kill me for failing them, but they knew this whole time."

I shifted Galen's hand from sitting atop the dragon egg to pressed against my chest. I felt my heartbeat beneath their palm. I only hoped they could feel it, too.

"I'm sorry they left you behind. I know that made you feel a lot of unnecessary anxiety."

"So much." They sniffled. "I worried about everything, thinking I wasn't living up to their expectations."

"You didn't let that worry cripple you," I said.

"I did, until I met you." They coughed. "Well, when I smelled you on Punky and Lark, anyway."

"You're being too hard on yourself. You lived without them for a century. Those dragon books said our baby dragon won't be considered an adult until their final molt."

"I had my final molt less than a year ago." Galen nodded. "That doesn't make me feel better. What was so wrong with me that they couldn't take me with them?"

"Nothing was wrong with you," I said. "There were too few dragons."

Galen snorted a puff of smoke but stayed silent.

"They worried there would be even fewer dragons if they didn't go searching for kobold betas to mate," I continued. "You weren't old enough to mate, and someone needed to stay at the fortress, The Spike," I amended, using their word for my home, "to keep the kobolds in line. You did more than that. You befriended Punky and Lark, and Coz and Grindl. You gave Axel the idea for the dragon pavilion and gave us back the sunlight. For centuries, kobold children will learn about Galen the Great in school."

"I thought it was Galen the Grumpy," they chided.

"Galen the Great and Grumpy," I compromised with a grin. Galen had been so serious about their obligations to all dragons and to their family, but they'd done so much more by being themselves.

"I am so proud of you," I said. "No one else can take credit for how well dragons and

kobolds get along all over Ignitas, now that we've traveled to the other villages and made amends. That's all you." If any of Galen's family tried to take ownership of their accomplishments, I would learn to breathe fire at them myself.

Galen caressed my cheek and then laced our fingers together atop our kobold egg. My arm fell asleep before I did, but I didn't care. I would do anything for them.

* * *

Emails from kobold villages all over Ignitas rolled into my inbox. The villages with dragons were the first to respond. Of course they would come to the first dragon reunion in almost two centuries. The villages with priestesses were almost as fast, though they gave us more information, like the number of betas who would attend to see if they could find their fated mates.

I wondered why they were so quick to hook up with a dragon, but then I reread the email I'd written in haste after Galen's paragon first mentioned the reunion. When describing the betas' fated mates, I'd somehow inconveniently left "dragon" out.

I responded to those emails with a correction. I couldn't in good conscience let them think they were going to the usual alpha/omega meet-ups, only to find themselves in an audience with all the unmatched dragons on Ignitas.

I almost dropped my tablet on the floor when the priestess responded saying even more betas wanted to take part, if they could be mated to a dragon. Apparently, I wasn't the only beta kobold with a death wish.

While half my friends at the fortress still thought that about me, I knew better. Galen would never hurt me. When we flew, they locked me in place with a spell tighter than a seatbelt. In all the time I'd known Galen, they'd never hurt me on purpose.

They'd spent so long alone, I often felt like their teacher and mentor, though they were far older than me. Galen listened to me and made an effort to change, which was a pleasant surprise. I'd expected them to ignore me, or have a "might is right" attitude, but they were intelligent and considerate, two things I'd been taught dragons were not.

I wanted to repay their kindness with a surprise of my own. I had gotten a few responses about Goff's whereabouts in my search, but no one had an email address for him. "He's older than email," a beta from The Meadows said. "The only way to get ahold of him is to knock on his door."

"Do you have anyone willing to do that for me?" I asked.

The response made me laugh. "You got any extra dragonets flying around? I might find it in my heart to check on him, if you do."

I sent a quick message to Han and Sunny. The young beta agreed to let his babies go if it meant a chance to reunite Galen with their father. I was so proud of him. He was already well on his way to becoming a dragonet trainer.

I emailed my contact out west to offer the final bargain. "If you can convince Goff to come to The Spike for a dragon reunion, you'll have two dragonets."

I only hoped it worked.

* * *

Galen's nesting instincts hit hard in the final month. They started rattling off items we would need to keep the babies safe, warm, and fed. I emailed a new list to the fortress every day, asking them to store the items for us in one of the dry caverns in the grotto until we could retrieve them after our eggs hatched.

I almost thought I was immune to nesting, and then the urge gripped me. I wanted to return to our cave and make it safer for hatchlings. I needed to put a lock on our meat cooler, sweep the entrance so there weren't any leftover bone shards from the last pile Galen pushed off the mountain, and ...

"When do baby dragons start flying?" I asked Galen.

"After their first molt."

I only had a few months to move the bone pile further away, or we would have a dragon baby foraging for rotten meat.

"Rotten meat is good for babies," Galen said, answering my thought. Their ability grew stronger by the day. I should have been used to it by now, but it still freaked me out. "They will have an iron stomach by their second molt."

"If they survive," I muttered.

"Stop worrying," Galen said. "Look how beautiful our eggs are, huddled together."

The dragon egg was roughly twice the size of our kobold egg, which was larger than any I'd seen before. I'd heard Punky's and Tuft's eggs had been huge from the sunlight, but we'd tucked ours inside the blanket fort most of the time to keep them warm.

"The shells are glowing," I noticed.

"We're getting close," Galen assured me. "Less than a week now."

I placed a hand on each egg and whispered, "I can't wait to meet them."

"Neither can I." Galen's voice rumbled in their chest, and the dragon egg gave a little shake.

"Did you see that?"

We both watched intently for several minutes, but nothing happened. After a quarter-hour, Galen frowned at the dragon egg and said sternly, "They wanted to play with us, but they wore themselves out."

They snorted a laugh at our dragon child's expense, and smoke filled our little enclosure, making me cough. Once we aired out the blanket fort, even the glow from the eggs seemed less intense. They were sleeping once more.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Galen

I must have scared our eggs with the burst of smoke. Just when I thought they were about to hatch, they went back to sleep inside their shells to wait for another day.

They were getting so big, it was hard to reach Mac on his side of our blanket fort. The weather on Ignitas never strayed far from comfortable, but the heat inside our little egg incubator was getting to me. Both Mac and I had been drinking more water than usual, but that only meant we had to pee more. Every time I got up, I worried I would miss the first tremor of a crack.

Still, nature called. I hurried from the nest. I was still washing my hands in the stream when Mac called to me.

"Galen! Hurry!"

That could only mean one thing! On the way back, I tripped over a rock and stubbed my toe. It burned, but I kept running until I was at the lip of the bowl.

I skidded to a stop and surveyed the beautiful image before me. Mac had stripped the blankets away, and our beautiful eggs shone in the sunlight. They were almost transparent, which was more apparent in the sunlight than it had been under the blankets.

I also had a surplus of magic compared to the last few days. That should have been

my first clue we were about to have hatchlings, but I was lucky I could remember my name with as much sleep as I'd gotten the last few days. Every time I started to drift off, a new worry popped into my head. What if we weren't good parents? What if Olaf was wrong about the way to break the curse?

At the first tremor, I slid down the embankment. "This won't do." I looked down at my kobold alpha form.

Mac wordlessly tugged both eggs closer to his pretzeled legs and grinned. "You won't need to conserve your magic anymore." He pointed to the large crack down the side of the dragon egg, and the tiny puncture at the top of the kobold egg.

I couldn't let my babies greet me like this. I shifted, wings first, raising myself above the nest and gently landing along the far edge. In my dragon form, the bowl was almost too small for the four of us. I rested my tail on the ledge behind Mac, so I didn't crush him.

"Hello babies." I cooed at them, nudging the shells with my snout.

I didn't hear any response, but that wasn't unusual. Our little ones wouldn't vocalize until their first molts. For our kobold, that would be in a week. For our dragon, it would be a few months.

Not for the first time, I worried I would be an impatient parent. Mac sometimes said I overreacted to minor changes, and this was a major one. We were about to have two additions to our family who relied on us for everything.

The dragon egg shook, and my fear succumbed to the awe of watching yet another deep crack mar the shell from top to bottom. The egg trembled and a huge chunk of shell fell to the nest, exposing our baby's left side. They were all-black like me, but their wings and claws were gray, with a sheen of opalescence.

They stood on their back legs, and the top of the shell stuck to their head, still covering their eyes.

"Let us see you, little one," Mac said, his voice soft so he wouldn't startle them.

We both knew better than to help the baby from the egg, though it took every ounce of my willpower.

They shook their head, and the eggshell slipped to one side, finally sliding down their wing and falling to the floor. They had the sweetest little dragon face, and their eyes were brown, like Mac's. They would remain that color until they could breathe fire after their third molt.

Mac spread his arms wide, and the little dragon scampered onto his lap. With wide eyes, Mac slid beneath my wing, cradling the beagle-sized baby close to his chest. "They have all their wing claws and toes!" He looked up at me and grinned. "There's your paragon, baby. Want to say hi?"

Though they couldn't vocalize, they made a high purring sound in their chest. They snaked their neck around Mac's, and then they dropped awkwardly to their wing claws and feet. This time, the sound in their chest was more of a grunt. They clambered awkwardly on their claws for a few steps, becoming more and more steady as they went.

I lowered my head to their level and covered them in a welcoming burst of smoke. "Hello, little one."

They closed their eyes and my smoke rolled over them, coating them in my scent. "Welcome, little dragon. I'm so glad you're here."

My neck was far too big for them to wrap around, but they rubbed their snout along

my wing. I did my best to pet them with a wing claw, but this form would never do. I was too jealous of Mac's ability to hold our baby in his arms, and to pat our little kobold egg, which had rocked on its base once and stilled.

I shrank back to my kobold alpha form. The spell to put on pants, which had been difficult even two hours ago, took much less time and effort.

"We have to name them," Mac said.

"Slate." I picked them up so there was no confusion. "You are as sleek and strong as the stone in the quarry."

Mac patted their head and slid an arm over my shoulder, turning me back to the egg still in our nest. "Slate," he whispered. "I like it."

"You get to name her," I said.

He sputtered. "What? We didn't agree to that! We have names picked out!"

"Yes. I picked Slate, so it's your turn to choose for our little girl."

"I'm not even good at naming dragonets," Mac whispered.

"You'll know the right name for her, the same way I knew Slate's." The little dragon clawed their way onto my shoulders and then snaked their neck out to rest their head on Mac's shoulder. Together, we sank down and leaned forward to watch the kobold egg's progress.

As though she knew she had our full and undivided attention, the egg shook. Then, the top exploded upward and fell inside-up in the nest. A little snout poked into the opening, and the egg shook again as she tried to worm her way out.

Finally, she gave up and smacked the side of the egg with her snout. A large portion of the side fell open, and she flopped out onto her back. Her white scales stood out against her brown skin. Her tail whipped, throwing the remains of the shell against the collapsed walls of the blanket fort.

"She's beautiful," I whispered. I reached out a hand, and she scampered to me, already sure on her feet. She quickly climbed as far as she could on my arm, and she nosed her brother in the flank.

"We should let them get to know each other," Mac whispered.

I nodded. I didn't want to say what we both thought out loud. I was ready to create a harness to tie them together if it meant our kobold daughter would survive her first molt. I pried Slate from my shoulders while Mac removed the dirty blanket, exposing a clean one underneath. Then, I set the two little ones in the middle.

"Opal." Mac squatted beside her to pat the top of her head. She wasn't about to let him go that easy. She followed his reach and almost knocked him onto his back. "If you're going to name our little dragon after stone, our little girl is a gem," he said once he finally stopped laughing.

"That she is." I helped Mac back to his feet, and we watched as Slate and Opal turned toward each other, sniffing. Instead of circling each other, they awkwardly scampered across the rough terrain of the blanket. Slate's claws got tangled in it. Opal tackled them onto their back, knocking their claws free.

For a terrifying heartbeat, I worried I would need to pull them apart, but then I heard Slate's strange purring sound, and Opal curled up on their chest.

"No suffocating, now." Mac shifted them to their sides, and Opal curled up beside them, still draping her tail over their neck.

Mac tugged at her tail, and it unwrapped.

"They're not trying to kill each other yet, at least," I said.

Mac laughed nervously. "You don't think?—"

"No. She loves them. Look." They were already fast asleep.

I embraced Mac, and the corners of my eyes stung at the glorious sight before us. Mac turned in my arms. I placed a gentle kiss on his nape, and we watched the rise and fall of their chests.

I had already forgotten my first duty as a parent. "I need to go hunting."

"No, you don't," Mac said. "You're not leaving her until her first molt."

"How will they eat?" Our baby dragon's first meal would be a fresh bovinji, or I was already a bad parent.

Mac laughed. "Rapture's bringing us supplies, and your paragon is already hunting for us."

I blinked. "You told them? When?"

"I sent some messages after the dragon egg cracked."

I dropped to the floor and pulled him into my lap, content to watch our children sleep.

"Gods, this is magnificent," I said. "We did this."

"We did." I couldn't see Mac's face, but his voice was thick with tears. "We have two

perfect little babies. I'd do anything to keep them safe and happy."

"I love you, Mac." The words rolled off my tongue without a care. I could read his mind, after all. I knew he loved me, too. We hadn't said it yet, too overwhelmed with the worries of becoming new parents. That hadn't gone away, certainly, but looking at our sleeping dragon and the adorable little kobold girl curled up beside them, I felt brave.

Mac turned in my lap, straddling my hips. His kiss said he loved me back, and more, so when he said it out loud, it was almost anticlimactic.

"I love you, too, my great grumpy dragon."

"I'm not grumpy," I argued. This is the happiest day of my life!"

"You sound grumpy to me." My paragon breezed through the doorway. They'd taken the form of a dragonet, with Rapture following closely behind them. Rapture landed beside them in the bowl.

They shifted into their kobold priestess form and swatted his snout when he leaned forward to sniff the babies.

"Wait your turn! These are my grandchildren!"

I stopped short of growling at them. The babies were already awake, blinking their eyes at each other before turning as one to study their grand paragon.

"Oh, look at you. You are the perfect pair. And your grand paragon brought snacks!"

They pulled a satchel from under their arm. "Your sweet kobold baby can't digest this, but I believe your dragonet has something for her."

Mac unpacked the supplies from Rapture's packs. There were soft plush toys for both babies and a salad container with a note on top.

"Clementine's favorites," Mac said. "Lark says she helped him pack."

My eyes stung as unexpected tears welled up. I missed our friends. I couldn't wait to be home, where the children would continue their class visits to see us, and we would make trips to the village for supplies. For now, we relied on these sweet gestures.

Mac tried to get Rapture to return to the dragonet barn, but he refused. He hunkered down near the doorway, wrapped in his wings, and stared at us as though daring us to make him leave.

"That's normal," Paragon said. "They were our pets before the kobolds put them to work." They glared at Mac. "He has already bonded with your little girl, which means the curse is well and truly broken."

Mac frowned. "How does that prove anything?"

"Dragonets only bond with powerful life forces from such an early age." Paragon paused. "Do my little grandchildren have names?" They held the bovinji organs just out of reach over our little dragon's head.

"Our dragon is Slate."

"That's a strong name. Slate," they said. "Remember who gives you treats." They shook the container, and the smell of fresh organs was strong in the air. "Can you follow me? We don't want to dirty your nest."

Slate followed my paragon off the blankets. They still had difficulty with their claws sticking in the fabric, but their eagerness to taste the goodies in Paragon's hands drew

them forward. Soon, they reached the stone floor, another learning curve, but much faster this time since their claws didn't get stuck in the stone.

"Here you go, my dear." They placed the bowl of organs on the stone floor, and Slate knocked it over in their haste. They slurped it off the floor, blood and all, much like I had done with my share of bovinji organs before I'd laid their egg. That had been ages ago.

Mac tried to feed Opal her bowl of salad, but she scampered after Slate, showing no interest in the food. She plastered herself against Slate's flank and watched with interest as they ate.

"I forgot," Mac said. "They should stay together."

Paragon nodded. "Yes. They will always be close, but the first week is critical."

Mac moved the salad bowl within her reach by Slate's side. She glanced at Slate, as though testing whether they would steal it from her. When they showed no interest, she dipped her snout in the bowl and began to eat.

Paragon reached down and patted her head. "What's her name?"

"Opal," I shared.

"It's beautiful. She's beautiful." They played with the white tuft of hair at the top of her head while she ate. "I'm certain she will break the curse."

"We're staying here until she molts," I said. "There's less trouble to get into here."

"We kept you here until your first molt," Paragon shared. "You were such a curious baby. The drop-off scared you enough to keep you in the cave, at least."

I'd continued to live in our family home after they left. The gradual slope, large landing at the cave entrance, and steep chute to the bone pile were unmatched by any other caves in the area. I would probably need to fish Slate out of the bone pile a time or two before their first molt, but they would learn.

The babies finished eating. Instead of returning to the nest, they curled up on the stone, Slate on their side and Opal curled around their head.

"They'll get cold." Mac picked Opal up, and I grabbed Slate under their wings and lugged them back to the nest. They returned to the same positions, and we covered them with the blankets to keep them warm, leaving a large vent above both their heads so they could breathe.

"Your siblings will be angry if I stay too long," Paragon said. "They wanted to come, but we'll wait a day before we overwhelm you."

"Thank you." At the cave entrance, we both returned to our dragon forms and twisted our necks together in a farewell hug. "Thank you for staying." My whisper echoed on the mountaintop.

"This is still my home, little Galen."

I snorted at "little." I was larger than they.

"I will help your siblings find their mates," Paragon said, "and then I will pick one of the ancestor caves as my own. I wish your father was here to see it. He always liked the one that looks like a dragon. I told him I hated it, but the priestesses have kept it clean over the years. Now that you've disbanded them, I can pick up where they left off."

"Are you mad about the priestesses, and the temple?" I asked.

They shook their head. "No. Dragons don't need to be worshiped. We also don't need to worry about how quickly these new kobolds reproduce. Several dragon planes have no kobolds. It will take millennia to repopulate them all."

I had more questions about the other planes, but I didn't want to stay too long away from our babies. "We'll talk more tomorrow," I said. "Tell Chance and Lux I can't wait to see them."

Paragon rubbed their snout against mine, the same way they'd done when I was little. "I will. Take care of those babies for me!" I closed my eyes against the downforce from their wings, and then I shrank back into my kobold alpha form. I patted the little dragonet still huddled resolutely by the door and returned to our nest.

Our little ones were still wrapped around each other on their sides. Mac stood over them with his tablet, snapping picture after picture.

Once he sent them to all our friends, we lay on either side of the little nest, facing each other above the blankets. Our babies were more compact now than they had been in their eggs.

I reached across the expanse and caressed Mac's cheek before resting my hand on his shoulder. We fell asleep like that, curled around our babies in our love nest.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mac

With both a kobold and a dragon baby, I'd worried Galen would give more time and attention to Slate and leave me to worry about Opal. The opposite happened, instead. Galen spent so much time with our little girl, I worried she wasn't getting enough time with Slate. The curious little dragon followed me everywhere, which made it easy to include them in bath time, meal prep, and even taking out the garbage. They stopped short of following the bovinji and beef bones over the steep ledge into the refuse pile.

I'd noticed a wild dragonet flying around our trash and wondered if she was the one responsible for Sunny's hatchlings. I hadn't seen them in months. I had a feeling they weren't little anymore.

Dragonets left our larger kobold children alone, but I didn't know what she would do with our babies. I made it my mission to catch her so I wouldn't have to find out.

I had help. Rapture followed us each time we left the cave. If Slate strayed too far, he herded them closer to me with wings spread and long neck guiding them.

The fresh bones were too tasty for the wild dragonet to resist. She swooped in after I threw a handful into the pile, picking them out one by one.

This was my chance. I still had a few bones in the lined grocery bag slung over my shoulder. I gathered Slate from where they and Rapture had been playing and took

them back inside.

"I'm going to catch her and take her to the barn," I told Galen on my way back out. "I'll let Han and Sunny know Rapture is staying with us, too."

Galen shook their head. "I don't like you leaving, but it will be easier to catch her now." The ancestral birthing cave sat atop a ridge of mountains. The bone pit was a narrow dip between three peaks. I assumed that was the main reason the cave was left for temporary use instead of a permanent residence. The times between uses allowed for most of the bones to decay, but daily use would pile up quickly.

The small area worked to my advantage. I removed Rapture's harness and tucked it in my hand in a way that would be easy to slip it over the wild dragonet's head. Rapture and I flew to an adjoining peak, and I tossed the remaining bones into the pit.

She was too hungry to care there was another dragonet nearby. She lunged for the bones, and we swooped from the peak.

As much as I wanted to think I hopped from Rapture's back and landed gracefully on the wild dragonet, it probably looked more like falling to the untrained eye. It felt like falling, too, with how hard my tailbone hit her spine. She roared and spit fire into the bone pile, but Rapture had already wheeled away, headed back to protect our little home away from home if I failed to capture and tame her.

Glory. I would name her Glory.

She was still hungry. I eased into our bond by offering her a snack back at the paddock, and then, all the food she could eat for a few days until she returned to her full adult weight.

Our bond snapped into place at the promise of food. The temporary bond between us

would be easy to pass to anyone willing to give her a treat.

Through our bond, I showed her where I wanted to go, to the dragonet barn. She already knew of it, which reinforced my guess that she was the mother of Sunny's hatchlings. She probably followed them at a distance, too afraid to attack the little kobold child with her baby dragonets in his pockets.

I felt a stab of anxiety for my own babies. I wouldn't want anyone to come along and take them from their nest, either. I passed my empathy along to her and reassured her she would see them again. If there had been any fight left in her before our brief discussion, it disappeared at the mention of her little ones.

When we landed, I gave her a jerky snack. When she followed me to the closed barn door, I gave her another. Han answered my knock, surprised to see me. "What are you doing here? Your little girl hasn't molted yet!"

"I couldn't resist the chance to bring another dragonet home to roost. This is Glory."

Han knew the drill with dragonets. He had a pocketful of snacks ready and handed her yet another one for being such a patient girl while Sunny pushed the door open for us.

"This is their mom!" Sunny recognized her right away. "Here! We'll take them out to the paddock so they can be reacquainted."

"Not so fast," I said. "She's starving. She'll need to eat a few meals before we take her back out. She can meet them in the pen inside."

Sunny nodded. "She likes food bribes. Got it." He led her off to the pen and then brought Copper and Nickel, the two hatchlings, out from theirs.

"How do you plan to get back?" Han asked me.

"I was hoping you'd lend me another dragonet. Rapture's enamored with our daughter and won't leave the cave."

"Rapture's sister is still here." Vice had bitten me a few times, hence the name, but she was a decent enough mount now that she was two years old. I handed her a few pieces of dog food and a hunk of jerky, and she seemed eager to come out of her pen to fly with me.

* * *

I could feel Galen's excitement through our bond while I flew back to the cave. It wasn't strong enough for me to hear their thoughts the way they could hear mine, but they were vibrating with joy. Despite my relief that our wild dragonet had been caught and tamed so she wouldn't die of starvation or become dragon food, Galen wouldn't be nearly this happy about my success.

When I landed at the cave and sent Vice on her way, Rapture did not greet us at the landing. I entered the cave and found him far from his usual place. He, Galen, and Slate were all huddled over baby Opal.

Our kobold daughter had shed scales all over the stone floor. The pile of blankets that had once formed our nest now lay in a heap along the edge of the bowl to give her room. She slithered and wriggled across the floor on her back, discarding old scales and skin and bringing a bright new set to the surface.

I joined them, completing the circle around her.

"Ahp!" She wriggled closer to me, and the last bit of stubborn scale attached to her tail came free, leaving her all shiny and new after her first molt. She climbed up my

legs until I could catch her under the arms and hoist her to my shoulder. Another molt, and I'd have to leave her on the floor and take her hand, but for now, she was still my shoulder-riding little buddy.

"She calls me Para, but it mostly sounds like Pa," Galen said fondly. "And Rapture's name has been shortened to 'Rap.'"

"Ahp!" She repeated for me.

"Opal," I said, turning to give her a peck on the cheek. "I'm proud of you, little one. We can go home now."

While Galen and I still had a long way to go to restore our magic, Rapture had no problem taking us back to our cave with all our belongings in his interdimensional space. Galen held Slate, and I held Opal for the short flight.

The cave was cold and damp at the entryway, but Galen lit a fire while I gave the blankets a quick wash and returned them to their original place in Galen's bed.

"This won't do at all," I mumbled. We had no privacy in our cave. The bed was near the pool we used for water and bathing, but it was only a few paces from the kitchen.

"This is the fun part," Galen said. "Now you get to tell me where you want the bedrooms and playroom."

"What about the bowl you made for your bed?" I asked, pointing to the giant dip in the floor.

Galen held out their hands and raised them. As they did, the floor raised with them until the blankets I'd just washed were now in a neatly folded pile in the middle of a flat stone floor.

"I worried our cave wouldn't be big enough for two babies." Galen gestured at the space larger than the fortress's gym with a vaulted ceiling high enough for Galen to stand on their hind legs and still not touch the peak. This was important to them, so I tried not to laugh.

"I've learned how to make the interdimensional spaces Rapture uses," they continued. "We can section off an area for the kids to play, and our bedrooms can be larger on the inside than they appear on the outside."

Opal was already asleep in my arms after the flight. Slate had crawled onto Galen's shoulders and nestled around their neck, but our dragon baby's eyes were closed. We needed to get them to bed.

"Let's make a makeshift nest here," I said. "While they sleep, we can plan."

We got the babies situated in a much smaller temporary version of our prior nest when we heard scrabbling at the doorway and an excited chirp from Rapture.

"Hello! I heard from a little dragonet wrangler you were home!" I recognized Coz's voice. We'd had many conversations before he'd felt comfortable letting Sunny train with me at the barn.

"Are you dressed?" Tuft's high, clear voice echoed in the cave, now that Galen had shoved all our furniture into an interdimensional space.

I ran to the doorway and greeted my friends with hugs. Coz had brought Sunny with him, and the little beta was petting Rapture's nose and telling him what a good dragonet he was for guarding the entrance. Punky walked around, examining the walls, while Lark hastily tucked something back into an interdimensional space of his own.

"We thought you'd had time to plan a nursery, with all these requests," Tuft said. He was decked out in a rainbow tie and suspenders over his vibrant yellow shirt to match his stripes. Even his belt buckle had a rainbow on it.

"They weren't home," Axel reminded him. "And they warded the entrance so no well-meaning friends could stop by and build nice things for them while they were off having babies."

"So we improvised!" Tuft tugged on the air between them, pulling into view a beautiful ironwood dresser with delicate carvings etched into the wood. "Where do you want this?"

"Give us a moment to decide where to put the bedrooms," I said. "Better yet, come help us decide."

"Not touching that," Punky said. "I'm the worst at interior design."

"Aww, look at him," Grindl pointed to Tuft, who vibrated with excitement. "He was made for this, Mac. You've created a monster."

I laughed and extended my elbow to Tuft. "Come with me."

Galen had a much better idea of what they wanted than I did. Axel was more carpenter than stone mason, but he had a good eye for architecture.

While Galen and Axel discussed the new rooms, I worried Tuft would launch into redecorating the rest of our space. I was pleasantly surprised when he dragged me to our makeshift nest instead.

"Look at how adorable they are!" Tuft whispered. "Do they always sleep like that?"

Opal was draped over the top of Slate's head again, clutching their horns with her claws.

"So far, yes."

"Clementine wanted to come with us," Punky said, joining us around the nest. "We ran out of room, even after we stuffed our individual spaces full."

"You are welcome to bring all your children," Galen said while they and Axel measured a few doorways against the rock wall.

"Soon," Punky promised.

Once Axel had the doorways drawn against the outer wall, Galen and I worked together to create the rooms. Each room was like an interdimensional space, but open to the cave so it filled with air. Then, Galen tied off the magic so it would hold until we needed to expand the space, which we most certainly would as Slate continued to grow.

Opal's room was in the middle, sandwiched between two dragons. Axel also included a doorway between her room and Slate's so they could play together, but in their own rooms.

I walked Punky, Lark, and Tuft through my wish lists, sharing what I'd ordered for each room. We had another pile of toys and games left over for the playroom, so Axel, Galen, and I discussed where to put it.

We used a ton of magic to shuffle the kitchen from the back of the cave to the side along the entrance, which would make food prep and cleanup much easier when Galen hunted. This left plenty of space to turn half of our former bedroom into the play area and the other half into an entertainment room, complete with a television.

"You mean we could have been watching movies on a big screen this whole time?" Galen whined.

"I told you about TVs," I said. "They're glorious."

"You made it sound like they did less than your tablet without emphasizing they are bigger!"

Punky backed away slowly as smoke started rolling from Galen's nostrils. "Well, now you have a television."

"Your bedroom is still bare," Tuft said from the doorway.

"We can handle it from here," Galen said.

I fully expected them to chase our friends out of our enclosure, but they invited everyone to sit and show them how to work the television. The kids had awakened from their naps, so we moved the makeshift nest in front of the television. Sunny sat with the babies on the floor while the adults filled the giant sectional couch to watch a half-hour of Sesame Street .

Growing up on Ignitas, I'd been denied the wholesome education offered by the cute and cuddly monsters. I wouldn't let my kids miss out.

"This is such a cute show," Galen said when the episode ended. "If I'd known humans had something like this, I wouldn't have needed a trip to Earth to evaluate them."

"The show's existence doesn't mean all humans are good," Punky reminded them. "But yes, it was one of the best things about growing up on Earth."

I'd picked up on some familiar names in the episode. "Are your kids named after the

show?" I asked. Ernie and Grover each had a skit, but no Clementine or Robin.

"They are." Lark had his arm draped over Punky's shoulders along the back of the couch while we watched, but now he gave him a light squeeze. "That was all Punky's idea. I was clueless about names."

I'd felt the same way, even when Galen asked me to name Opal. While I was still thinking about baby names, Coz and Grindl reminded us they needed to get home.

Coz pointed to Sunny, who was asleep with his hands wrapped around Rapture's neck. "Our boys are getting ready to molt again," he said. "They've been tired and cranky."

"Ours, too," Punky said. "I was hoping we could stay longer, so Mint and Juniper know what they're getting into." Mint, a newly adult alpha, and Juniper, an omega my age, had recently discovered their mate bond.

Tuft laughed. "We babysat for you, and it didn't discourage us."

"That's why we teamed up," Coz said. "They're watching the other nine kids at Punky and Lark's."

"We'll be lucky to have a house left," Lark said. My alpha best friend pulled me into a rough hug full of back thumping and congratulations.

"We'd love to watch your little ones sometime, to give you a night off," he whispered in my ear. "On one condition. Can Slate breathe fire yet?"

"Third molt," Galen answered. "Their eyes change at the second, but their little furnaces aren't big enough to do more than smoke."

Lark nodded. "Cool. How does two weeks from now sound?"

"Wonderful," I said. After hugs all around and a promise to bring Opal and Slate to the dragon pavilion to meet everyone soon, our friends left.

The quiet overwhelmed me after the rush of the day. Now, the hard work began. We had to learn how to be parents.

Galen approached behind me and wrapped me in their embrace. Their breath was warm on my nape as they kissed and licked their way to my shoulder.

"That feels too good," I muttered.

"We still need to decide how to decorate our room," Galen said, "and then I thought we could?—"

A peal of laughter from the entertainment room made us both blush and pull away from each other.

"Wait," I said. "I don't want our kids to think touching each other is weird or embarrassing." I held out my arms and Galen stepped into my embrace. They held me close for a moment before dropping a chaste kiss on my lips.

"We should feed them and get them to bed. Then, we can work on our room."

I liked the sound of that.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Galen

Adulting was hard. Every night for the first week after we returned home, I fell into bed too exhausted to give Mac more than a kiss goodnight and a gentle caress of his shoulder before taking my dragon form and falling into dreamless sleep.

After so many months of staying in my alpha kobold form, I craved my dragon, especially while I slept. Our bed was a giant round mattress set into the floor of our new space. It felt like sleeping on a cloud, which didn't make it any easier to get up in the morning.

Hunting bovinji was easiest at first light. When they woke, they headed for the nearest water source, and that's where they met me. The stream flowing down the side of my mountain joined another stream at its base. I did my best hunting at the water's edge.

Mac butchered my daily kills, giving all the best parts to Slate. I finished the rest and left meat on the bones for Rapture. I still didn't understand the dragonet's pull toward our daughter, but I welcomed it the same way I welcomed him into our home.

We even made him a giant bed like the ones Mac showed me for dogs on Earth. Rapture was the size of a van, not a dog, but he could tuck himself into a tiny enough ball to fit in the corner of the entryway, and his trilling alerted us to all visitors, even the birds who swooped in and out.

Mac and Opal ate their strange blend of human and kobold food. Opal was already showing signs of her second molt, and her vocabulary grew every day. She spoke for Slate, too. They still had their own method of communicating beyond what we could hear.

Mac's magic was potent enough to pull meals from the fortress now, which meant we hadn't left the cave since we arrived home. All that was going to change today.

After breakfast, Mac strapped the children and himself into my new family-sized harness. I blanketed them with a spell to keep them from falling off, though with the harness we probably didn't need it, and then I scrabbled onto the landing.

Rapture followed me into the air and landed beside me in the dragon pavilion. Sunny and his brothers greeted the dragonet, and Lark helped Slate and Opal off my back before Mac slid down my side, giving me room to transform into an alpha kobold.

"I still can't get used to that," Tuft said behind me. "Do all dragons shapeshift?"

"Only adult dragons." I turned and held my arms wide for a hug. "I prefer this to bumping you with my snout."

"So do I," Punky said. "Last time, you left bruises."

"Hush," Lark said. "That was months ago."

Tuft grinned up at me before passing me off to the rest of our friends for hugs. As we greeted everyone, I noticed Clementine had already grabbed both of Opal's hands in greeting. They danced and squealed the same way they had when Lark had brought Clementine to meet her earlier in the week. Then, they motioned for Slate to follow them to a group of kids kicking a large red ball between them.

"Come on! I want you to meet everyone. This is Grover, Ernie, and Robin, my brothers. You know Sunny. Briar and Rory are his brothers."

Punky nodded after them as they scampered back to the ball and formed a circle to play. "We're having a sleepover in the living room tonight. Clementine's idea."

We were taking Punky and Lark up on their offer to babysit for the rest of the day and tonight. They'd invited us to have breakfast with them at their cabin the following morning, and then we would return home when they left for school, the adults to teach and the children to learn.

It wouldn't be long before we would send Opal with them to class, but I wanted to keep her home one more week. Tonight was a test to see how well she did with Slate as her only dragon companion. My paragon was certain her bond with Rapture would protect her, but I didn't want to trust my daughter's life to the little dragonet without testing first.

Tonight was our first test. It was also the first night Mac and I could enjoy each other's company, alone.

When it was time for us to leave them, I felt useful again, if only as a means of transport. I shifted to dragon form and took Mac home. It felt like the old days until I shifted back into my alpha kobold form.

I worried our time alone would devolve to the awkward dance we'd done around each other before our trip to Earth, but Mac surprised me by pulling me in for a kiss in the entryway.

"I've missed you."

"I'm here." I wanted to remind him I'd been here the whole time, but I knew what he

meant. Parenting took a lot out of us, and we didn't have much left in reserve for each other. That was about to change tonight.

"I love your horns." Mac straightened my shock of hair, so my horns contained it, and then he gripped both with his hands. The sensation grounded me as only Mac could. I thrust against him on instinct, and he kissed me again.

"Gods, I love you," I whispered against his lips.

He laughed and stepped toward our bedroom. Though our doorway was closest to the entrance, it was still too far away.

It was quiet. Too quiet without the children. I stumbled, but Mac caught me and grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"They're safe with our friends," he reminded me.

"Can you finally read my mind?"

"If you were paying attention," Mac chided, "you would know we were thinking the same thing."

"No more distractions," I promised.

"Take me to bed," he said. "Show me why dragons make the best mates."

"It's my knot, isn't it?"

Mac laughed and latched onto my hands, prying them from his hips and leading me to our bedroom. "It's everything."

In the middle of our bed lay two forgotten items from our trip to Earth. My derby hat sat next to the firm silicone cup for my cock and ovipositor. I frowned at Mac. "What's all this?"

Mac shed his clothes and kneeled on the bed, with his ass up, showing me a purple base spreading his hole wide. The color indicated the thickest plug of the three he'd bought at the sex shop.

"I've been using the plugs to stretch," he said. "I want you to insert both your cock and ovipositor in my hole tonight, and I want you to wear your sexy derby hat while you drive us both out of our minds."

The saying didn't make much sense to me. I didn't know how to drive, for one, and no one wanted to be out of their mind, unless ... "Do you mean you want me to make passionate love to you until you pass out?"

Mac swayed from side to side, making the plug wiggle. "Gods, yes. Please."

I dropped to my knees behind him and spelled my clothes back to the wash pile in one motion. Mac swayed his hips again. I followed with my tongue, lapping at his rim where it sealed against the silicone.

Mac wriggled and moaned as I worked the plug out of him, continuing to lick his rim as it tightened around the widest part of the plug. Then, the plug was loose, and I removed it to continue what I'd started, getting Mac wet and sloppy for me.

"Oh, fuck," Mac moaned when I cheated and tagged his prostate with my tongue. Alpha kobold tongues weren't long enough to do it, but I had a lot to work with between kobold and dragon size, and I used it to my advantage. I made my tongue as thick as the plug, and thicker. The cup to hold my cock and ovipositor was larger than the plug, and I wanted Mac to be comfortable.

"I didn't know you could do all that with your tongue," Mac muttered. "Maybe your cock isn't your best body part."

I wiggled the tip of my tongue against his prostate, making him squirm, and then I sat back and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Take it back," I said. "My tongue can't knot you."

"Right." He flashed a grin over his shoulder, and something cool and tight slipped around my erection and ovipositor, squeezing them together in a way that felt weird but good.

"Too tight?" he asked.

"No, just strange." I ran my hand over the sleeve, marveling at how much I could feel through the material. "Oh wow. That's going to feel so good when I'm inside you."

Mac flipped onto his back and brought his knees to his chest, spreading his hole wide for me. His eyes dilated with lust as he watched me stroke myself. "You'll have to take it off before you knot, or you'll break it."

I could repair it with magic, but the thought of smashing my ovipositor against Mac's insides with my knot was enough to agree.

"I'm ready for you." Mac planted his feet on the mattress and lifted his ass in the air.

"Not yet." I found the lube bottle under his pillow and smeared the slick stuff over the sleeve. The material took far less lube to prepare. With the excess on four blunted fingers, I slicked Mac's entrance until he whined. "Please, Galen."

I crawled into position between his knees, but he stopped me when the strange fake

tip pressed against his entrance. "You forgot your hat."

"I did." With a quick spell, I fitted the hat between my horns with the little horses jostling for position beneath them. I adjusted the rim with my non-slicked hand until Mac gave a low whistle of approval.

"On your marks," Mac teased.

I pressed against him until the flare of the silicone fit against his entrance.

"Get set."

I almost let loose a rumble of laughter, but I contained it, releasing only a tiny curl of smoke from my nostrils.

"Go."

I pressed into Mac's tight warmth. I couldn't contain my laughter at his silliness, and he joined in with a snicker. The silicone heated from his body heat, and our laughter cut off abruptly when I bottomed out inside him with a moan.

"You feel so good," I said.

"How is your ovipositor? Cramped?"

"It's a tight fit, but it feels too good to care." It was suctioned to the side of the sleeve and each of Mac's adjustments beneath me sent ripples of sensation all the way to my balls.

"Good." Mac arched his back to take even more of me. Sweat beaded his brow above his scales, but his beautiful smile said it all. He wanted this. Needed this. We both

did.

"Are you ready for me to move?" I asked.

"Gods, yes." He wrapped his legs around my back and tugged me forward. I landed hard on one elbow, careful to keep from crushing him. Thankfully, my horns held my hat firmly in place, though one of the feathers tried to escape. Mac tucked it back into the hatband.

"Now, please?" He caressed my cheek. I followed him down, kissing him as I dragged my torso over his leaking cock. He gasped when I rolled my hips, using the sleeve's girth to my advantage. I didn't want to risk pulling all the way out and possibly hurting him.

With each circle of my hips, I pulled out a little further. Mac drew me back with his heels on each downward thrust, raising up to meet me and rubbing his cock along my abs. He was so gorgeous with his eyes closed and his neck arched back. I was already close, but I shoved my desire away, focusing instead on his pleasure.

With my elbow for leverage, I cradled his head in my hand and took his cock in the other, still slick with lube.

He whimpered. "So close, Galen."

"Come for me, baby."

I'd never understood the strange pet name Mac's favorite movie character had for his rival-turned-lover, but the command had Mac shooting over my hand and shouting my name. I stroked him through his tremors, drinking in his bliss with my gaze.

I pulled out and removed the sleeve, the insides of it now slick with my precome. I

slid my cock back inside Mac with one smooth motion, and he clenched around me while his legs flopped to either side of my thighs.

That wouldn't do. I would end up hurting him. I pulled back out and flipped him over with my dragon strength, careful to prop his chest and his hips on pillows so I wouldn't hurt him.

"This okay?" I asked.

"Gods, yes." He glanced over his shoulder at me with the heavily lidded gaze of a sated partner who was almost fucked out but still wanted more. "Please?"

How could I resist? I flattened myself between his legs, hands at his hips to guide myself into his tight heat again. We both moaned at our complete connection. With long, smooth strokes, I brought myself back to the edge.

Mac rallied his strength and rose up to meet me with each thrust. His grunts of pleasure and the slap of our flesh took me over the edge into bliss. I collapsed on top of him, shifting us to the side so he wouldn't suffocate as I kissed and licked the mark on his neck.

"Mine."

"Yours." He wriggled against me as my knot formed. "Gods, yes. So much yours. I love you."

"You love my knot, you mean."

"Same thing," he teased.

I rocked against him, working my knot against his prostate. Satisfied I was in the

right place, I took his cock in hand again, stroking him in time with my undulations.

He reached up, and I feared for my hat, sending it back to its special box in the closet with a spell. Mac's hand curled around my horn, tugging my head down to the mark on his neck again. I bit down gently over the mark, enough to sting but not enough to draw blood.

Mac came again with a hoarse cry, and his channel squeezed around my knot.

"Come with me, Mate."

Mate. Gods. That word did it for me, just like baby for Mac. I came so hard I saw stars behind my eyelids. I sucked on the mark on Mac's neck hard enough to leave a bruise.

"Gods, I love you," Mac whispered.

"I love you, too. So much. Mate."

Mac chuffed a laugh and snuggled closer. "Hey, now. That sounds like you're looking for round two. Or is it round three?"

"We have all night," I reminded him.

"We have more than that," he said. "We have the rest of our lives."

Gods, I loved him so much. Even his corniest lines made my eyes sting.

"That we do."

Galen

Dragons weren't supposed to have anxiety. We were the top of the food chain. The next greatest creatures were our tiny cousins, the dragonets, and their rivals, the dire weasels.

I had nothing to fear from other dragons, but that didn't convince my heartbeat to slow. It pounded in my throat as I contemplated the mass of dragons and beta kobolds outside the kickball dugout. The wooden structure hid my alpha kobold form from the crowd while I tried to regain my composure.

Kobolds and dragons alike read Mac's emails and came to see us! I swallowed hard. This wasn't anxiety, at least, not all of it. Excitement made my heart race even more. We'd called everyone together for the first dragon reunion in over a century, and they came!

Even more surprising, the betas came, too. Dragons used to fly from village to village searching for their fated mates, but now, we could unite all eligible betas and dragons in one place and see what happened. I hoped at least one dragon found their fated mate at the reunion.

Mac knocked on the wood frame around the door opening. "It's time to be a dragon," he teased. It was customary for dragons to look like dragons at the reunion. That was the reason the original pavilion was so large.

"What if they hate me?" I asked.

"Why would they hate you? If anything, they will thank you for giving them an excuse to meet. Speaking of which, someone is here to meet you."

There was a softness in Mac's gaze I didn't expect, and a flash of a shared thought I didn't understand before he focused on memories of Slate and Opal. He'd been doing that a lot lately. Before, I thought it was sweet, but now, I realized he was mentally blocking something from me.

"Who is it?"

I squeezed through the dugout doorway and allowed my true form to wash over me. I stepped away from the small building so I wouldn't smash it with my tail and turned back to where Mac stood with a kobold half his height.

I dropped to the ground on the kickball field, sending up a cloud of dirt. I extended my neck so I could scent the newcomer. He smelled familiar. Welcoming. He patted my snout.

"Galen. It's wonderful to see you again."

"Father?"

This was Goff, my paragon's beta mate. His stripes had darkened to the same black as Mac's, but they had dulled with time. He wore a simple short-sleeved work shirt beneath grass-stained coveralls. He studied me with a discerning gaze.

"You called me Papa," he said. "Don't you remember?"

Papa. The word jarred a memory of him leaning against my chest with a book open so we could both read it.

"Papa."

He was real, not a figment of my imagination. And he was here.

I started to shrink into my alpha kobold form, but he shook his head. "Let me see you as a dragon. You've gotten so big."

His eyes sparkled with unshed tears as he looked me over from snout to tail.

"You're still the same beautiful black," Papa said. "You always wanted to be the black sheep of the family, remember?" He laughed.

I didn't remember, but it sounded like something I would have said when I was a child.

I sniffed him again, noticing how similar his scent was to Mac's. He was much smaller, an earlier version of the hybrid gene pool, but larger already than the original kobolds.

"You're a hybrid." Even my whisper carried a few hundred feet, thanks to my overzealous dragon lungs.

He nodded. "I am. Your paragon was furious when they found out."

"Chance and Lux ..."

"Also part human." Papa nodded resolutely, "as are you. I told your paragon burning the kobold villages wouldn't fix what was already done, but they refused to listen."

"Have you spoken with them?" I asked.

"Not alone. I overheard them telling a group of dragons what happened to the kobolds on the other planes."

"Would you reconcile with them?" Mac asked.

"That isn't up to me," Papa said. "It never was. I have always loved them. I have always loved you." He patted my snout again. "I ran, hoping they would see our beautiful villages and the positive changes we'd started, but instead, they saw only unwelcome change that led to destruction."

"We went to Earth," I said. "I was worried human genes would have a negative impact on our children, but?—"

"They didn't have a negative impact on you three," Papa said. "That was my argument from the start. You were healthy babies and smart students. Until your paragon went on their rampage, you were happy children."

"We went to Earth for nothing."

"We went to Earth, so we both had a better understanding of our human ancestry," Mac said, patting my jaw. "We had a great time adventuring and eating our way through West Des Moines. It was fun, and I wouldn't change it for the world."

"Neither would I," I admitted. Both of our children were conceived there.

Mac blushed. For a moment, I thought I'd said the quiet part out loud, but he cleared his throat and motioned Papa toward the pavilion, where Clementine sat on a bench with Slate on one side and Opal on the other. At first, I thought they were watching something on a tablet, but then I realized she was holding a thin book with bright illustrations.

"These little ones are ours," Mac said, "and the older girl is Clementine, our friends'—"

"Clementine is our friend," I interrupted.

"Our friend, yes." Mac grinned at me. I got the impression he was teasing me, but I could be friends with a four-year-old kobold if I wanted.

Clementine was more than Punky and Lark's daughter to me. She'd shown me anything was possible, even breaking my paragon's curse.

Maybe my proximity to Punky during his pregnancy had nothing to do with her birth, but I liked to think she was my gift to The Spike, to show them what was possible. Now, we also had the gift of Opal. Already, three omegas at The Spike had hatched female eggs since Opal.

With the curse broken, there would be even more female hatchlings and beta mates. We had plenty of time to discover what that meant for both kobolds and dragons, starting with the days-long reunion party already underway.

Clementine shook Papa's hand with a solemn nod when I introduced him. She had just turned four years old (eight in human years, according to Punky, who had based it on a child development handbook from Earth), and already she was taller than my kobold father. It would have been easy to believe he was no different from the other beta kobolds of his time. Now, everyone but our two children towered over him.

"Are we taking the dragon bus to the other side of the pavilion?" Clementine asked. "Lux wanted us to meet up with them."

"I would like to see my other children," Papa said, though he frowned at my paragon's proximity.

"They want to see you," Clementine whispered.

"Not Rain. They'll wish I hadn't come."

"You don't know until you talk to them." Mac hoisted Slate onto his shoulders and

lifted Opal from the bench, balancing her against his hip.

I lowered my neck to the ground again to give Mac and Papa better access to pull themselves onto my back. Slate and Opal were already adept at climbing, and Clementine scrambled up my side without help.

It was much faster for me to walk and carry them to where my paragon and siblings stood across the pavilion from us. Paragon scoured the crowd, smoke pouring from their nostrils. I knew they could sense Papa getting closer, but they didn't know where he was.

"Stay on my back. Papa. Hold Slate in your arms."

"They won't hurt me," he grumbled.

Slate moved to protect him anyway, their little claws digging into the soft flesh between my scales.

"Look who dared to show up." Paragon's voice rumbled across the last twenty yards. Sensing their fury, the kobolds mingling around them hastened to the food stands along the edge.

"Papa?" Lux squinted at the kobolds on my back. "Slate's almost as big as you!"

I heard our papa snicker as I slowed. Mac patted my shoulder to be let down, but I wouldn't let them debark, not yet.

"You can be civil," I said. "No fire, and no swearing." I added the last part for Opal's benefit. She had picked up a few curse words from someone whose name started with M and ended with C, though my dear mate tried to blame Punky. When Mac then claimed she learned them from Clementine, I burst out laughing and almost lit the playroom on fire.

I did not want a fire here today, not after all Axel's hard work to build this beautiful pavilion for me. For us. This was a place for everyone at The Spike to come together. My paragon and siblings hadn't yet earned their place.

"There will be smoke," my paragon said. "And some selective word choice."

Good enough. Papa was the first to slide from my back, followed by Clementine, who helped both babies down my wing and led them beneath me, where I could shield them with my body if needed.

Mac stood by my side, his hand still on my wing as though considering climbing back aboard for a quick exit.

"Goff." Paragon lowered their head at an angle so they could sniff him from his feet to the tips of his ears. "You smell the same." They sank to the ground to see him better. "I've ... missed you."

Papa staggered on his feet at the words, and I had to blink a couple of times to confirm I wasn't dreaming. Mac clasped his hands to his chest the way he did when watching a heartfelt movie scene.

"You did?"

"You were my mate far longer than you've been my enemy." They sighed. "I think I am my own worst enemy, though. I should have trusted the kobolds' decision."

"It's much easier to say that now," Papa said. "Two centuries of dragon births without any rage issues or birth defects."

"Dragon births?" They glanced around at the assembled dragons, giving me a chance to look, too. There were a few juveniles no older than I was when I attended my first dragon reunion.

"The rift between kobolds and dragons hasn't kept us from finding our fated mates, though it's rare. This meeting will help."

"We assumed they were dragon pairings," Chance said.

"Nimbus is." Papa pointed. "Sve is Bale's with his mate, Olaf." He rattled off the names of more young dragons whose parents I didn't know.

"Kobold hybrids were around longer than we knew," Mac said.

Both Paragon and Papa grunted in acknowledgement.

"That was the crux of our argument," Paragon said. "It seems so silly now, after what we saw on other planes. Our kobolds were the only ones who survived."

Paragon shrank into a kobold alpha form with black hair and stripes. They took Goff's hand. "I am so sorry. I should have listened. You were right. Our children are nothing like humans. They are smart, and kind, and giving. So giving."

They motioned to Lux and Chance, who had both left dragon hatchlings on another plane. "They are nothing like the dragons of old. While I don't approve of humankind as a whole, their genes have made us stronger, when all I could see was weakness."

They dropped Papa's hands and held their arms out toward me. I shifted into my kobold alpha shape, which put me several yards further away, but I didn't care. I ran to their arms and hugged them close.

"You were little more than a baby when we left and look at what you've done. You brokered peace with a furious kobold population. You made enough connections with other dragons to bring them all here, and you found your fated mate."

"The last was pure fate, not me," I said.

"Maybe so, but you weren't afraid to act on it, and for that, we are so proud of you."

"We are," Papa agreed.

Mac joined me as they let go, and we made room for Chance and Lux to have their own hugs in their kobold forms. All around us, dragons had taken smaller forms to meet and greet the kobold welcoming committee, led by Tuft and his beta assistants. I overheard him telling a dragon I didn't recognize about an evening dance in the pavilion, supervised by Alma and the other former priestesses.

"We've already had a dragon find their fated mate!" Tuft's cheery voice traveled, and several dragons turned their heads.

"Who found their fated mate?" Paragon asked, glancing suspiciously at Chance, and then at Lux.

"I don't scent mine on the air." Lux sounded disappointed. "Maybe he is in a small backwater too far from kobold technology."

"Chance?" Paragon turned their sharp gaze on my sibling, who cowered.

"I haven't met him yet, but I know he's here."

I joined Lux, and together we squeezed Chance within an inch of their life. "I'm so happy for you!" I said.

"Gods, it worked." Lux sniffled. "I wish mine were here, too."

"You haven't met everyone yet," I reminded them. "Most of The Spike's betas have work to do before they can party tonight."

Lux frowned. "Don't get my hopes up. I would know if my mate had been this close."

"Not necessarily," I reminded them. "You haven't met nearly enough kobolds?—"

"I've met that one," Lux pointed in Tuft's direction. "He knows everyone."

"They have a point." Mac laughed. "Though he doesn't interact with many betas besides his coworkers, so there's still hope."

"Ugh." Lux rolled their eyes and smoked billowed from their nostrils. "Fine. I'll wait until tonight."

Mac took my hand and led me to our children, who climbed on Papa and Paragon while they talked.

"We can take our babies off your hands," Mac said, holding out his arms for Slate. They couldn't fly yet, but they could glide from Papa's shoulder to Mac's arms. Opal climbed down from Paragon's shoulders, careful not to rip their clothes. She scampered over to me, less concerned about my dress pants and polo shirt. "Aragon," she whispered in my ear.

"Hey, baby girl. We love you."

"Wuv oo," she cooed back. "Wuv Sate. Wuv Ahp." Sate and Ahp were Slate and Pop. One more molt, and she'd be talking as well and as fast as our friends' kids. Kobolds grew up too fast, if you asked me. I was glad Slate wasn't talking yet. Our dragon baby would be our baby a little longer.

Even so, there was nothing sweeter in the world than hearing our little girl so full of love for us, as much as we were for her and Slate. I took Mac's hand and led him to the ice cream stand. Beside it, a farmer offered bovinji meat kababs for the dragons. They were just Slate's size. With food in hand, we found a bench in the shade of the fortress and sat down to enjoy the day.

"I'm glad I already know where my mate is," I said. "I would have been so embarrassed to meet you like this, in a huge crowd with everyone watching."

"Maybe you didn't notice." Mac leaned over to whisper in my ear. "Every kobold at the fortress, including the changelings you brought back when you destroyed the circle, saw me leave on your back. Every single one."

My kobold alpha face felt too hot, which must have been a defect in my spell casting. I would fix it later. "I suppose when you've met your fated mate, no one else matters."

Mac leaned against me and rested his head on my shoulder, earning a disgruntled noise from Slate, who scooted over to give him room.

"Nothing else matters but us."

THE END