



FINCH

PIPER SCOTT

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*To everyone who wanted to see poor Hugh find his happily ever after.*

*And to Michael Ferraiuolo, who must be a dragon for all the magic he breathes into our stories.*

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P R O L O G U E

F I N C H

When Finch arrived at his employer's study, he found Mr.

Hugh Drake wearing a hole in its Turkish rug. "You called, sir?"

“Finch. Finally. I thought you’d never get here. I need your help.”

As Hugh’s primary Attendant and secretary, helping the dragon with whatever he requested was Finch’s entire job description, and what he’d done for the last third of his life.

Thirteen years, of course, was merely a brief moment in a dragon’s existence, but to Finch, who was very human, it was long enough to ascertain something was wrong with his employer. He’d never seen Hugh so agitated. “Yes, sir?”

“I need you to find me a list of Disgraces that have aged out of the Pedigree.”

Finch blinked at the dragon, who had a bit of smoke escaping from his mouth and nostrils. “Excuse me?”

Hugh raked a hand through his thick black hair. “You heard me. Now do your job and find them.”

Finch was nonplussed. He’d never seen Hugh in such a state, much less so short-tempered. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I must ask—why?”

“Because I—” Hugh stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Finch, I do apologize. I realize I’m being testy. It’s just... I’m tired of waiting. It’s been six years and I keep being overlooked. It’s time I take matters into my own hands and discover if all this science being bandied about is true.”

“If what’s true, sir?”

“That Disgraces are dragons,” Hugh whispered.

Finch fell back a step. “What?” Had Hugh finally gone mad? Finch had strict instructions from his employer’s father, the very intimidating Grimbold Drake, to notify him at the first sign of his son’s mental collapse. He’d thought the edict ridiculous at the time, but now he couldn’t be so sure.

“That’s the rumor going about,” Hugh confirmed. “My brother and his strange mate insist the data from their mating experiment is conclusive, but I really can’t be sure, since Father chose Reynard as the Amethyst candidate instead of me.” His face crumpled a little, then he stiffened his upper lip and

went on. “But who’s to say I can’t have my own experiment? Yes, all of the Disgraces currently in the Pedigree are either already mated or being courted by dragons far more impressive than I, but... there’s still hope. There are Disgraces out there no longer tied to the Pedigree, and I’m sure they’ve been as overlooked as me. My sanctioned period in which I can produce a clutch is coming to a close, though, so I’ve no time to lose. It’s of the utmost importance that you find me as many of these aged-out Disgraces as you can. One of them will surely be tolerable.”

Finch had no idea where to start, so he began at the end.

“Why do you need to tolerate them, sir? Do you mean for breeding purposes?”

The whites shone all the way around Hugh’s eyes. He looked both panicked and excited. “No. That’s not it.

According to what I’ve heard, there’s a very real possibility I’ll end up mated to her. Or him, I suppose. One can’t afford to be choosy when it comes to what bits they’ve got between their legs. Not given the circumstances. But it is absolutely imperative I can stand being in the same room as them for any amount of time if we’re to spend an eternity together.”

“Indeed, sir,” was all Finch could think to say.

“So you’ll do it? You’ll make a list of aged-out Disgraces that are still of child-bearing years? I’ve no idea how many of them exist. If the list is too long, just give me the females, but

please, be as thorough as you can. My future happiness depends on it.”

“A-All right, sir. I’ll get to work immediately.”

“Good man,” Hugh said, beaming. The smoke had stopped tumbling from his nostrils. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Finch gave Hugh a short bow, then left the room. As he walked down the hallway to his personal office, Finch made peace with the

thought that, despite Hugh's wishes, the list would never be absolutely complete. One name would never appear on it, no matter how thorough he strove to be.

1

H U G H

Hugh squinted at the file folder on his desk. "Is this everyone?"

"No, sir." Finch cleared his throat, sounding uncomfortable. "Due to non-compliance, I was unable to obtain information from the Diamond, Onyx, Gold, and Topaz clans. In addition, my research on Amethyst Disgraces was complicated due to the secretive nature of this... experiment of yours. Were I to directly inquire, word would have eventually made it back to Mr. Grimbold Drake, which you've explicitly stated is not to happen under any circumstance. Nevertheless, I persisted, and I've discreetly sourced a few Amethyst candidates."

"Excellent work."

"Thank you, sir."

"Will you explain how you've arranged this information?"

Finch reached around Hugh from behind to lay a hand on top of the folder. Like always, his nails were neatly manicured, each one filed into an identical crescent, and his suit jacket sleeve showed exactly half an inch of cuff. Notes of his cologne were subtly present in the air—a vetiver something-or-other, if Hugh recalled correctly. Whatever it was, it was proper, subtle, and masculine, much like Finch himself. "Of course," Finch said softly a short distance from the back of Hugh's ear while opening the folder. "It would be my pleasure.

"The list is sorted by clan and alphabetized by surname, starting with Amethyst, then Sapphire, Emerald, Ruby, and

finally Opal. I've inscribed information about each Disgrace therein with

individualized facts sheets. I've included as many details as I could find and a picture of the Disgrace when one was available."

Finch lifted the first sheet and held it so it was within Hugh's line of sight.

"Take, for example, Lianne Abbott, an Amethyst Disgrace currently residing in Hertfordshire."

In the top right corner of the page was a picture of a gorgeous woman who looked to be in her mid-to-late thirties.

Her dark hair fell in loose waves down her shoulders, and her piercing blue eyes appeared kind, although they seemed to Hugh to be rather uninspired.

"In the top left corner of each profile, you'll discover the Disgrace's name, age, height, weight, and last reported temperament. As you can see, Ms. Abbott was described by her cloister as a kind, sweet, and obedient young woman who excelled in her studies. The main body of the report is comprised of a more thorough analysis of each Disgrace and any pertinent details that came up during my research."

"My god, Finch. You've gone all out."

"I did what was necessary so you could make an informed decision, sir." Finch placed the profile on top of the stack and closed the folder. "I'll always do whatever it takes to best serve you."

"You're a good man."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, how many Disgraces were you able to find?"

There was a moment of prolonged silence, during which Finch stepped away from the desk. At last, he said, "Sixty-three, sir."

"Total, or is that just the women?"

"Total, sir."



“How many of them are female?”

There was another long silence. “A little less than half, sir.

There are twenty-nine female Disgraces listed.”

Twenty-nine? Hugh’s spirits lifted. He could barely believe it.

“My apologies, Mr. Drake,” Finch hastened to say. “I’m sure there would have been more had I been able to access records from the other clans, but this is the best I was able to do given the circumstances.”

“No, Finch, twenty-nine is more than enough.” Hugh pushed out of his chair and turned to face his secretary with the intention of clapping him on a shoulder to celebrate a job well done, but stopped upon catching sight of Finch. As usual, Finch stood with impeccable posture and had his hands tucked neatly behind his back, but there was something off about him.

Hugh couldn’t put his finger on it, but whatever it was made something clench uncomfortably in his chest. His enthusiasm deteriorated. Poor Finch—he’d worked tirelessly and produced astounding results, yet somehow still felt he hadn’t done enough. It would be up to Hugh to convince him otherwise.

“If the rumors are to be believed,” Hugh said reassuringly,

“I could find my mate after meeting just one or two out of the bunch. Even if I only meet the women, twenty-nine potential matches guarantees that I’ll have a family of my own before long.”

The something that was wrong with Finch intensified.

“Yes, sir.”

“Finch, this is a happy time! You’ve done exceptionally well.” Hugh squeezed Finch’s shoulder. “What’s the matter?”

Finch shook his head. “Nothing at all, sir.”

“Is this about the extra upkeep required to prepare me for international

travel?” Hugh snorted. “Because I’ve half made up my mind to stay right here in Aurora and invite the Disgraces that catch my eye to come visit me. In the event I’ll need to court more than one of them before I find my perfect match, it will be far easier. Just thinking about the paperwork I’d need to have done to grant me clearance into each clan’s

territory is giving me a headache. I can’t imagine actually having to sit down and do it.”

“No, sir.”

“Are you worried about having guests, then?” Hugh studied Finch’s face, seeking the truth, but found nothing but the same inexplicable disappointment. “I can hire on additional staff if you don’t think our current fleet of Attendants is up to the increased workload. And I’d only be inviting one Disgrace into our home at a time.”

Finch lifted his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat.

“With all due respect, Mr. Drake, would you kindly excuse me? I’m afraid I’m not feeling so well.”

Ah, there it was. That was why Finch didn’t look like himself. The tightness in Hugh’s chest undid itself, and he dropped his hand from Finch’s shoulder. “Of course. Why don’t you take the rest of the week off? You’ve gone above and beyond sourcing this list for me, and despite what Father thinks, I’m old enough to be able to take care of myself for a few days. Relax and feel better.”

Finch nodded tersely, then took a mechanical step back and turned on his heel. He hurried out of the room on long, slender legs and closed the door to Hugh’s study softly in his wake. When he was gone, Hugh shook his head. Oh, Finch.

Always worried he’d never done enough when in reality, he’d done three times the work of Hugh’s other Attendants. How lucky it was he’d come under Hugh’s employ. Life would have been insufferable without him.

Pleased to have given his star employee and good friend the time off he deserved to take care of himself, Hugh returned to his desk and began the painstaking process of selecting the very best Disgraces from the folder. How strange and wonderful to think that one of them might one day be his mate.

2

## F I N C H

Finch rose, as he always did, at six o'clock sharp, without the aid of an alarm. He made his bed immediately upon leaving it, then went to his kitchenette. His suite of rooms was much larger than the tiny flat he'd had in London. He missed London, sometimes, but Aurora had its compensations. Every now and then, he wondered at how his life had turned out, but never regretted his rash decision to take a dragon, of all people, up on his offer of a job in a country an entire ocean away from where he'd lived his whole life. There was such a thing as hiding in plain sight, and Finch accomplished it with expert mastery. Here, on American soil, he was the perfect, unobtrusive servant, and with Hugh vouching for him, no one within Aurora's Attendant network had a clue they had a Disgrace living in their midst.

Which was precisely how Finch liked it.

His life was neat, orderly, and exactly what it was supposed to be.

Finch switched on his kettle to heat water for his morning tea. He poured milk into his mug, grabbed a PG Tips tea bag, then put in bread to toast while he waited for his kettle to whistle. Tea having been properly prepared, Finch scrambled two eggs, buttered his perfectly golden toast, and took it all to his small table to eat. While he did, he looked through the news headlines to see if there was anything important he should know, then checked Hugh's correspondence, which came to him, as his family knew better than to expect Hugh to pay attention to emails or texts, let alone letters. As there was

nothing pressing, Finch blacked out his phone's screen, prepared two tiny plates with a chunk of egg and a bit of toast crust on each, and adorned each with one perfect blueberry. He cleaned up his breakfast dishes, then went to go visit his girls.

“Good morning, ladies,” he crooned into the large cage housed in a corner of his suite. Two rats poked their little noses out of the nest in their hammock, sniffing the air. “Yes, that’s right, I’ve brought breakfast.” Finch opened the cage’s door and placed each plate down. Elizabeth and Eleanor scrambled toward them. Finch clicked his tongue in warning and they slowed down, stopping right before the food. “Good girls,” he said, and Elizabeth grabbed her blueberry while Eleanor picked up her chunk of egg and nibbled at it.

He closed the cage door after giving each of the girls a good ear scratch. He’d let them out of the cage later, after his duties were performed for the day, but for now, he left them to amuse themselves with their wheel—Eleanor’s favorite—and a tissue box—Elizabeth’s current passion. Breakfast delivered, Finch went to wash his hands thoroughly in anticipation of the day ahead. It was officially time to go from being Finch the man, pet rat owner and inveterate tea drinker who enjoyed crossword puzzles and watching old romantic comedies, to being Finch the very correct and proper secretary of Hugh Drake.

The difference was stark. Finch the man wore pajama bottoms with penguins on them and a vintage Queen t-shirt he’d picked up in an Islington charity shop. Finch the secretary wore bespoke suits made by a tailor in Aurora who was obscure, ridiculously talented, and charged extremely low rates for his wares.

Finch’s room had a large walk-in closet he was grateful for. His wardrobe didn’t vary much, but his suits needed to be hung properly, and the small wardrobe he’d had in his London flat was less than ideal. He chose charcoal trousers, a waistcoat in the same material, a white shirt with a proper Windsor collar, and a black jacket. He pondered his ties, then chose one that appeared to be black, but was actually an extremely dark shade of aubergine. His socks were the exact

same hue. He dressed swiftly, but carefully, making sure everything fit just as it should and that no flaws were visible in his attire. Finch had more than one set of cufflinks, but he ignored them in favor of his favorite pair, which he wore most days. They were two perfectly cut dark amethysts that had been a gift from Hugh on his tenth anniversary of employment. It had been very unexpected of Hugh, which was likely why Finch treasured them. Not only

had it surprised him that Hugh had been aware of the passage of time, but it had shocked him that Hugh had recognized that giving a gift in celebration of such a milestone was appropriate. Moreover, Finch was startled that a dragon had given him—of all people

—a treasure from his hoard.

That had been nearly three years ago and Finch still didn't quite know what to make of the gift, but he wore them faithfully. They were, he supposed, a kind of badge of office.

That Hugh trusted him with even a small part of his hoard was, in dragon terms, a rather extravagant measure.

Dragons took jewels. They did not gift them.

Ever.

Except, of course, when they had a mate.

Finch had only met one dragon's mate—Hugh's brother-in-law Peregrine—and he wore so much treasure that he tinkled as he walked.

Finch tried not to read too much into the gift of the cufflinks, but sometimes he did, late at night in his bed, just before he fell asleep.

After donning shoes he'd polished the night before, Finch made his way to the main kitchen to see how Hugh's breakfast was coming along. He wasn't pleased to hear raised voices coming from Cook's domain.

"Bitch!" That was Bella, one of the maids and a former member of the Pedigree. She'd aged out three years ago and was still trying to figure out her life and what she wanted from it. So far, she hadn't made much progress.

"Whore!" And that was Emma, the cook and reigning dictator of the kitchen and pantry.

"Emma, maybe you should leave the poor girl alone," said George, Emma's husband and Hugh's chauffeur. The two of them were betas with two beta

sons. No Pedigree for them.

Finch stepped into the room and it fell silent, the only sound the faint echo of Bella's aborted shriek. "What, precisely, is going on?" he asked, not needing to raise his voice.

Bella pouted. "She started it." She pointed her thumb at Emma.

Self-consciously, Emma patted her tight gray bun. "I was only trying to instruct the girl, Finch. You know how she is."

"Instruct me, my ass. You're just mad I went on a date with Javier last night."

Finch sighed, sorting out the mess in his head. Javier was the groundskeeper, and he pretended to be straight, but was actually bi. Emma and George's eldest son had been trying to date him for years with no success. That Bella had scored a date with the handsome man probably was grating to Emma, who doted on her sons. Meanwhile, Javier and Gabriel, the pool boy and assistant groundskeeper, had been carrying on an affair for several months in secret. It was all very sordid and messy, two of Finch's least favorite things.

"Emma, you aren't the girl's mother. Leave her personal life alone," he said. "Bella, be careful when you date the staff."

There isn't always a happy ending like there was for Emma and George. Emma, where is Mr. Drake's breakfast? Bella, I believe there is dusting that needs doing in the east wing.

George, we might need to use the car soon. Please make sure it's fully tuned up. And I will be displeased if I hear any further shouting. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Finch." They didn't say it in unison, but it was a near thing.

"Good. Don't let me keep you."

Bella and George scurried off in separate directions. Emma turned back to her stove. "Mr. Drake's breakfast is nearly done. Today it's crepes with raspberries, brie, and honey. I can have it plated in a jiffy."

“Thank you, Emma.” Finch got Hugh’s breakfast tray and spread a linen cloth over it. He set it with cutlery, a glass of orange juice, hot cocoa, and a small carafe of black coffee, then added a folded napkin and a copy of the morning paper.

Finch dreaded the day that the newspaper ceased to be published in physical form. Hopefully, it wouldn’t occur until after he’d retired.

After taking Hugh’s covered plate from Emma, Finch placed it on the tray, which he carefully lifted. He’d had to develop muscles in order to do this. When he’d aged out of the cloister, Finch had been pale, thin to the point of emaciation, and as delicate as a piece of bone china. He was still pale, but he’d put on a tasteful amount of muscle in his arms and legs—

enough that he could do his duties and look properly correct in his suits. Lifting heavy objects wasn’t the struggle that it had been in his mid-twenties. He thought of those first few months after his release and gave a mental shudder. While he’d been happy to leave the cloister, Finch didn’t want to ever have to relive those first six months of living on his own in London. It had been a nightmare of culture shock, ill-preparedness, and bone-deep loneliness.

This was better. This was what he’d always wanted. Finch had been trained to serve dragons from the age of thirteen. It was all he knew, and he did it to the utmost of his abilities.

That he served with labor rather than as a dragon’s semen receptacle was immaterial. It was the service that was important, and Finch took great pride in offering it to the very best of his abilities, no matter what the task.

Technically, Hugh had a butler—Francis—whose responsibility it was to see to Hugh’s flights of fancy, but he was over seventy and refused to retire. He did little these days but putter around and open the door for visitors and tradesmen.

On paper, Finch was Hugh’s secretary, but he also acted as major-domo, referee, and disciplinarian for the rest of the staff.

It was his job to make sure that Hugh's life ran on tracks as smooth as silk, and so it did. Hugh didn't have to worry about a single thing, and he didn't.

Except for one.

It was the one thing Finch couldn't fix, and it was the thing that plagued his employer the most—Hugh wanted a clutch, and he wanted it badly. Finch would hazard to say he was obsessed with the idea, and had been for longer than Finch had been alive. He'd been trying, without success, for centuries.

But maybe, just maybe, Finch's hard work would make Hugh's dream come true.

The thought was bittersweet. While Finch longed to see Hugh happy, there was a part of him that didn't want to give up the fantasy that one day, Hugh might sweep him off his feet and add him to his hoard. It was an absurd notion, of course.

Finch was too old for a dragon, and even if he weren't, the fear that he would break Hugh's heart by failing to bear him offspring was too great to overcome. He would much rather remain Hugh's faithful servant and daydream of what could be than risk the happiness of his employer in the name of pseudoscience. Disgraces were not and would never be dragons. His kind—the human children of dragon sires—had been tossed away for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and for good purpose. To assume a mistake had been made eons ago, and that Disgraces had been dragons all this time, was...

Finch paused briefly at the upper landing of the staircase to think of the word he was looking for. He thought of it and proceeded onward to Hugh's bedchamber.

It was untidy. And Finch hated anything that was untidy.

Without knocking, Finch let himself into Hugh's bedroom.

He kept his back to the massive bed and placed the tray on Hugh's breakfast table.



“Is that you, Finch?” came Hugh’s voice from the four-poster. “Bloody hell, is it breakfast time already? It seems I just managed to fall asleep.”

“It is, sir.”

Hugh stifled a yawn. “I was up far too late last night delving into that list you made for me. If you wouldn’t mind, would you bring breakfast to me and come sit for a while? I may have found a candidate, but I’d like your opinion, if I may.”

“Of course, sir.”

Displeasure ran through Finch like a crack across ice.

Despite it, he collected the tray and turned to face his employer. The esteemed Mr. Drake was sprawled in the middle of the bed, entirely nude. His modesty was barely shielded by a thin sheet. All Amethyst dragons were attractive, but Grimbold’s brood of seven was particularly handsome. To Finch’s eye, though, the best and the worst of the lot was Hugh. He was, quite simply, lovely, with silky black hair unmarred by gray, perfectly sculpted features, and striking plum-colored eyes. Something about him, even after many years and much familiarity, never failed to make Finch wish that

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Never mind. There was no point at all in wishing for the impossible. Especially not now.

Finch carefully placed the tray between Hugh’s spread legs, then collected the file folder containing the list from Hugh’s nightstand and came to sit at the bedside, where he’d be able to see Hugh’s chosen profile while maintaining a polite amount of distance. His employer had other ideas. After collecting the breakfast tray, Hugh scooted across the bed to sit at Finch’s side, so close their arms were brushing. The sheet over his groin had fallen away. Finch resolved to keep his chin level and his eyes on the matter at hand, but a low tingling spread through his stomach regardless. He wished it would mind its own business and go away.

“What do you think of her, Finch?” Hugh asked in dulcet tones, selecting the

topmost profile from the stack and presenting it to Finch. “Astrid Forsberg, an Opal Disgrace.

She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

Astrid was quite beautiful. With long white hair done in a crown of braids, a strong but narrow jaw, and crystalline blue

eyes, she would complement Hugh’s darkness. They would be day and night, her and her dragon, a stunning marriage of classically defined femininity and old-world chivalry.

“I think she would be an excellent choice, sir,” Finch remarked in a quiet voice.

Hugh rested his head on Finch’s shoulder, and Finch could feel his smile. “I think so, too. Would it be within your purview to send her a calling card on my behalf?”

Finch closed his eyes and hoped his hammering heart would not alert Hugh that something was amiss. “Of course, sir.”

“Wonderful.” Hugh sank onto the bed and stared blissfully at the ceiling. The sight of him smiling so handsomely worsened the beating of Finch’s heart. “Just think of it... after all these years, a clutch of my own.”

Finch eased up from the bed and responded in a neutral tone before he left to continue on with his day. He would never let on that he had thought of it. Often. Sometimes incessantly, much to his own chagrin. But a pretty Opal omega had never been part of the fantasy.

With a quiet smile, Finch dismissed the thought and threw himself into overseeing the production of Hugh’s calling card.

It was his duty, after all. He’d serve his dragon as nature intended and take comfort in simply being near him, no matter how badly his heart wished otherwise.

## H U G H

The seconds passed in tandem with the click of Hugh's soles on the hardwood. He paced the front hall endlessly. Weeks had passed since he'd issued Astrid his calling card, and since then, travel arrangements had been made and preparations for her arrival had begun. The staff, under Finch's watchful eye, had been charged with scrubbing the house from top to bottom. Not a speck of dust was to be tolerated. Every wooden surface had been polished, including the floors, which now shone like newly minted pennies. The windows, Hugh noticed, had been washed to the point of being entirely clear, and every hanging picture frame had been straightened until it was precisely parallel to the floor.

As was expected of a task overseen by Finch, the house was perfect.

Unfortunately, Hugh was not.

He'd stood in front of his bedroom mirror for hours that morning smoothing the wrinkles from his shirt and adjusting his belt buckle. He'd burned off his outfit's every loose thread with tiny bursts of flame from his fingertips and styled and restyled his hair until it was so saturated with product that he'd had no choice but to strip down and shower. Finch had hovered nearby the whole time, sometimes fetching the things Hugh requested, at others insisting Hugh take one more bite of his breakfast, lest his empty stomach make him irritable. But through it all, Finch was a constant pillar of support. He'd been the one to slip the comb out of Hugh's hand before he could make a mess of it a second time and the one who'd

chosen Hugh's suit. It was him who'd put Hugh's mind at ease when Hugh had expressed concern over the potency of his cologne, and the one who'd dropped to one knee to buff Hugh's shoes to a shine. And now that Astrid was minutes away from their lair, it was Finch who stood patiently to the side while Hugh wore a groove into the floor.

"Do you think it possible George lost his way?" Hugh asked upon checking his wristwatch. George's estimated time of arrival had elapsed. He'd been due home five minutes ago.

Stomach tied in a knot, Hugh came to a stop in front of Finch, whose impartial expression was unwavering.

“No, sir,” Finch replied. “George is quite competent.”

“Then was the flight delayed, perhaps?” Hugh worried his lip. “Will you check the flight status, Finch?”

“Of course, sir.”

While Hugh resumed his hurried pacing, Finch took a sleek, glossy-backed phone from his pocket and went about tapping on the screen. “The flight arrived on time, sir.”

“Then what could the matter be?”

More tapping. “Traffic, sir. It appears there’s been an accident on the highway, leading to congestion on the northbound corridor. Reports specify that commuters will experience a delay of approximately ten minutes.”

Relieved, he sighed loudly before taking a seat on the grand staircase close to where his most trusted Attendant stood. Finch returned the phone to his pocket and folded his hands politely behind his back. “Oh, Finch, how good it does my heart to hear that. What would I do without you?”

“I’m not sure I know, sir.”

“Nor do I, and I hope never to find out.” Hugh afforded Finch a good look. As always, he was prim and proper, a picture of perfection, but Hugh also saw what Finch tried not to show—the tension that ran all the way from his thinned lips down to the backs of his knees. How exhausting it had to be, embodying excellence at all times, no matter the circumstance.

Wanting to show the man kindness, Hugh patted the space beside him. “Will you come sit with me?”

Finch eyed the step, and a glimmer of something uncharacteristically wild reared in his eyes. It was gone a second later, and Hugh had to wonder if it was real, or a product of his addled mind. Whatever the case, Finch nodded

curtly and came to sit next to Hugh, lowering himself onto the step with tremendous grace and delicacy.

They sat for a short while in silence, during which Hugh took simple comfort in the close physical proximity of someone he held in such high regard. Then, when the rushing beat of his pulse became too much to bear, Hugh turned to Finch and asked, “How do you think I’ll know when I’ve found the one?”

The tips of Finch’s ears went red. “I’m not sure I understand your question, sir.”

“The right omega,” Hugh elaborated. “When Astrid arrives, how am I to know if she’ll be the one for me, or if I’m better off choosing another candidate from amongst the profiles you curated? There are so many. I think part of the reason I’m such a mess comes down to fear I won’t have made the best choice.”

Finch cleared his throat. “That’s... understandable.”

“I’ve never entertained the notion of finding a mate before.” Hugh rested his elbows on his thighs and hung his head, watching as he worried the thumb of one hand over the knuckles of the other. “All I ever wanted was a clutch, but now I have the potential to gain so much more. The stakes are higher than they were before. If I make a poor choice, it could mean a lifetime of unhappiness, but how am I to know what a poor choice looks like?”

Finch was silent for a short while, undoubtedly considering the question—the faraway look in his eyes gave him away. At last, he said, “The other Mr. Drakes ought to have better insights into this than me.”

“Sebastian, you mean?”

“Any of your brothers, sir. I believe they’re all mated now, aren’t they?”

Hugh frowned and folded his hands together, following the zigzag pattern made by his woven fingers with his eyes. “All of them but Bertram, yes. But I’m not sure I can ask them. It would arouse too much suspicion—particularly from Everard, who’d find a way to flap his gums even if his

mouth were taken away.”

To Hugh’s surprise, Finch laughed, but by the time he’d lifted his gaze, all signs of it had been stricken from Finch’s face. “My apologies, sir.”

“For what?”

“For laughing. It was inappropriate.”

“I made a joke, Finch.” Smiling, Hugh laid a hand on Finch’s thigh and squeezed. “It’s all right to laugh at it, even if it was at my brother’s expense. Lord knows he’s done the same to me.”

A shiver ran the course of Finch’s spine, culminating in a tightening of his posture. Hugh, confused, took his hand away.

Why was it that Finch was so averse to his touch? Not for the first time since Finch had come under his employment, Hugh wondered if the man secretly despised him. But that was foolish. Finch was his model employee, and the only one Hugh trusted with his innermost thoughts and feelings. If Finch bore any kind of hatred in his heart for Hugh, it would have come back to bite him long before now.

“Finch,” Hugh said softly, “I—”

Before he could say what was on his mind, the crackle of rolling tires on the driveway stole Hugh’s attention away.

Heart in his throat, he jumped to his feet. “It must be the Audi!

They’re here. God, Finch, I’m nervous all over again. How will I know?”

Finch came to stand beside Hugh, the anchor to his storm-swept ship. “You’ll know because when you see her,” Finch said, “you’ll think to yourself there’s not a creature in the world who could rival her beauty. When you hear her speak,

you’ll hope a day never comes when she runs out of things to say. And her laugh—you’ll know from the second you hear it that you’ll pursue it for the

rest of your life. Her very presence will resonate inside you, and you'll know."

What a fount of reassurance Finch could be! Heartened, Hugh spun to face him and pulled the man into a tight embrace. Finch went rigid in his arms.

"Thank you, old friend," Hugh whispered into Finch's ear.

"I truly don't know what I'd do without you by my side."

Finch said nothing, but Hugh felt him tremble just slightly, as if what Hugh had said had warmed him so much that the rest of the world had gone cold by comparison.

When Hugh let him go, Finch took a hasty step back and bowed his head. "You'll have to excuse me, sir. I've just remembered I neglected to dust the baseboards in the guest room Astrid will be staying in. As she will be arriving shortly, it's of utmost importance I get it done."

"Oh, of course." Hugh nodded. "You're dismissed. Thank you for your hard work and encouragement. I really couldn't have asked for a better secretary."

It looked like Finch's lips twitched as if to speak, but he turned on his heel and swiftly exited the room instead. Strange how he didn't take the stairs to the next floor where the bedrooms were located. Hugh was about to call after him to tell him he was going the wrong way when he heard the click as George unlocked the front door—Astrid was about to arrive. Filled to the brim with hope that this would be the first step toward starting a family, Hugh stood a little straighter and did his best to smile, but fell a little short. How could he be happy when there was something wrong with Finch? He resolved to shelve the issue for now and figure it out later.

Astrid was waiting, after all, and the future waited for no dragon any more than it did a man.

4

H U G H

After a terrible moment of heart-clenching anticipation, the door opened, and there stood the woman Hugh hoped would one day carry his clutch. Astrid was as pretty as her picture.

Noontime sunlight sparkled in her hair and brightened the blues of her eyes. Her lips were painted a pale pink that sweetened her smile and made it all the more inviting. She wore a royal blue midi wrap dress that was tied beneath her bust. Its cut amplified the swell of her breasts and the shape of her curves, and while they were quite lovely, there was nothing about them that set Hugh alight. He'd imagined that there would be a spark, a pop, a... *something* when he finally laid eyes on his mate-to-be, but all he felt was empty.

Something had to be wrong.

While he made a fool of himself gawking at the woman he'd invited into his home, Astrid bowed her head and curtsied prettily. When she lifted her chin, she caught his eye. Wasn't his heart supposed to flutter? What was it Finch had said about no creature in the world rivaling her beauty? For the life of him, Hugh couldn't remember, but he did know that he was not deeply and irrevocably in love.

"Hello, Mr. Drake," Astrid said as she held his gaze. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me."

No, no, no. All of this was wrong. Panicked, Hugh took a hasty step back. There had to be a way to fix this. The spark had to be there. It was just... hidden. Obfuscated by his anxiety. If Disgraces really were dragons, that spark had to be in him somewhere. All he needed to do to coax it out was

stage his introduction to Astrid somewhere he felt more at ease. Once he did, all the pieces would fall into place.

Determined to make this work, Hugh took a bold step forward and addressed the woman on his doorstep. "I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but could you step back a touch? Yes. There you go. Perfect. Now, stay."

That said, Hugh closed the door in her face.



“Francis!” Hugh cried in total desperation, fleeing from the door as if the plague were waiting on the other side. “Francis, where are you? Ah! There you are.” Hugh discovered the butler snoring in the sitting room’s most comfortable armchair.

“Francis, you’re needed at the front door!”

The butler snored at him.

“This is no time for a nap,” Hugh argued. “There is a young lady waiting to be let in. You are to show her to my study, where I’ll be waiting to receive her. It’s only proper.”

The butler snored again.

“Francis!”

“What?” Francis startled awake, then squinted up at Hugh.

“Who?”

“A young lady—Ms. Astrid Forsberg.”

Francis groped his way across the end table next to the chair until he located a pair of round, frameless glasses, which he promptly slotted onto his face. When they were in place, he narrowed his eyes and scowled in confusion at Hugh. The man was always a little grumpy after being awoken prematurely from a nap. Most times Hugh found his grouchiness charming, but today he was too high-strung to appreciate much of anything.

“A young lady?” Francis grumbled. “Where?”

“At the front door, Francis. Please, do keep up. She’s waiting.”

“Why?”

“I…” Hugh pressed his hand to his forehead. “Francis, there’s no time for questions. The young lady is waiting. I need to hurry to my study so I can receive her. Please greet her and bring her upstairs. She’s come a very long

way to see me, and I'm afraid I've already gone and mucked it up."

Francis grumbled something under his breath and worked himself stiffly out of the armchair, his joints popping and creaking as he did. When he was on his feet, he shambled in the direction of the front hall, muttering to himself as he did.

"Thank you, Francis," Hugh called after him. "Please make sure to bring Ms. Forsberg upstairs to my study. I'll be waiting."

That said, Hugh fled the room and flew up the stairs to his study, where he sat at his desk and did his best to soothe his nerves. Up here, he was in his element. Surrounded by familiar sights and smells, he was at peace. Old leather-bound books, yellowed paper, dried herbal tea leaves, and vetiver—Finch must have been through recently.

Hugh slumped into his chair and thought about the manservant and how strange it'd been to see him retreat into a room on the ground floor when he'd claimed he was going to tidy the guest room. Perhaps he'd needed to make a pit stop to collect the appropriate supplies. Dust rags, cleaner, perhaps some gloves, although Hugh was half-convinced Finch had a pair in his pockets at all times. The man was equipped for any situation, just as ready to drop to his knees and scrub as he was to throw himself into desk work.

How remarkable he was.

Hugh breathed in deep, filling his lungs with the lingering trace of his scent. As long as Finch was around, Hugh had nothing to worry about. The house would be looked after, the Attendants on staff would be supervised, and Hugh's own life would run with effortless ease. He should see to it that the man took a vacation. Hugh was terrible with dates, but he had a feeling Finch's birthday was on the way. A little spoiling would be in order. Perhaps he could gift him a watch.

Something expensive, but not gaudy. Finch, he thought, would

look incredible bathed in diamonds, but he was much too practical to want something so flashy.

A pity.

A knock interrupted Hugh's train of thought. He sat up swiftly and made sure he looked proper, then turned in his chair to indirectly face the door. "Come in."

"Ms. Astrid Forsberg, sir," Francis grumped upon admission. He stepped aside and there stood Astrid, just as pretty inside as she'd been out in the sun. She smiled at him, and while Hugh smiled back, deep inside he already knew that hers wasn't the smile he wanted to see for the rest of his life.

Something vital was missing. He'd talk it over with Finch later and get it figured out. There was no mess good, reliable Finch couldn't tidy up, and Hugh was of the opinion that his mess of a life would prove no different.

5

F I N C H

Finch threw himself into work that day to avoid both Hugh and the visiting Disgrace. It was a temporary solution at best, but entirely necessary. Until he could untangle the knot of dread in his stomach, he needed to stay away lest he make her feel unwelcome. After all, one day Astrid might be Mrs.

Drake, and Finch would be hers to command. That was a thought that shot through him like an icy arrow and chilled his blood.

In time he would adjust to it.

In time, but not now.

Attempting to put it all out of his mind, Finch joined the very flustered maids on their daily cleaning of the residence.

He knew, distantly, that he was getting in their way, but he didn't let it bother him. Finch needed, more than anything in the world, to be busy. Then he wouldn't have time to meet lovely Opal Disgraces or think about what the future might hold.

Finch finally allowed himself to retire to his rooms when it was near midnight. Wearily, he undressed, put on a t-shirt and pajama pants, then made a cup of tea. While it brewed, he took a piece of shortbread and placed it on a saucer. He also grabbed two chocolate chips from a tightly sealed container he kept on his small counter and put them next to his biscuit.

In the living room, he put his tea and snack down on an end table and went to greet his girls. “Hello, ladies. How are

you this evening? Were you good while Daddy was working?

You were? Are you sure?”

Eleanor and Elizabeth hopped about, both clamoring for Finch’s attention.

“Come on, then. You can both come out.”

With the usual pleasantries out of the way, Finch opened the door to their cage. Elizabeth launched herself up his arm with Eleanor right behind her. Elizabeth settled on his left shoulder and Eleanor on his right. He smiled at them both, then asked, “Would you like a chocolate chip?”

That was, of course, a rhetorical question.

Finch settled down in his favorite chair, then gave each of the rats her treat. While they munched contentedly, he picked up his tea and took the first sip. It was perfect. Soothed by it, he loosened his shoulders and sighed contentedly. It’d been a hell of a day, but it was over, and after a good night’s sleep he’d be much improved.

Finch had relaxed for perhaps ten minutes when he was startled by frantic pounding on his door. It spooked the girls, who ran to the back of his neck and tried to hide in his shirt.

He fished them out, put each in a separate pocket of his sleep pants, and answered the door.

Hugh was on the other side. He was wearing his favorite banyan, which was embroidered with thousands of tiny purple dragons, over silk pajamas. The

sight of him on Finch's doorstep took him by surprise, but only for the briefest moment. Of course it was Hugh. Who else could it possibly be? No one else would be witless enough to bang on his door at such a late hour. But what kind of emergency would drive him out of his room in the middle of the night? Especially with a lady guest visiting. Finch was baffled.

"Hello, sir," he hazarded. "Can I help you?"

"No, no. It's... uh... fine. Yes. Fine. *I'm* fine. No help needed. Er... may I come in?"

Hugh rarely, if ever, came to Finch's room. Finch couldn't remember the last time Hugh had been inside the suite.

"Yes, sir. This is, after all, your house."

His employer stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. For some odd reason, that made Finch's heart beat faster and harder. Hugh seemed oblivious, however. He wandered about the space, making a great show of looking at things but not touching them. "Ah, yes, but these are your rooms and they should be inviolable, but dammit, I didn't know what to do!"

"Sir. Please sit down." Finch ushered Hugh into his favorite chair, put the girls back into their cage, and closed it.

"I'll just be a moment. Would you like some tea?"

"No... I... wait. Yes. I would like some. Thank you. It might steady my nerves."

Finch went to his small kitchen, washed his hands, then turned on the kettle. He prepared the tea exactly like Hugh preferred it—sugar, no milk—in a cup made from porcelain so fine it was nearly translucent. Finch put the cup on a matching saucer, added a spoon and a shortbread biscuit, then took the tea out to his employer.

"Thank you, Finch. You're an angel. I've no idea what I'd do without you."

He tried to keep those words from filling him with pleasure. Hugh didn't

mean them. Not really. They were just nice and polite things to say. “I’m sure you’d find a way to carry on, sir. Is there something I can help you with tonight?”

“I... yes. I need somewhere to sleep.” Hugh looked up at Finch with imploring eyes.

Finch sat down abruptly on his tufted footstool. “Excuse me?”

Hugh cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. “There is a young lady occupying my bed.”

“Astrid?” Finch asked. His stomach lurched sickeningly.

“Astrid is in your bed?” He’d known deep down that it was the purpose for her visit, but somehow hearing it from Hugh made the knot of dread in his stomach knit itself a thousand times tighter. “Was it...” Finch was at a loss for words. A wounded

part of him desperately wanted to know if Hugh had consummated their hours-old relationship, but couldn’t bring himself to ask it. He finally settled on, “Was it what you’d hoped for?” Although that didn’t explain why Hugh was here and not there.

Hugh shook his head. “It was blasted awkward, to be honest. I was in bed, reading, and Ms. Forsberg entered my room. She was very pretty, in this shimmery white robe which I much admired. Then she let it slip off her shoulders and she was naked underneath. Well. Nearly naked. And she’s very beautiful, and a dragonet, so it should’ve been fine, but it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t?” Finch echoed. He stood briefly, grabbed his now cool tea, and knocked back a great swig of it despite its tepid temperature. Before Hugh could reply, he sat back down.

“No! I couldn’t, well, you know. Maybe I was too startled.

And she said she could help me with that, and she touched me and...”

Finch swallowed enough tea to drown himself.

He both did and did not want to know.

“And, sir?” he asked, unable to resist.

“And I bolted!” Hugh exclaimed. “Decamped from my own bedroom. Told her I’d forgotten something and I’d be right back, which was clearly a lie, because here I am. Please help me. I don’t know who else to turn to. You’re my oldest friend.” Hugh paused. “My oldest human friend,” he amended.

Hugh had run from a beautiful Pedigree omega trying her level best to seduce him. Finch felt a stab of pity for the poor woman. That was an excessively harsh rejection. Not that Hugh had meant to be unkind. He was just a bit thoughtless sometimes.

“You’ll need to apologize,” Finch said. “What you did was quite rude.”

“I didn’t expect her to jump me in my bedroom on the first evening,” retorted Hugh, bristling.

As much as Finch empathized with Astrid and understood her actions, Hugh had a point. But if he hadn’t brought the girl here to bed her, why had he asked Finch to summon her at all?

Finch massaged the bridge of his nose. “Should I take that to mean you don’t wish to try to mate with Ms. Forsberg?”

Hugh recoiled, which was a very strange reaction. “God, no,” he replied, in the same tone he’d have used if Finch suggested Hugh get randy with the topiary. “She was all wrong. Very pretty, yes, but all wrong. Completely wrong.”

Finch sighed, but on the inside was deeply relieved. “Yes, sir. I’ll try to do better with my next selection. Although Astrid did fit all of your wishes for a potential mate.”

“Hm. Yes.” Hugh chewed on his plump lower lip thoughtfully. “Well, Astrid isn’t the one, obviously. Perhaps we’ll get luckier with the next one.”

“To keep this situation from happening again, you may wish to lock your bedroom door in future, sir. At least when we have guests.”

Hugh’s eyes grew quite wide. “But then how could you bring me my breakfast? I can’t go without breakfast.”

“Of course not, sir,” Finch assured him. “But not to worry.

I have a key.”

“Oh! Well, then, yes. Locking my door seems like an excellent solution. Thank you, Finch. I sincerely have no idea how I’d get on without you.” Hugh’s happy expression fell.

“But now I’ve nowhere to sleep.”

There were no extra rooms made up for sleeping, save Astrid’s room, and sending Hugh there seemed like a terrible idea, especially as she might have departed Hugh’s room and gone back there. “I could see if she’s left your room, if you wish.”

Hugh seemed to think it over, then shook his head. “No.

Too risky. What would you say if you found her there? I don’t want to hurt her feelings any more than I already have. I could sleep on the sofa in my study, I suppose. Are there extra blankets? Do you think it would be comfortable enough? My

feet might dangle off the end if I don’t sleep with my knees bent. I can’t imagine that would be good for my back, not that I have back problems, but I might if I sleep like that.”

Finch sighed. “You’re more than welcome to sleep in my bed.”

“Oh. Well, if you don’t mind...” Hugh seemed to cheer up.

Finch did mind, but sleeping one night on a sofa wouldn’t kill him. “Not at all, sir. I’ll just grab my pillow and you can have the bed to yourself. I’ll bring your breakfast in the morning, as usual.”



Hugh's face fell. "Oh."

"Sir?" Finch asked.

"I had no thought of throwing you out of your own bed, Finch. What an absurd idea. No. We can share your bed. With us being such good friends, there's no need for you to go sleep elsewhere."

"I..." Finch was at a loss for words. He felt a fluttery sort of excitement mixed with horror and fear settle inside his body like a trapped butterfly. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't.

Hugh stood up. "It's quite late. I think we should retire. I don't snore, and I'm sure you're far too well-mannered to keep me awake. This will be fine. You'll see. I used to sleep with my manservant all the time, you know."

"You, uh, did?" All eloquence had fled from Finch's mouth.

"Oh, yes. Before hotels were common, I often shared an inn room with my valet. And while you're not my valet, since such things aren't necessary anymore, you do serve me in many of the same ways. So this is quite correct. We are two men, sharing a bed. And yes, I'm your employer, but I'm also your friend." Hugh smiled at Finch brilliantly.

"Yes, sir. I... well... I suppose we should go to bed."

This had terrible, awful idea written all over it. Finch really should have insisted upon the sofa. It looked tolerably

comfortable and was markedly void of attractive, clueless reptiles. But somehow he'd let Hugh talk him into it, and now he was in the position of sharing a bed with his employer.

It might be the best and worst night of his entire life.

He'd be sure to get absolutely no sleep at all.

"Lead the way, then," Hugh said. "It's quite late."

Finch nodded, unsure what else to say, and opened his door to show Hugh his tidy bedroom with its neatly made bed.

“Hm,” Hugh said. “It seems awfully small.”

“I’ll just go sleep on the sofa, then.”

Hugh removed his banyan and threw it haphazardly on the floor. “No, no. We’ll make do. It’ll be like an adventure.” He pulled back the covers on Finch’s side of the bed and lay down.

“An adventure, yes.” Finch bent to pick up the discarded robe and hung it on a hook on his wall, then turned off the light and made his way by memory to the other side of the bed. He slotted himself between the sheets, laid his head on the pillow, and tried to keep his body still and as close to the edge as possible without falling off entirely.

“Goodnight, Finch.” Hugh rolled over and squeezed Finch’s shoulder. “See you in the morning.”

“Yes. Goodnight, sir.”

There was silence after that, interrupted only when Hugh grunted in his sleep. The heat from his body warmed Finch’s back, and the scent of his cologne worked its way into the air, making Finch’s heart throb. Only two thin layers of cloth separated their bodies. Finch tried not to think about that little fact, but it wouldn’t leave him be. Hugh was there, so close, less than an arm’s length away in Finch’s own bed, yet Finch, bound by duty and inhibited by fear, couldn’t touch him. It was torture, yes, but it was of the sweetest kind imaginable.

6

H U G H

“And so you see,” Hugh said to the pretty omega across from him, gesticulating with his partially eaten breakfast scone, “it really was no fault of yours. The blame rests entirely on me.”

Astrid nodded mournfully, but didn't look any happier.

Hugh supposed he couldn't blame her. He'd been rude in the extreme. It hadn't been his intention to injure Astrid—

rather the opposite, in fact—but it didn't excuse the fact that injury had indeed occurred. He hoped that this morning's talk had helped rather than hurt, but he couldn't be sure. If only Finch hadn't left his suite so early. Hugh had woken up in time to hear the door click, and by the time he was up and out of bed, Finch was nowhere to be found. It was a pity. Finch would have known exactly what he should say.

Well, there was no helping that now. Hugh was on his own, and he was determined to make things right. Since Astrid didn't look any more cheerful than she had before his apology, he had more work to do.

"I do very much enjoy your company," Hugh added with a sweet smile. "You're a lovely woman, sure to make a dragon very happy someday. I simply regret that dragon couldn't be me."

Astrid lowered her chin, her lashes fanning across her cheeks in a doleful, heartbreaking way. Drat. What else was there to say? He'd issued his apology and affirmed her worth.

That should have been enough, shouldn't it? All of this was so very confusing.

"Whenever you're satisfied with your visit, my secretary will arrange for your safe passage home," Hugh continued. He set his scone down on the fine china plate in front of him.

Astrid hadn't touched her meal. It was a pity, as Cook had gone all out this morning. The scones were fresh and delicious, the clotted cream was a delight, and the jam was heavenly and rich, having been made from fruits grown in the back gardens. It was Finch, Hugh was fairly sure, who'd seen the bowl of halved strawberries added to the meal. He knew very well that they were Hugh's favorite. What a treasure that man was, seeing to it that he had a small comfort during an otherwise trying time. If he wouldn't accept a

raise, Hugh would have to start slipping gold coins beneath his door.

When Astrid continued to be silent, Hugh elaborated. “By no means am I asking you to leave. In fact, it would be a sincere pleasure to entertain you for as long as you wish to stay. However, I must make it clear that I will be doing so as your host, and not as your potential mate.”

“I understand,” Astrid said, then fell silent again.

Hugh’s heart hurt for her, but he had no idea what else to say. When breakfast was over, he’d seek out Finch, and together they’d make things right.

Hugh found Finch scrubbing the kitchen floor, which was curious, because every surface in the room was already polished to a shine. He watched for a while from the doorway, then cleared his throat politely, which startled the manservant so much that he struck his head on the underside of the table.

“Finch!” Hugh said with a gasp, rushing forward to make sure Finch hadn’t been injured.

Finch winced and rubbed the spot where he’d been struck, and while it was perhaps overly cautious, Hugh channeled some of his magic into him to undo whatever damage had been done. “My apologies. It wasn’t my intention to harm you.”

Finch, usually professional to the extreme, looked at Hugh with gentle, partially lidded eyes and leaned into his touch.

How strange. Hugh had never seen his secretary in such a state, but then again, he’d never channeled magic into him, either. Not that Hugh minded. This soft, vulnerable side of Finch was charming, and Hugh found himself appreciating him in ways he never had before. It was a crime that he’d previously failed to notice Finch’s long, slender legs and his delicate facial features. Without his mask of impartiality to hide behind, Finch really was quite stunning. His lips were modestly plump and glossy, tinted a soft pink that gave Hugh the impression they’d taste sweet, and his eyes—god, his eyes.

Two deep, inky pools that held endless secrets Hugh couldn't help but want to discover.

Pinpricks worked their way up Hugh's arms, lifting the fine hairs growing there. Enamored, Hugh gifted Finch with a little more magic. It was unnecessary—excessive, even—but he couldn't help himself. If it gave him even a few more seconds with this version of Finch, it was worth it.

Finch leaned closer, eyelids drooping, then, with a start, opened his eyes and took a polite step away from Hugh. “My apologies, sir. I, um... I... well. This is rather embarrassing. It seems I've forgotten what we were talking about.”

“We weren't talking about anything,” Hugh said softly. He looked at Finch—at how his carefully coiffed black hair had been mussed around the site of impact—and frowned. “I startled you and caused you to bump your head, so I apologized.”

“Ah.” Finch pinched his lips and looked aside. “I see. No apologies are necessary. You are not at fault. I hit my head due to my own carelessness, not through any fault of yours.”

“You do seem a bit out of sorts,” Hugh agreed. He stepped forward and smoothed Finch's hair back into place with a stroke of his hand. “Now a little less so, if by appearance only.”

Did you sleep poorly last night? When I woke up, you were already gone, so I didn't have the chance to ask.”

A dreamy look flickered like shadows through Finch's eyes before he sucked in a breath and stood with his shoulders back. “I slept well enough, sir. Thank you for asking.”

“Good. Good.” Hugh returned his hand to his side and gave Finch a small amount of space. It seemed he had no desire to let his guard down, and that was fine. Finch was Finch no matter how he conducted himself. Hugh could respect that. “I, um, well... I was hoping you might be able to help me with the current *situation*. ”

“What do you mean by ‘situation,’ sir?”

“I mean the ongoing events with Ms. Forsberg,” Hugh said with a sad flap of his hands. “Finch, I’ve apologized, but it hasn’t helped any. Poor Ms. Forsberg continues to seem awfully out of sorts. You’ve always been good at this sort of thing. What should I do? What should I say? I haven’t the foggiest idea where to begin.”

“Well, what have you said to her?”

“I apologized for my behavior last night, and explained that my actions were a reflection of me, not of her. I was polite, but made it clear that while I think she’s an exceptionally lovely woman, she’s not the one for me. I then offered her the chance to stay here as my guest as long as she’d like and told her that travel would be arranged for her once she decides it’s time to head home.” Hugh sighed. “Isn’t that enough?”

The unyielding look on Finch’s face suggested it was not.

“Finch!” Hugh despaired. “What do I do?”

“It’s a difficult situation, to be sure, sir.” Finch set the scrub brush he’d been using in the sink and peeled off his rubber gloves, laying them neatly over the sink’s edge. When he was done, he rinsed his hands and dried them thoroughly, then turned to give Hugh his full attention. Only then did he continue. “Unfortunately, without being there in person to hear the words exchanged, I’m of little use to you. In this case, context is everything. While I have a feeling you may be

giving poor Ms. Forsberg mixed messages, I can’t conclude that with any semblance of certainty.”

“Is that all?” Hugh’s expression brightened. “So the message is the problem? Then not all is lost.”

Finch looked taken aback. “Sir, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“It’s simple, Finch!” Mood considerably uplifted, Hugh grinned and

presented a hand to Finch, who stared at it like it was about to bite him. Hugh didn't let it deter him. "I may have botched the delivery of my message face to face, but there are other methods of communication that can and will fix this mess. We'll write Ms. Forsberg a letter—a florid and sincere apology she can cherish for all of time. Will you help me? I need you now more than ever. Without you at my side, I'm sure to fail."

Was it a trick of the light, or was that a flicker in Finch's eyes? "I will, sir."

"Excellent."

Delighted at the outcome of their conversation, Hugh took Finch's hand and led him away. There was nothing more to worry about—with a little ink and Finch's excellent diction, everything would soon be well.

7

## F I N C H

Another balled sheet of paper landed in the bin. Finch exhaled steadily, prepared a fresh sheet, and set pen to paper once more. He'd been informed by Bella that the visiting Opal Disgrace was crying her pretty little eyes out in her room, so drafting an apology should have been his topmost priority, but he kept getting distracted by the dragon perched on the edge of his desk. "Sir," he said politely when yet another botched sentence forced him to start again.

"Yes?" Hugh looked quite excited. "Have you finished the note, Finch?"

Finch shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir. I'm finding it difficult to concentrate."

Hugh sprang up, his expression morphing from pleased to concerned. "Is it your head?"

Unconsciously, Finch touched the place where he'd been struck. There was no knot swelling and only the barest hint of pain. It must have been enough to make him wince, however, because Hugh stood and came rushing over to his

side.

“It is your head. I knew it!” Hugh laid his hand on Finch’s brow, and before Finch could protest, utter bliss swept through him.

Finch had never been told in all his years at the cloister that dragon magic could feel so good. He’d been taught it could burn and even kill, were a dragon to be disobeyed, but this was more like sitting by a cheery fire while you sipped a

hot cup of tea, snuggled in your favorite chair while draped in a much beloved quilt.

It made Finch want to bask in his employer and that was entirely unacceptable. He pulled away from Hugh’s touch.

“Sir, I do apologize, but this might be easier if you didn’t...

ah... hover.”

Hugh was affronted. “I wasn’t hovering. I was sitting clear across the desk, minding my own business.”

Finch sighed. “Yes, sir. But do you think you might be able to find something to engage your interest elsewhere?” At the hurt look that immediately formed on Hugh’s face, Finch hastened to add, “You want this to be perfect. Let me do my best for you.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” Hugh stood, looking around the study at its dark wood bookcases filled with old books like he’d never properly seen it before. “I’ll just leave you alone, then. I suppose.”

“Thank you, sir.” Finch again bent his head and went back to writing, trying to think of words that were correct, but could also be believed as Hugh’s own. When he looked up again, Hugh had gone, and while the room was no longer vibrating with his nervous energy, the air now felt flat, like soda with no carbonation.

Finch finished the apology. He put his pen down and stretched.



He was stiff from sitting in one position and he also had a headache. Nevertheless, he'd accomplished his goal. Astrid would have a credible apology and Hugh would not burn any Opal bridges. It was a balancing act, to be sure, but one Finch thought had been achieved.

Before Finch set off in search of Hugh to inform him that the task was completed, he massaged his temples. Blast this headache. It throbbed behind his forehead and irritated him like nothing else. After he delivered the letter, he'd have to

take something for it and have a soak in the tub to relieve the tension it had caused. He—

A hand touched the crown of his head, and before Finch could startle, he was filled with utter bliss. His headache disappeared, his muscles unkinked, and all was well with the world once more. He sighed in appreciation.

“Better?” Hugh asked.

“Much, yes, sir. Thank you.” Trembling on the tip of his tongue was an unspoken, “Can I please have some more?”

Dragon magic was exhilarating, flowing through him like warm syrup, coating all his raw nerve endings, relaxing his body, and taking away all discomfort and pain.

Except in one area.

Finch was grateful he sat at the desk, his lap and legs hidden from view, because he was now sporting an uncomfortable erection. Hugh's dragon magic did nothing to ease it and Finch prayed it would subside soon so he might stand up without embarrassment.

“I was thinking,” Hugh said.

“Yes, sir?” Finch willed his erection to subside.

Hugh moved so he was beside Finch rather than behind him. He touched

Finch's chin and tilted it up so that their eyes met. Hugh's plum-colored eyes shone with excitement. "We should have a ball."

Finch had a difficult time following that. "A what?" His pulse was pounding in his throat. Could Hugh feel it as well?

"A ball. Fancy dress, dancing, that sort of thing. We can bring all the candidates together at one event. It's ever so much more efficient than meeting them one at a time and hoping for the best."

Something constricted hard within Finch's chest. "Ah...

yes, sir. I suppose a ball might do."

"I know it's a lot of work for you and the staff, but we can bring on additional help. When do you think you might have invitations ready to be mailed?"

"I... er... a few days, sir. Would you like to see your apology?"

Hugh practically bounced on his toes. "Oh, yes. Thank you, Finch. I've got no idea how I'd get anything at all accomplished without you."

"Thank you, sir. Your faith means a lot to me."

Hugh skated his thumb over Finch's cheek. "My Finch.

How I do rely upon you. Never leave me."

Finch was silent. That was a promise he feared he wouldn't be able to keep. He imagined Hugh and his mate, seeing only each other and their offspring. While they would stay young and beautiful, Finch would grow old and frail until one day, having used his life to see to it that Hugh never suffered from want, he'd die. It was not a fate he thought he could face with equanimity.

"I do my best to assist you," Finch told his employer. "But I think it's an exaggeration to say that you can't survive without me."

Hugh frowned. "Promise me, Finch. Promise you'll never leave me. My

household, I mean. Promise that you'll always be here for me.”

Finch blinked up into Hugh's twilight eyes. When the day came that Hugh did find a mate, would Hugh still feel the same? It was impossible to tell. “I'll stay as long as you need me,” he finally said.

“Which is forever. You know that full well.” Hugh swept his thumb over Finch's cheek one last time, then withdrew his hand. “You are my rock.”

“Thank you, sir.” Finch handed the apology over to Hugh.

“Here. I would recommend writing it out in your own hand.”

With a huge smile, Hugh took the letter from Finch. “What a very sensible suggestion, Finch. You are a treasure, you know.”

Finch grunted. He opened his laptop and began to make arrangements for a ball. There would be a great deal of work

to be done, and if he was to have it organized before the end of Hugh's sanctioned period to produce a clutch, he'd need to start right away. Soon he had several tabs open.

One of them had nothing to do with the ball, however. The site was called The Attendant Exchange. On it were job listings for skilled Attendants looking for new positions within the dragon community. Finch made note of a few promising entries. There was nothing as good as his current position, unfortunately, but for as long as his future in the estate was uncertain, he would keep looking.

It never hurt to look.

8

H U G H

Preparing for a ball was no easy task. Nothing could be overlooked. From the floral arrangements to the catering to the date and time, every detail was important. If anything was botched, Hugh would besmirch his good name to

every one of his potential mates, and with so much on the line, that absolutely could not be allowed to happen.

It was a good thing he had Finch on his side. The man truly was perfection personified. Hugh would be hopelessly lost without him.

“Finch!” Hugh called out one afternoon several weeks after Astrid’s departure as he hurried from the privacy of his study toward the grand staircase. “Finch? Where the devil have you gone?”

Hugh proverbially flew down the stairs and headed into the sitting room, where he found Francis enjoying a nap on his favorite armchair. Since it was neither time for naps nor enjoyment, he cleared his throat, startling Francis awake.

“What?”

“Finch,” Hugh repeated. “Have you seen Finch? He’s not in his office.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Why?”

“I’ve got an important question to ask him about the ba...”

Hugh trailed off and stood perfectly still, like one might when

beset by a T-Rex. Alas, judging by the sharp click of approaching footsteps, a different and far more terrible lizard had entered his lair. Hugh spun on his heel and came face to face with his brother Everard.

Like all Drakes, Everard was dark-haired and purple-eyed, but unlike his brothers, he wore a perpetual smirk that was as mischievous as it was cutting. It was the kind of look a cat might give a mouse it had cornered, but not yet caught. Hugh’s cheeks burned. If their father found out about his plans to host a ball, he’d undoubtedly put a stop to it, and if Everard knew, he *would* find out. As much as his dear brother insisted otherwise, he was *quite* the

tattler.

“About the bah?” Everard asked, one eyebrow sardonically raised. “Don’t tell me your desperation has led you to consort with livestock, brother.”

“Of course not!”

Everard shrugged. “You can’t blame a dragon for inquiring.”

Hugh sighed. “Why are you here?”

“My, aren’t we testy today? What’s got you in such a mood?” Everard tucked his hands into his back pockets. “I’m here to relay some news about Father.”

The heat in Hugh’s cheeks burned into nothing, leaving him chilled over instead. Their father was an old dragon, but hardly *that* old. He had many hundreds of happy years ahead of him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is very right.” There was a hint of hesitation in Everard’s voice that suggested it wasn’t the entire truth. “In a twist of fate, Father has fallen in love and mated with a young Topaz dragonet. They’re expecting their first child in seven months—our future brother or sister.”

Hugh’s soul crumpled, and while he tried his best to hide it, he was sure his despair showed on his face. “He... he what?”

Everard clapped Hugh on the shoulder and steered him across the floor, putting distance between them and Francis, who’d fallen back to sleep. Once they were all the way across the room, Everard half-guided, half-pushed Hugh onto a couch while he remained standing. It hadn’t taken much effort on his part at all to get Hugh to sit—his knees had turned to jelly. If he’d remained on his feet, he very well might have collapsed.

“This is good news, Hugh,” Everard assured him, but Hugh wasn’t so sure that was the truth, either. He lowered his gaze and watched his hands, which were on his thighs. They’d tightened into fists. To distract himself from his utter desolation, he focused on the sensation of his fingernails as they dug

into his palms.

“Father really doesn’t believe I’m capable of raising a clutch, does he?” Hugh asked in a small voice. “First he chooses Rey for the experiment, and now he settles down as well? I’m the only one left without children, Everard, and I’m the only one who wanted them!”

“Hugh...” Everard sat beside him and patted his knee.

“Father’s mate is a... special case. I doubt he was looking for love when he took the boy in. This wasn’t meant to be an attack on you.”

Francis snored loudly from his armchair as if to agree.

“I know,” Hugh admitted in a sad, small voice. He dabbed his eye with the back of his wrist. “I don’t mean to be selfish. I am happy for Father. Truly, I am. I just... I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“And if you stay positive, your wish will come true.”

Hugh smiled, but his lips wobbled. “What a lovely fairy tale. Pray tell, where did you hear it? I read half the story, but misplaced the book somewhere along the way and never learned how it ends.”

“Then I suppose it’s—once again—up to me to save the day.” While Hugh didn’t see it, he imagined his brother proudly lifting his chin. “You’ll find your mate, brother. You’ll have your clutch. The conception of our new sibling cinches

with near certainty what my little broccoli floret thought to be true—not only are Disgraces dragonets, but the color theory is accurate. If you mate with a complementary Disgrace, you’ll have your clutch eventually. There’s hope for you yet.”

On a surface level, Hugh acknowledged that what Everard was saying was correct. That shallow understanding, however, didn’t quell the torrential currents of hurt and confusion whipping his soul into a frenzy. After four unsuccessful attempts at fathering a clutch and the disaster that’d been his trip

to Frisia, Hugh was still childless, and no one seemed to care. It'd stung when his father had chosen Reynard for the experiment over him, and it stung again now knowing his father had found his forever love.

“Now, will you promise to go visit Father and his new mate?” asked Everard. “You really should. Wally is a timid but sweet boy, and as he continues to warm to life as an Amethyst, I'm sure he'll come around. And even if you want nothing to do with him, there's no getting around the fact that he'll be giving birth to our future sibling.”

Hugh took a deep, stabilizing breath and forced the muscles in his back and shoulders to relax. Yes, the news was distressing, but one day soon it would be his turn to find love and start a family. What was a few more months in the grand scheme of things when he'd already been waiting for centuries? All would be well.

Francis let loose with a rattling snore that ended in a wet snort.

“I'll go visit Father and his mate soon,” Hugh said in the silence that followed. “You have my word.”

“Wonderful. Then my job here is done.” Everard stood and stretched, then turned to face Hugh. A peculiarly kind smile had replaced his typical smirk. “Brighter days are coming, brother. You never know what's waiting around the corner.

Stay positive. When the time is right, the love of your life will walk into your life, and everything will be just like you dreamed.”

Hugh nodded, but didn't comment. He showed his brother to the door, and once it was closed and locked, rested his head against the wood and let out a slow breath through his teeth.

“Sir?” came a familiar and reassuring voice from not all that far behind him. “Is everything well?”

Hugh closed his eyes and smiled. There was no mistaking who it was. “Everything is fine, Finch. Or, rather, it will be.

Where have you been? I was looking for you.” Hugh lifted his head and turned, finding Finch a few feet back. Sunlight from the room’s large windows lent radiance to his skin and shimmered in his hair. If only he were a Disgrace who’d aged out of the Pedigree and not simply the omega son of an Attendant. With Finch as his mate, Hugh would never have to worry about a single thing for as long as he should live. “I wanted to know if there was news from the event planner. I thought you’d told me that she would be getting in touch with some options.”

“Yes, sir. That’s why I came to find you. Melanie has sent you an email with several options intended to help you narrow down your event’s theme. Would you like to sit down so we can go over it together?”

Hugh nodded. “I’d like that very much.”

The smallest hint of a smile lifted Finch’s lips. He really was quite charming. It was a shame, Hugh thought as he followed the manservant from the room, that he wouldn’t be able to dance with Finch at the ball.

Well, maybe he would, even if only for fun. Finch deserved the chance to let loose. Without his assistance, the ball would never happen, and Hugh would be forever alone.

They spent that afternoon discussing color themes and catering, and that night, filled with hope but still raw from the news of his father’s coupling, Hugh gathered a handful of gold coins from his hoard and slipped them under Finch’s door.

With some luck, Finch would sell them and use the funds to treat himself to something nice. He deserved to live in luxury.

Imagining him sipping exquisite wine while soaking in the

finest bubble bath money could buy was a bright spot in what had otherwise been a trying day.



## F I N C H

Finch had facilitated the purchase of Hugh's Phantom two years ago. He'd hunted down the desired color—belladonna purple—and then negotiated the price. Hugh would've paid whatever sum Finch told him it would cost, but it was the job of a Pedigree omega to make sure his mate wasn't cheated.

Not that Hugh was his mate, but as Finch's employer, the principle remained. The lack of mark and sexual relationship changed nothing. Finch couldn't unlearn his training.

In any case, Finch watched through the sidelights as George pulled the decidedly purple vehicle up to the front door. "Sir," he told a seated but fidgety Hugh, "the car is here.

Are you ready to go?"

Hugh, who'd hunkered down on the steps of the grand staircase while the vehicle was retrieved, turned his imploring eyes on Finch. "No. But yes." He stood, almost lost his footing, and grabbed onto the railing to steady himself. Even then, he trembled slightly.

"And you still wish me to accompany you?"

"Of course I do." Indignation put a bit of starch in Hugh's tone. "My father is..." he swallowed hard, "mated and his omega is expecting. I need to pay my respects." He swallowed again. "It's only proper I congratulate them."

"Very well, sir."

Finch opened the house's heavy wooden door and ushered his employer through it. George, in turn, saw Hugh into the Phantom and closed the door. Finch made to sit in the front

passenger seat, but was stopped when Hugh opened the back door. "What on earth do you think you're doing, Finch?" Hugh demanded.

Finch froze. Hugh was unpredictable at the best of times, but his current behavior was markedly strange. "Have you changed your mind, sir? Do you

wish to go alone?”

“No, and I can’t think of a single thing I’d wish to do less.

Come here, Finch. Be with me. Sit beside me, where you belong.”

Finch and George exchanged a look. George raised his eyebrows, expression both curious and sympathetic. Finch gave a microscopic shrug, then said, “Yes, sir. I’ll be there at once.”

It took no time at all to situate himself in the back seat next to Hugh, and no sooner had he closed the door than Hugh turned toward him. “Buckle up, Finch,” he ordered, giving Finch a stern look. “Even the safest cars can be deadly. It is my duty to see to it that no harm befalls you, and a trip through the windshield would be very harmful indeed.”

Finch stared at Hugh for a few seconds, then buckled his seat belt. “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Hugh said, then patted Finch’s knee with his surprisingly firm hand. “All right, George, we’re ready to go.”

“Yes, sir,” George replied. He then put up the privacy glass separating the front and back of the car.

Once privacy had been established, Hugh bent down and opened the car’s small bar. He took out a tiny bottle of gin from the cabinet. “Would you care for a drink, Finch?”

Finch wasn’t much of a drinker at any time, but especially not now, when he was on duty. He shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” Hugh tipped the contents of the bottle down his throat and grabbed another.

It was very difficult for dragons to become drunk, but Hugh looked like he was game to try.

“Are you nervous, sir?”

Hugh downed his second tiny gin bottle. “No, of course not,” he said, reaching down to grab a third bottle. That left three remaining. Finch knew because he’d stocked the car himself.

Finch wavered between what he should say and what he wanted to say. Want won. “That’s enough, sir.”

Hugh blinked at Finch owlishly, holding the third gin bottle in midair. “Excuse me?”

“It wouldn’t do to go to your father’s house to meet his expecting omega smelling like Edina and Patsy on a bank holiday.”

“Excuse me?” Hugh repeated. He didn’t look any less confused.

Finch sighed. “Please stop drinking.”

Hugh frowned, then put the bottle back in the cabinet.

“Yes, of course you’re right. Who are Edina and Patsy? Are they staff?”

“Never mind, sir. You can do this. I know you can.” Finch gave Hugh a comforting, and hopefully impersonal, pat.

Hugh grabbed Finch’s hand and hung on like his life depended on it. “You can’t ever leave me,” he said. “I need you far too much.”

His words were a blade that slashed through Finch, making him flinch. Hugh’s grip tightened on his hand. After a stunned moment spent composing himself, Finch found himself able to reply. “Thank you, sir, but you survived many centuries before I was born and will carry on for just as many after I die. I have faith you’ll be fine.”

Hugh grunted, looked at Finch skeptically, and said no more for the rest of the trip.

He didn’t, however, let go of Finch’s hand.

It had been several years since Hugh had last taken Finch to his father’s

home, but it was every bit as impressive as Finch remembered. The exterior was stately and imposing, as was to be expected of the head of the Amethyst clan, and beautiful in a stoic and orderly way. It was the kind of estate where messes were never tolerated, and as such, it appealed to Finch at a fundamental level.

The interior was just as lovely.

From its impressive architecture to the tasteful furniture and displays of wealth kept within its walls, the place was a showcase for the wealthiest of all the Jeweled dragons. In particular, Finch found himself attracted to a dragon sculpted out of purple jade that sat on a plinth not all that far from the main entrance. Hugh was not the only Drake fond of purple, it seemed. The whole family appeared to have an affinity for it.

While Hugh exchanged strained pleasantries with his father's manservant, Carsons, Finch occupied himself by spotting other instances of the color around the room. There were the paintings on the walls—Renaissance, if he had to guess—in which bursts of purple sneaked in unexpectedly in small, mostly unnoticeable ways; and the blooms of flowering plants basking in the natural light pouring into the room. As they were led deeper into the residence, Finch spotted other subtle occurrences of the shade, from crystals sparkling in the depths of a chandelier to pocket squares worn by Grimbold's staff. It was quite lovely to behold. So lovely, in fact, that he was almost taken by surprise when Carsons stopped them in front of an ornate door and knocked crisply three times.

“Mr. Hugh Drake, sir,” Carsons declared. “And his secretary, one Mr. Finch.”

There came shuffling from inside, as of someone stiffly rising from an armchair by the door. It opened a moment later, revealing the distinguished Mr. Grimbold Drake.

Finch did not often have the chance to see his employer's father face to face. Every now and then, when Hugh was otherwise occupied, Finch engaged in correspondence with the

man, but the written word in no way prepared a soul for the gravitas embodied by the most senior of the Drakes.

Grimbold was, very much, a dignified personage. He was large of build and solemn in manner, and he carried himself with all the importance of a dragon who knew he was the best of his kind. Even Finch, with all his good breeding, found the man intimidating, and when Grimbold looked his way with his impressively dark purple eyes, Finch bowed his head. It was only when the weight of Grimbold's gaze moved on that Finch looked up and saw that, to his surprise, Grimbold was smiling.

Hugh not so much.

The younger dragon's posture had gone rigid, his spine a little too straight and his shoulders pinched. Despite his best efforts to keep emotion from his face, obvious emotional distress tightened his lips. Finch yearned to rest a reassuring hand on the small of Hugh's back, but knew better. He was not Hugh's mate—not even his partner—so the best he could do was stand by as a silent source of support.

“I've come to offer my congratulations, Father,” Hugh said as bravely as he could after a tense moment had passed. It was a commendable effort. Finch would have smiled had he not been on duty. “I've heard from Everard that you've found a mate, and that you're expecting your first child together. I look forward to... to meeting my new brother or sister.”

“Thank you, child.” Grimbold squeezed his shoulder.

“Much has changed in such a short time, hasn't it?”

Hugh's bottom lip trembled, but only slightly. “Yes, it has.”

“Come,” Grimbold bade him. “Walter and I have been resting. We were in the middle of a story, but it can be finished later. You're here now, and that's what's important. I would very much like for you to meet him.”

Finch checked on Hugh's expression from the corner of his eye. His employer was putting on a brave face, but Finch could see it was an act.

Hugh was stricken. Finch understood his pain. It hurt to see the ones you loved achieve what you

wanted more than anything else in life, but in some cases, it was unavoidable. One day, Hugh would understand.

Grimbold led them into the room, which appeared to be a library. Shelves of books with ancient spines lined the walls and formed great freestanding columns from the tops of which tumbled vines of pothos, their vibrantly green leaves in contrast to the sun-bleached buckram bindings beneath them.

Close to the library door was positioned a lamp—currently switched on—and an oversized armchair in which was curled a young man with sandy hair and porcelain skin. A book was beside him, no doubt plucked from one of the nearby shelves.

Finch wasn't one to stare, but in this case, he couldn't help it.

The boy was beautiful—a jewel of the Pedigree if Finch had ever seen one.

Strangely, the boy stared at Finch as if he were thinking the same.

“Walter,” Grimbold said gently as he approached the armchair. The boy blinked and turned his attention from Finch to the senior Mr. Drake. “This is my son, Hugh.”

Walter made no move to get up from the armchair. If what Finch saw was to be believed, he curled up on himself all the more. Perhaps it was premature to assume he was of the Pedigree—no omega, Disgrace or otherwise, would ever show a dragon such disrespect.

Grimbold, however, was seemingly unfazed by the egregious display. He swept over to Walter's side and sat on the armchair with him, tucking the boy protectively into his arms, where he brushed his sandy hair back from his forehead.

“He's safe, sweet. He won't harm you. None of my whelps ever will.”

Within Grimbold's embrace, Walter relaxed. He looked at Hugh with less

trepidation. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Hugh almost whispered. He’d raised his hand as if to wave, but dropped it slowly to his side, seeming more crestfallen than ever. It was torture to see him so afflicted.

Finch’s hand twitched as if to comfort him, but he resisted the urge and kept to himself. When they were alone, he would

make sure Hugh had his support, but he would not make his employer look weak in front of his own father no matter how much it pained him to do so.

Walter whispered something to Grimbold, who nodded and kissed his forehead, then rose from the armchair. “I’ve just remembered there are éclairs in the kitchen. Hugh, will you help me fetch them? I’m feeling a bit peckish.”

“Sweets, Father?” Hugh asked dubiously. “You’ve never cared for them. Things really have changed, haven’t they?”

“Yes, child.” Grimbold led Hugh toward the door. As Finch hadn’t been invited, he stayed where he was. “Now, tell me what you’ve been up to since your last visit. How have your investments been faring? I hope well.”

The door closed in their wake, leaving Finch with Walter.

“Hello,” Walter said in a small voice once they were alone.

He remained pushed into the corner of the armchair, but he did sit a little straighter. “I’m Wally. Are you Hugh’s mate?”

Had Finch been any less of a professional, he would have gaped. “W-What? No! Of course not. I’m his... his secretary.

That’s all.”

“Oh.” Walter looked Finch over carefully. “But you’re a Dis... a *dragonet*, aren’t you?” It seemed to pain him to say that word. “I heard his dragon, um...” Walter shook his head and trailed off, gaze averted.

Finch, who had no idea what the boy was going on about, stared at him.  
“What?”

“His dragon,” Walter insisted in a quiet but determined voice. He looked shyly up at Finch. “I heard him calling for you. You heard it, too, didn’t you? I saw your hand twitch when he was crying out for you. I saw the way you felt his pain.”

All of this was very bizarre, and Finch didn’t like it one bit. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Um, okay.” Walter swallowed nervously. “I just thought maybe you were like me, and... um, well, it’s okay. Just

pretend I didn’t say anything. Sorry for bringing it up.”

Luckily, at that moment, Hugh burst into the room. “Finch!

I thought I lost you! What are you doing in here? You belong with me and will accompany me to the kitchen. Please,” he added, sounding much more vulnerable than he had dared to be around his father.

“Of course, sir.” Finch spared Walter a lingering look, nodded in parting, and went to tend to his employer. They retrieved the éclairs from the kitchen, returned to the library, and made small talk. Shortly after that, Hugh announced he was ready to leave.

“Let’s never do that again, Finch,” Hugh said with a defeated sigh as he wilted into the Phantom’s back seat. “My heart simply won’t tolerate it. I spent the whole time wishing I had someone to wrap in my arms like Father does with Walter.

My dragon was absolutely not having any of it. He was so distressed, he was calling for you. Can you believe it? The poor creature is as heartbroken as I am. It’s imperative we find our mate at that ball.”

Finch opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. Rather than reply, he offered Hugh a nod.



How the devil could Walter have known what Hugh was feeling back in the library? Walter was a Disgrace, and Disgraces were human. They didn't have magic. To think that Walter could hear the thoughts of Hugh's inner dragon was absurd.

It came down to body language, Finch concluded. Walter had mentioned his observations and had simply elaborated on them using vague and universally applicable language, much like modern psychics. There was no way he'd actually *heard* Hugh's dragon longing for Finch—he'd simply guessed at it based on context clues.

The fact that he was pregnant with a Disgrace of his own was telling.

Disgraces were not dragons.

The other Drakes had mated and sired clutches with their Disgraces by chance, just like it had always been, and just like it would always be. More than that, Disgraces were, well, disgraceful, unlucky, and unfit for discerning dragons. It was why Finch's childhood had been so cold and lonely—why his father had never visited him once, nor ever made an effort to communicate. When the ball came and went and Hugh failed to bond with any of the candidates, he'd realize the same, and life would go back to normal. The world would become tidy again, and Finch would take pride in serving his dragon the best way a Disgrace could. There was no other way this could go. The alternative was simply too painful to consider.

10

H U G H

Three miniature gin bottles later, the Phantom turned onto the driveway leading to Hugh's estate and made its way toward the house. Hugh, nerves shot, pitched the bottles onto the floor and slumped into his seat. Meeting his father's omega had taken more out of him than he'd anticipated, leaving him in a very sorry state indeed.

"Finch?" Hugh asked in a quiet voice as the car rolled forward. Like he had on the way there, his manservant sat beside him. Hugh wouldn't have him sit

anywhere else—his presence was a constant reassurance that all would eventually be well.

“Yes, sir?”

“What are you up to this afternoon?”

“Tending to the estate, sir,” Finch replied in a guarded tone of voice. No doubt he was upset that Hugh had so thoughtlessly thrown the bottles of gin onto the floor. “I can list each individual task if you’d like, but I’d prefer to do it after the car has stopped—my to-do list is on my phone, which I try not to look at while in motion.”

Hugh nudged one of the empty gin bottles with his foot, pushing it toward the others in the hopes that doing so would prove he regretted what he’d done.

“There’s no need for specifics. In general, how pressing is the work you have to do?”

“Not very.”

“Then would you agree to putting it off until tomorrow?

Or perhaps entrusting it to another member of the staff?” Hugh stopped assembling the bottles to look at Finch imploringly. “I hate to call on you in such a way, Finch, but I’m not sure who else to turn to. I just...” Hugh took a breath and wilted into his seat once more, unable to keep looking at the man beside him.

“I find myself dreading the thought of returning to an empty house.”

“The house won’t be empty, sir,” Finch reassured him.

“The staff were not granted a day off—everyone should be in attendance.”

“No, I mean”—the car rolled to a stop, and Hugh closed his eyes—“I can’t stand the thought of being alone right now.

Would you be willing to keep me company for an hour or two?

Just until I can shake the awful feeling in my heart.”

There was silence. Hugh opened his eyes and lifted his head to find the tips of Finch’s ears had gone pink. The poor man had to be frustrated. Hugh would have been, too, had he an employer who demanded he cancel his plans to babysit a sad, sorry excuse for a dragon.

“Of course, sir,” Finch said politely. “I’ll arrange to have tea and a light repast brought to your study.”

“My study?” Hugh chuckled. “No, Finch. I’ve already put you out far too much as it is. We’ll retire to your chambers so you can relax in a place you find comfortable. It’s only fair, seeing as I’m the one imposing on you.”

The pink tipping Finch’s ears brightened. Hugh had to wonder at it. He hadn’t meant to cause offense, but it did seem as if he’d misjudged the situation.

Before he could rescind his statement, Finch nodded and said, “Of course, sir.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Never.”

“You are a treasure, Finch.” Hugh smiled at him. “Please arrange to have whatever your heart desires delivered up to us.

I’m in such a sorry state I’m afraid I don’t feel much like eating.”

“Consider it done, sir,” Finch said as George opened Hugh’s car door. Hugh stepped out, but when he turned back to collect the empty gin bottles he’d so carelessly thrown on the floor, he noticed Finch hadn’t moved. Their eyes met. For a stunning moment, the world itself seemed to stop, then Finch glanced away.

The bottles could wait. Hugh stepped around the car and opened the door for his secretary, who climbed elegantly from the vehicle and smoothed his shirt before offering Hugh a curt nod.

There was something special about Finch, Hugh thought as he closed the door and returned to his side of the car to collect his trash. Something that put him head and shoulders above the rest. If he was to keep Finch on his payroll, he would need to make sure he kept him happy—there were other dragons out there with larger estates, bigger hoards, and more influence than Hugh who would swoop a man like Finch up in a heartbeat.

Hugh couldn't let that happen.

Bottles collected, he led Finch into the house. They made a short detour into the kitchen to dispose of their garbage and request refreshments, then headed upstairs.

Gold coins, it seemed, were not enough. Hugh would have to do better.

Hugh enjoyed Finch's private domain as much on his second visit as he had on his first. The room was tidy—naturally—but it was decorated in such a way that gifted Hugh a glimpse into the life of Finch the man rather than Finch the manservant. He enjoyed the vintage record jackets artfully arranged on the walls and the framed map of London marked with dainty pins with round, metallic heads. All of the pins but one were silver, and the odd man out was gold. It was positioned seemingly at

random in St. John's Wood, close to where an Amethyst dragon kept residence. What Hugh didn't like about the room was the large metal cage in it. It was filled with chaos—paper shreds, gnawed cardboard boxes, and what appeared to be several old t-shirts that had been tied up so they stretched between its bars. One of the t-shirts was swinging suspiciously. Evil undoubtedly lurked inside.

"I apologize for the mess, sir," Finch said as he swept into the room. Hugh didn't understand what he was talking about until Finch fetched a dustpan hidden behind the cage and swept up three shreds of paper from the floor. While he did, a little furry face poked out from the folds of the swinging t-shirt, blinked its beady eyes, and launched itself at the cage wall nearest Finch. Hugh let loose with a startled bellow and sprang forward on instinct, tugging Finch into the safety of his arms and away from certain death.

Finch gasped. The dustpan went flying. Three scraps of shredded paper rained down on them from above.

“*Mr. Drake!*” Finch intoned breathlessly. “What are you doing?”

“Saving your life! The plague-ridden thing nearly ended you.”

The plague-ridden thing in question clung to the bars of its cage and watched them with glossy black eyes. Its body was mostly white and its head mostly a soft grayish brown, although spots of the opposite color dotted its flank and face.

In an act both repulsive and terrifying, it nibbled on the metal bar in front of it as if it were trying to escape. To make matters worse, a second creature emerged from a box on the bottom of the cage and scaled the bars with unnerving ease. This one was entirely gray with a small amount of white on its belly, and it had terrible pink hands with the smallest, most disturbing white claws Hugh had ever seen. A long, scaly-looking tail dangled behind it, then darted between the bars and curled like it was prehensile.

Hugh shuddered.

“Sir?” Finch inquired. There was a hint of a smile on his face and a curious glimmer in his eyes. “Are you really that afraid of the ladies?”

“Those are beasts, Finch, not ladies.”

“They’re rats, sir. Delightfully intelligent creatures with personalities bigger than some people. I can assure you, you’re quite safe.”

Hugh would have felt safer bumping into a bronze bastard in a dark, deserted alley, but he noticed the glint in Finch’s eyes and relented. Finch was to be trusted. The man never led him astray.

“Come.” Finch took his hand and brought Hugh to the cage, close to where the beasts were waiting. Once there, he took a small resealable container from the top of the cage and pried off the lid, revealing a stash of chocolate chips. “Take one.”

“Thank you.” Hugh did, and ate it. “Not bad, but nothing to write home about.”

Finch sighed. “Sir, the chocolate is meant for the ladies.

Take another and don’t eat it this time. There. Good. Now, hold it out to Elizabeth.”

Hugh had no idea which of the blasted things was named Elizabeth, but he extended the chip in the direction of the closest rat, which was the one that was gray all over. Quicker than he could see, the chocolate was snatched out of his fingers. Hugh startled, but managed not to jump back.

“There. You’ve made a friend,” Finch declared. He gave a chocolate chip to the remaining rat, and both of them scurried into different hiding spots. Hugh considered himself thankful he wouldn’t be forced to see their teeth. “That was very brave of you, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Finch sealed the container and returned it to its place atop the cage, then collected the dustpan and swept up the small mess strewn across the floor. To keep himself from being spooked by any rodent-like movement, Hugh watched him

work. Somehow Finch made even something as simple as sweeping debris off the floor elegant. Hugh could watch him all day. But watching him work wouldn’t keep Finch happy.

Determined to prove he was worth Finch’s loyalty, Hugh stepped forward and slid his hand over Finch’s, intending to take the dustpan from it.

Finch froze and looked up at Hugh with awe-widened eyes.

Hugh opened his mouth, intending to speak, but found himself at a loss for words. He’d known prior to this that Finch’s eyes were dark, but not that they were rich with smoky amber—not that when the light hit them just right, they ignited with life. Hugh’s heart constricted, and deep inside he felt his dragon

stir. It paced restlessly like it was the one in the rat cage, awaiting a promised chocolate chip.

“Sir?” Finch whispered, snapping Hugh from his stupor.

What a curious thing, to be rendered totally useless.

Hugh blinked at Finch and found he didn’t want to look away.

*Take, his dragon insisted. Claim.*

It was all the reminder Hugh needed. He cleared his throat and traced down Finch’s hand, easing the dustpan out of his grip. “Allow me.”

Finch’s ears burned more brightly than ever, but there was a soft look in his eyes that Hugh couldn’t attribute to irritation.

It seemed making himself useful was having the desired effect.

“Where is the rubbish bin?”

“In the kitchenette, sir.”

They walked to the bin together, never straying all that far from each other. Finch pushed the pedal with his foot, opening the lid, and Hugh dropped the dustpan into it. It was a tight fit, and to get it fully into the bin, he had to shove it down. “You need a bigger bin, Finch,” Hugh said between clenched teeth as he struggled to get the damned thing situated. “What do you

usually do to get it in far enough to close the lid? I can give the dustpan a good swipe with my claw if that’ll help.”

There was a long silence, during which Finch clamped a hand over his mouth. His shoulders shook. Then, just before Hugh could ask if he was quite all right, he snorted.

“Finch?”

Finch snorted noisily several more times, then shut his eyes and burst into

unabashed laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Hugh asked, almost laughing himself.

“Dustpans aren’t disposable, sir.” When Finch had recovered from the worst of his laughter, he retrieved the would-be trash and tapped it on the side of the bin to rid it of the last scrap of paper. “But I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

Hugh’s cheeks burned. “Oh.”

“Don’t be embarrassed.” Finch’s smile wobbled as he held back more laughter, and even though Hugh was the one he was laughing at, he couldn’t help but find it charming. He wanted to see Finch like this again. And often. “All of us make mistakes. If you saw me the first time Superin…” Finch stopped talking all at once.

“What were you saying?” Hugh asked. “Superin?”

“Superin,” Finch piped. He quickly set the dustpan on the counter and crossed his arms nervously over his chest. “A, um, a turn of phrase popular in London during my youth. You wouldn’t be familiar.”

“Well, what does it mean?”

“Sir, I’m not sure you want to know.”

“I can assure you that I do.”

Finch’s upper lip twitched. “If you insist. But I’m afraid you’ll have to make me a promise beforehand—absolutely none of the staff can know.”

A secret? Hugh stood a little taller, all the more intrigued.

He wasn’t sure what increased height had to do with

trustworthiness, but it certainly felt like the right thing to do.

“Of course! My lips are sealed.”



“Well...” Finch tilted his head back and took a grounding breath before he continued. “As I was saying, ‘superin’ is a...

turn of phrase. Yes, of course. A turn of phrase meaning...

uh... are you familiar with... um... with...”

God, it had to be scandalous if Finch couldn’t come right out and say it. Hugh held his breath, rapt with anticipation.

What was his secretary hiding from him?

After what felt like an eternity, Finch’s shoulders slumped and he leaned forward, bringing himself right next to Hugh’s ear so he could whisper, “*Marijuana?*”

Hugh gasped and took a startled step back. “*Finch!*”

Finch offered him a pained smile and shrugged, but it lacked the energy he’d had just moments before. If anything, he looked a bit hollow. “What can I say? My past is a secretive and sordid thing.”

“What else don’t I know about you, Finch?”

The hollow look only grew. “If only you knew, sir. If only you knew.”

1 1

F I N C H

There had been times in the past that Finch had ruminated on the relationship between cats and dragons. They had many similar traits. They were beautiful and devious and selfish and generally owned whatever space they occupied. Dragons, it seemed, also left presents like cats sometimes did. The trouble was, unlike with cats, Finch couldn’t figure out what prompted Hugh to leave them.

At first, it was a few gold coins, and they’d baffled him, but in the end he’d decided that they had to have fallen from Hugh’s pockets by accident. But

then one morning he found a gold chest the size of a shoebox encrusted with cabochon rubies outside the door to his suite and realized the coins hadn't simply been lost.

After checking to make sure Hugh wasn't peeping on him from a nearby doorway, Finch picked up the chest. It was quite heavy. With a grunt he carried it into his suite and closed the door with his foot, then laid it on the nearby table. The latch on the front was uncomplicated and lacked a lock, so he opened it. Inside was a strange figurine of some type. Finch took it from its velvet resting place and gave it a look. It was a dragon made from silver and gold with gemstone scales. With a soft tap of the ruby button on the dragon's back, its wings unfurled. It also appeared to be hollow, and...

Finch examined the button closer. There was a small, cleverly hidden hinge. With the touch of a finger, part of the dragon's back fell back and Finch saw it was a pipe.

An extremely impractical, dragon-shaped pipe.

Which confirmed that the gift was indeed from Hugh.

But why in the world would Hugh give him a pipe? Finch couldn't make heads or tails of it. He didn't smoke, and had no desire to do so. Perhaps Hugh hadn't realized. Whatever the case, he put both the chest and its pipe on a shelf in his closet where they'd be out of sight, but near enough to his suits that he'd still be able to see them every day.

Hugh stuck his head into the study where Finch had been working on preparations for the ball. "Did you... uh... find the trifle I left for you?"

"Trifle?" Finch asked absently. He was distracted by catering choices, particularly the sweets table, which was proving to be a headache in and of itself. What was the appropriate pudding to offer to Disgraces gathered in the hopes of winning a dragon's heart? The Pedigree had never prepared him for this. "I suppose we could have them do a sort of trifle parfait. That might work."

"What?" Hugh sounded entirely mystified.

Finch replayed the conversation in his head. “Did you not mean to suggest a pudding for the sweets table at the ball?”

Hugh continued to look blank, then brightened up considerably. “Oh, how silly. No, I meant the chest and pipe.

Do you like them?”

“They’re quite lovely, sir. Thank you.”

The dragon stepped into the room, grinning like a carved pumpkin. “Brilliant! Have you had a chance to use them?”

Finch stared at Hugh. “Ah, no sir. I’ve never smoked.”

Then he cursed himself as an idiot because just days before he'd told Hugh that he used to smoke marijuana. Damn.

Hugh looked taken aback, then he rallied. "Right!" he cheerfully proclaimed before winking at Finch. It was most unsettling. "Right. You've 'never smoked.' Of course." And

then he winked again. "Well. I should probably get out of your way. Don't want to disturb your work."

"Would you like to see what's been planned so far? You could, if you wished, still make changes at this point."

"No! That is, no thank you. I'm sure you have it all in hand and I'd hate to derail your creative and clever plans. But would you mind if I came by your rooms tonight?" Hugh looked at Finch beseechingly.

"I... I suppose you may. Although I will be in my bed by ten, sir, I do warn you. I have another early day tomorrow."

Hugh rubbed his hands together, his handsome features positively gleeful. "Of course, of course. I wouldn't want to impose. But this way we can talk and I won't be interrupting you. Yes. Perfect." Hugh beamed at Finch. "I'll see you tonight, then."

Finch continued to stare at his employer. "Yes, sir."

Hugh arrived at Finch's door, true to his promise, an hour before ten at night. The first thing he said, after Finch ushered him in, was, "I was thinking of getting a treat for your girls. A peace offering, of sorts. So they won't bite me."

Finch was both amused and charmed. "Is it chocolate? The ladies love chocolate."

"Er... that wasn't quite what I was thinking. But I don't see why not. Shall I go fetch some?"

“No, sir, I was just...” Finch couldn’t bring himself to tell Hugh he’d been teasing him. It was so inappropriate. Instead, he said, “I mean, I have plenty of it here. Would you like to give them one chip apiece?”

Hugh looked hesitant, then nodded. When Finch lifted the lid on the chocolate chips, Hugh took three. “One for each of us,” he said. He popped his into his mouth first and seemed to suck on it, letting the chocolate dissolve onto his tongue.

“Mm. I say, chocolate does make one feel better, doesn’t it?”

He took one more chip from the container then held it to Finch’s lips. “See for yourself.”

Finch’s heart felt like it wanted to explode from his chest.

He closed his eyes and opened his mouth slightly. Hugh put the chip onto Finch’s tongue. Somehow, during the maneuver, Finch licked Hugh’s finger before he pulled it away. Finch’s eyes flew open and he looked at his dragon. His eyes were dilated and seemed as dark as the night sky, and every bit as full of stars.

“Oh,” Hugh said. “Oh, I... er... yes. I should give these to your girls. Yes.”

After Hugh turned away to feed the fearsome rats their treats, Finch lightly touched a finger to his lips. They felt like they were burning, but his finger detected no untoward heat.

This was bad. This was very, very bad.

“Hello, ladies,” Hugh said. His voice quivered a little, but he stood his ground and held out a very tempting chip. Eleanor was on it in a flash. Elizabeth was just a heartbeat slower nabbing hers. “Are you placated, ladies? Promise you won’t break out and terrorize my house?”

“Their cage is quite secure, sir.”

“Mm.” Hugh watched the ladies for a few more moments, then turned around. “Tell me, Finch. Have you ever wanted something more than

anything in your entire life, only to find one day that you want something else just as much?"

"I can't say as I have, sir." Finch could feel his pulse throbbing in his throat.

Hugh went to the couch and sat, his back straight and his hands folded into his lap. "Well, it's a most uncomfortable situation, I can tell you. Please. Do sit down." Hugh patted the seat next to him.

Finch drifted over and sat rather nearer to the dragon than he'd wanted. He tried to shift farther away but Hugh grabbed Finch's knee. "No. No flying away, my Finch. Not yet."

"I... sir... perhaps you might..." Finch floundered, something he very rarely, if ever, did. "I mean, can you not

have both?"

Hugh shook his head sadly. "Obtaining one will nullify the other. These unfulfilled desires are what you'd call 'mutually exclusive.'"

"I see." Except Finch didn't. At all.

"To that end, I wish to go on a small trip tomorrow. It's not very far and, of course, you'll accompany me."

"Of course," Finch echoed, feeling completely lost and without so much as a map or compass. "I am your servant. Is, um, is that the purpose for your visit this evening, or is there something else I can do for you, sir?"

"Hmm." Hugh stood only to lean immediately down, place his nose close to Finch's ear, and inhale sharply.

"Sir?" Finch squeaked.

"My apologies, Finch," Hugh whispered into his ear, his voice sweet, smooth, and devastatingly enticing. "There truthfully isn't anything else, but my dragon's got it in his head that you smell delightful. It's quite peculiar. It's not often I indulge the beast, but I couldn't help myself. I had to know the

truth and lo and behold, you smell simply divine. Isn't that odd?"

"Yes, sir, quite," Finch managed to say, which was, perhaps, the understatement of the year.

12

HUGH

The next morning, Hugh met Finch at precisely eleven and ushered him into his Audi. When they were safely buckled and George had begun to drive, Hugh hit a button on the back panel, which activated the car's privacy screen.

"Thank you for coming out with me today, Finch," Hugh said when the screen was in place and George was out of earshot. "I appreciate your company."

"It's my pleasure, sir."

"Now that we have the assurance of privacy, would you like to know where we're going?"

There was a pause during which Finch pursed his lips and nudged one of the many brightly colored gift-wrapped boxes crammed around their feet. "I would. I assume it has something to do with all these boxes?"

"Gifts, Finch. They're gifts." Hugh smiled, but even when trying his best to act positive, a trace of sorrow sobered his voice. "They're for my nephews. Alistair's whelps turned seven last week, and Sebastian's whelps are turning eight in the next few days. My brothers have organized a party to celebrate. I wouldn't have asked you to accompany me, but I'm feeling especially vulnerable after meeting my father's mate. I'll be the only Drake there without a bonded mate and children of his own, and..." Hugh pushed a noisy breath through his nostrils. "Well, I didn't want to be alone."

Finch's expression immediately softened. "Sir..."

"But you needn't worry—I organized my purchases to make sure there were presents from you as well." Hugh scooped the nearest box up. "See?" He

examined its label, saw its benefactor was listed as “Uncle Hugh,” and tossed the box aside. It clanked and jingled as it fell. “Not that one. This one, though”—the box was wrapped in glossy purple paper accented with golden pinstripes—“this one is *definitely* from you.”

It wasn’t.

Hugh scowled and tossed it over his shoulder. It made a great crashing noise on impact, like a very expensive anvil.

“Where the devil are your gifts?” Hugh muttered. He rooted through a few others, but they were all labeled as from him. Several more tossed boxes and many clanks and clangs later, he shook his head. “All of yours must be in the trunk, but let me assure you, they exist. I made sure of it. I even inscribed the gift tags myself.”

“That’s... that’s very kind of you, sir.” The tips of Finch’s ears had taken on a cheerfully pink tint, which Hugh assumed was from joy at his thoughtful and inclusive gesture. “Did you wrap them yourself, too?”

Hugh blinked. “How did you know?”

Finch reached down to smooth a mangled piece of tape stuck to the side of one of the gifts. “No reason.”

“It’s because I didn’t use enough tape, isn’t it?”

“Sir, I can assure you that is not the case.”

“Is it the paper, then?” Hugh wrinkled his nose. “None of the paper I bought came in the correct shape.”

Finch opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Wrapped presents are supposed to have edges that meet neatly as well as triangular side pieces,” Hugh explained. “The paper I received was one large rectangle. I had to cut out triangles and tape them to the sides to get them to look even remotely like traditional gifts.”



Finch opened his mouth again and shut it just as quickly.

“It was terrible.” Hugh shook his head. “I have no idea where you go about procuring the proper paper. I paid an exorbitant amount for mine and it *still* wasn’t right. I suppose that’s why gift bags exist, but where’s the fun in that? Had wrapped decorative boxes existed when I was a whelp, I wouldn’t have wanted anything but. Not only can you claw them to pieces, but some of the papers have metallic sheens.

As a young dragon, I would have gladly collected as much of it as I could to add to my hoard.”

“I’ll write a strongly worded letter to the manufacturers on your behalf, sir.”

“You are a treasure, Finch.” Hugh patted his knee, eliciting more pink from the tips of Finch’s ears. “I hope you realize how dear you are to me. I’ve never known an Attendant who goes so above and beyond for their employer. Which is why I got you this.” From the mess of boxes at their feet, Hugh retrieved two gifts. One was the size of a shoe box, the other no larger than a stack of coasters. Both were wrapped in metallic purple foil. “These are for you.”

The pink tipping Finch’s ears veered toward red. “It’s not my birthday, sir.”

“I know, but you’ve gone out of your way for me today, and I wanted to show my appreciation.” Hugh laid both presents on Finch’s lap. “Please, don’t wait—open them now.”

“Which one should I open first?”

“The larger one,” Hugh insisted. “It’s the one that will be most immediately useful.”

Carefully, Finch lifted the larger box and held it in both hands as if to weigh it. Then, after a moment spent in reflection, he tipped the box to the side and picked away the tape securing the triangle cutout on the side. Despite how gentle he was, the paper beneath tore. From there, Finch ripped the rest of it off, unveiling a plain white box.

As far as packaging went it was a little bland, so Hugh had enhanced it by inscribing “FINCH” in bold letters across the top in purple marker.

“You really shouldn’t have, sir,” Finch murmured, although he sounded pleased. “My duty is to serve you. You don’t need to reward me for it.”

“Nonsense.” Hugh flapped a hand. “I enjoy spoiling you.

Go ahead and open it, Finch. I have a feeling you’ll enjoy what you find inside.”

Finch offered him a smile and removed the lid.

The smile decayed when he laid eyes on the box’s contents.

“It’s a... bag,” Finch remarked, flummoxed. “A Ziplock bag. And it’s full of... tiny bundles of sage?”

“Take a closer look.”

“Yes, sir.”

Finch lifted the bag by its resealable top, which was wise, since the main compartment was stuffed absolutely full and looked ready to burst. According to Gabriel, the pool boy, it weighed half a pound, but Hugh hadn’t thought to verify its weight before wrapping it. Regardless of its mass, it was impressive, and that was what was important. Finch deserved as many impressive things in his life as Hugh could afford.

“Sir, what is this, exactly?” Finch asked, both looking and sounding no less mystified than he’d been prior to removing the bag. “They’re too small to be smudge sticks. At least, too small to be any type that I’m familiar with.”

Hugh had never heard them referred to as “smudge sticks”

before, but Finch was a fount of new and exciting vocabulary from which Hugh was eager to imbibe.

“Do you think they’re small?” Hugh craned his neck to get a better look at

the bag. He'd studied it for a while before stuffing it in the box, but without a basis for comparison, he had no idea what was standard and what was a disappointment. "I was told that they were of exceptional size and quality. If they're no good I'll return them and demand a superior product. I'll admit, I'm not well versed in... well..."

*herbal recreation.* You are the superin master."

"I—" Finch froze. Then, slowly, he turned his head to stare at Hugh, eyes as big as dinner plates. "*Is this marijuana?*"

"It is!"

Finch jammed the window button on his door so hard, the damn thing nearly broke.

"Finch?" Hugh blinked, then caught on. "Oh, I get it.

You're wanting to put your present to use immediately and you don't want to hotbox the car. How considerate of you! I had no idea you were such a fiend for the stuff."

The window continued its slow descent. Finch was nearly bouncing in his seat with excitement—or maybe pain. With as much force as he was putting on the button, the latter did seem possible. Poor Finch's fingertip was turning white from exertion. He must not have known that North American car windows unrolled at a constant speed no matter the pressure put on their buttons. It was sweet. Hugh would have to look into importing a car from England. He hadn't known that their window buttons functioned differently, but Finch was the expert, and it did seem like there was some kind of disconnect going on. The expense would be worth it to help Finch feel at home.

"I figured we would wait and sneak off to be naughty halfway through the party," Hugh explained while Finch and the bag of weed vibrated beside him. "But I can see the benefits of smoking prior to arrival. I don't suppose you have a lighter? It's no matter. It just so happens I was born prepared." Hugh lifted his hand with a flourish and extended his index finger. A jet of flame

danced to life from its tip.

Finch looked at the digit as if it were diseased. “Oh, Finch, don’t worry—it’s quite sanitary. Now, how do you do this without a pipe? I know it’s possible. Do you just take a cluster from the bag, set fire to it, and suck the unlit part between your lips, or...”

Mid-sentence, the window reached the halfway mark, and Finch pitched the entire bag through the opening with as much force as he could. It sailed skyward and disappeared into traffic, never to be seen again. Hugh, mouth agape, scrambled

around to look out the back window, but the bag was well and truly gone, lost to the wilds of the highway.

Finch, meanwhile, had collapsed in his seat and was gasping for breath like he’d just run a race.

“What the devil just happened?” Hugh asked, too astonished to know what to feel. “Finch, you chucked your present out the window!”

“I did.”

“Why?”

Finch gave him a long look and asked in a thin voice, “Sir, how much marijuana was that?”

“Half a pound.” Hugh frowned deeply. “I know it isn’t much, but it was all Gabriel had. Would you like more? I’d have to ask, and it will probably take some time to source, but I’d be happy to do it for you.”

“Half a pound,” Finch muttered in disbelief. “Lord, help me.”

“Next time I’ll get you an entire pound.” Hugh sat a little straighter and worried his thumb over his opposite hand, gutted that he’d upset Finch with such a lackluster gift. “Or, better yet, two pounds. No, three.” Finch looked horrified, so Hugh upped the ante. “An even five?”

“There is nothing even about five, sir.”

“Then we’ll make it ten. And would you like them bigger?”

You seemed upset they weren’t bigger. The, um, *smudge sticks*, I mean, since a pound is a pound no matter what. I’ll instruct Gabriel to bring back the biggest, lushest smudge sticks he can find.”

Finch hid his face behind his hands, which was the opposite of what Hugh wanted.

“I’m very sorry, Finch,” he said in a small, disappointed voice. “I thought I was being kind, but I suppose the kinder thing to do would have been to invite you to examine the product with me. I did test it, you know, to see if it was adequate, and while I’m not quite sure what to look for, it

seemed aboveboard. I didn’t think I’d be sold such inferior stock.”

“No, that’s not it.” Finch lowered his hands, and Hugh was relieved to see he was smiling. “Sir, owning that much marijuana is very, very illegal.”

“I mean, that’s the point, isn’t it?”

“No.”

But Finch was still smiling, so Hugh laughed. “Finch, I don’t think I’ll ever understand you.”

“It’s probably for the best, sir.” He cleared his throat and looked at the remaining gift, which had tumbled off his lap and landed beside his thigh during the commotion. “Before I open this, should I brace myself to find something unlawful inside?”

“Not at all.” Hugh smiled. “Go ahead.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Finch scooped up the gift and opened it. When he removed the lid, he gasped. “Sir…”

“I thought you might wear it for the party today,” Hugh explained, lifting the

gemstone brooch from its velvet padding.

It was a small but masterfully crafted piece done in white gold, gray diamond, onyx, and ruby and resembled a wild finch perched on a branch. “I had it made just for you. May I pin it to your lapel?”

Finch nodded, and so Hugh did. Not only did the pop of color from the brooch draw the eye to Finch’s typically understated but stylish suit, but its gemstones glimmered in the sunlight.

Hugh was enthralled.

“It looks just as amazing as I thought it would.” Hugh smoothed Finch’s lapel, then met Finch’s eyes. They were every bit as exquisite as the jewels on his chest. “Thank you again for agreeing to come out with me today. When you’re around, I never feel like I have to shoulder the world on my own.”

“And you will never have to,” Finch promised.

*Mine*, Hugh’s dragon insisted, but Hugh paid it no heed. It would be rude to take the brooch back now, no matter how beautiful it was. Besides, the jewels looked better on Finch than they would in his hoard.

The rest of the trip to Sebastian’s estate was uneventful, but with Finch there to share it with him, Hugh still enjoyed it more than words could say.

13

## F I N C H

Even if Finch hadn’t known he was at the home of a dragon, it wouldn’t have been hard to guess. Sebastian Drake’s lair wasn’t a mansion—it was an obscenely large manor tucked into a gated community within one of Aurora’s richest suburbs. The outside stone facade was formal and imposing, and reminded Finch a bit of the British Museum with its massive Grecian columns. The similarities ended there, however. The estate’s sprawling gardens and lush greenery turned the space into its own oasis, and its pool-

sized ornamental koi pond was much more alluring than the urban jungle leading to the museum's front steps. Finch marveled at the magnificence of it all as he stepped out of the car and stooped to gather the children's gifts.

Hugh was by his side in an instant and placed a firm hand on his arm. "No, Finch. Leave that to the Attendants."

"I am an Attendant, sir," Finch reminded him.

Hugh colored, then firmed his lips and squared his jaw.

"Nonsense. You're my right hand. I'd never manage without you. Now come, or there won't be any cake left. Or snacks."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Finch?" They arrived at the front door, where Hugh pressed the door chime.

"When you said that you 'tested' my, er, present... what exactly did you mean by that?"

"That I sampled it, of course."

Finch's eye twitched. "And when was that?"

"Oh, not all that long before we took to the road. I had to ensure it was at peak freshness when you received it."

Finch wondered what the effects of marijuana were on dragons. If anyone would know, it would likely be Everard, but Finch couldn't imagine asking the dragon even if he had a million years to screw up his courage to do so. If they were lucky, Hugh would experience nothing more than an increased appetite. Finch decided to hope for the best. "Thank you for your consideration, sir."

"Hmm. Well, yes. Of course. Can you imagine if it were spoiled and I gave it to you anyway? I couldn't have you falling ill. You're a human and so fragile, and I couldn't—"

Hugh was interrupted by the arrival of a Range Rover. It slowed, then stopped, and out jumped three dark-haired boys.

They were followed by a pretty, if frazzled, young man and one of the Mr. Drakes. Alistair, by the looks of him, which made the young man trying to herd their three hellions his mate, Ignatius. What were the boys' names again? Something literary. Finch pondered a bit then came up with Chaucer, Abelard, and Malory.

Alistair soon proved him correct.

“Malory, please leave the book in the car. You know your papa gets upset when you forget his books at other people's houses. Do you want to lose your book privileges? No, I didn't think so.” One boy ran back to the Range Rover and handed the book he carried to the female driver standing beside the vehicle. “Abelard, you get one piece of cake. One! Do you understand?” The boy walking beside Alistair pouted, but he nodded. “Good. I'd hate for a repeat of what happened at your grandsire's house last Christmas.” The dragon looked around.

“Where's Chaucer?”

Ignatius looked startled and a little panicky as he took a large parcel out of the back of the vehicle. It was the size of a hatbox, only more rectangular in shape, and tied with twine to keep it safely shut. Was it a present, perhaps? “He was just

here, Alistair! Like, a minute ago, at least. I barely took my eyes off him.”

“Chaucer, *no!* ”

There was a resounding splash, then a small boy stood up in the ornamental koi pond, the water coming up to his chest.

He had a lily pad on his head. “I'm okay!” he shouted. He hopped about, splashing and likely giving the koi nervous breakdowns. “I'm a frog, Daddy! I'm a frog!”



Ignatius sighed and seemed to say to himself, “One day he’ll get the right lizard.”

“Good lord,” Hugh murmured.

“Sir?” Finch turned to him. Hugh’s eyes were wide, and he stood absolutely still. Perhaps he hadn’t realized how chaotic children could be. Even dragon children. Especially dragon children. “Children can sometimes be a bit noisy, and clumsy

—”

“I want a dozen just like him,” Hugh said with a sigh.

Finch shifted gears. “Just like Chaucer?” The child, having been scooped out of the pond by Alistair, wriggled free and took off running, his father right behind him.

“Be careful what you wish for,” came Ignatius’s voice from much closer than Finch was prepared for. Startled, he jumped and spun around to discover Alistair’s mate had come to join them near the door. Ignatius quirked a brow at him, then shrugged. “You might just get it.”

“Ignatius!” Hugh exclaimed. The marijuana had to be improving his mood, for he didn’t sound crestfallen in the least. “Have you met Finch? He’s my secretary. Couldn’t do a thing without him.”

“Hey.” Ignatius tucked the enormous box under one arm then stuck out his other hand, which Finch shook. “I’m Nate—

Alistair’s mate and father to two fairly good boys and one frog, apparently.”

Finch nodded. “Finch, at your service.”

“Did you ring the doorbell?” Ignatius asked. “I feel like we’ve been standing here for a long-ass time.”

“We have,” Finch replied.

“Huh. Weird. I guess everyone else must already be inside.

It gets kind of crazy when we all get together. It’s not surprising they didn’t hear the bell the first time. Let me ring it again.” He pressed the doorbell several times in rapid succession. “It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Finch nodded, but chose not to otherwise engage. He’d heard it said that Ignatius was a Disgrace, and while he was handsome, his behavior was not congruent with the teachings of the Pedigree. Perhaps it was all a rumor. That would explain how Alistair had sired a clutch with him. Slowly but surely, all the pieces were falling into place.

“Come here, boys!” Hugh called to his nephews.

The two children who had not fallen into a pond bounced up to their uncle and waited expectantly.

Hugh reached into his pocket and pulled out red licorice for Abelard and a candy bar for Malory.

“Oh, Hugh. They’re already going to get enough sugar today as it is,” Ignatius sighed. “Boys, what do we say?”

“Thank you,” the boys chorused with mouths full of candy.

“You’re welcome. Malory, boy, come here. We keep pushing the bell and no one’s come to let us in. Why don’t you help us out?”

Malory grinned at his uncle and darted forward, pressing his finger to the button.

“Just one push, sweetheart,” Ignatius admonished, seemingly unaware that he’d jammed it quite a few times himself.

The little imp grinned and kept on pushing.

The front door was wrenched open just as a very damp Alistair jogged up with an even wetter Chaucer in his arms.

“Stop that racket right now!”

Finch had expected an Attendant to let them into the house, but it was Mr. Geoffrey Drake who stood there. He had something white and fluffy, like whipped cream, stuck to his ear.

Alistair tucked his squirming child under one arm.

“Geoffrey? What on earth? Where is—”

Geoffrey looked harried. “There was an accident. With pie.

Everard and Harrison are seeing to the injuries. Most are superficial, but the butler might be concussed.”

Ignatius’s lips twisted with humor. “So a normal Drake gathering, then.”

“Indeed,” Geoffrey intoned, as solemn as any good butler, and ushered them into the house.

14

## F I N C H

Finch had thought to keep himself at Hugh’s side so as to be as unobtrusive as possible, but found himself instead seated at a table crowded with the Drakes’ omega mates. There were quite a few of them now, but thanks to his good memory, he knew them all by name. There was Ignatius, of course, whose brown hair and blue eyes hinted not at his clan of origin. Next to him was Harrison, Everard’s reptile-loving bespectacled mate, and beside him, Walter, who had never looked more nervous. He kept glancing at the conservatory door, no doubt in search of Grimbold. Peregrine, Sebastian’s mate, had taken to mothering him. While he was the oldest at the table by hundreds of years, he was blessed with eternal youth that tricked the eye into believing he was a teenager. The illusion was made complete by his mess of blond curls and his bright blue eyes, which lent him an angelic innocence that very few adults possessed. Misha, the closest to Peregrine in terms of appearance, was devilish in comparison. When his nose wasn’t buried in his

cell phone, he kept fixing Finch with a look that suggested he was up to something. Whatever it was, Finch hoped he would never find out.

The very last omega at the table was Matthieu, the redheaded Ruby Disgrace who'd managed to find himself mated to both a Drake and a Brand. It was rather scandalous.

All was well now, but half a decade ago news of the coupling had ripped through the Attendant and Pedigree communities alike, stirring gossip in its wake. Since then, several more unconventional couplings had come to light and the odd

pairing had become somewhat normalized. Finch was glad.

He'd always been a fan of happy endings.

What he was not glad about was the large lizard at the center of the table wearing a party hat. It was eating a strawberry off a miniature plate. None of the omegas at the table seemed bothered by its presence or tried to stop it when it finished the strawberry, waddled across the table, and climbed down the table leg onto the floor. It disappeared into a crowd of children and didn't return.

Finch hoped it wasn't destined for the dessert table, which was laden with food and sweets, including a large cake.

"Well." Ignatius flattened both of his hands on the table like he was about to do business. "Now that the ceremonial strawberry has been eaten, it's time for our club meeting to begin."

"Is that what we're doing now?" Misha asked distractedly.

"It's been so long, I thought we weren't doing them anymore.

And what about him?" He jabbed his thumb in Finch's direction. "He's new."

"Which is exactly why today's meeting is important."

"Club?" Finch asked. He was so far out of his depth that he was afraid he'd

never find his way to the surface.

“Wytad Club,” Ignatius explained. “It’s not actually a club in the traditional sense of the word, but it’s what we call ourselves when we get together. Although I guess it’s in need of a name change. We need to be more inclusive. Not everyone mated to a dragon lays eggs.”

Walter shrank into his seat and looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. No sooner had he than Peregrine patted him on the arm and inched his chair closer. “You’re right, darling. The language is outdated at best. The birth of a dragonet should be every bit as cherished as the laying of a clutch. Besides, Finch has yet to conceive at all, unless I’ve missed something.”

Finch almost fell out of his chair. “*What?* ”

“Have you copulated?” Harrison asked. He adjusted his glasses and gave Finch a good look. “With Hugh, I mean.

Previous instances of copulation don’t count. Although it would be fascinating to study the mating habits of a dragonet prior to the formation of a bond with his or her dragon. Ohh, I have so much research to do.” Harrison chewed on his bottom lip.

“Harry, you lived with me all through college,” Ignatius said flatly. “I’m pretty sure you’ve got all the data you need.”

Good lord, who were these people? Finch was starting to understand why Walter seemed in perpetual need of a stiff drink. Thank god the conversation swung off on a wild tangent pursuant to Ignatius’s comment about his wild college days, or Finch might have died of embarrassment.

Unfortunately, there was one individual seated at the table who seemed to have no interest in the time during Ignatius’s freshman year when he’d inadvertently hooked up with his TA. Misha set his phone down, leaned forward on his elbows, and peered straight into Finch’s very soul. “You. New omega,”

he said. “You never answered the question.”

Silence fell. All eyes turned on Finch. Finch sat with improved posture, but his good manners did nothing to alleviate the force of their stare. When it became obvious none of them would let him escape, he cleared his throat and said, “I hardly know what you’re talking about.”

Misha snorted and leaned back in his chair, returning to whatever he’d been up to on his phone. “I’ll take that as a no.

With that in mind, may I suggest ‘Dragonet Club’?”

Ignatius nodded. “Sure. That works. Dragonet Club it is.”

Finch hadn’t quite died of embarrassment yet, but it was a near thing. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work, as I’m not a dragonet.”

Despite the hordes of shrieking children running amok, the silence was deafening. It was broken after a time by Walter, of all people, who told Finch quite nervously, “It’s okay to admit it. I don’t know what your Superintendents taught you, but you don’t have to be afraid. The Amethyst clan isn’t full of bloodthirsty monsters. They won’t hurt you, not even when you deserve punishment.”

“I’m not—”

“But you are,” Misha said with a tired sigh. He turned his phone so its screen was facing Finch. On it was all of Finch’s personal information—information supposed to have been kept confidential within the Attendant network’s private databank. “Why do you lie? I have no patience for it. It says here you’re a dragonet.”

The actual word displayed on the screen was

“DISGRACE,” which was true. It was the implication that he was a dragon that Finch took issue with. Semantics, however, would have to be debated another day. Finch leapt up from the table and, in his panic, tried to snatch the phone from Misha, who snarled something at him in Russian and kicked him in the spleen. Finch stumbled back, winded, and resorted to begging Misha with his eyes. “Please,” he said. “Exit that screen at once. The

information on it isn't supposed to have been made public, and if Hugh were to find out—”

“If Hugh were to find out what?” asked Hugh as he entered the room flanked by a good twenty or so of his nephews. “It seems I’ve missed something. Finch, are you well? You’re unusually pale.”

The whole table sprang to their feet. Even Misha, who’d been glaring daggers at Finch. He tucked his hands behind his back and stepped in front of Finch. In his hand was his cell phone, its screen pointed in Finch’s direction. While he spoke, he used his thumb to close the page with Finch’s information on it. Finch had no clue how he was able to navigate the screen like that without looking, but that would be a mystery for another day.

“It’s the lighting in here, *drakon*, ” Misha said. “All of us look pale in this dingy room.”

“We were just discussing alternate lighting arrangements,”

Peregrine added. He stepped around Finch to stand at Misha’s side, effectively blocking Finch from Hugh. “Finch will have to excuse me for revealing his secrets, but the conversation came about when Harrison commented on his freckles. You might not think much of it, but Pedigree omegas are taught

that any and all imperfections are to be minimized or made invisible, freckles included. It seems the light here emphasizes them, and Finch was distressed by the thought you might notice.”

Finch did not have freckles. He did, however, owe thanks to the Dragonet Club. Not only were they giving him a chance to compose himself, but they were actively working to keep his secret. It was a shame they had to mention the Pedigree to do it, since Finch had been trying his best not to mention his enrolment at all in the hopes Hugh would simply forget he’d ever been a part of it, but he’d rather his involvement with the Pedigree be fresh in Hugh’s mind than his secret come to light.

With some luck, sweet, gullible Hugh would eat up their every word and

forget anything was amiss.

Which was exactly what happened.

Hugh made a moue of distaste. “How ridiculous. Finch, I’ve never seen a freckle on you, but I assure you if there were any to be seen, I would still hold you in the highest regard.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Other Drakes were filing into the room now. Grimbold entered, followed by Ian and Geoffrey. Alistair, Everard, Reynard, and Sebastian trailed behind. There was no sign of Bertram, but that was to be expected. He seldom attended family functions.

“I think everyone has arrived,” Hugh announced. “It’s high time we eat cake. Finch, what do you think? Will you come share some with me? I find myself ravenous, but I would like your company, if I may.”

“I would be glad to, sir.” Finch whispered his thanks to Peregrine and Misha, then stepped out from behind them to join his employer. “And thank you again for not minding my freckles. I always strive to be the best for you, but some things simply cannot be helped.”

“Think nothing of it.” Hugh took Finch’s hand and led him through the crowd. With almost thirty nephews between the ages of five and eight, one lizard in a party hat, seven grown

dragons, and six Disgraces—not including themselves—it was no easy feat.

“Isn’t it amazing, Finch?” Hugh asked when they were in the thick of it, the ghost of his lips moving against the shell of Finch’s ear. A shiver coursed down Finch’s spine, and he leaned into the touch. It was only so he could hear Hugh better, he told himself, but it was a lie. Being close to Hugh was a delight unlike anything else he’d experienced in life, and he’d take any excuse he could to partake in it. “Seeing all the children together like this puts all my fears to rest. Disgraces are dragons. They have to be. There’s never been a time when so many clutches were born in such rapid succession.



Harrison really has figured it all out.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t wait until we can put his theory to the test and add to the chaos at the next Drake family function.”

A new kind of pleasure coursed through Finch. Hugh had said “we.” It was a slip of the tongue, to be sure, but after his discussion with the Dragonet Club and so many years of repressed desire, Finch couldn’t help but imagine how wonderful it would be to carry a clutch to term for his dragon.

“Yes, sir,” Finch said again, not trusting himself with anything else.

But like all dreams, the fantasy ended all too soon. Hugh parted from his side and shooed away his nearby nephews.

“Step aside, children! Save some cake for your uncle Hugh!”

he bellowed.

Finch stood where he’d been left, eyes on Hugh’s back, as he convinced himself over and over that every other Drake mating had been a fluke. Disgraces were not meant for dragons. Even were he to try, he would never have a clutch with Hugh, and it would break his heart. A lifetime spent at his side longing for what he couldn’t have was better than taking a risk and having it end in catastrophic failure. At least, as his secretary, Finch would be able to serve him all his life.

He could not come clean about who he was.

Not now.

Not ever.

“Finch!” Hugh called as he looked back over his shoulder.

“Come along, now! We don’t have long before these little beasties crowd the dessert table again, and I need you by my side before that happens. We’re a

team, you and I. I can't have us apart. I need you."

The problem was, Finch needed Hugh, too, more than he could hope to say.

15

H U G H

Cake should not have been so delicious. Hugh ate his first piece in large forkfuls, shoveling the next into his mouth as soon as he'd swallowed the one before it. Magic had to have gone into this wonder of a dessert. There was no doubt in his mind. Flour and sugar alone could not come close to achieving such confectionery perfection. This was a dragon's doing.

Or maybe Perry's.

Hugh looked toward the children's table, where Perry was seated on the floor surrounded by his brood, and decided that, yes, Perry *had* to be involved. His brother-in-law was pretty, but to wrangle a dragon like Sebastian took all kinds of wit and cunning. And cake. The secrets of this year's birthday offerings were hidden somewhere within his crown of blond curls. Hugh was sure of it.

"Sir?" Finch asked in a low voice as Hugh lurched up from the table. "Are you well?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine. For whatever reason, the floor here is uneven and I can't seem to find my footing. I'm sure Sebastian will have it fixed..." A time frame eluded him, so Hugh waved a hand, dismissing the thought. "There are more important matters at hand, anyway. Finch. Finch! Have you tried the cake? You *must* try the cake. I've never had anything like it in my life." He caught the back of Finch's chair to steady himself, then dipped down and whispered, "Don't tell anyone, but I'm embarking on a mission to find out who baked it, because I simply must have them cater the ball. Can you

imagine? You and I, feasting on total decadence while we're serenaded with live music and plied with the finest wine?"

Finch blinked. “Sir... this is a Funfetti cake.”

Hugh jerked back from Finch, eyes wide, and cried in delight, “Funfetti!”

“Sir, please calm down. Your family is staring.”

“Never mind them, Finch! You’ve unraveled the mystery.

Now, how do I get in touch with this Mr. Funfetti? Or is it Mrs? Ms? *Lord* Funfetti... now there’s a name with a ring to it!”

“Sir—”

“Or would you call someone who bakes cakes for a living

‘Chef’? It seems more appropriate. What bits they have between their legs doesn’t matter as much as what they do with their hands, which are clearly magical. In any case...”

Hugh trailed off as he locked eyes with Everard, who was seated on the opposite side of the table. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and a moment later he rose from his chair. The bastard. It was just like him to snipe Chef Funfetti out from under Hugh while Hugh was otherwise distracted.

Well, not this time.

Hugh narrowed his eyes challengingly. “Don’t you dare.”

Everard leaned in to whisper something to his mate, Harrison, no doubt instructing him to join his evil mission. As a team they’d have an advantage Hugh wasn’t sure he could beat. If the best cake he’d ever tasted was going to be his, he needed to up his game.

“Finch,” Hugh whispered. “My brother and his mate are teaming up against me to steal the secrets of Chef Funfetti. I need your help, or they’re sure to succeed. If you have Chef Funfetti’s contact information, you *must* tell me, because if not we’ll need to mobilize and get to Perry at the children’s table before Everard and Harrison do.”

“Sir, I don’t—”

“Then it’s imperative we make haste!”

Everard was already on the move, although strangely he was headed away from the children’s table. It seemed an awful lot like he was trying to get to Hugh. But Everard was nothing if not sneaky, and Hugh saw through his ruse. While he faked Hugh out, Harrison would use the distraction as cover to slip unseen to the children’s table and vow Perry to secrecy. Such terrible trickery could not be allowed to happen. It was time to take action.

“Brace yourself, Finch!” Hugh declared.

Finch’s eyes widened. “For what, sir?”

Hugh answered by lifting Finch out of his chair and swinging him over his shoulder. Finch gasped.

“Brother,” Everard warned, but Hugh wasn’t swayed. He held on to Finch with one arm, grabbed his plate of partially eaten cake with the other, and rushed in the direction of the children’s table. The floor was no better there than it had been where Hugh had been sitting, but he made do as best he could, only stumbling once or twice, and never enough to endanger his beloved Finch or his faithful cake.

Or was it supposed to be his faithful Finch and his beloved cake? He couldn’t tell the difference anymore. Both were precious treasures meant to be protected at all costs.

Children swarmed him upon his approach, but all of them were smart enough to stay out from beneath his feet. It did make progression more difficult than it had to be, but with Everard and Harrison likely hot on his heels, it was a blessing in disguise. With a protective barrier of nephews around him, he needn’t worry about any of Everard’s more underhanded tactics. As long as he got to Perry first, he’d win.

“Uncle Hugh!” Maxime said. “May we please have some candy?”

A chorus of so many pleases followed that Hugh couldn't hear himself think, but thankfully the hubbub didn't seem to affect Finch. He wiggled and squirmed until he'd sunk an inch or two lower down Hugh's back and dug into Hugh's pockets.

From there, the details were a little foggy, but from what Hugh could ascertain, Finch took the candy he carried on him and threw it at random across the room. The effects were instant.

In a flurry of shouts and screams, the crowd of young Drakes bolted across the room.

A second later there came a startled cry from Everard.

It gave Hugh a brilliant idea. "Use the children, Finch! The children! Throw the candy at my brother!"

"Already done, sir."

"You are a treasure." Hugh came to a wobbly stop next to a baffled-looking Perry. "Hello, Perry. Would it be an inconvenience were I to temporarily kidnap you?"

Perry tilted his head to the side in thought, the golden chains of his ear cuff brushing his delicate shoulder. "Will Finch be there?"

"Certainly."

"Then no." Perry smiled prettily. "Please, kidnap away."

It was a struggle to kidnap an omega with one already slung over his shoulder and a precious piece of cake in hand, but Perry helped by raising his arms and allowing Hugh to lift him from the chest. Perry and cake on one side, Finch on the other, Hugh fled the room before his brother or his nephews could stop him. The secrets of Chef Funfetti were so close, he could taste them.

Sebastian's atrium was a place of wonder. Hugh set Perry down gently in a patch of its lushest grass, then lowered himself to one knee to let Finch off

his shoulder. Perry, ever the vision of beauty, tilted his head to best catch the light and lounged in a way that would have made Venus herself pale in comparison. Finch...

Hugh blinked, then stared.

He'd expected Finch to be far more clunky and awkward, but Finch held his own, stepping back from Hugh gracefully before sitting next to the omega beside him. His dark hair and

eyes were in direct contrast to Perry's fairness, but the difference didn't minimize his beauty. Rather, it amplified it.

Hugh was speechless.

"What an exciting turn of events," Perry said, breaking the silence. "I never imagined I'd be kidnapped from a children's birthday party. It goes to show that one can never be certain what life will throw one's way. Is this your first kidnapping, Finch?"

Finch cleared his throat. "Yes."

"Oh, how wonderful! They're not always as nice as this, you know—you really are quite fortunate the dragon who decided to stake his claim on you is civilized. There was one time shortly after Sebastian took me from my cloister that I..."

Perry laughed, the sound as bright and crisp as ringing bells.

"Well, perhaps that's a story for another day. We should focus on the present. Hugh, why have you brought us here? I can assure you that you won't be getting a coin out of our hoard."

Perry's eyes twinkled. "We're stretched positively thin trying to set the children up with riches of their own. If you're seeking ransom, you're far better off kidnapping Harrison."

If he was being honest, Hugh couldn't remember why he'd whisked Perry off in the first place. The details had been lost the second he'd laid eyes on his

secretary.

“Mr. Drake was moved by the quality of cake you served at the party,” Finch explained in his place, which... well, it did seem familiar, but Hugh couldn’t hold on to that thought no matter how hard he tried. How could he when Finch was sitting there in the sunlight, hair soft and gleaming, with the gemstone brooch Hugh had given him burning with inner fire?

He was too tantalizing to resist.

“So moved,” Finch continued, “that he felt the immediate need to kidnap you so he could inquire as to who made it.”

“Oh!” Perry twittered with laughter. “I’m embarrassed to admit it, but Ignatius asked if there was any way he could contribute, and I couldn’t say no. I entrusted the cake to him.

Chaucer was just telling me how much fun he had licking the spatula, so I assume it was homemade.”

“Chef Funfetti,” Hugh mumbled, nearly incoherent. He barely noticed when Finch took the plate from his hand. The world was moving more slowly than it had any right to, and he was having trouble following along.

“Hugh, darling, your eyes are awfully bloodshot.” There was a jingle. Hugh only clued in after the fact that Perry was patting his hand. “Are you well?”

The world started to spin, and even when Hugh closed his eyes, it wouldn’t stop. To protect Finch from being crushed should he lose his balance, he lay in the grass before him and closed his eyes. “My cake.”

“I have your cake, sir. I’ll keep it safe.”

“My Finch,” Hugh murmured sadly. He lifted a hand and grabbed at the air in front of him, but Finch was nowhere to be found.

“And I have your Finch,” Perry promised. “You needn’t worry. All will be well.”

Hugh couldn't open his eyes for fear the universe would spin out of control, but he did feel the air move around him.

"I'm here, sir," Finch said from close by. "I won't leave you."

"Never?" Hugh muttered.

"Never."

"Finch..." Hugh reached for him again and this time found a wrist or an ankle. Whichever it was, it belonged to Finch.

The pleasant, homey way the skin-to-skin contact made him feel could not be ascribed to anyone else.

Finch laid his hand over Hugh's. "What's the matter, sir?"

"Cake," Hugh despaired. "My cake."

"I will see to it that Emma bakes you one once we're back home and you're better."

"No."

"No?"

"You." Hugh swallowed the excess of saliva pooling in his mouth. All of a sudden, he didn't feel so well. "It has to be you. Will you make it for me?"

"I... I suppose, sir. I can try."

"He's awfully sweet, isn't he?" Perry asked in a soft voice, prompting Hugh and Finch to simultaneously reply, "He is."

Surprised, Hugh found the courage to open his eyes. The world was still spinning, but there was Finch, the tips of his ears pink, as beautiful as anything. It was a travesty he wasn't a dragonet. Hugh would give away every last treasure in his hoard to make it so, but the world didn't work that way.



Saddened, Hugh closed his eyes. Amorphous shapes and colors twisted in the darkness, but the message behind them was clear—longing, need, and affection. The longer he focused on those concepts, the less firm his grip on reality became until he had no grip left at all and the darkness behind his eyelids lulled him to sleep.

“—but Drakes in particular can be clueless,” said Perry an indeterminate amount of time later when Hugh regained a semblance of consciousness. The inside of his head was prickly and he felt minty, like someone had turned his blood to menthol. “I wouldn’t dismiss him so quickly. If you were to just tell him the truth—”

“Impossible.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid that if I did, it would destroy what we already have.”

Hugh lost track of the conversation and drifted back to sleep. When he woke a while later, a new voice was speaking.

It belonged to that cake stealer, Everard. “*How much?*”

“I’m not entirely sure, but possibly an entire nugget. Hugh seemed to be under the impression that was a small amount suitable for testing the... product.”

“Good lord.”

“It was my fault. I should have warned our hosts upon discovery.”

“Your fault?” Perry laughed. “Darling, this was the most fun I’ve ever had while being kidnapped. I imagine Sebastian will break down the doors any minute now and carry me off into the sunset, and—if I may be frank—I cannot wait.”

Hugh lost track of the conversation again. When he came to, no one was speaking anymore. The atrium was still and silent, but Finch was there. He’d positioned Hugh so his head was resting on Finch’s lap, which was a sweet

gesture in and of itself, but was made sweeter yet by the way Finch was running his fingers through Hugh's hair. He didn't notice Hugh wake up—he was looking elsewhere, eyes distant.

“Finch?” Hugh asked in a hoarse whisper. “How long have I been asleep?”

Finch looked down on him and smiled, but it was a small, depleted thing that made Hugh feel guilty. “Four hours, sir.”

“What are you still doing here?”

“I promised you I wouldn't leave.”

Oh, sweet Finch. Hugh frowned. His guilt grew. “I'm sorry.”

“Never be sorry, sir. It's my choice to be here.” Finch's smile gained sincerity. “I'm proud to be under your employ even when you kidnap the host of a children's birthday party and demand his Funfetti recipe as ransom. Which I've obtained, by the way. When Ignatius stopped by to check on us, I asked him for it. He claims to have used the Pillsbury mix. I've already notified the staff. There should be several boxes of it waiting upon our return home.”

Hugh had forgotten about the cake. The events of that afternoon were lost to the fog of his mind—only glimpses of it remained.

“You spoil me, Finch.” Hugh rolled onto his side and buried his face against Finch's thigh. “I think I'm ready to say goodbye to everyone and leave. I'm in need of another nap, preferably somewhere soft and familiar.”

Finch never stopped stroking his hair. “Of course, sir.”

“Will you come with me? To nap, I mean. It feels nice to have you near.”

“If you'd like.”

“I would.”

“Then I will.” Finch stroked Hugh's hair back from his head, then stilled his

hand. “Do you need help up, sir, or are you feeling capable?”

“Let’s see.”

Hugh stood, but even though the ground beneath his feet was no longer uneven, he wobbled a little. It was for show.

Like he’d hoped, Finch rose and tucked himself under Hugh’s arm to offer support. Hugh nestled closer to him and off they went, a man, his dragon, and a partially eaten slice of cake.

16

## F I N C H

Finch rode in the car back to Hugh’s estate while his employer slept, his cheek rested on Finch’s shoulder. Hugh snored, but very quietly, like a low rumble, and the sound was far more endearing than it was annoying.

When they arrived back at the house, George opened the car’s door and then helped Finch remove Hugh from the vehicle. He woke while it happened. His plum-colored eyes opened wide, and he stared around at things like an astonished child. “Finch. I say. We’re home. How did that happen?”

“George drove us, sir.”

“Nonsense. The journey took no time at all. Someone used magic. It’s the only explanation.”

“Just the magic of George’s driving, sir. Come, let’s put you to bed.” Finch took one of Hugh’s arms and George took the other. Hugh shook the other Attendant off, however.

“No. Thank you all the same, George, but I’m not an invalid. Just a bit... ah... woozy. I’ll be perfectly fine with Finch here. You go run along and do... whatever it is... you do. That’ll be all.”

George gave Finch a knowing smirk and a wink. “Of course, sir.” That said, he gave a shallow bow and went to return the car to the garage.

“There,” Hugh said. “Much better. Shall we go?” He started pulling Finch behind him with rather more strength than Finch had been expecting from a dragon who was higher than a kite.

“Of course, sir.” Finch had to practically trot to keep up after Hugh.

Through the front door they went, across the foyer, and straight past the marble staircase leading to the second floor.

Finch looked back at it uncertainly. It was the quickest and easiest way to access Hugh’s bedroom, where he assumed the dragon would want to nap. Hugh, it seemed, had other plans.

He led Finch into the east wing of the house, which housed the barely used library, the somewhat more frequently used conservatory, and—

“My hoard!” Hugh announced as they stood before the thick armored door.

Finch’s heart began to pound much too fast and too hard.

A dragon’s hoard was a special thing, and Hugh wanted to nap with Finch inside his. “Yes, sir. Your hoard.” Finch swallowed.

“You wish to nap inside your hoard?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Hugh cheerfully. “It’s my favorite place to nap. All the gold is very soothing, you know.”

“I... well... I’ve heard that, yes.” Finch felt his ears burn with the thought of what else dragons liked to do in their hoards.

Hugh smiled, and it lit up his entire face. “Have you?”

Brilliant. I’m very much looking forward to a nice snooze amongst my treasures.”

“With... uh... me?” It came out as a question rather than a statement.

“Of course with you, silly boy. Now. Let’s see here.” He placed his palm on

the touch screen mounted to the wall to the right of the door. A moment later, a panel on the wall opened and out came a retinal scanner, to which Hugh presented his right eye. A light flashed.

“Scan complete,” said a disembodied robotic voice. “You may now enter.”

“I do love technology, don’t you, Finch? How clever of Reynard to have these installed.”

“Indeed, sir.”

Hugh gave Finch a sideways glance. “He told me it would be possible to add another retinal signature to its database. If you like it inside, maybe I can have you added. It would be nice, I think, to have some company in my favorite place, especially if that company is you.”

“I have a suite of my own, sir.” The heat gathering in the tips of Finch’s ears was starting to become uncomfortable. It was an utterly ridiculous idea to have him added to the database, but Hugh was being so insistent. “I appreciate the sentiment, but since I’m not involved with the hoard’s maintenance, wouldn’t your mate be cross were she to discover me on the list? Or worse, in there when you two, ah... well...”

Hugh narrowed his eyes at Finch. “Yes, perhaps, but who’s to say how long it will be until I find her? I can have you put on the security system in the meantime.” The concentration on his face broke, giving way to another cheery smile. “Won’t that be nice?”

Finch was starting to sweat. “The ball is in two months, sir.”

“Details, details! Two months is an eternity from now.

Besides, this is no time to discuss serious matters—this is time to nap. Dragons like to nap. Did you know that? The best place is here, but the conservatory is also good. Harrison once asked me if I had a giant heat lamp, and I had to confess I did not. On sunny days, the conservatory does get quite warm, though.”

Finch's heart was beating so rapidly, it felt like he was going to pass out. "Indeed, I... yes."

"Yes to naps," Hugh supplied. "Very good. Let's get inside, then. I must say, I'm eager for my bed."

While Hugh wrestled open the heavy door, Finch stood perfectly still and worked on calming down. Hugh was a delightful, if slightly simple, dragon, and there was no way he was bringing Finch into his hoard for *that*. Not that *that* was

bound to happen. In fact, the very possibility of *that* was to be discouraged. Finch was Hugh's secretary, not a beta plaything ribbed for his pleasure. If Finch was to remain under his employ, it had to stay that way.

Midway through mentally chastising himself, the door to the hoard swung open, and Finch's mind went blank. He'd been braced for treasure, but nothing could have prepared him for the magnificence that was Hugh's hoard. Literal mountains of coins, jewels, and assorted golden trinkets were piled haphazardly within its walls. Interspersed throughout were pieces of furniture—a gilt armchair here, a throne there, and at the center of the room, a tremendous bed with soft-looking sheets and large, cloud-like pillows. The room was bathed in light from both sconces and overhead fixtures alike, positioned as if to celebrate even the smallest piece of treasure. "My lord..."

"Well, yes. I am an earl. How clever of you to remember.

And possibly a baronet. I forget. It was all a very long time ago." Hugh began to unbutton his shirt. "I honestly have no idea how I'd function without you, Finch." He pulled the unbuttoned shirt off and tossed it onto a nearby chaise upholstered in dark purple velvet. "You keep track of me so flawlessly, even the parts of me I forget. If I had a mind like yours, there wouldn't be a dragon in the world who would be my rival."

A slack-jawed Finch turned his gaze from several museums' worth of antiquities to ogle the room's newest treasure—Hugh. All dragons were beautiful, but Hugh was particularly lovely. His body was strong and sleek, with dark hair that ran down his chest and to his flat navel. From the short

distance that separated them, Finch could see Hugh's pink nipples were erect. God. How on earth was he supposed to deal with seeing Hugh's nipples? It was all so impossible.

"Thank you, sir," Finch said when he remembered that he had a tongue. "But... are you undressing?"

"Yes, I am. Otherwise I'll ruin a perfectly good pair of Brioni trousers, and you do yell when you have to pay the bills." Hugh unbuttoned said trousers and pulled them off.

"Well, pay the bills out of the accounts, naturally. I'd never expect you to buy my clothing out of pocket." Hugh had turned pink, but Finch suspected it had little to do with modesty. "Although I daresay that if you did, I'd wear anything you picked out for me. You have marvelous taste, Finch."

"Thank you." Finch's mouth was entirely dry. He'd gotten used to Hugh's handsome face, and while he found it no less nice to look at, it no longer dazzled him into utter bumbling stupidity. The same could not be said for Hugh's body, which was now entirely on display save for the tiny, thin, and very expensive bit of cloth covering his loins. To make matters worse, Hugh had inordinately beautiful legs. Finch wasn't sure exactly how legs could even be beautiful, especially covered, as Hugh's were, in fine dark hair. Yet it was inescapable: Hugh was beautiful from the silky hair on his head down to his rather elegant feet. No wonder humans used to slay dragons—

they were far too impossibly good looking.

"You are, as always, very welcome." Hugh took off the underwear and tossed them on top of his pile of clothes. He stood there, utterly nude and utterly unashamed, and why not?

There was nothing at all for him to be ashamed of when it came to his body. Finch, on the other hand, flamed with hot embarrassment.

"Do you... ah... always nap in the nude, sir?" Finch desperately hoped Hugh wouldn't require it of him. He was certain he wouldn't be able to control himself.

“Nearly always, yes,” Hugh said, then transformed.

Despite his thirteen years under Hugh’s employ, Finch had never once seen Hugh turn into a dragon. He’d known it was possible, of course, but there’d never been a time in which the change had been necessary. He’d assumed that it was a quick thing, rather like ripping off a coat, but whether Hugh slowed the process for Finch’s benefit or whether it was simply the way nature intended, the shift from man to beast took longer than Finch expected.

First, scales tumbled over Hugh’s shoulders and up his neck. They spread over his body gradually, one slotting into place beneath the other like shingles on a roof. While they did, Hugh’s body started to change. Black claws pushed their way out of nail beds, and the bones in his handsome face began to reshape themselves, elongating his mandibles and doing away with his human features. At the same time that his wings appeared, his pupils narrowed into slits. From there, Hugh’s body continued to reshape itself as he expanded, losing more and more of its humanity until a fully grown, fully scaled Amethyst dragon stood in front of Finch. It was enormous.

Rather, *he* was enormous. Finch could only stare.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise that Hugh was as lovely in dragon form as he was in his human guise, but his beauty rendered Finch speechless all the same. His scales had an almost blue cast to their violet depths. They were decidedly purple, but the sort of hue you got in twilight skies and in the water of the lake as the sun set and night fell. Like the treasure surrounding him, they glistened beneath the light. Finch wanted badly to touch them, but he knew better than to try. If Hugh wanted to be touched, he’d make it known. Until then, it was best Finch keep his hands to himself. It was never a good idea to accost a dragon.

After a moment spent in observation of Finch, Hugh turned and scrambled up the nearest mountain of treasure.

When he reached its peak, he curled up like a cat and tucked his tail over his snout. Some time passed. A minute or so later, Hugh lifted his head and stared down at Finch, his large, dark eyes narrowed. Finch knew that expression and he felt, suddenly, on firmer ground. “Is there something I can



get for you, sir?”

Hugh huffed out a breath of smoke and a tiny jet of flame.

With his front leg, he patted his taloned hand on the treasure beside him.

“I’m not sure, sir. It’s really not my place.”

The dragon patted even more insistently, flipping a few coins into the air in the process. They tumbled down the side of the mountain of treasure.

Finch sighed. Hugh was normally a very easygoing sort of man, but he could be stubborn, and he was currently wearing his most stubborn expression. “Fine. But I’m not entirely sure how I’m supposed to get up there without falling and breaking my neck.”

Hugh reached down and gently picked Finch up by the back of his shirt, hauled him up, and laid him on a velvet cushion embroidered with gold and silver thread. Finch was glad he wasn’t naked, because the pillow was itchy. With a little poke to his chest, Hugh encouraged Finch to recline and use his scales as a backrest. They were, Finch found to his utter delight, surprisingly smooth and comfortable, a bit like buttery soft leather, and so warm that Finch wanted to cuddle into them forever. Once he was settled, Hugh curled around him and used one of his mighty wings to close the open space over Finch’s head, creating a small room for Finch made entirely of himself. It was warm and comfortable rather than stifling, and delightfully dark. Who knew that dragons could be so resourceful? Finch cuddled against Hugh’s side and enjoyed it, occupying himself with listening to Hugh’s deep, rumbling breaths.

He didn’t intend to fall asleep. Rather, like this afternoon at the party, Finch figured Hugh would rest and he would stand watch. Nevertheless, fall asleep Finch did. It was almost impossible not to. Protected by his dragon and sheltered from the world, he’d never felt so safe in his life.

Finch woke up in bed. He was fully dressed with the exception of his shoes, thank the lord, but the issue wasn’t his state of dishabille so much as it was that he’d gained significant amounts of apparel. As Finch woke, he took

stock of it all. A ring had been placed on each of his fingers save his pinkies, which were stacked so high with rings, he could barely see his skin. There were *things* on his back—coins, probably, although they might also have been flat-backed jewels—and from the corner of an eye, he caught sight of a slender gold chain that had been draped over his head to nestle in his hair.

There may or may not have been diamonds studded in it. It was hard to see when he was trying his very best to pretend he was still asleep.

In addition to the riches covering his body, the bed was littered with coins and some of the largest amethysts Finch had ever seen. There were other gold trinkets and sparkly baubles, but there were so many that trying to identify them all would be insanity. Instead, Finch scanned the bed for the one thing that seemed to be missing—Hugh.

The dragon was nowhere to be seen.

With his employer missing and not a clock to be seen, Finch wiggled to dislodge the treasure piled on his back and attempted to sit up. He was still in Hugh's hoard, he realized, meaning that he was sleeping in Hugh's sex bed. Well, at least he assumed it was Hugh's sex bed. The truth was, for as long as Finch had served him, he hadn't noticed Hugh take any callers. Perhaps it was his wank bed. At the party, Ignatius had shared a story about a wank throne, so anything was possible.

After he'd shaken off enough treasure to sit up, Finch saw Hugh, naked and very human, coming toward him, carrying some sort of chest. "Oh," Hugh said. "It seems you're awake."

He blushed a rosy pink that spread all the way down his lightly furred chest.

"Ah, yes. How did I... uh... get here? On your m... bed?"

Finch had almost said mating bed, but he'd stopped himself in time.

"I carried you," Hugh said proudly, "and I did it so carefully, you didn't wake up." He set the chest down and started pulling ropes of pearls from its depths.

“I... see. And the accoutrements?”

“You needed decoration,” Hugh said, his chin set in a stubborn line. “You wore the lovely brooch today, but it seemed lonely, so I got it some company. Don’t you like it?”

Hugh spoke with such a hopeful air that Finch couldn’t bear to disappoint him. “It’s all very lovely, sir. You’ll make

some omega a very happy mate one day. One day soon, hopefully. The ball is only six weeks away.”

Hugh’s face fell. “Ah, yes. The ball. Of course.”

“You seemed excited about it at the birthday party,” Finch said, giving Hugh an encouraging smile. “You were very interested in cake.”

“From Chef Funfetti, yes. I’m delighted you’ve made arrangements to have some at the ball.” Hugh, despite his words, looked anything but delighted.

“Have you changed your mind, sir? Do you wish me to cancel the affair?”

Hugh looked at Finch and a variety of emotions flashed across his face: relief, resignation, determination, and something that might have been sorrow. “No,” he said slowly.

“No, I still need a mate if I’m ever to have a family. Still, it doesn’t give me much time.” He frowned.

That frown worried Finch. “Not much time for what, sir?”

“Oh, nothing,” Hugh replied airily. “Well, something, yes, but... well, never mind what. That’s my secret.” Then he gave Finch a smile every bit as brilliant as the diamonds nesting in Finch’s hair.

17

H U G H

Once upon a time, a young Hugh had discovered a golden coin. The tiny piece of treasure had been lost at the deepest part of the stream behind Drake Manor, where it sparkled once a day when the sun hit it just right. Hugh, smitten with its shine, had spent long hours on the shore plotting how to make it his. The current was too swift for him, and the coin too far away. At last, unwilling to give it up, he'd plunged headfirst into the water and had been promptly swept away. No matter how hard he'd paddled or flapped his wings, he simply couldn't beat the current. By the time he washed up onto the shore, he'd exhausted himself trying to stay afloat. It had been a long trip back home.

That summer, he'd come to the stream every day to test his luck, and little by little, his skills improved. Three weeks after first spotting the coin, Hugh bested the current. Heart pounding hard from the anticipation of victory, he'd darted all the way down and plucked his prize out of the silt. Alight with excitement, he'd shot back up to the surface and caught his breath on the shore while examining his new treasure. It was an old coin, like the ones he'd seen in his father's hoard, but it was even better than any of his father's treasure, because it was *his*. At least, it had been until later that night, when Everard had tricked Hugh and run off with it. The ensuing scuffle had injured them both and been so violent that not even their beta nursemaids had dared interfere. In the end, their father had been forced to step in and put a stop to it, and as punishment for being so naughty, he'd taken the coin away.

Hugh had learned an important lesson that day—guard the things you love, because you never know when they might be taken from you. Only now the thing he wanted to keep wasn't an object, but a man.

It was strange, Hugh thought as his gaze traced the arm of Finch's suit jacket, that his dragon would insist he add a man to his belongings. Heaven knew his brothers would laugh if they found out he was considering it. It was simply not done.

The purpose of a hoard was to demonstrate wealth and, through it, accomplishment. It was a reflection of a dragon's success, intelligence, and cunning. Priceless artifacts, expensive jewels, and humble gold coins conveyed that quite nicely. Human beings did not.

But Finch...

Finch was a treasure. Hugh had been saying it for years now. Seeing him in his hoard chamber drenched in riches only confirmed it. The man was meant to be cherished, and Hugh was just the dragon for the job.

“The caterer is asking for our final selections from the wine list, sir,” Finch announced, stirring Hugh from his thoughts. They’d assembled in Hugh’s study, Hugh seated at his desk while Finch stood at his side, cradling a thick folder of documents in his arm. Finch produced one of the documents and laid it in front of Hugh. “I’ve gone ahead and made a list of the ones you reacted positively to during the tasting. There was only one champagne you enjoyed, so with your permission I’ll confirm it as your selection, but I’ll still need you to choose from amongst the reds and the whites.”

“Any will do.”

“Any?” Finch frowned. “Sir, there are twenty wines listed here...”

“I trust your judgment. Why don’t you make the final selection? That way it will be a collaboration.”

Finch’s expression failed to lighten. “Sir, with all due respect, this isn’t my ball, and while I appreciate the faith you have in me, it’s not my place to make these kinds of decisions

for you. If you need guidance, I’d be glad to provide it, but the rest will be up to you.”

Hugh worried a gold coin between his fingers. Unlike the one he’d found outside Drake Manor, this one was of recent mint and shiny enough to bewitch even an adult dragon. For the last week, Hugh had been slipping coins just like it into Finch’s pockets in an attempt to integrate him into his hoard.

Unlike before, when he’d showered Finch with gifts in the hopes that Finch wouldn’t abandon him, these gifts were meant to mark him. Eventually Finch would become so used to finding them that he’d come to accept that being

around treasure was a normal part of life, that it belonged to him, and he belonged to it, and that Hugh would care for them both.

“Well...” Hugh tapped a finger on the wine list, prompting Finch to look at where he was pointing. Once the manservant was distracted, Hugh slid the coin into his pocket. “I choose this one.”

“Sir, did you even look before making your selection?”

“Of course I did. What kind of a man do you take me for, Finch?”

Finch’s lips pressed into a thin, exasperated line. “You’re pointing at the subheader denoting French Merlots.”

Hugh lifted his finger and discovered that Finch was right.

The room became awfully quiet. Hugh, too anxious to sit still, fished another coin out of his pocket and smoothed his thumb over it. Finch was mad at him. He had to be. He’d worked exceptionally hard to put the list together, and Hugh couldn’t even be bothered to look at it long enough not to make a fool out of himself.

But how could he with Finch standing so close?

Part of the reason dragons kept their most cherished possessions out of sight was to keep them out of mind.

Treasure was distracting. Hugh had spent the better part of a month in pursuit of a single coin, and while quite a few hundred years had passed since then, he was still, at his core, the same easily distracted whelp. Finch didn’t glitter in the sun

—thank god—but he was captivating in his own rights.

Beautiful—even more beautiful than Perry, which Hugh had once thought was impossible—intelligent, diligent, charming.

God, was he charming. Hugh had known it from the start, but only come to appreciate it lately. What a fool he’d been not to notice earlier.

“Well,” Hugh said with a laugh. “It goes to show what I know about wine. What about... ah, yes. This is the one the sommelier mentioned was recovered from a shipwreck, correct? What a romantic notion. Let’s make that part of our narrative.”

Finch leveled a skeptical look in Hugh’s direction, then made a note on the list. By the time they’d completed their selection, Hugh had slipped two more coins into his pockets.

He couldn’t wait for the day Finch jingled when he walked.

“Guests have begun to RSVP to the ball,” Finch informed Hugh one afternoon not all that long after. There were already three coins in his pockets and the secretary was none the wiser.

Hugh was positively giddy at his own cunning. “The interest thus far has been astounding. I think it’s safe to say we’ll have a full house.”

“Incredible.” Hugh dipped his hands in his pockets and felt up another coin he was plotting to plant on Finch. “How are preparations on the, uh, oh, what’s the word...”

“The catering, sir?”

“Yes!” Hugh hadn’t actually had anything in particular in mind, but he’d wanted to act present. Letting Finch fill in the blanks was a safe way to make sure he felt heard. “How is the catering going?”

“Wonderfully. We’ve locked in our appetizers and amuse-bouche, and I’ve been working hand in hand with a local pâtissier to perfect a Funfetti petit four that will be sure to please you.”

“And the, um... the people?”

“The temporary staff?”

“Yes! I meant exactly that.”

Finch turned his attention to the folder in his arms, providing Hugh with an

opportunity to slip the coin into his pocket. Hugh did so. The blasted thing clinked against another one he'd stowed there earlier, making Finch startle. Hugh whipped his hands away and ever so smoothly folded them behind his back, a picture of innocence. Finch's gaze lingered on him for a long moment, a glimmer of something sparkling behind his professional facade, then cleared his throat and proceeded to tell Hugh all about the job listings he'd posted on some 'Attendant network' in search of the right men and women for the job. Hugh didn't hear much of it. He didn't really care. As long as Finch had the help he needed, that was all that mattered. What interested Hugh was the way Finch kept subconsciously brushing his pocket, like he was taking pleasure from feeling the coins within it. That thought kept Hugh up well into the night and ultimately drove him into his hoard, where he lay on sheets woven with threads of gold and came again and again imagining that a pretty Disgrace who looked alarmingly like Finch was there in bed with him.

18

H U G H

"Finch," Hugh said out of the blue over lunch several weeks later. "You've been under my employ for, what, five years?"

Finch lowered his forkful of quiche. "Thirteen, sir."

"Thirteen! Thirteen whole years." Hugh crossed his arms on the table and leaned over his untouched meal. "It makes it even more bizarre that I know so little about you. All this time you've been so focused on me that you've never shared much about you, and I find that sad. Will you share your story with me?"

Finch was, by nature, pale, but when Hugh put forth the question he turned nearly transparent. "My story, sir?"

"Your history," Hugh clarified. "Where you come from, what experiences you've had, and what makes you the man you are. I know small things about you—like that you enjoy the company of two chocolate-chip loving ladies, and that you're originally from England—but there must be more.



What was your childhood like? What are your hobbies? If you were given the choice between a vacation to the mountains or to the beach, which would you choose and why?”

“Sir... are you fishing for information so you can send me on vacation?”

Hugh shrugged, but he also smiled. “Would you go if I was?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Not even after the ball?”

Finch said nothing for a long while as the joy in his eyes deteriorated. It was alarming. But right as Hugh was about to say something, he shook his head and spoke. “Perhaps it would do me good to get out of the house around then. I’d go to the mountains, if given the choice. I’m not the type to lounge in the sun—I burn far too easily to tan, and beaches tend to be packed with people, who I’d rather avoid, if possible. I’d much rather the quiet that comes with an isolated cabin on a forested peak.”

“I thought that was what you’d choose.” Hugh sat back in his chair and picked up his fork to poke at his quiche, but only because he was sure that if he kept looking at Finch, he’d make a fool of himself. The omega was far too stunning. It was a crime he wasn’t a Disgrace. “You do seem like the type who’d appreciate a good mountain. I imagine you curled up with a book in a comfortable chair in front of a window overlooking an ocean of evergreens. Is that something you would do?”

“Yes.”

“So you enjoy reading?”

Finch’s lips quirked in what might have been a smile, had he not been so stubbornly professional. “Yes.”

“What kind of books do you like?”

Finch raised a brow and picked his fork back up again.

“I’m starting to feel as though this is an interrogation.”

“It isn’t!”

“I know, sir.” He paused to eat his morsel, then added, “I read fiction.”

“*Really?*”

“Yes, sir. Romantic comedies, to be more specific. I especially enjoy novels set in the Victorian era, although I’ll never pass on a novel set during classical antiquity. But for the most part, romantic comedies are written in contemporary settings, so they’re the ones I read most often.”

Fascinating. Hugh divided a forkful of quiche from his slice and considered eating it, but paused. There had to be a question that could get Finch talking. If only he could find it...

Inspiration struck.

“How does a man like you end up working as an Attendant?” Hugh asked as he prepared his bite to eat. “Your tastes are sophisticated enough that I’d assume you’d want to pursue higher education, not shackle yourself to the world of dragons, no matter how alluring the compensation.”

“I’m afraid it’s a delicate situation.” The gentle clink of a fork on china marked Finch’s words. “And it wasn’t one I took without investing a great deal of thought. In the end, I decided the small passions I had would lead to careers that wouldn’t permit me the comforts I wanted. Working as an Attendant for a dragon is not only far more lucrative, but is also surprisingly fulfilling.” Hugh looked across the table to find Finch had folded his hands in his lap. His quiche was mostly eaten. He seemed disinterested in the rest. “Not all Attendants are so lucky, I know, but I was fortunate enough to end up under your employ, and I thank the forces that be every day for it.”

Hugh’s heart fluttered. “Then you enjoy it here?”

“Very much so.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” If that was the case, with just a little more coaxing

Hugh would be able to add Finch to his hoard, where he would guard him jealously forever. “Since you’re able to judge, you must have spent some time under the employ of other dragons. Is that right? Or perhaps your parents were Attendants before you?”

Finch lowered his gaze. “In a matter of speaking, but not entirely.”

“What about them, then?” he continued. “Would it do you good to go back to England while on vacation to visit? I can arrange for that.”

Hugh might as well have offered to throw him into a volcano for the look Finch gave him. “No. That won’t be necessary.”

“What’s wrong?”

“With all due respect, sir, I’d rather not talk about my family. The reason I’m so glad to be involved with your life is that I don’t much like being involved in mine. Now, I believe we were supposed to be discussing centerpieces? I’ve had some ideas since the last time we spoke. What do you think about camellia?”

Hugh didn’t even know what a camellia was, but it seemed to make Finch happy, so it was what he went with. Finch had never steered him wrong before, and Hugh had doubts he ever would.

Two weeks before the ball on a gray and snowy day, Hugh sat with Finch on a couch in the solarium while Finch explained the selection of petit fours they’d be serving at the ball. The lot of them had fancy descriptors—Madagascarian this and ganache-topped that—but what Hugh saw on the tray in front of him were four varieties: chocolate, vanilla, lemon, and Funfetti offerings. He spent a moment peering at them, then folded one of his legs beneath him and scooted around so he was facing Finch and not the table. “How do you know so much about all of this?”

Finch blinked and looked Hugh in the eyes, which made Hugh almost forget what he’d asked. “So much about what, sir?”

“So much about the ingredients and the work that goes into making these

cakes. I don't imagine that's something that's taught in school."

"I..." Finch hesitated, and something tightened his lips that Hugh thought might be worry. "I strive for excellence in all things, but in particular I take pride in having as complete an understanding as I can in matters that pertain to you and the estate."

"I would go absolutely batty trying to remember every little detail."

That chased a smile out of Finch's worry, and while he didn't join Hugh in lounging, he did allow his shoulders to relax to a visible degree. "It certainly isn't for everyone.

Several of my peers simply were not suited for it no matter how hard they tried, but they made do as best they could.

That's all anyone really asks for—an attempt. And those who struggle to memorize excel in other ways. Most of the young men and women I knew who had no head for detail were great conversationalists. I'm not sure I can say the same for myself."

"Are you joking, Finch?" Hugh grinned and hooked an arm over the back of the couch, eyes on Finch and only Finch.

"Of all the men and women in this place, you're the one for whom I'd drop everything were you to show up at my door with tea."

A touch of pink came to the tips of Finch's ears. "Thank you, sir."

"I mean it." The snow had stopped, and while the day was still gray, the clouds parted enough that light filled the room. A sparkle at Finch's wrist drew Hugh's attention. "Finch, are those the cufflinks I gave you several years back?"

"They are, sir."

"They look good on you." Hugh smiled at him, and even as rigidly professional as Finch was, he could have sworn he saw the man melt the tiniest bit. "I'm glad you enjoy them."

That day, not only did Hugh get to sample delicious cake, but he also smuggled three more coins into Finch's pockets.

That night, there came a tapping at his bedroom door. Hugh opened it and discovered a cup of herbal tea and a note placed on a small tray left in the hallway.

*I'll owe you one conversation if you'll owe me one moment when you drop everything.*

*x Finch*

To other dragons, a plain piece of paper was no treasure, but Hugh was not other dragons, and he stored the note in a place of honor—front and center in his hoard—which was where it, and everything relating to Finch, belonged.

Time was running short. One week remained until the ball, and Hugh had yet to find the courage to ask Finch to become part of his hoard. To be honest, he wasn't sure how. As far as he was aware, there was no etiquette for asking such a question because no dragon had ever claimed a man as one of his precious belongings. What he did know was that it wasn't a question that could be asked casually. If he wanted Finch to say yes, he'd need to prove he was serious.

It seemed, then, that the best time to ask wouldn't be before, but on the day of the ball.

Buzzed on wine, spirits high from seeing the fruits of his labor, Finch would be in an incredible mood, and Hugh would have a far easier time persuading him than he would otherwise. It would take some additional effort to plan when and where it would happen, but Hugh had nothing if not time, and even had he been outrageously busy, he would have made space in his schedule. Finch was more important than any of his preoccupations, and Hugh intended to prove it.

Early that same morning, Hugh checked in with Francis, George, and Emma to make sure affairs around the house would be handled the morning of the

ball, then went to find Finch, who was fretting over the cleanliness of the hardwood in the ballroom. When Hugh entered, Finch lifted his head and shifted his worry onto matters far more reptilian. “Sir, it only just occurred to me that you may be in need of a haircut before the ball. Should I book you an appointment?”

Hugh patted his hair. It was, admittedly, a little shaggy.

“Yes, but later.”

“Later? I’m not sure I understand. The longer I put it off, the less likely it is there will be an appointment available.

That, or we’ll have to entrust your appearance to a stranger,

and with so much on the line, I’m not sure that would be wise.

It took your current barber quite a few attempts to learn how you best like your hair cut and styled, and while I think you look dashing in a good trilby, I will *not* have you wear a hat to the ball.”

Hugh had never seen Finch so anxious. He laid a hand on his manservant’s shoulder and squeezed, and while he hadn’t thought it’d do much good, some of Finch’s tension eased.

“All will be well,” Hugh assured him. “I know you, and I know you’d never let anything slip through the cracks. My hair will be fine. The floor will be fine. *You* will be fine. And I’m here to make sure of it.”

“What do you mean by that, sir? That I’ll be fine?” Finch peered into his eyes like he might a small child he suspected was lying. “You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps,” Hugh said, and smiled. “I’ve arranged for you to take some time off on the morning of the ball. I’ve planned something—a surprise—and I’ve dropped everything to make sure it happens. Are you willing to hold up your end of the bargain?”

“The bargain?”

“Mmhm.” Hugh hummed. “I believe the deal was if I dropped everything, you’d owe me a conversation. I’ll have you know I had Geoff look over the terms and nowhere did it state *where* the conversation had to take place, so I’ve taken a few liberties. I hope you don’t mind.”

Finch looked too startled to be put upon. “You planned a surprise for me?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve arranged with the staff so that I needn’t worry about the state of the household?”

“Correct.” Hugh held out his hand. To his deep gratification, Finch took it. “You’ve worked tirelessly to make sure my ball will be the event of the century, and now it’s my turn to work just as hard to show you how much I appreciate

your efforts. Say yes, Finch. Let me spoil you. I know you’re busy, but I promise you won’t regret it.”

To Hugh’s great delight, Finch smiled and agreed.

19

## F I N C H

Finch was beginning to worry about his employer. He’d been acting much more eccentric than usual. His attention span, which had never been his strong suit, had become nonexistent, and he often stared off into the distance and sighed, which was odd in and of itself, but he also sighed whenever he looked at Finch. Most troubling of all, Hugh was losing track of his hoard. It was dribbling all over the house in an alarming fashion, particularly in places Finch tended to frequent. For example, just this morning Finch had woken up to find seven Roman coins, two doubloons, three Krugerrand, and over a dozen gold guineas in his bed.

As he did every morning, Finch gathered the coins and put them into the lovely casket Hugh had gifted him. He’d tried to give the coins back several

times, but Hugh wouldn't hear of it. That had been a shock. A dragon never turned down wealth of any sort, and especially didn't refuse the return of part of his hoard. Finch had warned Hugh to be more careful with his treasure, but it'd done no good. Finch's casket was now close to overflowing, and there was no end to the madness in sight.

It worried him enough that, after dressing, he begrudgingly decided to call Everard.

The phone rang, then Everard answered. "Well, if it isn't my brother's beloved typewriter. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Finch made himself count to ten. Everard could be so provoking at times. "This is Finch, Hugh's secretary. I'm calling because of your brother. I'm worried about him."

"Are you indeed? How intriguing. May I ask what's he up to that worries you? Is he ill in some way? What are his symptoms?" There was concern in Everard's voice, although Finch had reason to suspect it was feigned. He was likely much more interested in being able to stick his nose where it didn't belong.

"He's himself, I suppose, but more so, if that makes any sense. That wouldn't normally be a problem, but he's losing track of his hoard."

Everard was silent for a few seconds, which was quite unusual for him. "Losing his hoard how, precisely?"

"Bits of it are turning up where they shouldn't be. Mostly coins, but some trinkets and jewelry as well. Just yesterday I found eighteen gold coins of varying types in my office, an ingot on my night table, and a handful of diamonds in my pocket when I undressed to go to bed. Just now, upon waking, I discovered two dozen more coins scattered across my bed."

"Like rose petals?"

Finch was taken aback. "I beg your pardon."



“Never mind,” Everard said. “I recall you’re an omega.

When is your next heat?”

A blush spread from Finch’s hairline all the way down to his chest. “I’m not sure how that’s any of your business.”

Everard clucked his tongue. “You called me asking for advice. Before I can assist, I need to know all the current variables. Your heat?”

Finch huffed. “It’s a little more than a week away, but I’m always extremely cautious. I take dampeners and arrange to work from my suite until it’s passed. Your brother has always been extremely courteous of my indisposition.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure. Hm.” Everard paused again, hopefully because he was thinking up a solution to Hugh’s erratic behavior. “Well, it’s my professional opinion as a celebrated medical doctor that my brother is unwittingly courting you. I believe it’s all relatively harmless. For now, continue to humor him. If the situation escalates, I’ll step in and assess his

psychiatric health. Father always was concerned poor Hugh would snap one of these days, so I suppose this shouldn’t come as a shock.”

“Escalates how, sir?”

“Oh, you know.” Finch pictured Everard waving a hand in the air. “If he starts smoking at the nostrils when you’re near, or insisting that you’re treasure, or shows off his dragon to you in private.”

Oh.

The corner of Finch’s lip twitched, but he decided before opening his mouth that it was better Everard not know. The ball was tomorrow, and when it arrived, Hugh would lose interest in him quickly enough. Dragging his family into this would make things messy, and Finch abhorred the idea of having to clean it all up.

“And do try to avoid being with him in private,” Everard added. “While I’m

of the firm belief that Hugh is too much of a gentleman to lay his scaly mitts on you, I could be wrong.

Perhaps you should start to carry a mace.”

“A can of mace, sir?”

“No. A mace. Or a baton, if a mace is too unwieldy.

Anything should do as long as it can deliver a nice, heavy blow. I’ll leave the choice of the bludgeon up to you.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll look into it, and I’ll be sure to let you know should matters escalate.”

“Excellent. Well, take care, inkpot. I’ll be there posthaste should you need me.”

After saying the necessary goodbyes, Finch ended the call and tucked the phone into his pocket. A part of him had known that Hugh was courting him, but it’d been silenced by the much larger part of him that was in denial. When he’d first come to Hugh Drake’s estate, he’d overcome his emotions by telling himself that Hugh would never want a man like him. It had helped to keep him sane when his heart had cried out for its dragon. Now that he didn’t have that excuse, old pain dredged its way to the surface. It was a cruel world when two

people who desired each other could never make it work. But all Finch could offer Hugh was disappointment and heartbreak. He would rather stand by and comfort Hugh when another Disgrace failed to give him what he wanted than be the one Hugh chose to mate with to no result. Or worse, to conceive and bring shame to the Drake name by bearing Hugh a Disgrace.

The thought chilled Finch, and to stop himself from lingering on it, he fed the girls their breakfast and doted on them in all the ways he’d never been doted on as a child. No matter how badly he wanted Hugh, he would not succumb to his advances. Finch had already shamed a Drake once by virtue of his birth. He would not do so again.

The day of the ball arrived, and on it, Finch woke up swimming in pearls. Some loose, some strung, some set in precious metal and accented with other gemstones. Scooping them all up without losing any had put him more behind than usual for his morning routine, which was particularly distressing, since Hugh had requested his presence for the surprise. Whatever it was. To be honest, the stress of not being available to oversee preparations was eating at him, but telling sweet Hugh that he was too preoccupied to spend time with him was an impossibility. He'd simply have to hope that the event planner had everything under control.

Pearls collected and safely stowed, Finch went to give his girls some attention. To his astonishment, he discovered their ceramic food bowl had been replaced with something that looked like it was hammered from gold. In addition, two new hammocks that had been spun with gold thread were strung up in the cage. Elizabeth was in one of them. She gravely accepted the small chunk of strawberry he handed her and stayed put. Eleanor, on the other hand, grabbed her fruit, dropped it, then came back for more. He fished out the fruit from where she'd dropped it and presented it to her again. This time she started to eat it, thinking she'd gotten two pieces of fruit off him rather than one.

"Greedy little girl," he said, stroking her head and ears with one finger. "What will I do with you?"

A knock sounded on his door. "Are you decent?" Hugh called out.

"Come in, sir." Finch was not yet dressed for the ball, but he was presentable in his jeans and an old t-shirt.

"Good morning," Hugh said cheerily as he came into the suite and closed the door behind him. "Are you ready for today?"

"I suppose so, sir. Do I need to change my attire before we leave? You didn't give me a dress code."

Hugh waved a hand. "No, no. You're fine as you are. Shall we go?" He held out his arm.

Finch stared at it for several long moments. Hugh's expression started to dim, so Finch closed the cage and took his arm. Hugh beamed at him and Finch couldn't help but smile back. "Let's go, sir."

20

F I N C H

George met them at the door. He said nothing, but when Hugh wasn't looking, he smirked at Finch.

"You know this isn't my doing," Finch hissed *sotto voce* to the chauffeur.

"Of course it isn't. We all know that. Well, except for Emma, but you know how she is," George said, then he winked at Finch.

Actually winked.

Perhaps everyone in the household was running mad.

Finch bristled and was seconds away from reminding George that they were professionals on the job when Hugh swung around and beamed at Finch like nothing else in his world existed. Finch, enamored, forgot why he'd been so angry and hurried to catch up to Hugh while George snickered behind him all the way to the car.

Once settled in the back seat, Finch asked, "Well, sir, are you going to tell me our destination, or must I wait until we arrive?"

"Destinations," Hugh corrected. "And I suppose it won't hurt to tell you our first stop. It's Lorenzo's."

Finch was relieved. "Oh, good, sir. I was very worried about the state of your hair."

"I know you were," Hugh said with a soft smile that made parts of Finch feel things they had absolutely no business feeling. It wasn't helping that Hugh had put a hand on his

knee, but he couldn't, for the life of him, bring himself to tell Hugh to move it.

Once at Lorenzo's, both men were swept into one of the private salons. Finch was directed to a comfortable chair and offered refreshment, which he declined, having just eaten breakfast. Hugh, on the other hand, was sat down in a very plush barber's chair.

The first thing they did was tip back the chair and raise it so Hugh could be given a shave. Finch had to admit that he had a bit of a nasty moment when Lorenzo brought out a straight razor, but Hugh seemed unconcerned and the stylist indeed used it deftly to scrape the dark stubble from Hugh's face. After that, they applied a hot towel and then Lorenzo moved on to start snipping Hugh's hair. Finch could've read any of the magazines or books found in the room, but he was so fascinated with watching Hugh that he couldn't even begin to concentrate on the written word.

When Lorenzo was done, Hugh was an absolute vision.

His hair was styled exactly how he liked it and his face was perfectly smooth. He looked, perhaps unsurprisingly, breathtaking. Finch could only stare.

Hugh clapped his hands once he was out of the chair and standing. "Your turn now, Finch," he said.

"Excuse me?" But Finch was already being assisted out of his comfortable seat and into the barber's chair. "I assure you, I don't need—"

"Hush," Hugh retorted. "Sit and let Lorenzo work his magic."

"Yes, sir."

Hugh clapped him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit!

Good man."

Much like Hugh, Finch was given a hot shave and a haircut. It wasn't often that he treated himself to something so luxurious, so despite his initial reluctance, he let loose and enjoyed. Once freshly shorn, Hugh took him back

to the car and George drove them to their next destination, which turned out to be a rather small but elegant storefront. The sign out front read, "Tailor Shop."

"Are we here to pick up your suit for tonight's ball?" Finch asked. "You usually have such things delivered."

Hugh took Finch's hand and squeezed it. "Some things have to be done in person."

They were greeted by a handsome man in a beautiful suit.

"Good morning, Mr. Drake. It's good to see you again. And you've brought your companion, I see. Mr. Finch, it is a pleasure. I'm Roger, and this is my shop."

Finch didn't correct Roger to tell him that Finch wasn't his last name. "It's a pleasure, Roger," Finch said. "I've seen the work you've done in the past. It is, I must say, worth every penny."

"Thank you, sir. Let me take you back to Ashley. It might be my shop, but he's the genius."

They were shown into an extremely large private fitting room. There was a low bench to stand on, presumably to get cuffs the correct length, a few plush chairs to sit in, row upon row of fabric bolts in a large glass display case, and a wispy little omega who was at least a head shorter than Finch's rather average height. Finch could only presume he was the Ashley in question.

When they entered the fitting room, Ashley swept over, took Hugh's hands, and stretched up. Obliging, Hugh leaned down and let Ashley kiss him on both cheeks. "Darling, you look positively nummy, but who is this delectable creature you've brought me? Could this be the fabled Finch? Oh, Hugh, he's so very pretty. I approve. And I do believe you were quite close in your measurements. Did you spoil the surprise and tell him so you could get them?"

“Not a bit of it, Ashley. I’m just very good at estimating volume and surface area,” Hugh said, his face a bit pink.

Ashley raked Hugh with an amused glance. “I just bet you are, you naughty boy.”

Finch cleared his throat. He was not at all fond of where this conversation was going. And for reasons he didn’t quite understand, he longed to push Ashley out a ten-story window.

Ashley went to where Finch stood and eyed him up and down critically. “Yes. We’ll have to make a few adjustments, I think, but nothing too dire. Just a quick little fix here and there. It shouldn’t take long at all.”

“Thank you, as always.” Hugh sat down in one of the chairs and looked on expectantly. Finch had no idea at what until Ashley said, “Disrobe, please.”

Finch stared at him. “*Excuse me?*”

The omega sighed, sounding put-upon. “How on earth are we to get the final fitting done for your suit if you won’t disrobe?”

“I—”

Hugh looked at his watch. “We are on a tight schedule, I’m afraid. We don’t have time to waste, Finch.”

Finch felt like he’d been sucked into a mirror universe. It was supposed to be him hurrying things along while Hugh stood around and goggled at everything, and he wasn’t sure he liked this turn of events. “Yes, sir,” he said, then reluctantly began to disrobe under Ashley’s calculating and Hugh’s avid eyes until he was only wearing his old, saggy boxers.

“Oh, honey. You are *far* too pretty to be letting yourself go like this.” Ashley turned his head, and like magic out sprang an assistant from one of the side rooms. Finch yelped and covered himself to best preserve his modesty. Neither Hugh, Ashley, nor the assistant seemed fazed. “Buford, we’re going to need a new everything from the socks on up. I’m thinking black to start,

just to see what kind of canvas we're working with. Size small. Oh, and while you're back there, see what else we have that's comparable. Thank you. You're a doll."

Buford scurried off and came back with a few packages, which he handed to Ashley. Ashley pawed his way through them, then held up a pair of black boxers for Finch. "There you are, hon. Now, put these on, please."

"But—"

Ashley gave Finch a very scary look.

Hugh chuckled. "Just do as he says, Finch. You'll find it makes life much easier and quite a bit more pleasant."

"Yes, sir." He knew he had no reason to feel body shy.

That was one of the first things they drummed out of you in the Pedigree. Nevertheless, he hadn't been in his cloister for over a decade and he couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious. He wasn't as lithe as he used to be, his body not as supple or delicate. Still, he could do this. They were all men, after all, or men and a dragon, and there was nothing Finch had the other two hadn't seen before.

Finch slipped his old underwear off and put on the boxers.

They fit perfectly and were made of a material that was as light and cool as wearing gossamer. He looked up at Hugh, not able to help himself, and saw him sitting with his head cocked to the side. "Try the briefs, Ashley. I want to see the comparison."

Ashley handed Finch a very small pair of briefs, also black, and looked at him expectantly. With a sigh, Finch took off the boxers and replaced them with the briefs. To his embarrassment, they sat just below where his pubic hair started. He tried to tug them up but to no avail. His cheeks blazing, he looked at Ashley and said, "They're too small. I need the next size up."

"No, you don't," Ashley pronounced after running a jaundiced eye over



Finch. “They fit like a dream. Do you see how you were chafing before? I can see the irritation on your thighs.” Ashley gestured, much to Finch’s horror, at the insides of his thighs, which were slightly irritated. “Those sad boxers you were wearing before were too loose and were riding up.

When you get chafing like this, it’s a sign it’s time to go down a size. Underwear that fits shouldn’t ride. The ones I’ve got on you now won’t bunch or pinch or chafe. Sure, you’ll probably want to go in and manscape a little, but it’s nothing that can’t be taken care of. And can I just say, you look *ravishing*? If I

were having Mr. Drake for dinner, I’d want to gobble you up for dessert.”

Finch had never considered himself extremely attractive—

his hair was too dark, his face too severe, and his limbs too long. But seeing himself in the mirror with his hair cut just right and in underwear that hugged his hips, he saw a glimmer of the man he could have been had his life turned out differently. Surprised by what he saw, he brushed his fingers over the waistline of the briefs and smiled at his reflection.

“I’d like to see, Finch,” Hugh called out. “Can you please turn around for me? Ah. Very nice. And Ashley’s quite correct.

The size is perfect. They are a bit lower than you’re used to, but that’s no hardship.”

“Do you think so, sir?” Finch asked. His heart had started to pound in ways he both liked and didn’t like all at once. It was a thrill to be standing in front of Hugh next to naked and hear the dragon say that he was handsome. The compliment raced through him like adrenaline, and he found himself craving more. “If you like them, I’ll wear them. For you, I always strive to be at my best.”

“I love them,” Hugh said, meeting Finch’s eyes, and Finch’s heart sang. “I’ll take them. A dozen of them. Six in black, and six in assorted colors. And while we’re at it, I’ll take an equal amount of those boxers, divided the same way.”

Buford returned, summoned by the magic of fashion, in time to receive the order. He hurried out of the room to fill it while Ashley busied himself with something. Finch was too busy smiling at Hugh to see what it was.

“What are you doing, Ashley?” Hugh asked, even though his eyes were for Finch and Finch alone.

“Covering the mirrors,” Ashley replied. “You requested we keep Mr. Finch’s suit a surprise, so we’ll need to keep them covered during the fitting.”

“Ah,” Hugh said, sounding like he hadn’t heard at all. He smiled sweetly at Finch. “Right.”

For the next hour, Finch stood and had a suit they wouldn’t let him see be tailored to him. Pins were stuck in so many places that he started to feel like a pincushion. At last, the suit was taken off him and whisked away.

“Would you like a new outfit for him to wear out?” Ashley asked.

Hugh looked eager. “Do you have anything ready?”

“Naturally, Mr. Drake. Mr. Finch, do you have any color preference?”

“I like purple,” Finch said.

Color rose in Hugh’s cheeks, the sight of which made the tips of Finch’s ears burn.

Ashley smiled at them both. “Something purple, it is.”

More clothes were brought in and given to Finch, who, with Ashley’s assistance, donned them. The fit really was exceptional, and the comfort was otherworldly. The sticking point would be how they looked, as the mirrors were still covered, and Finch hadn’t been able to see.

“Oh, Mr. Finch,” Ashley said with a low whistle. “Purple is your color.”

“Is it?”

“Well, in my opinion, you could get away with wearing just about anything and still look stunning, but this is really something else. Keep your back to the mirrors, now. I want to do a grand reveal. Just wait until you see yourself.”

While Finch kept his back to the mirrors, there came the sound of fabric moving through air. Ashley had uncovered the mirrors, and all Finch had to do was turn around and look. His gaze was stuck on Hugh, however. The dragon was looking at him through partially lidded eyes, adoration spelled plainly across his face.

“You look amazing, Finch.” Hugh’s voice was soft and reverent. “Turn around and see for yourself.”

Finch turned to look in the large mirrors behind him. He’d been dressed in charcoal trousers and a dove-gray shirt. Over the shirt, he wore a rather plain jumper in a color that was somewhere between pearl and lavender. He could tell, by feel, that it was cashmere. It was entirely too much, but Finch liked what he saw. He wasn’t the proper secretary in one of his many proper and identical suits, nor was he the man relaxing on his day off in ancient jeans and an even older t-shirt. He looked handsome. Almost pretty. And when Hugh came to stand beside him, he looked like the sort of omega who might belong to a dragon. Finch bit his lip hard at the thought.

“I can’t afford this, sir,” Finch said. “I’ll just wear my other clothes.”

“It’s a gift.”

“I can’t accept it. It’s far too much.”

Hugh shook his head. “It’s nowhere near enough for a treasure like you. Wear the clothes, Finch. I like to see you in them.”

The declaration should have been criminal for the way it stole Finch’s heart, and Hugh the kingpin when he slipped his hand into Finch’s and squeezed. Finch shuffled a little closer and squeezed back. The sight of their reflections side by side was the truest happiness he had ever known. It was fortunate the ball was tonight. Finch’s guard was starting to slip. But with just hours until

Hugh was swept away in a sea of Disgraces all vying for his attention, he could afford a little weakness. It was the last chance he'd have to enjoy Hugh's affection, and if only for today, he would enjoy it.

Once their suits and other effects were paid for, George drove them to one of the most expensive hotels in downtown Aurora.

It was close to the lake and the upper floors all commanded an amazing view. They ate lunch in one of the restaurants in the lobby, then afterward, instead of leaving, Hugh led Finch toward the bank of elevators.

“Sir?”

“Come along, Finch. I have another surprise for you.”

Once in the elevator, he pushed the number for one of the uppermost floors.

“Where are we going, sir?” Finch asked, his heart pounding a staccato beat.

Hugh put his hand on the small of Finch's back and smiled down at him. Finch was so dazzled that he barely heard the words Hugh said.

“I'm sorry, sir. Could you repeat that?”

“I said,” Hugh went on in a slightly louder voice, “that I'm treating you to a facial.”

Even though Hugh had repeated it in a clear, loud voice, Finch knew he couldn't have heard that right. “A facial, sir?”

The doors to the elevator opened. Hugh led the way and Finch trotted behind him, wondering what the hell had gotten into Hugh. Surely he couldn't mean what Finch thought he meant, could he? Nevertheless, a vision of Finch kneeling, naked, while Hugh stood over him and shot his cum onto Finch's face persisted.

Everard had been right to warn him not to let Hugh get him alone—after everything Hugh had done for him today, Finch wasn't sure he could resist.

“Here we are!” Hugh sang cheerfully, and Finch felt both a wave of relief and a brief stab of disappointment. They were at a spa. The facial made ever so much more sense.

Mr. Drake and his “companion” were whisked inside, given robes, and sent to a changing room. Hugh immediately began to disrobe. Finch just gaped at him, unable to move a muscle. He hadn’t expected to see Hugh’s body again so soon, or indeed, ever. But the show was over far too soon. Hugh put on his robe, turned around, and saw Finch hadn’t yet changed.

“Are you quite all right, Finch?” he asked.

Finch shut his mouth with a snap, Hugh’s perfect ass and large cock prominent in his recent memory. “Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Then let’s get going. I can help you undress, if you like.

Did any of the clothing Ashley put you in have difficult closures? The trousers, I did notice, are quite tight.”

“No... ah... yes... that is to say, I can do it, sir. Just give me a moment.” As quickly as he could, Finch undressed in front of Hugh and put on the provided robe. “I’m all set,”

Finch smiled faintly, “for my facial.”

“And massage!” Hugh announced happily. “I booked us a couples’ session.”

Finch felt all the blood drain from his face. “So everyone out there thinks I’m your...”

“My Finch, yes. I told them you’re my treasure. They’ve promised to take extra special care of both of us.”

“Oh, good lord,” Finch moaned.

“I know, right? This is so very exciting.” Hugh opened the changing room

door to let the spa attendants know they were ready for their first treatment.

Finch spent the next few hours with Hugh being pampered within an inch of their lives. In addition to facials, each man was given a manicure, pedicure, a massage, and a detoxifying mud bath. Although what role mud played in detoxifying a body Finch didn't know.

"Would you like body hair removal as well?" one of the young women tending to them asked Finch. "We have several methods available."

Finch blanched and hoped Hugh hadn't heard her, but of course he had. He braced himself for whatever new torture Hugh planned to put him through.

"No, I think not," Hugh said. He reached over and lightly touched the hair visible on the V of skin exposed by Finch's robe. "I rather think it's fetching."

Finch didn't know whether to be relieved or horrified by Hugh's words.

"Very good, sir. In that case, your last treatment is a thermal soak, then you may use our bathing facilities. Is there anything else I can get you?"

Hugh shook his head. "No, my dear. Everything has been quite splendid."

"Thank you, sir," she said, then led man and dragon to the thermal suite.

Finch was extremely grateful that he was given his own bathing room when they were finished. He'd half-expected Hugh to want to share a shower with him. He couldn't even imagine how humiliating that would be, because there was absolutely no way he could be wet and naked around Hugh without sporting an erection. It simply wasn't possible.

After showering thoroughly, Finch went to the changing room to dress in his new outfit, but instead of a pile of neatly folded clothes, there was a large box. Curious, Finch opened it. Inside was his suit. Everything he might need was included, from the underwear outward, and numbly, Finch began to put it all on. The suit's wool was the finest and softest he'd ever worn, and the color was singular. Not charcoal and not violet, but something between the

two. The shirt was a pristine white and the jacket had satin lapels in the same shade as the wool. It was the most beautiful suit he'd ever seen. There were even shoes in his size, socks, garters, and a white bowtie included.

The only thing not found in the box was cufflinks. There were studs for the shirt, but nothing else. He'd have to run to his room shortly after they returned home to retrieve the amethyst pair from his room.

Finch was tying his tie when there came a knock on the door. "Come in," he said.

Come in Hugh did, looking resplendent in a suit the very same color as Finch's. The cut was subtly different, as Hugh was much taller and bulkier than Finch, but it was clear they matched. Upon seeing it, Finch's stomach dropped like he was on one of those dangerous and frightening carnival rides that popped up in parking lots every summer.

He and Hugh matched.

Hugh had gone out of his way to make sure of it.

Not only had Hugh cared enough about him to book Finch appointments alongside his own, but he'd put forth the effort to ensure Finch would have something to wear to the ball.

Something that showed the world how much Hugh cared for him. It was as horribly romantic as it was devastating. If only things could be different.

"You look handsome, Finch," Hugh said.

"As do you, sir."

Hugh grinned. "I know. I brought you something."

The knife in Finch's gut twisted a little more. "No, sir. I can't possibly accept another gift."

"Not a gift. I just made sure these got brought along. Hold out your hand."

Finch did so, and Hugh dropped something into them. Two things, to be precise. They were his amethyst cufflinks. Hugh had remembered them. Finch's heart clenched. "Thank you, sir." He deftly attached them to his cuffs.

"Are you ready?" Hugh asked. "George has brought the car around and is waiting for us."

*No, Finch thought. I am most definitely not.*

Out loud he said, "Of course, sir," then held the door to the room open and prepared for the pain he'd feel later that evening, when he'd give Hugh away to the Disgrace who would put an end to dreams he never should have had in the first place.

2 1

H U G H

By the time they made it home from the spa, Hugh's lair had been



transformed into a fairy-tale castle. No detail had been overlooked. The front hall had been buffed and polished to a shine. Clusters of candles housed in glass cylinders lined the stairs, surrounded by lush greenery that tumbled down the steps like water rushing over rocks, its leaves interspersed with gorgeous camellia blooms. A chandelier had been installed, and it cast a dim but dreamy light over the room. Other, less noticeable surfaces had been decorated as well—high-up window ledges overflowed with foliage. Hugh spotted clear jewels nestled in them—fat diamonds that shone like dew.

Upon closer investigation, he found them other places, too.

They were wrapped around the balusters of each staircase, held in place by invisible thread like magic itself had willed them into existence. Some glittered loose by the candles. The effect was immediate and striking. It really was quite something.

“Finch,” Hugh breathed as they stepped through the door.

“I am in awe. How did you arrange all this?”

“I had help from a professional,” Finch replied, ever humble, but Hugh knew the truth—Finch had fretted and fussed over every little detail until it had been made perfect. It was his nature. Without him, none of this would have happened. “Is everything to your liking, sir? There’s not much time left, but I should have enough to make an adjustment or two should something not be to your taste.”

“Are you joking? This is better than I could have dreamed.” Hugh grabbed Finch’s hand and squeezed it. “Will you show me what else has been done?”

Finch smiled, putting every diamond in the room to shame.

“It would be an honor.”

They walked hand in hand from the front hall through the inner corridors of the house. The way forward was decorated with the same camellia and candle arrangements, although now they poured over long console tables rather than stairs and decorated sconces instead of windows. The more Hugh saw, the

harder his heart pounded, and the surer his grip on Finch's hand became. All of this work and all of this beauty had come from the man beside him. Loyal, faithful Finch had gone out of his way to make sure Hugh's dream came true.

"Are you ready to see the ballroom, sir?" Finch asked when they arrived at the end of the hall. He lifted a hand and set it on one of the ornamental double doors, where the low light caught in his amethyst cufflinks. Like Finch, they were often overlooked, but precious beyond compare. "If all has gone according to plan, it should be breathtaking."

"I'm sure it is," Hugh said, but was unable to bring himself to look even when Finch opened the door. How could he when the heart and soul of his hoard was standing at his side?

"We spared no expense," Finch relayed with a sweep of his hand before quickly adding, "although I did haggle a fair bit.

The opulence you see before you was fought for tooth and nail. I know no dragon is wont to part from his hoard, so I did my best to guard it in your stead."

"You did, didn't you?" Hugh's fingers slotted between Finch's. Finch, startled either by the gesture or the dreaminess of his voice, whipped around to look Hugh in the eyes. Hugh's heart constricted. How could Finch be so beautiful?

"Sir?" It was little more than a timid and hopeful whisper, but Hugh heard it all the same. He was attuned to Finch in the same way that the ocean was attuned to the moon—pulled in by his gravity and bound to his every move. It was impossible to tell for sure, but by the way Finch's lips had parted and his eyelids had drooped, Hugh could swear that Finch felt a pull to him, too.

Hugh came closer. It was impossible not to. With the air thick between them and his heart racing like it was, now was the perfect time. Finch would be his, and Hugh would be Finch's, and he could rest easy knowing that his secretary would forever be his most cherished possession. "I want to ask you something."

Finch's dark lashes fanned over his cheeks, and he tilted his chin upward the slightest degree. "Yes?"

Hugh's pulse rushed in his ears. The slumbering dragon inside him stirred.

*Mine*, it proclaimed upon spotting Finch. *MINE*.

"I wanted to know," Hugh said, more excited and terrified than he'd ever been, "if you'd—"

"Sir!" boomed a crotchety old voice from down the hall. It belonged to Francis. "The guests have begun to arrive."

The moment shattered. Finch slipped his hand out of Hugh's and busied himself with smoothing the front of his jacket, then took a nervous step into the ballroom. "I should go check in on the catering staff," he offered by way of explanation. "I mustn't keep them waiting."

"Find me," Hugh urged. "Find me at the ball, Finch. Tell me you will."

"Of course, sir." Finch bowed his head and fled, leaving Hugh alone with his regrets.

No guests were waiting in the front hall when Hugh arrived, but someone else was—Hugh's brother Bertram. Hugh came to a stop upon spotting him, instantly nauseous. How had his family found out about the ball? He'd been so careful to cover his tracks and knew Finch had done the same, but here was Bertram nevertheless, twisting a diamond plucked from the staircase this way and that between his fingers like he hadn't

seen a thousand others like it in his lifetime. Perhaps, if Hugh turned tail and booked it for the ballroom, Bertram would get bored and leave. Hugh spun around and was about to make a mad dash back down the hall when there came the bright clink of a gemstone falling onto wood. Bertram cleared his throat.

"Hello, brother."

Shoot. "Hello, Bertram."

“This is quite the setup,” Bertram remarked as Hugh stepped into the room to join him. The diamond he’d once held was gone, no doubt having been returned to the staircase.

“I tip my hat to your interior decorator. An ambiance like this isn’t easy to achieve.”

Hugh nervously balled his hands into fists. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Bertram tucked his hands in the back pockets of his gray wool trousers and looked Hugh over. Hugh did the same. As always, his brother was meticulously dressed, his suit carefully fitted to his athletic frame. Dark stubble shaded his jaw. While he wasn’t as muscular as Sebastian, he held himself with a cool, unstated kind of confidence that suggested he was stronger than he looked. If he’d been anyone but a Drake, he would have looked like he belonged at an event like this, but Hugh knew better, and he dreaded the reason behind Bertram’s visit. No doubt he was here to announce Hugh’s ball would not go on as planned.

Hugh swallowed hard.

It was strange to be both devastated and relieved at the same time.

“You might be wondering why I’m here,” Bertram continued when Hugh made no attempt at conversation. “I can assure you it’s not on anyone else’s agenda—as far as I’m aware, no one else knows of my whereabouts. Not father, not Sebastian, and especially not Everard. I’m a lone agent tonight.” Bertram spared a glance at the front door, from beyond which came the sounds of conversation. “And I’d like to keep it that way. Walk and talk with me. We’ll head upstairs.”

Francis, who’d hobbled off to the sitting room after alerting Hugh there were “guests,” appeared once more. He shuffled toward the door.

“Direct our guests to the ballroom, Francis,” Hugh ordered, then nodded toward the stairway and started to climb.

Bertram followed behind. “I’ll be down later this evening to usher in the first dance.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You should consider giving that poor man a break,”

Bertram said in a quiet voice when they were well up the stairs and out of earshot. “He had no idea who I was when he greeted me at the door.”

“His oversight worked to your benefit.” They arrived on the top landing and cut toward Hugh’s study. “Why tell me to fix something that’s broken in your favor?”

“Because I care about you, Hugh. There are people in the world who wouldn’t hesitate to harm you. If your butler is letting everyone in regardless of who they are, you’re at risk.”

They arrived at Hugh’s study door, which Hugh hastened to open. He stepped inside, Bertram on his heels, and only replied once the door was latched. “There’s more going on here than you’re letting on, isn’t there?”

Bertram only smiled. “Isn’t there always? Now let’s stop pussyfooting around. I need into your kitchen. I don’t suppose you could show me the way?”

2 2

## F I N C H

Finch walked away from the ballroom and through the house in a daze. He felt, somehow, that he’d just barely missed something momentous. The look in Hugh’s eyes had been hungry and possessive. It was the sort of expression one would expect to see in a predator, but that seemed ridiculous, because Hugh was the exact opposite of a predator. He was sweet, sometimes a bit silly, and thoroughly adorable. When meeting with other dragons, Finch always knew he was dealing with a deadly creature, but he’d never felt that way with Hugh. From their first meeting, when he’d interviewed with Hugh

and Geoffrey to become Hugh's secretary, he'd felt safe in Hugh's presence. And despite the way Hugh had looked at him, he still did. Only now, Hugh the man and Hugh the enormous purple dragon had conflated in his mind, and Finch couldn't stop thinking about what Everard had said: *it's my professional opinion as a celebrated medical doctor that my brother is unwittingly courting you.*

When Hugh looked at him like that, Finch couldn't disagree.

Heart aflutter from all that had happened, Finch hurried to the mansion's large kitchen to check on things and distract himself from the turmoil raging in his head. When he arrived, it was bustling with activity. Maids and manservants rushed about while Cook directed her temporary help like a general ordering about a battalion of soldiers. The room was full of delicacies in various states of preparation and everything looked perfect. Finch's heart swelled a bit with pride at a job well accomplished.

"You're all doing a splendid job," he announced.

That brought all eyes to him, followed by all the questions and last-minute problems to be dealt with. It was a relief, if he was honest. The busier he kept himself, the better. With that in mind, he threw himself into the work and hoped it would keep him occupied for the entirety of the ball.

The first and most immediate issue in need of fixing was the champagne—the wrong bottles had been taken from the wine cellar, depleting Hugh's personal stores while the stock ordered for the ball went untouched. Luckily, the mistake had been caught before any of the bottles were opened, so all Finch had to do was venture into the cellar to fetch the right ones. There was an access elevator near the kitchen that would lead him right to it, so off Finch went. On his way there, someone tugged at his sleeve. "Please, sir. A moment?"

Finch turned and saw an exceedingly lovely omega standing there. He had raven-black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a slight Irish accent. His features were perfect and delicate, so much so that he looked out of place in the kitchen, dressed as he was in his uniform and matching apron. He was pretty enough to be one of the guests at the ball.

“Yes,” Finch said. “How can I help you?”

“I have a bit of a problem, and I think you’re the only one who can solve it.”

“Can you walk and talk? I’m on my way to the wine cellar.

If not, I suppose—”

“Oh, no. This is just perfect. I can help you carry bottles.

More hands make less work.”

“Thank you, um...”

“Bran,” the omega supplied.

“Right. Thank you for your assistance, Bran.” They arrived at the service elevator. Finch hit the button, and in no time at all the doors opened, granting them access to the cabin. Both men stepped into it, fitting around the empty wine cart that had been left inside. “Now, what was it that you wanted to talk about?”

Bran hit the button that would take them to the cellar. The doors closed, and the elevator started to move. “I’m sorry, sir. I need a second still. It’s so very embarrassing, and I’m not quite sure how to say it.”

The elevator arrived and opened into the dim light of the cellar. While Bran composed himself, Finch grabbed the cart and backed it out of the elevator.

“Sir,” Bran called. “I’ve figured it out. Wait a second, please.”

Finch waited until Bran reached his side. “Excellent.

There’s no need to be embarrassed, you know. It’s quite all right. Now, what was your question?”

Bran nodded, but it seemed Finch’s reassurance was not enough, for he bowed his head and mumbled something Finch couldn’t understand. To hear him better, Finch bent his head to be closer to him. Finch wasn’t an overly

tall man, but Bran was considerably smaller than he was. “I didn’t catch that. I’m sorry. A little louder, now. No one will be able to hear you.

Once I know, I’m sure we can sort things out.”

“I hope so,” Bran said. He moved his arm and Finch felt a stinging pain in his neck.

Finch slapped his hand to the spot. “What on earth?”

A strange tightness clenched inside of him, and the world felt as if it was tipping, but then he realized that it was just him as he crumpled to the ground.

Bran looked down at him dispassionately. His accent shifted from Irish to American. “What you’re feeling now is a very potent muscle relaxer and paralyzing agent. It’ll last long enough for me to get away, but not nearly long enough to save you.”

Finch tried to speak, but found his lips and tongue wouldn’t cooperate.

“Yes, speaking is off the table for a bit as well,” Bran went on cheerfully. “This way I can explain my devious plan without interruptions and still have time to escape. Because

you need to know exactly what I’m doing and why. It’s important.”

Finch could do nothing but lie there and hope he wasn’t about to die. Bran leaned over, pried his lips open, and pressed something into his cheek. A sweet taste underlaid by something sharp and bitter flooded his mouth. Finch longed to spit it out, but couldn’t.

“That, Finch Drake, is a heat stimulant. By the time the muscle paralysis wears off, it will start kicking in.”

Finch’s birth name was a secret, known to nearly nobody.

He’d had it legally changed shortly after arriving in America.

“Drake” was not a useful last name to have, especially in Hugh’s household.



How on earth could this small, innocent-looking omega know his real name? He was fairly sure the only person on the continent who knew it was Geoffrey, because it had been through him that he'd made the change.

“Oh, don't worry. I won't tell anyone your little secret. But I know who you are, Finch. I know *what* you are. And while it isn't fair, I'm going to use you as a sacrifice to save the rest of the poor Disgraces that have been conned into coming to this travesty of a meat market to fight for the 'privilege' of being mated to a dragon. It had to be you, of course. You've been consorting with the enemy for years and this party is your doing. You planned it down to the last detail, pleased to know that you would be dooming one of your own to an eternity spent as an incubator.” An unhinged cackle rose in Bran's throat, but he choked it off with a growl before it could materialize in full and ended it all by spitting on Finch. “Filthy traitor. I should kill you, but I think giving you a taste of your own medicine is a far better plan. In about,” he checked his watch, “seven minutes, I'm going to drag you into the elevator and send you on up. About that time, you'll start coming to and the heat stimulant will have taken effect. You'll do absolutely anything at that point to get an alpha knot inside you, and the only alpha here is your ridiculous employer. He'll knot you, of course. You'll beg for it, and he'll do it over and over until you're stuffed full of his eggs. That will end this disgusting ball and save dozens of Disgraces from spending

their lives as living wombs in service to a dragon. You'll be the one stuck as the eternal incubator. The one whose eggs are taken away from him and who gets shipped away until it's time to breed again. Isn't that all neat and tidy? I think so. And when that brother of Hugh's comes nosing around and asking you what happened, which he will, you can tell him it was all Raven's fault. He'll know what you mean.”

Bran's accent continued to slip as he spoke, shifting from American to Irish to something vaguely Eastern European.

Finch was too terrified to keep track of it. The omega was truly, utterly mad.

“No,” he managed to say. He tried, unsuccessfully, to spit out the pill.

Bran's eyes danced. “Oh, good. It's show time.” He dragged Finch back

toward the elevator by his arms. “I wish I could be here to see the action, but I have other fish to fry. I’m sure you understand.”

The elevator door opened as they arrived, but it wasn’t empty. Two men were in it, although all Finch could see were shoes. His nose, however, smelled alpha. Strong, musky alpha, plus the smell of good tobacco, old paper, and expensive brandy. It was the most wonderful thing he’d ever smelled in his life. He wanted to roll the scent around him like a soft and comforting blanket.

“Raven,” a voice said. Finch didn’t recognize it.

“Shit,” Bran hissed, then took off at a run.

The strange man moved as if to follow, but hesitated when he noticed Finch. “Dammit all to hell.”

With a groan of frustration, the stranger dropped to his knees and stuck his finger in Finch’s mouth, where he proceeded to fish around for something. It was decidedly uncomfortable, not to mention mortifying, but Finch couldn’t move enough to turn his head away.

“I say, get your own omega, Bertram. This really is the outside of enough. You come to my party, demand I follow you to the kitchen instead of greet my guests, and now you’re

fingering my secretary. I must insist you stop right this instant.”

“Got it,” the strange man—Bertram—announced. With his dark hair, handsome features, and purple eyes, he had to be Hugh’s mysterious brother. He pulled something from Finch’s mouth, examined it quickly, and flicked it away. “A heat stimulant. Of course. Some was absorbed, but not a whole dose. I doubt it will take effect. Well, not full effect.

Probably.”

“Probably? I don’t like the sound of that.” Hugh frowned while wringing his hands. “Is there anything we can do?”

Should do?”

Bertram stood and sighed. “Have someone watch over the omega while he recovers. Make him drink water, and if possible, milk. Give him bread. I think he’ll be fine.”

“Too. Close,” Finch managed, but neither dragon paid him much attention. He couldn’t blame them. The paralyzing agent was making quick work of locking up his jaw, and he couldn’t find it within himself to relay the rest of the message—that his natural heat was only a week away, and that even a small dosage could make it come early.

“Your best bet is to get him settled in bed so you can monitor him,” Bertram continued. He’d moved outside of Finch’s field of view, so all Finch saw were his shoes. Polished leather. Waxed, not conditioned. “By the looks of him, I wager he’s been hit with a paralyzing agent as well. As long as the dosage was correct, he should recover without issue, but if the dosage was off, there’s a chance his heart could fail. He’ll need supervision. Unfortunately, there’s unfinished business I must see to, so I’ll have to entrust his care to you. Be well, brother.”

Thudding footsteps sounded, receding into the distance.

Finch failed to follow where, exactly, they were headed, because Hugh had stepped into his line of sight and was peering down at him with anxious eyes. “How are you feeling, Finch? Are you quite well?”

Finch desperately wanted to say he was fine, but instead all his mouth could come up with was, “No.”

“Bugger.” Hugh scooped Finch up into his arms. He saw Hugh’s nostrils flare. “I’ll get you upstairs to a bedroom, then.

You can lie down until you feel better. How’s that?”

“No. Party. You.” If Finch could have shaken his head, he would have. He didn’t need tending, he just needed time and sleep and probably about a gallon of tea and a whole loaf of toast. He’d be fine. He didn’t need Hugh

fussing over him while the ball was going on.

Either Hugh didn't hear him or he ignored Finch's words.

He held Finch closer, enveloping him in his delicious alpha scent, and bore him off to who knew where.

23

H U G H

There was something different about Finch, Hugh thought as the service elevator ascended. Something pleasant.

Something... sweet. Bertram had mentioned that not enough of the stimulant had been absorbed to take effect, so it couldn't be his heat. A new cologne, perhaps? Hugh did enjoy Finch's signature vetiver scent, which was papery and proper and clean, but there was an undeniable allure to this new fragrance that made him want to press his nose into the dip of Finch's shoulder and indulge. When Finch was recovered, Hugh would have to inquire as to what it was.

Until then, he'd simply enjoy it.

"You gave me quite the scare, you know," he told Finch, who he had cradled in his arms. "What happened? The elevator opened and you were on the floor with a young man beside you..." A horrible thought occurred. "Finch, does this have something to do with... you know... *superin*? Are you involved with harder substances?" The thought made Hugh's heart want to break. "It's all the stress of planning the event, isn't it? You were hoping to take the edge off in the secrecy of the cellar with a drug cocktail, but the dosage was too high and knocked you off your feet." It was the only explanation that made sense. Why else would Finch consort with a stranger in such an out of the way locale?

"No," Finch moaned pitifully.

Which was *exactly* what someone who wanted to conceal their drug usage

would say.

Hugh frowned. “All of this is my doing. I should have stepped in to help. I’d hoped our day out would provide you with some relief, but I suppose it was too little, too late.

You’ve been shouldering all of this for so long that it was ridiculous of me to think a single day of pampering would help.”

“Nngh,” Finch argued.

“Well, it’s all behind us now, Finch,” Hugh told him. “I’ll make sure you’re taken care of and that you get well. If this is an ongoing issue, we’ll tackle your recovery together. You are not alone.” To prove it, Hugh nosed his soft hair and kissed the top of his head. Lord, the smell of him... Hugh closed his eyes and lingered there, wanting to breathe it in forever.

Which was how a small army of kitchen staff found them when the elevator doors slid open.

“Mr. Drake!” gasped Emma, scandalized.

Hugh opened his eyes and faced the crowd. “Well, this isn’t the second floor. I must have pressed the wrong button.”

He eyed the panel. The button for the second floor was still lit.

“Oh. Well. I... suppose you called the elevator, then?” He stepped to the side, making some—but not enough—room for the staff and their empty carts.

“Come. If we squish, there should be space.”

“I...” Emma’s mouth hung open in astonishment, as if she’d never seen a dragon carry a man before. Several of her underlings looked equally as startled. It perplexed Hugh to the extreme. “We... no, thank you, Mr. Drake. We’ll wait. We’re destined for the cellar. There’s no sense in invading your privacy when we’re headed in different directions.”

“Ah! Of course.” The door began to close. Hugh stuck out his foot to block it. “Emma, since I have you here, could I talk you into doing me a favor?”

Emma glanced nervously to the side, then looked Hugh over carefully and offered him a thin smile. “Arrangements for bedroom dining until further notice, sir?”

“What? No. Although I do imagine I’ll be tired tomorrow, so perhaps having breakfast sent up to my room wouldn’t be such a bad idea.”

Emma’s eyes went very wide.

Meanwhile, the elevator beeped angrily, bapping Hugh’s foot several times in quick succession. Hugh scowled at it. “It seems this blasted elevator’s developed an attitude problem, so I’ll be brief—would you track down our event planner and let her know I’ll be late to arrive to the party? I’m afraid Finch has fallen ill, and I won’t be able to enjoy the evening until I’ve personally seen to his recovery.”

Several of the kitchen staff gasped. Hugh had to sympathize. Finch had always been a paragon of health and responsibility, and to hear that he was out of commission on the most stressful night of the year had to be shocking.

Emma’s cheeks turned pink. “O-Of course, sir.”

“Wonderful!” Hugh smiled, hoping to set them all at ease.

“I appreciate it. Now, to bring Finch to bed.”

Finch moaned.

One of the younger members of the staff—a willowy young man with innocent eyes and a round face—went bright red and looked away.

How bizarre.

“Thank you all for your hard work tonight,” Hugh said as he removed his foot from between the doors. “I won’t keep you any longer.”

Not a single soul acknowledged his comment as the elevator door closed. They watched in silence, some very pale, some exceedingly flushed, but all

wide-eyed. It was concerning, to say the least. The stress must have been getting to them, too. Hugh would have to see to it the entire staff received extra vacation time, lest they all start to collapse on him. But that would come later. Finch was his immediate priority, and he would not allow himself to be distracted.

“What a strange evening,” he said to himself as Finch’s scent filled the enclosed elevator. Wanting more, Hugh nuzzled the top of his head. “Finch, I’m not sure what it is you’re wearing, but this scent... it’s simply irresistible. You must wear it more often.”

“No,” Finch croaked.

“Well, I suppose you’re right. If you were to wear it all the time, it would lose its allure.” Hugh breathed it in deep, hoping to commit it to memory. “Ah... how divine.”

The elevator opened onto the correct floor, admitting Hugh into the servants’ wing, where Finch’s quarters were located. It was an easy walk to Finch’s door, but Hugh found himself reluctant to leave the cabin. It was small, and while it wasn’t sophisticated, its walls were made of an alluring metal finish that scratched a dragony itch inside of him. What’s more, the space was enclosed, and in it, every breath he took was thick with Finch’s scent. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to lay Finch down here, coil around him protectively, nose into the crook of his neck, and breathe, and breathe, and breathe...

Hugh only snapped to when the elevator door began to slide shut. He intercepted it with his foot and exited into the hallway, but while his head had come to its senses, his heart wouldn’t stop racing. Where the devil had the floor idea come from? Finch needed a bed, not an elevator. A cold, hard metal surface would never do.

Although, come to think of it, Finch did seem to be running a temperature. He was unusually hot to the touch.

“Perhaps the stress is getting to me as well.” Hugh chuckled. “What a strange night this has been so far, and it’s barely even started. Now, let’s get you

settled before my daydreams get any more bizarre.”

24

HUGH

Hugh carried Finch to his room, where he laid him in bed on top of his sheets and loosened the knot of Finch’s tie. Once it was out of the way, Hugh undid the buttons of his shirt and removed his clothing from the waist up, letting Finch’s feverish body breathe. He hung the clothing on the back of a nearby chair, then returned to the bedside. Finch seemed to be coming to.

“Mmph,” Finch groaned from behind closed lips.

“Hush, Finch. There’s no need to speak. I’m here, and I’ll take care of you. You can count on me.” Hugh undid Finch’s belt and removed his pants and shoes, marveling all the while at his svelte figure. Sure, he’d noticed it at the fitting, but it hadn’t struck him then in the way it struck him now. To Hugh’s great embarrassment, his eyes weren’t the only part of him to notice the change—his cock twitched, too, roused by the beauty before him.

Determined not to let his libido interfere with what was right, Hugh put the remainder of Finch’s clothing aside and came to hold his hand. “While I’m no Everard,” he said, “I do have limited healing abilities. With some luck, what I can offer will be enough to help you overcome the effects of... whatever it is that’s left you in such a state.”

Finch only moaned, so Hugh went forward with channeling his magic into him.

“It may feel strange,” Hugh explained in a soft voice as his magic diffused through Finch’s veins. “Unfortunately, I’m rather clumsy at all of this. I don’t tend to get close enough to

others to ever have the opportunity to practice, and it means I’m, well, *rusty*. I hope you’ll forgive any unpleasantness. I hear magic can sometimes feel a little cold.”

While it was true, the more he channeled, the hotter Finch seemed to get.



“It, um...” Hugh trailed off. The scent of Finch’s cologne was getting stronger, and it was hard to focus on anything else.

If Hugh hadn’t known better, he would have thought Finch was going into heat, but that was impossible. Not only had he not fully absorbed the stimulant, but Hugh had been with several omegas while trying for a clutch, and none of their heats had ever smelled like this. This was... artificial.

Chemical, almost, although not in the pungent, irritating way he typically associated with the word. There was simply no way...

Hugh zoned out.

What had he been talking about again?

When the thought didn’t return to him, he cupped Finch’s cheek with his free hand and traced his thumb over its soft skin. The heat felt nice against his palm. Natural. As if Finch had been designed for a dragon’s touch.

*Mine*, Hugh’s dragon insisted.

*Mine*, Hugh agreed.

“You know, Finch,” Hugh said as his dragon paced restlessly in his mind. “There was a question I was going to ask you tonight. A very important question. One I hope might help alleviate some of your stress. I’ve said it before, but you truly are a treasure, and I... I never want to let you go.”

Finch’s expression sharpened. “Sir?”

“It’s not very traditional, but... since you’re not a Disgrace, I wasn’t sure what else to do, or how else to keep you. I... I want to know if you’ll be part of my hoard.”

Finch’s eyelids fluttered, and it took all of Hugh’s resolve not to kiss him then and there. Damn that smell! It was making him want what he couldn’t have. If only he could slide into

bed beside Finch and claim him like his dragon wanted. Like *he* wanted. But

it was a ridiculous notion, and entirely inappropriate, since his future mate was waiting for him just a floor below.

“If you will,” Hugh continued, heart hammering in anticipation and arousal, “I’ll take care of you always.

Anything you want, no matter how much it costs, will be yours. You’ll be my living treasure, and I the dragon who guards it jealously. Just...” Hugh trailed off again, smitten with the softness of Finch’s skin and how beautiful he looked tonight. How cruel it was that such a gorgeous creature should exist and not be a suitable mate. “Just consider it. The offer will always stand. Even after I find my mate, I can’t bear the thought of life without you.”

The magic Hugh poured into Finch finally seemed to take effect. Finch blinked several times in rapid succession, then lifted a shaking hand to lay it over Hugh’s. “Sir...”

“I don’t care if it will be a struggle,” Hugh told him. He looked down into Finch’s dark eyes and felt a tug, like Finch really had been made for him. “Life is nothing but a series of obstacles, after all. Conquering them for you — *with* you—will make it all worth it.” Hugh gradually eased the flow of his magic until it had ceased and smiled kindly at his secretary.

“So, what do you think, Finch? Will you let me keep you forever? Will you accept the role of the most precious treasure in my hoard?”

Finch’s eyes brimmed with emotion, but rather than agree, he shook his head wildly. “Sir, I... I can’t give you an answer yet. Not now. It’s imperative that you leave immediately. My heat—”

“Bertram said it would be fine!” Hugh patted Finch’s thigh, trying very hard not to think about how touching such an intimate part of Finch made him feel. “The stimulant wasn’t entirely absorbed.”

“No, sir. It won’t be fine. My heat was due next week, and I can already feel it starting to take hold. You need to leave

before it gets any worse. I don’t want either of us to do something we’ll

regret.”

Come to think of it, the artificial smell had faded away, leaving something much more natural—something Hugh did recognize as heat. He swallowed nervously and looked Finch over again, from his sweet, serious dark eyes to the hint of pubic hair above the waistline of Finch’s new underwear to the stiffening cock just below. Would he feel regret were he to work Finch through his heat? Their union would be fruitless.

Finch wasn’t a Disgrace, so he wouldn’t bear Hugh a clutch. If Hugh’s previous attempts with Pedigree omegas were any indication, he wouldn’t conceive at all.

Hugh traced from Finch’s thigh to his hip. The spark of excitement he felt as his fingertips ran over the fabric of Finch’s underwear was all the confirmation he needed.

“Would you like me to help you, Finch?” Hugh asked in hushed tones. “I told you I would be there for you no matter what, to care for you and keep you safe. I don’t see why this should be any exception.”

Finch’s face went bright red. “Sir, you must already be under the influence of my scent. Please, leave. Everyone is waiting for you downstairs. You’ve wanted for so long to find your mate, and she’s finally within your reach. Besides, if you don’t act soon, your sanctioned period to produce a clutch will end, and—”

“And it’s of no matter.” Hugh leaned down to kiss Finch’s forehead. The scent of him grew stronger and more delicious by the second, and while Hugh became progressively more aroused, he was determined to stay the course. He would be strong for Finch. “What kind of a dragon would I be if I didn’t give my all to protect and cherish that which I already hold dear? You are more important than a ball, Finch. More important than any Disgrace. More important than a clutch.

None of that means half as much to me as you do. If you want me, I’ll give myself to you wholly and without a single regret.

For as long as you shall live, I will never take a mate. You are the only one for me.”

Tears glistened in Finch’s eyes. “You’re certain?”

“Very.”

“Then I will be your treasure, sir.” Finch squeezed his hand gently, and Hugh’s heart soared. “I’ll be yours in body and spirit for as long as my short life will last, and I’ll do everything in my power to make you as happy as you make me.”

Hugh had never felt such a rush. Knowing Finch was his, even if they would never be mates, brought him even greater joy than when he’d finally fished that coin out from the stream behind Drake Manor. He couldn’t help himself—he had to ask.

“May I kiss you, Finch?”

But he needn’t have said a word, because Finch had already tangled his fingers in Hugh’s hair and upon hearing the question, kissed Hugh like no secretary ever should.

25

F I N C H

Hugh tasted every bit as sweet as Finch knew he would. At the same time, he was wilder than Finch had expected. Perhaps it was his dragon, or perhaps it was a part of Hugh he’d heretofore only seen in small flashes. Finch tended to think that Hugh was like he acted—a pure innocent. Logic screamed that couldn’t be the case. He was over nine hundred years old and had taken the heats of countless omegas. Finch, on the other hand, only had his training. Despite being in his late thirties, he was coming to Hugh’s bed—or rather his own bed

—as untouched as any Pedigree omega fresh from a cloister.

He’d suffered through dozens of heats, but this was the very first he wouldn’t

spend alone, barricaded in his room and nearly out of his mind despite his heat dampeners.

Hugh would be his first alpha, and this his first real chance at conception.

Not that he would conceive, because he was a Disgrace, and not a dragon, but the thought tantalized him all the same.

What if he was the one who was wrong? What if Hugh actually did put a clutch in him? The thought made Finch's toes curl. "Sir—"

Hugh kissed him hard, cutting Finch off before he could say anything more. "Hugh," he whispered against Finch's lips.

"My name is Hugh, Finch. Now that you're mine, you can use it whenever you want."

Finch blinked at Hugh, his heart pounding so hard, he thought it might break. This wasn't the Hugh he knew. Well,

not exactly. This Hugh wasn't dithering or being absentminded. He was confident and firm.

Hugh's erection pushed against Finch's thigh.

*Extremely* firm, as it turned out.

"Hugh," Finch repeated, but it felt strange. He stole another few quick kisses from the man, then quietly admitted,

"I'll try to use it, but old habits are hard to break."

"All I can ask is for you to do your best," Hugh replied. He kissed Finch firmly then, his mouth far more sweet and skillful than Finch would have ever expected. It was the kind of kiss a man could get lost in, but before that could happen, Finch needed to be transparent with his employer in a way he'd never been before.

"I need you to know," he said, "that this is my first heat without dampeners,

and also my first with an alpha.”

Finch expected Hugh to blush and stammer. He did neither.

Instead, a light flashed in his plum-colored eyes. Hugh’s expression softened after that, and he looked down at Finch with tremendous affection and tenderness. “Is that so?”

Finch nodded, unable to speak and mesmerized by the adoration in Hugh’s eyes.

“I’m glad you told me. This changes everything. I promise, I’ll be gentle.” Hugh kissed him more softly now, like Finch really was a treasure to be protected at all costs. While he did, he ran his fingers over Finch’s clothed erection. Finch held back a moan as his cock twitched in need. He wanted to be held and stroked and filled over and over until his dragon’s massive strength wore out. Instinctively, he pushed into Hugh’s hand and let Hugh feel how hard he was. Hugh squeezed gently, and Finch shamelessly ground against his palm. His slick had started to flow, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he was drenched with it.

“I need you,” Finch whispered as he pleased himself with his employer’s hand. “I need you so much. Please.”

Hugh kissed away each pleading word, taking them into himself, then said the words Finch would never forget,

“Anything for you, Finch, my love, my treasure, my everything. I’m nothing if not yours, and will be for all of time.”

Somehow—Finch was fuzzy on the details—he and Hugh lost their clothes and lay skin to delicious skin. They kissed over and over and over and Finch felt like he might be drowning.

Or melting. Melting was a definite possibility. He was wet. So wet. And so hot as well. Even naked, he felt like he was being roasted alive.

“Need,” he gasped between kisses. “Please. *Please.* ”

Hugh licked up the side of Finch's neck then bit the skin behind his ear. "Anything, Finch. Anything at all. Tell me and it's yours."

"Need..." Finch tried to think, but it was so hard. Hard like him and hard like Hugh. But there was something missing besides Hugh's knot, and it felt like if he didn't get it, he would die. If only his heat-addled brain would clue him in to what it was.

"Yes?" Hugh's hips rocked up against him, driving his cock along Finch's lower abdomen. Sparks of pleasure went off behind Finch's eyes, causing him to gasp and arch his back. Wild lust surged through him, overthrowing what little decorum he had left and bringing him to work his hips in tandem with Hugh's. How could he help it? He'd wanted Hugh forever, and now he was getting his wish.

It was all so hot. So impossibly hot.

Finch didn't know how much more he could take. "I need cold," he blurted, but not ice, or a chilly bath, or air conditioning. Only one thing would do. "Metal."

Hugh's nostrils flared. "Gold?"

That sounded like utter bliss. Finch imagined the way the coins in Hugh's hoard would press against his body and how their cool, flat faces would be a reprieve from the feverish heat radiating from his skin. "God, yes. Please."

"Come, then." Hugh stood, then picked Finch up in a bridal carry as if he weighed no more than one of Finch's rats.

Once Finch was secure in his arms, Hugh carried him to the door of his room and managed to open it without dropping him. Finch suspected magic had been involved.

"I'm naked, sir," Finch murmured as he nuzzled against Hugh's neck. With the way he was burning up, modesty was the least of his worries, but he thought it prudent to mention.

The staff would no doubt be scarred to see him in the nude, never mind the visiting Disgraces.

Hugh bent his head down so they were nose to nose. “It’s of no consequence. I won’t let them see you. You are mine, Finch. My treasure to keep forever. I’m a selfish, greedy dragon, you know, and I’d rather cut my own arm off than have to share. You’re safe with me. I’ll keep you out of sight.

And then, when we’re alone and you’re bathed in gold, I’ll make sure you remember it always.”

That said, he whisked Finch away, and like when he’d curled around Finch and tucked him under his wing, Finch had never felt more safe. The difference now was that he’d also never felt more loved.

There was another break in time when Finch’s heat took control, then Finch came to and found himself half-buried in old gold coins and decorated with jewelry and gemstones. He was in Hugh’s hoard, he realized, and had been laid atop one of his mountains of treasure. It was all so cool on his skin. So mercifully, blissfully cool. Finch twisted his hips in an attempt to dig himself deeper into it, but all he managed to do was send coins clattering down the mountain and dislodge a large pearl that had been resting in the dip of his navel. The pearl clicked as it hit the gold surrounding him, but before it could bounce its way down the heap, it was seized by familiar fingers—Hugh’s.

“Are you there, Finch?” he asked in a near whisper as he ran the pearl over the curve of Finch’s hip. “Have you come

back to me?”

Finch’s mouth was dry, and an aching need seized him that ran bone deep. “Yes.”

“I made you a bed from my hoard. Is it to your liking? I couldn’t get an answer out of you before. You were, well, *preoccupied*. ”

Finch looked down his body and discovered that riches weren’t the only thing he was covered in—stripes of cum glistened on his stomach. By the looks of



it, it was his own.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m fairly sure you did, but it’s of no consequence.” Hugh swept forward and climbed over Finch on his hands and knees, at which point Finch realized he was still entirely naked. Up close like this, there was no missing the trail of dark hair that ran from Hugh’s chest all the way to his groin, or the pronounced muscles of his arms. When clothed, Hugh was blundering at best, but when stripped down to nothing, he was all raw sexual prowess and unrelenting confidence. “I like you this way, Finch. I love to see you come undone. If I had it my way, I’d watch you touch yourself all day, but I can think of other ways to put our time together to use. Can’t you?”

Hugh’s lips brushed Finch’s, stirring Finch’s cock back to life. “I can, sir.”

“Would you like it to happen here, swimming in our hoard, or in our bed? I had the sheets made to match your eyes, you know.”

It was the most ridiculous thing Finch had ever heard, but it was also the most romantic, and he kissed Hugh hard as his heart sang. When he was finally able to look in the direction of the bed, he noticed the sheets had, indeed, been changed. They were a brilliant cobalt blue now, with their stitching done in gold. The bed itself seemed to float in a sea of treasure that hadn’t been there the last time Finch had been in Hugh’s hoard. It looked too good to resist. “Yes. Bed. Now.”

Hugh scooped Finch up into his arms. “That sounded practically draconic, Finch. How very curious. Although

Harrison does assure me that every omega, no matter how many generations away they are from their dragon sire, retains a bit of magic. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be omegas in the first place. It sounds like utter rot to me, but maybe the boy is onto something.”

Finch didn’t care for science. Not now. Right now, the only thing he cared for was Hugh, their bed, and the thickness between Hugh’s legs. He clung to Hugh as he was lifted from his bed of gold and carried down the mountain. It

all seemed so surreal, yet there was no denying it. Hugh had chosen him over a potential mate and even over the clutch he'd yearned for, and now Hugh was going to take his virginity.

Not even dreams were this sweet.

Hugh tossed Finch onto the bed, then climbed on after him, his enormous erection bobbing between his legs. It would be going inside of him, Finch realized with a start that warmed his stomach. *Hugh* would be going inside of him, shoving that thing that looked like it could tear him in half into Finch's tight little hole until they were one. Finch almost came from the thought alone. He needed it in the worst way.

But Hugh had other plans. "Hands and knees, Finch.

Now."

Finch did as he was told.

"Beautiful. Now spread your legs. Yes. Just like that."

To Finch's shock and disbelief, Hugh licked him there. The flat of his tongue was wet and warm and surprisingly thick, and the pleasure it brought was shocking. While Hugh lapped and probed and kissed, Finch dropped his head and gasped for breath. "Oh, *god*."

Hugh kissed the base of Finch's spine tenderly. "Would you like more, my darling?"

"Please," Finch begged. "Please."

"Tell me what you want, sweet. Use your words." Hugh kissed up Finch's vertebrae.

"Fuck me." It was crude, but Finch didn't care. No one from the Pedigree was here to reprimand him. He was at the mercy of a dragon, and he needed that dragon to know exactly what he wanted before he went insane from need. "Knot me and fuck me and knot me again. Breed me. Take me. Oh, sir, I need you. I need to feel you inside me."

“Hugh,” Hugh growled in Finch’s ear as the head of his cock probed Finch’s hole. “Call me by my name, Finch. When we’re in bed, I’m not ‘sir,’ I’m ‘Hugh.’”

Hugh flipped Finch over so he lay on his back, then spread his legs wide. In no time at all, Hugh folded Finch into position, and Finch felt the smooth skin of Hugh’s cockhead probe at his entrance once more. It was time. In seconds, Hugh would fill him and he’d finally lose his virginity to the dragon he’d loved for what felt like forever. Heat rose in Finch’s cheeks, and he squirmed as Hugh stroked himself back and forth, wetting his length with Finch’s slick. It felt like forever before the pressure returned and Hugh slowly pushed inside.

“Finch,” Hugh rumbled, sounding more draconic than Finch had ever heard him before. “God, Finch... the way you feel... I can’t...”

Finch didn’t know what Hugh could or could not do. In that moment, he didn’t care. Hugh was inside him, stretching him, *filling* him, and the pleasure of it all deprived Finch of any other thought. “Please,” Finch begged, not even sure what he was begging for, but he needed... he needed...

Hugh leaned forward, buried to the hilt in Finch’s body, and kissed his words away. From there it was all pumping hips, flowing slick, and senselessness. Finch lost himself more than once to his heat, only to regain hold of himself in the midst of Hugh fucking him to within an inch of his life. It was savage and sweet, absolutely primal in execution, but based in love. Finch could tell it from every kiss Hugh gave him and from the tenderness with which the dragon caressed his body.

Finch lost his grip on reality again. When he came to, Hugh had his hand wrapped around Finch’s own cock.

“Come for me, Finch,” Hugh urged him, his voice a low growl. “I want to feel you come before I give you your first knot.”

That alone was enough to nearly make Finch come.

Hugh's voice, deep and sexy and so self-assured, telling him to do the filthiest things, was beyond anything he'd ever imagined. With a strangled cry, he pushed himself as hard as he could against Hugh's hand and let go. Orgasm ripped through him, tightening his body and relieving some of the effects of his heat. While it happened, Hugh groaned and moved even more violently within Finch. It was divine. Finch rode out the pleasure, floating on post-orgasmic bliss. Then Hugh shouted and stilled, and a new kind of pleasure took hold as Hugh's knot swelled inside of him, stretching him beyond what he'd thought possible. Pain and pleasure mingled, one sweetening the other until there was no part of Finch that wasn't under its spell.

"God, Finch," Hugh breathed through it all. Hot cum rushed into Finch, and Hugh folded him back a little more as if to encourage it to sink deeper. "God... I've never, never experienced something like this with anyone else. Never. You are the one for me. The only one. And I hope that for all of time, I might be the only one for you, too. I know that we have but decades, but I swear I will be yours until the end. I promise it with every fiber of my being."

Finch's heart lurched and tears pricked his eyes. Hugh truly was in love with him. Deeply and irrevocably in love. No matter which angle Finch framed it from, it was a foregone conclusion. For him, Hugh had given up on his dream, and for Hugh, Finch would do anything. Even share his secret.

"Hugh?"

"Yes, sweet?" Hugh kissed Finch's shoulder.

"My name. It's not Finch. Or, rather, it is. But it's my first name. Not my last. I had it changed when I moved to Aurora. I petitioned to have it done through your brother, Geoffrey."

Hugh looked puzzled. "You're just Finch," he said. "Last or first, you're my Finch."

"Yes, but..." Finch forced himself to say it. "My real surname is Drake."

Hugh looked more puzzled. "What are you going on about, Finch? I don't

understand.”

“Your second cousin once removed, one Calvin Drake, is my sire, sir.” Scene set, the secret came rushing forth before he could lose his nerve. “I am, and always have been, a Disgrace.”

26

HUGH

The notion was so preposterous that Hugh laughed. Finch, a Disgrace? Certainly not.

But when Finch didn’t laugh along with him, Hugh fell silent.

“Finch?” Hugh asked apprehensively. “You’re not laughing.”

“I’m not joking, sir.”

“So it’s true?” Hugh hesitated. “You’re a Disgrace?”

“Yes, sir.”

“A Drake by birth? By blood?”

“Yes.”

Hugh’s head spun. It didn’t seem real.

“I don’t understand.” He brushed sweat-dampened hair back from Finch’s forehead, searching Finch’s face for answers he wasn’t sure he’d ever find.

“Your name wasn’t on the list. I devoured every word of that folder, top to bottom...

you were nowhere to be found.”

“I didn’t think it right to include myself.”

“That... that’s absurd. I would have chosen you then and there had I seen

your name amongst the other candidates. I wouldn't have given it a second thought."

At that, Finch closed his eyes and mournfully tucked his head to his shoulder. "Which is why I didn't want you to know."

Hugh watched Finch's expression for a moment. The pain in it was visceral, and it struck Hugh in a deep and uncomfortable place that made his stomach clench and his erection wane. Why would Finch hide from him? Hugh tried his hardest to be a good dragon—someone his staff could trust

—but it seemed his best efforts hadn't been enough. Finch had been too scared to tell him the truth. Finch, of all people. The one Hugh had cherished above all others. If he was frightening to Finch, the rest of the staff had to think he was a monster.

Emma's wide eyes earlier that evening were starting to make sense.

"Oh," Hugh murmured. Crestfallen, he gathered Finch in his arms—gingerly, so as not to scare him—and rolled them over so they were lying side by side. While Hugh's erection had gone soft, his knot held firm. It would be a while before it shrank enough to let them separate.

He wished it would just go away.

If Finch was so scared of him, did that mean Hugh had pressured him into sex? Had he agreed to it out of fear? The possibility was sickening.

"Sir?" Finch asked.

Hugh didn't have the heart to correct him. "Yes?"

"I didn't mean to upset you." Finch caressed his cheek, a sweet token of affection undeserving of someone as loathsome as himself. "I think perhaps you've misunderstood. I hate to see you so sad."

"And I hate to think that I've made you so uncomfortable you had to hide

who you are.” Hugh frowned and kept his gaze lowered. It hurt too much to look at Finch, knowing the pain he’d caused him. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Sir... *Hugh*.” Finch curled a finger under Hugh’s chin and lifted it, forcing Hugh to meet his gaze. “My decision to hide my ancestry was in no way intended to be a slight on you. I hid who I was out of fear that I would disappoint you.”

Hugh’s eyes widened. “Disappoint me? Finch, you could never!”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Finch kissed him sweetly, and what was left of Hugh’s foul mood lifted. He kissed Finch back. It was short but sweet, and when it was over, Finch expanded on what he’d said. “All my life, I’ve striven for perfection. It’s part of what makes me so good at what I do.

But conception is messy and unpredictable. It’s not something I can control, and I’m afraid that despite research to the contrary, I won’t be successful at it. It simply seems untenable that a Disgrace could be a dragon in disguise. I’ve never had scales, never lusted after gold, never known what it’s like to take flight...” Finch frowned, and Hugh’s heart frowned along with him. “I can’t help but wonder if your brothers were simply lucky, or if the fact their mates all produced clutches was a fluke. Disgraces are a disappointment, sir. They have been for longer than any of us have been alive. Why would the ancient dragons have discarded them if they were the ones who laid their eggs? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Hugh had never thought of it like that. Harrison’s research had been the glimmer of hope he’d needed after being eggless for so long, and he’d been so excited by the prospect that he hadn’t thought to check if his reasoning was flawed. It had been enough proof for him to see so many of his brothers mated and raising whelps, but five dragons out of hundreds did not a rule make. And what of Bertram, who’d shown up one day out of the blue with a clutch of his own and no mate to speak of? His success had been the driving force behind Hugh’s own attempts to start a family. Surely his brother wouldn’t have bedded with a Disgrace.

The uncertainty gave Hugh a headache.

No wonder Finch hadn't been so forthcoming about his identity—fastidious as always, he'd seen the faults in Harrison's proposal while Hugh had bought it without a second thought.

“Do you see now why I couldn't tell you?” Finch attempted a smile, but didn't quite make it. “If you'd found out

I was a Disgrace and took my heat expecting eggs, you'd be disappointed when I failed.”

Hugh laughed. “Fail? You? Finch, you could never. Even if you never bore me a single egg, I would die a happy man to have lived with you by my side. Did you honestly think I'd throw you away over something like that?”

Finch lowered his gaze. “Any dragon would.”

“I'm not any dragon, sweet.” Hugh stroked his cheek.

“And you aren't any omega. You're mine. My treasure. My Finch. The only man in all of history special enough to make a dragon want to keep a living creature in his hoard. I didn't offer myself to you tonight thinking you'd bear me a clutch.

Whether you do or not is inconsequential. I want you for you, not for what you can give me... and if that means we'll never have a family, so be it. You're more important to me than that.

I could never say goodbye over something you have no control over. Not to you. Not ever.”

This time the smile did make it to Finch's face, and it was such a rare and special thing that Hugh couldn't help but smile back. He kissed Finch soundly, wanting to feel the curve of his lips and taste how sweet his happiness could be.

“I adore you, Finch,” Hugh said as the kiss concluded.

“You are all that's right and good in my world, and I shudder to think what my life would be like without you in it.”



Finch shivered with delight and shifted closer to Hugh's chest. In doing so, his hips rocked in such a way that stirred Hugh back to partial hardness. Unable to resist, Hugh began to pump into Finch with small, almost superficial thrusts that teased him back to full excitement.

"Oh, Hugh," Finch moaned. "Yes. "

"You're mine." Hugh nipped the crook of Finch's neck and continued to rock into him. "Mine. Mine. Mine."

The scent of Finch's heat thickened in the air. It wouldn't be much longer before he succumbed to another bout of primal need. In anticipation, Hugh started moving faster, teasing Finch with the girth of his knot. Finch moaned and kissed

Hugh fiercely, and for a while they stayed like that, kissing and tempting each other with pleasure they couldn't quite realize.

"What changed your mind?" Hugh asked breathlessly as his knot began to slip. "Why tell me who you really are now when you were so eager to hide before?"

"It was you." Finch tangled his fingers in Hugh's hair and squeezed around Hugh's knot. The pleasure was so intense that Hugh bucked involuntarily into him, driven wild by the sudden tightness. Finch kissed him over and over, but it still wasn't enough. Hugh needed him. Every part of him. All of him. Forever. He'd almost forgotten what they were talking about when Finch found it within himself to end the kiss and respond. "When you told me you wanted me despite all the willing Disgraces waiting at the ball, that you'd care for me all my life and cherish me until I died even if it meant you'd never have a clutch, I knew my fears were baseless. You want me for me, not for what you think I can give you."

Hugh's knot slipped free, making Finch gasp with need.

Not trusting himself not to remount Finch immediately, he kissed his disheveled secretary one last time, relinquished his grip on his hair, and

slipped down Finch's body to get another taste of his slick.

"Oh, Hugh, you can't," Finch breathed, but Hugh had already folded back his legs and seen the mess they'd made together. He ran the flat of his tongue along the inside of Finch's thigh and tasted the sweetness spilled there, then worked his way inward. Finch tasted delightful when freshly bred. Hugh would have to see to it that he stayed that way.

"*Hugh.*" Finch trembled. "Hugh, I'm coming!"

More sweet slick was Hugh's reward. He lapped it up, then dipped his tongue inside, wanting more. Finch moaned and squirmed beneath him, but with every other breath begged Hugh to keep going. Hugh was happy to oblige.

Hugh bred Finch through the night and into the morning, filling him again and again as Finch cried out with need. They made love in Hugh's hoard bed—which really was the perfect color to complement Finch's eyes—and sometimes in the mountains of coin and other cooling treasures Hugh had amassed over his relatively short life. From those piles of riches, Hugh found precious things with which to adorn his omega. He slid rings with fat gemstones onto Finch's fingers, collared his neck with Egyptian gold, and draped him in delicate chains that stood out brilliantly against Finch's skin.

"More," Finch moaned as Hugh worked another knot into him. "More, more, more..."

So Hugh cuffed his wrists with bangles, their diamonds winking from micro-pavé settings, and crowned his dark hair with a golden circlet heavy with huge emeralds. He scattered the sheets with handfuls of coins and decorated Finch from the inside with strands of pearly white. When Finch came, tightening around his knot like a vise, Hugh groaned and thrust a little more, working his riches deeper inside.

"Finch?" Hugh asked breathlessly after one of those times.

Four days had passed since Finch had first gone into heat, and if Hugh's nose was to be trusted, Finch was starting to recover.

Hugh was, admittedly, woefully undereducated in matters of omegas' reproductive health, but his previous attempts to produce a clutch had all lasted a full seven days. If Finch's heat really was ending, then...

Hugh grinned and kissed his secretary. "Finch, sweet, do you hear me?"

"Mm?" Finch hummed. His eyes were closed and his hips rocked in a slow, steady rhythm as he milked Hugh's cock.

"Are you coming back to me?" Hugh asked. "I feel like you are. Do you think we've reached the end?"

Finch blinked his eyes open. "Maybe. How long has it been?"

"Four days."

"Mm." Finch closed his eyes again. "Too soon. Heat should last a week. No doubt I'll succumb to it again. You feel too good for it to end now, anyway."

The compliment bolstered Hugh, who kissed the corner of Finch's mouth while Finch made pretty noises for him.

"There is a way for a heat to end prematurely," Hugh said at last, kissing the words into Finch. "Do you think maybe you've conceived?"

Finch laughed in exhaustion and found Hugh's lips in full, kissing him soundly. "Impossible."

"Why?"

"It's just... outlandish. For reasons we've already discussed, I should add."

"But my brothers' mates have all conceived, and they're more or less Disgraces, just like you."

"Well, yes."

"And I've taken your heat." Hugh announced it with pride, his chest puffing up a little at the accomplishment. On the inside, his dragon preened by

fanning its wings. What it had wanted all along was finally theirs. “I know that it’s a long shot, but what if Harrison is right? What if it’s not all just a fluke, and Disgraces really are dragons? You would lay our eggs, and I would shower you in gold as you bask with them in the sunlight, their pretty purple shells sparkling like the jewels they are. Not even heaven could look half as beautiful.”

The tips of Finch’s ears pinkened. “Sir...”

“Hugh,” Hugh corrected with a smile. “I know I shouldn’t count my whelps before they hatch, but imagine it, Finch.

Imagine us curled in bed with young dragons snuggled between us, their scales still soft and their wings not yet strong enough to lift them off the ground. I think they’d be like you, you know. Or, rather, I hope they would be. Gentle, meticulous, and so incredibly intelligent. Our little scholars.

Not even Geoffrey’s whelps could compete.”

Finch’s ears pinkened further. “Sir, I think you’re getting ahead of yourself. If you keep imagining scenarios like that, you’ll only end up disappointed. My heat will take hold again any time now. It’s natural for it to wax and wane over the course of a week. It doesn’t mean I’ve conceived.”

Hugh sighed. Finch, as always, was right. It was much too early to get his hopes up. Besides, fantasizing about the future had only ever brought him heartache. Focusing on the present was much more sustainable. With that in mind, Hugh asked,

“Are you thirsty, Finch? Do you need me to fetch you some water?”

“No, thank you, sir.”

“Hugh.”

“Yes. Hugh. Old habits.” Finch offered him an apologetic smile. “I’m neither hungry nor thirsty. I’m simply tired. I’ve never... with anyone. It’s more exhausting than I was led to believe.”

“It is quite physically taxing,” Hugh agreed. By now his knot was receding, so he pulled slowly out of Finch and lay at his side. Finch moaned in disappointment when he withdrew, but it was for the best. Rest was essential. When Finch’s heat picked back up, they’d be glad they’d spent some time apart.

“I’ve entertained a few omegas through their heats over the course of my life, and I have no idea how they ever got by without the help of modern medicine. But I suppose biology doesn’t care. Reproduction eclipses all, doesn’t it? As long as offspring are being reliably produced, it doesn’t matter how inconvenient the method of conception.”

Finch snorted. “I’d like a word with evolution.”

“You and me both.”

A comfortable silence followed, during which Hugh plucked a loose coin from the sheets and teased it between his fingers, wanting badly to run it along Finch’s skin or place it in a dip somewhere on his body. Even when Finch’s heat wasn’t in full effect, he wanted to drown the man in gold, blanket him in billions, and bejewel him with finery even kings and queens

would envy. But for the moment, the best thing he could give Finch was a nap.

“I’m off to take a shower, sweet,” Hugh told him, then kissed him on the forehead. “I’ll bring back more water and some snacks. You may not be hungry now, but the same won’t be true after the next wave of your heat strikes. Rest while you still can. I shan’t be long.”

Finch, whose eyes were closed and whose body was blissfully relaxed, hummed in agreement, so Hugh left him in his hoard and went to shower. Like he’d promised, he didn’t take long, but he was delayed in the kitchen while Emma fussed about his shoddy diet. Hugh came out victorious, however, and left the kitchen in possession of a platter of leftover petit fours. Expecting to find Finch in the throes of heat, Hugh popped a Funfetti confection into his mouth on the way back to his hoard, but when he arrived, Finch was asleep, and the scent of his heat had faded away.

*Don't get too excited*, Hugh told himself as he returned to the bedside and placed their snacks on the nearby table. *Heats come and go. It will be back. Finch said so himself.*

But the scent of Finch's heat didn't return later that evening, or the day after that, or even on the morning of the seventh day, when Hugh woke to find Finch slumbering peacefully at his side. By that point, there was only one possible conclusion—Finch had conceived, and the clutch Hugh had dreamed of all these hundreds of years would be his.

27

## F I N C H

Hugh insisted that Finch book an appointment to see Everard at his medical office to confirm the clutch. He was so keenly positive and happy, and Finch tried to be the same, but he was worried. Very worried. Hopeful, too, but mostly worried.

Therefore he made two appointments: one he'd attend together with Hugh on Friday in roughly two weeks' time, and one by himself on Thursday the day before that. In the interim, he was free to dream of how wonderful a clutch would be, and how it would be even better to wear Hugh's mate mark, and how much more wonderful yet it would be to wake up every morning for hundreds of years in Hugh's bed. But dreaming wasn't all Finch did with the time he had before his first appointment—in addition to satisfying his secretarial duties, he used every spare moment he had to satisfy Hugh in bed.

Hugh was a remarkably inventive lover. He had a way of using every inch of his body to arouse Finch to greater heights of pleasure. Hugh did things that even the cloister hadn't warned Finch to expect—things that were decadent and somehow forbidden and absolutely wonderful. Hugh in a nutshell. Finch had thought that would change after his heat receded, but it hadn't. Hugh's frantic, frenetic desire had abated, somewhat, but his ardor remained undimmed. Without the influence of Finch's heat, Hugh painstakingly explored every inch of Finch's body and cherished each one thoroughly.

“Mine,” he said over and over, biting Finch's neck or teasing a nipple or

sliding his cock into Finch's eager body.

"Always, forever, mine."

And as if the thorough lovemaking wasn't enough, Hugh did other smaller and simpler things for Finch. He secured Elizabeth and Eleanor a gilded cage and installed it in Finch's suite, and took Finch on walks around the estate during which he always held Finch's hand. They ate their meals together, sometimes in the dining room where a smirking Bella brought in dish after dish, and sometimes in Hugh's room. They also talked for hours and hours, or rather Hugh largely talked and Finch added the occasional observation. The conversations were often absurd, but Finch loved them. He loved every single word that came out of Hugh's mouth, no matter how silly it might be.

Finch, in short, allowed himself thirteen days to wallow in Hugh's regard. He let himself dream of love, and marks, and forever. He hoped, in a hard and helpless sort of way, that his body held the thing that Hugh most wanted in the world. But, shoved deep under layers of happy dreams, contentment, pleasure, and love as sweet as honey, Finch still worried, made plans, and tried not to hope too hard, just in case that was what jinxed him.

On the Wednesday evening before the appointment, Finch took charge. Despite his new relationship with his employer, he was still Hugh's secretary, and he knew a thing or two about organization. He spent the day with Hugh playing with the girls—Hugh had become particularly fond of Elizabeth—

and then baking a Funfetti cake for that night's pudding. After the cake was carefully put in the oven by the formidable Emma, Finch drew Hugh to his hoard and asked to be told the story behind several of his most interesting pieces. Hugh cheerfully nattered on, happy as the proverbial clam, and when Finch drew him to the bed in the center of the room, Hugh went with no fuss at all.

"Finch, you wicked boy. I see your plan now!"

"I'm hardly a boy, Hugh."

Hugh huffed, a bit of smoke escaping through his nose.

“You, my love, are but an infant compared to me.”

Finch couldn't help but smile. “I'm afraid that doesn't sound much better.”

“Nonsense. Now come here so I can undress you, my darling boy.” Hugh made a grab for Finch, but he nimbly stepped out of reach. “Finch?” Hugh asked, sounding plaintive.

“Tonight, I wish to do something different. These past weeks have been beyond lovely, but I want more.”

Hugh looked both concerned and intrigued. “What kind of more?”

Finch disrobed quickly and efficiently, folding his clothes neatly as he went and laying them down on a small gilt table.

“Tonight I wish to serve you, sir.”

“Hugh, Finch. In bed, I'm Hugh.”

“Sir,” Finch insisted. “Please.”

Hugh blinked at him as if processing the idea in his head, turning it around and looking at it from every angle. “I... oh.

*Oh!* My. Well, if that's the case, then yes, Finch. Proceed. I will always give you whatever you wish.”

Finch shook his head very slightly. He didn't miss that Hugh's gaze seemed locked on to his body, especially his cock, which was already hard and leaking precum. “No, sir.

Tonight, it's whatever you wish.”

Hugh smiled his sweet, slow smile, the one he gave only when he was truly contented and happy. It was Finch's favorite smile. “All right. And just how will you serve me?”

Finch tried to keep his expression impassive, but he couldn't stop the



betraying twitch Hugh's words brought to his lips. "First, I will help you disrobe."

"Quite cheeky for a secretary, don't you think?" Hugh asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Ah, but there's where you're wrong. Tonight, sir, I will be your valet. Let me assist you." Finch stepped forward and removed Hugh's clothing with care, giving his body soft, sly caresses as he went. He ended up on his knees, taking Hugh's shoes and socks off, then pulling down his trousers. Unable to help himself, Finch swayed forward slightly, just enough for his mouth to touch the bulge hidden behind the dark violet cotton of Hugh's boxers. He ran his lips over the hard length, wetting the fabric and making Hugh moan.

"More. Finch, I need more. God."

Finch pulled back so he could look up into Hugh's eyes.

He rested his hands on Hugh's hips. "Should I remove these as well, sir?"

"God, yes."

"Very good, sir." Finch smiled up at Hugh. "My pleasure."

Hugh groaned as Finch pulled down the briefs far enough so Hugh's cock sprang free. It was fully erect, the foreskin pulled back, and the bright pink head begging for Finch's mouth. Finch touched the tip of his tongue to its slit, tasting the salty, smoky flavor with relish.

"Please," Hugh moaned. "Please, Finch. My love."

Finch obliged his lover and drew the head of Hugh's cock into his mouth. He sucked hard on the sensitive flesh, making Hugh cry out and bury one of his hands in his hair. While he did, Finch relaxed his throat and drew Hugh's cock into his mouth, this time not stopping with the head. He felt the need to gag and suppressed it, as he'd been taught in his cloister, and kept going until his throat spasmed around Hugh's cock.

Wanting more and knowing Hugh wanted the same, he cupped Hugh's

gorgeous ass and pulled him closer still.

Hugh, swearing and muttering incomprehensibly, got with the program. He grabbed fistfuls of Finch's hair in each hand and pushed just a bit more into Finch's mouth. Finch hummed with pleasure and approval, making Hugh swear more. He thrust again and again into Finch's mouth and they both gloried in it. It was so good. So good. *Too good.* But Finch

shoved that thought aside and focused on the joy of knowing it was his mouth that was coaxing Hugh toward orgasm.

One bob of his head at a time, Finch brought Hugh closer.

He licked and sucked and teased until Hugh was close to tears, then swallowed Hugh deep and let his throat do the work.

Finch was practically a virgin, but as a member of the Pedigree, he'd been taught how to please a man, and he knew how to do it well. In no time at all, Hugh tensed, then roared, and Finch tasted victory. It was surprisingly smoky.

Hugh didn't pop his knot to lock Finch's jaw in place—

thank god—so when he was done, Finch pulled away. No sooner had he than Hugh pulled him to his feet and kissed him deeply and thoroughly.

“My love,” Hugh rumbled, somewhere between man and dragon. “Oh, Finch. My dearest, my—”

“Would sir please lie down on the bed?” Finch asked solicitously.

“Huh?” Hugh stared at Finch, his glassy eyes wide.

“On your back, sir, or else I won't be able to please you.”

“Uh... right. Yes.” Hugh blinked then sprawled out on his back on the bed with sheets as dark as Finch's eyes. “Is this good?”

“That, sir, is perfect. Absolutely perfect. Just like you.”

Hugh frowned. “I’m a decent enough dragon, true, but—”

“No buts, sir. You are wonderful.” Finch crawled onto the bed and straddled Hugh’s thighs. “The very best dragon there is, bar none. And the very best employer. You know,” Finch trailed his fingers through the thick hair on Hugh’s chest,

“from the very first time I saw you at that interview, I knew that there would be no one else for me. Right then and there I told myself that I would serve you, and only you, for as long as I should live.”

Hugh sucked in a breath and squirmed. He’d never gone entirely flaccid, but his erection was back and harder than it’d been before. It rubbed enticingly between Finch’s cheeks.

“You,” Finch said, leaning down to whisper the words against Hugh’s lips, “were the subject of my wet dreams these thirteen long years. I used to imagine that you would bend me over my office desk and do things to me no employer ever should, and now here I am, on your lap, ready to serve you in ways no Attendant ever will.”

Hugh’s cock throbbed, so Finch clenched around it. He didn’t let it inside of him—not yet—but he was as eager for it to happen as Hugh appeared to be.

“All I ask,” Finch continued in a low voice meant to tease as he curled his fingers in Hugh’s chest hair, “is that you don’t treat me any differently after this, Mr. Drake. I’m still your employee, after all.”

Hugh groaned and began to thrust his hips, desperately driving his cock against Finch in search of somewhere to put it. How intoxicating it was to see Hugh driven mad with lust.

Finch kissed him firmly, over and over, not wanting any kiss to be the last one. He didn’t stop until Hugh begged him.

“Please, Finch, darling, please.” He ran his hands up and down the sides of Finch’s body. “Please, love, I need more. I need you. Right now I’m controlling my dragon, but he’s about ten seconds from taking over and

fucking you quite thoroughly, and while I don't wish to upset your plans, I do advise that you give him what he wants.”

Finch kissed Hugh's neck and throat, then moved on to his collarbones. “And what does His Excellency want?”

“You,” Hugh replied, his plum-colored eyes seeming to glow from within. “Always, always you. Only you.”

That squeezed Finch's heart hard. He opened his mouth to ask if Hugh's dragon also wanted whelps, but then didn't.

There was only so much self-inflicted torture he could stand.

“Would sir kindly hand me the lube?” Finch asked.

“Anything for you.”

“Especially when that anything gets you laid?” Finch prepped himself quickly then spread more lube up and down

Hugh's shaft. Finch knew he'd had the massive thing in his ass dozens of times, but it hadn't stopped being intimidating.

“No, Finch. Especially when that anything gets me you.”

Finch felt that painful squeezing of his heart again. He rose slightly, positioned Hugh's cock at his entrance, and slid down it. Under him, Hugh stiffened and arched his back. “You have me, sir,” Finch said. “You always have. You always will.”

Using his entire body, Finch tried to show Hugh how very much he meant it. He rose and fell, rose and fell, and worshiped Hugh in ways only a lover could. Finch wanted it to never end.

Hugh's dragon was impatient, though, and had other ideas.

He rose from the depths of Hugh, trailing smoke out his nostrils. He grasped Finch's cock and started to pump. “Come for me, darling. Come all over me.

Show my dragon how much you want this.”

Finch whined for perhaps the first time since he'd been a very small child. He threw all thought and worry and practiced skill out of his head and concentrated on one thing: his need to please his dragon. The first spasm of pleasure hit, but it wasn't enough to push him over the edge. “Knot me. God, knot me.

Please. Hugh. *Please!* ”

With several powerful thrusts and a rumbling roar, Hugh surged inside Finch and came. Tremendous pressure followed as his knot swelled, and it was enough to do Finch in. He gasped and arched his back, coming on Hugh's stomach and chest moments before Hugh caught Finch in his arms and dragged him down into his embrace.

“I love you,” Finch whispered as he caught his breath. “I love you, Hugh. More than I could ever say.”

Hugh, nearly as much dragon now as man, growled,

“Mine.” He moved, turning them both, until it was Finch with his back to the mattress. He thrust a few more times, working his knot a bit deeper and making Finch scream with pleasure.

Thank goodness for soundproofed walls.

“Mine,” Hugh repeated, gathering Finch close and showering him with soft, sweet kisses.

And in Hugh's arms, Finch wished he'd always stay.

28

F I N C H

Thursday came all too soon, and with it, Finch's appointment with Harrison. He arrived at the Drake-Lessardi estate early that afternoon and tipped his taxi driver well, then knocked on the house's imposing front door. Everard

and Harrison's butler, Cleaver, answered and ushered Finch inside, where he took Finch's hat and coat and said quietly but distinctly, "Hayden."

A young man dressed in gray trousers and a black jacket materialized as if conjured by magic. "Yes, sir?"

Cleaver handed Hayden Finch's snow-dampened coat and hat. "See to it these are cared for."

"Yes, sir." Hayden inclined his head, then turned and walked away, his heels a light click on the marble floor.

Finch was impressed. He'd gotten too used to Hugh's household, which was a tad more... informal, to put it mildly.

Hugh was far too soft-hearted to dismiss any of his servants.

"Come, sir," Cleaver said to Finch once Hayden was gone.

"I'll show you to Master Harrison's office. He didn't inform me we were to have callers today, but I'm sure we'll manage.

Would you like tea brought up?"

"I..." Finch was at a bit of a loss. He wasn't used to being waited on, being far too used to playing the role of several different servants in Hugh's erratic household. On any given day, in addition to being Hugh's secretary, Finch might also act as butler, scullery maid, footman, and pot boy.

Cleaver waited expectantly, one brow raised.

"Just tea, thank you," Finch managed.

"Of course, sir. I'll have it brought up shortly."

Cleaver led Finch through the house and up the stairs to an ornately carved door, upon which he knocked. "Master Harrison, you have a gentleman caller."

There were hurried footsteps from inside the room as if someone were running at top speed, then a silence during which the door opened. Finch was surprised to be greeted not by Harrison, but by a boy of about seven with a dark mop of hair and eyes that seemed to be impossibly full of color. He was dressed in a respectable, if very pink, button-down shirt and slacks with smart dress shoes and, for whatever reason, a lab coat. There was a lizard on his shoulder wearing tiny aviator goggles, a scarf, and a crash helmet. A pair of mechanical wings had been fastened to its back.

Finch had a sneaking suspicion it was the same reptile who'd eaten the strawberry at the birthday party.

“Hello!” the boy said cheerfully. “Do you know about aerodynamics?”

The lizard licked its lips in Finch's direction.

Finch, flummoxed, took a small and respectful step back.

“Ah, young Master Darwin,” Cleaver said. “Is your father present? I've brought a guest.”

“Does he know about aerodynamics?” Darwin asked again.

Cleaver looked to Finch, who shook his head.

Darwin frowned. “Drat. I was hoping he could help me with Steve. I'm trying to help him learn how to fly, but I think my wing prototype isn't working. I guess it's back to the drawing board.”

“Quite,” Cleaver replied. “Whilst there, might you send your father? I was convinced he was here.”

“Oh, he is.” Darwin spun around, the lizard on his shoulder wobbling as he did. “Dad? Dad, you can come out now. The

experiment is over. There's someone here to see you.”

Darwin, as most children his age tended to be, was fairly short, allowing Finch a good look into the room. He saw, to his alarm, Harrison lying on the

floor, supporting what appeared to be a cardboard launching ramp that ran from the edge of his desk all the way across the length of his body. When he rolled out from beneath it, the entire thing crumbled. He spent a second collecting it and the soft crash mats laid out nearby before joining his son at the door.

“Finch!” he said brightly. “I’d say it’s a surprise, except it isn’t, because I knew you were coming. I guess I lost track of the time. Sorry. I’m sure you know how it is.”

Finch looked from the boy in the lab coat, to the lizard, to the hastily piled wreckage of the launching ramp, and was sure he didn’t. At all.

“In any case, I’m ready for you. Darwin, do you think you and Steve could do some research into what kind of alloy airplanes are made from? I have a feeling if we switch up the material of Steve’s wings, we might get better results.”

“Okay. I will.” Darwin stepped out of the office and around Finch. “I’ll tell you everything about what I find.”

“Great! I’m looking forward to learning all about it. Have fun.”

“I will.” Darwin smiled almost shyly at Finch, then took off at a run down the hall.

“Is there anything I can fetch for you, sir?” Cleaver asked when Darwin was gone. “I’ll be bringing up some tea shortly, but if memory serves, you haven’t eaten since breakfast. Shall I arrange to have a light repast sent to your office?”

“Oh, that sounds great. Thank you, Cleaver.” Harrison smiled with tremendous warmth at the butler, who bowed his head and took his leave. It was all quite strange. “Now that that’s out of the way, would you like to come in, Finch?”

Harrison asked. “I promise I won’t keep you long.”



“My afternoon is yours,” Finch assured him. “I’m the one in your debt, not the other way around.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Harrison stepped back, granting Finch entrance to the room. “It’s not all that often I get to run tests without Ev around, so this is a treat. Make yourself comfortable and I’ll be right with you. While I’m getting ready, let’s go over some basic information. Can you tell me about how many days your heat lasted compared to what you’d usually expect?”

Finch, who’d settled in an armchair near Harrison’s desk, went over all the facts and figures he could remember. His last heat had lasted four days while his regular heats lasted for seven and had ended just shy of two weeks ago. No, he hadn’t bonded with Hugh—at least, not that he was aware of—and no, he hadn’t noticed the presence of any strange abilities or inexplicable happenings since becoming intimate with his dragon.

“Have you taken a pregnancy test yet?” Harrison asked as he jotted notes into a spiral-bound book.

“No,” Finch replied. He’d been too afraid to, and unsure if a standard pregnancy test would be able to detect a clutch.

“It’s probably a little early, anyway.” Harrison stepped over to where he was sitting. “Kind of right on the cusp. You’d probably get results, but why bother when you’ve got me and Ev around to give you a sure answer?”

Finch wasn’t sure if he was supposed to answer that question or not, so he nodded to be polite.

“Okay, well, let’s get started. Do you see that door that looks like it leads to a closet? It goes to my examination room.

Go in and you’ll find a screen—the kind you change behind, not the kind for a computer. That wouldn’t be much use, would it?” He chuckled. “Behind the screen you’ll find a medical gown. It’ll be folded and resting on a wooden chair.

Change into it and hop up on the examination table and I’ll be in to see you in

a minute. I just need to pop over to the bathroom to wash my hands. I'd do it in my examination room, but I figure you could use the privacy. I'll be right back."

"Thank you," Finch said even though he was increasingly unsure if scheduling an appointment with Harrison had been the best idea. "I'll be waiting."

They parted ways. Finch stepped into the other room, found the medical gown in question, and changed. Cautiously, he got onto the exam table and lay down, then took in the room while he waited for Harrison to join him. All things considered, Harrison's private examination room did look professional. It was sterile and tidy, stocked with the kinds of things you'd expect to find in a doctor's office. It was strange, since Finch was convinced he'd been told that Harrison was a doctor of herpetology, but it seemed there was much he didn't know about the Drakes and their mates.

A short while later, there came a polite knock at the door.

"Can I come in?" Harrison asked.

"Yes. I'm decent."

"Wonderful." The door opened and in came Harrison. He swept across the room, washed his hands a second time, and snapped on a pair of blue examination gloves. Finch watched with a clinical eye. While Harrison could be rather *enthusiastic*, he was surprisingly professional when he needed to be, which was now. Especially once he wheeled over an ultrasound machine and unhooked a wand destined for unspeakable places.

It was awkward, of course, but made a little less so by Harrison's steady stream of overly intrusive questions. At first, Finch found it frustrating, but he warmed to it as the conversation went on. Harrison truly was something else, and while his sensibilities were as distant from Finch's as the sun was from Pluto, they found common ground in an unexpected subject—their pets.

"That lizard on your son's shoulder," Finch said. "What's the story there?"

“Oh, Steve? He’s Darwin’s big brother. I adopted him when I was working toward my PhD and we’ve been together ever since. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“And his wings?”

“Iguanas don’t have wings,” Harrison provided helpfully.

He probed the wand into a place that made Finch blush. “They do have a dewlap, which is that flap of skin that hangs beneath his jaw and neck. If you use your imagination, I guess you could see that as a single wing, but you need two wings to fly.

And hollow bones. Or magic. It’s quite a complicated process.

I’m still trying to figure out exactly how much magic goes into dragon flight, but there are only so many hours in the day, and I have so many other experiments underway that I don’t have time to get to it right now. I’m hoping in the next five years or so I’ll have some availability, which will be perfect, because Darwin will be twelve, which should be just about the right age to help me with my research.”

Finch had been referring to the mechanical wings attached to the lizard, but he was too taken aback to bother clarifying.

“Do you have any adopted children?” Harrison asked as he continued to probe. His eyes were locked on a screen Finch couldn’t see while lying on the examination table. “Or maybe Hugh does? I don’t know too much about him. He tends to keep to himself.”

“I care for two rats,” Finch volunteered. “Their names are Eleanor and Elizabeth, and they are exceptionally sweet. My truest companions. Well, except for Hugh, of course, but that’s more of a recent development. My ladies have kept me sane since they came under my care, and so too the ladies that came before them.”

“Rats are interesting. Some reptiles eat them, and that’s fine, but I’ve always felt a little bad. They seem to be clever little creatures.”

Finch gawked.

“I’m glad that there are people like you to take care of them,” Harrison continued, oblivious to what he’d just said. “I just... hmm. Weird.”

“Weird?” Finch asked. “What’s ‘weird’ about a pet rat?”

“Oh, no, not the rat. Your ultrasound. At this stage, your eggs should be small but visible, but I’m not seeing anything.

According to my color theory, Amethyst dragons and Amethyst dragonets should be a mating pair that can produce a clutch, but... it’s not there.”

The bottom dropped out of Finch’s stomach, and he rested the back of his head on the examination table as a sudden wave of dizziness hit. The reality of the situation hit him hard.

Harrison had seen nothing on the ultrasound. Finch was not with egg.

Tears prickled in the corners of Finch’s eyes, which he hastened to blink away. He’d known this would happen. It was why he’d been so adamant not to pursue Hugh romantically.

Like he’d predicted, Hugh had taken his heat, and Finch had failed him, and while Hugh had charmed Finch into bed with sweet words and promises of forever, whether a clutch was involved or not, Finch had seen the joy in his eyes when he’d thought Finch had conceived.

When he found out the news, he would be devastated, and Finch would have to forever live with the burden of knowing that he was the one who’d made Hugh suffer.

“Don’t give up hope yet,” Harrison said with a sunny smile that only made Finch feel worse. “You could be carrying a dragonet. They’re much more common than clutches, after all, which makes sense when you think about it. At least from a biological standpoint. I don’t have a large enough pool to be able to draw conclusive evidence, but it seems to me like clutches happen in intervals of several centuries, whereas dragonets fill the gaps in between.

Anyway, don't worry too much about it. Ev will have a look tomorrow and confirm what I saw, and then he'll run some blood tests to see if you're pregnant with a dragonet."

Imagining he was pregnant with a Disgrace did not bring Finch any joy. Hugh would humor him with smiles and kind words, he imagined, but the hurt would still be there, only now it would be buried and would fester as time went on. Finch's own father had been so disappointed in his Disgrace of a son that he'd left Finch's mother to give birth in her cloister and

never bothered to visit, and while Hugh was too soft-hearted to want to do the same, compassion would not eclipse shame.

That was, of course, if Finch was even pregnant at all.

Harrison removed the wand, cleaned Finch up, and helped him off the table. Behind the screen where he'd left his clothes, Finch dressed mechanically. His emotions churned, throwing up scattered feelings like random vegetables in a boiling stew: a flare of sorrow here and a glimpse of worry there. It was all impossible, and he had no one to blame but himself.

When he was dressed, Finch exited the examination room and found the office was not as he'd left it. There was a pot of tea, several teacups, and a sandwich resting on a silver tray on Harrison's desk and an omega in the armchair Finch had once been seated in. Finch recognized his blond curls and excess of jewelry right away. It was Peregrine, whose eyes looked sad, but who smiled at Finch with a dignified, if subdued, happiness that hinted at pain. "Finch. How good to see you.

How are you? Are you well?"

"Did Harrison tell you, then?" Finch asked dully. He supposed it didn't matter. Soon enough all of Hugh's family would know that Finch was yet another of Hugh's failures.

"I would never do that," Harrison assured him. "I may not have my M.D. yet, but I do know a thing or two about doctor-patient confidentiality, and I would never break it. I promise."

Finch flushed. “I do beg your pardon.”

“Oh, it’s all right.” Harrison pushed his hands into his pockets like they were talking about the weather and smiled.

“I’m not mad. It’s a very easy mistake to make, and I’m glad we were able to sort it out before any feelings got hurt.”

“Would you like me to leave, darling?” Peregrine asked Finch in a sympathetic tone of voice. “I had no idea you were visiting, and I didn’t mean to intrude. I can wait in another room until your business has been concluded.”

“No. No, it’s fine.” Finch spared a look at Harrison, who never seemed to let anything detract from his happiness, then

to Peregrine, who seemed to be engrossed with misery of his own. “I suppose I should get used to talking about it, as word will spread soon enough, and everyone will know. Hugh took my heat and I didn’t catch. I’ve failed to give him a clutch.”

Peregrine looked surprised, but not as surprised as he should, considering their relationship had been a secret. Likely one of the servants had talked. They always did. Finch had more cause to know that than most.

“That’s not entirely true. Finch could be pregnant with a dragonet.” Harrison gestured at Finch’s midsection like one might on an anatomical model. “I couldn’t detect eggs during his ultrasound, but a fetus would be almost undetectable at this stage. We need to do blood work to accurately conclude what’s happening. Or a pregnancy test, but blood work is way more accurate, and I’d rather do the tests myself than rely on something that’s been mass manufactured.”

The more they talked about Finch’s failure, the harder it became to keep his stiff upper lip. Gathering up what shreds of dignity he had left, Finch inclined his head to both Harrison and Peregrine. “Yes. I think that about sums it up. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

“Would you like me to call Cleaver and have him show you out?” Harrison asked.

Peregrine shook his head and rose from his seat, his bangles tinkling as he did. “No need. I’ll show our friend out.

I’ll be back shortly.”

“I don’t need assistance,” Finch tried to say, but Peregrine placed a delicate hand on the small of his back and led him out of the room regardless.

When there was a closed door between them and Harrison, Peregrine leaned in a little closer and said, “Loving a dragon isn’t always easy. Especially when one isn’t marked.”

Finch, despite himself, flinched at that. “That really isn’t any of your—”

“It’s also hard to dream of children when you know, when you are *certain* in the deepest part of your heart, that you will

never have them. That you will never have anything.”

Finch’s heart felt like it was being shredded. He clenched his fists to mitigate the pain. “But you’re mated to Sebastian and have been for half a millennium. You have everything.”

Peregrine smiled, but he looked a little sad. “Perhaps not everything. But my situation is neither here nor there.”

“I don’t think I can bear it,” Finch said in a hard, desperate voice that surprised even himself. They’d arrived at the staircase, and for each step they descended, Finch’s spirits shrank.

“Bear what, darling?”

“Seeing his disappointment. Seeing it reflected in his eyes every day that he sees me. I... I just can’t.”

“I think you sell yourself short,” Peregrine said as they crossed the marble

floor of the grand foyer. “And Hugh. You sell him short as well.”

“My best-case scenario,” Finch said bitterly, “is to be carrying a human Disgrace.”

Peregrine paled and bit his lip, then seemed to collect himself. “Hugh can only father dragons and dragonets. There’s no such thing as a Disgrace. A dragon’s offspring, no matter what form they take, are never human. A dragon can only sire more dragons.”

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Hugh doesn’t want a Disgrace or a dragonet. He wants a clutch. All he’s ever wanted was a clutch.”

Peregrine paused in front of the mansion’s large and imposing door. He smiled at what had to be a footman.

“Gerald, please get Finch’s coat and hat. He wishes to go home.”

“Yes, sir.” The footman looked so deferential that in another time, he’d have likely tugged on his forelock. But then Peregrine was perfect, and people responded to that. Finch wasn’t perfect, and he’d never be perfect, no matter how hard he tried.

“I can’t believe you know the names of servants that aren’t even your own.”

Peregrine smiled and showed a sweet dimple. “I wasn’t always the mate of a dragon. But never mind that. I think that you’ll find Hugh doesn’t really want a clutch.”

Finch snorted. “I can assure you he does.”

Peregrine squeezed Finch’s hand. “I think that what Hugh wants is to be a father. Oh, and look. Here’s the very efficient Gerald now with your hat and coat. Think about what I said, Finch.”

Finch nodded but said nothing.

On the way home, Finch stopped at the store and bought a pregnancy test. Afraid to have it found in his trash by one of the housemaids, Finch took it



into the restroom at the store and used it. He waited three minutes then looked at the result: one line.

He continued home in a state of numb misery. He thought of the job listings he'd saved on his profile in the Attendant network and the opportunities therein. Heart heavy, he accessed his profile from his phone and conjured up a phone number.

“Finch. I never thought I'd see the day your number appeared in my phone. It's good to hear from you,” said the voice on the other end of the line. “Can I consider this an expression of interest in the available position?”

“Yes,” Finch replied, his tongue feeling heavy and thick with despair.

“Well, then consider this an official invitation to join our staff. We'd be lucky to have a man like you on the team. When can you start?”

“I can leave tonight and be there tomorrow.”

“Excellent. I think you'll find you've made the correct decision.”

“Yes, sir.”

Call ended, Finch wilted into his seat and buried his face in his hands. His heart felt like it had been crushed and trampled under many careless feet, but his head knew this was for the best. Maybe, if he kept saying it over and over, his heart would believe it, too.

29

HUGH

Finch had prior arrangements, so rather than devote his day to adoring his beloved secretary, Hugh spent it doing other things. Namely, preparing the room he imagined Finch would want to nest in. It was in the south wing of the residence and boasted luxuriously large windows that let in ample sunlight.

Better yet, it was in a section of the house with very little foot traffic, making

it blissfully quiet. With just a few alterations, it would be perfect.

Hugh spent the morning hauling dusty, neglected furniture out of the room and the afternoon tidying. More than once he spotted Bella peeping at him from the doorway, eyes as wide as saucers. Whenever he noticed her, he'd stop to wipe his brow and lift a hand in greeting and she'd promptly scurry away. It was just as well. There was so much to do that the less time he spent distracted, the better. If he had his druthers, the room would be spotless by the time Finch came home.

Hugh started by sweeping the floor. When he was done, he cleared the cobwebs from the ceiling and chased a spider away with the bristles of his broom. He wasn't entirely sure if brooms were designed for ceilings, but he had no idea what tool he'd otherwise use, and it did the job well enough. After scouring one of the supply closets for cleaning spray, he washed the insides of the room's windows—the outsides would have to wait for warmer weather—then stopped to survey what he'd accomplished.

The room looked better, but not perfect. The floor was dull and lifeless, nowhere near as shiny as the other floors were in

the rest of the house. Seeing as how construction crews weren't in and out of the estate every other month to replace the flooring, Hugh deduced that there was some way the staff kept the wood vibrant. He discovered the solution by accident whilst returning the cleaning spray to the supply closet

—“rejuvenating oil.” According to the bottle, it would clean and restore finished wood and penetrate deep. Hugh wasn't necessarily interested in that last bit, but he tucked it in his back pocket for later should Finch come back home feeling feisty.

Hugh loaded himself up with five very large bottles of the stuff and carted his spoils back to the future nest room, where he dumped the oil straight out of the bottle onto the floor, working from the perimeter of the room inward. By the time he was done, the drab-looking wood shone like a carefully polished suit of armor. Pleased with himself, Hugh beamed at his new, stunning floor. It was, perhaps, slightly more wet than he'd like, but all liquids evaporated given time. Small, oily ocean aside, what an excellent job he'd done.

Now that the room was in pristine condition, it wasn't hard to imagine what it would look like when it was complete.

Sheers would be installed, of course, running from the ceiling to the floor. They would be paired with royal purple curtains of equal grandeur that would add a pop of color to an otherwise serene space. Hugh would have the light fixtures updated and the walls painted. An armchair would be placed in the corner and a stately dresser would occupy the far wall.

Other furniture would be added, too, as per Finch's instructions. There was no telling what a nesting omega might need.

Regardless of what other furniture would be installed, the crowning feature of the room would be the egg bed. It would be circular, as most egg beds were, with a solid wood headboard carved not to reflect, but to improve modern sensibilities. With its fine purple sheets and exquisitely soft blankets, it would be a marvel not only to look at, but also to touch. Comfort was important. Hugh would spare no expense when it came to his wytad's wellbeing.

And how it made his heart sing to think that his wytad was Finch.

He would look stunning framed by dark Drake purple, curled around their eggs while they bathed in soft morning sunlight. Hugh imagined the way the light would play in his dark hair and soak into his skin to set him aglow. The eggs they made would be every bit as stunning, Amethyst gems in motley shades, the most important jewels of his life. Hugh would protect them always, and knew Finch would do the same.

What an amazing father his Finch would be.

Enamored with the thought of a lifetime with him, Hugh indulged in a wistful sigh before redirecting his focus to the task at hand. If he was to secure an egg bed before his clutch arrived, he'd need to get it ordered now. But from where?

He'd need to get in touch with Sebastian, who'd commissioned one for his newest clutch not all that long ago.

Surely he would know.

Now, where was his phone?

Hugh hurried out of the room to find it. Or at least, he tried. One second he was making haste toward the door and the next he'd fallen on his face. The floor, wet with oil, had become a slippery deathtrap. Hugh, now facedown in it, had become its first victim.

"Finch!" he cried out instinctively while he flopped across the floor, trying—and failing—to rise onto his knees. "Help!"

Neither Finch nor help arrived. Hugh—poor oil-covered Hugh—was on his own.

Never one to give up easily, Hugh tried a few more times to lift himself onto his knees, but the second he put any pressure on his palms, his arms shot out from beneath him.

After falling on his face a few too many times, he concluded there was only one way out of this. He rolled onto his back so he could unbutton his shirt.

"Sir?" Bella asked timidly when he was two buttons from sweet freedom. "What—" She gasped, sounding absolutely

scandalized.

"Bella!" Hugh ripped his shirt open and flipped onto his chest to try to get a look at her. "I've never been so slippery.

Send Finch!"

Bella gasped, all the more scandalized. All Hugh caught was a swish of her skirts as she raced away from the room.

Curiously, she ran in the opposite direction of Finch's office.

Perhaps she had it on good authority where the man was hiding. In any case, while he waited for rescue, Hugh resumed what he'd been doing—attempting

to save himself. He balled his discarded shirt and swabbed it over the floor, hoping it would suck up the oil, and it did. To a point. The problem was that there was much more floor than there was shirt, and Hugh still had a long way to go before he made it to the door.

“Bugger.” Hugh pitched the shirt across the room and was moments away from stripping out of his pants and repeating the process when an idea struck. Inspired, he lay chest-down in the oil slick and invited his dragon out to play. Dark purple scales tumbled down his spine and over his shoulders. While they did, his bones creaked and complained as his musculoskeletal system changed to accommodate his wings.

Once they were present, he flexed them to warm them up.

Then, with a few mighty flaps, he glided through the oil like a reptilian pontoon boat.

Hugh reached the door before Bella returned with help, which was just as well. Even outside the deathtrap that was their future nesting room, Hugh found it difficult to stand. In the end he had to remove his shoes and socks to get purchase on the floor. Shirtless, barefooted, and glistening with oil, he walked to his room in silence and spent the evening in the shower. Dinner was served late that night for shower-related reasons. Hugh, hair still wet, descended into the dining room and discovered the table had been set for one.

“Did Finch eat already?” he asked when a skittish Bella brought out his meal.

She shook her head and set his plate before him, then scurried away.

“Will you send for him?” Hugh called after her.

He could only assume by her squeak that she would.

Hugh waited a few minutes for Finch to appear. When he didn't, a despondent Hugh ate dinner alone and returned to his room to wait for Finch to come home.

Hours passed. Close to midnight, Hugh ventured from his chamber to see if

Finch had gone to sleep in his own bed. It would be unusual in the extreme, seeing as how they'd been cohabiting since Finch's heat, but Hugh could think of no other explanation for Finch's bizarre absence.

The estate was quiet as Hugh made his way through the halls. He came upon the door to Finch's quarters and rapped politely upon it, then took a small step back and folded his hands behind him. When there was no answer, Hugh rapped again. Finch was likely asleep, and it would take him some time to throw on a robe and answer the door. There was no cause for alarm. But as time continued to pass, Hugh began to run out of excuses.

"Finch?" he called through the door. "Finch, are you quite well? Should I call for Everard?"

There was no reply.

"Finch?" Hugh tried again. When he heard nothing—not even the creak of the bedsprings—he tried the door and found it unlocked. "Finch, I'm coming in."

The room was dark when Hugh entered. Finch had to be asleep. So as not to disturb him, Hugh left the overhead light off and summoned a flame that he held cupped in his hand. It cast a dull, flickering glow in a radius of several feet, allowing him easy passage.

"Finch?" Hugh whispered. He approached the bed, lifting the ball of fire so he could see Finch for himself.

Only Finch wasn't there.

"Finch?" Hugh's blood ran cold. He swiveled on his heel to look in the direction of the en suite bathroom, hoping to find Finch in it, but the door was open and the lights were off.

Thoroughly alarmed, he rushed across the room to turn on the light and immediately wished he hadn't. The room had been stripped bare of all of Finch's personal belongings.

Hugh's hand dropped from the switch. He looked from the wall, once covered with vintage record jackets, to the empty armchair over which he'd once spotted Finch's beloved polar bear pajama pants. Nothing. Not a trace of the man he loved remained.

"Finch?" Hugh asked again in a small, broken voice. He crossed the room to Elizabeth and Eleanor's gilded cage and saw that it, too, had been emptied. Eleanor's wheel had been taken away, and Elizabeth's beloved tissue box was gone. The girls were nowhere to be seen. Not even the small container holding their chocolate chips remained. Tears in his eyes, Hugh dropped his head. "Finch..."

What could have happened to cause this? Finch wouldn't simply pack up and leave, especially not now that Hugh had come to his senses and claimed Finch as his own. Hugh brushed tears from his eyes and shook his head. If he wanted to get to the bottom of this, he'd need to pull himself together.

Tears would solve nothing. Only action would bring Finch home.

Hugh spun around, eager to get to his office and piece things together, when he noticed something sparkling beneath the armchair. He dropped to his knees to investigate and uncovered a single amethyst cufflink. It was from the set he'd given Finch on his tenth anniversary of employment.

Finch loved his cufflinks. There was no world in which he'd leave one behind. All at once, Hugh saw the truth. Finch hadn't left the estate of his own volition—he'd been kidnapped. Without time to leave a note explaining the situation, he'd thrown a cufflink down in the hopes Hugh would find it, figure it out, and rescue him.

Only who would want to kidnap his Finch?

Hugh looked wildly around the room, scrambling to find other clues. Why would kidnappers remove all of Finch's belongings? To cover their tracks, of course. Doing so would trick Hugh into thinking Finch had packed up and left all on his own. Heartbroken over Finch's decision, Hugh would be emotionally vulnerable... at which point, one of the jilted Disgraces from the ball could swoop in and woo him, securing his or her spot by his side.

It made so much sense, Hugh audibly gasped. His poor Finch, abducted by his own kind and taken god knew where all so another omega could lay their claim on Hugh's heart.

Well, the joke was on them, because Hugh saw through their little scheme, and he wasn't going to stand for it.

"Never fear, Finch," Hugh declared to the empty room. "I know what's going on, and I will be putting an end to it. Be brave, my love. I'm on my way. Wherever you are, I will find you, even if it takes a lifetime."

Blood rushing in his ears, Hugh sprinted from the room and down the hall. He had a bag to pack and a certain dragon lawyer to call. Visas to allied clan territories weren't going to write themselves.

30

## F I N C H

Just as the reviews on the Attendant network had promised, Atticus Drake was a good dragon to work for, if a bit of an odd duck. He was obviously a Drake, if only by his royal purple eyes. His hair was no longer black. Instead, it was a beautiful silver. His body, on the other hand, was as fit and trim as any dragon's. Atticus was, even by dragon standards, quite old, and closing in on his third millennium. The only older dragon that Finch was aware of was Snorre Jorgenson, and like Snorre, Atticus was a trifle eccentric. It came, perhaps, with age. Either that or the odd ones lived longer. It was hard to tell, and not something Finch liked to dwell on, because it brought his thoughts too close to Hugh, and that was a subject he tried not to dwell on.

Being away from Hugh was painful—far more painful than Finch had predicted—but taking up the post of Atticus Drake's personal secretary was the correct decision. In the end, the only decision he could've made.

Unlike Hugh's household, Atticus had a large staff that was run with military precision by a tartar of a butler named Willoughby. He was about as far removed from Hugh's Francis as one was ever likely to get. Willoughby ran a very tight ship, leaving Finch with only his secretarial duties, such as they



were.

Mainly, Finch wrote letters. Mountains of letters. By hand.

On parchment. With a fountain pen. Some dragons weren't very good with technology, and Atticus hadn't progressed much past the seventeenth century in his daily living. The

castle did have electricity, running water, and a decent internet connection, but Atticus preferred candles, a drawn bath by the fire, and letters.

There was a full bathroom adjacent to Atticus's bedroom, but Finch didn't inquire into whether or not the dragon used the loo or the garderobe. Some things didn't need elucidation.

Other than writing letters and rearranging the dragon's massive, and sadly misshelved, library, Finch had little to do.

There were no disputes among the servants to mediate, no household to run, and worst of all, no Hugh to cater for. Still, as Finch reminded himself every day, this was better. Safer.

More secure. Working with Atticus was a superior position in every way. And if he kept on repeating that, day after day, Finch might eventually come to believe it.

For an old and rather reclusive dragon, Atticus had a steady stream of dragon visitors. Probably, Finch thought, because the old dragon refused to use a telephone, let alone email. Willoughby had been the one to contact Finch, and once he had taken on the position, the job of communication between Atticus and the outside world fell mostly onto Finch's shoulders.

Even so, Finch often found himself bored and lonely. He dreamed of Hugh day and night, and the wound caused by their separation refused to heal. Finch even thought, once or twice, of contacting Hugh, but each time he stopped himself.

The only thing that would do was bring on more pain. Hugh needed to forget

Finch and move on to a proper Pedigree omega who would bear his clutch and wear his mark. Finch would never have either one, and that thought hurt him in a way it never had previous to falling into Hugh's bed.

*This will get better, he told himself over and over. I will get better.*

But he didn't. Finch sank deeper and deeper into a melancholy funk that he couldn't seem to crawl out of. In addition, ever since he'd moved back to England, he'd felt mildly ill. At first, he'd blamed jet lag, but no one's jet lag lasted a month, let alone two. The only rational explanation

was that he had the flu and couldn't seem to shake it. There was always someone in the castle staff who was sick, and Finch began to think that they all had the virus and took turns passing it back and forth.

Whatever it was, it wasn't something Finch had to be concerned about. Summer would come eventually even to northern England, and being in the sun would help. Finch was sure of it. All he needed was more sunlight and another nap.

And perhaps a slice or two of Battenberg cake.

"You, omega!" Atticus shouted in a querulous voice. He pounded the wooden floor of the library with his silver-tipped walking stick.

Finch looked up from the letter he was transcribing, with his best calligraphy, from his shorthand notes. "Yes, your grace?"

"You may call me Atticus, you know," the dragon boomed.

"My title is no longer extant. We have been over this, have we not?"

"Yes, your grace." Finch went back to his transcription.

"Then why don't you heed me? I hate being 'your grace.'

It sounds positively idiotic. I am a dragon, not an adjective."

Finch hid a smile. "Of course not, your grace."

“Blasted omega. I should send you packing.”

Not that he would. Finch had figured that out the first week. “I will call you something besides ‘your grace’ the day you stop calling me ‘omega,’” he said in a mild tone. He put his pen down carefully and massaged his scalp. He was getting another one of his headaches.

Atticus let out a bray of laughter. “Put me in my place, didn’t you, pup?”

“Perhaps.” Finch tried to smile at his employer but the churning misery in his stomach made that difficult. He was coming down with that blasted virus again. “Was there something that you needed?”

Atticus pointed the walking stick at Finch. “You look peaky, boy. I mean, Finch. Like a stiff wind might blow you over. I don’t like it.”

“I’m fine, sir,” Finch insisted, although he felt terrible.

This round of illness was the worst one so far.

“Atticus!”

“I’m fine, Atticus. When I’m finished with this missive, I’ll go get a few ginger biscuits from Cook, then lie down. I’m sure I’ll feel better tomorrow.”

The dragon huffed and a plume of smoke came out of his nostrils. “What you need, boy, is a doctor.”

“Finch,” he said firmly. “Not omega and not boy. Or I’ll go back to saying ‘your grace.’”

“Impertinent baggage. But point taken. You can finish the letters tomorrow. None of them are urgent. Go lie down. I can’t have you dying on me. It would be dashed inconvenient.”

“I’d hate to put you to any trouble,” Finch replied.

Atticus snorted more smoke. “Just go. Stay in your rooms until you feel better. I’ll have Cook send up biscuits and tea.

You'll be right as rain in no time."

"Thank you, Atticus."

The grumpy dragon was, at his core, quite the dear. Finch stood, then put out a hand to steady himself. He felt quite faint, but it was probably from sitting too long and standing too quickly.

"Finch. Are you quite—"

Finch never heard the rest of what Atticus was going to say because a sharp knock sounded at the door before it opened to show a somewhat flustered butler.

"Sir," said Willoughby, who didn't call anyone by anything as crude as their given name, "there are visitors to see you."

He turned an accusing look on Finch. "Unannounced and unscheduled." As if Finch had control of every dragon and could predict their movements.

"Which of my get have come to trouble me today, Willoughby?"

"None of them, sir. These are American dragons," he said with a slight curl to his lip to show his distaste.

Finch began to tremble. It couldn't be. It couldn't. Spots swam in front of his eyes.

"We are," said a dry voice from behind Willoughby, "to be precise, your great-grandnephews."

Was that Geoffrey? Finch thought it might be. Why was he here and not in California?

"Well, strictly speaking, I'm not," said another voice. One much easier to identify. It was Harrison.

“You are, cantaloupe, through me. Much as Father is your father-in-law.”  
That was Everard.

Finch looked down and wondered if he could hide under the desk. It would probably be his best option.

“The dragons here to see you,” Willoughby announced in forbidding tones. “I had asked them to stay in the drawing room where I put them, but it seems etiquette is lost on those hailing from across the ocean. They claim they’re here to see you regarding a missing person.”

“Indeed.” Atticus shot Finch a look, complete with raised silver eyebrow.  
“And who might they have misplaced?”

Finch tried to calm his racing heart with deep breaths, but to no result. He felt nauseous, light-headed, feverish, and utterly exhausted. He was in absolutely no fit state to deal with any of this, but it didn't look as if he had a choice.

“Misplaced, my ass. You abducted Finch and I demand to have him back this instant!” It was Hugh's voice. Hugh was here. Hugh was here for Finch.

Geoffrey groaned. “Did I not say you weren't to do any of the talking?”

“You did say that,” Harrison supplied helpfully. “I heard you say it many times.”

“Finch,” Atticus boomed. “Would you care to explain what's going on?”

“I—” Finch took out his handkerchief and mopped his sweaty brow. It was hard to think over the spikes of pain in his head and the blood rushing in his ears. He stepped closer to Willoughby, drawn by Hugh's presence. He wanted to touch his dragon. Somehow, somehow, Finch felt that all would be well if he could just lay one hand against Hugh's cheek.

Everything would be better if he could smell Hugh's skin and look into his plum-colored eyes.

Finch shook his head. No. That was nonsense. He had to be strong. He had to make Hugh leave. It was for his own good.

“Get out of my bloody way, you jumped-up footman,”

Hugh snarled. Willoughby might have been formidable, but dragons were strong. The butler found himself shoved, albeit humanely, aside, and in strode Hugh. He looked awful. His hair was unkempt, there were dark circles under his eyes, and his suit was wrinkled and hung on his frame as if he'd recently lost weight. “I need my Finch and I need him now.”

Close on Hugh's heels was a resigned-looking Geoffrey, an amused Everard, and a bespectacled Harrison, who was mercifully lizard-free.

The second Hugh spotted Finch, he rushed toward him.

“Finch, my darling. I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“This is the most interesting day I’ve had in centuries,”

Atticus said to the room in general.

“This is a nightmare,” Geoffrey muttered at around the same time. “I knew it would be, and here I am, proven right yet again. Why does no one ever listen to me?”

“It’s because you’re a prat,” Everard called out over his shoulder.

Geoffrey fell into a sulky silence, Willoughby looked thoroughly affronted, Atticus amused, and Hugh had the most

determined look on his face that Finch had ever seen. It was worse than the Funfetti incident.

Hugh came a few steps closer to Finch. “Darling, are you well?”

“I—” Finch said again. He had no idea what he should say and it was far too late to hide under the desk.

“You look flushed. I say, Everard, don’t you think Finch looks flushed?”

Everard turned toward Hugh and Finch and pierced them with a magenta glare. “Perhaps,” he allowed, and strode over to them.

“Should I have them all thrown out, sir?” Willoughby asked Atticus. Although how Willoughby proposed to carry that plan out was beyond Finch.

Atticus ignored his butler and addressed Everard. “You’re the whelp doctor, aren’t you? Well, look at my secretary. I think he’s peaky. And then we’ll let Finch rest and we’ll sort this all out.”

“No.” Finch tried to shout, but it just came out as a tired moan. He didn’t want dragons deciding his fate, and he couldn’t go back to living with Hugh. Not and retain his sanity. But he’d been nothing but ill the entire time he’d been in England, and it felt like his very cells cried out for Hugh despite his

mind knowing it was impossible. Going to his dragon would be like curling up in bed under sheets still warm from the dryer.

Before Finch could give in, Everard shouldered Hugh aside. “Let me see to your omega, you lummo. I can’t determine his health with you hovering so close.”

Hugh moved away, but not far. He was still within Finch’s sight and from there, Finch drank the dragon up with his eyes.

He knew he should look away, but he couldn’t. It had been so long, and there hadn’t been a day since he’d come to work for Atticus that his heart hadn’t mourned the decision. The very sight of Hugh now made Finch weak.

“I think maybe you should sit,” Everard said to him when Finch failed to react to his presence.

Finch shook his head, then regretted the dizziness that brought on. He was afraid if he sat he’d never be able to get up again.

“Stubborn omegas,” Everard murmured. “Fine. Have it your way, feather quill. Let me feel your forehead. I want to see if you have a fever.”

Finch didn’t agree or disagree. All he could do was hold on to the desk and gaze at Hugh. His lovely, impossible dragon.

Everard put the back of his hand to Finch’s forehead, then pulled it back with a hiss of surprise.

“What is it? Will he be all right?” Hugh moaned. He pushed Everard aside. “I can’t lose you. Not again. You were kidnapped, weren’t you?”

“I’ve told you literally a hundred times over the past two months that your secretary was not abducted,” Geoffrey said indignantly, but no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

Finch closed his eyes. He felt, absurdly, as if he would cry at the slightest provocation, and today’s events had been provoking, indeed.



“Darling, please let me touch you.”

“I don’t think you should—” Everard began.

Hugh touched Finch’s cheek. “I’ve missed you so much, love.” Then he drew his hand back as if burned. “That’s not right,” he said.

“I just have the flu,” Finch said wearily. “It’s nothing serious.”

“Hm. I wonder,” interjected Atticus.

“It’s not the flu,” Harrison said happily. “At least it’s not just the flu. Finch is \_\_\_”

“Not now, artichoke.”

“He has a parasite, doesn’t he?” Hugh asked, horrified.

“That’s what I felt. There’s a huge parasite inside him.” Hugh turned to Atticus. “Nothing like this ever happened when he lived with me. What sort of household are you keeping here?”

Willoughby gasped in outrage. Atticus scowled. “Watch your tone, whelp.”

“Hugh,” Everard barked out. “It’s not a parasite.”

“Oh,” Geoffrey said. Then he repeated, “*Oh.*”

“If it’s not a parasite, what is it, then?” Hugh demanded.

Finch desperately wanted to vomit then lie down and sleep for a hundred years. Especially if he got to sleep in a room with no dragons, no uptight butlers, and most of all, no uncomfortable truths.

“It’s a baby!” Harrison exclaimed. “Finch doesn’t have a parasite—he has a dragonet. I’m so excited! Congratulations, Hugh and Finch.”

Hugh looked stunned, and not at all in a good way. Finch sympathized. Having a parasite seemed like a better option than having a Disgrace. He

started to cry, which was so unlike him, but he couldn't seem to help the embarrassing tears that pooled in his eyes then fell down his cheeks.

Everard patted Finch awkwardly on the shoulder. "There, there, inkwell. Don't cry. This is a good thing."

Finch swiped tears away from his eyes. He wasn't even sad, or not completely sad. Mostly he was tired and frustrated and angry, but for some reason, that decided to manifest itself by making Finch into a watering pot. "No, it bloody well is not. I'm pregnant."

Hugh gasped, his lovely eyes round with surprise, then he fell down in a graceless heap.

"Hugh!" Finch let go of the desk and flew over to his collapsed dragon, half falling and half sitting by his side. "Fix him," he growled at Everard. "Now."

"He just fainted," Everard complained, but he knelt by his brother and straightened out his limbs.

"I say," exclaimed a new voice. "What on earth is going on in here? It sounds like the circus has taken up residence in your study, Atticus." The voice belonged to a man who was no doubt a dragon and, by his coloring, an Amethyst at that.

There was no mistaking his striking purple eyes and dark hair.

He wore a fine gray suit, the top few buttons of its shirt left undone, and had his hands tucked casually into his pockets.

Compared to Atticus, he was a young dragon, but there was no telling his exact age. Not that Finch cared to. The only dragon he cared for at the moment was the one who'd just collapsed.

"Oh, just a bit of family drama." Atticus waved his hand dismissively. "I fear I may be in need of another secretary, which is a shame because this one was fairly young and had beautiful handwriting."

"Maybe you should get yourself one of those dragonets everyone's been

going on about,” the new dragon suggested.

“A clutch of whelps would do you good, you old goat.”

“Calvin,” Atticus warned. “You bite your tongue.”

Finch looked up. “Calvin?”

The new dragon strode over and extended his hand down to Finch, Hugh, and Everard. “Indeed. Calvin Drake at your service. You must be this crusty old dragon’s new secretary.”

Finch was filled with unfamiliar rage. Had he been able, he’d have gotten up and struck the dragon. Granted, all that would get him was pain returned tenfold, but it might have been worth it. As it stood, all he could do was glare, which Finch did to the utmost of his ability.

Calvin frowned and tapped a finger against his perfectly sculpted lips. “Why so frightened, little bird? I won’t harm you. I wouldn’t harm any of Atticus’s Attendants. That would be beyond rude.”

Atticus stood from his chair, brushed by Harrison, and came to stand at Calvin’s side. “I believe he’s angry, Calvin, not frightened.”

Calvin turned to the old dragon, confused. “Angry? At me?”

But why?”

Finch wanted to shout every reason he had to be furious, but his throat was too choked with emotion to allow him to speak. “Because,” was all he was able to get out.

“Because,” Atticus continued, “if I’m not mistaken, your little bird here is, in fact, your little bird.”

“My what?” Calvin seemed affronted. “I’ve never seen him before in my life.”

“Of course not,” Finch said, finally able to spit out the words that had

threatened to suffocate him. “Why would you have ever bothered to see me? I’m only your son.”

31

HUGH

The smooth, upraised edge of a large stone pulled back Hugh’s upper lip, and he woke up drooling all over it. It was, at first, a mystery how he’d made it to first base with what appeared to be a floor, but his memory was jolted by the voice of an angel himself—Finch—who snarled, “Do *not* touch me.”

Finch.

*Finch.*

How Hugh’s heart sang to know that, at last, he’d found him. After almost two months of storming allied territories, sneaking into dragons’ lairs in search of clues, and interrogating every Attendant he could find, Finch was finally his.

“I won’t do anything you don’t want me to, little bird,”

said a new voice.

Hugh’s eyes flew open.

That voice... it was a dragon, wasn’t it? A dragon who was making Finch feel unsafe. With a wounded bellow, Hugh launched off the floor and promptly bowled over Everard, who’d been leaning over him. Everard went down with a startled shout, arms flailing. It was a pity, but not enough of one to stop Hugh from charging forward to where Finch was standing. Once arrived, he wrapped his beloved up in his arms.

Finch startled—Hugh had approached him from behind—but must have clued in to his identity quickly, because no sooner did he tense than he relaxed.

“You, there,” Hugh said to the young Amethyst dragon threatening his Finch.

“You leave my Finch be. He wants nothing to do with you. I’ll have you know that any slight against him is a slight against me, and a slight against me becomes a slight against my family, up to and including my father, the esteemed Grimbold Drake. You will apologize for your wrongdoing immediately.”

The young dragon before him widened his eyes. He tucked his hands into the pockets of his trousers and cocked his head slightly to the side, the crop of dark curls on his head tumbling across his brow. He wasn’t particularly large, as was the case for most of the British dragons, but in Hugh’s weakened state, they’d be more or less evenly matched. Thank god for Geoffrey and Everard, who’d insisted on tailing him after word had gotten back to the family that Hugh had been apprehended in Belgium, having trespassed into a Sapphire dragon’s lair. Together they would have the upper hand.

“I’m not sure I’m following,” the dragon admitted. “What should I apologize for, exactly?”

Hugh scowled at him. “You know!”

“I’m afraid I do not.”

“Fibbing will only make things worse!”

“Excellent. Then we shouldn’t have an issue.” The dragon removed his hands from his pockets. Hugh braced himself to see scales and claws, but there were none. For now, the aggressor remained human. “I have no quarrel with you or with your dragonet. I’m simply seeking the truth. Senile old Atticus claims this young man is my get, which I find bizarre, considering I was never informed that my attempt at a clutch produced any kind of life at all.”

“Bollocks!” Finch seethed.

In an attempt to soothe him, Hugh wrapped Finch up a little tighter in his arms.

“I’m telling the truth, little bird,” the dragon said sadly.

“You’ll find I’m not much of a liar. I have no talent for it. You would be able to read my fib as plainly as words off the pages

of a book. I am, however, wondering how your existence was never brought to my attention, seeing as how Atticus here was in the know.” He looked at the elderly dragon—Atticus—who was fending off a starry-eyed Harrison with his cane. “Do you care to explain yourself, old man?”

“What?” Atticus poked Harrison in the chest a few times.

“You think this is my doing? I was only made aware when Willoughby brought it to my attention prior to the boy’s employment. Willoughby researches every Attendant brought into the fold to ensure they’re from good stock, you know. If you’d have come to visit earlier, I would have told you then, but no one comes to visit the old coot, do they? Hmm, Calvin?”

“I’d be glad to visit you,” Harrison said brightly. “You could tell me all about ancient dragons. Oh, and maybe your clutch! Clutches? I hope there’s more than one. I mean, you could basically tell me anything and I’d love to hear it. I’m a good listener, I swear.”

The offer was met by another poke from Atticus’s cane.

“You, boy, have all of the enthusiasm of a whelp and none of its sense of self-preservation. Now, Calvin, stop dawdling.

Make whatever introductions or apologies are necessary, then go wait for me in my study. There are far too many people here. Willoughby, Calvin and I will partake in tea in my study thirty minutes from now. See to it Marie prepares some of those excellent cucumber sandwiches she’s so fond of making.

Add extra pepper to Calvin’s, and make sure his sandwiches are marked with decorative toothpicks so we can tell the difference. Now, you”—Atticus turned his wizened stare on Everard as Willoughby exited the room—“you may be a doctor, but you’re also trouble. Out with you. You can come back in after Calvin has finished speaking with Finch. And you”—he poked Harrison in the chest, prompting the omega-beta to smile—“I’m putting you

in charge of making sure that oaf of a doctor does what I've told him."

"Okay. I can do that." Harrison turned to face Everard.

"Come on, Ev. We should wait in the hall until Calvin and Finch are done talking. It's only polite."

Everard, who was still on the floor, opened his mouth, then closed it again. He glared at Atticus, who glared back, then stiffly rose to his feet, dusted off the back of his pants, and allowed himself to be herded from the room by his mate.

"What about me?" Geoffrey asked.

"Oh. You." Atticus narrowed his eyes at him. "You seem crotchety. I like you. You can stay."

Geoffrey's expression fell flat. He arched a brow, folded his arms, and leaned against the wall by the door.

"Which brings me to you." Atticus directed his cane at Hugh. "I don't suppose you'll relinquish your grip on my secretary, so until Willoughby procures an omega-sized amount of grease to coat him in so we can work him out of your grasp, I suppose I'll have to put up with you."

"He is not your secretary," Hugh fumed. "He is *my* secretary! You pilfered him from me."

"I have done no such thing." Atticus tramped the floor between them with his cane rather like a judge would a gavel.

"Quiet down, now. This isn't about you. This is about Finch. It can be about you later, once we've neatened all this chaos.

Until then, I don't want to hear a peep out of you. Calvin, say your piece."

It was ridiculous that such an old and feeble dragon could command a room in the way Atticus did, but Hugh, as outraged as he was, felt compelled to stay silent. If Finch really did have unresolved business with these vile

kidnappers, it was important he have closure. Hugh could restrain himself long enough for that.

“I truly had no idea,” Calvin, the younger dragon, said. “I attempted a clutch five times with five separate candidates to no avail during my sanctioned period. The Pedigree omegas I bedded remained in their cloisters, and that was the end of that. No one thought to tell me that I had conceived a Disgrace.” He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Or, should I say, a dragonet. If I had known...”

“What?” Finch prickled. “What would knowing have changed? You still wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with me, and I would have been brought up in the cloister regardless.”

“If I had known, I would have made an effort to meet you,” Calvin said softly. He looked genuinely crestfallen.

“Perhaps it’s not much, but it would have been something. If I could change the past, I would, but I can’t. All I can do is tell you the truth—that if I had known you existed, things would have been different. I never meant to make you feel unloved.”

Finch went stiff.

“Excellent work, Calvin.” Atticus slapped him on the shoulder. “A heartfelt confession for the history books, I’m sure. Now that that’s out of the way, to the study with you.”

He raised his voice to call into the hallway, “Next!”

“I’m not done, you dusty codger.” Calvin rolled Atticus’s hand off his shoulder and took a step toward Finch—and by extension, Hugh. Hugh held on to his beloved Finch protectively, but Finch was in no mood to be coddled. He ducked under Hugh’s arms and took a bold step forward to face the approaching dragon.

There was a tense moment of silence. Hugh wanted nothing more than to pull Finch back to him, but he knew better than to steal his freedom. Perhaps there



was more to the kidnapping plot than he'd originally believed. He'd have to have a think about it later. For now, he needed to keep an eye on this Calvin. Yes, he was an Amethyst, but heaven knew they could be a wily bunch. There was no telling what he might be up to.

Calvin extended a hand toward Finch, which Finch made no move to take. When it became obvious that Finch wouldn't reconsider, Calvin dropped it to his side.

"A part of me may be cold-blooded, little bird," he said,

"but I am not a monster. I'm a dragon who wasn't given a chance to show how much of a man he can be. If you have no room in your life for me, I understand, but if you are my son

—"

"He is," Atticus posited.

"—then I want to make things right."

Finch crossed his arms tightly over his chest and stood a little taller. A prolonged beat of silence passed. Just when Hugh thought he'd stay silent, Finch cleared his throat. "I suppose that can be arranged."

"There. And we're done. Very good." Atticus smacked Calvin's ass with his cane. "Out, whelp. There are twenty-five minutes left before the cucumber sandwiches arrive, and there are still so many blasted Drakes to tend to."

"Will you be staying here with Atticus?" Calvin asked Finch, deftly stepping aside to avoid another smack from Atticus. "I visit often. I'll be able to see you, and I can arrange to be here for when the dragonet is born."

Hugh blinked.

The... dragonet?

Static fizzled behind his eyes. All of a sudden he remembered why he'd woken up lips to the floor.

Finch was pregnant.

He was going to be a father.

The strength left his legs and he crumpled to the floor in a heap. The last thing he heard was Atticus, who tapped his cane gleefully on the floor. “Excellent. Another Drake dealt with. I suppose in light of the situation, we should invite the doctor in next.”

3 2

F I N C H

Finch looked down at the dragon collapsed at his feet and sighed. It was very much like Hugh to faint. Twice. For little reason. At least time hadn’t changed him. It was a small consolation during an otherwise trying time.

“Is it common,” Finch asked the room in general as he sank to Hugh’s side, “for dragons to faint this often? It seems the sort of thing I’d have heard about if it were.”

Hugh might have fainted, but he was conscious enough to bury his face against Finch’s stomach once Finch had pulled him into his lap. Finch’s heart skipped a beat, and he took to stroking Hugh’s hair very gently, emotionally exhausted, but enamored all the same.

Everard, who’d entered the room upon hearing the commotion, smirked. “Ah, no. Things have been *unusual* since your untimely departure, notebook. Hugh went a little...”

“Mad,” Geoffrey concluded with finality. “He went bloody mad and stormed about, breaking treaties and trying to sneak into other dragons’ hoards. Wouldn’t listen to a lick of reason.

He still insists you were kidnapped, despite my assurance hundreds of times to the contrary.”

“Running from your problems, boy?” Atticus whistled low.

“I should have known. You can’t run from your mate, you know. Most don’t try—why would they? But the one or two who’ve tried over the centuries were found soon enough by their dragons and brought home. You do realize you’re part of his hoard, don’t you?”

Finch looked at Hugh, who was either still out cold or a truly spectacular actor. “I’m not his mate.”

Atticus snorted. “What rot. Youngsters these days, I do declare. What can they be thinking?”

Finch lowered his gaze and watched his fingers glide through Hugh’s hair. Yes, he loved Hugh more than heaven and earth and all things in between, but there was no mate bond connecting them. Finch hadn’t seen the mark or felt Hugh in his soul. The relief that had flooded him when Hugh had stepped into the room was due to his lovesick heart and nothing more. It didn’t mean they were mated.

Although he had to admit, his headache had receded since Hugh had fallen unconscious.

Finch took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to collect himself and his thoughts. “I wasn’t able to conceive his clutch—the clutch he’s wanted nearly his entire life. That’s why I can’t possibly be his mate. Mates birth clutches. That’s why Disgraces are named as we are.”

“Dragonet,” said Harrison, who was trying—and failing—

to push Everard back into the hall. “Using the proper nomenclature is important. Not only is it respectful to do, but it helps prevent the spread of disinformation. It’s our duty as members of draconian society to be accurate about such things.”

“God, I love you, pumpkin seed,” Everard murmured, and kissed Harrison sweetly on the top of his head.

“Dragonet, then.” Finch’s shoulders tightened, and despite his best attempts to stay calm, frustration throbbed in his temples. “Disgraces or dragonets, it

doesn't matter. We're all still failures! We're disappointments. We're a source of shame, and not meant to be mates. It's been that way since forever, and that is the way it will always be."

Harrison stopped his fruitless attempt at pushing Everard out the door and dropped down to sit at Finch's side. He kept his hands to himself, but sat close enough to make it personal.

"You know, it can be hard to accept when the things we

thought were true aren't so true anymore." Harrison offered him a smile. "It can be really easy, too. Like the time I found out dragons were real, or when I discovered Ev didn't want to eat me. But I guess this isn't one of those easy times, is it?"

Finch said nothing, but his silence spoke for him, because Harrison continued.

"It's okay to be upset, you know. We're creatures of habit, and disruptions to our routine can mean threats to our safety.

At least, from an evolutionary standpoint. But we shouldn't let fear of change hold us back. I know it's not an easy thing to do, but in science, realizing you've made a mistake means you're one step closer to knowing the truth, and that's something to be celebrated. So do you think we could celebrate this mistake together?"

Tears blurred Finch's vision. "Celebrate what?" he asked.

"That you're a dragon, Finch," Harrison said with great kindness. "That you're not a failure or a source of shame."

Nothing Finch could do could keep his tears at bay. They fell down his cheeks and plummeted onto his thighs. One of them landed on Hugh's forehead, which Finch promptly swept away. How embarrassing it was to cry in front of a room full of dragons. How shameful. He'd been raised to be the perfect servant, because he'd always been told that he would never be anyone's perfect lover.

Only Hugh had come around and mucked it all up.

Calvin reached out a tentative hand to touch Finch's cheek and to his utter shame, Finch looked into his face, which was so much like his own, and started sobbing. It was hormones. It had to be hormones. He'd been trained to be so much better than this.

"You are no source of shame, Finch." Calvin squeezed Finch's shoulder, causing Finch to sob harder than before. "I am so grateful, more than you'll ever know, that you came to stay with Atticus. I hope to be a part of your life, if you'll have me. And of my grandchild's life as well. I can't make up for past mistakes, but I can celebrate the future. Our future. One

where we're a family despite the distance between us. If you're willing, I am, too, and I would like that very much."

Finch ran an arm across his eyes and wished he had a tissue for his leaky nose. As if by magic, Hugh stirred and murmured something incomprehensible, then presented Finch with a handkerchief he produced from his back pocket. It was alarming enough that Finch began to settle down. Hugh had been out cold—how had he known what Finch was feeling?

"There. You see?" Atticus tapped his cane on the floor several times in rapid succession. "Do you believe in the bond now, Finch? Your dragon is responding to your emotional state even when incapacitated. You are his, and he is yours."

"I..." Finch's voice faltered under the onslaught of emotion. "I'm not sure —"

"Mine," groaned a broken voice. It came out of Hugh's throat, but didn't sound like him at all. "Mine. My omega, my child, my love, my treasure, mine."

Then, much to Finch's surprise, Hugh began to change.

He grew at a slow but steady pace. The baggy, travel-worn suit he wore filled out, then became overly tight. Its stitching snapped and its fabric tore,

revealing purple scales where there should have been skin. The others in the room wisely evacuated to its perimeter or slipped out into the hall, but Finch remained right where he was. He watched Hugh gain wings and a tail, saw his claws sprout and his spines grow. The room was large, but Hugh was larger, and when his wings gained their full size and expanded, the walls groaned and cracked in protest.

“He will, I assure you, pay for the damages,” came Geoffrey’s voice from out in the hall.

Atticus harrumphed, but had little else to say.

When the transformation was complete, Hugh lifted his massive head and looked Finch in the eyes. As he did, a feeling of love pooled in the center of Finch’s chest. It radiated through him and calmed all the horrible, irrational thoughts battling for supremacy in his mind. Very gently, he placed a

hand on the side of Hugh’s snout and closed his eyes, and Hugh, sweet as ever, pushed delicately into his hand and nuzzled Finch’s palm. Silent tears streaked down Finch’s cheeks, which his dragon hastened to lick away.

“It’s you,” Finch whispered, sounding hoarse. “It’s always been you, hasn’t it? My love. My mate. I can feel the way you love me. I never thought it could be possible, but here you are.” Finch tapped his chest right above his heart. “And here.”

He touched his brow. “No wonder I felt so wretched when I left you. It was bloody stupid of me to run. I see that now.”

The truth thundered through Finch like a heartbeat. It was inexorable. Finch was a dragon’s mate. He was a dragon himself, if Hugh’s family were to be believed. Everything he’d been taught was wrong. He was far from being a Disgrace.

Like the last pieces of a great cosmic jigsaw snapping into place, Finch felt for the first time like he truly belonged.

Over Hugh’s head, Finch could just make out Calvin, who smiled, but also

looked a little sad. “It seems you’ve come to your senses. I take it you’ll be leaving England, then? Your place is in America with your mate, not here in this dingy old castle under the watchful eye of a dragon so old, he breathes dust instead of fire.”

Atticus cursed at Calvin, and Finch couldn’t help but laugh. It wasn’t a happy sound, but it came from a happy place. Yes, he’d lost his way, but he’d found it again. Hugh had come for him. And were he ever to be lost again, he knew that Hugh and the rest of the Drakes would be there to guide him. “I think I will be, yes. My apologies, Atticus. I will be tendering my resignation effective immediately.”

“A bloody shame, but understandable,” Atticus replied.

“At the very least it will get all of these blasted Drakes out of my lair.”

There was a sort of squelching pop, and in the place of the enormous dragon lay a very naked Hugh. He sat up at once and knelt in front of Finch.

“Finch!”

“Hello, sir,” Finch said with a wobbly smile. “I’m so glad to see you again.”

Hugh tugged Finch into his arms and held him so tightly, Finch thought he might break. “Hugh,” Hugh insisted. “You must call me Hugh. It won’t do for my mate to go around calling me ‘sir.’ Well, except sometimes you may. If you wish.

When we’re naked.” He looked around and saw that while he was naked, Finch and his assorted relatives were not, and all had their eyes upon him. “And alone. Decidedly alone.” He touched Finch’s stomach. “My child,” he said, his entire being full of wonder. “This is my child.”

“Our child,” Finch tried, and found that it wasn’t all that horrible to say.

“Yes, of course, ours. Finch?”

Hugh sounded so plaintive that Finch looked up and into his eyes. “Yes?”

There was a moment of silence during which Hugh looked unusually

contemplative. He poked and prodded at the shredded pieces of suit encircling them until he found the inner pocket of what had once been his jacket. Finch watched curiously as he plucked something from inside, but for the life of him, he couldn't tell what it was.

"I'm not much of an orator," Hugh said at last. "I'm not clever like Everard or Bertram or Reynard. I'm not learned like Geoffrey or Alistair. And I'm certainly not as strong as Sebastian. But I love you. To the very fiber of my being, I am yours and only yours, and I wager I will be until the end of time." Hugh opened his hand, and upon it was one of Finch's amethyst cufflinks. Finch's heart squeezed. After the move, he'd only found one out of the pair of them and thought the other forever lost. "So will you be mine again, Finch?" Hugh asked as he held out the cufflink. "Will you come back to me?"

I promise to always love and respect you, and to be the best father that I can be to whatever children you give me. I'm but a dragon and can't give you an eternity, but for the thousands of years we'll have together, I vow to be the best me I can be.

For you. Always for you."

Finch, who prided himself on being a bastion of professionalism, burst into tears once more. "Of course."

Hugh pinned the cufflink to his cuff and gathered Finch in his arms, simply holding him while Finch cried. Through their bond, Finch felt his love and reassurance. All was well, and all would be well, that feeling told him. If ever Finch doubted it, all he had to do was turn to Hugh, and he would make it right.

"I love you," Finch managed to say through his tears. "I love you, and I'm sorry."

"I love you, and I'm not," Hugh replied with a smile.

"Are the lot of you done gawking?" Atticus demanded.

There came the sound of several more taps of his cane on the floor. "Out.



Out, I say! You've recovered what you came for, and I have cucumber sandwiches to devour. To the entrance hall with you all. Finch and his dragon will be down to join you shortly. Or not. Who knows? Their business is their own, and your business is now elsewhere. Shoo!"

"But what if they can't find us?" Harrison asked.

Everard pecked his mate on the nose. "I'm sure even Hugh can find his way home eventually."

"I am home," Hugh said, though only loud enough for Finch to hear. "And I will be no matter where I am, because I am with you."

3 3

H U G H

There was to be no egg bed in the quiet room with the gorgeous south-facing windows and the extremely shiny floor, but there would be a bassinet. A glorious bassinet. The kind of bassinet a dragon would covet, not that any apart from Hugh would have the chance. On his way home from England, Hugh daydreamed about what it would look like. There would be oak involved, certainly, although not in the same way as the traditional slatted cribs of yore. To Hugh, they looked too much like cages. Tiny baby cages. No child of his would be made to feel like a prisoner in his lair. He wasn't entirely certain what the alternative would be, but it would inevitably involve artistic incorporations of woodwork, gold, and cloud-like padding.

It would be *glorious*.

He intended to have it commissioned right away.

There were other effects a human-born dragon needed that their scaly counterparts would not. Hugh was distantly familiar with them. Clothing, for one. What did babies wear? Small suits? Or dresses, he supposed, if Finch gifted him with a daughter. He'd need to touch base with his father, whose new mate was carrying Hugh's soon-to-be sister. Perhaps he'd even know where Hugh could have bassinets commissioned.

It was all very exciting.

“What do you think, Finch?” Hugh asked as he flung open the door to the prospective nursery once they’d arrived back in Aurora.

Finch peered into the room, expression unreadable. “It’s very... shiny, sir.”

“Isn’t it just!”

“Is there a reason why you wanted me to see it?”

“Oh. Oh! Finch, yes, of course.” Hugh flapped his hands and almost took a step into the room, but thought better of it at the last moment. He remembered all too well what had happened the last time. “I was thinking this would be our nursery. What do you think?”

Finch continued to inspect the room. It was, regrettably, empty. Hugh had intended to furnish it, but that had been before he’d discovered Finch’s abduction and embarked on a quest to bring him home. There wasn’t time to shop for throw pillows when there was crime to be solved.

After a moment, Finch turned his head to look at Hugh. “I think it should do nicely. Shall I arrange to have it furnished?”

“You shall do no such thing.” Hugh collected Finch in his arms and pressed a kiss into his soft hair. “If I have it my way, you’ll spend the next six months resting, relaxing, and living in utter luxury while I see to the household.”

Finch blanched. “I’m not sure that would help me relax.”

“What?” Hugh blinked. In what world would a pampered life not lead to total bliss? “Well, never mind. What I want is irrelevant. For the rest of my life, as long as I shall live, what *you* want will be my priority.”

That made Finch smile. “Then let’s plan the nursery together.”

“Of course. A lovelier idea has never been had.” Hugh kissed his hair again, then pulled away when something wriggled behind Finch’s jacket. A small pink nose popped out from around the edge of Finch’s lapel, followed by a

pair of round dark eyes that peered at Hugh inquisitively. They belonged to Elizabeth, Finch's rat. She sized Hugh up for a good moment, then leapt at him, arms and legs spread wide.

Her tiny claws flashed in the light. Hugh gasped, but refrained from stepping away. The rat latched on to his shirt, scurried up

his chest, and came to sit on his shoulder, where she sniffed at his earlobe.

Hugh's heart hammered. He'd made peace with the girls and even come to adore them over the months he'd been with Finch, but it was still slightly unsettling to be besieged by a tiny twitch-nosed beast.

"Hello, Elizabeth," he said as she stood on her back legs and investigated the hollow of his ear. "There are no chocolate chips in there, I'm afraid."

Eleanor's head poked out from the same place where Elizabeth had emerged, but she chose to stay with Finch. Hugh couldn't blame her—the likelihood of finding a treat was far better that way. Hugh only stocked his pockets with candy when he knew he'd be seeing his nephews. He'd yet to get used to his role as rat stepdad.

"Come now, Lizzie," Finch cooed. He scooped Elizabeth up and brought her to his chest, where she took to nosing a button on his shirt. "Have mercy on poor Hugh. If you're nice, perhaps he'll reward you with a chocolate chip a little later."

Eleanor ducked back into Finch's jacket. Elizabeth, meanwhile, settled into a furry little ball in Finch's hand. The ladies were rather cute if you could look past their claws.

What a man Finch was to have taken something so frightening and turned it adorable. A smile curved Hugh's lips. "There will certainly be chocolate chips on the menu for later, but before that, what say you to curling up together in my hoard and discussing the nursery? A paltry six months remain before our little dragonet will arrive, and I'm worried there won't be enough time to have the room up and running."

Finch gave Hugh a hard look. “What, exactly, are you planning on putting in there?”

“The best of everything I can find,” Hugh replied cheerfully, then took Finch’s unoccupied hand. “A finer nursery the world shall never see. Its opulence will be unparalleled. A young dragon deserves a hoard-worthy room, don’t you think?”

Finch’s face flushed. “I’m not pregnant with a clutch, Hugh. You know that.”

Hugh stepped close and slid a hand over Finch’s barely there baby bump. “The child inside you is mine, Finch, and unless I’m mistaken, I am a dragon. It’s time to cast aside the ways of the past and embrace the truth of today. Whether born as eggs or birthed as babes, the children you carry for me will always be dragons. Always. And you, born of a dragon sire, are a dragon, too.”

Finch trembled and lowered his gaze, so Hugh gathered him in his arms once more and held him loosely.

“And dragon or not,” he whispered into Finch’s hair, “I love you more than I love gold, or jewels, or colorful pastries.

You are everything to me, Finch. I cannot live without you.

Even were we to never have a child, I would keep you forever, and you would be mine. I would give up everything to spend eternity at your side.”

Finch shivered, and in a quiet voice said, “I love you, too.”

“Now, come.” Hugh swung Finch up into a bridal carry despite Finch’s sharp gasp and fear-rigid limbs. “The hoard bed is waiting for us, and the less time we waste, the better.

There are far too many plans we have to make and furnishings we’ll need to have commissioned.”

“Commissioned?” Finch asked as Hugh proudly carried him down the hall.

“Oh, of course. Did you think I’d settle for furniture from a catalog?” Hugh laughed. “While we’re at it, I wonder if we should start to plan the baby’s future bedroom. Do you know if we’re having a boy or a girl?”

“No. Not yet.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. Gender is no more important than what form our child is born into. Now, what do you think about purple? Something rich and royal and deep.”

Finch’s eyes sparkled and he smiled for Hugh again. “I think I’d like that very much.”

Hugh returned the expression. “I think I’d like it, too.”

Purple did, indeed, look dashing in the nursery. Finch selected a color Hugh thought looked rather like his scales and incorporated it into their plans. It was used in the padded mattress cover of their bassinet—which did *not* look like a cage for babies—and while Hugh had wanted cut amethysts to stud the bassinet’s golden filigree sides, Finch had insisted small gemstones weren’t baby-proof, so he’d been forced to relocate them to places children couldn’t touch. Places like the bassinet’s canopy, which was sheer white and looked stunning when accented with flashes of purple jewels. Likewise, they incorporated their chosen shade of purple into their paint choices. Finch, who had an eye for aesthetics, designated an accent wall for a pop of color in a room that was otherwise cozy and neutral. It was all very modern and impressive.

Hugh’s heart was often nostalgic for times long past, but even he had to admit the nursery looked nice.

And it looked even better when he saw Finch in it.

His beautiful, radiant Finch.

During the time they’d spent remodeling and furnishing the nursery, Finch had become extraordinarily round with their child. Hugh quite enjoyed the sight of it. It was a reminder of what he and Finch had accomplished

together, and a promise that one day soon, he would be a father.

“We’ll need additional staff,” Finch said one afternoon while they were cuddled in their hoard bed. Finch was nude, but had covered his legs and groin with the blankets they shared. He was immersed in his phone. Hugh, also nude but entirely uncovered, rubbed some sort of hydrating cream in small circles over Finch’s taut belly. Whatever it was smelled excellent. He wasn’t entirely convinced it couldn’t double as food.

“Hire all the staff you need, love,” Hugh told him.

“Anything for you.”

“One extra maid should do the trick as long as I can keep our current staff on track.” Finch made a noise in his throat somewhere between a groan and a hum. The little dragonet inside him kicked. Hugh slid his hand over the spot and delighted when it happened again. “The issue is,” Finch continued, “I’m not sure how useful I’ll be after our baby is born. I don’t intend to cede any more of my responsibilities than I already have, but in the event any complications occur, it would be wise to have extra hands to help around the estate.

The two months we have left before the baby arrives should be sufficient to train new talent.”

“Hire three new staff, then, Finch,” Hugh said. The kicking stopped, so Hugh resumed smoothing cream over Finch’s skin.

“We hardly have more than a skeleton staff as it is, and you deserve all the time in the world to bond with our little one after he or she is born. I’d rather have the staff twiddling their thumbs for lack of things to do than scrambling like madmen to accomplish a chore list a mile long. And even if you don’t think our current staff is overworked, I happen to think it would be good to lighten their burden. They deserve it.”

Finch hummed in agreement, but didn’t otherwise reply.

He continued to flick his thumb across the screen of his phone.

While he was distracted, Hugh continued to massage his stretched skin. He dipped lower, following the curve of Finch's belly to the blankets covering his groin, which he casually lowered. Finch was flaccid, but if Hugh had his way, he wouldn't stay that way for long. While one of his hands remained on Finch's stomach, the other dipped down to wrap around his cock. Finch gasped in pleasure, prompting Hugh to start to pump.

"Besides," Hugh said while he worked Finch to full stiffness, "the work you do to keep the estate in check is worth the labor of five regular employees. Without you around, everything starts to fall apart. The more hands we have on dick, the better."

Finch gasped and moaned, twisting slightly before pushing into Hugh's fist. "Do you mean on deck, sir?"

"What did I say?"

"On dick."

"Oh. No. That isn't right at all." Hugh tightened his fist somewhat, giving Finch a tighter hole to fuck. "Only two sets of hands belong on your dick, Finch. Yours and mine. I'm quite a jealous reptile, you know. The thought of someone else touching you like that makes my dragon absolutely restless with rage."

A glossy bead of precum crowned Finch's dick, and Hugh took it from Finch with a swipe of his tongue, then slowly set to work taking Finch into his mouth.

"*Sir,*" Finch moaned.

"Mm?" Hugh hummed, taking Finch deeper.

The phone once in Finch's hand hit the mattress, then bounced and landed on the floor. Finch grabbed Hugh by the hair to hold him in place, which Hugh took as a sign to get to work. They'd spent the last four months ensuring they were ready to welcome a child into their home, but now the bulk of that work was done, and Hugh was ready to play.

## FINCH

Finch had been appalled when Hugh suggested he lie about like a pampered prince for six months while he gestated, but at seven months along in his pregnancy, he felt the time had come to hire more staff. First, a butler. Francis was a dear, but it was hard for him to properly do his duties at his age and with a gouty foot and a bad knee. Francis would be

“promoted” to major-domo, thereby salvaging his pride while shoveling his work onto a younger, and sturdier, back. Finch also wanted to find a good odd-job man who could also double as a footman, and a caring and nurturing individual who could fill the role of a nanny.

The first two positions had been relatively easy to fill. Of the many applicants, two had outshone the rest, and Finch had hired them on the spot. In addition to understanding how they were to fit into Hugh’s household, neither was squeamish around rodents and both seemed to be the unflappable sort, who would take Hugh’s more unusual whims in stride.

The nanny, on the other hand, was giving Finch problems.

None of them seemed quite right and he wasn’t sure how to pick. He thought that he might have to cast out with a greater net. The problem, of course, was that dragon nannies were used to whelps. He should have thought to ask the Dragonet Club when they’d last come to visit, but at the time he’d been suffering from pregnancy brain and hadn’t managed to do anything productive with the meeting at all apart from inquiring after Peregrine, who was absent. Again. Finch couldn’t remember for the life of him what Ignatius had said concerning Peregrine’s whereabouts, but out of all of them,

Peregrine was the one who most effortlessly floated through life, so Finch was sure it was nothing to worry about. He made a mental note to get in touch with him to make sure all was well, and also to get in touch with Walter, who was the most likely to have suggestions as to where he might find a suitable nanny.



The note would have to be enough for today because the firm hand, then hot mouth, on his cock made hiring staff seem like a completely unimportant task.

“Sir,” Finch moaned. Hugh was so extremely talented in this particular department. Not that Finch had much—or any—

experience with lovers besides Hugh. Maybe he was typical of the species. But somehow, Finch thought it wasn’t possible Hugh could be a typical anything.

Hugh hummed, then did something unspeakable with his tongue. The phone fell, unheeded, from Finch’s now nerveless fingers. A sensation was building inside of him that wasn’t entirely his own, and it enhanced the pleasure Hugh gave him a hundredfold until everything was all Hugh and love and pleasure beyond his wildest imaginings.

Finch, pushed over the edge, came easily and obediently into Hugh’s mouth. Hugh sucked on him until he’d wrung out every last drop and Finch was near to howling from the intense overstimulation. He blanked out for a few seconds, and when he came to, Hugh’s mouth had trailed wetly over his balls and down to his hole. Showing the same enthusiasm as he did when Cook made Funfetti fairy cakes for pudding, Hugh devoured Finch.

Hugh let some of Finch’s cum slide from his mouth and onto Finch’s hot, needy hole and used that to ease the way for one of his thick fingers. As he pushed the finger smoothly in and out of Finch, Hugh lapped at the tautly stretched skin that surrounded his buried finger.

“Want inside you,” Hugh moaned. “Need it.”

“You are inside me, I promise you.”

“No, Finch. Not like this. I want *more*. ” The truth of it rang in Finch’s soul as clearly as a bell, and he knew that Hugh was sincere. Even though he was bloated and far from his best, his dragon still wanted him. All of him. No matter what. “Will you let me knot you?”

Finch levered himself up as much as possible, which wasn't very far. "Knot me? How? I'm huge."

"You aren't, but even if you were, there are ways. There are always ways." Hugh withdrew his finger from Finch's body so he could cradle his belly, then kissed the smooth, tight skin that stretched over their child. "I'll have you know, I happen to like the look of you swollen with my child. I think you should do it far more often."

A pulse of arousal shot through Finch, stirring some life back into his cock. "Sir..."

"Hmm?"

"I... if you're sure. The last time you knotted me I wasn't quite so enormous. I seem to be growing at an exponential rate."

"Everard assures me you are growing at exactly the correct rate and I should stop pestering him with questions at all hours of the day and night."

"All right, then. But I think this is going to be a touch awkward. I resemble a beached whale."

"Nonsense. And do you trust me?"

"Of course," Finch said at once. "With everything. Body, heart, and soul."

Hugh smiled and it was endearingly beatific. "Good. Just put yourself into my hands."

"I already have, sir."

"I love you, my darling Finch."

Finch smiled back at his dragon's earnest face. "I love you, too. For the rest of my life."

What Finch had said, he meant, and while the bond he shared with Hugh was new and still mysterious to him in many ways, he tried to focus the emotion

he felt into the place deep inside where he so often detected Hugh's presence. While he did, Hugh lifted him up as if he weighed nothing and proceeded to make love to him in places and positions around the hoard that seemed to defy gravity and physics. Hugh must have gained mastery over time and space during their separation—it was the only explanation for the second orgasm that roared through Finch like a speeding train. He thought it might have been the most intense one of his life.

After Finch stopped sobbing out his release, Hugh carried him deftly back to the bed in the center of the room and put him down carefully, like Finch was the most precious and fragile Meissen figurine in his entire hoard, then spooned him from behind.

Sleepy and content, Finch still had to point out, "I thought you were going to knot me, sir. Did you change your mind?"

Hugh growled in his ear. "I'm not done with you yet, Finch. Don't think you can fly away from me."

"I'm fairly sure I couldn't walk away from you, let alone fly," Finch replied, snuggling his posterior against Hugh's still-hard cock.

"Good. Never, ever leave me. I won't allow it. Do you hear me, Finch?" Hugh raised Finch's leg then guided his cock back into Finch's body. He began to slowly fuck Finch with a methodical rotation of his hips. "I love how you take my cock.

You were always my star, so remote and beautiful and untouchable, but now you're mine and I'll keep making you mine over and over and over. My dragonet. My love. My mate.

Are you ready for me, sweet Finch?"

Finch felt like he'd been ready for this his entire life. "Yes, Hugh," he gasped. "Please. I need—"

Hugh thrust into Finch even more deeply and let out a tremendous roar of pleasure. His hot spend filled Finch's body, then there was the delicious

feeling of utter fullness and connection.

While Finch basked in the moment and enjoyed the way Hugh's knot bound them together, his mind drifted to random things, rather like a child gathering shells at the beach, keeping some and discarding others based on an inner logic no one else could begin to understand. Part of it, he was sure, came down to Hugh's influence. In small ways, feeling the things Hugh did shaped Finch's train of thought. The bond truly was a curious and wonderful thing.

"Hmm?" Hugh asked in a near whisper after several moments of silence. Curiosity flowed through their mate bond.

"What's this, Finch?"

"What's what?"

Hugh brushed his fingers over Finch's left shoulder blade.

"This. I don't remember you having freckles, even though Misha and Perry mentioned something to the contrary. Do you think it's your mate mark? I've never noticed it before now, but it might have been out of inattention. How do these blasted things work, anyway? No one ever thought to tell me."

Finch had no answers for him, because during his time in the Pedigree, mates had still been exceptionally rare. No one spoke of them much, except in passing daydreams, and even had there been lessons, there wouldn't have been much to teach. Hugh likely knew as much, if not more, about mate marks as Finch did. "I don't know, sir. I don't recall having any kind of freckle there, although I suppose I could be mistaken."

"It's very unusual," Hugh said with some finality. "It's almost triangular in shape, but not quite. And it is fairly pale.

If I squint at it just right, it resembles a piece of cake, which, well, has me quite convinced it *is* a mate mark, since you are even more scrumptious than Chef Funfetti's finest culinary creation."

Finch started laughing and felt like he might never stop.

“Hugh. No.”

“What?”

“I’m no slice of cake.”

“What are you trying to say by that, Finch?” Hugh wrapped him in his arms, and soon enough their bond was flooded with waves of love and humor. “If you’re not the omega equivalent of Funfetti cake, then what are you? You can’t mean”—he gasped—“that you’re secretly Chef Funfetti, and have been this entire time?”

Finch’s mouth ached from laughing. “Drat. You’ve found me out.”

“I knew it!” Hugh peppered the back of Finch’s head with kisses. “You. Are. Incurrable. What am I to do with you?”

“Well, that depends on how much cake you’d like.”

Hugh snorted. “All of it, naturally. Or rather, all of it so long as I can still have you. In the event that I can’t, then none of it. I’d much rather have you by my side than cake on my plate. I love you too much to trade you for anything.”

“And I love you, sir, enough that you may have cake every night if you wish it.”

A growl of dragony satisfaction rolled through Finch’s mind.

“And me, too,” Finch added, in case it wasn’t clear. A note of sheer joy rang inside of him that had nothing to do with Hugh’s influence—it was all his own. “Always and forever, for as long as we both shall live.”

35

H U G H

Finch kept his word—Funfetti cakes were had. Often. But not quite as often as Hugh had Finch. The man was irresistible, and Hugh partook of him at all

hours of the day. Sometimes that meant slipping into the shower with Finch in the morning, where Hugh lifted him up and let Finch hold on to whatever was within arm's reach while he slid into him. Other times it meant kidnapping Finch in the middle of the day and whisking him away from his duties to the bedroom, where Hugh reminded him in myriad ways how treasured he was. Most times, unless Finch was exhausted, Hugh indulged in him at night, lighting the air above them with dragon fire so he could watch the shadows dance over Finch's body as he came. And to Hugh's delight, the closer Finch came to giving birth, the more he sought Hugh out. There was nothing quite like lifting his beloved secretary onto his office desk and knotting him amongst his paperwork. The hitch of Finch's breath as he found satisfaction and the way their mate bond twanged with their mutual desire was much more interesting than investment documents, to be sure.

So when, late one night, Finch woke Hugh from a deep sleep, Hugh assumed he was being called into duty.

"Finch, you minx," he whispered as he drew Finch onto his body. The insides of Finch's thighs were already wet and slippery—he must have spent time preparing himself before waking Hugh. "You absolute temptress. Tempter? What the devil is the male equivalent of that word? Whatever it is, you and it are synonymous."

"Hugh," Finch said in a low voice, "I appreciate it, but—"

"Mm, yes, butt." Hugh squeezed the delightfully rounded muscles in question. "And what an amazing butt it is. I can hardly resist." It took no effort at all to squeeze his hardened cock between Finch's cheeks, brushing by his hole, but not yet slipping inside. "How do you want it this time, my love?"

Prolonged and sweet, or hard and instantly satisfying?"

"Hugh," Finch repeated, a little more sternly than before.

"Neither. I—"

"Both, then." Hugh took Finch by the hips and tried to lift him up, but was

swatted for his trouble. Right on his snoot. Or nose, rather, since he wasn't in his dragon form.

“No,” Finch said firmly. “Now is decidedly not the time.”

Something seemed very off about his precious Finch.

Hugh sniffed. His senses weren't as good in his human guise, but Finch smelled different. Not bad, but definitely different.

“Finch? What is it? I feel like I've gone batty, but something about you doesn't quite feel the same. Or smell the same, for that matter. There's something...”

Finch cuddled close in Hugh's arms, resting his head against Hugh's shoulder. His cock was somewhat disappointed it wasn't getting to immediately sink into Finch's body, but just holding his love close satisfied both him and his dragon.

“You're right,” Finch said. “Something is different. I'm almost seven hours into early labor, and I think the time has come where active labor isn't far off.”

Hugh went very still and very flaccid all at once. “What?”

“I'm having the baby, Hugh. *We're* having a baby. Our baby.”

“I... see.” Hugh's mouth was suddenly very dry. “Did I...

make things terrible by trying to stick my dick in you just now?”

A surprised laugh burst from Finch. “No.”

“Good.” He swallowed hard and lifted Finch off his wilted penis, setting him to the side. “Seven hours, did you say?”

“Yes.”

“How long have we been asleep?”

“You’ve been sleeping for five hours, sir. It’s three in the morning. I haven’t been able to sleep at all, which I suppose is to be expected in my condition.” Finch sucked in a pained breath through his teeth. It whistled slightly. Hugh, terrified, looked on in silence until Finch’s shoulders slumped and he resumed the conversation. “In my mind, there was no point in worrying you over what could have been false contractions. If they turned out to be real—which they did—there’d still be hours before I moved into active labor. It seemed much more compassionate to let you sleep.”

Hugh gawked at him. His gaze drifted from Finch’s face to his pregnant belly, which didn’t sit the same as it had yesterday. “I... see.”

“Now that I believe I’m in active labor, I thought it prudent to wake you,” Finch said. “I’ve already been in contact with Everard. He’s scheduled to arrive in the next hour or so. I’ve also been in touch with the staff to let them know additional bedsheets, blankets, towels, and other effects will be required.

The nursery is currently being deep-cleaned and preparations are being made to compensate for my absence. All that’s left is for you to shower and dress in anticipation of your brother’s arrival.”

Hugh wheezed at him.

“I understand that this is a very trying time, sir,” Finch said as he squeezed Hugh’s arm. “Rest assured that no detail has been overlooked. All will be well. Now, please see yourself into the shower. You wouldn’t want to look disheveled when Everard arrives, would you?”

Hugh’s head wasn’t all there, but the neurons he had left fired off a prickly memory. “That cake-stealing bastard.”

Finch smiled. “Yes, sir. That’s the one. Speaking of, while I don’t condone such activities taking place on the grounds of

the estate, would you like me to get in touch with Gabriel? I’m sure he could arrange to have something brought to you that would help take the edge off, so to speak.”



What did Gabriel have to do with Everard? There was a nagging sensation in the back of Hugh's mind like he should have been able to make the connection, but everything was a little hazy. The only thought able to permeate his thick cerebral fog was that in no time at all, Finch would make him a father. The thing he'd wanted all his life was finally coming to pass, only now not only would he have a son or daughter, but he'd have a perfect partner to share fatherhood with.

Blood rushed to Hugh's face. He was sure every bit of skin from his shoulders up was red. Stunned, he stared at Finch and announced to any eavesdroppers, "We're going to have a baby."

"Excellent deduction, sir." Finch patted his knee, then pushed him toward the side of the bed. "Go shower. It'll help you feel better. While you're in there, I'll get in touch with Gabriel and see if he doesn't have something to help you calm down a little."

Hugh left the bed, the bottoms of his bare feet meeting the cold wood floor. "You shouldn't be doing anything, Finch. I'm the one who should be doing everything. You're having a baby. *Our baby*. I—" The gravity of the situation hit, and Hugh's knees threatened to buckle. He caught himself on the side of the bed. "*You're having our baby*," he gasped.

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to be fathers."

"We are."

"A baby," he squeaked, and melted onto the mattress.

Finch carded his fingers affectionately through Hugh's hair, which would have felt nice had Hugh's head not been spinning. "Yes. But first, you're going to have a shower.

Adjust the heat after you get in to cool the water down. It'll help wake you up and jolt you out of your fugue state."

“The... the... *baby*, Finch,” Hugh despaired. “Whelps can care for themselves, but a *baby*? I’ll never be good enough for a baby. I’ll break it.”

“Nonsense. You’ll be an excellent father.” Finch patted him on the head. “Now, off to shower with you. I need you ready for when Everard arrives. By the time he gets here, there’s no telling what condition I’ll be in. I need you ready to speak with him if I can’t.”

“A baby,” Hugh whispered as he slid off the bed and wobbled toward the bathroom. “We’re really having a baby...”

“Cold water, please,” Finch reminded him as he hobbled through the bathroom door.

Hugh heeded his word and took the coldest shower of his life. It still didn’t help.

Hugh took longer than he should have to shower and dressed just in time to greet a sleep-cap-wearing Francis at the bedroom door. The major-domo narrowed his eyes at Hugh as if Hugh’s personal failings were keeping him from a full night’s rest. “Mr. Everard Drake, sir,” he said, then stepped aside to admit Everard, who had brought with him a doctor’s bag.

“Good morning, brother,” said Everard. “It’s come to my attention that your little hole punch is filled to bursting. May I come in to see him? You might never get him unjammed otherwise.”

At the sight of his brother’s smug, if slightly exhausted, face, Hugh’s dragon did something it never had before—it reared up in his mind and hissed. The sound escaped Hugh’s physical body, causing Everard to roll his eyes.

“Oh, hush.” Everard tapped him on the tip of his nose.

Hugh startled and recoiled. “I’m not here to steal him from you. I do still remember what happened the last time he was taken from you, and I’d prefer not to have to go through such

an ordeal again. Now, step aside. I have a niece or nephew to deliver.”

Hugh's dragon snorted in irritation, but Hugh himself was too gobsmacked to say much of anything. He stepped aside, granting Everard passage. Once the way was clear, Everard approached the bedside and set down his doctor's bag. "Hello, tape dispenser. Has there been any change since you called?"

"Yes," Finch said calmly. "My contractions are now, on average, three minutes and five seconds apart and last for sometimes over sixty seconds."

"Already?"

"Yes. It's early, isn't it?"

"A trifle. And your pain?"

"Terrible."

Everard nodded sagely, then looked over his shoulder at Hugh. "Brother, make yourself useful and see to it that your staff know there are approximately two to three hours before my future niece or nephew is born. We'll need towels, blankets

—"

"Pardon me, but it's already done." Finch took a deep, pained breath and shifted on the bed, where he'd come to settle. A section of their mate bond had been blocked off, preventing Hugh from feeling his pain, but Hugh ached for him regardless. "All necessary linens will be brought to the room shortly. I've also—"

Finch cut himself off, going rigid from agony. Hugh, terrified for him, rushed to the bed and clasped his hand.

"Finch?"

"I'll be fine, sir," Finch strained through his teeth.

It did not sound like he'd be fine.

Defeated, Hugh sat on the bedside and worried over him.

There had to be something he could do. What good was he if he couldn't comfort his mate in this time of great need? Yes, Everard was a doctor, but Hugh was Finch's mate, and Finch needed his unwavering support.

"I love you, Finch," Hugh told him, channeling as much of that sweet energy as he could through their bond. It warmed his connection with Finch like sunlight. If he was lucky, it would help take away some of Finch's pain. "I'm here for you no matter what."

"And I'm here for you for the delivery," Everard supplied in a dry tone of voice that grated on Hugh's nerves. "Hugh, I'm afraid I need access to your mate to check how far along he is. You'll need to move."

Hugh hissed again at the insistence of his dragon, but ultimately complied. As irritating as he could be, Everard was there to help Finch, not hurt him, and it was in Hugh's best interest he let the man do his job.

What he hadn't realized was that Everard's business was apparently between Finch's legs.

When Everard pulled the covers back, Hugh bristled.

*"Brother."*

"Hugh," Everard said, sounding very tired. He gave Hugh the flattest look. "Really? Where do you think babies come from? Be thankful my adorable strip of beef jerky elected to stay home until Chuck wakes up, for he would be much more invasive. Now be a good boy and open my bag. No, not that pocket, the other one. I'm going to need my inspection mirror."

Hugh located the first mirror-like object and handed it to Everard, who proceeded to use it to examine Finch in ways Hugh had never thought a man should be examined. Flushed and unsure where to look while still being polite, Hugh turned around and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to bounce off the walls or fall into a heap.

"Well, how unexpected. We are very slick and quite dilated. Are you sure this is your first birth, paper shredder?"

You're putting Perry to shame."

"Quite certain," Finch strained.

"In any case, you're doing exceptionally well. Keep breathing. I'd tell you to make an effort to relax, but you seem to be doing that already. I can't recall the last time I tended to a laboring omega so composed and collected." Something blunt and accusatory planted itself between Hugh's tense shoulder blades. "I wish I could say the same for you. Take a deep breath, brother. Hold it. Now let it out. All will be well. I have no idea how it happened, but you've found the most capable partner of any of us Drakes. Heaven forbid, were I to be struck dead this very second, there is no doubt in my mind your paperweight would do just fine. He's very capable. Now

—" Everard cut himself off. "Who the devil is that in the doorway?"

Hugh looked. There stood Gabriel, the pool boy. "Uh, special delivery for Mr. Drake?"

"Which one?" Everard inquired.

"Hugh," Finch groaned, sounding like at any moment he might tear in two. "Give the blasted thing to Hugh, Gabriel, then get out. All of you, get out, or I swear I will pluck you all scale by scale until you've learned to be *quiet*."

"It's best we listen," Everard said in a low voice as he steered Hugh out of the room. He shut the door behind them.

"There's still two hours at least before he's ready, if what I saw during my inspection is to be believed. Take a small walk to compose yourself, then come back. I'll look after him until then."

"Oh, cool. That'll be just enough time for you to smoke up. Have fun, Mr. Drake." Gabriel shoved something into Hugh's hand, winked, and booked it out of the hallway before Hugh could make heads or tails of what was going on.

"Smoke up?" Everard asked. "What the devil is he going on about?"

“I’m not sure. Everything today has been a blur, and not very much has made sense. What do you think of this, Everard?” He showed Everard what Gabriel had given him. It was a hand-rolled cigarette. “The aroma is reminiscent of something familiar, but I’ll be damned if I can remember what.

It feels like my head’s on upside down and backwards. I don’t think I’d remember my name if it weren’t for Finch scolding me with it.”

Everard’s eyebrows nearly took flight.

“What?” Hugh asked. He clutched the cigarette to his chest to protect it from Everard’s thieving ways. “I don’t like that look in your eyes, Everard. You’re up to something.”

“I am up to nothing, brother. I’ll remind you that I’m on the job. You, however, are bound by no such obligation and should be up to all kinds of things, especially smoking that doobie.”

“That *what?* ”

Everard clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed.

“Doctor’s orders. Your Rolodex was right in having it delivered. Go sit out on the stoop and enjoy it. If anything changes, I’ll see to it that you’re informed immediately.”

Hugh didn’t know what to think of Everard or his support of the pungent cigarette currently in Hugh’s possession, but he did know that Finch would never do anything to harm him.

Perhaps it would be for the best if he took a second to breathe and compose himself before returning to Finch’s side. If the baby was still hours away, there was no harm in it.

“Make sure he knows that I love him, and that I’ll be back soon,” Hugh told Everard before backing down the hall. “If anything happens, *anything*, retrieve me immediately. I won’t be long.”

“I will,” Everard promised.

And maybe it was foolish, but Hugh believed him.

36

H U G H

Hugh sat on the stoop of his lair and looked at the cigarette. As it had no eyes it didn't look back, but he couldn't help but feel like it was judging him.

“Quiet, you wretched thing,” Hugh muttered. “I am *very* capable, I'll have you know.”

The cigarette didn't believe him, so Hugh taught it who was boss by willing a flame into existence and lighting it on fire. The tip burned cherry red. The cigarette had the last laugh, though, because as it burned it stank to high heaven. It was unlike the pipe smell Hugh associated with gentlemen's clubs and coffee houses. Almost skunk-like. He wrinkled his nose and considered snuffing it out right then and there, but before he could, he was blinded by headlights as a vehicle crested the horizon and encroached on the horseshoe drop-off point near where he sat.

Upon closer investigation, Hugh discovered it was a minivan.

The vehicle slowed to a stop in front of him, at which point the passenger side door swung open and out hopped his brother Alistair's mate, Ignatius. He was wearing plaid pajama pants and a billowy graphic t-shirt with print so faded, Hugh couldn't hope to discern what had once been on it. Somehow, Ignatius had forgotten to put on shoes.

Hugh watched his bare feet as Ignatius hurried over.

“Hugh!” Ignatius exclaimed. “We heard the news. I—” He came to a sudden stop a little more than a foot away from

Hugh's position. “Uh, what's that?”

“Oh, this?” Hugh flicked the cigarette. “Finch commanded me to use it, but I haven't any idea why. I'm no smoker.

Worse, I think the blasted thing's gone rancid. It smells off."

"I don't know. It smells good to me." Ignatius sat beside him on the stoop and held out a hand. "Want me to check?"

Hugh passed him the cigarette and watched the cherry glow as he took a drag. "I didn't know you smoked, Ignatius."

"Have you met my boys?" he asked while holding his breath.

What a bizarre thing to ask. Hugh had, indeed, met his nephews. Many times. While Ignatius was in attendance. He fixed Ignatius with a queer look that Ignatius didn't notice—he was too busy blowing smoke into the sky.

The sound of a car door closing drew Hugh's attention to the minivan. Alistair, hair messy from sleep, stepped around the vehicle and came to join them. He sighed when he saw his mate. "Love, what have I said about taking treasure out of our hoard?"

"S'not mine," Ignatius replied as he handed the cigarette back to Hugh. "It's hitting the same way ours does, though.

Whew. You're good, Hugh. There's nothing off about that."

Hugh frowned at the cigarette. "I'm afraid I'm terribly confused. Not much has made sense to me since I discovered Finch is hours away from delivering our firstborn. Is it always like this?"

"What, the weed?" Ignatius asked. "Indica strains generally don't have that effect on people. I wonder if it's a hybrid. How much have you smoked since you found out?"

Hugh's mouth fell open. He looked at the cigarette between his fingers, then at Ignatius. "Excuse me?"

"Hey, no judgment here. We're not exactly heavy smokers, but we've been indulging a little more than usual since a literal half-pound of it fell through the sunroof of our car on the way to the kids' birthday party." Ignatius paused and seemed to



consider what he'd said, then hastily added, "The, uh, the kids were fine. Don't worry. It was pretty easy to convince them that it was a bag of vegetables, and after that they wanted nothing to do with it. I am so lucky it wasn't a big bag of weed brownies."

"We keep it locked in a cabinet in our hoard," Alistair added, as if it would help. "I imagine you won't have to be so careful for at least a good six months, or however long it takes for an infant to start crawling. You should look into it to be sure. I must admit, my knowledge of child-rearing is minimal."

Ah, yes.

Babies.

His baby, in particular.

The thought rammed itself back into the forefront of Hugh's mind and, despite the early morning chill, made him break out in a sweat. As a father, it would be his responsibility to know these things. A small, fragile life would depend on his expertise. The thought that a small, human-shaped dragon he loved more than life itself would depend on him for anything horrified him.

Desperate for some form of release, he took a puff of the cigarette. It hit him straight in the lungs. Coughing, he winced and fanned the air in front of his face. Alistair struck him several times on the back.

"Devilish stuff, isn't it?" Alistair asked. "It burns its way through your lungs like dragonfire. The first time Nate introduced it to me, I thought I would self-immolate and die.

Fortunately, that was not the case. Do you need some water?"

"No," Hugh said, and took another hit. He remembered the smell now that it was on his tongue—he'd tasted it when sampling that nugget for Finch before the party. In comparison to the nugget, the cigarette was very small. There was no way Gabriel had squeezed the entire thing inside. "Will this be

enough?” Hugh asked after his next exhale. “To ‘take the edge off,’ I mean. Finch was very clear that’s what this was intended to do.”

“Oh, dude, you’re gonna be just fine.” Ignatius bumped their shoulders together. “Congratulations on the baby, by the way. This sure as hell beats that outdated cigar tradition. Did you two ever find out if you’re having a boy or a girl?”

Hugh shook his head. Just thinking about details like that sent him into a mild panic. He sucked more smoke into his lungs, then thrust the cigarette at Ignatius, who shrugged and took it into his custody.

“I can see you’re worried, brother,” Alistair said. “But never fear. All will be well. I was worried at one time, too, with three unsanctioned eggs and a non-Pedigree omega to care for, but despite my blunders, I now have a beautiful family. Everything will fall into place for you. I know it.”

Hugh nodded stiffly and did start to feel a little better, but then he spotted new headlights on their way down the driveway and was plagued with indomitable anxiety. The Drakes were assembling to greet the new baby, and they’d all see how inept and unprepared he was.

“I need to go back to Finch,” he announced, rocketing to his feet. “Alistair, will you take care of whoever that is?”

Gather wherever you’d like—the sitting room, the ballroom, the dining room... it makes no difference to me. All I ask is that you respect my Finch’s privacy during the birth. I’ll have a member of the staff inform you when we’re ready to accept visitors.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll keep an eye out, too,” Ignatius promised. “I know all too well how little you Drakes care about privacy. It’s been years and I still haven’t been able to teach a certain lizard how to knock.”

Hugh nodded. “I’ll lock the door, then.”

The look Ignatius gave him was battle-weary and wizened.

“It won’t help.”

“Well, I’ll try it, anyway.” Hugh wrung his hands. The headlights were getting larger. It wouldn’t be long at all before the next vehicle arrived. “Thank you both for running interference. From here on out, I’ll be with Finch. If there are any urgent messages you need to pass along, please have them delivered to one of the staff.”

“You got it.” Ignatius shooed him off with a wave of his hand. “Now get going before they get here and rope you into staying. And give our best to Finch.”

“I will.”

Hugh hurried off, but on his way into his lair, he heard his brother cuss. “Jessica just sent a text to let me know that Chaucer has eaten the decorative candle.”

“Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Christ. I’ll have you know that this is your fault. I never ate candles as a kid. Finch has the right idea. Next time, I want a baby.”

Alistair chuckled. “Of course, my love. I’ll see what I can do.”

Hugh shut the door and hurried for the staircase, but whether it was by virtue of the marijuana he’d ingested or the conversation he’d overheard, he felt much better about fatherhood.

Hugh was assailed by a pillow when he stepped through the bedroom door. It hit him squarely in the face and chased a shriek out of him before it tumbled to the floor. The pillow-thrower, Finch, glared at him, then sank onto the bed and screamed through his teeth. Everard had taken shelter within a makeshift bunker made of two tall dressers, the girls’ cage, and a large painting he’d removed from the wall that was acting like a roof. Several pillows were piled

before the front-facing dresser. One pillow was on the painting.

Everard peered at Hugh through the bars of the cage.

*“Help.”*

Hugh stood stunned for a moment, taking in the scene before him, then collected the pillow at his feet and the ones scattered around Everard’s bunker. He returned all of them to Finch, who appeared to be in the throes of a contraction and didn’t see him there.

“You must be tolerant of Everard, my love,” Hugh said as he set the pillows on the bed. “As pesky as he can be, he’s the only doctor we have.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Finch replied through clenched teeth, *“Fuck that.”*

It was jarring to hear Finch swear, but understandable given the circumstances. Hugh finished positioning the pillows, then climbed onto the bed and sat within arm’s length of his lover. A strange feeling was creeping through him, like goosebumps, but on the inside. It tingled in his arms and legs, his chest, his head, his face. It was particularly noticeable in his fingers and lips, where it buzzed like static.

“Everard,” Hugh said when Finch collapsed onto the bed following his latest contraction. “Why haven’t you administered anything to help with his pain?”

“He requested a natural birth.”

Another pillow struck the dresser. It collided with one of the ornate metal handles, which clattered against the wood, then fell to the floor. Hugh knew he ought to retrieve it, but the floor seemed awfully far away, and he was so comfortable where he was. The prickling static in his fingers was only getting stronger, and when he ran his fingertips over the back of his hand, it felt like absolute magic. If only Finch could feel it, too.

Inspiration struck like lightning. Hugh gasped. “I can help.”

“I would bloody well hope you can,” Everard said. “I can’t deliver the baby

from behind the dresser.”

Hugh ignored his annoying brother and set his sights on Finch, who was glossy with sweat and narrow-eyed with suspicion. “Finch, I’ve had a wonderful idea. Do you trust me?”

Finch’s mouth twitched, but ultimately he said, “Yes.”

“Good. I promise, everything will be okay. I’ll make sure of it.”

Delighted with himself for his ingenuity, Hugh opened their mate bond as wide as he could and flooded it with the tingling sensation. Finch gasped, and a moment later his shoulders sagged and his eyelids drooped. He pushed the hair back from his brow with a trembling hand, then dropped his arm and sighed.

“Better?” Hugh asked.

Finch nodded.

“It feels amazing, doesn’t it?” Hugh dropped onto the bed beside Finch and grinned like a loon. “I was sure there wasn’t enough in that cigarette to do much of anything, but I only took three puffs and... well... apart from when I’m with you, I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so good.”

“Mm,” Finch hummed, but didn’t otherwise reply. Hugh didn’t mind. Conversation wasn’t a top priority. All he wanted to do was bask in the ever-growing feeling of utter relaxation.

Across the room, a besieged Everard sneaked out of the bunker and cautiously approached the bed. He looked down at Hugh in what was either bewildered shock or mild repulsion.

“I cannot believe your solution was to use the mate bond to get him high.”

“I can’t believe it worked,” Finch said with a snort. “Mm, am I able to push yet, Everard? I’m absolutely knackered.”

“Not yet, Post-It. Soon.”

Finch sighed and reached for Hugh's hand, which Hugh gratefully took. "I'm glad you're here with me again," Finch told him. "I'm glad that you're my mate. A life without you is a life without happiness. All the drugs in the world wouldn't

be able to numb the pain I'd be in right now if there were another omega in your bed, having your baby."

"Never." Hugh brought Finch's hand to his face and kissed it. "Never, ever, Finch. You always were and always will be the one for me."

"Are you planning on keeping up the drunken, heartfelt confessions for the next two or so hours?" Everard asked.

"Because if so, I'll go grab a pastry from the kitchen and maybe a coffee while I'm at it."

Hugh looked to Finch for guidance, for without him, he'd be lost.

"No," Finch said. "I don't need to say anything when I can feel his truth through the bond. I think I'd rather rest and be quiet."

It sounded like an awfully good idea, so Hugh did the same. They lay in silence, vibing off each other's presence and channeling their love through the bond until Everard approached the bed again and told Finch that it was time to push.

37

F I N C H

No sooner had Everard announced that it was time to push than a pain ripped through Finch that not even his second-hand high could mitigate. He screamed in pain and clenched, curling up on himself from the agony. It felt like he was being ripped apart.

"I could take away the pain, paper clip," Everard told him in an irritatingly calm tone of voice from the foot of the bed.

“Let me use my magic to ease your contractions. Hugh’s ingenuity will only take you so far. You’re in need of a healer’s touch. And before you argue, let me remind you that magic is entirely natural. If you’re fine with what Hugh’s done for you via the mate bond, there’s no reason to resist my healing magic.”

“I can help,” Hugh said, possibly to himself, because Finch was in no mood to listen to anyone. “Here, Finch.” Hugh took Finch’s hand and a cooling wave of magic spread through him.

It wasn’t enough to do away with the pain he was in, but it helped. It was only when Everard stepped in and laid a hand on Finch as well, adding his magic to Hugh’s, that Finch found any relief.

Hugh stroked Finch’s sweaty brow and kissed his temple.

“There. That’s better, isn’t it?”

“It’s... acceptable,” was as far as Finch was willing to go.

“All right, then,” Everard said, sounding far more cheerful and sure of himself. He placed himself between Finch’s legs.

“Let me have a bit of a rummage around in here.”

“I say,” Hugh began, sounding indignant.

“Hush, brother. I’m working here and this is very delicate.

I need to concentrate. Can you be still for me, fountain pen?”

“I... I can try. What exactly are you doing?” Finch couldn’t help the note of suspicion that crept into his voice.

“Something important. Now, do not push. Not yet. Even with the pain numbed, you will still want to bear down, but hold it back.”

“What are you doing, brother?” Hugh asked with trepidation. He gripped Finch’s hand with equal fervor. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“Your baby is being stubborn. Instead of being head-down, like a proper birth, your child has decided to turn his back on the proceedings. I need to turn the baby, and if this doesn’t work, I’ll have to do a caesarean.”

Finch closed his eyes, held tightly to his mate, tried not to push, and prayed that the universe would keep his baby safe.

The universe, cheeky as ever, responded by sending someone through the bedroom door. Finch heard it open, then shut.

“What did I miss?” asked Harrison. “Not the birth, I hope.”

Everard looked briefly over his shoulder. “No, pudding cup, you haven’t. In fact, I’m in need of your assistance. Come here.”

“What do you need me to do, Ev?” Harrison asked as he appeared at the bedside.

“I need you to perform an ECV while I administer magic to numb father and child.”

The door opened again and Finch cursed internally. What now? There was already far too much chaos as it was, and the more bodies in the room, the worse it would get. He wanted, very badly, to tell everyone who wasn’t necessary to go the hell away.

“Is there anything I can do?” asked Calvin Drake.

“Hold your son’s other hand,” Everard barked. Calvin trotted over to the bed and did so, and had Finch not been on high alert over what Everard had said to Harrison, he might have found it nice.

“Okay, Finch,” Harrison began. “I’m going to be putting some pressure on you so we can get the baby into the position he or she needs to be in. It’s not going to feel great, but I promise it won’t last for long. I’m going to make this as quick as possible, so please bear with me.”

Harrison laid his hands on Finch’s distended belly and pushed. Even with Everard’s numbing magic, the pain was intense. Involuntary tears streamed



down Finch's face. Hugh wiped them away ineffectually with his shirt sleeve until Calvin produced a snowy handkerchief and presented it to his son-in-law.

"You can do the honors," Calvin said to Hugh as he held Finch's hand in both of his. To Finch, he said, "You can do this, child. I have faith in you."

It was strange, but also good, to have a father in his life for the first time. Finch knew Calvin was trying, in his gentle way, to make up for missing his childhood. It was hard shedding years of resentment, but Finch was also trying, and the two were slowly growing closer. He only wished they weren't growing closer now, when he was in the midst of the greatest pain of his life.

"Steady," Everard said, speaking to his mate as he pushed on Finch's abdomen. "I can see movement. Come on, now.

Come on."

One last jolt of pain tore through Finch, and he screamed.

For a moment, the world was dark, and when he opened his eyes again, his fingernails were dug into Calvin and Hugh's hands. Neither dragon tried to pull away.

"It's done," Everard said. "I can now safely deliver the babe."

Finch gasped and sank onto the mattress. He tried not to think about what Everard was doing between his legs, but it

was hard not to. Even with his healing magic, Finch felt his hands and the tremendous, splitting pressure as his child was slowly born.

"Push," Everard said, and when the next contraction came, Finch let it wash over him and allowed nature to take its course. He pushed like he never had before.

"You can do it," Hugh praised in a whisper as he squeezed Finch's hand. "You can do anything. I've always known that."

He kissed Finch's cheek. "I love you so much."

Finch, meanwhile, held on to his father and his mate and labored to bring his first child into the world.

The ringing cry that sounded when the babe was finally born was the sweetest sound Finch could imagine.

"It's a boy," Harrison revealed. "Can I wash him?"

Finch was too tired to think of doing anything other than being in bed. He closed his eyes and nodded, hearing rather than seeing Harrison leave for the en suite bathroom. Water ran. While it did, magic flowed through Finch once more, making him tremble from the pleasure it brought.

*Magic, he thought, is my new favorite thing, right after Hugh, our child, and an efficiently organized desk.*

Finch didn't open his eyes again until a soft, small bundle was placed in his arms. Harrison had brought back his son.

The child was naked and quite warm to the touch, his face small and wrinkled. A dusting of dark hair covered the top of his head. He was perfect. Utterly perfect. Finch was already in love.

"Look at him," Hugh whispered in awe as he drew Finch into his arms. "Finch, he's more amazing than I could have ever dreamed. Look at him. Look how small he is. Can you believe it? And he's ours now to love forever. Our son. Our pride and joy. Our Theodore."

Love hummed through the mate bond from Hugh, which Finch met with love of his own. It was, perhaps, the greatest moment of his life to be here in bed with his mate and son, and surrounded by family who loved them. And if it was not the

greatest, it would still be the moment he'd hold up to every other wonderful thing to happen to him over the course of his long life.

While Finch fed his son, three dragons and an omega-beta made themselves

useful by setting the room back to rights.

When the last pillow was placed back on the bed, Everard asked, “Are you up to visitors? Although I’m fairly certain you won’t have much of a choice soon enough. Nothing will keep them out for long.”

To prove his point, there was a knock at the door, followed by Grimbold Drake’s booming voice. “We heard crying and a lack of swearing. When will we be permitted entry to meet the newest Drake?”

Finch growled. He wanted to send them all away forever but knew that idea was futile. They were dragons and they’d do what they wanted to do, everyone else be damned. It didn’t matter that he looked a fright and all he wanted to do was cuddle in bed with his two favorite men. Finch knew, better than most, that some things took precedence.

“Should I kill them all for you?” Calvin asked. He sounded earnest, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

“Oh, let them in. Better to get it over with. Then can you herd them all somewhere else?”

“It would be,” Calvin said with a smile, “my pleasure.”

The next few hours went by in a Drake-shaped blur. Most of Hugh’s family stopped by to greet Theodore, but there were a few notable absences. Namely, Sebastian and Peregrine. But the rest were there, even Geoffrey and his mates, who’d flown in from California, and Atticus, who’d come with Calvin. The men all cooed and made silly faces at the baby as they passed him around. The only one who didn’t hold him was Grimbold, who had his own baby held securely in his arms. He did smile

at his grandson, however, and held his daughter in only one arm long enough to touch Theodore’s dark, downy hair.

Finch was sad not to see Peregrine, as he rather liked the sweet omega. Hugh also seemed puzzled as to why they hadn’t shown up, and asked Everard if he knew anything the next time his brother passed by.

“Sebastian sends his regrets,” Everard relayed without coming to a full stop. He was on his way over to Harrison, who was conducting science on a wide-eyed Walter and his daughter, Joy. “He says his mate is not up to leaving the house at the moment.”

“I hope he’s not ill,” Finch said when Everard was gone.

“But if he’s unwell, it’s best he stays away. I’ll make a point to visit with him later. I’ll bring the little man with me.”

“You’ll bring the big dragon along as well,” Hugh said with a somewhat uncharacteristic huff. “Something is brewing.

Don’t know what, but my dragon senses it.”

As if to illustrate the point, Bertram, who’d been having a very quiet argument with Grimbald in the corner of the room, stalked away from his father and came to stand by where Hugh and Finch sat. “I apologize, but I must go. I’ve business to attend to.”

Hugh narrowed his eyes. “Do you?”

Bertram clapped his brother on the back. “I do, indeed.

And never fear. I’ll make sure all is well. It is, after all, what I do.” He bowed slightly and left the room.

Finch frowned after him. Of all of Hugh’s siblings, Finch knew the least about Bertram. “What exactly does he do?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” Hugh said, “and I’ve no wish to know. Something dull, I’m sure. Bit of an errand boy for our father. Not my cup of tea.”

“Hm.” Finch frowned, but didn’t pursue it. If it was important, the information would come to him in time. It always did. And he had far more important things to do now.

He was a father, and he was determined to be the best one that ever was.

“This is, without a doubt, the absolute best day of my entire life.” Hugh sighed happily. “I love you. I love you both more than I can ever express.” A thought drifted through Hugh’s eyes like a cloud, and in a sudden panic, Hugh peered down at newborn Theodore. “Finch, we need to find him a mate!”

Finch raised his eyebrows. “Hugh, he’s not even a day old.

You’ve got many years yet to meddle in his life.”

“But he can’t die, Finch. Not ever.” Hugh turned huge, beseeching eyes upon Finch. “I won’t allow it.”

Finch gave Hugh a quick kiss. “Give him time, my dear dragon. Let him grow up.”

“But—”

“And if, in time, he needs a mate, I can find one for him. I found one for you, didn’t I?”

Hugh grinned hugely. “What would I do without you, Finch?”

Finch leaned over and kissed his mate. “A better question, my love, is what would I do without you?”

## E P I L O G U E

### H U G H

Theodore Frederick Drake, born September nineteenth at 7:17

AM and weighing six pounds, two ounces, was not a whelp, but he was perfect. From the swirl of dark hair on his head to his ten tiny toes, there was not a thing about him Hugh would change. According to Finch—who was far smarter than Hugh would ever be—babies only started to resemble their parents at around the three-week mark, when they became less wrinkly and red and more adorably round. It didn’t stop Hugh from seeing echoes of Finch in his tiny button nose and in the shape of his lips.

“He’s just like you,” Hugh told Finch proudly when all non-resident Drakes had been shown from the room. “Do you see it, Finch? Do you see the resemblance? I know you said it’s too early, but I swear, it’s there. He’ll grow up to be every bit as gorgeous as you, I can already tell.”

Theodore, who was cradled in Finch’s arms, opened and closed his mouth soundlessly. Hugh, smitten with every little thing he did, cuddled closer to Finch’s side and stroked his son’s dark hair. His earlier buzz had, thankfully, started to wear off. All that remained was a dopey kind of cheerfulness that amplified his current mood.

“Do you think so?” Finch smiled down at Theodore. “If that’s the case, I hope he inherits your charm.”

“But with your sharp wit and intellect,” Hugh was quick to add. “Oh, the things he’ll accomplish in life. I can hardly wait to see. We should set up a college fund—no, two of them.

Three? Finch, how often does a young man go to college? I’m

afraid education was never a top priority of mine, and even had it been, so much has changed since I was of schooling age that I doubt my experience would be much of a help at all.”

“Sir, you are in possession of a hoard. A college fund won’t be necessary.”

“Are you saying college costs a hoard’s weight in gold?”

Hugh’s eyes bulged. “Good lord, how does Rey sleep at night?”

“No, sir.” Finch chuckled. “College is expensive, but even if we had eleven children enrolled in the finest institutions in the world, it wouldn’t put a dent in your net worth.”

“Ah. Good. And we will send Theodore to the finest institutions, won’t we?”

“If it’s what he wants.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. As long as it’s what he wants.” Hugh introduced his

pinkie finger to Theodore's hand and was delighted when he grasped it. The boy was small, but his grip was sure and strong. A Drake through and through. Hugh couldn't be more proud. "He will have everything he wants, and so will you. I will take care of you both to my last breath, Finch. I swear it."

"I have no doubt that you will."

All three were silent after that. Hugh rested his head on Finch's shoulder and watched Theodore fall asleep. It was hard to believe that this was his life now—that after so many years of unhappiness, not only had he found the family he'd been so desperately seeking, but the love of his life as well.

His darling, beloved, irreplaceable Finch would be his forever, and at his side, Hugh would learn to be a better man than he'd ever been before. A better dragon, too. Simply better as a whole. And all due to Finch's influence.

"What now?" Hugh asked when want of sleep began to prickle the backs of his eyelids. "I don't want to let Theodore out of my sight, but I could use a nap, and I'm sure you could, too."

"Place him in the bassinet," Finch said.

In retrospect, as beautiful as the nursery looked, it'd been foolish to set up Theodore's accommodations in a separate room. Geoffrey and Ian had been kind enough to carry in the necessities during their visit, insisting Hugh would want to keep Theodore close. They hadn't been wrong. Hugh was especially glad for their generosity now as he laid Theodore down to sleep.

"Is it okay to leave him there on his own?" Hugh asked as he settled into bed. "I placed him on his back, like you said, and there's nothing in there with him. That should be enough, shouldn't it? I haven't forgotten anything? I—"

Finch hushed Hugh with a tender kiss that didn't end until Hugh physically relaxed.

"He will be fine," Finch told him as he tucked in close to Hugh and wove their legs together. "You've done everything right. All that's left to do is hold

me.”

If their son hadn't been in the room, Hugh would have done more than that, but he was a family man now, so he wrapped Finch in his arms and let his mate get comfortable.

“I love you, Finch,” Hugh whispered into Finch's dark hair as they fell asleep. “You've made me the happiest dragon in the world.”

“I'm not so sure about that,” Finch said, a smile in his voice. “Being with you has made me uncommonly happy, too.”

Fatherhood suited Hugh, and he wore it as proudly and boldly as he could. Babies, he'd learned rather quickly, couldn't do much, but Theodore—Theodore was different. Hugh would teach him everything. And he would teach him right.

“This is a dragon,” Hugh told his infant son at their daily lesson. As usual, Theodore was in his bassinet and Hugh was stationed beside him. In his hand, he held a flash card. On it was a drawing of a friendly Emerald dragon and the letter “D.”

Despite Hugh's best efforts, he'd been unable to find flash

cards with Amethyst dragons. A pity that his art skills were disastrous at best—he would have loved for Theodore to see his clan represented in human media. Alas, it wasn't to be.

“Dragon,” Hugh said, making sure to enunciate the word.

“Dragon starts with a ‘D’ and ends with a ‘ragon.’ Do you see the picture, Theodore?”

Theodore, who was only three weeks old, kicked his feet.

Hugh took it as an affirmation.

“Good. Now, do you know why dragons are so important?” Hugh reached into the bassinet and stroked Theodore's soft hair. “Dragons are important



because they are family. I am a dragon, and my brothers are dragons, and we have been dragons for as far back as you can imagine. But what you might not know is that your father is a dragon, too.

And so are you. A dragon through and through.”

“Hugh?” asked Finch in an amused tone of voice from the door. “What are you doing?”

“I’m teaching Theodore about dragons,” Hugh replied. He showed Finch the flash card. “Whelps are born with their scales, so it’s easy for them to understand who they are, but dragonets aren’t. I want Theodore to know from the very start that he is no less a dragon than his cousins. I will not have him doubt himself. He will grow up strong and certain and proud of his heritage. Everything you went through, Finch, and all of the shame burdened on Disgraces out of sheer ignorance... I won’t have it. If there is only one thing Theodore learns in life, it will be that he is worthy of the Drake name.”

Finch was very still and quiet for a moment. When it came to the point where Hugh thought he would not speak at all, he swept into the room and stood by Hugh’s side. With such scant distance between them, Hugh saw for himself the glimmer in Finch’s eyes. “That’s a very sweet thing of you to do.”

“Sweet?” Hugh shook his head. He set the flash cards down—education could wait for another day. “No, Finch. It’s not sweet. It’s essential. For thousands of years we’ve told ourselves that our human-born children are lesser, unwanted creatures better left to perish in the cloisters than be a part of our lives, and a mindset like that won’t change overnight.

Theodore will encounter dragons in his life who are convinced that the old way is the only way, and he needs to know to the depths of his very soul that he is worthy, so that when he meets dragons like that, he can continue to hold his head high and know he is loved and valued no matter what they say.”

“Sir...”

“Yes, Finch?”

Finch shook his head and blinked a few times to do away with the glimmer in his eyes. “You know, I forgot what I was going to say. While I think on it, why don’t you tell me how I can help in this pursuit of yours? Surely there must be a way.”

“Oh! Yes. Of course.” Hugh snatched up the flash cards and handed them to Finch. “I’m teaching him other words, too.

See that, there? ‘A’ for ‘apple.’ I’m not sure how long it’ll be before he’s able to eat one, but it’s of no importance. By the time he’s ready, he’ll know everything there is to know about them—in other words, that they’re hard and crunchy and sweet... and shaped like an apple. Red, mostly, but sometimes green. Now, what do you know about bananas?”

Finch laughed and grabbed Hugh by the lapels. Cards went flying. Hugh would have gasped and gone after them had Finch not pulled him close and kissed him like one might a lover come back from war. Hugh wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve such affection, but he smiled and kissed Finch because Finch deserved to be kissed all the time, as often as he liked, and wherever he wanted.

“Never change, sir,” Finch whispered when the kiss concluded.

Hugh rested the tip of his nose on Finch’s, eyes closed. “I can’t promise that, Finch,” he whispered, heart pounding out of love for his forever mate, “but I promise that when I do change, it will always be for the better.”

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