



DRAGONS
OF ARDAÏNE

3

ROE HORVAT

FREEFALL

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DRAGONS OF ARDAINE BOOK 3

ROE HORVAT

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Freefall

First edition

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When his parents try to coerce him into marriage with an obnoxious snob of an alpha, Ansel finds refuge in his granddad's off-grid cabin where he can gather the courage to make some tough decisions. After a night's unusually thunderous storm, Ansel ventures out to investigate the damage, and finds...a dragon. An actual live, winged dragon that crashed into the forest. Ansel fully expects to become the beast's breakfast—instead, the creature politely greets him before transforming into a naked man and inviting himself over for tea.

At almost forty, Pascal would like to think he's not reckless anymore. When he goes flying without checking the weather first, and crashes during a storm, dislocates a shoulder, sprains a wing, *and* lets a human see him in dragon form, he realizes he's made a colossal mess. To top it off, his dragon-side decides that the little omega must be his mate. A nineteen-year-old sophomore! Pure luck that Ansel doesn't study at the college where Pascal teaches, or he wouldn't be allowed to even look at him.

A young dragon mate before his first heat is a fragile being, and Pascal needs to tread carefully. Overbearing parents and an evil ex are going to be the least of his problems.

Freefall is the third book in the *Dragons of Ardaine* series. The slow-burn age-gap romance features a protective dragon shifter, his sweet young mate, and a satisfying HEA.

CONTENT WARNINGS

This paranormal erotic romance features a relationship between a dragon shifter alpha and a human omega. The story contains half-shifted sexual interactions and male pregnancy. The relationship between the main characters is loving and monogamous.

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I

THE IDEAL ALPHA MALE

Ansel

VALENTIN LYON WAS AN EXCEPTIONALLY attractive man. If he weren't stinking rich already, he could be making a fortune as a model. Tousled black hair, bright blue eyes, summer tan all year round, chiseled jaw covered with dark stubble, tall, muscled body, wide shoulders, and impeccable style. He had an Ivy League degree in business, played polo—yes, the kind with horses—and my parents adored him.

What was more, Valentin Lyon wanted me.

He smiled at me over the table, elegantly tilting his glass against mine. My father, who sat to Valentin's right, nodded at me in encouragement. I mimicked Valentin's gesture, and we drank the champagne, holding each other's gazes. The air seemed to shimmer around us, and I got a little dizzy.

My father was convinced Valentin would soon pop the question. Maybe even tonight. I'd be engaged at nineteen, before my first heat, to the most desirable alpha in Ardaine.

I sincerely hoped I'd get more time to make up my mind because I knew I *should* want Valentin. But did I really?

When the dinner was over and the small crowd mingled in my parents' opulent living room, Valentin followed me like a shadow.

"I admire your father greatly, Ansel," he said in his polished, melodic voice.

"Mhmm."

“He is ruthless in business but a devoted family man at home.”

I smiled up at him. It was true.

“I hope I can one day live up to his example.”

With no idea what to say to him, I took another sip of my father’s finest champagne. The string quintet began a classic tune I’d heard a hundred times at these parties, and I sweated under my too tight suit. Valentin had always been flawlessly gallant and polite toward me, and I never knew what to say in response. It bothered me.

I wondered if I even knew him. Sure, he’d been around forever, and we’d talked for hours, but never about anything of substance.

“I see that the family portraits have been restored,” he said, glancing at the paintings lining the walls. “Your papa mentioned the restoration cost a fortune, but I must say, it was worth it. This house has witnessed prosperity and grace for generations, and the noble faces of your ancestors are the proof.”

“My family never belonged to the nobility,” I corrected him. “They earned their fortune through the Atlantic slave trade in the late seventeen hundreds.”

But Valentin already knew that, and it didn’t seem to dampen his enthusiasm in the least. His carefree smile only widened. “History is strange, isn’t it?” He paused in front of one of the oldest paintings in a gaudy carved frame. “Who is this gentleman?”

“Um. Yes. That’s Yves Perrault, my great-great-grandfather.”

“Ah. He was a senator, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. And that’s Alain Perrault, his oldest son and my great-grandfather.”

Valentin hummed appreciatively. “The famous judge.”

“More like notorious.” Was Valentin even listening to what I was saying? “He opposed the rise of the omega rights

movement in the nineteen thirties.”

“Judge Alain Perrault received the presidential medal,” my father said from behind me, and I straightened my spine. I hadn’t known he was standing so close.

“And, of course, your grandfather Augustus.” Valentin smirked at the next painting. It stuck out from the others, which was why my father had wanted to take it down, but my papa never let him, saying it added flair to the living room—whatever that meant. My granddad’s portrait had been done by a friend of his. Rather than aspiring to the most exact likeness, it captured my granddad’s personality with clashing colors, bold brush strokes, and dreamlike shapes swirling in the background. Boisterous, quirky, and full of joy. The others could have been eaten by mice in our cellar for all I cared, but I loved *this* painting.

“My pater was the only black sheep in the family,” Father said.

“I liked Granddad.” I bit my tongue. I sounded childish, dammit.

Valentin smiled benevolently at me. “You have to admit, he was a little outlandish.”

“Outlandish,” my father echoed derisively. “He used to take Ansel on weekends to his cabin in the mountains and fill his head with stories about fairies and goblins. We once spent an entire evening explaining to Ansel that dragons didn’t exist. Remember, Ansel? You were about eight years old, and you argued like a little lawyer.”

I smiled at the memories. “Granddad said dragons went flying to Cross River and that just after sundown, you could watch them circle above the mountains.” Granddad had told the most amazing stories. He would wink at me conspiratorially as if he were letting me in on a secret about a magical world nobody knew about but us. *The magic is in the soil, Ansel, right here around the cabin. That’s why the dragons come here. If you’re patient, you’ll see them.* I never did, but I would nod, sit still, and watch the stars blink to life.

Valentin frowned up at the portrait. “Didn’t he leave you the cabin, Ansel?”

“He did.” I hadn’t been up there since he died. I was afraid the memories would be too painful. At the same time, the small cabin lured me like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Maybe one of these days, I’d gather enough courage to go there again.

“The property has no value. It’s within the national park borders, and we’d have to bribe half of the city to get a permit to develop it.” Father had always dismissed my inheritance, saying the trust fund was negligible, Granddad’s old townhouse stood in a working-class neighborhood, and the cabin was dilapidated. I was glad. My father would have torn the cabin down and built a chalet for fifty guests and a spa if he had been allowed. And as for the trust fund—what was pocket change for Father, others could live off for decades. I didn’t contradict him. There was no point.

“You’re flushed, Ansel,” Valentin said. “It’s hot in here, isn’t it?”

“Valentin, why don’t you accompany Ansel to the garden?” my father suggested before I could reply. “He needs some fresh air.”

Alone with Valentin? My slight nausea wasn’t excitement—of that, I was sure.

Valentin bowed to my father pleasantly and offered me his arm. Encouraged by my father’s jovial smile, I looped my arm through Valentin’s, and he led me to the balcony and down the stairs to my papa’s rose garden. Outside, the music was muted, and he lowered his voice.

“I’d been hoping to catch a moment alone with you,” he said.

My nerves spiked, and I struggled against the urge to belch. I averted my face and pretended to clear my throat. I managed a quiet little burp that I blew out of the corner of my mouth. The champagne churned in my stomach. Lord, that was embarrassing! Hopefully, Valentin didn’t notice.

“Ansel, I talked to your father earlier today.” He sounded so important all of a sudden. After a dramatic pause, he sighed. “I know I should wait, but I’m simply too enamored.”

Enamored?

What a strange word. He wouldn’t ask me now, would he? Could I stop him before he did? I wanted to draw my arm away, but Valentin caught my hand in both of his, making me face him.

He didn’t let me speak.

“I swear, every day, you become more beautiful.” He squeezed my hand. “I need to hurry up before there’s a line of eligible alphas in front of your door, hm?”

He laughed for some reason, but I didn’t find his words funny. The thought of men lining up to court me bewildered me.

Lowering his voice to a seductive purr, he said, “I will marry you and claim you, Ansel, before your first heat.”

And he lifted my hand to his lips, kissing my wrist.

I jerked my hand away. I’d been wondering when this would happen, and it had seemed exciting in my head. But now Valentin was here, asking the million-dollar question, and all I felt was disappointment and fear.

“Can I kiss you, darling?”

He didn’t wait for my answer. He hadn’t even asked me if I wanted to marry him, had he? He’d just barreled forward. Exactly like my father.

His sickly sweet cologne wafted over my face, and his thin lips nipped at mine. Then he grabbed me, crushing me to his body, and I felt his sizeable erection digging into my belly. His tongue invaded my mouth.

I tried to push him away, but it was like he didn’t feel me struggling. He licked into my mouth, thrust against my stomach, and I wanted to run. He tasted like wet cardboard. I was going to throw up. I whimpered, which of course Valentin

took as encouragement. He grabbed my ass cheek and squeezed, rubbing against me.

Not knowing what else to do, I stepped on his foot. Hard.

Finally, he tore away.

“Wha—”

“I think I saw my father on the balcony behind you,” I blurted, breathless.

Valentin spun around, looking up at the facade. “Where?”

“He...there? Um. It was just a shadow.” I laughed awkwardly. “Sorry. I’m...nervous.”

Valentin smiled at me sweetly, cupping my cheek.

“You’re so innocent, darling. You make me burn. I want to claim you in front of everyone and then whisk you away to somewhere we can be alone.”

This was getting really, *really* bad. “I...”

“Shh. I understand. Shall we go back? I can’t wait to announce the news.”

What news? He didn’t even ask me!

“Valentin, wait.”

“Yes, darling?”

He frowned as I struggled to find words. I couldn’t tell him no outright, could I? What if he made a scene in front of everyone? But the thought of him announcing our engagement at the party *right now* filled me with sheer terror.

“I need time.”

Valentin’s pretty face contorted into a haughty sneer. A familiar one. I must have suppressed the memory, but I’d seen this expression on his face before. Years ago. I’d been a gangly preteen, and Valentin must have been around twenty. Why had he sneered at me like that? I couldn’t remember the reason, but I did remember the face.

“You need time?” he repeated.

“I’m just... I’ve never been with anyone, and this is a little sudden.”

“I’ve been courting you for months, Ansel,” he said, his voice cold. “You must have known my intentions.”

“I’m inexperienced. I truly had no idea.” Okay, that was a lie. I *was* inexperienced, but I knew what he was after. My entire family had expected and encouraged it since I’d turned seventeen. It had been Valentin this and Valentin that, like we were already engaged.

He scoffed. “Luckily, I find your naivete charming. I’ve already told your father I was going to approach you tonight. He welcomed it. I’m giving you a week, Ansel. And you will explain this to your father yourself. I’ve had enough humiliation for one evening.”

With that, he spun around and strode away.

Oops.

That hadn’t been ideal.

MY FATHER WAS unimpressed to say the least. The guests were gone, and he’d ordered the staff to leave us alone for one more hour before cleaning. He paced around the living room, his tie loose and fists tight.

“So you refused him?”

“No. I just need time.”

“More time? That man has been in love with you for *two years*. He’s been waiting until you were of age so he could approach you. He’s the most desirable alpha in Ardaine, and he wants *you*. You should be over the moon! What the hell do you need time for?”

They would force me. Could I accept Valentin’s offer? But the memory of the kiss had me cringing. I couldn’t marry a man whose kiss made me want to throw up my dinner.

“We agreed on a week,” I said pleadingly. “One week, Father. Then I’ll give him an answer.”

“Unless you’re a complete fool, you *will* marry Valentin. And you’re not a fool, are you? You’re going to call the man right now, apologize, and invite him for a private family dinner tomorrow. You’ll wear what your papa chooses for you and be the sweetest little omega, with fucking hearts in your eyes!”

Father loomed above me, fuming. I’d never seen him this angry. Then again, I’d never defied my parents. Not since that one time I’d thought dragons were real. They weren’t. I’d been a fool. A naive child.

Was I making a mistake? Was Valentin the best my life had to offer?

“Bernard, there’s no need to swear at the boy,” my papa said from the sofa. “I think Ansel’s being clever. I say to keep them wanting.” He winked at me.

Father turned to Papa, and his voice softened. “What if Valentin changes his mind?”

“He won’t. As you said, he’s been circling this house like a vulture since Ansel’s seventeenth birthday. He can wait a few more days. He might be rich and attractive, but so is our Ansel.” Papa stretched out his arm from his seat and put his hand on my father’s forearm soothingly. “Valentin won’t find a better match, and he knows it.”

Quietly, I waited for my parents’ debate to unfold. Technically, my papa wasn’t on my side even though right now, his argument helped my situation. For once, I was grateful for his toxic notions about romance. It would give me time to figure out what the hell was going on in my head.

“Ansel, give me your phone, please,” Papa said.

Knowing there was no point in arguing, I did as I was told. My papa typed in the code—I wasn’t allowed to keep it secret from my parents.

“You don’t have any lectures next week, am I right?” he asked offhandedly as his fingers flew over the screen.

“No, it’s fall break. The campus is closed until next Monday.”

He hummed and typed some more. Then he handed me the device back, smiling conspiratorially.

“There. Read it out loud.”

“Dear Valentin, I’m sorry for my overreaction earlier,” I read. “I’ve been so anxious, I barely know what was said. My parents are sending me on a short trip to rest my nerves, but I’ll be back in the city in a week. Please, visit me on Friday at seven. Yours, Ansel.”

I glowered at the message. It read disgustingly coy. But, of course, my papa had already sent it.

“It doesn’t sound like me at all.”

My papa cackled. “Ah, you’re so sweet, Ansel. He’ll never guess, don’t worry. Alphas don’t get these nuances. Besides, he already knows you suffer from anxiety attacks sometimes. To him, it might even be a part of your allure.”

My stomach was starting to ache. It happened when I was most frustrated. “Since when is anxiety attractive?”

“Weakness can be your greatest strength, my dear boy. You just have to use it right.”

“Pray it works,” my father said darkly. He refilled my papa’s glass and poured himself a large whiskey.

The phone beeped in my hands.

“What does he say?” Papa asked.

I blew out a breath and opened the text. I recited it robotically. “I understand, darling, and hope you feel better soon. I’ll be thinking of our first kiss, V.”

The reminder of the so-called kiss made me cringe. I should have told the man no right away. I was such a coward.

Clapping theatrically, Papa stood and headed for the bar. “Like I said. Keep them wanting.”

Father sent me one last withering look. “You must go on that trip now.”

“Can I go to Granddad’s cabin?”

“Out of the question. Nobody’s been there in two years. It’s falling apart. I’m booking you a hotel down in Juliane Beach. It has excellent security, and the entire resort is protected from paparazzi. Howard will come with you. You can’t stay in the city and be caught lying to your future husband.”

My future husband.

“Thank you, Father,” I mumbled, defeated. At least I could disappear for a week. Howard was my papa’s driver and sort of bodyguard. He was the friendliest of the staff and quiet, so while I would have loved to go alone, it could have been much worse.

I left the living room in a daze.

How did I even get to this point?

This morning, I’d been excited about the party, even about seeing Valentin.

That had been before the man’s kiss made me sick.

I didn’t want to marry him. I couldn’t. The idea of touching him again terrified me. And he’d want sex. I couldn’t even imagine *that*.

I LAY IN BED, staring at the ceiling. I’d been an exceptionally obedient and responsible child all my life, and my parents trusted me implicitly. I’d been going on solo vacations since I turned seventeen—always at secure, high-end resorts, of course, and with a personal driver. My psychologist had recommended alone time in peaceful destinations to alleviate my anxiety, so that was what I’d been doing.

But the thought of spending a week at yet another hotel had me on the verge of tears. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight.

A plan began forming in my head, hazy at first, but ever so slowly, it solidified.

Could I pull off something like that?

What about Howard?

I got up and peeked into the hallway. The house was dark and quiet, the entire household asleep, as they should be at two in the morning. Tiptoeing around, I started packing for a week in the forest.

At five, my heart pounding in my throat, I snuck into the staff wing. In the hallway behind the laundry rooms, I typed the code into the key box on the wall and seized the spare fob to the Audi.

THE NEXT DAY, I got out of the car at the Juliane Beach Blue Excellence Hotel, checked in, and let Howard carry my luggage upstairs to the royal suite. Then I told him I needed to rest because of a migraine.

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Yes, I’m sure. If I need anything, I’ll call room service. Take a day off, Howard. Walk on the beach, have a few drinks, and I’ll see you tomorrow at dinner.”

Howard smiled at me, good man, and wished me a speedy recovery.

After closing the door behind him, I waited for five minutes. I opened the largest suitcase, pulled my backpack out, and went back to the hotel’s parking lot.

I got into the Audi using the spare key, went shopping, then drove all the way to Cross River National Park. I stopped at the park border to pee and sat in the passenger seat for a while, staring at my phone.

It had two bars, but further into the mountains, there wouldn’t be any cell signal.

I typed up an email and scheduled it for tomorrow night, when Howard would realize I’d left and alert my parents. I hoped he wouldn’t get into too much trouble because of me.

Dear Papa and Father,

I couldn't relax at the resort and decided to go somewhere alone. I promise I'll be very careful and safe. I just need to think about the important decision I have to make. I'll be back in Ardaine by Friday.

I love you dearly,

Ansel

As I drove up the long, winding gravel road, my stomach, which had been in knots for days, finally loosened. I rolled the window down and breathed in the smell of damp forest soil and pine.

How I'd missed this place!

I parked on the side of the road by the turning point and trekked along the lake to the cabin. I had to return for the supplies but managed to bring everything in just before nightfall.

The cabin smelled musty, but I left the door and window open to air it out. I wiped off the dust from the few shelves with a wet cloth, shook out the mattress and the old wool blanket, and spread out my sleeping bag on top. The firewood in the shed was covered with spider webs, but it was dry. I carried three baskets inside and lined the logs along the wall. The nights weren't freezing, but if it rained, it would be nice to have a fire. Besides, since there was no electricity, I'd need to get the stove going if I wanted to cook.

Before I went to bed, I sat in front of the cabin to watch the stars like Granddad used to do. The forest hummed, dark and quiet, no human being anywhere for miles, and I felt like I could breathe again. Not even the buzz of a mosquito right by my ear could spoil my mood. How come I felt so anxious at home and in the city but never when I was alone in the forest? Maybe I didn't really belong in that life. Maybe I could do something else. Be someone else.

If I kept doing what my parents told me, I would end up trapped in an unhappy marriage for the rest of my life. I'd take a few days to pull myself together, then go home and face the music.

One thing was certain. There was no way I was going to marry Valentin Lyon.

THE PERILS OF A TEACHER CRUSH

Pascal

THE LECTURE HALL EMPTIED, the students spilling out of the room on a wave of animated chatter. There was bound to be a number of parties on campus tonight before everyone left for the fall break. Cowering behind my laptop screen, I tried to tune the buzz out as I answered the last few emails for the day.

“Professor Pembroke!” One voice cut above the noise.

I lifted my head from my laptop. “Yes?” A slim omega was making his way to me through the throng of students trying to exit. I remembered him. Jason Jacobson. Or was it James? No, Jason.

“Professor Pembroke, sir, do you have a minute?”

“Of course, Jason. What can I do for you?”

His face brightened, meaning I’d got the name right. “Thank you, sir.” He batted his eyelashes and cocked his hip, and I suppressed a groan.

It was one of those “have-a-minutes.” Did they have any idea how awkward their flirting was for me? I was their teacher, dammit. I took my polite smile down a notch and waited for Jason to get it out.

“I was wondering which elective courses you’ll be teaching next semester. I really like your method. I feel like your way of explaining made me truly understand how everything comes together, you know? You’ve made such a difference for all of us since you started here.”

Eyes shining, cheeks glowing, young Jason let his gaze drop to my chest and shoulders before meeting my eyes again. He was shameless.

“All elective courses offered are well described in the registration system,” I said, barely hiding my annoyance.

“Oh, I know. But is there something you personally recommend for me to pursue? I’d really like your view on it.”

“As a senior, you must already be aware of your strengths and interests, Jason. If you’re unsure, contact your study counselor immediately. The deadlines for registration are right after fall break.”

“Thank you, sir.” And there it was, the inevitable bitchy undertone.

“You’re welcome, Jason. Anything else?”

“No, sir. Have a good weekend.”

“You too.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw him rejoin his friends at the door. By the way he lifted his chin and the others laughed, I suspected he’d rolled his eyes. Good. On campus, I needed the reputation of an iceberg. The sooner they got the message, the better.

Some of these boys were relentless, though. I’d even considered wearing a fake wedding ring, but I doubted it would help much.

Instead, I put on my grumpy-professor mask and dodged their advances the best I could. Sadly, types like Jason Jacobson took my grumpiness as a challenge.

I packed my laptop and switched off the lights. Then I cast a faraway glance at the empty lecture hall. It seemed more impressive somehow, grand and a little threatening. Flirty students notwithstanding, I liked this job.

Closing the door to the hall behind me, I almost jumped when I spotted Jason waiting for me in the empty hallway.

“What now?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It was silly of me to approach you in a room full of people.”

Holy fucking insanity. Sure, he was pretty, but did he seriously think nobody would ever tell him no?

“Jason, what do you want?”

He pushed off the wall and sauntered toward me. “Isn’t it obvious? I find you very attractive, Professor Pembroke. I’ve been trying to signal my interest, but it seems I need to be blunt. I’d like to spend time with you alone. Off campus. In your study. Wherever you prefer.”

I didn’t enjoy flipping out on my students, but Jason had given me no choice. “And I’ve been trying to signal that I’m not interested. Even if it weren’t for the university’s non-fraternization policy, which means that I would face disciplinary action, I wouldn’t be interested. You need to learn to take a hint, Jason. I’ll gladly help you out with your studies the same way I help everybody else. That’s it.”

He narrowed his eyes, his cheeks turning a deep red. “Seriously?”

“I’m dead serious. Don’t approach me about anything personal ever again. Are we clear?”

He blew out a breath through his nose and visibly deflated. “Yes. Very clear.”

“Focus on your studies, Jason. You’re an intelligent man with a bright future. It would be a shame to mess that up.”

With that, I turned away and walked out of the building as fast as I could without running.

SOME DIMWIT BEHIND the bar had turned the music up, and it was getting increasingly difficult to hear each other over the thumping bass. The place was nice and quiet in the afternoons, but tonight we’d stayed later than usual, and it was filling up.

“What if he does it again?” I said, leaning close so Hugo would hear over the ruckus. “I should report it before someone gets the wrong idea.”

Hugo waved his hand dismissively. “I think he got the message. You’re developing the reputation of a true grouch on campus. Give it a few years, and you might even miss an admirer here and there.”

I glared at him over the brim of my beer glass. Hugo was the head of the Material Physics department and the only other dragon shifter on campus that I knew. I liked his directness and no-nonsense humor. We were becoming friends, and I appreciated the occasional after-work drink we grabbed together more than he probably realized. “Wouldn’t it bother you if a student kept hitting on you? I could be his father, for fuck’s sake.”

“If you had a kid at seventeen, sure. Why does it bug you so much? Can’t you take the compliment and move on? That’s what I used to do when I still had it.” Hugo was sixty but looked only a decade or so older than me.

“You still have it.”

He laughed. “How would you know? Anyway. You need an outlet for your frustration.”

My glower deepened. I knew where he was going with this.

“I found my Jamie when I was twenty-five,” he continued, “so I didn’t really suffer the plight of an unmated dragon alpha for long, but I hear there are perfectly acceptable ways to pass the time before you meet your mate.”

“I don’t like fucking around.”

“Find someone who wants the same—a friend with benefits?”

“Like that’s easy.” I used to fool around with a mated omega couple up in Ontario before I moved to Ardaine. We’d even spent a few of their heats together. But I had no idea how to find someone like that in Ardaine.

Hugo gestured at the bartender and ordered two more beers.

“Are you going to Sullivan’s party tomorrow?”

“I should. You?”

“Jamie and I will be there, yes.”

He waited as the bartender poured us two pints and moved away before leaning closer. “Davidson was single until his late forties. Folks started to think he’d stay a bachelor forever. Rumor has it that he had an escort service on a roster.”

“I’m *not* doing that.”

Huge smiled innocently. “Why not? Might help with the mood swings you have going on. It’s perfectly legit from what I hear. Those boys even have unions these days. You can ask Davidson for a recommendation tomorrow.”

I burst out laughing. “I’ll walk into a family-friendly party his husband is organizing, grab a piece of cake, and ask him to recommend me prostitutes? Are you for real?”

Chuckling, Hugo patted my shoulder. “Maybe not in front of his husband then.”

I shook my head. Sometimes I wasn’t sure when Hugo was joking and when he was being serious.

“I’d rather wait, thanks.”

Hugo’s expression got somber. “It’s not healthy for us to be lonely.”

He was right—us dragon folks were family people. I sure as hell missed mine, but aside from better career options, I had a much higher chance of finding a mate in a big city than I had in my small hometown up in Canada.

I just had to be patient.

ON SATURDAY, I slept in, then went to the campus to catch up on some assignments I needed to correct before next week. Then I headed home to get ready for the big event.

I’d considered bailing out of the party at Davidson Sullivan’s many times. There’d be mostly couples and families, and being the only single alpha above thirty-five at the Ardaine dragon gatherings was getting old fast. Pun

intended. But I'd only lived here in Ardaine since the spring, and fostering the friendships seemed important.

So, I humbly endured the twenty-minute traffic jam on Northwestern Avenue, and just before three, I arrived at Sullivan's estate.

From what I'd heard, Davidson had never hosted a party at his house before he got married. He'd lived alone in his dark, sprawling mansion and spat metaphorical fire at anyone who'd dared to come close to the gate, like the crabby old dragon he was.

Now his mansion wasn't nearly as dark anymore. The park bloomed with flowers as part of the lawn had been transformed into a meadow, the outdoor furniture was dotted with colorful pillows, and soap bubbles drifted in the air.

Today, there were children *everywhere*, from waddling toddlers to gangly preteens running around and yelling for some reason. Always the yelling. Why? Some kids wore bathing suits, and one little hellion sprayed someone's grandparents with pool water before the plastic gun was wrangled from his hands. An inflatable ball landed on one of the food tables, but all it hit was fruit, so a few adults gathered around and picked up the apples and nectarines, brushing off the grass clippings. Luckily, there wasn't a band or any other kind of loud stage entertainment, or I'd have already left.

I sat next to Davidson on a wicker sofa under a sprawling oak tree, overlooking the circus from a safe distance. I was considering how long I had to stay. "Thanks for inviting me," I told Davidson mildly sarcastically.

He chuckled and took a deep gulp of his whiskey. "You're most welcome." His eyes were glued to his husband, the blindingly gorgeous Leonard Sullivan, né Chase, who stood a few yards away, talking to some Bracknells. I couldn't keep track of the Bracknell clan—they were way too many and kept procreating—but I spotted Emanuel, the diminutive but formidable omega patriarch. Then my eyes were drawn back to Davidson's husband. In my defense, Leonard had that effect on most alphas.

He shifted their firstborn on his hip and planted a soft kiss on the toddler's temple. Then he handed the child to Emanuel Bracknell and stretched his back. A little baby bump stuck out from underneath his loose shirt.

“Another kid already?” I asked Davidson.

He shrugged, his expression terribly smug. “I like Leo pregnant.” He sighed contentedly and wiggled in his chair, sinking deeper into the cushions. “And he likes it too.” The energy coming off Davidson was undeniably sexual. Lucky bastard.

“But don't tell me you like this.” I waved my hand toward the busy lawn. Davidson was the last person here who I'd expect to enjoy himself at a garden party, and yet he was throwing them.

“I hate it. It's horrendous. I can't wait to kick everyone out.” A wide grin stretched his lips, contradicting his words. I followed his gaze to find Leonard walking toward us. He was indeed breathtaking, his white shirt billowing around his lovely form, eyes bright, his regal features alight with a sweet smile he seemed to reserve for his husband.

He had the glow of a happy dragon mate, shining so bright I might as well put on my sunglasses.

“Hello, Pascal, having a good time?” he asked me, sparing me a brief glance before focusing on Davidson.

“Not really. But at least I don't have to run after all those children.”

Leonard let out a carefree laugh and fluidly sank onto Davidson's lap. “And what about you, my master? How are you holding up?”

Davidson tugged at the collar around his husband's neck, the somewhat archaic symbol of their bond. “I'm annoyed. In fact, I haven't been in such a bad mood since my last birthday.”

Leonard brushed his lips over Davidson's. “I fear you will take it out on me.” He didn't sound the least bit afraid.

“Oh, I will. This party was your idea, and I’ll punish you for putting me through it.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at their exchange. “I’m still here, you know.”

“Did you hear something?” Davidson asked against Leonard’s lips.

“I only hear your voice.”

I groaned. “Seriously?”

They both laughed out loud and turned to me, Leonard cradled in Davidson’s lap, Davidson’s hand possessively on Leonard’s rounded belly.

“How’s work, Pascal?” Leonard asked. “Are you staying in the city indefinitely?”

“Looks like it.”

“Pascal got tenure at Ardaine University,” Davidson told Leo. “He’s stuck here with us.”

“Congratulations,” Leo said pleasantly. “Impressive.”

“Thank you. The job is great. I’ll just miss the freedom Ontario offers.”

“That’s the downside,” Davidson said. “It’s not like you can just lift off your roof in the middle of the day and fly for a hundred miles north, nothing but trees and lakes below you.”

“But Cross River is nice,” Leonard said. “Ernest and Lawrie go flying there almost every week.”

Davidson grunted. “I don’t enjoy flying in Cross River as much as I used to.”

Leonard petted his cheek. “It’s been so long. I barely think about it anymore. We could go together next weekend. I think I’d like it.”

Leonard’s kidnapping some years ago had caused quite the uproar, and the rumors spread among dragon shifters all the way to Canada. Rogues, or crows as some people called them,

were rare, so when one turned up and was eliminated, it became the talk of the dragon community for a decade.

Davidson looked worried but nodded agreeably. “Okay.” He pecked his husband on the lips, and Leonard laid his head on Davidson’s shoulder.

“Davidson told me you’re celebrating an important life event next Saturday,” he said. “Where’s the party invitation? Or are you going on an opulent cruise? Or getting a new car? A motorbike, perhaps?”

Leonard’s tongue was sharp. If I were in Davidson’s place, I might yearn to punish him too. But something told me—mainly the collar and the way they were around each other—that their games were way out of my comfort zone.

“Your alpha should have kept his mouth shut,” I replied.

Davidson nodded knowingly. “It’s coming for you, my dear Pascal. The formidable forty.”

“Ugh.”

“Hurry up. A single dragon alpha above forty is a disaster,” he stated.

Leonard rubbed his cheek against Davidson’s shirt. “You weren’t that bad.”

“I hear he was the worst,” I said. “He’s only been tolerable since you’ve turned up.”

Davidson didn’t protest, and Leonard smiled happily at him. He truly was too beautiful for words. Davidson kept petting his pregnant stomach, and suddenly, the marital bliss got a bit too much for me.

“I should be going. The talk about flying has me on edge.”

Davidson frowned. “You’re lucky. It’s the last good day. The weather’s supposed to go bad tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you in the city next week. Lunch?”

“Check with my assistant.”

“I will.”

I snuck out without saying goodbye to anyone. Some might consider it rude, but with the amount of people at the party, I'd spend an hour doing the rounds before I'd be able to leave. Hopefully, Davidson would understand and make excuses for me if anyone asked, but most probably, nobody would even notice.

After checking the map on my phone, I drove straight for Cross River National Park. Hugo was right. I'd been moody lately, which wasn't like me. I truly missed the freedom to fly whenever more than I'd anticipated, and it was making me restless. The familiar, jittery energy in my chest grew as I drove.

I couldn't wait to spread my wings.

THUNDERSTORM

Ansel

AN EXPLOSIVE SOUND shook the cabin, vibrating through the walls. I yelped and hid my head in the sleeping bag. The rough logs suddenly didn't seem so sturdy.

This had been a spectacularly bad idea. What was I doing alone in a raging storm in the middle of nowhere? My brain opened all the creaky cabinets with long-forgotten nightmares, and every childhood fear began spilling out. Monsters crawled from under the bed, zombies limped toward the cabin, swarms of flesh-eating bugs gathered outside, readying to attack...

It's just a thunderstorm. It'll be over in twenty minutes. Chill!

I peeked out of the sleeping bag, eyeing my surroundings. The dim room looked the same as it did when I'd gone to sleep.

Nothing to fear.

Another crack made me shudder. Lord, that was loud! Except this time, the thunder didn't roll over the cabin and away. Instead, ominous snapping and scraping sounds followed, like trees falling all around me. Had a lightning strike hit right next to the cabin? I wasn't sure I had the courage to look outside.

But what if the forest was on fire and I needed to get out of here? I needed to check.

Trembling, I sat up with my sleeping bag tight around my shoulders and peeked out of the window by my bed.

It was pitch black outside, and I could feel more than see the sheets of rain. If I turned on the flashlight, I'd see my reflection in the window and that would be it. Well, with how much it was raining, at least the risk of fire was zero.

Another loud crash made me jolt. It seemed to be coming from all sides now. I thought thunderstorms only came to Cross River in the summer, but it must have been lightning strikes. What else? A meteor? An alien attack?

I lay back down and listened, my heart galloping. The wind howled and wood creaked. Wrapped like a burrito, I sweated even though I felt cold. I should stoke the fire again, but the illusion of safety the sleeping bag gave me held me pinned in place.

Minutes went by. The storm quieted as quickly as it had come, and only the soft dripping of water from leaf to leaf whispered outside.

I couldn't fall asleep again, though. I lay awake, shivering and thinking. Should I just head back to the hotel my father had booked? But I wouldn't give up now.

Because realistically, nothing could happen to me out here. Nobody ever came to these parts of the park. The bears wanted to avoid me more than I wanted to avoid them, and the risk of wildfires was nonexistent with how much it had been raining since September. I had enough canned beans, protein bars, and pasta to last until next spring, the shed was stocked with firewood, I had all kinds of medicine for emergency situations, and my car was parked only a couple of miles away, the tank half full. The lack of cell signal made me nervous, but it had a good side to it—it made the chances of my father finding me out here lower. And even if lightning strikes battered the surrounding mountains on a nightly basis, I'd be much safer here than on the streets of Ardaine.

I tossed and turned for what felt like hours, nodding off then jolting awake from the tiniest noises. When the cabin got lighter predawn, I sat up and drank some water. I must have

slept a little because time felt warped, like the entire night had passed in just a few hours.

Why the hell did I have to be so afraid? Of what? Darkness? Rain? Wind? Like a little kid.

Annoyed with myself, I untangled my limbs from the sleeping bag and dragged on rainproof pants over my sweats. I slipped into my boots and threw a raincoat over my shoulders.

When I looked through the window again, it wasn't raining anymore, but wisps of fog hung in the air like curtains between the trees. If there were any fallen trees nearby, they had to be up the hill behind the cabin where I couldn't see. Which would be logical—lightning strikes usually hit the highest point around, right?

Fear still slithered its sticky fingers up my spine and around my throat as I hesitated before opening the door. I had to get used to being here alone and to do that, I needed to face things head-on. Hopefully, after I inspected the damage the storm had done, my overactive imagination would calm down, knowing there was no threat. Like my therapist had said—confront anxiety with reality.

I stepped out of the cabin and took a deep breath. The air smelled of moss and pine. The forest was beautiful after it had rained. Tall oaks shrouded in mist loomed above me, their branches bejeweled with droplets.

What time was it anyway? I hadn't even checked my phone. I'd turned it off to save battery.

Looking around, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. No fallen trees, not even a broken branch. Where had the sounds come from? Had I dreamed the entire storm?

I walked down the winding path in the direction of the lake, then turned to the left and began climbing the steep slope to the north. After the torrential rain, the side of the mountain was now crisscrossed with small creeks and waterfalls.

Higher above, where the slope gentled, a group of broken trunks stuck from the ground like spikes. The trees had literally been snapped in half.

I sped up toward the clearing that definitely hadn't been there yesterday. Shattered branches and lumps of torn-out bushes lay scattered everywhere. Yep, a lightning strike. What else had the power to splinter entire trees?

I trudged through the mess and climbed over branches until I reached the edge of what seemed to be a freshly dug groove in the forest soil, deep enough for me to fall into if I weren't careful.

Seeing the mess made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Had something crashed here?

My brain provided images of destroyed planes, exploding helicopters, and torn body parts.

I swallowed a wave of nausea and breathed.

Ansel Yves Perrault, I told myself sternly, imagining my granddad's voice, *this is a mystery, and you are an explorer. You're going to investigate.*

I climbed on top of the thick trunk of a fallen pine tree that lay on the edge of the groove. Holding on to a branch, I scanned the debris from a better vantage point.

Green, green, brown, green, the pale orange hue of naked pine wood, gray rocks sticking from the ground, crooked fingers of roots reaching out from the soil...

Then I almost choked on my own spit.

I coughed, then blinked.

What the hell?

It looked like...a wing. A huge, leathery wing. It was dark brown with greenish spots, the colors merging with its surroundings like military camouflage.

Then the wing flapped, sending a gust of humid air into my face, and my soul left my body.

On the torn-up ground, in a circle of fallen trees, lay a creature the size of a plane.

I must be still asleep.

I spotted a clawed foot, then another, a tail curling among the branches. How long was it? Ten feet? Fifteen? What living animal had wings and a fifteen-foot tail?

A dinosaur.

The electrical storm had created a portal and sent either my cabin or a dinosaur through the time vortex.

That, or a huge, carnivorous flying reptile had escaped a genetic laboratory.

Aliens shaped like dinosaurs were attacking planet Earth.

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. Then I counted to ten and opened my eyes again.

Still there, the creature lay on its side, slowly folding its wing to the ground, revealing a snake-like neck and...

Oh wow.

Was it...a dragon?

Yep. That's a dragon. A four-legged, winged dragon had landed in my backyard.

It had its eyes closed and a terrifying, toothy muzzle open. Its jaw was so long it could swallow me whole. To complete the horrifying picture, the dragon's pearly white teeth gleamed, bigger than my fingers. Even its forehead and neck were lined with spikes. A mammoth sigh reverberated through the ground.

Granddad was right. Dragons are real.

I wobbled and grabbed the branch tighter.

The creature sniffed again, and one eye peeled open, looking straight at me. It was bright yellow with a thin band of emerald around the iris and an oblong, reptilian pupil. It blinked and focused on me.

"Hi there," the dragon said.

I fell off the tree trunk, landing with my ass on the ground.

Ow.

“Oops. Sorry. Didn’t mean to freak you out. Would you mind closing your eyes for a sec?”

Holy fucking insanity. The dragon sounded like an earthquake. Its voice rattled my bones.

It didn’t even occur to me to protest. I dutifully closed my eyes and sat where I was, moisture from the moss seeping through my pants.

Groans and snarls filled the air. For a terrifying second, I thought I’d be a dragon’s breakfast. I covered my head as if that would help and whimpered pitifully.

Then it was quiet, only the pitter-patter of rain drops whispering in the forest.

I waited for a while longer. My heart smashing against my ribs, I slowly opened my eyes.

The dragon was gone. Instead, a naked man lay on his side in the dirt, his body pale and eerily still, his face partially hidden under his arm.

Where had the dragon gone? *You know the answer.* No, I didn’t know.

I didn’t know anything.

But I had a more pressing matter on my hands than the torn fabric of reality.

Was the guy dead?

Don’t be dead. I can’t deal with that.

I scrambled over the tangled branches until I reached him. Panting, I fell on my knees by his body. For a few seconds, I hovered uselessly, my hands fluttering in the air. He was huge, a mountain of muscles. Even lying helplessly on the ground, he looked intimidating as hell.

What do I do?

Check pulse. I pressed two fingers under the man’s jaw. Nothing.

Please, don’t be dead!

I moved my fingers around through his stubble and pressed again.

There.

I sagged with relief. The man was alive, but he must have been hurt. I patted down his arm and touched his chest, feeling it move with his breaths. Then I put my hand on his forehead.

He was warm. Hot even. Did he have a fever? And why was I even checking his temperature? It wasn't like he sneezed and complained about a headache.

I didn't know what I was doing, but the man needed help.

Have you forgotten about the dragon? It's you who needs help.

Abruptly, the guy shifted, making me jump. For the second time, I fell backward onto my ass, my heart in my throat.

He groaned, stretched one leg and bent it again, then pushed his fist into the ground as if trying to get up. With a pained grunt, he slumped again.

“Sir? Are you...okay?”

What a stupid question. He was naked, covered with scratches, and it looked like the ground had exploded around him. And it seemed he had a serious condition, having been a thirty-foot reptile just a minute ago. But I wouldn't think of that. I'd postpone it for later when I could have a nightmare about the dragon in the safety of my sleeping bag.

“Sir?”

His eyes flew open, and he pinned them on me.

They were emerald green, luminous, with a band of gold around his pupils. I'd never seen eyes like that.

He frowned, his blond eyebrows scrunching up. “You're still here?” he mumbled.

“Um. Yeah. I can help you. I think?”

The silence stretched while he stared at me. I squirmed.

“Where am I?” he asked. His voice was deep and rumbly. An old voice, but he didn’t look to be more than forty.

“Cross River National Park.”

“I know *that*,” he said as if I’d offended him. “Where in Cross River? I need to get to my car.”

“Sorry. Um. We’re in the northeast part of the park, away from the trails. I have a cabin. Over there.” I pointed.

Again, the man pushed to raise himself. He grunted and hissed but managed to sit up. Holy hell, he was a beast. Massive round shoulders and pecs, wide chest... I tried very hard not to look between his legs.

He grabbed his left upper arm with his right hand and yanked. His sudden shout made me scramble up.

“What are you doing?” I shrieked.

He looked up at me, face contorted with pain. “Dislocated shoulder. I just put it back.”

I gaped.

“You...put it back.”

Was he human? Of course not. But I knew that.

I couldn’t stop staring at how huge he was. Long arms and legs, covered with thick muscles. His torso seemed as wide as I was tall—only a slight exaggeration there.

A big, mature alpha.

I’m alone in the woods with an older alpha with...a reptilian problem.

A naked alpha.

I shut my brain up before all the possible implications could make me panic.

“Do you have something I can wear?” he asked.

“Um.”

Nothing I had would fit him. You’d need three of me to make one of him.

He must have come to the same conclusion on his own as he looked me up and down. “Never mind.”

Then he stretched out his hand. On autopilot, I took it with both of mine and pulled. Damn, he was heavy. I doubted I was of any help as he struggled to get up, his left arm hanging limply.

When he finally stood, he towered above me. How tall was he? Six and a half feet or more. This man could snap me in half using only his one uninjured arm.

He shifted from foot to foot and grunted.

“I seem to have sprained my ankle.” He looked around, assessing the mayhem. “Among other things.”

I stared up at him, at a loss.

Then he smiled at me, most charmingly, and offered me a scraped, muddy hand. “Pascal Pembroke. And you are?”

“Ansel.” He arched one eyebrow when I didn’t tell him my last name. But then his hand swallowed mine, huge and warm, and he kept grinning.

Pale lashes framed his bright-green eyes, and he sported a dark-blond stubble with reddish streaks over his powerful jaw. He had distinct laugh lines and full, smiling lips. His shaggy blond hair was a mess of pine needles and specks of dark forest soil, but he looked...nice. Kind of.

“Pleased to meet you, Ansel. Could you help me out? You mentioned a cabin.”

LITTLE CABIN IN THE WOODS

Pascal

I'D SCARED the poor kid so much he'd fallen on his ass. Now he kept blinking up at me with wide eyes as we stumbled down the slope toward what looked like an old hunting cabin. The thick canopy of pines hid the house from anyone flying above it, and moss grew on its roof. No wonder nobody knew it was here.

My foot hurt like hell when I put weight on it, but I couldn't lean on Ansel too much or I'd crush the petite omega. Biting back grunts of pain, I shuffled next to him as he pointed out roots and stones.

"Almost there," he said, his voice too bright.

I couldn't help but smell him. I tried not to—he looked like a doe-eyed freshman, way too young for me to be getting any ideas. But his natural perfume tickled my lungs and warmed me on the inside. He smelled like berries and cream, the fragrance rising from his tousled hair and getting stronger. When he opened the door to the cabin and ushered me in, I almost choked on the pungent scent. Was he older than he looked? Because the cabin smelled like...ugh. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Slick and omega sweat. And...blueberries?

Taken aback, I stumbled and accidentally put weight on my left foot. It was the reminder I'd needed. Any arousal the scent might have caused was erased by the stabbing pain in my

ankle. Which was a blessing since me getting hard while buck naked would probably make the boy run off into the forest.

Ansel handed me a towel and a blanket without looking at me. I quickly wrapped the towel around my hips in lieu of underwear and threw the blanket over my shoulders.

“Sorry, it’s really small,” Ansel said. “Please, sit down.”

There was nowhere for me to sit but the bed, so I pushed the open sleeping bag to the side and sat on the edge. Ansel took off his waterproof gear and hung it on hooks by the door. Then he lowered himself onto a small stool by an iron stove and began sorting through a basket of firewood.

Watching his profile as he worked, I couldn’t help but notice how lovely he was. His lips looked puffy, the pink skin delicate, and his lashes were almost too long to be real. He had soft brown eyes, almond-shaped and big. The kind of eyes that made you forget what you were thinking if you stared into them for a heartbeat longer than you should. When he glanced at me, I avoided his gaze, as if he could singe me with those eyes.

He’s barely legal. Snap out of it.

What was a young omega like him doing all alone in a hunting cabin in the middle of nowhere?

Sounding overly casual, he said, “So, a dragon?”

That was a potential disaster. But how much had he seen? How hard would it be to convince him that it had been a figment of his imagination? Most people were ridiculously gullible.

“What dragon?” I pitched my voice low, not attempting to seem threatening, but I wouldn’t go out of my way to be overly nice either. If he was afraid, his brain might suppress the memory.

But Ansel straightened his spine and looked into my eyes, undeterred. “You changed from a dragon into a guy,” he stated firmly. “I was there.”

The boy had guts; I had to give him that. “What? No. That would be ridiculous.”

He glared at me, his scowl ridiculously pretty on his captivating face. I gave him an innocent, confused smile. All the same, I felt my neck heat. Ansel’s sweet looks were most distracting.

He pointed at me with a slender finger. “Your ears are bright red. You know what you’re doing is called gaslighting, right?”

I sighed. The kid deserved my respect. I wouldn’t get anywhere with him if I tried to manipulate him. Weirdly, that didn’t seem like a bad thing. A part of me was relieved I didn’t have to lie to him. Not much, anyway.

“I apologize. That was mean of me.”

Ansel hummed in acknowledgment of my apology, opened the stove, and began preparing the fire. He chose a few thin logs, small dry twigs, and a wax baggie for a fire starter. He knew what he was doing.

“My granddad used to say he went to this cabin to be left in peace and watch the dragons fly.” Focused on his task, Ansel didn’t look at me as he continued to punch holes in the secret my kind had guarded for millennia. “He said they usually came right after sundown. He’d sit by the lake with his fishing rod, and they would circle above the forest and soar over the mountain peaks. He said the dragons came here because, like him, they wanted to be left in peace. I was a kid, so I thought it was just another one of the fairytales he told me before bed.” He scoffed softly and shook his head. “My father says Granddad was clinically insane. The black sheep of the family.” He made a quotation mark in the air with one hand, his voice gaining an angry edge, then he pinned his clever eyes on me. “And here you are.”

I had nothing to say. People couldn’t see us without direct sunlight. It was a well-known fact.

Except for Ansel’s deceased granddad, it seemed.

My mind swirled with questions and implications, but I couldn't say anything without revealing even more than what the boy already seemed to know. He studied me, matches ready in his hands. Panic fizzled in the back of my mind as I scrambled for any tale that could help me salvage the situation. At the same time, I couldn't bring myself to lie anymore.

"Can you, like, control it?" he asked. "Or does it happen every other moon like with werewolves?"

I chuckled at his questions, feeling a little helpless. "I can control it. And werewolves aren't real."

"But you are."

Screw it. "I apologize for questioning your sanity earlier. What you saw was real."

His Adam's apple bobbed. He turned back to his task and lit the stove, watching the flame spread before closing the door.

"I kinda wish you'd kept lying until you'd convinced me so I could have gone on as before."

It was what I'd intended at first, but I just...couldn't do it. Not with Ansel's almond eyes on me. Orange light flickered through the thin gaps in the stove door, brightening his face. He had a few freckles on the bridge of his nose.

"Are there more folks like you? Or was it you my granddad saw?"

Oh, if he only knew. "I can't answer that."

"Why?"

"It's not my secret to tell."

"So, the answer is yes," he concluded.

I laughed exasperatedly. "No. There is no answer. This is one of the best-kept secrets in the world, Ansel."

He poured some water from a jug into an old, scratched glass and handed it to me. "You just crash-landed that secret in my backyard. Doesn't that justify at least some answers?"

Ansel was cute *and* clever.

“Maybe. But I won’t be able to tell you everything.”

“That’s okay. Just the basics are fine.” Then he frowned, nodding at the glass. “You do drink water, don’t you?”

Instead of answering, I downed the water and gave him the glass back. “Thanks. I needed that.” He was still looking at me expectantly. “Just the basics?”

“Yes. I feel strangely calm, and I’m trying to figure out if that’s because you’re harmless or because I’m nuts.”

I liked this boy more by the second. “You’re a brave little guy, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “A couple of hours ago, I was huddled in my sleeping bag, terrified by a thunderstorm. It’s all relative.” His lips curved into a crooked smile, a dimple popping in his cheek. I felt suddenly hot under the blanket. The scent surrounding me wasn’t helping.

Too young. Besides, he saw you in dragon form.

“Do you eat people?” He posed the question as if we were talking about a restaurant menu.

“No. I don’t eat in my other form and definitely not living creatures.”

“Are you like an herbivore?”

I raised my eyebrows at his word choice, wondering if I should be insulted. “I’m not a *vegetarian*, but I only rarely eat meat. It’s not good for the climate.”

He blinked. “You’re a dragon who avoids meat because of the climate.”

I shrugged.

Ansel circled a finger in the air, frowning thoughtfully. “There was a joke somewhere in there, but I can’t pinpoint it.”

“Am I a joke to you?” I tried to sound outraged, but Ansel only snickered.

“It’s just so bizarre to be even thinking these thoughts and having this conversation.”

From his point of view...sure.

Then he tilted his head to the side, and a cute little crease appeared between his eyebrows. “Why did you crash?”

Now that was embarrassing. If my brothers knew, I’d never hear the end of it. “A miscalculation.”

“You weren’t being chased by government drones or fighting gargoyles or anything like that?”

Where was he getting these ideas? “I didn’t double-check the weather app before I went flying.”

Ansel, damn him, burst out laughing. “Really?”

“What’s so funny about that? I could have died. The lightning bolt hit right next to me when I dove.”

“So it was a lightning strike.”

“The damage in the forest? Yes. I’d be ground meat if I’d caused all of that.”

He looked at me a little longer, then the playfulness disappeared from his tone. “Are you dangerous for me in any way?”

I arched one eyebrow. “Do you think I’d tell you if I were?”

“No. But I think I’d be able to tell if you lied about it.”

He would see through me, wouldn’t he? Hell, who was Ansel? The things he said, how he held himself, how he faced me with defiance and humor... He seemed suddenly older and impressively intelligent. “I’m not dangerous at all.” Not for him, anyway. “I promise.”

“Cool. Do you want some tea, Pascal?”

“Yes, please.”

DRAGONS ARE REAL

Ansel

PASCAL, if that was his name, wrapped the blanket I'd given him tighter around his shoulders and looked around my humble, musty-smelling refuge.

"The cabin's cozy. It's yours?"

"Granddad left it to me."

I shoved another log further into the stove and closed the door. I adjusted the ledger to get more air into the fire, and the stove hummed. The pot of water was quivering as it heated.

"What are you doing here alone?" Pascal asked.

Busying myself with the teapot, I didn't look at him as I replied. "Vacationing."

"In this weather?"

I glanced at him over my shoulder, attempting a carefree smile. "It's peaceful. I needed a break from the city."

Judging by his expression, he didn't believe a word I said. "You're from Ardaine?"

"Uh-huh." I picked two tea bags and tied them neatly around the pot's handle. I usually looked down on bagged tea, but here it came in handy.

"How old are you?" asked my guest from behind me.

"Twenty-three," I chirped. God, I was bad at lying. I could bet my ears were just as bright red as his had been when he'd

tried to convince me I'd hallucinated the dragon. "The tea will be ready soon. You need to warm up. Can I offer you something to eat? A protein bar maybe?"

"Thanks, but do you have something with more carbs? I need to replenish my energy."

"Cereal?" I lifted the box from the grocery paper bag I kept by the counter.

He lit up like a kid at a fair. "I love cinnamon crunch."

I took a bowl from the shelf above the sink. "I have oat milk. Hope that's fine." I'd only brought oat milk because I figured it wouldn't go bad outside of the fridge.

"That's ok. Thanks."

As soon as I handed him the bowl and a spoon, he started shoveling the cereal into his mouth and chewing loudly.

"You really are starving, aren't you?"

"You've no idea," he mumbled, scooping up another spoonful.

It took him barely a minute before the bowl was empty. He sighed, his impressive shoulders sagging. "Yeah. That hit the spot."

"More?"

"Please."

He handed me the bowl, smiling softly. He seemed nice when he wasn't purposefully trying to intimidate me.

I poured him a second helping, which he gratefully accepted. He ate slower, gazing at me with disconcerting focus. His bare chest drew my eyes like a magnet. He was all big and strong, so very alpha; the omega in me was getting silly ideas. Dragon or no dragon, I needed to get him out of here. If he could stumble all the way to my car, maybe I could drive him to his.

"You said you had a car somewhere here?"

“I parked last night by the park’s main entrance, in the lowest part of Cross River valley.”

The park entrance was technically only fifteen miles away if you drew a straight line on a map. But the narrow slithering roads lining the mountain peaks were tricky to navigate, so it would take me nearly two hours to drive there. After the rainstorm, the drive would be even more of a challenge. Together with the trek to my car, the trip would be a full-day adventure. I hesitated.

“Can you just...fly back to the car?”

He rolled his shoulders and grimaced. “I’m not sure, but I might have sprained my wing. I shouldn’t shift when it hurts like this.”

The wing that wasn’t here now. The invisible wing in the alternate state of his being. “But how can you even...?” I shook my head. “Never mind.”

Pascal gave me an awkward smile and kept eating.

He was handsome. Not beautiful like Valentin, but somehow more alpha-like if that was a thing. A bit older and rugged.

Granddad, I’m having breakfast with one of your dragons. He’s kinda hot.

“I can drive you,” I blurted.

He swallowed the mouthful he’d been chewing and nodded. “That would be very kind of you. How far is your car? I didn’t see one outside.”

“Um. About two miles? The road ends by the lake below.”

Pascal winced. “I’m not sure I can hobble that far now.” He looked so genuinely sorry and obviously hated to depend on help; I couldn’t be mad at him. But he couldn’t stay here either. Staying in an enclosed space with a strange alpha for any extended period wasn’t something I was comfortable with.

He must have seen the worry on my face.

“I’ll rest for a couple of hours,” he said, “and we’ll go later today.”

Was I being a jerk kicking him out like this? “Your ankle must hurt.”

“It’s not broken. And I heal fast...” He trailed off, looking into his empty bowl intently.

“You mean you heal faster than humans.”

“Something like that,” he hedged.

“Cool.”

He looked up, surprised. “Aren’t you afraid at least a little?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. I’m still not entirely sure any of this is real.”

“Fair point. I won’t hurt you, though.”

“I believe you.” And I did. I didn’t know why, but I trusted him on that at least.

“Just give me a few hours and I’ll get out of your hair.”

“You won’t be able to drive yourself home if your foot hurts.”

“If that happens, I can call someone. My phone’s in my car, together with my clothes.”

“Um. It might rain again. But I don’t even have any gear that would fit you.” Something occurred to me at that moment. “Wait a sec, maybe...”

I walked around the bed, nearly brushing Pascal’s knees in the tiny space. I lifted the lid of the ancient chest where my granddad used to keep his fishing equipment.

“Voilà!” I called as I pulled out an oversized old raincoat with a flourish. A cloud of dust accompanied my gesture and specks of dirt fell back into the chest. “Oh.”

Pascal waved the dust away, sputtering.

“Yeah.” I sagged. The coat hadn’t been used in years. The waterproof material was cracked in places, a few buttons were

missing, and it was undeniably dirty. “Sorry.”

He frowned, looking the antiquity up and down. “Better than prancing through the forest naked.” Then he grinned. “Thanks.”

“Um.” His smile had me smiling back. “I’ll brush it off outside.”

In front of the cabin, I took the scourer I used for dishes and brushed the worst of the dirt off the coat. Then I shook it until it stopped letting out dust billows. It looked moderately better. At least it seemed clean on the inside. I hung it on a hook by the door, protected by the overhanging roof.

When I came back inside, Pascal was standing by the bed, studying the pictures on my shelf. He held the blanket around his shoulders and favored one leg.

“I left the coat outside to air it.”

“Thanks. That’s your granddad?” he asked.

I knew the photo he was looking at by heart. Every tree branch, every blade of grass, every ripple on the water, every wrinkle on my granddad’s face. I was around nine, with my granddad by his old fishing boat down by the lake. He was smiling in the picture, looking down at me like he used to, with pride and love.

“He used to bring me here when I was little.”

“When did he die?” Pascal asked gently.

“Two years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tea’s ready!” I said too loudly.

Pascal sat on the bed and accepted a mug.

“Honey?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He blew on his tea and breathed in, smiling softly. “I didn’t know I needed this.”

“Nothing beats a good cup of tea on a rainy day.”

He hummed agreeably, then silence stretched again, getting a little awkward. Neither of us was willing to tell the other what in the name of the devil we were doing here, in the middle of nowhere. But out of the two of us, his story seemed much weirder.

“Are you in any kind of danger?” I fished when I couldn’t bear the quiet any longer. “Did someone try to hurt you?”

Pascal lifted his gaze, his eyes turning tender. “No. It was really just an accident.” He took a deep gulp of tea.

“So Granddad was right. You were literally just flying around.”

“The dragon needs it. When I can’t shift and stretch my wings for some time, I get moody and snappy. Nobody wants that.”

“Some people go jogging or skydiving, but you turn into a dragon and go flying in the mountains? Must be amazing.”

His eyes flashed with something as he stared at me, his expression growing intense. “It is.”

“Do you go flying here often?” I asked casually, trying to disperse the sudden tension between us.

“It’s the closest place to the city where I can roam somewhat freely.”

“And nobody knows you even exist.”

“If you tell someone, would they believe you?”

That pissed me off a little. He sounded smug. “Granddad would have. I bet I’m not the only one who’s seen a dragon. Maybe someone else would believe me too.” Every time I said the word dragon out loud, he visibly cringed. “Maybe there’s a whole system of support groups for people like me. Accidental dragon-sighting anonymous.”

“Ansel...”

“I mean, I can keep it to myself, I guess. But there must be more of you. So logically, even if you’re all careful as hell,

encounters like ours happen. I bet all dragon legends and fairytales come from situations like this one.”

As I spoke, Pascal’s features hardened. “You *will* keep it to yourself.”

“Are you threatening me?” Fear lurked in the corners of my mind, but mainly, I was annoyed with his high-handedness. “That’s not nice. I invited you into my cabin and made you tea with honey.”

His emerald gaze narrowed. “You’re not on vacation, Ansel, and you’re not twenty-three, are you?”

And here I sat, thinking he was kind. Maybe the dragon wouldn’t hurt me, but what about Pascal the man? In which circles did he move? Did he know my father? If my parents knew I was in Granddad’s cabin with a naked alpha... I couldn’t even imagine the shitstorm that would cause.

“I’m not going to tell anyone anything,” I said. “I just don’t like it when you treat me like I’m stupid.”

“I understand. How about we both keep our secrets?”

I nodded stiffly and turned back to the stove.

His voice from behind me came softer. “Thank you for your help, Ansel. I’d really appreciate it if you could get me back to my car. You’ll get rid of me, and neither of us will ever tell anyone that we met. Sounds okay?”

What choice did I have?

“Sure.”

6

...AND NOT INDESTRUCTIBLE

Pascal

I DIDN'T KNOW how old Ansel was, but he sure as hell wasn't twenty-three. He might look it if I squinted, but he couldn't lie to save his life. I could smell his nervousness on him.

The entire situation screamed runaway.

A part of me wanted to help him. He seemed like a nice guy. But I couldn't really push him to tell me why he was hiding out here without revealing something about myself. He'd seen enough.

If he hadn't found me, I would have slept off the worst of it in dragon form and attempted to fly back to my car as soon as the sun went down again. But now, as I sat here, the pain in my back only grew. I shouldn't shift. The dislocated shoulder didn't hurt anymore, and my ankle would heal in a few days. But a sprained wing? That wasn't a mere trifle.

Could I walk through the mountains to my car? In my state, it would take a couple of days at least and cost me a lot of pain. If Ansel could shorten my journey, then I'd be most grateful.

Ugh. I still cringed internally at him seeing me. The Ardaine dragons always kept to the most remote places and only flew after sundown. Most of my friends vacationed in Canada or South America because, with the population density around Ardaine, it was getting increasingly difficult to go flying. Now, apparently, not even the deserted parts of Cross River were entirely safe. I hadn't known there even were any

cabins in this area. And how the hell had his granddad seen any of us?

Anyway, Ansel had guessed it right. Sightings like this had happened occasionally throughout history. It wasn't a big deal, especially since the boy didn't have any evidence and was alone. But still. I should have been more careful.

A single dragon after forty is a disaster, Davidson had said.

He'd been on point. The idea of sitting at home alone after the garden party had been so horrifying I'd gone flying. I hadn't even checked the weather. I'd grown restless over the years and begun taking unnecessary risks. What happened during the night was all my fault.

With a towel over his shoulder and a toothbrush in his hand, Ansel told me to rest and went out. I tossed around for a bit, trying to find the position that would hurt the least. In the end, I managed to fall asleep. I didn't even notice him coming back.

When I woke up from the nap, I watched Ansel flutter around the cabin, cooking lunch. He probably wasn't aware I was awake. Humming under his breath, he prepared sandwiches with peanut butter and jelly while something cooked in a pot on the stove. I didn't see a fridge or light fixtures anywhere, so maybe there wasn't any electricity here. Then I spotted a chunky black box on the floor by the bed with charging cables attached to it. Some kind of portable battery? Under the counter in the kitchen corner stood several jugs with water. As he pottered around, opening and closing cupboards noiselessly, he exposed cans, boxes of pasta, preboiled rice, and packs of dehydrated food. It must have been quite an effort to schlep all the supplies here. Was he preparing for the end of the world?

He turned around abruptly and caught my gaze.

“Oh. You're awake? How are you feeling?”

I wiggled my toes and rolled onto my back. The bed was so narrow; I barely fit into it.

“Much better, thank you.”

“I’m making us some pasta, then we’ve got PB&J sandwiches for later.”

Pasta? *Yes*. I couldn’t wait to put more carbs into my system. The dragon craved them after flying. The cereal earlier had merely awoken my appetite, and my stomach churned with hunger again. “That’s very thoughtful of you, thank you.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to walk?” Ansel asked, eyeing my legs anxiously.

I swung around on the bed, trying to keep myself covered with the towel and blanket so I wouldn’t flash him. I put my feet on the floor and pressed. It did ache, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been in the morning.

“I think so. I’ll find some makeshift walking stick in the forest, and I’ll be good to go.”

Ansel stared at my feet, scratching his neck. “You should at least wrap them in something. You can’t walk two miles through the forest barefoot.”

“What’s the ground?”

“Um. Pine needles and leaves mostly. Sand and gravel the last bit by the end of the road.”

“That’s fine.”

“You’ll be cold.”

“I don’t get cold.”

He peered at me with those eyes. Why did it seem as if he could *see* the dragon? My spine tingled, and my temples throbbed where the spikes would grow when I shifted. It was the strangest sensation, making me feel naked in a way that had nothing to do with my lack of clothing.

“Okay,” he said finally, releasing me from the power of his gaze.

I shuddered. Hell, for such a little omega, Ansel had a presence.

LEANING ON A THICK, crooked branch I'd found by the cabin, I shuffled after Ansel down the narrow trail. A lake shimmered behind the trees ahead. Ansel said we had to walk around it because the turning point of the gravel road where his car was parked lay on the other side.

"I feel a little ridiculous," I said.

Ansel glanced back over his shoulder, grinning. "A little? You're wearing a towel and an old, dirty coat and holding a wooden stick. It looks like the laziest last-minute wizard costume ever."

"You're mean, Ansel." I hopped over a root and winced when I almost lost my balance.

"Sorry. Does it hurt?"

"It's fine."

This was humiliating. I was a dragon, dammit. The apex predator. I didn't hunt per se, but still. I wasn't made for hobbling on one leg, dressed like a scarecrow.

"Should I walk next to you so you can lean on me?"

"It's fine, Ansel."

"No need to be snappy," my guide scolded. He held a branch aside for me so it wouldn't smack me in the face.

"Thanks."

The trail widened so we could walk next to each other for a while. I found myself looking at the boy more often than I should. He was a mystery. He seemed young and naive, but he was here alone, with the skills and equipment of a seasoned mountaineer. With his face and poise, not to mention his accent, he'd fit into a posh country club. Private education?

"Ansel, do you speak any foreign languages?"

"French and Spanish. Why?"

I ignored his question. "Impressive. Have you ever been to France or Spain?"

“Only with my parents. My papa is into art, so he’d drag us through all the galleries in Paris, Nice, and Madrid.”

Yep, the kid had been fed with a golden spoon. Which made the entire situation even more suspicious. His hiking boots seemed well used but in great condition, the leather polished, and he had a rain cover over his backpack, hiding the shapes of two water bottles. All his clothes were top-notch outdoor gear—expensive but practical. The faint scent of his sweat wafted to me, infuriatingly delicious.

Sharp pain shot through the sole of my right foot. “Ouch.”

“What? What happened?”

“Stepping on a pine cone feels just like stepping on a Lego. Who’d have thought?”

“Do you have a lot of experience with stepping on Legos?”

“Yes. Not recommended.”

He paused, looking around cautiously. “So, you’ve got kids?”

“No. But I’m an uncle to a few. They live in Canada.”

“Ah. Got it.”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“I’m an only child. How many siblings do you have?”

“There’s seven of us. I was born smack-dab in the middle.”

“Seven? Wow. That’s so cool!”

“Cool? My childhood was mayhem.”

He turned, walking a few steps backward. “And are all of your brothers...like you?”

“Not answering that.”

“You’re no fun.” Ansel sighed and resumed plodding forward. “It must have been great growing up in a big family.”

“I always thought it must be a sweet deal to be an only child. All the presents are yours only, nobody steals your

sweets or toys, nobody sits on your chest and tickles you until you pee yourself...”

Ansel laughed. “True, I’ve never peed myself from tickling. But I wish my parents had a little less focus on just me, you know?”

“Hm. That makes sense.”

We slowly made our way along the lake shore. In some places, the ground got muddy and soft, marsh-like, but someone had put logs and stones on the path, reinforcing the surface.

If I weren’t limping, trying not to put weight on my injured ankle, it would have been an easy twenty-minute walk. Like this, it took us an hour. I tried to brave it out, but I had to take breaks. My left arm was killing me after I’d popped the dislocated joint back, so I couldn’t lean on the stick properly.

Not for the first time, I wondered how people dealt with pain. As a dragon shifter, I suffered only a fraction of what a human would have endured with the same injuries. I watched Ansel as he walked in front of me, so tiny and fragile. A weak, breakable little omega. And I felt like a coward compared to him.

“We’re almost there,” he said cheerily. “Just one last turn and we’ll be able to see my car.”

“Thank you so much, Ansel. I haven’t made it easy for you, but you’ve been very brave. I really appreciate your help.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he threw over his shoulder. “We still have to drive to the park’s main entrance. The roads are always a mess after a rainstorm.”

Judging by the state of the trail, he was right. I frowned at my muddy feet. I should wash them before getting into a vehicle.

“Huh. That’s weird,” Ansel muttered.

I lifted my head. “What?”

But he was already speeding away from me, eyes on something in front of him.

I limped after him as fast as I could. “Is something the matter?”

He didn’t reply.

As the trail got steeper, I had to focus on where I was stepping so I wouldn’t face-plant into the mud. I caught up with Ansel after a few minutes.

He stood on the edge of a turning point of a gravel road, holding his arms around himself protectively. I followed his gaze to the side of the road, crisscrossed with deep cracks. Winding creeks ran over the road and off the edge, creating a small waterfall. There, a few yards down the steep slope, hung a banged-up Audi, stuck between two pine trees.

Ansel’s car.

Fuck.

It looked like the torrential rain last night had caused a small landslide. A part of the gravel road had been flushed down the hill, and Ansel’s little Audi must have slid with it.

I didn’t know what to say.

With my injuries, I wouldn’t be able to lift the car back up. Even if I miraculously managed to pull it up and start it, there could be more damage to the road further down. It seemed we were stuck.

“How far until we have cell service?” I asked, my tone flat.

“There should be some coverage higher up in the mountains, but I’ve never tried that. It’s at least a one-day hike. Otherwise, ten miles down this road where the valley opens.”

Shit.

I looked at Ansel, hoping he’d invite me back to his cabin. If he let me stay for a couple of days, I’d heal enough to leave on my own. I would even be able to shift again. Maybe.

I wasn’t prepared for the fear in his face.

“Ansel?”

He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

“Can you walk back to the cabin?” he asked, his voice shaky. “You must be exhausted.”

“I can. Sure. But we can also continue until you have a signal. If you let me use your phone, I can call someone to pick us up.”

“It’s ten miles down a flooded road. You’re in no state to do that. And even if we manage to call someone, what if they can’t get here? If the road is damaged up here, it could be even worse down in the valley.”

Just then, a few raindrops hit my head.

Ansel made a frustrated sound and threw his hands up in the air. “I just can’t catch a break, can I?”

“I’m so sorry, Ansel.”

Exhaling through his nostrils, he sagged. “Let’s go back before we’re drenched.”

“Well, I’m half naked, so...”

“Yeah, thanks for reminding me.”

And he started walking up the trail again.

Slowly, I followed him.

The trek back was harder. The rain got worse, and my bare feet slipped in the mud. My ankle throbbed, but I gritted my teeth and marched on. The vision of Ansel’s wood-burning stove kept me going.

Ansel checked on me over his shoulder, his expression a mix of pity and fear.

Why was he afraid of me when he hadn’t been before? Or did something scare him? Something I did?

When we finally reached the cabin, the rain stopped.

Ansel glared at the sky. “You have got to be kidding me,” he told the clouds, then opened the door.

Inside, he poured some water into a basin and handed it to me. “You might want to wash your feet.”

“Thank you.”

I sat outside and rinsed the mud off. My ankle was visibly swollen. When I was done, Ansel had already rekindled the fire. I couldn’t read him. He seemed completely shut off.

“Ansel,” I began in a soft voice. “I’m not dangerous, really. I won’t do anything to hurt you. You’re being very generous and kind to me. I would never take advantage of that.”

“I know.”

“I’ll sleep on the floor.”

He was quiet, looking into the flickering fire. His forehead was scrunched up as he seemed to be thinking hard about something. Then he blew out a breath and closed the stove.

“I only have one sleeping bag,” he said, “but there’s an inflatable mattress under the bed. You can use the blanket.”

“Thank you so much. When I’m back in the city, I’ll find a way to pay you back.”

He gave me a tiny, wary smile. “Sure. It’s fifty per night, breakfast not included. We’re currently understaffed, so we don’t provide room service on weekends, but you can take advantage of the minibar.”

I laughed, and the corners of Ansel’s mouth twitched.

“I’m sorry you’re stuck with me.”

He shrugged and turned to the stove, hiding his expressive face from me.

ANSEL MADE dinner from preboiled rice and canned beans. I felt useless, unable to help, but he seemed in a better mood. He was talking to me and didn’t seem so afraid anymore. My curiosity about him only grew.

“You said your granddad used to take you here?” I asked while we ate.

“My parents host these big dinner parties every other month. When I was little, I hated it. I had to dress up and be quiet and not stand in the way. There’d be loud music long into the night and loads of strangers milling around. I wasn’t allowed to play outside of my room and couldn’t swim in the pool while we had guests. So Granddad began taking me away on those weekends. My parents were happy to get rid of me when they were busy, while I was happy to skip the suit jacket and tie. My father complained about Granddad being a bad influence, but the setup was still convenient enough for him to let me go.”

“Your grandfather was a bad influence? How?”

“Granddad didn’t care if I got my pants dirty. In fact, he’d lie with me on the muddy ground, hiding in the bushes, watching deer. We’d eat chocolate for breakfast and dessert before dinner. He taught me which mushrooms were edible, how to start a fire in the rain, and how to build a shelter. In the summer, we’d go up the mountain to sleep under the stars. He told me to watch for the dragons. He said dragons were real.” Ansel lifted his eyebrows, looking at me meaningfully. “I believed him until I was about eight or nine. But even after that, I didn’t contradict him. I liked his stories. They were magical.”

“Your granddad sounds like a great man.”

Ansel glanced at the picture on the shelf. “He was the best.”

I helped with the dishes, then I washed up in what Ansel called the outdoor shower. It was a watering can hanging on the wall of the shed behind the cabin, equipped with a chain one could pull to tilt it. He gave me a pot of hot water to top the can off. I stood on a large flat stone and pulled on the chain. It worked great. With a watering can above my head like a flower, I soaped up and rinsed, smiling the entire time at the thought of little rich kid Ansel out here with his granddad.

When I came back, Ansel was ready for his turn with a toothbrush, towel, and a fresh pot of hot water.

“Um. About the toilet situation,” he began, blushing adorably. “I just pee in the forest, but the other thing... Do dragons even do that?”

I burst out laughing. “Yes, we do. We eat, don’t we? Stuff goes in, stuff has to come out. I noticed the outhouse down the hill. Is that functional?”

“Eh. Yes. Just...there’s a bucket with mulch. After you use the toilet, you throw in a few scoops of mulch. Stuff has to be covered so it doesn’t smell.”

“Cover poop with mulch. Got it.”

Oh, he was beet red. He couldn’t help the private school boy upbringing after all. He nodded jerkily, and with his head down, scurried away. A minute later, I heard the water hit the flat stone of the outdoor shower. I did *not* imagine him all naked and wet only a few steps away.

Tired from the trek, we settled for the night around ten. Except I couldn’t fall asleep.

The scent in the cabin got increasingly better. Or worse, for me at least.

Ansel dozed off, huddled in his sleeping bag, while I lay awake on the floor, naked, covered by a blanket. I wasn’t cold, but I felt exposed. Even more so when it became impossible to keep my erection under control.

That damned scent.

Ansel smelled like raw lust with melting blueberry ice cream on top. My stupid dick throbbed more than my injured ankle. I needed to go outside and jerk off, which felt like a crime. But lying just a couple of feet away from the young omega with a raging boner was even worse.

I tried to be as quiet as possible when I rose from the air mattress. With the blanket wrapped around myself, I crept out of the cabin.

The weather had cleared. It might even be sunny tomorrow. Through the gaps between the black silhouettes of trees, stars glimmered in the dark-blue sky. The fresh air didn't do shit to calm my libido. I limped to a nearby tree and leaned on it with my back to the cabin. There, I stroked my dick, trying to get it over with quickly and not think about the sweet, young omega sleeping only a few yards away. Of course, he was all I could think about. Christ, he looked even younger than most of my students, which should have turned me off, but Ansel must have flipped some switch in my brain. This had never happened to me before. It had been a good decade since I'd last been interested in someone so young. It was disturbing, confusing, and way too powerful.

The scent. His plush, full lips. His big, glassy eyes, so warm and deep. The slope of his neck, the soft skin on his throat... I'd bury my nose at the base of his throat and inhale... *He's sitting in my lap, rolling his hips, holding on to my shoulders, and he moans...*

My cum splattered a blueberry bush by my feet.

Panting, I stood there, guilt creeping in mere seconds after my release. I'd jerked off to the fantasy of Ansel. If he knew, he'd kick me out in the middle of the night and bolt the door.

I used the watering can from the outdoor shower to wash away the traces of the deed. Then I limped back to the cabin.

Ansel, thank heavens, was deeply asleep, but his granddad looked down from the picture on the shelf. My neck heated with shame.

I cowered on the floor, a couple of feet away from Ansel. He was safe. I'd only fantasized about him. He'd never know. No harm done, right?

The bed creaked. His arm fell over the edge, his hand dangling right in front of my face. His thin, fragile fingers twitched once—was he dreaming of something?

I lifted my head and sniffed at his wrist, careful not to touch him.

Heaven help me. I'd never smelled anything so tantalizing and delicious as Ansel's innocent scent.

He seemed so breakable, but he was fierce, wasn't he?

I wouldn't allow anybody to hurt him—not that there was anyone nearby. But the idea of me protecting Ansel as he slept soothed me.

7

T'M GOING TO FLY

Ansel

IT FELT domestic to eat breakfast with Pascal. Yesterday, I'd freaked out when I realized I would have to let him stay overnight. Not like I'd ever spent the night with a strange alpha in the same room. But in the end, I didn't mind. I slept like a log, knowing he was near. When I woke up because of some dream I couldn't remember, I glanced at his big body sprawled on the floor and fell asleep again.

Was it foolish of me to feel safe with him? But if he wanted to hurt me, he could have done it already. He seemed like a decent guy. Or a decent dragon.

"Ansel, I'll see tonight how I'm doing, but I think I could try to leave tomorrow morning." He paused, poking around his bowl with his spoon. His forehead crinkled. "I think you should come with me. We'll find some cell service, then you need to call for help with your car. You shouldn't stay here alone when you don't know if you can return safely."

He was right. I just didn't want to go back yet and face the music. My parents must have figured out already that I wasn't at the hotel. My phone would explode with messages and missed calls. When I thought of it, my stomach ached.

Pascal leaned forward, studying me with unnerving focus.

"Ansel?"

"Yes?"

"How old are you, really?"

I fidgeted, picking at a side pocket on my hiking pants. It bothered me that I'd lied to him, but he didn't need to know, did he? "Why are you so concerned about my age? I'm an adult."

We sat on the bed, each with a bowl of cereal. He was close enough for me to feel the warmth coming off his huge body. With only the towel over his hips, all the naked skin on display, he seemed to take over the entire cabin. He smelled nice, like the forest, without any of the typical sweaty alpha stink. He just gazed at me kindly and waited.

I slumped, my defiance evaporating. "I'm nineteen. Do you want to see my ID?"

"I'm good, but thanks for telling me." He still looked worried. "Why are you hiding out here?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm wondering if I can help you in any way. I owe you a lot. But even if I didn't, you seem like a good person. I would hate for you to be in any kind of danger."

He meant well, I knew.

"I'm not in any danger. Not like that." I leaned back against the folded sleeping bag, and my head hit the wall with a thump. If I could just bang the courage I needed into my skull, that would be awesome. "My parents thought I was going to a resort my father had booked. By the time they must have found out I wasn't there, they should have received an email from me that might have stopped them from calling the police, but I have no signal, so I don't know."

"What happened?"

"There's this guy."

With my eyes on the ceiling, I didn't see Pascal's reaction, but I heard how he sucked in a breath. I hurried to explain before he jumped to conclusions.

"His name is Valentin. My parents think he's, like, my ideal man. He's been around for years, an acquaintance of the family, but lately he's been...expressing an interest." I sighed.

There was no way to be honest and not admit to my stupidity. “Thing is, I probably encouraged him. I didn’t know what I wanted and let it go too far. Then my parents were hosting this party last Friday. He got me alone, kissed me, and wanted to get engaged. So I told him I needed time to think about it, which of course pissed him off because he thought we were a done deal. Then my parents got pissed because they thought the same. My papa took my phone and wrote this absurd message to Valentin that made it look like I wanted to marry him but got too nervous. As if his proposal got me so excited I had a breakdown or something ridiculous like that. Valentin bought it and is coming for dinner on Friday, where I’m expected to be all smiles and celebrate our engagement.”

As I recapped the story to Pascal, I got angrier and angrier. How come nobody ever wondered what I wanted? None of these people who claimed to love me even cared what I thought.

“I don’t understand,” Pascal said. “Are you engaged?”

“I don’t get it either. Nobody asked me if I wanted to marry him, not even Valentin. They just assumed.”

“And you don’t?”

“No!” Yeah, I was pissed. My stomach hurt, which always happened when I got frustrated. “They’re going to kill me, but I can’t make myself love someone when I don’t, can I?”

“Can you be honest with your parents? They shouldn’t force you to marry someone you don’t even like. This is not the eighteen hundreds. Honestly, even expecting you to marry so early in life seems rather strange.”

“It’s not that uncommon in my parents’ circles.”

“No?”

“My father is...” It felt so good to be talking to Pascal about it. I might as well lay it all out there. “My name is Ansel Perrault.”

“Why is that...” I glanced at Pascal just in time to see his eyes widen with recognition. “Your father owns the Perrault concern?”

“Yes. That I’m out here alone, outside of a preapproved resort, without security detail and an entourage of staff, is *not* normal. My father will have a fit. It was different when I was a kid. But now everybody knows my parents from the media. I’m lucky they kept me out of the limelight because I can still walk down the street without strangers recognizing my face. Anyway. Getting married before my first heat would save me a lot of potential problems. If I’m still single by then, my parents will probably hire some high-profile heat teacher, but my reputation will be questioned.”

Pascal was quiet for a while. When I looked at him, he was staring at me with this focused, almost angry frown. If I didn’t know better, I’d be worried he was annoyed with me. But it was just the things I’d said that bugged him.

“You’re not going to marry that man just to appease your parents,” he stated, a dark scowl marring his emerald eyes. He had beautiful eyes. Like huge green jewels. Now they glowed, and I felt a little strange staring into them.

It hit me at that moment. Pascal was a mythical creature, a shape-shifter who could soar through the sky. I knew but hadn’t truly realized, but now I did. It felt so huge. Life-changing.

The dragons were real. Pascal was one of them and emanated this energy, this concealed power that had me leaning closer until I could see the glimmering gold in the green of his irises...

I blinked.

“I’m not going to marry him,” I blurted. “I knew that the first night I came here. I’m stalling because I don’t know what will happen. I’m a little scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

“I guess I’m going to have to take responsibility for my own decisions. Be an adult. Marrying Valentin would be the safe choice. I’d fulfill the expectations of my family and friends and continue to live the life I’m used to.”

“Do you want that?”

“No. I want to finish college. Go traveling. Meet people. That’s what I want to do. But it’s scary too.”

“You’re much braver than you think, Ansel.”

I wanted to believe him. “Maybe.”

“You’ve traveled here on your own and met me. And I have it from reliable sources that I’m as scary as it gets. But you’re not afraid at all.”

“You’re not that scary.”

He looked insulted. “I beg your pardon, young man. I have a wingspan of forty feet, razor-sharp teeth, and twenty daggers for claws. I’m a monster, the most dangerous creature you’ve ever encountered.”

I snorted. “You are indeed terrifying. A big bad dragon.”

He grinned, bowing his head politely. “Thank you for the compliment.”

A strange lightness filled my chest when I laughed with Pascal. *Dragons are real.*

I smiled wide at him, and he smiled back. Then I laughed. The warm, giddy feeling spread through me, my heart beating a little faster.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, even as he laughed with me.

“Dragons are real.”

“They are. It’s no laughing matter,” he said with mock sternness.

But I was on a roll. “My granddad was right, and my parents were wrong. Not under any circumstances am I letting them make decisions for me anymore. The world is a magical place. There’s so much more I can do or be. And they have no idea.”

“You can be whoever you want, Ansel.” His eyes smoldered when he said that.

I sat up, determined. “Tomorrow, I’m coming back with you.”

“Back to Ardaine?”

“Yes. I’ll go home and talk to my parents.”

Pascal smiled at me. For the umpteenth time, it occurred to me how handsome he looked, in a rugged way I wasn’t used to appreciating in alphas.

“How about we fly back?” he asked.

It took me a few seconds to get his meaning. Then my heartbeat went into overdrive. “We can fly? You’ll carry me?”

“We have to get up before dawn. I can try to shift. If my wing is okay, we can fly to my car.”

“Wow.”

“Do you want to?”

“Of course, I want to. I’m going to fly with a dragon!” Then I deflated. “How are we going to take all my stuff? I mean, we can leave it here. I’ll pick it up later or send someone...”

“I’ll carry it.”

“But it’s a lot.”

“Ansel, when I’m healed, I can carry the entire cabin with you in it. Don’t worry about it. How did you bring the food here? Grocery bags, or did you have something else?”

“I have three big canvas bags and my backpack. I went two times with a full load, but we’ve already eaten a lot. If we leave all the canned stuff, it might fit.”

“Okay. We’ll take the perishables and all your personal things and leave the rest.”

“That works.”

I was going to fly. Some people took a plane, some a helicopter, and some had even been to space in a rocket. But I had by far the coolest means of transportation ever. I was a little nervous about seeing Pascal change forms, but as I got to know him better, I feared it less and less.

WE SPENT the day packing and securing the cabin. Pascal could walk now without limping, favoring his foot only a little.

He was drying the dishes and putting them away when something occurred to me.

“Do you do something else?” I asked.

“I’m...doing the dishes? What do you mean?”

“No. Like a job. Are you just a dragon, and that’s it? Or do you have a job? Is that something you can tell me?”

His expression brightened with recognition. “Sure. I teach math.”

I gaped, mute, as Pascal the math teacher wiped a mug and placed it on a shelf. He took another, swirled the dish towel around it, then put it next to the first, neatly aligning the handles.

“You’re a math teacher,” I mumbled.

He threw his arms in the air, sending the dish towel flying. A chuckle bubbled out of his chest. “Out of all the things I’ve said and all the things you’ve seen, *this* shocks you?”

“Um. Yes? I mean, together with the other stuff it does.”

Pascal put one hand on his hip and cocked his head to the side. “What should I do, then? What would be the ideal dragon occupation?”

I gave it some thought. “A firefighter?”

Pascal burst into laughter. “I’m so sorry to disappoint you, Ansel.”

“That’s okay. Math is okay, I guess.”

“Okay? You hate it, don’t you?”

“It wasn’t my favorite subject in high school, no. Where do you teach?”

“College level, at Ardaine University.”

“So you’re that good at it, huh?”

“Applied logic is my domain, but no, I’m nothing special, I’m afraid. Just your normal college professor, tweed, elbow patches, and a thermos with stale coffee.”

“You don’t look like a professor.” I let my eyes travel down his mostly naked body and up again. Nope. Definitely not your usual professor. “I bet half of your students have a terrible crush on you.”

Pascal opened his mouth and closed it again, staring at me with what could only be described as dread.

“What? Don’t tell me it’s never happened.”

He straightened his shoulders and studiously wiped an already dry plate. “The university has a strict anti-fraternization policy. The staff is forbidden from having any relations with undergraduate students. Relations with graduate students are discouraged and must be disclosed to a committee that might pursue disciplinary action. So when it happens, it’s awkward and very inconvenient.”

“Meaning it has happened?” It had been my own stupid notion, but now the idea of Pascal’s students fawning over him annoyed me.

“I have been hit on once or twice. I clearly communicated that the interest was not mutual, and I’ve considered wearing a fake wedding ring.”

That made me grin. “Not a bad idea. I’m at Wintringham College. We have this young, hot French alpha teaching phonetics. Everybody I know hates the subject, but this guy’s lectures have the best turnout.”

“Wintringham?” Pascal’s eyebrows flew up.

“Yeah. I know.”

“It’s a good school, I hear.”

“Small, secluded, very expensive, with enough famous names to ensure enhanced privacy measures. Everybody knows about everybody, but nobody trusts anyone.”

“That sounds lonely.”

I shrugged one shoulder. Time to change the subject. “How old are you anyway?” I asked. “And if you say two hundred thirty, I’m going to have so many questions.”

He gave me a soft smile over his shoulder. “I’m thirty-nine.”

“Huh.”

He didn’t look almost forty. Thirty or thirty-five maybe, but not forty. But what did I know? I liked the way he looked. If he were my professor, I might have been one of those students with a crush. But I would never have the guts to hit on him.

THE FOOD SUPPLIES WERE SORTED, the bags packed, and the kitchen counter wiped clean. We would eat cereal bars and apples for breakfast so as not to create any mess just before we had to leave. Pascal said that since the sun came up at half past six, we needed to get up at four and be ready to fly before five. Apparently, the dragons only flew during the night.

I thought I’d never be able to sleep, not knowing what was about to happen tomorrow before dawn.

Even so, as soon as my head hit the pillow, I disappeared into limbo land.

MIDNIGHT ENLIGHTENMENT

Pascal

I COULDN'T HAVE SLEPT for longer than a few hours because when I woke up, the forest outside was still dark. I stretched on the mattress and wiggled my toes. My ankle felt significantly better. Rolling my shoulders, I inspected the sensations in my back. With only some residual soreness, I could try shifting today. Worst case, we'd wait for one more day.

Sleeping this close to Ansel after spending the entire day with him, I was all but soaked in his scent. His soft breaths reached my ears. When I lay still, I could even hear his heartbeat. I'd tried to talk myself out of the attraction, but it felt like being caught in quicksand. The more I resisted, kicking around uselessly, the deeper I sank.

If it were just looks and scent, I could have fought it. Probably. I'd done that before without much effort. I could see and smell the young omegas in my classes, and even the prettiest boys were easy for me to ignore. But no mental exercise could reduce the sharp-edged awareness I felt around Ansel. *All of him* fascinated me.

The way he moved, his nimble hands, the curve of his neck when he paused to think about something, how his forehead creased and smoothed out...and his fierce independence facing his controlling parents, the intricate workings of his mind, how he didn't take any of my bullshit and never let me intimidate him even though he was two decades younger than me and so tiny I could fit him in my pocket.

In the quiet darkness, I stopped kicking around and allowed myself to feel it. Smiling, I closed my eyes and *really* thought of him. Fizzy bubbles and glitter twirled in my mind around the laughing image of Ansel.

Oh my stars, I had it bad! For a nineteen-year-old.

Quietly, I sat up. There he was. Eyes closed, lips parted, hands folded in front of his face... I was grateful for my heightened senses. Even in the dark, I could trace his features.

I couldn't tear my gaze off him.

Warmth grew in my chest, pulsating in time with the beating of Ansel's heart. A lock of hair covered his forehead. My hand itched with a physical need to brush it away. I could lean in...

I jerked back and sat on my hands.

What was I doing?

Horrified at myself, I stared at the innocent sleeping boy.

Safe. Ansel had to be safe. Even from me.

Like last night, I got up and left the cabin. With my foot only subtly protesting the strain, I walked around and breathed in the fresh air, trying to clear my head.

I ached with the need to go back and sit close to Ansel. To do what? Watch him sleep, like a creep?

The dragon was restless. Anxious. It urged me to hurry back, my spine tingling.

Then the proverbial lightbulb flickered to life in my skull. I stopped in my tracks.

It couldn't be.

That boy in there...? *No*.

I looked at the cabin, a crooked black silhouette in the night forest. Thin wisps of omega scent drifted through the air, clearly marking the path toward him. I could sense him clearly, feel the exact spot where he lay curled in his sleeping

bag, as if his heart had become a new center of gravity in my world.

Never had anyone smelled like him. Never had anyone made me feel like this. I was hungry, aroused, afraid...raw. I felt raw.

It hit me harder than the lightning that had nearly killed me a couple of days ago.

Ansel is my mate.

FLIGHT

Ansel

WHEN MY PHONE beeped at four in the morning, I felt like something had run me over. But I only had to think about flying with Pascal the dragon and I was wide awake.

I turned on the flashlight and hung it on a hook on the wall. Pascal grunted and turned, blinking up at me.

“Hi,” I whispered.

His lips curved into a sweet, sleepy smile. “Hi. Did you sleep okay?”

“Like the dead.”

“Good.”

“And you?”

He shrugged. “I’m fine.”

He sat up and rolled his shoulders, then tilted his head from side to side, stretching his neck. The blanket bunched up around his hips. I couldn’t get over how wide his chest was. Would my arms even meet if I hugged him? A hug. *My face between those big pecs...*

I looked around the room, reminding myself of the tasks at hand. We needed to eat something quickly, then I’d pack the sleeping bag, change into my hiking pants, and put my sweats into my backpack.

“Will you be able to...shift?” I asked. It was so weird to be thinking about it.

“I think so. It doesn’t hurt anymore. I’m only a little sore.”

“Breakfast?”

Pascal nodded. “Let’s do it.”

He scrambled up, holding the towel around his hips before fastening it properly.

We ate a couple of cereal bars, then I filled the water bottles while Pascal went out to pee and wash up. I took my turn and packed the last of my things. Then we stood in front of the cabin, the door locked and the key hidden in a hollow log under the window. I’d dressed in layers according to Pascal’s instruction, so I was a bit too hot under my fluffy hoodie and jacket.

“So. How are we going to do this?” I asked, looking up at Pascal.

Hands on his hips, he gazed around the dark forest. It suddenly occurred to me that with the towel, he looked like Tarzan. I covered my mouth to hide the quiet chuckle that escaped me.

“We need to find a clearing and put the bags in the middle. We passed something like that yesterday. Down by the lake maybe?”

All right. “If it’s large enough?”

“Sure. Worst case, I get my claws wet and lift from the lake.” He winked, smiling. There was this jittery energy around him.

“You’re looking forward to this, aren’t you?”

“Always,” Pascal said. “Flying is the best.”

We walked down toward the shallow end of the lake until we reached a place where the trees gave way to bushes and marshland. Pascal walked briskly, carrying my bags easily. He paused on the trail and set the canvas bags down on a somewhat dry patch of grass.

“This is good. Give me your backpack.”

I swung it off my shoulders. Pascal took it, arranging it, together with the bags, so the handles were sticking up properly. I assumed he did that so he could grab them with his claws.

Granddad, can you see this? This is about to get wild.

We needed to hurry because the horizon was getting brighter by the minute. Pascal stretched his back and looked me up and down.

“Zip up all your pockets.”

“Why?” I found his instruction funny, no idea why, so I laughed nervously.

“What? Do you want to lose your keys and wallet over the Cross River mountain range? You’d never find them again.”

“I’m just nervous, I think.”

He frowned. “Are you afraid of heights?”

I only laughed harder.

Pascal grimaced. “I probably should have asked that earlier, huh?”

“Yeah. A bit too late for that.” I patted my pockets, checking that all my belongings were safe. Then I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head and tightened the strings.

“Are you ready?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be. Let’s do this.”

He stared at me, a strange little smile on his now scruffy face. He hadn’t shaved in three days, and it showed. “You’re incredible, Ansel.” He said it with awe. I’d expect sarcasm, but there was none.

Blushing, I looked at my boots.

“Close your eyes for this part, okay?”

I nodded.

Soft pads of feet on grass, a whoosh of wind, then...holy hell! I covered my ears and squeezed my eyes closed.

Gusts of air blew into my face while the ground vibrated under my chunky boots.

“Ansel,” he said gently. Except his gentle voice was like boulders rolling.

Deep breath. I can do this. It's just Pascal.

I opened one eye, then the other. It took me a second to adjust to the dim light of the forest before dawn.

And I fell on my ass. For the third time, dammit.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight. When I'd spotted him after the storm, he'd lain in a groove, on his side, but now he loomed right in front of me, taller than a two-story building. His long neck bent down like a damned construction crane.

He lowered his head and paused with his huge muzzle right in front of me. His massive green-gold eyes blinked, slightly out of sync.

“Take your time.”

His hot breath warmed my entire body. Oh, he smelled nice. Like Pascal the human. Well, it was Pascal. And it wasn't.

His skin shimmered, the shape of him blurring like the horizon on a hot summer afternoon, his colors undecipherable in the dim light. I could easily imagine that if he flew above me, I wouldn't be able to see him. He waited, still and magnificent.

My head empty except for sheer awe, I lifted my hand to touch his nose. It was warm and dry, warmer than human skin, and silky soft. It felt nice. I rubbed him carefully with my palm, caressing him between his nostrils and up between his eyes. I had to stretch my arm to reach.

He sniffled, and I tore my hand away.

“Sorry. Please, continue.”

He nudged my hand with his nose like some oversized, cuddly puppy. Another crazy giggle escaped me as I petted

him.

“Mhmm. That’s nice,” he purred.

Tilting his head to the side, he offered me his cheek, so I used both hands and rubbed along his jaw and around his eyes and his forehead. I hugged his head to me and massaged his neck. The spikes lining his head looked ominous but were in fact blunt. They felt super smooth in my hands.

Then I realized I was petting Pascal—the big alpha man, who’d been walking half naked around my cabin and had maybe even starred in a dream or two I’d swiftly suppressed. I was touching *him*.

My hands trembled, so I dropped my arms.

Pascal lifted his humungous head.

“We should probably go. It’s already getting too bright.”

“Oh. Okay,” I stammered out when I found my voice. “Should I...sit on your back?”

“That would be too dangerous without equipment. We’d need a proper harness for that.”

“It exists? A harness for dragon flying?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“So people fly with dragons? Who? When? How?”

Pascal backed off a few steps, leaving small craters in the ground where he’d stood. “That’s not relevant now,” he said. “I’ll grab the bags with my hind legs and carry you with my front. Give me a sec.”

And he lifted.

If I weren’t already sitting down, I would have fallen again. Pascal waved his enormous wings, sending leaves aflutter around us.

“Can you get the towel?”

I scrambled up and caught the towel he’d worn, which was about to fly away in the small storm he had caused. I folded it and stuffed it into one of the bags.

Hovering above the clearing, Pascal hooked his claws through the handles of my bags.

Then he grabbed me.

I yelled with surprise when he lifted me from the ground, and then I yelled some more when he repositioned me in his hands. Clutching at a couple of claws, I shook, my stomach swooping.

What the hell had I agreed to?

“Shh. You’re okay. Look.”

I sat in his palm, his fingers and claws wrapped around me like safety bars on a roller coaster. And I flew.

The lake glittered under me. The treetops and cliffs got smaller as we rose toward the mountain range. Pale violet light lined the horizon, staining the undersides of a few fluffy clouds, and the landscape unfolded under me in hues of dark blue and green. Silver ribbons of creeks crisscrossed the forest. The trees got shorter and further apart as we flew up along the mountainside.

Pascal circled a sharp cliff sticking up from the slope and swooped down before rising again.

I couldn’t hold it in. The exhilaration burst out of me.

“Woohoo! This is insaaaneee!”

The dragon’s chest above me reverberated with laughter. Like thunder rolling over the peaks.

“Hold on.”

He tilted us to the side and did a wide loop, circling one of the lower peaks.

I loved Cross River. There was no place on earth I found more beautiful than the mountains around Granddad’s cabin. Seeing them now, I had tears in my eyes even as I yelled with excitement.

Oh, if I could fly like Pascal, I’d *live* up here and just hover above the mountains every day. Away from the city, away from honking cars and crowded restaurants, far away

from the rules my parents had imposed on me and that I'd been following like a sheep because I hadn't known better.

Now I knew.

I couldn't go back to that life. Within the walls of my family's mansion, I'd been a bundle of anxiety. That wasn't a home. Home was where one felt safe and happy, free from the everyday stress outside.

I wanted a home like that. It couldn't be Granddad's cabin—I wasn't that naive—but I would create a home for myself where I felt good.

On my own terms.

Cross River appeared underneath, wild and dangerous after the torrential rains. It thundered down the valley, foaming as naked branches and logs poked out of the brown water in a chaotic dance.

We flew along the stream, but all too soon, Pascal began descending. The entire flight couldn't have taken more than twenty minutes. The dragon turned above the empty parking lot by the park's entrance and hovered over a nearby meadow. There, he put me on my feet. He dropped the bags right next to me and landed gracefully.

He shook and stretched his wings before folding them to the ground.

Now, I could see him a little better, in all his beastly glory. I stared, my pulse in my ears. I was so high on adrenaline I was shaking all over.

“Um. Can you turn around?” the dragon asked.

“Oh, sure.”

After the ominous snapping and hissing sounds ceased, Pascal's voice came from behind me, human again. “All clear.”

I turned to face him. He had the towel around his hips again.

“How are you?” he asked.

I didn't really know. I was still trembling but not from cold. My knees felt weak, and my cheeks burned after being exposed to the cold wind above the mountain range. And yet...

"Can we do that again?"

Laughing, Pascal grabbed the bags, including my backpack, and began walking. He didn't reply. Dazed, I followed him over the meadow to a sleek black Volvo parked under a sprawling oak. The roof had a few small branches and leaves on top, traces of the recent rainstorms, but nothing too bad.

Pascal opened the trunk and pulled out a pair of boxers. I turned away, giving him privacy as he dressed. The sun was about to rise, the forest around us brightening quickly. It would be a sunny morning, only a few fluffy clouds rolling over the sky.

When I heard Pascal loading the bags, I glanced at him.

"Wow."

He closed the trunk. "Huh?"

"So that's Professor Pembroke."

Shrugging one shoulder, he smiled awkwardly.

He wore dark jeans, a green button-down that enhanced the color of his eyes, and a casual charcoal jacket. He'd been a dragon just a few minutes ago, dammit.

But he looked nice. Stylish.

He lifted his arms and twirled around.

"Do you approve?"

I did. I liked Pascal a lot. I'd petted the dragon's head and touched his face but couldn't do it now.

"I do," I said quietly. I wanted to lean into his wide chest and ask him to hug me.

He nodded toward the car. "Let's go, then."

IO

THE IMPOSSIBLE GOODBYE

Pascal

AS SOON AS we left the parking lot by the national park, Ansel's phone began bleeping with messages. From the corner of my eye, I saw him chew on his lower lip as he read them.

"Everything okay?"

"Not really."

"Your parents?"

"Yes. I need to call them before they tell the FBI that I've been kidnapped or something."

"Do you want me to stop somewhere so you can make a call in private?"

"You already know everything anyway."

He took a couple of deep breaths and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hi. Before you say anything, I was at Granddad's cabin with no signal, but I'm on my way home now."

Yelling ensued that I couldn't decipher, not even with my slightly superior hearing. There were two voices, so I assumed his parents had him on speaker phone. A word came through here and there. I heard "irresponsible," "hotel," "police," then "Valentin." I tried not to let the name affect me, but of course it did. I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Ansel listened quietly to his parents ranting for a good couple of minutes.

“I’m on my way back to the city,” he said evenly. “I should be at the estate in a couple of hours.”

More arguing, but not as loud as before.

“I’ll explain when I get there.”

Ansel averted his face, looking out through the passenger window.

I drove up the interchange and accelerated onto the highway. The two lanes stretched in front of us, eerily empty this early in the morning, but the traffic would get worse closer to the city.

“I will explain everything when I get home. I’m safe, nothing serious has happened, but I need to end the call.”

This time, just one voice came from the speaker, distinct and menacing. “I have meetings at the headquarters today. You’ll wait at home until I come back.” I assumed that was Ansel’s alpha father.

“I will,” Ansel said calmly. “I have to go now. See you soon.”

After his parents hung up, Ansel rummaged in his backpack until he pulled out a cable. He gestured at the console between us.

“Can I charge it here?”

“Of course.”

He plugged in the phone to charge and slumped in his seat. I gave the road the little attention it needed, most of my senses on him, but I didn’t know how to read his expression.

“Are you okay?”

“Surprisingly, yes.” He gave a little scoff. “I’m angry and finding out that it helps with my anxiety. I should get angry more often.”

“What are you angry about?”

“That they don’t care. The whole phone call was about how my disappearance screwed up their schedule. They had to

cancel going to see a play because of me. They asked where I'd been, but not why I'd gone to the cabin or how I was doing. I finish the call, and the first thing *you* ask is if I'm okay. You don't even know me."

"I'm getting to know you."

Ansel blew out a long breath. "Sorry. I'm just so mad."

"You have every right to be."

"As soon as I said I was on my way, they began yelling at me like I was twelve."

"Maybe they yelled because they were worried about you?"

"Worried? They don't care about how I'm feeling as long as I do what I'm told."

"I'm sorry, Ansel."

He wrapped his arms around his torso and scooted lower in the seat. With a sigh, he rested his head on the passenger window.

"Can we stop somewhere during the next half an hour or so? I think I'll need to pee soon."

"Sure."

"How is your foot? I can drive."

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"Are you one of those people who never lets others drive their car?"

I chuckled. "I swear, I'm not. It's yours if you want."

"That's okay. I'm all over the place. Better you drive and keep us intact."

We rode in silence for a while, but in my mind, it was earsplitting havoc.

In a mere couple of hours, I'd have to say goodbye to him. After he'd touched me in my dragon form, I had no doubt that Ansel was my mate. Every instinct I had was screaming at me to hold on to him and never let him out of my sight ever again.

Except Ansel didn't know any of that. He had no idea something like fated mates even existed. He was just freeing himself from the constraints of another relationship, fighting his parents' demands, and now I would swoop in and snatch him for myself? I couldn't do that.

But could I open the car door in front of his home and let him leave?

Impossible.

All the options, most of them dead ends, tumbled around in my head. When the Ardaine skyline rose ahead, I wasn't any closer to a solution than I'd been last night.

Ansel had to choose me freely. He had to recognize the bond himself. For that, I had to let him go.

I stopped to refuel, and Ansel used the bathroom. He came back with two cups of coffee.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I took one with milk and one black. The sugars are in my pocket."

"I'm fine with whatever."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"Can I take the one with milk?"

"Of course. I prefer black."

He pouted adorably. "You said you were fine with whatever."

"I was being a gentleman."

"Okay, then." He thrust the lidded cup at me.

"Thank you. Can you put your parents' place into the navigation?"

"Sure."

Ansel typed and searched while I drank my coffee. The route appeared on the screen, only thirty-two minutes to our destination. It was barely nine in the morning when we took off from the gas station. My one and only meeting for the day

was at ten. It was technically fall break, so nobody had missed me yesterday. With everything that had happened to me during the weekend, it seemed odd that I'd be at work on time.

Reluctant but not finding a way to postpone the inevitable, I started the car and navigated back onto the freeway.

I needed to ask Ansel for his number or at least give him mine. I could tell him I was worried about him and wanted him to let me know how it went with his parents. That wouldn't be a lie.

As I was sorting out in my head what to say, Ansel wiggled in his seat and turned to face me.

"Pascal? Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"We've established that I could *not* ask you anything."

Actually, being my mate, he could. But he didn't know that. "You can, but I might not answer."

"This is not dragon related."

"Okay. Ask away."

"Um. I don't want to say goodbye and never see you again. It feels like we could...be friends. And I'd like that."

I fought to keep my voice level. "I'd like that too."

"Could we maybe try and stay in touch?"

"I can give you my number. That way you can message me how it went with your parents."

I glanced at him briefly just when his smile lit up. The sun peeked out from behind a mountain as we drove, casting golden beams all around him.

He was dazzling.

"Awesome. Tell me."

He grabbed his phone, and I rattled off the digits. My phone vibrated a few seconds later.

"I just sent a hi, so you have my number too."

“Good. Thank you.”

Ansel put his phone away and finished his coffee.

After a while, he fidgeted, and I could feel his gaze on me. “Was it weird that I asked?”

“No. I’m glad you did.”

“I don’t have many friends,” he said. “With the way my family socializes, it’s complicated. My father always assumes people keep in touch only because they want something. In many cases, he’s right.”

“What about your omega dad?”

“Papa lives in his own world. He likes to think that he’s somehow superior to others, but he’s really just an outsider. Most people find him difficult.”

It struck me how lonely Ansel’s life must have been with parents like that. As if reading my thoughts, he shrugged. “Among my family, I was closest to Granddad.”

Whom he’d lost two years ago.

“I’m sorry, Ansel.”

He shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“I wonder how he knew about us. People can’t see us after dark.”

“I have no idea. Maybe something happened? Like with you and me.”

“Maybe.”

I wished I could delay the goodbye, and maybe I subconsciously tried, driving just a little slower than I normally would. All too soon, the countryside changed from wilderness to parks and golf courses. We passed a few gated estates and private driveways.

The navigation showed one last left turn, then the red dot appeared, announcing our destination. I stopped in front of a tall iron fence, and Ansel got out to talk to a guard in a small

gatehouse. When the gate began sliding to the side, he hopped back into the passenger seat.

The road wasn't asphalt but paved with small cobblestones in mosaic patterns. As we drove, a thick forest of oaks and pines opened into a vast lawn with a fountain in the middle. The driveway circled around it and widened into a parking area big enough for at least eight vehicles in front of a stone staircase. The house rose above us, four stories of sheer opulence, complete with a couple of snarling marble lions on a balcony above the main entrance and gargoyles lurking under the roof.

Freaking gargoyles.

"My great-great-grandfather was a fan of old European architecture," Ansel explained, sounding guilty for some reason. "He rebuilt the house in a blend of various historical styles."

"I'm not judging."

He laughed. "You were. But that's okay. I know how it looks."

"And you grew up here?"

"Yes. I'd show you around, but you said you need to be at work at ten."

That. I barely had time to help Ansel with his bags.

We parked and unloaded Ansel's things. I was about to carry the canvas bags up the stairs, but Ansel stopped me.

"We have staff. Leave it."

He stood by the base of the grand staircase, looking even smaller than before. How could I leave him here unprotected?

Ansel gave me a sad smile. "I guess this is it."

"You have my number."

"I do. I'll message you tonight."

I nodded, afraid that if I said anything else, my voice wouldn't hold. I opened my arms, and Ansel stepped into the

embrace. He laid his head on my chest and let me hold him.

Inhaling the sweet cream and blueberry scent from his hair, I closed my eyes.

“Thank you so much, Pascal.”

“It was you who helped me, remember?” I whispered.

“We flew together.”

“That we did.”

“It was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

My eyes stung as I squeezed him tight. Ansel sighed. When he tensed, shifting just an inch, I let my arms drop. He stepped away and looked at me. Could he see my heart breaking?

The dragon was hissing and growling inside me, clawing his way out. If he could, he would grab Ansel and carry him away, hiding his mate in safety.

But I had to let Ansel go.

For now.

“Bye, Pascal.”

“Message me.” Fuck, I sounded hollow.

“I will.”

He gave a wobbly smile, and I forced myself to move. One foot in front of the other, open the car door, get in, seatbelt, pedal, start. Leave.

I didn’t look back.

I DRIFTED through the meeting in a daze. I barely remembered what I’d said, but as my three doctoral students were leaving the conference room, everything seemed somewhat normal. Everyone had their heads full of plans for the break. If the math professor acted strange today, the students probably didn’t notice.

Hugo found me on a bench behind the cafeteria. He took one look at me and his expression went blank with surprise.

“What happened?”

I rubbed my face with both hands. “Do I look that bad?”

“Like someone died.” Then he sucked in a breath. “Oh Lord, I’m so sorry. Did you lose someone...”

“Nobody died. Nothing like that.”

“Phew. Okay. What’s the matter, then? You look like shit run over.”

I chuckled helplessly. “I found my mate.”

Hugo’s expression went from concern to glee comically fast. “That’s wonderful, my friend! Congratulations! Where is he?” he looked around as if Ansel could be hiding in the bushes.

“He’s at home. He doesn’t know.”

“Oh. Tell him then.”

“It’s not easy.”

“Nobody said it was. But start from the beginning.”

“His name is Ansel. His family is filthy rich and puts loads of unreasonable expectations on him. I met him when I crashed behind his cabin in dragon form, and he saw me shift. He let me stay for a couple of nights while I healed. That was when I felt the bond grow. When I flew him to my car over the mountains, I knew for sure. But then I had to drive him home and leave.”

Hugo stared with his mouth open. “You crashed? And he saw you shift?”

I winced. “I went flying on Saturday. I didn’t double-check the weather, ended up in a storm, and had to land in the forest, barely avoiding a lightning bolt. I remained in dragon form for the rest of the night and took a long nap, hoping my wing would feel better. When Ansel found me, I deemed it best to shift back.”

“How did he react?”

“That’s the thing. He was cool about it and didn’t let me intimidate him. He’s tough as nails.”

“That’s great.” Hugo grinned. “So now you have to take the conservative approach and date the guy, huh?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Why?”

“For one, his parents are forcing him into an engagement with someone else.”

Hugo jerked back, his eyebrows flying up. “Is he from the past?”

“No.” I laughed humorlessly. “But his alpha father might be.”

“If he’s really your mate, and judging by the state of you, I’d guess he is, then he feels the bond as well. He won’t marry someone else if he can avoid it.”

I blew out a deep breath. “There’s more.”

“I’m waiting.”

“He’s nineteen.”

My friend blinked and blinked again, his face blank. Then he burst out laughing.

“Hugo! This is not a joke.”

Chortling merrily, Hugo wiped his eyes. “Oh, but it is. The best joke fortune could have played on you. He’s even younger than Jason Jacobson.” Then he froze, his mouth still contorted in a laugh. “Wait a minute. He’s not a student *here*, is he?”

“No. He’s a sophomore at Wintringham.”

Hugo slapped my back. “You lucky bastard. Nineteen?”

“He’s very mature for his age.”

“Yeah, that’s what the daddies always say about their good little boys.”

I bristled. “That was uncalled for. He’s my mate!”

Hugo grinned sheepishly. “Sorry. But there’d be nothing wrong with that either, you know that, right? And you must admit, that after all the fuss you made about students hitting on you, it *is* rather funny.”

“I found my mate and had to leave him. I’m not in the mood to be laughed at.”

My friend got serious. “But what else is there, Pascal? You’ll be moping around a lot until he figures it out. Better have the right attitude from the start.”

“It’s only been three hours, and I already want to shift and burn this place to the ground.”

Hugo pursed his lips and looked around thoughtfully. The campus was already empty, everybody having left early to travel home for the holiday. A lawnmower groaned to life somewhere on the other side of the building, making a flock of pigeons shoot into the sky, trying to escape the monster.

“Do you at least have his number? An email address?”

“Yes. He asked to stay in touch.”

“See? That’s great news.”

“How the hell am I going to survive this? This is hell.”

“Look at it this way.” He leaned closer as if he was about to tell me a secret. “You’ve found your mate!”

Then he slapped my back and briskly stood up. “I know you feel like crap, dear Pascal. I get it. But you and I both know it’s only temporary. Maybe tonight, you’ll find him on your doorstep.”

II

THE LAST DROP

Ansel

THEY MEANT the waiting to be part of the punishment. I was supposed to roam the estate listlessly, ponder my crime, and fear the consequences. Except all I could think about was Pascal.

I unpacked and sorted out what needed to be washed. I brought the remaining food to the kitchen for Jessup, our cook, who seemed confused by the staples but didn't say anything. Then I put my camping gear back into the closet, except for the sleeping bag, which I left out to air.

When I was done, I stared around my bedroom as if seeing everything for the first time. The astounding number of anxiety bouts I'd experienced here... I used to do this exercise to avoid a panic attack—name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two you can smell, and something you can taste. I could always only smell lavender from the closet, which overpowered everything else.

Now, I smelled pine and the forest soil. Pascal.

It was only a memory, but it was strong enough to make me feel he was here with me. Maybe he was standing under the balcony, smiling and waiting.

I'd touched the dragon's face, but the dragon was Pascal, and Pascal was the dragon. One and the same. I'd touched his face and hugged his head to my chest. He'd smelled of the forest. Sitting on my bed with my eyes closed, I imagined stroking his cheeks. His coarse stubble scraped the pad of my

thumb. He smiled as I brushed the upturned corner of his mouth with my fingertip. His emerald and golden eyes glowed like jewels.

He kissed me.

Not like Valentin. When Pascal kissed me, it was soft as a feather and dry. His breath wafted over my lips.

I sank onto the bed with a sigh.

This time, his lips lingered. Nipped and nibbled. I opened my mouth, and his scent became a taste. He loomed above me and kissed me deeply, hungrily. I felt the dragon in him, the unlimited power and magic.

My eyes flew open, and I gasped.

I was hard. I was so *painfully* hard. My ass felt loose and wet, my balls ached.

Without thinking, I shucked my sweats and underwear and shuffled up the bed. Squeezing my eyes shut, I called the vision back. Pascal above me, kissing me.

He runs his hand down my chest and over my stomach, circling my belly button with a fingertip. He grips my cock and squeezes it, strokes it up and down. I moan, arching from the bed as I meet his touch. I spread my legs shamelessly, lifting my knees, and he hums with approval. Caressing my cockhead with one hand, he finds my opening with the other. He traces my rim with two fingers.

“You’re wet, Ansel.”

“Will you fuck me, please?”

Pascal thrusts his fingers into me and pumps in and out. I want to last. I want to come with his cock in me. He’s teasing me, going too slow and too shallow. I whine, frustrated.

“Fuck me. Fuck me,” I chant.

I rolled on the bed and fumbled for the nightstand drawer. There, behind old books and boxes of tissues, I found a dark plastic tube. I opened it and shook the dildo out. It was my only sex toy. I’d bought it in secret on one of my solo

vacations and had it delivered to the hotel. If my parents had ever found out, they hadn't said anything.

Now I clutched the toy and lay on my back, lifting my legs to my chest. I was too far gone to question anything. Rubbing the tip of the dildo against my opening, I thought of Pascal.

"You want me to be your first, Ansel?"

I nod, frantic. He presses on my hole, widening my rim with his cockhead.

"Please."

I'm ashamed but not enough to stop begging. I roll my hips and writhe, trying to get him inside me.

Then it happens. My ass opens for him as his cock slides into me in one long thrust.

I cry out, the glorious fullness taking over all my senses.

He pumps in and out, faster and faster. I moan for him. Please, please, please.

He's fucking me in earnest now, and it's perfect. I'm leaking so much slick every thrust makes a lewd smacking sound.

I want to prolong it. I want to feel him come first, but I can't last. The angle changes, and his cockhead drags along the front wall of my hole.

I explode.

Gasping for breath, I lay on my bed, twisting and jabbing the dildo inside me. I tried to wrangle more sensation out of the orgasm, but it was short and unsatisfying. The dildo was slim, a beginner's toy that had seemed scary when I'd first tried it. Now it wasn't enough.

Frustrated, I rolled to my side, and the dildo slid out of me on a gush of slick. My stomach was covered with my cum.

I'd just masturbated to the fantasy of Pascal taking my virginity. So that happened.

Not weird. Not weird at all.

Would he want me?

I scoffed, annoyed with myself. Pascal was twice my age, experienced, a college professor, and a freaking mythical creature. What if he had a unicorn or a fae boyfriend waiting for him at home? No, he would have mentioned someone. But did dragons even date people?

Alone with my thoughts, I showered and washed the toy. When it was back in the box in the nightstand drawer, I could pretend nothing had happened. Except it had.

I could still smell Pascal as if he were next to me. The self-love session must have opened some secret drawer in my mind, and things kept spilling out. I should be worrying about the inevitable row with my fathers, but instead, I daydreamed about running to Pascal and throwing myself at his feet. Naked.

The longing and desire only grew.

MY PARENTS never talked about anything personal in front of the staff. If a dinner was quiet, there would be music to face later. Tonight, we ate in deathly silence, with only the clanking of cutlery for a soundtrack. My papa scrolled on his phone as he ate, while my father kept casting me murderous glances over the rim of his wine glass.

I was more nervous about messaging Pascal later than about what my parents would say. When Father was done eating, he pushed off the table and strode to the drawing room. I followed without a word.

As soon as the doors to the drawing room closed, Papa went to the bar. My father rounded on me without hesitation.

“What were you thinking?” he hissed. “We were about to alert the authorities when you finally called.”

“I apologize. I needed to clear my head, so I went to Granddad’s old cabin.”

“Alone? Have you lost your mind? Or was that man there with you?”

“Who?” They’d found out about Pascal. Of course, they’d only had to ask the guard at the gate.

“The alpha who drove you here. Is he your lover?”

“No. He’s a friend. He gave me a ride when my car died.”

“Who is he? Where do you know him from?”

“That’s not important right now. I want to talk to you about something else.”

“Not important? You were alone with a stranger. Do you have any idea how that looks? I think your papa and I have the right to know—”

“I’m not going to marry Valentin.” I had to raise my voice to interrupt him. I’d never done that before. I was surprised at how satisfying it felt to be loud for once.

“What?”

“I don’t want to marry him. I don’t love him.”

Father got purple in the face. His nostrils flared, but he said nothing.

My papa sighed, swirling a glass of bourbon in his hand. “Ansel, baby, of course you don’t. You barely know each other. But you will get to know him once you’re together.”

“What if I grow to hate him?”

Father opened his mouth to yell, but Papa stopped him with a hand in the air, the golden rings on his fingers flashing and bangles clinking. Father clenched his jaw and remained silent. Papa’s raised bejeweled hand worked better than a big red stop sign.

“Valentin Lyon is literally the best available alpha in the entire city,” Papa said. “I understand you have doubts, but you have to trust your father and me on this. You will be happy with him.”

“I won’t. He’s patronizing and boring. He looks down on me.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Father exclaimed. “That man worships the ground you walk on.”

“As long as I smile and keep my mouth shut, he does.”

“You will—”

“Bernard, let me handle this,” Papa said mildly and turned back to me. “Don’t be naive, Ansel. He’s an alpha. He needs to feel he’s the superior one in the relationship. You let him think that and do what you want when he’s not looking.”

Father threw Papa a confused look.

“In any case,” Papa continued, “saying no to Valentin would be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. We can’t let you ruin your life, baby boy. That man is proud. If you say no to him once, he’s never coming back.”

Good. If my parents insisted, I now knew how to get rid of Valentin on my own.

“I’m not marrying him. There’s no way. When he kissed me, shoving his tongue into my mouth, I thought I was going to puke. You can’t make me.”

Papa slumped into the sofa with a theatrical roll of his eyes, which Father took as a sign it was his turn.

“That’s enough of this noise,” he boomed. “You’re grounded until you get your head on straight. Give me your phone.”

I stepped back. That was a new threat. What should I do? *I flew on a dragon today. There’s nothing I can’t do.* “No. I’m an adult,” I said, my voice shaking. “You can’t hold me here like a hostage.”

“Give me your phone!”

“No.”

“Ansel, I swear to God, I’m going to block all your cards and freeze your assets. Give me your phone right now and go to your room.”

It’s now or never. “Okay.”

“Good.” Father stretched out his hand expectantly.

“Okay, cut me off. I’m not marrying Valentin.”

With that, I spun around, walked out of the drawing room, through the main door, and down the stairs to the driveway.

I intercepted Howard in the parking lot by the family Mercedes. I must have been high on adrenaline because my brain worked a hundred miles per second.

“Hello, Howard, can you please take me to the headquarters downtown quickly? Papa forgot something personal at the office and asked me to retrieve it for him. It’s time sensitive, so we need to hurry.”

Howard looked puzzled by my request but did as he was told. I didn’t wait for him to open the door for me and got in.

Father appeared on the stairs just as we were leaving the property. My phone rang, but I silenced it.

Two minutes later, the car phone began blaring.

“Don’t answer,” I said.

“But, sir, it’s your papa.”

“Don’t answer.”

Howard looked at me through the mirror, then at the road and at me again. He liked me, I knew, more than my parents. But he had a job to keep. “I must answer. I’m sorry, sir.”

Papa didn’t wait for a hello. “Howard, bring Ansel back this instant.”

Howard slowed down. “Young Mr. Perrault says he has to retrieve something from your office, sir.”

A pause. “I don’t need it anymore. Come back.”

Howard glanced at me in the mirror. I nodded.

“Very well, sir. I’ll turn the car around at the nearest crossing.”

“Good.”

Papa ended the call.

“Howard, let me out by the traffic light.”

“But sir...”

“You can’t hold me here against my will, not even under my parents’ orders. Let me out.”

“You’re making my life difficult, sir. Your fathers will be very angry with me.”

“Tell them I jumped out at a red light. They’ll be angry with me, not you.”

He shook his head but stopped by the crossing.

“Thank you, Howard. Please, drive slowly.”

“Take care, sir.”

He drove off, visibly taking his time. He was a nice guy.

With nothing but my phone in my hand, I looked around. I was still in our neighborhood, surrounded by gated estates. I couldn’t stay for too long, or they’d find me here on the side of the road.

I chose one of the smaller streets randomly and began walking as I called a cab. I didn’t even have any money.

There was only one person I could ask for help.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Ansel, are you okay?” His voice, even distorted by the phone, made my heart beat faster.

“I’m fine, but I need help.”

“What can I do?”

I took a deep breath and plunged into the unknown. “Are you alone? Can I come to you? I argued with my parents and left the house in a hurry. I have nothing but my phone.”

He didn’t hesitate. “I’m at home. I’ll send you the address. Can you take a cab?”

“Yes, I already called one, but I can’t pay.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be waiting outside. Message me when you’re in the car.”

“I will. Thank you so much.” Was I smiling? Yep. I was grinning like a fool. I was going to Pascal. I’d see him in a few minutes.

“I’m glad you called me, Ansel.”

“Me too.”

MY MATE IS HERE

Pascal

I PAID the cab driver and put my card into my wallet before stuffing it into my jeans' back pocket. Only when the cab was gone, did I look at Ansel.

My oversized heart all but burst in my chest.

He looked out of place on the dirty sidewalk in dress pants and a formal shirt. His smile was tiny and weak, but his eyes shone brighter than the streetlamps. When he shuffled from foot to foot, hunching over, I ached to grab him and squeeze him to me.

“Hi.” The one shy syllable carried hope and longing.

Instead of replying, I spread my arms. He took one unsure step closer, so I opened my arms wider.

“Come here.”

Ansel walked over and sagged against my chest with a deep sigh.

Closing my eyes, I breathed him in. Cream and blueberries with a hint of vanilla. It used to be my favorite ice-cream combination as a kid—one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of blueberry. My mouth watered, and I swallowed. I wanted to kiss him and lick him head to toe. *Make him come.* But he came to me to feel safe. Unless he wanted the same, I wouldn't... I smoothed my hands up and down his back, soaking up his warmth through the thin fabric of his shirt.

Ansel leaned into our embrace, fisting my T-shirt. The softest little moan wafted away with the breeze. *Does he want me like I want him?* But I wouldn't be selfish—Ansel came to me because he had nowhere to go. He needed to feel safe.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

“Yeah.”

I was ready to let go whenever he wanted, but he didn't try to disentangle himself. Keeping his fists clenched tight around the fabric of my T-shirt, he tilted his face up. A little crease appeared between his eyebrows when he studied me.

“This is weird,” he murmured.

“What?”

“How this feels.”

“How does it feel?” I whispered my question, not wanting to scare him away.

Instead of answering, he pressed his forehead against my breastbone, and his breath warmed my chest. I tightened my hold on him, and with my blood rushing in my ears, I kissed the top of his head. Only a press of dry lips into his hair—would that be too much?

“I missed you,” Ansel mumbled, his voice muffled.

“I missed you too.” He had no idea. I'd been climbing the fucking walls without him. “I'm glad you called me.”

“Sorry you had to pay for the cab.”

“Don't worry about it.”

After another minute or two, he looked up at me. A tiny peek of his tongue, his cute, confused frown, his gaze dropping to my mouth for a split second... It was written in his face. Yearning and anticipation. Unless I'd gotten delusional from want.

I cupped his nape and kissed his forehead. This time, my lips touched his skin without any barrier.

Ansel's eyelashes fluttered over his glazed eyes as he refocused on me.

"Pascal," he breathed. My name held no question, no warning, and no hesitation. More than anything, it sounded like relief.

Watching his expression carefully, I leaned closer. Slowly. Millimeter by millimeter. He stretched on his tiptoes, his eyes roaming my face. His lips parted.

Together, we closed the gap.

The first brush of his mouth against mine felt electric. A shiver went through us both, and my knees wobbled.

I held his head in my hands; his hair tickled my fingers. His breath washed over my face. Our lips slotted together once, twice, a third time, tender and chaste. I had to tear myself away, or I'd devour him.

I could have freaked out I'd gone too far, but Ansel beamed at me. He threw his arms around my neck and held on as I lifted him from the ground.

His weight in my arms grounded me. I had no doubt anymore. I could see my future as if it were a movie, and Ansel was there in every scene, always in the limelight.

A car passed, engine roaring, an unwelcome intrusion into the happiest moment of my life.

I put Ansel on his feet, admiring the dark flush on his smiling cheeks.

"Come inside," I told him when I could speak again.

I kept one arm around his back as I led him into my building. In the elevator, we hugged and breathed each other in. Now that he was here, I was calm. I had all the time in the world, but Ansel must be so confused.

Stroking his upper back, I nuzzled his forehead. His heart thumped wildly, double time to mine.

"It's okay. You're safe with me."

"I'm not afraid of you."

“You never were.”

“Well, in the beginning, I was. But now I’m not.”

“I can hear your heartbeat, sweetheart.”

He glanced up at me, about to say something, but the elevator dinged, the door sliding open. He snapped his mouth shut, looking down shyly. We stepped out, and I unlocked my apartment.

My home wasn’t anything to be ashamed of since I had a top-floor condo close to the city center, but Ansel was used to another level of luxury entirely. I got nervous about showing him my place, but then I remembered the old cabin where he’d happily stayed for days, with a watering can for a shower and an outhouse. Despite his descent and upbringing, Ansel was no prince.

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“Just water.”

He looked around silently as we walked through the open space to my kitchen corner. “I didn’t know college professors did so well.”

“They don’t. You’re not the only one who was born into a wealthy family.”

Pausing by the glass door to my terrace, he glanced at the nighttime cityscape. “Nice view.”

“It’s a dragon thing,” I said as I filled a glass with water.

“What?”

“We tend to live higher up if we can. A top-floor apartment, a house on a hill, places like that. It calms me to feel like I can spread my wings even when I can’t.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I guess.”

I handed him the glass, and he downed it before setting it on the countertop. Then he shuffled from foot to foot. His heart still raced.

“So, I told them.”

“Your parents?”

He nodded. “Father got livid. He wanted to ground me, cut me off. All the cliché threats I’d only seen in the movies. Papa was just disappointed. They didn’t throw me out, but when Father wanted to confiscate my phone, I left.”

Some people did that to their own kids. What heinous crime would my future child have to commit for me to threaten him like that? “I’m so sorry, Ansel.”

“Thing is, they’re powerless. My granddad left me the cabin, which became mine when I turned eighteen, but it has no real value for anyone but me. What does have value is the trust fund and Granddad’s old townhouse. I’ll get both when I turn twenty. To my father, it’s pocket change, but it’s more than some people earn in a lifetime. Technically, even if they throw me out on the street, I only have to make it for three months, then I’m fine. I’ll be independent.”

“That’s good. But how do you feel about it?”

“Part of me is scared, but part of me is even excited, I guess. It felt good to tell them no. *So good*. I’ve never done that before. But I don’t know.” He let out a broken laugh and threw his arms in the air. “I don’t know anything. I just... It doesn’t even feel important right now. My head’s full of other things.”

With his scent filling my apartment, I could barely keep up with all the ideas popping up in my mind. