



The Sapphire Dragon Prince (Omega Fairy Tales #4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Once upon a time, in an enchanted kingdom of captive omega princes and jeweled dragon alpha princes....

Misha

The bravest thing I've ever done was to choose to leave the world I came from to stay permanently in the magical world. But it isn't really a brave decision because I'm terrified and traumatized and I don't know how to live anymore. I've met my fated mate, Azurus, but I'm not going into heat the way an omega should when they meet their mate.

All I want is to be normal and feel happy again, and Azurus might be the only person who can help me...

Azurus

It doesn't matter how much of a warrior I've been, nothing has prepared me to fight the demons that plague my sweet, shy mate. But nothing I do seems to be able to heal him, and it's breaking my heart. The only thing I can think to do is to take Misha to see my mother, Queen Gaia.

And then Mother sends us on a quest to collect three magical items that could either bring the two of us together at last or drive a wedge between us forever.

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Chapter

One

Misha

My father's castle was a forbidding place in the best of times, but something about it that night had my blood running cold.

The darkness of it all seemed somehow much more sinister than usual.

The icy breeze that blew through the hallways, swirling my robe around my ankles, was biting.

My footsteps echoed off the stones in a way that jarred me.

He would be able to find me by the sound of my footsteps, I was certain.

I shouldn't have been out of the large tower bedchamber that I shared with my brothers.

We omega princes were forbidden to leave our guarded room without our father, King Freslik's permission.

If he found me out of bounds now, who knew what unspeakable things might happen to me?

I'd gone down to our papa's cloistered garden.

I couldn't remember why, only that I'd needed to feel Papa's presence around me, needed to feel as though he was there guiding me and that he still loved me.

My Papa's love, even from beyond the grave, was the only thing that sustained me sometimes.

I wanted to tell him that I had met my fated mate, the sapphire dragon Azurus, and that I might finally be able to be happy.

Azurus had appeared in my life suddenly and at exactly the moment I needed him.

Some of my brothers and I had been banished by our wicked father to a work camp, but once we were there, the leader of that camp had sold us to an unknown man of power.

Fortunately for us, it had turned out that the man of power was our long-lost cousin Osric, an alpha with a legitimate claim to our father's throne.

Cousin Osric had plans to move on the royal castle, overthrow my father, and begin a reign of compassion and healing that would repair all the damage my father had done over the years.

I was all in favor of that, but unlike some of my brothers, like Leo or Rumi, or even Obi, I was too terrified to join the fight.

I was not a fighter. I was an omega in every sense of the word. All I wanted was peace, a settled life, and to find my fated mate and raise a family with him. That fated future seemed so close I could touch it, and yet so very far away.

Meeting Azurus and knowing instantly that he was the alpha for me had been a complete surprise.

I still didn't know how I felt about everything having a fated mate meant or about Azurus.

I was drawn to him, to be sure, but unlike the feelings some of my brothers, who had found their fated mates in the magical world we were now a part of just as much as we were of our own world, I didn't instantly go into heat or feel lust or longing for Azurus.

The rules of fated mates said that I should have gone into heat very soon after meeting my mate. I didn't. Something was wrong with me.

Azurus had comforted me in the terrifying moments of everything that had taken place during Cousin Osric's first attempt to do battle against my father.

I had clung to him and relied on him for protection.

I liked him very much and found his tall, powerful form and his bright blue eyes gorgeous...

but it was as if there were some sort of impenetrable wall blocking me from giving my heart and my body to him.

Perhaps that was the reason I'd left my shared bedchamber to go down to Papa's garden.

Perhaps I'd gone looking for answers as to why I hadn't gone immediately into heat when I met Azurus.

Papa would know what I should do, what was wrong with me.

I longed to be happy, to relax and laugh and enjoy life, like my brothers did.

I wanted to live. I wanted to be in love.

I just wanted to be normal.

The more I walked through my father's castle the longer and more frightening the hallways became. The echoing stones seemed to be laughing at me.

No, it was more than that. I could definitely hear laughter, but it did not belong to the stones. It belonged to my father.

"Just you wait until I find you," his voice reverberated off the walls around me. "You will rue the day you dared to be born into this cruel world."

I caught my breath and picked up my pace. He was there, somewhere nearby, and he was coming for me. I needed help. I needed my dragon or my brothers.

"Azurus!" I called out, gathering up my robe and running faster through the labyrinthine hallways. "Where are you?"

The only sound that answered me was my father's menacing laughter.

I ran faster, gathering up more of my robe. It felt like the material kept growing and expanding, weighing me down and making me slower the more I tried to gather it up.

"Azurus!" I called again.

He wasn't coming. I had failed to respond to my fated mate the way I was supposed

to when we'd first met, so he had rejected me. He wouldn't save me. No one would save me.

"Rumi!" I called out instead, turning a corner and dashing in what I hoped was the right direction to reach our shared bedchamber. "Leo! Tovey!" Most of my brothers had moved to the magical world, but surely some of them would still be in our father's castle to save me.

I turned another corner and another, but each one was dark and unfamiliar. I didn't understand how I could become so lost in my own castle, the place I'd lived all my life. The hallways were all new and twisting and so, so cold.

"You will never escape from me," my father's voice echoed behind me, growing ever closer. "You can run, you can try to hide in another world, but I will always find you. You will always be at my mercy."

"No!" I shouted, trying to run faster, though gathering up my robe made me feel as though I were swathed in a massive shroud. "Azurus!" I called out again. "Azurus, help me!"

The walls seemed to close in around me. There were more sets of footsteps echoing than just mine. It was my father, it had to be. Him or some of his guards. If they caught me, terrible things would happen to me. I would be captured and violated, and then my fated mate would never want me.

"Azurus!" I called out again, louder than ever, but it was too late.

I turned another corner and my father was there. His eyes glowed with hellfire as he reached for me, reached for my throat....

I woke with a start, shouting something.

It might have been Azurus's name, but as I came out of the horrific nightmare, I was uncertain of everything.

I had bedsheets wrapped around me so tightly that they felt like ropes binding me.

I thrashed and kicked at them, struggling to get away, my breaths heaving.

"Misha?" My fear spiked at the sound of Azurus calling my name from the other room.

I continued to struggle against the bedsheets, scrambling up to the head of the bed as a thumping sound came from the other room, followed by footsteps.

By the time the door separating my bedchamber from Azurus's swung open, I was cowering against the headboard, sobbing and shaking as if everything in my nightmare had been real.

Because for me, it was real. It had been real for a very long time.

"Misha, darling," Azurus said, his voice softening as he rushed to the bed.

He was my fated mate, the one alpha I should have been able to trust above all others, but I shrank away from him and hid my face behind my trembling arm.

"Oh, sweetheart," Azurus said, sitting on the bed close to me, but not too close. He reached for me but deliberately didn't touch me. "Was it another nightmare?" he asked so kindly. "You know you're as safe as safe could be here in the dragon castle."

I gulped in a few breaths, doing everything I could to force myself to be calm as I remembered the situation I was in.

I was not in my father's castle and I hadn't been for weeks.

After the battle and Cousin Osric's retreat to regroup, my brothers who had participated and I had been taken back to our father's castle.

We were locked in our bedchamber again, but we had escaped into the magical world through the enchanted doorway under Rumi's bed.

I had chosen to stay in the magical world, like my brothers Tovey and Selle had and like Leo would until Cousin Osric needed him, since he'd bonded with his fated mate, Diamant, and borne an egg. Rumi and Obi had returned to our father's world to help Cousin Osric's cause from there.

Azurus had taken me to the dragon castle near the dancing pavilion where we'd all begun our journey in the magical world. It was the safest place any of us could have thought of for me.

I slowly lifted my head from my arm and peered around.

The bedchamber I'd been given was cozy and warm.

It was decorated in light colors and had several tall windows.

It almost felt as if the room itself knew I needed comfort and cheering, so it had gone out of its way to radiate peace and joy.

As I looked around, the first light of dawn was peeking through the shimmering curtains that grew more transparent in the daytime.

I was safe. I was cared for. Nothing could harm me, let alone my father, when I was in the dragon castle.

I was still terrified and sick at heart, and it made me burst into tears.

“There, there, sweet one,” Azurus said, scooting forward and opening his arms as if to offer a hug I did not need to take if I didn’t want to. “It was only a dream.”

I did want Azurus’s arms. I’d carried the burden of my fear and anxiety for too long on my own.

I pushed away from the headboard and all but threw myself at my fated mate.

It was embarrassing to dissolve into the form of a frightened child because of a nightmare, but I had lived so long under my father’s shadow that his menace was too real for me.

Azurus wrapped his arms around me and pulled me all the way onto his lap. The bedsheets that I’d been tangled in were suddenly gone, and it was just me and Azurus and Azurus’s amazing alpha scent, like the rain on hot stones, cooling everything and making it better.

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And yet as comforted as I felt in Azurus's arms, as delicious and alluring as I found his scent to be, I was still cold without even a spark of heat coming over me.

It wasn't the way things were meant to be with fated mates.

"I'm sorry," I sobbed against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"Whatever for, sweet one?" Azurus asked, incredibly calm and patient. He had been that way from the start. He was everything an alpha should be, strong, brave, and powerful, but he was so caring and gentle with me. "You are not upset by a dream, are you?"

I sniffed, fighting against myself to be the sort of omega, the sort of man a dragon like Azurus deserved in a mate. I knew I came up short in every way, though.

"I am better," I said, willing myself to believe it and pushing back so that I could sit on my own. "You are right. It was just a dream. I'm feeling much better now."

It was a lie, and the way Azurus stroked his hand around my face and studied my expression told me he knew it.

"Whatever it was," he said, "it's passed now. Morning has come, you are awake and with me in the magical world, and nothing, not even your father, can ever harm you again."

I tried to smile. I wanted to believe him.

I knew in my mind that his words were true.

My father was an entire world away and had no means of accessing the magical world.

But I was still terrified, because as far away as my father was, the deepest feeling of danger was inside of me, and I feared it always would be.

“I will be well,” I said, smiling bashfully at Azurus. I meant it as a reassurance, but I prayed it was a prediction as well.

“You will be,” Azurus assured me. “I have you.”

He swept his hand around my face once more, then paused before leaning in to kiss my lips.

It was a lovely, warm kiss filled with promise and devotion...and I felt nothing from it. I kissed Azurus back as best I could, but as comforted as I felt, my fated mate's kiss did not fill me with lust and desire the way it should have.

Something was wrong with me. I was hopelessly broken.

Azurus ended our kiss and leaned back to study me with a kind smile. I could see how much he longed for our bond to form and for me to desire him. It tore me apart that I could not give him what he wanted.

But he did a good job of sounding cheerful when he said, “Why don't you get out of bed and have a quick bath to wash away the specters of the night?

Then we can dress and go downstairs for breakfast. Rufus said something about bringing Tovey and the eggs over to join us this morning. I think the others are

coming, too.”

I smiled. “I would like to see the eggs.” Pretty much the only thing that settled my soul these days was playing with my brothers’ eggs. They were the epitome of innocence and trust.

“Come along, then,” Azurus said, standing and offering me a hand.

With the intensity of my dream fading fast, I felt mostly embarrassed as I got up and went about my morning ablutions.

Azurus returned to his bedchamber to prepare for the morning so I had a few minutes alone to take care of everything I needed to do to make myself presentable for my brother and Azurus’s.

I loved having my brothers nearby. For so much of our lives, we had relied on each other for everything.

I’d been able to keep my meek, anxious nature under control when all six of us were together, even though our father inflicted terrible things on us.

But since Tovey and Selle, and now Leo, had moved into the magical world, my fears had grown too difficult to control and I missed them too much.

Even now, once I’d washed and dressed and spent a few minutes sitting in the morning sunlight just breathing, then as Azurus and I went downstairs and joined the rest of the family in a large room that served both as a dining room and socializing space, I felt fear.

“Misha! There you are,” Tovey said. He stood from the huge bowl-like structure everyone was gathered around and stepped to the side so that he could greet me with

a hug.

“It’s so good to see you.” When he let me go, he stepped back to study me, then said, “Are you sleeping well? You look a little piqued.”

“I’m fine,” I lied with a tight smile.

“We’ve got plenty of food for breakfast,” Tovey’s mate, Rufus, told me, a look of concern on his face that was as genuine as if he’d been born my brother. “Would you like tea?”

“I can fetch your tea,” Azurus said before quickly touching my back and heading over to the table, where tea things and a huge amount of food were set out.

“Thank you,” I told him, my smile still in place, though I could feel my anxiety growing with all the sudden attention coming my way.

“Come and see the eggs,” Selle said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. His mate, Gildur, had the power to correct Selle’s vision, but Selle insisted on continuing with his glasses, saying he didn’t feel right without them. “They’re so entertaining when they all get together.”

I moved over to the large bowl. It was some sort of portable nest for the eggs.

It was lined with silk cushions that seemed custom-designed for dragon eggs.

All four of my brothers’ eggs were nestled together within the silken folds.

Tovey and Rufus’s twin ruby eggs were the largest, though Selle and Gildur’s golden egg wasn’t that much smaller.

Leo and Diamant's glittering diamond egg might not have been as large as the others yet, but it had a sort of powerful presence about it that made me think Leo's child would be the leader of that particular group of my nephews or nieces.

"They are sweet," I said, watching the eggs quiver and pulse.

None of the eggs were near to hatching yet, but they definitely had life to them. I couldn't feel it because I was not the papa of any of the eggs, but Tovey, Selle, and Leo all insisted to me that they could feel the eggs interacting with each other.

I couldn't feel it. I wasn't a papa. The way things were going, I never would be.

I had my fated mate, but my body refused to go into heat so that I could mate and have babies. I couldn't even bond with my dragon, who I knew was falling in love with me, though I hadn't done anything to deserve that love.

I was broken, and after the nightmare I'd had, I didn't think I would ever be fixed.

"Here," Leo said, scooping his egg out of the nest and turning to me. "Why don't you hold him for a while?"

I gulped and would have refused, but the way Leo thrust the egg into my arms gave me no choice but to embrace it and cuddle it close.

I could feel the egg's warmth and caring innocence as I held it against my chest, but those feelings only broke my heart.

It was like the biggest part of me, the part I was meant to be, was missing, and there was nothing I could do to find it.

"You're certain it's a boy, then?" Emmerich, one of the dragon brothers who I knew

was fated for my brother Rumi, but who had yet to claim him asked.

“With a papa like Leo, how could it not be?” Diamant laughed, clapping a hand on Leo’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Selle said as he stroked his and Gildur’s egg in the nest. “I’ve met some fearsome women in my time.”

“I’ve no doubt,” Leo said with a shrug. “But I had a vision of this little warrior when he was still inside me.”

He spoke as if seeing visions of your future children was something ordinary. I’d had no such visions. It had to be a bad sign.

“Are you planning to leave your egg behind when Cousin Osric makes another attempt to take the throne in a few months?” Tovey asked, crouching beside the nest again. “I hated leaving my eggs in someone else’s care back when they were first borne.”

“If Osric needs me, I will do whatever it takes to fight by his side,” Leo said. “It will be the most important fight of any of our lives, and we must win.”

“I’ve no doubt Cousin Osric will succeed against Father,” Tovey said with a serious look at his eggs. “I just fear what sort of a battle it will end up being.”

“It will be the battle it needs to be,” Diamant said, beaming proudly at Leo. “And we will be there with swords drawn.”

A horrible shiver went through me. I had to push Leo’s egg back into his arms before I let it get the better of me. A wave of panic passed through me that was so acute I started to shake.

“Excuse me,” I wheezed, turning away from the happy circle of my family and starting for the doorway that led out into the castle gardens.

“Misha, are you well?” Azurus asked, stepping after me.

“I—” I almost lied to him and told him I was fine, but he could see that I wasn’t. “I just need to breathe fresh air for a moment. I’ll be alright on my own.”

I thought Azurus would come with me despite my insistence on being alone, but he stayed where he was as I picked up my pace and all but fled into the garden.

I could hear and feel my brothers and their mates talking about me behind my back, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. I raced out into the gardens, putting as much distance between myself and discussion of the war I knew was coming in my father’s world as I could.

At the other end of the beautiful, fragrant castle gardens was a water garden with a great many fountains.

I’d always found the sound of fountains to be soothing, so I went there, sinking to sit in the grass beside one of the larger pools.

There I was able to look at my reflection in the water... and I hated what I saw.

“Who are you?” I whispered demandinglly at my reflection. “This is not who you are meant to be.”

A sad, frightened, defeated omega prince looked back at me. He didn’t have any answers as to why I had become the miserable man I was. Nobody had those answers.

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Chapter

Two

Azurus

I was a sapphire dragon, son of Queen Gaia herself, and had already lived for hundreds of years and lent my strength to numerous battles and causes. I possessed a magnificent lair and a rich hoard. The ordinary people of the magical world looked up to me with respect and awe.

But nothing made me feel small and helpless in quite the way that watching my fated mate flee into the gardens, knowing he was beset by demons that I couldn't see and couldn't do anything to fight for him.

Nothing worried me more than the fact that we had known and been close to each other for weeks now, but Misha hadn't gone into heat and we hadn't bonded.

It was more of a problem than Misha realized.

When dragons bonded with their mates, it increased their magical powers.

Although I'd never heard of a dragon's mate rejecting him before, and while I knew Misha wasn't purposely rejecting me, I could already feel my magic beginning to fade.

The drain wasn't bad yet, but it was a cause for concern.

Misha and I needed to bond before it was too late.

I watched my beautiful, tormented mate run off into the sunlight and greenery of the garden, then blew out a breath and let my shoulders drop.

We were fated mates. I was drawn to the small, handsome omega in a way I had never been drawn to any of the lovers I'd had before.

He was so good and pure of heart, but so desperately needy at the same time.

I did not mind being fated for a needy mate, but I minded that I couldn't meet those needs.

Misha needed something, and try as I did, I could not figure out what it was or what might heal him.

My brother Emmerich's hand on my shoulder jolted me out of my spiraling grief on my mate's behalf.

"You're doing everything you can," Emmerich said in a kind voice.

I turned to him, noticing that all the others were watching me as well. "Am I?" I asked, my gut churning with restlessness and desperation. "Am I really? Misha awoke from a horrific nightmare again this morning, sobbing and cowering away from me as if I were some sort of devil chasing him."

"Our father," Leo said, scowling even as he cradled his egg protectively and affectionately. "Not a devil, our father."

"Is that what, or rather who, he's dreaming about?" Selle asked, picking up his egg and cradling it as well.

“I can’t imagine it would be anything else,” Tovey said, one hand on each of his eggs in the nest.

“Our father is the worst sort of villain,” Leo said, starting to pace as he stroked his egg.

“He made our lives a living hell since we were born. He hated that we weren’t alphas.

He despised our papa for only having omega children.

He drove Papa to an early grave, and he has lived every day of his life to seek revenge on us for who we are. ”

“For who we aren’t ,” Selle corrected him.

“Which is utter foolishness,” Diamant said, stepping into Leo’s path and pulling him into his arms. “Anyone with eyes can see that you are every bit as potent and wonderful as any alpha.”

From what little I knew of Prince Leo, I would have expected the fierce omega to pull away from Diamant rather than consent to being pet and hugged. Leo grinned up at my brother and snuggled closer, together with his and Diamant’s egg, though. As tough as Leo was, he softened for his mate.

Which only made me more frustrated for my situation with Misha.

“Misha is a gentle soul,” I said, moving to the table where an enormous breakfast had been laid out.

I picked up a pastry glazed with something sweet and sticky, but after one bite, I knew I wouldn’t be able to eat it.

Not while my stomach and my entire body were so unsettled.

“He was never meant for a life of conflict and war, like we’re heading for.

He was meant for a quiet, domestic life of peace. He was meant to be a mate and a papa.”

“Agreed,” Tovey said with a sigh. “I think we’ve always known that about Misha. He’s the meekest of us.”

“But that doesn’t mean he isn’t valiant and capable of great things,” Selle defended him, going to stand by Gildur. “Misha might be gentle, but he’s strong.”

“He is,” Leo agreed. He and Diamant moved closer, as did Tovey and Rufus, Selle and Gildur, until they all stood near the breakfast table. “He’s endured everything the rest of us have from Father over the years and he’s faced it with quiet grace.”

“And yet, now, even here in the magical kingdom, amidst the safety of our castle, he is tormented with nightmares and unable—” I stopped before I said too much. Some things were too intimate to share, even with family.

Because the fact of the matter was that Misha should have gone into heat shortly after the two of us met.

It was the way of things with dragons and their fated mates.

The bonds that formed in the magical world, particularly with dragonkind, were so potent that they caused omegas to rush into heat as soon as they acknowledged their fated mate.

Misha and I had known we were destined for each other from the moment we met.

I'd already suspected, based on the lore of our world, that I would be fated for one of the brothers of the omegas my brothers were fated for.

Fated mates within family groups were incredibly common, especially when major events of more than one world drew the alpha and omega pairs together.

Misha's brothers had all gone into heat shortly after meeting my brothers.

Misha should have done the same, but for some reason he hadn't.

There was a great deal of affection between us, yes.

My body reacted in all the expected ways to Misha's beauty and his sweet pea and sugar scent.

I wanted him like I'd never wanted another omega before.

But that was as far as things had gone. We'd even kissed a few times, but Misha had not gone into heat. No bond had yet begun to form. And I could do nothing to ease the terror of the nightmares that had Misha in their grip.

And I could already feel my magic draining for lack of a bond with my mate.

"Often, even the strongest among us can reach a point where the horrors and trials they've experienced become too much," Gildur said, unaware of my deeper worries, slipping his arm around Selle's waist and smiling sadly at him.

"Prince Misha has been enduring a great deal for a very long time. It may simply be that it has become too much for him."

"Clearly it's become too much," Leo said, as frustrated as I was. "But what can we do

about it?”

Leo looked to me for an answer. They all did.

I blew out a breath and rubbed a hand over my face. “I’ve tried showering Misha with love and attention,” I said. “I believe it helps a little, but it isn’t enough.”

“Maybe he needs to see that we all love him and want him to be happy?” Tovey asked.

“Can’t he see that every day in the way you interact with him?” Rufus asked with a confused look.

“It might take something more,” Tovey speculated.

I tried taking another bite of my pastry, but it still didn’t sit right. It wasn’t as if I needed my magic at full strength in order to digest food, but the drain I was feeling threw everything off. I needed to bond with my mate to feel right again, but bonds couldn’t be forced.

“We need to show him,” I said, scrambling for the only thing I could think of that would make my mate feel well and whole again so that we could bond.

