



Flame IT UP



NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MILLY TAIDEN

FLAME IT UP

PARANORMAL DATING AGENCY

BOOK 62

MILLY TAIDEN



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*NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR*

MILLY TAIDEN

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Mazie Kettler left home to make the world a better place. She'd heard things about Gerri Wilder she wasn't sure she believed. Until she meets Pyrus. Big, strong, handsome, and fiery Pyrus is so much more than she ever expected in a man...erm shifter. **The dragon came flying into their camp to save the day and made Mazie's heart go pitter-patter.**

Pyrus Bloodmoon is doing his best to protect his employees from his ex-partner. He's trying hard to save his people, but his patience can only be tested for so long. And once his fated mate comes into his life, she becomes the center of his priorities. **Mazie's sweet, sassy and has the softest lips he's ever tasted. He can't get enough of her.**

Pyrus' ex-partner returns with a vengeance. He uses Mazie as a pawn in his twisted game, testing how far Pyrus will go to save his one true love. **Pyrus is willing to fight to the death for Mazie and show his old partner exactly what he'll do for love.**

—*For my readers.*
Thank you for reading.

ONE



PYRUS

Pyrus Bloodmoon sat in first class on a flight to Johannesburg and loosened his thick, knit tie after about an hour in the air. He stared at the pulpy clouds and stunning blue sky, ruminating about soaring through them rather than being confined to some metal flying machine.

He was a dragon shifter, a rather old one, in fact, but if you looked at him, he would barely strike you as middle-aged. His height made him noticeable, his head brushing most ceilings and door frames so often that he'd learned to naturally tilt down before walking into a room. But it was his striking handsomeness that made eyes linger.

His dark brown hair appeared almost black in certain dim lights. It was neatly pushed back with minimal gel, and he never let it grow past the point of getting his fingers tangled within its softness. He was a daily shaver. Not a single bit of stubble had been seen in years, even by those closest to him.

But those he was closest to weren't really that close. Most of them were his business partners, his employees, and every now and then, a hot piece of flesh to warm his bed and his loins. He was eternally appreciative and generous in bed, but that hadn't translated into anything worth putting long-term efforts into.

No, like the dragon ascending into the sunrise, Pyrus flew solo, and that was the way he liked it.

South Africa was far too long a haul to get there by virtue of his expansive wings despite the longing he felt while staring

out the window. There also hadn't been enough time to have his private jet cleared by the FAA, so a commercial flight worked fine for him.

He always wore a suit on these trips, not only because it was mandatory in the first-class section but because it was the closest that he felt to being himself. It was miles away from how he felt in his dragon form, the scales running over his body, the fire swirling in his belly and throat.

But a dragon showing up to business meetings wasn't exactly embraced with open arms.

Pyrus heard the sound of the seat belt light clicking off, giving him an opportunity to stand and stretch his legs. It was a long flight, nearly seventeen hours, so he should take the chance to get up and walk around whenever he could. He had done the trip many times before, but usually within the comfort of his own private jet.

A change is as good as a rest.

Pyrus walked through the expansive aisles, smiling down at the pretty women who gave him unashamed glances. He was used to it all, of course, but he wasn't thinking about anything recreational. He was thinking of work, his business, and making sure he didn't get cramps in his legs from sitting too long.

Pyrus was often restless when he flew in a plane as opposed to in the air. It felt way too confining to be inside a machine, making him feel a bit claustrophobic. He was so used to spreading his wings wide, touching clouds, and moving through various weather patterns. It was freeing, and flying on a plane was the complete opposite of that.

Sometimes he'd feel his spine tingling, like his wings were aching to burst from his back. So he got up and moved around, trying to fool his body into believing it didn't need to shift just yet.

As he walked up the aisle, he spotted a woman from behind with blinding silver hair who seemed familiar. When

she turned her head, he knew instantly that those smokey, sage eyes could only mean one thing.

“Gerri Wilder,” he said, smirking.

The older woman sat in her private pod with a glass of wine in her hand, posing like she was sitting for a photoshoot. She met his eyes gently, then a tiny smile grew upon her pink lips.

“Pyrus Bloodmoon,” she said softly. “What are the chances?”

“What are the chances indeed?” Pyrus replied.

Pyrus was a billionaire, and, as far as he knew, so was Gerri, or at least she had been at some point. They’d met before at various charity events that Gerri ran, engaging in polite chat that was essential on such occasions. Pyrus had met many people at these events, but Gerri stood out to him. She never wavered in eye contact, looking into your soul like she knew exactly how to map it.

Pyrus wasn’t much for intuition, so he shook off the thought like an annoying gnat.

“Sit, please,” Gerri said, motioning toward the extra seat before her.

Pyrus nodded and sat, gazing at the woman in her easy chair. There were many benefits to first class, and one of them was the fact that each flier received their own private pod, like a division of desks in an office. Gerri looked more like she was lying on a beach than sitting midair with a handful of strangers.

“Wine?” Gerri offered with a grin.

Pyrus shook his head. “It’ll only make me sleepy,” he said with a wink.

“On a seventeen-hour flight, that doesn’t sound too terrible,” she said, smirking.

“I’ll save the sleep for when we hit solid earth,” he replied.

Gerri sipped at her drink, her fixed look on Pyrus never unsteadied.

“So what has you flying to Johannesburg?” Pyrus asked, leaning back and draping his hand over the chair.

Gerri remained unmoving, her eyes captivated by Pyrus’s presence. “I’m hosting an event that benefits endangered species in the region,” she replied. “It’s truly shocking sometimes to see how much our existence as humans has affected so many creatures on this planet.”

Pyrus nodded in agreement. It didn’t really surprise him anymore, though. “That sounds like a worthy cause,” Pyrus said. “I would love to offer a donation if you’d accept.”

Somehow, Gerri’s grin grew larger, like it was being pulled at by string. Pyrus could have sworn that he saw color dance in her eyes like a splash of paint.

“That is awfully kind of you, but that isn’t why I offered you a seat. I’m here to help you.”

Pyrus cocked an eyebrow, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. The impulse to loosen his tie a bit more was strong, but he didn’t want Gerri to interpret his apprehension. Though maybe they were already far beyond that.

“Help me?” he scoffed. “How on earth could you help me? No offense, Gerri, but if I want something, I can get it like that.” Pyrus snapped his fingers, but Gerri did not flinch. Instead, she motioned toward his left hand draped over the chair.

“Your ring finger looks a little bare,” she said teasingly. “It appears you haven’t been able to get *that* quite so easily.”

Pyrus felt himself beginning to blush, so he ran a hand over his face while letting out a smug chuckle. “What makes you think that is something I even want? And what if I already have it, huh?” Pyrus said, cupping his hands and leaning forward.

Gerri shrugged. “I can tell when shifters have yet to find their mate. There’s an air about them, like a scent that’s rather identifiable.”

A beat of silence sat between them. Pyrus looked to the floor briefly at his expensive loafers, not wanting to look rude but also not wanting to look at her. Gerri's eyes were slicing through his resolve like a katana through paper.

"Identifiable, eh?" Pyrus whispered to the floor.

"Pyrus," Gerri said. She leaned forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. When he looked up, they were eye-to-eye. The swimming shade of gray moved through him like a stiff wind.

"There's nothing wrong with admitting when you need help," she said. "That is what I'm here for. I am fate knocking at your door."

Pyrus smirked, doing his best not to burst out laughing. "Fate?" he said.

"Yes, fate. Do you not believe in it?"

Pyrus sat up straight with Gerri's hand sliding from his shoulder back to the stem of her glass. It was nearly empty, yet Pyrus hadn't seen when she had taken even a sip.

"It was drilled into me at a very young age," Pyrus said, adjusting his tie. "But I found those to be childish beliefs for people who don't believe in hard work. I try to focus on the effort."

Gerri's eyes flashed. "You don't think obtaining a mate is hard work?"

"Isn't that what you're telling me?" Pyrus remarked playfully. "That you will be the matchmaker and make the finding part easy for me?"

Gerri shook her head, her bob haircut cutting through the air. "My job is to bring her to you," she said, smiling with confidence. "But it is you who has to woo her, romance her, win her over. That often takes a lot of hard work."

Pyrus let out a long sigh. He had heard a lot from his coworkers and business partners about finding a mate in the past few years. It wasn't that he didn't long for it. He simply didn't think it was something that would work for him. So he

left it in the back of his mind, putting work first and having casual sex without attachment every now and then to let his hair down.

But Gerri had sniffed it out like a bloodhound.

“I suppose I am up for a challenge,” Pyrus replied.

Gerri raised her glass to him, then took the final gulp of wine. She then placed it on the table beside her and picked up a leather-bound notebook. “Here is the address for the charity event I am hosting tomorrow night,” Gerri said, scribbling. “If you attend this event, I promise you, your mate will be there.”

Pyrus raised both eyebrows. “Tomorrow night? Damn, you work fast,” Pyrus quipped.

Gerri finished writing the address and her contact information, then ripped it out and handed it to Pyrus. When she placed it into his palm, she looked at him, dead in the eyes with a look that Pyrus could only interpret as cosmic.

“Make sure you go, Pyrus,” she said assertively. “I can only find her for you. That is the job of a matchmaker. The rest is your own doing.”

Pyrus felt his heart skip a beat and chose to ignore it. “I have a few meetings to rearrange, but have no doubt, I’ll be there.”

Gerri let go of his hand, and Pyrus stood, doing up his three-button jacket.

“I hope you have a pleasant flight, Miss Wilder,” Pyrus said.

“I will see you tomorrow night,” she said, tapping her glass.

He gave her one last courteous nod, then departed back to his own private pod.

He sat and realized he had been sweating for the entire conversation. Pyrus removed his jacket and draped it neatly next to him, not wanting to wrinkle the expensive fabric. He then returned his gaze to the window where the light of day was beginning to fade, replaced by a blanket of darkness.

That was when he most loved to fly. The night was when life was most like a dream. The surrealness of it all calmed him, helping him let go of any anxiety that may have plagued his day. He wished he could do that right then and there instead of sitting in some luxurious seat for seventeen hours.

Pyrus pondered what he had gotten himself into as nightfall came and the shutters of the windows were pulled down. He left a tiny sliver of his up so he could still see the stars and the buzzing lights of life below.

He didn't really need or want a mate, so why the hell had he agreed to Gerri's matchmaking services? He had spent a fair amount of money on useless things, but he knew that asking her to find his one true love would certainly top the list. He tried to sleep, tilting his chair back and closing his eyes to the steady hum of the plane engine.

How on earth would she be able to find someone so quickly anyway? And how had she known he was on that flight?

These questions swirled in his mind when he tried to rest. He made a mental note to inform his assistant about the changes to his schedule, which would be sure to ruffle his feathers. Pyrus had meant it, though, when he'd said the charity of endangered animals was a worthy cause. What occurred in places beyond North America was always disturbing when it came to the immense loss of life.

That in itself would make the venture fruitful. Even if he met the woman Gerri claimed would be his mate, he would at least be able to have one fun night with her, wouldn't he?

Eventually, Pyrus was able to doze lightly, wanting to get most of the flight over with and to mute his thoughts about the mystery woman.

Once they landed, he went to his affluent hotel room and rescheduled a few meetings. He made the time to fly around the city, over the sight line of any human observer, of course. Humans were used to some shifters but didn't really know a lot about dragons. It was a silent agreement that these types of mythological shifters kept their presence hushed.

He found an empty, open field to give himself a place to expand without being seen. When his scales sprouted from his skin and the fire burned inside his throat, Pyrus finally felt like he had come home.

It was the only thing that kept the feeling of guilt at bay. He had tried booze and sex, but nothing was as good as blasting through the sky, miles above the earth, gazing down upon the ongoings of life without those below ever knowing.

Pyrus found himself thinking about the mysterious woman. He didn't want to hope; hope left scars. But he did wonder within the small bright area between the corners of his heart if it could ever be possible.

TWO



MAZIE

Mazie Kettler believed in hard work, and not only because her parents instilled it in her at a very young age. It was one of the only things in life that she knew was for sure, a self-reliance method that made her keep everything in her life close to her chest. That meant keeping relationships at an arm's distance and lacking confidence in any of her natural skills and abilities.

She put all of her efforts into giving to others, which she felt was enough to feel like a valuable member of society. She was young when she left home but left as soon as she could to seek out an infinitely rewarding job, which eventually landed her in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the Sanchez-Hathaway Animal Sanctuary.

As usual, Mazie was up early with the sun and with the rest of her coworkers. They took care of animals native to the area that had either been injured from poaching or were being used for breeding offspring that would eventually be returned to the wild. Her job, along with everyone else's, was quite broad. It was mostly cleaning stalls, feeding the animals, and, every now and then, interacting with some of the most beautiful creatures Mazie had ever seen.

The sanctuary was vast and growing larger by the day. She vaguely knew about the person who funded the sanctuary after having met her at a few events where money was being raised. Gerri Wilder was her name.

No one really knew much about her other than she was a renowned philanthropist with a known source of wealth. That

never really mattered much to Mazie, nor did a great amount of money. She was content cleaning the baby bush elephants with a hose and having them remove her hat from her head. It was a pure and joyful moment that wealth could not buy.

But on a particularly sweaty morning, her coworkers were all chatting and fired up with excitement about the gala being hosted that very night. They had been informed about a month ago by the executives and owners that they were going to set up larger tents for the event than any of the workers were used to and even expensive glamping tents for some of the guests to stay in. It was supposedly going to be way more glamorous than anything the staff had hosted before.

Mazie was cleaning up the stall of an injured baby rhino who had recently lost its mother. The baby had warmed to her over time, nudging at her leg and wandering around the pen with a contented familiarity. The sun beat down on Mazie, who had become accustomed to tying her long hair into a high ponytail and stuffing it under a wide sun hat.

One of her coworkers and a good friend, Emilia, ran over to Mazie with an exhilarated expression on her face. “Mazie!” she hollered. “What the hell are you doing?”

Mazie looked up at her friend with a feigned scowl. Sweat trickled down her back and the front of her chest, even slipping between her bra. “My job,” she scoffed. “What the hell are you so hyper about?”

Emilia and Mazie had developed a playful relationship, one that was driven by the trauma of high-pressured family influence. They could joke around with one another and not get hurt. There was a camaraderie there that both were at ease about.

Emilia waved a hand in the air and pursed her lips. “The gala, obviously!” Emilia yelled. “Gerri is actually coming this time, did you hear?”

Mazie went on shoveling rhino poop into a giant pile. “I did hear, yes,” she said.

“And you are more interested in rhino shit?”

Mazie stopped shoveling, propped up the tool, and leaned against it. Emilia was already grinning with anticipation for Mazie's clever retort.

“So what?” Mazie said, raising a hand in the air. “We've met so many of these rich CEO types before. What makes you think she'll be any different?”

Emilia wrinkled her nose and leaned against the fence. The glistening sun in her eyes looked like a pool, one that Mazie saw reflected within her own green orbs.

“She's a matchmaker, too,” Emilia said. “Some of the ladies are talking about meeting someone tonight. Wouldn't that be just grand?”

Emilia flicked a hand in the air and bowed backward as she emulated an English accent. Mazie once again rolled her eyes and returned to shoveling shit, what she enjoyed and was used to.

“Yes, it all sounds like a dream, doesn't it?” Mazie said, doing her best impression of a posh British accent herself.

“How long has it been since you got some?” Emilia asked.

Mazie smiled as she continued cleaning. “You know how long,” Mazie said. “It hasn't been a priority for me. This Peace Corps work was what I wanted. I'm not going to disrupt that with some fling.”

Emilia cocked an eyebrow. “Well, why not? That's why they call it a fling. One good flick, and you're good!”

Mazie laughed and told her friend to pick up a shovel. Emilia continued to go on about Gerri Wilder coming to the event and how they were set to attend as guests for once, rather than working in the back like they usually did.

“How does someone like that have time for matchmaking?” Mazie asked.

Emilia shrugged as she carried over the barrel for the rhino droppings. “You know rich people. They have time for things us working folks would never even dream of.”

“That’s very true,” Mazie said, considering. “I’ve spoken to her before at events. She did seem very romantic and intense.”

Emilia agreed enthusiastically. “It’s the eyes, chica,” she said, widening her lids comically.

Mazie listened and joked back, but she wasn’t kidding about her disinterest. She’d much rather stay in her lodgings with a good book while everyone got hangovers. Plus, she would never hear the end of it the next day, and there would be an assortment of social media photos she could go through.

She wasn’t unsociable. She just didn’t care about those kinds of things. She’d had enough of privileged people with her parents and the rich men who came to their events, thinking that because they donated what would take a lifetime for Mazie to gather that they could have anything they wanted. That often meant harassing the women in the kitchen.

Mazie would steer clear of all of that after they finished setting up. The corps workers spent most of the day discussing the event, which mostly revolved around what they would wear and who they might meet. Mazie didn’t blame them. It was a change of pace, a change of scenery. And that was often good for the brain.

After the corps workers finished up their day, they headed for the lodges they were assigned to for restrooms and showers, and they all began to get ready for the event. Mazie shared hers with Emilia and two other women, all of whom were fun to be around. Mazie showered off the sweat and dirt from her day, rubbing her face under the stream of cool water.

She began brooding a bit while she stood there, taking in the rush of liquid over her warm skin. It had certainly been a while since she’d been with anyone physically, and she wasn’t lying when she said it wasn’t on her priority list. But every now and then, she’d feel a tingle, a passing thought or whiff of someone’s scent at the sanctuary that wasn’t manure. She hadn’t lost her sexual desire. It had just been put on the back burner for a moment.

Mazie ran her hands down her body, her larger-than-most breasts, the curve of her hips, and bulbous ass. She hadn't even made time for pleasurable sessions for herself, so maybe she truly was due one single sweet night with someone she could meet at the gala event.

When Mazie heard the cackle of Emilia's laugh outside the bathroom, she was shot out from her fantasy world. She scoffed at herself and finished rinsing her hair and body before turning off the water.

There's not going to be anyone there tonight that would be clever enough to charm my pants off. Nah, my good book awaits.

Mazie wrapped her hair in a towel, got dressed, and let the other girls in to get themselves ready. She was still going to help set up before the night began because that was who she was ... always the helper, the giver.

The sanctuary ordered two massive tents that would be placed on the sanctuary property away from the animals. The catering company arrived along with the tents, and Mazie and some of her other coworkers helped coordinate the setup and placement of the food.

Emilia and her roommates arrived a bit later, sporting ball gowns that put prom queens to shame. Mazie watched as Emilia grinned ear to ear, her ruby red, sparkly dress dazzling in the evening light.

"You look gorgeous," Mazie whispered into her friend's ear.

Emilia giggled. "You could, too, you know," she whispered back. "It might even get you laid."

Mazie pushed her friend away softly and turned back to see the caterers. "You get on that then," she said with a little chuckle of her own.

Some of the corps members, like Mazie, had volunteered to work the event rather than attend it. The majority of them had arrived before any guests were set to, which was what they were instructed to do.

It was only a few minutes later that a party bus arrived along the pathway of the sanctuary. Mazie heard its gas-guzzling puff of air and squeaky brakes as she helped in the kitchen. She frowned, getting a fearful stir inside her gut.

She went outside and saw that the bus was full of white, frat-boy-looking types. She recognized the social media influencers invited to the event. Another form of privilege that Mazie detested. For entitled young men who borrowed their parents' money to show off a brand of champagne all over their Instagram pages. As if that added anything to the world.

“The event is here, boys!” Mazie called out.

A few of the men had been walking toward the sanctuary, which they had specifically blocked off due to the sensitivities of the animals. If any of them were to be disbarred, a usually nonviolent Mazie would have some fists to show their mouths.

Two men began to stumble toward her. It took a whole two seconds for Mazie to figure out that they had been pre-drinking and were already half in the bag as they approached the event.

“The animals are off limits for tonight, boys,” Mazie said as they got closer. “We will be happy to host you inside if you'd like.”

She gestured to the tents but turned back to find one of the men looking her up and down. Mazie often wore loose clothing when she was working with the animals, but with her voluptuous form, it was difficult to hide what she had going on beneath the fabric. But she knew that it didn't matter what she wore to those types of men. Harassment was as easy as breathing.

“You're looking like a snack tonight,” the man said.

Mazie did everything she could to keep from telling the man off. She was appropriately nervous, which was what women often had to be to protect themselves anyway.

“You have some much more filling snacks inside,” Mazie said, forcing a smile.

The men sauntered by after giving each other a high five. Mazie watched with concern as a rush of men who could have all been related moved into the tents, immediately grabbing alcohol from behind the bars and screaming for the DJ to turn the music on.

Mazie ran inside, looking around like she had just walked into a horror movie.

The idiots had started talking to the women of the corps, as well as the men. They were taking over tables and demanding booze and food before the event was even set to begin. Sweat trickled down her back again, but it wasn't from the heat.

She made a beeline into the kitchen and informed the higher-ups what was going on. They told her that they would deal with it, and she returned to the main area where the Peace Corps personnel were being harassed.

Mazie thought there should already be reinforcements. They had hired security for the night, but they were not set to arrive for another hour. She was able to find a radio in the back office of the venue not far from the tent.

“We've got some rich assholes here harassing everyone,” Mazie said into the walkie. “I think they're all drunk. I don't even know if they were invited. Send the security now. Better yet, get the police.”

Mazie placed the radio down, then caught the scent of something rancid. She spun around and saw the man from earlier standing at the doorway, holding a whiskey bottle in his hand and swaying.

“My snack ran away,” he muttered.

The man was tall and likely stronger than her. But he was drunk, which was something she could use in her favor. Mazie looked down at his feet, looking for sensitive spots that she could kick, punch, and smash.

She had been trained in self-defense after arriving in the country, mostly for her own reassurance. She had also been harassed before by men at other events, but none had ever done anything physically.

But Mazie had a sneaking suspicion that the intoxicated man before her, whose eyelids were drooping over his red eyes, which were filled with a violent hunger, wasn't going to take no for an answer.

“Get out of here,” Mazie tried to snarl. “Get the *fuck* out of here. You aren't allowed back here!”

The man stumbled forward, still holding the bottle and slurring his words. “I want my snack first,” he said. “I will taste my snack, and then I will go.”

Mazie flicked her eyes at the door and tried to hurry past him. She remained out of his reach most of the way, but he grabbed hold of the back of her pants at the last second. She smacked his hand, which pissed him off, causing him to yank at the back of her T-shirt.

“Bitch doesn't know what's good for her,” he grunted.

Mazie was terrified but also enraged.

THREE



PYRUS

Pyrus was dressed to the nines to attend the endangered animal charity event. He was picked up at his hotel by Gerri once he had moved around a few meetings. The large, unrelenting sun shining down on him glinted off the black limo, giving it the appearance of having perspiration.

He had been to Johannesburg before, so the heat wasn't anything new. He wore a taupe suit that was light and airy with the extra bonus of still looking sharp and attractive.

Pyrus climbed into the air-conditioned splendor of the limo, finding Gerri sitting comfortably and looking pretty. She already had a glass of champagne in her hands, holding it daintily with two fingers.

"It's never too early in this heat," she said as Pyrus settled opposite her.

Pyrus unbuttoned his jacket and shook his head as she offered him a glass. "Perhaps we should save the celebration for later," he said with a charming wink.

Gerri gave him an equally charming grin back and then nodded with approval.

"This isn't my first rodeo," Gerri said, leaning the glass on her leg. "I have known shifters like you before ... rich, a bit lonely, a bit cynical. And I never fail to find them the one thing that makes them whole."

A smirk grew slowly like ivy on an old house on Pyrus's lips. "And what is that?"

Gerri frowned, amused. “Well, love, of course,” she smirked.

“Love,” Pyrus said, gazing out the window. “Of course.”

“You’ve heard the term?” Gerri quipped.

Pyrus shrugged. “I have heard it, yes,” he said, feeling far away. “I am a dragon shifter, after all. I’ve just never experienced it, I suppose.”

Pyrus always wondered why he was so quick to divulge personal information to Gerri. He thought maybe that was her power. She sat opposite him with a nonjudgmental stare, a look that said, “tell me everything.”

“Never been in love?” Gerri said.

Pyrus shook his head. “I put it in the category of unicorns and vampires,” Pyrus said. “Maybe it exists, but probably not for me.”

Gerri nodded, a smug smile on her face. “I will certainly enjoy proving you wrong.”

Pyrus hoped she was right, though, on the surface, he didn’t want to admit that he was holding out that kind of hope. If it hadn’t happened in his five hundred years of living, why on Earth would it happen now?

The sanctuary was a fair distance from the main city, so Pyrus and Gerri chatted between comfortable silences where only the hum of the air conditioning could be heard between them. As a billionaire entrepreneur, Pyrus had learned the art of chitchat and could probably teach a Harvard class on it for up-and-coming creative minds.

A few minutes away from the event, Gerri received a call. She removed her phone from her clutch and placed it on her leg, letting it speak aloud within the car. “Gerri speaking,” she said with a sip of her drink.

A frantic voice on the other end of the line severed the serenity of the cool car ride. “Ms. Wilder,” the voice said, “we have a situation going on here ... the influencers arrived early, and they are ... they’re disrupting everything.”

Gerri's calm demeanor remained as she leaned toward the phone. "Tell me everything," she said firmly. "Breathe in and out slowly and tell me what's going on."

It seemed that the woman on the phone did just that, and Pyrus could hear the sounds of jovial, immature laughter echoing behind her.

"They're harassing the women, knocking over tables. I don't know what to do."

Pyrus's ease had been shattered too. He squeezed his fists, the nails digging into his palm sharply.

"Where is security?" Gerri demanded.

"I ... I don't know," the woman said, her voice about to crack with fear.

There was nothing Pyrus hated more than the innocent people being bothered. He widened his eyes at Gerri and spoke over the person on the phone. "How far out are we?"

Gerri looked at the time, then shifted her gray, thoughtful eyes back at him. "About fifteen minutes."

Pyrus's dragon rumbled. "I really like this suit," he said, removing the jacket and folding it neatly beside him.

"We will be there soon, Megan. Don't you worry," Gerri said before hanging up.

She did not question what Pyrus was about to do. She had really meant it when she said she'd met shifters like him before.

"Stop the car," Pyrus said, removing his dress shirt and unbuckling his pants.

Gerri ordered the driver to stop, and by that time, Pyrus was just in his underwear. Gerri was looking at him with gratitude but not objectification. Her eyes glimmered with some kind of knowing Pyrus couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Take me on a date first before you get naked," Gerri said, smirking over her glass.

Pyrus gave her a sexy grin, knowing she didn't mean it. Teasing with Gerri was fun, but that's all it was. Besides, he had Peace Corps personnel to save.

"If you'd only be so lucky," Pyrus said and winked.

He climbed out of the car into the blinding sunlight, then closed his eyes to settle the mix of sensations stirring inside him.

The shifting process was a lot like sitting down to meditate. Once you'd done it a few times, it was easy to tap into. Pyrus had done it well over a few thousand times, maybe more at his ancient dragon age, so for him, it was more like flicking a switch.

He grew taller in the middle of the road, his tail sprouting from his back, his nose elongating into a snout, jaw cracking to make up for the space required for his ravenous fangs. His skin was covered by a thick layer of dark-magenta-shaded scales that felt like leather to the touch. And the fire that swirled in his belly gave him a deep sense of tranquility and purpose that no other human feeling had replicated.

Pyrus opened his eyes, then immediately blasted forward.

His wings made it easy to get to the venue in record time. He saw the empty party bus and the few drunken idiots who were mulling around outside, some of them standing outside the animal side of the sanctuary, attempting to break in.

Pyrus landed directly next to the two men, indenting the earth with his huge feet. The ground shook as he hissed at the men who looked up at him like they were looking into the eyes of the devil.

They toppled onto one another as he curled his head down at them, letting small billows of smoke twirl out of his nostrils.

"Fucking hell!" the men screamed.

Great satisfaction rolled through him from seeing the look of terror in their eyes. He stalked the two men as they scurried back to the party bus, stomping slowly to make the ground shake. Pyrus flew over the bus and landed just outside the door

they attempted to slither through, his massive feet leaving more imprints in the road.

Fucking morons!

Pyrus let out a louder, much more intimidating roar at the men, who once again stumbled away, petrified. Pyrus then turned to the bus, made sure no one else was on it, then smacked it with his boulder-sized head.

The bus fell to its side, glass shattering instantly with a thud. He turned to face the venue where the men he had easily terrified had retreated to. He could hear women yelling and screaming, which only acted to further enhance his rage.

The tents the corps had set up weren't tall enough to allow him entrance, so he shrunk his wings into his back and lowered his long neck. He instantly saw what the woman on the phone had been talking about, making his already hot blood boil.

Tables had been flipped over while bottles of alcohol were being stolen from the bar section. Women and men alike were trying to fight off the assholes, but there wasn't any support in sight.

So Pyrus did what he always did best. He breathed in deeply, tilted his head back, and let out a deafening shriek. It stopped everyone in their tracks, turning to face the massive dragon who had abruptly entered the venue.

Get out! Pyrus screamed in his mind.

Though they couldn't hear him, his words were easily interpreted. The men stumbled around him, exiting the area with eagerness and an intoxicated alarm. Pyrus made sure to snarl at each man as they tumbled by, trying to hold back on the impulse he had to rip their heads from their torsos.

“Let go of me!”

Pyrus snapped his head toward the kitchen area, where he heard a woman's voice yelling at someone. He didn't hesitate for a moment and charged in the door that led into the back room.

His dragon shoulders scraped along the side walls, knocking some of the structure to the ground. The kitchen ceiling lifted high to allow him space to move, and what he came upon within that room was something he would never forget for more than one astounding reason.

Pyrus came upon a man holding a woman by her throat against a giant metal fridge. It seemed that she had managed to get a few blows in, as the man's nose poured red and his cheeks sported fresh scratch marks.

He is going to be pouring out more than blood once I'm done with him!

All at once, the universe seemed to stop for Pyrus. He took in what was happening to the woman, the danger and the rage surging inside him, and at the same time, something soared like a meteorite swimming through the sky.

Her eyes were bright emerald, shining at him, unafraid and ferocious. Despite the fact that she was being held against her will, Pyrus knew she wasn't weak. She was a strong-willed woman with a captivating mind, body, and soul.

His dragon heart knew the woman was his mate. Which not only caused a cascade of joy to move through him but also a blinding, incomprehensible fury.

Pyrus saw a flourish of violent images in his mind like a carousel of homicide. He imagined snapping the man's neck in half like a pencil, pulling his guts from his body and displaying them like party streamers.

Nothing would make him happier than to make his ancestors weep.

But Pyrus saw a look in the woman's eyes that told him to hold back. So he took a step forward, stomping his feet. It caused a mini earthquake within the kitchen, shaking the plates of food and causing a few to plunge to the ground.

He then roared in the man's face, drool mixed with a tiny wildfire that lit his eyebrows ablaze.

The man instantly let go of the woman, squealing like a pig, who took the opportunity to fling her elbow and slam it

into his testicles. The man leaned forward in agony, using the other hand to wipe at the destruction of his brows.

The woman pushed the man over, who immediately curled into a pathetic fetal position. That was all these types of men really were. Sad little children looking for attention.

“Fuck you, you piece of shit!” the woman yelled.

Pyrus snarled in agreement, which caused the woman to gaze up at him.

Her eyes swam with apprehension, which made Pyrus a little sad. He took a step back, bowing his head in submission.

“I ... I guess you're here for the party?” the woman asked.

Pyrus nodded, his massive head causing a gust of wind within the small space.

He wanted to shift back, to talk to her and comfort her, but he needed to make sure the other corps members were okay first. So he moved his head around the woman, lightly grazing her hips, and took the man by his pants with his teeth.

He saw the woman cover her mouth, shielding a tiny smile of glee. That made something beyond the fire of his dragon nature glow in his stomach.

Pyrus made sure the influencers had all left the venue, lining them up along the curb like a police raid. It was only then that Gerri had arrived, along with the local authorities she had called along the way.

Pyrus stayed apart from the woman intentionally. He was feeling nervous, which was something he wasn't used to. He maintained his dragon form until the men were taken away, and the venue was cleaned up by the other corps workers who had arrived later.

She was standing along the edge of the tent with her hands crossed, her brow furrowed as she watched the men being taken away. Pyrus felt a little creepy, standing there by the car watching a woman he had just met. But she was just so fucking beautiful, he couldn't keep his eyes away from her.

She wore jeans and a loose T-shirt, her dark brown hair tied up into a bun. Her breathing was rapid, which caused her generous breasts to rise and fall hypnotically. Her jeans hugged her waist and hips in all the right, tasty places. Pyrus began to fantasize about comforting her, using his fingers to trace the outline of her body until she couldn't take it anymore.

He had been physically drawn to women before, of course, but this woman was like a fucking magnet. Already, he would crawl on his hands and knees for her and give her the pleasure she had never experienced in her entire lifetime.

It was odd, arousing, and a bit disturbing. He wondered if that was what it felt like to find your mate ... out of this world and slightly upsetting.

He had heard from his dragon ancestors about love and finding your mate being like some kind of madness. He had scoffed at it, thinking it was for someone else, for romance novels, even for humans.

But when she gazed at him with a curious look, and one side of his face grew into a smile, Pyrus knew the woman was going to either define him or destroy him.

FOUR



MAZIE

The smoke and sparks were still clearing, the heat and light giving way to a pleasant, charcoal smell like a campfire on a quiet fall night.

Mazie waved her hand in front of her face, trying to clear the air. Everything had happened so fast. She still wasn't sure she'd seen everything properly. She was being menaced by one of those noisy influencer guys when she was rescued by ... a dragon.

A dragon?

A cool breeze stirred the air, making the curls of smoke drift around her face. Shafts of late sunlight split the hazy cloud, and a solid, huge dark shape was revealed.

Mazie stepped forward to get a better look at the dragon when he suddenly shrank. The massive wings folded and disappeared. His giant, dark form dissipated toward the ground in a flow of dark specks too fast for her eyes to follow.

Mazie blinked, and standing in front of her was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen.

Naked. Most gorgeous naked man I've ever seen. And he's NAKED!

There didn't seem to be an accepted socially contrived response to this situation. Still, Mazie was pretty sure it wasn't correct etiquette to just stare at him. She couldn't help herself, though.

A few stray strands of light wove through the curling smoke clouds, illuminating the man's strong, broad chest. His shoulders were huge, and his arms thick with sculpted, defined muscle. Mazie's eyes were drawn down his washboard abs, and she couldn't help a long pause when she laid eyes on his lower attributes.

He cleared his throat lightly, and Mazie almost jumped. He didn't seem embarrassed at all ... *why would he be?* ... and he was standing relaxed with his feet set apart and his hands on his hips.

Mazie looked up into his face, and she was caught by his golden eyes. They would look pale brown in almost any light, but right now, with the late sun angling through the curls of smoke, they were a shining, flawless amber.

Maybe, it's the dragon lingering in his blood. Those eyes do not look human.

His gaze had definitely entranced her. Now that her cool green eyes were locked onto his fiery ones, it was as if both of them were caught in a trap. She sensed unbelievable power and strength, a presence that went far beyond his impressive human shape.

Mazie took a step forward, feeling like she was drugged. She was being pulled to him, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Parts of her body that hadn't stirred in years were suddenly awake, alive, and throbbing. Her lips parted, and she let out a tiny, breathy sigh, a sound of pure longing.

The man smiled, and her heart leapt to an even faster beat. His lips were dark red, the dramatic curve of his smile accentuating his noble features. Her gaze darted between his lips and his eyes as if trapped in a perpetual motion machine. She was hypnotized, but the sensations flooding through her were so powerful that she never wanted it to end.

Unless it just gets better once he starts touching me. I should get closer.

Mazie took another step toward him, and the man's smile widened. His golden eyes shimmered with a light that came

from within and had nothing to do with the setting sun. He reached out a hand, and Mazie took it.

“I am Pyrus,” he said softly. Mazie almost moaned aloud as the deep, resonant baritone stroked her senses. She tilted her head up and smiled, enjoying the dancing glints in his amber eyes that just grew deeper the closer she looked.

He cleared his throat again, and Mazie blinked, trying to clear her mind.

He said something, didn't he?

His name!

“Pyrus,” she stuttered. “It’s nice to meet you, Pyrus.”

He raised his eyebrows, a truly mischievous grin dancing across his features. His eyes glinted a whole new shade of gold as he watched her.

Shit.

“Mazie,” she said, forcing the word out through her throat. Nerves rose in her as she realized she’d stood there staring at his nakedness so hard that she had literally forgotten her own name. “My name is Mazie,” she said, letting her breath out in a rush.

Pyrus’s hand tightened on hers. “Nice to meet you, Mazie,” Pyrus said. “Are you all right? Did that man hurt you?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine,” she said. “No harm done.”

He smiled, a look of relief flooding across his face. Mazie became lost in his eyes again, enjoying the touch of his hand against her own.

Suddenly, the shrill sound of a siren broke through their quiet, private world. A gust of wind came along at that exact moment and lifted the smoke. It had been wreathed around them like a shield against the outside world, but now the world had come to them.

The area suddenly was flooded with authorities. Pyrus dropped her hand, and Mazie stepped away from him. A sense

of panic surged in her ... she didn't want him to go away.

We only just met!

"I must go and explain to security what happened," Pyrus said. "And find some clothes."

"No rush," Mazie muttered. He grinned.

"Not everyone will be as forgiving as you," Pyrus joked.

"Can't imagine why not," she said, winking. She didn't get a chance to say anything else as Pyrus disappeared toward a nearby patrol vehicle.

Gerri appeared out of nowhere, throwing her arms around Mazie and hugging her fiercely. "Are you all right? What a ruckus! I saw most of it, but then the smoke got in the way. Please tell me you're okay."

"Yes, yes, I'm okay," Mazie assured Gerri. "Just a little shaken."

"Good." Gerri's smile was dazzling. "I'm Gerri, by the way. You must be Mazie."

It shocked Mazie that a billionaire would know the members of the corps so well. "I am. It's really great to meet you. I have to get back to work, though."

"What?" Gerri muttered.

Mazie waved a hand at the chaos that surrounded them. "Look at this mess. The tents, the decorations, it's all gone to hell. It's going to take ages to get this all fixed up."

"Oh, my dear!" Gerri exclaimed. "I have a backup crew on it already. Don't worry about a thing."

"Really?" Mazie asked, confused.

"Really," Gerri said, squeezing Mazie's shoulders one last time. "The only thing that matters is that you're all right."

"I might be better than all right," Mazie said softly. She was watching the direction that Pyrus had disappeared, hoping she could conjure him by thought. "What about everyone

else?” Mazie asked suddenly. “Where are my friends? I need to check to see if they’re okay.”

“Of course, honey. Let’s go,” Gerri said, steering Mazie toward a nearby truck. There were a couple of Mazie’s friends sitting around the back of it, gulping from bottles of water and sneezing from the smoke.

“Is everyone okay?” Mazie asked. Nods went around the circle, with most of them having enough mild smoke inhalation to stop them from talking.

“That was wild,” one of the younger girls said. “Never seen anything like it. Just pow! A dragon appears, breathing fire just like in a story! Knocking over trucks and scattering villains. What a day.”

“Yeah,” Mazie agreed. “What a day.”

She backed away from the group, relieved that no one had gotten hurt. She was still a little in shock, not just from the events that had taken place but from her reaction to the man himself.

Pyrus.

“Gerri, who was that guy?” Mazie asked. She was gazing into the distance, watching the troublemakers as they were being cuffed and thrown into the security vehicles.

“That was Pyrus Bloodmoon. He’s a very rich entrepreneur. Supports a great many charities with me. He’s one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met, underneath his tough shell, that is ... and he is also your true mate.”

Mazie did a double-take, looking back at Gerri. “What do you mean by that?”

Gerri shrugged. “With shifters, there is always a fated match. Pyrus has been alone for a very long time ... centuries, in fact. When he meets his fated mate, it will complete his heart, and he will never desire another ever again.”

Mazie felt excitement and fear building in her stomach. She wanted to get closer to Pyrus, definitely. But this was all a bit heavy.

“I see,” Mazie answered, even though she wasn’t absolutely sure what it all meant. Suddenly, a bunch of clues added up in Mazie’s mind. “Oh, this is because of that matchmaker thing, isn’t it? I’ve heard a lot about that recently. You do some kind of meetup service.”

Gerri smiled, shaking her head. “It’s not just a hookup deal, Mazie. I have a one-hundred-percent success rate with making matches. I specialize in finding mates for shifters, and so far, I’ve never been wrong.”

“But ... you only just met me a few times.”

Gerri nodded eagerly. “I know. The moment I saw you, I got a sense of the kind of man you needed in your life. That’s how these things work. I always tend to meet people at just the right time to bring them together.”

“So ... what happens next?” Mazie felt incredibly confused. She wanted to see Pyrus so badly that it was literally causing her pain. At the same time, she was floored by the news that they were “fated mates.” She certainly hadn’t been looking for a serious, permanent relationship when she got out of bed this morning.

“You’ll have to start getting to know each other,” Gerri said, her eyes dancing with amusement. “Let him court you. See if you get along. Even if it’s ‘fated,’ it doesn’t mean it’s set in stone. Both of you have to choose each other, as well.”

Mazie felt like there was more to be said, but Gerri did not elaborate. *If we are fated but refuse each other, what happens after that?* “I don’t know,” Mazie muttered. “This is kind of a big deal, you know?”

“Yes,” Gerri said, taking Mazie’s hand and giving it a friendly squeeze. “I really do understand. Sometimes, I don’t drop all the news at once, but I feel like you and Pyrus already connected. Did you?”

Mazie smiled, remembering the way their eyes had locked and the way the light pressure of his hand seemed to bind them together with a gravity that was almost planetary.

He's a fiery, blazing sun, and I'm an asteroid getting pulled in until I melt.

“We did,” Mazie said. “I felt something.”

“Good,” Gerri said, squeezing her hand again. “All I want is to see the two of you happy.”

Mazie nodded, wondering how she had gotten lucky enough to have Gerri taking such good care of her. “I wasn’t looking for a relationship,” Mazie said. She still wasn’t. It didn’t matter how badly she wanted to see Pyrus again. She wasn’t ready to upend her entire life to fit him into it.

Does he know about the mate thing? What sort of expectations does he have?

“I can see your mind reeling from here, Mazie,” Gerri said. “I’ve got to go and organize this crew to get the event back together. Why don’t you take a few moments to think about this? Don’t rush yourself, dear. You’ve had a great shock as well as seeing a dragon for the first time. Get yourself something to drink and sit for a while.”

“Yes,” Mazie said softly. “That is a great idea. Thank you, Gerri.”

Gerri smiled and hurried away, gesturing, and calling out to people as she went. Even though she was not a tall woman, Gerri somehow had a commanding presence that everyone responded to. She wasn’t overbearing, loud, or rude. She just carried a strong, empowering energy that made people feel valued. It seemed to affect anyone she met, and it encouraged people to go with her cause.

Mazie headed away from all the excitement and found herself a cup of tea and a bottle of water at the back of the medical van. The nurses demanded to examine her, and Mazie sat quietly but impatiently for a few minutes as they listened to her lungs and took her blood pressure.

Her friends had already been released back to their tents and were probably getting ready for the gala. She knew she should have been, too, but she hadn’t been keen on attending

even before all this went down. Now she was tired, shocked, confused, and kind of scared.

As soon as the nurses let her go, Mazie took her cup of tea out to her tent at the edge of an open field beyond the main area. It was off the more populated grounds and had a small lake at the back where the plain met the trees. She pitched it here because she enjoyed listening to the silence of the wilderness.

Mazie took small, slow sips of the sweet tea. It revitalized her immediately, and the tension running through her was quickly replaced by a wave of exhaustion.

The words *fated mates* tumbled through her mind. Gerri said it meant they were destined to be together, but how? The idea of spending her whole life with a man she'd just met sounded absurd. No matter which way she looked at it, it did not make sense.

Common sense always failed in matters of the heart, though. As the sun finally sank below the horizon, deepening the shadows into dark violet shades, Mazie let herself just think about him.

Pyrus.

Her body warmed in ways it hadn't for such a long time. Her blood felt like it was threaded with tongues of fire. Flames flickered in her from the inside out, making her nipples harden and pussy throb.

Mazie let her eyes slide closed as she remembered every beautiful, muscular inch of him. The sculpted shoulders, broad arms, beautiful long-fingered hands. His skin was a light tan, a sheen of gold that gave him a glow of good health.

And no tan lines. Almost as if he just walks around like that all day.

Mazie's mouth watered so much that she had to swallow hard. Bolts of desire ran through her as images of their bodies twisted together danced through her mind.

His face. His eyes.

She gasped, holding her breath as she thought about his eyes. She had never seen a gaze with so much depth. It wasn't just that he saw her or looked so carefully at her. It was the way he seemed to invite her into him.

Into his soul ...

Whatever arguments she could come up with for not seeing him, they wouldn't hold out for long. Pyrus was a delicious, intoxicating drug ... and she was already hooked.

FIVE



PYRUS

Uncertain of how the night would go, Pyrus didn't bother to put his suit back on. He didn't want to ruin it by quickly shifting.

He forgot, though, that others wouldn't accept his nakedness so nonchalantly and was quickly pulled aside by one of the firefighters and given a pair of blue overalls. He thanked the guy and apologized for the fire. The guy told him not to sweat it ... most men with any sense of honor would have blasted the creeps.

Pyrus then tried to make his way to the main building, but people flooded his path. He wasn't exactly thrilled that so many people were seeing him in baggy, blue overalls, but a crowd had gathered, and most people knew he'd saved the day.

"Good job," a random man said, slapping him on the shoulder. "It was close to being a disaster, there."

"Yeah, thanks," Pyrus said. "Too bad I'm underdressed." He threw a glance back to where Gerri's car had been, and it had disappeared along with his clothes. "I guess I'll have to find another tux ..."

"Oh, no rush, dear," said an older woman who paused to give him an appreciative look. "We all know that heroes don't always wear capes."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, shaking his head. Pyrus was very aware that his bare shoulders and chest were exposed,

with long, loose straps falling across his belly, leaving his hips bare.

Of course, the only overalls the guy has are two sizes too big.

Pyrus kept trying to make his way back to the main buildings but had people stopping him the whole time. Some of the guests had been too far away to see, and they wanted a blow-by-blow account of what had happened, then they had to get Pyrus a drink to congratulate him.

When he reached the office buildings, he maneuvered his way through the crowds of people who were looking at the information displays for each animal looked after at the Sanchez-Hathaway Animal Sanctuary. Pyrus wouldn't mind checking out the stands for himself so he could see what kind of work his mate was involved in.

My mate.

Pyrus couldn't believe it. The connection he'd felt the moment he looked at her had been like a lock turning deep inside his soul. He would never desire another woman in his entire life.

I just need to get changed. Then, I can find her.

Pyrus was inventing wonderful daydreams of finding his beautiful mate sweeping through the crowd in elegant shoes and a silken gown. He'd put his arms around her waist and take her straight to the dance floor, where they would sway slowly while they gazed into each other's eyes.

He was on his way through to the staff area when he saw a manager. She was talking with a couple of chefs in a firm tone. It sounded like they had to change up some of the dishes because of an unexpected shortage.

When he paused next to the group, both of the chefs gave him a shocked look. The event organizer turned to him and smiled, appraising him quickly.

“Mr. Bloodmoon, isn't it? It's very unfortunate that we had such an incident and that you had to get personally involved.”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you,” Pyrus said. “It was my pleasure to help, but I have lost my tux in the process.”

The woman’s gaze flicked across him, and he saw the glint in her eye.

“I personally don’t have a problem,” she said with a soft laugh. “But we do have press here ... legitimate reporters, not internet influencers. We’ll need to get you into a suit.”

She turned and looked down a nearby hallway. “Gerald!” she called. An older man hurried out from the kitchen, muttering as he came toward them. “Event coordinator,” she whispered. “The best in the business.”

“Yes, Shelley,” Gerald snapped. “If the steak shortage isn’t bad enough, now I’m here to supervise errant workmen? You need to take better care of your appearance, young man. You can’t come to an event like this dressed like *that*.”

Shelley covered a giggle with her hand. “Gerald, this is Mr. Bloodmoon. He was involved in an incident in which he ... lost his tux. Since we need him looking smart for promotions, I was hoping you’d have something he could wear.”

“All right, all right,” Gerald said. “I might be able to throw something together.”

Every moment that dragged by felt like a sharp edge dragged against every single nerve. He wanted to get back out there and find his mate.

Mazie.

Somewhere, deep in his blood, his dragon growled with a possessive, primal urge. He wanted to take her right now.

As Gerald led him to a small office and threw together an acceptable ensemble from leftover dinner jackets and suit pants left by waiters, Pyrus thought about shifting back into his dragon shape and just diving down on his mate, grabbing her with his claws and carrying her away.

He was still thinking about it as he examined his reflection in the mirror. Pyrus took a moment to tidy his hair and wipe a

smudge of ash from his cheek, then he headed back out to the party.

He'd only taken two steps into the foyer when someone called out.

“Mr. Bloodmoon!” boomed the voice. “If it isn't the man of the hour!”

A young guy came out of the crowd to shake his hand, and everyone nearby turned and clapped. Pyrus held a smile on his face, but it was difficult. He wanted to shove them all out of his way and run through the compound until he found Mazie.

“The fellow who single-handedly saved the event and protected the members of the corps,” an older gentleman said, bringing over a tall glass of champagne. “A toast! Raise your glasses to Mr. Bloodmoon!”

Everyone did. Flashes went off as several people took a picture. Pyrus was angling toward the edge of a crowd when a young woman came charging at him, a small microphone clutched in her hand and a cameraman hot on her heels.

Pyrus groaned out loud. Luckily, everyone was talking so loudly about how great he was that no one heard it.

The short, enthusiastic reporter stopped in front of him and presented her microphone. “May I have a few words, Mr. Bloodmoon? How heroic of you to step in and save those people. What motivated you into such a selfless act?”

My mate was getting pawed by a lecherous creep, and I decided to shred his flesh from his bones.

“I just like to help,” he said awkwardly. “I saw people in trouble, and I acted without thought.”

“Wow,” she said, nodding and gesturing for her cameraman to zoom in. “That is so inspiring! I hear you're a major contributor to this charity, as well?”

“Yes, that's correct,” Pyrus answered. His eyes were fixed on the distant crowd as he searched for Mazie. He couldn't wait to see what she looked like when she was made up.

Not that she wasn't nonstop sexy in her work clothes.

Far away, near the buffet table, Gerri suddenly came into view. Pyrus excused himself from the reporter and dove through the crowd after Gerri. At least people seemed to have settled down about his heroics, and no one asked him to step in and shake their hand.

Pyrus chased Gerri, wondering how such a tiny woman could move so fast. Finally, he flagged her down by the champagne fountain.

“Pyrus!” she exclaimed. “Where have you been?”

“Finding a suit and being interviewed,” he answered.

“You met Mazie?” Gerri asked, her tone light and teasing.

“Yes, I met her,” Pyrus said. “She’s my mate. I’m sure of it.”

Gerri nodded. “She certainly is. I knew it would be a good match.”

Pyrus nodded, slightly thrown. He’d known Mazie was his mate, but hearing it confirmed sent his mind into a bit of a spin.

“If you check your calendar, you’ll find that your appointment in Johannesburg has been canceled,” Gerri said. “I also have a tent set up for you to stay in during the event with your possessions already brought in from the hotel.”

Pyrus frowned. “What? I thought it was an important meeting.”

Gerri laughed, waving a hand at him. “All a ruse, darling. I just needed to get you on a plane, and at this event, so you could meet Mazie.”

“How did you know?” asked Pyrus, amazed. “How did you know we were mates?”

Gerri shrugged. “I didn’t *know*, exactly. I meet a lot of people through these events, and I take note of the interesting ones. I knew you and Mazie were a likely match, so I conspired to get you together.”

Gerri grinned as she took a sip of champagne. There was a twinkle in her eye that Pyrus couldn't ignore.

"Wait," he said, shaking his head. "This whole event was for us? You planned this thing just so we could meet up?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Gerri said. "It's a worthy cause. Besides, I love a good party."

"But what if I hadn't agreed to come?" Pyrus asked, confused. "You've spent millions here."

"And I've made millions for the charity and the sanctuary itself," Gerri said with a very satisfied smile. "The event is a huge success. Besides, I knew you'd come."

"Really?" Pyrus asked, grinning. "How did you know that?"

Gerri shrugged as she took another sip of champagne. "I'm good at convincing people. I also know you pretty well, Pyrus. I was sure you'd show."

Pyrus looked around at the luxury involved in the party. It was a massive event, and he was stunned to find it was all in his honor. "I just don't know what I did to deserve this kind of gesture from you, Gerri," Pyrus said softly. "Thank you."

"I appreciate your gratitude," Gerri said. "But maybe it's not about you. Maybe, it's about Mazie."

Hearing her name sent waves of warm pleasure pulsing through Pyrus's body. His sense of smell sharpened immediately as if his dragon was attempting to track her.

"You know what, Pyrus?" Gerri asked. "It's an incredible night out, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is," Pyrus agreed, looking up at the flawless black sky studded with stars that glinted like chips of shattered crystal.

"I think you should take a walk around the perimeter of the compound," Gerri said, winking. "You might find something out there that you've been looking for."

Gerri turned and disappeared into the crowd. The place was quieting down, and guests were beginning to leave. Some die-hard partygoers still danced and helped themselves to food, though.

Pyrus was able to leave the main crowd without being stopped and quickly walked out to the farthest edge of the sanctuary. The night was very still, only broken by the odd, haunting sound of insects or night birds calling from the trees.

The farther away from the event he went, the more peaceful the night was. Pyrus was beginning to enjoy the solitude when he saw a soft light up ahead.

Gerri sent me out here. She practically drew me a map.

Pyrus approached slowly, his eyes making out a small tent with a lantern hung out front. As he got closer, he saw two fold-up chairs in front of it. One of them was empty.

In the other was his mate.

Pyrus paused in the darkness, knowing she wasn't aware of him yet, and probably wouldn't be able to see him if she looked up. He drank in her beauty, enjoying the chance to watch her while she was unaware.

Mazie was curled up in the chair, her legs folded up against her. She had a book resting on her knees, and it was clear by her focused attention that she was really into it. Her cool green eyes flew across the pages as she absorbed the words. Pyrus was too far away to see the title.

Her long, light brown hair was pulled into a messy knot at her neck, with pale strands drifting around her face. The light flickered as moths passed back and forth in front of the lantern, and made her shimmer like something ethereal, truly not of this world.

Mazie sported an oversized, long-sleeved shirt and sweatpants. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and curl up with her. She looked so cozy. Pyrus was almost sorry he'd wanted to see her in formal dress.

He took a few steps closer, still sure that she couldn't see him. Her eyes remained fixed on the book. Pyrus watched.

Heat was rising in him again.

It was undeniable. His dragon recognized her. His body tensed as his muscles swelled and adrenaline poured through his veins. The urge to take her was so strong that it was a throbbing pain. Pyrus had never been so hard in his entire life.

She sat up slightly, and Pyrus stayed absolutely still. He was enjoying watching her so much that he was careful to contain himself unless he disturbed her.

Then she opened her mouth and lazily stuck her tongue out. Pyrus stifled a cry as the hot pulsing between his legs increased. He knew exactly where he wanted that tongue.

She lifted one hand from the edge of the book and put her fingertip in her mouth. Again, Pyrus had to hold himself still with a fierce act of will.

It only took a couple of seconds for Mazie to lick her finger so she could catch the corner of the book and flip the page, but to Pyrus, it felt like an eternity. Lust raged through him, taking his breath away and making his temples pound. He found himself taking small steps toward her, unable to resist the pull of her scent.

Automatically, part of his mind turned outward to assess for threats or see if anyone was nearby to disturb them. He was slightly shocked to find she was out here all by herself with absolutely no one around. His intense desire was dampened by a strong, sharp bolt of worry.

“Mazie,” he snapped, coming out of the shadows toward her. “What the hell are you doing out here by yourself?”

Mazie jumped in her chair so hard that she almost fell out of it. Her green eyes were wide and confused as she looked him up and down. Pyrus strode into the circle of light made by her lantern and stood in front of her with his arms folded while he waited for her to answer his question.



MAZIE

Mazie was so startled by the sudden voice that she almost dropped her book. For a few moments, her head swam, and blood pounded in her ears. She'd come out here purposefully to be alone, and she hadn't expected to be disturbed.

She clung to the book, not letting it fall, as she sat up and quickly put her feet on the ground. After the incident earlier today, she was ready for just about anything.

When her eyes finally focused on the figure that stepped into the light, Mazie's heart didn't slow. It sped up tenfold.

It's him. Pyrus.

His glinting, deep golden eyes were fixed on her with a kind of intense focus she only associated with big predators, not people. She could tell by the set of his shoulders and the bulging arm muscles that he was tense.

Did he ask me a question?

Mazie couldn't remember if he had or not. She was still blinking up at him as if he had literally reached out and stolen her voice. She swallowed, but her mouth stayed brick dry.

Gerri said he was my mate.

The moment drew out between them. His eyes were so intense and predatory that Mazie felt like a helpless rabbit on a treeless plain.

Are you going to hunt me down ... eat me, maybe?

“Mazie,” Pyrus snapped. “I asked you a question. What are you doing out here by yourself?”

Mazie heard the question, but it didn’t register. His words sparked her thoughts back to life and returned her power of speech.

