



EDGE OF DARKNESS

DRAGONS OF SAN DELAIN

ONE

M. A. CHURCH

Edge of Darkness
Dragons of San DeLain



M.A. Church

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This series is the second set of books in the world of San DeLain. There will be three books with the dragons, and this is definitely going to be a slow burn series that stretches out over the three books. Kit, Hudson, and Connie will get their HEA, but I don't want to rush this relationship.

Since there will be several series based in this world, and each series will build off the last, I highly recommend reading the series in order.

Daemons of San DeLain is first:

Book 1: Chasing Shadows #1

Book 2: Shadows Embrace #2

Book 3: Of Love and Shadows #3

Then the 2nd series is: Dragons of San DeLain

Book 1: Edge of Darkness #1

Book 2: Coming Soon

Book 3: Coming Soon

Then the 3rd series will be: Gargoyles of San DeLain

Book 1: Anticipated out late 2024

Book 2:

Book 3:

We'll see if the two werewolf packs, the vampires, and the merfolk get books.

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Characters:

Fire Court (Dragons)

Hudson–Dragon King; best friend and business partner to Kage Dargan

Conrad (Connie)–dragon; assistant to Hudson

Wilson Mackmore–dragon; Hudson’s driver; was killed by hunters during an attack on Hudson

Lanny Brooks–female dragon and Austin’s agent

Parker Hicks–dragon; IT specialist

Mitchell Fields–dragon; weapon specialist

Nelson West–dragon; specializes in close combat training

Torres Manchester–dragon; in charge of security

Sheila Walker–dragon; financial advisor

Audrey Darnell–dragon; specializes in training their dragon forms to fight

Hacker–code name for Hudson’s hacker

Stella Yearwood–dragon; head cook

Beckett Newhouse–dragon; graphic designer; Ancient

Leo Davenport–dragon; bodyguard/bouncer

Daemons of San DeLain

Kage Dargan–Elder; daemon

Austin Dean Hathaway Berkshire–mated to Kage; was human; member of the clan

Denisha McDaniels–Lieutenant to Kage; daemon and member of the clan

Maia Revilla–Lieutenant to Kage; daemon and member of the clan

Mr. Newson–night shift concierge; daemon and member of the clan

Mrs. Covington—day shift concierge; daemon and member of the clan

Cain Novak—owner of House of Novak; daemon and member of the clan

Martin Ingalls—waiter at Embers; werecat; member of the clan

Dr. Terry Sanchez—doctor; daemon and member of the clan

Susan Hayes—waitress at Embers; magic user; member of the clan

Harold Armstrong—Kage’s driver; was human; a member of the clan

Keenan Jones—manager of Embers; daemon

Jeannie and Jake Arquette—fraternal twins; elementals and member of the clan

Darnell McIntosh—hacker; fire mage; member of the clan

Gargoyles of San DeLain (Clan Tywyll)

Hereward Tywyll—Gargoyle King; goes by Ward; unmated

Vampires of San DeLain (St. Clair coven)

Raven St. Clair—Master of the City; unmated

Frederick King—psychiatrist; vampire; unmated

Felix March—vampire; unmated

Merfolk of San DeLain (Golden Reef Colony)

Fenton Moss—Merchieftain; merman; unmated

Cross River pack of San DeLain

Li Li Kim—Alpha; werewolf; mated

Jerome Benton—mated to Li Li; werewolf

Crimson Fangs pack of San DeLain

Alpha Sherman “Diesel” Whitlock—werewolf; killed by Axel in a challenge

Alpha Axel Scheffler—current Alpha; werewolf; Kage’s ex

Danny “Dutch” Johnson—werewolf; Sergeant at Arms for the Crimson Fangs; killed by Kage

Jordan Hicks—werewolf pack member

Tank Mitchell—beta werewolf killed by Axel during a challenge

Liz Cross—rogue; female werewolf; ran with Axel on neutral territory. Joins Axel’s pack

Jennifer Dennis—rogue; female werewolf; ran with Axel on neutral territory. Joins Axel’s pack

Moon Bay Pack

Noah Tucker—Alpha; werewolf

Jensen Smyth—mate to Noah; werewolf

Oscar James—a werewolf who was kidnapped by the hunters; mated to Tammy

Jeff Dewberry and Davon Horner—human pack members who were kidnapped by the hunters

Council of Wolves

Charles O’Connell

Benjamin Reeves

Deacon Bush

Evan Bryant

Patrick Gun

Random paranormal

Onyx—ability is telekinesis; owner of Malavasi's
Isadora Ocho—arachne; owner of Beau Monde
Nox Astor—mimic; dead
Lennox Astor—lynx shifter
Palladius Dargan—Kage's father; daemon; dead
Kallos Dargan—Kage's mother; daemon; dead
Anthea Kallergis—lynx shifter; Nox and Lennox's mother
Alcaeus Kallergis—Alpha of the Kallergis coalition; lynx
shifter
Michail Papadopoulos (Meadows)—lynx shifter; member of the
Kallergis coalition; Kit's other father
Wendy McCallahan—witch

Humans

Richard Berkshire—father to Austin
Karen Hathaway Berkshire—mother to Austin; dead due to car
accident
Kit Meadows—owner of The Book Spot
Doug Weaver—human driver for Austin's dad
Eric Gamzatti—Mayor of San DeLain
Grace Harper Meadows—Kit's mother
Chris Meadows—Kit's biological father

Hunters

Tom (real name was Jerry Hall)—killed by Kage
Albert Smith—killed by Hudson
Pete Reynolds—killed by Kage
Tammy Rice—female hunter; mated to Oscar
Don Porter—hunter, Kit's boyfriend

Places:

Moon Bay, California

Little coastal town; werewolf territory–Moon Bay pack. Alpha is Noah Tucker

Beach Hut B&B

The Pier–restaurant located in Moon Bay

New York City, New York

Chilled Bites Parlor–Ice cream shop in New York

Malavasi's–restaurant in New York Austin told Kage about

San DeLain, California

The Book Spot–local bookstore owned by Kit

Apex–nightclub; owned by Kage

Grand at the Dominion–high-rise owned by Kage. Many clan members live and work there

Embers–restaurant in Grand at the Dominion

Rafferty's–bar and grill

Beau Monde–restaurant owned by Isadora

Club Nomadic–well-known queer club owned by Raven

Jonathan's–human-owned restaurant

Black Rose Café–owned by Raven

The Echo–night club in San DeLain

Bell, Book, and Cauldron–owned by Wendy McCallahan

California

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

Montana

The Bitterroot Mountains

Sometimes the dragon gods make mistakes.

That's the best rationale Hudson can come up with. How else can he account for the fact that the one he's falling in love with is not his fated mate? Getting involved with someone he doesn't share a soul bond with could be devastating, but Hudson is willing to take the risk. Connie is his and nothing will stand in his way of having him.

Sometimes the dragon gods might be more clever than anyone gives them credit for.

A sassy human stumbles into Hudson and Connie's life, upsetting their very existence. How can Hudson and Connie have a soul bond to Kit... but not each other? Are the Fates drunk? Or testing them? Dragons are possessive creatures, and that's before adding in one of them is a thousand-year-old royal in charge of the dragons of San DeLain.

Sometimes it's better not to question the dragon gods.

But things aren't always as they appear. Danger stalks the streets of San DeLain in the form of an old enemy once thought dead. What's real? What isn't? As Kit struggles with a nightmare from his past, Hudson and Connie try to figure out how to keep their very breakable human in one-piece and happy. Fate is a tricky, tricky thing, and sometimes?

Well, sometimes Hudson has just gotta trust the dragon gods as the darkness edges closer.

PROLOGUE-HUDSON



AS USUAL, the San DeLain International Airport was controlled chaos. Hudson slid into his Mercedes and shut the door, closing out the noise.

“Welcome back, my king,” Wilson, Hudson’s driver, said as he pulled away from the corner.

Hudson settled into the comfortable leather seat. “Glad to be back, let me tell you.”

“Welcome home, my king,” Conrad said, resting his hand on Hudson’s knee.

Funny how when Conrad, his assistant and right-hand man, used his title, Hudson’s body reacted differently. Every. Damn. Time. He swore he could feel the heat of Connie’s hand on his skin through the pants he wore.

Why hadn’t he told Wilson to bring the limo? That way, he could’ve raised the privacy screen and debauched Connie on the way home.

No, no, no. They weren’t doing that anymore. Right? Right.

But then, why was it so hard to not touch the male next to him? His body thrummed with the need to, especially since he’d been gone. Connie must have felt the same because he was slowly walking his fingers up Hudson’s thigh.

He quickly clasped that questing hand before it could reach its destination. “Behave,” Hudson said quietly.

Connie’s grin flashed in the darkened interior. “Never.”

One simple touch, and Hudson was half hard. It boggled the mind that they were not Fated mates. In fact, it

concerned Hudson so much he'd backed off from Connie, although Connie was still fighting it.

He'd never run from anything in his life, yet here he was, running from a relationship with Connie. Why? Because he was afraid—afraid one of them might actually find their true mate. If that happened, any relationship between them would end.

Then where would Hudson be? Brokenhearted. That's where he'd be... because he could so easily fall in love with Connie. Hell, he was halfway there already.

He was a thousand years old, and never, not once, had Hudson felt the call of his true mate. He no longer looked, in fact. Just because Fate decided dragons had true mates didn't mean they necessarily *found* that one particular person. Apparently, Hudson had missed his during his long life.

Hudson released Connie's hand. It hurt to do so, but this was for the best.

Connie huffed in annoyance but didn't call Hudson on it. "Any more sightings of hunters outside of the attack at the hotel?"

"None."

Hudson and Kage had had business in New York. They'd been looking to buy real estate in the city. While there, hunters had found them and set off the fire alarms in the hotel he and Kage were staying at. They'd ambushed Kage in a stairwell.

Kage had handled it, of course. Hudson's best friend had a tendency to drop people who annoyed him off high-rise buildings.

"Good. Any other problems I should know about?" Connie asked.

"No. We signed off on the property Friday before we left New York."

"Excellent news."

“The endless paperwork on the purchase should be here tomorrow,” Hudson said. “We’ll look over it then.”

“I look forward to it,” Connie said.

Wilson merged into traffic as they left the airport, then took the exit ramp to the interstate.

Hudson’s compound was on the northwestern side of San DeLain and was a gated territory consisting of nearly three hundred forested acres with resort-type living.

There were two lakes, and one was near the main house where Hudson lived. His court was surrounded by natural wildlife and wooded acreage. Hudson was the king of the San DeLain Fire Court, a dragon, and one of the leaders of the paranormal community of this city.

“I take it Kage is okay too?”

“Yes. I imagine he’s with Austin by now.”

“There is definitely some benefit to traveling by a portal,” Connie said.

“Yes, well, I much prefer the normal standard of transportation—planes, trains, or automobiles.”

Connie snickered, and Hudson fondly rolled his eyes. Both Connie and Kage were well aware Hudson did not particularly care for portals.

Kage and his kind, daemons, were nicknamed shadow demons for a reason—they could use the shadows to create a portal and travel to any place in the world. Daemons could also manipulate the shadows to do their bidding, and wasn’t that just terrifying?

The leader, or Elder, of the Daemons of San DeLain was Hudson’s best friend and business partner, Kage Dargan, and he had recently found his mate, Austin.

Hudson would never admit it to a living soul, but he was a little bit—just the tiniest bit, mind you—jealous. Kage had his happily ever after. Hudson wasn’t sure he would get his. In fact, if he were a betting man, he’d say he wouldn’t.

Connie kept the conversation going as they left the city and headed toward Hudson's compound. Hudson could admit to himself that he had missed Connie's company.

"So anyway, I told Torres that he was just being ridiculous. It wasn't *my* fault he got killed while playing his video game. He should've been paying attention to—"

"Uh, I hate to interrupt, but we may have a situation," Wilson called from the driver's seat. "There's this asshole coming up behind us really fast. I don't like how he's not moving out of our lane. Shit. I think he's—Oh Gaura, he's going to—"

Hudson barely had time for the words to register before they were rear-ended. He and Connie were thrown forward, then slammed back, thanks to their seat belts. His neck screamed, and a metallic taste filled his mouth. He must have bitten his damn tongue.

"What the hell?" Connie yelled, scrabbling for purchase as the car fishtailed.

"Hold on!" Wilson bellowed, fighting the steering wheel. "Fucking hold on, he's coming again!"

Hudson's Mercedes was hit once more, metal grinding against metal.

"Those fuckers!" Wilson swore. "Son of a bitch! We're being attacked! They just used the pit maneuver!"

Hudson's vision suddenly sharpened, and he blinked, his vision readjusting. Everything stood out in stark contrast in the dark interior of the vehicle now.

"I'm losing it!" Wilson cried desperately.

The Mercedes spun completely around, and the smell of burning rubber hit Hudson like a ton of bricks. Brakes squealed as the light from the headlights, trees, and smoke from the tires sped past them in a crazy, twirling mass.

Then suddenly everything was upside down. His body lifted off the seat, the seat belt biting into his shoulder and

chest. His arms flailed around him. Then, a few seconds later, he was slammed back down as they flipped right side up.

But then they flipped again.

Someone was cussing. There was roaring. The car finally came to a stop, but they were hanging upside down in their seat belts. He desperately shoved his hair out of his face, and his gums tingled as his canines dropped.

Connie's anger soaked the vehicle, but there was also an underlying edge of fear to it. That pumped Hudson's adrenaline higher. Whoever had made Connie react in such a way was going to die a slow death by his hand.

Even though the windshield was a cobweb of cracks, Hudson saw the other vehicle, nothing more than a flash of black, as it pulled in front of them and stopped.

Hudson snarled at it.

"You okay, Hudson?" Connie fought to unbuckle his seat belt. "Fucking hell, we're upside down."

"Yes. You?" *Breathe*. Hudson needed to breathe for just a second. He'd slammed his head against the car window pretty good as they'd flipped.

"I'm good." Connie squinted at Hudson. "Oh no, you're bleeding!"

Even in the dim lighting, Hudson could see that Connie's eyes had changed to those of his dragon—the irises were a golden-red sunburst of color with black slitted pupils, like a cat... or lizard.

Wilson groaned from the driver's seat.

Connie finally managed to unbuckle his seat belt and dropped to the roof of the car. He crouched there.

Hudson was sure his eyes had transformed too. "I bit my tongue, that's all." Hudson unbuckled and fell into a crouch next to Connie. "Wilson? You okay?"

"I'm okay, Sire. I'm just having trouble getting the seat belt to unhook. I—"

Their headlights shined on a rather large truck, which had two shadowy figures moving around inside. Then the truck doors flew open.

“Incoming! Take no prisoners,” Hudson warned. He didn’t know who’d attacked them—and in his territory, no less—and he didn’t care. They would die because of it.

Hudson reached for the door handle as the driver’s door was violently yanked off. But that... that was simply impossible. No human had that kind of strength.

“Mohefu—” Wilson desperately slashed at his seat belt with his claws.

A human scent flooded the vehicle, but it was wrong. *Off*. Tainted in some way. And he knew. He knew immediately who’d attacked them.

“Hunters!” Hudson roared. How dare they? How fucking dare they attack him. And on his own land too.

A masked hunter yanked Wilson out, and the sound of a single gunshot froze Hudson. No. Oh no. No, no, no. Chills ran down Hudson’s back and horror flooded him.

The smell of blood saturated the air—a lot of blood. Too much blood. Reality slowed down as the scent of that mingled with the awful scent of a genetically altered human.

Distantly, he heard the thump of a body hitting the ground. Connie was yelling beside him, crowding into Hudson. Anger unlike any he’d ever known lit his blood. They killed one of his dragons. His skin tightened, and his horns began to grow from his forehead as his true nature tried to emerge.

A soft laugh echoed on the air currents as a masked man leaned into the driver’s seat, his gun pointed at them. Connie shoved Hudson hard just as the gun went off. Agony burned across the top of his shoulder.

“Die, you—arrrrgh!”

Hudson fell against the side of the car, his hand clamped against his shoulder. Next to him, a line of dragon fire

flowed from Connie's open mouth, engulfing the hunter who had just shot at them. The smell of cooking meat filled the interior as the burning hunter stumbled back from the car, screaming in agonizing pain.

Good. He hoped that damn hunter didn't die too quickly from suffocation.

"Hudson!" Connie spun, still crouched. He reached for Hudson, fear stark on his face. "Fuck, you're bleeding! Are you hit? Oh fuck, you're hit!"

The rumble of an engine turning over caught Hudson's attention. "The other hunter is escaping. Connie, please, I need you to take care of that."

"But you're hit!"

"Connie! Deal with the hunter while I check on Wilson! Please!"

"Oh Gaura, oh great dragon gods, Wilson. Yes, yes, I'll take care of the hunter. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Go. *Now.*"

Connie gently wiped the blood off Hudson's chin, then scrambled out of their upside-down vehicle just as the truck reversed, tires spinning as the driver slammed it into Drive and took off.

Hudson slowly crawled out just in time to see Connie transform into a dragon and then launch himself into the air after the hunter's truck. He trusted Connie to do what needed to be done.

Still holding his shoulder, Hudson knelt beside Wilson's body. The hole in his forehead told Hudson everything he needed to know. Not even dragons could survive a bullet to the brain.

Grief washed over Hudson as he slowly closed Wilson's eyes. He sincerely hoped Connie took his time and made the last moments of that hunter's life torturous.

SEVERAL HOURS later, Hudson and Connie were in his office. The scene had been cleared, and Hudson's Mercedes and the hunter's truck had been towed.

Thank the dragon gods they'd been on Hudson's land and not on the interstate when the attack had happened. This way, the human police were kept entirely out of Hudson's business.

Arrangements had been made for Wilson's funeral, the court had been notified of a fellow member's death, and Hudson's shoulder had been treated. Fortunately, the bullet had only grazed him. He'd shift later to finish healing it.

Hudson didn't quite know what to make of his assistant and right-hand man. Connie was pacing Hudson's office, little curls of smoke drifting up from his nostrils. His eyes were still those of his dragon, and his claws were still extended.

In all the time that he'd known Connie, he'd never seen his unflappable assistant so... flapped. Hudson could hear Connie's heart racing.

While Connie paced, Hudson made a quick phone call to Kage to inform him of what happened.

"I'm fine. Seriously, Kage. I'm fine," Hudson said, eyeing Connie.

"Fine?" Connie bellowed. Spinning around, he stormed back to Hudson's desk and slammed his hands down on it. Leaning over it, he stared at Hudson, smoke curling from his nose with every huffing breath he took. "Dammit to hell and back, you could have died! Do you understand that? *You. Could. Have. Died!*"

"Connie—"

Connie roared.

Okay then. "Look, I'm going to have to go. I'm fine, Conrad!" Hudson yelled in Kage's ear. "No, seriously, the bullet barely grazed me. You act like it's the first time I've ever been shot. Okay, why are you partially shifting? Good gods, my assistant seems to be having a mental breakdown. Talk to you later. Bye."

As soon as Hudson hung up, Connie was around the desk. He prepared himself for shouting and angry words from Connie. He was certainly worked up enough for it.

Instead, Connie crawled into Hudson's lap. Stunned, Hudson let him.

Collapsing against Hudson's chest, Connie started crying hysterically. "I could have lost you. I could have lost you. I could have lost you," Connie repeated over and over.

Holy shit, whatever he'd been expecting, it hadn't been this.

"I can't. I can't *do* that, Hudson. Don't you understand? I can't lose you. You're everything. My everything. I need you, Hudson. I *need* you. Without you, there is no me."

Hudson knew then that whatever resistance he'd had against a relationship with Connie because they were not soul bound had just gone up in flames.

CHAPTER ONE-HUDSON



“IT’S OVER.”

Hudson sank into his desk chair, holding his cell phone to his ear. “What? What do you mean? What’s over? Kage? What’s going on?”

“Nox is dead.” Kage sighed heavily. “And he left a mess for me to clean up. Fucker attacked my mate and exposed us to a human before he drew his last breath.”

Hudson blinked several times in shock. “Are you okay? Is Austin? Do you need me? That bastard.” Hudson’s quiet workday had suddenly been turned on its ear.

“Yes, well, funny you should use that particular word. Nox really was a bastard, meaning that he was born outside of wedlock. Want to guess who his father was? I’ll give you a hint—it was mine.”

“Holy fuck, Kage.” Stunned didn’t even start to describe what Hudson was. “Are you telling me that Nox is—shit, I mean was—your half-brother? What the hell? And how the hell do you know this? Are you sure you can trust your source?”

Kage’s laugh bordered on bitterness. “Oh yes, I’m absolutely sure. Do you have time to talk? I kind of need to unload. Be warned, it’s a long story.”

“I have all the time in the world.” Even if he didn’t, he’d make the time. “Tell me.”

“I guess the best starting point would be to update you on what’s going on with Axel, because that indirectly plays into what happened. Have you ever heard of the Council of Wolves?”

“I have, yes. They’re a bunch of puffed-up assholes who think their shit doesn’t stink.”

“By the dead gods, you got that right.” Kage took a deep breath, then began.

The more Kage talked, the more Hudson’s mouth dropped open. He didn’t interrupt because he could hear how hard this was for Kage—his voice shook. That bothered Hudson tremendously. Kage wasn’t one to show his emotions freely.

The sheer audacity of Nox was breathtaking in its arrogance. And as much as Hudson hated to admit it, pretty smart too. Involving the human, Kit, that Austin was friendly with, was brilliant. Horrifyingly so. He felt sorry for Kit. What a way to get introduced to their world.

Nox was Kage’s half-brother. Hudson couldn’t wrap his mind around it. No wonder Kage’s emotions were all over the place. He’d gone his entire life without knowing this, and then to find out in such a way? Yeah. Hudson could hear the anger, but also the sadness, in Kage’s voice.

“I’m so sorry,” Hudson finally said when Kage wound down. “Austin really is okay?”

“Yes. He’s being observed for forty-eight hours. Terry is looking after him.”

For several minutes, neither Kage nor Hudson said anything. Finally, Hudson broke the silence, “I hate to say it, but at least it wasn’t you who ended Nox’s life.”

“I know.”

“How is Axel handling that?”

“Honestly? I think he’s having a lot of the same emotions I’m having—just minus the sadness, of course. Lots of anger, for sure. Austin and I are keeping an eye on him.”

“That’s good. I’m not going to lie, that situation is a little weird, but I’m glad you and he have worked things out. It sounds like he needs a friend. Also? I hear you’re connected to a wolf pack too.” Hudson snickered.

“Well, that didn’t take long. But yes.”

“Werewolves are just a bunch of old gossips. Anyhow, I never thought I’d be saying that. Not in a million years.”

“That I’m connected to a werewolf pack? Me either. Life’s a damn trip, is it not?”

“It is indeed, my friend. So, is Austin up to having visitors?”

“Of course.”

“Conrad and I will stop by, then. Is any time good?”

“Yes, just call. I’m still feeling rather protective.”

“I bet.” Hudson wasn’t soul bound to anyone, which was the equivalent of a mate for dragons, but he could imagine how he would feel if he were in his friend’s shoes. “Hey, Kage?”

“Yes?”

“I’m here for you. If you need anything, *anything*, let me know.”

“Thank you. I most definitely will. There’s a possibility I might ask to borrow your jet to make a quick trip to Greece, but I’m not sure yet.”

“Anything you need.” Hudson didn’t ask why Kage was going to Greece because, frankly, it wasn’t any of his business. If Kage wanted him to know, he’d tell him, eventually. But Hudson had a sneaking suspicion—he knew where Kage was born.

After the call ended, Hudson leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. His friend was hurting, and he hated that. It made him want to burn something to the ground.

They’d met when Hudson had fished Kage out of the River Thames during the late eighteen hundreds. Ah, the Victorian era. What fun that had been. How Kage had stunk too.

It still made him smile thinking about it. Kage had turned the air blue with his foul language. He was one of the

few non-dragons Hudson trusted.

They had several joint ventures that paid nicely, and they shared similar tastes in both stocks and bonds... and at one time, in men and women. But those days were past, for both of them.

Strong hands began to massage his tight shoulders. Turning his head slightly, he nipped at the fingers working a particularly brutal knot.

“I certainly didn’t see that coming.”

Hudson wasn’t surprised Connie heard what Kage said. He was a dragon, after all.

“He’s hurting. You can hear it in his voice. And stop biting at me before you start something right here in your office, *again*, you damn horny dragon.”

Hudson spun his desk chair around and yanked the biggest pain in his ass into his lap. “If I remember correctly, Connie, it was *you* who started it last time.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Connie sniffed as he straddled Hudson’s lap.

“Uh-huh.”

The first time they’d made love had indeed happened in Hudson’s office. Oh, they’d fucked plenty before that, but that time had been different.

It had been rough and motivated by fear from the hunters’ attack. Conrad had freaked out over Hudson being shot—so much so, he’d partially shifted out of fear.

Only it hadn’t been just fear. That was the day they’d stopped running from what they’d felt and ended up making rough love on top of Hudson’s desk. Well, Hudson had stopped running. Conrad had still been fighting for something between them.

Seeing Conrad come undone by fear had nearly broken Hudson. The problem was, as much as he adored Conrad, or Connie as he called him more often than not, they were not soul bound.

A soul bond was much like the werewolves with their Fated mates. And Conrad was not his soul bound mate. He was not Conrad's, either. They were *not* Fated. The knowledge had been devastating.

But after the attempt on his life, they'd decided it wasn't going to stop them from being together. Problem was, somewhere out there *was* a person who was his bounded mate. Same for Connie.

He had no idea what they'd do if either of them found that elusive being. They were both desperately ignoring that possibility for now. Hudson had cursed their god long and hard over that one.

"Now that we've established you don't know what you're talking about, when should we go see Austin?" Connie ran his thumb over Hudson's bottom lip.

"After." Hudson nipped Connie's thumb.

Connie raised an eyebrow. "After?"

"Yes, after."

Standing, Hudson carried Connie to the couch in his office and dropped him on it. For a moment, he simply stood there, staring down at the sexy man sprawled before him with a smirk on his lips. How had Hudson gotten so lucky? Connie was everything he wanted.

Connie trailed his hand down his crisp white dress shirt until it came to rest on the bulge in his dress pants.

Hudson wanted a taste.

"See something you like, my king?" Connie taunted.

It always drove him wild when Connie used his title in that tone. Made him want to pound his chest and roar his ownership of this dragon to the skies.

He also wanted to worship Connie like he deserved—cover him in jewels. Gold. Fine silks. Take Connie to his hoard and lock him inside.

Connie would probably delete his appointment calendar for that, though. The horror. Seriously.

His lover might only be six hundred years old, but he was no helpless maiden to coddle. Connie was also the only dragon Hudson would ever bend a knee to. He'd burn the world for this male—he didn't need anyone else.

Screw Fate.

His mouth watering, he started to drop to his knees in front of Connie when the hair on his neck stood up. Every instinct he had suddenly screamed to life, and his heart pounded in his chest. Goose bumps rose on his arms, and a shudder racked him. His entire body vibrated.

“What?”

The lazy, sexy look on Connie's face disappeared and suddenly he was the very efficient and deadly right hand of Hudson Redmond, king of the Fire Court of San DeLain.

Connie was off the couch and standing in front of Hudson in the blink of an eye. “What just happened? You tensed up like you're on high alert. What's wrong?”

“I'm not entirely sure.” Uneasy, Hudson stared at Connie. “I was thinking sexy thoughts about you and then suddenly every instinct I had flared to life.”

“Okay.” Connie hurried around Hudson's desk. Sitting in the huge leather chair, Connie tapped furiously on the computer.

Hudson wandered over and stood behind Connie. “What are you doing?”

“Calling up the cameras to see if our perimeter has been breached.” As he scanned the cameras, Connie pulled his cell phone out and unlocked it. “I'm also calling Torres. As our head of security, he should damn well know if we've been breached.”

Just like werewolves, dragons were deeply connected to the land they claimed. While Connie was smart in thinking

Hudson's reaction was based on their territory being invaded, Hudson didn't think that was what had happened.

He *had* been thinking sexy thoughts about Connie, but that hadn't been all he was doing. Not by a long shot. He'd been thinking things he shouldn't have.

Hudson stayed silent as Connie talked to Torres. He doubted there had been a breach in their security, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

He wandered away from where Connie sat at his desk to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows in his office and stared outside. The openness of lovely blue skies greeted him, but they didn't soothe his soul as usual.

What an interesting mess his life had become lately.

He was falling in love with Connie but hadn't told him yet. The fact that they were *not* soul bound hung over their heads like the sword of Damocles.

Hudson hated this, hated it with every fiber of his being. They *should* be soul bound. No two dragons could be more perfect together. How could their dragon god, Gaura, *not* see this?

Connie disconnected the call and leaned back in Hudson's chair. "The perimeter is secure."

"Silent alarms would've been going off if we'd been breached. You know that, sweetheart."

"Yes, well, an attack was the only thing I could think of that would've caused such a reaction in you." Standing, Connie walked over to the window where Hudson stood.

Hudson huffed. Connie didn't have any idea how wrong he was.

Connie tugged on Hudson's arm until Hudson faced him. "You seem calmer now. Any idea what triggered you?"

How in the world was he supposed to reply to that? Instead, he slipped his hand behind Connie's head. Grasping Connie by the hair, he pulled him closer.

He wasn't surprised to see Connie's pupils elongate into slits. Connie's dragon always seemed closer to the surface whenever Hudson touched him.

His lips whispered across Connie's, the kiss slow and sensual. Hudson's eyes fluttered closed when Connie slipped his arms around his waist and relaxed into Hudson. This. This right here. This was where Connie belonged.

He trailed kisses across Connie's face, then tightened his fingers and yanked Connie's head back. A sibilant hiss escaped Connie's lips, and Hudson shivered in response, loving the sound of Connie's pleasure.

Hudson worked his way down his lover's pale throat, nipping at the skin. The slight hint of salt lingered on his tongue as he licked Connie's pulse point.

Closing his lips over it, he sucked gently. Whatever marks he left would not last long, unfortunately. But for however short a time they were there, Hudson would take joy in the signs of ownership.

Yes, dragons were possessive creatures. Sue him.

Connie's hands tightened on Hudson's hips, his fingers flexing. Sharp pricks of pain made Hudson smile against the firm skin he was sucking. Connie might have just ruined another pair of Hudson's pants with his sharp claws, but he was fine with that. He loved the loss of control he caused in Connie.

Releasing the tender skin, he licked it for good measure. Was there anything sexier than a strong dragon baring his throat? Fuck if he knew.

He withdrew his hand from Connie's hair and lifted him up. Connie wrapped his legs around Hudson's waist and peppered Hudson's face with little biting kisses.

Striding across his office, he dropped Connie on the boardroom table. He wanted to be buried balls deep in Connie as fast as possible, so he rushed back to his desk to grab the lube. He was a horny dragon, after all.

“Hurry up,” Connie called from where he was sprawled on the table. “Or I’ll start without you.”

He could fucking *hear* the teasing note in Connie’s voice. The damn sassy dragon probably would too. He dropped the lube next to Connie, shoved him back onto the table, and pulled down the zipper of Connie’s dress pants. “Gonna make you scream.”

Was that a slight growl in his voice? Why yes, yes it was.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well now....” Connie arched his back so he could shove his pants and underwear over his hips. “Better get on with it, then.”

Hudson’s fangs dropped at the teasing challenge, and he bared them at Connie. All he got was a raised eyebrow. Connie truly wasn’t scared of the big, bad dragon king.

He worked off Connie’s shoes, tossing first one and then the other over his shoulder. They each landed with a thump somewhere behind him. Finding them would be a problem for later. The underwear and pants followed.

Once he had Connie stripped from the waist down, he moved in between his thighs. But before he could even touch him, Connie’s slender foot landed on Hudson’s shoulder, stopping him.

Without hesitating, he turned his head and pressed a kiss on Connie’s ankle. Connie laughed softly as he put on a show of unbuttoning his shirt for Hudson.

The sides fell open, finally exposing all of Connie to Hudson’s heated gaze. He licked his lips as he admired all that lovely pale skin just begging for his mark. Hudson held Connie’s ankle, kissing down his leg.

The muscles bunched and jumped under his lips. He neared the tender skin behind Connie’s knee and licked it. It

was warmer and softer and smelled more strongly of Connie's musky scent.

“Damn, but you look good doing that.”

Hudson nipped the inside of Connie's thigh.

Grinning, Connie spit in his hand and wrapped it around his cock, stroking slowly. “Bet you'd look good licking this too.”

“Are you demanding something from your king?” Hudson asked against Connie's thigh.

“Maaaaaybe.” Connie spread his legs a bit.

Hudson growled, and Connie shivered happily. He lowered Connie's leg. Feeling constricted, Hudson unbuttoned his own shirt, shrugged it off, then went to work on his zipper since his cock was being strangled by his tight pants.

Having Connie nearly naked while he was mostly dressed flipped a switch in Hudson. Yeah, this was going to be fast and dirty. He bent over Connie, knocking his hand away.

Elongating his tongue, he wrapped it around Connie's shaft.

CHAPTER TWO-CONNIE



“BY GAURA’S scales!” Connie’s toes curled. Fuck, he loved it when Hudson partially shifted body parts, especially his tongue.

Especially his fucking tongue.

Hudson lifted his head. “Already praying to our fire dragon god?”

“What can I say? That tongue of yours is worthy of prayer.” Prayers, odes, and whatever else there was.

Hudson gazed at Connie fondly. “You’re so weird.”

“You like my weird.” Connie wagged his eyebrows.

“That I do.” Hudson winked at Connie, then lowered his head.

With that serpentine tongue wrapped back around his dick, Connie forgot what day it was, the time, and even his name. Yes, Hudson was that talented. He could move that muscle in ways it probably wasn’t meant to move.

Thank the dragon gods.

Connie arched on the table at a particularly inventive flick. The heat. The wetness. The fucking acrobatics. It was all driving him closer and closer to the edge.

Pleasure washed over him in waves, threatening to drown him. No one—human, dragon, or otherwise—had *ever* made him feel this way. He had fucked his fair share of men and women, paranormal and human. Who hadn’t?

He was a dragon, after all, with an incredibly long lifespan and a libido that didn’t quit. Maybe part of that was

because he was just six hundred years old. He was still considered a young dragon.

Maybe the affect Hudson had on him was because of Hudson's experience. Maybe it was because Hudson was the king of the San DeLain Fire Court.

Or maybe it was just Hudson himself. What Connie felt for the older dragon was indescribable. He'd never been in love before, but this? This felt like it was heading that way.

How the hell could they not be soul bound? It made absolutely no sense.

"Hudson, Hudson, please." Connie clawed at Hudson's back. He wanted to come desperately. He liked his cock sucked as much as the next dragon, but what he truly needed was Hudson inside him.

Chuckling softly, Hudson released Connie's dick. Cold lube was pressed into him and spread around. As much as he loved feeling Hudson's long, slender fingers inside him, he wanted cock, dammit.

Connie huffed and a puff of smoke drifted upward.

"Going to set me on fire?" Hudson teased as he watched the smoke ring drift toward the ceiling.

"Don't think I won't." Connie couldn't, actually. Both of them were red dragons, meaning they had control over all types of fire, including breathing it. Simply put, they didn't burn.

Hudson pressed against Connie's prostate, and his body nearly locked up. It took everything he had to fight off an orgasm because, by damn, this was not how he wanted to come.

"Hudson, *please*." Connie wasn't too proud to beg.

Hudson removed his fingers and slowly slid his cock inside. "Easy, sweetheart. I don't want to hurt you."

As fierce of a dragon as Hudson was, he was always careful with Connie until he knew Connie was ready for him not to be. And Connie loved that about Hudson, because as an

Ancient, Hudson was incredibly powerful. He was certainly capable of doing a lot of damage if he so desired.

That didn't mean Connie didn't like pushing. "Fuck me, Hudson. Fuck that ass hard, lover. Give it to me."

Hudson grabbed both of Connie's legs and held them straight up as he began to thrust powerfully. He drilled Connie's hot spot every time.

The cords in Hudson's neck stood out as he stared down at where they were joined. "Yes, fuck yes. Look at your hole sucking me in. So tight and wet."

Connie grabbed the edge of the table so he wouldn't be fucked across it. Hudson was slamming in and out of him so hard now, and he could feel every inch of Hudson filling him up.

His heart slammed against his ribs, and he could hear it beating wildly in his head. Hudson used him roughly, and he loved every minute of it. Pleasure spread through him. He wanted a lifetime of this and would do whatever he needed to in order to have it.

His body tightened as his orgasm crept closer. "Soon. Going to come soon. Come with me, lover."

Hudson bent over Connie, the speed of his thrusts picking up. Connie wrapped his legs around Hudson and locked his ankles. All that long, deep-red hair of Hudson's fell around them.

He stared into Hudson's eyes, seeing Hudson's true self shining through, staring back at Connie. The ancient power in that gaze scared Connie as much as it turned him on.

Letting go of the table, he wrapped his arms around Hudson's neck so they were pressed from hip to chest. His cock rubbed against Hudson's stomach, pushing Connie closer to coming.

Pulling Hudson's head down, Connie kissed Hudson with every shred of desire inside of him. His balls tightened, and he groaned into Hudson's mouth as his body lit up, his orgasm rampaging through his body.

A low, rumbling growl escaped Hudson, then suddenly, liquid heat filled Connie as Hudson came.

For a few moments the world retreated, and it was only him and Hudson plastered together on top of the table. Nothing else mattered. Then it ended and Hudson collapsed against him, breathing harshly into his neck.

Satisfaction flowed through Connie, and he gently drew random patterns against Hudson's naked back. What could he say? He liked touching Hudson.

"The things you do to me," Hudson whispered against his sweaty skin.

"Our fire burns hotly," Connie whispered back.

"Yes, yes it does." After a few more minutes, Hudson pressed another kiss to Connie's throat, then slowly pulled out.

Hudson stumbled slightly as he tried to move out from between Connie's legs and ended up slapping his hand down against the table to steady himself.

Connie braced himself on his elbows and giggled. "Weak in the knees, are you?"

Hudson tried to flip his hair out of his face. Mock glaring at Connie, he held out his hand to help Connie off the table, all the while muttering about the things Connie did to him.

Grinning widely, he took Hudson's hand and hopped down. Picking up what clothing he could find, he followed Hudson into the private bathroom that was connected to the office.

Turning on the shower, he watched Hudson wet a washcloth and clean himself up. Seeing Hudson put himself back together always gave Connie a little spurt of pleasure, especially knowing he was the one who'd messed Hudson up.

Stepping into the shower alone, he grabbed Hudson's favorite bodywash and set about cleaning the come off his stomach. He heard Hudson moving around the bathroom, then the door opened and shut.

After he finished cleaning up, he dried off and dressed in what articles of clothing he'd been able to find on his way to the bathroom. All he needed now were his shoes, socks, and his dress shirt.

He exited the bathroom and returned to Hudson's office. Hudson met him halfway and handed over the rest of his clothing, all except his tie. Once he was fully dressed, he stood quietly as Hudson tied his tie.

"Ready to get back to work?" Hudson growled softly, pressing a soft kiss to Connie's lips.

"Yes, my king." Connie smirked as he stepped around Hudson. That growl never got old.

TWO DAYS after the attack on Austin, Kage notified all the leaders of San DeLain of Nox's death. He also told them what Nox had done to Austin.

Connie and Hudson visited Kage and Austin, of course. Kage's protectiveness was in overdrive like he'd warned, and the tension around his mouth and eyes was hard to miss.

Connie felt for him. It was obvious Kage was struggling, even though he tried to hide it. Having his mate hurt was bad enough, but Connie couldn't imagine growing up thinking he was an only child only to find out he had a sibling who was damned and determined to destroy him. *And* had targeted Kage's mate to maximize the damage.

They didn't stay long since they didn't want to impede Austin's recovery. The sun was setting as they drove away from the Dominion.

"Are you hungry?" Hudson asked.

"I could eat." Connie was a dragon. There was never a time when he *didn't* want to eat. "What do you have in mind?"

Hudson stopped at a red light and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "Hmmm. Club Nomadic is open."

“Feeling energetic, are we?” Connie gently poked Hudson in the ribs. “Sure you’re up to it, old man?”

The light turned green, and Hudson accelerated. “I’ll dance your ass into the ground, then later through the mattress.”

“Ooooooh, a challenge. I like it. Yes, let’s go play with the vampires—see what they have going on tonight.”

Club Nomadic was a well-known queer club that was very popular with the hip, trendy set. The building was located downtown, right in the middle of San DeLain’s nightlife, and was owned by a vampire, Raven St. Clair, who was the Master of the City.

Hudson availed himself of the valet parking and followed Connie to the entrance. There was a line snaking around the building, but fortunately someone must have given the bouncer a heads-up because he and Hudson were immediately escorted inside.

Hudson laughed softly at the song playing—*Bite Me* by Enhypen, a South Korean boy band. “These vampires, I swear.”

“I’m shocked you know the song.”

“I don’t, but there’s no mistaking the lyrics.”

Connie had to laugh. “I forgot you know Korean, along with several other languages.”

“Even if I didn’t, parts of the song are in English. So why don’t you come over here and bite me?”

“I’ll take you up on that later,” Connie said, winking.

The outside of the place looked like any other modern building, but inside was another story. Club Nomadic was an intriguing conglomeration of Goth Victorian and steampunk, with vampire-like elements thrown in for good measure.

There were exposed brick, concrete floors tinted black, open stairwells heading up to the second and third floors, awnings throughout, and private nooks enclosed with long, velvety drapery.

Heavy, ornate black leather furniture was scattered throughout for people to sit and visit. Tables had low lighting to eat by. Black, ornate chandeliers hung throughout the building. Décor pieces were made from vintage leather, driftwood, old lanterns, and wrought iron.

A rolling fog crept along pathways and onto the dance floor. The massive bar filled the entire back wall and had a huge mirror behind it. The vibe was creepy, but sexy.

Dress ran the gamut from Goth Victorian, to steampunk, to regular clothes, which he and Hudson wore. But clothing wasn't what made Club Nomadic interesting—it was the vampire element.

Everywhere Connie looked, there were humans wearing fake vampire teeth and red contacts. Some wore makeup to make themselves even paler than what they naturally were.

Well, the humans had it partially right. Vampires did have fangs and pupils that turned red, but their forehead and brow area thickened when they took their true form.

There was a television show from the late 90s that accurately depicted vampires. Raven had not been happy, but the show had been so popular there wasn't much he could do about it.

That was not the only television series that correctly portrayed certain paranormals. The gargoyles also got in trouble with a TV show, but it was a cartoon that time.

But what was *really* surprising were the vampires who showed their true nature in the club. Of course, the humans thought the vamps were wearing prosthetics and makeup—it kinda went with the whole vibe of the club. What they didn't know was that there was no makeup, and that vampires were real. They didn't know they were among predators.

That was half the fun.

A vampire in his true form nodded to them, then handed them a black wristband, which meant they were paranormal. No wristband meant the person was human.

“Have a good evening, King Hudson and Sir Conrad.” The vampire bent his head slightly out of respect to Hudson.

“Thank you,” Hudson said.

“Thanks, man.” Connie grinned at the vampire as Hudson dragged him inside the club. The vampire smirked back at him, flashing his fangs.

They ate, then hit the dance floor. Lights flashed, and the music beat in his chest. People danced in groups, and hands trailed over his body—a teasing touch here, a quick grab there. A growl from Hudson and they disappeared.

Hudson ended up behind him with one of his hands resting against Connie’s stomach. He let the music fill him and take over. Moving his hips, Connie began to rock to the beat.

Hudson moved with him, grinding against his ass. Connie leaned his head against Hudson’s shoulder and wound his arm around Hudson’s neck as they rubbed against each other. A vampire ended up in front of Connie—moving with them but not touching.

Smart vampire. Dragons were possessive to begin with and touching was off the table unless Hudson granted permission—which Connie didn’t see happening. But that didn’t mean the other male couldn’t dance with them, as long as he behaved.

A few humans joined their little circle. Maybe they picked up the vibes Hudson was giving off because they also did not touch either of them. That suited Connie. The only hands he wanted on him belonged to Hudson.

Several songs played before Connie turned and grabbed Hudson by the hand, leading him off the floor. He headed straight for the bar. Thanks to being paranormal, regular human alcohol didn’t affect them, but he did like the taste of certain things.

“Beer?” Connie asked when they reached the bar.

Hudson nodded as he lifted his hair up and fanned his neck, trying to cool off. “Yes. That sounds good.”

The bartender, a vampire in his true form, drifted over to them and nodded discreetly to Hudson. “What can I get you?”

Connie gave their orders, then turned back to Hudson. Even though Hudson was dressed in jeans, black boots, and a black silk T-shirt, in Connie’s eyes, he was sexier than any other person there.

Hudson’s hair was down, with a simple braid by his face. His temples were slightly damp, and his cheeks were flushed from dancing. And even though he was leaning against the bar, grinning at Connie, there was an air of danger, of immense power, around him.

The male was sex on two legs, and he was all Connie’s.

The bartender brought their drinks, and Connie paid him. Hudson grabbed Connie by the hand and led him to one of the seating areas. He pulled a chair out for Connie, then sat down across from him. Almost immediately, he felt a cooling breeze flow over him.

“Whew. Much cooler here.”

“Yeah.” Hudson pulled a hair tie off his wrist and twisted his hair on top of his head. “Much better.”

Connie indulged himself by staring at his lover. Hair up or down, it didn’t matter. Hudson was still striking.

Connie sipped his drink as they chatted. The conversation mostly revolved around subjects that were safe to be overheard since there were definitely paranormals, and humans for that matter, in the building.

As they talked, the hair on the back of Connie’s neck stood up and a feeling of menace wrapped around him. Calmly, he swallowed the sip he had just taken and nonchalantly scanned the area as he answered a question Hudson had asked.

Dragon gods, there were so many people here. Way too many for him to figure out if there was someone staring at him —them?—with such loathing. But there was, he’d bet his scales on it.

“Connie?” Hudson demanded softly.

He shouldn't be surprised that Hudson noticed his attention had wandered. “Someone seems particularly interested in either me or us. And *not* in a sexy way,” Connie whispered back. “Do you feel it?”

CHAPTER THREE-HUDSON



HUDSON LEANED back in the chair and sipped his drink as he casually looked around. He hadn't noticed what Connie said he felt, dammit, but he also hadn't really been paying attention.

And shame on him for that. He knew better. Just because Nox was dead, that didn't necessarily negate the threat of hunters.

There were so many people around them, even though they were off the dance floor. Then there were the folks upstairs who could stare down into the bottom level. It would be impossible to pin down whoever was giving them the hairy eyeball.

Nevertheless, Hudson discreetly drew air into his lungs and tried to shift through the various scents he inhaled. Unsurprisingly, everything was muddled thanks to the humans' sweat, cologne, hair products, and so on.

It didn't help that they were sitting under an air vent that was running on high. Then add in the identifying scents from the various paranormal there, and it was definitely messing with the scents.

As luck would have it, though, the air-conditioning kicked off for a moment. What perfect timing. Hudson made himself wait before inhaling again so the scents could settle.

Oh yes. That was much better.

The vampires were easily identified thanks to their slight metallic scent. And it was a vampire-owned club, after all, so there were a lot of them there.

Salt and brine rode the air currents. Glancing about, he spotted a few merpeople. Their androgynous features marked

their species. Like the vampires, they needed blood, but unlike the vampires, it didn't have to be human.

A couple of magic users were there too. They tended to smell of ozone even when not using their powers. They blended in with the human crowd the easiest.

A lone gargoyle sat at a table, his earthy scent tangy and fresh but also sharp. Seeing him was a surprise. They didn't often leave their territories.

Then it hit him like a brick to the face—an oddness to a human scent that made his nose wrinkle because it was just *wrong*.

“Hudson?” Connie murmured. “Do you—”

“Why, yes, I was just thinking about getting another drink,” Hudson replied, cutting Connie off.

If this was one of the genetically altered hunters, then they could hear nearly as well as any paranormal. Last thing he wanted to do was alert whoever was watching them that they were aware of it.

“I'll take care of it, Conrad. You stay here and hold our table, please.” Hudson knew Connie would catch on pretty quickly. For one thing, Hudson usually used Conrad's nickname of Connie. Unless, of course, he wanted Connie's immediate attention.

“Yes. Yes, okay, I could go for another drink. Sure. I'll stay here.” Connie lounged in his chair, looking completely unperturbed. He even smirked. “It's your turn, anyway.”

“That it is. I'll be back.” Hudson left the table and hurried to the bar. From where he was standing, he had a pretty good line of sight to Connie, as long as no one got between them.

The vampire bartender drifted down to Hudson, a slight smile on his face. “Hey. Do you want the same?”

Hudson acted as if he was having problems hearing the bartender. Which, if he'd been human, was a distinct possibility with the way the music was thumping.

Hudson leaned across the bar like he was trying to give the bartender his order. The bartender blinked in confusion, then met Hudson halfway.

“Hunters are on the property,” Hudson breathed, speaking so quietly it was almost subvocal.

Whatever paranormal powers hunters picked up through DNA mutation wasn’t quite as strong as a true paranormal’s. He hoped his warning was quiet enough the hunter couldn’t pick it up.

The vampire’s eyes widened, but that was the only indication of nerves. “Certainly. I’ll get right on that. Oh, wait. We’re out in the coolers up here. Sorry about that. Be right back.”

The vampire disappeared into the back, and a few minutes later, he returned with his and Connie’s beer. As Hudson left the bar, he noticed the bartenders, who were all vampires, leaning closer to paranormals to take the drink orders.

Hudson made his way through the crowd to his table. As he walked, he noticed several paranormals making eye contact. Word was getting around quickly.

Now if only he could figure out *where* the hunter was that he smelled. All the leaders of San DeLain had briefed their people on how to spot hunters. The oddness to their human scent was the main giveaway.

He’d barely sat down when he saw Raven, the Master of the City and owner of this club, moving through the crowds.

“Here you go,” Hudson said, handing Connie his beer. “Sorry it took so long. The bartender had to go into the back since they were out in the coolers up front.”

“I understand.”

Hudson watched as Raven moved through the crowd, stopping to briefly speak to people as if he was nothing more than an owner saying hi to his patrons.

Of course, the only people he was stopping to speak with were other paranormals.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hudson saw a blur of movement... then nothing. It was like nothing had occurred. Even he, as a dragon, barely noticed it. It was one reason why vampires were apex predators. They moved at speeds humans had no hope of following.

“Get ready,” Hudson whispered to Connie.

“Of course.”

The flashing lights also provided cover for the vampire as she suddenly disappeared into a hallway with a very startled human. Hudson would bet one of the fist-sized rubies he owned that was the hunter he'd scented.

Problem was, was that the only one?

Before he had a chance to finish that thought, the lights in the club went out. Humans were the only ones who'd have trouble seeing in the darkness, and sure enough, seconds later, they began to scream.

Of course they did, when nearly everyone and their brother owned a gun in this country and a certain element liked to shoot up gay clubs.

Then the fire alarm went off.

“For fuck's sake,” Connie growled, surging to his feet.

Oddly enough, Hudson didn't smell smoke. He did notice the humans around him panicking, though.

“It's a distraction,” Hudson said softly over the screaming to Connie. “No smoke.”

“Why?” Confused, Connie glanced at the terrified crowd.

That was the question. If the hunters—and apparently there were more than one—were trying to escape, the threat of fire would certainly be a good cover for them to get out of there. But even if they were trying to save their buddy, again, a fire was still a perfect distraction.

A man shoved a woman into Hudson as he rushed by. Hudson helped steady her even as he cursed the human male. This was going to get ugly quickly.

The humans were on the verge of stampeding the exits because they didn't know there wasn't really a fire. And in the dark, everything was confusing. The red lights of the fire alarm and the screaming didn't help matters either.

"We need to help the other paranormals evacuate the club." Hudson motioned to one of the exit signs. "Come on."

Connie stuck close to Hudson as they made their way to the nearest exit. Sure enough, the door had been thrown open and paranormals were trying to direct humans through.

More likely the same was being done at the other exits. He hoped. There was crying and shouts as people fought to get outside. He noticed a vampire trying to use his talent of persuasion to calm the humans, but there was too much stark terror for it to work.

Fucking hunters. The acidic scent of fear canceled out everything else. Even if a hunter passed Hudson on his way through the exit, there was a good chance Hudson wouldn't know.

Off in the distance he heard sirens. Well, it appeared the police were responding in a timely manner. Hopefully, they could calm the crowd and not incite them.

Connie had moved outside and was trying to calm a group of young women who were crying hysterically. One of them had apparently been pushed down in the rush to get outside.

Her lip was busted and bleeding, her dress was torn, and she'd scraped her knees pretty badly. Several people were bleeding, in fact. Hudson hoped the vampires didn't lose control.

Some humans were quickly vacating the area while others were standing around aimlessly staring at each other. Most likely shock was setting in.

It appeared as if people had finally figured out the fire alarms were false and were calming down a little. Hudson scanned the groups of people standing around talking. Now several of them had their cell phones out. Because of course they did.

A decrepit white van stopped a little way down the street from the club. Its door slid open.

Alarms started going off in Hudson's head immediately. "Shit."

A human male dressed all in black had his arm around a young woman, consoling her as he gently herded her toward the van. In fact, Hudson noticed several humans were being led that way.

The alarms in his head were now shrieking. He hadn't stopped to consider option three—that this was a human kidnapping mission. Hudson ducked out the exit and started speed walking toward the van and the people moving in the direction of it.

Connie fell into step beside him within seconds. "What?"

"Men in black clothing are moving humans toward that white van on the street." Hudson picked up his pace, Connie still beside him. "I got this. Make sure there isn't another van on the side streets."

"Torres will kill me if I leave you unprotected, Sire," Connie murmured.

"Check the side streets, Conrad. That's an order."

"Dammit to the flames. Fine. Yes, Sire." Connie broke off and headed in the other direction.

Hudson hated to use his position to order his lover about, but right now he was acting as the king of the Fire Court, and he had a really bad feeling about this.

He broke into a run just as the pair closest to the van started to fight. The girl's instincts must've finally kicked in,

but it was too late. The man who was leading her picked her up and threw her inside.

The other hunters dropped the charade of being helpful and dragged whoever they were pretending to help toward the van. There were at least three hunters, not including whoever was inside.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Breaking into a run, Hudson caught up with the couple closest to him and didn't waste time. Grabbing the hunter in a chokehold, he broke his neck. The human captive immediately started running in the other direction.

He debated going after the human, but didn't. Hopefully, they didn't get a good look at Hudson since he basically killed somebody right in front of them.

Hudson let the guy drop to the asphalt and took off after the next couple. The hunter was fighting with his captive, who was a guy this time.

The hunter slugged the man, then threw the human over his shoulder and sprinted toward the van. The victim wasn't little by any means, but the hunter handled him as if he weighed no more than a feather.

Just as Hudson caught up with them, a hunter came out of nowhere and slammed into him. The hunter was partially transformed, and the yellow eyes were a dead giveaway of what DNA had been spliced with his—werewolf.

Deadly sharp claws slashed at Hudson, ripping through his shirt and into his skin. Hudson spun, catching the hunter's arm. As he turned, he slammed his elbow into the hunter's ribs.

He smirked in satisfaction when he heard several of them crack. The hunter's yells gave him a little spurt of joy too. Finishing the turn, Hudson picked the hunter up and tossed him against the van, making it rock.

The hunter collapsed in a heap on the ground and didn't move. Hudson sprinted toward the last hunter, who had the human male over his shoulder.

Something blurred past at an incredible rate of speed, and the hunter came to an abrupt stop, dropping his human. The guy rolled several feet away, jumped up, and started limping off.

Hudson caught up to the hunter, surprised to see a vampire had his fangs in the hunter's neck, draining him. The vampire dropped the hunter and glanced at Hudson.

"The human male saw," Hudson said, just as the van started to pull away. "Can you compel him to forget? I'll take care of the van."

"Yes, King Hudson." The vampire blurred toward the human trying to escape.

Hudson hated to do that, but the human had seen something he shouldn't have. He had to forget.

Hudson raced for the van and grabbed the back bumper just as the driver hit the gas. He lifted it, and the front wheels smoked as the van tried to go but couldn't.

Eventually the hunter figured out something was wrong. The first hint was probably the fact they weren't moving. Idiots. Opening the door, he and another hunter bailed out of the van and started running.

Hudson dearly wanted to go after them, but he couldn't, not as long as there were still victims inside the van. Hudson lowered the back of the van down, then hurried to the driver's door.

Scrambling into the seat, he put the van in park. Fuck, it stunk of hunter in there. Now to deal with the humans who'd been kidnapped. Opening the door again, he got out and started around the back.

The vampire appeared next to him suddenly. "Need help?"

"Possibly. It depends on if they saw something they shouldn't have. By the way, what's your name?"

"Felix March of the St. Clair coven."

“Thank you for your help, Felix. I’ll make sure Raven knows,” Hudson said as he reached the back of the van.

“Glad I could be of assistance, King Hudson. Fucking hunters.”

“Fucking hunters indeed.” Hudson opened the van doors. The one girl the hunters had managed to kidnap ran at them, clutching one of her high heels in her hand.

“I do love a fighter,” Felix said, staring at the woman. “Relax. You are safe. Lower your weapon.”

Hudson heard the power in the vampire’s voice. Impressed, he watched as the human woman stumbled to a halt and slowly lowered her shoe. She stared at Felix, her face blank.

Felix held his hand out, and the woman took it. He gently helped her out of the van, then took her shoe from her. Kneeling, he instructed her to brace her hand on his back while he helped her put the shoe back on.

For some reason, the gesture touched Hudson.

Standing, Felix gently took her chin and stared into her eyes. “You were kidnapped, yes, but you saw nothing unusual. No claws. No red eyes. Nothing a human would not have. A blond-headed guy with blue eyes and of average height helped save you, but he disappeared before you could get his name. Do you understand?”

The woman nodded slowly. “Yes. I understand. I saw nothing unusual and a blond-headed guy with blue eyes who is of average height helped save me.”

“Now go back toward the club and find a group of people to stand with. There is safety in numbers.”

“I will go back to the club and find a group of people to stand with because there is safety in numbers.”

Hudson watched the woman walk back. He glanced at Felix and grinned. Hudson had long, red hair and brown eyes. Felix had short, dark brown hair. They were both tall. He

couldn't tell the color of his eyes because they were currently red.

“Smart.”

Felix bowed his head slightly. “Thank you, King Hudson.”

A few seconds later, fire trucks and cop cars came screaming up to the club.

Hudson smelled Connie before he saw him. Connie stopped next to him and nodded to Felix.

“Connie, this is Felix, one of Raven's vampires. Felix? This is my right hand, Sir Conrad. Felix was very helpful.”

“Hey, Felix. Thank you. I've noticed several of Raven's people helping. Is everything okay?” Connie asked as they moved into the shadows.

“One hunter is dead. I'm not sure about the other there on the ground. He hasn't moved since I threw him against the van. The others escaped,” Hudson said. “Anymore attempted kidnappings?”

“No, fortunately,” Connie said.

“That's good to know,” Felix said. “King Hudson? Sir Conrad? I must take my leave now. I'm sure the human police are going to want to talk to Raven since he owns the place.”

“I did see a female vampire capture what I think was one of the hunters inside the club. Once everything calms down, will you ask Raven to update me on what happened, please?” Hudson asked.

“Absolutely. I didn't know about that. Interesting.” Felix nodded to both of them, then walked back toward the club at a human speed.

“Making friends, are you?” Connie asked.

“Never can have too many,” Hudson joked. “But Felix was a great help. I do envy their ability to compel humans.”

“It would definitely be a nice talent to have,” Connie agreed. “But I'll take being a dragon any day.”

“Can’t argue with that. We really are the best.”

Laughing, Hudson threw his arm around Connie’s shoulders.

“Come on, let’s go home. I’ve had enough excitement for the night.”

CHAPTER FOUR - CONNIE



THE NEXT evening, Raven contacted Hudson and updated him on what happened at the club. Connie was in Hudson's office and overheard the conversation.

The hunter they'd nabbed in the club? Wasn't actually a hunter. He was a human who'd smelled like a hunter because the two of them had gotten busy in the bathroom.

The hunter had rubbed himself all over the human, thus scent-marking him. Raven had questioned the human and found he'd just left the hunter in the bathroom when shit went down.

The human had not been harmed before they found out the truth. Of course, the poor human had to be compelled to forget the entire incident. Several of them had to be.

Cops found the dead bodies and had questioned Raven about them, not that they could tie the deaths to the attack on the club. It all seemed like a rather elaborate undertaking just to kidnap some people, not to mention Raven was now thoroughly annoyed.

The only good thing, if one could call it that, was that they had proof the hunters were still active in San DeLain even though Nox was dead, and two of the hunters had perished. Hudson had apparently killed the one he threw against the van.

Oh fucking well.

Hudson emailed the rest of the San DeLain leaders and updated them on what happened. Kage and Austin had already left for Greece on Hudson's private jet, which included members of his court as the crew.

Before Kage had left, he'd reminded Hudson they needed someone to keep an eye on the human that Nox had

attacked.

Seeing no sign that Hudson planned to stop working anytime soon, Connie ducked down to the kitchen and grabbed the plates of food left for them.

He made two trays consisting of the plates and some drinks and took them back to Hudson's office, where he placed them on the conference table. It was dinnertime, and Connie was starving.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. Thank you." Hudson joined Connie at the table. "Pizza?"

"Homemade pizza," Connie corrected.

Since all of Hudson's court lived in the compound, he employed a full-time staff to cook in his home. All the dragons on Hudson's land had their own homes, but several of the single ones ate at the main house. In a very loose way, Hudson's residence functioned like a werewolves' pack house.

Hudson took a bite and groaned softly. "This is excellent."

"Did you expect anything less?"

"Nope. Stella and her staff excel in all forms of cooking. To say otherwise would be to tempt Fate," Hudson quipped as he took another bite of pizza.

"Yeah, Fate in the form of your head cook. She'd probably whack you on the ass with one of her wooden spoons. Stella doesn't play."

"No, she does not." Hudson picked up the soda that Connie had brought and took a sip. "So, about that human Kage wants us to keep an eye on."

"What was the guy's name again?" Connie asked.

"Kit Meadows. He's the owner of The Book Spot. His ex was the hunter who let Nox into Kit's office."

Connie grimaced. Talk about betrayal. "Ouch."

"Yeah. And the ex is missing too, so Kage and Austin are worried about Kit's safety."

Kit owned a bookstore that Austin had done a book signing at. The two had hit it off and had become friends when Austin had suddenly backed off.

Austin had mainly done that because he hadn't wanted to draw Nox's attention to any friends of his. Not that it had done any good. Nox had attacked Kit, assumed his identity, and lured Austin into a trap.

"Any idea of who you want to use to babysit the human?" Connie asked as he bit into his pizza.

"I think Beckett would work nicely. He's pretty nonthreatening for an Ancient—which is good for Kit's peace of mind. Plus, Beckett's a bookworm. Doing guard duty in a bookstore should be right up his alley."

"I'll check with him and see what he's got going on. You do realize, of course, that saying Beckett is nonthreatening for an Ancient is all kinds of wrong, right? He's damn near as powerful as you," Connie pointed out.

"This human is important to Kage and Austin. That makes him important to us, which is why I am assigning a Grand Lord to watch after him," Hudson said.

Dragons had titles that correlated with age. Hatchlings were dragons from birth to ninety-nine years old. Younglings were one hundred to four hundred ninety-nine years old.

Dragons who were five hundred to six hundred ninety-nine years old had the title of Sir/Mistress. Connie fell in that category. Any dragons seven hundred to nine hundred ninety-nine years held the title of Lords/Ladies.

Dragons a thousand years and older who were not born a King or Queen held the title of Grand Lord/Lady, like Beckett, and were also considered an Ancient.

A King/Queen was a solid color of whatever court they belonged to. In Hudson's case, since he belonged to the Fire Court, he was a completely red dragon.

"Be that as it may, I do believe Beckett will enjoy this little mission. I'll caution him to try and keep his power

dampened around the human.” Hudson took another bite of his pizza. “Let me know if he’s willing to take the assignment.”

“Of course,” Connie said. “And that’s enough talk of business for the night. I swear, if I didn’t keep an eye on you, you’d work twenty-four seven.”

Hudson leaned back in his chair and grinned at Connie. “Good thing I have you, huh?”

“You better believe it.” Connie then kept their conversation to topics that did not include work so Hudson would relax.

Once they were finished with dinner, Connie took the trays back to the kitchen. He knew better than to leave dirty dishes in the sink, so he loaded them into the dishwasher and returned the trays to where he got them from.

Humming a Katy Perry song about a dark horse that he’d had stuck in his head all day for some reason, he returned to Hudson’s office. Not finding him there, he went to Hudson’s private den, which was right off the master bedroom.

There was also a pool just outside Hudson’s master suite that was only for his use. Connie agreed with his decision to create his own little private place inside his home, otherwise he’d be tripping over his dragons at all times of the day and night.

Hudson’s house did have a living area that was communal, though. There was a TV with a gaming system, plus a pool table and darts. Also, in the main house was a massive gym and a custom theater. The kitchen served three meals a day that anyone was welcome to partake in.

Hudson had set up a clubhouse with pool tables and darts for those dragons who didn’t want to come to the main house. Hudson’s private compound was gated with a secured entrance. They were, after all, out in the middle of nowhere.

His house was a twenty-three hundred square foot, one-story home with stunning lakefront views. It had five bedrooms and five full baths, along with two half bathrooms located throughout.

They were surrounded by natural wildlife and wooded acreage. On the property there were two tennis courts, a community pool, two basketball courts, and two lakes. One lake had boat docks for the court's use. Spread out over his territory were his dragons' homes.

"Glad to see I didn't have to pry you out of your office after all," Connie said as he walked over and sat down next to Hudson on the couch. "What are we watching?"

In front of them was an entertainment center with a massive TV in the center with shelves expanding outward. It took up the entire wall.

Hudson was flipping through the channels, a frown on his face. "I don't know. Nothing looks good." Sighing, he dropped the remote onto his lap. "I'm restless."

Connie tucked his leg underneath him and leaned into Hudson. "Yeah? Any particular reason why?"

"I honestly have no idea, but I'm unsettled." Hudson rested his arm on the couch behind Connie and gently played with his hair. "I can't shake the feeling that something is about to happen."

Connie knew better than to ignore Hudson's words or blow them off. The male was a thousand-year-old Ancient and a king of dragons. Even though Connie knew Hudson intimately, he still didn't know the full scope of Hudson's powers. If Hudson had a feeling something was about to happen, then something was definitely about to happen.

"Any idea if that something is good or bad?" Connie fought back a shiver when Hudson's fingers brushed across the nape of his neck.

"I... I don't think so?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Connie asked, resting his head against Hudson's shoulder.

"I wish I knew." Turning his head slightly, Hudson kissed Connie's hair. "I don't think what's coming is bad, but I have a feeling it's going to be complicated—whatever 'it' is."

“We’ve dealt with complicated things before. We’ll deal with this too,” Connie reassured Hudson.

“I know. And thank you. You’re the only one I trust enough to share stuff like this with.”

And wasn’t that just sad, but that was the burden of being a ruler. “I’m glad you can talk to me. Hey, why don’t we turn our dragons loose for a little while? Maybe you need a good, rousing flight to help you relax. What do you say?”

“You know, that sounds like an incredibly good idea. It’s been a while since I stretched my wings. Come on, last one in the air is a big pile of dragon shit!” Hudson yelled as he launched himself off the couch, running toward his bedroom.

“Dammit!” Connie raced after Hudson, laughing as he dodged the clothes Hudson threw back at him. For a thousand-year-old dragon, sometimes Hudson could act like such a child, but he only did it around Connie.

Thank the dragon gods he could bring that side of Hudson out.

Connie started stripping as he ran, following Hudson through the bedroom and out to the private deck. He ducked as one of Hudson’s shoes went sailing past his head.

Laughing hysterically, he hopped around, trying to get his own shoes off. When he finally managed to get naked, he took a moment to study Hudson.

The gods had truly broken the mold when they made Hudson. All that long, dark red hair, pale skin, and his deep brown eyes featured prominently in Connie’s dreams... and in his waking moments too.

His eyes were focused on the lean-but-muscular body standing in the soft moonlight. Hudson stood with his head thrown back, his arms out to his side as he stared up at the sky. Moonbeams caressed his skin. Connie wanted to trace where the light touched... with his tongue.

Connie reminded himself to keep his mouth shut because Hudson needed to take to the skies more than he needed a romp in the grass. But it was so tempting to tackle

Hudson to the ground and kiss every square inch of skin he could find. His cock was so hard it hurt.

Slowly, Hudson faced Connie. "I can smell your desire."

"Big shock there." Connie dropped the last bit of his clothing and put his hands on his hips. "You're naked in front of me. I mean, what did you expect?"

"Eternity, Connie. I expect eternity. With you."

Connie's mouth fell open. Of all the things he'd been expecting Hudson to say, that hadn't even made the list.

How had they gone from the silliness of just a moment ago to this? They'd decided to throw caution to the wind and start a relationship, yes, but they hadn't really spoken about their feelings. Until now. Once again Hudson left Connie reeling.

"Yeah?" Connie prowled toward Hudson, and when he reached him, he took Hudson's face into his hands and kissed him softly on the lips. "I'm not sure an eternity is long enough. End of time sounds good to me."

Hudson turned his head and kissed the inside of Connie's palm. "I mean it, Connie. My feelings for you are strong. Stronger than any I've ever had for another person."

"I feel the same. I don't know what this is, but it's something serious. It's huge, and it's kind of scary, but I want to see what it'll grow into."

"Me too. I want that with every fiber of my being." Hudson kissed Connie hard and fast. "Now, let's fly, sweetheart."

"Yes, my king!"

With a smirk, Hudson took off running toward an open field not far from the back of the house. From the blink of the eye to the next, Hudson's form blurred.

His human body disappeared, and in its place a red dragon powered across the field on four legs. With every step

it took, its size expanded until it was the size of a three-story house.

The ground shook under Connie's feet as the massive dragon ran. His wings snapped out, and the dragon launched itself into the air, wings beating strongly.

"Magnificent," Connie breathed.

Out of all the Fire Court dragons, Hudson was by far the largest, but that was normal for a king or queen.

Dragons were not like werewolves—they didn't share their human body with an animal. Instead, the animal shared its form with a human body, but they were still two parts of a whole. They were also creatures of magic, which accounted for how they transformed and their spell work.

They didn't so much as shift as they dropped the human façade and became what they truly were, much like the daemon. And like the daemon, they were born and couldn't change a human into what they were.

"Shit." Connie swore softly as the dragon circled above him. "He distracted me with that kiss and beat me into the air. Cheater!" Connie yelled at the skies.

The dragon dipped a wing in response.

Laughing, Conrad ran across the field and flung himself into the nighttime sky, taking on his true form. He aimed for the huge dragon waiting for him.

He was sure Hudson had already taken care to hide them, but he still mumbled a spell in his head that kept humans from seeing them and took off after Hudson.

Hunters on the prowl, bookstore owners, the never-ending headache of running a court this size, petty arguments... it could all wait. For right then, the dragon in front of him and the open sky were all that mattered.

CHAPTER FIVE – KIT



KIT COULDN'T do it.

God knows, he'd tried, but he just couldn't get past what had happened in his office. Every time he stepped in there, his skin crawled and his heart beat faster, which made his head hurt.

People thought vampire-like teeth were sexy. People were idiots. He still had nightmares about those long, sharp fangs sinking into his neck. It had felt like two large gauge needles piercing his skin.

It had hurt, and there was nothing sexy about that. At all. And there was nothing sexy about feeling that... that... *thing* sucking his blood either.

Kit's shoulders slumped. Dammit. He had to stop thinking that way. Nox wasn't a "thing." He shouldn't call any paranormal that, and Kage had been quick to point that out. It was insulting. And Kit knew all about how insulting language could hurt somebody.

He was a perfect example. He was a gay guy with a slightly femme, androgynous look who liked to wear things that were not considered 'boy' clothes.

Although today was the exception to the rule because of, well... reasons.

So, he was trying to modify his language. He knew firsthand how hating on somebody because of how they were born was simply ridiculous. But he also couldn't get past what Nox had done to him in his office. And now Kit couldn't stand to be in there.

Thus the "reason" why he was dressed in plain old jeans and a simple T-shirt on this bright, lovely day—he

needed to move his things to a new location.

Good thing there were other empty rooms in the building. His original office might've had the biggest window and all, but it was going to be a storage room now. Or something. What it was *not* going to be was Kit's office.

It took most of the morning, and involved asking favors from his staff, but Kit got his office equipment moved to a different room. It did have a window, although it overlooked the parking lot. Meh. At least he had natural light.

Once he got everything situated how he wanted it, and plugged in again, he stood in the doorway surveying the room. Yep, it was definitely smaller. And the plain white walls offended him on a personal level. He liked color.

And speaking of color, he had the most perfect idea of what colors he wanted to do his new office in—seafoam green and apricot. In fact, outside of the office furniture, everything else had to go. He was going to start completely over.

He arranged for a charity to come pick up everything, then went shopping. Retail therapy was good for the soul.

SEVERAL HOURS later, he was back with paint, a new rug, some cute pictures, and several new knick-knacks that matched the new colors. Again, he had to ask his staff for help getting the things to his office. Which, in retrospect, he probably should've gone shopping and *then* moved into the new room. But oh well.

He wasn't sleeping all that great, so he could blame his lack of planning on that. Which, again, he probably should've painted first too. It wasn't *that* large of a room, fortunately for him. He put the tarp over the floor, threw his hair up into a messy bun, and got down to business.

Okay, so yeah, it didn't take long for him to figure out that he *really* should've painted the walls first, but it was what it was. At least he had two of the four walls done. Progress!

Grabbing a bottled water, he collapsed into his office chair. Woo wee, he was going to feel this tomorrow, especially

in his arms. Maybe he should start going to the gym in his apartment complex.

He was still debating the pros and cons of that when his cell phone rang. Pulling it out, he frowned at the number. It wasn't one he recognized, although his phone said it was a valid number.

Shrugging, he answered it. "Hello?"

"May I speak to Kit Meadows, please?"

Whoa. That was one sexy voice right there. It gave him a nice little tingle. "This is Kit."

"Hello, Kit. My name is Hudson Redmond. I'm Kage and Austin's friend. I believe Austin spoke to you about... shall we say... protection due to an unfortunate situation that involved you?"

Whatever tingle Kit had going on dried up like water in the desert. Suddenly it all came flooding back—his boyfriend's betrayal, Nox's attack, beings who looked like demons and used the shadows to travel, the werewolf, Austin struggling to breathe... all of it.

"Kit?"

Kit yanked himself back to the present. Now was not the time to take a side trip into that nightmare. "Yeah, yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to... I had a moment there."

"Completely understandable. I've had several moments here lately too. Now, as I was saying, I'm friends with Kage and Austin. Actually, Kage is my best friend."

Suddenly it hit Kit where he'd heard that name. "Oh wow. Oh goodness. I remember Kage mentioning you now. You're a... a... a...."

"Yes, indeed I am." Hudson laughed softly.

"Did you know dragons are my favorite paranormal?" Kit whispered.

"I had heard that, yes. I'm honored that I've been asked to see to your safety. Will you allow me to do that for

you?” Hudson asked.

The fact that his ex-boyfriend was a hunter and still on the prowl out there somewhere was enough to make Kit accept Hudson’s offer. “Yes. And thank you, I appreciate it. Did they tell you I own a bookstore?”

“They did, yes.”

“Okay, good. We’re a pretty easygoing group here. Also, I don’t know if Austin told you or not, but we’re LGBTQIA+ friendly. So whoever you send needs to be aware of that. This is a safe place.”

“Believe me when I tell you that’s not a problem. We’re not hung up on labels like hum—that is to say, like others are.”

Kit caught the slip. Hudson had almost said humans. Paranormals were apparently very careful what they said over the phone, which made sense. Maybe he needed to do that too. “I’m very glad to hear that.”

“I’m sending a man called Beckett Newhouse. He’s one of mine. Beckett is roughly six-foot-tall and has collar-length golden-red hair and brown eyes. Make sure you check for that, Kit, because *my* people will have some color of red hair and brown eyes. It’s, ah, a trait.”

That was odd, but whatever. Kit had no idea what Hudson meant by trait. “Could you maybe text me a picture of him?”

“Good idea. Um, I don’t know if I have one. Let me.... Just a second.”

Kit could hear Hudson mumbling to somebody.

“My assistant is taking care of that. I’ll get it to you just as soon as I have it. Beckett will arrive today,” Hudson continued. “He *is* there to protect you, but I promise he’ll be more than willing to help out with anything you should need.”

“Oh, well, thank you, but I don’t want to take advantage.”

“Beckett’s a bookworm.”

“Ah, I see! In that case, he probably will enjoy this. Maybe tell him to dress very casually too. Jeans and a T-shirt are fine.”

“I will certainly do that. If you need anything, anything at all, please feel free to contact me. This is my personal cell I called on, so you will get me if you call.”

“Thank you, again, and I appreciate that.” Although Kit couldn’t see a reason why he’d need to call the dragon king.

God Almighty, he was talking to a frigging *dragon* king.

“Alright then, I’ll text you the picture as soon as Connie sends it to me. Expect Beckett this afternoon. Have a good day, Kit. It was nice talking to you,” Hudson said.

“Same to you. And thanks again,” Kit said and disconnected the call.

He placed his hand on his chest in an effort to calm his heart. He had just spoken to an honest-to-goodness dragon. A dragon! And not just any dragon, either. Oh no. A dragon *king*. A dragon king who seriously had the sexiest voice in creation. Was that a thing? Could their voice mesmerize humans?

Actually, that was kinda scary.

Questions. Sooooo many questions. Which, unfortunately, he’d probably never get to ask. Would it be rude to ask the dragon coming to babysit him things? Like, all the things? Yeah, it probably would be.

Holy shit, a dragon.

Kit was pretty sure that he’d read every book, ever, about dragons. And movies. Couldn’t forget the movies. He hadn’t really cared about the human actors; all he’d wanted to see were the big ass dragons.

The sudden loud knock on his office door jerked Kit out of his musings. One of his employees stood there grinning.

“Hey, it’s coming up on lunchtime. We’re going to place an order from that sandwich shop down the street. Do

you want anything?”

“Yeah. I do. Wow, I hadn’t realized it was lunch already. Thanks.”

Kit gave her his order. As he watched her leave, a thought hit him. Shit, how was he going to explain Beckett to the staff? They didn’t know about Nox and the attack. Shit. Shit. Shit. And Beckett was going to be there that afternoon.

The only thing Kit could come up with was that he hired a new employee. The folks who worked there wouldn’t believe Beckett was anything but that.

Kit couldn’t even say Beckett was a boyfriend because everybody at the bookstore knew Kit had recently been in a relationship that had ended abruptly and rather nastily.

Of course, Kit hadn’t explained to his employees why his ex-boyfriend was now an ex. All he’d said was that Don had done something horrible, and Kit had dumped him.

Which, basically, was true. Thanks to that, Kit had decided he was going to be terminally single.

“Right. But are they going to believe I suddenly hired a new employee with no warning?” Kit rubbed his forehead as he stared into space.

Finding out about paranormals was a huge pain in his ass. How did people deal with this stuff? Just lie all the time? He was a horrible liar. Ask anyone who knew him.

“There’s no way around it. I’m going to have to act like he’s an employee. That’s the only thing that would make sense.” Kit sincerely hoped Beckett was willing to play along.

After she placed the order, she stopped back by to tell Kit what he owed and get the money. While Kit waited on his food, he tried to get as much painted as he could. A picture of Beckett also came in. No doubt about it, the guy was good-looking, and in the picture at least, he looked friendly.

Shrugging, Kit slid his phone back into his pocket. Frankly, after the disastrous ending of his last relationship, he was kind of off men at the moment.

About twenty minutes later, he scrubbed the paint off his hands so he could eat. Sitting at his desk, he dug in. He was so hungry he inhaled his sandwich. He'd really worked up an appetite painting, which was nice since that too had been off lately.

Kit had just eaten the last chip when another one of his employees popped her head into his office to tell him he had a visitor. Figuring it was Beckett, he cleaned up the remains of his lunch, tossed his trash, and made a quick trip to the employees' bathroom to wash his hands.

Butterflies took flight in his stomach as he made his way up front. He was about to meet a real live dragon. That was excitingly terrifying.

He spotted Beckett almost immediately, and he had to say, the picture really didn't do the guy justice. He was simply gorgeous. As luck would have it, he was standing in a beam of sunlight that made his reddish-gold hair blaze.

"Hey!" Kit came to a stop in front of Beckett and held out his hand. "I'm Kit Meadows."

Beckett shook Kit's hand. "Nice to meet you, Kit. I'm Beckett Newhouse. I believe you're expecting me?"

"Yes." Kit took note of the red hair and brown eyes. "Why don't we go back to my office?"

"Sounds good."

As Kit led Beckett back, the previously mentioned butterflies were now doing cartwheels in his stomach. And get this. Now that he knew paranormals existed, he was uncomfortable having one at his back. Which was silly, really. He had firsthand knowledge how useless he was at defending himself against one, so why worry about it, right?

Yeah, no. He was not gonna relive that again. Nope.

"Come on in. I'm in the process of moving my office, so things are a mess right now. Sorry about that. Damn." Well, he was certainly an idiot. "There's nowhere for you to sit. Just a second, let me go grab a chair from our breakroom. Sorry."

“Hey, it’s not a problem. I completely understand.”

“Be right back.” Kit hurried down the hall, grabbed the chair, and rushed back to his office. Seriously, where was his brain lately? He set it down in front of his desk.

“Thank you,” Beckett said, taking a seat.

Kit collapsed into his desk chair and blew a stray strand of hair out of his face. “Really, I’m usually much more organized than this.”

“Kit, it’s okay. Hudson explained everything. Of course you’re rattled after what you went through.”

Kit leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. “It’s been an adjustment, that’s for sure.” Kit straightened up in his chair and then made eye contact with Beckett. “Anyway, sorry you got stuck with babysitting duty, but I really do appreciate you being here.”

“Don’t look at it as babysitting duty, and I’m thrilled to be here. Hudson did tell you I love books, right?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And he did tell you that I am more than willing to help out around here, right?”

“He did. I don’t want you to feel obligated though. I don’t know if you have another job or whatever, but—”

“It’s fine, I promise.”

“Okay. Okay. Sorry.” Lord, he had already apologized twice so far. He needed to stop that. Gah, what an impression he must be making. “I guess I’m still somewhat overwhelmed.”

“Again, that’s not surprising, all things considered. It’s going to be okay, Kit. I’m pleased to be here and more than willing to help out. And also? Just so we’re clear? You’re not a burden, in case that thought may be lurking around in your head.”

“I mean... yeah. It is. And I am. I’m sorry Hudson got stuck with... me.” Oh look, third time apologizing.

“My king was asked by his dear friend to watch over you. In other words, Kage honored Hudson by entrusting your care to him. *I’m* honored my king gave that duty to me.”

“Wow, that’s.... Yeah.” What a beautiful thing to say. “Thank you. That helps.”

“I’m glad, because I meant it. Now, I see you’ve started painting. Would you like to have a helping hand?”

“Seriously?” Because really, who willingly offered to help paint? Who did stuff like that?

“Seriously. Between the two of us, I believe we can get this done in a matter of hours. I like the color, by the way.”

Apparently, dragons did stuff like that. More than happy to have help, Kit stood. “That would be awesome and thank you.”

“I never would’ve thought of combining those two colors, but they definitely work together. You have a good eye.”

“I know, right, and thanks! Oh hey, by the way, I’m going to tell everybody here you’re a new hire,” Kit said. “For a bookstore, we’re pretty busy, and several of the ladies have been on me to hire somebody to help me out. So I’m going to say you’re my new assistant.”

“Excellent idea. In that case, let me assist you in painting this room.” Grinning, Beckett stood too.

Laughing, Kit led Beckett over to the cans of paint.

CHAPTER SIX – KIT



THE NEXT few days were a whirlwind of activity, and thank goodness the weekend had finally arrived. It'd been a good week. Kit and Beckett worked well together and even had exchanged phone numbers. He thought they were becoming friends.

He'd also been told that someone would be tailing him after he left work too. Hudson had once again sent a picture of the dragon who'd be following him around.

This time, though, his babysitter would just be keeping an eye on him. In other words, he wouldn't be working with them like he did with Beckett.

Kit hadn't been entirely sure how he felt about that, but it made sense. There wasn't any point in *only* keeping an eye on him during the day. That left all night for bad things to happen. At least that's what Kit had been told. He was already paranoid enough without adding in someone following him that he didn't know about.

Standing in the doorway of his office, Kit looked the space over with a critical eye. He'd finished painting and now had it furnished. He really liked the colors, and it gave the smaller room a bright, airy feeling.

He was rather happy with the outcome.

And speaking of happy outcomes, Beckett had been a godsend. Or maybe he should say a dragonsend. Was there such a word? If not, there definitely should be.

Beckett hadn't been joking when he'd said he was a book lover. He could talk about any author Kit brought up. They'd had long discussions over the classics—including

funny little stories about a certain English playwright, poet, and actor from long ago who Beckett had met.

Shakespeare. Beckett had freaking met William Shakespeare.

It boggled Kit's mind just how long Beckett had obviously been alive. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure *how* old Beckett was. Was it polite to ask? Yeah, probably not.

Dammit.

But after spending several days in Beckett's company, it was fairly obvious the man was much older than he looked—and he looked to be in his early thirties at the very least.

And had Kit mentioned Beckett was drop-dead gorgeous? Kind too. He was always willing to lend a hand, whether it was something Kit or one of his employees needed. He treated everyone in the store with the utmost respect also.

Beckett was perfect in every way—and he did absolutely nothing for Kit's libido. Not even a spark. Just nothing. Kit really needed to have a serious conversation with his libido.

Maybe he could trade it in for a new one, because obviously there was something wrong with his. It made him want to beat his head against the nearest wall.

He'd only been half kidding about being terminally single, but it appeared his body took his comment as the gospel.

Fuck his life.

“Hey. Ready to call it a day?” Beckett asked, coming to a stop next to Kit.

“Yup.” Kit followed Beckett to the front of the store, set the alarm, and locked the door. Beckett had made it a point to always walk Kit out to his car, which Kit appreciated.

Kit unlocked his car door and opened it. “Thanks. Have a good weekend. I'll see you Monday.”

Beckett rested his hand on Kit's car door. "Hey, listen, do you have plans this weekend?"

Oh no. Kit sincerely hoped Beckett wasn't about to ask him out. The only feelings he had toward Beckett were those of friendship. "Not really. Why?"

"You know you have somebody trailing you, but if you *do* decide to go out, make sure you always stay with crowds. Just to be safe," Beckett said. "I mean, in this day and age, that goes without saying anyway, you know?"

"Believe me, I know." Kit wanted to hug Beckett. He really was the nicest person ever. "But no, more than likely I'll stay home. I'm not really in the mood to party."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I do understand. Okay, I'll see you Monday." Beckett pushed Kit's door closed, waved, then walked over to his truck.

Kit started his car and pulled out of the parking lot, Beckett right behind him. He'd follow Kit all the way to his apartment complex before breaking off and heading home. Wherever home was for Beckett.

Kit also knew what the dragon who was watching him drove. He thought his name was Leo. Maybe it was Leon. No, no, it was Leo. Like the Zodiac sign. Except he was a dragon, not a lion.

But didn't the sign have something to do with fire? Maybe? Which made sense, considering that Leo was a red dragon who breathed fire and... and good grief, can you say squirrel brain?

Anyway, Beckett had introduced him to Kit. How Leo managed to sit there all night without drawing any attention was beyond Kit. But then again, Kit had no idea just how influential Hudson was.

Oh, he'd definitely Googled Hudson, and he knew the man was insanely rich, just like his good buddy Kage. No doubt about it, money talked. Must be nice.

Kit parked in the underground parking reserved for his apartment building. He lived on the tenth floor and had a fairly

decent view, thank goodness.

The layout of his apartment was one where you entered through the kitchen. The reason for that was the floor-to-ceiling windows at the other end. His apartment had lots of natural light, even if it was small.

He hung his keys up next to the front door, then locked it. The kitchen was open concept to the living area with a small island between the two. The flooring was some sort of fake, light gray hardwood and the walls were white.

Even the cabinets in the kitchen were light gray. The countertops were gray marble. There was a whole lot of damn gray, so of course Kit combated it with pops of color everywhere.

The living area only had enough room for a couch, a small chair, and the TV. The bedroom and bathroom pretty much followed the same theme: gray flooring and white walls.

It wasn't a bad apartment, but it was just... an apartment. He'd grown up surrounded by nature with lots and lots of room to roam. Sometimes it was hard to breathe in this little boxy thing.

He'd kill to have a garden again.

Kit changed into pink yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt that looked as if it had been splattered with pink and orange paint. Tying one part of it into a knot on his hip, he padded out of his bedroom. Flipping his hair over his shoulder, he made a beeline for the kitchen.

Time for wine.

Curling up on the couch with his drink, he turned on the TV. It was a little early to think about dinner, so he decided he'd pick up where he'd left off rewatching *Game of Thrones*. Hello badass dragons! Then maybe he'd have dinner delivered from his favorite Italian restaurant down the street.

Honestly, what could be better than that? Maybe if he said it a few more million times, he'd believe it.

TWO HOURS later, Kit's doorbell rang. Stomach growling, he hurried toward the door. He was more than ready to dig into some lasagna. He checked the peephole before opening it, grabbed his food, then shut his door quickly.

Good Lord, his mouth was watering. He poured himself another half glass of wine and settled down with his food in front of the TV.

Around eleven he was yawning so hard his eyes were watering, so he turned off the television and headed toward the bedroom. Stripping, he hung his clothes on a hook in his closet.

His apartment might be small, but it did have one thing that was to die for—a garden tub. Damn thing was like a small pool. He threw some bath salts into the running water, lit a few candles, and piled his hair on top of his head.

He still had what was left of his wine with him, of course.

Kit soaked until his fingers and toes started to prune, then got out, dried off, and slathered himself with lotion. Taking off the remains of his makeup, he moisturized, then grabbed a cute pajama set.

The shorts were cut high on the hip, and the top was basically a tank with spaghetti straps. It had the cutest little bow in the middle. The material wasn't real silk—he couldn't afford that—but it still felt cool and soft against his skin.

And it was red. For some reason, that color seemed to be on his mind a lot lately.

Climbing into bed, he pulled the sheet over himself, then told his brain to shut up and go to sleep. And oh yeah, if he could have just one night where he didn't dream of pointy teeth sinking into his neck, that would be great.

CLOUDS DRIFTED across a full moon, briefly bringing darkness to the land. A warm breeze fluttered his hair. Kit tucked a strand behind his ear.

Where was he? Looking around, he could see a tree line off to the left. Okay, so woods were close by. But at the moment, he was standing in a field, grass swaying gently in the breeze.

Off in the distance he could see the lights of a house reflecting off water—a small lake, maybe? Even from here he could tell the white stone structure was massive. He didn't know anybody who owned a house that big.

Wait. A field?

Glancing down, he saw he was dressed in his favorite red suit with a black mesh tank-like shirt. His belt and shoes were black.

“Okay, what the hell?”

A dream. He had to be dreaming. Nothing else made sense because there was no way he'd be standing in the middle of a damn field dressed in one of his vintage suits. Still, it was a damn strange dream he was having.

The breeze picked up, playing with his hair, tossing it around. Thunder rumbled across the sky, a deep roar that Kit felt in his chest. Oh, if he got his favorite suit wet, he'd cut a bitch. No lie.

Looking up, he noticed there were no clouds in the sky now. The full moon lit everything with its ghostly light. He could see as well as he could during the day, which yeah. No way that was normal.

Did he mention this was a damn strange dream?

The thunder rolled across the sky again. Only this time, it really did sound like a deep roar. Kit squinted. Wait. Was that...? There. Yeah. A dot on the horizon was coming his way. Something that was... flying? Flying low and fast.

No, no, there were *two* dots. Two dots that were rapidly gaining in size. His heart started to pound. Two somethings were coming at him really, really fast through the air.

His heart was about to jump out of his chest, and the hair on the back of his neck was standing up, but he wasn't

afraid. That roar sounded again, and flames shot through the sky. Holy *shit!* They were dragons!

Oh dear God, they were *dragons*.

They barreled toward him, their massive wings beating hard. He could freaking well *hear* them.

There was nothing graceful about the brutally powerful creatures approaching him. He should be scared, right? Because they were massive, lizardly-looking creatures with huge bodies, long necks, and humongous wings. Oh, and a long fucking tail.

And they were coming straight for him. His hindbrain suggested that this might be a good time to get the hell out of Dodge because, you know, two dragons were bearing down upon him.

But instead of fear, a crazy sense of anticipation danced along his spine, which was nuts. Did he have absolutely no self-preservation? It seemed not.

And if this dream wasn't already weird enough, and it most definitely was weird, the wind picked up, whispering to him—

Magic.

Come to us.

Be our one and only.

Do you dare?

Fated.

Because of course it did. Wind whispering some of the words from *Dark Horse* was perfectly normal, right? It promised things as the two massive dragons circled high above him. Things Kit desperately wanted. He stared up at the dragons circling above him—the red dragons.

They were magnificent. He also noticed that one was definitely much larger than the other as they twirled and rolled, showing off their acrobatic moves on the breeze. It was as if they were showing off for him.

Then the moon's light began to fade due to a sudden rush of clouds. The dragons cried pitifully to him.

Choose. But know that there's no going back when you do.

“No! Don't! Don't go!” Kit screamed. Now the fear that *should* have been there earlier flooded him. “Please!” They were going to leave him, and he didn't want that. Never that. His soul hurt.

The dragons roared again.

Kit stood on the edge of darkness, watching as the dragons slowly disappeared. Sadness pierced his chest.

Choose. CHOOSE!

KIT'S EYES snapped open, and he jackknifed up in bed. His heart was racing, he wanted to cry, and the urge to... to do *something* was a screaming demand in his head.

Dreaming. He'd been dreaming about... dragons? Yeah, dragons. Two of them. It was right there on the edge of his consciousness, but it was quickly fading. But the memory of red dragons circling above him stood out in his mind.

Shit. Was he crying? Or just sweaty? He swiped at his face and stared at his fingers. They were wet, and his nose was stuffy. He flopped back into bed, his hand on his chest.

His mouth was dry, his head hurt, and dammit, he needed to do *something*. He couldn't shake that feeling. It hammered at him, that need.

Glancing over at the alarm clock, he groaned. “Are you kidding me?”

Fuck if he was getting up at five on a Saturday morning. Closing his eyes, he demanded his body to go back to sleep.

Forty minutes later he was in the kitchen, madder than a wet hen and fixing himself some coffee. That was absolutely

the last time he watched *Game of Thrones* before he went to bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN – HUDSON



CHOOSE.

CHOOSE!

One second Hudson was sound asleep, and the next, he was wide-awake and on the verge of transforming into his true form. He wrestled the urge back, but it was a near thing.

By the dragon gods, he was even panting. It had been hundreds of years since he'd come close to losing control. What the hell? But something had nearly caused that loss of control and fear in his chest.

Yes, fear. Along with sadness.

Shoving his sweaty hair back, he glanced at the clock and grimaced. Five fucking o'clock in the morning? The fuck? A memory flirted on the edge of his consciousness, just out of reach and fading quickly.

Hudson desperately tried to grab hold of it. But like fairy dust, it slipped away no matter how hard he tried to hold on to it. There had been someone standing in the moon's light, but for some reason, Hudson hadn't been able to clearly see him.

But the one thing he *did* know was that it was a man, and he had long, light-brown hair. Dragons of the Fire Court had red hair. Every. Last. One. Of. Them. Whoever he'd been dreaming about, it had not been Connie or any other dragon in his court.

And he'd been circling above the man in his dragon form.

"Fuck!" Connie clutched Hudson's arm, his claws sinking into flesh. "I think I'm going to—"

Hudson quickly glanced at Connie, who was sitting in bed next to him. His eyes were those of his dragon, his claws were out, and his horns were extending from his forehead. His skin was quickly fading to that sickly gray color that signified a partial shift.

Hudson grabbed Connie's chin and stared into his eyes. "No." The powerful voice of his dragon demanded attention. "You will not change."

Connie sucked in a breath. "Yes... yes, my king. Dragon gods above, I will not lose control!"

As Hudson watched, Connie fought for control. Breath shuddering, he gave himself over to Hudson's demand. Eventually Connie's eyes returned to their lovely shade of brown, his horns receded, and his claws disappeared.

"What the fuck was that?" Connie choked out, still shaking. "I was dreaming about, about, something, and now I can't really remember, but I kept hearing the word 'choose' and then suddenly I was really upset, and I just, I just...."

"Easy, sweetheart." Hudson wrapped Connie up in his arms.

"I almost lost control. I can't believe I almost lost control. I could've easily destroyed this section of your house if I had changed into my dragon."

"But you didn't." But it'd been close. "You got the urge under control. Do you remember what you were dreaming?"

"Good thing I was in bed with you because I don't think I would have otherwise. And no, I don't really remember. It's like it's there, right on the edge of my brain, but I can't remember for some reason."

"Okay." Hudson hugged Connie again. "But you remember the word 'choose', right?"

"Yes. It's like the word was shouting inside of my head. But I don't think it was aimed at me. And I was afraid. And upset. Sad. Oh, wait. I do remember something."

“What?”

“I was circling above a person in dragon form, but he had long, light-brown hair. He wasn’t one of us with *that* hair color.”

Goose bumps crawled up Hudson’s back. There was no way, absolutely no way, they could’ve both had the same dream. Could they? It certainly sounded like they had.

“Connie?”

“Yes?”

“It was a man? You’re sure?”

“I am, but I don’t know why I’m sure.”

Hudson took a deep breath before replying. “I think I had the same dream.”

Connie jerked back out of Hudson’s arms. “What? *What!*”

“Yes. I woke up on the verge of transforming too, and the word ‘choose’ was ringing in my head. There was also someone there—a male with long, light-brown hair. I was circling above him in my dragon form.”

Connie’s mouth fell open. “The hell? We both had the same dream?”

“It certainly sounds like it.”

“Hudson? What’s going on?”

It broke Hudson’s heart to hear how scared Connie sounded. As capable as Connie was, he forgot sometimes that Connie was also relatively young.

“I don’t know, sweetheart, but whatever it is, we’ll face it together.” Hudson pressed a kiss against Connie’s temple.

“You and me, huh?”

“Always.” The word *choose* whispered across Hudson’s mind, and he fought not to shiver. It was almost as if the fingers of Fate had just brushed down Hudson’s spine.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m wide awake now,” Connie grumbled. “Might as well get up.”

“Why don’t you grab a shower, and I’ll start the coffee.” Hudson had a small coffee bar set up in his bedroom because there were times he didn’t want to trek halfway across his home for a cup of java.

“Yeah, okay. Sounds good. I won’t be but just a minute.” Connie kissed Hudson’s cheek, tossed the sheet off, and padded barefoot into the bathroom.

For a split second, Hudson seriously thought about joining Connie, but Hudson needed a second to steady his nerves. Apparently, Connie must’ve felt the same because he hadn’t invited Hudson to join him.

Damn dream had shaken both of them up.

Hudson slipped out of bed and walked over to the coffee bar. He got the machine going, then stared out one of the floor-to-ceiling windows in his bedroom.

Past the deck and small pool, Hudson stared at the field that stretched out behind his home toward the tree line. A sense of déjà vu made him shiver.

He and Connie had shared a dream. Hudson had never heard of such a thing, nor had he ever experienced something like that. He was a thousand years old and had definitely been around the block a time or two, but this was throwing him.

Who had they been dreaming about? And better yet, why? Who was that person to them?

Both he and Connie had woken up on the verge of transforming, which was alarming by itself. Connie said he’d been upset when he woke up, and Hudson had been too, although he didn’t clearly remember why.

He had a lot of questions and no answers, which was completely unacceptable.

Hudson watched the sun rise, his mind sorting through what he did know. Finally, the coffee machine beeped. Turning away from the window, he fixed himself a cup.

A few seconds later, Connie entered the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He used another to towel dry his hair. “Oh good, it’s ready.”

“Here, let me fix it for you,” Hudson said. He knew exactly how to doctor Connie’s coffee. Funny how little things like that stuck with a person. He poured a mug, added cream and sugar, and handed it over.

Grinning, Connie tossed the towel he was using to dry his hair over his shoulder and took the cup. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” Hudson kissed Connie’s naked shoulder, then wandered over to the little sitting area in his bedroom.

Connie followed him, sipping his coffee. Hudson pulled out Connie’s chair, then sat down once Connie was seated. He liked doing those little things for Connie, liked to see the other male’s eyes light up.

They both sat at the table, staring outside. Neither one of them really had much to say. Several long minutes passed, but the silence wasn’t uncomfortable.

“So, who is the man, and why are we both dreaming of him?”

“That, my king, is the million-dollar question,” Connie said, slowly sipping his coffee.

Hudson couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling of someone, or *something*, tampering with their lives, and he didn’t care for it. At all. “Don’t let your guard down, Connie. We don’t know who this man is. I don’t think he’s a foe, but I don’t know for sure.”

“I agree.” Connie set his coffee cup down. “And we contact each other immediately if this guy should show up.”

“Not if, but when.”

Connie blew out a breath. “Should I alert Torres?”

Hudson thought about it for a second, then shook his head. “No. We don’t have anything to give Torres, and this doesn’t feel like a security threat.”

After all, what would he tell his head of security? That he'd had a weird dream about some guy standing in a field while he and Connie circled the mysterious man in dragon form?

Oh, and that he and Connie had apparently shared the same dream? He wasn't sure if Torres would laugh his ass off or insist he be checked out by a doctor. Possibly both. But all kidding aside, there simply wasn't anything concrete to tell Torres.

Hudson looked at Connie. "Unless it does to you? Feel like a security threat, I mean."

Connie bit his lip but then shook his head. "No. This feels personal. Really, really strange, but personal."

"I agree. So, for now, we keep this between us. If anything should change, we'll alert Torres and the rest of the court. Agree?"

"Agreed," Connie said.

"Okay, good. I'm going to take a quick shower and then we'll go for breakfast."

"I'll get dressed while you do that," Connie said, standing up.

Hudson pressed a kiss to Connie's cheek as he passed him on the way to the bath. Connie still had his own place, but he spent the majority of his time at Hudson's, so more than half his clothes were there.

For all intents and purposes, Connie was basically living with Hudson.

What was between them was still new enough that Hudson wasn't comfortable with pushing Connie to officially move in, and Connie hadn't brought it up either. They were content with what they had, so Hudson was more than willing to leave it alone.

For now.

But Connie having another place to call home irked Hudson's more primitive side. His instincts demanded that

Connie be there, close by, so he could easily find him if needed.

Why no, the urge to squirrel Connie away in a cave and breathe fire at anyone who approached them wasn't like a splinter underneath the skin. Of course not.

Okay, it totally was, but that was a dragon thing. And seeing how Connie was another dragon, he'd probably blow the mountain up if Hudson tried something like that. Didn't change the possessive instinct, though.

Yeah, dragons absolutely could be assholes. And seeing how he was one of the oldest dragons around, and royalty to boot, he could be a bigger asshole than most. Good thing he wasn't young and impetuous anymore.

Hudson showered, dressed, then walked with Connie to breakfast. When they arrived, several of his dragons were already there and eating.

Since his home functioned much like a packhouse, he made sure there was room for his dragons to gather. He and Connie went through the buffet line and joined Torres, Parker, and Beckett at a table.

"Morning, everyone," Hudson said as he sat down, Connie next to him. He was greeted with a chorus of good mornings.

"Beckett? You have anything new to report on Kit?" Hudson asked as he sampled his scrambled eggs.

"There hasn't been any trouble at the bookstore nor at Kit's home," Beckett answered. "I did notice when I walked in yesterday morning a ward had been placed around the building by a magic user though."

"Huh." Hudson put down his fork and pulled his cell phone out. No one had told him about added security on Kit. "I wonder if Kage had anything to do with that. He does have a magic user in his clan."

"Are you texting him?" Connie asked, buttering his toast.

“Yes. I know it’s night over there, but he should still be awake.” Hudson put his phone back in his pocket once he was done. Just because Kage might be awake didn’t necessarily mean he wasn’t... busy. He was sure Kage would get back to him eventually. “So? What are your impressions of this human, Beckett?”

Beckett swallowed the mouthful of food he had before answering. “He’s nice. You can tell he cares for his employees—and that feeling is returned.”

“If his employees like him, that’s a point in his favor,” Torres said.

“Agreed,” Parker said after finishing his bite of waffles.

“That bookstore is most definitely his baby, so it’s safe to say he works at a job he loves,” Beckett continued. “And you can tell that too. Everyone who walks in there seems to be drawn to him. He’s got that kind of personality.”

“Yeah, and if something seems to be too good to be true, it usually is,” Torres said, forking up some hash browns. “So, what bad things have you picked up about him?”

“Honestly? Nothing. Kit’s easygoing, funny, and, well... he’s genuinely nice.” Beckett shrugged. “He’s fast with a comeback and a bit snarky, but he’s never mean. I do think he’s still somewhat jumpy, thanks to what happened to him with Nox.”

“What do you mean?” Connie asked.

“He moved his office to a much smaller room with a crappy view—probably because of the attack in his old office. And, if you come up behind him and he’s unaware of you, if you touch him, he flinches,” Beckett said.

“He was attacked by a mimic. Is anyone surprised he’s jumpy?” Parker asked.

“No, not really,” Beckett answered. “Just stating that I feel like some of his easygoing, ‘it’s all cool’ attitude is a front. Also, as far as I can tell, he doesn’t socialize.”

Hudson nodded. “The report says he never leaves his house at night.”

“So, he goes to work and then he goes home,” Torres said. “Yeah, I think it’s a safe bet to say what happened with Nox affected him.”

“That’s... not good,” Connie said, biting into his toast rather vigorously.

“Kage told me they’ve mentioned Dr. Frederick to Kit.” Frowning, Hudson picked up his coffee and sipped it. He had no idea why hearing this human was basically locking himself away bothered him.

“That’s the psychiatrist, right?” Parker asked. “Isn’t he one of Raven’s vampires?”

“Yes,” Hudson said.

“Um, surely to goodness someone told Kit that Frederick is a vampire. Right?” Connie demanded. “Didn’t you tell me Austin told you that Kit seemed to have a problem with fangs? Or was it blood?”

“I mean, how could he not regardless of whichever it is?” Torres asked, jumping in. “Mimics drink their victims’ blood. It’s how they get their information.”

“That’s correct,” Hudson said.

A mimic was a supernatural creature who was a shapeshifter. He/she took the form of someone and mimicked them. They did that by absorbing the powers, energies, memories, knowledge, talents, personality, and physical abilities—whether superhuman or not—via their victims’ blood.

In other words, they drank blood like a vampire. But unlike a vampire, a mimic didn’t need the blood to live. They weren’t the undead. And Nox had done exactly that to Kit—he had forcibly taken Kit’s blood.

Taking blood from a willing donor was something very intimate... and could be sexual if both parties so chose. But

without consent, the act turned into something horrifying and so very violating.

Then add in watching someone turn into a carbon copy of yourself—Hudson couldn't imagine how a human could handle that. Hell, paranormals didn't handle it well either.

That's why mimics were hunted to extinction. No one, human or otherwise, should have to live through something like that.

"Poor guy," Parker said. "Hopefully, he'll talk to that psychiatrist. It's not like there's a whole lot of people to choose from."

"Yeah, he can't just talk to anybody about *this*," Torres added. "He'd probably get locked up if he started spouting off about vampires and werewolves and such."

"And Kit knows that," Hudson said. "Hopefully Austin can talk him into it once he and Kage return from Greece."

"Speaking of, have you heard when they plan to return?" Connie asked.

"Not—" Hudson's cell phone beeped. Pulling it out, he unlocked it and read the text message from Kage. "Okay, Beckett. Kage did ask Susan, a clan member, to ward Kit's business, and apparently, Kit's apartment door."

"Good to know," Beckett said. "She beat me to it, actually. I'd planned to do that."

Dragons were magical creatures, and as such, could use the magic that created them.

"Kage apologized for neglecting to let me know also." Hudson was sure Kage and Austin had been busy. There was little doubt that taking Nox's ashes back to Greece to be buried was hard on Kage.

"It's understandable," Beckett said. "The trip to Greece wasn't for pleasure, after all."

"Very true. Anyway, Kage said he's instructed Susan to contact me if Kit's wards are breached."

“What kind of ward did she put up?” Torres asked.

“Nothing too spectacular—basically, no one with ill intentions can enter,” Hudson said, reading the text message.

“Okay. My next question is, should Kit be told of this?” Beckett asked. “I feel like he should know.”

CHAPTER EIGHT – CONNIE



“OF COURSE he should.” Connie had no idea why Beckett’s question bothered him, but it did.

For that matter, he wasn’t sure why the entire situation with this human troubled him. He didn’t even know Kit, for crying out loud. He was just some random human who’d been at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Which was a crappy thing to say, but it was the truth. Bad shit happened all the time to both humans and paranormals. That was life, unfortunately.

So why was this fucking *bothering* him?

“Yes, tell Kit. The last thing the human needs is more unpleasant surprises,” Hudson said, sipping his coffee.

Beckett nodded. “Will do, my king. And he has someone keeping an eye on him during the weekend too, right? He doesn’t go in to work on Saturday and Sunday.”

“Yes. Of course,” Hudson said.

The rest of breakfast was, thankfully, focused on more pleasant subjects, and the need to do something—Connie had no idea *what* the hell he thought he needed to do—finally passed.

After breakfast, he followed Hudson to his office, and the two of them sorted through the more pressing emails before calling it a day, as far as work went.

They changed clothes and spent a couple of hours out by Hudson’s pool, then grabbed a late lunch. After both of them showered off the chlorine, they changed into night pants.

Connie leaned against Hudson as he flipped through the channels on the TV. They were in Hudson’s private living

area, so it was just them. As much as Connie enjoyed spending time with the court, he also prized his alone time with Hudson.

“Doesn’t seem to be much on TV,” Hudson said.

“Not surprising. It is Saturday.” Connie rolled his head so he could see Hudson’s face. “You know, the *weekend*?”

Hudson set the remote down and looked at Connie. “Brat. I know what day it is. What do you have in mind?”

“How do you feel about seeing a movie? Then we can grab dinner after? Maybe go down to the boulevard? It’s a nice evening.”

The boulevard, or the San DeLain Ocean Boulevard as tourists called it, was a quintessential beachfront thoroughfare lined with some of the grandest hotels, fabulous beachfront homes, restaurants, amusement parks, and an art museum.

“I like that idea.” Hudson pulled his phone from his pocket and started scrolling. “Any particular movie?”

“Action.”

“Action it is. Ah, okay, here we go. One action movie coming up. And there, tickets bought. It starts in about an hour and a half.” Hudson stood and held his hand out to Connie.

Connie crossed his arms over his chest. “What are we seeing?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

“You hate not being in control of events or actions,” Hudson corrected, a slight grin on his face. “Surprises, by their very nature, take control away.”

“Ha. Pot, meet kettle.” Seriously, Hudson was one to talk about being a control freak.

“No argument there.” Hudson wiggled his fingers. “Now come on, let’s get dressed and get on the road. As you so kindly pointed out, it’s Saturday evening, and we’re probably going to need every minute of that hour and a half to get to San DeLain for the movie.”

“You just had to live out in the middle of nowhere, didn’t you?” Connie grumbled, taking Hudson’s hand and letting him pull him to his feet.

“We’ve got plenty of room to roam here.” Hudson slapped Connie on the ass as they walked into the bedroom.

“Hey!” Connie threw a mock glare over his shoulder. “Tread carefully, old man.”

Hudson moved with incredible speed, grabbing Connie by the back of the neck. He had Connie up against the nearest wall before Connie could blink.

“What did you call me?” Hudson growled softly.

Licking his lips, Connie stared through his eyelashes at Hudson. The slight height difference was sometimes awesome. Not to mention he loved it when Hudson got all growly on him. “Great and powerful dragon king?”

Hudson leaned in a little closer. Their naked chests were *almost* touching. “Try again.”

“Ol’ magnificent one?” Connie’s dick began to swell. Dragon gods, his nipples were aching.

“Mmm. Closer, but still not *quite* right.” Hudson pressed their bodies together. Lifting his hand, he traced Connie’s bottom lip. “Try again.”

A sharp thrill of pleasure ran through Connie. Fuck, Hudson touched him and his body lit up. It was insane, maddening, and he wouldn’t change it for the world. Resting his hands on Hudson’s hips, he let his claws extend, piercing the thin cloth between his nails and Hudson’s skin.

Hudson’s eyes fluttered.

Fuck, he loved seeing what he did to this ancient and powerful dragon. Nipping Hudson’s thumb, he sucked it into his mouth, caressing it with his tongue.

The slight metallic taste of the small wound he’d inflicted filled his senses, and he moaned softly. They were close enough he caught the sharp inhale of breath from Hudson at the sound.

Hudson's eyes darkened as he watched his finger move in and out of Connie's mouth. "I swear, that mouth of yours."

Grinning, he let Hudson's thumb fall from his lips. "You like my mouth."

"I do like your mouth, especially when you have your lips wrapped around my cock." Hudson's hand tightened against Connie's throat. "Now, try again."

Even though his airway was slightly restricted, Connie had no problem breathing. Not really. And he trusted Hudson. Trusted him to the very depths of his soul. Dragon sex tended to be a little rough, and Connie liked it that way.

"Old man," Connie whispered, leaning his head back against the wall so Hudson had full access to his throat. His heart pounded with excitement.

"There it is." Hudson's mouth hovered over Connie's, but instead of kissing him, he tightened his fingers.

Connie didn't move a muscle as Hudson gently cut off his air. He stared into Hudson's eyes, eyes that were now the color of his true form.

Hudson pressed small biting kisses along Connie's jawline, and then, growling, he slammed his mouth down on Connie's. Lust, passion, and just a hint of darkness swirled through the kiss. There were depths to Hudson very few knew—dark, powerful depths.

And still Connie didn't fight the hand at his throat.

Snarling, Hudson released the pressure on Connie's throat. He sucked air while Hudson's tongue swiped a path from his ear to the base of this throat... then latched on.

Connie buried his hand in Hudson's hair. "Oh gods, yes, please. Mark me, my king."

The biting suction sent sharp arrows of pleasure shooting through Connie, and he ground his dick against Hudson's, which was just as hard. The bruise wouldn't last, unfortunately, but for a brief time he would wear his king's

brand on his skin. How he wished he could make it more permanent.

Hudson finally released the tender bit of skin he was sucking on, then pressed a light kiss to it. “Beware the bite of the dragon,” he whispered.

“What?” Connie asked, slightly out of breath.

“Nothing.” Hudson pressed another kiss to the mark. “Anyway, this old man shut you up, now didn’t he?” Hudson patted Connie’s cheek and stepped back.

“And apparently is going to leave me hanging,” Connie grouched, letting his head thump against the wall. He groaned loudly as he palmed his dick.

Hudson grabbed Connie’s hand. “Behave and I’ll take care of that later tonight. Otherwise, you’ll only have your hand for company—for several days.”

“Dragon gods, Hudson!” Only his hand? Over his dead body. Groaning, he let Hudson pull him into the bedroom so they could get dressed and leave for the movies.

Behave? He hadn’t behaved a day in his life. Behave. Right. Didn’t his king know Connie liked playing with fire?

CONNIE FOLLOWED Hudson through the house and out to Hudson’s private garage. The lights flashed on one of his convertible sports cars as Hudson unlocked it.

He waited for Hudson to open the door for him. They had done this enough for Connie to know it was something Hudson insisted on. It gave him a nice, warm spurt of pleasure to know that his king could be as gentlemanly as he could be brutal.

Hudson’s territory extended for quite a distance, but eventually they left it as they drew closer to San DeLain. And, of course, the closer they got to the city, the more insane the traffic became.

They arrived at the fancy movie theater, and once more Connie waited for Hudson to open the passenger door for him.

Once he was out, Hudson tossed the keys to the valet.

They walked inside, Hudson's hand low on Connie's back. The theater was packed but not too terribly bad. The interior looked like any other movie theater, just much more upscale. Once they were seated, a waiter took their drink orders and hurried off.

The movie they were seeing was the latest action-packed adventure from one of the industry's leading actors. Connie was almost giddy as he waited for the movie to start.

There were sure to be plenty of high-speed chases, explosions, and gun battles. He'd been in a couple of those during his life, and it was much more fun to watch on the big screen than it was to live it.

The waiter brought their drinks just as the lights dimmed. Connie settled in to watch the movie, absurdly happy when Hudson linked their hands together.

“DAMN, THAT might've been the best movie that actor has ever made.” Connie blinked rapidly as the lights came up after the movie was over.

“I think you might be right. I hope they come out with a sequel,” Hudson said, standing.

“I bet they do. I'm pretty sure they have a blockbuster on their hands.” Connie got to his feet and started scooting down the row with Hudson right behind him.

There were a lot of people in there with them. Seemed like he wasn't the only one who'd thought seeing this movie tonight was a good idea.

Connie scanned the crowd, unable to help himself. It was habit, and he was pretty sure Hudson was doing the same. He inhaled discreetly. The air current was heavy with a variety of scents—food, alcohol, perfume, hair products, and so on.

Plus the scent of humans, of course. He'd even picked up a paranormal or two in the theater with them. The skin

between his shoulder blades itched as he took note of the many humans whose gazes caressed Hudson as they walked by.

Not that he blamed the humans.

Hudson was a striking man with his long, dark auburn hair. The braid that hung by his face drew attention to his big, brown eyes. It didn't hurt that he obviously kept himself in shape, either.

But there was a dangerous and mysterious aura around Hudson. Humans were drawn to it even as their instinct warned them away. Their hindbrains warned them that there was a predator in their midst, but that allure still pulled at them, drawing them to Hudson.

That he completely understood, because he was drawn to Hudson also.

Still, it made him twitchy that so many watched his king. He continuously scanned the crowds as they left. Nothing happened, but he refused to let himself relax.

They walked out of the movie theater, hand in hand, toward Hudson's vehicle. He didn't lower his guard until they were pulling out of the parking lot.

But before they left, Hudson dropped the top on the convertible. They chitchatted as Hudson drove, the wind blowing Connie's hair.

Hudson found a parking lot with a guard. After they parked, they started toward the boulevard. The smell of the ocean smacked Connie in the face, and he inhaled deeply.

Connie had joked on more than one occasion that if he hadn't been born a dragon, he'd probably have been a merman. He'd always loved the water and was so grateful Hudson's territory had two large lakes on it.

As they walked along, Connie took Hudson's hand. For the most part, no one paid much attention to the fact that two men were holding hands, although they did get a glare or two from the odd human.

He didn't understand the hang-ups certain humans had about sex and gender and probably never would. It simply wasn't a thing for dragons. They fucked whoever they wanted and in as many combinations as they wanted, and no one even blinked at it.

You certainly wouldn't see a dragon clutching their pearls about sex.

The biggest problem with dragons, outside of their fierce need to protect their hoards, was the fact that they were possessive and arrogant. They tended to take what they wanted; at least, the older generation of dragons did. The newer generations, Connie's generation, understood this little thing called consent. At least they had a better grasp of it than the Ancients.

Connie saw a little Mexican place that had tables set right by the beach and pulled Hudson in that direction. There were fairy lights set up in the palm trees above them, along with soft lighting along the boulevard. It was damn romantic.

After they placed their orders, the food was quickly brought out, along with a couple of margaritas. Connie was impressed with how fast the service was, considering the crowds.

And the food was good too. It was freaking excellent.

"Mmm. You should try this," Hudson said, holding up his fork.

Connie leaned across the table and took the offered bite. There was something so intimate about such a gesture. "Yum."

Deciding to return the favor, Connie held up his fork. "Your turn."

Grinning, Hudson slowly ate the bite Connie offered up. Then he made sure to lick the fork. Of course Connie's gaze dropped to Hudson's very agile tongue. He knew firsthand what it was capable of, especially when it was wiggling into tight places.

Connie was tempted to palm his dick, but he remembered Hudson's warning from earlier and resisted.

Hudson leaned back in his chair, shook his hair back over his shoulder, then picked up his margarita. Ever so slowly he took a drink. Was that damn dragon trying to seduce him right there at the table?

His gaze followed Hudson's Adam's apple as it bobbed. Discreetly he shifted in his chair as his cock twitched. Hudson finished his drink and set the glass down, then licked his lips, staring at Connie.

Closing his eyes, Connie groaned softly. The ass *was* seducing him right there in front of the humans and anybody else who happened to be around.

By Gaura, he was tempted to lunge across the table, grab Hudson by that long ass hair of his and—

Hudson cleared his throat. Loudly. "Sweetheart."

Blowing out a breath, Connie opened his eyes. "You're evil. Do you know that? Never mind, of course you know that. Gods, Hudson."

"Having trouble keeping up with the old man?"

"Evil. Absolutely evil."

Laughing, Hudson forked up some more food and held it out to Connie. "Better eat. You're going to need your strength."

"Eeeeeeeevil." Nevertheless, Connie took a bite. So Hudson wanted to tease him? Fine, then. He might fuck him through the mattress later, but by all the dragon gods, Connie was gonna make Hudson work for it. "By the way, same goes."

"Then you better get to feeding me," Hudson said, smirking. "The sooner we get done here, the sooner we can get home."

Connie crammed as much food onto his fork as he could.

IN WHAT was possibly the fastest meal of all time, Connie had managed to clean both his and Hudson's plate, wave down the waiter for their bill, pay it, and drag Hudson halfway down the boulevard.

And of course Hudson was walking as slow as he possibly could. Connie was seriously considering throwing Hudson over his shoulder when the feeling of being watched made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Hudson stiffened next to him.

Connie quickly searched the surrounding area, but there were people *everywhere*, even at this time of night. All playfulness fled as Hudson suddenly picked up the pace.

Neither one of them made a comment as they walked to Hudson's vehicle. But Connie noticed he wasn't the only one watching the crowds. Someone was watching them, he'd bet his hoard on it.

Just as they reached the car, Connie caught the flash of black hair out of the corner of his eye as somebody ducked behind a building.

The scent of a feline shifter floated on the breeze.

Close. They were entirely too close. Connie all but shoved Hudson into the vehicle, then hopped into the driver's seat. Hudson snarled at him, but Connie didn't care. He was no longer acting as a lover, but as a bodyguard to his king. Hudson would just have to get over it.

He paid the parking fee, the gate rose, and Connie wheeled them out onto the street. He watched the other vehicles as he drove, prepared for anything.

Connie didn't relax until they crossed over into Hudson's territory, and even then, not entirely. They'd been attacked on their territory before and had lost one of theirs. Maybe he was overreacting, but he didn't think so.

Someone had been stalking them.

CHAPTER NINE – KIT



SUNDAY MORNING rolled around, and it was another bright and sunny day. Kit did a couple of chores around his apartment, then washed a load of laundry.

Since his refrigerator was almost empty, a trip to the grocery store was also on the agenda. After making a quick list, he changed into shorts and an oversized T-shirt that he tied at the waist. Slipping on sandals, he grabbed his wallet and keys and headed out.

Even on a Sunday morning the grocery store was crowded. Gah. He hated shopping. What he needed was a full-time chef. Yup. And a giant bag of money to hire one.

Snorting, Kit grabbed the cart. Since that wasn't likely to happen, he was stuck doing his own cooking. He pulled out his cell phone and opened the notes app that had his list.

He made pretty good time and even managed to find a checkout lane that didn't have a lot of people waiting to check out. Luck was on his side.

Carrying his groceries to his car, he fumbled with his key fob until he managed to pop the trunk. Just as he leaned over and placed the first bag of groceries inside, goose bumps rose on his arms and the hair on the back of his neck rose.

Shit.

He quickly straightened and looked around. There were a few other people in the parking lot loading their groceries like him, but they didn't seem to be paying attention to Kit.

Kit couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was staring at him, but he couldn't find whoever it was. He looked around again but didn't see anybody paying an undue amount

of attention to him. Nevertheless, his instincts were screaming at him to get out of there.

Just as he leaned over with the second bag, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of somebody ducking between vehicles several aisles over.

His breath caught in his chest as he caught a flash of black hair and olive skin. He only saw the person for a few seconds, but that fucking face had figured prominently in his nightmares lately.

Straightening abruptly, he spun around, but there was no one now. Whoever it was had just... disappeared. Leaning against the back of his car, he rested his hand on his chest, his heart beating furiously.

Now his head was starting to pound, and he could only imagine what his blood pressure was right then. He probably looked like death warmed over.

“He’s dead,” Kit mumbled softly to himself. “They *told* me he was dead. Calm your ass down. He’s nothing more than ashes now. You’re just seeing things.”

Which, in an odd way, made sense. God only knew he still dreamed about the asshole. Taking a deep breath, he tried to get his heart rate back under control.

He was still struggling with it when he noticed a woman about his age pushing a cart towards him. Frowning, she watched him. Yeah, he probably was scaring her with how oddly he was acting. Fuck.

Rubbing his chest, he turned back toward the trunk just as she drew even with him. He needed to finish up and get the hell out of there before he got the cops called on him for acting suspiciously. Which was exactly what he didn’t need today.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Startled, Kit whipped back around to see the woman had stopped next to him. “Oh, hey, yeah. I just thought I saw somebody I knew. Somebody I didn’t particularly want to see again, you know what I mean?”

Which was true but certainly didn't explain how badly he did *not* want to see Nox ever again. But Nox was dead, so he shouldn't be seeing him again. Right?

Right.

“Ugh. An ex? Dude, I get it. I would rather set myself on fire than have to deal with my ex.”

Nox certainly wasn't his ex, but you know what? He wasn't going to go down that rabbit hole. Let her think his reaction was due to that. “I know, right? I thought I caught a glimpse of my ex out of the corner of my eye and kinda panicked. I'm sorry if I scared you.”

“Well, can't be too careful nowadays, you know?” The woman nodded her head vigorously. “I mean, seriously.”

“I agree.”

“Okay, if you're sure you're okay...?”

“I am. And again, I'm sorry if I scared you.”

“It's all good. See you.”

“Thanks again.” Kit pushed his shopping cart back to the little holder place for them and hurried back to his car.

All he wanted to do was get home. He'd had enough excitement for the day, and it wasn't even noon yet.

Had someone been stalking him?

KIT DIDN'T sleep well that night, and when his alarm went off Monday morning, he debated chunking it across the bedroom. Seriously. He still had to get up, but maybe a little violence to start his day off would make him feel better.

Instead, he settled for slamming his hand down on the sleep button. He could not adequately put into words how much he did *not* want to get up and go to work today.

“Gah.” Rolling to his back, he stared up at the ceiling. He still had a slight headache from yesterday, and his mood

was circling the drain. It was going to be a very long Monday indeed.

Flinging the sheet off, he dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. Coffee. He needed several gallons of the stuff to make him safe for human consumption.

Of course he bumped his big toe against the bed frame on the way to the bathroom. Then he dropped the bottle of shampoo on the other big toe. *Then* he dropped the soap, and when he bent over to pick it up, he almost fell over and hit his head.

Good God, maybe it *would* be safer if he did go back to bed. Concerned with the way things were going, he decided to skip shaving. He'd probably slit his throat if he tried.

After he showered, he wrapped a towel around his waist and wandered into the kitchen. Morning sunlight streamed through the windows at the other end of his apartment, and he promptly flipped the sunlight off.

Yeah. It was going to be that kind of day.

The sooner he got the coffee maker going, the sooner he'd stop growling at everything. Once he had a cup, he trudged back to the bathroom and dried his hair.

He loved having long hair, but he could already tell today was going to be one of those days where he was tempted to hack at it with a pair of scissors. He wasn't in the mood to deal with it, so he dried it and piled it on top of his head.

Even though he felt like a bear with a sore paw, he still did his makeup, because nobody wanted to see the horror show he looked like thanks to yet *another* sleepless night.

He stood in front of his closet, staring. Since his mood seemed to demand it, he grabbed his slim-fit black pants that ended well above his ankles, a sleeveless, cropped, black turtleneck, and a long, sheer black cardigan that had a deep-red embroidery on the lapel and cuffs.

He added several deep-red bracelets to one wrist, a black bangle to another, a ring with a big black stone, and

deep-red earrings, and... why the hell not? He picked up a black belly chain and fastened it around his waist.

Slipping on black dress shoes, he looked at himself in the full-length mirror. Yeah, his makeup wasn't working. He definitely needed cat eyes, and his makeup needed to be sultry overall.

After he redid that, he debated what to do with his lips—black or a deep red? Since he was heading to work, maybe the deep red was a better choice. Or he could just say screw it. Wasn't like he had to worry what the boss would say.

Black it was.

Once he applied the lipstick, he studied his image in the mirror. Yeah. Yeah, he liked this. He wasn't one to wear black a lot, but when he did, he rocked it. And really, it did fit his mood this morning.

Fuck Monday.

THE DRIVE to his bookstore was insane, but that was the cost of living in such a big city. No biggie.

Okay, it was a massive pain in his ass thanks to the mood he was in, but he only side-eyed a few people on the drive in. Coffee was probably the only thing keeping him out of jail at this point.

Speaking of which, he sucked some more down.

He arrived at his store, parked, and pulled down the visor so he could see himself in the mirror. "Okay, you want to buy trendy clothes? Buy stupid, expensive coffees? Pay your employees? Buy books? Food? Shoes? You gotta work, bitch."

Satisfied with his little pep talk, he got out, travel mug of coffee in hand, and model-walked to the bookstore. Waving to his staff, he beelined to his office.

His ass had barely hit the seat when there was a knock at his door. Instead of banging his head against his desk as he was tempted to do, he instead called out for whoever it was to come on in.

“Hey. Listen, that shipment we were supposed to get this morning? It’s been....” Beckett stopped halfway into the office, his head tilted to the side. “Kit?”

“Yeah?” Coffee. He needed more coffee if Beckett was already in his office this early in the morning. “What about the shipment?”

“Who died?” Beckett asked.

“What?” Seriously, what? “No one died. The hell?”

“Oh.” Beckett pursed his lips. “Huh. Ah. Well then, are you... okay?”

“Of course.” Kit crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his desk chair. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Well, I can count on one hand how many times I’ve seen you wear black. You’re usually way more colorful. And, well, you look....”

Kit scowled. “I look what?”

“Like a dark but fluffy cloud.”

Kit’s mouth dropped open. “Fluffy? *Fluffy*? Are you saying I look fat? Shit, does this outfit make me look fucking *fat*?” He hadn’t thought so, but what did he know? Maybe he *had* hit his head this morning while showering. He’d hit everything else.

“What? Good gods, *no!*” Beckett exclaimed, rushing the rest of the way into the office. “Clouds are usually soft, and pretty, and cute, and, and, clouds make people happy, which you do! You’re a happy cloud. Clouds are happy, you know?”

Kit raised an eyebrow.

“But you’re dressed all in black, and kinda scowly, which is what I meant by dark. You know, dark like a thundercloud, and oh my gods, I’m making a hash of this!”

Kit hadn’t heard that phrase in a long time. It almost made him smile.

“I was *not* saying you look fat. You’re damn sexy!” Beckett’s eyes widened. “Not that I’ve been looking, of course. I just meant—oh my dragon gods, I’m just going to shut the hell up now. The damn shipment is late but will be here tomorrow.” Beckett dashed out of Kit’s office.

Kit slowly sipped his coffee, his mood suddenly much better. Beckett was usually so calm and collected. Stately. Dignified. It was kinda fun watching that dragon trip all over himself.

A few minutes later Beckett returned, a slight blush on his face. “Okay, let’s try this again... and sorry about that. I really *wasn’t* saying you looked fat. You never wear black, is all. So, again, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Kit shrugged. “This Monday is just the most Monday ever. I didn’t sleep well, hit my big toe on the bed frame when I got up, dropped a full bottle of shampoo on the *other* big toe, almost fell over trying to pick up the soap, and yeah. I’m in a shitty mood ’cause Monday is Mondaying.”

“Is that all?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Kit demanded. Seemed like it should be enough, by damn.

“You said you didn’t sleep well. Is that normal for you?”

Of course Beckett zeroed in on that. Kit sighed. “Well, yeah, it is now— thanks to a certain someone drinking my blood and then turning into *me* right before *my* very eyes,” Kit snapped.

Beckett blinked.

“Sorry. Sorry.” Kit pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe he should’ve stayed home, dammit. “That was unnecessarily harsh.”

“But I think it was an honest reaction that you didn’t intend to show me,” Beckett said, sitting down in the chair across from Kit’s desk. “You’ve been hiding how this has affected you, haven’t you?”

“I mean, not really? Austin and Kage know. But maybe some?” Kit waved his hand at Beckett. “I don’t know how to deal with... you guys... and I’m not sleeping well because of nightmares—”

“Oh, Kit.”

“And now the nightmares are showing up during the daylight hours and.... God. That fucker will not get out of my fucking head.”

“Wait. Wait. What? What do you mean your nightmare is showing up during daylight hours? You’re talking about Nox, right? I think you need to explain,” Beckett said.

Kit huffed. This should be fun. “You know I love to read, and I freely admit I have an overactive imagination.”

“Which has to do with... what?”

“I just want you to know how ridiculous this makes me feel repeating this. I bought groceries yesterday, and when I was pushing the shopping cart back to my vehicle, I suddenly got creeped out. It felt like somebody was watching me. Only, there wasn’t. There was no one paying attention to me in that parking lot.”

“That you knew of. Dammit, Kit, why didn’t you call?”

“And say what? That I got freaked out because a possum walked over my grave?”

Beckett blinked again. “Um, what?”

“It’s an old saying that means I had a sudden case of goose bumps. And oh my God, if you don’t know what *that* means, Google it.”

“Huh.” Beckett peered at Kit. “I may have to reassess the dark cloud analogy. You have definitely got teeth.”

“Dude, stay on topic.”

“Right. You should’ve called me because ignoring your instincts is never a good idea.”

“My instincts are shit. I certainly never picked up that my ex was a piece of shit who was setting me up for Nox. Look, it was nothing. Overactive imagination, remember?”

“Kit.”

“Lord, you sounded like one of my dads just then.”

“*One* of your dads?”

Kit waved his hand as if he was waving away Beckett’s question. “Long story. I have a mom and two dads. Anyway, I freaked out another shopper because *I* freaked out. End of story.”

“That is *not* the end of the story. What freaked you out?”

“Fine! I thought I caught a glimpse of.... Well, this is going to sound nuts, but I thought I caught a glimpse of Nox,” Kit finally, grudgingly admitted. “But it couldn’t have been that asshole. He’s dead. He’s ashes, right? I mean, that was the whole point of Austin and Kage’s trip to Greece, *right?*”

“Yes, Nox is dead. A true death too.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.”

“Axel killed him, and Kage saw the body,” Beckett continued. “My friend, have you thought about seeing the psychiatrist Austin told you about?”

Kit deflated. “The vampire? I... I don’t know. I mean, I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that vampires exist, along with the rest of you guys. Then there’s the fact that vampires drink blood. I don’t know if you’ve noticed it or not, but I kinda have a problem with that.”

“Which is completely understandable, but your fear of fangs is quickly turning into a phobia. Besides, it’s not like Doctor King would be feeding from you. There would be absolutely no reason for you to see his true self.”

“I know. I know.” Now if Kit could just convince his hindbrain of that. “Maybe, okay? Maybe once Austin gets back, I’ll set up an appointment if he’ll go with me that first time.”

“From what I’ve heard, Austin is a really nice guy. I don’t see a reason why he *wouldn’t* go with you if that’s what it takes to make you see Doctor Frederick. Just so you know, I would be more than happy to also go with you,” Beckett said.

“Thanks, I really appreciate that. I’ll let you know.”

“Please do,” Beckett said, standing. “Okay, I’m going to get back to work. If you need anything—” Beckett’s body suddenly stiffened. A low, menacing growl exploded from him.

Kit jerked back in his chair. He’d never heard such a sound like that out of a human. Then again, Beckett wasn’t a human, something that was easy to forget.

Beckett faced Kit’s doorway. Before Kit could ask what was going on, Beckett slammed the office door shut and locked it. Kit had no idea Beckett could move that fast.

He opened his mouth again, but snapped it shut when Beckett faced him. Holy shit. The irises of Beckett’s eyes were a golden-red sunburst of color with black slitted pupils.

“Beckett?” Kit whispered. He had no idea why he was whispering, only that he should—kind of like when you didn’t want to startle a wild animal into attacking.

“The wards here just activated. I felt the rejection.”

“Huh? What? What does that mean? And how do you know?”

“Dragons are magical creatures, so I felt the ward activate. And it means that someone with ill intent just tried to enter your bookstore. Shit.” Beckett pulled out his cell phone and started dialing. “I need to see if I can find who it is, but I don’t dare leave you. *Shit.*”

“Oh my God, oh my God, are you serious? What the fuck does that even mean—someone with ill intent?” Kit asked, jumping to his feet.

His heart was pounding to the point he was a little light-headed. Later, when he wasn’t freaking out about this, he’d examine Beckett’s statement more closely about dragons

being magical creatures. Kage had gotten on to Kit about referring to paranormals as creatures.

“Someone who means you harm just tried to enter your establishment.” Beckett turned away from Kit when his phone call was answered. “My king, we have a problem.”

CHAPTER TEN – HUDSON



HUDSON DISCONNECTED the call with Beckett and immediately dialed Connie.

“Sire?”

“Beckett just called. Someone tried to enter Kit’s bookstore, someone who meant Kit harm. The wards activated.”

“Where are you? Are you still in your office?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, give me twenty minutes to get there and—”

“That’s not necessary, Connie, plus I need to go now.”

“Dammit, then take Lord Nelson with you. Do not go by yourself, especially if there’s a problem. I mean it, my king. Promise me, or I swear I’ll show up there just as soon as I can,” Connie growled.

“I really don’t think that’s necessary, but to keep you and Nelson from *both* yelling at me, fine. I’ll take him with me. Finish your training with Lady Audrey. I’ll contact you just as soon as I know something.”

“Thank you, my king. I’ll talk to you then,” Connie said, disconnecting the call.

Hudson knew by the tone of Connie’s voice that his lover was annoyed with him for not waiting, but he felt like he didn’t have the time. Connie was in one of the far training fields getting ready to practice aerial maneuvers in his dragon form with Audrey, who was their specialist in such exercises. Still, he knew Connie would’ve preferred to be the one to go with Hudson.

Hudson dialed Nelson, told him what he needed, and arranged for Nelson to meet him in his office. As he was speaking to Nelson, another call beeped in.

Ending the call with Nelson, he switched over.
“Hello?”

“King Hudson, this is Susan. The wards on Kit’s bookstore were just activated. Luckily, Doc Terry doesn’t have any patients, so he’s bringing me to you momentarily,” Susan said. “We’ll get you, then go to the bookstore.”

“Good. I was about to call you,” Hudson said. “Beckett told me he felt the alarms activate. Since Kage has tasked me with Kit’s protection, I feel like I need to investigate this.”

“Which is why we’re coming to you first. Where should we meet you?” Susan asked.

“My office. It’s been a while, but Terry has been here before.” Hudson noticed Nelson and waved him into the office. “I’m bringing Lord Nelson with me. He specializes in close combat training, but he’s skilled in many forms of combat. Just in case.”

“The more the merrier,” Susan quipped, then hung up.

“Majesty?”

Hudson quickly explained to Nelson how they were traveling, grimacing in agreement at the look on his face. Neither one of them were thrilled traveling by the shadows, but a daemon’s mode of transportation was the quickest way to get there.

Since Terry hadn’t been to Kit’s new office, Hudson sent a quick text message asking Beckett for a picture of where they were at. Daemons could travel by the shadows without knowing where they were going, but it was always risky. They could see out of their portals, so they knew what they were stepping into the majority of the time, but accidents could happen.

Terry and Susan stepped out of a shadow a few seconds later, making Hudson flinch even though he knew it

was going to happen. He slipped his phone into his pocket and took a deep breath.

Terry opened another portal, and Hudson stepped inside of it. He really did hate traveling this way.

A FEW seconds later, they were standing in Kit's office, and chaos exploded as soon as they stepped out of the shadows.

Only this time, it was all Hudson's doing.

His true nature surged to the forefront as the most sinful scent wrapped around him. It scrambled his ability to think, snatching his iron control away from him in the blink of an eye.

It taunted him, making him want things that he'd yearned for... for hundreds of years. Hudson's gaze sharpened as his control unraveled, and his eyes shifted to those of his dragon.

Someone gasped.

That scent called to him, demanding his attention. His fingernails lengthened and sharpened into deadly claws. Horns sprouted from his forehead, making his scalp burn as they grew upward and back.

That scent.

That fucking scent.

His dragon demanded he find that scent and capture it. Hoard it away. Lock it up and keep it safe. His body tingled as he started the partial transformation.

Mine! Mine, mine, mine! His heart beat in time to the words. *Protect. Protect!* He wanted to roll around in that scent until he was covered in it.

“Hudson! What the *hell* are you doing?” Susan yelled. “Nelson! What the fuck is your king *doing?*”

Yelling. Lots of yelling. Aggressive yelling that was entirely too close to that scent. It needed to stop. He needed to

do something about it.

“I don’t know. *I don’t fucking know*. Your Majesty! Hudson! Shit, Terry, open a portal,” Nelson desperately demanded. “And do it quickly! He’s lost control. I’ll shove him through and—”

No. He would not leave. Couldn’t, in fact. No way was he losing that scent. It had already buried itself in his heart. He’d waited his entire life for this, and he’d burn the entire building down before he lost it.

Hudson roared a promise—he’d kill anything that got between him and that scent.

“Shit, Beckett, do *something!*”

Another powerful presence moved closer to Hudson, and his dragon snarled in warning. Another Ancient was in the room with him, but they were not royalty.

Hudson would battle them—rip them apart and grind up their bones as he devoured the threat to that scent. They would not take what was Hudson’s.

“Holy shit, is he... is he changing? Here? Oh fuck, he can’t do that here!” Terry shouted.

“Open the damn portal before it’s too late!” Nelson bellowed.

“Oh my God, what is *happening?*”

Fear.

Stark raving fear. That sweet scent was now drowning in *fear*. Fear that Hudson had caused. It assaulted Hudson’s senses, the acidity of it.

That was wrong. No, no, no. That shouldn’t be happening, especially not because of him. His dragon whimpered in confusion, and a word whispered across Hudson’s mind.

Mate.

Oh gods. Oh dragon gods. It couldn’t be. It simply could not be, but there was no denying it, not with what that

scent had done to him. It had taken his control and forced him into a partial shift.

Hudson fought harder than he had ever fought in his life. Control. He needed control. He could not shift into his dragon. Not here. He would harm the person with that scent—could kill them.

He would sooner cut off his horns.

And that did the trick. His dragon stopped fighting him and gave Hudson control again. Looking around, he saw several horrified faces looking back at him.

But it was the human's who almost brought Hudson to his knees. The fear. The terror. What was the human's name again? Right. Kit. The owner of the bookstore. Austin's friend.

The human that Kage had asked Hudson to take care of and protect. And what had Hudson done? Put that look of abject horror on Kit's face.

Hudson had done that. Glancing down at his arms, he saw his skin had reverted to that sickly gray color that heralded his partial transformation. He'd rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt earlier and had never rolled them back down. Damn horns were on full display too.

"Oh Gaura, I am so very sorry," Hudson said quietly to the group. To the human. Embarrassment washed over him. How could he? How *could* he terrify his own mate like that?

Oh gods, a *mate*.

Disbelief, need, and sadness rolled unpleasantly in Hudson's chest. A mate. Something every dragon desired, and Hudson desperately did *not* want. Fuck. Connie would be devastated.

He almost, almost, turned on his heel and walked out of the office. Unfortunately, from the tales that he'd heard, that would be useless. He'd smelled his mate and nothing would ever change that. He wouldn't have a moment's peace until he claimed Kit.

Hudson was incapable of walking away now. His dragon simply would not allow it. Even the thought made nausea roll through him. Fuck. If only he could turn back time.

Taking a deep breath, Hudson willed the partial transformation back. “Again, I am so sorry everyone.”

“Your Majesty? Hudson? What—”

“I’ll explain later. Everything is fine, Nelson.” Hudson said, quickly cutting him off. He needed to deal with what he’d just learned before he started explaining what happened. And then there was Connie.

“Are you sure?” Terry asked.

“I’m positive,” Hudson said. “I’m no longer in jeopardy of losing control. I apologize, Terry and Susan.”

“Jeez,” Susan mumbled, wiping her brow.

Hudson slowly approached a very pale Kit and held out his hand. “Hello, Kit. I’m Hudson. I am so very sorry for scaring you. That was never my intent.”

Kit swayed slightly, and Hudson grabbed him.

He gently held Kit as he eased him down to the floor. “Okay, easy there. You’re okay. It’s okay. You’re safe. I’m so damn sorry. It’s fine now. No changing, I promise. Just breathe. You’re safe.”

“What the fuck was that?” Kit whispered.

“A partial transformation. Dragons can do that.” There was no way Hudson was going to admit what caused him to do it, or that he’d lost control, which had prompted the partial transformation in the first place.

He was trying to reassure Kit that everything was okay, not further freak him out. And Kit was as pale as a ghost.

“Okay. Okay.” Kit patted his chest. “That was more excitement than I was bargaining for, but okay. I’m just going to, you know, maybe put my head between my knees here for a minute.”

Hudson ran his hand up and down Kit's back as his mate immediately did what he just said. Glancing up, he met several annoyed and/or concerned gazes. Beckett, in particular, was watching Hudson. There was a knowing look on his face.

Shit.

After a few minutes, Kit lifted his head. "I think I'm fine now. I don't feel like I'm going to pass out anymore."

Hudson burned with shame. "Here, let me help you back up."

Kit took Hudson's hand, and Hudson pulled Kit to his feet. "Again, I cannot adequately express how very sorry I am for frightening you."

Still holding Kit's hand, he kissed the top of it.

Kit's eyes widened. "Oh wow. Yeah, that was... that was... I don't know what that was. Are you sure you're okay?"

By the dragon gods, Kit's skin was smooth and soft. Hudson wanted to lick him from wrist to... Hudson physically had to make himself let go of Kit's hand before he did something he shouldn't. Like lick him. Everywhere.

"I'm perfectly fine. I promise," Hudson said, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. It was either do that or reach for Kit again. He couldn't seem to keep his hands off the other man. "I'm sorry you had to see my partial transformation. I understand it can be a bit much."

"I was just... just not ready for it. It's been a hell of a day so far. But yeah, you're terrifyingly awesome," Kit admitted.

Hudson fought the urge to preen, and his dragon perked up. Kit thought he was terrifyingly awesome. He'd take it. Kit's words replayed through Hudson's mind, and he realized Kit had given Hudson the opening he needed to get things back on track.

"Ah yes, the wards. Everybody? I think we need to discuss this. Shall we sit?"

“I’ll grab some chairs from the break room,” Beckett said. “I’ll be right back.”

With a meaningful look at Hudson, Beckett went to the office door, unlocked it, and left. Terry and Susan were also keeping an eye on him, but Hudson didn’t care. The only person who drew his attention was Kit.

The human was of average height, but Hudson couldn’t tell much about his body, except for that toned belly Kit’s cropped shirt showed. It was all Hudson could do not to drop to his knees and tease that belly chain Kit wore... with his tongue.

Gaura help him.

There was an awful lot of black, though, and the black lipstick was certainly throwing Hudson. Kit looked like a very dressy goth, and that had never been something Hudson had been attracted to.

He certainly could not say that now.

Kit’s hair was piled up on top of his head, so Hudson couldn’t tell how long it was, but it was most definitely brown. His eyes were hazel and framed by some of the longest lashes Hudson had ever seen on a person. Hudson couldn’t tell much about Kit’s lips except that they were full and pouty... and black. His eyes were lined in black too.

No doubt about it, Kit definitely had a very femme look, which had never really appealed to him until right this second, and he was definitely trendy. He also appeared delicate. Again, the urge to whisk Kit away and hide him in his hoard was nearly overwhelming.

Beckett returned with a couple of chairs and everybody crowded around the small table Kit had in his office. Hudson made a point to sit next to Kit, of course. He’d happily toss his dragons out of the way if he had to.

Hudson listened as Beckett described what he’d felt when the ward was first breached.

“I also took a look around when I left to get the chairs,” Beckett said, glancing at Hudson. “I should’ve done it

sooner, but I was unwilling to leave Kit.”

Even after you got here was left unsaid by Beckett. Not with the way Hudson had reacted. And neither Nelson nor Beckett knew *why* Hudson had acted the way he did. There would be questions later, no doubt.

Now that Hudson was calmer, he recognized that the Ancient that felt so threatening to him earlier was Beckett. Lord Beckett wasn't as powerful as Hudson, but he was close.

“You did the right thing by staying with him,” Hudson said. “Thank you, Beckett.”

“There were a lot of scents around the business, of course. It's a popular place with a lot of people in and out of it.”

“Then you didn't get anything?” Terry asked.

“Quite the opposite, actually. I got too much. There were a bunch of human scents, a feline shifter—”

“Wait. A feline shifter? Are you sure?” Hudson asked.

“I'm positive. Why?”

“Huh. Connie and I picked up the scent of a feline shifter who we thought might be stalking us Saturday night,” Hudson said.

“Well, that's certainly... coincidental,” Nelson huffed.

“Maybe. Maybe not. The thing is, if the shifter was stalking us, he did nothing,” Hudson said. “Continue, please, Beckett.”

“Sure. There was also a mer. And I did manage to pick up some older scent trails,” Beckett said. “A vampire walked past last night, as did a wolf. So yeah. Even if I had gone straight out there, I don't know that it would've helped.”

“Kit? Do you have security cameras?” Susan asked.

“Yes, but they're not top of the line,” Kit said.

“It's better than nothing,” Hudson said. “I would like to see what was recorded, if you don't mind.”

“Sure. No problem,” Kit said. “I’ll pull it up on my laptop before you leave.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, Kit? I think you also need to tell Hudson about the feeling of being followed during your grocery run yesterday,” Beckett said.

Hudson nodded. “Absolutely you should.”

“I don’t know. I still think I was just overreacting,” Kit said.

“If your wards hadn’t just rejected someone today, I could see you saying that,” Hudson said. “But things have changed.”

“Okay, yeah, you have a point.”

“The fact is, someone tried to get in here. Don’t downplay anything,” Hudson warned. “If you felt like someone was following you yesterday, then I need you to tell me everything that happened. And any other time you felt like that too.”

Kit sighed. “Okay, so I went grocery shopping yesterday, right? Well, anyhow—”

Hudson listened intently as Kit explained the creepy feeling he’d had of being watched, and how he’d reacted. Considering that Hudson and Connie had felt like *they’d* been watched recently, and a feline shifter had been around not only them but also Kit... Hudson was concerned. Very concerned.

Then Kit asked Susan a bunch of questions about the ward that had been placed. Hudson enjoyed listening to Kit’s voice—it was very melodious and pleasing.

In fact, even though it surprised Hudson, everything about Kit appealed to Hudson, which scared the hell out of him. Why had this happened now? And how was he not going to break Connie’s heart?

Susan explained exactly what the ward was, and what it did, and why it had been set off. Someone had tried to enter

Kit's business, someone who had wanted to hurt Kit. The very thought made Hudson want to set something on fire.

Since the threat seemed to have passed, Hudson reminded Kit he wanted to see the security camera videos. Maybe something would show up there, but Hudson had a feeling that would come up empty too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – CONNIE



CONNIE FREELY admitted he'd had trouble concentrating during the drills. Audrey had almost knocked him out of the sky twice, and he'd plowed into Parker because he hadn't been paying attention to where he was flying. Thanks to him, training had been a disaster.

He'd *wanted* to go with Hudson, but he'd *needed* to be there for training. His training partners probably would've preferred he *had* gone with Hudson. Gods, he'd been a menace.

At least Nelson was with Hudson. Well, Connie sincerely hoped Hudson had asked Nelson, or there was going to be a screaming match later. If Hudson could avoid taking guards with him when he went out, he would.

After practice was over, and Audrey had lectured him for a full ten minutes, Connie finally got dressed and headed back to the main house. Several hours had passed since Hudson had left, and Connie was dying to know what had happened.

Connie called Hudson and Nelson, but both calls went to voice mail. Dammit, could they seriously not pick up the phone and let him know what was going on?

If he didn't hear from one of them soon, he'd Google where this damn bookstore was at and show up there himself.

He showered in Hudson's bathroom, dressed in clean clothes, and raided the kitchen. Since he and several others of the court had had mandatory training, there would be plenty to eat, even though lunch was over.

Just as he sat down at the table with a couple of the other dragons, he got a text message. Finally! Pulling his cell

phone out, he quickly read the very incredibly short text Hudson had sent.

Connie sipped his water as he read. The human was fine, and whoever had tried to breach the building had gotten away. There had been too many scents for Beckett to figure out who it had been. Hudson said he and Nelson would be back within the hour.

Annoyed, he slipped his cell phone back in his pocket. He hadn't been expecting a five-page letter, but Hudson could have sent a little bit more than just the bare facts. At least he knew Hudson was okay.

He and Parker talked about the aerial maneuver Audrey had taught them as they ate. Other dragons in their court stopped by and spoke before going about their business. He laughed and joked with each of them.

As much as he liked having private meals with Hudson, this was also a very necessary part of their lives. Dragons weren't naturally pack animals like wolves, so social interaction was necessary to strengthen the bonds of their court.

Plus, Connie enjoyed shooting the shit. He'd always been more sociable than other dragons. Since he had an hour to kill, Connie made a quick trip to his house, grabbed some more clothes, and returned to the main house.

Maybe one day soon Hudson would ask him to officially move in. Hell, the majority of his time was spent there anyway, and most of his clothes hung in Hudson's closet.

He swung by Hudson's office and checked the emails, answered those that he could, and marked the ones to show Hudson when he got back.

Since there wasn't anything else he could do until Hudson returned, he stopped by the communal living area to see who was hanging around. Maybe he could play a game of pool or two until Hudson arrived.

CONNIE HAD just pocketed the eight ball when his cell beeped with an incoming text message. “Okay, guys, gotta go. Hudson’s back.”

Waving goodbye to the dragons he’d been playing pool with, Connie put his phone away and headed toward Hudson’s office.

The door of the office was closed, which was highly unusual, and tension seeped into Connie. Unease climbed his spine. His hands shook slightly as he knocked, then opened the door and walked inside.

Only Hudson was there, and he was sitting on the small love seat he had in his office. On the table next to him was a glass of purple liquid—Dragon mead.

It was a magically infused alcohol and the only thing guaranteed to get a paranormal drunk because it was not metabolized too quickly. Needless to say, the stuff was like liquid gold and crazy expensive.

It was also a bad sign if Hudson was—Connie staggered backward as a heady scent slammed into him. His sight immediately sharpened, signifying that his eyes had changed to that of his dragon.

Sweat beaded his brow and slid down his hairline. His entire body shook as his fingernails grew and sharpened. A deep, rumbling growl started in his chest as Connie lost control and started a partial shift.

Straight up panicking, he panted, trying to regain control as that fucking scent filled his lungs. “Oh gods, *what* is that?”

“Connie? What’s going on?”

That delicious scent wrapped around him, yanking him into the room. He padded across the carpet, heading straight toward Hudson, which seemed to be the source of that maddening scent.

His thoughts churned as his dragon roared in his head. Nothing mattered except for that damn scent. He wanted to

roll around in it, cover himself completely with it until it saturated every cell in his body.

The power of it took him by the throat and sank its fangs into him. It whispered dark, needy things in his ear that Connie was totally on board for.

His cock sprang up, his balls high and tight to his body. Suddenly his clothes were too tight. He ripped his shirt off, leaving grooves in his skin as he did so, but he didn't care. He needed... he needed....

Dragon gods! He breathed deeply. That scent. Connie prowled toward a surprised looking Hudson. Straddling his lap, Connie sank his claws into Hudson's thick hair and yanked his head back. His lips crashed down on Hudson's.

Connie dominated the kiss, demanding Hudson's compliance. Growling harshly, he sucked on Hudson's tongue. Pleasure and need stormed through Connie, robbing him of his ability to think.

Something was wrong.

The thought kept repeating in his head. Of the two of them, Hudson was the more dominant. What was wrong with him, and why the hell was Hudson putting up with this attack? And it was definitely an attack of sorts—he'd crawled into Hudson's lap and practically mauled him.

Ending the kiss, he stared into Hudson's eyes, eyes that were the color of Hudson's dragon. "That scent. Gods above, *what* is that scent on you?"

"Breathe, sweetheart. I need you to gain control. Don't make me force the issue," Hudson said quietly. "Concentrate."

"But that scent," Connie whined, then leaned closer and licked Hudson's throat. "It makes me yearn. I wanna fuck you."

"Get control, Connie. I need you to fight the siren's call of that scent. Can you do that for me? Don't let your dragon take over. I need you to be in control."

Connie shuddered on Hudson's lap. He chanted the word control in his mind, for all the good it did. "I can't. It's that scent. It's making me wild." Connie began slashing at Hudson's shirt.

Hudson didn't say a word, he simply stood with Connie in his arms. Connie was aware they were moving, but he didn't care. He was too invested in sucking up marks on Hudson's neck.

Connie wanted to strip Hudson down, mount him, and fuck him into next week. He'd fuck him, then feed him. Torch anything that came near them. He'd lock Hudson in his hoard so nobody could take what was his.

Some small part of his brain that wasn't hopelessly lost in the scent coming from Hudson screamed that his thoughts and actions were really, really wrong, but Connie couldn't figure out why.

Then another random thought popped into his head. Hudson was strictly a top. The few times they had tried with Hudson bottoming had been disastrous.

Then that thought was lost under another wave of pleasure.

A few seconds later, *that* wave of pleasure was buried under a wave of actual water. Pool water. The iciness of it snapped Connie out of the spiral he'd been in. Stunned, he stared at Hudson, who was still holding him. Underwater. In Hudson's pool.

Holy shit.

Now that his mind was clear, he remembered everything that had happened over the past several minutes. He'd lost his mind. Literally. Hudson caressed Connie's face, and Connie nodded. He knew what Hudson was asking even without words being exchanged.

Yes, Connie was back in control.

They surfaced, and Connie immediately began to babble. "Oh gods, Hudson. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry. I

didn't mean to.... I don't know what came over me. I've never acted like that. Ever. It was like I completely lost—”

Hudson pressed a quick kiss to Connie's lips while still treading water. “You did lose control, but I know why. It's okay. You're okay.”

“Why? And no, I'm not okay. Please tell me. Is something wrong with me? Am I sick? Have I been cursed? What the hell is going on?” Connie nearly sobbed.

By Gaura's scales, he'd lost control more here lately than he cared to think about.

Hudson flipped his wet hair out of his face. “Fuck, Connie. I was so scared, so damn worried. You don't know how sick I was about this, then you reacted exactly the same way I reacted, and I had hope that—”

“What?” Why did Hudson look relieved? What was there to be relieved about, because Connie certainly wanted to know. “What is *wrong* with me?”

“Apparently the same thing that's wrong with me.”

“What does that *mean*?” Connie wailed, grabbing at Hudson as they treaded water.

“Tell me something, Connie. Do you still feel out of control now that I've dumped us in the pool?”

Hudson's question stopped Connie cold. “No. Actually, I don't.”

“I thought as much. That's why I tossed us both into the pool. The water washed the scent off me, and the scent was what was affecting you. Connie, I'm positive you smelled your mate on me.”

“*What?*” Connie roared. “No! Absolutely not! Oh, fuck no. No! I don't want a mate. Only want you. Fuck this!” Conrad started thrashing in the water, trying to get away from Hudson.

He wouldn't listen to this. He absolutely would not. He made it to the shallower part of the pool before Hudson caught up with him.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Hudson grabbed Connie by the arm and pulled him around. “Connie, I had the exact same reaction. Do you hear me? The *exact* same reaction. I also lost control and scared the fuck out of several people around me.”

Connie heard the words, but they made absolutely no sense. Was Hudson saying he met his mate? That was what he was saying, wasn't it? Connie was pretty sure his heart just shattered. Why couldn't Fate just leave them the fuck alone?

“You had the exact same reaction as I did to that scent. I don't think you understand what I'm telling you, sweetheart.”

“You met your mate. I do understand that, Hudson.”
And it killed Connie.

“I did, yes. And this person is *your* mate too. Of that I have no doubt.”

TWO HOURS later, Connie was still trying to come to terms with the bomb Hudson had dropped in his lap.

Hudson had wanted to immediately talk about it, but Connie had practically leaped out of the pool to avoid the subject. Once Hudson caught up with him, he shut that shit down again.

He couldn't discuss this yet. He didn't know who it was and hadn't asked. He was still trying to come to terms with both of them having an actual mate who apparently was one and the same person.

He wasn't losing Hudson. And Connie had a soul bound mate out there somewhere. Who apparently was Hudson's soul bound mate too. How the hell did *that* work?

They had dried off and changed. Now they were sitting in Hudson's living area, both of them with a glass of Dragon mead. Connie had already downed over half of his. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to drink himself into oblivion today.

“You’re sure?” Connie asked again, because oh dear gods, he still couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, sweetheart, I’m sure,” Hudson said again.

“You’re sure that you’re sure?”

“I’m sure that I’m sure, yes. That answer isn’t going to change, sweetheart. Are you ready to talk about this now?”

“Yes. No. Yes. Fuck.” Connie massaged his temples. “Okay, who is it?”

“It’s Kit.”

Connie let his head flop back against the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling. He laughed softly. “Of course it is. So, we have Kage to thank for this.”

“Yes, we do. Or Austin. He was the one who befriended Kit first.”

“Kit, the human that Nox attacked.” Scowling, Connie lifted his head and glared at Hudson. “The human who got thrown into our world in one of the most brutal ways possible. The human who apparently is now being stalked by someone. That Kit?”

“That Kit.”

“The Kit who is apparently the soul bonded mate to two dragons—one of which is royalty.” Connie sighed heavily. “And Kit, of course, knows nothing about this. Yeah, this has train wreck written all over it.”

“There are most definitely complications. I agree with that.”

“Several.”

“But he’s ours.”

“How is this going to work, Hudson? You know as well as I do how possessive dragons can be. If Kit is a mate to both of us, are we going to end up at each other’s throats? How in the world are we going to be a throuple? Or am I going to be playing second fiddle to you since you’re older and more powerful?”

“You do know that there are other dragons in three-way relationships, right?”

“Yeah, but are they soul bound?”

“Okay, that I don’t know. But I will tell you this—the three of us will be equal in this relationship. Just because I’m older doesn’t mean my relationship with Kit will be stronger than yours. None of us would be happy with that setup. The bond won’t allow it, either.”

“We hope.”

“No. I believe this fully. We *will* be equals in this relationship. That, of course, does not mean I won’t be the more dominant one. I am in our relationship. Do you agree?”

“Well, yes. That’s why my reaction surprised me as much as it did. I tried to dominate you.”

“Which is something that is probably going to happen again with Kit, and you’re going to have to be careful with that. Kit is human. They’re delicate and easily damaged.”

“Then we’ll give him our blood and—”

“We absolutely will when he’s ready to take that step, but he will never have the strength or the power of a dragon. Our blood will make him more than what he is now, and he will live as long as we do, but in this instance, he will never be our equal.”

“Gods.” Connie took a big swig of his drink. The liquor burned going down his throat. “We need to talk to Kage. He’s in the same type of relationship.”

“That’s an excellent idea. We’ll do what we have to. But the first thing we have to do is ensure Kit’s safety. Let me fill you in on what I learned today.” Hudson quickly repeated what Kit had said about feeling like he was being stalked.

“So, you’re telling me that Sunday morning Kit felt like he was being watched, and he saw a flash of black hair while he was at the grocery store. That even though Beckett picked up several scents around Kit’s bookstore, there was definitely the scent of a feline shifter.”

“Yes.”

Connie had to suppress a growl. That wasn't good.
“And Saturday night, while *we* were on the Boulevard, we also caught a flash of black hair from someone possibly following us and picked up the scent of a feline shifter.”

“Yes.”

“I don't believe in coincidences. Do you?”

“Not in the least.”

“Fuck. So, who do we need to kill?” Connie demanded.

CHAPTER TWELVE – KIT



KIT FINALLY managed to clear everybody out of his office, even though it took some fast talking on his part. He needed a minute. So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours he was feeling overwhelmed. More so than normal, actually.

Kit leaned back in his office chair and stared up at the ceiling. Holy shit, he'd met Hudson, the dragon king. His heart had beat faster, and not just because Hudson had scared the absolute shit out of him.

Hudson had called it a partial transformation, and whoa. Kit had never seen anything like that before in his life. Which, now that he knew what he did, wasn't saying anything.

“And I still don't know what triggered him and caused that,” Kit mused.

While the partial transformation had been terrifying, Hudson was insanely sexy. Kit's libido had certainly sat up and taken notice. Had it ever. For crying out loud, he'd wanted to run his hands through all that sexy red hair, then all over that damn fine body.

Kit closed his eyes so he could visualize Hudson more clearly. Lord have mercy, that hair! Kit wasn't picky—he'd dated men with no hair, short hair, and long hair. But color was a different matter. He freely admitted he had a thing for gingers.

And Hudson smelled so good. Kinda woodsy with a cedar undertone that made Kit think about all the nights he and his family had sat around a bonfire, laughing and joking. It reminded Kit of... home.

The feeling of homesickness swept over Kit, startling him. He was close to his mom and dads, and it had been a while since he'd talked to any of them.

Problem was, he couldn't share the troubles he was having right then. He'd promised Kage he wouldn't tell anybody what he knew—and that included his loved ones.

And his mother would know as soon as she heard his voice that something was bothering him—and how she did that, he had no idea—which was one of the reasons he *hadn't* contacted any of them. She wouldn't stop until she got it out of him.

His family, and the commune they lived in, was pretty open-minded, but this might be pushing it, even for them. Plus, it wasn't his secret to share.

So, for the time being, he didn't have a choice but to avoid them.

Which meant he really didn't have anybody to talk to who would understand. Well, there was Austin, but Austin had his own shit going on. And okay, there was Beckett. They'd gotten to be pretty friendly too.

So maybe he wasn't as isolated as he thought. Opening his eyes, he stared at the computer sitting on his desk. There was also that psychiatrist guy Austin and Beckett had mentioned. He was certainly somebody Kit could talk to.

An involuntary shudder racked Kit's body. Yeah, the good doctor certainly knew about paranormals—he was a vampire. Kit honestly didn't know if he could handle that the guy drank blood to survive. He had to, but it didn't change the fact that it still triggered Kit.

“Thanks, you fucker,” Kit whispered as a memory popped up of Nox sinking his fangs into Kit's neck.

And Nox hadn't even been a vampire, but Kit was associating his trauma with blood drinking. He knew what he was doing, but it didn't change anything. It made Kit want to beat his head against the nearest wall because mimics *didn't* need blood to survive.

They only took it so they could mimic their victims, but Kit couldn't seem to separate the two. His stomach rolled uneasily, but this time, *this fucking time*, it pissed Kit off. He was damn tired of reacting this way.

Kit had never been one to run from his problems and damned if he was going to continue to. Yanking his cell phone out, he fired off a text to Beckett asking if he would be able to set up an appointment with that psychiatrist—even though panic threatened to overwhelm him when he sent the text.

He practiced a breathing exercise, and when that didn't seem to be helping, he marched himself down to the break room, yanked open the refrigerator, and grabbed a fistful of ice.

Even though his hand got uncomfortably cold quickly, it seemed to snap him out of the spiral he was headed into. He had no idea why the cold seemed to work, but he'd seen a video about it, and it did do the trick.

Kit wasn't one to suffer panic attacks and never had, which was just one more reason why he really needed to talk about what happened with Nox to someone.

He wanted his damn life back.

Now that he had himself under control, he dumped the ice in the sink and dried his hand. Glancing at his watch, he was surprised to see that it was nearly lunchtime. Even more surprising was the fact that his stomach was growling. He was actually hungry.

While he was contemplating where he wanted to go for lunch, Beckett texted him back saying he would ask someone named Conrad to take care of the appointment with Doctor King. He also asked if Kit was ready for lunch.

“Great minds think alike.” Grinning, Kit told Beckett he'd meet him by the cash register in five minutes.

“SO WHERE do you want to go?” Beckett asked as they drove out of the bookstore's parking lot.

“I don’t care,” Kit said, buckling his seat belt. “You got any suggestions?”

“What about Rafferty’s? It’s this bar and grill type restaurant that’s not too far from here.”

“Sounds good to me. Although I might be slightly overdressed.” Kit glanced down at his clothes.

“Well then, how about Embers?” Beckett asked, stopping at a red light. “It’s a bit more of a drive though.”

“Isn’t that the restaurant located in the Dominion?”

“Yup. Kage owns the building and the restaurant.”

“Oh. It’s kinda upscale, isn’t it?”

Beckett shrugged. “You’ll see everything from shorts and T-shirts to suits that cost ten grand there. Since Kage and Austin live in the building, they eat at the restaurant quite often. From what I hear, Austin is *not* a fan of dressing up.”

“You got that right.” Kit grinned at the memory. “One time I overheard his agent threatening him with all sorts of dire consequences if he showed up to a book signing in clothes that had more holes in them than Swiss cheese.”

Beckett snickered. “His agent is Lanny Brooks—Lady Lanny Brooks. By the way, she’s a dragon too.”

Kit’s mouth fell open. “Holy crap, of course—the red hair.”

“Yup. Not everybody who has red hair is a dragon, but every dragon who is a member of any Fire Court has red hair.”

“That’s right, Hudson told me to make sure you had red hair and brown eyes when I met you. He said that it was a—well, he called it a trait.”

“Which it is. So? Do you want to go to Embers?”

“Sure.”

Beckett put on his blinker and moved into the lane that would take them toward downtown.

“So, a moment ago you said *any* Fire Court. There’s more than one?”

“Absolutely. Hudson is king of the San DeLain Fire Court. There are Fire Courts in pretty much every major metropolis in the United States and overseas. There are also different *kinds* of courts.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” Beckett sighed when a Lamborghini cut in front of him. “I swear, these people can’t drive worth a crap. Okay, so, San DeLain only has one dragon court—ours. Hudson claimed territory here when the city first got started and ran other dragons off.”

“Dragons can do that?”

“Of course, if they’re strong enough. And believe me, Hudson is strong enough. He’s an Ancient and also royalty.”

“When you say Ancient you mean...?”

“He’s a thousand years old.”

Kit blinked several times in shock. “Holy mother of all, he doesn’t look like he’s more than thirty.”

“We stop aging once we hit a certain age.”

“Well damn. Must be nice.” Never get wrinkles? Body parts never sagging? Yeah, sign him up.

Beckett laughed. “It certainly has its perks. Okay, back to the dragon courts. The Fire Courts—those are dragons who have control over all kinds of fire and have the ability to breathe fire. Their dragons are a combination of reds, yellows, and oranges. Kind of like fire. People who belong to this court all have some shade of red hair and brown eyes.”

“Like you guys.”

“Yes. Then there are the Storm Courts. Those dragons are a combination of blues, greens, and purples. They breathe bolts of lightning and have control over the winds and rains of all storms. Unlike us, their hair can be any color, but their eyes are a weird combination of blue, green, and purple.”

“Can they be of any race, like you guys?”

“Yes, all dragons can be of any race. Next up are the Winter Courts. These dragons are either silver or white. With them, it’s always one *or* the other, and they all have silvery-white hair in human form, but no particular eye color. They breathe frost and can call forth and control frost and snow. They like to freeze things. They’re the smallest of the dragons, and they tend to avoid fights.”

“I bet that white hair is eye-catching.”

“It was, but not so much in this age. We have people walking around with all sorts of hair color now, so the white dragons don’t quite stand out like they used to in the past.”

“Gotcha.”

“Finally, there’s the Night Court. These dragons are either black *or* gray. Again, it’s one or the other. In human form they have gray eyes and black hair that has gray streaks.” Beckett grimaced. “They spit acid.”

“Holy crap!”

“Yeah. They’re bad news all the way around. While red dragons tend to be the most powerful, and quite frankly, the most aggressive, dragons from the Night Court are brutal. Cold. Mean. Dangerous.”

“So, avoid them at all costs.”

“Exactly. I’m not exaggerating when I say that either. They truly are dangerous. If you see a human who matches the Night Court’s description, get away from them as quickly as possible.”

“Jeez, they’re that bad?”

“They’re that bad. Please understand, I’m not trying to scare you, but you do need to be more aware of your surroundings now.”

Kit glanced out of his window. “Yeah, I’m not sure that would do any good. It didn’t last time.”

“Kit, you had the misfortune of running into a mimic. There aren’t too many paranormals who can stand against them. Look, I need to tell you something while we’re on this subject. I’m an Ancient too.”

Kit’s head snapped around, and he goggled. “Shit. Just how old are you?”

“I’m a little over a thousand years old. The only one more powerful than me is Hudson, and that’s because he’s royalty. There *is* one other Ancient in our court, and that’s Grand Lady Stella. She’s a close second in power to me. And *I* wouldn’t want to tangle with a mimic.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Really.”

“That... that kinda helps. Thanks. And wow, you’re a thousand years old.” The hits just kept coming. “That boggles my mind. My God, the things you must’ve seen. Wait. Wait, you said there was another Ancient, right?”

“Yes. Grand Lady Stella.”

“That’s a title, right? So, you are...?”

“Grand Lord Beckett.”

Kit collapsed against the seat. “Good grief, should I be bowing to you or something?”

“I will smack you upside the head if you do.”

Kit snickered. Now that he knew how old Beckett was, hearing him use slang was cracking Kit up. Oh, the old man jokes were writing themselves in his head!

“That crap went out years ago, along with kissing the signet ring of a queen or king. And kneeling. And pressing your forehead to the floor in front of them. And them killing you because you didn’t grovel enough.”

What? Was Beckett kidding? That was horrifying. Kit massaged his temples. “You know what? I need a drink.”

“Most people do when dealing with dragons.”

KIT DID indeed have a drink with his lunch. In fact, he had two, because by damn, he'd earned them. Unfortunately, the slightly tipsy feeling didn't last nearly long enough to suit him.

He and Beckett returned to work and finished out the day. As usual, Beckett walked Kit out to his car and then followed him home. He waved as he drove off. Kit nodded his head to Leo, the dragon who would take over watching Kit.

He fixed himself a glass of wine, had dinner, then took a long, hot bubble bath. He read a bit instead of watching TV, then went to bed. He was glad to see the backside of this Monday. Tomorrow had to be a better day, surely.

It certainly couldn't be any worse.

He heard his mom's voice in his head, yelling about tempting Fate, and cringed. He sent up a quick prayer. He really couldn't handle another day like today.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – HUDSON



HUDSON WAS sipping his morning coffee and debating on calling Kage when his cell phone rang. Pulling it out of his pocket, he quickly unlocked it when he saw that it was none other than Kage. Funny how that worked—it was like Kage knew.

“Well, good morning. Was your nose itching?”

“Good afternoon to you... and what?” Kage asked, laughing.

“Haven’t you heard that if your nose is itching, someone is thinking about you? I was just debating calling you, in other words.”

“I have now. How’s it going?” Kage asked.

“It’s going.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging. What’s up?”

“Do you have a moment?”

“For you? Always. What’s going on, Hudson?”

“Before we get into that, how are things with you?”

“You know that just makes me more curious, but I’ll let you get away with it this time. Nox has been buried in the cemetery where my parents are. Austin and I have done some sightseeing, and I am currently arguing with officials because I want to see the original copy of Nox’s birth certificate.”

“And?”

“And I was informed they don’t let just *anybody* see such ‘delicate and rare documentation’ and that’s a quote. So I’m now pulling some strings to get what I want.”

“Of course you are.”

“Unfortunately, that means that we’re going to be in Greece a little longer than I first thought.”

“Take your time, my friend. Do what you need to do. There’s no rush.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. I’m not leaving here until I see that original birth certificate, and if I have to steal the damn thing, so be it. I’m about done messing around with these humans,” Kage grumbled.

“Try not to accidentally drop anybody off a building.”

Kage snorted. “I make no promises.”

“Can I ask what the big deal is about you seeing it?”

“What I saw was photocopied. There were sections that looked blurry. I don’t know what’s been bugging me about it, Hudson. All I know is I need to see the original.”

“Hey, do what you gotta to put this to rest. So, outside of that, is everything else okay? How is Austin liking Greece?”

“I’m loving it!” Austin yelled in the background. “Especially the bits and pieces of forgotten or omitted history Kage has shared.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hudson said to Austin.

Since Austin was Kage’s mate and drank Kage’s blood, he had many of the abilities other paranormals had—like excellent hearing. It was why he could hear what Hudson was saying without being on the phone.

Austin wasn’t as strong as a born or changed paranormal though. He also couldn’t use the shadows like Kage could.

“Yep, I’m having a blast. How are things there?” Austin asked.

“We’ve had some interesting developments,” Hudson hinted.

“That sounds intriguing,” Austin said. “But before you get into all of that, can you tell me how Kit is doing?”

Hudson groaned. “What a perfect opening.”

“Okay, now you have *my* attention,” Kage said.

“I honestly don’t know where to start.” Hudson stared into his coffee cup. “My whole life got turned on its ear yesterday morning, Kage.” Which only brought about more questions undoubtedly. “Look, let me start from the beginning.”

“Always a good idea,” Kage joked.

“I haven’t had enough caffeine yet to deal with you,” Hudson grumbled. “Anyway, you know Susan set wards around Kit’s place of business and on the door and windows to his apartment, right? Well, the wards at the business activated yesterday morning.”

“Shit. Is Kit okay?” Austin asked.

“Yes. Someone with ill intent tried to enter Kit’s business yesterday morning. Beckett said he felt the wards reject whoever it was. It just so happened that the incident occurred while Beckett was in the office with Kit, so he locked them in and called me.”

“Makes sense that Beckett wouldn’t leave Kit alone,” Kage said.

“Yeah, the whole thing freaked Kit out,” Hudson admitted. “While I was talking to Beckett, Susan beeped in to inform me what was going on. Did she not tell you?”

“She mentioned the wards went off but that everything was under control. She said that Beckett later picked up the scent of a feline shifter,” Kage said. “Of course, that doesn’t mean it was a feline shifter who tried to get to Kit. One could have been passing by.”

“That’s very true,” Austin added.

“Hell, it could be someone who’s homophobic, for all we know,” Kage continued. “Kit does have a pride flag

hanging outside the bookstore. I take it more than that happened?”

“Yes and no. Yes, a feline shifter scent was picked up outside the bookstore.” Hudson then went on to explain why that scent was indeed significant.

“Well, shit. You and Conrad felt you were being stalked and picked up a feline shifter’s scent Saturday night? Then Kit feels like he’s being watched at the grocery store Sunday morning. *Then*, on Monday, a feline shifter is scented around Kit’s business,” Kage repeated. “Is that right?”

“Yes. But unfortunately, the drama doesn’t end there.” Hudson took a deep breath. “Nelson and I went to the bookstore also to check things out. And as soon as I walked into Kit’s office, I promptly lost control of my dragon.”

“*What?*” Kage demanded. “You *what?* By the dead gods, Hudson.”

“Oh yeah, it was a thing. I partially transformed unwillingly.”

“Shit. Really? You haven’t done that in a long time,” Kage said.

Hudson didn’t bother to mention just how recently he had. “I managed to scare the hell out of everybody, Kit included.”

“Hudson, come on,” Kage said quietly. “Isn’t Kit traumatized enough? What were you thinking?”

“I know. I *know!*” Hudson snarled. He’d regret that until his dying day. “I lost control, dammit. Hell, I scared myself. And as far as what I was thinking? Well, I was thinking I’d just met my soul bound mate.”

“Son of a—are you alone?” Kage snapped.

“What? That’s the first thing you ask me? Yes, you ass, I’m alone. Fuck, Kage, I just told you I met—”

A few seconds later Kage stepped out of a shadow. He was holding his cell phone to his ear with one hand and had a grip on Austin’s hand with the other.

Hudson rolled his eyes. "I should've known."

Kage smirked. "Yes, you really should've."

Austin let go of Kage and bounded across Hudson's office.

Hudson scrambled to his feet just as Austin threw his arms around his neck. "A mate! I'm so happy for you! It's Kit, isn't it? That's awesome!"

Kage disconnected the call and pocketed his cell phone. Raising an eyebrow, he studied Hudson's face. "Why am I not seeing the excitement I'm expecting?"

Austin backed off, then peered at Hudson. "Huh."

"It's a long story," Hudson said. "Would you guys like some coffee?"

"Sure." Kage walked over to Hudson nevertheless and hugged him. "Congratulations, my friend. Now tell me why you aren't happy."

"It's not that I'm unhappy, Kage. It's just... a mess. Or it was. I don't know." Hudson resisted the need to tug at the braid running down the side of his face. "Why don't you guys have a seat, and I'll get you that coffee."

Kage clasped Austin by the hand and sat at the table in Hudson's office. Hudson fixed two cups of coffee and took them to the table, then he picked up his own and joined the two men.

"This is probably going to come as a shock, but I've been involved with somebody. It's one of my dragons," Hudson said. "The thing is, me and this person are not soul bound. And even though we knew it was a risk, we decided to pursue a relationship."

"Is it Conrad?" Austin asked.

Hudson's mouth fell open. "How in the hell did you know that?"

Austin shrugged at Kage, sighing heavily, pulled his wallet out and opened it. He promptly handed a folded bill

over to Austin.

“The hell?” Hudson growled as he watched the money exchange hands.

“Well, I lost that bet. Thanks, Hudson,” Kage said.

Austin giggled as he slipped the money into his billfold. “I told you, Kage, I never bet unless it’s a sure thing.”

“You two have been betting on my love life? What is wrong with you?” Hudson asked. “What is even going on right now?”

“Austin pointed out that he thought something was going on between you and Conrad a while ago,” Kage said.

“Conrad’s reaction when you were attacked coming back from the airport was very telling,” Austin said. “Plus, I write romance for a living.”

“Good grief.” Hudson wasn’t sure how to react. He wasn’t ashamed that he was dating one of his dragons. That wasn’t it at all. But he did have concerns, especially since they were not soul bound. The current situation was an excellent example of *why* he had concerns.

“Why hadn’t you told me about you and Conrad?” Kage asked.

“I had intended to when you returned from Greece,” Hudson admitted. “There’s been more important stuff going on with you than my love life.”

“Wait a minute,” Kage said. “You said you and Conrad are in a relationship, but you’re soul bound to Kit. Is that right?”

“Yes, and it appears Connie is *also* soul bound to Kit,” Hudson said.

Austin whistled. “Holy moly, the plot thickens.”

“When I returned from the bookstore, Connie picked up Kit’s scent on me and had the exact same reaction I did—in other words, he lost control too. But unlike me, Connie was on the verge of shifting into his dragon.”

Okay, that was a lie, but they didn't need to know that. Hudson would never hear the end of it from Kage if he knew just how close he *did* come to losing it.

“He's younger than you, isn't he?” Kage asked.

“Yes. He's only six hundred years old.”

Austin rubbed his temples, mumbling about the word *only*.

“I ended up dumping both of us in my pool. It washed the scent off us, and the shock helped Connie get control. It appears our dragon god has mated both Connie *and* me to a human. Which reminds me. We need to talk to you about how we go about having a relationship with a human.”

“Oh my, this is going to be interesting.” Austin hooted.

“On that note, I should *also* add that Kit is unaware of all of this,” Hudson said, staring at Austin.

“Soooo interesting. There's all these juicy plot elements.” Austin rubbed his hands together. “I love it.”

“This better not show up in one of your books, Austin.”

Austin grinned widely.

“Good luck with that, my friend.”

“Shit.” Hudson ran a hand through his hair.

KAGE AND AUSTIN visited long enough to finish their coffee, then Kage used the shadows to return them to Greece.

A few minutes later, Connie knocked on the door and entered. “Hey. I heard Kage and Austin. Everything okay?”

“Of course.” Hudson motioned Connie to have a seat at the table.

“Kage is your best friend.” Connie poured a cup of coffee and sat down. “I had a feeling you needed to talk to him.”

“You could’ve still joined us. I didn’t say anything to him that I wouldn’t have said in front of you. You’re my lover *and* my right hand.” Hudson reached out, resting his hand on the table. “You’re always welcome. Always.”

Connie took Hudson’s hand. “Thanks.”

“Now, it’s my turn to ask if everything is okay.”

Connie studied their entwined hands. “I want to meet Kit, but I’m afraid. Afraid of what could happen. What if I lose control again? I don’t want to scare him.”

“I understand. Believe me, I do.” Hudson squeezed Connie’s fingers, then released them. “He shredded my control too, so I get it.”

“He doesn’t know who we are to him either. Hudson?” Connie fiddled with his cup. “What if he rejects us?”

“I don’t believe he will. He’s our mate. Fate wouldn’t have paired him with us if he couldn’t handle being a dragon’s mate. Do we have some hurdles to get past? Absolutely. We need to handle this with care.”

“So no carrying him off to our hoards?”

“Not yet.” Hudson smirked. “We’ll get him there one day though. Tell you what. Since we both responded so strongly, why don’t I ask Beckett to stop by here after he leaves work? He’ll have Kit’s scent on him since he’s around our mate all day. It’ll give us a chance to acclimate.”

“Huh. That’s not a bad idea.”

Hudson leaned back in his chair. “I’ve been known to have good ones on occasion.”

“Smartass. Okay, yes, let’s try that. If we can get desensitized to his scent, we might be able to talk to the man instead of turning into raving beasts.”

“Yeah. Small steps first, Connie. Let’s get used to his scent before carrying Kit off to the bedroom.”

Connie swallowed loudly. “I can’t even go there yet. Fuck, Hudson. I want to see him pinned between us.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – CONNIE



CONNIE'S DRAGON stirred at the very thought of seeing Kit being fucked by both of them. He scrubbed his hands over his face. Oh yes, he'd definitely have to get used to Kit's scent before he dared to get around him.

"You okay?"

Connie dropped his hands from his face and rolled his neck, listening to it pop. "I'm in control."

"Good. This hopefully will get easier," Hudson said.

"I see now why your generation snatched humans and ran off with them. This need is hard to control."

"It's instinctual, yes, but it also caused a lot of problems. History has glossed over the fact that humans did indeed hunt dragons at one point. Which is good, I guess. Less threat to us if they think mythological creatures like us only exist in books and movies."

"They tend to think about paranormals in general like that," Connie agreed.

"What they don't know won't hurt them."

"Or us." Connie shrugged the thought off. "Okay, are you ready to start your day?"

"Let me call Beckett and explain what we want to do—which means informing him of who Kit is to us—then yes, I'll be ready to start."

Connie wandered over to the coffee bar and fixed himself another cup of coffee while Hudson talked to Beckett. Fortunately, Beckett was en route to Kit's bookstore, so there was no concern of Kit accidentally overhearing the conversation.

Of course, Kit was human, so that really wasn't a problem. A shiver traveled up Connie's spine as he thought about that. Humans were damn breakable. They died so easily. Hell, all one had to do was *look* at them wrong, and they up and died.

The very thought of something happening to Kit's mortal body made Connie want to light something on fire. Kit wasn't a dragon and never would be. Like the daemons and gargoyles, dragons were born not changed.

But their blood would give Kit certain paranormal attributes—the rapid healing was the first one that came to mind. What else would change about Kit though?

Connie frowned as the thought bounced around in his head. There wasn't much in their written history about mating with humans for some reason.

In fact, he couldn't think of anything off the top of his head. But then again, it hadn't been a subject he'd ever really paid attention to. He didn't dislike humans—he'd fucked his fair share—but he truly never imagined one as his mate.

Again, they were so very breakable.

And now he had a breakable human as his mate. And it made him want to roar in fear. Actually, it made him want to pour his and Hudson's blood down Kit's throat.

That'd probably go over like a lead balloon.

Funny how he always thought his generation was so much more modern and hipper than the older generations, when in actuality, they were probably just as barbaric.

It was the main reason he needed to acclimate to Kit's scent—he wasn't sure he could stop his dragon from carting his mate off. Hudson would be the only one who'd be able to reason with Connie during such a situation, and he did *not* want a thousand-year-old royal dragon pissed at him. No thank you.

None of them needed the drama *that* would start.

Connie pulled his cell phone out and sent a quick text message to Beckett, even though Beckett was speaking to Hudson at the moment.

Beckett hoarded books—that was his thing. All sorts of books, but especially rare ones. He also had just about everything ever written about dragons and their courts.

Maybe Beckett would be willing to do some research and see if there was anything about how dragons handled being mated to a human. Couldn't hurt, right?

Once Hudson hung up with Beckett, Connie shoved all thoughts about humans and mates out of his head. “Okay, first on your schedule is a nine o'clock conference call. Then you have lunch with the mayor of San DeLain at noon.”

“Okay. Also? I need you to find out who owns the apartment building Kit lives in. I want to buy it, and I won't take no for an answer. If our mate is going to live there for any amount of time, I need to make sure it's secure. Find out if there are empty apartments near him too.”

Connie opened the notes app on his phone and started typing. “Got it. Why do you want to know about empty apartments?”

“Because some of my dragons are going to temporarily live as close to Kit as possible. At least until we can talk Kit into moving here.”

“I haven't thought about that.” Connie frowned. “How long do you think that will take?”

“Hopefully not long, but Kit is human. They... they don't move as fast as paranormals do when it concerns a mate.”

“So this could drag on for months?” Connie asked, horrified.

“It could, yes. Which would be extremely difficult for you and I, but we're not going to rush Kit. Doing so could blow up in our face. Understand?”

“I understand, but that doesn’t mean I like it.” He hated it, in fact. He wanted Kit somewhere close so he could keep an eye on him. And wasn’t that just slightly stalkerish? “Oh. I also noticed an email from King Hereward Tywyll.”

“An email from Ward? What in the world is the gargoyle king emailing me for?”

“He didn’t say, but I responded, letting him know that I’d seen it and would tell you.”

“Okay.” Hudson checked his watch. “That’ll have to be done tonight since Ward’s currently a chunk of stone.”

“Yeah. The sun isn’t kind to the vampires or gargoyles. I can’t imagine being out of commission during the day.”

“Every paranormal species has its pros and cons, you know? The sun won’t kill a vampire, although it will certainly fry them to a crisp, and that takes them a long time, and massive amounts of blood, to heal from,” Hudson said, sitting down at his desk.

“But they can wipe a human’s memory, so that’s a nice pro,” Connie said. “Gargoyles revert to stone during the day, so that’s definitely a con. What would you say is a pro for them?”

“They can harden their skin while in human form. It’s nearly impenetrable. Bullets, swords, knives, and so on really aren’t a threat to them,” Hudson said.

“And us?” Connie asked. “What would you say our con is?”

“You mean as a dragon in general or as red dragons?”

“Both, I guess?”

“Hmmm.” Hudson leaned back in his chair, lips pursed. “Dragons are possessive. When we want something, we tend to take it, and damn the consequences.”

“Which can cause problems,” Connie added.

“And dragons are arrogant enough to think that we can fix the problem. Plus, dragons are hardheaded. Now, red

dragons? Take those qualities and magnify them by a hundred. Let's face it, reds are the most aggressive out of all the dragons. We tend to be hot-tempered to boot."

"Well, we do have red hair for a reason," Connie joked.

"There is that." Hudson straightened in his chair and patted his knee. "Come here, sweetheart."

Connie raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I don't think so. Nothing will get done if I do that."

"I'm not going to ravish you."

Hands on his hips, Connie smirked. "I've heard that before too."

Hudson laughed. "True, but that isn't what this is about. We both found out we're mated to a human, even though you and I don't share a soul bond. That's kind of life-altering, don't you think? I just wanted to be sure that you and I are still—"

Connie quickly moved to sit in Hudson's lap. Wrapping his arms around Hudson, Connie snuggled in. "We're okay. Nothing has changed between us. Yes, I feel like my world has been turned upside down, but you're my port in the storm."

"Always." Hudson hugged Connie tightly.

"I admit, I don't understand why Fate did this."

"I don't either, but I'm sure there's a reason."

"They die so easily," Connie whispered. "Humans, I mean."

"Believe me, I *know*. But we'll do what we must in order to ensure Kit's safety and longevity. Plus, we'll talk to Kage some more. He's basically in the same boat as us."

Connie leaned up and kissed Hudson's cheek. "And there's two of us. Double the protection. Or trouble, depending on how you look at it."

"Yes. Two arrogant, hardheaded, aggressive red dragons who wouldn't think twice about setting the world on

fire to protect what's theirs."

Connie leaned back in Hudson's arms and stared into his eyes. "While I agree with the last part of that sentence—"

"Damn straight."

"—I should point out that you're way more arrogant, hardheaded, and aggressive than me, Your Majesty. *I'm* the voice of reason. I have to be as your right hand."

"Uh-huh. Wanna bet how many times you're going to end up in the pool in order to calm down, Mister Voice of Reason?" Hudson asked.

Connie grimaced. "Our poor human."

THE DAY passed quickly. It was still light outside, and Beckett had called to say he would be arriving at the compound soon. The drive from San DeLain wasn't short by any stretch of the imagination, but Beckett was making good time.

Connie and Hudson ate dinner with several of the other dragons, then retired to Hudson's quarters. Since it was still daylight, Hudson couldn't call Ward yet.

Both he and Hudson had changed out of their work clothes and into something much more comfortable. Keeping Hudson's words about being tossed into the pool in the foremost of his mind, Connie left his cell on the end table next to the couch—just in case. It had survived his first trip, but why push his luck, right?

Connie didn't realize he was pacing until Hudson caught him by the hand, bringing him to a stop. "What?"

Hudson pulled him down to the couch next to him. "Why are you so nervous?"

"I don't know." What a lie that was. "Okay, no, that's not true. I know exactly why I'm nervous. I'm afraid I'm going to lose control again."

“Which is why we’re doing this. Worst-case scenario? I can stop your dragon from coming out. It won’t be pleasant, but as your king, I can do that.”

“Gods.” Connie ran his hands through his hair.

“Don’t go borrowing trouble. Maybe you won’t react so strongly this time.”

Connie snorted but didn’t bother to answer.

“But if you do, that’s okay too. Beckett will be here also, just in case.”

“Great. Two Ancients, one of which is royalty. If that doesn’t make my dragon bristle, I don’t know what would.”

“I’m also your lover.”

Connie leaned into Hudson. “Just don’t let me tear up anything.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Hudson’s cell phone beeped. He pulled it out and unlocked it. “Okay, Beckett is here.”

Connie sucked in a harsh breath. Shit. Here they go.

“Breathe, sweetheart. You’re working yourself up, and Beckett hasn’t even walked through the door yet.” Hudson grabbed Connie by the chin and stared into his eyes. Then Hudson kissed Connie, long and hard.

Connie relaxed against the couch as pleasure surged through him and headed straight for his dick. It amazed him how Hudson’s kisses could melt his brain. One thing was for sure, though. He no longer felt like he was going to vibrate out of his very skin.

Connie palmed his erect dick through his shorts once the kiss ended. “You’re going to take care of this later, right?”

“One way or the other.”

Connie scowled. “What does that mean?”

There was a knock at the door to Hudson’s suite.

“Oh look, Beckett’s here.” Hudson stood quickly.

Connie scrambled to his feet but sat back down abruptly when he remembered how hard he was. “Wait just a sec. What did you mean by that? Hudson? Dammit, old man, what did you *mean*?”

Hudson’s soft laughter floated back to Connie. Flopping his head back against the couch, he scowled up at the ceiling. “Damn dragon.”

Connie heard Beckett before he saw him. A few seconds after that, the most delicious scent in the entire universe wrapped around him... and Connie’s dragon started to rumble.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – KIT



KIT WAVED goodbye to Beckett and walked into his apartment building.

He was tired and out of sorts, mainly because he'd caught Beckett looking at him strangely several times today. When he'd asked Beckett what was up, Beckett had brushed him off.

Kit was certain he hadn't mistaken the contemplative looks directed his way. Plus, Beckett had spent an inordinate amount of time around him and even brushed up against Kit a couple of times.

Weird. Very, very weird.

And why was Beckett suddenly soooo helpful? Even more so than normal. If Kit bent over to pick up something, Beckett was there, doing it for him.

If he needed more ice for his cup, Beckett had the cup out of his hand and was gone with it before Kit could blink. If he left something in his office? Beckett went to get it. He'd been underfoot all damn day, and it was driving Kit nuts.

Kit unlocked his door, walked in, hung up his keys, then relocked it. He made a beeline for his bedroom, undressed, and changed into a pair of shorts.

Grabbing his yoga mat, he headed back to his living area. Between the sleepless nights, all the shit that had gone on, and now Beckett acting weird, his stress level was through the ceiling.

Kit cleared his mind and got to work.

HE FINISHED off his day by having spaghetti for dinner, then he took a nice, long bath. But unfortunately, he was nowhere near sleepy. And quite frankly, the four walls were closing in on him.

By damn, he wanted to go out, do a little dancing, and have a drink or three. He wanted to forget about dragons, daemons, mimics, and whatever else was lurking in the shadows.

On second thought, maybe staying in was a better idea.

Nope. No way. He was tired of hiding in his apartment, and that was exactly what he'd been doing since the attack. Look at him being a grown-up and admitting that. Mind made up, Kit stomped toward the bedroom.

He was going out.

TWO HOURS later he was made up, dressed to kill, and arguing with Leo in the underground parking garage of his apartment complex. Because of course he was.

“Look, I’m not asking you if I can go out. I’m a grown ass man. I’m telling you I’m going out to do a little dancing and a little drinking. If you want to go, you’re welcome to tag along,” Kit said through clenched teeth. “If not, that’s fine too.”

“My king isn’t going to be happy with this,” Leo snapped.

“That sounds like a you problem.” Kit was done arguing. Shrugging, he started walking to his car.

“Shit. Okay, fine. I’ll ride with you.” Leo hurried along behind Kit, his phone in his hand. “But I’m calling Hudson and letting him know. Don’t be surprised if he shows up.”

“Whatever you need to do, man.” Kit unlocked the car and slid into the driver’s seat. Maybe he was being a tad bitchy, but Leo was acting as if Kit needed permission to go anywhere.

Um, no. While he greatly appreciated the dragons watching over him, he wasn't answerable to them. He didn't belong to their group or clan or what the fuck ever they called themselves. So why would the dragon king show up? Please. He wouldn't. Leo was being an ass.

Jeez, he'd been responsible and told Leo what he was doing and where he was going. It wasn't as if he tried to sneak out or something.

"Sneak out," Kit grumbled. He hadn't even done that when he was a kid.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." Kit drove toward downtown San DeLain, where some of the hottest nightclubs were located.

Since he wasn't interested in hooking up, he headed for one of the biggest straight clubs there was: The Echo. Since it was nine o'clock, the doors were just now opening.

The bouncer took one look at Leo and immediately escorted him and Kit inside. Kit sighed internally. Leo had been recognized. That meant the bouncer was a paranormal, and more than likely, there were other paranormals there also.

Kit grabbed a table while Leo went to get them a couple of beers. Kit caught his reflection in one of the mirrors along the back wall. He had to say he was rather pleased with his appearance tonight.

Since he'd known he'd get hot, he'd done his hair in a French braid. His black leather pants were tucked into combat boots and gave him a kick ass air.

But the shirt. Oh, the shirt. It was white, practically see-through, and there was no back. Seriously, there was a strip of material that went from one edge of the shirt to the other at the top of his shoulders.

That was it. It was loose, flowing, and sexy as hell. It made *him* feel sexy as hell. As a finishing touch, he'd added half a dozen bracelets to each wrist, a couple of long necklaces, and small hoops in his ears.

Several people had already checked him out, but he hadn't made eye contact with anybody.

Leo returned and set the beers in front of Kit, and he promptly started on one of them. Since the music was already raging, conversation was impossible, but that was okay with Kit too.

He finished the first beer and started on the second. That was probably all he was going to drink tonight since he was driving. Then he eyed Leo. On second thought, Leo could damn well drive.

"You're driving back," Kit hollered over the music. "So don't drink too much."

"It doesn't affect me like it does you," Leo yelled back.

That was some of the best news Kit had heard all night. He finished his second beer and headed toward the dance floor. And of course Leo was right behind him.

It didn't take long before they were both surrounded by sexy women. Too bad they didn't do anything for Kit, but again, that wasn't why he was there.

The music pounded, and the lights flashed. His body moved to the beat, and his worries melted away. Hands caressed him, but as long as they didn't get too insistent, he let it go. That was part of club dancing.

Several songs played before Kit needed another break. He caught Leo's eye and motioned that he was leaving the dance floor. Leo followed him, of course, and they both ended up at the bar. Since Leo got the first round, Kit sprang for this one.

A few women came on to him, but he politely turned them down. Someone even sent Kit a drink, but Leo intercepted it. Which was fine. He hadn't planned to accept it anyway.

Kit didn't want to give the wrong impression. Plus, he wasn't going to drink something that he didn't see personally poured. It was better to be safe than sorry.

After he cooled off, he dragged Leo back to the dance floor and lost himself in the music again. He was more than a little tipsy and having a blast. This was exactly what he'd needed.

Then the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

An unpleasant chill raced down his back, and Kit came to a screeching halt right in the middle of the dance floor. The feeling of being watched swept over him.

Someone bumped into Kit, jostling him. Faces blurred in and out of his vision as he frantically searched the crowd. The nightclub's lights flashed, making him squint.

Kit heard yelling and turned in that direction just in time to see someone push Leo down. People pressed closer to Kit, blocking his view, and his heart rate picked up.

People were entirely too close to him. He wanted off the dance floor. Pronto. He tried to move, but bodies blocked him in every direction he turned.

Someone screamed as a fight broke out not far from him. The crowd surged away from the fight, carrying Kit with them, but he managed to catch a glimpse of Leo fighting with three or four other men.

Problem was, there was only so much Leo could do without exposing himself as something other than human.

From the corner of his eye, Kit caught a flash of black hair, which sent his heart rate soaring. Desperately he searched for the person he just saw. It had just been a glance, but he could almost swear—

Kit's braid was violently jerked, nearly pulling him off his feet. Agony shot through his scalp. Yelling, he grabbed his braid, trying in vain to ease the pressure as he was hauled backward.

He grabbed at several people as he was yanked past them, but no one seemed to be paying attention. Or they just didn't care.

Kit tried to see who had ahold of his hair, but they'd wrapped his braid around their fist. He was being dragged off the dance floor by his damn hair. He shouted for Leo, but the fucking music was so loud, and Leo was completely surrounded.

And Kit wasn't the only one yelling now. Leo was desperately fighting to get to Kit, but he was losing that battle. The desperation on his face clearly showed.

That scared Kit more than anything. He was wrenched clear of the dance floor and shoved violently face-first into a dark corner. His forehead bounced off the wall, and pain exploded in his head. Instead of frightening him more, all it succeeded in doing was pissing him off.

Not again. He was *not* fucking doing this again.

Turning, he faced his assailant and swung. Last time, he stood by meekly while he was assaulted. Not this fucking time. He managed to clip the guy on the jaw, and his assailant's head turned.

Kit felt like he'd possibly broken his knuckles. While he shook his hand out, his assailant fingered his jaw. Kit watched as the guy slowly faced him.

