



The Manny's Fiery Dragon Bond (Heat, Prey, Love #11)

Author: Jena Wade, Lorelei M. Hart

Category: Fantasy

Description: It takes a strong omega to be mated to the dragon clan leader and mine is the strongest— he is also a mouse.

After my mate died, I tried to do it all. I provided, I cooked, I cleaned, I took the kids to school. All my kids are grown and now having children of their own.

Now that I have grandchildren, I'm not wasting a single moment. I'll provide my son with the help I never had.

A houseful of dragon shifter children needs a strong manny, one who can handle an accidental shift here or there, one who won't cower to me just because I'm the dragon clan leader. I never expected that person to be a mouse shifter, but here Ollie is, sliding into our lives seamlessly.

Despite his incredible looks, amazing personality, and the way he adores my grandchildren, I try to keep things professional. He works for my son. Technically he also works for the dragon clan that I lead. And besides, he deserves to find his fated mate, not to be hooking up with an old dragon like me.

Ollie doesn't agree, telling me I'm his mate and he can prove. I can't wait to see how.

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Chapter 1

Malric

The cityscape lit up in a cascade of twinkling lights visible from the window of my office. The breathtaking view was one of the reasons we had settled on this office building a few years ago when the Emberstone clan established our headquarters here. It lost its appeal after staring at it every day. Or maybe it was me who lost my sense of wonder. After hundreds of years of life, it wasn't uncommon.

The world was ever-moving. I, like many other long-lived dragons, knew that better than anyone. We had seen such change in our long lives. And yet, some pain never dulled with time. I carried it with me like a backpack, weighed down and constantly on my mind. There were days I wondered if we really were the lucky race or if our long life was more of a curse. At least for me.

It had been nearly a hundred years since my mate had passed. A hundred years since I had last seen the chocolate brown of his eyes. A hundred years since I truly lived. And days like today, it felt like a hundred years longer than I should've.

It hadn't been a sudden thing. People tried to comfort me, telling me it was better that way because I had time to say good-bye, that that somehow made it somehow easier. But I wasn't so sure that if I had a choice, I'd have picked our route. The long, drawn-out illness allowed him to settle his affairs, but at what price? His last time on earth had been torture. Maybe a quick demise would've been kinder to all of us. Not that it was a choice.

I was thankful for the time we had together. We had two perfect clutches, although even those were wrought with loss. Three sons born alive, while one had failed to hatch. His innocent life cut short before it could even begin. He deserved so much better.

Now, a hundred years later, I was dedicated to my work. Work didn't get sick. Work didn't die. Work didn't leave.

Our children were all grown, and one already had a family of their own. They were living the lives they had carved out for themselves, and I was happy for them. But they carried their loss too. Losing a parent wasn't easy, no matter how old you were when it happened.

And I had the clan—which had somehow selected me as their leader. If Chastain could see me now... I could just about hear his laugh.

“Clan Leader Malric? Seriously? The same dragon who had once caught the village square on fire, causing the whole clan to have to move else we'd be hunted down by dragon hunters?”

In my little fantasy where Chastain was still here, he'd roll those beautiful eyes of his and shake his head.

But he wasn't here anymore. I was, and part of my job was keeping young dragons in line. I suppose the clan's logic was that I did all the reckless things in my youth, so I'd know how to help them avoid doing the same. They might not think that if they knew all that I'd gotten away with. What I'd been caught doing was only the tip of the iceberg.

I was lucky. In my youth, we didn't have cell phones or cameras. For a scandal to be made public, it had to be witnessed. And even then, witnesses could be negotiated

with. Young dragons now had to deal with screenshots, videos, and audio recordings. There was no way I'd have gotten away with even half the things I did if we'd had that technology. I wasn't quite sure how I'd done so without it.

By some miracle, I hadn't been caught with the big things. The only time I came close was when I'd accidentally caught the village on fire, and even with that, there were only rumors. In my youth, I thought it would be a great way to impress Chastain. It very much wasn't.

"Dad, what are you still doing here?"

I turned to find my son, Tavian, standing in the doorway of my office.

"Me? What are you doing here?" It was far too late for him to still be working, especially with little ones at home.

Tavian's tie was loosened, his jacket unbuttoned. He looked tired. I checked my watch to see just how late it had gotten—sure, I could use my cell phone to tell the time, but I preferred the old-style wristwatch that worked on batteries. It didn't need to be charged. Sure, batteries could die, but not daily. I used to stick with the wind-up ones, but I had a bad habit of overwinding it

"I had some briefs to work through," he said, "and I thought it would be easier to get it done here. Kier agreed that I wasn't getting anything done at home and sent me to the office. I'm about to head home, though." He had a good mate, one who looked out for him.

"Good, that's good." I turned back to the window.

"Is everything all right?" I heard the pity in his voice now more than ever. Since finding his own mate had opened his eyes to what it was like to be complete. He now

had a hint of what my loss had been like and feared I was lonely. I was, but I had been that way for a long time. I was used to it.

“Yes,” I said. “Everything’s fine.” When had fine ever been the truth?

I pasted on a smile—one I was used to wearing like a piece of armor. I’d gotten so used to using it, I wasn’t sure I knew how a real smile felt anymore. Everything was fine, as long as I didn’t let the loneliness seep in. I was well-practiced at that. My sons never needed to know just how much I felt alone.

“Kier and I were talking about getting a manny to help with the dragonets.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. They were amazing parents, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t use a helping hand.

“How did you and Dad manage to have two clutches without the help?”

I chuckled. “We were smart enough to take time off work. Which is why I offered both you and Kier a year sabbatical after your clutch hatched. You decided not to take it.” And even at that, it had been chaos—beautiful, beautiful chaos. I wouldn’t have traded a second of it.

“We both enjoy our work. We like working for the clan. But it does make this difficult, especially with three of them.”

“Indeed. A manny will help to give the children some consistency and take some load off you two. If there’s anything I can do to help—”

“You do enough. You visit regularly. The children adore their Pop-Pop, and I don’t want you to have to be a babysitter. I want you to enjoy being a grandpa.”

I appreciated that. I knew too many grandparents who became de facto babysitters, and while they loved it, it was a very different role than being the fun, spoil them all the time, grandmother or grandfather.

“Oh, I do. Trust me.” My grandchildren were the light of my world. I couldn’t wait for my other sons to find their mates and give me more of them if that was what their hearts desired. There was something magical about seeing the world through the eyes of a child.

Tavian’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment, I thought he could see through the facade I put on. I moved to my desk, closing my laptop and gathering some papers, trying to distract from that moment vulnerability I’d accidentally shared. He didn’t need to be worried about me.

“Well, if you’re going home, I might as well go, too.”

“Perfect. I’ll walk out with you. We have interviews in the next couple of days. I’ll send the profiles over so you can look them over.” My son still wanted my opinion, and I valued that respect more than he could know.

“I’d appreciate that. Not that I need to be informed, but it wouldn’t hurt.” I gave his shoulder a squeeze.

“Kier and I would appreciate your opinion. You know the kids as well as we do. Plus, you are well-practiced at hiring people.”

Indeed I was. “Thanks, Son. How are my perfect grandchildren?”

Tavian grinned, then launched into the most recent silliness my grandchildren had gotten up to. The three of them had reached a year old and were on the move now. The only way to keep them contained was with a gate, and even that wouldn’t hold

them for long. They were curious and weren't going to let anything stop them— a fact that filled me with both pride and fear.

As long as I filled my heart with these kinds of stories—memories with my grandkids and my family—the loneliness couldn't take up too much space.

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Chapter 2

Ollie

I was a mouse in a dragon's den. Literally. What had I been thinking? It wasn't even the fire-breathing, talon-owning, fly-away-with-their-prey that was a danger to someone like me. They could step on me and I'd be finished. I wasn't scared for my life, although maybe I should be. But I was pretty concerned that I wouldn't fit in here enough to be taken seriously.

Everyone around me, including the receptionist I checked in with and every businessperson I passed in the hall to get to the interview space, was a dragon. Even the people here for meetings were fire-breathing, wing-sprouting beasts. But me? I was the meek mouse. If I shifted next to any of them, I would disappear beneath their sheer size. I couldn't even consider myself prey because I'd be a single bite, not even large enough to qualify as a snack.

Of course, one didn't just shift inside an office building. Plus, I'd drown in my suit if I even tried. Ask me how I knew...

I wasn't scared of the dragons around me. Not necessarily. We were all civilized creatures, even if we were all shifters. Still, not all dragon clans were welcoming of all types. Some were old-school and felt that dragons were superior to all others. I stayed far and clear from them.

Most of the clans were open only to other dragons, though. Tradition had a way of growing roots like that. Emberstone clan was incredibly accepting of all types of

beasts, or so I'd heard. If they didn't have that reputation, I wouldn't have bothered to show up today. It would've been a waste of all of our time.

Tavian, the man I was interviewing with, was mated to a wolf, and he was interviewing me to be a nanny to his three children, so there had to be some truth to the rumors. His father was high up in the clan, and if interspecies relationships of any kind were frowned upon, he'd be the last person to test the waters. Or so I told myself.

I really thought I could walk in here and be fine. No nerves, no trepidation, nothing but confidence about my skill. I was wrong. There were just too many of them around. I did my best to keep my fear to a minimum. They could smell that just the same way that I could smell them. It was one thing to be weak, another to project that weakness out there for all to scent.

And the truth was, I needed this job. More than that, I really wanted this job. I'd been looking for a long-time nanny gig ever since my last one had ended. The children that I had cared for from the time they were small children were now in middle school, and their families were going off to a new location—one where I wouldn't be needed.

It hurt, but that was life. I knew going into this profession that I'd have to say goodbye to children I cared for. That's how it worked. It still sucked.

"Ollie?" The man I recognized as Tavian stepped out of the conference room. "Come on in."

This was it. It was go time.

Inside the room was another person who had to be his mate, Kier, sitting at the table. Finally. I wasn't the only non-dragon around. I was still the only prey, but that was

my norm.

Kier was a wolf shifter mated to the clan leader's son. They were the couple that were in need of a nanny for their one-year-old triplet dragons, and even if they weren't, their existence gave me the courage to come here.

"Thanks for meeting with us today," he said.

"Absolutely." I held out my hand. "I'm Ollie. It's nice to meet both of you."

Kier and Tavian both shook it.

"We must say, your references are impeccable. Your last family couldn't say enough good things about you," Tavian said. "They said you would always be considered family."

That was nice to hear.

I smiled. "Yes, I was with them for quite a while. They were great, but the kids are all in middle school now, and they've moved across country."

They nodded along as I spoke.

"Can you tell me about your kids?"

I knew most parents wouldn't hesitate to gush about their children—as they well should. And if they weren't quick to gush about them, then they probably weren't the type of parents I wanted to work for.

As a nanny, I wanted to be a part of a family, not a substitute for either parent. I had seen plenty of parents who treated their children like little accessories. I didn't want

to be a part of that. I was there to help make the parenting job easier, not to take over.

“Well, there’s three of them, so that makes things interesting,” Kier said.

Kier and Tavian had their fingers laced together, their hands resting on the table. They smiled as they looked at one another. They were so in love. I’d always wanted that, but in my profession, I met lots of other mannies and parents, but not single shifters looking for love.

“They’re great kids. Challenging, because there is three of them and we are outnumbered.” There was nothing but love in their tone. “We’ve made it work for the past year, but lately, Tavian has taken on more responsibilities and clients within the clan. I’ve taken on more responsibilities here as well, and we love our clan. We want to help out as much as we can. We’re hoping that having a manny will lift some of the household burden.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure it would be much easier if, when you were at home, you could focus on being with the children, rather than dishes, laundry, that sort of thing. Those are some of the things I can help with.”

“Exactly. The kids are one now, and so they are, of course, running around a lot, learning new things every day. All three of them are walking. It took Flint a while to get the hang of it, but now he’s just as fast as the other two. And I think the three of them can talk to one another. I swear they are conspiring against us.”

I smiled. “I’m sure they have their own little way of communicating with one another. They sound like great kids.”

The interview went on much longer than I expected. They had plenty to talk about with their kids, and I had plenty of questions for them. I was feeling great about the position. Usually when I interviewed for a position, I’d sit on an offer for a few days

before deciding. That wouldn't be the case today. If they offered it to me right now, I'd accept, and I hadn't even learned the full details yet.

"The job comes with a room, which has its own en suite. You would have any access to the house you need. We have a home gym and a hot tub you'd be welcome to use. Plus, any of the amenities we have here at headquarters."

I nearly let out an embarrassing squeak at that. I doubted that I'd come to Emberstone headquarters to use the pool or gym, though both things sounded lovely. Being around that many dragons would be nerve-wracking.

"You'll have days off, of course. We're not expecting you to be available twenty-four seven. Both Kier and I like to cook, so we won't always need meals. We can come up with a schedule," Tavian said. "Our hours here can be challenging. So it won't always be nine to five."

"Of course," I said. "I am well versed in putting together meal plans and meal prepping. That way you aren't thinking about what to make for dinner on the day of. And I'm not concerned about the hours, just as long as we communicate about when and where I'm needed."

"That sounds fabulous. Right now, we're living on hamburgers and bland chicken. We're running low on everything. There's no time to go to the store or even put in an order for groceries."

I could only imagine how hard it was to work full-time at high-powered jobs while spending the time you wanted with your kids and on top of that somehow managing to keep the household running.

I nodded. "I can help manage the grocery lists as well." I was an odd one in that I loved to meal plan and go through the grocery fliers to figure out the best things to

buy each week. I took it as a challenge, a fun one.

The two exchanged a glance. “When can you start?”

And there it was, the offer I’d been hoping for. Little did I know at the time that it was going to be the offer that changed my entire world.

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Chapter 3

Malric

\ What a long, hectic week it had been. I dealt with far too many different clan issues that all seemed to arise at once, sat through board meetings, and had discussions about the clan's future with elders. But as intense as the week had been, it ended my favorite way— Friday-night dinner at Tavian's home. No matter how horrible, how stressful, or even on the rare occasions, boring the week had been, it all melted away at one giggle from my grandbabies. Their smiles were magical. I was sure of it.

Since finding his mate in Kier, my son had been happier than I'd ever seen him. They were fated and knew instantly that they were meant for one another, but even if one of them had no sense of scent, they'd have known. The two fit together so perfectly. I loved to be in their presence so I could soak up some of their happiness. It helped to chase away the loneliness for a short while.

There, I could spend time with my grandbabies. Since they were born, I'd made a habit of having Friday-night dinners with the family, and then on Sunday mornings, I'd take care of the kids so Kier and Tavian could take a break. They were great parents and excellent at their chosen careers, and it was important that they had time together as a couple each week.

I didn't want to impede too much on their family time. After all, while I was family, I still wanted my son and his mate to enjoy their time with the children. This felt like a good balance for all involved, and if it ever seemed like it no longer was, we'd reevaluate at that time.

My own parents had stayed away when my kids were growing up. Chastain's parents hadn't been around at all. I didn't want to be like that, but I also didn't want to be overbearing. Thus, I found a nice balance. Still, I wouldn't have complained about seeing the children more. Whenever they asked me for help, I made sure I cleared my calendar to do so.

My kids had felt the lack of grandparents growing up. They'd wondered why they were the only kids who didn't have extended family for milestones. I vowed never to miss a single game, recital, school event, or whatever the children were into. I didn't want them to feel what my kids had, not when it was so easily avoidable.

I let myself into the home, expecting to find giggling children running and toddling about. Ever since the children started moving, they hadn't stopped. They skipped over walking and headed straight to running. I had a feeling that at least one of them was going to end up on one of the flight teams when they were older.

Flint enjoyed being in various states of undress, including a sock on his hand and another on his foot. You never knew what you were going to find him wearing when you arrived. Meanwhile Ruby liked to see just how many shirts she could put on at one time. She was the epitome of the "can't put my arms down" kid during the winter. And Opaline lived for anything with stripes. They each had their own unique style, and I loved it.

The house was quiet, and the delicious aroma of something Italian filled the air. That yummy scent of food wasn't unusual. The quiet? Very much so.

"Hello?" I called out.

Usually, one or more of the children would come running to find me. None did, and as I looked around, I noticed that the house was incredibly tidy. Not that the house was ever a mess. It just tended to be more lived-in than it was now. And really, I

didn't judge my child and his mate on their ability to keep their house clean. They were making memories. Kids didn't remember if everything was dusted and the throw pillows were plumped. But they did remember when you made cookies together or created some masterpiece out of a cardboard box. Those were the important things.

But regardless of all that, the place was in shipshape compared to how it usually was, and that piqued my curiosity.

"We're in here, Dad!" Tavian called.

I stepped into the kitchen to find Tavian and another person. The person I didn't recognize was a mouse shifter, by the scent of him, standing at the stove wearing an apron, stirring the pot of tomato sauce in front of him. He was young, but compared to me most people were. But even so, I couldn't help being taken aback by his stunning good looks. Not that I should be looking at my son's friend that way.

He had one of the boys in a carrier on his back, fast asleep. Flint's little head rested on the man's shoulder. The two other kids were in their highchairs, playing with some sort of clay, quiet and content. He smiled when he saw me, his eyes widening as he took me in.

"You must be Lord Malric. I'm Ollie."

Lord Malric. Yes, it was my title, and yes, it showed respect, but something felt wrong about him being so formal with me. Like we were meant to be closer than a title.

He held out his hand. I stared at him, not moving. Mesmerized by him.

The apron Ollie wore was tied tight around his trim waist. Ollie was on the shorter

side, probably a good half a foot shorter than my six feet. His wavy brown hair was flopped to one side like he'd tried to tame it with his hands throughout the day. Some tomato sauce had splattered, and he had a speck on his chin he hadn't wiped away yet.

Did I feel the sudden urge to lick it away? Yes. Yes, I did. Did I try to shake that thought away? Also, yes.

I lingered too long, taking in every detail of this stranger. I didn't reach out a hand, just standing there like an awkward oaf rather than a refined gentleman. Ollie dropped his back to his side, and his eyes ping-ponged between me and Tavian.

"Dad," my son said.

"Sorry." I shook myself. "My apologies. I didn't know there was someone here."

"Dad, this is Ollie, our new manny. Ollie, this is Lord Malric, my dad—although you don't need to use the title in this house, right?" Tavian elbowed me.

"Of course not," I said. "Malric is fine." Good, although in the back of my mind, the thought of him calling me his alpha started to form. This man was going to be trouble, there was no denying that.

Maybe I needed a little trouble in my life.

I found it hard to look away from Ollie, his bright eyes shining at me, my grandson snuggled against his back.

"He spent the morning with the kids?" I asked.

"No. Kier had the morning off, so Ollie's taking the evening shift."

“Oh,” I said. “Do you need me to take the kids for a while? I can take them to the park.”

“That’s exactly where I was planning on taking them.” Ollie smiled bright. “Once dinner was done, anyway. Would you like to join us?”

Me, alone with him—the morsel of temptation? I cleared my throat. That would not be appropriate. Yet, was I going to pass up the chance to spend time with my grandchildren? It wasn’t lost on me the mental gymnastics I was currently doing to convince myself it was a good idea to accept the offer.

“Sure, I could do that. Or if you need the evening off, I can take the kids.”

“Dad,” Tavian said. His tone held a warning to it. Though what he was warning me against, I didn’t know. Probably because I was acting weird. Or maybe Ollie had a mate. My stomach lurched at the thought of that possibility. I had no right to be jealous. I didn’t even know this omega’s last name.

“Let us know when dinner is ready, Ollie. We’ll be right back.” My son gave me his best this-is-not-negotiable glance. Great, I’d pissed him off. That hadn’t been my intention.

“Okay, sure thing,” Ollie said.

Tavian pulled me out of the room.

“What in the world is going on with you?” He didn’t bother with small talk.

“What? Nothing.” Even if I wanted to be honest with him, what would I say? I didn’t understand what was going on myself.

“Look, I know it was odd to hire a non-dragon, and perhaps you were expecting me to hire someone from within the clan, but Ollie’s amazing.”

How could he think I cared about that? Did Ollie interpret my weirdness that way? Talk about messing things up in five minutes flat. Perhaps that was better than the alternative, which was that I was acting oddly because Ollie was incredibly attractive and I’d wanted to lick away the sauce on his face and then do... no, I couldn’t go back to that train of thought.

“What?” Maybe I misunderstood.

“You’re being weird. Is it because he’s a mouse?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. That is absurd. I’m not speciesist, of course.”

Sure, I’d noticed it when I came in, but it was a passing thought, unlike the way his lips beckoned me to nibble on them.

“So you’re just acting weird... for another reason?” My son grinned at me, a knowing smile spreading across his face. He knew. Of course he knew. “If I wasn’t married, I would be willing to say that he’s attractive. It’s okay if that’s what you are thinking.”

“Tavian. Be serious.”

“I am serious.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Son. It has been a long week. I’m glad that you’ve hired someone and that they are working out. Why don’t we have dinner, and then we’ll talk after?” A redirection perfectly executed.

“You’re more than welcome to go to the park with them. The kids would enjoy it.”

Or maybe not so perfectly, after all.

“Yes... well. We’ll see how dinner goes,” I said, not willing to make any promises.

Perhaps the food would distract me, or better yet, he did something gross that had me no longer able to see him in the same light. Would slurping his pasta be enough to have me no longer seeing his jawline for the magnificence that it was? I doubted it, but something had to give. He was my grandchildren’s manny, and by all accounts, he was the right man for the job.

I couldn’t risk my family losing the help they so desperately needed because I was drawn to their new hire. They deserved better than that, and so did Ollie.

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Chapter 4

Ollie

I had seen pictures of Lord Malric. Who hadn't. He was an imposing figure in the shifter community, and anyone who didn't know who he was was either human or hiding under a rock. I was no exception.

Living around the Emberstone clan territory meant that I was aware of the clan as a whole. I wasn't part of them, being a mouse and all, but I knew of their politics and their business ventures. Out of all the dragon clans, they seemed to be the most open to change which had them soaring in areas not all could. When you're stuck in the past, that's where you get left behind.

Even so, I never envisioned I'd be having dinner with him or working for one of his sons. I was a mouse, not a dragon who had the pedigree to work for a family with such power. But also, I was good at what I did, and I needed to not convince myself otherwise.

Whether you were a dragon or not, you knew the dragon clan leader. Rumor had it, he was over five hundred years old. He wasn't quite old enough to have been around when dragons battled demons, but he wasn't far off. To him I was nothing more than a baby. At least based on years on this planet. To look at him, if he were a human, I'd have thought him early thirties, max. And a fine-looking thirty at that.

His attitude toward me, or my being the caregiver for his grandbabies, didn't shock me. I'd never heard anything that would indicate he'd have a prejudice against other

species, though. From everything I had heard about him and the way he ran Emberstone Clan, he was accepting of all types. Yet I couldn't help but wonder if he had any hesitation about me being a mouse.

Did he have concerns about me being able to wrangle three dragon children? The last family I had nannied for were bear shifters. I handled that just fine.

Then again, it did seem rather humorous to have a mouse wrangling three dragons—even if they were babies.

I didn't let myself dwell on it. Allowing insecurity to build wasn't going to do anyone any good. And this wasn't me. Usually, I was confident in my skills and what I brought to the table, and if others didn't see it? Oh, well. But with Malric, what he thought of me mattered far more than it should.

If it was an issue for him, then there wasn't much I could do about it, anyway. I truly did not want to lose this job, though. It may have only been a few days, but I was already attached to the children. The three of them were so unique and precious in their own ways. It was easy to love them. And my bosses were great. It was the ideal next position for me.

We all sat down in the formal dining room. The house that Tavian and Kier lived in was large, but not too intimidating... except for the part where it had a formal and informal dining room. That was dining room overkill.

Usually, we ate in the kitchen or the informal dining room. But not tonight. Tonight, we were in the formal dining room, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't add a level of nerves to the meal.

I had been on the job for just three days, but things were going incredibly well. I already felt at home with the family, had figured out a semblance of a schedule that

seemed to be working well with my charges, and not once did my bosses treat me like “the help.”

“Ollie organized the pantry and all the cupboards,” Kier said. “There’s so much space now! Did you know we had an unopened bottle of ranch dressing from two years ago?” There had been multiple.

I smiled as Kier gushed about the things we had gotten done this week. All he had needed was an extra set of hands, and I was more than happy to provide that. He and Tavian had been doing just fine on their own, but now that I was here, it was smooth sailing. Mostly.

“That sounds like things are working out well, then,” Lord Malric said.

He fed one of the kids while I fed another, and Tavian fed the third. Although we used the term “fed” quite loosely, considering all three of the kids were scooping up their pasta and tossing it back on the table.

“That is enough,” Lord Malric spoke, his voice holding enough authority to have the inner dragons of the children perk up and listen. His voice wasn’t scary or punishing, just commanding.

And what did my mind jump to? Imagining what that voice would sound like being bossy in bed. I needed to get a grip or five. This was my job, and I should be focused on the children and not on their hot relative.

Their inner dragons listened to his command. For about thirty seconds. Which honestly, was a really long time given their age. I was impressed.

Then they were also looking at their grandpa, who they obviously adored. Flint broke into a grin and giggled, flinging his fork in the air—which in turn launched several

noodles into Lord Malric's hair, along with a few splotches of tomato sauce on his face.

A giggle erupted out of me, and I quickly covered my mouth with both hands. I should not be laughing at a man of his status. It was stepping over the line for sure. But also, it was hilarious. Had he seemed upset by it, that would've been a different story, but he didn't. If anything, he was equally amused.

"Hmm, seems your new manny thinks this is quite funny, young Flint. But it won't be so funny if I fling some at him, will it?"

It probably would've been funnier, but I kept that thought to myself. He didn't know that the mere thought of a dragon as old and powerful as him flinging food to get his grandbabies laughing was going to be the highlight of my week.

Flint giggled again, clapping his hands happily.

"You are fantastic with them," I said. He truly was. I'd worked with a lot of great families during my lifetime, and it was rare for me to see extended family so in tune with the little ones' needs. I was impressed.

"Ah yes. Comes with practice." He smiled down at the children with a soft look of fondness that stirred some inappropriate feelings in me. He was my boss's father and getting a crush on him was the last thing I needed to be doing. Still, my heart melted, and if Ruby hadn't let out a screech just then, I might've turned into a full-on puddle of goo watching Malric with his grandchildren.

He grabbed a napkin from the table and wiped the tomato from his face, then reached for the noodle in his hair. He missed it. He reached again. Another miss.

"Oh, let me," I said, and reached over. I told myself it was because he needed the

help, but that was a lie. I wanted to touch him, to feel his hair, to be close to him. Crap. I was in trouble.

His eyes met mine as I threaded my fingers through his soft hair, grabbing the noodle and dropping it back onto the table. I lingered a few moments too long.

“There,” I said.

“Thank you,” he replied. “I did not plan on wearing the spaghetti tonight, but I’m glad I could be of service.”

“Perhaps you should try it out at the next board meeting,” I suggested.

“I’ve often thought it’d be humorous to walk around all day with a stain on my shirt to see how long it took anyone to point it out.”

For most Alphas in his position, I had a feeling no one would ever say anything out of fear that they’d lash out. Looking foolish for some was a fate worse than death. But with Malic, it wouldn’t surprise me if the first person he greeted was the one who told him. He was so much more approachable than his position. It was probably why this clan was thriving the way they were.

“I think you did that once, Dad,” Tavian said, “and it was all day. No one said a word. In fact, several people started doing it just out of solidarity with you.”

That surprised me... a lot. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. They wanted to protect him, which was very different than being afraid to tell him. It was out of love.

Lord Malric rolled his eyes.

“Not going to lie, it’s hilarious,” I said. “They really let it go all day, while at the same time staining their own clothes? That’s priceless.”

“It wasn’t quite like that. My son exaggerates.” He shot him some side-eye. Was he embarrassed by the story or was it me, a mouse who was not from his clan, having heard it?

“What was it like?” Now I was invested. Fine, I’d been invested since I first took in the alpha. But I was extra invested.

“I can tell you all about it on the way to the park.”

Both his son and son-in-law gave each other looks, then watched me as if I somehow held some sort of magical answer they needed. No pressure there. But also, in that moment, I wasn’t thinking about them; my every single thought was occupied with the alpha before me, the one that was so far out of my league that we weren’t even in the same division, the one who was old enough to be my father—heck, my great-great-great grandfather, the one who stole my breath away, the one I had no business wanting. Crap. This wasn’t good. At this rate, I was going to cross a line and be fired before I even reached my first paycheck.

The question remained: Did I care? Apparently not, because the next words out of my mouth were, “I can’t wait to hear it. Let me help clean up so we can go before the bugs come out.”

Was I making a huge mistake? Probably. Was the sexy dragon who was wrapped around not one, but three little fingers, worth the risk? My gut said yes.

Who knew—maybe we’d make it halfway to the park and I’d already be bored of him. That would be for the best, right? Who needs attraction and unprofessional feelings toward the boss’s father getting in the way of a good gig, anyway?

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Chapter 5

Malric

C lan leaders in the past had a lot more—or rather, a lot different —responsibility. They met with other clan leaders in person, all of them bringing their strongest guards in case a fight broke out amongst the dragons. It was all a show of power and wealth.

The expectations included being dressed in our best furs or whatever the fashion at the time was. I'd gone through more wardrobes than any person had any business doing in my years, and none of them were for me. Nope. It was all to play the part. We even had props... guards who were there as a show of force to show our strength and not for actual protection. I was so glad we'd moved on from that.

Nowadays, we brought our lawyers and we wore suits. Any disputes were handled via Zoom meetings and other digital nonsense instead of wings, talons, swords, and flames.

It was great... but also way less exciting.

There were even times I almost missed sword play. It had been a long time since I attached a scabbard to my belt and carried a mighty sword around. If I showed up that way now, they'd accuse me of being on the way to cosplay at a ComiCon or heading to a Renaissance faire.

At least in today's age, my role as clan leader was more about making sure my members were happy and healthy, rather than fighting over territory or settling other

disputes with violence. We were much more civilized now. Or at least we pretended to be.

“Did you wish to attend the fundraiser next week, sir?” my assistant, Olivia asked.

I groaned. “Must I?” I understood the value of fundraisers and my presence at them, but they were boring, and I always felt like I was on display. Why was it I couldn’t just write a check and stay home again?

She grinned at me, that knowing glance that told her she liked this small bit of power she had. “Yes. And it’s been quite a while since you went with a date on your arm. Perhaps we can find someone suitable to accompany you?”

My immediate thoughts went to Ollie. If I had to go on a date, why couldn’t it be with someone like him? No, not like him—him.

But no. That would be inappropriate. I couldn’t take my grandchildren’s manny as my date to a fundraiser. He wasn’t even a dragon. Asking him to be in a room full of high-powered dragons was unfair to him. There was no way that would be a good time for him.

Not that these events were good times for anyone. My dates were always one of my advisor’s sisters or a close friend. They were never anyone that I was actually interested in.

I’d never attended events with my mate. We hadn’t been very high up in the clan hierarchy when we were first mated. We were simply normal dragons living a normal life. Times had been much simpler when he was alive. Warmer, richer, more vibrant. Living without my mate was like living in black and white.

Ollie wasn’t slated to attend the event. He wasn’t an official clan member. Though

now that he worked for Tavian and Kier, they could petition for him to have membership. Would he want that?

I, of course, would approve that... or maybe I shouldn't. No, I should. A strong clan leader didn't allow themselves to be controlled by their feelings.

Sure, it was dangerous for me to be so close to Ollie. Something about him... I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew deep in my soul that I was drawn to him in ways I hadn't been drawn to anyone before. Not since...

No. I couldn't let myself think like that. It wasn't good for either of us.

Despite knowing we could never become anything, every day that I was away from him, my dragon grew more and more restless. My beast was ridiculous.

He hadn't always been. I wouldn't still be here if it weren't for his strength. My dragon had remained stoic and uninterested ever since my mate passed. If he crumbled the way I had... things would not have... they'd be different and not in a good way.

What had changed? Suddenly, he was rumbling to life and causing all sorts of problems. All over an omega I had no right even noticing. Sure, he was attractive, but I'd met many good-looking omegas over the centuries. It had to be more than that.

"You should find a date, Dad," Tavian said as he came into the room.

I hadn't realized he was so close. That was how distracted I was. Had he been listening the entire time? Knowing him, he might've set the entire thing up. He didn't like the fact that I was still alone, no matter how much I reminded him I wasn't. I had him and his mate and my grandbabies. My life was filled with love.

Sure, it wasn't the love of a mate, but fate had already given me that. I had that time in my life. Dwelling on the past was never the way to move forward.

"You know, just because we have heightened senses and can hear everything doesn't mean it's polite to butt into someone else's conversation."

"But it's relevant to me. Since I'll be sitting at the same table with you," he said with a grin. That was a stretch and a half. "I know plenty of eligible bachelors we could hook you up with."

My dragon came dangerously close to the surface.

"That won't be necessary, Tavian. Olivia, I will find my own date. Or I will attend alone."

Alone. Definitely alone. The thought of going with a random person for the sake of appearances made my stomach turn.

There were plenty of friends I could ask to go with me, and I supposed that wouldn't be the worst idea. I'd done it countless times. Why was the thought of it so distasteful?

Objectively, being alone at these events meant I didn't have to dance or fetch anyone drinks. I could sink into the scenery with no one knowing. It was perfect. But that didn't sound good either.

Argh, I was a mess today. "Did you need something, Tavian?"

"Not really. Except that Ollie's been working out so well. Things have been great for Kier and me. In fact, I just made arrangements with Ollie for him to watch the kids over the weekend. Kier and I will visit the Ebonshire Clan to do the ceremonial glad-

handing. It's a short trip, but it'll be our first overnight away from the kids. We might even make it two nights."

That was a huge sign of trust.

"That's great," I said. "You two deserve some time away."

"Would you mind just checking in? I know Ollie will have things well in hand, but I'm sure it would help the kids to have a familiar face, and I would understand if he needed a little break. Three is a handful. Besides, you know they love their grandpa."

Like I needed an excuse to visit the grandkids. Even if it meant coming face to face with the scrumptious Ollie and having to navigate those feelings.

"Of course. I'm there Friday nights for dinner anyway—I'd be happy to visit Saturday as well." Then again, I didn't wish for Ollie to think I didn't trust him or that my son and his mate didn't either. Based on what I'd seen, he was more than capable of managing the children.

"Great. I'll get you the report of topics I plan on talking with Ebonshire about. I'll be sure to give Lord Rhaziel your best."

"Absolutely. It's been a while since I've seen him."

He continued telling me about his plans, but I heard none of them. My mind was focused on Ollie and how I was going to be seeing him soon. Why couldn't I get him out of my head?

"Dad." Tavian's hand settled on my shoulder, snapping me out my head. "Were you listening at all?"

“Not really, sorry. Start again, and I will focus. I promise.”

“What has your head in such a spin? Anything I can do?” Leave it to Tavian to think about how to help me when I was the one who’d just spaced out.

“It’s nothing. I think I need to let my wings out is all.” Getting altitude and possibly burning some shit would go a long way. Probably. Maybe. I hoped.

“It’s not because of the fundraiser?”

“No. Why? By all accounts it’s set to be our most successful yet.”

“I didn’t mean that.” Apparently, kids were never too old to roll their eyes at their parents. “I was talking about your lack of date. Real talk, Dad—we were talking, and we think it’s time you considered dating.”

“We? Who’s we?” If we included Ollie, I might as well find a cave to hide in for the next few centuries. But that was ridiculous. Why would he be talking about my lack of male companionship? He wouldn’t, but somehow everything always seemed to lead back to Ollie.

“It was at the staff meeting, obviously.” Another eye roll.

“Then have HR send someone my way.” Because sometimes you just had to laugh at yourself.

“If I thought you were serious, I’d be headed there now, but seriously, consider it. I’m not saying to hop on the dating apps and fill your calendar, but asking a nice omega out to dinner or maybe going to a human bar and seeing if you click with anyone?”

My dragon slammed into me. He wasn't having any of that. It took all I had to push him back down.

"I think I will keep my life the way it is. I've had my time with my mate, and now I have the clan and the kids and..." Ollie's name almost popped out. "And life is pretty good."

"Dad, you deserve better than pretty good. You deserve to love again." He pulled me into a hug, his emotions rolling off of him. "Think about it. Can you promise me that much?"

"Sure." It wouldn't go anywhere, but I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about this conversation even if I tried, so it wasn't a lie. "But first, let's get back to this weekend. Tell me about your plans with Lord Rhaziel again, and this time I'll be sure to listen."

And I kept my promise. My son had a really great head on his shoulders, and this weekend was going to be good for the clan... and for him and his mate. Carving out extra time for just the two of them was important. You never knew when the goddess would call your mate home, and you didn't ever want to look back with regrets. This was something I knew all too well.

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Chapter 6

Ollie

“P op-Pop!” Opaline babbled, slapping her spoon against the highchair. It was absolutely stinking adorable the way all three of them loved their grandfather.

“Yes, I believe Pop-Pop is on his way.” I had to smile at the nickname.

He was “Pop-Pop” to Opaline, “Mali” for Flint, and just “Pop” to Ruby. They each had their own special nickname for their grandfather.

Grandfather. Obviously, it was true, but also, it felt impossible. He was so sexy and strong and... I was traveling down a path I shouldn't be once again. Malric was the father of my boss and the clan leader. I shouldn't have been thinking of him as sexy, and I sure as sunshine shouldn't have been wondering how his lips would feel pressed against my own, even if that had become my favorite pastime lately.

From what I'd gathered in the limited time I'd spent with Lord Malric, he was a doting grandfather—even if he didn't look like a typical grandpa.

“Hello?” Malric's voice called out as the door clicked open, followed by the little alarm that chimed every time it did. I was still getting used to all of the noises this place had.

The beeps were one of those security features I truly appreciated about this household. As big as it was, with me staying there alone with the kids, the extra

security gave me peace of mind. In addition to the door alarms, there were cameras at the front and back door, and in the nursery. I wasn't normally as timid as a mouse, but I had three little ones in my charge, and they counted on me to keep them safe.

"We're in the dining room!" I shouted—then winced. Shouting probably was not the proper way to greet the lord of the clan. But it was either shout or repeat myself a bunch of times with the size of this place.

He came into the room wearing a pair of black slacks and a blue button-down shirt, his tie undone and loose around his neck, the top button open. My mouth went dry. Peeking out from the V of his shirt was dark chest hair... the kind you could tangle your fingers in. The fabric of his shirt stretched against the broadness of his shoulders.

Thankfully, Flint didn't let me sit there staring for too long. He let out a squeal when I took too long to feed him, and I snapped my head back to my young charges.

This weekend was going to be rough and not because the kids were energetic and missing their fathers or because I was on round-the-clock duty and would be sleeping poorly. Nope. It was going to be rough because I had a full-on crush on the this alpha. I tried to deny that was what this was. It would be easier to have this be simple attraction, but nope. I liked this alpha, despite him being off limits.

"I came bearing gifts," Malric said. "Don't tell Kier." He winked.

There I went being mesmerized by him again...

The kids all let out delighted squeals, and I had to bite back the urge to join them. I'd be surprised if he ever showed up without gifts. That wasn't his way. I didn't need to tell Kier, there was no way he didn't know.

“It’s nothing too extravagant,” he said. “Just cookies from the bakery.”

“That sounds delightful. I didn’t have dessert picked out for the evening. Would you like some dinner? I’m afraid I didn’t make anything too exciting—the kids were a little extra clingy this afternoon without Kier and Tavian here.” I was babbling and oversharing, but it was that or accidentally saying something that would give my crush away, something like I couldn’t wait to watch him wrap his lips around his fork.

“I actually ate at work, but thank you for the offer. Is there anything I can help with?”

So much for watching his lips.

“Well... it’s bath night,” I said. “You could help wrangle all three of them?”

My original plan was to do each one of them as they woke up from their naps, but without their fathers home, their naps were one on my back, the second in the front carrier, and the third in the stroller as I paced in the backyard. That hadn’t been the plan. We’d gone out for some fresh air, but life was what happened when you made other plans or whatever it is they said.

He chuckled, probably envisioning the mess bathtime brought. “I’d be happy to do that.”

I hadn’t expected help for the evening. Kier told me that Malric often stopped by on the weekend and to call him if I needed help, but I’d assumed he was just letting me know I wasn’t alone, not that there would actually be company. If I had suspected as much, I’d have been sure worn my good ass jeans.

Part of me wondered if I should let him help—considering it was my job, not his. He should be enjoying his time with his grandkids, not doing free labor.

“If you want to just entertain one while I bathe the other two, then we can swap—”

“Nonsense,” Malric said. “I can do the bathing. It’s actually my favorite part, the way their eyes light up as they pour the water out of the measuring cups or push the little boats around. And besides, there are so many modern conveniences to make the process a lot easier than when my boys were younger. When Tavian was born, we just dunked him in the river to get him clean.”

He had to be exaggerating, right? I’d never asked them how old they were, so maybe not. Either way, the thought of my boss being dunked in a river amused me.

“Yeah, I suppose it had to be different back in the day, without everything we have now.”

“You’re not kidding. Though, lucky for me, we did have some modern conveniences. We didn’t actually use the river. After all, it was easy for dragons to keep bathwater warm when we could just breathe fire onto it. Thank goodness for modern plumbing.”

I laughed heartily, trying to imagine such a thing. “I never thought of that. But how convenient to be able to breathe fire. You didn’t have to worry about keeping a fire stoked either.”

“Nope. Ready-made fire all the time.” He leaned in slightly, a smile tugging at his lips. “And chopping down trees was incredibly easy when you could turn into a dragon the size of a house and clear out a forest with the swipe of your tail.”

My eyes widened. I could almost see the dragon in his eyes. It was easy to forget how small I was compared to all the shifters I was surrounded by, but I didn’t think they were that ginormous.

“Are you really that large?” Then I realized how that sounded. I slapped a hand over my mouth. “My apologies, Lord Malric, that was—”

He chuckled. “It’s not inappropriate to ask a dragon his size. The same can’t be said for our age. And yes, I am that large.” He winked.

My heart thundered in my chest, and goddess help me, if I wasn’t thinking about something other than his beast.

Opaline let out a squeal and tossed her plate to the floor.

Right. I was working. Not flirting. I was most certainly not having inappropriate thoughts about my boss’s father and the size of his cock. Nope. Not doing any of that.

“Looks like that one’s done. How about I take him upstairs first?” Malric gestured to Flint.

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

Together, the two of us worked in tandem. Malric bathed them, then handed them off to me so I could get them into their pajamas. Although I wasn’t sure how much was bathing and how much was playing sink-the-boat in the water.

We managed to get the job done with no screaming or crying, an abundance of giggles, and only a small lake of water on the floor.

I laughed when Malric came down the stairs with Ruby in his arms. She was patting his cheeks like they were a drum set while he made silly noises.

“Sir, your shirt is soaked through.”

He looked down at himself. “Ah. It is. That’s no bother.”

He set Ruby on the floor, then finished unbuttoning his shirt and pulled it off. Now I was the one bothered—hot and bothered that was.

He wore a white tank top underneath—and my mouth went dry just looking at him. That chest hair that’d piqued my interest earlier in the evening was on full display now. It too was damp and clung to him in all the right places. Letting him help with the bath wasn’t the best idea.

“They seem quite sleepy. I suppose putting them down for the night shouldn’t be too hard,” Malric said.

I cleared my throat. “Nope. I have their bottles ready.”

“Fantastic,” he said. “I haven’t mastered carrying two at a time.”

“That’s fine. I have.” And then what did I do? I winked. So much for the don’t flirt with the boss’s father plan. Thank gods, he didn’t notice, or if he did, he was gentleman enough to ignore it.

Putting the kids to bed was a lot easier with the two of us working in tandem. Not a single fuss was made, and we were able to walk out of the bedroom with all three of them sound asleep in record time. They wouldn’t stay that way, of course, but they’d be down for at least six hours. Eight if the wind died down.

“Thanks for all your help.” I wanted to ask him to stay, maybe watch a movie. I knew better. The best result would be him politely declining and then avoiding being alone with me. The worst? I’d lose my job. I needed to keep everything professional.

It would be so much easier if he was mean or ugly or looked even a fraction of his

age. But he was none of that.

“It was no problem. I enjoy spending time with... with the kids. It’s nice being able to dote on them and then hand them back to their parents when they get grumpy. Not that they get grumpy. They are practically perfect.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“As perfect as they are, it was nice having a second set of hands.”

He watched my mouth as I spoke, and for half a second, I thought he was going to lean in for a kiss. Or maybe it was wishful thinking. One thing it wasn’t, was reality. Because the next thing I knew, he was walking out the door, leaving me standing there and wondering if maybe this wasn’t the job for me, after all.

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Chapter 7

Malric

Something about Ollie brought out my dragon. That was a lie. Everything about Ollie did.

I found myself utterly unable to stay away. I tried to distract myself with work and the mile-long to-do list I had for both my personal life and the clan. Nothing worked. The man was etched into my every thought.

It was so bad that I nearly kissed him when he thanked me for helping with the kids. And worse than that, I couldn't stop thinking about the look of disappointment on his face when I didn't. Had I read him correctly or was I interpreting things the way I wanted them to be instead of the way they actually were? Probably the latter. Still, I couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if I'd leaned in just a tiny bit more.

The next morning—despite the mountain of paperwork I had waiting for me and the long list of plans to finalize for upcoming clan events—I drove over to my son's home instead. Most of the list could wait, I added on there in my feeble attempt at restraint.

It took all I had to wait that long and not show up in the middle of the night—or for that matter, to leave in the first place. I'd nearly turned around the second I was out the door, feigned losing something or offering to let Ollie take a break or possibly tasting those tantalizing lips. Yeah, it was better I went home.

I lied to myself, saying I was heading there to see my grandchildren. And it was true, I did love spending time with them, but I wanted to see Ollie just as much. Perhaps more. That should've been the sign for me to turn around.

His smile had me captivated in a way I hadn't felt before. And that was only one of his attributes that called to me. He was trouble, in the very best of ways. If he knew what he did to me, he wouldn't have been so open to having me around, that was for sure.

The drive was short, and when I arrived, Ollie had all three kids in a stroller, walking down the sidewalk. I'd arrived just on time, by the look of things.

His face lit up with a broad smile the moment he saw me. Was that because he needed help or was that smile for me? Mine was for him, that was for sure.

"Lord Malric! I didn't know you were coming today."

I wished he would skip the whole Lord thing. Being respected for my title was great and expected from most, but with Ollie, it was like there was an invisible wall erected between us when he used it. I didn't want him to see me as my position, not as the clan leader and not as a grandfather for the children he manned for. I wanted him to see me as a man... an alpha.

"Yeah, I'm avoiding work." I left off the part about longing to see his sexy smile. "If you're headed out somewhere, I don't have to stay—"

"Oh, no. Come with us. We're going to the park. I thought the fresh air would be good for the three of them." He leaned closer to me and lowered his voice. "I'm also hoping it'll help them sleep well tonight."

"Fresh air is great for that."

He leaned away, and I missed him being close to me instantly. It was ridiculous... utter nonsense that I couldn't seem to get enough of this omega. Yet, I wasn't going to run away. I couldn't. I fell into step beside him as we made our way down the sidewalk, wishing I were beside him, our fingers woven together.

It was already mid-afternoon, and the day was warm, though the light breeze made it bearable and kept the bugs at bay. Some light clouds were rolling in, but no rain ones in sight. It was the perfect day for a stroll.

"I trust they napped well?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from my wandering thoughts. The children were still on a two-a-day nap schedule, although they were getting to the stage where it would soon morph into one.

"They did. And they slept well last night, too. All three woke up exactly at eight. They were a little sad that their dads weren't here, but we had a FaceTime call, which helped." Technology was such a wonder like that. It wasn't the same as having them home, but it was far better than not seeing them at all.

"We had a slow morning—some jungle gym play, a too-short nap, a lunch they were very unimpressed with, and then a proper nap this afternoon."

"Good to hear," I said, then hesitated continuing. I wasn't one of his bosses, and this conversation was heading into boss/employee territory and I didn't want that.

"You're welcome to stay for dinner, Lord Malric," Ollie said. "I have a chicken dish in the crock pot."

"That sounds delightful. Thank you." He could've told me he was making dry toast and I'd have agreed with a smile on.

He glanced over at me, smiling.

“And you don’t have to keep calling me Lord Malric. Just Mal is fine.” My heart gave a painful little pang even as I said it. No one had called me Mal in... years. Not since my omega. He would have no idea it was reserved for so few, and I originally meant to say Malric, but that smile... that smile wanted him to be more than everyone else.

Something about the nickname felt right, and I couldn’t wait to hear it from Ollie’s lips—from his gentle voice, his warmth.

“All right, Mal.”

Once we reached the park, Ollie laid out a blanket, tossed a few toys onto it, and let the kids roam. They were still too small for most of the playground equipment, but the fresh air was nice, as was the change of scenery and having the other young children playing nearby of varying ages.

One little one toddled over, his father trailing behind him. The kid was adorable. The alpha? He was conventionally attractive. Why couldn’t he be old and gross? Not old like me old, but human old.

The man held out a hand to Ollie.

“Hi there, I’m Bryan. I’ve seen you here before. Are you new to the area?”

Ollie smiled back politely, and I had to fight back a growl. Who was this man to flirt with my omega?

My omega? Where did that come from? He wasn’t mine.

Apparently, I didn’t hold back my dragon well enough.

My grandson, who had been climbing into my lap, let out a small wail and looked at me with big, sad eyes. Tears welled around his long lashes. He must've sensed my dragon's distress, for this wasn't fear. It was empathy. He was such an amazing child.

Ollie immediately held out his hands, and the little one went to him after looking into my eyes, which were far more dragon than human. Was he able to communicate with my beast like this? It wasn't the first time he had shown signs of a connection.

"Not new, no," Ollie said, still smiling, though now more tightly. "I'm the manny for these three. This is their grandfather."

The human looked at me, eyes widening.

He was probably wondering how I could possibly be a grandfather .

By human standards, he'd be right. I didn't look the part. I gave him my best stern look that I used in the boardroom. I told myself it was to make me look older, smiling would make me look too young, but in reality, I didn't want this human feeling like he was allowed to talk with my Ollie.

"Nice to meet you," I lied. There was nothing nice about it.

"You too. It's a great day to get the kids out, isn't it?" His grin was too wide, his eyes too flashy with the way they sparkled in the sun. Was he so oblivious to my not-so-subtle warning? "My omega's a doctor and unfortunately on call this weekend, but maybe we'll see you all around again? It's great to have other kids of this age in the area."

"Absolutely." Ollie shot me a pleading look. As an omega, even if he wasn't a part of my clan, he must sense my dragon's domineering personality rearing its ugly head.

I pasted on a grin. A mostly real one this time. The man was mated, which meant he probably wasn't trying to hit on Ollie the way it first appeared, and if he was, Ollie would want no part of that. He wasn't the type. "Agreed. The children need playmates."

Bryan didn't leave as I hoped, but my dragon settled a bit, which was good. He didn't need to push his way out in a park full of humans all because he was jealous. That was no way for clan leader to behave.

The children all toddled around one another and took turns picking at the grass and tossing it at one another. Meanwhile, Ollie and Bryan compared notes on what it was like to deal with one-year-olds. Ollie even went so far as to take Bryan's number and promised to share it with Kier and Tavian, so they could meet Bryan and his omega. It made sense. Knowing your neighbors was important. But I still didn't like Bryan having any access to Ollie.

I spent the whole conversation brooding like a freaking teenager. My dragon sat just below the surface, my scales hidden underneath my long sleeves. I needed to get a grip.

Finally, it came time for us to leave. I was not sad to see Bryan go.

"He was nice," Ollie said once we had started the trek back to the house.

"Yes, a perfectly adequate human." It was as close as I could come to a compliment.

Ollie laughed and tucked his arm through mine while we worked in tandem to push the stroller. My dragon instantly settled. This was more like it, the two of us touching as we walked.

"Humans can be good friends too, you know." I didn't need to see his eyes to know

they were rolling, and it was fair, I deserved it.

My issues with Bryan had nothing to do with his being human and everything to do with whatever these feelings were growing between Ollie and me.

“I know. I just...” I had no reason not to like the man. He had been very pleasant. Plus, he was mated. He had a child. I just didn’t like him being around my ma—Ollie. My Ollie.

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Chapter 8

Ollie

“The kids are asleep.” Malric settled onto the couch next to me as if his limbs couldn’t hold him upright anymore. A dramatic sigh escaped his lips. There was a lot of kids... full stop. But especially when they were clutchmates.

I laughed. “Forgot what it was like to have little ones?” I teased.

“Oh, no. I remember all too well. It just feels more exhausting now.”

“Because you’re so old?” I pushed my shoulder into him and stuck out my tongue. Way to make myself appear older and wiser.

“Ouch.”

“Ouch as in I hurt your shoulder or your pride?” I watched his face, hoping I wasn’t crossing any lines. I felt comfortable with him, comfortable enough to be myself and have fun. That didn’t mean I should be doing so. He was still related to my bosses. It wasn’t like I randomly met him at a coffee shop and it was time to get my flirt on.

“A little from column A and a little from column B. I’m not that old, not as far as dragons go.” Great. I hurt his feelings.

“I didn’t mean either. And for what it’s worth, you look great for your age.”

“For my age?” He quirked a brow.

“Period. You look great period.” And I needed to stop going down this path. And quick. “Anyhoo, tell me about what it was like when your kids were young?”

His lips turned into a half smile, and his eyes took on a faraway look. “Well, as you have already indicated... it was a long, long, long, long time ago.”

I couldn’t help but giggle.

“But seriously, it was a lot different but also the same. Kids are kids. That doesn’t change.”

“That makes sense.” But didn’t give me insight into the alpha I was crushing so hard on.

“Tell me about you. How did you get into manning?”

Was he asking about how I chose this career or why I was alone? That one I’d heard a lot over the years, as if being a manny was somehow such a horrible job that people would only take it on if they had no other choice, like they wanted to be married with kids but no one wanted them. Malric wasn’t that kind of guy, though. At least I didn’t think he was. I was still getting to know him, and it would be fair to say that my attraction to him might cloud my judgement.

“I’ve always loved kids. I’m certified to teach, and while I was looking for a teaching job, I got a gig as a manny. Turned out I liked that a lot better.” As great as being in the classroom was, there was so much grading and paperwork. With my job, instead of spending my time on that, I was able to focus on the parts of the job I loved. “I’ve manny’d for three different families now. I love it.”

“You’re great at it.” Malric’s gaze locked on mine. “It’s like it comes naturally to you.”

I leaned closer, licked my lips. The scent of him drew me in like a moth to a flame. For a moment I lost myself in the what-if. What if I leaned in even closer? What if I put a hand on his thigh and felt the heat of him beneath my palm? What if...

Then reality came crashing back.

This was my boss’s father! It was bad enough I had the naughty thoughts I did about him. But to actually contemplate acting on them? That would only result in disaster.

I got up from the couch. “Let me get you—” I tripped over my own feet, and before I knew it, I was falling directly into Malric’s lap. Because of course I did.

He caught me—his hand clasped over my arm, while my body landed on him. Our heads collided, his nose was mere centimeters from mine.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

I was categorically not all right.

With him this close to me, his scent was the only thing I could think about. It wrapped around me, trapping me, keeping me from moving. My gaze dropped to his lips. Surely a taste wouldn’t hurt.

Mine . My mouse told me so.

He was mine, and I wanted him more than I ever thought possible.

Mine .

I closed the distance between us, crashing my lips onto his, not caring about the consequences. If this was all I got to have with him, so be it.

For a split second, I thought maybe it was just me, his body frozen against mine. Maybe I acted too impulsively and Malric didn't feel this attraction. Maybe he thought me too young or my beast too small.

But just as I was about to break away and apologize a gazillion times, he kissed me back.

Fire warmed in my belly. His hands went to my waist, and he lifted me as if I weighed nothing. He settled me onto his lap so that my knees were on either side of him. The kiss deepened, his tongue sweeping into my mouth and devouring me. I moaned against him and rocked my hips.

"Mal," I moaned against his mouth.

Malric threaded his fingers in my hair and held my head with his firm grip. My cock ached, and I rocked forward, needing the friction. Needing to cum.

"Ollie. Tell me you want this," he said.

"Fuck. So much. Take me upstairs."

It was reckless. Stupid. Inappropriate. But I was lost in his touch, and there was no returning.

Holding me tightly against him, Malric stood. I locked my legs around him as he began to walk. I grabbed the baby monitor. The three angels were all still asleep, and I prayed to the dragon gods that they would stay that way.

The trip to my room was quick, but not quick enough. I needed him naked, his body pressed against my own.

Mal closed the door once we entered, and he placed me on the bed. He made quick work of removing his clothes until he stood in front of me gloriously naked. He was a work of art, and I wanted to explore every inch of him with my mouth.

I palmed my erection through my jeans.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Care to join me?” he asked. “You seem overdressed.”

Right. I was supposed to be doing something. It was his fault... he looked too freaking good.

I tugged at my shirt, pulling it over my head. My pants were next. My clothing was gone in record time.

Malric’s gaze roved over my body. I was smaller in stature than him, and I felt very much like the prey shifter that I was when his gaze was zeroed in on me. The heat in his eyes spoke volumes. He wanted me the same way I wanted him.

“Well? Are you going to let me get cold in here by myself, dragon?”

He growled. The rumble set shivers down my spine. “No, mouse. I won’t be letting you get cold.”

He covered me with his body, and his lips were on mine again. I opened my legs and let him settle between them. His heat enveloped me, lighting my skin on fire.

His lips left mine, and he trailed kisses down my neck, meanwhile his hand snuck between my legs until he found my hole. Slick leaked from me, and he used it to

smear around my rim.

“Fuck, I bet you taste delicious, Ollie. So much slick. All for me.”

“Yes,” I breathed. “Only you. Taste me, alpha.”

A groan rumbled out of him. “Later. I want to fuck you first.”

“Yes!” Fuck, I wanted that. So much. My body burned with need to have him fill me.

My hips bucked in invitation. His fingers danced around my rim until they finally entered me. First one, then two.

I kept my hands on him. His broad shoulders, his powerful back. His muscles flexed and moved as he touched me. I pressed my lips to his pecs, letting his chest rub against my face.

“Malric. Please. I’m ready for your cock. Please.”

He sucked at the skin on my neck, and my cock ached with need. He hadn’t even touched it yet and I was ready to erupt. His own cock was hard, pressed against my middle. It would take time for me to take that considerable length inside me, but I wanted the chance.

“You’re so responsive for me, baby.”

“Need you.”

Every instinct I had screamed for me to be claimed by him. He was mine. He was my mate. The one I’d been searching for, waiting for my whole life.

He withdrew in his fingers and cleaned them off with his tongue, sucking the two digits into his mouth with a loud moan. “Delicious,” he said. “Just as I suspected.”

Then he was gripping my hips and settling his cock between my thighs. He pushed forward, the tip of his cock pressing against my hole. I opened for him. The stretch of having his thick cock breach my hole burned. I gritted my teeth and relaxed, letting my body open for him naturally.

“There it is,” he said. “Fuck, baby, you take my cock so nicely.”

I whimpered with need. I needed him deeper. I needed his mouth on me. I needed his cum to fill me up.

“More, dragon. Please.”

Malric pressed on. My body accepted him. My channel walls clenched around him, and he moaned with each inch that he drove into me.

“Ollie. So fucking tight, Ollie.”

My legs wrapped around him, and I urged him deeper until he was buried deep within me.

I kissed him then when he was buried to the hilt in my channel. We were one. One being, one heart beating in sync.

When he moved, I thought I might die from the force of it. He stole my breath as he thrust into me, chasing my orgasm.

It built quickly, faster than I wanted it to. I wanted this to last forever, but instead, I had to fight to keep from coming too soon.

When Malric kissed me, I couldn't hold back anymore. Cum spurted from my cock, coating my stomach.

He followed soon after, his seed releasing deep within my body.

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Chapter 9

Malric

I didn't regret my night with Ollie. Not a single bit. I could never regret it, and I doubted very much that it would be a one-time thing. It did, however, throw a wrench into some aspects of my life, and I wasn't sure what to do about that.

Like my relationship with my son and Kier. I doubted very much that they would appreciate me dating their manny. They would be happy I found someone, sure, but there was no denying that awkwardness would abound. My head was racing with possibilities on how to protect Ollie from our joining messing with his job, and each time, I came up with exactly zero.

Unlike me, Ollie snoozed peacefully, while I'd been up for over an hour.

"Oh," Ollie sighed and stretched next to me. His head rested on my chest and his arms reached into the air, stretching the sleep away. "You're thinking awfully hard for this early in the morning."

His sleep-filled voice had my dragon perking up. He was all-in with Ollie. I was too. I just wasn't sure how that was going to work.

I chuckled and kissed the top of his head. "I can't help it," I said. "Did the kids sleep through the night?"

Ollie laughed outright. "Goodness, no. You slept right through it, though. They were

up twice. Flint slept through the fussying, but Opaline and Ruby were both up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have—”

“Nonsense.” Ollie cuddled closer once he finished stretching. The whole length of his body was plastered against me. “It’s my job to take care of them.”

“Still, I was here to help.” And instead, I distracted him.

“I don’t think the plan was for you to stay the night,” Ollie said, pushing up on his elbow and looking down at me. He was absolutely delicious-looking in this state—hair mussed, pillow lines on his face. His teasing smile had me feeling all fluttery. “Or was it?”

How was I supposed to answer that? I opted to skip over it completely and to change the subject instead. “What’s your plan for today?”

“As soon as Tavian and Kier get home, I have the afternoon free. Maybe we could grab dinner?”

“I’d like that very much,” I said. “I have some work to do. I should get up and get going soon so I can get it done. Unless you need help with the kids?” I didn’t want to leave him, but also, my job still needed to be done. Also, it was probably better to tell my son about Ollie than have him discover it on his own.

“We should be fine. The kids will be getting up soon. I should get their breakfast going.” He laid his head back down on my chest.

“You don’t seem in a hurry to do that.” And I wasn’t in a hurry for him to leave my side.

“I realize it’s been a while since you’ve had babies this young, but the rule is: never wake a sleeping child. If they’re going to sleep, I’m going to let them.” He snuggled in closer. “And besides, I like being here with you.”

“I seem to remember the other rule being: sleep when the baby sleeps, but I’m not going to argue with you.”

“I appreciate it. It’s interesting that the ‘experts’ were spouting that nonsense back then too, don’t you think?”

I winced at the “back then” comment. But he wasn’t wrong. My last clutch was one hundred and fifty years old. Several lifetimes separated Ollie and me.

We were quiet for a moment longer, and then Ollie sat up again, looking at me. “Is this going to be awkward with Tavian? Because you and I—?”

I grasped his hand and kissed his fingertips. “No, it doesn’t have to be. You and I are adults, right? Tavian will have to deal with us.”

I spoke with more confidence than I felt. Tavian didn’t like me being alone, but also... this was Ollie, not some random omega I met somewhere. It was different.

“Of course. And I mean... I never expected to find my mate. But now that I have, I—”

I stilled, holding my breath. Mates.

We weren’t. We couldn’t be. Could we?

Ollie must’ve sensed my unease. He went quiet as he looked at me, his body still.

“Ollie,” I said. “We can’t be mates. Our chemistry is off the charts, I’ll give you that, but—”

He scrambled away from me, pulling the sheet over his body. Fuck. I sure knew how to turn a mood on its ass, didn’t I?

“What do you mean?” His voice quivered.

The cold air hit me like a bucket of water, and I reached for him. He scrambled farther away.

“I realize that you had— That you lost— I’m not— But what we have is—” He shrank in on himself, and I hated that I was the one who caused that to happen. His eyes darted around, confusion scrunching his forehead. It was like I was watching him break before my eyes and all because of me.

“You... It’s just impossible. Ollie, we can’t be mates.”

He recoiled like I slapped him.

“I know what I feel,” Ollie said. “You do, too. But I understand why you’re denying it.”

He wasn’t wrong. Never before had I felt anything as explosive as this—except for with my previous husband. But that ship had sailed. You only get one mate in life, and I had lost mine.

“Ollie, I care for you a great deal.” I slapped my mouth shut before I found myself in a it’s-not-you-it’s-me speech that would only lead to more heartache.

He winced. “Let’s not talk anymore.” He got out of bed, keeping the sheet wrapped

around him.

“I’d like to rescind my offer for dinner,” he said, not meeting my gaze.

“I—Ollie, please. Let’s not—”

He shook his head, then walked away.

There I was, left with my thoughts—the absolute worst place to be. How could I have messed up something so beautiful so quickly.

I tried once more to talk to him when I made coffee in the kitchen after I had gotten dressed, but he shook his head. I didn’t want to keep pushing and make it worse, but also, the notion of giving up broke my heart.

“Later we can talk.” Which wasn’t a never. I was going to have to take it. “It’s too much right now, please. Your son will be home soon, and I need to get the kids ready. I’m working.”

I would be long gone by the time Tavian arrived. He’d walk in here and immediately sense something was wrong if I stayed. Or possibly even if I was gone. There was no winning here.

It was best to go. I left the house and went straight to my office. Even though it was Sunday, I could sit here and get work done. My house would be too empty and cold for right now. If I was there, I’d never be able to stop thinking about Ollie. Ha! As if location mattered. I wasn’t going to be able to stop thinking of him even when I was trying to bury myself in work.

I didn’t deny that what we had felt the day before was as close to what having a mate felt like as I had ever gotten since losing Chastain. But it was impossible, right? I

couldn't have two mates. There was no way. I'd never heard of such a thing.

When my phone rang, I jumped out of my seat. It was Vlad, one of my advisors and oldest friends. We chatted for a while about the reason he called, some sought-after work advice.

"Is everything all right? Malric, you seem very distracted," he asked.

"Well, I... I met someone," I said.

"That's wonderful. You've been alone too long. Who's the lucky person? Anyone I know?"

"Do you think... could a dragon have two mates?" I asked. I hadn't expected the words to just tumble out, but there they were. I could trust Vlad to be discreet. He wouldn't take my question lightly.

I expected him to gently let me know that it was impossible. Yet, his answer was immediate.

"Of course. I mean, it's not often, obviously, but why wouldn't a dragon be able to have two? Or any shifter for that matter?" He spoke with complete confidence and matter-of-factly.

"You're that sure?" I said. "I just assumed I would never find anybody that I could care for as much as I did Chastain."

"Well, you'll love them differently, obviously. I can't begin to even pretend to understand what it would feel like to lose a mate the way you did, but look at Charlisle the paralegal from our southern branch. He has two mates. The three of them are a triad. Why wouldn't you have two mates? Hundreds of years apart, of

course. But why not?”

My stomach dropped like it was hit with a ton of bricks. I knew Charlisle. How had I not pieced that together? Of course, it was possible. The evidence had been there all along.

Why not indeed? I’d been looking at this all wrong.

“Oh, shit. I hadn’t thought about it like that.” If a triad or more of mates was possible, though it was rare, why wouldn’t I have more than one mate a century apart? Never in the past hundred years had it occurred to me that it would be possible. I was too clouded with my grief over my loss that any sort of happiness with another person was unfathomable. “Fuck. Vlad, I think I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

There was no thinking to it. I had.

“Well, hopefully you haven’t forgotten how to grovel.”

At first, I thought he was teasing me, but he was dead serious. Good thing I never let pride get in my way. I was willing to grovel like it was my superpower.

“Courting rituals have changed over the years, so you might want to brush up on those. But I’m told that flowers are still an acceptable form of apology—not that I would know. I’m perfect and never have any issues with my mate.”

I rolled my eyes at that because I knew it wasn’t true. His mate preferred chocolates over flowers, that was the only reason he never resorted to the fragrant beauties.

“I forgot about your perfection.”

“If only you could be as perfect as me.” He chuckled.

Fuck. There was no way Ollie was ever going to forgive me.

“I have to go. Thanks for calling.” I hung up before I could hear anymore. I had work to do and a lot of it.

Chapter 10

Ollie

Don't focus on it, don't think about it.

Don't focus on it. Don't think about it.

Don't focus on it. Don't think about it.

That became my mantra for the past two hours since he left. Of course, all I was doing was focusing on it—thinking about it. How could I not? I found my mate and he rejected me. Maybe that was me being dramatic, but he didn't recognize me, and wasn't that the same thing?

I changed the sheets in my bedroom, vacuumed, swept, spritzed around a linen-scented room freshener, as if I could wipe the scent of Malric from the house. It was impossible, his scent was everywhere, a sweet torture.

I pretended it was all for the happy couple, who would be returning home today. I didn't want them to think there was any part of this weekend that was difficult. They deserved their time away.

The children were happy and content, playing on the floor. Thank goodness they eased into their day and hadn't been too upset about their fathers being gone. I didn't think I could've handled three distressed little ones this morning, not in the way they'd deserve.

I had the couch positioned in such a way that they couldn't escape, along with two different gates to keep them in the living room. This set-up would only work for a short time. Soon enough they were going to be climbers who could rival the Olympic sports climbing team, but it was working for now.

Finally, when I felt that the house was sufficiently clean, I sat down with them, and we played.

Each of them looked so much like Malric. I could see him in their eyes, in the shape of Flint's nose, the way all three of them had one singular dimple. I'd never be able to escape him, not working for this family, but I'd made a commitment to this job, and I would keep it. It wasn't their fault that I'd fallen hard for someone who didn't want me.

Perhaps I could avoid him for a while, although not for long. He was an active part of their lives, as he should be. And I wasn't silly enough to think that the truth wouldn't come out eventually.

The hardest part was that I knew in my heart of hearts that we were mates. He was mine. I was his. There was no one on this planet for us except each other and all that jazz. If only I could convince him that.

And if Malric continued to refuse to believe that, then that was his problem. Also mine, but mostly his. It wouldn't change the facts. Rejected mates were rare, but they did happen. I wouldn't die or anything dramatic like that. I would just want to. Why couldn't I unmeet him? That would've been so much easier.

When the door clicked open, the children all squealed with delight, as if they could sense that their fathers were home. Tavian and Kier threw their bags down and picked up their children, hugging them tightly, giving them lots of kisses, as if they had been away for weeks and not just two nights.

“We missed you guys so much.” Tavian blew raspberries on Ruby’s belly, and the room filled with her giggles.

I grinned. “They missed you. They were very brave, though a little bit more trouble at bedtime than usual, but they did very well. And in the middle of the night, Ruby wasn’t satisfied that it was me who came in there and not one of you.” Secretly, I thought she was comforted some by the fact that she could scent Malric on me, and that did enough to appease her last night.

That wouldn’t happen again. Rip my heart out once—shame on you. Do it a second time—shame on me.

“Thank you, Ollie. We really would never have done this trip without you. I’m sure you’re ready for a break.” Kier snuggled Flint and Opaline in his arms.

I smiled. “Oh, I wouldn’t mind one.”

Originally, I’d planned to shower and then go meet my mate for a nice dinner. That plan was gone. But regardless, I was exhausted and a break from pretending everything was sunshine and roses would be nice.

“Well, feel free. We’re here. We’re just going to toss our stuff in the laundry and then relax for the day,” Kier said, and truth be told, he sounded pretty exhausted as well.

“That sounds great. I have lunch all prepared and dinner in the crockpot for you.”

Kier put a hand over his heart. “Oh, Ollie, that is above and beyond. Thank you. Thank you. I was just telling Tavian that we could just order pizza for the day.”

I grinned. “Me and the kids might have done that for lunch recently.”

Tavian eyed me carefully, his nostrils flaring. “Did my dad visit?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Of course he could scent him.

He kept his sharp gaze on me, as if he was looking for any morsel of information. Could he know what had happened? No, he couldn’t. Probably. Suck.

“Yes. He visited Friday night and again yesterday.” That wasn’t a lie. I just didn’t mention that he was also here this morning because he stayed the night with me in his arms after his cock was in my ass. I wasn’t going to say that part out loud in front of them... ever.

“I’m glad he was here to help.”

“Great. I... well, I’ll let you spend some time with the kids. I’m gonna—” I pointed toward the hallway.

I needed to escape right now. I’d been on the go since Malric left my bed, and I almost wanted to sink into the shower and cry, but that would do zero good, and there was shifter hearing in this house. I wouldn’t be crying here, not unless I wanted them to know, and I did not.

“I might run to town, check out the bookstore and a few other places. If there’s anything you all need—” I needed nothing, but the privacy and fresh air would do me good.

“We’re great. Thank you, Ollie. Truly. We’d be lost without you,” Tavian said.

They’d be fine. Sure, it was easier with a third set of hands around here, but they had managed before I arrived and could continue to manage on their own after I left. Not that I was planning on leaving.

“Ollie, seriously.” Kier pulled me into a hug and held me tight. “Thank you. I never would’ve left my children with anyone else. I mean, maybe Malric, but seriously—”

“It’s what I’m here for,” I said, and I left them alone before I let the emotions overwhelm me.

Inside my room, I looked at the freshly made bed. I had swapped out the linens and even the comforter with some extras in the linen closet. I would have to switch over the laundry later. It was possible I would have to wash everything twice just so I could get the scent of Malric out of them. And even that might not be enough. Just the tiniest hint of his scent was enough to bring all of my emotions flooding back in.

And it wasn’t like he wouldn’t be back at the house again to fill it with his scent once more.

My heart constricted, making my chest hurt like my lungs refused to fill with air. If it hurt this much now, would the pain get worse or better with time? I thought I knew the answer, and I did not like it.

I wasn’t delusional. I wasn’t wrong. Malric and I were mates. I knew that in my heart of hearts. A mouse and a dragon might’ve been laughable, but I knew my truth. Malric was it for me. And I was for him, even if he didn’t want me.

And we had been together. We hadn’t used protection, but I was on birth control, like many omegas. But I also knew what biology was like, and it was more likely than not that I would be expecting. Fate always seemed to find a way to make that happen.

Fuck.

Malric already had two clutches with his previous mate. I doubted that he would want a third with me. If he wouldn’t claim me as his own, then fine. I would find a way to

make this work on my own. He already made himself clear. He didn't want anything to do with me. And that sucked, but I'd move past it, even if that meant being a single father.

No one had to know about Malric. Except me. While it hurt me to be rejected, I refused to hurt him in return. I couldn't shut off my feelings for the dragon simply because he didn't return them. That wasn't how the heart worked. It would be so much easier if it did.

I'd definitely have to leave if I was expecting. Everyone would be very suspicious if a mouse shifter had a clutch of dragon eggs. It might reflect poorly on Tavian and Kier also. And it wasn't like I could keep Malric out of my business if I was this close. He might not want me or the clutch, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have opinions on all of my choices.

Never one to wallow around in self-pity, I threw myself into getting ready for the day, grabbing a jacket and my trusty list of to-be-read books, then made my way to the bookstore. It was my happy place, and I needed to be happy or at least not so miserable.

If real life really sucked, then that was when it was the best time to immerse myself in another world. Plus, they had the best coffee in town. I needed to hold onto the small things now, because the big things were too much for me.

All of this was too much. In a perfect world, Malric would accept me as his mate, tell me how much he loved me and wanted me in his life, and hold me like I was the most precious mouse on this entire planet.

But this wasn't a perfect world, it was one where my mate either didn't recognize me or refused to believe what was right before his eyes, a world where I was rejected by the one person who was meant for me, the world where my future was a hot mess in a

way that I couldn't fix.

Chapter 11

Malric

I spent the whole morning fighting with my dragon. He was in the pissiest mood I'd ever seen him in. He roared beneath the surface like a petulant child denied their favorite candy. I hadn't lost control like this since I was a whelp learning to shift for the first time. If it continued, I was going to need to go someplace to be alone, someplace where I wouldn't accidentally burn shit.

Scales erupted along my arms and refused to fade. My neck was covered too. Nothing I did calmed me down—and I knew nothing short of seeing Ollie again was going to help. My beast was stubborn, and he wanted the manny who'd stolen our heart. And he wanted him now.

There was no point denying it anymore. He was my mate. He was ours, and I'd nearly ruined it. Or maybe I did ruin it. If I were Ollie, I wouldn't want to be around me after what I'd done. That was for sure. But the thought of him not in my life... it was unbearable.

The second I allowed myself to believe he was mine, to really feel it, everything changed. The desire for him hit me like a storm. Why had I been such a stubborn ass? Even when I said that there could only be one mate, I didn't truly believe it. Not deep down, anyway. My dragon always recognized him, it was Malric the man who'd messed everything up and epically.

I heard laughter in my head. A voice I recognized but hadn't heard in over a century

echoed in my ears. I wasn't sure if it was real or not, but it comforted me in the way I needed. I knew you'd find someone someday, Chastain's voice echoed in my head as if he was actually here. And maybe he was. Maybe he had been watching over me, waiting for me to find happiness once again.

Chastain wanted me to move on. He'd said as much often enough before he passed. He wouldn't have wanted me to be living a half-life, and I had been. I might not've realized it at the time, but before Ollie came into the picture, everything had a cloud over it, it was dark.

Moving on had once felt unfathomable. Losing him had torn me apart and stomped on the pieces. And until Ollie, I had remained that way. Now it was like I was being stitched back together.

My phone rang, and for a split second, I thought it might be my mate. It wasn't, and the disappointment slammed into me. I loved my son, but I needed my mate, to hear his voice, to know that he was okay.

"Tavian?" I answered. "Have you and Kier returned from your trip?"

"Never mind that." He didn't sound pleased. Far from it. "Why does Ollie smell like you and also like sadness and despair? What happened?" Of course he picked up on everything. Ollie wouldn't have told him, as was evident by the direction this conversation was heading. But hiding what happened? It was impossible.

A lecture from my son had not been on the agenda today, but here we were.

"I can explain." I still didn't know how, but I would figure it out and quick.

"Dad, if you broke his heart..." He sighed. "What the heck could've happened? You were only here a little while, right?"

I cleared my throat. “I stayed the night.” It wasn’t something I had meant to share and was probably equally something my son didn’t want to hear, but it was too late to suck the words back inside.

“Oh.”

“Tavian,” I said, taking a breath. “It’s very possible... actually, I’m pretty damn sure of it. Ollie is my mate.” I’d wanted Ollie to be the first person to hear my acceptance, but it still felt good to hear them out loud.

Gods, I wished I’d had this talk after speaking to Ollie. Or at least face to face with my son. But this was what I had.

“Oh,” Tavian said again, softer now.

“I didn’t believe it at first when Ollie told me, but... there’s no way he’s just a fling. Or even a casual relationship. I feel the same way for him that I did for your father,” I admitted. “Or close enough to recognize the signs now.”

If only I hadn’t been too stubborn to accept them immediately. Then we wouldn’t be having this conversation.

“Then what are you waiting for? Go get him.”

“I fucked up,” I said quietly. “I thought I’d give him some space.”

“Space is not what he needs,” Tavian snapped. “If you rejected him, you need to go to him. Now. Take it from me—I waited too long. I thought I was giving Kier time. What I should’ve been doing was being honest with him. We could’ve saved so much time.”

Damn it. He was right. I hated that he was right. At five hundred years old, I shouldn't be making rookie mistakes like this, and yet here I was, needing my kid to tell me what a bonehead I was being.

"Is he at your house now?" I asked. I was already reaching for my keys. I'd already wasted too much time, I refused to waste any more.

"No. He said he was heading to the bookstore. Try there."

I knew the place well. I'd been going for years. What was new to me was that my mate enjoyed it too. Or maybe he was on an errand. I planned to find out which.

"Okay," I said. We said our goodbyes. I closed my laptop and left to find my mousey mate.

After all this time, the idea of having someone at my side again... it was wild. The longest years of my life had been the ones spent alone. The ones without Chastain. Without anyone. Just me and my sons, and now they were grown.

Thankfully, even though it was a Sunday and the bookshop was usually packed, it was quiet. I blamed the beautiful day and was grateful for it. It made finding my mate easier. I instantly spotted Ollie through the window, curled into one of the comfy chairs, reading.

He looked up. Our eyes met. Then he looked away fast and sank deeper into the chair. He wasn't happy to see me. If anything, my presence caused him pain.

Fuck. I really had screwed up.

I pushed through the front door, barely acknowledging the woman at the counter who normally greeted me with a smile. I didn't stop, walking straight to my mate.

“Hello, Lord Malric,” Ollie said, still flipping pages. He wasn’t actually reading, though—I’d watched him flip two pages in five seconds. The “lord” was like a punch in the gut.

“Ollie, I’d like to talk.” To fix things, to make you see that I am worthy despite being a horrible mate.

He sighed. “I don’t want to talk. Eventually, we can have a discussion. But not today. I just want to be alone.”

“I respect that. I do. And I want to give you space—but I believe you. I believe we’re mates.” I had to at least get that out. He needed to know.

Ollie sucked in a breath and finally closed the book. He set it beside him.

“You do? You truly do?”

He didn’t fully believe me, and I understood why. I’d messed up so royally.

The hope in his eyes fueled me.

“Yes. I recognize the signs now. I spoke with a friend of mine. He confirmed it’s possible. Some people have two mates at the same time . So it’d not beyond the realm of possibility that I would have two years apart.” I shouldn’t have needed a friend to open my eyes. I should’ve trusted my feelings, trusted my mate. Past me was a jerk of a dragon, and I vowed to myself never to be that guy again.

“You talked to a friend?” Ollie’s face twisted, and he sank back into the chair, further away from me. “About me... about us... about what we did.” His cheeks were bright red. Adorable.

“Yes.” I figured it best not to linger on any details connected with me discussing our personal life with anyone not him. “And as soon as he confirmed it, everything clicked. I can’t control my dragon right now. It’s taking everything I have not to scoop you up and run.”

Ollie smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Did he still not believe me. That would be fair, given my behavior.

“What is it?”

“You didn’t take my word for it. You didn’t trust what I was feeling. You needed someone else to tell you it was real. Probably a dragon. Probably someone older than me.”

I winced. “Yes. But I do believe you, Ollie. I’m glad you told me. I see it now.”

Still sadness radiated from him, like a signal blasting to the world that he was unhappy. “I’m sure we’ll talk about this more,” he said, voice quiet. “But I’m not going to lie and say it doesn’t hurt. You didn’t trust me. That destroyed me, Malric. It hurt. A lot.”

My chest ached like I’d been punched in the chest.

“I don’t know what it feels like to lose a mate,” he went on, “and maybe that’s something we’ll have to work through. But you are my mate, and you hurt me.”

“I know,” I whispered. “And I want to tell you it was me I didn’t trust, which is also true, but I should’ve listened to you. You are the one person I should trust unconditionally.”

“So I guess we’ll work through it,” he said. “But right now, I don’t want to talk.”

I swallowed hard. “Okay. I respect that. Do you... do you know when you might want to talk?” I was being pushy, and I hated that, but I had to try.

He considered. “You can call me tomorrow. Tuesday night, I’m free. I have the evening off from watching the kids.”

If I called my son, they would make sure he had off right now until next week, but that wasn’t what my mate wanted, what he needed. I had to learn to accept his boundaries even if I hated them.

“I’d love to take you to dinner.” Or anything else that would make him smile.

He nodded. “Yeah. I think that would be nice.”

It wasn’t much, but it was something. I could work with that. I had no choice. The alternative was giving up, and I refused to give up on my mate and me. He was mine and I was his, and if waiting until Tuesday was what I needed to do, then I would do it.

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Chapter 12

Ollie

I spent most of my Sunday evening just trying to understand Malric's side of things. Losing his first mate the way that he had, and still having to care for his three children, could not've been easy. Especially not for a creature so long-lived. To expect to spend your life with someone and then not being able to had to be heartbreaking in a way that couldn't be put into words.

But that didn't change the fact that it hurt when he and his dragon didn't recognize me for what I was. Or maybe his dragon had. I only half processed our conversation at the bookstore. I'd been sitting there trying to hide from the hurt and he came walking in, his scent tearing open all of the wounds twice as deep.

I'd dreamt of meeting my mate for so long. I had this perfect image of how it would go. He'd sweep me off my feet and cherish me and love me in a way that only mates could. That had been my ultimate fantasy, and then reality came rushing in.

The reality that Malric hadn't recognized me for what I was to him. He didn't see me, not really. Not even when I had told him straight out what was happening.

Still, we would have to work through it. There was no other choice. We both felt the pull, both needed it. It just took him a little more time to get there. So much for wisdom coming with age.

I believed with my whole heart that this was just a bump in the road.

I'd spent most of the evening lost in my book because I didn't wish to think too hard about the reality of the situation. Living in a fantasy land of unicorns and fae was a much better place to be. At least for now. It could be a problem for tomorrow—or the next day. I didn't want to dwell on it, or else I'd be reduced to tears.

Monday came far too slowly. I was happy to be back to a normal work schedule. It was easy to keep busy because I had three children to chase after. It gave me both a sense of normalcy and a sense of purpose. Still, there were quiet moments where my thoughts were able to wander back to that night.

Kier and Tavian went to work as normal, and I worked with the children on different projects. Of course, one liked painting, another liked sensory bins, and the other one—well, she spent her time flipping through books. A girl after my own heart. I loved how all three of them were so very different, and their parents not only saw that in them but fostered it. I'd heard stories through my manny groups of so many dragons who wanted their clutches to not only be identical but take on the interests the parents had. A healthy childhood that did not make.

I was surprised when the doorbell rang. We weren't expecting anyone, and most packages were just left on the doorstep without so much as a knock, thanks to a well-placed note for the delivery people.

When I opened the door, I found a man in a suit standing there with a box, I was extra confused. Wouldn't they have seen the note, too? But then again, they weren't driving around in a big brown truck wearing a uniform.

“Mr. Ollie?”

“Yes?” I wished I hadn't opened the door. The man was definitely a dragon. But then again, none of my prey instincts were screaming at me to take cover, so he must've been part of Malric's clan... possibly someone Malric knew.

“This is for you.” He handed me the package. It was addressed to me, but there was no postage or anything. “It is from Lord Malric.”

That explained so much.

“Right. Okay, thank you,” I said.

The man smiled, bowed slightly, and left. Malric had gotten one of his clan members to deliver me something. Okay. That was... odd. But also... sweet. Probably. I supposed what was in the box mattered as far as that was concerned.

“Pop-Pop!” Opaline said once I walked back into the house holding the box.

I smiled. “Yes, this is from Pop-Pop.”

How did she know that? The children must’ve been able to scent whatever this was. That was the only logical conclusion. That was unless he often sent men all dressed up to the house to deliver presents.

I took it to the living room. The children returned to their activities as if they had no interest in the box at all. Interesting. As a child, I’d have been all about what was in there.

My heart thundered in my chest and my palms grew sweaty at the anticipation. This felt big... Huge, even.

The box was a deep blue color, made of thick material, with a magnetic flip top. It was the kind of box that could be a present on its own. Malric wasn’t messing around.

I opened it slowly to reveal the item inside. A thin layer of blue tissue paper covered the item, and I moved it aside. Underneath was a first edition signed copy of the book

that I was reading yesterday. *A Gentle Heart Afloat: Letters from an Omega Abroad* was a collection of letters written by omegas who made the voyage across the ocean in the 1800's. The book I had picked up at the library was one of my absolute favorite comfort reads. It was one of the few books I owned multiple copies of, but with every re-print or new cover, I had to have one. One copy I had was simply for displaying on the shelf, the others for reading. One I had even annotated in the margins—that copy I could never show to anyone.

But this... This was a first edition. I'd looked into picking up one before, but the prices were outside of a manny's range, even when they were in bad condition. And this one? This one was pristine.

Oh, my. I didn't know what to say... what to do. I almost didn't want to touch it. It was so perfect. So glorious.

Dear Ollie,

Courtship begins by learning about one another. In my younger days, it was tradition to share a piece of your hoard with your potential mate, and so I share this—an item I procured from a small bookshop in London not long after the book had first been published. I gift it to you knowing that, as my mate, what is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours, and that this piece will remain a part of my hoard. I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday and sharing more about myself. Until then, I'll be thinking of you.

-M

Tears filled my eyes and blocked my vision. Oh, goodness. That was sweet, sweeter than anything anyone had ever done for me before. If his intention had been to soften my hurt feelings, he'd succeeded. There was still work to do, and a serious conversation to have, but it was a start. A good one.

I reread the note again and again. Each time, I felt his words just as deeply. Possibly more so. He gave me something so precious, not only to me on a personal level, being the book it was, but because it was precious to him as well. There wasn't a more perfect gift on this planet.

Did Malric hoard books? Or something else that books would fit into? Was I about to walk into a library? Was I allowed to ask what a dragon hoarded? I couldn't recall. I'd never known a dragon well enough to learn about hoards before. It was all new to me.

Either way, I almost wished that I didn't have plans this evening. My plans weren't actual real plans, either. I needed to do laundry. That was it. That was my whole thing to do. And also, I wanted to read. I could have postponed both of those things and spent more time with Malric, but I supposed tomorrow would have to do.

Perhaps his grandchildren would like to put together some pieces of art for him in the meantime. Something, anything to keep me occupied. Part of me wanted to call him, ask him to come over. But this was better. Giving us both the time we needed to make sure we were doing this right.

"Who wants to play with stickers?" It was a universal favorite, and I knew I'd have instant buy-in.

All three of them loved to cover a paper with cute stickers. They would like to do the same to walls and furniture and doors, too, but I was quick enough to prevent that. I didn't need to lose a job due to sticker overload, something I'd seen a manny mention a time or two on the manny boards.

I used a permanent marker to make a thick outline of a dragon on each of their papers and let them go to town. When all the stickers were put on there, I would cut out the dragons. They were hardly Pinterest-worthy, but cute and made the kids happy.

They would make Malric happy too, and I wanted that. I wanted that so badly, I'd nearly caved on the two of us slowing things down like this. But it was important that we didn't rush in again, because the last time I did, he wasn't ready, and it left us both hurt and miserable.

From there we played, we ate dinner, and I helped put them to bed. All that was left was laundry and a whole lot of it. They might've been small, but they knew how to fill a laundry hamper like a boss.

As I took the last load out of the washer and put it into the dryer, I couldn't help but be sad that I'd scrubbed the house in a far-too-successful attempt to get rid of Malric's scent. What I would do right then to be able to wrap myself in the sheets he'd slept in and inhale his scent.

But I couldn't.

Next time I saw him, I was going to rub myself all around him and not wash my clothes. Then I could be enveloped by his deliciousness all of the time. Was that creepy? Possibly. Was I going to do it anyway? Absolutely.

Chapter 13

Malric

I arrived at my son's home bearing another small gift, ready to pick up Ollie for our date. Another wasn't the right word, the first book had been huge. Not the actual book and its value. I honestly wasn't sure what the monetary value was. But those words, I couldn't remember a time when I'd opened up to someone so freely before. It had been at least a century, that was for sure.

But with Ollie, I wanted to give him that, give him access to the me no one else got to see, not even my kids. It was the part of me reserved for my mate—for my Ollie. I wished I could've been there to see his face when he opened it, read my heartfelt words. I knew he liked the book... I'd seen him reading a more modern release of it. But that wasn't what had mattered to me, it was if he had opened his heart to me, something I planned to discover today.

Our last conversation had been pleasant, but it did little to alleviate my dragon. He demanded I go to my mate and grovel. But Ollie was clear about his boundaries, and I would respect them even if it killed me. Which it wouldn't, despite my dragon insisting otherwise.

I felt absurd going on a date at my age. I might've looked relatively young, but I felt all of my five hundred years. Then again, it was no more absurd than me having to pick up my date at my son's home.

Tavian opened the door, a wide grin on his face. He looked me up and down, his gaze

narrowing and his chin lifting. “You must be the man interested in Ollie. What are your intentions?”

I rolled my eyes even though I suspected that he was dead serious. “I did not give your mate the third degree when you began courting.” I’d wanted to but had managed to restrain myself.

“I don’t plan on giving Ollie a hard time at all. I’m going to reserve all of that nonsense for you. Because it’s fun.” He smirked. “His curfew is eleven. You should have him home no later than that. Also, no one calls it courting anymore.”

“I think he can set his own curfew, and I call it courting.” It was a perfectly respectable term. Or maybe it was super dated. Probably both.

“Well, if he doesn’t plan on coming home tonight, can you please let us know? I don’t care to stay up late, waiting or worrying. No judgment from Kier or me on if he stays the night with you.” It was difficult to tell if he was serious or if he was mocking me. This was such an odd situation. I understood that. But still... the navigation of it was perplexing me.

“We like Ollie.” It was impossible not to notice that he mentioned Ollie, not me. Fair enough. I was the one who had hurt him, after all. “We hope you have a nice date.”

Oh goody, I had my son’s blessing. “He’ll be back for work in the morning.”

Not that I would make any assumptions about where Ollie was going to be staying that night. He could make all of those determinations on his own—and also, let the proper people know where he’d be. It felt like the more open-ended way to leave it. If I promised he’d be back and then he wasn’t—weird. If I promised he’d be gone, but he opted to go home instead—awkward. Open-ended for the win.

“Ahem.” Ollie cleared his throat loudly as he looked between Tavian and me. Both of us hung our heads. “Ollie can make these decisions on his own; after all, he is a grown man.”

He was 4000% right.

“Of course. I’m sorry,” I said. I was going to be doing a lot of apologizing today, might as well lead in with one. Especially since my son and I had been negotiating his personal time for him.

“Ollie, I’m sorry. I was just giving my dad a hard time,” Tavian said.

“As well you should. But your dad is also an adult. I understand that this is weird and a touch awkward, but all of us are grown-ups, and we can manage.” Tavian and I might’ve been a lot older than Ollie, but he was the only one acting his age here. “I’ll let you know if I don’t plan on returning this evening. Regardless, my date has no bearing on my ability to do my job tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Tavian said. “Have fun.”

There was a comfort in seeing that Ollie felt relaxed enough around my son, his boss, to be himself like this.

“Thank you.”

Ollie walked out the door, and then it was just the two of us standing on the front porch.

“This is for you,” I said, lifting another small box.

“Another gift, Malric? You’re going to spoil me.”

That was 100% my plan.

“Courtship is serious—and any suitor who is worth their weight would have showered you with gifts long before now. I am behind the curve in this regard.” It was customary to share at least three gifts before an outing. The first outing should be chaperoned by a trusted family member of the omega. Thankfully the time of chaperones had long since passed. If my son was giving me that kind of attitude now, he’d have been unbearable as a chaperone. All in fun, of course, but I was fine doing without.

Ollie eyed me skeptically. “If you say so.”

He opened up the little box and pulled out the golden crocheted scarf I’d purchased from a local witch, and as soon as I saw it, I knew it was for him. The color would make his eyes pop, and who didn’t love staying warm.

“This is very nice. Thank you. Oh! And it is warm! How is it so warm?” Ollie’s eyes dazzled as he wrapped the scarf around him and rubbed his face against the yarn.

“It is an enchantment. It will only ever be warm for you. It has been heated by my own dragon fire.” Because I couldn’t get him just any scarf. No. I needed to get him the most amazing scarf in existence.

Ollie stroked the material against his face. “Malric. I love it. Thank you.”

“I had a smaller piece made.” I pulled it from my pocket and held it out to him. The small piece was about the size of a postcard. It was loosely knit together. “It’s for your mouse. I thought that—”

Ollie sucked in a breath. Elation filled his face. “I love it. Thank you. Seriously. I am tempted to go shift right now so I can cuddle into it.”

My dragon rumbled his approval. Score one for me.

“You’re welcome. Shall we?” I held out my arm, and he took it... my dragon puffing up in victory.

Calm down. We still have a lot to make up for.

I led him to my car and opened the door for him. Was I being overly old-fashioned? Opening the door for him, closing it behind him, giving him my arm, following the norms of the days of old? Probably. But I didn’t care. It was how I knew to spoil him, and he needed spoiling. Lots and lots of spoiling.

“Where are we going?” Ollie asked as he buckled his seatbelt.

“Someplace I know that you’ll like.” And I did—but only because I overheard my son calling him for advice about a great place. It was when he was trying to set up a date night for him and his mate when Ollie first started. I hadn’t even met Ollie then, but my dragon knew on some level, because eavesdropping wasn’t my norm, but for some reason that call mattered. I saw why now.

We drove to the restaurant, chatting about the weather and the kids. He loved my grandkids, and that meant the world to me. The place we were going to was high-end and was known for its food and service, all that good stuff. But that wasn’t why it was a great choice for a first real date. That honor went to its view.

People traveled long distances to dine here, just to look out the windows as they ate. It was nearly impossible to even get a reservation. The only reason I’d gotten in so easily was because I somehow lucked out, calling at the perfect time, a reservation having just been cancelled. I could use my title, of course, or money for that matter, but I wanted to do this the right way, and using my power and position was categorically not that.

The restaurant was tucked away in the mountains, the entire dining room exterior made of glass, and tonight, the moon was high. You could not only see the areas surrounding the restaurant but also down to the city.

He gasped when we arrived. “I’ve always wanted to go here.”

“I know.” I parked the car. “My son mentioned that you recommended it when he wanted to surprise his mate. I listened.”

“Oh...” His cheeks pinkened. “Well, thank you.”

The food was great. The atmosphere—private enough that we could have conversations. And the company, of course... the company was fabulous.

For the night, we both put aside what had happened, not talking about anything too serious. We chatted about books we loved, places we’d gone to, favorite foods, all typical first-date kinds of things. At least I thought they were. It had been so long since I even considered going on one.

The night was absolutely perfect.

I placed my hand on his across the table. There was something I’d been wanting to ask him, something I was beyond nervous he’d reject. But it was now or never, and I was choosing now.

“I was wondering... would you—would you like to go to the charity benefit with me next weekend?”

His eyes dropped to the empty dessert dish from the soufflé we’d just shared.

“I can’t.” It was all but a whisper.

“That’s fine... if you have plans... this is pretty last minute.” It didn’t feel fine. It felt like my heart was being stomped on, but I refused to let him see that.

“No, it’s not that.” He bit the corner of his lip. “I don’t... I’m not fancy enough for that.”

“Fancy?” It dawned on me. He didn’t have a tux. Of course he didn’t. It was hardly normal wardrobe fare for most people. “How about we go shopping tomorrow then?” Problem solved.

Wrong.

“Oh, I don’t know... that would feel awkward.” He still wasn’t meeting my eyes. I hadn’t meant to offend him. To me it was another way to spoil him, but now that I thought about it, I understood.

“You know what would feel awkward? Being at such a special event knowing that my mate couldn’t attend because of some scraps of fabric.”

He turned his hand over so our palms were touching. He wasn’t pulling away. He was giving me more.

“Then I’d love to go shopping with you tomorrow.”

And my dragon felt like he’d just won the lottery.

I did too.

Chapter 14

Ollie

As far as the benefit event went, I had no idea what I was getting into, except that my mate invited me, and he was important, and I knew it was important for me to stand by his side. It was difficult to agree to going tux shopping with him. I didn't want to feel like I owed him money. But he was right, we were mates. We should start acting like it, even if it was only in these small ways. We'd get to where we needed to be eventually. It was just going to take some time.

I'd never been to a store as high-end as the one he took me to. We were offered champagne the second we stepped inside, and I was treated like royalty. I didn't even have to get items off the rack and hit up a cramped changing room. Instead, they measured me, gave me some style and fabric options, and told me to come back in a couple of days. Malric literally had a tux made for me, and when I put it on for the first time, I felt like a million bucks. And for all I knew, that was exactly what it cost.

He looked so proud to have gotten it for me, and I accepted it as the gift it was intended to be and pushed the inequity of our finances aside. I'd never been one to worry about money before and starting now was a piss-poor idea. I had enough other things to worry about, like how I would fit into his world given his position.

I desperately wanted to ask someone what it meant to be the clan leader's mate, but I knew no one in the clan except Kier and Tavian. And while Kier could give me a perspective of what it was like as a non-dragon shifter in a dragon clan, I wasn't sure if he was the right one to ask about this specifically. He was the son-in-law of the

clan leader, not the one standing by his side. The expectations would be different. At least that was the case with wolf shifters, which was my only frame of reference, and that was based on a college friend venting, not actual firsthand knowledge.

Tavian was totally on my side regarding this mating, and for that, I was incredibly grateful. He didn't look at me as less-than, not for being the help and not for being a mate. He didn't even make comments about me potentially leaving the position, which most families would've in my experience. Goddess, he even played protective father when my mate came calling with his tail between his legs. I was so lucky to have Tavian and Kier on my side.

Tavian seemed to want his father to be happy above all else. He was a great son. And I was determined to make Malric happy. Rocky start or not, I was all-in and would move mountains for the alpha who stole my heart. Well, maybe not mountains, I was only a mouse, after all. But I would move a book or two.

Tavian was my boss, but also sort of my stepson? It was complicated and a little weird. Fine, it was a lot weird. He was also a hundred and twenty-five years older than I was. Still, I was in it for the long haul, and if I needed to learn on the job, that was what I would do.

Another thing that we had not discussed or figured out how it would work was where I would be living. After our date, I had stayed with Malric and commuted to work. It didn't seem fair to Tavian and Kier, being that they had hired a person to live in and be available whenever they needed. Yet, after just a few weeks on the job, I was contemplating moving out, but it wasn't as if I could leave my mate.

And then there was that other thing—newly mated individuals were highly likely to have a clutch of their own. Would we? Would Malric want that? I was sure it had never occurred to him that he would have additional children. He had children that were fully grown. How would they feel about having an additional clutch in the

family?

All of it gave me a headache and caused anxiety, none of which I wanted to deal with at that moment, so I locked it up in a little box and set it aside for another day's problem.

"Are you ready?" Malric asked.

He leaned against the door frame to the massive en suite bathroom that was attached to the primary bedroom, looking like a gift that needed to be unwrapped. Not that we could do that now, not with the event counting on his presence. But later... later I was going to enjoy every second of stripping him bare.

His home wasn't far from Tavian's, though it was larger. If I understood it correctly, this home was meant to host visiting clan members or other clan leaders when they were on our territory. For that, it was the perfect home with its ten bedrooms, two formal dining rooms, and I had lost count of the number of bathrooms. I was so beyond grateful someone came in to wash those or really keep the rest of the house in order. It was ginormous and a full-time job in and of itself.

Thankfully, he had a staff of individuals whose job it was to manage all of the household things. They were all really nice and seemed to like working for Malric. I could see why. Not once had I witnessed him treating them as anything less than an equal.

"I am ready," I said. "How do I look?" I twirled around.

His tux was not unlike mine. If I had been picking out a tux for a different type of event, I'd have gone for a pop of color, but I didn't wish to embarrass my mate or commit any faux pas I was unaware of, so instead, I went with something that was more classic, suitable to what we were doing... something more aligned with my

mate's ensemble.

"You look amazing," he said. He lifted up his elbow, and I linked my arm into his. "Almost too good when we have places to me," he whispered close to my ear, and I let out a small groan.

"Tell me about it."

There was a driver waiting for us. Malric tended to work on the go whenever he could, so he had a driver most of the time. I'd never realized just how much work went into being the clan leader. He made it look easy, but there was never a time when he wasn't on call or available for questions—his phone constantly going off, him putting out fires, dealing with people, other dragons. He wasn't a slacker, that was for sure.

"I do plan on introducing you as my mate today, Ollie. I hope that is all right."

"Of course," I said. I was glad he hadn't given me too much warning on that. I'd have overthought it to death and back again.

"We may have a more formal introduction to the rest of the clan, maybe even a celebration that is totally about our mating. But for now, this will have to do. People will know by our scent." And there was that.

"Do you anticipate any issues since I'm a mouse?" It was my biggest worry lately, and it lived so close to the edge. I hated that I had to ask. It shouldn't have been a consideration, yet it was, and I needed to know what I was up against.

He held my hand, his fingers lacing into mine.

"I won't say that there will be none. After all, Kier had issues when he and Tavian

announced their mating. Before then, I would have said absolutely not. We're a very accepting group, and we are—but that doesn't mean that someone might have something to say."

My stomach dropped. A mate was supposed to make their lives easier, not harder.

"What is important for you to know is I will not tolerate any disrespect or prejudice." He brought our joined hands up to his lips and pressed a sweet kiss on mine. "Anyone who has anything to say unkindly toward you will deal with me."

From the growl in his voice, I doubted those people would last long once they faced my mate's wrath. I hadn't known I was into that, but it was kinda hot. Okay, it was very hot.

"Thank you, Malric. I don't want to cause problems with your clan."

"Our clan." He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. "This is our clan."

"Right. Our clan."

I fought to keep myself still, to hide the anxiety that was rolling through me. All I really wanted to do was shift and hide under the floorboards like a good little mouse would do. Instead, I was walking right into the dragon's den, deeper than I had ever before.

It was whoa. A mouse mated to a dragon. Yet here we were.

As we pulled up, Malric called up to the driver. "Jenner, give us a moment, please."

"Of course, sir," Jenner said, and he stepped out.

Malric held my face in his hands. “I understand you’re nervous. I was too when I became clan leader, and it wasn’t even thrust upon me like it was you.”

“I’m not—”

He put a finger over my lips. “As my mate, you are an extension of me. If that’s not something we want, then we can talk about me stepping down as leader, but that takes time. It won’t happen overnight. I have so much faith in you, mate. You will be amazing. But what I’m asking of you tonight is to fake it. Walk in there like you own the place. You are my mate and therefore you are their leader.”

I swallowed the knot that had clogged my throat. It was a lot to ask, but also, he’d offered me a way out in the future. He wasn’t telling me to go in and take my spot as the clan leader’s mate forever. He was asking that I play the role tonight and give it a chance. I could do that. Or at least I was going to try my best. Anything for my mate. Anything.

“You are strong, important, and everyone there is incredibly lucky just to be in your orbit, just like I am.” His words held me like a blanket.

“I’ve got this.” Fake it till I make it and all that.

He grinned and kissed my lips. “Then, let’s do this.”

He knocked on the glass, indicating for Jenner to open the door. A moment later, both of us were stepping out of the car, lights flashing as people took their pictures.

Please let me really have this.

Chapter 15

Ollie

Walking into the event had been eye-opening. It was one thing to know your mate was powerful and rich and important to so many. It was another to have cameras all pointed at you while you walked by his side into an event that was so fancy you half expected you were dreaming. But that was exactly where I was, this mix of reality and fantasy, not knowing where one began and the other one ended.

Thankfully, there were people that I recognized. Malric was great, but he had more to do than be my comfort dragon. This wasn't just an event for him, it was part of his job.

Kier was home with the children while Tavian was here mingling with the other dragons. I had originally been on the schedule to watch the kids, and at first, I felt guilty about that.

Kier insisted he was more than happy for the excuse not to dress up "like a penguin." His words, not mine. And Tavian? He only planned to stay for a short while. He had no desire to "glad-hand with the stuffed shirts." His words, not mine. It turned out, I'd done them a favor, which was good because I'd been feeling like I'd been letting them down more than helping lately.

Now that I was here, I could understand their desire not to be. There was nothing easy and comfortable about the environment. It was like being in a fishbowl with people watching you at every turn. Such an odd experience, but one I was going to need to

get comfortable with.

Malric's other son, Eryndor, grinned widely when he met me. He pulled me into a hug, his massive frame engulfing my smaller one. I didn't know where Eryndor got his size from, but he towered over both his brother and father.

I'd been worried about meeting him. I'd already been liked by Tavian when Malric and I got together. He was predisposed to liking me by that alone. To Eryndor, that wasn't the case. It could've gone either way.

"Oh, this is going to be so funny. I'm never gonna let the old man live this down. He's robbing the cradle!" Eryndor gushed.

He meant it with humor, but there was some truth to it. My mate had been alive entire centuries before I was even born.

"Eryndor!" Malric admonished.

"Come on, Dad, it's funny. You have to admit it's funny."

Mal scowled. "There's nothing funny about me being mated. It is a celebration. I am blessed to have found Ollie." He had his arm wrapped around me, his hand placed possessively on the small of my back.

I bit back a grin. On this, I would have to stand in solidarity with my mate. But I would remind him later that he did not feel that way initially. I too had been worried about the age difference, as well as the difference in our beasts. But no longer. He was mine and I was his. And that was all that mattered.

"Oh, are those the latest champions in the Dragon Flight Games for the four-person teams?" I asked, wanting to change the subject. It was one thing for families to

banter, but we were hardly alone. We didn't need to give people a reason to question our relationship.

I didn't point because that would be rude to the people I was asking about; instead, I just indicated with my gaze at the two shifters standing near the bar.

"Yes, that's Flight Leader Zayne and Ash. Mated to each other." Malric had to lean down to whisper into my ear. "Also very different in age and species."

"Really? I hadn't heard that." Not that I kept up on the drama in the dragon flight world. Perhaps I would now. It was a pretty cool sport, much more interesting than watching golf or basketball, in my opinion.

"Yes, it was quite the scandal and a shock to Zayne, but thanks to the two of them being so great at what they do, we brought home another championship for our clan." Pride poured off of Mal. "Have you ever gone to any of the dragon flight games?"

I shook my head. "I got to watch some footage once, but that was years ago. I only knew about them winning because Kier mentioned it."

"Well, I will have to take you. And as clan leaders, we tend to get invited to all the team events, so you'll meet some of the players up close."

"Wow," I said quietly, making sure that we were mostly alone. "I think this is a good time to mention that I've never actually seen a dragon in shifted form."

My mate's face turned all sorts of confused. His jaw dropped, and he blinked slowly at me. A little wrinkle creased between his eyes, and his lips drew tight.

Come to think of it, that was odd. We were mated, but also, I had no clue what his beast looked like or if he would even accept my beast. I mean, obviously we were

mates, so he wouldn't eat my mouse for a snack, but what did our beasts have in common? Nothing. We could hardly frolic in the forest together.

"That we can fix." He kissed my cheek. "I'll show you my dragon right now."

He made a move toward the exit as if we really were going to go right now. Honestly, it wasn't the worst idea. Getting out of here sounded blissful. Sadly, it wasn't an option.

I kept my feet planted. "Calm down, mate. I'd love to meet your dragon, but it can happen later. It's fundraiser time."

"How is it possible that we have been together for this many days and you have not met my dragon?" His expression was pained now, like it physically hurt that I had not met his dragon.

I grinned. "We were busy with other things."

A sharp blush worked its way across my mate's neck, contrasting wildly with the stark whiteness of his shirt.

"Right. Of course. I must meet your mouse too, mate. It would please me greatly." He'd already spoiled my beast with a gift. It was absolutely freaking adorable.

"Lord Malric! So great to see you." A voice interrupted us, and I froze. Had he heard our conversation, did he know we hadn't even shared our beasts with one another yet?

"Ah, Vlad. Glad you could make it." My mate let go of me briefly and hugged a man who I recognized as Vlad, one of his many advisors. Tavian had given me a rundown of who was who amongst Malric's closest advisors. I'd learn more about them later,

but I at least had some knowledge.

“Vlad, I’d like you to meet Ollie, the man I’ve been telling you about... my mate.”

I held out my hand, and Vlad shook it. The happiness that was on his face was not faked. He closed my hand in both of his and leaned closer to me. “Thank goodness. We are more than happy to have you, Ollie. It’s about time this old man got himself tied down again.”

“Thank you.” I hadn’t expected such warmth, and it meant more to me than Vlad could know. “I’m extremely happy to have found Mal as well.”

“Malric, what is this about you being mated?” Another man came forward. Only his face did not have the happiness that the other advisor did. Instead, a scowl marred his features.

Jackass.

Now that Mal and I weren’t alone, it was as if the crowd thickened even more. Everyone stared at us. We were surrounded. It was as if Vlad coming over was an “all are welcome” sign. It was a lot all at once, but maybe that was better. Like pulling off a band-aid.

“Elias, I’d like you to meet my mate, Ollie.”

“This mouse? Mated to a dragon?” He scoffed. “Ridiculous. I always knew your policies for the clan would lead us to ruin, but honestly, Malric, this is a step too far.”

A growl erupted from my mate’s lips. I’d expected some looks, maybe a snide comment or two—but outright hatred in front of a group of people? That took me aback, like a slap to the face.

I refused to cower. Instead, I held my head high. Mal had asked me to fake it until I made it, and I planned to do exactly that.

“My name is Ollie,” I said, holding out my hand. “And you are?”

“Not shaking your hand,” the man said. “I am Elias Falkridge. A member of this clan since its inception. I’ve been an advisor to clan leaders for longer than your family’s been on this continent.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “but never a clan leader, right? After all, Malric’s been leader for how long now, dear?”

“Nearly a century,” he said. He kept me close to him, and I sensed his dragon just below the surface, simmering with rage, but his tone was even. I was impressed with his restraint, because if I had a beast strong enough to take this asshole down, he’d probably have already ripped through this far-too-expensive tux.

“It was a pleasure to meet you. Malric and I need to make our way to our table. He’ll be speaking soon, I believe.” Being a nanny had prepared me for this moment. I’d had occasions when I had to hide my fear as I handled emergencies over the years.

We walked away, and I held on tightly to his arm, needing to borrow some of his strength.

“I would like to go back and murder him,” Malric said.

Same. But I couldn’t encourage that behavior, despite my seething hatred for the bigot.

“Maybe later,” I said. “For now, we just keep going.”

“You were absolutely perfect, mate. I’m so very sorry that happened. We knew we would face some comments today, yes—but not that. Never that. That was grounds for removal from the clan.”

“Malric. Nothing’s happening tonight, especially not a banishment.” Despite my desire to watch that go down in front of all the people that jerk thought worthy of him. “Just take deep breaths, get up on stage, say what you need to say, and let’s go on with the night. We’re not letting him ruin it.” I stopped for a moment, making him face me. “Thank you for defending me.”

“I hardly did anything.”

I cut him off. I put a finger over his lips, like he had done to me earlier. “That growl—I knew what that meant. You would protect me above all else, and that, my dear, means the world to me.” I leaned in closer, making sure my next words were just for him. “I also know how much it turned me on.”

He let out another growl, a very different kind, one that told me he felt the same exact way. Sexiest dragon ever.

Chapter 16

Malric

I let myself into my son's house, as I normally did. He and I hadn't yet had a chance to really talk about the fact that I had found my mate, except for when he berated me into not fucking this up completely. He, more than my other two children, had a stake in this, since Ollie worked for him. He also had an understanding of some of our obstacles, ones I planned to remove.

It was one thing for a dragon to have an opinion. We all had them. It was another for Elias to disrespect both my mate and my position in public like that. He knew better, having been around for such a long time. But with that seniority came a sense of entitlement and superiority that wasn't acceptable.

I went to the kitchen and found Tavian at the stove.

A mischievous grin covered his face when he saw me.

"What?" I said. "You look like the dragon that captured the canary."

"Well, you look like the dragon that ensnared the mouse." He was enjoying this much too much, and it was exactly what I needed... full acceptance and joy over my mating.

"Okay, I walked into that one." And would again, probably. I was okay with that.

“You really did.” He put the lid on the skillet and crossed over to me, pulling me into a hug. “You know me and Eryndor are very happy for you, Dad. Thalric is also, and if he ever slowed down his traveling long enough to visit, he could tell you in person.”

Thalric was the wandering sort. I hadn’t actually seen him in person in many years. Thankfully we’d all adopted enough modern technology to keep in touch. It wasn’t a case of him not wanting to stay connected, it was more that his dragon needed to keep moving. Humans would call it wanderlust, but I had a feeling it was more than that.

“I know you all are. I truly didn’t think this was possible, but I’m very happy that it is.”

“Me too. Father would be pleased as well. He always wanted you to be happy, even without him here.”

I sighed. I knew that it was true, and as happy as I was about finding another mate, sharing my life with someone and having a bright future, the guilt remained. And the grief.

Grief was such a fickle thing. There were days when I didn’t feel the sadness, the loss, and others when I wore it like a bad suit. There was no rhyme or reason as to it, either.

“We are gonna have to figure out how this is all gonna work out, though. Have you and Ollie talked about whether or not he’ll continue working?” Tavian asked.

Work. That was an easy one. It wasn’t a matter of clan politics or family acceptance. It was a job.

“We haven’t, but I believe that he wants to.”

And as long as it was his desire, it was mine also. I wasn't one of those alphas who needed their omegas home doing the housework and goddess knew what. I had people for that, but even if I didn't, we were a team, and we'd share those tasks. If that was his yearning, I'd support him, but I didn't get that from any of the conversations we'd had.

"And if you two have a clutch..." Tavian's brows raised. There was hope in his voice, thankfully.

I grimaced. We had not talked about that. It was yet another thing I hadn't let myself think about. I had to stop doing that. I scrubbed a hand over my face.

"We... that hasn't come up yet." I'd raised my children to be open and honest with those around them, and here I was avoiding the difficult conversations at every turn

"Oh, for goodness' sake, will the two of you sit down and communicate? Please? I can't be your little relationship coach. I have a family and a job, I don't need a side hustle." He tried to lighten the blow with humor, but he was right. I was old enough to know better.

"Easy there, young one," I said.

"Oh, you're gonna pull out the 'I'm your dad' voice now, huh? I'm a dad, too." He made a face that reminded me of when he was young and being silly, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Mal, you're here." Ollie came to my side and wrapped his arms around my waist.

I pressed a kiss to his lips.

"How was your day?" I asked. With him here, my son would stop his twenty

questions. Did I ever learn?

“Great. The kids have learned quite a few new things. We were watching some television, and Ruby saw someone jump roping. And, well, you’ll have to see.” He linked his fingers into mine and tugged me toward the living room.

There, Ruby had a shoelace she was desperately trying to hold in both hands, fumbling in a way that only a child with very few fine motor skills could do. I held back a laugh as I watched her try to grasp it in her little hands and try to mimic the movements they had seen.

Ollie was so good with the kids. So many people tried to prevent kids from getting hurt to the point where they never got to experiment. Ollie found that balance, and moments like this highlighted how amazing he was at that.

“Are you jump roping, Ruby? Is that jumping?” I squatted down to her level.

She bounced their little legs, her feet never moving off the ground as she bent her knees. A wide grin split her face. She was having the time of her life.

“You’re doing so great,” Ollie said.

That was when I saw it—a vision for what our future could be.

I may have been old, but I wouldn’t be the first dragon to have a clutch at my age. Thanks to all of our shifter abilities, I didn’t age like humans. And at one time, I thought I’d never have any more children. I’d had that season of my life. But now, watching Ollie with the kids, it made me want that again... with him.

Ollie and I could do this—this could be us. I’d love to have one with Ollie. He’d be a fantastic father, just as he was a fantastic manny. And together, we could grow our

family. But was that what he wanted? My son was right. I needed to alpha up and have the conversation already. It wasn't fair to either of us to keep avoiding it.

"You want to keep an eye on these three? I'll see if Tavian needs any help with dinner," he said.

"Absolutely," I said. "They are three of my favorite people."

Dinner was a laid-back affair. Eryndor had also come for dinner, arriving at the same time that Kier came home. My whole family was here, except for Thalric, which was a far too common occurrence. Everyone around the table was important to me. This wasn't work, it was so much more important than that. It was family.

"So how's this gonna work?" Eryndor asked. "Are you gonna move in with Tavian? Is that what's gonna happen?"

I rolled my eyes. It seemed my sons had gotten together on this one, and knowing them, they were never gonna stop pushing. That made me happy, even if it was slightly annoying. They were showing how much they loved me and wanted my happiness and didn't want me trapped in my grief. I was such a lucky dragon.

"We haven't discussed it." Which I'd already told them.

"It's early in their mating. There's not a whole lot of talking going on," Tavian said with a wink at his brother.

My mate looked like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. I got it. These were my children discussing our private time. That was awkward on a good day.

Eryndor made a face. "Gross, dude."

“Hey, you started the conversation.” Tavian wrinkled his nose at his brother.

“I absolutely did not.” Eryndor shook his head. “You’ve taken it too far, like you always do.”

Eryndor went to ball up a napkin and toss it at his brother. In some ways, their sibling bond was no different when they were teens.

“Ah,” Ollie said, giving a glare to both of them. “You guys can have fun later, after the kids go to bed, but right now you’ve got little eyes watching. Let’s keep the sibling rivalry down to a minimum.”

I hadn’t thought of that. We didn’t need three little ones throwing things at the table. That was for sure.

“Sorry,” they both mumbled, the almost-fight petering out before it even started.

Kier covered his mouth with his hand, laughter bubbled out of him. “He really is like a stepdad.”

The blood drained from Ollie’s face as he looked around the table. “No, I was just... because of the...”

“You’re fine, Ollie,” I said. “They think they are funny. They aren’t.”

Tavian went to open his mouth, probably to say that he was funny, and I stopped him with a glance. There’d be plenty of opportunities for Ollie to experience the joy of their sibling antics. Today was not going to be that day.

“It’s not like that. I’m not your dad—” Poor Ollie was so flustered.

Eryndor shrugged. “You kind of are...”

“Should we call you like Pops? Or Da? Dad 2.0? Young Dad?” Tavian asked.

“I like that one. Let’s go with Young Dad,” Eryndor said.

Great. Now they were conspiring together. Their intent was to make Ollie feel like one of us, and I got that. But being dragons, they wouldn’t understand the age issue. Not fully. I didn’t even, and I was the one mated to him. For us, the huge age difference was something we were used to in our daily lives. We were constantly around people far from our age. That wasn’t true for Ollie.

“My goodness, you guys are going to be the death of me,” I said.

“That’s our purpose in life.” Eryndor winked.

Ollie still looked like he might be a bit sick. I placed my hand in his.

“You sure everything’s okay?”

He grimaced. “Yes, sorry, just—” He put a hand to his stomach. “Excuse me for a moment.”

Ollie ran from the room, and before I could fully get up, Tavian’s arms were wrapped around me. “Dad, I didn’t realize—congratulations!”

Next thing I knew, Eryndor’s arms were around me the other way, from the other side. “I’m so happy for you!”

It took me a few seconds to piece together what they were saying. “You think it...?” I asked, afraid to get too excited, in case I was wrong.

Both chuckled.

“Yeah, we think... Actually, we know.” Eryndor stood back. “Now go. Go to him.”

I was out of the room so fast, standing in the bathroom doorway as my mate was looking up at me, his face still a little green.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin dinner.” He had no clue yet.

“You didn’t,” I assured him and grabbed a washcloth, cooling it off with water before handing it to him. “Trust me, you didn’t.”

“Wait outside. I don’t want you seeing me like this.” Poor guy was embarrassed and still hadn’t figured out what the rest of us knew.

He came out a minute later, his face looking normal again.

“Feeling better now?”

“Yeah, thanks. I don’t know what I could have eaten.”

“It isn’t something you ate.” I placed my hand on his belly.

“Oh... that’s what you meant. You think I’m really...?” He placed his hand on mine.

“Really.”

“Is... is that okay?” He looked up at me, his eyes filled with worry.

“No, it’s not okay. It’s amazing.” I hugged him close. “I love you, Ollie. I can’t wait to start a family with you.”

“I love you, Mal. More than words can express.”

Chapter 17

Malric

Ollie was expecting... he was going to have my clutch. There was no test necessary, no ultrasound or any such thing that we needed to do. His symptoms were the only verification we needed. And truthfully, it would've been shocking if he hadn't been. We had been enjoying each other's bodies pretty much nonstop. A clutch was inevitable given that we were mates.

We'd only been mated for a short amount of time, but as was typical for newly mated dragons, my seed took, and with it came a clutch of eggs. That had to be a lot for him to take in. He was a mouse, and mice didn't lay eggs, but there was something about the genetics of a dragon that turned that impossible into the possible.

How many eggs would be a mystery until a few weeks from now when Ollie laid his clutch. But until then, we were in the throes of a fierce nesting storm. It came on quickly, and at first, Ollie didn't even see what was happening. He thought he was just on a cleaning kick. It was so much more than that. And after the cleaning came the building.

I watched helplessly as Ollie gathered blankets, pillows, and bits of cloth—anything he could get his hands on that was soft. Unlike with cleaning, this part was very personal, and the omega was the one who made all the decisions. It was their body, the clutch they grew, and biology gave them intense possessiveness over the nest itself. All I could do was be there to get anything he wanted, to bring him food, and to assure him he was doing a great job.

He used empty boxes, books, and other things to prop up the blankets and make a nest-like structure out of it. He was determined for this to be perfect, and despite his mouse biology, he had done a really good job of creating a nest from nothing, but it wasn't necessary.

"We'll get a new nest, mate. I promise." The nest that I had used for my first two clutches, and that had been in the family for generations, was still at Tavian's home. The kids used it for naps and as a reading nook. More than once I had found Ollie curled up in the nest with the three kids reading and cuddling.

Not once had Ollie asked for it or for me to get another. He had been determined to make his own, to provide for his own clutch. While I appreciated his desire to be the best, it was hard not to take over and make it simpler for him.

"Are you sure?" Ollie said. "I thought you'd only want to use the family nest." He didn't look away from his work at hand. He fluffed and adjusted the blankets and pillows to his liking, then did it all over again until it was perfect.

"I would love that, but Tavian's children still need it."

"They do." He paused his work, studying his nest intently. "That's why I was doing this. I didn't want you to feel like the family nest was our only option."

He was such a sweet mate.

"With a clutch being born this close to one another in a family, it's not uncommon to have multiple nests. The new one can be ours," I said. "Having another in the family will come in handy in case Eryndor or Thalric find their mates."

"Do you think..." Ollie trailed off, his hand caressing the sides of the makeshift nest, "that we could have another clutch after this one?"

“It’s not beyond the realm of possibility,” I said. “I never thought I would have another clutch. Yet here we are.” Perhaps the lesson there was never say never.

“You’re happy, though, right? About this?” Ollie’s face was pensive and unsure.

“Yes, mate,” I said, and I went to him. I climbed into his beautiful nest he had put together and then pulled him to my side. “I am so very happy. I never thought I would feel this way again. Not after...” The pain of my loss still burned deep within me. Who knew that grief and happiness could live so close to one another. “I never thought I could be this lucky again, and if another clutch comes along, I’ll be luckier still.

“Please tell me about him, tell me about your first love, the one who helped you become the alpha you are, the one who was and will always own a part of your heart. Let me know and love him too.”

I looked at my beautiful mate, smiling up at me, his eyes glistening with emotion.

“He’s such an important part of your past, Mal, and I know next to nothing about him. I didn’t want to ask Tavian or Eryndor. That’s not fair to them, and it’s awkward.”

I sighed and relaxed into the comfort of the nest. Ollie clung to my side. “Chastain was amazing. Believe it or not, he was the stern one among us. I was the fun dad, and he had us all on a schedule.”

“I can see that. You are the fun grandpa too. It’s like you’re a different man at work and with family. One side all business all the time, but I suppose that’s the way it has to be.” He snuggled into me.

He was right that my job required me to be no-nonsense.

“Tell me more.”

At first, I worried that sharing about my past would hurt my mate, but there was a calmness spreading over him as he spoke of Chastain. He needed this. I did too.

“Chastain kept us all in line—making sure we were at our events, making sure the children learned their languages and did their music lessons. He had each of them learn an instrument because he wanted them to experience music fully. Of course, this was back before electrical anything. The piano we have in the foyer belonged to him. He liked to play. I still can’t listen to music the same way. He was fiercely loyal and quick-witted. Strong. Like you.”

“He sounds like someone I’d have liked.”

“You’d have loved him. Losing him was hard. One of the hardest things I ever went through. I threw myself into my work afterwards. It’s the only reason I became clan leader. The boys were all grown, and I was alone in my home for the first time. The grief was... insurmountable. Tavian looks the most like me. Thalric looks the most like Chastain. He has that same quick wit.”

“The two of you did an amazing job raising your sons.”

“You and I will do the same with ours.”

Ollie sighed and looked around the nest. There was plenty of space for the two of us and however many eggs we ended up having. Of course this wasn’t the final nest, but whatever style we purchased would be large enough to accommodate both of us. I’d make sure of it. We didn’t have a lack of space, there was no reason to go small.

“I’m terrified of having a large clutch.” He admitted, and I completely understood. This wasn’t going to be a normal pregnancy for his species, and he had no experience

with others like him having a clutch. The entire situation had to be terrifying.

I chuckled, squeezing my mate against me. "Fate will deliver us whatever she thinks we can handle, whether that is one egg or five."

Ollie shuddered in my arms. "Please, not five."

"You know, even though you will lay eggs, it doesn't mean they will all be dragons. There is the possibility that we will have a little mouse in there." It wasn't common, but it had been known to happen.

"That's terrifying also." He shivered.

"Would it help alleviate some of these concerns if you met my dragon? I still cannot believe you haven't met a dragon before."

Ollie rolled his eyes. "I've met plenty. I just haven't actually seen one in their scales."

"Come, let's go."

My dragon was itching to get out, not wanting to take the time to go all the way outside first, like he would have fit in the room without breaking pretty much everything.

Ollie and I went outside, and I led him to the covered swing I had out there. "Have a seat."

I rubbed my nose against his, and he gave me a look, one I couldn't quite decipher.

"You're carrying our dragonettes or our mouslettes or both. No need to be standing here when there is a nice seat for you to use."

And while that was all true, there was a part of me that was worried my beast would scare him. Sitting would give him a little bit of grounding.

I took off my clothes, ignoring the way my mate licked his lips upon seeing me. “You’re killing me, Ollie.”

“Is that so?” He did it again. He knew exactly what he was doing.

I jogged far enough away to allow me to shift and still give him ample space to adjust to my size and my scales as I took my dragon for the first time.

My dragon was more than ready for this. He wanted to meet our mate, and he wanted to meet his mouse. But today wouldn’t be the day for that. Ollie was growing our clutch, and while some shifters were able to do that and shift, because of his size, it was highly recommended that he didn’t. We’d have to wait for that.

I called forth my scales and landed on the ground with a thud. I kept my wings close to my body, waiting to see how he would respond. He gasped, his hands going to his mouth as he got up and crossed over to me.

“You’re stunning.” He reached out, and I lowered my head so he could run his fingers along my scales, just under my eyes. “I hope our young have your eyes. Every single one of them. You. Are. Stunning.”

He didn’t say much for a long time—walking around me, running his hand over my wings, my back, doing his best to give me a hug, even kissing me on my nose.

I was enthralled. And my dragon was, too.

“I want to see you fly. And maybe one day we could build something so that you could fly with me... maybe a basket.” And he chuckled at the image of that, but the

second it came out of his mouth, I was already planning to make that happen. I could think of nothing better than flying with my mate.

“I’m gonna go sit over there so you don’t yell at me for standing too much when you get down.” He winked.

I didn’t yell, but I would be worried, and I would shorten my flight.

Once he got in his seat and was watching me, I took to the air. And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t showing off. I 100% was.

I tried to think of every fancy move from the Dragon flight Games that I could accomplish, and I did every single one. Up and away I went as he stared up at me in awe. I couldn’t help but wonder how the goddess deemed me worthy of such a mate.

But I was ever so grateful that they did.

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Chapter 18

Ollie

I had traveled with the triplets before, so I thought that I knew what I was doing. Load them up, be on our merry way, come back and unwind. Easy peasy. Only it wasn't easy peasy at all.

I'd failed to anticipate the amount of attention that they would get the minute we walked into Dragon Headquarters, the unofficial name of the Emberstone Clan's headquarters building. Sure, they never went unnoticed when we went to the park or for a walk. How could they? They were absolutely adorable. But that paled in comparison to when they entered dragon spaces, especially being Lord Malric's grandchildren.

I wondered if things would be the same, or possibly worse, when our clutch arrived. Worse wasn't the right word... overwhelming, possibly. But this was much and adding to it... if this was a glimpse of my future, I needed to be prepared.

The building itself wasn't new to me. The first time I'd been here was for my interview with Tavian. The difference this time was my mating Lord Malric and bringing along three little ones. I couldn't recall a single person even noticing me that first time I walked through these doors. My, how things had changed.

Turned out, when you were the clan leader's mate and you arrived with the clan leader's first clutch of grandchildren, people took notice. When you were a lowly mouse coming to see about a job, not so much. I had a feeling there were some days

in the future where I'd want that anonymity again, but it came with the territory.

Kier usually worked the reception desk, but since being mated to Tavian, he'd been promoted to a different role, one I didn't quite understand. The receptionist now was a young dragon who gushed over the three kids. If they had their way, we'd have hung out with them the entire day. It was sweet, but also awkward having to say good-bye multiple times.

I pushed the massive stroller that managed to hold all three babies into the building and still make corners with ease into the main area and was immediately met with a flock of people oohing and aahing over the children. They all gave me big smiles, introduced themselves, and welcomed me into the clan. More than one of them slipped me a business card and requested meetings with "my people."

I didn't have people. I didn't want people. I was confused as to what they would even want with me, but I accepted them graciously. What else was there to do?

No official announcement had been made about Malric and I, but apparently, news traveled fast. Plus, I was sure that they could smell Mal on me. A part of me wondered if they'd heard through negative gossip from that jackass at the gala or if it came from someone like Vlad who was thrilled I was part of Mal's life.

I supposed it didn't matter since they were all being kind. Of course I had the buffer of the babies with me. No one would risk upsetting them. It wasn't just Lord Malric who would take care of them if that happened.

I navigated the stroller to the daycare center located on the first floor. It was a great benefit for them to have. I understood why my bosses preferred having their clutch with a manny most of the time, but that didn't deter from my understanding of just how amazing this facility was.

I settled in with the children, letting them play. I spent a good deal of time talking with the main teacher, Alice. She opened up about the struggles they had with accommodating all of the children and how they needed more space. I could see that. The clan was growing, and mannies were expensive. Add to that being able to visit your children throughout the day—no wonder this was a popular place

“When we first opened the headquarters building, I thought the space was too large. I never imagined we’d grow so big! But we seem to be having an influx of clutches lately. Which is a good thing. That’s what happens when a clan has a strong leader. We could use twice as much space, honestly. And double the staff. I’d love to get our teacher-to-child ration lower.”

Five minutes into the conversation, I finally realized that she was not just venting to me. She was telling me all this because, as the mate of the clan leader, I was expected to do something with that information. I totally could, and I realized very quickly that I wanted to be a part of this.

The children were our future, as corny as it sounded, and we needed to provide for them in the best way that we could. The daycare had outgrown the space that they had allocated in the headquarters building. Perhaps it was time to start thinking about where else they could expand to—perhaps a second location? I’d have to talk with Mal to see what our options were.

“The kids are having a good time with the others. If you wanted to run upstairs and see your mate, you totally can.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I said.

Alice smiled. “You can have a break and go see your mate. I remember what it was like to be newly mated.”

I grinned. It would be nice to see Mal's office. "Thank you. I won't be long. I've actually never seen where he works."

"Have him give you a tour of the whole place. He designed headquarters to be comfortable and functional. There's a gym, with a sauna and a hot tub. Plus, the game room and cafeteria."

I checked in to make sure that the children were set and then went to the elevator. I knew where Mal's office was, but I hadn't been there before. His assistant smiled when they saw me.

"You must be Ollie." They practically leapt from behind their desk and came to greet me. "I'm Jamie. It's so great to finally meet you."

"You as well," I said. I had no idea how they knew me on sight, but I wasn't going to question it. It could be he scented my mating and that would make things uncomfortable, at least for me.

"He has time between meetings right now, if you'd like to go right in."

"Thank you," I said.

Mal looked up as I walked into his office. His desk sat in the corner so that he could have a view of the door and also be able to look out the windows. The windows were floor-to-ceiling, giving him a gorgeous view of the city skyline. On the opposite wall was a tall bookshelf with various decor, some picture frames, and books. I wanted to study each item and ask why it was there. I longed to learn more about my mate.

"Ollie, I didn't know you were visiting today."

"It was an impromptu trip. I messaged Alice to see if they had some space at the

daycare, and they did.” There was more to it than that, but I planned to save business talk for later. Right now, I wanted nothing more than to be in my mate’s arms.

He scooped his chair back and gestured for me to come closer to him. I wasted no time climbing onto his lap. Then he hit a button on his desk, and the shades for the windows that looked out to the rest of the office rolled down.

“Malric,” I said.

“Ollie.”

“People will hear us.” I wasn’t saying no, but I wanted to put that out there.

“No. They won’t. It’s soundproof.”

That was all the assurance I needed. I climbed off his lap and went down to the floor, shifting closer, and wedged myself between his knees. “Because I don’t think I could resist any longer.”

“So, was this is the plan?” he asked, his voice raw with need. “Seduce me in my office when I should be working?”

I rested my hands on his thighs and looked up at him with half a shrug. “Something like that.”

“And I thought you were a shy little mouse.” His voice was teasing and lighthearted, but also heady.

“Shyness is overrated,” I said. I leaned forward and placed a slow, deliberate kiss at the base of his throat.

“That so?” His hand moved to the back of my neck, a subtle press. “Prove it.”

Gods, I loved the way he exuded power in this place. He treated me like an equal... always. Except here, in this space, I didn't want to be. I wanted to feel his power, and he must've seen that in me because he was bringing it.

“I will,” I said, gaze locked with his.

I lowered my body, now on my knees, my face level with his zipper, his bulge evident, only encouraging me.

He raised an eyebrow. “Comfortable?”

“Getting there.” I winked and reached for his belt.

“What are you doing?” he asked, knowing full well what I was up to.

“Whatever I want.” I worked on his buckle, and once open, pushed it aside, fingers slipping beneath his waistband. His breath caught, and a growl was building in his chest.

I pulled back just enough to open his slacks, the sound of the zipper echoing close to my ear. “I need a little snack.”

I leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to the spot just above his waistband, before pulling them, glad he pushed up enough for me to slide them all the way down, releasing his cock, hard and heavy and so very ready.

I licked my lips, gave him one last, needy glance before lowering my head, parting my mouth, and closing around him.

He groaned, encouraging me on. I moved on him with slow, even strokes, my tongue tracing patterns against the ridge, the veins, the tip, learning him all over again. My jaw was going to hurt later, his size stretching it to its limits, but gods, was it going to be worth it.

His fingers intertwined in my hair, and he moved, guiding my rhythm. He didn't force me, but he made his desires known, and it turned me on in a way I hadn't expected. He had me greedy for more... so much more. But we were in his office on borrowed time. All of that would wait. For now, it was my mission to make him explode in my mouth and be unable to think of anything else the entire day.

I hollowed my cheeks, took him deeper, my free hand clutching his thigh.

His breath grew ragged, and his hips began to roll. He was hard and hot against my tongue, and the taste of him—the salt, the musk, the scent that was uniquely him.

“Ollie. Gods, Ollie, you're so...”

I sucked him in as far as I could take him and swallowed around his cock.

He growled as he came, his cum hitting the back of my throat in spurts as I greedily swallowed every drop down, licked him clean, and sat back on my heels before standing up.

“Thanks for the snack.” I licked my lips. “Delicious. Well, I best be off.”

He stared at me in disbelief. “Don't I get a turn?”

“You absolutely do... tonight, but you have a meeting in a few minutes, and I am going to need a whole lot more of your time than that.”

His head fell back against his chair. “You are going to be the death of me, little mouse.”

“Small, but mighty.”

Chapter 19

Malric

Never had I ever. That was a game that the kids played, right? Or something like it. Something about being with Ollie made me feel like a young dragon again, like I was coming alive after years of dormancy. I'd never felt old, not really. But maybe more... lackluster. I'd been living without truly living, and now... now every day was an adventure.

Never had I ever gotten hard in my office. Never had I ever come like a teenage dragon in my office. Never had I ever had my mate in my office. And now, here I was, getting blown by my sexy mate in a stolen moment. When he said I was going to remember it all day, he was wrong. I was going to be thinking about it nonstop.

There was a first time for everything, and this first time was... wow.

Still, perhaps having relations in my office was a bit of overkill. I couldn't find it in myself to be upset, though. After all, my mate was irresistible, and he was my mate. It wasn't like I was having an illicit affair.

"Just so you know, I don't make a habit of that," I told Ollie as I straightened my shirt, and he did his best to do the same with his hair.

Or more accurately, I hadn't in the past... In the future? That was a different story.

"I don't make a habit of it either—especially since I'm technically working. More so

than the first night that we were together, since I left the kids literally in someone else's care." He flinched, and I instantly felt guilty for messing up the spell we'd both been under.

I wrapped my arms around his middle and pressed my lips to his neck, inhaling his scent. My dragon went wild with need, and even though I'd just come harder than I thought possible, that didn't change the fact that I wanted him again.

"I don't for one minute think that my son and his mate have not done something similar. I've caught them more than once being less than appropriate at the office."

Still, I should've probably been more professional. I was the clan leader, after all.

Or perhaps I should show just how irresistible my mate was. There was no use in pretending that I didn't want him every minute of every day. Anyone who'd found their mate would understand.

"Still, this is your office. It should be off limits." Ollie was backtracking. I hadn't meant to make him uncomfortable. Way to ruin his afternoon snack, as he called it.

"On the contrary. This is my office," I insisted. "We should feel at home here. Now I have very fond memories here." I kissed the top of his head.

He chuckled. "Mal, you need to be serious."

"I am serious. Now I can think of something other than paperwork while I'm sitting at my desk." And I would think of it, often. It was the hottest thing I'd ever experienced at work.

"What if someone caught us?"

“That would be a shame, and avoiding that is why I locked the door.” I’d never put him at risk of being caught in a compromising position. If he was into that sort of thing, I’d be all over it, but he was my shy little mouse. I was going to both respect and protect that.

Just then, the intercom went off. Of course it did.

“Lord Malric, your advisors are waiting for you in the boardroom.”

I checked my watch. Sure enough, I was running late. Great. I wanted to finish this conversation on a high note, one where Ollie was bouncing out of here happy as could be. I’d need to make it up to him tonight.

“Okay, perhaps if we do this again, we need to clear my schedule.” It came out like I was teasing, but I wasn’t. I was one hundred percent willing to cancel everything and have him in every corner of this room, including against the wall of windows. My cock was already stirring thinking about it

“Are you late? I’m so sorry,” Ollie said.

“Nothing to be sorry for, mate. In fact, come with me, and I will introduce you.”

“To whom?” he said.

I had a feeling if I listed everyone with whom he’d be meeting, it would scare him away. He had met a few of my advisors at the charity event, but I didn’t think he fully understood the full breadth of who they were. And it had been a mixed bag of reactions. I was pretty sure I’d made it crystal clear that the negative behaviors were not to be tolerated, but I’d understand why the situation might make him uncomfortable. Scratch that... would make him uncomfortable.

Ollie had not been through any of the new mate orientation training that non-dragons went through. I would need to remedy that. And quick. I grabbed my phone and fired off a quick text to Jamie. She would manage getting him the classes he needed.

Then I was off, grabbing Ollie's hand and tugging him through the passage that led to the boardroom. I could go the route through the rest of the building like a normal person, but it was nice that we'd had what equated to secret tunnels built.

The room grew quiet when I entered, and everyone turned to look at me and my mate. Ollie let out an adorable squeak. I put my hand on the small of his back and walked with him to the head of the table.

"Hello, everyone. I apologize for the delay and also for the slight change in agenda for today."

A few of my advisors, who were also my close friends, gave me encouraging smiles. They were the ones that I knew would support me and Ollie.

There were a few who had scowls on their faces. It took all kinds to run a clan. Not everyone would agree with everything that I said or did, and I had accepted that a long time ago. But when it came to my mate, I was not going to have the same level of leeway.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to Ollie—my mate."

Ollie smiled, and he gave an awkward little wave.

"I understand that it is sudden and unexpected, given that I had already been blessed with a mate. But it seems that fate had a twist in store for me." Better thwart any people trying to deny he was mine with my past from the get-go.

“Congratulations,” Vlad said, and there was applause from several members at the table, a majority of them, but not all.

Elias cleared his throat. “A non-dragon, Malric? Surely you can see how this would be problematic. I have the same concerns I brought forth to you when I first met this Ollie.”

He was such a jerk, and he’d learned nothing from my reaction to his behavior at the gala. Not a freaking thing. How did people get to be this ugly and hateful? How? He couldn’t even blame it on his clan and its culture. We weren’t like that, but he definitely was.

“No,” I said. “I do not see how this will be problematic. In fact, I think it only strengthens our clan.”

I was about to say more, but Ollie stopped me.

“I understand your concerns about a young mouse shifter being mated to your leader. Lord Malric has led this clan through tough times. He’s helped bring this clan into the modern times with his courageous leadership. So you might be wondering if a mate will distract from that. I am here to assure you that it will not.”

He was born for this role.

“I’m as committed to this clan as Lord Malric is. In becoming his mate, his worries became mine, his passion became mine. And no one is more passionate about this clan than Lord Malric. But I do not understand and will not tolerate disrespect toward me and my family because of fear related to my species or my age. If you bring us your concerns professionally and with respect, we will listen and address them. But we will not tolerate hatred.”

I wanted to clap or drop a mic... that was what they did now, right? But regardless of my reaction, my pride was running over. He'd done amazingly, not for a single second showing the discomfort he had to be feeling as he addressed the situation.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I have to get back to the children that I'm here with. I look forward to doing business with you all in the future."

I walked him out. "You were amazing, mate. Absolutely amazing."

"I wanted to puke the entire time." He snuggled into me. "Thank you for standing up for me."

"Always." It was my vow.

"You should go back inside for your meeting, and I'll go get the kids." He stood on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to my lips. "See you tonight."

"Maybe for some dessert?"

"I thought you wanted a snack." He smiled mischievously.

"I was hoping for both."

He giggled and was on his way. I was glad that he left with a smile. His introduction had been pretty intense. He'd handled it like a true leader, but I hated that he had to handle it at all. We were in the 2000's not the 1600's. Species should no longer matter.

When I went back inside, the room went silent—telling me exactly what I already knew. They'd been talking about Ollie.

Vlad would fill me in on all the little details. I had no doubt that he was there protecting Ollie just as strongly as I would. But it was unacceptable that the discussion had even been happening.

I went to the head of the table and sat at my seat. “Just so you’re aware, this kind of behavior will not be tolerated. At all. Ever. Not for my mate. Not for any of your mates.”

Elias looked like he wanted to strangle me. Good. Because if he was mad, it meant he was listening, and he understood just how deadly serious I was.

“We are better than this.” At least, we always had been. “I want my kids to grow up in a clan that respects all species. One that understands that being part of a clan isn’t about what scales or fur or feathers you have. One that understands that clan life is about coming together as a family—a large family that takes care of each other.”

“Are you saying that your mate has a clutch growing inside of him? You’re planning to breed with that... omega?” Elliot had a death wish. I was sure of it.

“You’re dismissed.” I refused to take any more of his bullshit.

He shot daggers at me.

“Do not make me repeat myself. You are dismissed. And anyone else who wants to be like that can be on their way, too.”

He begrudgingly left, and everyone else sat where they were, watching me carefully.

“Now, before we begin the business at hand,” I wasn’t going to address Elias’s behavior any further. They already saw and understood my response. “Yes, Ollie and I are expecting our first clutch. The goddess has blessed me with another mate and

our clutch. We both accept that blessing wholeheartedly.”

This time, everyone smiled and cheered, even those who I knew hadn’t been this thrilled before. Maybe it wasn’t them in the first place. Maybe they were just following Elias’s lead out of fear. Or maybe they’d learned their lesson. But in any case, it was a step forward.

“Now it’s time to do our favorite part of our agenda. Vlad, can you go over the report for this quarter?”

This time, the groans that came were accepting.

Chapter 20

Ollie

My body hummed with adrenaline. I managed to walk out of the boardroom with my head high, and my mate had stood by me the entire time. Not for a single second did I feel alone. But the minute I was out of his sight, I leaned against the wall and let out a long breath.

Holy shit. That had been intense on a level I'd never expected. Looking back, I was impressed by past-me. There had been a time when I'd have cowered in the corner or worse, shifted and run away. But not today. Today, I stood with my head held high and fought back, in the only way I stood a chance of winning.

I hadn't intended to give any such speech today, not even when I first began speaking. But it was either a speech or a "Fuck you, Elias, you bigoted piece of shit," and speech seemed like a much safer route to go given my mate's position.

It shouldn't have been necessary, but a couple of times I saw a glimmer of recognition and understanding from one of the men who had initially been unimpressed by my little mouse. Maybe I broke through to him. And between that and my chat in the nursery earlier, it was a lot to take in. I was still trying to process the idea that people were looking to me for answers on anything at all. But this was the world of being the clan leader's mate, and I would fulfill that role.

I had no desire to leave my job as the children's nanny. Plus, I had children of my own that would be arriving. But I understood that as mate to the clan leader, I had a

responsibility to the clan to help. It wasn't like a typical job. I couldn't simply decide to quit or even not accept it. Not while my mate was the clan leader.

Could I ask him to step down? Sure. Would he do so? He already offered. But I refused to be the kind of mate that asked their partner to give up their dreams for no better reason than my comfort. I was going to give this role my best effort, and if there came a time when I realized it was impossible, then we would have a conversation. But until then, I was going to give this 100%.

Turned out, I knew exactly how I could do both—delegation.

Delegation was not something I was going to only embrace myself. I was going to support my mate in doing so, as well. It was good for us and would be good for the clan. Everyone had gifts to bring, so why not use them all to the benefit of everyone.

I stopped at the bathroom to clean up and make sure I didn't look too I-Just-Gave-a-Blowjob. In hindsight, I probably should've done that before walking into the boardroom. Oh well, they were more distracted by the little mouse inside me and my words than anything else. At least I hoped so.

Initially, I'd meant to go back to get the kids, but I felt this need to return to Mal's office. Easier said than done, especially since I was returning to the office a different way. I took a few wrong turns, and eventually I had to ask someone how to get there.

"Jamie," I said as I approached her desk.

She smiled broadly when she saw me. "Yes, how may I help you?"

"Can you set up a meeting for you and me—and perhaps Tavian and Kier as well—for next week? I want to start building out my team, if that makes sense." Was I already mucking this up by not using the right lingo? I'd never worked in a

corporate setting before. And that was very much what managing the clan was like—a business.

Her smile got huge, and her eyes lit up. “That makes perfect sense, Ollie. I’ll find some time. And if I may be so presumptuous, I can put together a few recommendations for assistants for you?”

Her support meant the world to me. It would’ve been easy for her to not want to bother with me. In many ways I was going to be a pain in her ass as I tried to learn everything, not out of lack of ability but out of cluelessness. Still, the end result would be the same.

“That would be absolutely perfect,” I said.

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say more, but then she pasted on a smile. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I sensed that she would be an ally of mine, someone who could help me navigate this new world I found myself in. And I one hundred percent was going to take her up on it.

“Be honest with me. Always. I don’t know the rules of this world, and I’m learning as I go. So if there is something I should be doing or shouldn’t be doing, please let me know. I only want to help the clan, and help Mal. In whatever way I can.”

Whatever I said must’ve been the right thing, because her eyes lit up again. She leaned forward and looked around. Then she spoke quietly.

“I can also put together a list of things that a clan mate is typically expected to do. That doesn’t mean you have to do them, but they are the types of responsibilities other clan leader mates take on. And I can help to prioritize. I hear a lot around here.

The advisors seem to think I'm invisible or something, because they speak freely when they're waiting for Lord Malric. I often know about their complaints before he does."

It was my turn to grin. "Before that meeting with Kier and Tavian, perhaps you and I could have dinner. We have a lot we could discuss."

"Indeed. Lord Malric has a board meeting on Thursday evening. It's here, and it's a full catered dinner. I always work late in case they need anything. Perhaps we can use that time?"

"That sounds perfect. Thank you, Jamie." I needed to remember to let Kier and Tavian know. There was nothing on the calendar yet, but that didn't mean there might not be something in the works.

"Thank you, Ollie. I think you're going to be just what this clan needs. And on a more personal note, I'm so happy to see Lord Malric smiling."

I'd only known him the way he was now, but she wasn't the first person who'd mentioned being happy he was smiling, and that saddened me. It meant he'd not been smiling before.

After we exchanged numbers, I returned to the baby room, where the triplets had joined the rest of the group for their afternoon nap. Alice was cleaning up the mess from lunch. How she managed to get that many children asleep at the same time had to have its roots in magic. I only had three on a daily basis, and if I got two down at a time for naps, I called it a victory.

"Looks like I have a few minutes," I said. "Is now a good time to talk about what we were discussing before?"

Jamie might be helping me by putting together a list of clan needs, but I could still do some legwork. Childcare was one of my specialties and an area that very obviously needed attention.

She grinned. “Are you sure? I don’t want to take up too much of your time.”

“I have as much time as what the twins will sleep, which isn’t much at all some days.” Once they fully dropped to one nap a day it would be better. This in-between time was rough for all kids.

“That’ll be enough time for me,” she said. “Let me grab the other teachers.”

“That’s perfect.”

While Alice gathered the other teachers, I took a moment to collect my thoughts. There were so many options and possibilities. It seemed insurmountable when I barely knew anything about the clan. Right now, all I had was my desire to help. I hoped to goddess it was enough.

“Ollie! I heard you were here.” Kier came over to where I sat at the table designed for children. “I also heard about your speech to the advisors.”

I balked at that. “What? That was like twenty minutes ago, max. How did you hear?”

“News travels fast.” He grinned. “And another thing, Jamie messaged me and put an appointment with you on my calendar. I’m so happy that you’re jumping in. I think it will really help.”

My cheeks heated. “I’m hoping so. But I promise I still plan on watching the kids. I’m not giving that up. That’s why I want—”

Kier held up a hand. “Hey, we’ll make it work either way, okay? You’re family now, Ollie. Tavian and I felt that even way before we found out you were Malric’s mate, but its solidified now. You are officially stuck with us.”

“I’m glad.” There was so much more to say, but I was already mentally drained from the super fun board meeting I’d attended.

“We’re just happy you’re here. And that our children will have the best grandpas ever.”

I grimaced. Grandpa. He was right. Technically, I was the kids’ step-grandfather. Yikes. “I think I’m younger than you.” Which didn’t make the grandfather thing less true but felt a tad better.

Kier laughed. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’re a grandpa now. That’s why you are Young Grandpa.” He was having far too much fun with this.

I smiled because he was right, and his amusement was spreading.

“Do you have time to talk with the teachers and me about what sort of needs the daycare has? I figured while I was here, I might as well start gathering information. As a new parent, your input will be fantastic.”

“Of course!”

The teachers were amazing. Throughout our discussion, I made a long list of things to bring up with my mate. We had a lot to do and little time to do it in. Once the clutch was laid, I was going to be pretty preoccupied, and I wanted to get things rolling before them.

What I knew for sure was that we would do it together—teachers, parents, my mate,

and me. And when people come together for the benefit of children and families, great things happened.

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Chapter 21

Malric

The routine that my mate and I fell into was seamless. The way that Ollie fit into my life, my sons' lives, and the clan was amazing. It was like he was born for this, and I supposed in a way he had. Otherwise fate wouldn't have made him mine.

Once he gave me his plan for hiring a team to help him navigate the needs of the clan, I gave him the full green light. It was shocking that I'd not heard of anyone doing this before. They had to have, right? It was genius.

And Ollie being Ollie, he ran with it more perfectly than I could've ever imagined. He had my team wrapped around his finger, and his own team already had a ton of ideas on community events, improvements, and activities for the clan. His transition into the role had gone so much better than I originally feared after Elias pulled his bullshit.

I was sure the alpha still wasn't pleased. You didn't get admonished into no longer being a bigot, but he hadn't been inappropriate or disrespectful in the office since I kicked him out of the meeting, so there was that.

Somehow Ollie managed to do all that he did and continue to watch my grandkids—who I suppose were technically his grandkids as well. And those grandkids would have aunts and uncles younger than them. Funny how it all worked out. My son liked to tease him with the grandpa thing, but Ollie loved it. He especially loved being called, "young grandpa."

I stepped into the sunroom where my mate was currently scurrying around the nest. His mouse had been pestering him to get out, and after consulting with some of the best shifter doctors in the country, we felt comfortable letting him shift. Apparently, the not shifting if your beast was small thing was an old wives' tale that took root, and there were countless studies showing it was perfectly safe.

I wasn't so sure I believed studies, but I trusted my mate's beast. He would never do anything harmful to his clutch. He loved them as much as Ollie and I did.

The first time I met his mouse, he stole my heart. To say he was adorable would be the understatement of the year. And was he fast.

Today, his little mouse body was running up and around the blankets he'd arranged. The blankets were all different shades of pinks and reds. It was a beautiful nest. Eryndor, Thalric, and Tavian had surprised us with a new one earlier today, and Ollie wasted no time in getting it set up.

Once Ollie noticed I was there, he shifted to his human form and lay back on the pillows, his large belly on display. I suspected he had a fairly large clutch in there, despite the test results, but I wasn't going to be the one to tell him that. He had enough going on without worrying if his clutch was the size of a small nation or if he looked huge. And he'd for sure take the comment as meaning one of those two things.

I smiled. "You look amazing, mate." He really did.

He shot me a look. "If by amazing you mean that I look a bit like a whale, then thank you."

And I'd made the right call.

“You are perfect.”

“How is it possible that there’s only one egg in here? I feel like I’m carrying five.”

I chuckled. We’d found out it was just one egg two weeks ago when we visited the clan physician, and we were perfectly content with that. With how much we had going on, focusing on one child rather than two or three or four was perfect for us. Though if we’d had more, we would’ve made it work.

He did have a point, though. He looked rather large for how far along he was.

“And how are you and our little princess doing?” We had it on good authority that we were having a girl, and make no mistake about it, she was going to be spoiled beyond belief. Exactly how it should be.

My dragon was said authority. He insisted Ollie was carrying a girl, and while I didn’t care either way, I couldn’t help but be a little excited about the idea of having a daughter.

“We are both fine, mate, and we are ready. In fact, I was just putting the final touches on this nest. I believe that today is the day.”

It wasn’t the first day he’d said that. At this point, I had a feeling it was more wishful thinking than anything else. I didn’t blame him. He had to be miserable at this point.

In the last few weeks, gifts had begun to arrive from our clan. We had new blankets, pillows, and trinkets for the nest. Then there were the baby items. A new crib from Kier and Tavian, a fancy swing from Thalric, a bathtub and more soaps and lotions to last us the first few years from my assistant Jamie. All sorts of other items had begun arriving each day.

Most importantly, we had a new bookshelf right next to the nest with modern children's books. My dragon and I were fascinated with the children's literary genre in this modern era. I still had many of the books from when my children had been young in the other room. But in here, they were all gifts just for our little one. When people asked what we needed, I pointed them to books. Little ones couldn't be read to enough.

I raised a brow. "You're sure about today?" I didn't want to burst his bubble, but after the first day he thought was the one came and passed, he'd bawled, and I hated that for him. If it were in my power, he would never shed another tear that wasn't out of complete joy.

He nodded. "I trust my mouse on this. Last time it was all me... this time it's him who is insisting. It's different. I think our little girl is ready to come out."

My dragon rumbled beneath the surface. If our mouse thought today was the day, then we trusted him. We would not be leaving his side. No matter what.

True to his word, three hours later, after Ollie woke up from his nap, I found him adjusting the nest just so. Something in the way he grimaced as he moved made me realize, this was it. This was the time. Our egg was coming.

I rushed to his side. "Do you need anything? What can I do? Should I boil water?"

"Boil water?" He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, which... fair.

"Sorry, I'm excited and nervous and... it was on the movie we watched yesterday." Not that they used the water, but they had insisted it was needed.

He shook his head with humor and then flinched. The pain was back. "Hold my hand, Mal. You've done this before, so I'm sure we'll be fine, right?"

“It’s been many years,” I said. “Perhaps we should call the doctor—”

He shook his head again. “No, we’re fine. I’m fine. There’s just one. How hard can it be?”

Twenty minutes later, as he gripped my hand until I was sure the bones would disintegrate into dust and let out a screaming cry, I realized we were about to find out just how hard it could be. Very. Tremendously. Extremely.

While still holding his hand, I managed to position myself between his legs so I could guide the egg out. It wasn’t needed, and some omegas refused the help, citing that it was natural to do it alone. Ollie and I had discussed it, and we’d both agreed that there were no awards given for being stubborn. We were going to go through this together, every single step.

“You’re doing great, Ollie.” Better than I could, that was for sure. I might have had a fierce dragon inside me, but I wasn’t as strong as he was.

“Arnngh! Please tell me I’m close.”

“So close,” I said with more confidence than I felt. This could be another few minutes or another few hours. For his sake, I was crossing my fingers it was only minutes.

He let out another blood-curdling scream, and fear ran through me. What if we really did need help? What if we couldn’t do this alone?

Thank goddess, with one final push and a scream that could’ve shattered windows, a perfect pink egg emerged, gleaming in the sunlight and blending perfectly into the nest.

Ollie panted. “Is it done?”

“It is,” I said.

He turned quickly, putting his hands on the egg and pulling it close. “She’s beautiful.”

We stared at it for a long time, and finally I was confident that it was only one egg. I couldn’t deny there was a tiny bit of disappointment in that after half convincing myself we’d been wrong about one. That fell away quickly when I saw the way my mate was looking at our egg, the joy radiating off him so powerful.

Our daughter was here, even if she was still in the safety of her egg. The scales on her temporary home were almost triangular in shape, gleaming pink with hints of other shades of red. They would match those of her beast.

I snuggled up next to them, putting my hand over Ollie’s. “You did so wonderful, mate.”

He sighed. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

With my free hand, I reached for the robe I’d grabbed earlier. My mate wouldn’t want to leave the nest for several hours, but we would have visitors. Dragons throughout the clan would sense that our clutch had been laid, and they would visit or send their congratulations. It was our way.

And Ollie’s way was shyness. He wouldn’t want to be naked in front of everyone just after laying our clutch.

Ollie pulled on the robe and a pair of pajama pants.

I left the nest briefly to get him a washcloth so he could wash his face, and I brought him a bottle of water.

Within a few moments, Tavian and Kier were walking in the door, all three of their children toddling along with them

The three children, as if sensing the magnitude of the situation peered over the edge of the nest, wide-eyed and curious.

“Hello, my precious darlings,” Ollie cooed. “Come meet your... aunt?”

Ruby, Opaline, and Flint climbed in and took turns touching their hands and cheeks to the shell of the egg. They oohed and aahed over her.

“This is so beautiful.” Kier sniffled. Tavian had an arm wrapped around him.

Not a one of us had dry eyes.

Chapter 22

Ollie

D ragoons were smart creatures, and they knew no omega wanted to be away from their nest for long. And out of that understanding, someone had invented a contraption much like a baby sling, but for eggs. It worked perfectly. I could fit my egg snugly against me when I went to work, which meant my dearest daughter was never alone.

At first, I'd been worried. What if I cracked my sweet daughter's safe home? But then Mal came home with an ostrich egg. At first, I was confused, and then he gave me a challenge—break it.

He had me drop it, bang it against the counter, wear it in the sling and bump into random things. The egg was solid, nothing at all like a chicken egg. It wasn't until I took out actual tools that I made any progress, and even then, it had taken a lot of work.

“See... broken.” I beamed at my success. Break wasn't exactly the right word. I had chipped it, but close enough. Chipping our egg wasn't a matter of wasting an egg that might eventually become food, it was harming our daughter, and I refused to let that happen.

“And how much effort did it take to manage that?”

I gave him my best stink-eye. “Not the point. It still broke.”

“And guess how many times harder a dragon’s egg is than an ostrich egg?”

I knew it was a trap, and I still walked into it, asking him for an answer. Five hundred percent stronger. It was 500% stronger. How was that even possible? But one thing was for sure, it made me feel better about carrying her around, but added a new fear to my plethora of new dad anxieties—how would they get out? Mal insisted they just did and not to worry about it.

That was so much easier said than done. But for now, the knowledge made my daily life exponentially easier. Staying home when I knew there was so much to be done would’ve been torture. My clan needed me, my grandbabies needed me. That still took a bit to get used to.

Our daughter’s three niblings got to know her very well. She joined in for every story time with the triplets, something her father and I both insisted on. He was a huge proponent of early literacy. It was one of his passions.

The kids babbled to the egg endlessly, asked it to play, brought it stuffies, and cuddled it frequently. And as adorable as that all was, all of it paled in comparison to their chirps. One day they started chirping at her, mimicking their father’s dragon, and a few times I could’ve sworn she chirped back—she communicated with them. How I wished I’d gotten that on camera.

“Those four are going to be trouble,” Kier said one night as we looked at the four of them nestled together in the triplets’ nest. We were playing music in the background, and they were “singing along” with the singer. They didn’t come close to getting a single word right, and that somehow made it more precious.

He wasn’t wrong about them being trouble. But what adorable trouble it was going to be.

Watching them spend the day together was always a delight. The three toddlers were so enamored by her. They snuggled around the egg like she was one of them. They babbled and played and brought her toys as if she could play with them. One of the kids was touching the shell at all times. And they knew how to be gentle. The three of them rough-housed outside of the nest all day, but when they were near the precious egg, they knew it.

It was a wonder to behold.

“We are going to be in so much trouble,” I agreed.

“I know. Isn’t it great?” He laughed. “We were hoping that they would get some siblings, and it turned out all they needed was an aunt.”

“We are going to be on our toes, that’s for sure. May the dragon scales help us all.”

I stayed for another hour before heading home and making dinner. I was dead on my feet. For whatever reason, today was the day all my being on the go caught up to me. If it weren’t for me knowing that Mal was going to be hungry when he got home, I’d have skipped dinner all together and gone straight to bed.

“It’s time we get some rest, sweet girl.” I bit back a yawn. “We can wait for your father in the nest.”

I nestled my egg into her spot in the home nest. Exhaustion weighed me down like I’d carried bricks rather than my egg. I might not have been carrying an egg in my body anymore, but chasing the triplets around all day and managing my additional responsibilities as mate to the clan leader took brain power that I wasn’t used to and was exhausting in its own way.

Each day I fielded questions and made decisions about things that I’d never

considered before. All while wiping noses and changing diapers. I'd never considered myself great at multitasking, but even I was impressed by all I had been able to juggle lately. It wouldn't be this way for long, though. Once our little girl was here, priorities would shift.

For now, all she needed was to be protected and talked to. But soon enough there would be feeding and diapers and naps and bathing and soothing. And she would come first. That was my non-negotiable.

"How about I tell you a story." I snuggled in beside her. "Once upon a time there was a little mouse. His entire life he grew up wondering if he could ever do big things, if he could ever make a change, and then one day he met a dragon... a really, really, really old dragon." I laughed at my own joke. "And they fell..."

I didn't remember falling asleep or even shifting into my mouse form, but that was how Malric found me when he got home—a sound asleep bundle of fur in the sleeve of my shirt. Had it been anyone else who found me, I'd have been embarrassed, but this was Mal, my Mal, and he could and would see me at my worst and my best, and he would love me completely through both.

He shifted to his dragon form and lay beside me. Had we been in my old place, that wouldn't have been possible. Heck, it wouldn't have been possible in any house I had ever lived in before moving to this clan.

But Mal's home was ginormous, as was this room. When I first saw it, I thought the sheer size was a waste, but now I understood the reason.

My little mouse body was the size of one of his claws, and he always curled his tail just right so I could nestle on top of it, snug and safe with my dragon. His scales radiated heat thanks to his fire power. Not all dragons could breathe fire, but mine could.

I hadn't been kidding when I told him I wanted to build a little basket so he could take me flying. I should probably bring it up again, now that I was no longer pregnant. We could use it once the baby hatched.

Eventually, we had to shift back. I smiled as my mate lay there, naked as the day he was hatched. His form never ceased to steal my breath away. In the days of old, they'd have made a statue of him. I kinda hoped they'd bring that tradition back... only I wouldn't want to share it with anyone else because he was mine.

"How was your day at work?" I asked.

"Great. Yours?" He trailed a hand over my shoulder, eliciting a shudder from me.

"Our grandchildren are devious little creatures. I think they've figured out how to communicate with our egg."

"Probably," he said. "I do recall my boys having a language all their own when they were young. It's precious that they will be so close to their... aunt."

I grinned. The family dynamics were unique.

"More gifts arrived today," I added. That wasn't a surprise to anyone. Our little daughter was beyond cherished by the clan.

Malric sighed. "I'm not sure I have the energy to open them right now, mate. Maybe later."

"I put them with the others in your office. We'll go through them tomorrow. Then we need to work on another round of thank-you notes."

The thank-you cards were an endless task, one that never seemed to decrease thanks

to their generosity. I'd made the mistake early on, by writing full-on letters to each person who sent a gift, and now I was stuck doing the same for all of them, not wanting to risk "picking favorites."

"Indeed," he said, lacing his fingers through mine. "My hand is still tired from the last one."

"Same." I snuggled in close. "I missed you all day."

"You should visit me."

It was something I'd considered numerous times, but the thought of making it happen overwhelmed me.

"I would, but it's hard to bring all the kids and our egg. Maybe next week I can arrange it. I'll see if Tanya and Brent can help." They were two individuals who were now "my team." They had their own space at Dragon Headquarters where they took in complaints and requests from clan members that wished to speak with me. They were a lifeline, that was for sure.

So far, we had set up countless dinners and a few conference calls to discuss everything, from familial disputes to re-aligning out strategic goals to better meet the needs of our members. It was all very businesslike. And then there were the days when it wasn't at all like a business. Like last week when I'd met with a family that had recently lost their omega grandfather, and we'd spent hours together talking about his life and the family he left behind. It was those moments that were the hardest, yet the most fulfilling.

"True. Maybe I should work from home."

"Or maybe we'll just have to make the most of the time we do have." I ran a finger

down his chest.

Malric's grin turned sly, and he pulled me to my feet. I went to grab clothes, but he stopped me.

“You won't be needing those, mate.”

As much as I loved that idea, it would have to wait. “I have food for dinner. I whipped up a casserole at—”

Then he was kissing my neck. “It can wait.”

And indeed, it could. All it needed was a reheat.

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Chapter 23

Malric

Work had slowed down. Or more accurately, I had slowed it down. I'd taken a page out of my mate's book and finally learned how to delegate. I'd be lying if I said that I hadn't been nervous at first. I'd been bearing the weight of it all on my shoulders pretty much alone for so long and was afraid everything would fall apart if I didn't.

Spoiler alert: it didn't fall apart. In so many ways, things were better.

What used to be a team of one had grown into a team of five, which left me with more time to focus on other things, like looking toward the future for the clan and spending time with my family.

Every discussion item I brought up with my team had already been taken care of. I was becoming pretty useless around there. Just a simple figurehead now. There'd been a time in my career when I'd have felt threatened by that, but not any longer. Now? Now I saw it as a sign of success.

Best of all, it meant I could go home early most days and be the mate Ollie deserved.

Except today. Today, I had a stop to make first.

I closed my laptop, waved goodbye to the receptionist, and made the short walk from Dragon Headquarters to the Emberstone mausoleum where my late mate was laid to rest.

I didn't come here often. Even though Chastain was important to me and would always be important to me, it was hard to visit his resting site. And really, he wasn't there, he was with the goddess, but visiting him there made the conversations I had with him feel more intentional.

I carried him with me every single day, but standing in front of his resting place always brought the weight of the loss back fresh. There was no pretending he was on a trip or that one day he would walk back in the front door and say, "Just kidding." Not there. There the cold hard truth slammed me in the face.

My throat grew tight, and my stomach churned just knowing that I would be standing before his remains today. But it was important.

Chastain had been cremated, as was tradition. Burned by the dragon fire that flowed through my veins. He had picked out his own urn, which had one of his scales grafted onto it. As if I could ever forget the beautiful soft mulberry color of his scales. Everything was simultaneously how he wanted and didn't want it. Being dead so young hadn't been his desire or mine. But there were some things in life we didn't get a choice about, and this death was one of the biggies.

In the beginning, I'd start to head there and turn around, the weight of it too much. Over time, the weight lessened, but it was ever present and always would be. Today was different, though. Today, I needed to be there, and it felt right to go.

I picked up a bouquet of flowers along the way, making sure it included all of his favorites. When I stepped into the stone building, I was surprised to find someone already there. Not just any somebody either.

Standing at Chastain's plaque was my mate.

"Ollie?" I said.

He whirled around, eyes widening. “Mal! What are you doing here?” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, that’s a silly question. I just mean, I didn’t expect you to be here, and I got startled.”

I stepped forward. “I didn’t expect anyone either.”

He sighed and turned his gaze back to the plaque. “It just felt like the right time to visit. Kier and Tav got home early, and... I had this printed.” He held up a framed photo.

I blinked back the tears as I took it in, not even able to see what was inside, but knowing Ollie, sensing it would be exactly what was needed.

He held it out to me, and I took it from him. Inside the oak frame was a picture of our three grandchildren huddled around our egg.

I smiled.

“I just thought maybe...” He hesitated, his voice cracking, tears streaming from his eyes. I reached around him and set the frame on the ledge next to Chastain’s plaque and placed the bouquet of flowers beside it.

“Thank you, mate,” I said quietly. “Today marks ninety-four years since he’s been gone.”

“Really? I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“There’s no reason for you to have known. Dates don’t really mean much when you’re this long-lived.”

“Maybe on some level I did,” he said softly. “Maybe that’s why I was drawn here

today.”

“He would’ve loved those little kids,” I said. “He never shied away from a game of peek-a-boo. He even let the kids climb over him when he was in dragon form.” He’d loved it, knowing his dragon was what brought all of their giggles out.

Ollie grinned. “I know another dragon who is the same way.”

I’d gotten it from my mate.

“Chastain would have loved them so much. We’ll have to tell them all about him. And our little girl, too. Chastain is a part of you, Mal. An important part. There’s no reason to ever erase that.” He wrapped his arms around my middle and placed his head against my chest.

I kissed his temple, throat tight. “Thank you. That means the world to me, Ollie.”

When Ollie and I first got together, I’d tried not to bring Chastain up too often. It felt like I was talking about my ex on a date, even though he wasn’t an ex. But still, it was discussing another man, and that had to hurt. It was Ollie who would ask about him. At first, I thought he was trying to be nice, to be sensitive. And he was both of those things, but that wasn’t the reason he asked.

He was afraid I’d feel like I couldn’t still cherish my late mate, at least not around him. That I would suppress those emotions to comfort my mate. He told me that Chastain was part of the man I was and would always surround us, that not saying his name or telling his stories was disrespectful.

My mate was so much smarter than I was.

The two of us stood there in silence, paying our respects. Then Ollie went up on his

tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you at home, okay?” he whispered.

He was giving me the time I needed with Chastain, without hesitation or question.

I nodded. He walked away, and I stayed a little longer.

“Chastain, I heard you, you know. I heard you letting me know you gave your approval to be with Ollie. Thank you for that. I miss you. Every day I miss you, still. But Tavian was right, you wouldn’t want me living some sort of half-life. I half wonder if you were the one to send me Ollie.”

I looked at the picture my mate left. “We’ll be sure to do as Ollie said, we’ll make sure your grandbabies and Ollie’s and my daughter know all about you. I wish you could be here, to be part of their lives... our lives, and this will make it possible in some small way. I love you, Chastain, and I always will. Rest in peace, my love. Rest in peace.”

My mate was waiting for me when I got home, and I walked straight into his waiting arms. He held me close as the tears fell, both his and mine. When the tears had dried up, he walked me into the bathroom, set a shower for us, and while the water came to temperature, brought our egg in with their tiny porta-nest.

“Let me help you get cleaned up.” He slowly undressed us both before leading me into the shower and under the cascading warm water.

Starting with my hair, he washed me tenderly and lovingly, dried me off, and brought me to the nest where the two of us and our beautiful pink egg cuddled up, and I drifted off to sleep, feeling so completely loved just as I was.

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Chapter 24

Ollie

Today was it. I felt it in my bones. Today was the day we were going to get to meet our daughter. The egg looked exactly the same. Not even a hint of movement. But I knew.

More specifically, I had felt it in my shoulder blades. All day I had been itchy. I went so far as to rub my back against a tree in the back yard. Mal found me shimming against the bark, his eyebrows raised.

“Let me call Eryndor,” he said.

How or why Eryndor was going to help, I didn’t know.

Twenty minutes later, Eryndor had me and Malric standing in the back yard, facing each other, holding hands.

“You understand that as part of being a dragon mate, you will develop wings?” Eryndor asked.

Yes, I had known that theoretically. I’d just been so busy that it hadn’t occurred to me that it was true, and especially not that it was happening. I’d kinda thought that ship had sailed. Even today when I had stuffed a coat hanger down the back of my shirt, it hadn’t even crossed my mind that my wings could be coming in.

“Of course,” I said. “But I guess I assumed since it hadn’t happened yet, that I might be the exception to the rule.” I was a mouse, after all, and as far as I knew, that was beyond rare. It wasn’t like I could poll all the dragon shifter mice mates to see if they had wings, and if so, when they’d come in.

“You will not be able to fly right away, but soon you’ll take to the skies with your mate at your side.” Eryndor’s voice took on a sultry, soft tone meant to keep me at ease. I knew that he believed in the power of meditation, I supposed that was why Malric had called him.

Malric’s dragon rumbled his approval.

I grinned. “That sounds amazing, but for the record, I’d be happy with a basket.”

“And I will still make you one.” Mal kissed my cheek. It wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned it, and I had a feeling it was because he liked the idea as much as I did.

Eryndor looked back and forth between us as if trying to figure out if we were kidding or not. I held up my hands in the form of a basket, and he rolled his eyes.

“But first you have to bring your wings forward. That’s what I am here for.”

I didn’t care what that entailed exactly, as long as it meant this itching would stop. I was so done with the itching.

Malric gave my hands a reassuring squeeze and winked. “Just trust your mouse. He will know what to do.”

I snorted. “I don’t think he’ll know what to do with wings, Mal.” I knew I sure didn’t.

“Shhh. Close your eyes. Focus on your breath.” Eryndor began coaching me on

breathing. Something about a box. Breathe in for five, hold for five, out for five, and hold for five. I was completely lost.

“Visualize your wings. The color, the feel, the scales.”

How was I supposed to know the color? Was I supposed to pick? Was that how it worked? Or maybe by default they matched my mate’s or maybe my daughter’s. I needed a whole lot more information than he was giving.

“I can’t—”

“Shh. You know what they look like, Ollie. They’re your wings. They’ve always been there, we’re just bringing them out.”

There was no way this was going to work. As if I could just picture a massive set of wings sprouting from my shoulder blades, with talons at the end of each joint, the leathery membrane matching in color to my dragon mate. The flapping noise they would make if I fanned them out and flexed against the breeze. Only that was exactly what I was doing.

Malric gasped, and his hands gripped me tighter. “Ollie,” he said.

“Shh,” I said. “I’m concentrating.”

I swore I had them in my mind’s eye. The weight of them against my back, the way that they would flex and pull against my shoulders. I leaned forward, putting more weight on the balls of my feet to keep myself from falling backward from their weight.

“Ollie... open your eyes, mate,” Malric said.

My eye flew open, and I stared at my mate, only he was looking at something over my shoulder. His eyes were wide with wonder and his jaw hanging open.

“Mal, I was so close. Why did you interrupt me? Now we have to start over.” I shouldn’t have snapped at him. He meant well. My frustration wasn’t his doing.

“Um. Ollie. Look at your shadow,” Eryndor said.

I looked down at the ground. My shadow was there, but behind me were two wings fanned out wide. I spun, trying to look at them, except my center of gravity was off and I ended up on the ground. My wings flapping wildly, throwing me even more off balance. I landed on my mate since he had tried to catch me. He still couldn’t take his eyes off my wings.

“They are magnificent, mate. Truly.”

He helped me to get up right again. Then he walked around me in a circle while I tried to take one tentative step forward.

I don’t know why I had envisioned my wings on my beast initially. This made more sense. A mouse with wings would be absolutely adorable, though. I dared anyone on this planet to deny that.

“This is... not easy,” I said. “I can’t imagine ever flying.” Just standing and not falling took concentration. How could I ever be graceful enough to take to the sky?

“You’ll get there,” Eryndor said. “I have coached many new mates through this process. Unlike shifting to your other form, this one doesn’t always come naturally. You’re doing great. For the next couple of weeks, you should bring your wings out at least once a day and get used to walking around with them.” He made it sound so simple. “Then we’ll work on taking to the skies. Put away any valuable things if you

plan to bring them out in the house, though. Plenty of people have knocked down shelves or broken windows.”

I snorted out a laugh. “I could see that happening. When I had my pregnant belly... let’s just say there were a few casualties.” More than a few, and my wings were a whole lot larger. I was going to have to reserve their release for the great out of doors, at least until I got control.

“They truly are beautiful, Ollie.” Malric grazed the back of his hand over the thin membrane between the joints.

I let out a giggle. “That tickles!”

“I’ll have to note that for later.”

After walking around—first with help and then on my own—it was deemed time to figure out how to put them away. Turned out, that was so much more difficult than pulling them out.

It wasn’t a case of simply seeing them in my head and having them be there. It called on the same kind of energy I used to shift, but without the assistance of my beast. I hadn’t realized how much of the weight my little mouse pulled when I shifted. I was more like the person who turned on the ignition of the car, while he was the one driving it. And I had to figure out how to become both, at least when it came to my wings.

Eryndor was a great teacher. And after I put my wings away and took them out, put them away and took them out three more times, he told me it was time to rest.

“Go. Take a shower. Forget they exist.” As if that was possible.

Just like when I'd been sure that it was the day for my hatch to be laid multiple times, I'd been wrong about today being hatching day. The feeling, the sensation I got that told me it was time to meet our little girl, had nothing to do with her at all, and everything to do with my wings.

"I thought I was gonna get to meet you today, sweet girl," I whispered, kissing her shell as I pulled a blanket over myself. I was chilled after my shower, and the fuzzy blanket was perfect. "Could've used the distraction."

Exhaustion saturated every cell of my being. Taking wings was rough, but putting them away—that was so much more.

"Your father's taking a shower, and when he comes out, sweet baby girl, he can tell you a story. I want to, but Daddy's too tired to think straight. I got my wings today. It's very exciting. It means I'll be able to fly with you. But don't worry, I'm still getting my basket."

And for a split second, I could have sworn I heard our girl chirp.

"See? Even you agree—a mouse needs his basket."

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Chapter 25

Ollie

What made me decide we needed to have a party when I woke up this morning, I had no idea—but once that notion filled my head, it was happening. I was out of the nest and on the phone, calling my mate's kids to let them know it was family day. I was going to make food. We were gonna play games. The whole nine yards.

My heart soared, and I was filled with excitement when my mate woke up forty-five minutes later.

The first thing he did was ask me why I was up so early.

“It's not so early.”

“Did you look at the clock?” Something about the tone of his voice told me it wasn't mid-morning, like I thought it was.

And for the first time that morning, I checked the time. Crap. “Mal, I maybe called your sons at 4am. Why didn't they say anything to me?”

If someone called me at that time, first thing I would do was ask who was dead.

“They answered all chipper and happy like it was normal to be called at that time.”

“That's because they were hoping that you had good news about the egg, and

probably pieced together pretty quickly that you were still half asleep.”

Talk about cringe-worthy.

“That’s the thing—I wasn’t half asleep. I woke up ready to take on the world. By the way, we’re having a party today. Get ready.”

And “party” was a term that was pretty loose here. We weren’t inviting tons of friends, just family. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to have all the components we needed to call it a party.

I opened up the laptop and placed a grocery delivery order. Mal offered to run the errand for me multiple times, but it just didn’t feel right having him not here by my side where I could see him. Safe to say I was being a little needy.

Groceries would be here by 10. I had gotten all the sandwich fixings I could think of, various kinds of rolls and wraps for people to use, fruits, veggies to make a platter, and, of course, a cake. What kind of a party would it be without cake?

“You keep going at this rate, little mouse, you’re going to be asleep before they get here.”

“No, I’m too wired for that.” So very wired. Like entire pot of coffee and a bag of gummy bears wired.

I vacuumed places that didn’t need to be vacuumed, dusted places that didn’t need to be dusted, and finally conceded—taking the shower my mate kept offering me while he made me some toast and tea.

When I came out dressed, the delivery was just being dropped off, and then it was game on again—prepping platters and worrying I didn’t have enough options.

“You’re not feeding the universe. And they are all family. If they like what’s on the platters, great. If not, they can go in the fridge or the pantry.”

I let out a long breath. “I just wanted to make this perfect. Today feels... special.”

Mal gave me a look. A knowing look.

“What was that look for?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I didn’t give a look.” Mal took a bite of his toast.

Oh, he so gave a look.

Everyone started showing up around noon, and the first thing the little ones did was race to their aunt’s egg and give it a kiss.

“Baby. Baby,” each of them said as they caressed the egg.

It was beyond adorable.

We ate lunch, chatted, read books to the kids, and turned on music. Once the cake was in our bellies, we took everyone outside, including my precious egg, which was in the sling. The weather was absolutely gorgeous.

I loved watching the little kids run around in the grass on a good day, but today, it was so much better because all of their grown-ups, except for me, had let out their beasts, and the little ones were frolicking with the animals of those who loved them most.

And that was when I felt it. The first move of my egg.

Initially, I was sure I imagined it. How could my egg be moving? But then another

wiggle. And another.

“Everyone, let’s bring this inside—to the nest.”

They all shifted back to their human forms, and excitement crossed everyone’s face. They knew what was happening before I even told them in so many words.

I rushed inside as they worked on gathering the kids and their clothes. I placed our egg down in the nest. Once they started to crack, it was best not to mess with them—but it was so hard. After remembering what it was like to break open that ostrich egg, I was getting nervous about what our baby was going through.

“They’ll be born with talons.” That was what Mal had said. Which was great, if they weren’t a mouse. Mice didn’t have talons.

But both the clan doctor and my mate had said I could be having a mouse, and if I was, then we were in for a world of hurt, because there was no way they were getting out of that egg. It was far too thick for that.

“You look terrified. Tell me what’s worrying you.” My mate wrapped his arm around my waist.

“You’re gonna laugh at me.” I buried my head in his chest.

“Absolutely not. If it’s distressing you this much, I will not laugh at you. I promise.”

“I... I’m worried our daughter is a mouse, and they won’t be able to come out.”

Tavian came over and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “That’s not how it works. Each animal, each beast, is able to get out. What you can’t see from the outside is that the inside of the shell has been thinning all day long.”

I blinked. “So it’s... not much stronger than an Easter egg at this point? And I was carrying her like that in the sling.” Horror filled me at all the what-ifs that could’ve happened.

“Little mouse, the baby was always fine.” He pressed a kiss to my temple. “And now it’s time to wait.”

It was funny watching a group of adults staring at an egg, willing it to move—to give signs of hatching. They were so bad at it. The kids, on the other hand, they were staring too, but they didn’t have the same impatience. It was like opposite day when it came to that.

But eventually the movements became closer together—became a rocking. And then there was tapping.

Tap. Tap. Tap tap tap tap tap.

I clenched my fists at my side, trying to force myself to restrain, knowing that “helping” the process wouldn’t be helping at all. My mate’s warm arms wrapped around me, holding me to him.

“She’s got this, little mouse. Trust me. She’s got this.”

We heard it first, and then it appeared. A crack being formed.

And then another.

And then another.

And when the shell finally fell away—

And out of the shell came a little mouse.

But not just any little mouse. This little mouse had wings. She looked exactly like what I thought I might look like when I first found out I'd be getting wings.

"Is this... is this... am I dreaming?" Surely I didn't give birth to a dragon mouse. That wasn't a thing. Although, maybe it was?

My mate kissed my forehead. "Nope, not dreaming. I have no idea how this happened, but we have the most perfect baby to ever baby."

Tavian barked out a laugh. "What?"

Mal looked up at him. "Are you telling me it's a lie?"

Eryndor looked down at the little mouse dragon. "Honestly? I want to stand by Tavian and tell you you're wrong, because I know three wonderful children, and was a child once myself, but if there was ever anyone cuter on this planet, I'd be shocked."

But all too soon, it was time for us to say goodbye to our little mouse dragon and hello to our baby girl.

I reached for her, and she shifted in my arms—our daughter letting out a cry. "We've been waiting for you."

I cuddled her to me for a brief second and then handed her to Mal so I could take off my shirt. Our little girl was hungry. He placed her on my chest, and she latched on like a champ.

"Have you finally settled on a name?" Eryndor asked.

Tavian had been bugging us for a long time, and now apparently had gotten Eryndor involved.

“I... I think so.” I reached over and took my mate’s hand. “I think... Chastine.”

He looked at me, his eyes glistening. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I can’t think of a more perfect name than honoring someone who meant so much to all the people I love.”

“Chastine it is.” My mate snuggled in beside me. “I love you, little mouse. And I’ve got a present for you.”

He nipped at my earlobe and then reached over behind one of the many stacks of pillows. When he came back, he held out a box.

“Want me to open it? Since you’re busy, you’ve got your hands full.”

I nodded. He pulled off the top and reached inside, pulling out a tiny little basket with a lid—and a harness. A harness that was just the right size for his dragon.

“You really did it, Mal. You got me a basket.”

“Of course I did. Your little mouse wants to soar with me—then who am I to get in the way?”

Best. Mate. Ever.

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