“What are *you* doing out here?” she asked as if he hadn’t even spoken. The last time she’d seen him, he’d been completely butt-naked. Now he was dressed in an elegant dinner jacket and fitted slacks. She couldn’t decide which she liked better. “Aren’t you supposed to be at the gala?” she asked.

Pyrus shook his head. “No. I mean, yes. I mean, I was. But I came looking for you.”

Pyrus turned in a small circle, gesturing around them with sharp hand movements.

“Why are you out here by yourself? You were just attacked not that long ago. Shouldn’t you have guards or something?”

Mazie laughed softly. He was so cute. When his face twisted in consternation, his eyes darkened just a little. She loved the twist to his mouth and the confusion in his eyes.

“I’m fine, Pyrus. Ordinary people don’t have bodyguards just hanging around. Besides, I’m perfectly okay.”

“I don’t like this,” he said, still surveying the area as if he wanted to set up a perimeter. “What if something happened?”

Mazie shrugged. “I’m pretty far out, and I do this specifically for peace and quiet. I really don’t think any of the tourist caravans would come out this far. Most of those guys would be scared to wander around the camp at night. They’d be too scared of nocturnal animals ... or dragons.”

He studied her, his warm gold eyes meeting her cool green ones. They both chuckled at the joke, and Mazie felt a pull between them that was so strong that she almost flung herself at him. The urge to wrap her arms around his neck and press her body against his was overwhelming.

“Word does seem to have gotten around about our dragon protector,” Mazie said, putting her book down and curling up in the chair again. “I think I’m pretty safe.”

“Pretty safe just isn’t good enough,” Pyrus said, scanning the darkness again. “But we are alone, so I think you picked a good spot.”

Mazie smiled up at him, waiting for him to take his eyes away from whatever threats he perceived in the darkness and look at her again. It only took a few seconds before his amber eyes came back to her face, and Mazie absorbed his attention like a flower drinking in the heat and light from the sun.

“Won’t you sit?” she said as she gestured to the empty chair.

He looked at it in surprise. “You want me to join you?”

“Please,” she answered, smiling. Pyrus sat across from her and folded one leg as he got comfortable. A couple of moths flitted by the lantern, their wings sending flickering patterns across Pyrus’s handsome face.

He’s sitting right in front of me, staring at me. What the fuck do I say?

Even though Mazie was confronted by how powerfully attractive he was, she didn’t feel nervous or tongue-tied, not exactly. There simply seemed to be nothing that needed to be said, as if she and Pyrus were already comfortable with each other.

It was obvious that he was content to just gaze at her as if recording every detail of her features into his deepest memory. Mazie couldn’t blame him one bit ... she was doing the exact same.

The only anxiety she felt was because of her own attraction to him, a burning ache deep inside her that was quickly destroying her self-control. Pyrus did not make her nervous, but her reaction to him did.

“Do you like living like this?” he asked, gesturing to the tent.

She nodded. "I like being close to the land and the animals. If I'm far away from other people, I get to see some pretty amazing things. I'm at peace out here."

"You don't miss basic comforts? Luxuries?"

"Of course I do," she said. "I just find it stifling if I live hemmed in by people and buildings for too long."

"How long have you been in the corps?"

"Oh, pretty much my whole adult life," she said, laughing. "We go where we're needed. There's always someone in trouble."

"So, you're like a superhero?"

Mazie winked. "If you like."

Pyrus paused, watching the pair of moths darting around each other as they fought for their chance to immolate themselves in the flame. Mazie could almost feel him scanning the area again, making sure they weren't in danger.

"Don't you ever want to settle down?" he asked. "Don't you want a place to call home?"

Mazie looked away, feeling an ache in her chest. An old emotional scar, but a deep one.

"Of course," she said a bit wistfully. "But this is where I am, now. I'm committed to this, and it gives me purpose."

"And pleasure?" he asked. "Your daily work should always bring you joy."

"It does," she said, grinning. "Why, does your daily toil bring you joy?"

Pyrus's face fell so completely that Mazie worried she'd said something wrong. Pyrus let out a long, rattling sigh.

"That bad, huh?" she asked. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, don't be," Pyrus said, waving a hand. "It's just that there isn't much to say about my business. It's terribly boring."

"Isn't it exciting to make so much money, though?"

“I suppose it is,” he said, nodding. “But I don’t even really know how it works. I inherited most of it. Investments, shares, big and small companies. I’ve got a huge board of directors, as well as a team of submanagers. They handle it all for me, but I’m the guy in charge. I do all the deals, the hand shaking, stuff like that.”

Mazie tilted her head, watching Pyrus look away to study the ground. He really did not seem happy.

“You don’t seem very passionate about it, for a man who says his daily toil should bring him joy.”

Pyrus sighed, still looking at the ground. “It is extremely dull. Maybe that’s why I made my comment. I do like networking and making new connections. Joining businesses together or making trade deals can be very exciting, and I really do love meeting people who are into making good businesses.”

“Good businesses?” Mazie asked, wondering if he meant profits.

“People who care about their companies, their employees,” Pyrus said firmly, finally looking up to meet her eyes. “I take great pride in making sure all my workers are well cared for. It’s important to me that they are paid highly and have jobs they enjoy.”

Mazie laughed softly. “So, you care more about your workers having joy in their daily tasks than you do for yourself.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Pyrus said, laughing softly. He looked away as if the question had stirred up an old memory. The expression on his face became contemplative, and Mazie’s curiosity spiked.

She got the impression that Pyrus knew exactly the kinds of things that could happen if employees were not well cared for in their jobs. It made her wonder just how long he had been in business and what kind of things he had done in his past.

Wait. He’s a shifter. Does that mean he’s, like, really old?

He didn't look a day over thirty with his rich brown hair and beautiful, lightly tanned skin. Mazie propped her chin on her hand and gazed at him, grateful for the quiet, dark night that shrouded them in a circle of light that belonged to them alone.

Mazie was about to ask him why his employees were so important to him when she saw something moving in the darkness. Then she realized there were a lot of shapes coming toward them and sat up.

Pyrus noticed her movement and sat up too. Mazie saw him tilt his head back and take a deep breath through his nose.

"It's okay," he said softly. "It's people. From the party."

Mazie didn't understand for a second until brightly clad women and men in their sober, but elegant suits began to walk by her tent. It was a decent-sized crowd, all of them laughing and joking with one another as they left the party. No one paid much attention to them.

Some of the guests passed by very close and waved as they crossed the circle of light made by Mazie's lantern. She realized that the gala must have ended, and she'd picked a spot somewhere between the compound and one of the housing areas.

Now that they were no longer alone, Mazie felt awkward with Pyrus. She looked away and blushed, standing as another small crowd of people walked by. Some carried lanterns that bobbed in the dark, illuminating fragmented patches of long grass against deep shadows. Some of their faces glowed in the flickering light as if they were marching into the early scenes of a horror movie.

"I need to go to bed," Mazie said. The crowd of people had given her a little shock as if, for some reason, she shouldn't be alone out here with Pyrus. The traumatic events of the day triggered in her mind, and Mazie suddenly felt lightheaded.

She stifled a yawn, feeling all her muscles relax and her joints turn to water. Enough was enough for one day. She needed to lie down.

Then, Pyrus stood in front of her. He was much closer than she'd expected him to be, only a few inches away. The clean, fresh smell of him hit her in the face, and she sighed in pleasure, taking the breath slowly into her lungs and letting it caress her throat as if she could absorb his essence through the back of her tongue.

Mazie was lost when she looked up into his wide, amber eyes. Heat radiated from his body, almost shimmering.

The only thing that stopped Mazie from moving was the sound of people still walking past her tent. There were small bouts of laughter and conversation, as well as the flicker of their lanterns and the rustling of the grass as they made their way.

I wonder what we look like to them.

Mazie had an image of her and Pyrus standing under the lantern in the little covered area at the front of her tent, the two moths still flying around each other in a complicated, tandem dance. She didn't think anyone was paying attention to them at all.

So maybe I should just kiss him.

Mazie was shocked by her own thought. She'd never been so forward, so keen to put herself out there before. Even more shocking was the way her body responded to that thought.

Fire raced down her belly, singing across her skin and cascading across her shoulders to trickle down her spine. Her body tingled with the most powerful goosebumps she'd ever had.

Every inch of her body had become hypersensitive. Her eyes slipped away from his and focused on his perfect, delicate lips.

I want to kiss him. I've never wanted anything so much.

The fire running through her streaked through her core and lower back, making her clit throb. Something very deep inside her ached, then pounded, becoming more insistent.

Am I getting wet right now?

Pyrus's lips twitched, just slightly, as if he knew what was happening to her. Mazie expected to be embarrassed, but it only turned her on more.

Yes. Fuck me, right here, right now. Let them watch. I don't care.

"So," Pyrus said quietly. "Are you doing anything tomorrow afternoon?"

Mazie shook her head automatically. Of course, she wasn't doing anything. *When am I ever doing anything?* "I'm totally free," she said without thinking.

Pyrus's smile was incredibly wide, and Mazie actually wondered why he cared so much. "Excellent," he said. "I'd like to take you out ... on a date."

"A date!" she cried. She was so shocked by the force of her response that she clapped a hand over her mouth.

Even though Gerri had told her they were a match, Mazie had not believed it. There was no way a guy like Pyrus would be interested in her ... especially since he'd only seen her in dirty, sweaty work clothes or in her favorite, comfy pajamas.

She looked up at Pyrus, but he wasn't laughing or changing his mind. He was just watching her with a gentle, expectant look. Mazie felt excitement rise in her chest as she said the only word she could say.

"Yes."

SEVEN



PYRUS

The afternoon sun lent a breath of warmth to the breeze that flowed through Pyrus's tent. He'd spent the day carefully staying out of the way of the rest of the camp, keeping to himself until it was time to meet Mazie.

He didn't want to get sidetracked or dragged out to any company business. There were still a lot of people around from the event the night before, and plenty of them would like to get his support on their personal projects.

Today, Pyrus had no time for it. Even though meeting people and finding out what they were passionate about was his favorite part of the job, the only person he was interested in connecting with right now was Mazie.

Pyrus studied himself in the mirror. His tent was very large and comfortable. Separate rooms were sectioned off with heavy white cloth, and it had mats on all the floors. His room was fully furnished with a big bed, a set of drawers, and a full-length mirror.

He knew there wasn't much point in worrying about his appearance. There was probably going to be swimming at the yacht party, and if he spent time on his clothes or hair, it might end up being wasted. Still, he wanted to make an impression on Mazie when he picked her up.

Just as Pyrus was picking out a shirt, his phone rang, distracting him. He was hoping so much that it would be Mazie. He didn't even check the screen before tapping the button.

“Hello?” he asked, his tone jaunty and hopeful.

“Well, hello there, old pal,” grated a low, hissing voice. “You sound pretty pleased with yourself. I wonder what you’re doing to sound so full of yourself.”

Pyrus froze. The shock was enough to make him stand dead still in the middle of the room as he listened in complete disbelief.

“Richard,” he muttered.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke. Extreme tension filled the silence as if neither wanted to talk first. Pyrus felt his fury rising ... Richard had called him!

“What the fuck do you want?” Pyrus growled. His patience for Richard was generally nonexistent on any day. But on a day like today, when Richard ruined his good mood, rage replaced tolerance.

They had parted ways some years ago when Pyrus discovered Richard was laundering money for a well-known organized crime boss. Pyrus had made it very clear to Richard that he needed to stay far out of his way. It was the only concession Pyrus was willing to give him.

“I’m in trouble,” Richard said, his voice even lower and shadier than usual.

“Excellent,” Pyrus said, going back to the dresser to look over his shirts again. “Sounds like this is all going great. I’m hanging up now.”

“No!” Richard demanded. “Please. I need your help, Pyrus. For old time’s sake.”

Pyrus stopped and stood up straight. His fingers tightened on the phone as if he wished it were Richard’s neck.

“Old times?” Pyrus growled. “You dare come to me now, talking about old times? You might not want to remind me of our connection, Richard, or how we parted.”

“I just wanted you to remember that we were friends once. That you cared about what happened to me.”

“Yeah,” Pyrus said, chuckling. “Once, I did. But not now. So, as interested as I am in your *trouble* and how much shit you’re about to get buried under, it’s really none of my business, so ...”

“They’re going to kill me, Pyrus!” Richard yelled.

“What?” Pyrus asked, genuinely confused. “Who?”

“The gangsters,” Richard muttered. “The guys I’m laundering for. They found out that I was skimming. Well, I still am, kind of skimming, and you need to hear this.”

Pyrus stood still, closing his eyes. A big smile spread across his face as he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

He felt a tremendous sense of amusement ... and satisfaction ... that Richard was in such a terrible position. He couldn’t enjoy it, though. A wave of fury rode hard behind that good feeling because Richard wasn’t just fucking up himself.

Pyrus wanted to completely destroy him when he found out about Richard’s illegal activities. Pyrus had been personally insulted by someone he trusted doing such a thing right under his nose, but he was also furious at the implications for their business and everyone connected to it.

“I should have destroyed you when I had the chance,” Pyrus growled. “Instead of just letting you walk, I should have taken you apart, piece by piece.”

“Why didn’t you?” Richard asked, his voice harsh with the power of his rage. “You can’t threaten me after the fact, Pyrus. That’s when it ceases to become a threat. Don’t fuck around telling me what you might have done since you clearly didn’t have the balls to go through with it.”

“It had nothing to do with the size of my balls, asshole!” Pyrus yelled. “Don’t think, for even one second, that my restraint had anything to do with any lingering vestiges of friendship I might have for you. Believe me, Richard, all the warm and fuzzies went out of our relationship a long time ago.”

“So why not destroy me?” Richard asked. “Maybe, you couldn’t. You didn’t have the power to take on the mob and me at the same time.”

Pyrus laughed out loud at the absurdity of such a statement. It was pathetic that Richard could entertain such an idea. It was also a clear indication of his lack of intelligence.

“Don’t be so ridiculously fucking stupid,” Pyrus said. “The only reason I didn’t touch you was because there are too many innocent people connected to you.”

“Oh?” Richard asked, sounding genuinely curious. Pyrus couldn’t believe it, but he knew damn well Richard never thought about anyone except himself.

“The workers in your factories,” Pyrus said softly. “Their families. All the members of your staff that don’t know shit about what you’re doing under the table. If I destroyed you, I’d destroy all of them too.”

Richard laughed with a low chuckle that sounded threatening, more than amused. “Well, check out the situation now, old friend. The mob will take care of that. Once they murder me, everyone goes down. They might even want to kill a few of my staff just to cleanse the area if you know what I mean.”

“You are one reckless, selfish son of a bitch, you know that?” Pyrus exploded. He felt an intense regret welling inside him that he hadn’t killed Richard when he had the chance. He might have been able to mitigate the liquidation of Richard’s assets and make sure innocent people didn’t get hurt.

I can still do that if I work fast.

“Fine,” Pyrus snapped. “Let them do the dirty work for me. They can take care of you, and I’ll take over your company. I can build a safety net for anyone caught in the jaws of your bullshit schemes. I’m calling my lawyer right now. Have a nice life, Richard, however long it might be.”

Pyrus actually pulled the phone away from his face and raised his thumb to tap the screen. Before he could, Richard’s voice reached him, and it was low and sinister.

“You don’t want to do that, old buddy.”

Pyrus glared at the screen, tempted to end the call. But Richard was the worst of backstabbers. If he hung up now, he could stumble right into a trap set by Richard. Even if his old business partner had nothing left to say but empty threats, Pyrus needed to hold his temper just for another few minutes to hear it.

“Okay, I’m listening. Why don’t I want to do that?” Pyrus asked, sighing in exasperation.

Richard chuckled. “Got your attention now, don’t I?”

“Not for long,” Pyrus warned.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Richard said. His tone was so smug and manipulative that Pyrus knew he had something truly shocking to drop on him.

“Out with it,” Pyrus grumbled.

“See, I never actually told anyone that we weren’t in business anymore. In fact, I might have deliberately given the mob guys the impression I was still working with you.”

“What?” Pyrus asked, his voice soft with disbelief. He wanted to shout so badly, but the shock had hit him too hard. It felt like he’d lost his voice.

“They’re after both of us, old buddy,” Richard said, his voice smooth with satisfaction. Pyrus imagined his old friend would use that tone of voice to say goodbye to someone he was knifing in the gut.

“Both of us?” Pyrus echoed.

“Yup. Both of us,” Richard said cheerfully. “Well ... I kind of made it look like your idea. So, they might be a bit more pissed off with you than they are with me.”

Pyrus heard his phone make the tiniest of squeaks as his fingers tightened on it. He pulled it away from his ear very carefully and tapped the screen to end the call. He was moving very slowly and carefully because he wanted to close his fist and crush the device into tiny shards. He couldn’t do that, though. He still had to call Mazie.

And my fucking lawyer.

Pyrus quickly called his top legal advisor and gave him a rundown of what Richard was up to. Chad had been in the business for over twenty years and had seen every kind of hell human beings could wreak upon each other. He did not seem surprised by the news.

“Hold up, hold up,” Chad said as Pyrus finished telling the story. “Why did he call to tell you all this?”

“To shake my cage,” Pyrus said bitterly. “He’s setting me up to take the fall, so he was hoping to get something to make me look bad. He’s not the kind of guy that can do something like this and not gloat about it.”

“Agreed,” Chad said. “Richard was never that smart. I honestly don’t see how he can pull off something like this. Your finances have been separated for some time now.”

“I don’t think the mob has access to my financial records,” Pyrus said wryly.

Chad laughed. “Yes, obviously. Still, the skimmed money will have to be somewhere, and it would be nearly impossible to trace it to you. I don’t think you have much to worry about, but I’ll get on with the legal team and go through everything.”

“Thank you, Chad. I appreciate it.”

“No sweat.”

They both hung up, and Pyrus went back to stand in front of the mirror. He ran a hand through his hair as he stared into his troubled eyes. Here in Africa, he didn’t need to worry about gangsters. Once he got home, though, it would be a different story.

I’d like to see them try anything. Hit me on my worst fucking day, and I can still take out twenty gangsters with one shot.

Pyrus closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting all the tension out as he did so. It only took him a few seconds to push Richard’s call out of his mind. There was only one thing he wanted to focus on today, and it definitely wasn’t Richard.

He let thoughts of Mazie build in his mind. He couldn't wait to see her, and the excitement that rose in him obliterated any lingering anger he had toward Richard. He realized he'd forgotten to tell Chad to set up contingencies for the employees, but he could do that next time they talked.

Pyrus decided on a dark gray shirt and a pair of board shorts for the party, so he was ready for anything the party had to throw at him.

After running his hands through his hair and checking himself out once more in the mirror, Pyrus headed out to Mazie's tent. Every step closer to her also took him further from his troubles. By the time he arrived at her tent, his mind was almost completely clear of Richard and his insane schemes.

Pyrus waited in front of Mazie's tent, wondering if he should call out. The sun had sunk considerably while he was on the phone, but it was still early afternoon. Pyrus was sure that he was right on time.

Maybe she forgot.

Just as Pyrus was getting ready to call her, he heard a rustling sound inside the tent. He barely had a chance to compose himself before she came out through the tent flap. Pyrus was so shocked that he almost took a step back.

Mazie's pale brown hair was styled against the back of her head with a delicate pin. Tendrils curled down around her ears, framing her pretty face. She was wearing light touches of makeup that were barely noticeable, yet they enhanced her beauty a great deal.

Slowly, almost with trepidation, Pyrus let his eyes slide down her body. So far, he'd only seen her in her work clothes or the loose, cozy sweats she'd been wearing the night before.

Mazie wore a tight tank top with very slender shoulder straps. It showed off an impressive amount of bust and revealed her gorgeous, muscular shoulders. Her long, curvy legs were left bare by the very snug, short shorts she wore.

He was staring, but he couldn't seem to stop. She looked good enough to eat, and his dragon agreed. It took Pyrus a couple of minutes to get a hold of himself.

“Are you ready?” Mazie asked almost shyly.

“I am,” Pyrus answered. Any thought of Richard or dodgy work situations had definitely flown from his mind.

There was only one thing Pyrus was thinking about right now, and that was Mazie.

EIGHT



MAZIE

When Pyrus pulled up at the marina, the sun had sunk to the horizon, spreading a bright, orange glow across the ocean. The sky shimmered with gold, silver, and blue. Tiny stars were sparking to life, heralding the clear night to come.

As she got out of the car, Mazie looked up at the yacht in astonishment. It was a lot bigger than she'd expected, and she was suddenly intimidated. Seeing the well-dressed, graceful people gliding up the gangplank only increased her anxiety.

Mazie looked down at herself in dismay. When she'd put on her favorite tank top, she'd thought she was showing off her sense of fashion but looking at the other women arriving at the party, Mazie felt like a dime store reject.

The tank top was a swirl of dark blue on black like a night sky covered by a storm. The black short shorts were fairly new and fit her perfectly. She was very comfortable and usually felt super sexy in this outfit ... but she'd never had to compare herself to billionaires before.

Mazie surveyed the crowd moving toward the yacht. She recognized some of the people from last night's benefit, and she was stunned to see others that she knew from social media. These people were famous ... *really* famous.

*I'm nowhere near as important as any of these people.
What the fuck am I doing here?*

Pyrus came up beside her, stroking her arm gently as he took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Are you okay?" he

asked. “You’re looking up at that yacht with a combination of fear and terror.”

“Is it that obvious?” she said, chuckling. “I was shooting for bored.”

“You definitely don’t look bored,” Pyrus answered, smiling. “But you do look worried.”

Her heart skipped a beat as a graceful woman paused at the bottom of the gangplank for a photographer. She was wearing a tiny string bikini with a wrap dress made of netting over the top.

Why didn't I think of that?

Mazie’s thought was laced with sarcasm. She glanced down at her tank top and shorts, feeling like an absolute frump next to the model’s glittering, see-through cling dress.

“Hey,” Pyrus said, giving her hand another squeeze. “Don’t you want to get going? They’ll be setting sail soon.”

I can't even ... I'm just a nobody from Arkansas who joined the Peace Corps to see the world. I don't belong here.

“Okay,” she said very softly. It did sound like lots of fun to sail out to that sunset, which was still slashing the sky and the sea beneath with vivid hues of orange and flaming pink. The sigh of the water against the dock was hypnotic and soothing. Mazie tried to relax.

“Yeah, we should get going,” she said, looking up at Pyrus. His gold eyes were catching the last of the light from the setting sun, and as he looked at her, his eyes widened, his lips curving into a happy smile. Her smile answered his, a pure expression of joy that came from her heart.

He really likes me. He wants to be with me. I've got to get a grip. I'm okay.

“Excellent,” Pyrus said. Mazie expected him to lead her to the gangplank, but instead, he let go of her hand, stepped away, and pulled off his shirt.

Mazie was so shocked by the reveal of his perfect, chiseled body that for a moment, she couldn’t think, let alone speak.

She'd seen Pyrus naked the other day, but she had been trying to avert her eyes to be polite. Now, she could look as long and hard as she wanted.

Don't think about things that are long and hard.

Mazie gulped. Pyrus tossed his shirt into the jeep, and his shoulders rippled. She swept her eyes down his hard abs, and her mouth watered as she thought about caressing those strong muscles with her tongue.

Pyrus kept his shorts on, and Mazie didn't know if he had a smaller bathing suit underneath or if this was it and he was naked under there. A few seconds of silence passed, and Mazie realized she was staring. When she snapped her eyes back to Pyrus's face, he was watching her with an amused smile dancing across his lips.

He put his hands casually on his hips, flexing for her. Mazie gasped, watching his muscles harden all over.

"I can do this all night," he whispered.

Mazie giggled. "No, no, you're right. We should go to the party," she said. Looking up at the yacht caused another wave of anxiety to run through her, and she shuddered. Pyrus didn't appear to have noticed.

"You can leave your clothes on if you like," Pyrus said as he grabbed his phone and keys, stuffing them into his front pocket. "It's up to you."

Mazie looked down at herself, her stomach churning. She wasn't comfortable at all. She didn't want to stick out more than she already did, though. Being the only person wearing clothes would definitely mark her as different from the others.

Mazie took off her shorts and tank, tossing them into the back of the jeep. She was wearing her faithful old black one-piece. It was cut high on the hips and not too low across her breasts. It was meant to be serviceable, not fashionable.

I wish I'd brought a wrap, a long shirt, anything. I feel so naked.

Then she noticed Pyrus watching her. His eyes were glued to her body as he looked her up and down. He was doing the exact same thing that she'd done to him a few minutes before.

Mazie grinned and put her hands on her hips, flexing a little as she pushed out her breasts. Pyrus gasped softly, his eyes widening. Mazie jiggled slightly, enjoying watching his face as he followed the movement of her body and the bounce of her ample breasts.

“Sorry,” he murmured as he looked back up to her face. “You just look ... incredible.”

“Thank you,” she said, meaning it. The moment had given her enough confidence to walk up the gangplank with pride, even though she still felt a bit out of place.

They hit the main floor, and, of course, everyone wanted to talk to Pyrus. Mazie clung to his arm, smiling and nodding while she tried to join in. Pyrus treated her like a VIP, and all those he introduced her to acted the same way, but she could still feel her confidence failing.

As they moved through the crowd, Pyrus was at his personable best, greeting people and shaking hands with almost everyone they saw. Mazie was impressed by Pyrus knowing everyone's name, as well as small personal details, as he engaged them in conversation.

He is really good at this. He loves it, and the crowd loves him.

As Pyrus frequently stopped to greet his friends, people began to chat with Mazie. She struggled to keep track of names and faces, but other than that, the conversation flowed easily. She talked a bit about her work with the corps and her duties at the animal sanctuary, and most people were fascinated by her knowledge.

After some time of being surrounded by a crowd, the web of people finally began to thin out. Pyrus wrapped an arm around her waist and snuggled her against him.

“It's a great party, don't you think? Everyone just loves you, Mazie,” Pyrus said.

“Really?” she asked a little bashfully. He nodded and kissed her on the forehead.

“I’ll grab us some more champagne. Wait here for me.”

Mazie watched him go, then looked out across the dark water. Even in the ripples made by the hull, the reflected stars winked at her. She sighed with pleasure as the soft sea breeze teased across her face.

This is great. I have nothing to worry about.

“Hello, there,” gushed a loud, intrusive voice. Mazie flinched as a tall, blonde woman leaned on the railing next to her.

“Hi,” Mazie said uncertainly. The woman was dressed in a tight wrap over a very tiny bikini, showing off her incredible, fit, and tanned body. Mazie was immediately intimidated.

“Yes, hello,” another obnoxious voice sounded from her other side. Mazie actually did jump this time. The other woman was a brunette, and all she wore was a tiny, red bikini that was so small she should have just come naked.

Mazie felt like a mouse caught between two cats. “Uh, hi,” Mazie muttered.

“I’m Priscilla,” said the blonde, reaching out a hand. Mazie shook it warily.

“I’m Heidi,” the brunette said, not offering a hand to shake. The woman had big green eyes accentuated by hard lines of black kohl.

“You’re here with Pyrus?” asked Priscilla. Mazie felt like they were going to attack her from either side with their words just so she’d get dizzy looking back and forth between them.

“Yeah,” she said softly.

“Hmm,” Heidi said, leaning back on the rail. Her expression was only a shade away from being hostile.

“What?” Mazie asked, feeling her nerves rising.

“It’s pretty obvious what someone like you is doing with a guy like Pyrus,” Priscilla said.

“What?” Mazie said again, her voice very soft.

“Oh, come on,” Heidi snapped. “Don’t play all innocent and dumb with us. It might work on Pyrus, but we see right through you.”

“Yes,” Priscilla said. “It’s obvious to everyone on this boat that you’re just after his money.”

“Excuse me?” Mazie squeaked. She felt even more like a mouse now, being tossed in the air as the cats juggled her back and forth with their sharp claws.

“Pyrus deserves so much better,” Heidi said, shaking her head. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Mazie looked down into the dark water. Her heart hammered, and there was a cold, numb feeling in the pit of her stomach. She started to feel sick as the dread set in.

“Pyrus!” Priscilla cried. “Darling, how are you?”

Mazie looked away from the water to see Pyrus greet Priscilla with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. Cold flooded from her stomach into her limbs, making her fingers and toes numb.

“Yes, sweetie, what have you been up to?” Heidi said, moving in for her own kiss. Mazie turned to watch, and she was shocked by the way Heidi sidled up to Pyrus. Because she was almost naked, and he was bare from the waist up, quite a lot of her skin rubbed up against him.

“It’s so great to see you girls,” he said. “Pris, I haven’t seen you since that disco in Rome. Remember? Someone tried to smoke a joint out back, and we were all evacuated to the parking lot because of the fire alarm.”

“Yes,” Priscilla gushed. “I was freezing in my little silver mini dress, and you gave me your jacket.”

“Anything for a lovely lady,” Pyrus said warmly. He lifted her hand and kissed her fingers gently.

“And what about me, handsome?” Heidi said, her voice low and seductive. “The last time I saw you, you left me on a mountaintop.”

“I thought you were following me,” he laughed. “It’s not like you can’t fly, Heidi.” Pyrus leaned over and put an arm around Heidi’s shoulder, giving her a squeeze.

“I might not be able to fly,” Priscilla said, posing a little. “But you can’t stalk the woods like I can. Cats beat dragons every time.”

Shifters. They are both shifters. His kind in every possible way. They have everything I don’t.

Mazie couldn’t bring up the nasty things they had said to her. It was obvious that these women were close to him, and if she spoke badly of them, Pyrus might not appreciate it.

Would he even believe me?

Doubt grew inside her, making her heart ache. Mazie watched the women laughing and joking with Pyrus, and she had never felt so out of place in her entire life.

Eventually, Pyrus excused himself, saying he had to pay attention to his date. It should have made her feel better, but instead, she just felt like a burden. When he put an arm around her and took them out on the dance floor, Mazie felt dull and miserable, barely able to sway, let alone dance.

“Hey,” Pyrus said, bending down a little to look into her eyes. “Is everything okay? You’ve gone very quiet.”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she said softly. “Just a bit overwhelmed with the music and everything.”

“No problem,” Pyrus said, immediately taking her from the floor. He led her to the back of the boat, where it was very quiet and dark. Mazie sat on a shadowed bench next to the rail.

“Seriously, are you all right?” he asked.

Mazie nodded. “Just give me a moment. I guess I’m not used to being on boats.”

Pyrus watched her, his frown deepening. Mazie wanted to get off the yacht, but that was impossible as they’d left the dock some time ago. The movement of the water felt almost hostile as it dragged them farther out to sea, confirming to Mazie that she was utterly trapped.

“Do you think I could lie down somewhere?” she asked. Mazie could see Pyrus getting frustrated, and she didn’t want him to miss out on the party because of her. It would only make things worse.

“Of course,” he said, giving her a light hug. “There are cabins downstairs, just pick an empty one and make yourself at home.”

“Okay,” she replied, nodding. She really was feeling sick now, but it wasn’t from the sea.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Pyrus asked.

Mazie shook her head. “I’m fine. Well, I will be fine. I just need to lie down.”

“Okay,” Pyrus said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will,” Mazie said softly. She hurried below deck as quickly as she could.

I have to get out of here!

NINE



PYRUS

Pyrus watched Mazie head downstairs, an ache in his chest and anxiety rising in his gut. He was sure that he'd done something wrong. She did look pale and weak, common signs of seasickness, but Pyrus was worried it was more than that.

He'd noticed she was nervous. It was obvious from the first moment she had gotten out of the car. Mazie had seemed to warm up while they were mingling. He couldn't help but feel like he'd done something wrong.

I'll have to think of something spectacular to do for her; something that will make her feel better.

Pyrus headed back to the main area, watching people swaying around the dance floor. The music was loud, and everyone was starting to get a bit drunk. He tried to convince himself that Mazie was just overwhelmed by the party.

After all, didn't I find her on her own, camping in an isolated spot surrounded by darkness? It's probably just the amount of people crammed on here.

As he headed to the bar, he assured himself that everything would be fine. Leaving her alone for a while was the best thing to do. After he'd given her a chance to rest, he'd go and look for her and make sure she was okay.

He was ordering a stiff drink when Priscilla approached him, leaning against the bar in her snug, glittering wrap dress.

"Hello, Pris," he said, smiling. He'd known her for years, and she was fun to hang out with as well as being very

business savvy and influential with all the right people. She was quite literally a wild cat, and he had never been tempted to sleep with her.

Pris blinked her big, pale green eyes, her pupils changing shape for the briefest of seconds. "I'm glad I found you, Pyrus. Where's your date?"

"She went downstairs for a rest. Why? What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I'm surprised she didn't drag you down below with her," Pris said cattily. She tilted a champagne flute to her mouth and took a neat sip.

"What are you talking about?" Pyrus asked, thoroughly confused.

"Surely, she's all over you every chance she gets," Pris said. Pyrus shook his head.

"No. She's not."

"Really?" a voice said from behind him. Pyrus turned around to see Heidi behind him. "I thought she'd be throwing it in your face constantly. Maybe even trying to get pregnant."

"What the fuck?" Pyrus muttered. "Will you two explain yourselves right now?"

"Darling," Pris said, putting a hand on his arm. "We spoke to her for a while. All she could talk about was your money. She doesn't care about you."

"She talked about how stupid you are," Heidi put in. "That you had no idea that all she wants is to milk you for all you're worth."

Pyrus looked between the two of them in disbelief. Finally, he laughed, leaning his head back and covering his face. "You girls," he said, chuckling. "What are you playing at?"

"I'm trying to protect you, Pyrus," Pris cried. "She's going to destroy you."

"Yes, darling, please, listen," Heidi said, grabbing his arm. "She's no good for you, and she doesn't belong here."

“Girls,” Pyrus said, shaking his head. He paused to take a good sip of strong whiskey, letting the fiery burn of it soothe him. “Mazie is not after my money. I don’t believe you. She would never say anything like that.”

“But she did,” Heidi protested. “I heard it.”

“So did I,” Pris said, backing her up.

Pyrus shook his head again. “You do know she’s in the Peace Corps? She travels around the world, doing charity, sleeping in tents, and volunteering to save the world. She’s not into luxury, and everything you’re saying just isn’t in her character.”

“Pyrus,” Pris said, her tone low. “I think you’re not being fully objective here. If you would just ...”

“Pris,” he said firmly, cutting her off. “Mazie is my *fated mate*. It doesn’t matter if she’s come to rob me blind. Everything that is mine is hers.”

He enjoyed the silence and the shocked looks of the girls. He didn’t like to think they were playing him by talking smack about his date, but there didn’t seem to be another explanation.

“What?” Heidi cried, her voice almost a shriek.

Priscilla gasped and grabbed his arm. “No way. How do you know? Are you sure?”

Pyrus nodded, regarding Pris with complete confidence.

Heidi grabbed his other arm. “But what if you’re wrong? You could be, you know?”

Pyrus met her cool green eyes with an even gaze. “If you’d met your mate, you’d know how ridiculous that statement really is,” Pyrus said. “When you see them for the first time, you know.”

He watched their faces fall as they took in the news. Then Pyrus dropped his next bomb. “Besides,” he said, casually, as he took another sip of his drink, “it’s a Gerri Wilder match.”

“What the fuck?” Heidi snapped. “Seriously?”

“I can’t even right now,” Pris cried. “When did this happen?”

“Only a few days ago,” Pyrus said. “Gerri contacted me and contrived for me to meet my match. Don’t worry, girls, I’m sure your time will come.”

For a moment, Pris and Heidi just stared at each other. Pris looked crushingly disappointed, and Heidi was so shocked that she was staring into the distance, looking at nothing.

“There goes one of the world’s most eligible bachelors,” Pris said, shaking her head. “It’s a day of tragedy for us. Come on, Heidi,” Pris said. “Let’s go shake it on the dance floor for a bit.”

“Uh-huh,” Heidi muttered. “I’m still processing the shock. This is the worst news I’ve had in a long time.”

Pyrus was suddenly struck by the idea that maybe the girls were the reason for Mazie suddenly feeling unwell. They’d been circling her like predators around a bleeding rabbit when he’d gotten back to her.

The things Pris and Heidi had told him made utterly no sense. Mazie was not like that, and he knew it. Now they were upset that he was no longer single ... in fact, he was now mated for life. He regarded their hard expressions and icy voices in a whole new light.

Where is my mate? I have to find her.

He dropped cash on the bar, turned abruptly, and walked away. He was a bit rude by snapping at them, but by his standards, so were they. Pyrus cut through the crowd, heading for the stairwell that would take him below deck.

He tracked her scent very easily in the confined space. He knew that some cabins would be occupied, and he certainly didn’t want to bust in on the wrong person. When he reached the door that had Mazie’s scent practically seeping through the wood, he heard the soft sound of someone crying inside.

He wanted to tear the door off its hinges and charge in there, but he knew that Mazie didn’t need that right now. She needed reassurance and comfort, not his unbridled rage.

His dragon was fuming so hard that smoke almost came out of his nose. Things were very simple for the primitive dragon mind. *Take her, protect her. Claim possession of a remote mountain peak, keep the princess there and defend her from all hurt and enemies.*

Pyrus shook his head, fighting the urge to do just that. He raised a hand and knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Mazie’s voice was soft and dragged down by tears.

“It’s me,” he said softly. “Mazie, please let me in.”

“It’s open,” she sniffed.

Pyrus came into the room, shutting the door behind him. Mazie sat on the edge of the bed, wiping her face while trying to hide her tears. He sat beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. Even though he was pretty sure he knew exactly what had happened, it was up to her to tell him if she wanted to.

“I just ... I don’t belong here,” she cried, her voice hitching on sobs. “I can’t talk to anyone. I don’t understand your world. People just misunderstand me ... I can’t change that.”

Pyrus frowned, now even more sure that Pris and Heidi were responsible for this. “Mazie, of course, you belong here. You’re an amazing, strong woman. So many of the people I introduced you to admire your passion and skill.”

“Really?” she muttered, still wiping her tears.

“Really,” he agreed. “There are always going to be people who don’t appreciate you in any setting. Don’t worry so much. My friends love you.”

“I don’t know,” Mazie whispered.

“I do,” he said, pulling her close. “And you don’t have to worry about a thing. If there is anywhere in this world you don’t fit, I’ll change the world, so you do. I’ll do anything for you.”

Mazie looked up at him, her wide green eyes searching his face. The cabin was fairly dark, but he could see she was responding to his words.

Her beautiful, lush red lips were right below his. Pyrus willed himself to be still and let her come to him, but her scent rose all around him, filling him with longing. Under his fingertips, the soft, tight fabric of her suit felt like a silky enhancement to her skin.

He leaned forward, drawn to her by forces he could not control. Mazie turned her face up to him, her eyes wide. She looked so sweet and innocent that it fired his lust and passion until his blood was molten lava.

Pyrus couldn't stop himself. He brushed his lips against hers gently. With all the strength he had, he fought the lust rising in him, but she was so close, so warm, and so very vulnerable.

I need you.

He had never needed anything, ever, as badly as he needed Mazie right at that moment. She felt the same way. He just knew it.

Pyrus leaned forward again, tightening his arms around her. When his lips met hers, a flash of heat ran from his mouth straight into his blood. Fire streaked through him, passion igniting deep in his soul. As Mazie opened her lips to let him kiss her even deeper, Pyrus moaned, his voice a combination of pleasure and torture.

As Mazie leaned her head back, Pyrus played his lips against hers, gently finding her tongue and teasing it with his own. When her hands slid across his bare belly and up across his chest, a shudder ripped through his whole body as desire threatened to take him over.

Pyrus slid his hands around Mazie's waist, pushing her back onto the bed. Even though she was relaxed under his touch, he broke off the kiss to catch her eye.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded. “Yes. Yes!” she answered, her voice breathy with excitement.

Pyrus grinned, pushing her down with his body as his lips found hers. She opened her legs and writhed under him, the thin fabric of their bathing suits feeling like nothing at all as they slid against each other.

Mazie arched her back, thrusting herself against him. Pyrus moaned, running a hand down her chest. Her big soft breasts tossed under his hand, and he rubbed her gently until he felt the nipple stiffen against his palm.

She twisted under him, a sharp cry rising from her throat. Pyrus covered her mouth with his, kissing her even more deeply as he rubbed his hips against her. Her hot, wet pussy was so close to him, separated from his cock by the tiniest strips of fabric.

Pyrus leaned back a little so he could stroke both of her breasts, cradling Mazie against his left arm while he used his right hand to explore her through the bathing suit. As she breathed under him, her breasts tossed as if they were trying to break free from the suit. He was tempted to grab the neckline and tug it down, unleashing her perfect breasts for him to feast on.

As he ran his fingers across the neckline of the suit, his cock hardened as he imagined devouring her huge breasts. He wanted to explore every last inch of them with his mouth, flick her nipples with his tongue and suck on them with slick, hot lips.

She moaned as he rubbed her through the suit and Pyrus groaned, part pleasure, part pain. He ran a hand down her belly. Frustration raged through him as he fought to control his desires.

Mazie reached up and grabbed his shoulder, pulling him on top of her. She squirmed, wrapping her legs around him as she reached up with her mouth. Their lips met, and he moaned with pleasure as she lapped at his mouth with her tongue.

His arms held her shoulders, crushing her against him. He was almost beyond thought, beyond control. He shoved against her with his hips, and his cock dragged against her pussy through the thin fabric. He forced himself to stay completely still, gasping at the effort it took to stop himself from tearing off their suits.

Mazie leaned her head back and moaned as she pushed her hips forward. Pyrus gasped, feeling her pussy rubbing against him as she pleased herself on his hard cock. He watched her face, seeing the sweet, contented smile that grew.

Her hips shifted under him when her soft hands wrapped around his waist to explore his back. Even though they were still rubbing against each other, he wasn't in the perfect position to penetrate her now. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second as he calmed down.

When he looked down again, Mazie was watching him. The room was very dark, but he could see her eyes and the pleasure on her face. He smiled as he bent down to kiss her again. It was obvious she was very excited, but Pyrus didn't know if she was ready to go all the way.

For now, all he needed was the touch of her hands, the press of her soft, warm lips against his. The promise of more tormented him but also comforted him.

She is mine, and that is all I need to know.

TEN



MAZIE

“**Y**ou’re amazing,” Pyrus whispered, his breath hot against her ear. “You’re so fucking hot, Mazie.”

She writhed under him, moaning as pleasure streaked through her. When he licked under her ear and nibbled her neck, she cried out, wrapping her arms around him and thrusting against him with her hips.

Pyrus’s big, strong hands squeezed her breasts and groped at her hips as if he was trying to touch every inch of her at once. Every time she moved her hips, his huge, hard cock brushed against her, and the throbbing inside her begged for him to come inside.

“Those girls are just jealous,” Pyrus said softly, and she wondered how he knew exactly which *friends* she was talking about. “They don’t have their mates, so they can’t understand. Neither of them have had a serious relationship, not ever. Both are known as serial daters, flakey and not to be trusted.”

“Really?” Mazie asked, surprised. “They are so refined and beautiful.”

Pyrus laughed softly. “They might look that way, but most guys steer clear of them. Those girls never take anything seriously.”

Mazie was trying to think of a response when Pyrus thrust against her, bracing his hands on her waist. All she could do for a few seconds was gasp as lust flooded through her, completely banishing all thought. She opened her thighs wider and rocked into him, enjoying the building pressure inside her.

“And they all have their secrets, Mazie,” Pyrus said as he bent to kiss her. “None of them could do what you do. They aren’t just jealous that you’re with me. They’re jealous that you’re so much stronger and more giving than they could ever be.”

Mazie felt a tender warmth growing in her chest. As it mingled with her desire, it combusted into something entirely new, something beyond arousal. Her very soul yearned for him, not just her body.

She looked into his eyes, feeling like the world could be standing still. Mazie saw how sincere he was, that he meant every word. She reached up and wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling him down to kiss her again.

This time, his kiss was even more forceful. She moaned softly as his tongue explored the inside of her mouth, feeling her body softening for him as he groped her and moved his hips against her.

She sensed insistence in him, his lust like a flood gathering behind a gate. Any moment now, the pressure would become too strong, and he’d be unleashed. It turned her on, but it scared her a little too.

Pyrus was so passionate and forceful that Mazie felt like her will was being taken from her. She wanted him so much that she literally couldn’t think, and part of her was absolutely certain she wasn’t ready for this.

There must be over a hundred people out there. No, I’m not comfortable with this, not at all.

Pyrus moaned, his need evident in his voice. Something inside her responded to the sound, a desperate urge to give him anything he desired. She couldn’t bear to see him hurting even slightly, especially when it was within her power to satisfy him.

Their lips tangled together again, Mazie closing her eyes and losing herself in the moment. When Pyrus’s hand ran across her hip and dove between her legs, she lifted her hips to him, inviting him inside.

He shoved the thin strip of her bathing suit out of the way, and then his fingertips gently teased at her clit and the upper edges of her flushed, throbbing pussy. As he toyed with her, slowly sliding his fingers down, she writhed against his hand.

Pyrus kissed her even harder, tightening his grip on her with his left arm. With a sharp movement of his hand, he plunged his finger into her, making Mazie cry out and buck her hips.

The escalation affected Pyrus deeply. He stiffened all over. Tension emanated from him as every single muscle coiled, preparing to take her. His lips wrapped even more tightly around hers, and his hard body pressed her into the bed. The pressure of his hips had a purpose now, and the deeper he stuffed his hand into her, the harder he got.

Suddenly, the tension in the air, the power of Pyrus's body, they just felt wrong. Mazie's anxiety was rising, and it was dampening her desire. She shoved against Pyrus's shoulder, breaking the kiss.

"Stop," she said, her voice breathy.

"What?" he muttered against her neck.

Mazie shoved him again. "Stop. Get off."

A shudder ran through him. He bent his head and leaned against her shoulder as he took a deep breath. He took his hand from her and gently pulled away, sitting on the other side of the bed.

"Are you okay?" he asked as Mazie straightened herself up a little.

"Yes," she said. "I just ... I'm not comfortable here. It's a public party. Even with the door locked, I just don't like it."

"That's cool," he said, smiling. Mazie watched him closely for any sign he was really upset, but he truly seemed to be okay with it.

He reached for her hand, and she took it, sitting up so she could look into his eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

“What for?” he asked, confused.

She shrugged. “Everything. I don’t know,” she giggled. The make-out session had left her feeling very excited and somewhat bold. She didn’t have to worry about if Pyrus found her sexy or not. It was obvious he was into her, and it gave her confidence she’d never had before.

“It’s my pleasure,” Pyrus said, leaning in to kiss her softly and briefly. “Truly. Anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“All that kissing kind of made me hungry,” she admitted. “I suppose we should find some food.”

“They’ll be serving dinner by now,” Pyrus said. “We don’t have to go up and eat at the main table, though. If you like, I can have a steward bring our food here.”

Mazie sighed. It was an attractive thought, but it also felt like an incredible cop-out. If she was serious about being with Pyrus, she needed to face her fears.

“No, we’ll go up,” she said. “I realize the other girls are just jealous, and it’s not really personal. Like you said, your friends like me, and I’m just in my head. I also know that the fated mate’s thing is bigger than both of us. People will expect to see us there together.”

Pyrus smiled, stroking her cheek. “They would also expect me to skip dinner entirely, should my mate need me for any reason.”

Mazie leaned forward and kissed him gently. She also had to completely own the situation ... she was bound to Pyrus. It didn’t matter if she felt like she didn’t deserve him. Fate had chosen otherwise. She had to get used to being in his world, being seen by his side.

They both cleaned up a little and then headed to the upper deck. The tables were beautifully set up, and Pyrus led her to their seats. She immediately felt very small and shy, but the others at the table soon drew her into the conversation.

Even though a few of them seemed a bit snobbish, none were as bad as Priscilla and Heidi. Most of the people at the

table were genuinely interested in her work with the Peace Corps, and some even pledged to come to Gerri's next event.

Throughout dinner, Pyrus was at his charismatic best, laughing and joking with ease. Mazie watched him with growing admiration. The more she got to know him, the more she understood what a sweet guy he really was.

They finished dinner without much strife, and Mazie had gotten on so well with a couple of the women that they planned to keep in touch. Most of the other guests were nice to her, and Mazie hadn't seen Priscilla or Heidi anywhere.

The boat returned to the marina, and Pyrus escorted Mazie to the jeep and drove her back to camp. The conversation between them was easy and casual, and now that they were alone again, there was a hint of intimacy that made Mazie feel vulnerable but safe at the same time.

As they walked to her tent, they held hands and talked about her work at the sanctuary.

"It must be fun to work with the animals," Pyrus said. "It's not something I ever thought of myself."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," Mazie laughed. "I'm actually pretty happy that our assignments change regularly. Like today, I'm cleaning poop out of cages. Next week, I could be putting tin roofs on shacks. It's the variety I thrive on."

"Were you here to help with new habitats?" he asked.

"Yes, mostly. None of us are certified animal handlers. All of us have basic skills, though. Any moron can clean out a cage, but only an animal lover can enjoy it."

Pyrus laughed softly. "When did you last sleep in a real bed or live in a normal house?"

Mazie went to answer, then realized that she had to think about it. "I really don't know," she said, surprised. "It must have been years. I know that sometimes, we've stayed in hotels paid for by sponsors, but this tent has been my home for literally as long as I can remember."

As she talked, her tent came into view ahead. Mazie suddenly saw it in a different light. It really was hers, not just a random tent. Over the years, she'd modified it, so there were pockets and flaps where she liked them, as well as netting windows and the easy-to-use hooks that pinned it to the ground.

Mazie pulled up the deck chairs and set her kettle to boil. She asked Pyrus if he wanted to stay for tea, and he agreed.

"It is a fairly nice tent," he said, smiling. "But not as nice as mine."

"Ha!" Mazie joked. "Yours looks like it was made for a sultan. Why didn't you just have a mansion dropped in the middle of the field?"

"I tried," he said, very seriously, even though his eyes glinted with mischief. "I couldn't get it past customs."

Mazie laughed as she made the tea, handing him his cup. They were quiet for a moment as they watched the shadows shifting around them.

"When did you last go out?" Pyrus asked. "I don't mean tonight or things like the gala. I mean, if you're back in civilization, and you're free on a Saturday night, where do you go?"

"Oh, I love the movies," Mazie said. "Sometimes I could get a free ticket for a double feature, and I'd just sit in there for hours crunching popcorn. When you come out into the street after a really good movie, it's weird trying to rejoin the real world."

"Yeah? I haven't seen a movie for years, actually,"

"Didn't you go a lot as a kid?" Mazie asked innocently.

Pyrus grinned. "They didn't have movies when I was a kid."

"Oh. Oh, wow," Mazie muttered, remembering. It struck her suddenly that all the things she'd grown up with had been invented while Pyrus was an adult. He'd watched the world

change with mature eyes, and he wouldn't see something as simple as the movies the same way she did.

“Were you always the man at the center of attention?” Mazie asked. She wanted to know how old he was, to try to understand the technological advancements he'd seen, but she was worried it might be an offensive question.

“No,” Pyrus said with a chuckle. “I was awkward as fuck as a kid. I always fell off my damn horse. As soon as my wings came in, I flew everywhere I could.”

“It must be amazing to have seen the whole world. Is there anywhere you haven't seen?”

He shook his head. “I've flown over every inch of it. There are a few places I've never landed, though. Places I'd like to see close up.”

“Is there anything you could do, back in your day, which is exactly the same as now?” Mazie asked, still trying to get an idea of how old he was.

Pyrus sighed, smiling as he closed his eyes. “Cafes,” he muttered. “And bars. Ordering a drink and food has not changed for centuries.”

Centuries!

“You like cafes, then?”

“Are you kidding me?” Pyrus asked. “They're the best. Not as formal as restaurants, with inventive menus and friendly staff. Coffee just gets better and better every year, I must say. You should have tried the first European attempts at it. Growing beans all around the world and roasting them in different ways has really changed things.”

Mazie giggled. Pyrus was adorable when he got enthusiastic about something that gave him simple pleasure.

“And bars?” she asked. “I'm guessing they haven't changed much?”

Pyrus grinned. “There are still places in Europe and the surrounding isles where I can slap a copper on the bench and

get a draught of local brew, as well as a haunch of mutton, just like it was when I was a boy.”

“Wow,” she muttered, watching him. He was truly gorgeous when he was animated.

He’s gorgeous all the fucking time but look at how he shines when he’s excited.

“What about you?” Pyrus asked. “Cafes a thing for you too?”

Mazie nodded, reaching out to hold his hand. “I was going to say it’s my next favorite thing after movies. I can’t wait to go café hopping with you.”

“Anytime,” Pyrus said, raising her hand to kiss her fingers.

Exhaustion pulled at her brain. It had been a long day and an even longer night. Talking with Pyrus was just so comfortable that it was hard to stop.

He leaned over and kissed her. Mazie smiled up at him, then quickly stifled a yawn. Pyrus laughed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It isn’t you. I’m just tired.”

“As well you should be,” Pyrus said, standing. “I’ll not stand between you and your bed, my lady. I bid thee goodnight.”

Pyrus stepped back and bowed, gently taking her hand to kiss her knuckles. He released her and turned to go, giving her a little wink. Mazie watched him walk away, her whole body tingling with excitement.

At moments like this, there was no doubt or fear. She might not truly understand the meaning of fated mates, but she wanted Pyrus, and he wanted her too.

ELEVEN



PYRUS

Pyrus woke the next morning on a high. He hadn't gotten much sleep because he and Mazie had talked so long last night, but he was full of energy all the same. He dressed in a hurry and headed out to the main section of the camp.

While he walked, he let his imagination run wild. Last night had been the most amazing night of his life, even if the sexual frustration had left him feeling like electric eels were running through his blood, zapping him at random moments and triggering erotic thoughts.

Pyrus had lived a long time, and he'd been with many women. He'd always needed a connection, so tumbling with easy girls had never been his deal. He'd had amazing lovers over the course of his life. All of them had been beautiful, seductive, and incredible women that stirred his heart as well as his passion.

It was shocking to find that every single one of those experiences paled next to being with Mazie. He shouldn't be surprised because she was his fated mate, and obviously, things would be different with her. He'd just never realized how different it would be.

A bird flitted by his head, chirping brightly. He watched the dip and curve of its flight as it winged through the trees before perching on a nearby branch next to another of its kind. To his delight, the two little birds immediately nuzzled each other's faces and began to sing together.

Literal lovebirds.

The sun seemed warmer today, the early morning rays angling through the trees above with shimmering grace. The breeze that swept across his face was more invigorating than ever before. Pyrus had never felt so happy to be alive. He paused, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes to let the sun warm his cheeks.

Mazie.

In his mind, she was all he could see. The night before came back to him in a rush, the lust stampeding into his mind and demolishing all other thoughts like a herd of buffalo charging through a ravine, a force of nature that could not be stopped.

He groaned softly, feeling his muscles ripple as his cock stood in his pants. The need for Mazie was delicious, intoxicating, and addicting. Still, it was a sharp and undeniable pain.

He longed for her. The kisses they'd shared, the feel of her skin under his fingertips, and the movement of her body against his own ... they haunted him. His skin sang as if it waited for her touch, and his blood ran with fire.

The dragon in his soul roared in frustration, flapping against the walls of his mind like a caged beast. He had to keep it caged. He couldn't allow it a moment of freedom. If he allowed his primal half to take him over, even for a few moments, it would claim its mate.

Pyrus opened his eyes, grounding himself. He blinked hard, looking around the trees, hearing the bird song, scenting the breeze. He struggled for control, eventually quieting his mind, and cooling his blood with an extreme act of will.

He forced himself to walk slowly up to the main camping area, following the good smells of bacon and eggs. Someone was swirling masses of pancake batter across a huge hotplate, and the crisping edges gave off a hot aroma of sugar and butter melting together into a delicious, gooey mess.

He looked around for Mazie, unable to stop himself from sifting through the food smell to search for her scent. At one

point, he had to stop and calm himself because the idea of Mazie covered in butter and maple syrup suddenly overwhelmed him so badly that he almost dropped his plate.

As he ate, he began to feel a rising sense of anxiety. He was pretty sure that Mazie wasn't here, and this was the last day of Gerri's event. He knew the Peace Corps was moving on. He thought that they'd ended on a good note last night, but now he wasn't sure.

Where does that leave us? Would she really just disappear?

The idea caused his worry to combust into full-on anxiety. He finished his food and kept looking for her. He didn't find Mazie, but he did find Gerri sitting by a campfire, chatting with a bunch of people from the gala. He pushed his way into the circle without even thinking about his manners.

"Gerri, can I talk to you? If that's okay?" he asked boldly. Gerri smiled and stood, leading him away from the circle.

"What's the matter, Pyrus? You look like you have literal ants in your pants."

"There's something in my pants, all right. It's not ants, though."

Gerri laughed softly, taking a sip of coffee. She was dressed in khaki cargos and a white blouse, somehow making the casual safari gear look like the height of fashion.

"How are things with Mazie?" Gerri asked, her eyes sparkling. "Has she inspected your pants for ants?"

"Yes. No. Well, it's complicated."

"Complicated how?" Gerri said, taking another sip of coffee.

"I just ... things started to go really well last night. We fooled around a bit. Then she pulled back. I don't know. I thought things were good, but now I can't find her."

"How did the night end?" Gerri asked curiously. "Were you making out, and then she fled from the room?"

“No,” Pyrus said with a laugh. “We were at the yacht party, and she wasn’t feeling well, so she went to have a rest, and then I went to check on her. We started making out.”

Pyrus paused, his eyes sliding off into the middle distance as he let the memories flood his mind. It didn’t take long before he was locked into a full-on sensory memory of Mazie under his hands.

“Earth to Pyrus,” Gerri giggled. “Come in. We lost you.”

“Yeah, look. I got sidetracked, okay?” Pyrus shook his head. “As far as I know, everything’s great. We’ve been getting on really well. Mazie didn’t want to fool around too much on the boat, which I get. But then we went back to her tent and talked for hours.”

He paused, giving Gerri a very serious look.

“It’s really real, Gerri. I love her.”

“Yes, you do,” Gerri said. It was as if she could see straight through to his soul. “That’s obvious, Pyrus. I can see it all over you. So, if everything’s so great, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is I have to claim her,” he said. The words rushed out of him in a hasty whisper. “My dragon is insistent, and to be honest, so am I. I know we’re meant to be. I’m trying to respect her perspective, but I’m frustrated by how slowly humans have to do things.”

He sighed, feeling the weight of his frustration as a solid presence in his chest.

“I just need her,” he said simply. “I was worried about this, but now, it’s the final day at the sanctuary, the Peace Corps is moving on, and I don’t know what’s going to happen next!”

“Oh, Pyrus,” Gerri said. “You always were so very impatient and impulsive.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you realize you have only known Mazie for a couple of days?”

Pyrus frowned. “Yes, of course. What does that have to do with it? We’re mates. We’re going to be together forever. I need to know what she intends to do. I can’t just drop everything in my life and follow her around the world.”

Gerri laughed, throwing her head back. She reached out and gave Pyrus’s arm a squeeze.

“Slow down, dear heart! Oh, my stars, but you really don’t understand, do you? You poor, sweet boy.”

Pyrus’s frown deepened. He bridled a bit at her tone, but since he didn’t know exactly how old Gerri was, he couldn’t berate her for treating him like a youngster.

Wait. Was she old even when I was young?

“No, I don’t understand,” he admitted. He was completely lost.

“You need to take this one step at a time,” Gerri said. “A strong foundation is built brick by brick. To Mazie, you’re still a stranger. I think it’s absolutely splendid that you fell into bed with each other so soon, even if you didn’t go all the way. It means this is a very strong match.”

“But wait, what?” Pyrus said, shaking his head. “We’re strangers? I don’t get it. She’s my fated mate.”

Gerri sighed, rolling her eyes. “Typical male. I’m going to have to spell it out. Try to imagine, just for five seconds, what it would be like if you didn’t have the fated mate’s sense.”

Pyrus stared at Gerri, trying to imagine it.

“Don’t you think it would be hard to trust a stranger?” Gerri said. “Think about it, Pyrus. You have only known each other for a few days, and poor Mazie doesn’t have that same instinct that you do. You’ve also lived a very long time, dear one. You know how it feels when it’s *not* the one.”

Gerri shrugged, taking a step back as she finished her coffee. “If you really didn’t have the fated mate’s sense of fate, imagine how hard it would be to trust a new person. Especially after all the hell that went down with Richard.”

Pyrus hadn't been aware that Gerri knew about Richard, but Gerri seemed to know a great many things ... at times, she seemed to know absolutely everything.

"Mazie's a lot hotter than Richard," he said wryly. "I don't think I'd have much trouble trusting her, even if my dragon didn't roar like a beast every time she came near."

Gerri smiled, nodding. "It's easy to say from this side of the fence, but give the girl a break. It's a whole new experience for her, a massive shakeup from the world she's come to know. She's probably not thinking too far ahead right now. I suggest you do the same."

"She really isn't comfortable in my world," Pyrus said. "Something happened last night. I'm hoping that it doesn't scare her away."

"Did you say she was unwell on the yacht?"

"Yes. Kind of. A couple of girls said some nasty things to her, then tried to convince me that she was using me."

"Oh," Gerri said, scowling. "That's unfortunate."

"As I said, I think the night ended well, but there definitely wasn't as much closeness by the time we got back to her tent."

"But you talked all night?"

"Yes," Pyrus said almost wistfully. "I didn't get a whole lot of sleep, between staying up late talking then tossing and turning in my bunk with an extremely hard ... mattress."

Gerri laughed, covering her smile with one hand.

"I have always believed that humans do feel it when they are with their shifter mate," Gerri said. "Their senses aren't like yours, but I know they feel an intensity with their mate that they've never felt. Because it's so much more powerful than any human experience, I think it shakes them up a little."

Gerri stepped closer to him, putting a hand on his arm. "I think if you just back off a little, give her some space, you'll see everything will work out."

“But ... today’s the last day here!” Pyrus cried. “I don’t know where she’s going or where I’m supposed to be.”

Gerri chuckled. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. Do you have any immediate engagements?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Anything on fire that you have to go and salvage?”

“No,” he said, grinning now. “But I could start setting things on fire if you like.”

Pyrus’s dragon growled from deep within his chest. The beast within was more than ready to comply.

Gerri shrugged. “So, just play it by ear. You might have to give her some space, Pyrus. I mean real distance. If she says she needs to go her own way, you’ll have to honor it.”

“I don’t think I can,” he said, his voice barely making it through his closed throat. “This is exactly my problem. What if I abandon everything to chase her around the world only to have it never happen?”

Gerri’s face fell, and she put her coffee on the ground so she could give him a big hug.

“You tough guys are all the same,” she said, patting his back. “You act like you’ve got it all, but deep down inside, all you want is to know you’re loved.”

“Do you love me, Gerri?” he asked, laughing. She reached up ... way up ... to ruffle his hair and make a complete mess of it.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I’ve been watching you for years, just knowing that your mate would appear. I was right, as usual.”

“If you know so much,” Pyrus asked, “do you know if we end up together?”

Gerri paused, her face very serious. He felt like her eyes were looking straight through him. It wasn’t a comfortable feeling.

“I can’t answer that,” she said with regret. “I know you’re fated mates. A perfect match. How to fit your lives together, though? That’s up to you. I can’t say how that part will work out.”

Pyrus sighed, shaking his head. “Okay. Thank you, Gerri. I will try to take a step back and lower my expectations.”

“Very good,” Gerri said, smiling up at him. At that moment, Pyrus saw Mazie walking towards the site with a small group of her friends.

“Already forgotten me, I see?” Gerri joked. “Though, hopefully, not my advice?”

“Thank you, Gerri,” Pyrus said, moving past her. “I’ll take your advice. I’ve got to go.”

“Of course you do,” Gerri said. “Good luck!”

Pyrus barely heard her last words as he rushed across the field to meet Mazie. He was sure he could take Gerri’s advice. He’d do anything for his fated mate.

What was her advice, again?

Maybe the first lesson he had to learn was that he was a fool when it came to his mate. With a deep breath, Pyrus prepared himself for the delicious torture of wanting Mazie so badly that he couldn’t stand it, while preventing himself from making any definite moves.

When she saw him coming and looked up to wave at him, Pyrus was struck by her beauty all over again. It was going to be a lot harder to stick to Gerri’s advice than he’d originally thought.

TWELVE



MAZIE

The first thing Mazie thought about when she woke up was Pyrus. The feel of his mouth and body pressing against hers and the taste of his lips. She hadn't ever been with anyone who made her feel that way so quickly. She felt like she wanted to know every inch of him and that she would let him know every inch of her.

She found herself sweating as she sat up in the tent, and it wasn't just from the heat. "Jeez," she whispered. Mazie quickly pushed those naughty thoughts out of her mind, knowing she had an important day ahead of her.

It was the last day that the corps team would be at the sanctuary. They would then disband and go their separate ways. It was a pattern that Mazie was used to. The goodbyes were always difficult because she'd made friends along the way. But inevitably, they'd lose touch and move on with their lives.

Mazie wasn't great at moving on. She held onto people, often without them knowing and often without her ever having informed them of how much she'd ached to get close to them. She had lost out on close relationships with both men and women because of the pattern, but it was something she had to work out in her mind.

She tried to let go of that sorrowful feeling that came over her on the last day at the places she'd volunteered. She showered, once again trying to avoid thoughts about Pyrus being in the shower with her, his hands moving tenderly over her naked body.

It was confusing, to say the least, to feel both sad about leaving potential friends and meaningful work while also being aroused by the thought of some strange dragon-man moving his fingers in her most intimate spots.

She huffed out a breath and turned the shower off, forcing herself to face the present moment. She would have lots of time for brooding later.

Mazie placed her things into the corps' jeep they would take back to the sanctuary and then headed to breakfast with the group. She went to a table and sat with Emilia, as she always did, along with a few other friends she had garnered over the months of working together.

“Aren't you riveted?” Emilia said, sliding eggs into her mouth.

Mazie smiled, taking a long sip of her coffee. “Not exactly the word I would use,” she muttered.

“I just can't wait to take a hot shower and sleep in a real bed,” Emilia said, emphasizing the word *bed*. “I think I might take a mini-vacation and just fucking sleep in an air-conditioned hotel for a week. And eat. That's it.”

Mazie sighed, trying to conceal her resignation. Before Emilia could take notice of it, she nodded at something behind Mazie.

“I think someone is trying to get your attention,” Emilia said with a wink.

Mazie raised an eyebrow, then turned.

Standing there and towering over everyone like the Empire State Building was Pyrus. He was dashingly handsome, even in a sea of sweat and dirt that the corps had all grown used to. The sight of him and his golden eyes shining in the morning light made Mazie feel like grunting.

He lifted a hand and gave her a little wave.

“Lord,” Emilia said. “You better climb that like a tree, or I will.”

Mazie snorted with laughter, then lightly pushed at her friend's shoulder. It was that kind of connection and camaraderie she was going to miss. She hadn't attained it with many people in her life, and she longed for it, especially with women.

"Don't drink my coffee," Mazie said, rising from her seat.

She felt her hands starting to shake as she walked over to Pyrus. She was having difficulty raising her eyes to meet his. So she folded her arms over her chest and did her best to look him in the eye without fumbling her words.

"Hi," she managed to say.

His smile was glistening and made her knees weak. "Good morning," he said. "Did you get to sleep okay last night?"

The truth was that she was close to touching herself the night before but felt it was a bit awkward to do in the tent. So she held back, perhaps, making herself hold out for a bit more.

"It was fine, thank you," she said, grinning up at him. "I didn't think I'd see you here this morning."

"I wanted to see if you could hang out today?" he asked, voice drifting away a bit in the wind.

Mazie would have loved that, but it was their last day. She wasn't going to bow out of that. She shook her head while she spoke. "I can't right now, unfortunately. It's the group's last day at the sanctuary," Mazie said. "Maybe later?"

Mazie had subconsciously moved a hand up her own neck and found a strand of hair that had come loose from her bun. She was twirling it like some sixteen-year-old smitten with the high school quarterback.

She immediately shot her hand back to her chest, hoping Pyrus hadn't noticed.

"Why don't I come with you?" he said softly. "I don't mind helping out."

Mazie grimaced, then gazed back at her team. "I don't think my supervisor can just have someone standing around, watching us shovel shit," she said, smirking sweetly.

Pyrus tilted his head. Fuck, she wanted to kiss him.

“What makes you think I can’t shove shit?” he quipped.

Mazie swore her heart skipped multiple beats. “You want to shovel shit around with me all day?” she said, swaying her body side to side.

Pyrus shrugged. “I’m willing to do anything as long as you’re around.”

Mazie wanted to leap into his arms and have him carry her away, find somewhere where they could be alone, and just take over each other’s bodies. But instead, she moved a hand up and down her chest, feeling her skin growing more and more sensitive by the minute.

“You should talk to my supervisor,” Mazie said, motioning to the breakfast table.

Pyrus nodded, then gave her another little wave as he walked away. “I’ll see you later, gorgeous.”

Mazie had to stifle her girlish giggle, watching him in his fitted jeans walk away to speak to her manager. She sighed, watching his hips sway side to side like a pendulum.

A few seconds later, she looked at Emilia, who gave her a dramatic wink.

Mazie couldn’t help it. She gave her friend a thumbs up while biting her lip, trying to contain the exciting and erotic sensations moving through her body.

Her supervisor was ecstatic about having another person that would help them close up shop for the season. Especially a big shifter who could carry heavier loads and would be less likely to complain about the heat and the amount of work they needed to do.

So Pyrus rode with everyone to the sanctuary, pressed into the jeep against Mazie and five other corps workers. He looked comical, with his knees nearly hitting his chin, but he didn’t cringe for a single moment.

They tackled cleaning up the pens with Pyrus tagging along with intrigue. He listened to her instructions closely,

leaning into her and bending over so she could speak directly into his ear. A part of Mazie wondered if his hearing was just fine, and he simply was trying to find a reason to stand close.

Either way, Mazie didn't mind.

They cleared out the pens quickly and easily, with Mazie telling him about the history of the animals, which included rhinos, hyenas, and a few elephants. Pyrus seemed genuinely interested in what she was saying, asking follow-up questions and nodding.

If he was faking it, he was the best faker Mazie had ever seen. Despite her busy schedule of moving around from place to place, Mazie had been on a handful of dates and felt she was a pretty good judge of character.

If Pyrus just wanted to get into her pants, he didn't have to come with her to watch her look raggedy and sweaty. He could have just waited for her to be done, get all dolled up, and spent time together in a cool setting.

But he didn't. He was there, sporting his volunteer T-shirt and jeans, sweating and shimmering in the sun in a disheveled state just like her.

That was what made her want him the most.

"So what happens after days like today?" Pyrus asked as they finished up in the rhino pen.

Mazie flipped her hair up after crouching, squinting in the relentless daylight. "After the corps disbands, you mean?" she replied.

Pyrus nodded, moving around hay for the rhino to feast on.

"Well, what usually happens is that most people go home for a bit, then decide what their next move is."

Pyrus was then the one crouching, and Mazie adored the way his T-shirt strained against his muscles. She had seen him with his shirt off multiple times, but there was something about the tease of the fabric that made her thighs clench together.

"What are you going to do?" Pyrus asked.

Mazie sighed, then leaned on the shovel as she spoke, watching him do exactly what she had instructed him to.

“I like rolling straight into the next assignment,” Mazie said. “I will usually stay in a hotel for a bit and figure out what I want to do.”

“Are those your plans for tonight, then?”

Mazie realized what he was doing. He wanted to spend more time with her, believe it or not. She bit her lip, feeling that sweet sensation of bashfulness glitter up her spine.

“Everyone else will head to a hotel near the airport,” she said. “We all stay for one night, then like I said, everyone flies home.”

Pyrus nodded, then brought his hands to his knees. He gazed up at her thoughtfully.

“Will you work with any of the same people?” he inquired.

Mazie was having trouble not getting lost in his eyes, so she looked away briefly, adjusting her bun. “I might,” she said, contemplating. “But usually, I won’t see any of them again. They’re young, so they’ve got a lot ahead of them that they may want to do. I don’t blame them, really.”

Mazie placed the shovel aside, then flipped her head forward. She gathered up her hair and tried to get all of the loose strands, then flipped back to standing up. As she tied the hair ribbon, Pyrus stood, looking at her like she was a precious piece of gold.

She utterly lost her train of thought.

She held her arms over her head and finished tying the bun. Pyrus was smiling and not saying anything as she finished up, then she brought her hands to her hips.

“Hi,” she said playfully.

He smirked at her. “Sorry,” he said breathlessly. “You’re so stunning, Mazie. I can’t keep my eyes off you.”

Mazie had never felt so sexy in her entire life. And she was wearing a simple T-shirt and jeans, just like him, with no

makeup and nothing even close to glamorous hugging her curvy frame. She was wearing a sports bra as well, which held her bosom together comfortably. She likely smelled of body odor and had sweat streaming down all her crevices.

But no set of lingerie or seductive slit in a dress could have made her feel the way she did standing in that rhino pen. “Pyrus,” she said, looking away, “you’re making me blush.”

“Am I?” he whispered.

Mazie cleared her throat as it had dried up, then forced herself to move out of the pen. If she had stayed any longer, her own animal would have emerged.

“We should work on some enrichment toys,” she said. “For the animals.”

Pyrus nodded, then trailed behind her. She felt his eyes on her ass, wishing it was his hands or mouth instead.

They sat on a bench along with other members, making toys that would stimulate the mind of the creatures. It usually tried to entice foraging and socializing between animals who had experienced trauma.

Pyrus and Mazie sat with Emilia for a bit of toy making. He socialized easily with her, which only made Mazie even more ravenous for the handsome shifter who had suddenly emerged in her life.

She wished deep down that she could be more confident about what she wanted. It had always been hard for her, especially within relationships, to say that she needed or wanted something from a partner who was too aloof to notice.

Around lunchtime, Emilia left to get them some sandwiches. When they were alone, Mazie felt her heart pick up the pace.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable back there,” Pyrus blurted out, a slight huff of smoke sneaking out of his nostrils. “I am not used to being so struck by someone.”

Mazie tried to focus on the toys they were making. It was pointless as her thighs were on fire, and her focus was blurred.

“I didn’t mind it,” she whispered faintly.

Pyrus simply grinned, fiddling with the string of food they were creating for the baby rhino.

“In between getting a new assignment,” Pyrus said. “You just stay around the hotel, I guess?”

Mazie nodded, wishing and praying he would just ask her already. “Yes, but it doesn’t take long to get one,” she remarked. “I usually just chill and research until something interesting pops up.”

Silence took over once again. Pyrus placed the string down and looked at her directly, his mouth opening and closing multiple times before the words finally shot out like an arrow into the sky.

“Would you like to spend those few days with me?” he spewed. “I know it’s kind of fast, but I would love to get to know you better.”

Mazie’s eyes had been averted, and when he spoke, it was like a violinist lightly stroking the strings to start a quiet, soft arrangement.

She nodded enthusiastically. There was no point in turning back. She wanted him so badly that she could barely stand it.

“I would love to, Pyrus.”

THIRTEEN



PYRUS

Pyrus hadn't had so much fun in nearly a hundred years as he did helping Mazie at the sanctuary. It didn't matter what they were doing, as long as they were together. That feeling made his heart radiate like the center of a thousand suns.

Plus, she looked so damn sexy doing it all. He could sense the passion coming from her soul as she sweetly spoke to the animals, giving instructions to other people who looked to her for leadership. It made his soul sing, the dragon inside of him softening to a low purr rather than an intense howl.

He wanted to feel her all over him physically, but he also wanted to respect her boundaries. He knew she was attracted to him by her rich, tangy scent as they made out the last time, which assured him that he wasn't pushing too hard.

He would wait for her forever if that was the case.

After blurting his question about spending time together, he feared he may have pushed it too far. She had made friends over her time at the sanctuary, and maybe she wanted to spend time with them.

Pyrus wanted to take what Gerri had said seriously. There's no point in pushing a human woman into what you want. You have to guide her, romance her, and show her how much you care for her to help her feel comfortable.

But Mazie had gazed up at him, her emerald jewels glistening.

“I would love to,” she said, a smile curling at the side of her lips. “I would love to spend some time with friends before heading out somewhere new.”

Pyrus felt his heart drop in his chest a bit but didn't show it. The word *friend* was a little hurtful, but he figured it was a way to keep him at arm's length for the time being. He would be patient, just like Gerri instructed him to be.

He placed the string toy he had been making down and leaned forward on the bench. She flicked her eyes up at him with a provocative look.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked. “We can go anywhere. Anywhere in the world.”

Mazie placed the toy she was making on the table, then leaned on her hand. She looked tired, but Pyrus thought she still looked beyond angelic.

“Hmm,” she said, pursing her lips at him.

Pyrus wanted to leap over the bench and pull her into his arms. He missed her sweet, candy flavor.

“I think I want to know about where you're from,” she said, smiling. “That would be interesting to me.”

Pyrus felt his heart swell in his chest. He couldn't wait to get her alone. “You want to come back home with me?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course,” she replied. “I want to know where this big tough dragon came from.”

Pyrus was exhilarated, though he tried to keep the feeling slightly diminished. It was like trying to let fireworks go off inside a greenhouse.

“Then we will go back home together,” he said. “Do you want to stay with me in my hotel tonight? It's not too far from the airport.” Fearing that he may have sounded too desperate, Pyrus corrected himself. “If you want to, of course,” he said, clearing his throat. “No pressure.”

But Mazie was still smiling. Her cheeks were as plump as sweet red apples. “I would love to stay with you,” she said,

almost purring.

They finished assembling the toys for the animals, and Pyrus felt excited beyond belief. He couldn't remember the last time the air had felt so brisk on his skin, the sun so warm and inviting, a refreshing drink of water so satisfying.

Everyone at the corps finished up their work, then headed toward their shared hotels. Mazie said goodbye to her friends, and when Pyrus felt guilty for a single moment, she approached him with a beaming look on her face.

"I might go into the city first before I meet up with you," she said. "I don't have anything nice to wear."

Pyrus's breath hitched in his throat, the thought of Mazie in a dress or short-cut skirt too appetizing an image to cope with. He blinked a few times, centering himself from the dizzying concept.

"You look great as you are," he remarked, completely meaning it.

Mazie looked at herself, and when she did, Pyrus caught a brief glimpse of some cleavage.

Mother of God, this woman is magic.

"You're sweet," she said. "But I want to try something on that's a bit more ... I don't know ... appropriate."

Her voice had lowered to nearly sensual, and Pyrus wasn't going to deny whatever that statement was implying.

They both headed into the city in Pyrus's car, but Pyrus dropped Mazie off at one of Johannesburg's large shopping malls. He drummed on the steering wheel, watching her get out of the car and attempting to ignore the ample curve of her ass.

"Are you sure you're okay finding the suite after?" he said. "I can send a driver, or I can come to get you. It's no problem."

She spun around adorably and tilted her head down to the car. "Now, that will just ruin the surprise," she said with a wink. "I'm a big girl, Pyrus. Don't you worry. I won't be late."

She spun back around and walked inside with Pyrus biting his knuckle to keep from blurting out how much he looked forward to seeing her.

Pyrus returned to his hotel suite, an expensive and luxurious penthouse at the highest peak in the city, and ran to shower at lightning speed. He wanted to smell and look as good as he possibly could for her since it was their first time really being alone. He wanted to spoil her rotten, too, after working so hard at the sanctuary to let her know she deserved it all.

While she was gone, Pyrus had dinner brought in by the most prestigious chefs in the city, along with a bartender who made the most culturally specific cocktails. He also managed to call the hotel staff and tipped them generously to set up a table on the terrace that overlooked the bustling city.

Pyrus found himself sweating again after she had been gone for about an hour. He rinsed off his armpits and looked into the mirror, and glimpsed a man he had never encountered before. A man who wanted to impress a woman so desperately and so deeply that his hands shook at the thought of her presence.

He knew she was his mate because no one had ever made him feel this way.

Pyrus made sure the dinner was set up promptly with the cocktails made and the decor on the terrace set up flawlessly. When the doorbell to the room rang, he thought his heart was going to leap out of his chest.

“I’ll get it!” Pyrus yelled to the attendant. He opened the door slowly and was nearly sent backward at the sight of the real-life Aphrodite standing in front of him.

Mazie was wearing a green, whimsical floral dress that exposed her lovely cleavage down her long neckline. Her hair was long and wavy, running down her back, and she had applied makeup to make her eyes burst out even more ... waves of green he merely wanted to drown in.

Both his cock and heart twitched at the same time. Her scent smacked him in the face, a delightful apple blossom and vanilla. Her plump, cute cheeks stabbed his heart repeatedly as she smiled broadly and gleefully.

“Good evening, Pyrus,” she said.

Pyrus blew air out of his mouth as he held the door open. She walked in and looked around, the whiff of her hair causing another dizzy spell to overtake him.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t think I’d be dining with a real goddess tonight.”

Mazie looked over her shoulder at him, still smiling. The image of her bare shoulders shining at him, combined with the glistening illumination of her eyes, would be etched into his soul forever.

“Oh, you,” she said, wrinkling her nose at him and pouting her lips painted a candy apple red. “Is this how you treat all of your guests?”

You’re the only guest I ever wanted.

Pyrus closed the door behind him, then leaned against it. He gazed at her, fondly entranced. “Only the cute ones,” he quipped.

Mazie let out a giggle that was melodic and enchanting. He held out an arm to her and escorted her to the terrace where dinner waited.

Pyrus wasn’t sure he could eat after being so nervous, and having Mazie on his arm was all the sustenance he thought he would ever need.

“Oh, Pyrus,” she said, covering her mouth.

Her reaction was thrilling, and Pyrus, more than anything, wanted to cause that reaction in her. Again and again.

They ate together once Pyrus asked the attendants to depart, thanking them profusely. They drank and joked and laughed, and it was the most fun Pyrus could remember having in so many decades.

Afterward was when the anxiety returned. Mazie sat on the couch in his suite that faced the window, watching storm clouds slowly rolling in. They spoke about her goals and dreams in life, with Pyrus sitting on the opposing end of the couch so as not to pressure her.

“I don’t really have any,” Mazie said, sounding forlorn. “My parents were very strict, and I honestly couldn’t wait to get out of there. So I didn’t really have time to come up with them.”

Pyrus could tell it was difficult for her to reveal that kind of information. She gazed out the window but looked comfortable and smoking hot as she lounged. He moved in a little closer, aching to absorb her essence.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said sincerely. “I would love to help you find out what those dreams are and certainly make them come true.”

Mazie turned to face him, her eyes glassing up a little. She breathed in deeply and blinked the tears away with a smile. “Come here,” she whispered.

Pyrus didn’t have to be asked twice. He nearly bounced to her side, slipping his body next to her, so their thighs were pressing together and placing an arm to drape overhead.

He gazed down at her, unable to turn away. All of her features were so fucking close to him, so pristine and arresting. He couldn’t wipe the smile from his face.

“Hi,” she said, giggling.

“Hi,” he blurted out. “You’re so gorgeous, Mazie. I’m sorry, but it has to be said.”

Mazie had her legs crossed over one another, with one of them sticking out in front of her and pulling at the dress, so the skin of her thigh was exposed. His free hand moved from the couch and slid over her bare skin. He nearly lost it when she gasped at his touch.

“You’re driving me crazy,” Pyrus whispered.

Mazie's mouth had parted, and she had begun to breathe rapidly. Pyrus could sense her heartbeat rising too, which was a good sign.

"Is that so?" she said, her voice smokey and sensual.

"It is," Pyrus said, moving his mouth closer to hers. "And I think we also have to talk about this word *friend* that we've left lingering in the air."

"Uh-huh."

Mazie seemed entranced herself, watching Pyrus closely, and her tongue slipped between her lips. Her eyes flicked from his eyes to his lips, back and forth, as he slowly moved his hand up her thigh to the hem of her dress.

"The last time I checked," he whispered, leaning in closer and closer. "Friends, don't let friends touch their thighs like this."

"Mmm, really?" Mazie moaned, which made Pyrus's cock twitch in his pants.

"No," he growled. "I don't think they do this either."

Pyrus slipped his hand beyond enemy territory and moved beneath the hemline of her dress. He moved up slowly, finding the smooth silk of her underwear.

"Oh, Pyrus," Mazie moaned again.

He moved his hand along her hips, teasing at the waistband, then boldly lifted up the side of her dress. He saw she wore a shiny black thong, a single cheek of her ass exposed as she turned to face him.

"Fuck, Mazie," Pyrus growled.

Mazie bit her lip, took him by the neck, and pulled his mouth to hers, speaking in a gravelly tone that made Pyrus as hard as stone.

"Touch me," she demanded.

As much as Pyrus loved teasing Mazie, he wanted her too badly to keep the game going any longer. As he plunged into

her mouth, he brought his hands back to her center, then slowly slid down two fingers between her legs.

She parted for him like the Red Sea, letting him into the most intimate part of her body. She let out a sexy whimper as he rubbed over her panties, sensing she was wet and primed for him.

“Oh, Pyrus, baby,” she groaned between kisses.

He rubbed at her as they made out with a mighty fever on the couch. Their tongues swirled and danced like a couple who had been together for years, knowing each other’s patterns and desires like a well-traveled roadmap.

Pyrus felt Mazie getting impatient, moving her hips in a circle where his fingers met. It would be time to please her soon. There was nothing he wanted more in the world than to make her feel the utmost spellbinding pleasure.

“Fuck, Pyrus, I want you,” she crooned over his lips. “I’ve never been so turned on in my life.”

“I want you too,” Pyrus growled back.

With mutual agreement, the two made out while Mazie’s arousal increased, running her hands through Pyrus’s slicked-back hair and slowly revealing her true, sexual indulgent self to him.

He wanted her to unfold completely for him because he was willing to do the same for her.

FOURTEEN



MAZIE

Mazie's body was a house on fire, and she loved it.

She had never ached for anyone so deeply as she did for Pyrus. His hands were a soothing rainfall over her torched skin, but instead of putting it out, they only further encouraged the fervent passion wanting to burst from her chest and the most intimate corners of her body.

She didn't realize that she hadn't had sex in such a long time until Pyrus's fingers found the pulsing jewel of her clit. The pressure he applied sent her soaring, and she writhed against him like a wave crashing against the shore.

"Yes, Pyrus, oh my god!" she begged into his ear. "I want you so bad, baby."

Pyrus moved his mouth to her neck, kissing it lightly, then pressed harder, sucking against the supple section between her chin and shoulder. It made her roll her eyes to the back of her head, every atom in her body buzzing.

"Oh, god," she crooned.

"Mmm, I love it when you moan for me," Pyrus whispered against her skin.

He moved his fingers in teasing circles over her thong, causing Mazie to quiver and shake like a jellyfish. He had such power over her. It was wild and absolutely naughty.

"You make me feel so good," Mazie whimpered as Pyrus moved his mouth down her shoulder, pushing at the dress until he found her bra strap.

“I want to make you feel things you never thought possible,” he hummed over her skin. “I’m going to make you fly.”

Mazie giggled as he nipped at her shoulder, moving his mouth to the valley between her breasts. He licked at it, teasing the sides of her mounds as Mazie rolled up the skirt of her dress.

His hand had remained on her clit the entire time he explored her with his mouth, maintaining the pressure and circular motion. But Mazie wanted him to go beyond that. She wanted to feel all of him and for him to feel all of her.

Pyrus shifted from the couch and got on his knees before her. He was very tall, so his head was able to remain moving around the cups of her bra. He boldly lifted a hand, wrapped it around her left breast, and it popped it out of her dress.

Mazie clapped her thighs together with his hand still between them, gasping as he wrapped his full mouth around her exposed nipple.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned, tangling her hands in his hair.

She was a woman possessed, writhing against the handsome, tantalizing dragon shifter she had only just met as he suckled at her. Rumbles of the approaching storm beyond were like God practicing his bowling shot.

She continued to gasp and whimper as Pyrus casually moved to her right breast, removing it, too, with such ease and precision from its enclosure. Watching him wrap his mouth around her nipple and close his eyes with such rapture drove Mazie even closer to the edge of cataclysmic implosion.

No one had ever treated her body like it was a temple. Like a temporary motel visit, sure, even a hotel stay if the dalliance lasted for longer than a month or two. Especially when it came to the first time, there had always been a sense of a rush that was incredibly self-driven.

But not with Pyrus. He was taking his time with her and seemed to be absorbed in every sound she made, every movement, every coo, and plea.

It made her feel sexy beyond any word capable of expressing itself in the English language. There was nothing that made a woman feel sexier than when she was desired and appreciated.

“Touch me deeper, baby,” Mazie said, her voice dusky and low.

Pyrus looked up from sucking at her breasts, then lifted a hand and caressed them back and forth. One side of his mouth moved into a smirk, and his lips lingered like hot coals over hers.

“Oh, like this?”

Pyrus stroked his fingers to the top of her underwear, then pushed past the hemline. He then laboriously pushed his fingers over the top of her clit, seeping through to the soaking treasures of her desire.

Mazie opened her mouth silently while Pyrus hovered his mouth over hers.

“Oh, baby,” he growled. “You are so fucking wet.”

He moved through the slick folds of her pussy, up and down a few times, then pushed two fingers into her. Mazie gasped and grunted, gritting her teeth as he stroked inside of her.

“*Pyrus*,” she crooned.

Desire fogged her mind, making it difficult to string together a few words or even a thought. However, Pyrus seemed to be enjoying it, returning to her breasts briefly. He sent an electric shock through her system as he played with her stone-hard nipples, then nipped at each playfully before moving down to her torso.

Mazie helped Pyrus roll the skirt up from her legs and then, thankfully, parted them for him. He removed his fingers from her for a moment to help her take off the thong, slowly moving it down her legs and casting it aside over his shoulder.

Mazie smiled and opened her legs even farther for him. She was exposed, almost entirely, with her breasts sitting out

the front of her dress and her legs spread out so wide that her knees brushed against the couch. She rolled her hips toward him, an instinctive and impulsive movement as arousal crawled through her like a snake.

His eyes were blazing at her, golden in the faint light of the evening. He looked like a delicious treat as his suit strained against him, and he crawled on his hands and knees back between her legs. They maintained eye contact the entire time, making Mazie feel like she could cum the second his tongue grazed her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, kissing her legs from her ankles all the way up to her thighs.

“Lord, Pyrus,” Mazie moaned.

He knew what he was doing to her. The smirk on his face lingered as he moved up her body, teasing at the sensitive skin where her pussy pulsed for him. He then slid to the other leg and started at the ankle again. Once he finally arrived at her core, Mazie felt ready to hiss at him.

“Oh, baby, *please*,” she begged. “I need you. You’re killing me.”

He curled a lip downward, then moved his face closer. His breath brushed her nether lips, hot and ready.

“Oh, we don’t want that,” his voice rumbled. “I want you to tremble, baby.”

Mazie watched as he opened his mouth, and a long, dragon-like tongue emerged. He tasted her first with a long lick that began at the bottom of her pussy, and leisurely moved up to where her clit throbbed.

The pleasure stole her breath, and she threw her head back against the couch.

“Fuck!” she cursed.

Pyrus let out a slow chuckle but was quick to return to her. He licked and sucked at her for a few minutes before bringing his fingers back, slipping inside her wetness easily and stroking with enthusiasm.

He then used his powerful lips to wrap around that beautiful bundle of nerves and sucked at her like his life depended on it.

“Oh!” Mazie whimpered, her hips thrusting forward in response. “Oh, yes, babe!”

Pyrus was no longer teasing her. He was going at it with such vigor, inserting his fingers back and forth while continuing to apply pressure to her clit with a consistent suction. It was all very overwhelming to Mazie, who couldn't remember the last time anyone ... if ever ... had applied such a fruitful technique to her quivering need.

She had been primed for a long time, frankly, and had looked forward from the moment their lips met to have him deep inside her. So it only took a few passionate strokes to bring her to the very edge of her sanity.

“Yes,” Mazie screamed into the sky. “Yes, don't stop! *Pyrus!*”

His name hummed off her tongue like a whisper of silence after a storm. Then her orgasm coursed through her, causing her breath to hitch in her throat and her voice and body to freeze for a moment.

Then, the pleasure rocked through her like an avalanche. She shook against him as she clung to his head between her legs, clapping her thighs together like a seashell. She groaned and grunted with him lapping up her juices to send her into spirals of wonderful madness.

She had to push his head away when everything became too sensitive. She held him, hovering over her trembling thighs as she tried to catch her breath. “Oh, fuck, Pyrus,” she moaned. “My god, I haven't come in so long!”

He grinned, then gave her pussy one last kiss. He came up to her mouth, and she kissed him dozily, feeling like she had shot up a hundred syringes of heroin.

“That's no good,” he whispered. “Let's make sure that never happens again.”

Her body went limp as he lowered her back to the couch, then helped her move her dress up and over her head. She mindlessly unclasped her bra, cast it aside, then watched as Pyrus stood and disrobed before her.

Mazie hadn't felt this relaxed with a man in her entire life. Orgasms within themselves could help a person calm down, but there was something about Pyrus that made the feeling more enriched and thorough.

She never wanted to leave that couch.

He took off his jacket and dress shirt, folding them neatly over a chair nearby. He then unbuckled his belt and lowered his pants, theatrically bringing his cock out, much to the amazement of a feverish Mazie observing him.

It was the perfect girth and perfect length. It made Mazie's pussy ache again, and she sat up slightly on the couch and spread herself for him once more.

"Get over here," she growled.

"With pleasure, my lady."

Pyrus laid his naked body on top of her, bringing his mouth to hers gently and offering a passionate kiss. His hard cock rubbed against her leg, and she felt like a ferocious woman when telling him what she was really thinking.

She pressed her forehead against his, nibbled on his lower lip, and moaned his name.

"Pyrus, please, fuck me," she said.

Pyrus had a mischievous, sexy look on his face when he kissed her again, then sat up on the couch to grasp his cock. He stroked himself before slowly bringing his cock to her opening, then easily slipped inside like a finger into a glove.

"Fuck!" Mazie whimpered.

"You okay?" he asked.

She smiled up at him, then pulled his head close. He moved on top of her, pressing his chest into her breasts.

“You feel so good, baby,” she said soothingly. “Give me what I want.”

A devilish grin flashed across Pyrus’s face. “I want nothing more,” he whispered.

Both of their breaths had hitched in their throats when Pyrus thrust the first time inside Mazie. Her body moved against the couch, then rolled in sync with him as he picked up the pace. He felt incredible inside her pussy, slamming against every sensitive spot she had missed feeling.

“Yes, baby, yes!”

Their pelvises clapped against each other on the cushion as the thunder roared beyond them. Mazie raised her arms over her head and lifted her hips against his cock as he pushed inside her, faster and faster, grunting as he brought himself closer to the edge.

“Oh, Mazie,” he groaned. “Fuck, you’re sexy.”

Mazie felt empowered, truly like a goddess. She pushed against him with equal intensity, attempting to meet the speed of his shifter stamina. She wasn’t going to last very long as the avalanche of another orgasm approached rapidly.

“Pyrus, I’m going to come!” she bellowed.

That encouraged him more. He slammed against her like the hammering charge of feet and sent an electric line of pleasure streaming through her body like the peal of a thunderclap outside.

“Oh, Pyrus!”

She writhed and whimpered against him again. Her climax lasted for nearly thirty seconds of utter rapture. She felt him getting close, too, so she continued to push against his magnificent cock until she felt him spill inside her.

“Mazie, oh,” he breathed into her ear.

He had wrapped his mouth around her neck as he trembled, and she pulled him in close as they both wallowed in the aftershock of their explosive bliss.

Mazie couldn't stop moaning, letting her body take charge as he lay on top of her, whispering her name over and over. His skin was warm and soft against hers, lulling her into a state of tranquility previously unknown.

Especially when it came to post-sex realizations. Usually, she was glad it was over with and began to plan her escape. Not because it wasn't good, but because it was the aftercare that she feared. The men she'd been with weren't the snuggly type, which made her not feel inclined to try.

But with Pyrus, it felt normal and natural. Running her hands through his hair as he breathed on her skin, pressing his ear to her chest, and chuckling felt as natural as the sunrise.

"That is," Pyrus began, "certainly not something friends do."

Mazie laughed, a deep, satisfying belly laugh. Pyrus joined in, too, his rumbly voice vibrating through her body as they lay completely spent on the couch.

A glow inside her that couldn't be explained through sex warmed her. She wanted to lay there with him for hours ... maybe even forever.

Soon enough, Pyrus sat up, his hands instantly coming to her hips. "Do you want a drink? Even some tea or water?"

That was all it took for Mazie to think that what she had with Pyrus wouldn't be a short fling.

FIFTEEN



PYRUS

To say he was excited was putting it mildly. He was over the moon about Mazie going with him to his home. He was thrilled to be able to fly with her and show her his life.

Pyrus couldn't wait to have her inside his house and to show her around. He could envision her in his space, and he liked the idea of it. He wanted her to come into his home and never leave.

He could see her cooking in his kitchen, and he envisioned her in the living room reading a book. He could see her fitting into his life as if she had always been there.

He also looked forward to showing her around town and letting her see everything he loved. His favorite views, to his favorite places to eat. He had a never-ending list of options to keep her entertained.

His heart was beating quickly while Mazie sat next to him, looking so calm. He wondered if she could tell how excited he was. He didn't want it to scare her, so he was trying hard to keep it inside.

"We should be landing soon," he said, giving her a smile. He was trying not to look overly giddy, but it was hard. Mazie, his mate, was at his home.

She gave him a smile in return, still looking relaxed in her chair. "I'm excited. It will be fun to get away from work for a little bit." She looked outside, watching the airport grow closer.

The plane landed, and he offered her a hand as they each got out of the seats. They grabbed their luggage, and he headed down to ground transportation to find his driver waiting. He took in the time, seeing it was just a little past six.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as they stopped in front of his car. He popped the trunk, allowing Mazie to put her bag inside first.

She looked at the time as well before her eyebrows went up. “Wow, time flew by. Yes, I am.”

“How about we go to my favorite restaurant for dinner tonight, then?” He gave her a smile. “You’ll love it. It’s nice but not fancy, so there is no dress code.”

They both hopped into the back while he told his driver the destination. She chuckled as she buckled herself in. “So, what does this place serve that makes it so great?”

He smiled back at her as they pulled out. “They have amazing steaks and seafood. The Pasta La Sea is alfredo with shrimp and lobster. It’s amazing. I get it almost every time I go there.”

“That sounds good.”

“And afterward, I’ll take you to get the most amazing dessert on the planet. There is a little ice cream shop around the corner that serves a never-ending list of options.”

She blushed. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like ice cream.”

He chuckled, glancing at her for a moment. “If you don’t like ice cream, we can always go somewhere else.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “No, I actually love ice cream. That sounds great. Saying I love ice cream doesn’t show my true obsession.”

He couldn’t help but laugh as they pulled up at the restaurant.

They walked in and didn’t even have to wait. It helped to be a regular. The waiter guided them to a table in the back, which was his normal spot.

The menu was placed down, but he didn't bother looking at it. He knew everything on it. Mazie scanned over it, and he watched her. She looked comfortable and relaxed as she read everything.

The waiter came back after a moment and gave them a smile. "So, what will it be?"

"Pasta La Sea," he said, not even bothering to look away from Mazie. She set her menu down and looked at the waiter.

"Make that two."

He smirked as the waiter took the menus. He chuckled. "Decided to give my favorite a try?"

"Well, you made it sound good." She leaned forward, crossing her hands together. "This place is breathtaking. The view outside is gorgeous, and the waitstaff is amazing."

He gave her a wink. "You can see why it's my favorite."

He'd always gotten excellent service here, even on the weekend. He always tipped well, which probably helped a little.

"So," he leaned forward, "tell me more about this ice cream obsession of yours."

The food was brought out soon after they ordered, and Mazie's eyes were wide as she took in the large plate. He maybe should have mentioned how large the servings were here.

They both dug in, and the moaning across the table told him she loved it. He tried to ignore her reactions, knowing it was a sign that she liked the food and that it was not sexual in nature. He couldn't lie. The sounds were the exact same.

They both finished their meal and chatted for a moment while digesting everything. Mazie gazed outside at the sunset while sipping on her water. The sky burst into shades of pink before it went dark.

They left, and upon stepping outside, Mazie shivered. He pulled his jacket off, wrapping it over her shoulders. She blushed at him. "Thank you."

He chuckled. “You sure you want ice cream? It’s going to be freezing in the ice cream parlor.”

Mazie laughed. “Ice cream is so worth freezing to death for.” She reached out, grabbing his hand, and wrapping her fingers around his. “Besides, I have you to keep me warm.”

“You have the room for it?” he joked, poking at her side. “I don’t know. After that meal, you’re probably full.”

“There is always room for ice cream.” She laughed, glancing around the street. The area was quiet, with a few other couples roaming the area as well. But the ice cream shop would still be packed. It always was when he was there.

They arrived at the two-story shop a block away from the restaurant. Mazie’s eyes grew wide as they stepped inside.

The shop was covered with white walls, and the words *ice cream* were written over a hundred times. There were photos of people that had eaten at the place on the opposite wall. Toward the back, there was a list of over two hundred ice creams to choose from.

Mazie’s eyes locked at the list, and she was stunned. “Wow, I ... I don’t even know what to say. God, that’s a lot to pick from.”

He nodded. “There are tons of options. It seems to grow every year too.”

“Which ones have you tried? You’ve come here before. What’s the best?”

He froze. He wasn’t sure how he was going to tell her that he’d not tried any ones besides the one he always got. How was she going to react to finding he came to this shop and bought the same order every time?

Her eyes narrowed on him, and she raised an eyebrow. “That’s rather quiet for someone that likes ice cream. Come on, Pyrus, tell me your favorite. There are too many for me to look through. Give me a handful of options.”

He scratched his neck and whispered low. “Vanilla. I always get vanilla.”

Her eyes widened, and she was stunned. “Pyrus, did you really just say vanilla? Out of all the options?” She threw her hands up. “You choose vanilla? You come to an ice cream parlor that has over two hundred options, and you pick vanilla?”

“What?” He pointed at the sign. “It’s never a bad idea. Vanilla is wonderful.”

“Wonderfully bland,” she snorted, shaking her head. “Come on, you have to have something else. You can’t go to an ice cream shop and just pick the same one you can buy from a store. You have to try something new.”

He watched her eyes scan the list. “What about nuttery butter? Or peanut waffle? They have a blizzard pecan or an Oreo mint. You could try a sundae or a shake, even.”

He looked at the list, not liking any of the options she was looking at. His eyes did land on one that he had heard all about. Everyone always seemed to talk about it.

“Fine, I have one.” He crossed his arms, turning to her.

“Great.” She smiled. “What is it?”

“Peanut butter and jelly.”

Her eyes widened. “Really? That’s the one you’re going to go with? From vanilla to peanut butter and jelly?”

“You said I had to try something new, and that is. What are you going to get?”

She scanned the list once more before she decided. “I’ll get a scoop of nuttery butter.”

After they got their ice cream, they found a spot outside in the back. It was a little warmer than inside the parlor, so Mazie would not turn into an icicle. They sat under the lights, and he watched Mazie dig into her ice cream. He stared at his.

“You can’t taste it without eating it.” She laughed as she watched him. “Give it a try.”

He swallowed, knowing he needed to at least try it. The look of it wasn’t wonderful, though. The jelly was swirled in

with the peanut butter. It honestly looked disgusting, but he was bound to prove a point. He could try new things.

He took a bite of it and was surprised. He liked it. He could see why the kids always picked it and why people were always stunned when they tried it.

“Is it good?” she asked, taking another bite of her own.

He nodded, taking another bite. “It’s really good.”

She laughed, and he watched her for a moment. He was surprised by how easy it was for her to get him to try something new. He didn’t think there was anything new for him to try.

He had a favorite everything. A favorite quick meal, a favorite dining area, a favorite lake walking path, but he never thought to expand his horizon to more things. You could always have more than one.

He stared at her, and she stopped eating. She blushed. “You’re staring at me, Pyrus. What’s wrong? What’s with the look in your eyes?”

He gave her a smile. “I’m just grateful, that’s all. I would never have picked this if you hadn’t pestered me. I didn’t think there were still things for me to learn that I would like, so I can thank you for this.” He took another bite of his ice cream. “I still have a lot to learn, and at this rate, you’ll teach me a lot.”

Her face grew darker, and even her ears turned a shade of red. She stirred her spoon for a moment. “I’m nothing special, Pyrus. I just had you try a new ice cream flavor. I’m as plain as they get.” She gave him a smile. “Are you sure you’d be happy with a Plain Jane?”

He liked who she was, and he had no problem with it. They always had something interesting to talk about, and when they spoke, he felt like they had been doing it for years. It just came so easily.

“Yes.” He finished his ice cream, setting it on the table. “I would be perfectly fine with that.”

She narrowed her eyes and held out her ice cream. She grabbed his hand and hovered it over her bowl. “You have to swear on this dessert that you like me for who I am and don’t expect me to change. You have to say that you like who I am as a person, and your intentions are pure. That I’m not just some rando.”

He didn’t miss a beat. He stared at her, looking her straight into her eyes. “I swear on this ice cream that you’ve mostly eaten that I like who you are and don’t expect you to change. My feelings and intentions are a hundred percent pure, and I want you.”

She swallowed, slightly surprised by how quickly he answered. He didn’t need a moment to think. He already knew everything he said was true.

“Are you sure about that? This is an ice cream promise, Pyrus.” She leaned forward, lowering her tone. “That’s pretty serious. An ice cream swear is some pretty powerful magic.”

He laughed at her teasing tone and leaned back, nodding his head. “I swear. Now finish your ice cream. It’s starting to melt.”

She leaned back with a smile but seemed perkier as she ate. He watched her, feeling even happier.

“I like you, Mazie. I wouldn’t have brought you here if it wasn’t true. Believe it on an ice cream swear or believe it because I said it. It’s the truth.”

She took the last bite of her ice cream, and she smiled. “That’s great news. Because I feel the same about you.”

He reached across the table, giving her hand a squeeze. “I’m happy to hear that. So, now that we’ve had dinner and our dessert, where should we head next?”

Mazie got up, grabbed their paper bowls, and threw everything into the trash. She stopped next to him and gave him a smile. “Well, what did you have in mind?”

“We can drive around or walk.”

“Or,” she said, “we could go to your place. I would like to see it.”

He heard the difference in her tone. The sudden drop and the way her eyes lit up.

He suddenly loved the idea of going back to his place. Although he wasn't entirely sure he would be showing her much besides the bedroom. He wasn't sure he would let her leave it.

“Really? Are you sure?”

She nodded her head. “I'm sure.”

He pulled himself up. “All right. Then to my house.”

SIXTEEN



MAZIE

She was nervous during the entire drive to his place. She felt comfortable with Pyrus but going into someone else's home was intimate. Seeing his place and everything that was his was different. It took everything to another level.

She figured he was excited, his knee had been jumping the entire drive to his home, and he kept smirking. She couldn't help but think of a little kid in a candy store.

"You seem excited," she said, looking around the neighborhood filled with tall buildings and apartment complexes. It was a fancier part of town, clearly.

Pyrus chuckled. "Yes, I'm also excited to be home. It's nice to have your own space to go to at the end of a trip."

Before she could say anything, they pulled into an underground garage, and the driver parked. Pyrus wasted no time and grabbed her hand, pulling her out.

They walked across the garage to an elevator, and she froze. "What about my luggage?"

He gave her a smile. "My driver brought everything back when we were eating. It's already upstairs in the guest room." He pushed a button, and the doors swung closed. The elevator went up, and she watched as he bounced on his heels.

The doors swung open, and her eyes widened, taking in his place. Pyrus lived in a penthouse condo. The walls were white, and everything metal was black. It was very modern, with a

large kitchen that opened to a huge living room with a fireplace.

Two glass double doors led straight out onto a balcony with a garden and a pool with a waterfall. It took her breath away.

Pyrus pulled her off the elevator, and she heard the doors shut, but she was too stunned.

“Wow,” she said, doing a circle. “This is ... amazing.”

“Thank you, I thought so. Would you like a tour?”

“Yes.” She nodded eagerly. She could see why he was excited to get home. If this was her home, she’d never want to leave either.

Pyrus took her into the kitchen, where she found a chef’s fridge with a wine cooler next to it. There was a double oven for the perfect kitchen to cook in. She was jealous of the granite countertop and how pristine everything was.

The living room consisted of an oversized circular couch that sat opposite the fireplace and TV. It was warm, and even with the white and black, it still felt comforting. She couldn’t deny that the house felt very homey. Everything around it made her feel like she could relax.

Pyrus pulled the doors open, and they stepped out into the night air. The garden had a few lights, but otherwise, it was lit up by the stars. The pool glowed, and the air was fresh. She could get used to something like this.

“You have a beautiful garden.” She pointed at his flowers and bushes. Everything was neatly cut and trimmed.

“Thank you, I feel it adds a little more life to this place. I like my house to feel like my home. I spend so much time traveling that I feel there should be one place I know I can come back to and relax. Where I don’t have to be anyone else.”

She had never considered that. She always moved around and never thought about settling down in one place. She could

say that was her parent's fault, feeling like she was never good enough to stay somewhere permanently.

As she looked around, she wondered why she hadn't. It seemed nice. "I've never done that, but it seems you really like it."

He gave her a smile. "I do. When you move so much, you lose the feeling of comfort after a while."

She understood that. She actually knew that feeling well.

She and Pyrus headed inside and up the spiral stairs to a loft with a second living room. Down a small hallway was a bedroom, and Pyrus allowed her to walk in first.

The room was a light gray color with a king-size bed and matching bedside tables. A small bathroom was to the right, with a view of the city on the opposite wall.

"This will be your room while you're here. All of this is for you to use. Bathroom, bedroom, and wonderful view."

She eyed her luggage at the foot of the bed and wondered if this was what home felt like. She could relax, and she felt content.

"If you want to freshen up, go right ahead. I was just about to head down for a little TV before bed."

She thought of the pool and that she wasn't ready to be done talking with him. She liked the time she had with him. She didn't want them to go their separate ways for the night.

"How about swimming?" she asked, turning to him. "Just for a little bit."

He looked at her and, after a moment, smiled. "I guess it's been over an hour since we ate. Why not?"

He turned to the door. "I'll let you change, and I'll meet you down there."

He shut the door, and she took a deep breath in. She thought of her swimsuit and how it was probably still wet. She thought of her underwear and knew that she still had a nice pair with a matching bra.

She stripped down and put on the bra and underwear. She wanted to at least look a little sexy when seeing him and her one-piece wasn't what she wanted.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her long brown hair looked messy, and her green eyes looked full of fear. She wanted to switch her clothes. "No," she told herself. "You can do this. You can be confident about this."

She could be sexy. She just never had to do it. She grabbed a towel, wrapped it around herself, and headed downstairs.

Pyrus was already by the pool, wearing swim shorts with his chest bare. His back was to her, but he turned when he heard her footsteps.

She drank him in, taking in the way his muscles bulged and his abs rippled under the low light.

He looked at the towel and gave her a confused look. "What's wrong?"

She was nervous. Sweat rolled down her back, and her fingers shook on the towel. She was rethinking this idea. "My swimsuit was still wet," she managed to muster out. "And I ..."

His eyebrows went up. "Are you naked?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I'm wearing clothes." She pulled the towel free, and his eyes widened. He took in her bright pink matching set of underwear with lace threaded into it.

She swallowed, biting her lip. "Is this okay? I can change."

"Do not change," he said in a growl. He took a few steps toward her, reaching a hand up with a smirk. "You are breathtaking in that."

She stepped into his space, and he pulled her in for a kiss. She leaned into him, into the kiss. She felt like she was home.

Pyrus jumped into the pool, splashing water everywhere. She took the stairs, allowing herself to get used to the water. It was warmer than she expected.

Pyrus came up next to her in the water, pulling her into his arms. “I have a heater, so the water is a comfortable temperature.”

“Convenient.” She chuckled, wrapping her arms around him.

He kissed her, pulling her closer to him. His chest was rough against hers, and he wrapped her legs around his waist.

He pulled her tighter, deepening the kiss. She moaned when his lips trailed down her neck. She leaned her head back, feeling the water soak her hair.

She focused on the water and the way his lips felt on her skin. Her body was on fire, and she loved it.

She had known Pyrus for a short time, but she felt like she understood who he was. She knew his past, and he knew about hers. He made everything easy.

“Tell me how you found this place.” She leaned back slightly, looking at him. “How did you land this home?”

He smiled, walking her farther into the water. “I was looking for a new place and needed a little more space. When I bought the penthouse, it needed a lot of work.”

“Really?” She grinned as his hand snaked up her thigh, sending sparks up her spine.

He nodded. “Yes, I had the entire place remodeled, down to the flooring.”

He had good taste. She gave him that much. “And the garden and the pool? Was that remodeled as well?”

“They were here, the pool was redone, and the garden was redesigned. It was about a year’s worth of work.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “I think it turned out well.”

She chuckled. “I think it turned out amazing. You have a beautiful home.”

His fingers graze over her panties, and she inhaled. His fingers drove her to new heights.

He kissed her neck, pulling at the band. “Have you ever skinny dipped?”

She smirked. “I can’t say that I have.”

He pulled her underwear down, tossing them outside the pool. He unclasped her bra, and her breasts fell free. She never thought that not wearing any fabric was freeing.

Pyrus pulled her closer, and his cock pressed hard against her thigh. She swallowed, her desire growing. How could it not? He was kind and cared about her. When they had sex before, god, it was mind-blowing.

He pinned her against the wall of the pool, grinding into her. She inhaled, his hands grabbing her hips. The friction he put on her clit was intense and just what she wanted.

“I’m not being a very good host,” he said in a growl. “My apologies, but seeing you in that makes it hard to contain myself.”

“Screw the rules,” she said. “I wore a teasing outfit. I don’t blame you.” She’d be lying if she said she didn’t want him because she did.

He chuckled, and it was music to her ears. He slid a hand free from her hips, slipping it into her folds. He glided two fingers into her, and she moaned.

Fuck. She had no idea pool sex could be so damn fun. She wanted to repeat this over and over.

The water and his fingers were sending her to new heights, and she wouldn’t last long.

He slipped a third finger into her, thrusting his fingers deeper into her. Her head fell back onto the tile as he worked her.

“I’m ...” She wasn’t even able to finish as an orgasm hit her. She moaned loudly as Pyrus smiled at her.

She leaned into him, feeling his cock still hard against her thigh. He slid his swim trunks off, pulling her legs wide.