I tossed the pastry onto an empty plate.

“We need to celebrate all the wonderful things about him and really make him see that we love him and think he’s amazing and strong. ”

“How?” Diamant asked, arching one eyebrow at me.

Damned if I knew.

I glanced across the laden breakfast table, and an idea came to me.

“We could turn this breakfast feast into some sort of celebration for him,” I said, moving around the table to see what we had to work with. “We could cheer him up with songs and drink to his good health with the tea I know he likes.”

“Like a birthday party, even though it is not his birthday?” Emmerich asked.

“Yes, something like that,” I went on, reaching for a plate and piling it with some of the pastries I knew were Misha’s favorite.

“We’ll sing to him and let him know he’s loved.

” And with any luck, my beautiful mate would feel that love in his soul and it would restore him.

With any luck, he would go into heat and we could bond.

“It could work,” Leo said with a small shrug. “Why don’t you go into the garden to fetch him and we’ll set everything up here.”

I nodded. “He has to know that he’s loved if we celebrate him like this.”

Even though I’d said those words, something deep within me wasn’t certain my sweet mate would understand what we were trying to do for him. I’d never seen anyone so sad or so traumatized before, and I wasn’t certain that an impromptu party would make everything better.

Those feelings grew even stronger when I found Misha sitting by the edge of one of the fountain pools in the water garden.

“There you are, love,” I said slowing my steps so I didn’t startle him as I approached.

Misha jumped anyhow and twisted into a defensive position before seeing it was me and relaxing. “Azurus,” he said.

For half a moment, a smile appeared on his face. Then he sighed heavily and glanced back at his reflection in the water.

It was painful to watch. I could face down a clump of ogres without pause or battle King Freslik’s army in the field as part of Osric’s forces, all without questioning myself or my courage once.

But seeing my fated mate wilted with defeat while sitting in the grass beside a fountain in a quiet garden had my heart quivering in my chest.

I did the only thing I could think to do. I put on a happy face and reached down for his hand. “Come back to the castle,” I said, trying to pretend nothing was amiss. “Your brothers and mine have a surprise for you.”

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“A surprise?” Misha turned his face up to me, but his expression contained only mild curiosity instead of anything close to excitement.

“Yes,” I said, holding his hand tightly when he slipped it into mine. I helped him to stand and pulled him into a quick embrace. “We all care so much about you, Misha. We just want to see you smiling again.”

I’d hoped saying that would encourage him, but instead, Misha lowered his face once more.

“I’m sorry that I’m such a....” He shrugged, unable to find a word that described what he thought he was.

“You’re wonderful,” I told him, still trying to smile, though my heart was breaking. “That’s what you are.”

Misha gave me a look as if to say, “If you think so”.

“I absolutely think so.”

To prove my point, and to test how depleted my magic had become, I closed my hand, then opened it, revealing a magical blossom that glittered like it was made of sapphires. I smiled at it then tucked it behind Misha’s ear. All was not lost as long as I still had some magic.

“Come.” I kissed him quickly, then led him back toward the castle.

Everyone was waiting for us, and as we stepped through the glass doors into the room, they burst out into song.

“For he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fellow!”

I smiled and sang along, but my heart pounded harder and my desperation to make Misha happy bordered on panic when Misha shrank at the singing instead of gaining confidence from it.

We might not have started bonding yet, but I knew my tragic mate well enough to know that the celebration we’d hastily planned was making things worse instead of better.

“For he’s a jolly good fellow, that nobody can deny!”

When the song finished, all of Misha’s brothers and mine stood waiting, expectant smiles on their faces.

Nothing happened. Misha only stared at them, his bottom lip quivering and his eyes going glassy. My magical blossom seemed to wither and fall from behind Misha’s ear, disintegrating before it could hit the floor.

“See, Misha?” Tovey said, taking a step forward. He had both of his eggs in his arms and he looked as though he wanted to hand them over to Misha so he could feel their happiness and comfort. “We all love you. We’re so glad you’re here with us.”

“You’re not alone,” Selle added. “You’ll never be alone as long as you have family.”

“But I am alone,” Misha blurted, his tears beginning to flow. “I’m so alone. You are all too kind to me. I don’t deserve it. You don’t know what these horrible feelings of fear and sadness are like.”

“We’ve all experienced Father,” Leo said, inching closer, like he wanted to embrace his brother, which was, as far as I knew, out of character for Leo.

“No,” Misha said, shaking his head and backing away, even from me.

“You don’t know what it’s like. You all experienced Father and were stronger and braver than me.

I’m the only one who has broken down and can barely draw breath now.

I cannot let you celebrate me when I’m so broken. I cannot do this.”

Before I could reach for my beloved to pull him close and tell him that everything would be alright, he turned and bolted for the door leading into the garden again. It felt as though some of my magic vanished with him.

I wanted to go after him. Everything within me wanted to chase after him and catch him and just hold him, crying with him until we could figure out what was wrong and how to fix it.

At the same time, I thought perhaps my beloved mate needed to be alone for a moment.

Or perhaps not? I just didn’t know, and because I didn’t know, I couldn’t make him better.

“Should we go after him?” Tovey asked, his voice and expression showing that he was just as puzzled about what to do as I was.

“I think he needs some time to himself,” Leo answered.

“Or he’s had too much time to himself and he needs to know that we care about him enough to chase after him,” Selle said.

“Or will that just upset him even more?” Gildur asked.

“The whole thing is just so frustrating,” I blurted before I could stop myself.

It was my business and Misha’s, but I needed the care and support of our family as much as Misha did.

“I’ve never encountered anything like this cloud of sadness and fear that Misha seems stuck under.

It’s...it’s affecting me as well.” I sent a sideways look to Emmerich, but I wasn’t ready to share my loss of magic. This was about Misha, not me.

“These are the scars left by evil men like King Freslik,” Emmerich said with a sigh.

“They are far worse than battle wounds and the scars they leave.”

“But what can we do about it?” I asked, my frustration growing instead of lessening.

“I don’t know how to make my mate happy.”

That was the crux of it. I didn’t really care how much magic I had or lost. My purpose as an alpha was to make my mate happy and to give him the most wonderful, love-filled life I could, but with things the way they were, I didn’t know how.

“Could you take Misha to see Queen Gaia?” Selle asked, adjusting his egg in his arms and glancing between me and Emmerich. “Your mother was very helpful when Gildur and I needed help with Lady Saoirse.”

“We ended up in Mother’s throne room because I was in trouble,” Gildur reminded

him with a sheepish, sideways look.

“Yes, but she helped us,” Selle argued. “She was so good and loving and...and wonderful. She made me feel so much better just by being in her presence.” He glanced at me. “I’m sure your mother would know exactly what to do to make Misha better again.”

My first reaction was to deny it. Mother was far too busy with the numerous important things she did to take time to help me and my mate.

Then again, Mother was the essence of love above all else. This was exactly the sort of problem she would know how to solve in an instant. And the way I felt about things, I was growing so desperate that only Mother would be able to calm me down.

“It’s worth a try,” Emmerich said, shrugging. “Mother will know how to help.”

That settled things for me. Emmerich was not just my brother, he was the leader of this part of the magical world. I went to him for help in most things, and if he was telling me to go to Mother, that was a sign that it was time for the last resort.

“Alright,” I said, blowing out a breath and rubbing a hand over my face. “Since nothing else seems to be helping Misha to feel better, I guess it’s time to do what needs to be done.”

“I know Mother will be able to find a solution to your mate’s sadness and fear,” Diamant said with a supportive smile. “She knows all when it comes to these things.”

“I suppose I should find Misha so that we can set out at once,” I said.

I nodded to my brothers and their mates, then turned and headed out into the garden.

I wasn't certain how Misha would feel about being taken to visit the queen of the magical realm, but if there was even a small chance that Mother could fix whatever had become broken in my fated mate's soul, then I would carry him every step of the way there so that she could heal him.

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Chapter

Three

Misha

I felt wretched for running away from Azurus, my brothers, and their mates.

They were only trying to help. I knew they were trying to make me feel better and remind me that I was loved.

But it was like I was surrounded by a high, cold, brick wall, and even their best efforts couldn't break through that shell.

The kindness and love everyone had shown me wasn't what had me fleeing the cozy company of the others in tears, though.

That was all on me. I was embarrassed and ashamed that I couldn't be the happy, sweet omega they all wanted me to be.

There was something profoundly wrong with me that I couldn't shake the fear and anxiety that wrapped around me like the robe I couldn't escape in my nightmare, not even for them.

I found myself back in the water garden, though I couldn't bear to face my reflection in any of the fountains again.

There were a series of stone benches carved into the cloister that surrounded the garden.

They were meant for people who wanted to come to the beautiful place to bask in the sound of gurgling fountains and to take in the beauty all around them.

I slumped into one, but it was as if the beauty I knew was all around me couldn't penetrate the curse of gloom my father and my life in the cruel world had cast over me.

I knew Azurus would follow me, but instead of feeling relieved and grateful when he jogged into the garden and glanced around for me, instead of feeling joy that my fated mate would leave a happy company to come after me, I felt nothing.

When Azurus finally spotted me huddled on the bench in the shade, his tight, tense body relaxed as he blew out a breath of relief. He smiled, or at least he tried, but he couldn't hide the look of despair that pinched at the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, Misha," he said, coming straight to me.

That was all it took for me to burst into tears. I couldn't stand the way I felt. I didn't want to be the person I'd turned into.

I did feel marginally better when Azurus reached me.

Instead of merely sitting on the bench with me, he scooped me into his arms and sat so that he could hold me close.

I clung to him, even though it was undignified for a prince, and buried my face against his shoulder, breathing in his rain-soaked scent.

Actually, that did make me feel better. I could tolerate myself and the black emotions that hung over me when I was touching Azurus, when I felt his arms around me. It wasn't exactly going into heat or bonding, like I should have been doing, but it was a tiny shred of hope when I really needed it.

"I'm so sorry," I said, fighting not to sob as I hid against him. "I don't know why I'm like this. I don't know why I can't just be happier."

"I don't know either," Azurus said, stroking a hand over my back. That felt good, too. Azurus then surprised me by saying, "I don't know, but I think I know someone who can help us."

I lifted my head so I could stare at him. Two things he said gave me pause. He knew someone who could help? And he considered us an "us", despite how wretched I was?

"My mother," Azurus said before I could ask any of my questions out loud. "She is all-knowing and full of love. She lives to help her people, to help people everywhere. I know that she will have the answer to how to break you out of this darkness you've fallen into."

I swallowed hard. "Are you certain that Queen Gaia would stoop low enough to concern herself with me?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"Of course she would, my darling," Azurus said, sweeping his hand around my face. "I don't know why I didn't think to take you to her sooner."

I pressed my cheek into Azurus's palm and closed my eyes for a moment.

Bits and pieces of the love he felt for me actually were poking holes in the cold wall that surrounded me and leaving me with bits of warmth.

It had to be part of being magical, being fated mates.

Nothing else had been able to penetrate the fear and darkness my father had left me with for so long.

“I will do whatever you wish me to, Azurus,” I said earnestly, opening my eyes and staring up at him with as much affection as I could find in my broken heart. “If you think Queen Gaia can make me better, then I’ll go with you to see her.”

“Good,” Azurus said, smiling with the first hint of confidence I’d seen in him since he’d brought me to the castle to keep me safe. I saw more than hints of the strong, commanding dragon he was, and the tiny, trapped omega part of me that just wanted to belong to my mate shivered with excitement.

Azurus stood, placing me on my feet. “We’ll go to Mother right away,” he said. “Her throne room can be hard to find, but I think she’ll feel the need we have to see her and draw us to her.”

I blinked, confused by those statements as Azurus took my hand and led me out of the water garden and into the wider, more open field beside it. “What do you mean hard to find? Don’t you already know where it is?”

Azurus laughed. “This is a magical kingdom, and my mother is queen over it all and more. Sometimes she is needed at one end of the kingdom and sometimes at the complete other end minutes later. Her throne room moves around to suit her needs.” He glanced around once we were in the field, and when he was satisfied with whatever he was searching for, he turned to me with a smile.

“Sometimes I think her throne room appears in other worlds entirely.”

“I thought people weren’t permitted to travel between worlds except under special

circumstances,” I said.

Azurus laughed again. “Mother is her own special circumstance.”

He didn’t elaborate, but I suspected I knew what he meant.

My brothers and I had met Queen Gaia before, when Selle and Gildur had defeated the sorceress Saoirse, but I had stayed to the back of our group then, too overwhelmed with the woman to approach her in any way.

Since that event, my brothers and I had discussed the Queen, and I, for one, believed her to be something greater than any of our understanding.

“The best way to find Mother at any given moment is with magic,” Azurus said, turning to me with a glint of excitement in his eyes. “And the best way to do that is in magical form.”

I caught my breath, guessing what he meant.

“Are you ready to ride your dragon?” he asked, confirming my suspicions with a smile.

I didn’t know what to say. A silly part in the back of my mind giggled at the double meaning of the question. The fact that I could even think something so ribald was its own sort of encouragement, even if that lusty feeling felt miles away.

“Yes,” I answered in any case, meaning it in both ways.

“Then grab hold now,” Azurus said, turning his back to me. “It’s easier to position yourself before I transform, and I’m not certain if...” He paused, suddenly looking anxious. Then he sucked in a breath and said, “No, this will work. But it will be

easier if you're already in position.”

I nodded and stepped forward, wrapping my arms around my mate's neck when he crouched for me and pressing myself against him when he stood. He didn't stop there. With a powerful leap, he jumped into the air, and as he did, his body changed and expanded under me.

For a moment, I felt Azurus wobble and I wondered if I was too much for him.

I caught my breath and gripped him tighter as his back stretched and pulled, and huge, leathery wings unfurled just under where my knees rested.

The fine clothes that Azurus wore transformed into glittering blue scales that caught the morning sunlight.

The warmth of Azurus's body seemed to increase as well, as did his delicious, rain-like, alpha scent.

After a few wingbeats, Azurus felt stronger under me and radiated confidence.

“Are you secure?” Azurus's voice surrounded me as we rose higher and higher, though I couldn't figure out whether I heard it in my head or whether he'd spoken aloud. It might have been both.

I blinked, focusing on his question, and squirmed slightly on his back, adjusting the way I sat as he reached his full, dragon size. “I am,” I called out, hoping he could hear me. His neck had elongated as well and his head was farther from me than before.

I could feel Azurus smile and I could see the sparkle in his dragon-shaped eye as he turned his head to glance back at me. “Then hang on,” he said. “We're in for a ride.”

I tightened my grip and flattened myself to Azurus's back as he sped forward through the air, soaring over the meadow beside the castle.

He flew higher and higher, and within seconds I was able to see the entire expanse of the area around the castle, complete with the dancing pavilion where my brothers and I had first come to know the magical world and the bejeweled forest that surrounded it.

I'd never been up so high before, never flown like a bird, or rather, like a dragon.

The world seemed so small and harmless from up so high.

The sky and the sun were so much more prominent.

The few clouds that dotted the sky were so close that I was certain I could reach out and touch them, if I dared to let go of my mate's neck.

There was so much more to the magical world around the castle than what I'd explored.

From the sky, I saw cultivated fields and wild meadows.

I saw tiny villages and a few larger towns that I hadn't known existed.

Azurus flew us off to the north, toward a ridge of mountains with snowy caps that stood majestically against the blue sky.

He turned and flew us off over a vast ocean that was so clear I could see its depths and some of the larger creatures living in it.

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I wasn't sure how long we soared and wheeled through the sky.

It was hard to tell whether Azurus was showing off, giving me a tour of the magical kingdom, or simply searching for Queen Gaia's throne room.

Everything we saw and everywhere he took me was new and exciting and filled with wonder...

but it felt as though I was looking at it through a glass or thumbing through illustrations in a book.

It felt distant in a way it shouldn't have.

I should have felt more joy at what I saw and what I was doing.

Flying should have had my heart pounding and my body buzzing.

I should have been whooping with excitement and laughing with pure delight at the unique experience.

I could feel all of those emotions waiting, but it was like I couldn't reach them, couldn't touch them.

By the time Azurus spotted a patch of shimmering, pinkish light on a hilltop near the sea, the happiness I knew flying on my dragon's back should have given me had turned to an even deeper sadness than I'd felt before.

I was wrong, all wrong. I would ruin this wonderful thing Azurus was trying to do for me.

Those dark feelings only grew as Azurus descended into the shimmering garden that was Queen Gaia's throne room.

It was difficult to say what it was or how we actually arrived in it.

One moment it was as if we were seeing it from afar, and the next Azurus was landing and transforming back into his human form without me noticing our descent and arrival. We were suddenly just there.

"You did well," Azurus said, panting slightly as he shrugged me off his back then turned to brush me off and make certain I was stable. "Did you enjoy your first flight?"

"I did," I said, forcing a smile to try to hide how hollow I actually felt.

I couldn't hide anything from Azurus, though. I could see from his expression that he knew the darkness still had me in its grip. His smile faltered for a moment before he pushed it back into place.

"Never mind," he said, taking one of my hands and leaning in to kiss my lips softly. "We're here now. Mother will know how to make you better."

My heart and throat squeezed with hope and doubt together. I wanted nothing more than to be healed from whatever was wrong with me, I just didn't know if it was possible.

"Azurus," the musical voice of Queen Gaia greeted us from the center of the garden. "Misha. How delightful to see you this morning."

Azurus and I turned to find the enigmatic figure of Queen Gaia seated on a grassy mound in the center of the garden that seemed custom-shaped to be the most comfortable seat in the world.

It was alive with flowers and growing things, and everything from butterflies to happy bees flew and swirled around her and the flowers.

I spotted a few small, furry creatures playing around her throne as well, and a handsome, red fox was curled on her lap, sleeping peacefully.

I felt a quick pinch of longing to be that fox, so safe and secure and happy. It was as if nothing in the world could bother the creature which was so often vilified and hunted.

“Mother,” Azurus greeted the Queen, walking forward and escorting me with him. “I’m so glad we were able to find you today. We need your help.”

“Oh?” the Queen asked, settling her kind, compassionate gaze on Azurus at first before turning to rest it on me. “How can I help you?”

Queen Gaia was the personification of magic and goodness.

It was hard to say whether she was tall or short, old or young.

I’d seen her appearance change before my eyes that one time I’d met her before.

She had the form of a beautiful woman, but at times it felt as if she towered over you, and at others it was as if she were as lithe as a child.

The only consistent things about her were her long, flowing, white hair, the diaphanous gown she wore, and the kindness in her eyes, which seemed to always be

changing color.

“Misha is suffering,” Azurus began. “He?—”

Queen Gaia held up her hand gently, her eyes never leaving mine.

The way she studied me filled me with the most extraordinary sense of being known .

I wasn't inclined to bother someone so wonderful and so important with my small problems, but the way Queen Gaia seemed to caress me with a look and to embrace my entire soul, like a mother comforting a child who had tripped and skinned their knees, left me feeling breathless and invigorated.

The care I felt from Queen Gaia was so powerful that it brought tears to my eyes.

It reminded me of my papa's love, which I sorely missed.

I felt miserable because I wanted to be good and whole for her.

I didn't need words to tell her everything that was in my heart, about the fear and worry my father had scarred me with, about the hopelessness and panic that Father would win and that we would all be doomed, about how much I missed my papa.

I didn't need to form those thoughts and emotions into words, and I couldn't hide or downplay the truth either.

After a long time of feeling that magical embrace, Queen Gaia let out a long, mournful, hum. “My poor child,” she said. “You have been grievously wronged. No son, no omega, no living creature at all, should be subjected to such harshness and pain.”

Tears streamed down my face as her words enveloped me. I'd heard people say similar things, but no one had ever truly made me feel and believe that the things that had happened to me were not my fault.

Queen Gaia stood, the fox waking and jumping off her lap and the other creatures swirling around her keeping a wider berth, and came close to me. When she rested a hand on the side of my face and smiled, I shivered with emotion.

"I can feel how deeply you are hurt, my love," she said as if she were speaking directly into my soul. "But I must ask you an all-important question."

"Yes, Mother." I blinked at the words that came out of my mouth. I'd intended to call her "Your Majesty", but "Mother" came out instead as if it were the only right thing to call someone so powerful.

Queen Gaia smiled as if she could sense what I was feeling. She grew more serious and stared directly into my eyes before asking, "Do you want to get better? Because there are people who live their entire lives this way. Do you want to heal from the wounds that were inflicted on you?"

I swallowed, my heart swelling to the point of bursting, and gusted out, "Yes! I want to be whole again. I want to live and be happy and make my mate happy. I want to go into heat and please him and bear him children and make a beautiful life for our family."

The words came spilling out of me with full emotion before I could rein them in.

Instead of feeling ashamed of my outburst, though, it felt as though cracks had formed in the wall surrounding me and keeping me prisoner within myself.

I could also feel Azurus's love and pride as he stood beside me, almost as if we were

bonded and could sense each other's emotions.

Queen Gaia laughed, not to make fun of me, but with fullness and joy.

She stepped back, regarding me and Azurus together.

"You have a delightful mate, my son," she said, stepping so that she could rest her hand on the side of Azurus's face for a moment as well.

Even though I knew Azurus was hundreds of years old, when his mother touched him, he looked like a boy barely out of the schoolroom.

"The two of you will be happy together."

"Will we?" Azurus asked, his brow lifting with hope and questioning.

Queen Gaia smiled and stepped back once more. "Yes," she said, looking at both of us. "As long as this spell that has you in its grip is broken."

"How can I break the spell?" I asked with a sudden rush of energy. "I swear, I'll do anything. Yes, I want to get better. I don't want to feel like this anymore."

Queen Gaia looked at me with such compassion that it made me want to throw my arms around her and hug her like a child seeking comfort in his mother's skirts. "I know a counter-spell," she said. "I will happily perform it for you."

"Thank you, Mother," Azurus said, blowing out a breath.

Queen Gaia smiled at us both and said, "In order to perform this spell, I will need you to bring me three things."

“Anything,” I said. “I’ll bring you anything you need.”

The Queen smiled and nodded. “The first element I will need is a pit from a cherry taken from the one hundredth tree.”

My hope and enthusiasm instantly faltered. A cherry pit? The one hundredth tree? I didn’t understand.

“Second,” the Queen went on, “I will need a purple chicken feather.”

My shoulders sagged even more. Were there such things as purple chickens?

“And thirdly, I will need a shard from The Black Mirror.”