Just as he did, one of the lights from the club illuminated the other man's face perfectly. Time stopped as Kit's breath froze in his chest. "No. It can't be. You... you... *you're dead.*"

"Am I?"

Nox's face danced in front of Kit's wavering gaze. The black hair, the olive-colored skin, the shape of his jaw—it was all the same. Devastatingly the same. Little black spots danced in front of Kit's face as the roar of something inhuman raged through the nightclub.

"Seems like that's my cue to go. Do tell Kage I said hello when he returns from Greece."

Kit slid down the wall as Nox disappeared into the crowd. Within seconds, a bloodied and bruised Leo knelt

beside Kit, frantically talking to him, but Kit couldn't hear a word he said. In fact, his head was filled with white noise.

Nox was alive.

Mother of all, he thought he might be sick. Then Leo was shoved aside, and Kit's heart started to pound again as the king of the San DeLain dragons suddenly appeared in his vision.

Gentle hands cupped his face as Kit stared into Hudson's beautiful brown eyes—eyes that were quickly turning into a golden-red sunburst of color with black slitted pupils. They were eerily beautiful and completely non-human.

Another man dropped down next to Hudson, a sexy guy with short, golden-red hair and scruff on his face. He was as stunning as Hudson, and he caught Kit's attention immediately. Between Hudson's hands on his face and the other man's on his leg, Kit's heart rate began to slow. The fear retreated.

“Let's get you out of here,” Hudson said.

Both of the men gently helped Kit to his feet, and each took one of Kit's arms as they escorted him out of the nightclub, Leo bringing up the rear. They herded him toward a black Lincoln Navigator with blacked-out windows.

“Wait.” Kit tried to stop, but they kept moving him along. “Where are you taking me? What about my car?”

“Somewhere safe,” Hudson said. “Leo can drive your car there.”

“And where is there? Where is considered safe?” Kit demanded.

“My compound.”

“Stop dragging me along, dammit.” Kit yanked his arms away from both the dragons who were holding him. He had a feeling they let him do that. They had managed to get Kit out of the nightclub before he had even realized it. “Your what now?”

Hudson faced Kit. “You were targeted. I need to get you to safety.”

“Yeah, I’m aware. I was there,” Kit snapped. “And we need to talk about that too, because fuck me sideways, you’re not going to believe who I just saw.”

The sexy dragon next to Hudson made a low rumbling sound.

“That can wait until we get you to safety,” the dragon who made the rumbling sound growled. He was breathing heavily, and that rumbling was growing louder.

Kit glared at him. Why the hell was that dragon *growling* at him? Did he not understand the kind of night Kit was having? “And just who are you?”

“My name is Conrad. I’m Hudson’s right hand.”

Kit eyed the other dragon uneasily. He was practically hyperventilating, his eyes had changed color, and his skin seemed to be fading to a sickly grayish white. And shit. Were those horns sprouting from his head? Crap. Hadn’t he seen Hudson do something similar?

“Connie?” Hudson grabbed Connie’s arm. “Get control. Now.”

“I’m trying. Fuck, I am *trying*, Hudson, but I... I can smell...”

Kit jumped when Hudson suddenly grabbed the other dragon by his chin. “Connie. Look. At. Me.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.”

“*You will not shift.*”

Kit blinked. He might be human, but even he felt the power rolling through those words. His damn knees went weak, and his cock chose that inappropriate time to take an interest in the situation. What the hell was going on with him?

Connie shuddered. “Yes, y-yes, Your Majesty.” Connie closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Finally, he opened them again. “Fuck, that’s unpleasant. My entire body

hurts now, and I feel like I've been pulled through a keyhole sideways, but thanks.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“I know, but it had to be done, Hudson.”

Kit had no idea what was going on, but their entire interaction seemed... personal. Almost intimate. Then they both turned their searing gazes to him, and Kit took a step back before he caught himself.

Holy shit.

Kit's cock twitched, and the dragon named Connie.... Well, Kit would swear on a stack of Bibles that Connie's eye also twitched. Heat washed over Kit as he was dragged into the intensity flowing between the two dragons.

Kit's body caught fire as he imagined being pinned between the two of them, kissing, sucking, and—

“By Gaura,” Connie whispered. “What are you thinking? I can smell your—”

“Nox attacked me just now in the nightclub,” Kit blurted, desperate to stop Connie from finishing that sentence. He could well imagine what Connie was smelling. Didn't paranormals have heightened senses?

“*What?*” Hudson roared.

Oddly enough, it sounded like the roar Kit had heard in the nightclub. That certainly took care of Kit's inconvenient erection.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – HUDSON



HUDSON WAS going to kill something. Or someone. When he'd gotten the call Kit was going out, his stomach had dropped, and he'd immediately grabbed Connie so they could get to that damn club. Now that they knew who Kit was to them, of course they'd be there.

They'd arrived and walked into chaos. Gods help him if a fucking hunter crossed his path right then, he'd charbroil them and wouldn't think twice about it.

Someone had targeted Kit, and indirectly, Leo, since Leo had been basically acting as a bodyguard. Leo had been unable to use his full strength during the fight since he was surrounded by the fucking humans, and things had gone to shit quickly.

Speaking of humans, Hudson hadn't smelled any hunters at the club, but there had definitely been paranormals there, including felines. Fucking cats seemed to be everywhere lately.

Then there was the question of if the humans who'd attacked Leo had been paid to do so? Or was it nothing more than a coincidence?

And now Kit was standing there telling him that Nox had been in the club? That he'd attacked Kit *again*? But it couldn't be. Nox was dead. Axel had killed him. Kage had seen the body. Hell, Kage had Nox cremated and took the ashes to Greece. Nox was fucking dead.

"I hear police sirens, Your Majesty," Leo said, wiping blood off his face. "We need to get out of here."

"Kit? I need you to trust me and give your keys to Leo so we can vacate the area," Hudson said.

“Trust you? I don’t *know* you.” Kit put his hands on his hips and glared at Hudson. “I don’t know these other two dragons. I don’t know where this compound of yours is located. And I’m just supposed to go with you?”

“Would you rather stay here and possibly run across whoever you saw who you thought looked like Nox?” Leo asked.

“Leo,” Hudson warned.

“I don’t think he looked like Nox. I know for a fact he did. Also? Fuck you.” Kit glared at Leo. “I saw him. You didn’t.”

“I’m just saying that it isn’t possible,” Leo said. “He’s dead.”

“And yet I had a conversation with him,” Kit retorted right back.

“Enough,” Hudson snapped. “Kit?” As much as Hudson wanted to throw Kit over his shoulder and leave with him, that would only exacerbate the situation. “Beckett will be at the compound. I’ll arrange for him to be waiting for you. Would that help?”

“I, ah, okay. Yeah. Yeah, it would. Please understand, I’m not trying to be an ass, but I’m kinda at the end of my rope here.” Kit scrubbed his hands over his face, his shoulders slumping. “My head hurts and—”

“Why does your head hurt?” Connie demanded. “Are you hurt?” Connie reached for Kit, but then dropped his hands. “Maybe we should check you out?”

“Again, we really need to go,” Leo interjected.

“I’m fine. Nox used my braid to drag me off the dance floor. And Leo is right about this, at least. We really do need to leave before the cops get here. Fine, I’ll go with you, but please call Beckett?”

“I will, I promise,” Hudson said.

Connie moved swiftly to open the passenger door for Kit.

“Thank you,” Kit said as he climbed inside.

Within seconds they were pulling out of the parking lot and making their way toward the interstate. There was dead silence while Hudson called Beckett and arranged for him to be waiting at the main house. He even put the call on speaker so Kit could hear the conversation, including the part about who attacked Kit.

He tried not to get his feelings hurt that Kit was more comfortable around Beckett than he was around him and Connie. It made sense that Kit would be more at ease with Beckett—Kit spent more time around the other dragon—but it still stung.

Once Kit had been reassured Beckett would be there, Hudson gently questioned Kit, because he too was having a problem understanding what Kit saw.

Connie was also as tight as a bowstring. He was still struggling with Kit’s scent, so Hudson was keeping an eye on him too. So much for them having a chance to become accustomed to the mating scent. Dammit, he hated having to use his power on Connie like that.

Something was going on, and Hudson had no idea what it was. What if—and this was almost too terrifying to think about—what if Nox had figured out some way to clone himself? It wasn’t completely outside of the realm of possibility.

After all, Nox had figured out how to mutate human DNA and make some sort of human/paranormal hybrid, so why couldn’t he clone himself?

Hudson shuddered. That didn’t bear thinking about. What if there were dozens of Noxes running around? What would that do to Kit’s state of mind? Hudson’s claws threatened to erupt from the tips of his fingers, and he had to take a few deep breaths to rein in the impulse.

As they drove toward Hudson’s territory, Kit patiently repeated everything that had happened to him from the

moment the fight started and he'd gotten separated from Leo until Connie and Hudson had showed up.

Connie had growled a couple of times but managed to stay in control of himself. Hudson completely understood where Connie was coming from, though.

Whoever had attacked Kit had hurt their mate. With his sharp eyesight, he'd discreetly checked for bruises on Kit's face, and sure enough, there was a red spot forming on his forehead.

Connie had asked a few questions also, which had made Kit turn to face him to answer. Hudson had caught the frown on Connie's face—Connie had noticed the bruise too, more than likely.

“Oh, Nox also had a message for Kage,” Kit added.

“What did he say?” Hudson asked.

“He said to tell Kage he said hello when Kage returned from Greece.” Kit swallowed. “And he was smiling when he said that too. He knows Kage is in Greece.”

As soon as he had a chance, Hudson was making a phone call to Kage. “Is that all he said?”

“Well, no.” Kit quickly explained how his forehead had bounced off the wall in the corner Nox had shoved him into and how he'd swung at Nox and hit him.

Both Hudson and Connie growled in unison.

Head tilted, Kit stared at both of them. “Can you two stop that? Damn. Anyhow, when I saw Nox's face, I said *No. It can't be. You... you... you're dead.* And Nox said *Am I?* Then there was roar, and Nox said *Seems like that's my cue to go. Do tell Kage I said hello when he returns from Greece.*”

“I-I don't understand.” Connie's voice was still rumbly. “How can that be Nox?”

Kit glared at Connie.

“Okay, hold on.” Connie patted Kit on the leg. “Stop trying to kill me with your eyes. I'm not saying I don't believe

you.”

Kit blinked. “Really?”

“Really,” Connie said.

“I believe you too,” Hudson added. “I believe you saw Nox. What I’m questioning is if that is the original Nox. Does that make sense?”

“Not even a little,” Kit admitted.

“What are you thinking?” Connie asked Hudson.

“This is going to sound crazy, but hear me out.” Hudson took a deep breath before spilling his thoughts. He felt silly mentioning this because it was so outrageous. “What if the person Kit saw was a clone?”

Connie’s eyes widened. “Shit.”

“Holy sci-fi, Batman,” Kit muttered.

“Nox figured out a way to create hybrids. Why couldn’t he also do something like this?” Hudson asked.

“Shit. Shit. So was the Nox who Axel killed the real Nox? Or a clone? What about the one Kit just saw?” Connie demanded. “And fuck, Hudson, if Nox managed to do this, did he figure out some way to pass on his abilities?”

Kit grabbed Hudson’s arm. “Wait. Are you saying there might be several mimics running around? Please tell me that’s not what you’re saying. Please.”

Hudson calmly covered Kit’s hand with his own. “I don’t know what I’m saying, honestly. I’m only throwing out ideas that would account for Nox being killed, cremated, then buried... but then attacking you at that club tonight.”

“But doesn’t a mimic need blood to assume someone’s identity?” Connie cringed as he looked at Kit. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“You didn’t *bring* up anything, trust me. They’re always there, lurking. But that is a good question. Does anybody have a good answer?” Kit asked.

“Mimics can’t store information like that. It’s why they need....” Hudson trailed off.

“Blood.” Kit shuddered. “They need fresh blood. Am I right?”

“Yes. They’re not like a computer that can store the information and then call it up at any time. Their ability doesn’t work that way,” Hudson said.

“Good to know,” Connie said.

“Please keep in mind that this is conjecture only,” Hudson said. “There might be another explanation that’s much less outlandish. Regardless, there *is* a viable threat. Which means, Kit, you will be staying at my compound, and you go nowhere alone.”

This was not the way Hudson wanted things to unfold between the three of them, but his first concern was Kit’s safety. And he couldn’t keep their mate safe unless he could keep an eye on the human.

Kit held up his hand. “Let’s play Put a Finger Down.”

“What?” Confused, Hudson glanced at Connie.

“It’s this thing on TikTok.”

“Again... what?”

“Put a finger down if I’ll be staying with you because *I* agree to, not because *you* say so.” Kit put a finger down.

“What the hell is TikTok?” Hudson asked.

“Oh, come *on*. Everyone has heard of that app.” Kit threw his hands up.

“It’s a social media platform,” Connie said. “It’s a video-sharing app.”

“Ahh, yes.” Hudson nodded. “Not really my thing, Kit.”

Kit rubbed his forehead. “Good God.”

“He *is* a thousand-year-old dragon,” Connie added helpfully.

Hudson shot Connie a look. Connie flashed Hudson a grin.

“Look, you think I’m going to pitch a fit, don’t you?” Kit questioned, peering at Hudson. “Is that your insistent face? Because it looks like you’re going to insist I do this because you’re right... and then explain all the reasons *why* you’re right.”

Connie snorted. “Insistent face. I like it. And Kit’s right. That *is* your ‘I’m right and here’s why’ face.”

“Well? Are you? Going to pitch a fit as you called it?” Hudson asked, ignoring the rest of that because it made his head hurt. Having two younger mates might be the death of him. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

“Bet you think I’m going to make some grand speech about not being a prisoner and living my life on my terms and blah, blah, blah.”

“Um. You’re not?” Connie asked, looking between Kit and Hudson.

“Nope. I’ve dealt with that asshole twice now, and both times I’ve come out on the losing end. What’s that old saying about three strikes and you’re out? I’d just as soon not find out if that’s true.”

Hudson raised an eyebrow. He had to admit, he’d prepared himself for a full-on battle. “So you’ll accept my protection?”

“Damn skippy. But I’m still going to work—I’ll leave it up to you to figure that one out—and I need my clothes and stuff. Other than that, I’m good.”

Hudson was ridiculously pleased that Kit was going to be residing in his territory. If the look on Connie’s face was any indication, he felt the same.

“Still want me to check out the situation on that certain building we talked about taking over?” Connie asked, grinning.

Hudson stared fondly at Kit before turning his gaze to his lover. "It appears that will no longer be necessary."

Thank the dragon gods.

THEY ARRIVED at the compound with no trouble. Beckett greeted them on the front steps. It was hard to miss how Kit immediately relaxed.

He and Connie stopped by the kitchen and got something for Kit to eat, then took him on a quick tour of the house. Beckett, of course, went with them.

"You have a beautiful home," Kit said as they returned to where they started. "Lots of space. I envy you that."

Hudson tried to keep himself from preening. His mate liked his home. "Feel free to use any of the entertainment areas of the house. Also, several of my dragons will be in and out. Connie and I will try to be with you at all times, so you don't feel alone. We'll slowly introduce you to my court."

"I can also be here," Beckett added. "There's no point in me going to the bookstore if you're not there."

"Speaking of that," Hudson said. "Since Kit is going to be staying here, would you be willing to carpool with him? That way, he isn't alone going to and from work."

"I don't mind," Beckett said. "Kit? Are you okay with that?"

"Yes. I didn't realize we would be so far out, though. It's quite the drive, isn't it?" Kit asked.

"We're used to it." Beckett shrugged. "It's the trade-off of having so much land. Dragons need their space."

"I see. Do you live here at the compound?" Kit asked.

"I do, yes. Every dragon in Hudson's court lives here," Beckett replied. "If it's okay with Hudson and Connie, I can also introduce you around."

"That would be great," Kit said. "I don't want to take up their time. It's already bad enough I kind of inflicted myself

on Hudson.”

“You did no such thing,” Hudson quickly reassured Kit. Last thing he wanted was for Kit to think that he was a burden. “We’re happy to have you here.”

“Absolutely.” Connie nodded vigorously. “Thrilled, in fact.”

Kit gave Connie a strange look but smiled nevertheless.

Beckett raised an eyebrow at Connie, who blushed.

Hudson cleared his throat. “Why don’t we show you your room? It’s not far from me. In fact, it’s in my wing of the house.”

“That would be great, thanks,” Kit said. “It’s getting late, and I’ve got work tomorrow. Shit. I’m going to need to stop by my apartment before I go in tomorrow, Beckett. I need to pack.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – CONNIE



CONNIE'S DRAGON was thrashing around in excitement in his head. Silly thing didn't seem to understand that just because Kit was in their territory it didn't necessarily mean Kit was going to be in their bed quite yet.

Still, Kit was a hell of a lot closer than he'd been. And if he and Hudson had their way, Kit would never leave there. Okay, that sounded way scarier than he intended, but it didn't change the fact that was how he felt.

Especially now that someone or something was targeting Kit again.

Connie didn't understand why, though. Kit wasn't a paranormal, wasn't rich, didn't move in high society, and wasn't in politics. Not to sound like an ass, but Kit wasn't anyone important.

So why stalk him?

Connie also couldn't wrap his head around the possibility of a clone. While he agreed with what Hudson had said about Nox's ability to create hybrids, this seemed too far-fetched.

But one thing he did know for sure? Kit was in danger. So it didn't matter who or what was after their mate, they would need to die. And the sooner the better.

He and Beckett followed Hudson and Kit to the guest bedroom Hudson had mentioned, although Connie feverishly wished the three of them were piling into Hudson's massive bed.

Hudson opened the door and stepped aside so Kit could see inside. Like the rest of the house, it was light and airy with

several floor-to-ceiling windows. There was also an attached bath.

“This is nice,” Kit said, standing in the room, making a slow turn as he looked around. “Like a fancy hotel room.”

Connie caught the quick grimace that flashed across Hudson’s face before he quickly smoothed his features. Yeah, Connie agreed. A hotel room spoke of a temporary stay. That was not what they wanted, but it would have to do for now.

“Here, let’s exchange phone numbers,” Connie said. “I’m always here at the main house since I’m Hudson’s right hand. He and I will always be available to you.”

“Okay, sure.” Kit took out his cell phone. “I’m ready.”

Connie rattled off his phone number. A few seconds later his phone beeped. It was Kit calling him. Now he had Kit’s number too.

“You have my phone number and Beckett’s, right?” Hudson asked.

“Yes,” Kit said.

“What time do you want to leave in the morning?” Beckett asked.

“How long does it usually take to get to my bookstore?”

“It can take up to an hour sometimes,” Beckett said. “It depends on traffic.”

Kit wrinkled his nose. “I was afraid of that. What time do you normally leave?”

“Usually about eight forty-five since you open at ten. I like to be a bit early if I can.”

“Right. Let’s leave at the usual time then. It’s not as if the boss is going to get mad at me if I’m late.” Kit snickered.

“Breakfast usually starts at six,” Hudson said. “Kit, would you like to have breakfast with Connie and me?”

“Well, that depends. What time do you normally eat?”

“We’re usually there about seven thirty. Would that work for you?” Connie asked.

“Could you make it eight? That way I can eat, then Beckett and I can leave.” Kit glanced at Beckett. “Will you be there?”

“Of course. So will several of Hudson’s dragons. We can start introducing you then.”

Kit blew out a breath. “There will be coffee, right? Because if I have to be social at that time of the morning, there had better be coffee.”

“I hear you.” Connie elbowed Kit. “We’ll see you then.”

“We’ll knock on your door in the morning,” Hudson said. “Oh, there are also towels, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, and lotion in the bathroom. There is also a spare toothbrush and toothpaste under the sink. Have a good night, and we’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Kit said.

“If you need anything, anything at all, please feel free to call one of us. Even if it’s the middle of the night,” Connie said.

“Thanks. I appreciate that. I’ll see you guys in the morning,” Kit said as he followed everybody to the door of the guest room. “Good night.”

Once Kit closed the door, Hudson motioned for Connie and Beckett to follow him to his quarters. No one said a word until they entered and shut the door.

“Gods, what a mess,” Hudson said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he walked into his living area.

“Anybody up for drink?” Connie asked.

“Yes,” both Hudson and Beckett replied.

“On it.”

Hudson motioned for Beckett to have a seat. “Thank you for taking Kit to and from work. I appreciate that.”

Needless to say, I'm going to have some more dragons keeping an eye on his business."

"Good."

Connie handed Beckett and Hudson their drinks and sat down next to Hudson. "Don't forget you have to call Ward too, Hudson," Connie said.

"I will shortly," Hudson said.

"So. Nox, huh?" Beckett asked. "Not that I'm doubting your mate's word, but did anyone else see this person?"

"No," Connie said. "Unfortunately, Leo was too far away."

"Nox is dead and nothing but ash, so who or what did Kit see then?" Beckett asked.

Hudson took that opportunity to explain his theory.

Beckett shuddered. "Clones?"

"Yeah." Connie nodded. "Isn't that just damn well disturbing?"

Beckett downed half his drink. "By the dragon gods, let's hope that's not the case. We need to get in contact with Kage immediately."

"I'm calling him right after I call Ward. Hopefully he'll be up," Hudson said.

"I think we also need to talk to Axel," Connie said. "I'd like to hear him tell how he killed Nox."

"Do you doubt him?" Beckett asked.

"Of course not. If anybody had a reason to kill Nox, it was definitely Axel. I'd just like to hear a play-by-play of it," Connie said.

"Wasn't Denisha there too? Or was it Maia?" Beckett asked.

"Definitely something we need to ask Kage. Whichever one of his lieutenants *was* there when Nox was

killed, I'd like to talk to her too," Hudson said, taking a long sip of his drink.

"I think it was Denisha," Connie said.

"I'll check with Kage," Hudson said. "Maybe we need to call another meeting at Isadora's restaurant and get all the leaders there. If we've got clones running around—"

"We're going to have another battle on our hands," Connie finished. And this time *their* mate would be in the middle of it.

"Well, if that's all, I'm going to bed," Beckett said, standing. "I'll see you guys in the morning. Good night."

"Good night."

Connie nodded to the other dragon. "Night, Grand Lord."

After Beckett left, Hudson dragged his phone out and checked the time. "Guess I'll call Ward now."

While Hudson talked to the king of the gargoyles, Connie refilled their drinks. He wandered around the living area aimlessly, listening with half an ear to what Hudson and Ward were discussing.

Apparently Ward's castle had some structural problems, and he wanted recommendations of people qualified to work on such things. Preferably paranormals, Connie gathered.

Which Connie understood. Having humans in your territory was bad enough. Having them in your home was a whole 'nother ballgame. And the gargoyles tended to be more territorial than even dragons. They were also a lot more vulnerable because they turned to stone during the day.

Connie shook his head. He didn't know how the vamps or gargoyles stood it. Dragons did sleep, but they didn't need as many hours as a human. Five was more than enough for them.

Speaking of sleeping, Connie's thoughts turned toward the guest room and its occupant. What was Kit doing at that

very second? Was he taking a shower? Or had he gone straight to bed? Oh damn. Kit didn't have any clothes with him, so what was he sleeping in?

Connie swallowed. Was Kit sleeping in the nude? Was his mate literally right down the hallway, naked? His dragon perked up, and the insane urge to bust into Kit's room and find out grabbed Connie about the throat.

His breathing picked up and a deep rumble started in his chest. His mate was so close. So. Damn. Close. He could be in Kit's room in a matter of seconds.

“Could you hold on just a moment, please, Ward?” Hudson lowered the cell phone and cleared his throat loudly. “Connie?”

Connie wanted to lick and kiss every square inch of Kit's delectable skin. Maybe nibble on it a little—cover Kit in love bites so everybody would know exactly who the human belonged to.

“Connie!”

The power in Hudson's voice shook Connie out of the spiral he was in. Shocked, he looked down at his hands. He was well on his way to partially transforming. “Dammit!”

Lurching to his feet, he tossed his cell phone on the table next to Hudson. Stomping through the living area, he entered the bedroom, stripping as he went, and then opened the sliding glass door. He flung himself into the pool.

He sat at the bottom, fuming. This was absolutely ridiculous. The fact that he had no control over his dragon when it came to Kit was horribly embarrassing. By the dragon gods, this had to get better. It simply had to.

Or he was going to spend a lot of time sopping wet.

Once he was assured he had control of his dragon, and the need for air was becoming pressing, he surfaced. No more thoughts of Kit showering or sleeping.

Connie climbed out of the pool and padded into the bathroom, where he dried off. Slipping on a pair of night

pants, he joined Hudson on the couch, who was now off his cell.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I got to thinking about Kit and what he could possibly be doing... and got heated. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I understand.”

“So anyway, Ward wanted recommendations for construction crews? Did you have any?”

“A few, yes. I do have to admit I’m surprised he called me. The gargoyles are not the friendliest bunch,” Hudson said, running his hands through Connie’s damp locks.

“Who knows. Maybe Ward is trying to change that.”

“It would be nice.” Hudson tugged on Connie’s hair. “I’m going to call Kage now. What time is it over there?”

“About eleven.”

Hudson dialed Kage’s phone number.

“Hello.”

“Oh, good, I caught you,” Hudson said.

“I’m waiting for Austin to finish getting dressed, then we’re going to lunch. I have an appointment at one to see the original birth certificate, fucking finally.”

“Excellent. I’m very relieved to hear that because, unfortunately, I’m going to be the bearer of bad news.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hope you’re sitting down,” Hudson said.

“Well, shit. Okay. I am now. Let’s have it.”

Hudson quickly related what had gone down only a few hours earlier.

“By the dead gods, Hudson,” Kage breathed. “I don’t know what to say. Well, I *want* to say that a clone is impossible, but you and I both know what the hunters have managed to accomplish so far.”

“That’s exactly my thoughts too. But it just seems so outlandish.”

“I agree, but never say something is impossible. We, for example, exist. So the impossible is possible. The only thing I can say for sure is Nox is dead.”

“But which one?”

“I need a drink,” Kage groaned.

“I hear you.”

“Is Kit okay? Are you and Connie okay?”

“We’re fine. Kit is rattled but didn’t fight me about coming here,” Hudson said. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if he had.”

“Probably carried him off anyway.”

“You joke, but you really don’t know how close you are to being right. Connie and I both are struggling with how he affects us.”

“I’ve already made one trip in the pool since Kit arrived,” Connie said. “And he hasn’t even been here that long.”

“Damn,” Kage said. “I don’t know whether I should laugh or sympathize.”

“Both. I freely admit the situation is ridiculous,” Connie said.

“I can’t wait to see you two around Kit. And speaking of that, as soon as I wrap up business today, Austin and I are heading back.”

“Good. I would also like to meet with Axel. I’d like to hear exactly what went down when he killed Nox,” Hudson said. “Could you set that up?”

“I’d be glad to. I will also call you back later with whatever information I get from that meeting. Get some sleep, my friend.”

“I’ll talk to you later, then.” Hudson disconnected the call and turned toward Connie. “I had a thought while talking to Kage. The court needs to be aware that Kit is here.”

“I was going to bring that up as soon as you got off the phone. It’s unusual to have humans in our territory, so there’ll definitely be questions,” Connie said. “They need to know he’s our mate.”

“I agree. They also need to be warned not to disclose that information to Kit. That’s something we need to do. I’m going to send out a mass email before we go to bed.”

“After Kit leaves for the day, might I suggest you call a formal meeting with the court? Or at least as many who can attend on such short notice. An email is great, but I think you still need to meet with them face-to-face. And definitely you need to meet with your inner circle,” Connie said.

“I will. Let’s go take a shower and go to bed.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Connie said, standing. He offered his hand to Hudson, then pulled him to his feet. “Listen, I thought of something earlier, which was half the reason I ended up in the pool. Kit has no clothes with him outside the ones he’s wearing right now.”

“So he has nothing to sleep in. I see what you’re saying.” Hudson followed Connie into the master bath. “And that shirt that he’s wearing, while sexy as hell, is completely useless.”

“Gods. That damn shirt.” Connie rubbed his hands over his face. “Anyway, I was thinking maybe one of us should let him borrow a T-shirt or something?”

Hudson nodded and walked to his walk-in closet. He rifled through his clothes, then pulled out a blue T-shirt that was very soft to the touch. He handed it to Connie. “Get your scent on it.”

Grinning, Connie took the shirt and rubbed it against his chest, then handed it back to Hudson, who did the same thing. “Now both of our scents are on it. Do you mind if I take it to him?”

“Not at all. I’m not sure how I’ll react.” Connie slipped his night pants off. “But hurry back, okay?”

Hudson stepped up to Connie and kissed his lips. “I will. And soon I’m going to be kissing the both of you instead of just one of you.”

“I can’t wait.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – KIT



“HERE BE dragons,” Kit muttered to himself as he leaned against the guest room door. The shirt he’d worn was completely open in the back, so the hardwood was cold against his bare skin.

He shivered as the chill seeped into him. Kit knew what the phrase meant and where it supposedly originated from. But in this case, there really *were* dragons here.

His libido, which had been MIA until recently, had suddenly decided to zero in on two of them. And of course he just *had* to be attracted to a king and a king’s right-hand man. Yep, Kit did nothing by half measures.

He was so fucked.

Sighing, he pushed off the door and wandered toward the attached bathroom. He hunted around until he found what he needed to take his makeup off. He’d have to skip his usual bedtime skincare routine, but that was okay. It was only for one night.

After he stripped, he started the shower, gave it a few seconds to warm up, and stepped inside.

For the longest time he just stood there, letting the hot water relax him.

But he couldn’t stay in there forever. Grabbing the soap, he washed himself. Good grief, had he ever been in a shower this huge? It was a freestanding shower that was big enough to hold three grown men, which of course gave him ideas he really didn’t need right then.

Everything he’d seen in the house shouted money and class, but Kit figured it made sense, especially if Hudson was a

thousand years old. Mother of all, Kit was attracted to a thousand-year-old dragon.

Every time he thought that his brain glitched.

And Connie? Kit had no idea how old Connie was, but he gave off confident, poised vibes—like he could handle fifteen different tasks, while under attack, without breaking a sweat.

Both of them were so out of Kit's league it wasn't even funny. But hey, nothing said that he couldn't fantasize about the three of them. Together. In a bed. Or on the floor. Or a counter.

Damn, he was getting hard.

That he was attracted to two men at the same time didn't freak him out. Kit had grown up with a mother and two dads. Poly relationships were the norm to him because of his parents. He'd had more than one lover at a time too. He liked playing with two men and having them play with him.

Oh yeah, he was definitely getting hard. He squirted some conditioner in his hand and wrapped it around his cock, stroking quickly. This was going to be hard and fast since he was so wound up.

In his mind, his dragons had him on a big bed with his head hanging off the side. Connie was between his spread legs, fucking into him, and Hudson was standing at Kit's head, feeding his dick to Kit.

Hell yeah, this was not going to take long *at all*, not with that visual in his head. Add in some growls—and he had no idea why he was turned on by those sounds—and some filthy moans, and....

Kit gritted his teeth as he spurted against the tile. His head spun, and he slapped a palm against the wall to keep his balance. Dear God. He'd pretty much drained his balls.

Too bad it was just a fantasy. Funny thing was, he wasn't freaked out that Hudson and Connie were paranormal. Okay, he *was* a little bit, but not enough to kill the attraction.

He had enough sense to know he couldn't judge an entire race on the actions of a few. Beckett was quickly becoming a close friend, and Hudson had been nothing but nice to Kit. He'd just met Connie, but he seemed cool too. Then there was Kage, who had also treated Kit very well.

So, yeah, the majority of paranormals he'd met were okay.

And he was going to meet a lot more, from the sounds of it. Kit finished showering and got out. No, what actually freaked him out was that he was attracted to two men who probably considered him nothing more than an obligation.

Which sucked.

What also sucked was that he didn't have any clean clothes to sleep in. Looked like he was going all-natural tonight. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he wandered into the bedroom and unmade the bed.

Before he got in, there was a soft knock on his door. Kit walked to the door but paused before opening it. All he had on was a damn towel. Finally, he shook his head. Screw it. He was clothed. Besides, if he wasn't safe there, he wasn't safe anywhere.

"Hey." Kit glanced down at the T-shirt Hudson held.

"Oh. You've... ah, you've showered. Ah, sorry to bother you. Connie mentioned you didn't have clothes with you, which I... I should've thought of. I brought this." Hudson thrust the shirt toward Kit. "It's probably too big, but I guess it's better than nothing."

"Oh, wow." Kit took the incredibly soft shirt. It felt like liquid silk in his hands. "Thanks."

"You're, ah, very welcome. We'll see you in the morning," Hudson said, then hurried off.

"Yeah, ah, okay. See you." Kit watched Hudson beat a hasty retreat before closing the door. "That was weird," Kit said, hugging the T-shirt to his chest. "But it was thoughtful."

Holding the shirt up to his nose, he inhaled deeply. It had a woody, sort of toasted marshmallow, cinnamon scent. It kind of reminded him of making s'mores over a campfire.

He dropped the towel and slipped on the T-shirt. Yep, it was definitely too big. The scent on the material wrapped around him, making Kit feel safe. That was certainly something he hadn't felt in a while. He walked back to the bathroom and tossed the towel over the shower door.

Yawning, Kit set his alarm on his cell and climbed into bed.

KIT ONLY slept for a few hours, but the rest he *had* gotten had been freaking awesome. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so soundly.

Actually, that was untrue. The last good sleep he'd had was before the first attack by Nox. Even what happened last night hadn't kept him awake into the wee hours of the morning because he'd felt safe there.

He felt *safe* there.

Kit absolutely had no idea what to do with that knowledge. His stay was only temporary, so he certainly couldn't get accustomed to that feeling. But by damn, he'd enjoy it while he could.

He lay in bed, thinking about all he had to accomplish that morning, when his alarm went off. Getting up, he used the restroom, washed his hands, then brushed his teeth.

His braid was kinda messy, but he wasn't tackling his hair until he got home. It was going to be a wavy mess after having it in a braid all night. Slipping on his underwear—black lace boy shorts that he absolutely adored—he then wiggled into his black leather pants.

Instead of changing into the shirt he'd worn last night, he kept on the one Hudson gave him. He wasn't ready to take it off, so sue him.

Kit had just finished putting on his combat boots when there was a knock at his door. His heart gave a hard, happy thump, which was disconcerting. He couldn't get too attached to these guys.

Reminding himself of that, Kit opened the door. Jeez, that was almost too much sexy goodness first thing in the morning. Hudson wore a dark gray suit that probably cost more than what Kit made in a week. Damn thing fit him like a glove. All that long red hair framed his face beautifully, like liquid fire.

Connie was standing next to him dressed in a dark-blue suit with a lavender shirt. The jacket was slung over one of Connie's arms, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, exposing his forearms—his muscular, veiny forearms.

His short, golden-red hair was styled becomingly, and he still had the scruff. Holy cow, Kit had just unlocked a new kink it seemed—suit porn!

“Good morning,” Hudson said.

“Morning,” Connie echoed.

“Hey. Good morning to the both of you,” Kit answered.

“Are you ready?” Hudson asked.

“Yeah. Just a second. Let me grab that shirt I wore last night,” Kit said, turning from the door.

“Oh. You can leave that. Since you'll be moving in, your laundry will be taken care of,” Hudson said.

Turning back around, Kit frowned. “While I appreciate that, I feel I should mention that I am more than capable of doing my own laundry. I have for years.”

“You're more than welcome to do so if that's your wish. But I have a head housekeeper, just like I have a head chef,” Hudson said.

“I, uh, don't know what to say to that,” Kit admitted. “I've never had anything like servants, so I'm used to taking care of myself.”

“They’re not servants,” Connie said gently. “They’re part of our court. Okay, time for a crash course in how a dragon hierarchy works.”

“Whoa boy. Should I be taking notes?” Kit joked.

“Naw. Since you own a bookstore, I’m going to assume you like to read. What do you like best?” Connie asked.

“Romance, and mainly gay romance, now that there’s such a thing. Paranormal romance, in particular,” Kit answered.

“You’ve read about werewolves then?” Hudson interjected. “They’re pretty popular, I hear.”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ve read about alphas, pack life, and a packhouse, right?” Hudson asked.

“Yes. There’s some variation of course, depending on the author, but yes.”

“There you go. This house is Hudson’s home, but it functions as a packhouse. As you saw last night, there are communal areas for dragons to come and hang out. Hudson also has his private areas,” Connie said.

“Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten that,” Kit said.

“There are also two tennis courts, a community pool, two basketball courts, and two lakes, one of which has boat docks for the court’s use. We all have our own homes spread out through Hudson’s compound too,” Connie said. “But breakfast, lunch, and dinner are always served at the main house—meaning Hudson’s home.”

“That’s one of my functions as their king,” Hudson said. “I make sure my people have a place to live, a place to hang out, and jobs. Some of my dragons are single, and it’s too much of a bother for them to cook for one person, so each meal is offered buffet style.”

“Well, that’s awesome.”

“Since you’re my guest, all those amenities are available to you. You’re more than welcome to use my private areas too—my living area and my pool.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t want to intrude,” Kit said.

“You won’t be intruding.”

“Hudson wouldn’t offer if he didn’t mean it, Kit,” Connie said. “And you probably will end up wanting to take Hudson up on his offer. Dragons can get to be a bit much. If nothing else, use Hudson’s private areas to take a break.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind,” Kit said.

KIT REPLAYED Connie’s words on the way to breakfast. What exactly did Connie mean by dragons could be a bit much? He’d spent plenty of time around Beckett, and the guy never got on his nerves. He was the very definition of easygoing.

As they approached the breakfast area, Kit got the first inkling of what Connie could have possibly meant. He could hear Hudson’s dragons before he saw them.

Loud. They were loud.

And shit. Was that hissing he heard?

There was also laughing, joking, and what sounded like some good-natured arguing. They entered the area, and the first thing Kit noticed was a long table that could easily seat twenty to twenty-five people. On the back wall, a buffet station had been set up.

There was a group of folks already sitting and eating, several more going through the buffet line, and then some more just standing around drinking coffee and talking.

All conversations came to a screeching halt, and Kit swallowed uncomfortably. Well, that wasn’t noticeable, not at all. Having that many eyes on him was kinda intimidating too, not to mention every last person in there was a dragon. Well, he guessed they were since everyone had red hair.

“As I mentioned in the email I sent out last night, this is Kit Meadows,” Hudson called out. “He’ll be staying with us for the time being. Fire Court, please make him feel welcome and see to any needs he might have.”

Hudson sent an email about him last night? Actually, that kind of made sense now he thought about it. Hudson would need to let his dragons know there was a human bebopping around here.

Those who were enjoying their coffee were the first to come over and welcome Kit. Once they drifted off, Hudson walked Kit over to the buffet line.

It did not escape Kit’s notice that Hudson rested his hand on Kit’s lower back. Nor did it escape his notice that when they went to sit down, Connie pulled his chair out for him.

There were a couple of dragons sitting down from him that waved, then came over and introduced themselves. No sooner had they left, another group joined him, Hudson, and Connie.

“Kit? I would like to introduce you to a few members of my inner circle. These dragons are ones who are the closest to me, who understand me the best, and who I trust to always be there when I need them,” Hudson said.

“Also? If you can’t find me, Hudson, or Beckett? Go to one of them,” Connie said.

“I don’t know if you remember him or not, but this is Lord Nelson West. He specializes in close combat training, but he’s skilled in many forms of combat. Nelson, this is Kit.”

Nelson was a Black man with some of the cutest freckles Kit had ever seen and long, beautiful dark-auburn dreads. Kit and Nelson exchanged greetings.

“Next to him is Lady Audrey Darnell. Her specialty lies in training our dragon forms to fight,” Hudson said. “Audrey, this is Kit.”

Audrey was a white woman with long, orangish-red hair. Kit noticed she had dimples when she smiled.

After they exchanged greetings, Hudson introduced the dragon sitting next to her. His name was Sir Torres Manchester, and he was in charge of security. He was a Black man with short, fiery-red hair, a mischievous grin, and a sexy jaw line.

“And you already know me.” Beckett winked.

“You do know that Beckett is in heaven, right, Kit?” Audrey asked. “Working in a bookstore? Seriously, I don’t know if there *is* a more perfect job for him.”

Beckett nodded. “Not only that, but the place has a very welcoming vibe. I like it there.”

“I’m glad to hear that. That’s definitely what I was going for. And Beckett has been a lot of help to me. He’s always willing to lend a hand,” Kit said.

“Yep, that sounds like Beckett,” Torres said.

The conversation was easy and fun. Kit noticed that the dragons Hudson called his inner circle liked to pick on and tease each other, and Hudson and Connie were not omitted from that.

Kit liked that Hudson’s dragons were comfortable enough to tease him. Royalty always seemed steeped in tradition and rules—and stuffy—not that he’d met a lot of royals, of course.

Halfway through breakfast, Connie noticed Kit’s glass was empty and offered to get him a refill. Hudson offered Kit some of his bacon.

Shortly after Connie sat back down, another female dragon joined them, and Hudson introduced her as Mistress Sheila Walker, their financial advisor. She was a white woman with tanned skin, sultry eyes, and auburn hair that was so rich in color it almost appeared a deep purple.

“There’s a few of his inner circle missing,” Connie said as he passed Kit some napkins. “Lord Mitchell Fields is our weapon specialist. He’s in charge of acquiring whatever the Fire Court needs, weapon wise, and then teaching us to use it.”

“I’m never going to remember all these names,” Kit lamented quietly. “Nor the titles. Which, speaking of, was I supposed to use them? You guys didn’t tell me if I was supposed to. Did I offend anyone, Connie?”

Audrey reached across the table and gently patted Kit’s hand. “I’m not trying to eavesdrop, it’s just that it’s almost impossible to carry on a private conversation around paranormals. Of course you didn’t offend us.”

Nelson nodded. “About the only time we use titles is during formal situations or—”

Torres snickered. “Or if we’re arguing with another dragon and want to remind them we’re a higher rank than them.”

“You know how old folks are,” Sheila joked. “They are all grrrrr, get off my lawn.”

Kit tried not to cringe. Lord, he was at the bottom of the ladder then because he wasn’t a dragon and didn’t have a title.

“Don’t make me smack you with my cane, Sheila,” Beckett quipped.

“Oh, jeez, that’s right.” Kit goggled at Beckett. “You’re a Grand Lord. I keep forgetting you’re a thousand years old. And I’m *still* having trouble believing those words are coming out of my mouth.”

Hudson waved at somebody coming toward them from across the room. “Get ready to meet a Grand Lady too.”

Kit gulped. Just what he needed—another thousand-year-old dragon surrounding him.

“Kit? This is Grand Lady Stella Yearwood. She runs my kitchen and everyone in it. Without her, we’d all starve to death.”

“Amen,” Audrey said.

Everyone sitting around them lifted their drink and toasted Stella, who rolled her eyes, even though she was smiling.

Stella held out her hands to Kit. “I’m very pleased to meet you. While you’re staying with us, if there are any dishes you’d like, please let me know. It would be my pleasure to make them for you. Seriously.”

“Oh, well, thank you. And it’s a pleasure to meet you too,” Kit said.

Stella was a drop-dead gorgeous Black woman with long auburn hair with black highlights. It suddenly dawned on him that every dragon he had met so far was simply gorgeous in appearance.

Talk about feeling like an ugly duckling.

Stella spoke for a couple minutes more, then returned to the kitchen, waving at the other dragons as she left. It amazed Kit how well everybody seemed to get along.

After breakfast finished up, Hudson and Connie escorted Kit to Beckett’s vehicle. Connie opened the door for Kit, and once he was inside, Hudson shut it.

Kit wasn’t sure what to make of the attention. He’d ended up between the two of them at breakfast, and both of them had touched Kit several times throughout the meal.

They were innocent touches, but they were still touches. If Hudson and Connie were human, he’d be tempted to think they were flirting with him—almost tag-teaming him.

But they weren’t, and he needed to remember that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN – HUDSON



“I LIKE him,” Torres said when Hudson and Connie returned inside. Several of the other dragons who’d sat with them during breakfast nodded their agreement.

“We like him too.” Hudson winked, sitting back down at the table as more and more dragons trickled in.

Hudson spoke with his inner circle quietly while Connie kept an eye on the ever-increasing crowd.

After about twenty minutes, Connie tapped Hudson on the shoulder. “I think that’s everyone.”

“Okay, thank you.” Hudson stood and cleared his throat. Conversations quickly died. “I would like to thank everybody for coming, especially on such short notice. As I mentioned in the email I sent out, we have a human staying with us. His name is Kit Meadows.”

Connie got to his feet too. “As you know, Kit was an innocent bystander in the attack on Austin by Nox. Because of this, paranormals were exposed to a human. But since Kit is friendly with Austin, Kage asked us to keep an eye on him. We were honored to do this.”

“Last night, Kit was attacked by someone who resembles Nox,” Hudson said. Whispered conversations immediately broke out between the dragons attending the meeting. “Yes, I know. That shouldn’t be possible since Nox is dead. Right now, we don’t have a good answer for what is going on.”

“But we do know Kit was targeted. Again. The attacker had a message for Kage, which he has also been told about,” Connie said.

“Kit will be staying here for the time being,” Hudson said. “Last night was the first night Connie had actually met Kit, although we had picked up his scent on Beckett, seeing as he works with Kit at his bookstore.”

“Kit is our mate.” Smiling, Connie glanced at Hudson. “Both Hudson *and* I have a soul bond with him. We want the court to know because this changes everything.”

“Connie and I *will* claim Kit. Meaning that both Kit and Connie will be my consorts—their titles only second to mine.” Hudson held out his hand and Connie took it. “Connie and I don’t share a soul bond—I don’t know why—but as many of you know, we’ve been seeing each other.”

“We have, and now the two of us share a bond with Kit. Throuples aren’t that unusual with dragons, although having a human thrown in the mix seems to be less common,” Connie admitted.

“I’ve stated what I plan to do concerning these two males,” Hudson said, straightening. “If anyone has a problem with that, I will grant permission for you to leave my court and will even help you transfer to another.”

There were several gasps.

“Yes, I’m that serious. You can either accept a human as our mate or leave,” Hudson said, making eye contact with every dragon there.

So far all he saw was happiness on the faces looking back at him, but there were several dragons missing who had work that morning and couldn’t get out of it.

“Kit is also unaware he’s our mate. We’re going slowly because he *is* human,” Connie stressed. “And quite frankly, he’s had a rough time of it lately. Being introduced to our world due to an attack by a mimic has caused problems for Kit.”

“Don’t let it slip what he is to us, and treat him with the utmost care,” Hudson said. “Or you’ll be answering to me.”

“And me. Plus, Beckett is a friend to Kit.” Connie grinned at the crowd, flashing his fangs. “You know, one of the three Ancients we have in our court.”

There was plenty of good-natured laughter—although there wasn’t a dragon there who wanted to tangle with someone of that age.

“That’s all. Thanks, everyone, for attending. Have a good day,” Hudson said, sitting down and pulling Connie with him.

Another thirty minutes passed while Hudson’s dragons congratulated him and Connie and asked questions about Kit. Hudson had a feeling Kit’s business was going to suddenly be inundated by a bunch of curious dragons.

Connie pulled out his cell phone, wiggled his fingers out of Hudson’s grip, and started typing.

After the last dragon drifted off, Hudson leaned over, kissed Connie on the cheek, and looked down at his phone. “What are you doing?”

“Giving Beckett a heads-up that a bunch of busybodies are probably going to be showing up at Kit’s business,” Connie said, reading over his message.

“And this is the reason you’re my right hand.” Hudson patted Connie on the knee. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Hopefully they’ll buy something while they check Kit out,” Nelson said.

“I think it’s a pretty good bet they will, especially since they’re driving all the way into San DeLain.” Torres glanced between Connie and Hudson. “I’d bet on it, in fact.”

Audrey stared into her mug. “You know, I haven’t been in a bookstore in ages.”

“Me either.” Sheila perked up. “Suddenly I have the urge.”

“Do you have anything going on today?” Audrey asked.

“I don’t, in fact. You?”

“Oddly enough, my schedule just cleared.” Audrey laughed. “How do you feel about making a trip into San DeLain? Maybe we could do a little shopping too.”

“Absolutely. It’s nine now. I’ll meet you back here, say, around ten?” Sheila asked. “How does that sound?”

“Perfect. I’ll see you then,” Audrey said, standing. “Bye, you guys!”

Torres watched Sheila and Audrey leave. “Those two are trouble.”

“You watch, they’re going to adopt Kit.” Nelson shook his head.

“Poor Kit.” Torres snickered.

“You guys laugh, but I’ve seen firsthand how Denisha and Maia treat Austin. They’d both deny it with their dying breath, but Kage’s mate has both ladies wrapped around his pinky. They’d move mountains for Austin,” Hudson said.

“His lieutenants are definitely badass,” Connie said.

Torres wiggled his eyebrows. “And hot.”

“Nope. No way. You don’t want to mess with those two, my guy,” Nelson said. “One wrong step and you could find yourself stranded in an ocean somewhere.”

Torres shuddered. “Yeah, there is that. I hate traveling by the shadows.”

“Try having a best friend who is a shadow demon, then talk to me,” Hudson joked.

Connie smirked.

“Oh, shut up, Connie.” Hudson bumped Connie with his shoulder. “Come on, you, time to get to work.”

Laughing, Connie followed Hudson out of the dining area.

“WELL, I think that went well.” Connie collapsed in one of the overstuffed chairs in Hudson’s office. He was smiling from ear to ear. “So, you’re claiming both Kit *and* me? No asking, just telling me, huh?”

Hudson locked the door behind him and stalked toward Connie. “Got a problem with that?”

Connie grinned playfully. “Fuck no.”

Hudson stopped in front of Connie, resting his hands on the chair arms, and leaned into him. He let his eyes change color. “Fuck no is right. You know I care deeply for you. Very deeply. No dragon has touched my heart like you have. Only you.”

The playfulness slipped from Connie’s face. “I know. I care for you deeply also. Shit, Hudson. What I feel surpasses that. I’ve never been in love before, but I think—”

Hudson quickly placed his finger on Connie’s lips. “Don’t say anything until you’re sure. We’re in no rush here, sweetheart. We also have Kit to consider now. You and I had been circling each other for a while before we gave in. Kit needs to have a chance to catch up.”

Connie nipped Hudson’s finger. “Fine. I won’t say the words until I’m sure.”

“Good.”

Connie grabbed Hudson’s tie and pulled him closer. “But the same goes for you then.”

“Of course.” Hudson took Connie’s mouth in a kiss that quickly turned filthy. He didn’t stop until Connie groaned into his mouth. After he ended the kiss, he leaned back, staring into Connie’s reddish-gold eyes. “So beautiful. So mine.”

Connie shuddered. “You have no idea how much those words affect me. For a while there, you shut me out. I was scared I was going to lose you, Hudson.”

“I know, sweetheart. That was stupid of me, and I hurt both of us. But I was scared too. I was scared something like this would happen—that one of us would find our mate. I

never dreamed that both of us would have a soul bond to the same person.”

“Or that he’d be human.”