“Fuck, Mazie. I don’t think my cock has ever been this hard.”

She smiled, looking up at him. She reached up, kissing him. She wanted him. She wanted to fuck him over and over and never stop.

Pyrus slid into her, sending her flat against the wall.

“Ohhh.” She moaned as he thrust into her slowly, taking his time. The water thumping deeper into her with his cock was new.

Pyrus turned them, still deep inside her, as he started walking toward the stairs. “I can’t finish here,” he said, holding her from under her thighs. “I’m not getting deep enough.”

Her face flushed hotly as he pulled them out of the water. They were both bare-ass-naked with Pyrus’s cock deep in her. She would have been embarrassed if they weren’t on the top floor.

He walked them into the living room, and they tumbled onto the couch, soaking the fabric and the rug.

“We’re getting everything wet,” she said, feeling bad.

“Fuck it.” He kissed her, pulling her legs wide. “I don’t give a shit.”

Pyrus ran his fingers down, thumbing her clit as he picked up speed. He was hitting her G-spot, ramming her core. She gripped him, trying to hold onto something.

A coil of heat rose in her stomach quicker than lightning. It wouldn’t take long. Pyrus pulled one of her legs higher, shifting the position, and she came hard.

She screamed out his name, digging her nails into his shoulders. Pyrus thrust three more times before he finished.

They both gasped for a second, and she looked around. Pyrus was soaking wet with droplets sliding off his hair. He looked at her with lust and comfort. She kissed him on the cheek.

“That was amazing.”

He kissed her back. “I agree. I could do it again.”

She perked up at the idea. They had all night. She didn’t want to go to sleep. She wanted to stay up as late as they could. “All over the place?” she teased, looking deep into his eyes. “I’d be down for that.”

He nodded, hoisting her off the couch and turning down the hallway. She laughed as he kissed her neck, growling at her.

“All over the place sounds nice. Let’s start in the bedroom.”

She smiled, knowing they wouldn’t be leaving the bedroom, and she was okay with that. She didn’t want to leave anyway.

Pyrus opened the bedroom door, not bothering to flick the light on. They stumbled onto the bed, Pyrus crawling on top of her. She gazed at him, watching the way the moonlight flickered over his face. He was breathtaking.

He pinned her arms above her head, giving her a wicked grin. “You’re in for it now.”

She giggled. “I am.”

SEVENTEEN



MAZIE

Soft sheets slid against Mazie's legs as she stretched out in Pyrus's bed. The lingering warmth caught between those crinkly folds, the slick feel of the expensive fabric, and the luxurious mattress beneath her ... all this added to a kind of contentment she hadn't felt in years.

Maybe, ever.

She couldn't remember the last time she slept in a real bed. She'd been in her camp cot in the tent for so long. Occasional stays in hotels were a nice change, and she was always grateful for a bed ... any bed ... but hotels could never feel like home.

Never met a hotel bed that was particularly comfortable. Even the one we stayed at recently couldn't compare to this.

Mazie stretched out on her belly, reaching out with her fingers and toes for the corners of the massive bed. She couldn't get anywhere near the edges. The mattress was too huge. She ran her fingertips across the smooth sheet, thinking that the thread count had to be insanely high.

She wondered where Pyrus was. Mazie wasn't worried. She knew he'd be around somewhere. She'd just expected to wake up next to him.

She turned over slowly, relishing the feel of the sheets caressing every single inch of her skin. She pulled the blankets down just a little, so she could see the morning light filtering through the window. There was so much peace in her soul. The entire setting seemed like a daydream.

It's not, though. It's real.

Slowly, Mazie sat up, the familiar shapes of Pyrus's furniture giving her an immediate sense of comfort and familiarity. She hadn't been here long, but already, it seemed like home.

Home.

It made her slightly uncomfortable to have a home. Up to now, she'd been sure she didn't need one and, therefore, talked herself out of wanting one. She made her home anywhere she was, and the only thing she truly needed was to make the lives of others better.

Is that my problem? That I think I don't deserve this happiness?

Mazie sighed, getting up slowly. A robe was thrown over a nearby chair, and Mazie put it on. Pyrus's subtle scent rose around her, sending waves of pleasure surging through her body. She closed her eyes and wrapped the robe around her even more tightly. It was far too big for her, and she enjoyed wrapping the excess of soft folds around her.

On the bench by the bed, she saw a handwritten note and hurried over to read it:

Mazie,

Sorry to leave you alone, but an emergency came up at work. I'll only be gone a few hours. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen or order out if you like. Sleep in, relax, enjoy yourself, and I'll see you very soon.

Pyrus xxx

Mazie ran her fingers over the page, admiring his old-fashioned lettering. She wondered if writing handwritten notes was more of a habit for him, given his age. She found it incredibly sweet and much more personal than a text.

Even though she'd been looking forward to waking up with him, Mazie knew things couldn't always be perfect, and Pyrus did have a lot of important work to do. She admired his

commitment to his employees, and being so responsible was part of the reason she was so attracted to him.

Mazie carefully folded the letter and put it with her things. It might be sentimental to the point of silliness, but she wanted to keep it. Afterward, she headed for Pyrus's big bathroom.

It was an endless expanse of gleaming white tile graced with elegant silver filigree patterns. The layering of the tiles made the little swirls dance along the walls. The tub was giant, half sunken into the floor with steps leading to its edge.

Mazie was tempted to use the big tub, and the selection of oils and bubble baths lined along it, but the tub looked like it took ages to fill, and she wasn't sure she was committed to that long of a soak. Instead, she went to the shower cubicle and spent time in the hot spray, using all the fancy soaps and hair products.

It didn't strike her as odd that Pyrus had so many different types of bath products. Some of it looked like travel bottles left over from hotel stays. Others looked like samples, and some of them had obviously come from gift baskets. She giggled to herself, thinking about years' worth of gifts and leftovers slowly filling Pyrus's bathroom because he didn't know what to do with them.

As she dressed, her stomach rumbled. After brushing out her wet hair, Mazie hurried to the kitchen to check out the pantry.

She gasped as she opened the door. There were rows upon rows of food. In one section were endless boxes of cereal lined up against each other, right next to stacks of wrapped pancakes, waffles, muffins, and bagels.

Other shelves revealed an incredibly varied amount of snack foods, including biscuits, chips, and chocolate. The other side had basics and staples, as well as fancy sauces, dips, and spices.

A little overwhelmed, Mazie headed to the refrigerator. It was almost overflowing with drinks, yogurt, berries, all the

luxuries Mazie usually could not afford. She almost felt bombarded by the abundance of choices.

Mazie headed for the kitchen bench, finding a stack of pamphlets for the nearby restaurants. She decided that spoiling herself by ordering in was the best option, especially since she was in no mood to cook, even if she hadn't been overwhelmed by the sight of Pyrus's pantry.

She ordered a breakfast burrito from a place nearby. When she tried to pay, they told her that anything to Mr. Bloodmoon's place would go on his account, and she didn't have to pay.

Feeling very spoiled and cared for, Mazie called a famous bakery next. She ordered a box of mixed donuts and a very fancy coffee. Again, she was told that anyone from Mr. Bloodmoon's address did not need to pay.

Once she'd ordered her food, Mazie took a walk around the condo. She'd seen most of it the night before, but not in any detail.

On the wall in a far corner of the living room, there was a large frame full of pinned photographs. Mazie paused in front of it, amazed that some very old, black and white pictures were in the collage. Pyrus was in some of them, and she realized these were literal snapshots from his entire life.

In the top corner was a stained sepia picture of Pyrus in old-fashioned britches holding the reins of a tall, noble-looking horse. Another black and white photo showed him on a bicycle ... another in a very old-fashioned motorcar. It hit Mazie with a sudden bolt of knowledge that he might still own these antiques.

She let her eyes flow across the massive collage, picking out scenes of Pyrus in foreign cities, near landmarks, and in remote areas of wilderness. There were photographs of every age as if Pyrus had loved cameras since their invention and always made sure he had the most updated equipment.

She wandered down the hallway, feeling a bit lost in the face of so much personal history. There was so much of Pyrus

that she didn't know, and even seeing a brief snapshot of his history had been too much to take.

In a small nook down the hall was a display case of glass cubes. In one box was a bit from a horse's bridle, old fashioned but highly polished. Mazie would have bet anything that it was the exact same one that had been on the horse in the picture. There were other strange items, like uncut opals, raw gems, and small pieces of twisted metal.

She couldn't wait to ask Pyrus where these things were from and what they meant to him. Pyrus was definitely sentimental and had preserved these mementos so he could hold on to fragments of his past.

A very loud, sudden rap came from the front door. Mazie jumped, her hand going to her pocket. It had to be the food delivery, but it was odd that they hadn't texted or called her first. She hurried for the door and undid the locks.

Her hand hovered on the chain, and at the last minute, she decided to leave it on. She peeked through the slit in the door and saw a very well-dressed tall man with a commanding presence. Behind him hovered a couple of tough guy goons with hard, impassive faces.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Who are you?"

The man's face broke into an easy smile, and he pulled off his shades so he could give her a friendly look. Mazie wasn't buying it ... literally, because it looked like he was about to try and sell her something.

Fake smile, cool eyes, this guy makes a living out of fucking people over.

"Hello, my dear," he said in a smooth, easy tone. "I'm Richard, and I'm a good friend of Pyrus's. These are my business associates. We heard that Pyrus is back in town, and we were hoping to see him."

Mazie frowned. She didn't understand why they were here at Pyrus's house if it was business. It would make more sense if they tracked him down at work. "He's at work," she said

firmly. “I think you’d know that if you were in business with him.”

“Of course,” Richard said. His voice had turned slightly placating, and it was pissing her off, even though she was trying to be polite.

“Pyrus is very difficult to get a hold of,” Richard said. “We know he’ll be home before long and decided to come here to meet up with him. Our business is of a delicate nature.”

“Really,” Mazie said, glaring at him. The two goons behind him had barely moved, and with their dark shades still on, she had no idea what they were even looking at, let alone thinking.

“Really!” Richard said, laughing. It was as if he thought a little humor would help her to trust him. Instead, she felt like slamming the door on his self-satisfied grin.

“My dear,” Richard said, “won’t you invite us in? I really am an old friend of his. He won’t mind a bit if we wait here for him.”

Mazie clung to the door, peeking through the tiny crack. The strip of chain which held the door had seemed unbreakable when she left it hooked on, but now it looked as flimsy as spider silk. She knew they could push into the room in a blink if she pissed them off.

They might too. I’ve got serious bad vibes from these guys.

“No, sorry,” Mazie said. “I’m not letting you in. I suggest you call Pyrus and set up a meeting. Goodbye.”

“Wait, wait!” Richard said, his tone slightly alarmed. He raised a hand but didn’t touch the door. Mazie paused. She would have slammed it shut immediately if he’d made any kind of move for the door.

It was the change of posture and the troubled look on his face, as well as the fact he didn’t attempt to force the door, that made her pause. “What?” she muttered.

Richard shook his head. “I’m sorry. I wish it hadn’t come to this, really. I was hoping to spare you. Pyrus is involved in

some bad stuff ... and I mean really bad stuff.”

“What do you mean?” she asked softly.

Richard’s face was grim. “He’s been working with the mob. At first, it was just goods, cash, and drugs. Bad enough if you ask me. But now innocent people are getting hurt. He has to be stopped.”

“Really,” Mazie said dully. She wasn’t buying a word of this ... Pyrus cared about people. She knew he did. *Richard is a fucking liar.*

Richard took another step closer to the door as if he knew he was losing her. Mazie swung it as if she was going to slam it shut.

“I’ll pay you!” Richard whispered furiously through the gap. “Millions of dollars ... whatever you need. Just help me set him up, and I’ll get you anything you want.”

Mazie actually laughed. She couldn’t help herself.

“I suspected from the first moment that you guys had absolutely no right to be here, and you’ve just dug your own grave. You aren’t a law enforcement or government agency, otherwise, you’d have badges. You’d have told me who you worked for and never would have offered to bribe me. You look like a bunch of guys on the wrong side of the law.”

“Is that what I look like?” Richard muttered.

Mazie nodded. “I don’t believe a word you’re saying. Pyrus cares for people. He would never do anything to hurt anyone.”

“Really?” Richard said, his eyes hard. “He hurt me.”

Mazie wanted to snap that he probably deserved it, but the situation was getting out of hand. She felt very alone and just wanted to get away from the door as fast as possible so she could call for help.

Mazie went to slam the door at the exact same moment Richard told his goons to grab her. She managed to slam the door shut, but before she could pull even one lock, the guys on the other side smashed into it. She threw her whole weight

against the door and held it steady for a total of ten seconds before they smashed into it again.

Mazie went flying. Behind her, the chain snapped as the door busted open. She hit the floor hard, smacking her chin so hard that her teeth clacked together.

She tried to get to her feet and run, but a big, strong hand grabbed her shoulder and pushed her back down. She was pinned to the floor, utterly helpless and more terrified than she'd ever been in her entire life.

EIGHTEEN



PYRUS

Pyrus worked quickly through a stack of paperwork when a call came in on his priority line. It was security from his condo's building, and he answered immediately, his mind reeling.

I left her alone ... I didn't even think about it. I just assumed she'd be safe.

The security team told him there had been a disturbance at his condo, like a break-in. Pyrus did not even wait to finish the call. He just hung up, threw the phone into his pocket, and ran. He wanted to head to the roof, shift and fly. Then he could get back to the condo in seconds. He knew he couldn't, though. Too many people would see him. Even though every single second hurt him as it passed, he drove home as fast as he dared.

As he ran toward the door and saw it hanging open, fear shot through his chest, carving his heart in two with an icy blade.

"Mazie!" he yelled. "Mazie!"

Pyrus bolted through the doorway, seeing the shattered edges of the door and scatter of splinters showing it had been forced open. He opened up the security panel near the door and called up the camera footage from the last hour.

When he saw Richard and the goons show up at the door, he groaned aloud. He couldn't believe that he'd left Mazie here alone without any protection. He just never imagined Richard would stoop this low.

Pyrus pulled out his phone and called the security center.

“Mr. Bloodmoon,” a calm voice answered on the first ring. “Do you require assistance at this time?”

“No,” Pyrus snapped. “The bad guys are long gone. I just need to know what measures have been taken so far.”

“We have not notified any authorities, Mr. Bloodmoon. We were waiting on your word. Is this theft or something of a more violent nature?”

Pyrus couldn't hold back a small grin. All the guys that worked on the building's security team had seen all kinds of hell go down. He had no doubt that they'd had to cover up more than one dead body over the course of their job.

“It's a personal matter,” Pyrus said. “Not theft.”

“I understand,” the security guy replied. “Is there anything you need from us?”

“No,” Pyrus said. “Keep it on the down low and look out for these guys. They are very dangerous. If they decide to come back, the cops can't help you.”

“Understood. Good luck, Mr. Bloodmoon.”

Pyrus thanked him and stuffed the phone into his pocket. For a moment, he stood in the hall. He fought his dragon, who wanted to take him to the sky and burn the city down until they found Mazie. Pyrus's blood was so hot that he felt like he could breathe fire in his human form.

Where did they take her?

Pyrus headed back out the door, looking for any clues. Her scent was very faint, and there was no sign of which way they had gone. Camera footage had not revealed their vehicle. Pyrus was stumped.

Maybe I should just give my old pal a call.

The idea had appeal. If Richard came here and then abducted his girlfriend, he wanted something. Mazie was leverage ... an unexpected bonus for Richard. The asshole would probably call him eventually to make demands.

So, why wait?

Pyrus pulled out his phone and called Richard. His *friend* answered on the first ring.

“Pyrus, old buddy! What a surprise. You don’t call, you don’t write ...”

“Richard, where is she?” Pyrus roared.

Richard laughed. “Is that any way to talk to your old friend?”

“I’m going to ask you one more time. Where is she?”

“What exactly are you going to do if I don’t tell you?” Richard asked. “You have no fucking clue where we are.”

“I’ll find you,” Pyrus swore. “If you make it easy for me, I might go easy on you. If it takes a lot of time to track you, I’m going to get very pissed off. Richard, you don’t want me to find you when I’m in a temper.”

His old friend chuckled as if he liked the idea. Pyrus held his breath and waited.

“Look,” Richard said in a friendly tone. “It turns out I do want something from you. So, I’m going to send you the details of a certain bank which is just outside the main business district. A little quieter for personal matters, if you understand me.”

“I do,” Pyrus muttered.

“Excellent! I’ll send the details through. All you have to do is meet me there. We’ll keep your girly safe ... for now.”

“If you fucking touch her, I will skin you inch by inch!” Pyrus roared.

“You have nothing to worry about,” Richard said. “I have no desire to hurt a lovely young lady. The trouble is these mob guys ... well. They get upset. If you aren’t here in good time, they may take their frustrations out on the girl. I can’t promise she’ll stay in one piece if you’re late.”

Pyrus hung up, knowing that hurling insults at Richard wouldn’t do any good. He ran to his car and took off through

the streets, heading for the bank.

When he arrived, he parked on a back street, then called Richard again. "I'm here, asshole. Tell me what you want."

"I need money, Pyrus," Richard said. "I'm not far away, and your girlfriend is still unharmed. The thing is, I need cash. My mob guys won't accept a transfer. You get me?"

"I get you," Richard muttered. "How much?"

"Ten million," Richard said. His voice had a lofty air as if he expected Pyrus to argue.

Pyrus didn't give a fuck what number Richard named. He'd give his entire fortune to see Mazie safe. "I might be a while in there," Pyrus warned. "It's not every day someone withdraws ten million in cash."

"Of course," Richard said. "But you're so wealthy and well known, I don't think you'll have any trouble. Once you have the cash, walk through the park to the empty office building, and let yourself in the side door. Good luck, Pyrus."

Pyrus wanted to tell Richard he was the one who needed luck but thought better of it. He headed into the bank and went straight to the manager with his request.

After a few security checks, phone calls, and stacks of paperwork, Pyrus was able to withdraw the ten million. He had no intention of simply handing it over because his first preference would be to beat the shit out of Richard and the mob.

He wanted to have the money on him, though. If he took a decoy bag, it could mean Mazie's life. If he had to lose the money and let the bad guys get away to save her, then that's exactly what he'd do.

Pyrus hurried from the bank toward the office building. The duffle bag full of cash bumped against his leg as he jogged to the side door. It was unlocked and swung open at the touch of his hand.

Immediately, he caught Mazie's scent. It thrilled him as it trickled through the air vents and settled around him.

She's here, and she's alive.

Pyrus's phone beeped with a text from Richard. He was directed to the basement and rushed to find the stairs that would take him to the lower levels.

As he pounded down the stairs, he noticed Mazie's scent getting stronger. He couldn't believe it, but it looked like Richard had brought her to the meeting.

That could be very good news.

Pyrus hit the bottom of the stairs and pushed through the door at the end. He entered into a huge underground chamber big enough to store jets. Pyrus didn't know if Richard used this space ... because he couldn't imagine what for ... or if they'd just borrowed an empty building.

"Pyrus!" Richard called from across the room. "Good to see you, old pal."

Richard took a few steps toward him as he held tightly to Mazie in front of him like a shield, keeping the muzzle of his gun pressed against her neck. "No sudden moves," Richard said, shaking her.

Mazie whimpered, and Pyrus put the duffle bag down, raising his hands above his head.

Pyrus looked around as the two goons came forward to collect the money. It was a big enough space for him to shift, and it was far enough underground that he could fight without anyone up top knowing what was happening. He was somewhat restricted from breathing fire because he could turn the place into an oven if he wasn't careful.

Even more stupid on Richard's part, he had actually brought Mazie to the meeting. Pyrus had to hold in a satisfied grin as the goons approached. Now that he had his eyes on her, he could keep her safe. If she'd been elsewhere, possibly under threat, he wouldn't have been able to attack.

The goons collected the bag, and Pyrus kept his face still and his hands behind his head. He was calculating how fast he could shift and free Mazie as soon as Richard dropped his guard.

“You have the money,” Pyrus said. “Let her go.”

Richard shook Mazie, pressing the muzzle of the gun to her forehead. “No way,” he muttered. “I’ll take a look in the bag first.”

Pyrus stood still, watching the goons walk up to Richard. As his old buddy leaned forward to look in the bag, he loosened his grip on Mazie and the gun.

Now!

Pyrus shifted in the blink of an eye. With one flap of his powerful wings, he was above Richard and Mazie. Faster than a hawk plunging from the sky to snatch its prey, Pyrus plucked Mazie from Richard’s grasp. All three of them turned to fire, and he simply put himself between Mazie and the guns.

Most of the bullets didn’t penetrate his dragon scales, and those that did weren’t very deep. Pyrus set Mazie down behind some crates and spun around to take care of Richard.

The two goons stayed put while Pyrus turned to them, but when he snapped at one of them and almost cut him in half, they both bolted for the stairs. Pyrus let them go.

“It’s just you and me, now,” he hissed. Richard nodded.

As they glared into each other’s eyes, Richard shifted. Pyrus had never seen him shift. Richard was almost the same size as him and had armored scales, as well as wickedly sharp teeth and claws.

Both of them roared as they charged each other. Pyrus let all of his hate and rage pour into that scream, attacking Richard as fast as he could. Just before they clashed, Pyrus saw the other dragon shudder, and he knew his old friend was afraid.

They locked claws, spinning as they snapped at each other with their jaws. Pyrus went for Richard’s throat, but the other dragon kept him at bay. Frustrated, Pyrus pulled back and darted forward, sending them both rolling across the floor to hit one of the solid concrete walls with a loud crash.

A pressure crack streaked up the wall, and white dust drifted down from the ceiling. Pyrus realized that if the building fell in, he and Richard might survive in their dragon forms, but Mazie wouldn't.

Pyrus twisted toward Richard with renewed urgency, trying to claw out his throat. Richard slashed with his wings and caught Pyrus across the ribs, ripping open his flesh. Pyrus roared and staggered backward, almost falling.

The two dragons glared at each other, both of them puffing hard. Pyrus charged, feinting to the left and then darting to Richard's right.

His old pal was just a second too slow, and Pyrus managed to slash him across the shoulder. He dodged out of the way before Richard could return a blow.

They faced each other again, and Pyrus's hate for his old friend emanated through his pores. This wasn't just about money, not anymore. Pyrus had to destroy Richard for his own reasons.

Pyrus waited for Richard to make a move. When the other dragon laughed, Pyrus was thrown off guard. Then he noticed the smoke leaking out around Richard's fangs.

Pyrus ran toward Mazie, praying that he'd make it in time. Richard was going to blow fire all around the room, turning it into a furnace. The two dragons would take little damage, but Mazie would be turned to ashes. The only chance was for Pyrus to reach her before the flames did and shield her with his fireproof body.

Richard roared as he released his flame. The blaze crept up on him, the golden light racing him as it sped along the walls. Mazie jumped out from behind the crates and ran toward him. Pyrus increased his speed, desperate to reach her.

Just as the first waves of fire caught his tail, Pyrus reached Mazie. He dropped down on her, covering her with his body and wrapping his wings around her. The firestorm passed over them both, barely singeing Pyrus's scales. As the fire died

down, Pyrus let Mazie up, and the sight of her soot-smudged cheeks was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He only looked into her eyes for a few seconds before he turned to charge Richard. Even though the other dragon was coming at him with force and purpose, Pyrus knew the spurt of flame had taken it out of him. This time when they clashed, Richard had no strength left.

Pyrus ripped his throat out in one swift move. He watched his old friend fall to the floor, blood spraying out around him in a massive pool. Nothing but relief filled him now that the threat of Richard was finally gone from his life.

Pyrus shifted, running to Mazie, where she sat on the floor. He threw his arms around her, patting her all over as he frantically looked for injuries. Mazie looked shocked, her eyes wide and her face a frightening shade of chalk white.

“Mazie,” Pyrus cried, stroking her cheek. “Are you okay? Please, say something.”

“I’m okay,” she whispered, tears shining in her eyes. Pyrus wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly, letting the throb of her heart soothe him.

“I love you,” he whispered against her ear. “I’ve tried to be patient. I’ve tried not to push you. I wanted to give you space to leave if that’s what you want. But I can’t pretend anymore.”

Pyrus pulled back, cupping her jaw as he looked into her eyes.

“I love you,” he said. “And I always will. I will wait for mountains to crumble into dust if that’s what it takes. I’ll wait till the end of the world ... until every river runs dry. Every moment for the rest of my life, I will be waiting for you, waiting for you to stay with me and be mine.”

Pyrus held her shoulders gently, keeping his eyes on hers. His heart and soul now rested in her hands, and his fate would be decided by her answer.

NINETEEN



MAZIE

Mazie knew she was in shock. It had been bad enough to be thrown into a van and driven away by Richard and his toughs, then lugged into the basement like a sack of garbage. Seeing an all-out shifter fight, as well as almost being incinerated on top of that, had left her in a state of numb, horrified panic.

As Pyrus's arms went around her, Mazie knew she was safe. No matter how bad things were, he would always come for her and protect her from harm.

Mazie finally understood what it meant to have a home, and that home was Pyrus.

She looked into his wide, worried eyes. There was so much fear and relief in his voice that it struck her to the bone, a chord of pure harmony in a cacophony of chaos. She could see how vulnerable he was, how afraid he'd been to show her his heart.

Now it was exposed, and he couldn't shield it from her, even if he wanted to. Mazie broke through the haze of emotion, putting a hand on his cheek. The warmth of him was so very real that tears sprang to her eyes.

"You don't have to wait that long, Pyrus," she said softly. "I'm right here, and I love you, and I'm never leaving you."

The vulnerability that showed on his face almost undid her completely. Pyrus's eyes widened, and his lips trembled as he leaned in to kiss her. Mazie turned her mouth up, closing her eyes as she fell into his embrace. His strong arms went around

her, and for a few moments, the entire world disappeared under the force of his kiss.

When he pulled back, he held her face gently in both hands. His eyes darted across hers as if he were trying to burn the moment into his memory. Mazie laughed softly, then leaned in to kiss him again.

They stayed there for a few moments, tangled together on the concrete floor. They shared deep, brief kisses and muttered nonsense to each other, the words all lovers expressed when they were overcome by emotions that could not be defined.

Before long, though, Mazie's butt started to go numb from the cold hard concrete, and she shifted uncomfortably against the floor.

“So, are we getting out of here?” she asked.

“Yes, we damn well are,” Pyrus said, putting his arms around her and standing while holding her as if she weighed nothing at all. Mazie curled against him, loving the feel of his strong chest against her cheek.

“What about the dead dragon?” she muttered.

Pyrus shrugged. “It's not the first shifter incident to ever go bad. The mob won't want any ties to Richard, and they'll be fucking terrified of me. I think they'll clean it up just to prove they weren't connected to this shit show.”

Pyrus turned and walked determinedly to the stairs. Mazie cleared her throat. “Ah, Pyrus?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Do you need the ten mil?”

Pyrus chuckled, shaking his head. “No, of course not. I'll grab it, though.”

He turned and jogged back to snatch the duffle, never letting go of Mazie the whole time.

They hurried up the stairs, and Pyrus carried her all the way to the car, tucking her into the passenger seat. The second she stretched out on the comfortable cushions, Mazie closed

her eyes, sighing with pleasure. The next thing she knew, they were pulling up at Pyrus's condo.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked wearily.

Pyrus nodded. "Pretty much the second I put you down. You scared me. I thought I might have to call a doctor."

"No, I'm fine," she said, yawning. "I think it's just the stress."

Pyrus helped her inside, then she changed clothes while he made tea. Mazie sipped the strong, sweet brew, feeling strength returning to her with every mouthful.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Pyrus asked.

She nodded. "I have to say something," Mazie said, putting down her teacup so she could take his hands. "I feel really bad about this, and I'm sorry."

Pyrus's eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

"I'm so, so sorry that I didn't tell you how I felt," Mazie said. "I was just waiting ... the same as you were. I didn't ask for a new assignment. I had no plans about going anywhere. I just wanted to be with you and see how it went."

She shrugged, smiling at him. "I guess we were both waiting on the same thing without even knowing it. I wasn't planning to get back out there at all. In fact, I was thinking of doing what the rest of the team did. Taking some time off to be with someone I love."

Pyrus leaned forward and kissed her hard and deep. Mazie leaned into the kiss, reaching out to run her hands along his arms as he pulled her close.

"Maybe the next time I do go out on assignment, you could arrange some time to go with me," she said.

Pyrus smiled. "I'd love that," he whispered. Mazie wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled his face down to her, kissing him even harder as she wiggled closer to him.

Pyrus ran his strong hands over her body, his touch gentle but his grip firm. Mazie leaned back on the couch, moaning as

she let Pyrus pull off her shirt. The moment her breasts were free, he bent down to tease her nipples with his lips and teeth.

Mazie moaned, grabbing the back of his head as she writhed against him. Pyrus's hands tightened on her waist, and she slid even closer, pinning him between her legs.

Pyrus thrust toward her, teasing her. Mazie reached down and grabbed the waistband of her jeans, tugging on it in frustration.

Pyrus laughed softly, taking his attention away from her breasts to grab her pants. He slowly tugged them down, pulling them off her legs one at a time, so he could tease her with the tips of his fingers.

He tossed the pants away and gently wrapped his hands around her ankles, running his hands along her calves, knees, and thighs. He teased around the edges of her underwear with his fingers as if he was going to pull them off, then put his head down and put his lips against her pussy, rubbing his lips along the thin fabric of her panties.

Mazie let out a sharp cry, bucking underneath him. Her hands flailed out, and she grabbed the edges of the couch as if she were on a rocking boat. Pyrus teased her a few moments more before running his hands along her belly, hooking her panties at the hips, and slowly pulling them off.

Mazie could barely breathe; she was so horny. Pyrus wore only a trench coat that he'd kept in his car for such shifting emergencies. With a hitch of his shoulders, he threw it off, and it fell into a puddle on the floor.

She gasped at the sight of his perfect, sculpted body. She couldn't believe that all of this was just for her. He was gorgeous, but by far, the hottest thing about him was the way he looked at her.

Pyrus stood over her, running his eyes across her body. His gaze was so careful and full of intent that she could almost feel it like it was a real physical touch. Her lover's eyes opened wider as he looked at her, and his lips parted as if she was the most delicious treat he'd ever seen.

Pyrus slid onto the couch, running his hands down her legs again. This time, he didn't take his time and tease. Clearly, he had a purpose. He stared right at her pussy, and he looked starved.

His hands wrapped around her hips as his tongue found her clit, and Mazie let out a shriek that tore from her throat. Pyrus moaned with pleasure as he held on to her, keeping his lips and tongue wrapped around her clit.

She twisted under him, her hips bucking. His warm, slick tongue slid lower, and when he opened her up with his lips to lap even deeper into her pussy, Mazie came in a rushing flood.

She trembled as the orgasm thundered through her, unable to feel her limbs even though she was shaking. Her chest felt tight, and she could only take fast shallow breaths. Pyrus paused while she thrashed, but only for a moment.

As her shudders subsided, Pyrus leaned in again, teasing the length of her pussy with the tip of his tongue. Mazie threw her hands over her face and gasped, her body quivering as sweat beaded on her skin. After teasing her clit and outer lips, Pyrus dove down again, lifting her hips with his strong arms so only her shoulders rested on the couch.

As Pyrus lapped inside her, using his lips to tease, another orgasm built. Pyrus increased his efforts with every shudder, keeping in rhythm with her. When she shrieked and thrashed as another wave of pleasure crashed through her, Pyrus moaned in pleasure and held her even tighter to his face as if he didn't want to waste a single, precious drop.

Mazie tried to catch her breath, her whole body buzzing as her breath shuddered in and out of her lungs. She finally took her hands from her eyes and looked up to see Pyrus staring at her.

His face was alive with awe and wonder. It was obvious he didn't just love giving her pleasure ... he loved watching her receive it, as well.

While Mazie struggled to get her breath back, Pyrus ran his hands over her body, squeezing her breasts, teasing her

nipples, and caressing her ribs. She giggled and writhed as he explored her skin, feeling a whole new wave of arousal rising inside. When she couldn't take it anymore, she slithered toward him and hooked her feet behind him.

"I need you," she said, arching her back. "Fuck me, please. I want you so much."

Pyrus leaned forward, stroking her cheek. She gasped as his hard cock rubbed against her wet pussy, teasing her and making her ache inside.

"I love you," Pyrus said. His eyes were so full of emotion, his voice so husky and deep, that he cracked open her soul with his willingness to show his own.

She kissed him while his hands went to her hips as she thrust toward him. His hot, hard cock parted her soft pussy, and he cried out as he slammed his hips forward, joining them together with one sharp movement.

Pyrus paused and looked into her eyes. He rested his forehead against hers as they stared at each other, the slow pressure of his hips against hers keeping him sheathed inside her as far as he could possibly go.

Mazie blinked, gulping hard as pleasure throbbed through her. It was as if Pyrus was all over her, as well as within her. He possessed every inch of her, body and soul, and she was utterly safe, completely free to be as open as she could possibly be.

Because he is the one.

A harsh cry ripped out of Pyrus's throat, and he looked away from her eyes, his breath coming faster as his hips began to move. Mazie braced herself on the couch, keeping her hips tilted forward as Pyrus grabbed her around the waist and pounded her with long, hard strokes.

She was so warm, wet, and throbbing from the orgasms she'd already had that the stroking of his cock quickly grew to another, even more powerful, orgasm. Mazie threw back her head and yelled as Pyrus shoved his cock into her as hard as he

could. As her pussy gripped him, he crumpled against her as if the strength of her pleasure had robbed him of his will.

Mazie wrapped her arms and legs around him, thrashing against his strength. Pyrus kept still, holding her tightly and keeping his cock thrust into her as far as he could. As he let her orgasms bombard him, Pyrus let out gasps with each spasm of her pussy and every movement of her body.

When the waves of pleasure finally settled down, Mazie was a shuddering, sweaty wreck trapped under Pyrus on the couch. He held himself up from her body so he didn't crush her, but she was still wrapped around him as if her joints had locked.

Mazie tried to move and felt his incredibly hard cock still piercing her all the way to her cervix. She moaned and tried again to let go of him, feeling as if every single cell in her body had become overloaded with sexual pleasure.

Pyrus moved a little, leaning back so he could look into her eyes. She stared up at him, her body throbbing almost painfully every place their bodies touched.

Gently, Pyrus ran one hand across her chest. Mazie sighed, shivering as her hips responded by grinding against him. Pyrus grinned and cupped her breast, rubbing the nipple against his palm.

Mazie whimpered, the pleasure running through her too intense to process. When Pyrus's lips and tongue found her breasts again, she writhed against him, shoving her chest up to encourage him. He slid down her body to get a better angle, and his hard cock slid out of her pussy, leaving her with a hot, throbbing ache deep inside.

Pyrus teased her breasts, squeezing them and pinching her nipples gently as he ran his mouth back and forth, nibbling on the big, soft mounds. His tongue flicked around her right nipple, and his teeth nipped the edge while he rubbed her other nipple between two fingers, and Mazie cried out as pleasure rippled across her skin.

One of his big, strong hands ran down her belly. Mazie parted her thighs in anticipation, mumbling as she squirmed under him. Her clit and her pussy throbbed and burned in a way they never had before. She was wet like a river, and Pyrus was clearly not satisfied yet.

Slowly, Pyrus put his fingers between her legs while his mouth still worked her breasts. Mazie felt him tease her clit and then reach deeper, sucking the deeper lips of her pussy. He was going to tease her a lot more before he used his cock again.

His cock was still huge, utterly rock hard. Mazie knew he wouldn't take any pleasure for himself until he was sure she could take no more.

TWENTY



PYRUS

The sight of Mazie spread out before him, locked in the throes of pleasure, was the most beautiful sight Pyrus had ever seen. The strength of her desire, the depth of her love, and the power of her commitment were all displayed in the ferocious response of her body to his.

He'd spent so long in a state of pure anxiety, thinking that he might lose her. Then, he'd seen his love only a breath away from death, truly beyond his reach forever. To have her safe in his arms again, knowing that this was where she truly wanted to be, affected him in a way sex itself never could.

Pyrus moaned as she lay under him, responding to his hand deep inside her and the pressure of his mouth on her breasts. He tried to ride the waves of her pleasure, loving the way her breasts tossed back and forth under his lips.

He tried to tame her nipples with his tongue while he pressed his finger into her, teasing her clit with the heel of his hand. Her thrashing excited him further, and his cock felt hard enough to burst.

Not yet.

Pyrus teased her even more with his hand, resting his forehead between her breasts while exploring every single thick fold with his long fingers. He plunged his hand down into her wet heat, drawing it back slick and slippery so he could tease the juice around her clit.

Mazie fell so still under him, her hands over her face while she whimpered. Pyrus couldn't take it for another moment and

sat up, grabbing her thighs as he bent his mouth to her pussy again.

She shrieked as his lips went around her clit, but it was drowned out by his long, drawn-out moan. Pyrus lapped at her clit, punishing it with the flat of his tongue before sucking on it, teasing his lips over it, and lapping at her lower lips to bring forth more juice.

Mazie moaned low in her throat. Her pussy throbbed in his mouth, and he dug his fingers into her soft thighs as he increased his efforts with his tongue.

“Yes, Mazie,” he moaned. “Come again. Come in my mouth.”

The shriek that tore from her throat was a primal sound that made his dragon soul roar with utter, naked desire. Pyrus could only make the smallest whimper against her hot flesh as he contained himself, waiting for her pleasure to peak once more.

She pulsed and twitched in his mouth as her hips bucked up and down. A series of cries burst from her throat in time with the movements of her body. Pyrus sank low, holding her legs up over his shoulders as his tongue snaked up inside to feel her orgasm explode against his mouth.

Mazie shuddered, crying out. Pyrus could only focus on her wet, hot pussy as he lapped deeper to swallow every bit of her.

As the orgasm began to subside, Mazie shook her head back and forth, murmuring softly. Pyrus sat up and watched her, seeing the goosebumps fly across her skin as ripples of pleasure flowed through her. He reached out and grazed his fingertip across the skin of her belly, watching her shiver and moan in response to his touch.

Slowly, Mazie took her hands away from her face. The great heaving of her chest began to settle, and when he touched her, she leaned into his touch. He smiled, bending down to kiss her gently.

“Good, my love?” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“More?”

“Yes!”

Pyrus’s grin widened as he ran his hands over her body. She was so relaxed now that her limbs moved languidly as if all the tension had been taken out of her muscles and joints. He could simply admire her like this for hours, softly stroking her perfect skin and trying to memorize every expression that crossed her lovely features.

“Pyrus,” she whispered. He looked up at her eyes and saw the intent in her green gaze.

“Bring your cock up here,” she whispered. “Let me taste it.”

Pyrus had thought he couldn’t get any harder, but with her words, his cock straightened and swelled even farther. He rose from the couch, moving up to her face. He wanted her to lay there as comfortably as possible while she took joy in pleasuring him.

Mazie rolled to the side, reaching out with one hand to drag him closer. Her fingers dug into his ass as she tugged him to her, wrapping her lips around the head of his cock.

Pyrus gasped, a moan of pleasure smothered in his throat by the force of his reaction. It took everything he had to stay still and let Mazie gently suck at the tip of his cock, tracing her tongue slowly around every crease.

Her hand tightened on his ass, her nails digging into him as she forced him even closer. He cried out as she swallowed the full length of him, her lips meeting the base of his cock in one swift mouthful.

Mazie moaned with pleasure as his cock filled her mouth, the sound coming out as a growl that was buried in her throat. She bobbed back and forth, keeping herself stretched out on the couch and using her tight grip on his ass to thrust him in and out.

Pyrus looked down, seeing her eager red lips devouring his cock. She writhed a little as she sucked on him, her big beautiful breasts tossing back and forth and her legs wide open, giving him an amazing view of her hot, juicy pussy.

Mazie loosened her grip on him, and her lips and tongue darted to the head of his cock, lapping at him and teasing as she wrapped her mouth around the tip to suck on him hard. Pyrus shuddered, pleasure racing down his spine as his cock hardened in her mouth.

He couldn't take the sight of her naked body spread out before him any longer. Mazie's thighs were parted, and her pussy was open, glistening wet and throbbing with arousal. Trying not to disturb her angle too much, he leaned forward, braced himself on the back of the couch, and wrapped his lips around her clit again.

Mazie arched her back, a loud cry bursting out of her as she tried to keep her lips wrapped around his cock. Both of them wiggled to get a better angle as Mazie wrapped both hands around Pyrus's hips and leaned her head back to take in all of him.

Pyrus lapped at her pussy, gently flicking with his tongue. When he dove down to eat her as deeply as he could, he felt the pressure of her hands and obeyed by thrusting his cock into her mouth.

His hands tightened on her thighs as he shoved his tongue into her, using his lips to tease and caress every fold. His hips bucked up and down, and for a few moments, Pyrus completely lost his mind under the avalanche of sensation. There was only her hot, throbbing pussy under his mouth and her sweet lips wrapped around his cock as her throat took him in as deeply as he could go.

Pyrus paused, gasping for air. As he got himself under control, he eased his hips up, letting Mazie breathe. She gave a plaintive cry and dug her nails into his butt cheeks to drag him back down, moaning as she slid the head of his cock between her lips again.

He blinked hard, trying to stay still. He knew he was moving beyond control and that his dragon was feeling a rising need to claim her. He didn't want to hurt Mazie with a moment of blind passion. Even if she was happily taking his cock now, she, also, could easily take herself too far in the throes of pleasure.

Pyrus tried again to move his hips away from her mouth. She pulled him back down again a few times before he finally found the strength to pull away.

"Hmm," she whispered, wiping her mouth. "I was hoping to taste you, all of you."

"I want that too," Pyrus answered, his voice husky as he fought for control. He wanted it so badly that he was almost shaky with need. Still, his dragon half was taking him over, and he had to claim her. For that, he had to be in her pussy. The dragon would accept nothing else.

Pyrus crawled off her, settling again between her legs. The dragon within him felt like a fire roaring through him, hot and powerful enough to come burning out through his flesh if he did not comply. He stayed still, though, and took Mazie's hands. Her eyes flickered open, and she looked up at him with perfect love and trust.

"I have to claim you, now," Pyrus muttered, more dragon than man at that moment. Mazie looked into his face, completely without fear. She sat up and stroked his cheek, kissing him softly.

"Whatever you need to do, do it," she said, smiling. His hands tightened on hers.

"My dragon will take control," he said. "I might not be sane. I won't be able to stop myself. I would never hurt you, but there will be a moment of pain when I claim you with my fangs."

Pyrus saw a flicker of fear pass through her eyes, but it was quickly followed by a still calm.

"I am yours," she whispered. "Claim me, so no other can touch my flesh, ever again."

The need inside Pyrus roared through him, pouring from his mouth in a primal wave of guttural sound. He grabbed her shoulders and threw her down on the couch, slipping his cock into her hot, wet pussy with one stroke. Mazie stretched under him, opening her legs and pointing her hips at him.

Pyrus held her hips, and Mazie's hands covered his. She threw her head back, letting him take full control of her body. He watched her huge, soft breasts bouncing up and down as he pounded her harder and harder.

With every stroke, he slammed into the soft, hot end of her and felt her pussy clench around his cock as it got thicker and harder. Control was leaving him, slowly bleeding away with every movement. As the red-hot fire of his dragon soul took him over, Pyrus's vision was covered by a sheen of white-hot flame.

He threw himself on top of her, his hands wildly groping at her breasts and clumsily reaching for her waist. He fell against her chest, her soft breasts slapping his face. The sweet, salty tang of her sweat rushing over her soft skin was too much for him.

Pyrus's face snapped to the side faster than a snake. His fangs latched onto the smooth mound of her breast and sank in deep. Mazie screamed under him, but Pyrus was unmoved by her sound.

He was cresting on a wave of pleasure like nothing he had ever known. He could taste her blood on his tongue, mingled with her sweat and her cum. His teeth were deep in her hot, juicy flesh, and his cock was buried inside her as far as it could go, so thick and hard, he felt her pussy stretching around him.

The wave peaked in an explosion that blew through every single nerve in his body at the same time. He opened his mouth to let out a roar, his teeth gently retracting as he let Mazie go. His cock pounded and throbbed, spurting deep inside her as he finally spent himself in a flood of incredible, soul-wrecking pleasure.

For a few minutes, neither of them moved or spoke. His breath rasped in and out of his throat as his heart thudded at an impossible rhythm, leaving every muscle trembling and his skin singing with tingling waves of pleasure.

Slowly, Pyrus raised up on his hands to look down at his love. She was smiling, her eyes soft and gentle as she reached up to stroke his face.

He looked down at the claiming bite on the inner edge of her left breast. It looked like a neat circle of deep red dots with only a few stray drops of blood.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, touching it softly. “Does it hurt?”

“A little,” she said, nodding. “Not much. I didn’t even feel it at the time.”

“Good,” he said, relieved. “I completely lost it for a minute there.”

“Yeah, you did,” Mazie whispered, reaching up to kiss him gently. “It was the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“What?” he asked, not understanding. “Really?”

“Yes,” she answered, slowly rocking her hips up and down. Pyrus was still sheathed deep inside her, and as her pussy clenched against him, his cock worked on getting hard again.

“You’re so gorgeous,” she said, kissing him again. The soft brush of her lips, her hot breath, and her intense eyes were hypnotizing him.

Pyrus shook his head, trying to find the words to tell her that she was the incredible one. Every time he tried to speak, Mazie moved her hips, making her pussy grip his cock again. His body had ceased to be his own. She owned it now.

“So, tell me,” she whispered, kissing him gently and teasing his lips with her tongue. “What do I have to do to see it again?”

“See what?” he asked, his mind completely void of thought. His entire universe was now her lips on his, her hot

pussy gripping his cock, and the mystery of her words.

“See you lose control like you just did,” Mazie breathed.
“Fuck me, Pyrus. Fuck me like the animal you are!”

A wave of primal instinct rushed through him as all his male power responded to her wish, and his body bent to her will. He was owned now, and his will was not his own.

Because I am hers to command from now until the very last day of my life.

TWENTY-ONE



MAZIE

Icy wind blew from the nearby peaks, whipping at Mazie's cheeks and tossing back her long hair. The mountains reared around her, impossibly rugged, spearing the flawless sky with their jagged edges.

The sun was high, not yet sinking toward the horizon, but close. Mazie stood on the balcony of their small hut, her hands resting on the smooth wooden rail. Right below her was a drop of several hundred feet that cut between the nearby mountains.

All around her, the mountains reflected beauty from their snowy tops, the dustings of white looking like sugar on chocolate from this far away. Mazie wasn't sure exactly where they were, but she knew they had flown by the great peak of Denali on the way here.

Straight after the ordeal with Richard, she and Pyrus had retreated into the safety of his condo and did not come out for a week. It was as if they needed to fully absorb each other without being distracted by others, and once the mate mark was made, Mazie understood Pyrus's mind much more deeply than she had ever imagined she could.

Although lying around the condo was relaxing, Mazie didn't like to sit still for too long. She contacted the corps and was sent out on a large boat to track whalers. Pyrus was with her the whole time, an active member of the crew and the corps.

When that mission finished, Pyrus had to attend to his business. They flew to Rome, stayed in the best hotels, and

attended incredibly lavish events, and Mazie shopped to her heart's content while Pyrus handled his business meetings.

Next, they went to Peru with the corps. Mazie was always interested in working with the children and schools, as well as improving water and food quality. There was a need for a community economic developer, and Pyrus shone in the role, only using a small amount of his own money to kick start a local market and teach the community to invest.

They stayed in Peru for a couple of months, with Pyrus taking Mazie out to see secret parts of the jungle and ruins. Pyrus returned to his earlier thoughts, that there were places in the world he'd seen before but never visited and that he wanted to get to know them up close now.

By the time they wrapped up in Peru, Pyrus's business was screaming to have him back. They flew to New York and spent a week in a luxurious hotel suite. Pyrus took back-to-back meetings in an effort to catch up on the work he'd missed.

On the final day, he came back to the hotel looking weary. Mazie went to him immediately, concerned by the drop of his shoulders and his downcast eyes.

"My love, what's wrong?" Mazie asked, stroking his cheeks.

He shook his head a little. "I'm tired, Mazie. I miss you. We've been all around the world the last few months, and it's been amazing, believe me. I've had so much fun with you. But I want to just stop and be with you for a while."

"Where would you like to go?" she asked, her eyes shining with anticipation. She'd been thinking the exact same thing.

"Somewhere no one's ever been. Somewhere no one will ever go."

Mazie wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him against her. "I'm ready when you are," she said eagerly.

They left that night. They made a few calls to let people know they would be away, then Pyrus shifted and took off from the roof of the hotel. All they took with them was a small pack of camping gear.

They flew through the night with Pyrus drifting aimlessly through the dark sky. Mazie had flown with him a few times, but this was, by far, the most thrilling. The stars above glittered, so close to her that it seemed as if she could reach up and run her fingers through their clouds of incandescent dust.

The earth below was sunk in deep shadows, suggestions of land and ocean flowing beneath them. The air turned crisp, then cold, and then downright freezing. Mazie huddled close to her dragon, wrapping her legs and arms around him so she could soak up the fiery heat that ran in his blood and warmed his skin.

He flew her to a high peak not far from Alaska, and for the first night, they made camp in a small cave. Pyrus collected wood and lit a massive bonfire within seconds with a stream of flame from his nostrils.

The two of them sat by the fire, huddled in blankets and making s'mores. After the relentless luxury of Pyrus's lifestyle, roughing it was enjoyable for them both.

The next day, Pyrus took Mazie for a flight through the ranges. They landed often to take pictures and explore, some of the locations so savage and wild that only a dragon could reach them and survive.

After a few days of camping, Pyrus revealed that he didn't want to leave. It was the most beautiful place he had ever seen, and the wind moaning through the peaks combined with the pure hills of snow gave him clarity and peace.

Mazie was happy to stay, but they needed real shelter. To her amazement, Pyrus built a shack, flying back to civilization to collect the timber and bringing it to a suitable platform between two peaks. In less than a day, Pyrus had built the cabin working in his dragon form most of the time.

It was only a simple, one-room affair with a big bed and a fireplace, but it was very comfortable. Pyrus brought back cushions and blankets, and a bathtub. Even though there was no running water, he set it up in the back of the shed, and he melted and heated snow in it with ease so that Mazie could soak in the hot water.

Every few days, he took her back to civilization, but Mazie was needing it less and less. The longer she stayed away with Pyrus, the more she liked it. The small inconveniences ... such as not having a real bathroom ... became less of a bother as they were set up with camping equipment.

The cabin itself was extremely warm and comfortable. Cooking food over the open fire gave everything a rich, smokey flavor that Mazie really enjoyed.

It had been a few weeks, and they would have to leave soon. They had no choice. That made her even more determined to stay as long as they could.

Finally, on the clear, blue horizon, she saw the dark speck that was Pyrus. He'd flown into the nearest city to bring back a store of food that would last a few more days. Even with his speed, it had taken him most of the day.

They didn't have to worry too much about predators as they were too high for most of them. Pyrus had also built the cabin on an almost inaccessible peak, so he knew Mazie was safe when he went away.

Pyrus hovered over the cabin, dropping slowly as he calculated for the wind speed. He dropped the bags full of food so Mazie could catch them, then landed and shifted in one smooth movement onto his feet. No matter how many times she saw it, the change took Mazie's breath away.

"My love," Pyrus whispered, hurrying over to cup her cheek. "You'll freeze! What are you doing out here?"

"Checking out the view," she said, gesturing at the incredible horizon. The mountains were so varied and dramatic that it was like being pounded in the face constantly by a relentless, savage beauty. Mazie couldn't get enough of it.

"And waiting for you," she said, smiling. She gave Pyrus a quick kiss on the lips.

"Come on, let's get inside," he said. "I might be a dragon with red hot blood, but right now, I'm just a naked man."

Mazie giggled and ran her hands teasingly over his body. "You sure are."

“Knock it off,” he said, smiling. “I am not making love in the snow again.”

Mazie giggled as he picked her up and carried her inside. The place had cushions and blankets all over the floor, the majority of the space covered by a thick mattress. By the fire, a few cooking implements, cups, and utensils lay about. It was truly all they needed.

Pyrus went through the bags of food and stuck a bottle of champagne into a snow drift by the door. Mazie helped herself to fresh bread and cheese, with slices of tart green apple in between. She didn't know how to tell him she wouldn't be drinking any of the champagne.

Pyrus sat with her, sharing the simple meal and getting ready to cook steak and potatoes over the fire. The wind howled through the mountain tops, singing around the cabin like the voices of lost souls. Mazie closed her eyes and listened to it, feeling close to the wild soul of nature itself.

“You didn't stand out on the balcony waiting for me the whole time, did you?” Pyrus asked as he stoked the fire. Mazie shook her head.

“No, I read a book and took a nap. But you know how I feel about that horizon. I can't get enough of it.”

“I should take you out again with your camera,” Pyrus said eagerly. “We got some incredible shots the other day.”

“We sure did,” she said, grinning.

He'd taken her to the highest peaks and ducked into narrow, sharp crevices. Pyrus had swung close to the most dangerous crests of the mountains, and Mazie had clung to his neck with one hand while her other clicked furiously to capture every inch of the mountains so wild that no human had ever set foot on them.

Mazie didn't know how to tell Pyrus that she wouldn't be doing anything like that for a very long time.

Pyrus was setting up a massive pot with potatoes, butter, and chives. They had both become extremely good cooks using only simple ingredients. She knew the potatoes would

take a while on a lower section of the fire, and Pyrus would usually have some thick steaks or fresh chicken to go with them.

She watched him fussing over the fire, content to let him take charge. He'd floundered a little at first when he'd come into her world. Heading out on a whaling ship was very different from cleaning animal cages. Visiting Ghana was nothing like a charity gala.

Now, though, Pyrus was more comfortable in the wilderness doing things for himself than he was in a luxury hotel. Mazie wasn't sure where they would go from here.

Is there a place on Earth that will cater to our love of adventure that is also civilized and safe?

Pyrus was so entranced by what he was doing that he'd started humming a happy little tune. Mazie made a mental note to find her phone. If it had enough charge, she'd love to play some music. The phones were useless for anything else as there was no reception up here, anyway.

Pyrus noticed her looking and grinned, cutting off his song. "What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Oh, just the hottest guy in the world."

"Where is he?" Pyrus cried, leaping to his feet and spinning around, punching an invisible enemy. "I can't let that handsome devil get my woman!"

Mazie laughed, reaching for him. Pyrus sank to his knees in front of her and kissed her, pushing her down into the soft cushions as their hands began to explore.

"Don't burn the potatoes," she whispered in between kisses. "I'm hungry."

"I'll give you something to put in your mouth," Pyrus whispered. Mazie gripped his shoulders and pressed her body to his, moaning as she thought about running her tongue down his firm, hard belly and teasing his cock until he couldn't take any more.

“I have to ... tell you something,” Mazie gasped, coming up for air between kisses.

“This isn’t about the potatoes again, is it?” he muttered.

She shook her head. “No, It’s not about potatoes. I’ve known for a little while now. I just didn’t know how to tell you. Maybe, I just don’t want to leave here, and I know we’ll have to.”

Pyrus’s eyes widened. “What? Why?”

Mazie sighed. “You know that last time we went to town? Well, I bought a few things I didn’t tell you about.”

“Babe,” Pyrus laughed. “You spent five grand in one transaction shopping in Rome, and I didn’t even blink. I think a few items at a local market or small-town drugstore won’t break my budget.”

“That’s not the problem,” she said with a laugh. “I do remember that day in Rome, though. I didn’t know the conversion rate.”

“That’s a really good excuse,” Pyrus said, shaking his head. “For the purchase of a thousand-dollar leather jacket.”

“The tailoring was very expensive,” Mazie protested. “Not to mention, I did spend a whole two thousand on lingerie.”

“Yes, okay,” Pyrus said. “I’m not complaining. But still, my question stands. What could you possibly buy up here in a remote town that would upset my very delicate budget? The most expensive things I’ve seen out here are huge snowplow trucks.”

Mazie looked at him very seriously, holding his eye. “That’s it, my love. I bought a snowplow, the most expensive one they had.”

Pyrus laughed out loud. “Can I drive it? Sounds like fun.”

Mazie laughed, falling against his chest and kissing him hard.

“Okay, no. Here goes,” Mazie said, taking a deep breath. “I bought a pregnancy test. Two, actually. I did one in town and

brought the other one with me to do here a few days after.”

Pyrus was watching her with huge, round eyes. His face was slack, more shocked than she’d ever seen it.

“Both were positive,” she said softly. “We’re going to be parents. We’ll have to leave our secluded mountain peak and be people for a while.”

Pyrus reached out and put one hand gently on her belly. He blinked and shook his head. “A baby? I’m going to be a dad?”

Mazie nodded, feeling tears sting her eyes. Pyrus leaned forward and kissed her, and she fell into his arms, melting into his embrace. They had proven that all they needed was each other and that together, they made a family. A family both of them wanted to make bigger, so they could share the gift of their love.

The End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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<http://eepurl.com/pt9q1>

Find out more about Milly here:

www.millytaiden.com

milly@millytaiden.com



ALSO BY MILLY TAIDEN

Find out more about Milly Taiden here:

Email: millytaiden@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.millytaiden.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/millytaidenpage>

Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/millytaiden>

You can find a complete list of all my books by series and reading order at my website: [millytaiden.com](http://www.millytaiden.com)