Azurus sucked in a breath then. I turned to find him watching his mother with concern. “The Black Mirror is perilous,” he said.

“It is,” Queen Gaia agreed. “But a shard is necessary to lift the darkness your omega has been thrust into. But if you do not think you are up to the challenge....”

“I can do it!” I cried out, desperate not to have the Queen turn her back on me. “Whatever it is, I can do it. Even though I don’t understand any of this.”

The Queen smiled at me. “You are braver and bolder than you think, Prince Misha. I know you can find these three things. Once you have them all in your possession, return to me and I will break the spell that has you in its grip.”

“Thank you, Mother,” I said, desperate to get started.

I glanced to Azurus. My mate watched me with a strange combination of awe and reservation. I supposed that he knew more about the magical items his mother was

asking us to find, but he didn't seem to know much more than me.

"Is there a time limit to how long this quest will take?" he asked, glancing back to his mother. "I have sworn my assistance to Osric in defeating King Freslik and improving the lot of the cruel world. I do not want to disappoint anyone."

Queen Gaia smiled. "Everything else will wait until you have seen to your mate and made him well again. Do not worry. You have all the time in the world."

"Thank you, Mother," Azurus said.

I could tell he was a little uncertain, but he turned to me and offered his hand. I took it readily, eager to get started.

"Come on, then," he said, smiling. "It's time to do whatever must be done to bring us both healing and peace."

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Chapter

Four

Azurus

As we left my mother's throne room, I felt buoyed by the possibility of being able to help my mate fight his demons and be happy again, but also worried that I wouldn't be able to complete the tasks Mother had set for us.

Not with my magic draining and turning unpredictable.

Besides which, I had no idea what she meant by the one hundredth cherry tree or by a purple chicken feather, but I knew full well what The Black Mirror was.

People in the magical realm whispered about The Black Mirror as if just speaking its name could curse you.

It was an evil artifact left over from a time that no one remembered, and with good reason.

Legend had it that it was created by a dark sorcerer as a place to trap his enemies in eternal torment.

Granted, I didn't know anybody personally who had come up against The Black Mirror, at least nobody who had faced it and lived to tell the tale, but I was determined to be ready for whatever collecting a shard from the mirror would mean.

“We have to prepare ourselves for this quest,” I told Misha as we stepped out of the sphere of my mother’s throne room and into the pastoral countryside where it was currently located.

I looked around to get my bearings, then said, “We have to make absolutely certain that nothing on this journey can harm us.” Especially if I wasn’t going to be able to rely on my magic to keep us out of harm’s way.

“Is it very dangerous?” Misha asked, gripping my hand tightly and glancing up at me.

I smiled as soon as I stopped searching for whatever equipment we might need to complete the quest and focused on him instead. “Whatever the danger,” I said, resting a hand on the side of his face, “I won’t let it harm you.”

Misha’s smile was filled with gratitude and love, and for a moment I wanted to forget the quest entirely in favor of taking him back to my lair and trying to see if we could bring on his heat. Heat and bonding would fix things just as much as completing my mother’s quest, I was sure.

As was the way of my mother’s magic, however, as soon as I had those thoughts, I suddenly noticed a large storehouse off to one side of the hill that hadn’t been there before. If that wasn’t a subtle hint from Mother to stay true to the quest she’d set for us, I didn’t know what was.

I stole a quick kiss from my sweet mate, then took his hand again and moved forward toward the storehouse.

Misha jumped as soon as he turned around and spotted it. “That wasn’t there before,” he said in awe.

“Yes, well, this is the magical realm,” I explained, “and we’re close to Mother’s

throne room.

” Although looking around now, it appeared as though the entire garden where Mother had her throne had vanished entirely and, worryingly, I didn’t feel as if my magic was strong enough to find it again.

“Mother has a way of giving us exactly what we need at precisely the moment we need it,” I said, mostly to reassure myself.

“What is she giving us with this building?” Misha asked, gazing up at its plain, barn-like edifice as we came closer.

“If my guess is correct, it’s a storehouse filled with everything two travelers might need to accomplish the quest she’s set for us,” I said.

“Then I’m eager to see what’s inside,” Misha said, picking up his pace as we reached the large, open door. “I have a good feeling about this quest. I think Queen Gaia really can heal me. I could feel it coming from her. I’ll do whatever it takes to bring back the items she asked for.”

I smiled as we moved from the brightness of the meadow to the relative dimness of the inside of the storehouse. It was such a relief to see Misha excited and eager, even if he didn’t entirely know what he would be facing.

“What sort of things do you suppose we’ll need to find? Cherry pits and feathers and mirror shards?” he asked as he walked farther into the storehouse, looking up and around at the many shelves of supplies.

“Let’s see,” I said, looking around as well.

The storehouse truly had everything. On one side of the vast space were hung suits of

armor, shirts of chainmail, and weapons of every kind.

There were swords and spears and axes, and even a few bows and quivers of arrows.

There was armor and weaponry for horses as well.

I stepped closer to examine all of it, hoping to find something suitable for my omega's smaller frame.

"Look at all this," Misha said in awe as he examined shelves on the other side of the space.

I turned to find him standing in front of what could have been a banquet's worth of food.

There was bread and various cheeses and sausages, along with many pots of preserves, both sweet and savory.

Misha took a jar of something from the shelf and looked at it before putting it back with a thoughtful sound.

There was more in the storehouse than just armor, weapons, and food.

There were sacks of every size and description to carry bedrolls and camping tools, tents that could be pitched and tools for everything from fixing carriages to mining.

The supplies were appropriate for people who might go mountain climbing or those who intended to swim through the sea.

"There is so much to choose from. What do we take with us?" Misha asked. "What are we going to need to make me better?"

I turned in a circle, looking around at it all and taking it all in.

“First and foremost,” I said, heading for the wall of armor. “I want you to be protected on this quest.” Especially since I didn’t know how much I would be able to protect him myself, especially from The Black Mirror.

“Alright,” Misha said, following me.

I pored over the armor and selected a sturdy, gleaming breastplate made of silvery metal and set with sapphires.

It seemed only appropriate, given who I was.

Misha found a woolen shirt to wear under the armor, and once he’d donned that, I fastened him into the breastplate.

I also added arm and leg guards and found a helmet that matched the rest of the armor.

“If that doesn’t protect you, nothing will,” I said, returning to the wall and selecting a powerful sword. I brought it back to my mate, who lifted his arm heavily to take it. “No enemy would dare to harm you equipped like that.”

“I suppose not.” Misha said, though he didn’t sound as enthusiastic about his suit of armor as I was.

“We’ll need a few other things to keep you safe and secure as well,” I said, heading to the other side of the storehouse and taking up one of the leather packs.

I filled it with a few items of food, but also with a large dagger, a hammer for pitching tents, a coil of rope in case we reached a pit and needed to climb out, and

various other tools. When I returned to Misha, I slipped the pack on his back, then stepped back with a smile to study my work.

My smile quickly dropped. Misha had all but disappeared under the heavy armor and extensive supplies. He didn't really know how to hold the sword and could barely keep it lifted.

"Nothing will harm me now?" Misha asked, his voice small and echoing somewhat in the vast helmet.

I frowned. I'd given my mate everything he could possibly need to be safe and protected, but instead of making him look like he could withstand an army, he looked like he might drown under the weight of all the "help" I'd given him.

"It's not right, is it," I said, my shoulders sagging. All I wanted to do was keep Misha safe, but anyone with eyes could see that I'd only made it worse.

Misha cleared his throat slightly and said in the softest, kindest voice, "These might be the right things to keep you safe and make you strong, but I can hardly move."

I sighed. He was right. The same sort of things that would make me stronger were only crippling my sweet omega. What he really needed to keep him safe was not equipment and armor, it was my magic. But without our bond forming, I had no idea how much of it I would have to surround him with.

"Let's take this all off," I said, moving toward him and starting to strip away all the protective layers I'd burdened him with. "You're right. This isn't the way to equip you for the journey ahead of you."

We managed to get the pack and all the armor and weapons off Misha's shoulders and set it aside. The trouble was, without all those things covering him, my dear mate

looked more vulnerable than ever. It was almost enough for me to march back to Mother and demand another way to heal him.

“There has to be another way to prepare for this quest,” Misha said, glancing around the storehouse again. “I know we need to be safe and protected, but I can’t wear all that armor or carry a sword.”

“What makes you feel strong and safe, then?” I asked, accompanying him back to the side of the storehouse with the food and smaller tools.

Misha shrugged and rubbed a hand over his face. “Nothing, really. Not when I know how much power my father has over me.”

“He doesn’t have power over you here,” I insisted, standing by his side as we looked up at one of the shelves.

Misha peeked sideways at me as if he wanted to believe me but didn’t quite.

He looked at the shelves again, then blinked into a smile and reached for a small dagger, no bigger than the kind used to open letters. “This is pretty,” he said, turning the small, slim, silver thing over. “It reminds me of my Papa, of his garden. See?”

Misha held the dagger up to me. Sure enough, the handle was carved with roses in full bloom. It wouldn’t hold up in any sort of fight with a serious enemy, but it made Misha smile.

It did more than that.

“Papa always loved his roses,” he said, his cheeks glowing pink at what I could see was a beautiful memory.

“He could grow the largest and most beautiful roses, and he grew them in all different colors. I don’t think I ever saw him happier than when he was working with his roses. He once told me they reminded him of?—”

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Misha stopped, and I looked at him curiously, eager to hear the rest of the story. “Go on,” I said.

Misha smiled sadly and held the dagger to his heart. “Papa was in love with an alpha before Father found him and forced him into marriage. That alpha was the love of his life, and it’s a tragedy that they could never be together. Papa always said the roses reminded him of his true love.”

My heart broke for Misha’s papa, even though I’d never met the man. King Freslik was beyond cruel to stand in the way of true love.

“I think you should bring that with you,” I said, taking down a smaller pack from a high shelf and starting to fill it with food.

“It will be like bringing a piece of Papa with me,” Misha said softly before tucking the dagger into his belt.

He smiled as he looked at me again. “My family,” he said.

“That’s what makes me feel strong and safe.

I know they can’t come with me on this quest, but keeping this dagger by my side is almost like a reminder of them. ”

My mate’s sweetness was so touching that my throat closed up for a moment. I wanted to be his family, give him more family to support him and make him feel strong. That was my goal in the quest we were about to set out on.

We swept through the storehouse, gathering mostly food to put in our packs.

I gave myself more of a load than Misha had, including a bedroll that the two of us could share.

The things Misha packed for himself were mostly for cooking and taking care of ourselves.

He even found a first-aid kit and tucked it into his pack.

“In case we get hurt,” he said with a sheepish smile.

I couldn’t have been more in love with him if I’d tried. My sweet omega was already hurt, but he thought to bring aid in case I was hurt as well.

We set off about an hour after leaving Mother’s throne room, each of us wearing a simple pack on our backs.

We didn’t have any armor or hardly any weapons to speak of.

I trusted that if we ran into danger, particularly when we reached The Black Mirror, I could transform into a dragon and defend both of us that way.

Although the legends and stories about The Black Mirror said most weapons and forms of magic were useless against it.

I didn’t care. I would do whatever I could to defend my mate and help him complete the quest.

“I think this quest should be fairly simple and easy until we reach the end,” I said as we walked through the meadow.

The path had appeared before us when we left the storehouse, so I trusted that was Mother's way of pointing us in the right direction.

"Mother wouldn't send us off on a quest and then make it impossible to complete."

"But every quest is a challenge in some way," Misha said, turning slightly gloomy.

I squeezed his hand, which I held while we walked. "We'll be able to complete the quest, though," I said. "I don't pretend that I know what each of the tasks means, but we're clever, we can figure it out."

"Clearly, there will be some sort of cherry orchard ahead of us," Misha said, frowning in thought, like he was making an effort not to let the dark cloud of sadness and strain I knew followed him push him down. "And chickens?" He glanced up at me.

I laughed. "I have no idea what the chicken feather is all about," I admitted.

"Do you know what The Black Mirror is?" he asked.

I wished I could have laughed that off as well. "I do," I admitted with a sigh.

Misha looked deeply worried. "What is it?"

My expression turned pinched for a moment, but there was no point in hiding the truth from my mate. "Legend has it that The Black Mirror is an ancient, evil curse. No one is entirely certain what it is, but they say it can bring even the most valiant warrior to his knees."

"And I'm far from being a valiant warrior," Misha sighed, looking down at the grass path we traveled over.

It pained me to see defeat creeping in around my beloved so soon after we'd set out. It hurt even more knowing that I might not be able to help him if my magic kept draining as it was.

"It worries me, too," I said, surprising myself by admitting my own worries.

Misha glanced up at me, also in surprise. "You worry too?"

I laughed. "All the time," I said. "I worry about whether I'm doing enough to support my mother's kingdom.

I worry about whether I'm a good brother.

I worry that I won't be strong enough to assist Osric in winning the kingdom from your father.

But most of all, I worry that I won't be able to give you all the happiness and peace you deserve. "

"But you're a dragon," Misha said, his eyes going wide. "You're so strong and powerful. You can transform and fly. I can't imagine anyone standing up against you for long. How can you have anything to worry about?"

I smiled and shifted to rest my arm around Misha's waist as we walked.

"Your faith in me is humbling, my sweet. But I'm just as much a human as the next man.

Yes, I worry. I get scared, too. And much of the time I'm not certain I'll be able to be the man everyone expects me to be, that you expect me to be.

It takes courage to get up every day and be the man I'm supposed to be. ”

“But you make it look so easy,” Misha said, still marveling. “You’re naturally strong, whereas I’m naturally weak.” He lowered his head again.

I made a sound of disagreement. “I had to work hard to become the dragon I am,” I said.

“I had to prove myself every day when I was younger, and I still do. But as long as I know what is right and continue to work for that, not for myself but for the people who depend on me, I know I can be strong.” I shifted to holding his hand again and added, “You are stronger than you think, my Misha.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said in a quiet voice.

“I swear, you are,” I insisted. “I think we’re about to find that out for ourselves.”

Indeed, those words turned out to be truer than I intended them to be.

As Misha and I rounded the side of a hill, a vast field stretched out into view in the valley beyond.

It wasn’t just a field, it was an orchard filled with trees as far as the eye could see.

They were in various stages of growth and bloom.

Some were small saplings, some had canopies filled with soft, pink blossoms, and some were full green with barely visible dots of red among the branches.

“Look at that!” Misha said, perking up a bit and picking up his pace. “It looks like a cherry orchard.”

“I think it must be,” I said, smiling broadly and hurrying along the path with him. “Although that looks like far more than a hundred trees.”

“It looks like thousands,” Misha said, light in his eyes again. “How do we find the hundredth tree?”

I shrugged as we started down a gentle slope that led to the orchard. “I suppose we’re about to find out.”

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Chapter

Five

Misha

I 'd never been on a quest before, let alone one set by someone as magnificent as Queen Gaia.

I didn't know how they were supposed to feel or how I was supposed to conduct myself while searching for the items Queen Gaia had requested Azurus and I retrieve for her.

So I wasn't certain whether I should feel the fluttering sense of anticipation as Azurus and I picked up our pace and headed toward the stretching orchard that filled the valley in front of us or if I should feel dread.

"We should probably be serious about this," I said, trying to steady my heartbeats as we approached a series of small buildings near the edge of the orchard. "Who knows what we'll find here or whether whoever tends the orchard will even let us in?"

Azurus grinned at me and rested a hand on my shoulder. "I think you'll find that in the magical world, things come fairly easily to dragons."

He was teasing, I knew, but something about his comment made me feel off-center. I was no dragon, and despite being a prince, nothing had ever come easily in my life.

I tried to fight the gloom of that thought.

I was on a mission set by a queen. I couldn't let that inner darkness that lived in my gut pull me down when there was a task to be completed.

It required far more energy to do that small thing than it had to walk all the way from Queen Gaia's throne room.

"Excuse me. You there," Azurus called out in his rich, bold, alpha voice to a man that stepped out of one of the outbuildings with a large basket in his arms.

The man, who wore the simple clothing and straw hat of a farmer, but who seemed to have authority all the same, started a bit, then turned to us. When he saw us, he smiled and changed directions to meet us.

"Hello and welcome, friends," he said, holding his basket with one hand and touching the brim of his hat to us with the other. "How might I help you today?"

I had always been wary of strangers, even ones who smiled and appeared friendly.

Indeed, in my father's court, it was the ones who pretended to be friendly who usually swooped in and demanded to take my heat or the heat of one of my brothers.

So I took a half step back, trying not to embarrass myself by hiding behind Azurus completely, and glanced up at my fated mate.

Azurus was completely at ease as he addressed the farmer.

"My mate and I have been sent on a mission to collect the pit from a cherry on the one hundredth tree," he said.

“If it would be alright with you, and if you can point out which of all these trees is the one hundredth, we’ll pick a cherry and be on our way. ”

The farmer laughed, which had the hair on the back of my neck standing up, even though it wasn’t an unkind sound. “If it was as easy a matter as pointing out which tree held which number I would surely help you,” the farmer said. “But this is a magical orchard.”

Azurus’s confident smile faded. “Oh, I see,” he said. “What does that mean?”

The farmer shrugged and pivoted to gesture to the trees. “It means that each tree is planted, grows, flowers, and produces fruit all within a day before completing its purpose and vanishing.”

I frowned in confusion for a moment, then looked past the farmer to see what he meant.

It was obvious as soon as I watched the trees for a few moments. I’d noticed from our approach that the trees were in all phases of growth and flower, but now that we were there in the orchard, I could see the growth happening.

Some of the trees were nothing more than saplings, but I watched as they slowly grew before my eyes.

The growth wasn’t as evident if I simply stared at the trees, but if I glanced away and looked back, there was progress, new branches and new leaves.

Beyond those trees were taller ones bursting with blooms that seemed to flower before my eyes.

Another section had mostly green trees with fruit growing swiftly.

Still other trees had circles of baskets around them, and as the cherries ripened, then fell off the trees and straight into the baskets of their own accord.

Several attendants were gathering baskets or putting new ones out.

At the very end of the orchard, I watched as trees that had delivered all their fruit vanished.

No, they didn't vanish entirely. It was more like they disintegrated into a dozen tiny saplings, which other attendants gathered up in trays and brought back to the outbuildings.

"You see," the farmer explained. "It is a constant cycle, an ongoing effort. There is no beginning and no end to the production of fruit, so it is impossible to number the trees and say which is first and which is one hundredth."

My shoulders sank and my hope for a better life with it. Queen Gaia had set us an impossible task.

Azurus wasn't half as deterred as I was. "If the orchard is a constant cycle, how do we find a specific one hundredth tree?" he asked.

The farmer shifted his weight and scratched his beard. "I suppose the only way to give the trees numbers would be if you planted them yourselves," he said. "There would be the first tree you planted, the tenth, and the hundredth."

Azurus smiled. "Perfect," he said. "Then if you'll allow us, my mate and I will plant a hundred trees and take a cherry from the last."

The farmer nodded cheerily. "All of us here would be glad for the help with our tasks. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to a prepared field, find you several trays of

seedlings, and explain the planting process.”

Azurus seemed completely satisfied with the arrangement, but as I followed him and the farmer to one of the outbuildings, my heart sank.

“How can we plant a hundred trees?” I asked once the farmer provided us with everything we would need for the task and led us into an empty field. “Planting trees is hard work. I...I must admit that I’ve never had to do manual labor in my life.”

Azurus, who was lining up the two-foot-tall saplings and the tools we would need to plant them, turned to me with a smile. “You can do this, Misha. I know you can. Have I not said all along that you are stronger than you look?”

I tried to smile at his kind assessment, but I didn’t feel strong at all. “You overestimate my abilities,” I told him with a sigh, putting on the gardening gloves and hat I’d been provided with.

“And you have no idea how wonderful you are,” Azurus told me.

He stepped closer to me and surprised me by sweeping me into his arms when I wasn’t expecting it and planting a firm kiss on my lips.

His rain scent surrounded me, and for a moment I felt something loosen and soften inside me.

I wanted to embrace him in return, keep kissing him, and see where the kiss might go.

It was the closest I’d come to going into heat since the two of us had met, and it encouraged me.

“How do we do this?” I asked with a different sort of sigh entirely when he let me go.

Azurus seemed as happy as could be as he took me to the line of saplings he'd made next to the small ridge of dirt where the trees needed to be planted.

"In theory, it's simple," he said. We dig a hole deep enough for each sapling's roots, then we put the tree in, fill the dirt back into the hole, and water it. "

I drew in a bracing breath and nodded. "It sounds simple enough," I said.

Then I glanced down the long, long row where we needed to do all the planting. It seemed to stretch on forever. The task Queen Gaia had set us might not have been impossible, but it looked like it would be difficult and take forever.

Just as my fear and anxiety started to well up at all the work ahead of me, the Queen's voice sounded in my head again. "Do you want to be made better?"

I sucked in a breath, using it to help me stand tall. "Yes," I answered aloud. "I want to get better." And to do that, I needed to do the work.

Azurus had gone to fetch a shovel. He walked back to the ridge of dirt like he would dig the hole and do all the work for me, but I stepped forward and held out my hand.

"I can do it," I said.

"Not if you think it's too strenuous," Azurus said, hesitating instead of handing me the shovel.

I shook my head. "This quest is to make me better. I need to do the work."

That seemed to be enough of an answer for my alpha. He handed over the shovel.

I walked to the ridge, and with only a bit of hesitation to take a deep breath, I thrust

the blade of the shovel into the ground, digging my first hole.

It wasn't as difficult as I'd thought it would be.

The dirt was moist and loose and came away easily as I put my back into it.

Azurus stood at the ready with the first sapling, and as soon as the hole was deep enough, he lifted it and placed it just so.

I shoveled dirt back into the hole, and together we patted it securely before watering it.

Once that was done, I glanced up at Azurus and smiled. "That wasn't so hard," I said.

"Not at all," Azurus agreed.

He looked so proud of me, which warmed my heart in ways I wasn't sure it had ever been warmed. I'd never been cared about the way Azurus cared about me before. It made moving onto the second tree so much easier.

We worked together to plant the second tree, then the third, then the fourth.

Azurus and I worked so well together, which became apparent almost immediately.

We fell into a sort of rhythm with each other, me digging and Azurus placing the tree before we filled in the dirt and watered it together.

We were a partnership, a team, and the whole process felt good.

Until we got to the twenty-fifth tree.

“How are you holding up?” Azurus asked, concern hiding behind his smile.

My muscles were aching from digging holes and I could have sworn blisters were starting to form on my hands. But I answered, “I’m okay,” with a short, tight smile for him.

“Do you want me to take a turn digging the holes?” Azurus asked.

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I shook my head and thrust the shovel into the ground for the twenty-sixth tree. “No, I need to do this myself.”

By the thirty-fifth tree, my arms were starting to feel like rubber.

I wasn’t used to so much labor. The sun was still cheery and encouraging overhead and somehow just feeling its rays made me more relaxed.

But the work was growing harder and harder, and every time I glanced up to try to gauge where the end of the row might be, it seemed farther away than ever.

The entire process slowed down, and by the fiftieth tree, panic began to fill me again.

“Misha, you’re doing your best,” Azurus said. “I know that and you know that. But you need to let me take a turn at digging the holes or you’ll wear yourself out.”

I thrust the shovel into the ground then looked up at Azurus, fighting against the despair that poked around the edges of my heart and soul. “Shouldn’t I be doing all the work to get better myself, though?” I asked. “Isn’t this my quest and my burden to bear?”

“It’s our quest,” Azurus said, stepping in and closing his hand over mine on the handle of the shovel before I could start digging again.

“You’re still doing the work, you’re just doing it differently for a while.

Let me do this hard bit for a while. Just because I help you dig the holes, that doesn’t

mean you're not still working hard. ”

I gulped a few breaths, trying to decide if I felt guilty for handing over my burden to someone else.

I could see that Azurus was right, though.

I couldn't plant fifty more trees all by myself, or at least doing the hardest part of the work.

Azurus was my fated mate, the alpha I would be with for the rest of my life.

My mind knew that my burdens were his burdens, but it seemed that the only way for my heart to learn that was to let him help.

“Alright,” I said, stepping back from the shovel and over to the line of saplings. “You dig and I'll place the tree.”

With a warm smile, Azurus picked up where I'd left off, digging a hole so that I could then place the sapling in it.

We still filled in the hole together and watered it together, and after a few more trees, I started to feel like I was still doing the work.

I hadn't just handed it all over to Azurus.

The entire process went faster from there. We planted twenty-five more trees, and my heart began to feel light again. The sun felt more comforting than ever, and as we continued down the last stretch of the field, I actually began to enjoy the movement of my body and the strain of my muscles.

“I’m beginning to think Queen Gaia had the right idea in having us set out on this quest together,” I said when we had fewer than ten trees left to plant. “I doubt I could have done it on my own.”

“That’s what a mate is for,” Azurus said with a shrug, then pushed the shovel into the dirt for yet another hole. “Quests and tasks like this are always so much easier when you have someone to work with.”

“And you’re certain you don’t mind doing the work for me?” I asked, trying not to entertain the constant thoughts that niggled at me, saying I was a burden and weak and that Azurus deserved better than me.

Azurus glanced up at me with a look of mild surprise. “But I’m not doing the work for you,” he said. “We’re doing the work together. There’s a difference.”

He smiled, and I was struck by a feeling of love so deep and so unlike anything I’d ever felt before that it gave me the energy to continue on and plant the last of the trees.

My whole life, the only people I’d ever had to work together with were my brothers, but there had been times when I felt like I was holding them back from being the men they were supposed to be.

But with Azurus, I felt like I was finally being given the chance to become the man I was meant to be as well. As we planted the hundredth tree, I started to understand what it really meant to be someone’s fated mate.

“There,” Azurus said once the last tree was planted and watered and the two of us stepped back to survey our handiwork. “That’s one hundred trees planted.”

“I don’t know if I can thank you enough for helping me,” I said, stepping slightly

closer to him.

I wanted to throw my arms around him and hug him tightly, but I didn't know if I had a right to.

Besides, we were both sweaty and dirty from all the work we'd done, although that just made my mate's scent stronger, which I loved.

Azurus must have somehow read my thoughts. He scooped me around the waist and pulled me in for a tight hug. "You don't have to thank me for doing what comes naturally to me," he said.

"Planting magical cherry trees?" I asked with a mischievous arch of one eyebrow.

Azurus laughed. I loved the sound. I loved how light and happy I felt on the inside. It was almost like Queen Gaia's spell to heal me was already working.

"Being with you," Azurus answered. "Working side by side with you. That's what comes naturally to me."

"I like it, too," I said, lowering my voice and glancing up at him, bashful from the swell of heated emotions that had begun to swirl in me.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to kiss my beloved mate like we hadn't yet kissed. It wasn't quite the urgency of heat finally showing up for me, but it was warm and pulsing and whispered of the way things could be.

I was certain Azurus felt it as well. His deep, blue eyes flashed with desire, and the way he held me turned more intimate. It didn't matter that we were both dirty and tired from work, we wanted each other.

I would have lifted to my toes and been bold enough to kiss Azurus first, but we were interrupted by the farmer coming to see our progress.

“You’ve done well,” he said, the surprise of his appearance breaking me and Azurus apart. “The first trees that you planted are already flowering.”

It didn’t seem possible, but when I stepped to the side and craned my neck to get a look at the beginning of the row, which seemed so far away now, it was clear that the farmer was right. The first trees we’d planted were tall and pink with blooms.

“Wow! This really is a magical orchard!” I said, my heart racing.

“We’ll have our cherry pit in no time,” Azurus said, glowing with satisfaction.

“I can bring you refreshments if you’d like to wait,” the farmer said.

“Thank you,” I said, glancing from the farmer to Azurus. “I could certainly use a rest and some refreshment.”

“You deserve it,” Azurus said, taking me to a grassy slope off to one side where we could sit and wait for all our hard work to bear fruit, literally. “We both deserve it.”

“I’ll fetch everything you need,” the farmer said, walking away.

I sank down to sit in the grass by Azurus’s side, looking down the line of trees we’d planted. The work had been hard, but I had a good feeling about what it would produce.

Chapter

Six

Azurus

Whatever my mother's intentions in sending Misha and I on her quest, I had to admit that it was nice to spend the afternoon working side by side with my omega.

I didn't exactly understand why Mother needed a cherry pit, but it had felt good to dig in the dirt with the sunshine on my back, knowing that I was helping Misha.

It was good to do something that didn't require magic.

That way I could forget that mine was growing weaker and weaker despite the increasing closeness Misha and I felt.

"I still can't believe we planted a hundred cherry trees!" Misha said as the two of us sipped on the cherry cordial that the farmer had brought us, along with a few cherry tarts. They were the second most delicious things I'd ever tasted. Misha's lips were the first.

"You did amazingly well," I told my beloved, taking up one of the last tarts from the tray, saluting him with it, then biting into its sweet-tart goodness, all while gazing straight into Misha's eyes. His strong sweet pea and sugar scent only made the pastry taste better.

Misha laughed as if he didn't believe me and took the last tart from the tray. "I don't know how I managed it," he said. "Truly. When we first started and I looked ahead to see how much work we would have to do, and all for a single cherry pit, I definitely didn't think I was capable of it."

I shook my head, then swallowed my bite of tart. "You do not give yourself enough credit, my sweet," I said. "You are a prince, the mate of a dragon. You can do anything you set your mind to."

Instead of being flattered by my comment, Misha sighed and shrank in on himself a little. "My mind is sick," he said. "And I am a prince of nothing."

It was frustrating to hear someone I loved so much put themselves down, especially knowing those dark opinions had been frightened into him by a cruel and evil father. They weren't really a part of him. I was desperate to get past the veil of pain Misha wore and to get to my true mate.

"Your mind is healing," I said, brushing the last of the tart crumbs from my hands then scooting to sit flush against my beloved's side, one arm around his back. "And if all else fails, you are the mate of a dragon." I winked at him teasingly for good measure.

Blessedly, Misha laughed. Because he was still chewing his tart, the sound came out as a snort, which only made both of us laugh harder.

It was beautiful and peaceful and simple.

The two of us were sitting in the afternoon sunshine, our bodies warm and loose from hard work, watching a long row of magical cherry trees we'd just planted grow and bloom in the hope of bearing fruit.

There was nothing bold or heroic about it, we weren't saving any kingdoms or fighting against evil, but it felt as if we were exactly where we were supposed to be, enjoying each other in the perfect way.

The cozy feeling of the moment turned wistful when Misha finished eating and gazed up at me. "I haven't gone into heat," he said. "I should have a long time ago, but—" He finished his thought with a shrug.

"Don't worry about it, love," I said, combing my fingers through his hair. "Everything that is fated to be will come to pass in good time."

"But will it?" Misha asked. "Are we truly mates if we haven't—" he held his hands out, "—mated?"

"Of course we are," I said. "I've been waiting for hundreds of years to find my fated mate," I told Misha, feeling suddenly vulnerable. "A few more days or weeks doesn't mean anything to me."

Misha's eyes went wide. "I knew that dragons lived an incredibly long time and that you are very old?—"

I laughed before he could finish his statement. "I'm not very old," I said. "In fact, in dragon years, I'm still a young and spry man."

Misha blushed adorably. "You know what I mean," he said.

"I do," I said, smiling at him with all the simple joy that radiated from my heart.

He took a small breath then said, "What I mean is that you've been alive for hundreds of years. Why haven't you found your fated mate already?"

I shrugged. "Because I was waiting for you," I said.

"But I'm so insignificant," he insisted. "It doesn't seem right to think that you would have to wait hundreds of years to fall in love, and that once you finally met me I should be so...." He turned away, letting the sentence drop.

"Hey." I twisted so that I could cup the side of his face and turn him to look at me again.

"I don't feel as though I have missed out on anything," I said.

"I don't mind that I had to wait for you at all.

"I had no intention of mentioning the various lovers I'd had over the years, mostly because none of them had mattered compared to Misha. "You are worth waiting for."

Misha's cheek was hot in my hand, and even though I didn't let him turn away again, he lowered his eyes. "Still," he said, "it seems a shame that you should spend so long just...waiting."

"I haven't just been waiting," I said with a shrug. When he glanced questioningly up at me, I went on with, "I've been working for Mother, as we all have. The magical world seems peaceful and glorious, but even this place is not without its conflicts and trials."

"Really?" Misha blinked. "It seems so perfect to me."

"It only seems that way because my dragon brothers and I have put in a great deal of work to make it so," I said. "That's the way of everything. You have to constantly work at the things you love in order to keep them alive."

“Like a garden,” Misha said, brightening a little. “My Papa loved his garden and gave so much of himself to keep it alive and growing, even in the darkest times.”

“Precisely,” I said. “You cannot plant a garden once and expect it to look beautiful and colorful forever. Everything has its season, and work needs to be done during each of those seasons to keep the garden healthy.”

Misha smiled and sighed. “That’s a beautiful way to look at it,” he said. His smile faltered and he went on with, “Right now, it feels like my garden is covered in brambles and thorns.”

“Maybe it is,” I said, which surprised Misha.

I wondered if he expected me to disagree and say everything was beautiful and growing with him.

I stroked the side of his face again and said, “You weren’t the one who planted those brambles and thorns.

It feels unfair for you to have to be the one to clean it all up, but at least I’m here to help. ”

Misha smiled again. “I’m so grateful,” he said. “I...I was worried that I would be alone my entire life.”

“So was I,” I admitted.

That surprised my love. “I cannot imagine you ever being alone.”

“Hundreds of years can seem like a long time when you haven’t met your fated mate yet,” I confessed. “I’ve been wondering when you would come along for a while

now.”

“I hope I’m not a disappointment,” he whispered.

“Never,” I said, cupping his face with both hands.

I couldn’t resist kissing him then. The sunlight was too warm, the scents of grass and dirt and cherry blossoms, not to mention my sweet omega, swirled around us, and birdsong and the sound of farmworkers singing as they harvested cherries filled the air.

The moment was too blissful not to lean in and kiss Misha softly.

Whether it was the closeness that the two of us had found through working together, the beauty of the afternoon, or something magical in the air, that kiss felt more important than anything we’d shared so far.

Misha’s mouth was warm and ready, and he opened to me without hesitation.

I could practically feel his heartbeat, even though we were barely touching.

I could feel more from him as well. As I explored him with my tongue, gossamer tendrils of what I knew would become our bond seemed to swirl around us, catching us in a net.

The slow drain of my magic seemed to stop for a moment.

More than that, it felt as though every part of me tingled with renewed magic and wonder.

I could feel Misha’s earnest hopes for a better future and his fear that he would never

be truly healed, but above all I could feel a latent desire deep within him.

Misha wanted me. My sweet, fearful mate was alive with desire that was just waiting to burst free and encompass both of us. Whatever worry I might have had that he didn't want me that way or was frightened of how ferocious a dragon might be in bed was dismissed as I felt the longing pull at him.

And yet, he still wasn't going into heat, and I still felt somehow...faded.

I ended our kiss, not wanting to pressure him too much. If Misha wasn't ready, then all the desire I felt and all the need to breed my mate that pulsed within me wasn't going to make things suddenly right with him.

"No," he whimpered as I let my hand drop from his face.

"No?" I asked, worried he was telling me he didn't want me after all.

Misha shook his head and swallowed, then looked up into my eyes. "I don't want to feel this wall between us anymore. I want to be normal, to go into heat like a normal, ordinary omega who's met his mate."

My heart broke for my sweet omega. "I know," I said, stroking my fingers through his hair, then pulling him into my embrace. "But these things cannot be rushed. We'll get there in time, and when we look back, this delay will feel like nothing at all."

"I hope so," Misha said quietly.

"I know so," I echoed him.

I did more than that. As I had in the garden of the castle, I closed my hand and summoned enough magic to create a sapphire bloom.

Only, when I opened my hand, the faded, flickering bloom was only there for a moment before it vanished.

I swallowed hard, fighting not to react too strongly and to upset my omega. I should have had more than enough magic to summon a flower. I tried again, but the attempt was even more feeble than before.

Just when I'd thought things were getting better, it appeared as though they were taking a turn for the worse.

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Misha sensed it. “Is something wrong?” he asked with a puzzled look.

“No,” I laughed, though the sound was tense and airy. “Nothing is wrong at all.”

“You were trying to make another flower for me, weren’t you,” he said.

“I was....” I said, uncertain whether I should admit what was happening to me. “I, er, I changed my mind.”

It was a lie, and as such, it sent an uncomfortable shiver through me. Worse than that, Misha studied me with a confused look, as if he knew I wasn’t being honest. He blinked, then said, “You would tell me if something was wrong, wouldn’t you?”

My heart pounded harder as I felt put on the spot. “I promise that I will always let you know if something is really wrong,” I said. “I think I’m just a little tired right now. It’s been a long day.”

That wasn’t a lie, but it didn’t make me feel better at all.

Worse still, the closeness and almost-bond I’d felt with my mate had vanished like the flower I’d tried to conjure.

I knew enough to know my failure to be completely honest about my own shortcomings was the cause, that I’d put yet another wall between us, but I just couldn’t bring myself to hurt Misha more than he was already hurt.

If I told him my magic was fading because we hadn’t fully bonded yet, he would

blame himself. That was the very last thing I wanted.

“Why don’t we lie down in the grass and enjoy this beautiful afternoon while we wait for the cherries?” I asked instead. “Heaven knows the two of us could use a rest.”

Misha smiled and let out a breath. “Alright,” he said, lying back with me and then turning his body into my embrace. “This feels so nice.”

“It does.”

I closed my eyes and held Misha close for several minutes, so long that I thought maybe he’d fallen asleep.

But no, it was just the two of us enjoying a quiet moment together.

Quiet moments were so rare sometimes, and it was unbelievably nice to just be there in such a beautiful setting with my mate.

We were interrupted sometime later, as the sun began to set, by the farmer clearing his throat somewhere close by.

“Your cherries are just about ready,” he announced to us.

Misha and I sat up from where we’d reclined in the grass and looked at our trees. Sure enough, at some point when we hadn’t been paying attention, they’d all grown, bloomed, and borne fruit.

“The hundredth tree!” Misha gasped in excitement, scrambling to his feet.

I rose with him, and together the two of us went to investigate the trees.

Even I was impressed by how quickly the trees had grown, and I was a dragon.

What had been a two-foot-high sapling only a few hours before was now a fully-grown tree whose boughs were filled with small, green cherries.

As Misha and I walked around it, those green cherries grew and reddened, ripening into full, juicy fruits.

“Does everything in the magical world grow like this?” Misha asked, gazing at the tree with round, impressed eyes.

“Only when there is some need for quick growth,” I answered.

“It’s amazing!”

It really was incredible. The tree seemed to stretch and shiver as its fruit filled out, dotting the green branches with dots of bright red. Misha and I watched until the fruits all hung heavily.

“If you plan to collect your cherry pit, you’d better do it now,” the farmer said, coming up behind us with a few of his workers, all of them carrying baskets. “Sometimes, if you leave the fruit too long, it spoils before you can do anything about it.”

I nodded, then gestured for Misha to pick a cherry. “These are the fruits of your labor, so you choose.”

Misha continued to study the tree for a moment, then looked at me before moving in. He reached for the highest branch he could, plucking a particularly large, glittering cherry and bringing it back to me.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Is this one good enough?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said, taking the cherry from him and popping it into my mouth.

I didn’t just eat the fruit whole, though. I bit into it, then in a moment of whimsy, I leaned toward Misha and winked. Misha laughed and caught on to what I was hinting at. He lifted to his toes, grasping onto my arms for balance as he did, then bit the other half of the cherry.

Eating the cherry turned into a kiss. It was silly and sweet, and we both ended up with cherry juice dribbling down our chins.

But the playful moment was its own kind of magic and did what it was intended to do.

As we broke apart and chewed to finish eating the cherry, Misha pulled the small, golden pit out of his mouth.

“I’ve never seen a golden cherry pit before,” he said in awe, studying the tiny thing. He then glanced up and looked down the row of cherry trees, which were being harvested by the workers. “Imagine that our prize after doing so much work is something so small.”

“Small but important,” I said, taking Misha’s free hand and leading him away from the trees so that the workers could finish the harvest. Already, the trees at the end where we’d started were dissolving into more saplings.

It seemed somehow fitting that more trees and more cherries should be created from our labors.

“So what do we do now?” Misha asked, still studying the cherry pit as we walked back to where we’d left our packs earlier. “We have the first item Queen Gaia asked for. How do we find the rest?”

“We keep traveling,” I said, nodding to where the path we’d taken to reach the cherry orchard now seemed to stretch off toward the sunset. “Although I think we should find somewhere to make camp for the night first.”

Misha dragged his eyes away from the cherry pit, which he stared at as if it by itself could heal his soul, and looked at me. He breathed out a sigh then said, “I could use a rest. Planting magical cherry trees is exhausting.”

“Anything worth doing comes with its own level of exhaustion,” I agreed, hoisting my pack onto my back and picking up Misha’s as well. “Come on. I’m sure Mother will have arranged some sort of place for us to stay for the evening. The only way to find it is to travel on.”

Misha glanced at the cherry pit once more, then took his pack from me. He stashed the pit carefully in a pocket of his pack, then swung it onto his back.

“I’m ready,” he said with a satisfied sigh. “Whatever awaits us next, I think I can handle it.”

I beamed at my sweet omega. Yes, Misha was far stronger than he thought he was, and I loved him for it. I didn’t need magic for that, and if I was fated to lose mine forever, I was resigned to that, as long as I had him.

Chapter

Seven

Misha

We had the cherry pit. It was one step in the right direction.

I'd been uncertain about the quest Queen Gaia had sent us on when we'd first set out, but successfully obtaining the cherry pit had given me hope that between me and Azurus, we would be able to obtain the other two items and Queen Gaia would be able to fix me.

One thing was certain, though. I wouldn't have been able to do anything without Azurus.

"We should make camp for the night," he said as the sun dipped low to the horizon, about an hour after we'd started away from the cherry orchard.

"I know you're in a hurry to finish the quest so that Mother can make you well again, but I don't think she would have wanted us to walk all through the night. "

"I don't mind walking with you," I said, smiling up at my mate. I even reached over to take his hand.

So far on our journey, Azurus had reached for my hand whenever I had a moment of doubt or anxiety.

It was nice to reach for him just because I liked being with him and wanted that physical contact.

It gave me hope that my heat might finally come and we could bond the way fated mates were supposed to.

Azurus smiled back at me. I hoped it was the promise of a perfect future between us that had me warming and almost shivering at the emotion contained in his smile.

Azurus really was gorgeous. He was tall and had broad shoulders and strong muscles, like most alphas.

Unlike most alphas, he had a kindness in his eyes and a ready smile that always made me feel like there was hope the world could be righted again.

“I love walking with you, too,” he said, then laughed lightly and added, “but I would like resting for the night with you even more.”

I laughed as well, happy in the moment.

Queen Gaia must have somehow been watching us or known where we were in our journey.

No sooner did Azurus and I make the decision to stop and make camp for the night when we came across the perfect clearing in a glade of trees by the side of the road.

It was ideal for camping, complete with a circle of stones that had logs already stacked to build a fire.

“I think your mother is helping us,” I said with a cheeky look as we stepped off the path and into the clearing. “She has to be the one who created this spot for us.”

Azurus chuckled as he shrugged the pack he wore off his back. “I wouldn’t be surprised. Mother is the essence of love and caring. She wants us to succeed in this, and she wants us to be happy together.”

That raised a few questions in my mind. “Why didn’t she just cast some sort of spell or lay her hands on me to make me stronger and braver?” I asked as I, too, shrugged off my pack and placed it beside a stump off to one side of the circle of stones. “Why send us on a quest instead?”

Azurus grinned as he went to check on the fire pit. “It’s Mother’s way,” he said. “She could fix everything with a smile if she wanted to, but there’s always some higher purpose to the way she does things. I’m certain there is more to this quest than either you or I know.”

I tilted my head to the side, considering that.

It was true, and so far, I hadn’t been disappointed in the quest. Planting a hundred cherry trees had been a challenge, but looking back on the day, it hadn’t been unpleasant.

I’d been together with Azurus, working and chatting with him the entire time.

More than that, I’d been out in the sunshine and fresh air all day, using my body and working my muscles.

The same couldn’t be said for my life as a captive in the bedchamber I shared with my brothers in our father’s castle.

Sometimes, that sense of confinement that Father had subjected us all to was so strenuous in its own way that I’d wanted to scream.

At least my brothers and I had had Papa's garden for fresh air and exercise. At least until the last few months.

Come to think of it, my fear and anxiety had started to grow exponentially as soon as Father had confined us to the bedchamber and forbidden us from going outside.

If we hadn't been able to escape into the magical world through the enchanted door under Rumi's bed every night, I wasn't certain I'd've been able to keep my sanity.

"Do you suppose that?—"

I turned to where Azurus stood next to the firepit, but my question died on my lips.

Something was wrong. Azurus had his hand stretched over the pile of logs and he wore an expression of concentration, but that was it.

His concentration turned into a frown. He shook his hand and held it over the logs again, but again nothing happened.

A quiver of new fear shot through my gut. "Is everything alright?" I asked.

Azurus's frown turned to confusion for a moment before he pulled his hand back and glanced up at me with a smile. A tight, almost fake smile. "Everything is fine, my love," he said.

"Are you certain?" I asked, the tight feeling in my stomach turning into a knot. "Do you need help lighting the fire?"

Azurus took a long time to answer. "Perhaps I do," he said, stepping away from the circle of stones and going to fetch his pack. "It's been a long time since I lit any sort of fire. I hope I remember how it's done."

I could tell from the sudden tension in Azurus's back and the way his reassuring smile dropped as soon as he turned away from me that there was something he wasn't telling me. That was just one more thing to make me anxious and fill me with doubts about what we were doing.

I wasn't going to let it bring me down, though. For Azurus's sake, I needed to at least pretend to be brave, even if I didn't feel like I was at all.

"I don't think I'll be much help," I said lightly as Azurus returned to the firepit with a tinderbox, "but I have at least made a fire before. Or rather, assisted Rumi when he made a fire. We used to make small fires in Papa's garden so we could roast things and have impromptu picnics in the summer sometimes, like Papa used to do with us when we were children. "

"That sounds lovely," Azurus said, his smile returning in a more genuine way as we crouched beside the pit and went to work on the fire.

"It was," I said, letting myself fall into the memories of those days for a moment. "Life with my brothers hasn't been all bad, you know. The six of us are very close. I love them all dearly. I'm so happy that Tovey, Selle, and Leo have found their fated mates and started families."

"They've made my brothers very happy," Azurus said, striking the tinderbox several times, falling into a frown as he did, before the kindling under the logs finally caught and started to burn. "I'm sure your two remaining brothers will make Emmerich and Argus very happy as well."

"I'm worried about Rumi and Obi," I said, helping to fan the flaming kindling so that the bigger logs would catch. "I cannot imagine how the two of them are getting on in our father's castle all by themselves. Father must be livid that the rest of us are gone."

“They are not entirely alone,” Azurus said, leaning back to stare at the fire once it started to burn.

“Argus is there in the castle looking out for Obi, and Emmerich spends as much time shadowing Rumi to make certain he’s safe as he does performing his governing duties in the castle in this realm. ”

I sat back to watch the fire as well, scratching the back of my neck for a moment as a wealth of thoughts zipped through my mind.

“How exactly do fated mates work?” I asked.

“I know that the six of us were fated for the six of you, but it all seems so mysterious and strange. Did any of us really have a choice about who we fall in love with or was it written in the stars from the dawn of time?”

Azurus huffed a laugh. “I don’t really know,” he said.

“I can’t say whether there is some magic at work that makes six alpha brothers the perfect mates for six omega brothers or whether, as family, we each have enough similarities to create perfect partnerships with each other.

For all I know, Mother might have a hand in it. ”

“I knew from the moment I saw you that you were my mate,” I said, lowering my voice and my face a little.

I felt sheepish, mostly because I wasn’t certain those feelings were polite to talk about.

Then again, Azurus was my mate, even if we hadn’t bonded yet.

“You made me feel safe from the moment you smiled at me. You made me feel even safer when you first touched me. Usually, when an alpha touches me, it terrifies me.”

A quick, dark cloud passed over Azurus’s expression at my mention of other alphas touching me.

Even that warmed my heart. I liked his possessiveness.

I wanted it and needed it. Everything that pulsed behind that instinct to possess and protect me was exactly what gave me the confidence that Azurus would never let any harm come to me.

“I was drawn to you straight away as well,” Azurus said, inching closer and sliding his arm around my back. “I took one look at you and saw such glorious sweetness that I knew you’d been made for me.”

I blushed, feeling warm from more than just the fire.

“I’m not certain I deserve you,” I said, lowering my eyes to watch Azurus’s free hand as he took my own and threaded our fingers together.

“Shush,” Azurus said, his voice growing deeper and more amorous. “I don’t want to hear you speaking of yourself that way. You’re my mate, the mate of a dragon. You are special in so many ways.”

I glanced up at him, my heart beating hard and fast. I’d longed to hear someone, a good, strong alpha, say those words to me for so long. I still didn’t really think someone as broken as me deserved someone as magnificent as Azurus, but I blossomed with love all the same.

Azurus must have felt something of what I was feeling. He studied my face for a

moment, his gaze landing on my lips. I parted them as I breathed out, willing him to kiss me.

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Blessedly, he did. He leaned in, shifting to hold the side of my face with one hand, and slanted his warm mouth over mine in a kiss that was as passionate as it was sweet. His lips molded to mine and his tongue reached out to explore.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the connection I felt with him because of that kiss. It was so powerful, and all I wanted was to open everything I had to him and to give myself to him forever.

I pushed up enough to swing one leg over his and to sit straddling him.

Once I was fitted against him, I clasped the sides of his stubbly face and kissed him from the bottom of my heart.

It felt so good, brought us so close. My body pulsed and shivered...

but that was it. There was no tightness or insistence in my core, no growing heat spreading through my body, and most significantly, no slick pooling within me or leaking out of me.

My heart wanted everything, but my body was still dry as a bone and my womb was still asleep.

I heaved out a breath and turned my face away from Azurus.

“What?” Azurus asked, his voice low and dusky. I could feel the bulge in his trousers between my legs, but even that did nothing for me. “What is wrong?”

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “Nothing,” I lied. “We...we can continue. I’ll do whatever you want me to.”

Even saying those words made my voice quiver. Without my body producing any slick, making love, even with my fated mate, would be painful. In more ways than one.

Azurus stroked my side and leaned in to kiss me again, but I could tell he knew what my problem was.

“You’re still not going into heat,” he said.

I shook my head, tears forming in my eyes. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I whispered. “I want you. Every part of my body, heart, and soul wants you. So why am I not going into heat?”

Azurus let out a heavy sigh and pulled me into a tight hug. “I don’t know, my love,” he said. “That’s what this entire quest is about, isn’t it? It’s about finding ways to break through whatever has you in its grip so that we can get on with our lives.”

“But what if we never do?” I asked in a whisper. “What if I’m like this forever?”

“You won’t be,” Azurus insisted, brushing a hand over my head. “I promise, you won’t be. Whatever happens, we’ll still be together.”

I smiled sadly, praying he was right. I didn’t think a powerful dragon like Azurus would still want a broken omega who couldn’t be fixed, though.

“Come,” Azurus said, moving me so that he could stand up. “It’s been a long and tiring day. Let’s set up the tent I brought and get some sleep.”

“Alright,” I agreed, rubbing my arms and feeling useless once I was on my feet. I wasn’t sure what I could offer someone like Azurus the way I was now.

I was so stuck in my own, low feelings that I didn’t notice the way Azurus had started to frown again once he untied the condensed tent from his pack.

He shook out the rolled fabric and set it and the folding tent posts that came with it to the side, then just stood over them, hand raised, looking at them.

I blinked, waiting for something to happen. I wasn’t entirely certain what he was trying to do. It was almost as if he expected the tent to erect itself.

No, it was as if he was trying to erect it with magic...and nothing was happening.

“Are you certain everything is alright?” I asked him in a cautious voice. I didn’t know anything about dragon magic. I assumed it was always there. Was it possible that magic got tired at the end of a strenuous day of work, the same way that bodies did, and wasn’t as easy to use?

“Everything is fine,” Azurus said, reflecting his earlier, tense answer, complete with false smile as he lowered his hand.

“Is...is something not working?” I asked awkwardly, uncertain how to put my suspicion into words.

Instead of answering me, Azurus bent to scoop up the tent materials and set them to the side. “What do you say to sleeping under the stars tonight?” he asked, forced enthusiasm in his voice.

My suspicions grew to the point where they on their own caused me more anxiety. Something was definitely wrong with Azurus’s magic.

At the same time, as he pulled out the bedroll we'd packed, the idea of sleeping in my mate's arms under the beautiful, starry sky that spread above us was a fantastic one.

"I'd love to sleep under the stars with you," I said, letting out a breath and the tension I'd been holding with it. "In fact, nothing sounds better than that."

Azurus smiled with genuine feeling as well. I could practically see the relief wash through him and the affection that swooped in to replace it.

"A night of rest under the stars is exactly what we need," he said.

It truly was. Azurus spread out our bedroll, we took a few moments to eat a bit of the food we'd brought with us, then we took off our shoes and climbed into the bedroll together.

It was so far from what my mate probably expected of sleeping with me.

I had no heat to offer him, no passion to satisfy him with.

Azurus didn't seem to mind, though. I loved how patient my alpha was, how generous and understanding.

I just loved him. I could feel that love growing with each moment we spent together.

Heat or no heat, we truly were fated mates.

I could feel the bond that would be between us hovering just out of reach, but for the first time, I started to believe that we wouldn't need to have wild, passionate sex first in order for it to form.

It would be there to join us one way or another, I just had to have faith and be patient.

It was easy to be patient when I lay in my alpha's arms. Even though Azurus and I started out our snuggly time in bed together with light, unimportant conversation, I drifted off before I knew it.

There was something so comforting about Azurus's large body cradling my much smaller one.

For the first time in ages, I slept soundly and peacefully, without a single nightmare.

That might have been why I was so startled to awake to the sound of a loud, though distant, cock crowing.

"Hmm?" I mumbled, rubbing my face against Azurus's chest as sleep left me feeling jittery and ready to flee.

The cock crowed again, and it was joined by another, then another.

"Three roosters?" Azurus asked, sounding as if he'd been awake longer than me, but letting me continue to sleep on him.

The roosters cried out once more.

"I guess it's morning," I said as we both sat up.

The implication of hearing three cocks crowing wasn't lost on either of us. Sleep left me entirely as Azurus and I locked eyes and smiled.

"Roosters mean chickens," Azurus said, excitement radiating from him.

"And chickens mean the possibility of a purple feather," I said.

Azurus laughed. “It’s our second challenge.”

I was so ready for it that I jumped to my feet and went to work cleaning up our camp.

The sooner we could find a purple chicken feather the sooner we could return the requested items to Queen Gaia so she could heal me.

And after the lovely night Azurus and I had just had, I wanted to heal and go into heat more than I’d wanted anything in my life.

Chapter

Eight

Azurus

Sleeping under the stars with Misha in my arms should have been a wonderful beautiful thing.

It was, really. Nothing made me feel stronger and prouder than the feeling of my mate in my arms, his breathing calm and steady, all through the night.

I knew Misha had been suffering from nightmares beyond the one he'd woken from that morning—it felt like days ago, but our journey so far had only been one day—so it was bliss to feel him sleeping soundly with me.

If only that peace and coziness we felt together had not come at the expense of my magic.

I'd tried to light the logs in the firepit with magic when we'd first found the camp and nothing had happened.

Not so much as a spark. It didn't matter how much I'd concentrated and willed my magic into being, the logs had remained cold.

I'd tried to hide the truth from Misha, but I didn't need to be bonded to him to know he was suspicious and concerned.

A dragon who couldn't even summon fire was in serious trouble.

That trouble had continued when I couldn't pitch the tent we'd brought with us magically.

That should have been child's play as well.

Any of my brother's eggs probably had enough magic to pitch a tent.

I was so reduced that I didn't even want to try to use magic for anything else. I didn't want to know how bad it was.

And at the same time, I couldn't remember being happier than I was with Misha tucked in my arms, snoring softly in the deepest sleep. It seemed utterly wrong that I could be so happy and so worried at the same time.

I wondered if Misha felt the same way.

"I don't think there was a chicken farm so close to us last night," Misha said as we scurried around the camp, packing up the food and tools we'd taken out of our packs the night before. "Is this Queen Gaia at work again?"

I laughed as I secured the top of my pack, then went to help Misha roll up the unused tent. "I'm certain of it," I said. "Mother wants us to succeed. She wants everyone to be happy and whole. I've no doubt that she's making this quest much easier than it could have been."

Which, of course, begged the question of how easy it would be for us to find The Black Mirror when the time came.

The Black Mirror. Thoughts of that final obstacle froze me in my tracks as I crouched

to help Misha with the tent.

Without magic, Misha would be in incredible danger when we finally reached that evil artifact.

I'd been uncertain about whether I could meet that challenge with my magic working perfectly.

Now, I wondered if completing the quest was really a good idea.

"Are you certain you're alright?" Misha asked me in the sweetest, most caring voice, resting a hand on my arm as I reached for the tent.

I drew in a breath. Misha was my mate. He deserved the truth.

Once we were bonded I wouldn't be able to hide something like this from him anyhow.

But if he knew I was vulnerable, if he suspected I couldn't actually protect him the way he needed protecting, it could make him worse just when he was starting to feel stronger.

I opted for giving him a cautious smile and placing my hand over his. "I will admit that I'm feeling a little out of sorts," I said. "I don't want to worry you, though."

"Are you ill?" he asked, exactly the sort of alarm in his eyes that I didn't want to see. "I did bring that first aid kit. Or should we call off the quest and go back to your mother? If you need to rest and get better, you shouldn't be running around on a quest with me."

"I'll be fine," I said, touched by how someone with so many cares could put someone

else first. “I would rather be here with you than anywhere else.”

Misha looked like he would protest, but before he could do more than open his mouth, one of the roosters cried out again, as if reminding us we had a task ahead of us.

I stood with a smile and glanced in the direction of the sound. True to Mother’s form, I could now see what looked like a vast poultry farm off in the distance.

“Let’s leave the tent,” I said, offering Misha a hand to help him to stand. “If we need to, I’d rather sleep under the stars with you again tonight.”

“That was wonderful,” Misha said with a bashful, alluring smile as he took my hand and stood. “I can’t remember the last time I slept so well, even though we weren’t in a bed.” He blushed beautifully and lowered his eyes slightly at the mention of a bed.

My mate was so adorable that it might just kill me, especially if he didn’t go into heat soon. The prospect of finally bringing on Misha’s heat was all the motivation I needed to keep going.

We finished packing our things then set out in the crisp, clear, morning sunshine in the direction of the poultry farm.

It was completely incongruous to see such a gigantic farm out in the middle of nowhere, but then again, the situation had Mother’s magic written all over it.

Wherever the poultry farm and the cherry orchard were naturally, she had brought them to us so that we could accomplish our quest as swiftly as possible.

As we made our final approach to the farm, I couldn’t help but laugh at the sheer volume of clucking and noise the massive yards filled with chickens made.

It was still early and I guessed that at least half the chickens were still lodged in the long, tall rows of coops that ran the entire length of the farm, but a good many of them were outside as well.

The chickens weren't the only ones outside. As with the cherry orchard, a large number of workers were gathered around one of the outbuildings. Someone was handing baskets to them from the outbuilding's doorway.

"Excuse me," I asked, striding forward with Misha to join the group. "Hello."

We were greeted with smiles and friendliness by the workers, and one particularly matronly woman stepped forward with her arms filled with empty baskets.

"Can I help you?" she asked us.

I glanced to Misha, who nodded at me, then answered her with, "We've been sent on a quest by my mother, Queen Gaia, to find a purple chicken feather." I didn't see any point in beating around the bush with this task.

The woman's eyes went wide, and she bobbed a quick curtsy, sending the baskets she carried rattling.

"My lord dragon," she said reverently. "It is an honor to have you here at our farm." She glanced up, her expression changing from deference to curiosity.

"You say you're looking for a purple chicken feather? "

"Yes," Misha answered. "It's one of three elements we need for a spell to make me...er, that Queen Gaia will perform. Do you have any purple chickens?"

The woman blinked at Misha. "To the best of my knowledge, chickens aren't purple,"

she said.

We all turned to look out into the yards that were filling with chickens as some of the workers scattered feed for them. Sure enough, as far as we could see, all of the chickens were either white or various shades of brown.

Misha's shoulders dropped. "How are we supposed to find a purple chicken feather if there are no purple chickens?" he asked, mostly to himself.

"Perhaps one of them is a brownish purple?" I suggested, though I had the feeling that if my mother said a purple chicken feather, she meant really purple.

"The only way to find out is to look," the woman said. She shuffled the baskets on her arms and took two off, handing one each to me and Misha. "And the best way to do that is to help with the morning's egg harvest."

I took my basket and stared at it, an amused grin spreading across my face. "You want me and my mate to collect eggs from the chickens?"

The woman looked apologetic. "Those are the rules here," she said. "People are allowed to take all the eggs, or feathers, I suppose, that they need, but they need to help out in order to do so."

"It seems only fair," Misha said, glancing up at me. There was a spark in his eyes that said he was up for the challenge of collecting eggs. It had to be easier than planting a hundred cherry trees.

I turned to the woman with a grateful smile. "We'll help in any way you need us to," I said. "Just show us what we need to do."

"Collecting eggs isn't that difficult," the woman said, turning to gesture to the long

rows of henhouses.

“Just go inside and take them from the nests. Some of the hens might not want to give them up, but a little encouragement and a quick shove should send them on their way so you can find what you need.” She turned back to the two of us.

“And who knows? You might find a purple feather waiting for you in one of the nests.”

It seemed entirely likely. I smiled at Misha, back to thinking that this particular task would be easy.

“Let’s get started,” Misha said, hooking the basket on his arm.

The woman was right. Collecting chicken eggs wasn’t that difficult.

Misha and I made our way into the first henhouse in the third row from the entrance to the farm and found rows and rows of nests three tiers high.

There was nothing particularly challenging in taking eggs from those nests and gently placing them in the baskets we carried.

At least, when the nests had been abandoned.

When we came to nests where the hens were still happily sitting on their eggs the task took on a whole new challenge.

“Come along, ma’am,” I playfully told the first nesting hen I came across, sending Misha a teasing look as he took eggs from another nest. “I need what you’re hiding.”

Instead of getting up and moving, the hen clucked indignantly.

I huffed and sent her a stern look. “I know you’re possessive of your eggs, but I can assure you, unless you’ve been at it with one of the roosters, you won’t be parting with anything too precious.”

The hen clucked at me with even more offense, if that was possible.

Across the way, Misha giggled. “Are you arguing with a chicken?” he asked, a bright smile on his face.

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That smile did something to my heart that went far beyond amusement. I loved seeing Misha looking so happy.

“If she would just see reason, we could get this task over with sooner rather than later,” I said, pretending to be serious.

Misha laughed and shook his head and went on collecting eggs.

I turned back to my hen. “Right. Enough of this.”

I reached under the bird to feel around the nest and to take the egg I found there. But rather than hopping aside or letting me take the egg easily, the hen squawked and batted her wings at me as if she would go to battle for her egg.

“Easy there!” I warned her, taking the egg and depositing it quickly into my basket. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

The hen continued to cluck indignantly. More than that, she jumped down from her roost and followed me as I moved on to collect more eggs, pecking at the back of my boots as I went.

Misha, who had gotten ahead of me, noticed and burst into laughter. “She’s a valiant hen,” he said. “But after what I’ve seen from my brothers over their eggs, I think I understand her protectiveness.”

“Chicken eggs aren’t dragon eggs,” I said, thrusting my hand under another chicken who refused to move for me. “And most chicken eggs aren’t viable as baby

chickens.”

“Tell that to the hens,” Misha said.

He was right to say hens plural as well. The second chicken I took an egg from hopped down and joined her sister in following me and pecking at the hem of my trousers. So did another who I had to take an egg from.

Misha laughed at the small parade I was leading as we made it to the far end of the henhouse, but that laughter turned into a yelp when he needed to take an egg from under a hen and that hen pecked at his hand.

“Careful there,” he warned the hen as he added her egg to his basket. “I’m only clearing the way so you can make more.”

The hen clucked and squawked indignantly at him. Misha pulled back with a look of shock, as if the hen had said something to insult his papa.

“I beg your pardon,” Misha said, feigning offense.

As we stepped out of the far end of the henhouse and made our way across an open area into another one, I caught the sparkle of mirth in Misha’s eyes.

That could have been because the hens we’d offended in the first house crowded around us, like they would have a word with us before we entered the second house.

“Are these ordinary chickens or are they magical chickens?” Misha asked, laughter in his voice, as we entered the second henhouse and started our collecting there.

“I think they’re just normal,” I said, smiling despite myself simply because Misha looked happy. “Although they are mighty determined.”

In fact, not only did the hens who we took eggs from have something to say about us, a few of them seemed to know that we were coming and what our mission was. They hopped down from their nests and charged at our feet or flapped their unimpressive wings like they would get us to go away.

It was amusing to see the old birds defend their nests so bravely. It was twice as funny when one of them took it into her mind to chase Misha around the henhouse after he plucked away her egg.

“Stop it!” Misha laughed, dodging around the other chickens and the central post that held up the henhouse roof. “I’m your friend, I swear. I’m only collecting eggs you don’t need.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the dexterous moves my omega executed in order to avoid the indignant hens. He was surprisingly nimble at that and managed to avoid stepping on chickens and spilling eggs from his basket both.

In the course of my laughing, I happened to breathe in dust or chicken fluff or something. It made me sneeze suddenly, which shook my entire basket of eggs. It also caused me to step back onto a chicken, who let out a squawk of alarm. That only made me laugh harder and sneeze again.

Misha managed to avoid his chicken attacker, but as soon as he saw me sneezing and laughing and dodging irate chickens, he burst into even louder laughter himself and nearly doubled over.

Of course, that caused him to nearly spill his basket of eggs. He rushed to save them, but then laughed even harder for his efforts.

“We should return these full baskets for empty ones,” I said once we stepped out of the second henhouse, still giddy and giggling.

“Agreed,” Misha said. “And we need to concentrate more on looking for a purple feather.”

We switched out our baskets for empty ones and dove back into another henhouse.

The story there was similar to what we’d been through so far.

Most of the eggs were easy to collect, but the ones that were being guarded by hens were guarded fiercely.

And there was nothing funnier than an offended hen.

They clucked and fussed, flapped their wings and chased us, and by the time Misha and I made it out into the sunlight of the chicken yard again, we were both in stitches.

“Who would have thought that collecting eggs could be so fun?” Misha asked, laughing and brushing stray feathers from his sleeve.

“Fun?” I asked, pretending indignation. “I think we’ve taken our lives into our hands here.”

Misha giggled as he gazed up at me with so much fondness it took my breath away.

I couldn’t help but reach for him. I put my basket down and took his from his hand to set it beside mine, then moved closer to him.