“There is that.” Hudson straightened and moved to the chair next to Connie, collapsing into it. “And we will claim him. He’s already interested in us. I picked up the scent of his arousal last night. I know you did too.”

“I did, yes. It smells so sweet. Reminds me of a magnolia. It’s kinda floral and lemony.”

Hudson’s eyes fluttered closed for a second before he opened them again. “Yes. Exactly. That’s the perfect description.”

“I also think he’s insecure about his interest in us. Even with all the attention we paid him at breakfast, I don’t think he understands that we’re pursuing him,” Connie muttered.

Hudson frowned at the table in front of him. “That’s not really surprising, I guess. He doesn’t know either of us, so he doesn’t know it wasn’t just harmless flirting.”

“Which neither of us would do. And gods, what if thinks he has to choose between us?”

“I didn’t think of that. But that leads me back to what I said just a second ago—he doesn’t know either of us. But we’re going to change that, Connie.”

“I’m all for it. While we’re on the subject of Kit, there’s something else I think we need to address. Should we let him know that you and I are already in an established relationship? Do you think that’ll intimidate him or make him feel like a third wheel?”

“My gut says that we don’t hide it from Kit. Besides, I have a problem hiding what I feel for you anyway. If Kit was a dragon, he’d know why we were pursuing him.”

“But he *isn’t* a dragon,” Connie said.

“We’ll just have to make sure he understands that he isn’t a plaything for us to pass the time with. We’ll show him how serious we are.”

Connie pursed his lips, his head tilted as he stared at Hudson. “We’re going to court him.”

“Yes. We are.”

Connie rubbed his hands together. “This should be fun. What should we do first? Shit, how do you even court someone?”

“Really?”

“Courting is such an old-fashioned thing.”

Nonplussed, Hudson stared at Connie. Did... did he just get called old? Again?

“I know! Yeah, time to test my Google-Fu.” Connie threaded his fingers together, popped his knuckles, then pulled out his cell phone. “Okay, here we go.... Huh.”

“What? That was fast. Already found some ideas?”

“Not yet. I accidentally tapped the Google icon and the search bar popped up. I got distracted by this article from the San DeLain Daily News. Give me a minute to read this. It’s about a sudden spike of kidnappings in the area.”

“Gods.” Hudson pulled his cell phone out and started searching too. Within seconds he found the article that Connie was talking about. The human run newspaper was reporting several kidnappings from bars in the panic after their alarm systems were pulled.

“Well, that’s not good. Did you read the article, or do I need to summarize it?” Connie asked.

“No, I found it. The exact same thing happened that night at Raven’s club, only we stopped it,” Hudson said. “The article speculates why it’s happening, but I think we know what’s really behind this.”

“Yeah. Hunters.” Connie tossed his cell phone on the table next to him and scrubbed his hands over his face. “It seems we were mistaken in thinking the cell in San DeLain had been eradicated with Nox’s death.”

“Since we’re questioning Nox’s death, I think it’s safe to say we might have jumped the gun on that too.”

“Fuck, Hudson. Who or what did Axel kill and Kage bury in Greece?” Connie demanded.

“That’s the question, isn’t it? We need to meet with everyone again. Immediately.”

“Wait. Should we not hold off until we hear back from Kage?”

“Dammit.” Hudson stared down at the cell phone in his hand. “No. The sooner I can arrange a meeting the better. If I have new information to add, I’ll send that out in another email.”

Hudson dialed Isadora’s number.

“Good morning to you, dragon king. A very early morning, I might add. Please tell me you’re not calling with bad news.”

“My dear, I sincerely wish I could.”

“Lovely. What have you done now?”

Hudson chuckled. “Why do you always assume *I’ve* done something?”

“Because you’re a dragon. So tell me, what seems to be the problem and what can I do for you?”

“Have a seat, Isadora. I have a very interesting story to tell you.”

“Am I going to need coffee?”

“Or something stronger.”

“Lovely.”

The conversation went pretty much the way Hudson expected. Isadora was reluctant to believe what Hudson told her at first, at least until he shared the possibility of a clone.

Isadora descended into a spate of Spanish that would’ve made a sailor blush. “Dammit to hell and back. Has someone notified Kage?”

“Of course I have. I’m waiting for him to call me back even as we speak,” Hudson replied.

“I sincerely hope you’re wrong about this, Hudson.”

“You’re not the only one, my dear.”

“Fine. Next Monday night at ten PM we’ll meet at my restaurant,” Isadora said.

“Same fee?” Hudson asked.

“Yes.”

Isadora’s restaurant was considered neutral territory, so the leaders always met there. Since she would lose paying customers that night, Hudson always covered her lost revenue. “Payment sent.”

“Thank you, dragon king. I’ll see you then.”

Hudson disconnected the call and sent out a mass email letting everyone know about the meeting. Ten PM would give the gargoyles and vampires enough time to wake up and get moving.

“Okay, that’s taken care of. What’s first on my agenda today?” Hudson asked Connie.

BY MID-MORNING, Hudson’s time, his cell rang. Hudson quickly hit send on the email he had just finished and pulled his phone out.

Seeing it was Kage, he answered immediately. “Hello?”

“Son of a bitch! *Son of a fucking bitch*, that mother-fucker had a fucking twin, Hudson.”

Connie’s head snapped up, horror on his face.

“A fucking twin! How the hell did the Council of Wolves miss that?” Kage swore violently. “They were so happy to throw who Nox was in my face. Did they not bother to check into *all* the details? Nox was a twin!”

“By Gaura’s scales, what kind of twin? Identical?” Hudson’s stomach dropped. If Nox had an identical twin, that would answer some of the questions they currently had. Some, but not all.

“No. The original birth certificate didn’t say, only that the second baby was male. But I met with the feline shifter tribe their mother came from.”

Well damn, Hudson was impressed. “How in the world did you manage that? How did you track them down so fast?”

“Money talks.”

“And?”

“Nox was *not* an identical twin. The second child, born five minutes later, was a feline shifter like their mother. Nox was the only mimic, thank fuck. The other child was named Lennox Astor.”

“Wait. One was named Nox, and the other was named Lennox? You do see the similarities in the name, right?”

“Of course. And get this, as children they looked a lot alike, from what I’m told. Like, nearly identical. Get your hacker on this, Hudson, and I will too. We need more information.”

“I will. Quick question—the leader of this tribe just volunteered this information?” Hudson asked.

“Well, he did after I threatened to make the alpha’s only male child disappear,” Kage snarled.

“Of course you did.” Hudson met Connie’s gaze and rolled his eyes. A pissed off Kage was a deadly Kage. At least no one had been dropped from a sky rise. Yet.

“I wanted answers, and I got them. Look, it’s eight thirty here. I’m going to notify your plane and crew to return without us.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Austin and I will return via the shadows. It’s faster. We’re going to the penthouse and sleeping for a few

hours, then I want to have dinner, your time, with you. We have a lot to talk about.”

“What about Kit? Do you want him there too?”

“I’ll leave that up to you, but I feel like he should know what I’ve discovered,” Kage said.

“Okay. Be here by six. We’ll visit for a bit, have dinner, and then discuss this over drinks.”

“See you then.”

CHAPTER TWENTY – CONNIE



CONNIE WHISTLED loudly. “I have to say, I didn’t see *that* coming.”

Hudson shook his head. “A damn twin. Why didn’t we think of that?”

Connie sat on the edge of Hudson’s desk, one of his legs swinging freely. “We just didn’t, but let’s be thankful for small mercies—at least *this* guy isn’t a mimic.”

“And apparently Nox didn’t figure out how to clone himself.” Hudson leaned back in his chair. “Thank the dragon gods for small mercies.”

“You know....” Connie pursed his lips. “Both of us have picked up the scent of a feline shifter lately.”

“Yes, we have. But why?” Hudson stared out the windows in his office at the lush greenness. “Why is this guy targeting us? And Kit? Why isn’t he focused on Kage, like Nox was? Not to sound like an ass, but we don’t have anything to do with their family drama.”

“We’re dragons. Ninety percent of the time we sound like asses, but I get what you’re saying. Nox targeted Kit so he could lure Austin into a trap. So why is Lennox targeting Kit? No way Austin and Kage are going to fall for that again, so why?”

“Also, something else comes to mind.” Hudson linked his hands behind his neck and frowned at Connie. “How involved is Lennox with the hunters? Nox claimed he was Nighthawk and the head of Illuminacon, remember?”

“Shit.”

“Makes me wonder if Nox actually was. Frankly, he seemed a little too psychotic to be in charge of running such a huge corporation.”

“Obsessed with Kage too.”

“Psychotic. Obsessed.” Hudson shrugged. “Either works. He sacrificed a working lab that also held prisoners. We found Axel and one of Kage’s clan members in that lab. We questioned that, remember?”

“Maybe Nox wasn’t Nighthawk and didn’t have some grand scheme like we thought. Maybe Lennox is the mastermind behind all this.”

“We need to know more about Lennox’s life,” Hudson said. “Did he go to college? If so, where? How? How did he start up his company? So many questions.”

“What warped him? We know what did Nox.”

“Yeah. Here’s something else—maybe everything Nox did was more flying by the seat of his pants and Lennox let Nox have free rein so Nox would be out of Lennox’s hair.”

“Which is absolutely terrifying,” Connie said.

“Right? It also begs the question—if Nox was the unstable one, what are we dealing with now?”

“Good question.”

Hudson straightened in his chair. “I need to update everyone. This can’t wait until our meeting. While I do that, I need you to touch base with Torres and inform him to beef up the security around here.”

Connie snapped to attention. That was Hudson’s authoritative voice. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Please inform Stella we’re having Kage and Austin for dinner tonight and that we won’t be eating in the communal area.”

“Okay.”

“Since Kage likes steak, request enough porterhouse rib eyes for all of us, baked potatoes, side salads, and dinner

rolls. Maybe some appetizers also. Ask her to pick that out.”

“What about dessert?” Connie asked.

“Those fudge brownies Stella does with vanilla ice cream. Ask if she’d be willing to do those.”

“Damn, that sounds good. I’m assuming Kit is going to be there?”

“Yes. He’s as invested as the rest of us. Plus, he and Austin are friends. I’d like for Kit to see that a human can be involved with a paranormal and be happy.”

“Good idea.”

“I’ll remind Kage to remind Austin not to bring up Kit being our mate,” Hudson said. “But I’m hoping Austin and Kit have an opportunity to talk privately. I’ll mention that to Kage too.”

“Well, *we* won’t be talking to Kage about how to date a human if Kit is there.”

“We’ll pick another time. Also? Remind me to bring up speaking to Axel with Kage. Axel is the only one who’s really spent any amount of time around Nox.”

“Well, yeah, because Nox was forcibly taking Axel’s blood so he could mimic him while Axel was a prisoner,” Connie pointed out. “That’s not going to be a memory that’s easily revisited.”

“I know, and I hate to bring up that time, but maybe Nox let something slip that didn’t make any sense at the time but does now, since we know there are two of them. Something,” Hudson said desperately.

“Do you want me to write up the information we have and send it to our hacker?”

“No, I’ll do that. You take care of the things I mentioned. Also, would you please call Kit and inform him of what’s going on?”

Connie wasn’t expecting that request. “Me?”

“Yes. Kit has had the opportunity to speak to me a couple times already. He hasn’t with you, so I want you two to have a chance to spend some time together.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. But to be clear, do you want me to tell him about Nox being a twin or just ask him to dinner?”

“Nox being a twin is something Kit should be told in person, I think. He probably won’t react well, and I want us to be there to help.”

“Good. I feel the same. So, ask him to dinner only, right?”

“Yes. Tell him Austin will be there too.” Hudson rested his hand on Connie’s knee. “Ask Kit how he likes his steak and what he wants on his potato too. We need to get to know him and give him the chance to know us.”

Leaning over, Connie pressed a quick kiss to Hudson’s lips. “I will. If I’m not back for lunch, don’t forget to eat.”

“I’ll probably work through lunch so I can be done by the time Kage and Austin arrive tonight.”

“Okay then, I’ll ask Stella to send somebody to your office with food. That way I know for sure you’ll eat.”

Hudson slipped his hand behind Connie’s neck, keeping Connie from leaning back. “Cocky.”

“You know it. Also? You need to inform your inner circle about Lennox,” Connie reminded Hudson. “Please do that now, so Torres is up to date when I speak to him. Now let me go, Your Majesty, so I can carry out your orders.”

Hudson growled softly and stole another kiss.

Reluctantly Connie slipped off the desk when Hudson finally did let her go.

HE MET with Stella first because the kitchen would be responsible for cooking two separate meals for dinner, and he wanted to give her plenty notice.

Since he and Hudson could eat as much as two grown men, there would be plenty of appetizers to tide them over until the main meal. Stella also agreed to do the brownie thing Hudson mentioned.

After he was done with that, he hunted down Torres. Hopefully Hudson had sent the email to his inner circle like Connie requested, so he wouldn't have to explain everything to Torres.

Torres scowled fiercely as he questioned Connie about the email Hudson sent.

"A twin," Torres said, pacing in his office. "A fucking twin."

"I know."

"Who is a feline shifter?"

"Yes."

"Didn't I hear someone tried to enter Kit's place of business, but the wards rejected them?"

"That's correct."

"And didn't Beckett say he noticed the scent of a feline shifter after that incident? Plus, Kit felt uneasy while grocery shopping too, right?"

"Yes. There's been a few incidents. Hudson and I have picked up a feline scent also. And while it's easy to assume that it was Lennox, we don't know that for certain."

"But it could've been."

"Most definitely, or it was just a random shifter. We don't *know*," Connie stressed. "Which is why Hudson wants you to beef up security around here."

Torres opened his mouth.

"Yes, yes, I know we already have good security, but Kit is staying here now. Humor us, okay? Call it instinct, call it the jitters, call it whatever you want, but we both need to make sure our mate is protected."

Torres paced back over and patted Connie on the shoulder. "I'm glad things worked out for you and Hudson. We all knew you two cared deeply for each other."

"Yeah, we weren't exactly subtle." Connie blushed when he remembered how he and Hudson went at it after they were attacked coming back from the airport. He was sure everybody in the house had heard them.

"We will welcome Kit with open arms too. You know that, right?"

Connie grinned. "Hudson won't allow anything else."

"There is that," Torres said.

"Anyway, I can't think of anybody in our court who has a problem with humans so that shouldn't be an issue," Connie said.

"I agree."

"Okay, I need to get going. We're having Kage and Austin over for dinner tonight, and I have some stuff still to do. Kit is joining us, so none of us will be in the communal dining room this evening," Connie said.

"I'll pass the word around."

"Thanks. If you have any questions about security measures that you need to check on, contact me."

"I will. Have a good time tonight."

"Thanks." Connie waved as he walked out of Torres' office. Next on the list was calling Kit so he would be aware of what was happening that evening.

Unfortunately, it seemed like everywhere Connie went in the main house, there were dragons who wanted to talk. After the fifth time being stopped, Connie used one of the side doors to slip outside. He started toward one of the lakes, hoping he could find some privacy.

Halfway down the path, he stopped. If he kept going, he'd end up at the communal lake, and he could hear people there. Looking around, he decided where he was at was a good

enough place to call Kit. At least no dragons were around asking him questions, although he could hear a few birds chirping rather loudly at him.

Connie dialed Kit's number and waited patiently. No one had to know just how nervous he was calling his mate. That was between him and the birds.

"Hello? Connie?"

"Hey, Kit. Do you have a few minutes? I need to ask you some questions."

"Hey, yeah, sure. Give me a sec to get to my office."

"Sure." Connie heard Kit speak to someone, then he listened to Kit moving away from people.

"All right. I'm here. What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine. Sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you." Everything was not fine, but Connie wasn't going to drop that bomb on Kit over the phone. "Hudson invited Kage and Austin over for dinner tonight. We would like for you to join us around six."

"Ah, us meaning... you and Hudson?"

"Yes. And you. It'll be the five of us."

"Oh. I-I don't know. I don't want to be the fifth wheel," Kit said slowly. "That'd be really awkward."

Shit. He had to keep reminding himself that Kit didn't know who he was to them. "You won't be. Trust me on that. Please, have dinner with us. It would mean a lot to me *and* Hudson." There. Hopefully, that was enough of a tease to get Kit interested.

"Both of you, huh?"

"Both of us, yes."

"I see. Okay, yes, I'll come."

Hearing that word made Connie shudder. He wanted to see Kit coming. Preferably numerous times.

"But I have questions."

“We have answers,” Connie promised. “Now, are you okay with steak? In particular, rib eye? Oh, and by the way, how do you like your steak cooked? What do you want on your baked potato? What kind of salad dressing do you like too? How do you feel about brownies?”

Kit laughed softly. “Tell you what, why don’t you text me all of that, because that was a lot of questions that were all run together. I’ll text back my answers.”

“Yeah, it was, wasn’t it? Sure thing. I’ll send that as soon as we hang up.”

“Okay. I’ll tell Beckett we might want to leave just a little bit early since it takes so long to get back to where you guys live. How dressy is this little get-together?”

“Casual. Jeans are perfectly fine. We’re just a bunch of friends relaxing.”

Kit snickered. “Uh-huh. You guys aren’t *just* a bunch of anything. Okay, I’ll see you then.”

“Have a good day, Kit.”

“Thank you. You too, Connie. Bye,” Kit said.

“Goodbye.” Happy with the way the conversation went, Connie disconnected the call, texted the questions, and slipped his cell phone into his pocket.

CONNIE STOPPED by the office around five to make sure Hudson was wrapping things up. Then he followed Hudson to his quarters so they could get ready.

“I told Kit casual,” Connie said when Hudson came out of his walk-in closet in a pair of pants. “I also gave the kitchen Kit’s likes and dislikes.”

“Good, good. Casual, huh? Okay.” Hudson headed back into his closet. A few minutes later he stepped out in a pair of tight jeans and a light-blue polo.

Connie’s jeans were so faded they were almost white, and he wore a silky chocolate brown shirt. “I’m going to go

get Kit. It's almost six."

Hudson was in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing his hair. He met Connie's eyes in the mirror. "Okay. By the way, you look very nice."

Connie winked. "So do you. Oh, I forgot to mention, but when I was talking to Kit, I told him that you and I *both* wanted him to attend this dinner. I hinted heavily that we're together too."

"Good. We're also going to hint heavily that we're interested in him."

"No lie, I'm ready to skip to the good part." Connie's dragon rumbled in agreement in his head.

"Keep your mind out of the gutter, sweetheart, or you're going to end up in the pool again."

Connie grimaced. That, unfortunately, was true. Ridiculous, but true. "I'll be back in a minute."

Making sure his thoughts were pure—or at least as pure as he could make them—Connie walked the short distance to Kit's room and knocked on his door.

When Kit opened it, his scent immediately assaulted Connie. The sweet smell of magnolias wrapped around him, and Connie inhaled deeply, rumbling.

Kit crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door. "Ah, what was that?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. Should he act like he didn't know what Kit was talking about or be honest? Yeah, honesty was the best policy, right? Hadn't he heard that somewhere? "Sorry about that, but you smell good."

"Really? I'm not wearing any cologne. Beckett mentioned that most paranormals have a heightened sense of smell, so I thought—"

"Your natural scent. I mean, your natural scent smells like magnolias to me." And it was stronger when Kit was aroused. Connie could feel his face heating.

Kit straightened so he was no longer leaning against the door. “I smell like magnolias? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Good thing. I like it.” That wasn’t a declaration of his intent, but it was a start, right? “You look very nice too.”

He was glad to see Kit had his clothes with him. There were several suitcases by the bed. Connie was beginning to think that Kit was a fashionista.

Kit’s color blocked shirt was black on one side and pink on the other. The pink side had a black pocket and sleeve. Even the collar was pink. Under that he wore a white T-shirt.

His light-colored jeans fit him at the waist but seemed to be really baggy everywhere else. He also had on a couple of leather necklaces and leather wristbands. Kit had left his hair down too and had done his makeup.

Jeez. Was this Kit’s idea of casual? Connie felt woefully underdressed, but damn, Kit looked hot.

“Yeah? Thanks. You look good too.” Kit’s eyes widened. “I mean, you look nice too. That color really looks nice with your hair. I’m so jealous. I always wanted red hair, but I got stuck with this ugly brown color.”

“Don’t say that. Your hair color is gorgeous.” Connie wanted to grab it and pull Kit to him, but he resisted. Small steps. Smalllllll steps. “I’ve always thought men with long hair looked hot.”

Kit’s cheeks darkened.

Connie wanted to pump his fist in victory. Score!

“It’s a lot of work, though,” Kit said. “Having long hair, I mean.”

Connie leaned closer like he was going to share some vital secret. “Hudson bitches about his too. Bet you two could share tricks and tips. He’d like that.”

Was he being too subtle? Connie didn’t think he was if the color in Kit’s cheeks was anything to go by.

Kit blinked at him. “I, ah, I.... That would be nice, but Hudson’s a really important guy. I doubt he has time for me.”

“We always have time for you. Always.” There. That was pretty blatant. He leaned back so Kit could have some breathing room—literally and figuratively. “Are you ready? Kage and Austin should be here soon.”

Kit perked up. “Yes! It’ll be nice to see Austin again.”

Connie stood back so Kit could shut the door to his room, then made sure they walked side by side to Hudson’s quarters. He even let his hand brush Kit’s.

This time Connie kept the conversation light. He didn’t want to stress Kit out too much by dropping too many hints that they were interested in him.

When they entered the living area, Hudson was standing in the middle of it on the phone. He nodded to them. “Okay, thanks, Kage. See you in a moment.”

“Are they on their way?” Connie asked as soon as Hudson ended the call.

“Yes, but they’re coming by the shadows,” Hudson said. “Kit? That means Kage and Austin will be stepping from a shadow momentarily. It can be a bit startling, so I wanted to let you know. Kage usually gives me a heads-up when he does this.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the warning. Seeing two grown men suddenly appear isn’t an everyday occurrence, you know?”

Connie snorted. “It is when you’re dealing with daemons.”

“Noted,” Kit said.

A few seconds later, a shadow next to the couch suddenly extended. Kage and Austin stepped through, holding hands.

As soon as the shadow returned to normal, Austin dropped Kage’s hand and immediately stepped toward Kit.

“I’m so happy to see you. Just going to go ahead and warn you, hug incoming!”

Connie watched as the two hugged. He was a little worried about how he would react, but his dragon was okay with it. Huh. Go figure. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he could literally smell Kage all over Austin. Plus, Austin smelled like a daemon to Connie. That was probably due to Austin taking Kage’s blood.

He wondered if the same thing would happen to Kit when he started drinking their blood. His dragon rumbled again in his head. He liked that idea. So did Connie.

Not long after Kage and Austin appeared, the kitchen staff brought the appetizers. Kit seemed a little stiff at first, but it didn’t take long for Austin to get him to relax. Kage’s mate had that effect on people. If ever there was a sunshiny person, it was Austin.

Kage and Austin sat on the love seat. Connie and Hudson managed to maneuver Kit into sitting between the two of them on the couch. Austin was telling them about his latest book while simultaneously poking fun at Kage.

Dinner was served, and they ate with gusto. The dessert was equally demolished. Once everybody had a glass of wine, they retired to the living area. Then Kage began explaining to Kit what he’d found out while in Greece.

Seeing the horror on Kit’s face destroyed Connie. But the anger that soon followed? That anger reassured Connie more than anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – KIT



“A FUCKING twin? Mother of all, are you kidding me right now?” Kit exclaimed.

Kit didn’t know if he wanted to cry, throw up, or scream like a banshee. Shit. Were there actual banshees? His brain shied away from that because he couldn’t handle one more thing at the moment.

A twin.

Kage explained his unease with the photocopied pictures of Nox’s birth certificate and how that had prompted him to dig into the subject.

Maybe some doubt or something showed on his face because Connie leaned over and reminded Kit that things—like birth certificates—were done differently in the 1500s, which was when Kage, Nox, and Lennox were born.

Kit downed his wine at that and held it out for Connie to refill. Dammit. Wasn’t the 1500s, like, the late Middle Ages? So Nox had a twin who looked amazingly a lot like him. Kit could testify to that. The two looked so similar that Kit had thought Lennox *was* Nox.

Thinking about Nox brought back memories that Kit didn’t want to deal with right then, so he stood up. “Excuse me for a moment.” Hudson and Connie jumped up, but Kit shook his head at them. “I need a minute, please.”

Taking his wine, Kit slipped past both of them. Air. He needed air, dammit, but he didn’t know the layout of this place well enough to know where to go.

Austin hopped to his feet and hooked his arm through Kit’s. “Come on.”

Kit let himself be led outside to Hudson's pool area. Fortunately, there was nobody out there. Then he remembered Hudson had his own private areas that the other dragons didn't get to use.

"Thanks," Kit said quietly, staring at the water.

"I get it, you know," Austin said. "It's a lot. *They're* a lot, and I say that while freely admitting I love Kage more than life itself. I mean, I gave up being human for him. I love that guy, but yes, they are definitely a lot. He's my monster under the bed."

Kit raised an eyebrow. "I take it there's a story there?"

"Oh, you better believe it." Austin cackled as he told it. "So, yeah. That's how we met. I've known Kage in one form or another since I was a small child. And he has loved me, in some form or another, the entire time."

"Then you knew about this world."

"I did, yes."

Kit took a big gulp of wine. "I got thrown into it."

Austin rested his hand on Kit's shoulder. "Yes, you did, and I'm so sorry about that since I'm indirectly responsible. Nox targeted you because he saw you with me."

"At least now I know why you made overtures of friendship and then went MIA on me."

"Not that it did a darn bit of good," Austin muttered.

Kit swirled the wine in his glass, staring at it. "Weird question time."

"Okay, shoot."

Kit dragged his gaze from the contents of his wine glass and stared at Austin. "Do you believe in Fate?"

"Ah, now that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? We could be out here discussing that for the next several hours, but I'll save us the pain of that and just say yes." Austin chewed his bottom lip for a moment. "I do believe things

happen for a reason, Kit. But that's not to say that the things that happen won't have some pain involved with them."

"Nox fucked with my head."

"Same, my friend. Same. And I'm not trying to pester you about this, but have you thought about talking to Frederick?"

"Connie called to set up an appointment, but either he hasn't heard back or he forgot to tell me."

"I can't see Connie forgetting to tell you. I mean, he's Hudson's right hand. He keeps Hudson on track. I truly can't see him letting something like that slide, so maybe he hasn't heard back from Frederick yet. But I am glad you're willing to talk to him."

"What's he like?"

"Doctor Frederick? He's a super nice guy. Seriously."

"A super nice vampire, you mean."

"That's just one part of who he is, Kit. It's not the defining thing about him though."

"How can you say that? I mean, isn't it?"

"Because, again, that's just *one* part of who he is. He's a doctor. He likes hard rock music. He's Black. He likes to read. He's a vampire. He likes romantic comedies. He's also a snazzy dresser. He likes to play tennis, even though he freely admits he sucks at it."

Now Kit felt like an ass. "Okay, yeah, I hadn't bothered to think of him as a person. I guess I got hyper-focused on the fact that he's a vampire. The blood-drinking thing is really throwing me for a loop."

"Which is completely understandable, just so you know."

"And something I need to get past though."

Austin pursed his lips. "Yes, you really do. You really, really do."

Kit frowned at Austin. “Why do I get the feeling you know more than what you’re saying?”

Austin smiled brilliantly but didn’t say anything.

“And by the way, I caught that remark you made earlier,” Kit said. “You want to explain what you meant about giving up being human for Kage?”

“All in due time. Alllll in due time.” Austin patted Kit on the shoulder, then linked his arm through Kit’s again. “Now, come on, let’s get back in there before we have two fire dragons rampaging because they’re worried about you.”

“The hell does *that* mean?” Kit demanded as Austin ushered him toward the sliding glass door that led inside.

“They think you’re hot,” Austin whispered. “And, you know.” Austin wiggled his eyebrows. “They want to do the mattress mambo with you. Have a visit from old one eye. Grind your corn. Toss a hot dog down a hallway. Board the beef bus. Batter dip the corn dog. Churn butter. Fill the cream donut.”

“Are you hungry?” Kit side-eyed Austin. “Because there were a lot of food idioms in that.”

“You know, I am suddenly craving donuts.”

“Mother of all, but you writers are fucking weird.”

Austin snickered as he pushed Kit back inside. “You have no idea.”

Connie stood up as soon as they walked back inside. “Hey, we were getting ready to come out there and interrupt you two.”

“That’s code for rampaging,” Austin whispered.

Kit snickered before he caught himself.

“Are you okay?” Connie asked.

“We were worried,” Hudson added.

“I had a moment, but I’m okay now. What’s up?”

“Kage called Axel and invited him over,” Connie said. “Axel is going to tell us what happened the night Nox died.”

“Are you sure you wish to hear this?” Hudson asked, walking to where Kit and Austin stood.

Austin discreetly made his way back to Kage while Connie joined Kit and Hudson. Connie gently patted Kit on the back while Hudson tucked a strand of hair behind Kit’s ear.

“Yes. I do.” When had his brain decided that safety meant being surrounded by Hudson and Connie? When had that happened? He hadn’t been there long enough to feel any sort of way but having them stand so close was definitely reassuring.

“If it gets to be too much, let one of us know,” Connie said. “Either of us can escort you out if you need to leave.”

“No, that’s okay. There must be a reason why you want to hear what this guy has to say, so I don’t need anyone babysitting me. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure,” Hudson said, rubbing Kit’s shoulder.

“Do you want me to refill your glass?” Connie asked. “I’d be more than happy to.”

Austin’s words ran through Kit’s mind about how Hudson and Connie wanted to have sex with Kit. He kind of thought Austin might’ve been kidding, but now he was seriously beginning to wonder.

Granted, he’d picked up on the subtle flirting, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Maybe they were flirty. They’d certainly been very attentive since he came there, but maybe they were only being good hosts.

And maybe he was overthinking the whole ordeal. He had two really hot guys giving him the eye. What was there to think about? Okay, yes, they were both dragons. And one was a thousand years old. And a royal. The other one was at least six hundred years old.

Fuck it. You only live once. He was gonna get him some dragon dick.

Goddess help him, he'd lost his damn mind. They'd probably eat him alive. His dick twitched at the thought, and seconds later, a rumbling groan escaped from Connie. A few seconds after *that*, Hudson was dragging Connie out of the room.

Kit watched them go. "Ah...?"

"They'll be back in a moment." Kage's lips twitched as he watched the pair. "How about that glass of wine, Kit?"

"Sure. Why the hell not?" Were all dragons this weird?

"By the way, Terry and Axel should be arriving momentarily via the shadows," Kage said as he poured more wine into Kit's glass. "Terry is the one who treated you and Austin after Nox injected him with king cobra venom, and Axel—"

"Axel is the werewolf who killed Nox."

"Yes," Austin said. "He's a close friend to us."

"Incoming," Kage said softly. "Don't be alarmed, Kit."

"They always say that, and it's always alarming," Austin muttered.

Personally? Kit agreed. He also appreciated the warning because a few seconds later, another portal opened, and two men stepped out, holding hands. Kit remembered both of them, of course. One was a gorgeous Hispanic man with dark hair and eyes. There was a quiet power to him.

The other was just as sexy with short brown hair and a nice beard. He wore skull rings and leather bracelets, along with black boots, jeans, and a white T-shirt. Oh yeah, and a leather jacket. Everything about him shouted badass.

"Kit? Do you remember Doctor Terry Sanchez?" Kage asked. "He's a daemon and part of my clan."

"I do, yes. Hey, Doctor Terry. It's nice to meet you again," Kit said, holding out his hand.

"Definitely a lot less stressful this time," Terry said, shaking Kit's hand. "How have you been?"

“Oh, you know.” That was all Kit was willing to admit to.

“And this is Terry’s partner, Alpha Axel Scheffler of the Crimson Fangs werewolf pack of San DeLain,” Kage said, introducing the other man.

“Whoa! Congratulations, you two,” Connie hollered as he and Hudson reentered the living area.

“Well, this is certainly news. Congratulations, you guys!” Hudson exclaimed as he and Connie wormed their way in beside Kit.

Kage laughed softly but gave ground. He scooted his way over to stand next to Austin.

“Thank you both,” Axel said, grinning. Then he held his hand out to Kit. “Hello, Kit.”

“Hey. I don’t know why exactly congratulations are in order, but congratulations,” Kit said, shaking Axel’s hand.

“Thank you. It’s kind of a long story and that’s not the story we’re here for.”

“Why don’t we all sit down and get comfortable. Terry? Axel? Would either of you like a glass of wine? Or something else?” Hudson asked.

“Just a soda for me,” Terry said.

“I’ll take a beer if you have it,” Axel said.

“Sure.” Hudson walked over to the bar he had in the living area. While he fixed their drinks, Connie got a couple extra chairs for Terry and Axel.

Once everybody had a drink and was seated, Kage asked Axel to go over how Nox died.

“Before he starts, let me catch Kit up on what happened with Maia. She’s one of Kage’s lieutenants, Kit. She was the one with Austin in your office,” Terry said.

“She was the one Nox forced to leave, right?” Kit asked. He sort of remembered a lovely Hispanic woman.

“Yes. She portaled immediately to me. I called Kage to her bedside. Before she fell unconscious, she repeated the threats Nox made against Austin. I examined her and deemed whatever she’d been injected with was not life-threatening,” Terry said. “Best thing for her was to sleep it off.”

“I immediately contacted Axel and asked for help,” Kage said. “When he agreed, I sent Denisha to get him and bring him to Terry’s office. The three of us quickly made a plan to rescue Austin and put an end to Nox.”

“Kage showed up and listened to Nox rant and rave about how horrible his life had been. Do you remember any of this, Kit?” Austin asked.

“Sort of? Things are a little hazy because I was scared out of my mind, but yeah, I remember everything you guys just told me,” Kit said.

“Nox made it clear he wanted me to suffer,” Kage said. “He injected Austin in the neck with king cobra venom. He gave me two options—save Austin or kill him. I chose option three,” Kage said.

Kit remembered that clearly. No sooner had Kage said that, then a shadow had extended from the couch to the ceiling. A werewolf had leaped from it—straight at Nox. Austin had jerked his head away from Nox’s hand and collapsed to the floor.

A beautiful Black lady then stepped out of the portal, and with a flick of her wrist, opened another portal to the side of Nox just as Axel had collided with the mimic. Together, they’d tumbled into the portal, snarling and yelling.

“Someone opened a portal, and Axel came through it. He attacked Nox. Another portal was opened, and they fell into it,” Kit said.

“That was my other lieutenant, Denisha,” Kage said.

“Denisha opened a portal onto my pack lands,” Axel said. “She followed us there. I killed Nox, and yes, I’m certain it was Nox. I was around him for years. I recognized his fucking scent.”

Terry gently took Axel's hand. "You're okay, babe."

"Yeah, yeah, I am." Axel's eyes flashed yellow for a moment before returning to their original human color. Axel squeezed Terry's hand. "Thanks to you. Anyhow, I fucking snatched his heart from his fucking chest."

Kit shuddered.

"It's a wolf thing," Austin whispered.

"Damn straight it is." Axel puffed out his chest. "As I said before, I'm glad he's dead. It was quick, and he didn't deserve that, but it *was* Nox. You can't fool a wolf's sense of smell. And if I have to? I'll kill that other fucker too."

Kit nodded. He didn't know exactly what happened between Axel and Nox, but there was definitely a story there. The pain he saw in Axel's eyes was heartbreakingly obvious. "I believe you."

Kit let his mind drift as he listened to everyone ask Axel questions about Nox. There he sat, surrounded by daemons, dragons, and a werewolf. How was this his life now? It was nuts.

He didn't know anybody in the group well at all, but he could sense there was a tight bond between these men. But the main thing was that he trusted Austin, and Austin trusted everyone there.

That was enough for Kit.

"Okay, thank you, Axel," Hudson finally said. "I appreciate you doing this. I know it wasn't easy for you."

"No, it wasn't, but we need every advantage we can get to deal with the Astor brothers. If I should think of anything else, I'll call you Hudson."

"Thank you," Hudson said. "And congratulations again. You seem happy."

"I am," Axel said, smiling as he glanced at Terry. "For the first time in a long time, I'm truly happy. I'm at peace now."

Yep, definitely a story there, Kit thought. Everybody said goodbye, then Kage opened a portal for the two couples to leave by. Kit honestly didn't know if he was ever going to get used to this.

The few times he'd traveled by the shadows had been absolutely terrifying. It wasn't something he wanted to do again and didn't know how Austin handled it.

Now that it was just the three of them again, Kit wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. But one thing he did know? He was exhausted.

"You look tired," Hudson said, resting his hand on Kit's knee.

"I am, even though I haven't really done anything." Now that Kit had acknowledged he was tired, the urge to yawn was nearly overwhelming.

"Stress can wear you out," Connie said, fiddling with a strand of Kit's hair.

As long as Connie didn't pull it, Kit was good. It wasn't that he didn't like it. He did. That was the problem—it was one of Kit's buttons, and he did not need it pushed right then.

He liked having his hair pulled during sex, so sue him. Hell, he liked all aspects of sex and normally had a high drive. Thanks to his ex-boyfriend, it had gone MIA for a while, but it seemed to be making a reappearance.

"I—" The yawn that escaped Kit surprised all three of them and Kit giggled. "Wow. Sorry, that came out of nowhere."

"Why don't you go to bed?" Hudson asked. "We can discuss what we learned over dinner tomorrow night. How does that sound?"

"Besides, you have to get up earlier now than you're used to," Connie added.

"Dinner sounds nice, but isn't your kitchen staff going to get upset with us if we do it two nights in a row?" Kit

asked. “That’s two meals they have to cook.”

“We’ll eat whatever they’re having, we’ll just have it here instead of the communal area,” Connie said. “Hudson and I sometimes do that. So? Will you have dinner with us tomorrow night?”

Kit really didn’t have to think about it. He wanted to spend time with them because he had questions he wanted answered, which included what exactly they wanted with him. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like to do that.”

“Excellent!” Hudson patted Kit on the knee, then stood.

Since Connie was also getting to his feet, Kit took the hint and got up.

“We’ll meet about seven for dinner. Is that okay with you?” Hudson asked.

“That sounds fine.”

“Good. Good. Sweet dreams.” Hudson leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Kit’s cheek. “See you then.”

Kit blinked in shock. Wait. Wait a damn minute. Hudson just kissed him on the cheek. Holy Mother, Hudson *kissed* him.

“Come on, I’ll walk you back to your room,” Connie said, taking Kit by the hand.

Kit blindly followed Connie out of the living area, still looking over his shoulder at Hudson. The shock hadn’t faded when they stopped in front of his door.

“Good night,” Connie said, also pressing a quick kiss to Kit’s cheek. “We’ll see you at breakfast.”

Blinking slowly, Kit watched Connie flash a grin at him. Then he returned to Hudson’s part of the house, one hand in his pocket, whistling. Damn dragon was whistling. He’d helped render Kit speechless and was now *whistling*.

He narrowed his eyes at Connie’s retreating back. Oh, so that’s how it was, huh? That meant war, of course. Nobody

out-flirted him. Kit touched the cheek that both dragons had kissed.

Well, he guessed that answered that. They *were* interested in him, and Kit was pretty sure they were a couple.

A shiver racked him... and moved downward. Shit, he was getting hard. It was a good thing his door wasn't locked because he didn't know if he had the motor coordination to unlock it.

They'd kissed him.

Oh yeah, he was definitely going to have sweet dreams tonight, at least as soon as he rubbed one out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – HUDSON



HUDSON HADN'T planned on kissing Kit; it'd just happened. That was his story, and he was sticking to it. No one had to know that his dragon had been pushing him all night to do it.

Seeing Kit upset had been hard for Hudson, and he'd wanted to comfort him in some way. He was positive Connie was having the same problem. So his dragon had insisted Kit needed to be kissed. It'd made sense at the time.

Kit's skin had been so soft, and the sweet scent of magnolias lingered in the room even though Kit had left. Hudson inhaled, then slowly exhaled. Yeah, the night had definitely had its ups and downs, but overall, Hudson was happy with the way things turned out.

He was glad to see Axel had found happiness with Terry. If anybody deserved a break, it was most definitely that wolf. Funny how life turned out.

A short time later, Connie walked back into Hudson's living area, a smile on his lips. "I think it's safe to say Kit knows we're interested in him now."

"Oh? What did you do?"

Connie crossed the room and moved into Hudson's arms. "Same thing as you. I kissed him on the cheek. Brilliant idea, by the way."

"I thought so. Well? How do you think he reacted to our little overture?"

"I saw how he reacted. He was a little shocked, sure, but totally okay with it."

Hudson squeezed Connie. "It was a good first step."

“I agree.” Connie threaded his hands through Hudson’s hair and pulled his head down for a kiss.

Hudson went willingly. The kiss was sweet and gentle instead of the usual insanity that flared between them.

“I need to fly,” Connie whispered against Hudson’s lips, smoke trailing from his nostrils. “My dragon needs to stretch his wings.”

“Then let’s fly.” Taking Connie’s hand, Hudson led his lover outside toward the area near the woods where they often shifted.

Instead of rushing, they took their time slowly undressing each other. Each patch of skin revealed received a kiss as clothes fluttered to the ground. Hudson nipped at Connie’s throat. Connie buried his hands in Hudson’s hair, holding his head captive as Hudson sucked at the skin.

Someone groaned.

A deep rumble answered, dancing on the air current. The moon played peekaboo with fluffy clouds in the nighttime sky as Hudson tried to devour Connie.

Hudson finished the kiss and leaned back once Connie let go of his hair. “My beautiful dragon.”

Connie slowly moved away. “My king, command me.”

The simple words set Hudson’s blood on fire. “Release your dragon! Fly!”

Turning, Connie sprinted across the land. From one heartbeat to the next, Connie’s human form became hazy as it transformed into something... more. A magnificent dragon with golden-red scales raced across the field on four legs.

With every step it took, the ground shook as its size expanded. His wings snapped out, and the dragon launched itself into the air, wings beating strongly. Fire exploded from Connie’s snout, a deadly line of death and destruction.

“Glorious,” Hudson breathed. “Simply gorgeous.”

Allowing his dragon to take over, Hudson joined Connie in the sky.

THE NEXT morning, he and Connie collected Kit and escorted their mate to breakfast. Hudson had succeeded in swallowing his groan when Kit answered the door, but Connie hadn't quite managed to.

Hudson understood why.

Kit was absolutely breathtaking in an emerald-green mesh, collarless shirt with multicolored flower appliqués on it. Underneath the see-through shirt, Kit wore a sleeveless crop top of the same emerald-green color.

But what stirred Hudson was the brown leather kilt. His mind flashed back to the first Scots Highlander he'd ever met... who'd worn nothing under it. Hudson had found that out firsthand.

Which begged the question, what exactly did *Kit* have underneath that kilt? Connie apparently had the same thought if the sudden spike in his scent was any indication.

Kit had finished the look with leather necklaces and wristbands. And combat boots. Kit once more had his hair French braided and makeup done.

Honestly, Kit made Hudson feel downright dowdy in his suit.

"Good morning," Kit said, stepping out into the hallway and closing the door behind him.

"Morning." Hudson kept an eye on Connie as he answered. It took a couple seconds for Connie to get himself under control, but he did eventually answer Kit too.

"That shirt really makes your eyes look green," Connie said as he walked next to Kit.

Hudson was proud of Connie. At least he wasn't having to throw himself into the pool *every* time he came in contact with Kit. Progress!

“Yeah, green usually does that with hazel eyes.” Kit looked up at Connie as they walked down the hallway. “It just so happens to be one of my favorite colors too.”

“Oh? What’s another favorite color of yours?” Hudson asked, his hand casually brushing against Kit’s as they walked.

“Red and all shades of it,” Kit admitted.

Hudson quickly glanced at Connie over Kit’s head, a small smile lurking at his lips. Well now, that was certainly an excellent choice. Nothing a red dragon liked better than hearing his mate liked the color red.

“But honestly? I like all colors. What about you?” Kit asked Hudson.

“Red,” Hudson said immediately.

“Connie?”

“Same,” Connie chimed in, looking down at his brown suit. “But I also like gold. And brown.”

“I tend to favor blues and grays,” Hudson said, running a hand down his chest to draw attention to his light-gray suit. It gave him a small thrill that Kit’s gaze followed his hand.

“Both of you look nice in suits, but I don’t know if I could wear one every day.” Kit ruefully glanced down at his clothes. “I like variety.”

“And we definitely like your variety,” Connie added, gently nudging Kit.

Kit flashed Connie a flirty little smile as they walked into the communal dining area.

Hudson hid a grin as color rushed to Connie’s face. Connie had a tendency to blush more than Hudson did. And at a thousand years old, Hudson had pretty much done and seen everything there was to do and see. Nothing much made him blush anymore.

He had a feeling that could change though, thanks to Kit.

They went through the buffet line, filled their plates, and escorted Kit to one of the tables. Once more they positioned Kit between the two of them.

As if conjured from thin air, Audrey and Sheila immediately plopped down across from Kit with plates full of food.

“Good morning,” Audrey chirped, immediately cutting into her fried eggs.

“Hey, everyone,” Sheila said. “Kit? I really enjoyed you showing Audrey and me around your bookstore yesterday.”

“I had a blast,” Kit said, spreading jelly on his toast. “Oh, hey, I also liked the idea you mentioned while I was giving you a tour. Little seating areas strategically placed throughout the store is genius.”

“And thank *you* for the recommendations you made. I started that book last night,” Audrey said, sipping her coffee. “Needless to say, I stayed up way too late.”

Kit nodded. “I hear you. That author really drags you into their world.”

“Hey, Kit? I just have to know. Where did you get that leather necklace? That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” Sheila finally asked.

“Oh, this?” Kit touched the leather necklace. “There’s this little boutique near me called Bell, Book, and Cauldron. The lady who owns it is super nice. I guess it’s kind of a new age shop.”

Audrey raised an eyebrow. “Um, Kit? What else does she sell?”

“Books, herbs, crystals, candles, ah, what else? I’ve seen incense, teas, and oils. Jewelry, obviously.” Kit waved at his necklace.

Sheila glanced at Hudson.

“And that’s just what I can remember off the top of my head. I mean, I only go for the handmade jewelry. You can’t

beat this quality,” Kit said, glancing at the leather wristband.

“Your Majesty?” Sheila asked.

“Yes. Please,” Hudson said.

“Okay, what?” Kit looked from Sheila to Hudson, then back to Sheila. “What was that unspoken ask and answer thing you two did right then?”

“Someone’s very observant,” Audrey commented.

Connie leaned into Kit, his nose barely inches from the necklace against Kit’s chest. “I’m not picking up any magical vibes from it. Are these the ones you wore last night?”

“You are all up in my bubble, but yes.”

“Then they are indeed just jewelry,” Hudson said. “I didn’t pick up anything from them last night, either.”

Kit put his fork down. “You guys are freaking me out. What’s going on?”

“Dragons are inherently magical,” Audrey said. “In other words, we’re magical creatures. We can sense magic, and we can also use magic.”

“I... I was not expecting to get told that first thing this morning, so I’m not exactly sure how to respond outside of holy crap. That’s cool. But I’m a little confused as to *why* you’re telling me this,” Kit said.

“Because that nice lady who owns that little boutique? She’s a magic user,” Connie said. “Not too long ago they were also called witches.”

“Other names are mage, magus, spellcaster, enchanter/enchantress, sorcerer/sorceress, warlock, witch, or wizard,” Audrey added. “It’s someone who uses or practices magic derived from supernatural, occult, or arcane sources.”

“Holy shit,” Kit whispered. “I had no idea. Did I do wrong by going in there? Should I not have done that? I mean, she’s really a nice person who has a damn shop so she can sell stuff, so why *wouldn’t* I go in there? That’s the point, right? Right? I’m so confused.”

“I’m sure she is, but Sheila is still going to check her out,” Hudson said. “Especially if this is someplace you like to shop. As to why? I want to make sure what she sells you doesn’t come with a little ‘something’ extra.”

And give her a warning that Kit was under the protection of the Fire Court of San DeLain. Couldn’t hurt, right?

“I have no idea what that means,” Kit said. “Speak human for me.”

“It means I’m going to make sure there are no spells attached to any of the jewelry she sells. Less ethical witches sometimes do crap like that,” Sheila said. “But since we’re not sensing anything from what you’re wearing, she probably isn’t that sort.”

Kit rubbed his forehead. “Do you mean to tell me there are people out there selling bespelled jewelry?”

“It happens,” Connie said, shrugging. “Sometimes shit is stolen from old burial sites and ends up in shops. There are movies and books geared toward it even.”

“Shit,” Kit groaned. “Maybe I should start buying my stuff off Amazon.”

Audrey shook her head. “I don’t know why you think that would be safer.”

“Mother of all.” Kit took a big gulp of his coffee. “I may never leave the house again.”

“Naw.” Connie bumped shoulders with Kit. “You don’t have to worry. That’s why you have us. And we have a Hudson.”

Hudson nodded seriously. “I’ll happily torch anything or anyone that threatens you.” He even let smoke drift from his nose to make his point.

“I don’t know why you think that’s comforting,” Kit spluttered, his eyes wide. “But thanks. I think. Could be useful at a bonfire, I guess.”

The grin Hudson flashed Kit was positively evil. Eventually, his mate would figure out how useful he was.

Beckett joined them a few minutes later, and the conversation lightened up again. Audrey and Sheila said their goodbyes once they were done eating.

A few minutes after that, Kit also finished breakfast, so Hudson and Connie walked with him and Beckett to Beckett's vehicle.

"Seven tonight, don't forget," Hudson said, patting Kit on the back.

"Casual," Connie said. "Very, very casual too. Seriously, no one is going to side-eye you if you wear sweatpants. Did I mention casual?"

"Any particular color sweatpants?" Kit joked.

Hudson looked at Connie, confused. "Whatever color you happen to have is fine."

Kit laughed. "Sure thing. I can do that. Yup."

Connie shrugged as he opened Kit's door for him.

"Guys, do yourselves a favor and Google men wearing gray sweatpants," Kit said as he got into Beckett's vehicle. "I'll see you tonight."

Beckett was laughing as he got behind the wheel.

Hudson waved as Beckett and Kit drove off. Connie was madly typing on his phone.

"Oh, fuck me," Connie growled, handing his cell phone to Hudson. "What the fuck have we done?"

Hudson read what Connie had pulled up on Google, then looked at various pictures. Growling, he inhaled deeply, held it, then slowly blew out his breath.

Laughing softly, he handed Connie back his cell phone. "What's this 'we' business? That was all you. And by the way? To save time, maybe you should wear your swim trunks in case he *does* show up in sweats."

“For a fire dragon, I’ve certainly spent a lot of time in the damn water.”

Tonight was definitely going to be interesting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - CONNIE



CONNIE WAS still grumbling as he followed Hudson back into the house.

It was a good thing they had work or Connie would've probably spent the entire morning on the Internet looking at pictures of men in gray sweatpants.

How in the world had he not known this was a thing? He did social media, but apparently, he wasn't doing the *right* kind of social media.