“You have feathers in your hair,” I said, brushing away the stray, brown feather that sat on his head.

I didn’t care how many of the farm workers, or the chickens, were watching us. I grasped Misha’s face in my hands and leaned down to slant my mouth over his. He

was so beautiful when he was happy and laughing, and I couldn't help myself.

Better still, he continued to laugh as I kissed him, which only made me laugh as well. There was nothing quite so deliciously amusing as kissing while laughing. It made me want my mate even more, and it also made it harder just to kiss.

Making it harder still was the sudden peck and pull at my ankle as one of the hens grabbed hold of my trousers.

"Oy!" I called down to the hen, annoyed about being parted from my mate but still giddy. "What do you think you're doing?"

My pretend anger was stopped short at the sight of a single, bright purple feather sticking out from the tail of the chicken pestering me.

Misha gasped as well. "It's the purple feather," he said, his voice filled with wonder.

I smiled and let him go. "That was easy," I said.

I spoke too soon. As soon as I leaned down to grab the chicken so I could pluck its feather, the wily bird jumped away from me, flapping its wings cheekily. I lunged for it, but it leapt even farther away.

"Hurry!" Misha said, laughing again. "Catch it before it gets away."

I tried to do as he asked, but every time I reached for the bird, it dashed farther from me. Misha chased after it as well, laughing the entire time he did. That in itself encouraged me to continue the chase.

We dashed around the chicken yard like madmen, leaping over some of the other chickens and even a trough of water at one point. The chicken with the purple feather

stayed just out of our reach, ducking under a long table at one point and trying to hide in a group of her fellows at another.

The other workers watched with amusement as Misha and I ran and jumped, dodged and crouched, moving almost like we were chickens ourselves as we tried to catch the bird.

I'd never heard Misha laugh so loudly or so freely.

It made me want to continue the chase for as long as possible just to hear that glorious sound.

The chase came to an end eventually, though.

Misha and I managed to corner the chicken against one of the fences.

I snatched at it and Misha leapt after it when it tried to flap its way free.

It was all for naught and the clever lady managed to evade us, but not before the purple feather dropped from her backside.

“We’ve got it!” Misha shouted in triumph, picking up the feather and holding it up like a trophy. “We’ve got the purple feather!”

He turned to me, his expression bright with victory, then launched himself at me.

I caught my mate in both arms, lifting him so that he could wrap his legs around my waist and his arms around my neck. He didn't stop there. With the feather still held aloft in one hand, he slammed his mouth over mine, kissing me with far more passion than I would have expected.

I felt that kiss reverberate through every part of me.

It filled me with light and hope, not to mention arousal.

My mate was clever and spritely when he wasn't in the grip of his anxiety.

He had the stamina of a warrior and the speed and agility of a racer.

As we kissed, I felt like he was so many more things than just a timid omega who had been traumatized.

As our mouths met and explored each other, I felt as if I held my future in my arms.

“We did it,” Misha said breathlessly when he ended our kiss. “We found the second item. We can do this, Azurus,” he said, looking into my eyes with excitement and hope. “We can complete the quest and break whatever horrible curse I’ve been under, I just know it.”

“We can,” I agreed. And if we broke Misha’s curse, my magic would come back as well.

Chapter

Nine

Misha

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun.

Who would have imagined that chasing chickens around a dirt-packed yard would have brought so much laughter with it?

Chickens were ridiculous in their own right, but watching someone as strong and dignified as Azurus lowering himself to their level as we went about our task was one of the most hilarious things I'd seen in a very long time.

"You still have feathers in your hair," I giggled, pointing at Azurus's hair as we sat with the other farm workers at the end of our task, enjoying a feast of omelets, toast, and tea as thanks for our labor.

Azurus's eyebrows went up and he brushed a hand over his head, coming away with a few downy feathers. "I'm not the only one," he said, shaking his hand out then plucking a few bits of fluff from my head. "You've got enough feathers on you that I'm worried you're starting to molt."

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help myself.

My soul hadn't felt so light in ages. It was like the shroud that had covered me had

lifted even more.

Everything about the quest Queen Gaia had sent us on so far made me feel as though healing were possible.

The sunlight I'd found myself in for the last two days and the physical activity was soothing, but more than anything, seeing Azurus happy along with me was wonderful.

I still had the feeling there was something he wasn't telling me, but at that moment, as we finished up our omelets and drank our tea made with good, pure water from a spring that flowed magically from a fountain off to one side of the farm, it didn't really matter.

We were together, and for the moment, we were happy.

"I really think that Queen Gaia's spell will actually work to make me whole again," I said cheerily once we were traveling along the magical path again. "I mean, I believed it before, but I'm starting to really believe it."

We'd said goodbye to the farm workers, thanking them profusely for allowing us to join them for a time.

They'd been so gracious, and even though I was usually wary of strangers, I didn't feel at all threatened by them.

That, if anything, was a step in the right direction.

Now, with our packs on our backs again and the road stretching before us, Azurus and I walked on with a spring in our steps.

“Of course Mother’s spell will work,” Azurus said, smiling up at the sun as though it were his mother and he was expressing his gratitude. “Mother has always been there to help us when things are looking down.”

“Has she helped you that way before?” I asked.

When we’d started our journey, even when I’d first met Azurus, I couldn’t have imagined him as anything other than perfect.

Now, however, I could see that he was a man just like anyone else, despite being a dragon.

I was curious about whatever setbacks he might have experienced in the past, particularly whatever he was struggling with now but not telling me.

“She’s helped everyone,” Azurus said, looking at the path ahead with a soft smile as though he was looking at someone in his memories.

“I remember when we were young she set a series of tasks for my brother Argus to teach him patience.” He laughed at his memory, smiling at me.

“Argus always wanted whatever reward he got for a job well done delivered to him immediately. He deserved those rewards, true, but his impatience made him insufferable to be around. So Mother had him move stones, one at a time, from one side of the castle to the other.”

“And he completed the task?” I asked.

“He did,” Azurus chuckled. “Or at least he tried. When he realized that the rest of us kept sneaking the stones he’d already moved back to the original pile he was furious with us.

But Mother insisted he keep with his task no matter what the rest of us were doing.

In the end, we grew tired of the game before he did, Argus finished moving the stones, and the prize he earned was a tip from Mother about how to tease the rest of us by planting a magical box in our schoolroom and waiting for us to find it and open it. ”

I laughed. “That’s a unique way of teaching patience. What was in the box?”

“Nothing serious. It merely exploded into a cloud of confetti when it was opened,” Azurus said, chuckling at his memory. “It scared the rest of us silly, but no real harm was done. And Argus learned that the best results come from planting a trap and waiting patiently for it to be sprung.”

“I suppose that’s what he’s doing by hiding among my father’s counselors,” I said, considering that for a moment.

I shook my head to dispel those thoughts after only a few seconds, though.

I hadn’t thought about my father or his world all day, and I wasn’t about to ruin the wonderful time I was having with terrifying thoughts.

Instead, I turned to Azurus as we walked and asked, “Did you and your brothers get into trouble a lot when you were young?”

“All the time,” Azurus laughed. “Young dragons are unruly and full of themselves. They have more energy than they know what to do with and less control over their magic when they’re younger than—” He paused unexpectedly, his mirth turning to worry for a moment, then shook his head and finished with, “—than is good for them.”

All sorts of questions flew through my mind about what Azurus's problem might be.

It had to be something to do with the efficacy of his magic.

But again, I wanted to be in a good mood for a change, so I ignored the threat that seemed to be looming...

like the dark clouds I noticed on the horizon ahead of us.

"I long to have dragon babies," I said with a sigh, sending Azurus a particularly wistful, and maybe a little flirtatious, gaze.

Azurus's eyes sparkled with warmth and he reached for my hand. "I rather like the idea of having a great many dragon babies as well," he said, his voice lowering to a sultry tone.

That made me giggle with anticipation as warmth spilled through me. It wasn't quite like going into heat, but it was closer than anything I'd been feeling before.

"I've always loved children," I went on, ignoring the thickening clouds in front of us.

"Not that I've been around many, since my brothers and I have been captive in our father's castle for so long.

" I quickly swallowed the rising gloom that thought brought with it and rushed on to happier things.

"I even like babies, although not every male omega does. To me, they're innocent and precious.

I want to have a large family someday," I said, glancing to Azurus again with an

inviting smile.

“I’d love to have an entire house of them running around, causing trouble, like you and your brothers did. ”

Azurus laughed loudly. “I hope my lair is large enough and sturdy enough for all that chaos.”

“But you do want to have lots of children too, don’t you?” I asked, swaying closer to him and squeezing his hand.

Azurus gazed down at me with a look in his eyes that asked whether I was offering to get started on that family right away.

Truth be told, I very much wanted to get started.

I’d been anxious and wishing for my heat from the moment I’d met Azurus, but the feelings that rushed through me now were different.

I didn’t just want to go into heat now because it was what I was supposed to do or because it was a sign that I was healthy in body and mind.

I wanted it because the prospect of tangling up in bed with Azurus was enticing.

I’d gotten to know him so much better in the last two days of our quest alone, and I knew we would be happy and exciting together.

I was so ready to move on to the next part of my life.

“Nothing would make me happier than to have a large, rambunctious brood of children,” Azurus replied. “All of them as beautiful and intelligent as their papa.”

I beamed under that subtle praise, feeling, perhaps for the first time, as if I really could be everything a dragon wanted in a mate. It was astounding that I had come so far in such a short time.

No sooner did those soothing thoughts wrap themselves around me when we heard a low roll of thunder in the distance. My smile dropped as I glanced ahead, only to see that the storm clouds gathering near what I could now see was a small mountain range had increased.

“Should we be worried about the storm?” I asked, my brow knitting with concern. Even that was a better reaction than the doom and terror I knew I would have felt at the sight of the storm just two days before.

Azurus frowned at the stormy mountains and brushed a hand through his hair with his free hand. “I’m not certain,” he said. “Considering our quest, it stands to reason that those mountains are where The Black Mirror is kept.”

“The Black Mirror.” I took a deep breath and sighed it out, studying the trial that lay ahead of us. “I suppose every task Queen Gaia set for us can’t be as easy and enjoyable as planting trees and chasing chickens.”

“No,” Azurus said, though he didn’t add anything after that.

I worried that his lack of a fuller answer portended bad things. He seemed to know a bit about The Black Mirror, and I suspected he wasn’t telling me everything I needed to know. About more than just our task.

“You can tell me,” I said, beginning to feel prickles down my back at everything that wasn’t being said as much as the things we had been talking about. “Whatever is troubling you and whatever lies ahead, you can tell me about it. I don’t need to be protected from everything.”

“It’s not that big of a concern,” Azurus said, though I suspected that was a tiny lie as well.

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“Really, Azurus,” I said, the knot in my gut beginning to reflect the storm ahead of us. “I might be a little bit fragile, but I don’t need to be shielded from everything. If you need my help with something I would love nothing more than to give it.”

“I don’t want to trouble you,” Azurus said, darting a sideways look at me.

“Azurus,” I said, impatient and desperate to make my point that I was capable of more than he thought.

I didn’t have a chance to say anything more on my own behalf.

The terrain we’d been walking through had grown rockier as we approached the mountains, and all of a sudden, one of the rocks moved.

It wasn’t a rock at all, it was a man dressed in a rough, gray cloak.

He was seated on the ground, and as he turned to us, he unfolded from his crouched stance, holding up a battered tin cup to us.

“Spare a poor old man a coin or a bit of bread,” the man said in a dry, cracking voice...but one that sounded strangely familiar to my ears.

I glanced quickly to Azurus for reassurance, but he looked as confused as I was. “I wasn’t aware there were beggars in my mother’s kingdom,” he said.

“Times are hard,” the beggar said. “Every man must do what he can to survive.”

Azurus and I reached the man and paused to watch him for a moment. I twisted to open one of the pockets in my pack, taking out an apple I'd brought with us from the storeroom. "Here," I said, extending my arm and cautiously handing the apple to the man, wanting to help as much as I wanted to flee.

The beggar stared at the apple from under the hood of his cloak and sniffed. "You call that an offering?" he asked.

I pulled the apple back, hugging it close as if the beggar's harsh words might have offended it. "I...I was just trying to help," I said, confused about why someone in need would be so snappish.

"Coins," the beggar said, shaking his cup. There was something in it already that made a rattling sound. "Coins are what I need."

"You would refuse an offer of nourishment from my omega?" Azurus demanded incredulously. "Is there not a saying about beggars not being choosers?"

"I am no beggar," the man said, his voice growing stronger and even more familiar. "And this omega owes me. He owes me his very life."

I gasped and jumped back, hiding behind Azurus as the beggar stood and pushed back his hood.

Instead of some weak, old man standing before me, it was my father.

Underneath the cloak he wore a regal suit trimmed with gold and jewels.

His eyes blazed with hatred and avarice, and he continued to hold out the tin cup, shaking it as if it were some sort of weapon.

“You owe me!” he shouted, glaring straight at me. “You and your brothers. You are mine, my property to do with as I see fit. Your wretched waste of an omega papa tricked me by only having useless omega offspring. You owe me recompense for the alpha sons I should have had.”

“No!” I gasped, hiding behind Azurus. Although with the pack he wore, I couldn’t get close enough to him to really feel secure. “No, leave me alone!”

It was like every nightmare I’d had recently, only worse. Father was standing right in front of me, reaching out grotesquely with his tin cup and its sickening rattle.

“He owes you nothing,” Azurus said, holding his arms out to shield me even more. “Misha is his own man, and he is free of you forever.”

“He will never be free of me,” my father cackled. “Not as long as I live inside him. All the magic in the world cannot remove me from his head.”

“No! No, go away,” I wept, trying to turn away from my father. Everywhere I turned, though, it seemed like he was there. He was right, I would never be able to be free of him.

“You’re not real,” Azurus said in a steely voice. “You’re some sort of test thrown into the road to test us. Be gone with you.”

“And how do you propose to get rid of me?” my father, or at least the specter of him, asked with a laugh. “With your magic?”

Yes, that was it. Azurus was a powerful, magical dragon. He could make my father go away.

“Please, Azurus,” I said, trembling like a leaf as I tried to keep my mate’s body

between me and my father. "Please banish him."

Azurus made a frustrated sound and raised his hand, but nothing happened. The ghost of my father was still there.

"You are mine, boy," my father growled. "Now and for always."

"Azurus, please," I cried. "I'm scared."

"Leave us!" Azurus shouted, holding one hand up to my father and reaching behind him for me with the other. "Go back to wherever you came from."

"You cannot make me," my father's specter laughed. "You do not have it in you."

I sucked in a breath, suspecting that my father meant what he said literally. Azurus did not actually have the power to banish my father's ghost.

"You are nothing," Azurus told my father in return, also meaning it literally. "You are just an idea, just a phantom. You cannot do any harm to him."

But he could and he already had. Just the memory of my father was enough to have my knees shaking and my heart feeling weak.

"Can't you do anything?" I wept, stepping away from my mate, hurt not only by my memories but by Azurus's lack of honesty with me. "Can't you help me?"

A loud roll of thunder sounded, taking my attention for the moment. We were so much closer to the mountain and the storm than I'd thought. It was right there, all around us.

"Misha," Azurus said, a note of hopelessness in his voice as he turned to me. "I want

to help you. With everything in my body, heart, and soul, I want to help you. I wish I had the power to banish your father from your life and your thoughts completely...but I don't have that power."

I knew it. I'd known all along that the bulk of the burden I carried was mine and mine alone. Azurus had made things better. He'd helped me to heal and feel hopeful again. He was so important and meant everything to me, but he hadn't been honest.

"I've been losing my power bit by bit since we came together," he admitted with a sigh, dropping his shoulders.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that my father's specter instantly vanished with Azurus's admission of the truth.

"That first, bonding heat fated mates are supposed to enjoy when they meet isn't just for the benefit of the omega or for having children.

Without it, an alpha dragon's powers start to fade. "

His words struck me to the core. "It's my fault," I said, the hurt of it all sweeping through my body. "My brokenness has broken you, too."

"No, my love, it's not that," Azurus said, taking a step toward me. "It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

"But it is," I said, the tears streaming down my face joined by the rain that began to pummel us from above. "If I wasn't so broken I would have gone into heat when we met. We would have an egg, we would be happy, and you would still have your magic."

"I promise you, love, the moment will come," Azurus said. "We just need to be

patient.”

I shook my head, knowing the time for patience was long past.

“I’m never going to get better,” I wept, taking a few backwards steps away from him.
“I will be like this always, and I will bring you down with me.”

“No, Misha, that’s not true.”

“It is, it is,” I wept. “I don’t deserve to be with a dragon like you. You deserve more than me.”

“I love you, Misha,” Azurus said, stepping closer to me.

I couldn’t let him reach me and pull me into his arms, though. I knew the truth now. I was broken and I always would be. If I stayed with Azurus, I would only ruin him as well.

“I love you, too, Azurus,” I sobbed, “but I cannot do this to you.”

I did the only thing I could think to do.

I turned and ran away from my beloved. The mountain and the storm loomed all around us now.

The jagged walls of rock that thrust up into the lightning-filled sky were living personifications of the wall I’d felt all around me for so long.

They seemed to close in on me, keeping me prisoner, stopping me from ever healing or seeing the light.

“Misha!” Azurus called after me.

It broke my heart. I wanted to be everything good and light for my alpha, my mate. I wanted to make him happy, even if I couldn’t be happy myself.

But maybe you can , a celestial voice whispered through the storm. Maybe together you can make the path to healing easier .

I caught my breath as hope flickered in me, like the first sparks of a tinderbox.

Maybe.

I swallowed hard and turned back, searching for my beloved mate. But as soon as I spotted him running toward me from what felt like such a long distance away, lightning struck hard between us and a massive wall of reflective black glass slammed down, separating us. The Black Mirror.

Chapter

Ten

Azurus

“ M isha!” I called after my love, trying to catch up to him. He’d run ahead, and within seconds, he was so far out of my reach. Mother had to be involved, but I couldn’t imagine why she would choose that moment, of all moments, to separate us.

Unless it was some sort of lesson for me.

I shouldn’t have kept the truth about my magic from my mate.

I shouldn’t have lied to him and told him not to worry.

I didn’t want him to ever have to worry about anything else again for the rest of his life, but that didn’t mean keeping him in ignorance of a serious problem was the right thing to do.

As hard as I ran after him, the distance between us only seemed to grow.

It sent panic through me. I needed to keep my mate safe.

That was the core of what it meant to be an alpha, especially a dragon alpha.

Whether I had magical abilities anymore or not, my first and only concern was to

wrap Misha in my arms and stop the world from causing him any more harm than it already had.

And then Misha turned to look back at me. I could feel him. I could suddenly feel the fear and the doubt, but also the love and courage under that. It was as if our bond suddenly snapped into place and we were one.

But only for a moment.

As soon as I felt that sense of connection, a massive lightning bolt shot from the sky and struck the ground between us. In an instant, a shimmering wall of black glass rose up between us, completely cutting us off from each other.

“Misha!”

My heart pounded so hard I thought it would burst as I sprinted the rest of the way to The Black Mirror. I was certain that was what now stood between me and my beloved. I’d heard plenty of legends about The Black Mirror, but none of them had conveyed how much of a force it actually was.

The mirror filled the entire, cavernous space between me and Misha.

It was more than just a reflection, although I could see myself and everything behind me superimposed over Misha’s shadowy shape and the other side of the cavern beyond him.

The mirror itself wasn’t a thin sheet of glass either.

It was thick. It had to be at least a foot thick and murky all the way through.

“No!”

I slammed my hands up against the dark glass, but there was no possible chance I could break it. It was freezing cold as well, colder even than ice, which I didn't think was possible. I yanked my hands back, afraid they would burn if I left them there too long.

I took a step back and dug deep within myself, summoning every bit of remaining magic I might have, then raised my hands and pushed them at the mirror.

Surely, in a moment of desperation like this, Mother would somehow give me my powers back.

She was everything good and loving. She would enable me to save my omega.

But nothing happened. I tried again, grunting as I threw my hands forward, trying to break the glass, but it remained as cold and solid and forbidding as ever.

“No, no! Misha!”

On the other side of the glass, Misha looked small and terrified.

He hugged himself close, twisting and turning as he gazed around the cave where he was now trapped.

Even though the glass itself had a sickly yellowish tinge to the black, Misha appeared blue, like the space on the other side of the mirror was frigid and he was slowly freezing to death.

“Misha! I will help you!” I cried out, shrugging the pack off my back and searching inside for one of the weapons I'd brought with me or anything that might stand a chance of breaking through the thick mirror.

“Azurus?” Misha’s voice echoed, almost too quiet to hear. “Are you there? I can’t see you anymore? Azurus?”

My heart broke at the fear and pleading in my beloved’s voice.

“I’m right here, love,” I called out, taking the largest dagger I’d brought with me from my sack and charging at the glass. “I will save you, Misha. I will!”

I stabbed at the mirror as hard as I could.

My dagger shattered into dust that fell to the ground at my feet.

“No!” I called out, dropping the last handful of dust, then pounding against the glass again. “Misha, I will save you!”

Once again, the pain of touching the glass threw me back.

I stumbled a few steps, panting heavily and gazing at Misha on the other side of the barrier with wide eyes.

My omega was alone and afraid. He hunched in on himself, clearly in pain.

I could do nothing to reach him or break him free of his prison. It was a nightmare.

And then, worse still, a shadowy figure emerged from the darkness behind Misha. I knew at once who or what it was. It was the same cloaked figure of King Freslik that had accosted us on the path, and he wore a triumphant sneer, as if his moment of victory had come at last.

Misha

“Azurus, can you hear me?” I cried out, rushing toward the thick wall of glass that had risen between me and my alpha.

I wished I’d thought to ask more about The Black Mirror, what it was and what it did. It was more than just a mirror. I could see my reflection and the darkness behind me, yes, but the image of Azurus was also clear on the other side.

Only something wasn’t right about it. Yes, I could see Azurus, but I couldn’t feel him.

Not like I’d been feeling him for the last two days, as we’d tackled our quest. The image of Azurus on the other side of the glass was strange and foreign to me, whereas Azurus had become like the beat of my heart in the last few days.

He stood on the other side of the glass, staring at it with a sharp frown. It was like he was staring at me. He paced back and forth in front of the glass, shouting at it with words I couldn’t hear.

Just because I couldn’t hear them didn’t mean I couldn’t see the emotion behind those words.

Azurus was shouting at me. He was railing at me from the other side of the mirror, telling me this was all my fault, that I shouldn’t have run away from him.

He was telling me that I should have put my complete trust in him from the beginning and allowed him to take care of everything for me.

“I’m sorry!” I called out to the mirror, reaching for my beloved as if I could break through the glass to throw my arms around him. “I’m so sorry that I’m not the omega you wanted, that you deserve.”

Azurus stopped and crossed his arms, glowering at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, taking a step back from the mirror, my heart breaking. After everything we’d been through, it was as if my alpha didn’t want me at all.

If he rejected me and sought a different mate, would he get his magic back? Had I become nothing but an inconvenience to him now?

That thought was crushing, and I sank to sit on the cave floor, tears spilling down my face.

I hugged my knees and buried my face against my arms. Was this what it all came down to?

Was this how it ended? With me trapped in a prison that felt like I’d conjured myself while my fated mate shook his head at me in disappointment?

“Misha!”

I snapped my head up as Azurus’s plaintive cry sounded through the glass. The feeling that something was wrong returned. Azurus’s cry hadn’t come from the image of him, it echoed from somewhere else.

“Azurus?” I called out, scrambling to my feet again and studying my apparent beloved as he frowned and shook his head at me.

I sucked in a breath as the truth dawned on me.

The Azurus that I saw looking at me with so much disappointment wasn’t really my beloved.

He was a reflection. The thing in front of me was The Black Mirror , after all, not The Black Glass .

It was reflecting something back at me, something that probably came from my own mind or my own heart.

“You’re not real,” I told the false Azurus. “My mate would never look at me like that. He isn’t disappointed in me, he cares for me. He loves me like no one ever has before.”

Except Papa , a voice deep within me reminded me.

“Azurus!” I called out again, ignoring the figure that stood opposite me, glowering. “Are you there? I can’t see you anymore? Azurus?”

For a fraction of a second, the image I saw in the glass flickered. I caught sight of Azurus on the other side of the mirror, farther away, going through his pack. He looked terrified but determined.

Azurus was there, on the other side of the mirror, and he was fighting to save me.

But there was more on the other side of the mirror than just my beloved. I could see shadows creeping out of the high, stone walls that had grown up to enclose him. He wasn’t alone. Something was trying to get him.

I gasped and raced toward the mirror when the full truth hit me. Something evil was coming out of the shadows to hurt my beloved mate, and without his magic, he wouldn’t be able to stop it or save himself.

“Azurus!” I called out to him. “Watch out! There’s something in the shadows behind you!”

I lunged to bang on the glass, but to my shock, it was blisteringly hot. I cried out in pain as soon as my hands made contact with it, then stumbled backwards, panting and shaking my hands to dispel the burn.

The false image of Azurus had vanished, but that only meant that I could see the true Azurus as he tried to stab the glass with a dagger. The dagger dissolved into dust. Azurus's expression was frantic as he raised his hands to pound on the glass, like I'd just done on my side.

Except that the moment my beloved touched the glass, it was as if he was blown backwards by a bruising force. He flew off his feet and landed hard on the dirt near his back, unmoving. The black forces of evil that hovered around him seemed to move closer, like they would smother him.

"Azurus, no!" I called out, raising my hands to pound on the glass again.

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I stopped myself at the last second. I couldn't touch the glass, but I had to get through in order to save my beloved.

Azurus needed me. Without magic, he was as helpless as I was.

But Azurus wasn't used to being helpless.

His crumpled, slow-moving form was proof of that.

I could almost hear him groaning in pain as he tried to get up but failed.

"Hold on, Azurus!" I called out, dancing one way then the other as I searched the glass wall for any sign of weakness. "Hold on! I'm coming for you!"

All I had to do was figure out a way to get through the glass and I could race to Azurus and rescue him. I had a first aid kit in my pack, and with any luck, that would contain something that could heal my beloved.

I took a few steps back and started to swing the pack off my back, but the bone-chilling voice of my father stopped me.

"You'll never be able to save him," Father said, a sneer in his voice. "You're nothing. You're a useless, stupid omega. What makes you think you are good for anything other than breeding and suckling disgusting babies?"

I swallowed hard, letting the pack drop to the ground as I turned to face my father. I'd heard every one of his insults before, more times than I could count. My father's

views on omegas were well-known.

“Go away,” I said, screwing my face up for a moment and trying to reach for whatever courage I had within me. “Go away! You’re not real!”

“Of course I’m real,” my father sneered. “I’m the most real thing in your world. I made you, and I can destroy you.”

I shook my head, raising my hands to cover my ears for a moment, even though it felt foolish.

“My father, King Freslik, is real,” I said, opening my eyes and staring at the apparition.

“He is an evil man who spreads hate wherever he goes. He has made my life and the lives of my brothers a living nightmare. He is responsible for my papa’s death.

I will always bear the scars of the vile things he did and caused to be done to me, but you are not him. ”

“That’s what you think,” the specter of my father said.

“But this is the magical world. How do you know I didn’t find another doorway into this world?

How do you know I haven’t had access to magic all along?

How else do you think I’ve become so powerful that I could imprison my own sons and no one would question me? ”

I sucked in a breath and stumbled back. He was right.

How did I know? My brothers and I had entered the magical world through a concealed doorway, so what was to say our father hadn't done the same?

What if he'd discovered the door under Rumi's bed?

What if he'd somehow hurt or even killed Rumi and Obi and snuck into the magical world so that he could steal all the magic here and use it to ruin everything?

"No!" I shouted, gripping the sides of my head again for a moment. "I refuse to believe that you are powerful enough to reach this world. You aren't powerful at all, you're just a bully who torments his own, vulnerable, omega sons because you cannot stand up against anyone else."

"How dare you say such a thing to me?" my father demanded. "No one speaks to me like that. I will see you punished."

He stepped toward me with one fist raised.

I cowered back, but I didn't like the way that made me feel.

I knew this wasn't my father any more than the initial reflection I'd seen in the mirror was really Azurus.

The Black Mirror was playing tricks on me.

Or maybe it was my own mind playing tricks on me and the mirror was reflecting them back.

Either way, I was done with it. I'd been in pain for too long and fought too hard against it. More than that, Azurus was somewhere on the other side of the glass, hurt and in need of my help. I didn't care what happened to me as long as I could reach

my alpha somehow and save him.

“I don’t believe for a second that you’re really my father,” I shouted at the specter as it came closer to me.

“I don’t know what you are or where you come from, but I want nothing to do with you.

I chose to come into this world for a reason, to get away from you and your evil.

I will not allow you to follow me here and ruin the beautiful thing I have now. ”

My father laughed and sneered. “You cannot get rid of me,” he said. “You’re too weak. I will always haunt you.”

“Maybe,” I said, standing firm and tilting my chin up. “But maybe I will have other things in my life, other joys and other love, that will make your threats into nothing but old echoes. I’m stronger than you think.”

“Pitiful omega,” my father sneered, still coming toward me. “No one could ever love you. You are utterly unworthy of love.”

My heart faltered for a moment. All my brave words hadn’t seemed to do a thing. Father was right. I was too broken for anyone to love, no matter what I did. I stumbled back, nearly tripping over my pack as I did.

The top of my pack fell open, and a few of the things that were near the top spilled out. One of those things was the small, slender dagger I’d taken from the storehouse, the one that reminded me of Papa.

Tears suddenly sprung to my eyes and my throat closed up as I bent to pick up the

beautiful dagger.

It was hardly worth the title of weapon, but holding it in my hand, feeling all the love and strength my papa had bequeathed to me, whether he was there or not, made it feel like the most powerful sword that had ever been forged.

“I am not a pitiful omega,” I growled at my father. “No omegas are pitiful. We are strong. We love fiercely and we protect what we love.”

My father continued to huff and sneer as he came closer to me, but his image seemed to shift and lose focus. The same dark, yellowish gleam that came from the glass separating me and Azurus shone from him.

“I might not be perfect,” I went on, “but I am loved just as I am. I am worthy of love. I have always been loved. Papa loved me so much. You might have destroyed him, but you didn’t destroy the love he felt and gave to me and my brothers.

He’s the reason we’re all so strong. He’s the reason that you can lock us in our room and give us to horrible alphas as prizes, but he’s also the reason you’ll never defeat any of us.

We know what love is because of Papa, and because of the dragons who love us. ”

“Those dragons don’t love you,” the increasingly shimmery image of my father said, or at least tried to say. “You’re weak and broken. What sort of dragon would love a?—”

I didn’t let him finish. I charged at him, Papa’s dagger raised, and slammed the slender blade down hard where my father’s heart, if he had one, would have been.

The moment the blade made contact, not only did the image of my father shatter into

a million pieces, but the impossibly large and thick wall of glass separating me and Azurus burst with a deadening roar into more shards of glass than there were stars in the skies.

Chapter

Eleven

Azurus

Watching my beloved, terrified Misha cowering in fear as his father emerged from the shadows and circled him was far more painful than any blow that could have been landed on me.

I would have rather endured the agony of a thousand sword slashes or been burned with my own fire than see the omega I loved suffer for another second.

Misha deserved so much more than to be tormented by his father's cruelty.

"I will save you!" I called out, approaching the glass again, though I knew I couldn't touch it. "I won't let this thing harm you!"

They were brave words, but they rang hollow to me. How could I save or protect my omega when every bit of magic I'd once possessed had drained away from me? What was I without magic? Was I even a dragon anymore?

I was shaken out of my own misery by a slight flickering in the glass.

Misha still cowered on the other side, sunk into a ball as his father stalked him, hurling harsh words at him that I couldn't hear.

But at the same time, I saw something else in the mirror.

It was as if there were a second layer behind what I was seeing, and in that layer I saw Misha standing and proud.

He confronted his father rather than cowering from him.

His expression held bravery instead of pain.

I took a step back and blinked, then squinted at the mirror as the image of a strong Misha faded and only the cowering Misha remained. I no longer trusted what I saw before me, though. The Black Mirror was deceptive. It was known for showing people the worst of what they were trying to see.

“Misha?” I asked, stepping toward the mirror again.

A different sort of determination filled me.

I couldn’t reach my beloved where he was, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t help him.

For those few seconds before the mirror had crashed down between us, I’d felt the beginnings of our bond.

We might not have forged that bond through the excitement and pleasure of Misha’s heat, but we’d certainly been through the fire together.

I might not have had magic, but I had Misha. And if what I’d seen beyond the image the mirror showed me was true, Misha had all the courage he needed to fight his own battles. I could help him, but only if I was brave myself.

“You can do this, my love,” I said, stepping back up to the mirror again. “You are so

strong. Your father will never be able to truly defeat you.”

Even though the mirror was still showing me a crumpled and defeated Misha, hugging himself into a ball on the ground as his father shouted at him and kicked him, I held the image of a valiant, powerful Misha in my mind as I raised my hands.

I knew it would hurt me, because that was what The Black Mirror did, it caused pain, but my pain didn't matter anymore.

I needed to give everything I had to my beloved to help him fight this battle.

“I love you, Misha,” I said, then closed my eyes and placed my hands on the dark glass.

Searing pain, like being burned by the coldest ice, shot from my hands, down my arms, and through my entire body, but I held strong, sending every bit of love I had through the glass to my omega.

I didn't know if it would do any good, it certainly wasn't like imbuing my beloved with magic, but my heart told me it was right.

“You can do this, my love,” I said, pressing my cheek against the glass as well, as if I could embrace him and lend him whatever power I had left through the glass. “I believe in you.”

I opened my eyes and turned my head to look through the glass, even as the pain became unbearable.

The image of Misha being beaten by his father was there and it almost broke me, but the other image, of Misha standing on his own and shouting back at his father grew brighter and brighter.

My beloved wasn't just holding his own, he had taken the small, pretty dagger from his pack and was pointing it at his father.

I couldn't hear what he was saying to the vile man, but I could feel the love and the strength from his heart as he spoke.

"Yes, my love," I said aloud, pushing harder at the glass. "You can do this. You are amazing and powerful. You can overcome this."

A moment later, Misha raised the dagger and thrust it at his father.

The mirror that I pressed against suddenly shattered, sending shards of yellow-black glass flying in every direction. I squeezed my eyes shut and raised my arms to protect myself, certain the shards would tear me to shreds and leave both me and Misha bloody and broken.

But when I opened my eyes the shards of glass fell to the ground as softly as snowflakes, and neither Misha nor I had a spot of blood on us.

"Misha!" I gasped, gaping at the sight of my beloved standing in a pose of action, the dagger in his hand. He panted heavily, his eyes wide and filled with determination. "Misha, my love!"

I surged forward as Misha turned to see me.

At the sight of me, arms stretched out for him, no mirror between us, Misha let out a cry of relief and triumph, but one that was laced with far more painful emotions.

He lunged toward me, throwing his arms around me when we met, careful not to bring his dagger too near me.

“Azurus!” he cried, clinging tightly to me and weeping. “He’s gone. He shattered.”

“Yes, he’s gone,” I said, hugging my omega so tightly that I might have squeezed the air from him. I lifted him into my arms and he wrapped his legs around my waist, weeping freely against my shoulder. “You defeated him,” I said. “You and you alone. You are amazing, my love.”

“I couldn’t let him haunt me anymore,” Misha said, then lifted his head to look at me. “I don’t want him and his cruelty holding me back from the life I am supposed to live.”

There was something beautiful and fierce in my mate’s eyes as he said those words.

I could feel it through the bond that now joined us, growing stronger with every beat of our hearts.

There was a life we were supposed to live and an amazing omega that Misha was meant to be.

I could feel that part of him emerging as he smiled at me.

He did more than just smile. With all the aggression of an omega who knew exactly what he wanted, Misha slanted his mouth over mine in a kiss that had my head spinning in no time at all.

“My love,” I managed between kisses, holding him tightly and kissing him back, exploring his mouth with mine and with the excitement of the bond that had opened between us.

I could feel everything. I could feel Misha’s lips and tongue against mine, his warm body grinding against mine as I held him, and even more importantly, I could feel his

heart swelling with joy and pride in himself for defeating his enemies.

I could feel how deeply the two of us were meant to be together and how beautiful the life ahead of us was going to be.

“I feel so free,” Misha panted between kisses, cupping my face with one hand as he gazed deep into my eyes. “I don’t think he can ever hurt me again, at least not the way he did before.”

“No,” I agreed with a smile. “He can’t hurt you. You are far too powerful, and you are mine.”

Our mouths smashed together again in a desperate and needy kiss. It was no accident that Misha’s body was growing warmer and warmer by the second. At last, after so much trial and tribulation, he was going into heat.

But there was other business to be settled first.

“A shard!” Misha gasped, pulling back from me. “We need one of the shards to take to your mother along with the other items.”

I almost laughed as he pulled out of my arms, stood on his own feet, then twisted and crouched to pick up one of the thousands of pieces of glass that lay around our feet.

I already had a fairly good idea that the items from the quest were secondary to the quest itself, but my mate was right, we had things to finish before I swept him off to my lair for the hottest heat that anyone in the magical kingdom had ever seen.

“Do you think this will be good enough?” Misha asked, standing with a small shard of black glass in his hand. “It seems so small.”

I smiled. "I think it will be perfect," I said, brushing my hand through his dirty, mussed hair then cradling his face.

I leaned in for another kiss. I could hardly stop myself. Now that the worst was over and the quest was complete, now that I could sense my beloved going into heat, even if he couldn't tell himself yet, I just wanted to kiss and touch him and join with him.

I didn't want to waste any more time, so as I ended the kiss, my hand still on Misha's face, I looked up at the twilight sky and called out, "Mother, we've completed your quest. We're ready to go home now."

As expected, the towering, cavern walls around us shimmered then vanished and my mother's garden throne room took their place.

The intimidating greys and pile of sickly black glass shards melted into the soft, green grass and rambling flower beds that always surrounded Mother.

Even the darkening sky took on a more romantic glow as the colors of twilight gave everything in Mother's garden a rich, magical feel.

Mother sat on her mound of grass, her usual animal companions with her. She smiled when she saw us, though, and quickly rose to greet us.

"My children," she said, arms outstretched. "How well you look."

Misha gasped and pivoted so that he could bow to Mother like he would to a queen, but Mother merely laughed and clasped his face, lifting him to look directly at her.

"You have done so well, my child," she said, studying him as if she could read all the way into his soul, which I was certain she could. "You showed such bravery in the face of truly terrifying things."

Misha looked as if he'd waited his entire life for someone to praise him for what he'd endured. His lip wobbled and his eyes turned glassy with tears. "It was so hard," he said, his voice wavering, "but I couldn't not do it."

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“And you did well, my sweet,” Mother said, then kissed his forehead. “You did so well. I watched you through the entire encounter with your father, and you were brilliant.”

Misha wept freely with those words, but they weren’t tears of defeat or misery. They were simply his emotions overflowing and the pain he’d carried for so long leaving his body.

“We have the items,” he said, holding up the glass shard that he held in one hand while still holding the small dagger in his other hand.

He glanced around and seemed relieved to find our packs had transferred to Mother’s garden along with us.

He dashed to the side for his pack, putting the dagger down and taking the purple feather and the golden cherry pit out.

“We collected them just as you asked us to.”

“Misha was incredibly brave in all his actions,” I said as my beloved came forward to show the three items to Mother.

“I’ve no doubt,” Mother said. “You were brave and true as well, my son,” she told me with a mischievous smile.

My own smile faltered. “I was brave as I could be without magic.” I sent Misha a cautious, sideways look. “It began to fade almost as soon as we set out.”

Misha went from being excited to present the three items to Mother to crestfallen in an instant. “It’s my fault,” he said, lowering his head. “Azurus lost his powers because of me.”

“Did he?” Mother asked, glancing between the two of us as if we were adorable children who didn’t understand what we were telling her.

“It’s because I didn’t go into heat and we didn’t bond the way we should have when we first met,” Misha explained sheepishly.

“I was too broken to go into heat, and I’ve broken my mate as well.

” He quickly drew in a breath then rushed on with, “But now you have the three things you asked for and you can complete your spell to make me whole again. When I’m whole, Azurus will be whole as well. He’ll get his magic back.”

Mother laughed, which was one of the most beautiful sounds known to nature, and stepped forward. She took Misha’s hands in hers as they held the three items we’d fetched for her. “You have done more to heal yourself than I could ever have done for you,” she said.

“Me?” Misha blinked. “I don’t think I did anything.”

Mother smiled and took the items from Misha’s hands, stepping back so she could address both of us.

“You set out with intention to make yourself well,” she said.

“You spent all day in the fresh air and sunshine, using your body to dig in the dirt and help nature to grow and flourish. There is more magic to be had in working with the earth and letting sunlight infuse you than there is in a single cherry pit.”

She held the golden pit up, and it dissolved into sparkles before our eyes.

“You helped others with their work, spent time with living creatures, and laughed so much while doing it when you sought out the purple feather,” she went on.

“Laughter is more magical than any spell or charm imaginable. It is a healing balm that exceeds even the strongest potions made by the cleverest sorcerers. Laughter is magic itself.”

She held up the feather, and it, too, dissolved into sparkles.

“You walked by your mate’s side,” she said, addressing me this time, “talking with him, reassuring him, and sharing your own story, your own vulnerabilities. Talking with those we love, listening to them as well, and sharing from the depths of our souls is all the magic you needed for this quest, my son.”

I sucked in a breath as the sensation of magic washed through me again, like someone had turned on a tap that had been closed off.

But it had never been closed off. That kind of magical power, the kind that would have lit a fire or pitched a tent without effort, wasn’t what I had needed on the quest. I’d had what I needed within my power all along. I’d had Misha.

“Most importantly of all,” Mother continued, smiling at Misha again, “when dark forces separated you from your love, you looked beyond yourself to help another. It does not matter how great the challenges we face might be, when we see beyond ourselves to help others, we help ourselves.”

“My father, or at least the specter of my father, was still terrifying,” Misha said, swallowing hard. “I don’t know if I could face him again. I don’t know where I found the courage to fight back against him in that moment.”

“You have that courage within you always,” Mother said. “It was given to you a long time ago by someone who loved you more than his own life.”

“Papa,” Misha whispered.

“Yes,” Mother said with a smile. “Though he has moved on to the next life, your Papa is always with you. You may not always feel it, but you will always know his love is there. You were able to stand against the man who has given you so much pain and tell him what you know in your heart. Those wounds may tear open again from time to time, but now you know that you can rise up to defeat that evil and to heal yourself.”

“With Azurus’s help,” Misha insisted. “I don’t think I could have done it without Azurus’s help.”

“I don’t think I could have done half the things I accomplished on our quest without you,” I told Misha in turn, sliding an arm around his waist and pulling him close to me.

“That is what love is,” Mother said, spreading her now empty hands wide. “We cannot fight each other’s demons, but we can lend strength and help through loving each other unconditionally.”

“I do love Azurus,” Misha said, panting and beginning to look visibly pink and dewy. “I know it was because we were fated to be together before, but now, after this quest, I feel like I know him and love him so much more deeply.”

“And as time goes on that love will grow even more,” Mother said, her smile turning mischievous again. “Especially since I believe Nature to be running its course at the moment.”

I held Misha closer; his sweet scent was growing more powerful by the moment and his body felt like a small furnace against mine.

Misha seemed to understand what was happening all at once. “Oh no!” he gasped, writhing slightly, as if his body were suddenly sending him other signals he couldn’t ignore. “I’m going into heat! Of all the times. What am I going to do?” He glanced up at me in a panic.

I laughed. “Don’t you worry, little omega of mine,” I said amorously. “I know exactly how to take care of your heat.”

Misha whimpered, both with desire and with embarrassment. He peeked briefly at my mother, mortified.

“Do not feel ashamed of the ways of Nature on my account,” Mother said, raising a hand. “I invented the ways of Nature. I know precisely how you feel and what you need.”

“That’s even more embarrassing,” Misha mumbled.

I laughed and folded Misha into my embrace, partly because I needed to feel as much of him against me as possible and partly to shield him from Mother, mostly for his own sake. “Mother, would you be willing to send us directly back to my lair to spare us the strain of the journey?” I asked.

Mother laughed. “Absolutely.”

She raised a hand, waving it over us like a blessing as well as a practical act of magic. In an instant, the world of her garden faded and Misha and I found ourselves in the master bedchamber of my palatial lair.

“Now, my sweet omega,” I said, clasping Misha’s face in my hands, a growl in my voice, “we’ve come to the moment I’ve been waiting for since we first met.”

Chapter

Twelve

Misha

My heart hadn't stopped pounding from the moment Azurus and I had arrived in Queen Gaia's throne room.

I could still feel the frantic pulse of fear and victory that had come from defeating my father—or perhaps it was defeating the lingering hold his abuse had over me, at least for the moment.

Those residual emotions had masked the physical and inner heat that had been rising within me since the moment The Black Mirror had shattered.

"I don't know what to do," I gasped, glancing warily up at Azurus.

All this time, I'd been desperate to go into heat. I'd felt myself somehow lesser because I hadn't launched straight into the same state of nature that my brothers seemed to have embraced without any hesitation. Now the moment was upon me, and I was damned if I knew what to do about it.

But looking up into Azurus's eyes somehow stilled my panic.

He loomed somehow larger above me. His delicious, rain-like scent enveloped me, and the wickedness of his grin as he gazed down at me, like he was contemplating

how he wanted to devour me, went a long way toward melting me out of the uncertainty that gripped me.

“You are a brave and passionate omega,” Azurus told me, caressing the side of my face with one large hand. “You know what to do.”

“I—”

He silenced my further protest by tilting my face up to him and bending to slant his mouth over mine in a searing kiss.

We’d kissed before now, but something about the need and openness behind that kiss felt as though it reached into my soul.

It was hot and filled with desire, and as my mate explored me with his tongue and lips, I caught my breath, realizing what the difference was.

I could feel him deep within my heart. His love and desire for me wound its way through my body and soul as if they were my own emotions. I could even sense his thoughts through the wide-open cord that seemed to join us now.

“Yes, my sweet,” he said in a low growl between kisses. “Somewhere in the midst of all this, we bonded.”

I leaned back to study him, my mouth slightly open. “I thought bonding only happened through heat,” I said, my cheeks flushing hot as images of exactly what that entailed swirled through my mind.

“Apparently not,” Azurus said, taking my hand and leading me across the room to the huge bed. “But I’m willing to attempt to see if we can make the bond even stronger through joining and knotting in heat if you are.”

His words shot through me like lightning, bringing several things to my awareness at once.

I could feel his confidence within me, which changed how I felt about myself.

Azurus believed in me, which made it so much easier to think I was capable of greatness.

But also, a wave of fiery warmth spread through my body, making the clothes I wore feel ponderous.

More than that, my body seemed to be opening up to my mate. For the first time in my life, I felt a welcome rush of slick seep through my eager hole. The sensation made me moan with need and embarrassment. I loved it and was mortified at the same time.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” I said, clutching at Azurus’s tunic but turning my face away from him. “I feel so?—”

There were no words for how I felt, but as I breathed in a strong burst of Azurus’s scent and glanced up to find him watching me with fierce, unconcealed lust, my hole spasmed, sending even more slick spilling from me.

“Oh, Goddess!” I gasped, writhing where I stood, desperate to get out of my clothes.

Azurus laughed softly and stroked his hand around my head, finishing the motion by starting on the fastenings of my tunic. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said, making quick work of the buttons of my dirty things. “It’s only heat. Haven’t you gone through heat before?”

I nodded tightly, not wanting to remember those horrible, painful, hollow times. “It

was never like this. It was like a sickness, an ache within me that wouldn't go away."

"And your father never gave your heat to one of his cronies?"

I hated the question but was vaguely satisfied that the answer was no. "He tried to, but I wouldn't do it."

Azurus nodded, and thankfully, that was the end of that discussion. "You've nothing to worry about," he said, pulling my shirt off over my head and tossing it aside. "I'm here with you. I'll take you through this first consummated heat as carefully as I can."

I tried to say thank you, but instead, a deep, pleading sigh escaped from my lungs as the cool air of Azurus's bedroom brushed against my exposed skin.

I should have been embarrassed about being naked, or terrified at being so exposed in front of an alpha, but it was Azurus, my fated mate, my dragon love, and all I wanted was to be his to do with as he pleased.

"I need you," I whispered, reaching for him then pulling back slightly, like I didn't know what to do with my arms. "I want you."

"I'm yours, my love," Azurus said.

I still didn't know what I was doing, but Azurus was so certain of himself. He reached for the fastenings of my trousers, loosening them, and then crouching as he pulled them down. I gasped again as my cock sprung free and as what felt like a huge amount of slick spilled down my thighs.

Azurus growled as he sucked in a breath of my scent. "You are sinfully delicious," he said, bringing his face close to my belly so he could breathe me in. He planted an almost chaste kiss on my stomach—no, right above where my womb lay pulsing and

waiting for him—then continued with his task.

He had to remove my boots and stockings before he could take my trousers off all the way.

It felt glorious to be completely naked in front of him, like that was my natural state and I should never be allowed to wear clothing in his presence again.

When he finished and stood to remove his own clothing, I hardly knew what to do with myself.

I wanted to preen and pose and display my heat-racked body for him.

I wanted to bend over the side of his bed and spread my cheeks for him, showing him my slick-messy hole and begging him to take me.

I was too mesmerized by his body as he undressed, though. My eyes went wide as he pulled off his tunic, revealing his broad, slightly hairy chest. I was almost paralyzed with the need to kiss and lick him and rub myself against him.

That was nothing to the feelings that welled in me when he pulled off his boots and kicked his trousers aside. When he straightened, his thick, proud, alpha cock stood out to me, demanding attention.

I couldn't have denied him if I'd wanted to.

He hadn't really asked for anything, but the driving impulse to mate that burned within me told me exactly what to do.

I sank to my knees in front of him, gripping his hips and burying my face into the sweat-and-rain-smelling scent of his groin and rubbing against the hot wonder of his

large balls and firm cock for a moment.

I moaned and my body trembled, slick gushing from me, at the sensations and scents that filled me.

That was nowhere near what my desperate body needed, though. I inched back and glanced up at my mate briefly before taking his cock in one hand, licking my way up its length, then closing my mouth around his flared head.

The sounds I made as I sucked and swallowed, taking him deeper than I thought I was capable of without any practice, were sinful. My body knew what it wanted, what I'd been made for, and it didn't want to waste any time.

"Misha," Azurus groaned, grabbing a handful of my hair. The pleasure in his voice made me feel like, at last, I'd done something completely right. "My love," Azurus panted, thrusting into my throat.

I should have been terrified at the aggression that overcame my mate.

Considering how everything else frightened me, I should have been weeping and screaming in fear.

Tears absolutely streamed down my face, but only because everything felt so good.

I was a vessel for my alpha to fill, and however he wanted to use me was a blessing to me.

Within moments, I was gulping and swallowing as hot cum hit the back of my throat.

Azurus groaned with orgasm, thrusting harder to enjoy it.

He held my head to keep me in place, otherwise I might have melted into the floorboards, it felt so good.

I could almost feel my insides being coated with his seed, and nothing had ever soothed me so much.

I was so relaxed when he pulled out that I almost forgot to breathe. Azurus pulled me to my feet, which prompted me to take a deep breath, then lifted me into his arms for a passionate kiss.

“You are amazing,” he said between ravishing my mouth and groping my body. “Everything about you is amazing.”

“More,” I panted, grasping at him frantically. “Give me more. Use me for your pleasure. I need it. I need you to fill me with your seed.”

Azurus made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan and kissed me again.

For the first time, I was disappointed in his kiss. I wanted so much more than our mouths to be joined. I wanted to be spread and splayed beneath him while he bred me.

He must have heard the cry of my body and heart.

When he ended our kiss, he shifted so he could lay me across his bed.

I noticed the bright blue of the coverlet for the first time and the rich warmth of the wood that made up the bed’s headboard and posts.

A quick glance around told me that the entire room was decorated beautifully, but those details quickly disappeared as Azurus flipped me to my stomach and pulled me

back so I was perched on the edge of the bed with my dripping ass lifted high.

“You are everything I’ve ever dreamed you would be,” he said in a low, sexy voice before bending down to bring his mouth to my hole.

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I shouted with the intensity of the pleasure that came from his tongue moving across my highly sensitive hole.

One lick was all it took for my body to explode into orgasm.

Omega orgasms weren't much, or so I'd always been told, but the pleasure that overcame me as my body throbbed and pulsed for him was incredible.

Azurus seemed to think so, too, by the sounds he made as he lapped up my slick. His tongue pushed into my hole, demanding more and shooting my pleasure higher. It wasn't nearly enough, though.

"Fuck me! Breed me!" I panted, shocked that I could make demands like that to a dragon.

Even more astoundingly, Azurus obeyed. He rose to his feet, pulled my hips closer, then pushed himself quickly inside me.

I cried out at the intensity of the initial pain and then the incredible pleasure as he stretched and filled me.

I wasn't sure my body could take all of him, but he continued to thrust deeper and deeper, his grip on my hips bruising before he shifted to cover my body with his own.

He reached for my hands as they gripped the bedcovers in front of me, twining our fingers together as he thrust harder and harder.

“Misha, my love,” he gasped against my shoulder, then bit into my flesh.

I cried out in surprise, not only because of his bite, but because his hard, heavy cock punched right into my womb at the same time. It happened so fast, but the mind-warping pleasure that overtook me as I felt his knot swell to fill me and his seed spill deep inside me was beyond description.

I was completely his instrument, his vessel.

My body was nothing but pleasure as my womb welcomed him.

The orgasm that took me encompassed my entire body.

Every part of me, from my eyes to my toes, felt as if it was convulsing in climax for him and making way for his seed to take hold.

I was his and only his. Every fear or strain I’d ever felt was burned away in the power of the pleasure he gave me.

It was so overwhelming that I passed out.

It wasn’t a terrifying feeling, though. For some indeterminate amount of time, I floated in the warm darkness of his pleasure.

I wasn’t myself, I was an extension of Azurus and he was an extension of me.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so fulfilled or so peaceful.

When I finally awoke who knew how long later, I was tucked comfortably in Azurus’s bed.

The sheets and pillows were comfortably cool around me.

Even with my eyes closed, I could feel my mate very nearby.

We weren't touching, but I knew he was sitting in the bed with me.

The scents of coffee, sweet pastries, and savory breakfast foods filled the air, and as I woke up, I breathed them in with an appreciative sound.

"Something smells good," I said groggily, turning so I could see where my mate was.

"It's you," Azurus said, teasing in his voice.

I opened my eyes to see that teasing in his smile as well. I couldn't help but return his smile with a deep, heartfelt one of my own.

"I love you," I said, reaching up for him. He sat right next to me, eating one of the pastries as he watched me sleep.

"And I love you, my darling," he answered me. He took my hand and kissed it.

I moved to sit up. My stomach growled, which wasn't surprising, since I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

Halfway through the action, I froze. My body felt strange, different. It felt bigger than I thought I was, more expansive inside and out. More precisely, it felt as though I had new life within me.

I gasped as I sat the rest of the way, touching a hand to my stomach. I knew on a visceral level that I'd conceived. I glanced up at Azurus with wide eyes.

Azurus saw the astonishment in my expression and laughed warmly. “Yes, my love,” he said. “It happens that swiftly when fated mates, well, mate.”

“I’m with child,” I gasped, turning my senses inward so I could feel the baby now inside me.

“As a dragon’s mate, you’re with egg,” Azurus explained. “But yes, my darling, brave omega, our family has begun.”

My mouth dropped open even more as I pushed the covers back so I could stare at my stomach. Nothing looked particularly out of the ordinary. There was a slight bulge in my middle, but that was it.

As far as appearances went, at least. I could feel my child within me, feel its life and its vitality.

“We’re going to have a baby,” I gasped, joy spreading through me like sunlight spilling across a field after a long period of clouds.

“We are,” Azurus said, finishing his pastry, then turning to me with a sly, amorous look. “Would you like to birth the egg right away or do you want to feel it growing within you for a few days first?”

I gaped and blinked at him, then remembered everything my brothers had gone through with their eggs. “I want to see it,” I said. “I want to hold it.”

Azurus’s smile grew in size and heat. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

With a glint of mischief in his eyes, Azurus reached for me, pulling me up from the bedcovers then turning me to face him. I settled neatly into place straddling his lap, but even though I could feel his cock already growing hard against my groin, he

kissed me instead of trying to get inside me.

“You truly are amazing, Misha,” he said between kisses. The way he stroked my tired, overly sensitive body was a dream. I had never felt so safe or so cared for.

“You are the amazing one,” I told him in return, kissing him with as much enthusiasm as he kissed me.

I had so much more confidence when it came to being with him now.

I wanted to explore all of him and give myself over to him in so many different ways.

I had a feeling I only knew a fraction of the ways two mates could give each other pleasure and make each other happy. I would relish learning so much more.

“Are you certain you don’t want to wait?” he asked, adjusting me and himself so that all I would need to do would be to lower myself onto his suspiciously larger cock to have him inside me again. “We’ve rushed this process more than usual.”

I shook my head. “We haven’t rushed anything. We’ve had two beautiful days to be together, completing our tasks and getting to know each other. I feel like I know you on such a deep level now, more than if we’d just spent days and days of heat together in pleasure.”

Azurus made an approving sound and kissed me again. “You see?” he said. “I said you were amazing.”

I laughed mischievously, kissing him back, then made the bold move to impale myself on his cock.

I was shocked by how much larger he felt than before. I’d been so frantic and

insensible before that I might not have noticed his size, but he felt so large that I was afraid he would rip me apart now. I even cried out with pain as the head of his cock reached my womb.

“I am sorry, my love,” he murmured as soothingly as he could while thrusting up into me. “A dragon’s egg needs a dragon’s cock to come out.”

I understood what he meant, and a moment later, the same amazing pleasure that had filled me when I’d had the breeding orgasm filled me again.

I let it take me, relaxing into it and opening my body and heart for everything it meant.

I cried out at the sensations that stole my breath, both pleasure and pain.

When I felt the entrance to my womb stretch wide enough to release the brand-new egg that had formed within me, I shouted in pain. But as it slipped down through as Azurus pulled out, I gasped in wonder. An egg. My egg. Mine and Azurus’s. It was coming.

I cried out again as the egg passed through my hole, then wept in wonder as I looked down at the small, beautiful, sapphire egg that now rested between me and Azurus. Fear that it was too small mingled with utter joy at welcoming a child of mine and Azurus’s into the world.

“It’s perfect,” Azurus said, helping me pick up the egg and cradle it in my arms. “You’re perfect.”

I had no words to express the emotions I felt as I cradled my egg for the first time.

I knew from my brothers’ eggs that it would grow larger in time, but none of the facts

I'd learned about eggs so far mattered.

All that mattered was holding my baby against my chest as Azurus settled all three of us more comfortably against the pillows at the head of the bed and feeling its life.

Between the egg and my bond with Azurus, it was as if the three of us were one entity, one happy, thriving entity.

"I didn't think it was possible to be so happy," I whispered, tears streaming down my face.

"And this is only the beginning," Azurus said. "I swear to you, my love, that from this time forth, you and I and our family will be the happiest, safest, most beautiful family that ever existed, in this world or any other."

I smiled at our egg then turned my head to beam at Azurus. "I believe you," I said, leaning into him for a kiss.

The things that haunted me from my past would always be there, and I was certain we'd struggle with them in the future, but I wasn't alone with those horrors now. I had so much love in my life. Everything would be alright.

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Rumors began to swirl that King Freslik's omega sons were missing.

No one had seen so much as a glimpse of any of them in months.

Where once the king had paraded his sons before his courtiers as if they would be prizes for those who supported his ambitions, now the court was surprisingly devoid of any omegas at all.

In fact, since rumors that a challenger to the throne had arisen on the western border of the kingdom, a Lord Osric, who was rumored to be the son of King Freslik's younger, omega brother, people had begun whispering wilder and wilder theories about the missing omega princes.

Some said that King Freslik had killed them all because they'd dared to defy him at the harvest celebrations.

Some said the king had married them all off to noblemen from distant kingdoms as a way to secure their loyalty.

As it was looking more and more likely that the king would have to fight a war against his nephew if he wanted to keep the throne, that rumor was believable.

Freslik would need soldiers from neighboring armies to stand a chance of winning a war.

Still other rumors said that the omega princes had been kidnapped by dragons and whisked off to some magical kingdom, but that was a ridiculous notion. Everyone

knew there were no such thing as dragons.

Yet another rumor said that the omega princes were still in the castle, locked away in their bedchamber and kept like virtual prisoners.

“Part of me wishes more people believed that rumor to be true,” the youngest prince, Obi, sighed as he played chess in said bedchamber with his oldest brother, Rumi, in the middle of the afternoon on a chilly winter’s day. “Because that’s the one that is true.”

Rumi laughed and moved one of his pawns. “It’s not the only true rumor,” he said. “Tovey, Selle, Leo, and Misha really have been whisked off to a magical kingdom by dragons.”

“Sometimes I wish I’d gone with them,” Obi said, moving his rook. “Check.”

Rumi’s eyes went wide as he stared at the chessboard. He hadn’t seen that move coming. Then again, Obi might have been the youngest of the brothers, but he was incredibly clever, if somewhat impatient.

Rumi moved a piece to block the attack on his king, then said, “You’re welcome to go anytime you feel you need to. I won’t stop you.”

Obi shook his head and frowned at the board. “I’m not leaving you alone to deal with Father, especially when there’s a war coming.”

Rumi grinned. “You just want to stay because you know your fated mate is one of Father’s advisors and you’re dying to figure out which one it is.”

Obi blushed and pretended that wasn’t the reason at all. “That’s not it at all. I want to help Cousin Osric,” he said. “I want to fight in the war that is to come and help depose Father. It has nothing to do with who my fated mate might be and where he’s

hiding.”

Rumi chuckled and was about to say something more to tease his brother when the rattling of the chains on their bedchamber door warned them that their father was about to barge in.

He’d once been able to throw open their doors and invade their privacy without any warning at all, but in his haste to make his remaining sons believe he had all power over them, he’d inadvertently given them the means to know when he was coming for them.

Fortunately, they were merely playing chess and not doing anything that would cause their father to suspect they were anything but ignorant of their brothers’ whereabouts.

Once the chains and locks were removed, the doors banged open and King Freslik walked into the room with a look of pure hatred for his sons.

“Where is he?” he demanded. “Tell me where he is!”

Rumi and Obi looked up from their game and feigned surprise at the king’s interruption.

“We’ve already told you, Father,” Rumi said, blinking innocently. “We don’t know where our brothers are.”

“Not them, you fool!” the king snapped. “That traitor, Osric! You were with him when he attacked me, you are in league with the would-be usurper.”

Rumi and Obi exchanged wary looks. Their father wasn’t wrong, but it would spell disaster for them if he knew that.

“We were his prisoners,” Obi said, attempting to convince his father to believe the

story that would go the farthest to protect him and Rumi. “You rescued us from him.”

“I do not believe it,” King Freslik said, narrowing his eyes. “But even if you were merely prisoners, you know where my bastard nephew is. You will tell me at once.”

“For what purpose?” Rumi asked, standing. Obi stood with him. “What use is the information of omegas. Aren’t you always saying that we are a lot of lying, deceiving whores anyhow?”

The king glared at his eldest son. “I will wring the information out of you one way or another,” he said. “Or you,” he added, narrowing his eyes at Obi. “You are by far the weaker of the two. One hour alone in a room with Councilor Dormas interrogating you and you would break like a dry twig.”

“Councilor Dormas is an old, feeble man,” Obi said with a cocky sneer. “He couldn’t break a straw.”

“Oh, no?” King Freslik asked. “We’ll just see about that. Guards!”

Obi and Rumi lost their smug smiles and snapped to readiness as the guards came forward.

“Take Prince Obi out of here and deliver him to Councilor Dormas for interrogation!” the king ordered.

“No!” Obi shouted as one of the guards clamped a hand around his arm and yanked him away from Rumi. “No, you cannot separate us! You cannot take me out of this room!”

The guard didn’t listen to him.

The king was unrelenting. “Now we’ll get to the bottom of this,” he growled with

glee. “Now we’ll know the truth. I should have thought to separate you all from the start.”

“Obi!” Rumi called after his brother as the guard dragged him out of the room.

He was helpless to stop the forced separation, though.

As long as the omega princes had been able to stay together, they had kept each other strong.

But now that the last two had been torn apart, there was no telling what sort of danger Prince Obi and Prince Rumi might fall into.

I hope you’ve enjoyed Misha and Azurus’s story!

This book turned into so much more than just a fairy tale.

As I mapped it out and wrote it, it turned into a story about the journey that I have taken through a really bad bout of anxiety and depression.

I know that a lot of us might have been through this or are going through this sort of a trial right now, what with the state of the world.

I’ve learned a lot of things about mental health and how to overcome dark times throughout my life.

The quest that Misha and Azurus set out on is very much an allegory for the things we do and experience when dealing with our mental health.

We spend a lot of time dwelling in dark, unhelpful thoughts, and it feels like we can’t control them.

The negative emotions that chemical imbalance cause and the stress that surrounds us can feel so loud.

They can convince us that we've lost our power and that we're not worthy of love and that we'll never come out of the darkness.

But those thoughts and feelings are dead wrong.

There is always hope. We are surrounded by people who love us and want to help us, whether we know them intimately or not.

And each of the tasks that Queen Gaia sends Misha and Azurus on is something that I've found works wonders for me when my mental health goes south.

For me, there is so much value in just being outside, soaking up the sun and feeling or digging in the dirt.

Actual scientific evidence exists saying that getting in touch with nature combined with exercise or physical activity creates exactly the sort of chemicals in our brains that we need.

Interacting with animals, be they chickens or our beloved pets, is incredibly healing as well.

And, of course, laughter really is the best medicine.

Anything that makes us laugh is a balm to our souls.

But most of all, I find that interacting with other people, whether that's in the art classes I try to take whenever I can, through hanging out with friends, or even doing video calls with one or a group of friends, changes my mood for the better like nothing else does.

Leaving the house, for a walk or a shopping trip or a class, especially with friends, changes my headspace and gets me out of a downward spiral so effectively.

And talking and sharing my struggles with people who also need someone to talk to and to listen to them is absolutely the best thing ever for mental health.

So if you're suffering through a dark stretch right now, just know that you aren't alone! The world can be overwhelming sometimes, but as long as we all have each other and as long as we keep reaching out and trying to connect, we'll all be okay in the end.

What's up next for the omega princes? Will Obi and Rumi stay separated for long?

What happens when Obi meets his fated mate...

and realizes Argus has been in the castle all along, disguised as the elderly Councilor Dormas?

Finding your fated mate isn't an easy walk in the park for everyone.

Can Obi and Argus come to terms with what destiny has in store for them and band together with the others and Lord Osric to defeat King Freslik once and for all?

Find out next in The Silver Dragon Prince !