If Kit showed up in gray sweatpants, Connie was done. Toast. He'd spend the entire night in the damn pool, no kidding. Shit. On second thought, maybe his reaction and lack of control would convince Kit they were really interested in him—that was if Kit still didn't know.

Or it could scare him to death.

Hopefully, the conversation they needed to have with Kit about Lennox wouldn't kill the mood because Connie was really, *really* hoping they could be intimate with Kit in some form or fashion tonight.

THE MORNING went quickly, and lunch was approaching when Hudson got a call from Kage. Since Connie was in Hudson's office, he overheard the conversation, of course.

"Kage is coming?"

"Yes."

“I’ll get the three of us something to eat from the kitchen,” Connie volunteered.

“Okay, thanks, sweetheart,” Hudson said. “And no, I wasn’t talking to you, Kage, so don’t even start.”

Connie heard Kage’s snort of laughter as he left Hudson’s office. He had the kitchen make up three meals in Styrofoam containers so he could carry them back to Hudson’s office easily. Stella put drinks in a cup holder and placed them on top of the containers.

Connie hurried back to Hudson’s office. When he walked in, Kage was already sitting at the table. Connie placed the containers on the table along with the cup holder. Hudson set the drinks out while Connie handed out the meals.

“Hope you like what we’re having,” Connie said as he sat down.

“Stella is an excellent cook. I’m sure I’ll love whatever she made,” Kage said, opening the container. “So, why don’t we talk while we eat since we’re all on lunch break.”

“Where’s Austin?” Connie asked.

“He’s meeting Lanny. His latest book has released and Lanny wants to set up another book signing. Not sure if she’s going to ask Kit to use his bookstore again or if she’s going somewhere else,” Kage said.

“Lady Lanny will stick to him like glue. You know that, of course,” Connie said.

“I do, but regardless of where this is being held, I will have daemons there as extra protection.”

“If they do it at Kit’s bookstore, I’ll send a couple dragons too,” Hudson offered. “Things being as they are, I think the more protection Austin and Kit have, the better.”

“I agree,” Kage said. “Since Austin is busy, and Kit is at the bookstore, I figured now would be the perfect opportunity to talk about the care and feeding of a human.”

Connie snorted.

“So? What do the two of you want to know?” Kage asked.

“Aren’t you worried about hurting him during sex?” Connie asked immediately. It was one of the things he worried about the most. “Humans are so damn fragile, and we’re so much stronger than them.”

“And dragon sex tends to be rather aggressive,” Hudson added.

“Do I need to have the sex talk with you two?” Kage asked nonchalantly.

“Dammit, Kage, I’m older than you,” Hudson snapped.

“Okay, children, time for the birds and the bees talk. Or is it the dragons and bees? Actually, since there are three of you, maybe I should say the birds, the bees, and the dragons.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Connie complained. “There aren’t any females in this mix.”

“By the dead gods.” Kage rolled his eyes. “Have the both of you lost your sense of humor? Just be careful with him, because yes, humans are rather breakable.”

“Kage—”

“Look, I don’t know how it works with dragons, but at the back of my mind, always, is the knowledge to go gently with Austin. I don’t want to hurt him.” Kage threw his hands up. “I honestly don’t think I could. And if I do get too rambunctious? One word is enough to bring me to a dead stop.”

Hudson nodded slowly. “That could work. Unless, of course, Connie and I have already traumatized him having sex.”

“I’m going to need you to be a bit more blunt. What exactly are you worried about?” Kage asked.

“You want blunt? Fine. When Connie and I have sex, it’s not uncommon for one of us to sink their claws into the other. Or to bite. Neither one of us thinks anything of drawing

blood. And Kit seems to have a phobia of blood now, thanks to Nox.”

“Dear dragon gods, what if we did that to Kit? We could hurt him. Possibly kill him.” Connie put his fork down. Suddenly, the meatloaf looked much less appetizing.

“Connie? Have you ever had sex with a human?” Kage asked.

“Of course.”

“Did you do any of that to them?”

“No. But I also wasn’t with my mate.”

“Nevertheless, you know how to treat a human. Why do you think you would treat Kit, who is your mate, harsher than you would treat some random human?”

“Because, dammit, every time I smell his scent, especially if he’s aroused, I lose control of my dragon,” Connie growled.

“Have you shifted because of that?” Kage asked.

“No, but only because I stopped him,” Hudson answered.

Kage nodded. “I can see where a sudden shift could be problematic. Connie would certainly destroy whatever was near him. And possibly hurt anybody around him. But Connie? Do you really think if Kit was in danger from you that your dragon would force a shift?”

Connie opened his mouth, then closed it. Shocked, he looked at Hudson. “You always stopped me before anything could happen, but we never let it go far enough to see if I *would* actually shift.”

“Because we thought it wasn’t safe, but Kage does have a point,” Hudson said. “Your dragon knows who Kit is to you. I don’t think he would do anything that could possibly harm Kit. Does he want Kit to see him? Of course.”

“He wants to be seen more than anything,” Connie said.

“As does mine. But scaring the shit out of Kit to the point where he would be afraid of our true form would be counterproductive,” Hudson mused slowly.

Hudson’s dragon grumbled softly in his head.

“We let our human emotions dictate this,” Connie whispered.

“Which is understandable,” Kage said. “I can see why both of you would be concerned, because after all is said and done, paranormals are stronger than humans. But I think the both of you forgot what a mate is to you.”

“Our soul bond.” Connie reached across the table.

Hudson immediately took his hand. “Our everything.”

“I think part of the problem is your dragon is a primitive creature stuck in a human body. Just like me, you have a human form and then your true form. But unlike me, your true form is an actual animal.”

“What are you getting at?” Hudson asked.

“Didn’t you tell me that the dragons of old just kidnapped their mates and made off with them? Your dragons are fighting their instincts because your human sides are telling them that’s not the way to do this without causing massive problems.”

“Holy shit,” Connie whispered. It suddenly all made sense.

“Honestly? Regardless of how fast or slow your intimate relationship goes, I think you need to let Kit see both of you in dragon form as soon as he’s comfortable enough to do so. I think your dragons will quit giving you fits once that happens. My friends, don’t you see? Your dragons want to be acknowledged.”

Hudson blinked in surprise.

“What? Don’t look at me like that.”

“That was incredibly deep,” Hudson said. “For you, I mean.”

“Austin has been a bad influence on me,” Kage groused. “Okay, seriously. Stop looking at me like that. Keep it up and I won’t tell you the rest of what I know,” Kage threatened. “We haven’t got to the feeding part of a human.”

“Feed them. I mean, what’s so hard about that?” Connie asked.

Kage snorted.

“Okay, what?” Connie scowled.

“Do either of you have a romantic bone in your body?” Kage demanded.

Hudson groaned. “We’ve discussed courting Kit.”

“Did that include ways from *this* century?” Kage asked.

This time it was Connie who snorted.

AFTER LUNCH was finished, Kage left. Connie and Hudson had worked out a plan to woo Kit, starting tonight. After they had dinner, they planned to see if Kit was interested in taking a stroll.

A lot of Hudson’s territory was left natural, but the grounds around the main house were landscaped. There were lots of lit pathways, fairy lights everywhere, sitting areas, and fountains. There was even a massive old oak with a branch that was just perfect for a swing.

Several nice, secluded areas to steal a kiss or three.

Dinner that night was what Connie called comfort food—they’d start with grape salad, then have chicken and dumplings, fried apples, cornbread, fried okra, green beans, and corn pudding. For dessert was chocolate cake.

Stella had a taste for good ol’ Southern food, and they all benefited from it. Connie had arranged earlier in the day for someone to bring dinner to Hudson’s suite a little after seven.

He walked out of the closet just as Hudson came out of the bathroom. Connie had on a pair of board shorts, a graphic

T-shirt, and flip-flops.

Hudson had on a pair of khaki shorts, a Beatles T-shirt he and Connie had gotten when they'd attended a concert in the 60s, and sandals.

Kit showed up in black yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt with flamingos all over it. He also wore flip-flops. Connie swallowed hard when he noticed Kit's toenails were painted a bright pink.

He'd never paid attention to men's feet before, and now suddenly he was fascinated with Kit's. Those pink toenails were the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

"Hey," Kit said as he walked into the living area. "Oh, thank God, you two didn't dress up. I was scared to death I'd be the only one dressed like this."

Connie gave Kit a quick hug. "You look great. Would you like something to drink? Here. Have a seat. Dinner should be here shortly."

"A little red wine wouldn't be remiss," Kit said, sitting on the love seat.

Neither Connie nor Hudson said anything, but they both frowned at Kit's choice of where to sit.

"How was your day, Kit?" Hudson asked as Connie handed him his drink. He glanced up at Connie and smiled. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"You're very welcome." Out of the corner of Connie's eye, he saw Kit's reaction to Hudson calling him sweetheart. Well, if there was still any question of what was going on between him and Hudson, it had been answered now, which Connie was glad about.

"It was fine. No trouble, at least," Kit said, getting comfortable on the love seat.

Connie handed Kit his glass of wine. "Here you go."

"Thank you so much."

Connie sat on the couch next to Hudson.

“As Connie said, dinner will be here shortly, but before it arrives, is there anything you want to discuss concerning the situation with Lennox?” Hudson asked.

“Or would you prefer to wait until after dinner?” Connie asked, crossing his legs as he got comfortable.

“I’d rather get this out of the way now. There are things I want to talk to you guys about after dinner,” Kit said, tucking his leg under him. “But before we get into that, I wanted to ask if you’ve heard anything back from Doctor Frederick?”

“I was going to bring that up tonight,” Connie said. “Sorry for the delay, but Frederick ran into a situation and couldn’t get back to me for a few days. I did hear from him earlier. The appointment is set for next Friday at 9 PM.”

“Okay, good, thank you.” Kit stared at his wine for a moment. “I’m glad to have that set. I-I don’t really know what to say about Lennox, except I’m not sure why he’s targeting me. I mean, really, I’m nobody.”

Connie wanted to yell that Kit absolutely wasn’t nobody, but he couldn’t. Not yet. If anything, Kit was incredibly important—he was the mate to a royal dragon.

But there was no way that Lennox could know that. Hell, Connie and Hudson had only figured it out recently.

“We don’t know why he’s targeting you,” Hudson said, scowling at his glass like it had personally offended him. “Maybe it’s because he knows you have ties to not only Kage and Austin, but to us too.”

Connie nodded. “The daemons and dragons are two of the most powerful groups of paranormals in San DeLain. I would say the gargoyles rate right up there with us. We’re the only paranormals the hunters can’t use for their experiments.”

“Say what now?”

Hudson sighed softly. “I’d say it’s time to fill you in on the whole sordid story with the hunters, paranormals, and the DNA-mutated super-soldiers that either Lennox or Nox created through their funding of the hunters.”

Connie listened as Hudson laid it all out for Kit from start to finish. He left nothing out.

As Hudson spoke, Kit's eyes kept getting bigger and bigger. When Hudson finished the sordid tale, Kit gulped his wine.

"Mother of all. They're experimenting on humans?" Kit asked. "They're kidnapping and turning them into some sort of hybrid? Holy shit, did they do that to my ex? Did they turn him?"

"It's very possible. Hunters whose DNA has been mutated have a smell that's... off." Hudson grimaced. "I doubt a human would notice, but a paranormal definitely would."

"It's something we look for now," Connie said. "We, meaning paranormals. And I don't know if Don was experimented on. Did you notice anything odd about him before he betrayed you? Did he seem stronger? Suddenly hear things he shouldn't have been able to?"

"Jesus. He slammed a door one night when we were arguing and broke it. That by itself isn't that unusual, but suddenly he couldn't pick up a glass without breaking it. He twisted a doorknob completely off once too." Kit cleared his throat. "And he was a lot rougher during sex."

Connie didn't quite manage to hide his growl. Smoke trailed from his nose. Had the asshole hurt Kit?

"Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with rough sex," Kit hurriedly said. "I like being manhandled as much as the next guy, but this wasn't that. He left scratches all over me, and Don always had short fingernails. I couldn't figure out how he managed to do that."

"If he had mutated DNA, his claws probably came out and scratched you," Connie said. He too wanted to leave his mark on Kit, but he didn't want to *hurt* him.

Connie thought about all the times he'd pierced Hudson's skin with his claws during sex. Had Don done more than scratch Kit and Kit wasn't saying?

"Oh. Is that a thing for you guys?"

“Do you mean us or paranormals in general?” Connie asked, dragging his thoughts back to the conversation.

“We’ll get to you guys in a minute,” Kit said. “What about paranormals in general?”

“It can be,” Hudson said. “It’s trickier when the partner is a human though,” Hudson said. “A simple scratch from us could be problematic.”

“Because humans don’t heal as fast as paranormals,” Connie finished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – KIT



“I CAN see how that would be a problem.”

Kit had never minded love bites, as long as they weren't noticeable. He worked with the public, after all, and wasn't comfortable having his neck covered in bruises.

Now, when he wasn't at work? Different story. He had no problem showing any marks he had. He loved sex and was proud of his body. In fact, he wasn't modest by any stretch of the imagination. Part of that was how he was raised, but the other part was just... him.

Connie's cell phone beeped, and he quickly checked it. “Dinner will be arriving momentarily.”

“Oh, good. I'm hungry.” For Kit, lunch had been a long time ago.

“Any more questions about the hunters or Lennox?” Hudson asked.

“No, not really. I'd like to be kept up to date, though. Is that okay?” Kit wanted to be kept in the loop, even though there wasn't anything he could do to help.

“Absolutely,” Hudson reassured Kit. “You're directly involved, so of course you should be kept apprised of the situation. If you ever have any questions, you can ask me or Connie.”

Kit nodded. “Thank you.”

A few minutes later, dinner arrived. Stella came, along with a couple of other dragons who pushed the carts of food. She made small talk with Kit while everything was set up on the dining table. Once more she asked Kit for a list of his

favorites, and he rattled a couple of things off the top of his head.

“Okay, you guys have a good evening,” Stella said. “Good night.”

The food was superb, and Kit stuffed himself. He did yoga to help relax, but if he kept eating like this, he was going to have to start an exercise routine or he was going to be in trouble.

Hadn't one of them said there was a communal pool? Since he was living here temporarily, maybe he could use it. Hopefully, there was a weight room or something too. He also liked to run, although he hadn't had time to do it lately. Surely there was a trail around here he could use.

Dinner was much more relaxed than it had been the night before. It was becoming pretty obvious that Hudson had an extremely dry sense of humor and a sarcastic wit.

There were definite flashes of Hudson's age during the conversation. Sometimes he used words that were no longer trendy, and the way he dressed was definitely more... conservative. Still, he gave off a vibe that said he was dangerous, even if he was dressed in shorts.

Connie was more upbeat and easygoing. His style was trendier, and he had that boy next door vibe, but Kit wasn't fooled. The power that surrounded Connie might not slap someone in the face like Hudson's did, but it was there. Lurking.

What was that old saying? Better watch out for the quiet ones? That's how Connie came across—a quiet power waiting to strike.

Neither Hudson nor Connie were what Kit would call beefcakes—meaning they were not muscle-bound gym bunnies. Not that there was anything wrong with that. There wasn't. He'd fucked his fair share who fell in that category, that was for sure.

Both dragons were about six foot, but they didn't tower over Kit, and they were muscular without being overly so.

Definitely masculine and powerful.

Each was sexy in his own way. Kit loved Hudson's long auburn hair. He wanted to feel it brush across his naked body. Connie's short reddish-gold hair made Kit want to sink his hands into it and mess it up... just because.

Briefly, Kit wondered what they thought about how *he* dressed. His clothes were definitely hip but also femme. And, well, old. Some of his outfits he'd picked up from vintage resell shops.

Vintage. The thought tickled him immensely. Hudson and Connie were vintage. Still, though. Kit was by no means masculine. If anything, he had a femme, androgynous look. He'd had more than one straight guy think he was a woman from the back.

Kit liked soft, pretty things as much as he liked leather, and his clothes reflected that. So did his underclothes. There had even been a guy or two who'd walked away from a relationship once he saw what Kit wore under his clothes.

It had hurt at the time, but Kit decided some people just couldn't handle his fabulousness. And his lace. Hopefully Hudson and Connie didn't lose interest when they saw just how much Kit did indeed like soft, sexy things. People could get freaked out over the damndest thing.

And honestly, Kit could get used to how Hudson and Connie treated him, because seriously? Kit couldn't remember the last time somebody went to such lengths to meet his every need.

The last two nights, one of them had made sure he had something to drink. The other one had held his chair out for him. Plus, they were always touching him, but not in a creepy way. A hand to the shoulder or a palm on his lower back was nice. Very nice.

Kit felt cared for.

Which was really, really dangerous because he could get used to such treatment, and they were already in a

relationship. They probably only wanted to play with him, and he was up for that.

That didn't mean they wanted something long-term. Kit didn't know if he did, either. His life was kind of a mess right then.

After dessert was finished, they retired to the living area, each with a glass of something to drink.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns—or was it the dragon in this case?—Kit jumped right into it. “You guys have been flirting hot and heavy with me since I got here. I need to know exactly what you want.”

“I see we're getting right to it,” Hudson said, setting his after-dinner drink down.

“Yup. I don't believe in beating around the bush. Are you interested in me or is this some sort of game?”

“Whoa. Whoa. This is no game, I promise you that,” Connie said.

Hudson nodded. “We don't do things like that.”

“That's good to hear.” Kit swirled his wine in his glass before taking a sip. “So?”

“We're interested in you,” Hudson said.

“Both of you,” Kit clarified.

“Yes,” Connie said. “Both of us.”

“Okay. That brings me to my next question then. Are you two in a relationship?” Kit asked.

“Yes, we are,” Hudson answered.

“I thought so. So, does that mean you guys are in an open relationship?” Kit asked.

“Yes and no,” Hudson said. “So there isn't any confusion, let me explain how relationships with dragons work. We don't think anything of having multiple partners. It's not uncommon for there to be threesomes or even foursomes. And it can be any combination of partners too.”

“I remember you saying dragons didn’t have the same hang-ups as humans on same-sex pairings,” Kit said.

“We also don’t consider a woman a whore if she has multiple lovers either.” Connie shrugged. “Or a man, for that matter. Again, that’s more of a human thing.”

“Dragons are very accepting. Good to know.” That was encouraging. “Back to my original question. Are you guys in an open relationship?”

Hudson hummed softly. “Connie and I are *not* in an open relationship. Neither one of us had any interest in someone else until we met you.”

“It’s *you* we’re interested in, Kit,” Connie said, leaning forward. “Not some random human. Or anybody else. Just you. And neither of us is looking for a quick hook up—you need to understand that.”

Kit’s mouth dropped open. “Wait. Wait just a minute. Are you saying you want a *relationship* with me?”

“That is what we want,” Hudson said. “We want to play with you, yes, but not for a day or two. No, we want something much longer.”

“Shit. Okay, hold on. I was expecting a quick hook up. I *wasn’t* expecting to get invited into an established relationship.” Kit set his glass down, then he hopped up and started pacing. “Just... hold on. I need a minute.”

When pacing in front of the couch wasn’t enough, Kit widened his circle. Of all the things he’d been expecting, them wanting a relationship hadn’t entered his mind.

There were so many things to consider, least of all the fact that he was human, and they were dragons. To him, that was a huge hurdle.

Connie caught Kit by the hand as he passed by, bringing him to a stop, and pressed a small kiss to the back of it. “What concerns you?”

Kit goggled at Connie. He wasn’t sure if it was the kiss or the question that caused his response. Because seriously? It

could've been either one.

“It'd be faster to list the things that *don't* concern me.” Kit waved his hand at himself. “I mean, I'm human. You are dragons. I have a very limited lifespan. Have either of you thought of that? I'm going to die waaaaay before you. Hudson over there is a thousand years old!”

Hudson and Connie shared a look.

“Okay, that right there.” Kit tugged his hand from Connie and pointed at them. “That look. I don't know what that look is supposed to mean, but it definitely meant something.”

“Can't give up all my secrets at once,” Hudson said, grinning. “But there are ways around the age thing. That's all I'm going to say right now. Next concern?”

“There are ways around that, he says,” Kit muttered, hands on his hips. “Like that didn't cause me to think of a million *more* questions.”

Hudson chuckled.

“And speaking of you, Your Majesty.” Kit plastered on his most serious-looking face. “You're a royal. The king of these dragons. How will your people react to you dating a human, hmm?”

“You're putting too much emphasis on the fact I'm a royal. All that really means is I was born to lead *because* I was born a solid red dragon. Royal is just a word, Kit. A title. A job, if you will,” Hudson said.

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

“No, seriously,” Connie said. “His age has more meaning than the fact he was born a solid color. With age comes strength. Wisdom. Patience. And knowledge.”

“I'm going to trust what you're telling me because I have no way of knowing any different. So answer the question: How will your dragons react to me?”

“Why would there be a problem?” Hudson asked.

“Why? Because I’m human. Argh. Don’t answer a question with a damn question.”

“Ha, he called you out on that.” Connie snickered.

“Look, Kit, if someone’s going to have a problem with you because of your species, isn’t it safe to assume they’d have a problem with anyone who *wasn’t* a dragon?”

Kit scowled.

“And if they do, they can leave my court, because I don’t want such bigotry infecting my people.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

Connie hooted. “That’s why he’s the king.”

Kit laughed softly. “Okay, fine. I’ll give you that one. I guess the question I really need an answer to is, why me?”

“Why not you?” Hudson asked.

“I’m going to throw something at you,” Kit threatened.

“Okay, okay,” Hudson held up his hands. “You’re driven, attractive, open-minded, and easygoing. You’ve had a lot thrown at you lately, and yet you’ve rolled with the punches. I appreciate a fighter, and you are one.”

“You are kind too,” Connie pointed out. “Beckett always talks about how your employees love you. Do you know how unusual that is in this day and age? You have a good heart. You’re sweet but also kind of sassy. I mean, seriously, what is there *not* to like about you? Why not you?”

“I have to say, you guys are certainly good for my ego. Thank you.”

“We’d like to be good for you too,” Connie said.

“We’re serious about this. About you. We want to get to know you. Will you give us a chance? Are you interested in us?”

“I’m pretty sure you know I am,” Kit said. “I just don’t know why you’ve focused on me. You’re both big, bad dragons, and I’m just me. I guess having both of you interested in me leaves me feeling a little overwhelmed. But I am interested.”

“Dragons can be kind of intense, so we’ll try to go slow and give you a chance to get used to us. But make no mistake,” Hudson said. “We want you. We want to fuck you.”

“Fuck, yes,” Connie growled.

Kit raised an eyebrow. “Just so you guys know, I also like to do the fucking on occasion.”

Connie hissed, the sound sudden and loud, as his eyes fluttered.

Kit jumped at the sound. “Holy shit, that was....”

“That’s not a problem. Soooo not a problem,” Connie said, opening his eyes.

Kit immediately noticed his eyes had changed colors.

“Sweetheart? Are you okay?” Hudson asked, resting his hand on Connie’s leg.

“Yes. Yes, I’m good.” Connie closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, he looked at Kit. “Sorry. Hearing that you’re a switch got to me. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Glad to hear you’re receptive,” Kit said.

“Very. We should mention that we only want to fuck you. And we don’t share,” Connie said. “Are you okay with that? Are you okay being exclusive with us?”

Kit seriously considered the question. This felt monumental, and he didn’t want to rush it. He stared at both dragons. They returned his look calmly.

“I am. I’m not interested in anyone else either. I want to see where this goes,” Kit said, grinning from ear to ear. “Lord have mercy, I’m dating two dragons!”

Connie let out a whoop, jumped up from the couch, and wrapped his arms around Kit. The next thing Kit knew, he was being twirled around the living area.

“Jeez, put me down, you maniac. I’m entirely too full for you to be doing that.” Kit laughed, staring at Connie’s happy face.

Connie plunked him down right in front of Hudson, who had also stood when Connie jumped up. Breathless, Kit stared into Hudson's face. Connie crowded in behind Kit as Hudson moved in closer.

Heart pounding, and trapped between the two, all Kit could do was stare into Hudson's eyes, eyes that were rapidly changing color. Connie's hands landed on Kit's hips just as Hudson cupped Kit's face.

Connie's warm lips landed on the nape of his neck, nibbling at the sensitive skin while Hudson claimed his mouth.

Kit fisted his hand in Hudson's shirt and wrapped his other one around the back of Connie's neck, because fuck, he needed something to hold on to.

The dual sensations drove him nuts. And hell's bells, Hudson's kiss was as dominating as the man himself. He demanded that Kit open, and when he did, Hudson's tongue swept in, owning everything it touched. The kiss was hot and wet. Overpowering.

Kit's deep moan was a heated plea for more.

Both males jerked as if they'd been electrocuted. Connie rubbed his hard cock against Kit's ass as he growled softly in Kit's ear. Hudson ended the kiss and snarled against Kit's lips.

Instead of scaring the shit out of him, it drove his arousal higher.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – KIT



NEEDING MORE, Kit pushed his ass back against Connie. Damn, Connie was packing.

Hudson suddenly pulled back when Connie made a high-pitched whine. He looked over Kit's shoulder at Connie. "Sweetheart?"

"M-my dragon is really, *really* pushing me, Hudson."

Kit might be pretty new to this world, but even he could tell something was wrong. "Ah, guys? What does that mean?" Kit asked. "What's the problem?"

"Not a problem, per se, but more of a control issue," Hudson replied, watching Connie. "Our dragons really want you to see them. Since Connie is younger, his dragon is fighting Connie for control."

"I see." Oh, who was Kit kidding? "Actually, no, I don't see. I have no clue what you mean. Is there some reason I can't see your dragons? Is it not allowed?"

Connie groaned, burying his face in Kit's hair. "Oh gods, do you *want* to see our dragons?"

Kit turned as far as he could, trying to see Connie. "I'm nuts about dragons. I've seen every movie and read every book I could find about dragons. I *love* dragons. Why in the hell would I not?"

"It's not the same," Hudson cautioned. "We're real, living creatures who breathe fire. The ones in the movies and books aren't. It is *not* the same. We're scary, Kit. Big and scary."

"But would you hurt me?"

“Not in a million lifetimes,” Hudson swore. “But again, we’re big and scary. The very last thing either of us wants to do is traumatize you more than you already are.”

Kit nodded slowly. “I see your point. What about this, then? What if Connie shows me his dragon while you stay with me, Hudson? I mean, you stay in this form with me. I think, maybe, that would help keep me from panicking.”

“Hudson? Please. I think I need to do this. And if he’s willing....”

Hudson tugged Kit’s face back toward him. “Crash course on us, Kit. We are still ourselves in our true form, and being a dragon *is* our true form. We are still cognitive. We’re still us. You’re going to see a huge animal, but please remember that we’re not *just* an animal. Connie is in there, okay?”

“In other words, don’t run, right?”

“It’d probably be a good idea not to, yes,” Hudson agreed. “Are you sure, Kit?”

“Yes. And Connie seems to think he needs to do this too. So, let’s do this.”

Hudson nodded. “In that case, let’s head outside. There’s an area close by we use to shift. Connie? Hang in there. Tell your dragon just a couple more minutes. And warn him to behave, or I’ll take matters into my own hands. Understood?”

Connie nodded frantically as he grabbed Kit by the hand. “Understood. Let’s go.”

Hudson took Kit’s other hand, and together the three of them headed outside and into a cleared area behind the house.

Kit was shaking. Nerves were a huge part of that, most definitely, but he was also insanely excited. In a few moments he was going to see a real fucking dragon—a mythological creature that supposedly didn’t exist.

Newsflash, they did, and he was going to get to see one live and in person.

“I will not pee my pants. I will not pee my pants,” Kit chanted quietly.

Connie huffed out a laugh.

“Shit,” Kit groaned. “You heard that? Shit.”

“Supernatural hearing,” Hudson reminded Kit as they hurriedly crossed the ground to a flat area of land that had no trees.

Connie was practically vibrating with excitement. So was Kit.

Connie stumbled to a halt, dropped Kit’s hand, and turned around. Lunging forward, he plastered his lips against Kit’s. The kiss was a little desperate and didn’t last long.

“Please don’t be afraid,” Connie begged quietly against Kit’s mouth. “Please.”

“I might be a little scared, but I’m more excited. Just keep in mind I’ve never seen a real dragon, okay? It’s a lot. But I want to see you. I mean him. Just... show me.”

Connie nodded his head frantically.

“We need to move. He’s going to need room,” Hudson said, taking Kit’s hand and moving backward as Connie stripped.

“Okay, yeah. Back. Got it.” Kit followed Hudson to what he assumed was a safe distance. His heart was pounding from nerves and excitement. He barely noticed Hudson still held his hand.

How Kit wished he was close enough to see all that naked skin of Connie’s.

Connie, bathed in the bright moonlight, stared straight at them. Intrigued, Kit watched. How did this work? Was it like those werewolf movies with breaking bones, painful screams, and hideous sounds? Did he actually shift? Or was it something completely different?

Between one heartbeat and the next, Kit got his answer. Connie’s figure blurred. It was like reality glitched for just a

moment and time kinda froze. What was once clear and distinct was now hazy. Indistinct. Then reality snapped back into place and Connie was nowhere to be found.

In his place was a rapidly expanding... animal... that stood on four legs and had a tail and a long neck. And when Kit said rapidly expanding, he wasn't joking.

Within seconds the creature was as big as a large-size SUV, then as big as an eighteen-wheeler... and he just kept expanding and growing.

Kit stopped breathing, unable to make sense of what he was seeing. A dragon. A real fucking dragon. And he was big. As tall as a modern two-story house—maybe sixteen feet tall and thirty feet long from nose to tail now that he'd stopped growing. He also had a tail that ended in the shape of an arrow.

“M-mother of all,” Kit whispered. “A dragon.”

Kit could hear the reverence in his voice. Was he scared? Shit, yes. The animal standing in the middle of the field was as tall as a damn huge ass dinosaur and twice as scary looking. Kit was in awe of him.

“Doing okay?” Hudson asked.

“He's a dragon,” Kit choked out. “A beautiful, terrifying dragon, and holy shit, my knees are weak. That's a damn dragon there.”

Hudson chuckled. “Do I need to help you sit down?”

“No. No, no. I'm good!”

“You are indeed very good. Most people, paranormals included, panic when they see us in our true form. I'm very proud of how well you are handling this, Kit.”

“Trust me, if you weren't here, I probably would've fainted. My hindbrain is a blithering mess, but I am awestruck. Can we get closer? Is that okay?”

“Connie would love for you to get closer. And you can touch him if you want. He won't mind. In fact, he'd probably love it,” Hudson said. “Do you want to do that?”

“You better believe it. Just... keep holding my hand? My heart is pounding.”

Hudson calmly took Kit’s hand and kissed his knuckles. “You’re safe. Remember that. Shall we go?”

Kit wasn’t ashamed to admit it took a couple of fortifying breaths before he could take the first step toward Connie.

Holy shit, Connie was freaking huge.

In his dragon form, Connie had a muscular, long body with an elongated neck. His short, beefy limbs were powerful-looking and had three digits on each foot that ended in sharp claws. Sharp, deadly claws that Kit could imagine ripping through flesh quite easily.

He gulped.

Connie stood calmly. They were close enough now Kit could hear each breath Connie took. They stood in front of Connie, and Kit noticed there were tiny nostrils located on either side of his snout—a snout that was full of gnarly teeth.

He tried not to think about those teeth in action. There was also a set of horns that extended from the jaw upward.

They moved to the side of Connie. Two horns extended straight from Connie’s scaled forehead, and he had small, delicately shaped pointy ears. A bony ridge separated his nostrils, and a mane of daunting spikes sprouted from the back of Connie’s head and ran down his spine.

And he couldn’t forget the huge, leatherlike wings right in the middle of Connie’s back.

But the scales, now they were the real showstopper. The iridescent scales were a golden red, much like Connie’s hair color. They glimmered and flashed in the moonlight.

“You are amazing, Connie.”

Connie twisted his long neck around, and Kit found himself staring into one of Connie’s giant eyes. Holy shit, he was eye to eye with a dragon. A slightly hysterical giggle escaped before he could stop it.

Connie huffed.

Kit was going to take that sound as one of amusement. Still holding Hudson's hand, he backed up a little bit and stared intently into Connie's eyes, searching. There. There was that human intelligence he was looking for.

"Wow, you are... you are...."

Horribly gorgeous. Beastly. Imposing. Intimidating. Threatening too, although Kit didn't feel in peril. Which was nuts, considering there was a creature in front of him that could snap him in half with those powerful jaws.

Not the most comforting thought, and Kit instinctively took a step back, but a low, rumbling purr rose from the dragon's chest.

Absolutely stunned at the sound, the building fear vanished like fog before the morning sun. "Oh my God, are you purring?"

"He is," Hudson said. "He sensed the sudden spike of fear in you, and he's purring in the hopes of calming you down."

Oh God, his heart. That was the sweetest thing ever. And even better was the fact that before Hudson finished speaking, peace had flooded Kit, a sense of well-being that quickly chased away the sudden spurt of anxiety. Kit's nerves settled, and the wonderment of what was standing in front of him began to rise again.

"You are magnificent, awe-inspiring, and scary as hell." Kit rested his hand on his chest as his breathing slowed.

Caught by a sudden need to explore, Kit edged closer, even though he kept a lookout for sudden moves. Instinctively, he knew Connie wouldn't hurt him, but there was also no denying Connie could accidentally squash him with little effort.

"Hudson said it was okay, but I should ask you. Can I touch you, Connie?"

Connie lowered his long neck so they were almost eye to eye and slowly nodded. Oh wow, that was awesome. Wanting to explore every square inch of a creature made famous by ancient lore, Kit threw caution to the wind and reached out.

Connie's scales were hard, but he expected nothing less since they were basically his armor.

Kit studied them. "Interesting. Your scales are shaped like a teardrop." He examined them closer, mumbling to himself. "Huh. Two long sides and two shorter ones, and a very short fifth side attached to the skin. How flipping neat."

Connie had raised his head and was looking down at him.

"Hmm, I wonder. They're only attached in one place." Kit glanced up. "Can you maybe move them somehow?"

Connie made his scales stand on end. He rumbled happily when Kit scratched underneath them.

"Like that, huh?"

The tear-shaped design of the scales fascinated him. Upon closer inspection, Kit observed the innermost part of a scale was composed of a compact, hairy formation firmly rooted in the epidermis.

On the hair follicle, there were some tiny glands that secreted a substance that adhered firmly to the skin.

"Interesting. You are truly a marvel of nature, you know that?"

Connie let his scales settle back into place, and Kit ran his hand over the ones he could reach. Another rumble came from Connie, one Kit now knew meant pleasure. Connie shook his enormous head, and a slight breeze teased Kit's hair.

"Man, you are massive."

Another huff came from Connie, and he slowly lowered himself to the ground and rolled onto his side. Kit quickly stepped away to give those gigantic legs plenty of room.

He couldn't imagine getting kicked by one of those humongous things. With the moonlight still shining down upon them, Kit noticed Connie's scales became finer and less thick on his underbelly.

If someone had told Kit a month ago that he'd be in an isolated field, scratching a dragon's belly, he would've insisted they check into a mental hospital. But here he was, doing just that.

The power rolling off Connie was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. It danced along his skin, little pops and tingles that tickled. He realized then how much Connie kept his power under wraps when in human form.

But it flowed over him like a gently moving brook over smooth pebbles. That's about how Kit felt too—so insignificant in front of such a powerful being, but... safe, like this was what was meant to be.

With one last good scratch to Connie's belly, he grabbed Hudson's hand and continued his exploration. Connie rolled so his belly wasn't exposed anymore, and it dawned on Kit what Connie had done—he'd shown Kit his stomach.

That wasn't something animals did unless there was trust. He had to swallow past the lump in his throat. Connie trusted him. He patted Connie and received a low, growly purr in return.

The muscles Connie had were astounding. His legs were impressive, but that made sense considering the weight they had to uphold. He looked at Connie's back foot, or whatever Connie called it.

The talons at the end were nearly as thick as his forearm. He shivered slightly, imagining Connie picking up something like a cow right off the ground.

Kit quickly walked around the back end and examined Connie's tail. Obviously, it could move on its own and was also covered in scales. The arrowhead on the end was deadly sharp from the looks of it.

Kit decided not to touch it. He walked up the other side of Connie, following the spikes that ran the length of his spine.

Then he focused on the wings. Kit shook his head in amazement. They were set above Connie's muscular shoulder blades. Currently they were folded and lying flat against Connie's back, but before they left this field, Kit was determined to see them opened and stretched out.

Kit drew closer to Connie's skull. Connie's eyes were a sunburst of reddish gold with a slitted pupil, like a reptile's.

Connie slowly closed one eye at him like he was winking. Kit giggled, then was slightly mortified at the sound. Oh well, giggling might not be the most manly sound to make in such a moment, but at least he wasn't screaming in terror. He wondered how many had.

He paused before walking around in front of Connie. Standing in front of Connie unnerved him. Maybe it was the idea of what Connie could do with such a mouth. Straightening his shoulders, Kit reminded himself there was nothing to be afraid of and walked toward Connie's snout.

A warm breeze lifted his hair, and Kit jumped, realizing what he felt was Connie's breath. Not to mention that was where the fire came from. Lovely thought that was. He also hadn't realized until then how much heat Connie put off in this form.

Kit moved back around to where he could see one of Connie's eyes. Connie must have recognized he was done exploring and slowly clambered back up to his feet.

"Can I see your wings?"

Connie extended them, and Kit gasped. They were enormous. They reminded Kit of bat wings, only more leathery and a thousand times bigger. Of course, they had to be if they were going to support Connie as he flew. And they were indeed monstrous.

"Like I said, magnificent."

Connie preened.

Kit laughed softly. “Honestly, you’re terrifyingly beautiful.”

Connie flapped his wings, and the breeze practically pushed Kit off his feet.

“Hey, now!”

Connie snorted as he looked down at Kit.

“Who ever thought a dragon could snort?” Kit sighed as he looked at the superb creature standing in front of him. “I take it since you have wings, you’re capable of flight?”

Connie nodded.

“That must be wonderful,” Kit whispered. “Soaring up there, looking down on all of us, nothing but the moon and stars around you. I can’t imagine.”

“We crave it. Flying relaxes us,” Hudson said.

“I also want to see your dragon.”

“I pretty much look the same, just bigger and a solid red color,” Hudson said.

“Still. I want to see you.” Kit looked at Connie in his dragon form, then at Hudson, who was in his human form. “But maybe not right now? There are other things I want to do right now.”

Because why the hell not? They’d decided they were in a relationship, so *why the hell not?* He was horny and wanted to get his hands on both of them. He wasn’t ready to go all the way, but he was more than ready to get off with them.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Kit glanced back at Connie. “And the things I want to do require a human body. Hint, hint.”

Kit had barely had time to register what he was seeing before Connie was standing naked in front of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – HUDSON



AS BADLY as Hudson wanted to show off his dragon, he was much more interested in what Kit wanted to do that involved human bodies.

“Well, one of us has the right idea.” Kit eyed Connie, who was standing there staring at Kit. “And dear God, whose horse is that?”

Connie choked on laughter. “Thank you. Hudson’s bigger.”

“Shit. Good thing I’m a size queen.”

“What?” Hudson asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Connie said as he backed Kit up against Hudson.

Liking where this was heading, Hudson settled his hands on Kit’s hips and flexed his fingers against the soft yoga pants he was wearing. He wanted to drag them off right then and there.

Kit froze against Hudson, the scent of magnolias heavy on the summer breeze.

From one heartbeat to the next, Hudson’s body lit up. “Now would be the time to tell us to stop if you need to.”

“I’m not saying stop, but I’m not ready to go all the way yet.”

Connie crowded closer. “That’s fine. Can we taste you though?”

“How about I taste you?”

Hudson’s heart pounded, and fire raced through his veins. Why did that make Hudson so hard he throbbed with

excitement? Desire was a living thing in him. He needed their hands on him, both of them.

Connie moaned softly. “You smell like magnolias. It’s my favorite flower now.”

“You do smell good,” Hudson growled. “And we’ll do as much or as little as you want.”

“Then let’s get somewhere where there’s lube. I—shit, okay, then!”

Hudson blinked in surprise as Connie slung Kit over his shoulder and started toward the house.

“Grab my clothes and come on, Hudson!”

Kit’s head popped up, and he crooked his fingers in a ‘come on’ gesture as he was carted off.

“Now, Hudson!” Connie yelled.

Hudson wondered if Connie realized he was literally carting their mate off like the dragons of old. For some reason he found that amusing. Looked as if Connie wasn’t so modern after all.

Dragon instincts were a bitch.

Grabbing Connie’s discarded clothing, Hudson hurried after them. He hadn’t dared hope the night would end like this, but he was certainly not complaining.

By the time he got inside, Kit and Connie were in Hudson’s living area on the couch. Well, Connie was laid out on the couch, and Kit was between his knees, Connie’s dick in his mouth.

Well now, wasn’t that a pretty sight?

Connie’s head was thrown back, the cords in his neck standing out. He had one hand wrapped around Kit’s braid, moving Kit’s head up and down over his groin. Connie’s other hand was behind his head, clutching the couch arm.

Connie’s desire perfumed the air, mixing nicely with Kit’s magnolia scent.

Dropping Connie's clothes on the ground, Hudson darted into the bedroom and grabbed the lube. Stripping off his shirt as he returned, he moved quickly, sitting behind Kit on the couch.

Kit slurped happily as he shook his hips.

"Can I finger you?" Hudson asked.

"Oh gods," Connie moaned, lifting his head. "Wish I could see that."

Hudson ran his hands over Kit's ass. "Want to trade places, sweetheart?"

"Fuck. No. Yes. No. Shit, I don't know. No. Godssss!" Connie hissed suddenly. "What the hell? Do that again with your tongue! *Fuck*, Kit, you're good at that."

Kit lifted his head. "You're not going anywhere, so stop squirming. Busy here, you know." Kit shook his ass. "Someone else needs to get busy too."

The authoritative tone heated Hudson even more. Kit surprised Hudson, but he liked it. A lot. He didn't understand, though, why Kit tensed when he grabbed the waistband of his pants.

Was he having second thoughts? He didn't appear to be, since he was still trying to suck Connie's brain out through his cock. Plus, Kit told him to get on with it. When Hudson didn't get told to stop, he eased the yoga pants down.

And nearly swallowed his tongue. A pair of hot-pink lace boy shorts lovingly cupped Kit's ass cheeks. "Dragon gods. That's... that's fucking hot."

"What?" Connie demanded.

"Lace underwear," Hudson replied. Even he could hear how husky his voice was. "Hot-pink lace underwear."

"Holy fuck," Connie swore loudly. "That's hot."

Kit immediately relaxed, and Hudson wondered how many times a guy Kit had been with hadn't reacted nicely to

what he wore. Hudson's dragon suggested they torch those humans. He couldn't find fault in his dragon's logic.

"They're so sexy. *You're* so sexy, babe," Hudson said. He eased the pants and lacy underwear down. Perfect, tight cheeks filled his gaze. Running his hand over them, he marveled at the softness of Kit's skin.

Kit widened his legs.

Since they were on the couch, Kit unfortunately couldn't open them too much, but it was enough for Hudson to glimpse a tight little hole—a hairless tight little hole.

He wanted to plunge his tongue in there, but Kit needed to be made aware of what they could do first. No point in scaring him right off the bat.

But he *would* get his tongue up that tight ass. Soon too. Hudson stripped the pants the rest of the way off with some help from Kit.

Kit paused sucking Connie long enough to strip off his shirt. He tossed it at Hudson, winked, and bent back over Connie. Somehow Kit managed to get his legs opened more. Hudson thanked the dragon gods for small favors.

He placed a light kiss on each ass cheek, then opened the lube. The sound was a nice complement to Kit's slurping and Connie's moaning. Slicking his fingers, he rubbed around Kit's hole, massaging the opening.

Reaching through Kit's legs, he grasped Kit's cock and stroked him from root to tip. Kit shivered as Hudson's hand glided over his shaft. Hudson watched as goose bumps rose on Kit's back and ass.

Connie moaned helplessly. "Better get on with it, Hudson. Whatever you're doing is making him suck harder. I'm going to come soon."

"Fight it," Hudson suggested. "I want to play with this pretty hole, so don't come."

Both Connie and Kit moaned.

Hudson liked the sound of that. He teased Kit, rubbing his thumb over Kit's hole until it started to soften. Taking his time, he slipped a small portion of his finger in. Last thing he wanted to do was hurt Kit.

Kit hummed.

“Oh, *oh* gods,” Connie gasped.

Seeing how he was getting very little resistance, Hudson entered Kit fully. In and out he moved his finger, the heat making him crazy. Hudson's dick was pressed against his zipper, and he was uncomfortable, but he wasn't about to stop what he was doing.

He'd deal with his dick in a minute. Right now he was too fascinated with Kit's hole. When Kit started to press back, Hudson added another finger. He twisted and turned them, hunting for that spot that would light Kit up.

Kit's entire body jerked when Hudson found it.

Kit threw his head back. “Right there. Fuck yes, that's it. Jesus, your fingers feel good. Now bang me like you mean it. I'm going to paint him with my come, then drink him down.”

Connie cried out.

The needy, desperate sounds Connie was making were driving Hudson insane.

“Make me come, Hudson, before Connie is bad,” Kit demanded.

Ho-ly shit. Hudson's head spun. Kit was trying to dominate him now, and Hudson was so hard he hurt.

Hudson got to work. He had a human to make come.

He drenched his fingers with lube and fucked Kit ruthlessly, shoving grunts from Kit. The filthy sounds of the lube squishing, Connie's desperate moans, and Kit's grunts all drove Hudson's need higher.

Kit lifted his head again. “Stroke yourself off, Hudson. We all come together.”

“Hurry,” Connie begged Hudson. “I don’t know how much longer I can take his mouth!”

Kit laughed quietly as he lowered his head. “I’ve just been playing with you. Buckle up, buttercup. I’m about to get serious now.”

Hudson let go of Kit’s cock, unzipped his shorts, and pulled out his cock, stroking desperately. He was hard as nails and already so close he could practically taste it.

Connie shouted when Kit lowered his head. “Oh, fuck me. *Fuck* me! He took me all the fucking way! Make. Him. Come. Hudson or I will fuck you up!”

Hudson added another finger and drilled Kit’s hotspot without mercy. Time seemed to slow down. Connie was panting like he had been flying for several days. The agonizing look of concentration on Connie’s face was something Hudson would never forget. He was fighting so hard not to come first.

Then Kit’s body tightened on Hudson’s fingers.

“Connie, Connie, he’s about to come!”

Kit suddenly straightened on his knees, his hand flying over his cock as he came all over Connie’s abs and chest. The scent of come filled the air, and Hudson kept banging Kit’s ass through it.

Laughing, Kit dropped back down and swallowed Connie again.

Connie roared suddenly. Hudson heard Kit gulping desperately, and that did it for him. He jerked his fingers out of Kit, lunged to his knees, and came all over Kit’s ass.

He was pretty sure the blinking spots before his eyes had never happened before. His dragon gave a happy little huff of contentment as Hudson tried not to collapse against Kit’s back. Instead he kind of slumped against the couch.

That angle was perfect for Hudson to watch Kit run his fingers through his come splattered on Connie’s chest... then rub it against Connie’s lips.

If he hadn't just come, that would have done it. And if he *still* hadn't come, watching Connie lick his lips would have most definitely got the job done.

Then Kit twisted around and did the same to Hudson.

Eyes wide, he also licked his lips just like Connie had. They had now both tasted Kit. Where the fuck had Kit been hiding this dominant streak?

"By Gaura's scales, that was hot," Connie whispered, then winked at Hudson.

Kit watched Hudson, and since they were staring at each other, Hudson saw the first hint of insecurity enter Kit's eyes.

"It was indeed," Hudson said as he played with Kit's braid.

And just like that, the insecurity was gone.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use a shower," Kit said.

"How do you feel about us all taking one?" Connie asked.

"Lead the way," Kit said.

THE SHOWER was just that—a shower and nothing more, although there was definitely some touching, but even the touching was kept easy and simple. They did more talking in the pounding water than touching.

Kit got out first, but before he left the shower, he kissed both of them. Hudson followed next, and then Connie.

Kit had redressed when Hudson entered the living area. Since it was so late, Hudson had changed into night pants. Connie joined him a few seconds later, also in night pants.

"Do you feel like watching a movie?" Hudson asked, sitting next to Kit on the couch.

“I’d love to, but I’m getting tired,” Kit said. “I’d just end up going to sleep on you guys. Plus, I have work tomorrow.”

Connie sat next to Kit on the other side. “We could watch TV in bed. Hudson’s bed is huge. You wouldn’t have to get up then.”

“Connie.”

Connie pasted an innocent look on his face as he glanced at Hudson. “What?”

Kit shook his head. “Yeah, innocent is not a look you can pull off. Just so you know.” Kit patted Connie on the leg. “While I appreciate the offer of sharing a bed with you guys, I’m going to have to take a rain check. I’m not ready for that.”

Hudson could see that Connie wanted to argue but he didn’t, fortunately. Besides, Kit had said he wanted a rain check. That was encouraging.

“Okay. I understand,” Connie said. “Sorry. I don’t mean to push.”

“It’s not a problem.” Kit yawned. “Besides, I’m not used to sleeping with anybody. That’s going to take some adjusting to. Anyhow, tomorrow starts the weekend. Maybe the three of us could do something?”

“We could go out,” Hudson said. “You like to dance, right?”

“I do, but how about we hang around here? Maybe watch a movie then? Maybe take me on a tour of the grounds? I used to jog but haven’t lately. Any good trails around here?”

“There absolutely are,” Connie said. “You like to jog? Hudson isn’t much on it, but I am. If you want a jogging partner, just let me know.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Kit said. “Maybe we could hang out at the pool or the lake? Since I live in the city, I don’t get to spend a lot of time in nature. I miss it.”

“Nature boy, are you?” Hudson asked.

Kit grinned. "I grew up in a commune. I can milk a cow, lay out a garden, sew, shoot, skin an animal, and run a trout line. Yeah, I like nature."

"Really?" Connie asked. "A commune?"

"That's a story for another time," Kit said as he yawned again. "I need to get to bed. Are there any sexy dragons around here who'd be willing to walk me to my room?"

Connie hopped up immediately. Hudson laughed at his overeager lover as he too got to his feet. Kit hooked his arms through both of theirs, and the three of them walked together toward Kit's room.

When they got there, Kit kissed both on the lips, blushed prettily, then ducked inside his room.

Connie was still touching his lips when they returned to Hudson's bedroom. "I can still feel his lips on mine."

Taking Connie by the hand, Hudson led them to the bed. "I can taste him on my lips."

"We've got it bad, don't we?" Connie asked as he helped Hudson unmake the bed.

"Indeed we do, thank Gaura." Hudson collapsed on his side of the bed, and Connie immediately rolled into his arms.

"I wish he was here," Connie whispered.

"So do I, sweetheart. But don't push him," Hudson whispered back. He had no idea why they were whispering, it just seemed like the thing to do. "We'll get him here soon enough."

Connie kissed Hudson's naked shoulder. "I know. Now explain to me exactly what he looked like in that underwear, because dammit, I didn't get to see that."

An image flashed across Hudson's mind. "You know, maybe you should show up a couple minutes early tomorrow morning before we take Kit to breakfast and remind him of the treat you were denied."

“Ohhh, I like how you think! Good idea.” Connie snuggled deeper into Hudson’s arms.

“As I said before, I do occasionally have them.”

Connie snickered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN – CONNIE



CONNIE DID indeed show up early to Kit's room the next morning but got nowhere. Instead, Kit patted Connie on the chest and told him if he was good, he'd get to see what Kit had on under his clothes that night after his appointment with Frederick.

That was a promise he intended to make sure Kit kept.

"So where is Hudson?" Kit asked as he slipped on his white heeled sandals.

"Huh? Oh, sorry. He's on his way." Connie had gotten distracted staring at what Kit was wearing.

Standing, Kit glanced down at himself and then looked back at Connie. "Is there something wrong?"

"What? No! Absolutely not. Oh, damn, sorry. I wasn't looking at you in a bad way. I mean, I think you look absolutely gorgeous." Connie scrubbed his hands over his face. "I was drooling over you, okay? And you caught me."

Grinning, Kit walked over to Connie and kissed him on the cheek. "Why, thank you."

Connie didn't know the name of those pants Kit wore, but they were wide, calf-length trousers with a high waist. They were loosely tapered from the thigh to several inches below the knee.

And they were orange.

Kit wore a white and orange checked halter-top that ended a few inches above his bellybutton. He'd also added several beaded necklaces and a couple of huge bangles on his wrists. Even his earrings were orange.

Kit's hair was some sort of complicated ponytail-looking deal that Connie wanted to take down so he could run his fingers through Kit's hair.

"You look lovely too," Kit said.

Connie shook his head, amused. "Thank you for the compliment, but you outshine both Hudson and me."

Connie had some errands to run in San DeLain, but he was still dressed in a light-blue suit. As he was leaving Hudson's bedroom earlier, he noticed Hudson was wearing dark-blue pants, so he probably was wearing a dark-blue suit. The biggest splash of color Connor had was his paisley blue tie.

"While that may be true, I'm willing to bet that suit cost more than my entire outfit," Kit said as he ran his fingers down Connie's sleeve.

"Hey, you two," Hudson said from the doorway. "Ready to go eat?"

Kit quickly crossed the room and hugged Hudson. "Good morning. And yes, I'm starving."

"You look lovely," Hudson said, peering at Kit. "Is there a color that doesn't look good on you?"

"Aw, thank you, and I haven't found one," Kit said, blushing. "You look intimidating as usual. Connie? Are you ready? Oh, would you grab my purse off the bed please?" Kit asked.

Hudson grinned. "Thank you. Also, before we go to breakfast, there was something I wanted to ask you, Kit."

"Oh?"

"You have the appointment with Frederick tonight."

"Okay?"

Hudson glanced at Connie. "What's on the agenda for today?"

Connie rattled off the tasks they needed to accomplish that morning. "After lunch, I need to make a trip into San

DeLain. There are some things I need to do.”

“Would one of those things involve stopping at a certain witch’s shop?” Hudson asked.

“Yes.” Connie fully intended to stop by there.

“Take Sheila with you, then.”

“I had planned to,” Connie said. “I should be back by six this evening, or maybe earlier.”

“Since Kit has that appointment with Frederick tonight, why don’t we meet at Embers for dinner? There’s no point in you and Kit coming all the way back home just to turn around and return to San DeLain. It’s too far of a trip.”

“Shit. I didn’t think about that,” Kit confessed. “Maybe I should ride with Connie instead of Beckett, then?”

“No, I still want you to have Beckett with you,” Hudson said. “And I want you to have a vehicle also. I don’t like the idea of you not having a car if you needed it.”

“I agree,” Connie said. “But I’ll have Stella drive me so she has her own vehicle once I meet up with you guys. Do you want to meet about five then? We can have an early meal, then catch a movie before the appointment.”

“That sounds perfect,” Hudson said. “Is that okay with you, Kit?”

“Sure. Nothing really changes for me,” Kit responded. “But I do appreciate you asking.”

“I’ll text Kage and ask him to reserve a table for us then,” Hudson said.

“Do you think Beckett would want to join us?” Connie asked.

“I’ll ask him on the way in and text you,” Kit said. “How’s that?”

“That works,” Hudson said. “Let’s go to breakfast.”

Connie picked up the little orange thing on the foot of Kit’s bed and joined them at the door. Kit slung it over his

shoulder, hooked his arms through Hudson's and Connie's, and started walking.

Connie barely managed to get Kit's door closed before getting dragged along. Okay, apparently someone was hungry this morning. And walking into the communal eating area arm in arm was certainly going to attract attention, which was what Kit probably intended.

Connie liked the idea that Kit was staking a claim on him and Hudson. He liked that a lot.

They went through the buffet line and sat in their usual place. Seconds later, some of Hudson's inner circle joined them. Connie was pleased how everybody laughed and joked with Kit. He appreciated that they made the effort to include him in their conversations.

Right before they finished eating, Beckett joined them with a cup of coffee. "Sorry I'm late. I didn't hear my alarm."

"Hey, go ahead and take time to eat if you want," Kit said, sipping his coffee. "I promise the boss won't get mad if we're a few minutes late."

"Thanks, but I grabbed a pastry," Beckett said, holding up the wrapped goodie he had in his hand. "I can eat that on the way in."

"If you're sure. I don't mind waiting," Kit said.

"I'm good, but thanks. Are you ready?" Beckett asked.

"I am, yes."

Hudson and Connie stood and walked with Kit and Beckett outside to Beckett's vehicle. There were several dragons coming into and out of the main house who waved at them.

Connie also didn't miss the fact that Kit kissed them on the cheek before getting into Beckett's vehicle. A dragon or two even whistled at the kiss.

Kit just waved at them as Connie shut the passenger door.

Both he and Hudson stood there watching as Beckett drove off. “Somebody was marking their territory,” Hudson said, his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah, he was.” Connie touched his cheek where Kit had kissed him.

Hudson glanced at Connie, then grinned.

“What?” Connie asked.

“You have the perfect imprint of lips on your cheek. And what do you know? The imprint is kind of an orangey pink. Matches a certain someone’s clothes.”

Connie laughed heartily as he stared at Hudson’s face. “Guess what? So do you. Damn, he literally marked us. Are we sure he doesn’t have dragon blood in him?”

“Since dragons can only reproduce with other dragons, yes, I’m sure. But I *do* like his instincts.”

“Yup.” And he knew Hudson would walk back through the main house to his quarters with the lipstick mark on his cheek, just as Connie would, before removing it.

THE NEXT several hours flew by quickly. He and Hudson ate lunch in the communal dining area, then went their separate ways. Since Sheila ate lunch with them, he didn’t need to track her down now that he was ready to go.

The drive into San DeLain was insane as usual. Since Sheila was aware of the witch who’d sold Kit the handmade jewelry, Connie didn’t have to fill her in.

Connie had already looked up the address for Bell, Book, and Cauldron and programmed it into the GPS. He and Sheila made small talk as they drove.

“Huh. According to the GPS we’re getting close. This isn’t too far from Kit’s bookstore.”

“Yeah, I believe he mentioned that. I think that’s how he found the place.”

“I recognize the area. Audrey and I stopped by Kit’s place of business, remember? By the way, have you been there yet?”

“No, but I plan to remedy that today.” Connie stared at the GPS. “We’re almost there.”

The mechanical voice directed them to take the next right. Sheila did as she was told and parked in a parking lot. They both looked at the freestanding store before them. It was a pretty brick building with a black-and-white canopy above the door.

There were windows encased in white wood on either side of a black door. There were also two black planters outside the store exploding with colorful plants.

“Very cute and welcoming,” Sheila said. “I can see why Kit was attracted to the place. I wouldn’t mind looking around in here after our business is done. That is, if we’re still welcome.”

“I’m not going to threaten her,” Connie said, exasperated. “Just going to let her know that Kit has friends in high places.”

“You know what? Why don’t you let me talk to her? You’re not the most rational when it comes to your mate,” Sheila said. “If she decides to be difficult, you can be my muscle.”

“I can do that.” Connie flexed for Sheila.

“Good grief, get your ass out of the car.” Sheila laughed as she opened her door. “Seriously though, let’s try not to make an enemy, okay?”

Connie nodded as he opened the door and got out. He heard the beep of the locks engaging. Sheila caught up with him on the other side of the car.

She looked beautiful as usual. He might be in a suit, but she was dressed in jeans that had silver rivets running down the sides of her thighs.

Something told him that Kit would like those jeans. She wore black heeled boots, a white T-shirt, and a cropped denim jacket that had black fringe around the bottom. She had left her auburn hair loose around her face.

She looked both beautiful and kickass.

Connie opened the store's door for her, and a little bell chimed sweetly as Sheila sailed inside. The dragon gods must be with them because there wasn't a single soul inside the shop.

The place smelled like herbs, but the scent wasn't overpowering. There were all kinds of items placed strategically to draw a customer's attention, including the handmade jewelry.

He caught Sheila looking at it longingly and just shook his head.

"Hello! Welcome, welcome. How may I... Well, now. This is interesting."

A beautiful woman with long brown hair with caramel highlights approached them slowly. Connie wasn't the best at gauging age, but he would put her in her early 30s. She wore wide-leg jeans that had what he thought might be huge hand-painted butterflies on the legs.

There was a thick brown leather belt around her waist, and her brown boots were nearly the same color as the belt. Her blouse was red with those drapey sleeves that seemed to be so popular. She wore an opaque white stone on a leather necklace around her neck. The same stone hung from her ears.

"Are you the owner of this establishment?" Sheila asked.

"I am. My name is Wendy McCallahan. How may I help you, Mistress?"

"If you know my title, I'm going to assume you know what I am," Sheila said.

"Of course I know who you are. I make it a point to know all the movers and shakers in our community. I take it

this isn't a social call," Wendy said.

"Yes and no. Could we speak to you privately?" Sheila asked.

"Of course. Just a moment." Wendy went to the front of the store and turned the 'open' sign to 'closed.' Then she took keys out of her pocket and locked the door. "There. Now we won't be disturbed. Why don't the both of you come to my office?"

"Thank you," Sheila said.

Connie followed behind the two women. He was getting a good vibe off Wendy, which was reassuring. They followed her into an office that was as comfortable as it was stylish.

"Please, have a seat." Wendy sat behind her desk. Connie and Sheila took the two chairs in front of the desk.

"Now, why don't we fully introduce ourselves," Wendy said. "I am Wendy McCallahan of the McCallahan coven."

"It's nice to meet you, Wendy. I am Mistress Sheila Walker of the Fire Court of San DeLain. This is Sir Conrad Turner, right hand to King Hudson Redmond of the Fire Court of San DeLain."

Wendy whistled long and loudly. "Well, it's not every day I end up with two dragons in my shop. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'm going to be blunt as I believe it saves time," Sheila said. "There is a human who frequents your shop. He owns a business not far from you called The Book Spot. His name is—"

"Kit Meadows," Wendy interrupted. "Who happens to be one of the sweetest humans I have ever met. Now I'm going to be blunt. I am not his friend, but I *am* acquainted with him. If you have a problem with him, then I'm going to have a problem with that."

"Oh, thank the dragon gods," Connie breathed.

Wendy raised an eyebrow at Connie.

“Sorry,” Connie said. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to hear that. Kit is under the protection of Elder Kage Dargan and—”

Wendy straightened in her desk chair. “Shit. The daemon?”

“Yup,” Sheila said.

“—and our court. Kit is friends with Austin, who is Kage’s mate,” Connie finished.

“Holy hell, this human has friends in high places,” Wendy muttered.

Connie found it funny that she had said exactly the same thing he thought earlier.

Wendy suddenly stared at Connie. “And why do the dragons have an interest in Kit? Is it related to the attack on him by the mimic?”

“So you have heard?” Connie asked.

“Who hasn’t?”

“Yes, Kit came to our attention thanks to the attack on him by Nox,” Connie said. That was all he planned to tell her because that was all she needed to know.

“I see.” Wendy stared at Connie a few more seconds. “And you thought to come meet me because he sometimes frequents my shop?”

“And because he wears jewelry that is made from here,” Sheila said.

“Ah, I see. I do find it kind of insulting that you think I would sell handmade jewelry with spells attached—and don’t try to tell me that wasn’t what you thought,” Wendy said.

“It was the first thing that hit our minds,” Connie admitted. “But Hudson and I both checked the necklaces Kit had on the last time he was around us, and we didn’t pick up anything. But we did want you to know that he is under our protection and that of the daemons.”

“Warning received,” Wendy said. “As I said, though, I don’t do stuff like that. Plus, Kit is genuinely a nice person. He truly has a heart of gold. I like him.”

Connie didn’t manage to stop the growl that vibrated in his chest.

“And you do too, I see.” Wendy smirked.

Connie refused to show any further reaction, although he had a feeling Wendy had figured him out.

“But don’t worry, I only like him as a person. Nothing more,” Wendy said. “I will look out for him too.”

Sheila nodded. “Thank you. We would appreciate that.”

“Thank you. I will let our king know,” Connie added.

“You do that,” Wendy said. “Now, is there anything else?”

Sheila rubbed her hands together. “Actually, yes. I’m very interested in your handmade jewelry. Kit had on some things that were simply to die for.”

Wendy stood, grinning. “I love hearing that. Come on, and I’ll show you what I have in stock. I can also make you custom pieces.”

Satisfied with the way the conversation had turned out, Connie followed the two women out of the office. While Wendy showed Sheila what she had, Connie also browsed.

And what do you know? He found the perfect little ankle bracelet that he happily bought for Kit. He couldn’t wait to see Kit wearing it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – HUDSON



HUDSON DECIDED to take one of his luxury SUVs into San DeLain that evening. He'd made reservations at Embers for the three of them like they'd discussed.

He arrived at the bookstore in time to see Kit and Beckett finishing up giving Connie a tour. He also noticed Kit and Connie holding hands.

Kit waved when he saw Hudson. He pulled Connie over to where Hudson stood by the counter. Several of Kit's employees were smiling at them too, which Hudson took note of.

"Hey, you," Kit said, kissing Hudson on the cheek. "Are you about ready? Beckett is closing for me."

Oh yeah, several jaws dropped. Hudson almost laughed at the looks of shock on several of Kit's employees' faces.

"Yes," Hudson said. "Shall we go, then?"

Kit grabbed Hudson's hand and pulled both him and Connie out the door. "Whelp, that cat's out of the bag now. I'm going to get buried with questions when I get back on Monday."

Hudson didn't think Kit was too worried about that. He was the one, after all, who'd let that cat out of the bag. Hudson liked that Kit had made a point of claiming him and Connie in front of his people. They seemed happy for Kit too.

Connie snorted as he opened the door for Kit while Hudson got in the driver's seat. "Why do I get the feeling you can be trouble?"

"Moi?" Giggling, Kit got into the passenger seat.

Rush-hour traffic was horrible, but Hudson kept his patience as he dealt with it. Still, there was a time or two he wanted to set some asshole on fire.

They arrived at Embers, and Hudson used valet parking. The restaurant was already pretty busy as the three of them followed the hostess to their table.

Kage and Austin often ate here, especially since it was located in the building they lived in, but they probably wouldn't be there until much later. Hudson walked with Kit beside him, his hand on the small of Kit's back. When they got to the table, though, Connie pulled out Kit's chair.

The paranormals in the restaurant tracked the three of them.

Hudson was aware that, before dinner was over, the fact that he and Connie had been seen with the human would spread like wildfire. It was one disadvantage of being so well known in their community.

Since Kit wanted a glass of wine, they all decided to have one. While they sipped on that, they placed their orders.

"Nice place," Kit said, glancing around.

"It's one of Austin's favorites." Connie sipped his wine. "Of course, that could be because they live right above it. Well, not right above it. Kage has the penthouse, of course. He owns the building."

"Still, it's a building right in the middle of downtown." Kit shrugged. "I like where you are, Hudson. Lots of room."

Hudson's dragon puffed up. His mate liked Hudson's territory. That made his dragon absurdly happy.

Hudson glanced around. Several paranormals caught his eye and bowed their heads slightly. Yup, the gossip mill was going to be working overtime.

Their meal came fairly quickly, and since they'd each ordered something different, they ate off each other's plates. Privately, Hudson could admit he enjoyed feeding Kit. It appealed to the primitive part of himself.

Once they finished dinner, they opted for an after-dinner drink. Several movers and shakers of San DeLain stopped by the table to speak to both him and Connie.

Hudson made sure to introduce each and every one of them to Kit. By doing so, he showed he considered Kit important.

After a quick check of the time, Hudson paid the bill and escorted his two men out to his SUV. The drive to the movie theater didn't take long.

He had been worried they would be a little overdressed, but he saw other men who were also in suits.

As they were walking toward their movie, his sensitive hearing picked up some unkind comments being made about how Kit was dressed. From the way Connie stiffened, he'd heard too. A quick glance at Kit's face showed he hadn't caught what was being said about him.

Good thing for that human.

They stopped to get popcorn and drinks, and Hudson committed the human's face to memory. Once they had their goodies, Hudson led them to the theater that was showing their movie and arranged Kit so he was sitting between him and Connie.

Laughter caught his attention, and he glanced over his shoulder. What luck. The asshole human and a group of his friends walked past them to seats closer to the screen. Hudson made note of where they were sitting.

"I've been wanting to see this movie for a while," Kit said as he munched on a handful of popcorn.

"I was surprised you wanted to see this," Connie said, sticking his hand in the popcorn tub Kit held in his lap. "I didn't know you were into superheroes."

"See? That's the thing," Kit said. "We really don't know much about each other, so how could you? But yes, I'm into shows like *Superman* and the *X-Men*. I also like to see things go bang."

Connie snickered. “Me too.”

The lights finally dimmed, and the movie started. Since Kit was holding the big tub of popcorn, there was a time or two Hudson’s hand collided with Kit’s. Each and every time he heard Kit’s quick intake of breath.

They went through the popcorn pretty quickly, and when Hudson noticed it was finished, he caught Kit’s hand and gently licked the salt off his fingers. Even in the darkened movie theater, he could see how Kit reacted to the wet heat around his fingers.

Next to Kit, Connie groaned. “What are you two doing?”

“He’s licking my fingers,” Kit whispered to Connie.

“Hey, no fair!”

Kit swirled his newly cleaned fingers around the bottom of the popcorn tub and held his hand out to Connie. Hudson leaned forward far enough to watch Connie lick Kit’s fingers too.

As much as Hudson wanted to pursue that, he reminded himself that they were in a crowded movie theater.

The scent of magnolias was suddenly strong. But even more impressive was that Connie wasn’t struggling for control. It seemed as if showing his dragon to Kit had helped matters.

He held Kit’s hand while Connie slung his arm around the back of Kit’s chair. Kit rested his head on Connie’s shoulder.

They were about three quarters of the way through the movie when Hudson noticed the man who had made the derogatory remarks about Kit walking past.

“I’ll be right back,” Hudson whispered to Kit. “I’m going to make a quick trip to the bathroom.”

“Okay,” Kit whispered back, not taking his eyes from the screen.

Connie caught Hudson's eye and nodded.

He'd stay and Hudson would take care of the one who'd insulted their mate. Hudson stood and followed the other man to the restroom. A quick look reassured him that the place was empty.

Perfect.

Muttering a spell to keep the door jammed, and to block sounds from escaping the bathroom, Hudson strode to the urinal where the guy was finishing up pissing.

As soon as he had his jeans buttoned, Hudson grabbed a handful of his hair and dragged him away from the urinal.

"What the fuck?" the human yelled, his hands immediately scrabbling at Hudson's. "Son of a bitch—"

Hudson spun the guy and slammed him up against the wall. He held him in place by his throat. "I heard what you said about my boyfriend earlier. I didn't appreciate it."

The guy tried to pry Hudson's hands loose but was having no luck. "What the fuck are you talking about? Let me go, dammit, or I'll—"

"What? You'll do what?" Hudson lifted the guy up the wall several inches. The dumbass could still touch the floor with his tippy toes, but just barely.

The human tried to slam his elbow down to break Hudson's hold, but all he succeeded in doing was hurting himself.

Hudson laughed at him, and the human's eyes bulged.

"You don't like the way my boyfriend dresses? Or maybe you don't like the fact that I have a boyfriend?" Hudson tightened his hold on the man's neck.

The guy started to choke.

"Honestly? I don't really care what your problem is. If you don't like the way he looks, then don't look at him." Hudson leaned closer. "Or maybe I should just pluck your eyes out, since he offends you so much. Problem solved, right?"

Once more the guy tried to break Hudson's hold on him, and once more he failed. Hudson admired the bright red the man was turning.

"I could make you disappear, do you know that?" Hudson allowed his eyes to change color. "There are other things that walk this earth besides humans. I am one of them."

The guy started making gurgling sounds.

Hudson let his fangs drop and bared them at the human. "You really should be careful how you talk about people. You never know who, *or what*, is listening."

Hudson released his hold on the human, who collapsed on the nasty bathroom floor. He wasn't dead, but that was a good thing, Hudson guessed.

Getting rid of the body in the middle of a crowded movie theater would have been problematic. Nevertheless, his dragon was all for roasting the guy.

"I'm going to go watch the rest of the movie with my boyfriends. Yes, I have more than one. And the other one is just like me. I suggest you call it a night and get the hell out of here," Hudson said.

He petted the top of the man's head, canceled the spell, and walked out of the bathroom. He wasn't particularly worried that the guy would go run off at the mouth since he reeked of whiskey.

But if he did? Hudson would take care of it.

Satisfied that he'd made his point, he returned to his seat and watched the end of the movie. Over Kit's head, he nodded to Connie.

Connie grinned.

KIT WAS talking a mile a minute as they walked out to the SUV. Going by how excited he was, Hudson assumed he'd really enjoyed the movie. But when they got inside the vehicle and pulled out of the parking lot, Kit got quiet.

“Everything okay?” Connie asked. Since Hudson had driven there, it was now Connie’s turn.

“Everything’s fine. I’m just dreading this appointment,” Kit said, tapping his fingernail against one of his rings.

“That’s understandable,” Connie said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if this appointment isn’t just a sort of meet and greet with Frederick. He knows you’re nervous.”

“Really? Do you think so?” Kit asked. “Wait. How does he know that?”

Hudson spoke up from the back seat. “I’m sure Connie explained your reservations and where they come from.”

“Oh. Well damn, I hope I didn’t offend him,” Kit said, biting his lower lip.

“I seriously doubt that you did,” Connie said, checking traffic as he changed lanes. “Besides, he knows what Nox was capable of. Don’t forget, Austin is a patient of his too.”

“But if it makes you feel more secure, we can ask if Connie and I can sit in on the first session or two,” Hudson said. “At least that would give you a chance to spend some time around Frederick while also having someone with you.”

“Something else I want to mention,” Connie said. “I understand why Frederick freaks you out. But you have to know that he wouldn’t hurt you. Believe me when I tell you, he does *not* want to become the enemy of the Fire Court.”

“Let me put it to you like this,” Hudson said. “Fire isn’t supposed to kill a vampire, but dragon fire is something completely different. It burns hotter than any natural flame on this planet.”

“That’s true,” Connie said.

“Not that I think Frederick would ever do anything to you, but if he did? I’ll burn him until there’s nothing left.”

Turning around, Kit gaped at Hudson.

“You need to understand, Kit, that you’re dating two dragons now. We’re possessive. Overprotective. And after having dinner tonight at Embers, the word is already getting out that you were with us,” Hudson said.

“Oh yeah,” Connie said, nodding his head. “Give it a few days, and it’ll be all over the paranormal community.”

“You’re ours,” Hudson said, staring at Kit. “And we take *very* good care of what’s ours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – CONNIE



CONNIE GLANCED at Kit even though he was driving. Thanks to the lights from oncoming vehicles, he saw the blush that crossed Kit's face at Hudson's words.

Good.

Maybe Kit was finally getting it. Anyone who messed with Kit would be dealing with two pissed-off dragons. Just like that human Hudson had followed to the restroom, for example.

Connie had heard the insults the human made about Kit's clothing choices. If Hudson hadn't taken care of it, Connie would've. The male was lucky Kit *hadn't* heard what had been said.

Maybe later, when it was just them in bed, Hudson would tell him what went down in that bathroom. He loved when Hudson got all growly and snarly.

The rest of the drive was pretty quiet. Connie figured Kit was mentally preparing himself for what was coming up. Kit was still quiet as they parked and took the elevator to Frederick's office.

Probably before Kit was ready, the three of them were sitting in a well-appointed office. They sat on a small couch, and there was a comfortable-looking chair next to it.

Kit stood when Dr. Frederick entered the room. Hudson and Connie instantly flanked Kit. It was pretty obvious to Connie they were protecting the human. It would be to any paranormal.

Connie wondered how Frederick would react when he saw the three of them together and if the good doctor would bring it up. He doubted it.

Frederick immediately went to Kit. Dr. King was a good-looking Black man with short black hair, dark brown eyes, and a well-groomed beard. His dark-gray suit fit him perfectly.

From what Connie had heard, Frederick had fought for civil rights in the 60s, and he'd marched with some very prominent figures from that time. He'd been beaten and gassed by police, and the story was that men in white robes had tried to murder Frederick.

Raven had shown up and slaughtered everybody there, then saved Frederick's life by turning him. Connie eyed the scar Frederick still had around his throat from the rope used to hang him.

Hudson had told Connie once that whatever marks were on the body stayed after a turning. And humans had the nerve to call paranormals monsters.

Kit held out his hand, and Frederick shook it. "Hello Kit, I'm Dr. Frederick King. It's nice to meet you."

"Hello, Dr. King. Nice to meet you too," Kit said, his voice trembling a bit. Connie wanted to wrap Kit up in a big hug. He was so proud that Kit was facing his fears to get the help he needed, even if it did scare him.

"Kit? Please, feel free to call me Frederick." Frederick released Kit's hand and faced Hudson and Connie. "Your Majesty." Frederick bowed his head slightly to Hudson. "Sir Conrad. It's good to see you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Connie saw Kit jerk. The titles more than likely surprised Kit, which Connie understood. Although Hudson reeked of the power of an Ancient, he didn't put on airs, nor did he demand to be treated as a royal.

"Please have a seat, everyone," Frederick said, sitting down in the chair.

"Okay, thank you." Kit sat, as did Hudson and Connie.

Hudson immediately placed his hand on Kit's knee. Connie rested his arm on the back of the couch right behind

Kit's head. Frederick didn't say anything, just raised an eyebrow. Yup, message sent and received.

"I, ah, would like for both of them to stay for the first session or two, if that's okay?" Kit asked.

"If it makes you feel more comfortable with me, I am more than okay with that," Frederick replied. "I understand you're uneasy around me because I'm a vampire."

Kit cringed, hiding his face behind his hands. "Aw, man."

"No, no, don't do that. Seriously. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I completely understand that it's not personal."

Kit peeked between his fingers. "So, you know what happened to me?"

"I'd like to hear it from you in your own words when you're ready," Frederick said. "I'm fully aware of what Nox was capable of."

Kit shuddered.

"But we're not getting into that today," Frederick hastened to add. "Instead, why don't we just talk? Why don't you tell me a little about yourself, then I'll tell you a little about me. How does that sound?"

"That sounds nice," Kit said, relaxing into the couch.

CONNIE WAS surprised at how fast the hour passed. Frederick, true to his word, talked about some of his hobbies, movies he liked—which brought up the movie they'd just seen—and how he liked to play tennis, though he was awful at it.

Connie was relieved to see that Kit had even laughed a time or two as they'd talked.

They wrapped up the session, said goodbye, and Hudson and Connie walked Kit back to the SUV. Overall, Connie thought Kit's first session had gone really well.

Hopefully, Kit would be comfortable enough with Frederick to see him on his own soon. But Connie would happily sit in the doctor's office for as long as Kit needed him to. So would Hudson.

The drive home was uneventful, fortunately. This time Hudson drove, and Connie sat in the back seat. Neither one of them was expecting trouble, but Connie still breathed a sigh of relief once they were parked in front of Hudson's house.

It was hard to forget that hunters had attacked them on their territory once before. There was no reason to think it couldn't happen again, especially now that they knew Lennox was out there somewhere, lurking.

Since Kit was already yawning, neither of them brought up spending more time together and instead walked Kit to his room. Connie was sure Kit was exhausted. It had been a long day for him, both mentally and physically.

When they got to Kit's room, Connie pulled Kit into his arms. Hudson immediately moved in behind Kit, the two of them caging their mate in their arms.

Kit wasn't passive by any stretch of the imagination. He wrapped his arms around Connie's waist and leaned in. With his heels, he was as tall as Hudson and Connie.

Hudson nibbled on Kit's neck while Connie and Kit kissed. Resting his hands on Kit's hips, Connie blew softly in his ear. Kit moaned softly, and Connie rumbled in response.

Kit broke the kiss off and leaned his head against Hudson's shoulder. Reaching back, Kit tangled his hand in Hudson's hair, then started moving his ass against his dick.

Connie's eyes nearly crossed as he watched Kit move his hips like he was dancing. He licked a wet stripe up Kit's throat.

"Aw god, aw god," Kit groaned. "Wait. Wait just a second."

Connie and Hudson both froze.

“You’re both always so focused on me, but I want to see the two of you kiss.”

Connie moaned softly against Kit’s ear. “Shit.”

He shuddered as Hudson leaned past Kit, pressing Kit hard against him. The three of them were so close together he could feel every panting breath Kit took.

Hudson began to grind against Kit. “Careful with the claws, sweetheart.”

It was a good thing Hudson said something because Connie had forgotten he was holding Kit’s hips. Last thing he wanted to do was sink his claws into Kit and scare him.

“Your eyes,” Kit whispered.

Hudson’s eyes were the color of his dragon. Connie’s sight had sharpened, so his had changed too.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Hudson said quietly.

“Oh, I know. Now kiss him for me,” Kit demanded.

Connie barely had the chance to chuckle before Hudson plastered his mouth against Connie’s. There was no softness to the kiss. No, just as it always was between them, there was a driving need and a wildness to it. Hudson dominated the kiss, demanding Connie submit, which he gladly did.

The heat of Hudson’s mouth, and the hardness of Kit’s cock plastered against his, made tingles race down his spine as he thrust against Kit while Hudson tried to devour him.

Hudson was grinding into Kit, which pushed Kit into Connie. Kit moaned shamelessly, driving Connie’s raging desire even higher. Eyes closed, Connie gave himself over to the demand of Hudson’s mouth and the softness of Kit’s body.

Holy shit, he was going to come in his pants. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. Pleasure swirled through his mind and body. Then Hudson bit gently down on Connie’s bottom lip, drawing a drop of blood. Sparks raced through Connie, coalescing into an explosion inside him as he came untouched.

A few seconds later, Hudson growled against Connie's mouth and came too. The scent of their come mixed together in the air, making Connie's dick jerk again in his pants.

"Mother of all, mother of all, I'm going to—" Kit gasped as he came.

The sudden urge to bite Kit slapped Connie in the face, but he ruthlessly pushed it back. Kit was nowhere near ready for that, and they weren't either, honestly.

They'd just talked Kit into dating them. Kit didn't know he was their mate yet, and this was *not* the time to tell him. Connie had to remind himself of that.

"I haven't done that since I was a teenager. Good grief, I'd forgotten how messy it is." Kit laughed breathlessly. "Please tell me I wasn't the only one to come in my pants."

Connie snorted. "Not by a long shot."

"It was still hot though," Hudson added. "But yes, I think we all need a shower now."

Kit let go of Connie and Hudson as he moved out from between them. "I should sleep really well tonight." Kit winked and then gave them each a kiss on the cheek.

Hudson opened Kit's door for him.

"Since it's Saturday tomorrow, I'm not getting up at the ass crack of dawn. Is it okay for me to text one of you once I get up?" Kit asked.

"That's fine," Hudson said. "By all means, sleep in. We'll see you in the morning. Good night."

"Sleep tight. Oh, wait. I forgot..." Connie reached into his pocket and brought out a small white box. He handed it to Kit.

"Ah, okay, what is this?" Kit held the box up, staring at it.

"Just something I picked up," Connie said. "I saw it and thought of you."

“You got me something?” A smile crossed Kit’s face. “Jeez, Connie, that’s so nice. You didn’t have to do that though.”

“I know, but I wanted to,” Connie said.

Kit took the top off the box. “Oh, that’s lovely. And yeah, I recognize the craftsmanship. You got it at that shop right down from me, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.”

Kit tilted his head as he glanced at Connie. “And should I ask what you were doing there?”

“Nothing bad,” Connie hastened to reassure Kit. “I was just letting the owner know you’re under the protection of the dragons and daemons. That’s all.”

“Good Lord. That’s all, huh? So am I banned now?”

“Of course not. Having you as a customer is a feather in her cap,” Connie said.

“I’ve never been a feather in someone’s cap.” Kit admired the anklet. “I love ankle bracelets. It’s beautiful.” Kit kissed Connie’s cheek. “Thank you so much. I’m going to enjoy wearing it.”

“I’m going to enjoy seeing you wear it.” Connie winked as he backed up so Kit could close his door. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hudson and Connie waited until Kit closed the door before walking away.

“He looks good in jewelry,” Hudson said.

“I can’t wait to see him draped in some of the things from your hoard,” Connie said as he tried not to waddle to Hudson’s bedroom. Oh yeah, now he remembered why he hated coming in his pants. Yuck and gross. Next time, they needed to be on a damn bed.

Hudson grinned at him as they walked. The ass. Connie rolled his eyes at Hudson. Like Hudson didn’t have come sticking to him too in uncomfortable places.

He and Hudson took a quick shower, and Connie was already sitting in bed, scrolling through social media, when his phone started buzzing. He answered it just as Hudson sat down next to him.

“Hey, Beckett,” Connie said. “What’s up?”

“Are you guys in for the evening?” Beckett asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Is it just you and Hudson?”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“Remember asking me about human mates?”

Hudson raised an eyebrow at Connie as he put some pillows behind his head and leaned back against them.

“Yes.” Connie shrugged at Hudson.

“Well, I found some scrolls in my hoard, and I went through them,” Beckett said. “There aren’t too many instances of dragons mating with humans, but there *are* some.”

“So it has happened before,” Hudson said, listening in on the conversation.

“Yes, it has,” Beckett said. “Much like the daemon, humans take our blood to extend their lifespan. As long as he’s taking your or Connie’s blood, he will live indefinitely. We already knew this, of course.”

“Right. And Kage said Austin inherited many of the traits of a paranormal, like our eyesight, hearing, and accelerated healing,” Hudson said.

“That’s true, yes. As you know, we can’t change humans like shifters can, but our blood gives them properties they wouldn’t otherwise have,” Beckett said. “It’s very similar to what the hunters have done with some humans.”

Hudson cringed. “But what *we* do is voluntary.”

“Some humans volunteered,” Connie said. “Although we know many did not.”

Hudson scowled at Connie. “I don’t like comparing the two.”

“I understand that. I’m just saying.” Connie shrugged.

“Guys? Kit will be harder to kill, have better eyesight, excellent hearing, and an extended lifespan, but he won’t be suddenly shifting into a dragon or breathing fire,” Beckett pointed out.

“We know that,” Hudson said, crossing his ankles.

“But I bet you didn’t know there are stories handed down through our history that say a red dragon’s soul bound mate, a mate who is *not* dragon-born, can survive our dragon fire.”

CHAPTER THIRTY – CONNIE



CONNIE'S MOUTH fell open. "What? *What?* Are you kidding me?"

"Okay, just a second. A dragon who *is from the Fire Court* can survive a red dragon's fire. Any other dragon from any other court will eventually succumb," Hudson said slowly. "But you're saying a human mate can do the same, Beckett?"

"According to what I found, yes."

"I don't care," Connie snapped. "I don't care if there are stories handed down about bonded mates who aren't dragon-born surviving our dragon fire. There's only one way to find out, *and we're not doing that.*"

"Settle down. Of course I'm not suggesting that," Hudson replied calmly. "But it is interesting."

"Dangerous. It's dangerous, and we're going to forget Beckett brought it up," Connie growled.

"Speaking of Kit, Monday night is the meeting with the paranormal leaders of San DeLain. Are you planning on taking your mate with you?" Beckett asked.

Connie groaned loudly. "Shit. Remember how everybody acted when Kage showed up with Austin?"

"I don't think that'll happen again," Hudson replied. "It was the first time a human had ever attended something like that. Kage made his feelings quite clear when certain paranormals reacted negatively to Austin too."

"Fucking Raven," Connie said.

"Indeed, the Master of the City was on thin ice with Kage that night," Hudson said.

“He wasn’t the only one,” Connie said.

“True. But no, I don’t think we’ll be taking Kit with us. That’ll cause questions neither of us are ready to answer because Kit doesn’t know he’s our mate. And because he doesn’t know, that would render us incapable of explaining his presence at a meeting he shouldn’t be at,” Hudson said.

“So we’re leaving him here?” Connie asked.

“It’s probably the safest place for him,” Hudson said. “Or maybe we could ask if Austin is attending the meeting. And if he isn’t, maybe Kit would like to visit with Austin.”

“Here?”

“Well, that’s the issue. Of course we want Kit here in our territory,” Hudson said.

“And Kage is going to want Austin in *his* territory,” Beckett finished. “And since we would be the ones asking if Kit could visit with Austin, we would be the ones asking for the favor.”

“Meaning Kit would be in Kage’s territory and not ours,” Hudson said. “Kit really doesn’t know anybody outside of my inner circle. At least if he was with Austin, he’d have somebody he knows to talk to.”

“I don’t like it,” Connie argued.

“Here’s an idea,” Beckett said. “Why don’t you check with Kage and see what he plans to do concerning Austin? Then tell Kit you have a meeting with the other leaders and *ask* Kit what he’d rather do.”

“You mean instead of making the decision for him,” Hudson said.

Connie wrinkled his nose.

“Yeah, I agree,” Hudson said, noticing Connie’s reaction. “But that might be the best thing to ensure a happy mate. I’ll talk to Kage tomorrow. Thank you, Beckett. We appreciate you taking the time to find that information for us.”

“Glad I could help. And if Kit wants to stay home that night? I’ll be happy to hang out with him.”

Connie liked how Beckett phrased that. He wanted Kit to think of this as his home eventually.

“Thank you. That would mean a lot to him, I’m sure,” Hudson said. “I’ll let you know. Good night.”

“Night.” Beckett disconnected the call.

Connie laid his cell on the end table next to him and rolled into Hudson’s arms, his head on Hudson’s chest. “It’s going to be hard not doing what we think is best for Kit.”

“Good old dragon instincts,” Hudson quipped, running his hand through Connie’s hair.

“I’ve always poked fun at you older dragons, and yet I find myself battling the same desire to stuff Kit in my hoard to protect him.”

“We’ll learn to balance our instinctual need to protect him against his need to come and go as he pleases. Once we mate him, his freedoms will be somewhat restricted, unfortunately.”

Connie sighed. Of course they would be. Kit would be the mate of a royal.

“But sticking him in one of our hoards is not the answer either,” Hudson said. “And speaking of that....”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you think it’s time for you to move into the main house?”

Connie propped himself on his elbow and stared down at Hudson. “Into the main house or into your bedroom?”

“Yes.” Hudson grinned up at Connie. “My house, my bedroom, my life. You practically live here anyway. Why not make it official?”

Connie bit his lip. “But how do you think Kit will react to that?”

“He already knows we’re in a relationship. I’m pretty sure he also knows we’re sleeping together every night.” Hudson tapped his finger on Connie’s lower lip. “And stop that. You’ll have a sore lip if you keep that up.”

“I don’t want him to feel alienated. I already worry he may feel that way, since he knows we *are* sleeping together every night.”

“Keep in mind he chose where he wanted to sleep. And anyhow, he’s going to end up in our bed sooner or later, sweetheart. Although I’m hoping for sooner. I don’t want to rush him though. He’s been intimate with us faster than I thought he’d be,” Hudson said.

“I get the feeling he had an interesting childhood. He’s mentioned before that he has a mom and two dads. Plus, he lived in a commune. I bet he has some really cool parents.”

“Speaking of parents, both of ours will eventually want to meet our mate,” Hudson said.

Connie cringed. “Aw, dragon gods.”

“Oh, come on, she’s not that bad.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Connie said. “Your mother is a force to be reckoned with.”

“That’s true. My dad is much easier to deal with,” Hudson conceded. “But back to what I mentioned earlier. I want to make it official. I want you living here. In fact, I’m going to expand the underground vault where I keep my hoard for you.”

“Say what now?”

“I’m going to enlarge it, then enclose one section for your hoard. You will have your own secured entrance. I don’t think either one of our dragons would be happy combining our hoards, so I’m going to do this. What do you think?”

That sounded like a wonderful idea to Connie. And yes, as much as he cared for Hudson, sharing a space for their hoards was out of the question. “Are you serious?”

“Of course. Why are you so surprised? I want you here with me, so of course I will do what I need to in order to make your dragon happy,” Hudson said.

Connie closed his eyes and checked in with his dragon. The beast rumbled agreeably. He also liked the fact they would be living with Hudson. Connie opened his eyes. “We like the idea.”

“Please, feel free to make any changes you want to our bedroom too,” Hudson said. “And just so you know? I like saying our bedroom.”

“Why don’t we hold off on that? Eventually, we’ll have Kit here with us. Then we can redecorate when we make things official,” Connie said. “But in the meantime, there are some small personal things I’d like to have in here. The rest of my junk I can put in storage.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“What are we going to do with my cabin?”

“Why don’t we leave the big furniture in it for the time being? Anything else of importance, you go ahead and bring here. How does that sound?”

“That works.” Connie leaned down and kissed Hudson’s lips. “We’re so close to what we want.”

“Be patient, sweetheart. We’re getting there. We have Kit in our territory and within reach. Our mate may not know it yet, but he isn’t leaving here.”

“So it isn’t just me worried Kit will want to move back to his place once everything gets straightened out,” Connie remarked.

“Kit isn’t going back to that apartment.”

“That’s your instinct talking,” Connie teased.

Hudson shrugged. “Nevertheless, he’s here, and he isn’t leaving.”

Connie dropped back down onto Hudson’s chest. “Do you think he’ll be happy with us? Do you think we can make

him happy? Mating with us is going to be a huge change.”

Hudson went back to running his hand through Connie’s hair. “Fate paired us with him for a reason. We may never know the reason, but that’s okay too. We don’t have to. All we need to worry about is making him happy.”

“Which goes back to what I just asked. *Can* we make him happy?”

“We can. We will. He belongs to us, but we also belong to him. Do I think all three of us are going to have to make adjustments? Of course. Probably in more ways than one too. But Kit is our soul bonded mate, and I don’t believe Fate makes mistakes.”

“It terrifies me Lennox is targeting Kit,” Connie said.

“Me too,” Hudson admitted. “Especially since it makes no sense for him to be doing that. But we’ll deal with him just like we dealt with his brother.”

Connie snuggled closer to Hudson. The threat in Hudson’s voice was unmistakable—he would do whatever he needed to in order to protect their mate.

As would Connie, but an Ancient dragon with royal blood was a threat not to be overlooked. Very few understood Hudson had the power to wreak havoc and destruction if he so chose.

Messing with his mate would be a good way to see just what Hudson was capable of. And red dragons were the most aggressive out of all the dragons.

“Sweetheart, go to sleep and stop worrying about things you can’t change,” Hudson said. “Best we can do is take this one day at a time and deal with threats as they arise.”

Connie released a soft breath and then tried to do what Hudson said—shove everything out of his head and go to sleep. His lover was right about one thing, though.

They would indeed deal with any threats that arose because their mate was all that mattered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – KIT



KIT TOOK a shower, dried off, and changed into a cute red camisole and shorts night set. Grabbing his Kindle, he settled into bed. He was looking forward to tomorrow. It'd been a while since he'd either hung out at a pool or gone to one of the lakes around San DeLain.

Or hell, even gone to the beach.

He hadn't realized how much he'd stepped back from life until that very moment. It hadn't been intentional, but Don had never wanted to go anywhere or do anything.

When his ex had gone out, he hadn't wanted Kit with him. Of course, now Kit knew why. Don had been involved with the hunters who were targeting the paranormal community in their city.

Now Kit was dating two of those aforementioned paranormals.

Wasn't that a trip? Not only was he dating two of them, his therapist was a vampire, and a friend of his was... something. Kit wasn't sure exactly what Austin was now that he was with Kage, but he was not human anymore.

I'm dating two paranormals. Kit played those words over in his mind again—he was dating two paranormals. Two dragons, actually. Dragons. Holy shit, he still couldn't believe it, even though he'd seen Connie in his true form.

Kit wasn't even going to address the fact that Connie didn't consider his *human* form his true form. He couldn't wrap his head around that. Wasn't it odd, though? Kit had been obsessed with dragons as far back as he could remember.

A memory surfaced. As a small kid, he'd had this huge toy castle that came with a bunch of figures... and a big pink

dragon. It was sheer luck the toy dragon was pink, but Kit had loved that thing dearly. He'd bathed with it and even slept with the thing.

One of the legs had broken off eventually, and Kit had cried hysterically until his mom found another castle set just so Kit could replace that pink dragon.

Yeah.

He'd grown up watching cartoons and reading books about dragons. It had come as no great surprise that the toy dragons he'd played with were never interested in the princesses.

Oh no, they'd wanted the prince. And Kit was always the prince!

Now he was grown, and the dragons he was playing with were real fire-breathing creatures of enormous size who treated him like the prince he'd always wanted to be.

Kit gave up trying to read on his Kindle. There was too much in his head. Hudson and Connie were truly interested in him, and that still surprised him. It wasn't that Kit didn't know his own worth. He did. He was self-confident and comfortable with his sexuality.

But he was human. There was no getting around that. Okay, apparently there *was* a way to get around that if Austin was to be believed. Still, Connie and Hudson were dragons.

Hell, Hudson was a damn royal.

Both of them could have anybody they wanted, and probably had before Kit came along. Kit was okay with that. He'd done his fair share of playing the field too.

But from the first moment he'd heard Hudson's voice on the phone, something had tugged at his heartstrings. Same thing with Connie. There was something there.

Kit didn't know exactly what it was, but he had never responded like that to anyone before. He was drawn to them and had been from the first moment he'd met them.

They were scary, but he wasn't scared of them. That distinction was worth mentioning, especially considering what he'd gone through recently.

He trusted them, even though there was absolutely no reason for him to. He didn't know them. Not really. Yet here he was, in the middle of nowhere, living under Hudson's roof with a bunch of other dragons.

And why had he done that? Because his heart told him he could trust Hudson and Connie. Yep, that feeling certainly hadn't been based on facts.

"So here I am," Kit whispered to the empty guest room he was staying in.

He had no regrets and would not change anything he'd done. Something told him this was where he was supposed to be, and he'd trusted that voice more than once in his life.

Kit blew out a breath. He liked Connie, and he liked Hudson. Actually, what he felt was more than 'like.' It wasn't love. Not yet. But he felt easy with them.

Content.

The chemistry between the three of them was certainly sizzling. Nobody got bent out of shape when Kit got a little bossy while they fooled around either.

A lot of men Kit had dated in the past automatically assumed Kit was strictly a bottom because of how he looked and how he dressed. Yeah, no. That wasn't the case. He wasn't sure about Hudson, but Connie seemed open to being topped.

Which brought him to the next point in their favor. They accepted every aspect of Kit's personality. Neither one of them got freaked out because Kit liked to wear skirts, or heels, or jewelry.

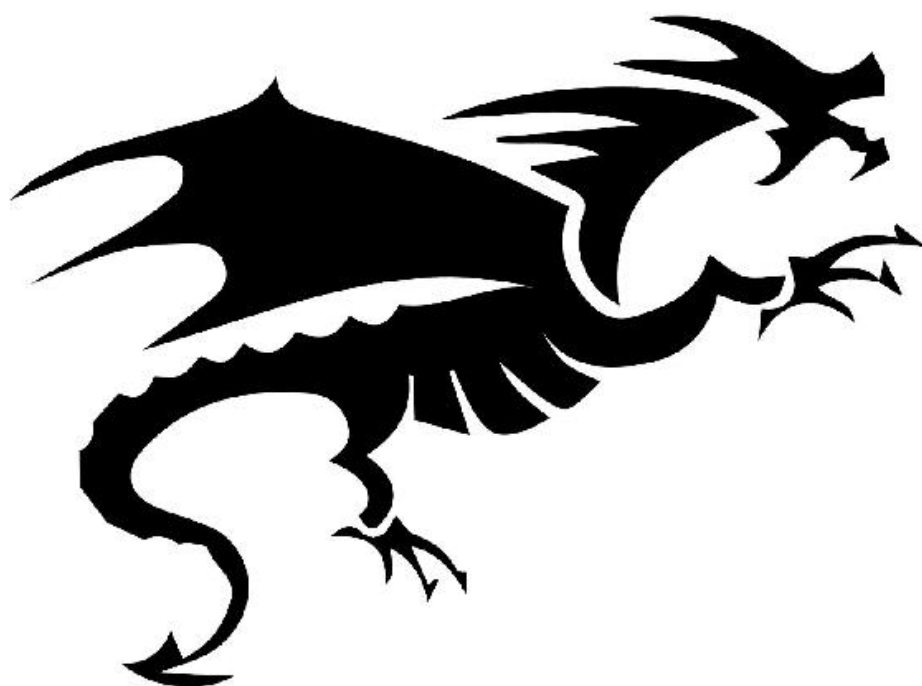
They got bonus points for not losing their shit over the lacy things he liked to wear too. Kit knew firsthand how important that was. And he accepted them for who they were—fire-breathing dragons who could turn into humans.

Kit reached over and turned off the lamp next to his bed. He didn't know where this thing between them was going, but he was fully invested in it. It felt right in a way that no other relationship had before.

He was happy, even though he felt like there was a darkness edging ever closer to him. Good thing he knew a couple of dragons who'd be thrilled to light his way.+-.+

For now, Kit, Hudson, and Connie have a HFN ending. But their story will continue in Walking in Darkness, #2 in the Dragons of San DeLain series, which will hopefully be out sometime in January 2024. By book #3, they will have their HEA.

~M



Books by M.A. Church

Daemons of San DeLain

Chasing Shadows

Shadow's Embrace

Of Love and Shadows

Dragons of San DeLain

Edge of Darkness

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Destiny: A Prequel to Bound by Destiny

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M.A. Church is a true Southern belle who spent many years in the elementary education sector. Now she spends her days lost in fantasy worlds, arguing with hardheaded aliens on far-off planets, herding her numerous shifters, or trying to tempt her country boys away from their fishing poles. It's a full-time job, but hey, someone's gotta do it!

When not writing, she's exploring the latest M/M novel to hit the market, watching her beloved Steelers, or watching HGTV. That's if she's not on the back porch tending to the demanding wildlife around the pond in the backyard. The ducks are very outspoken. She's married to her high school sweetheart, and they have two grown children.

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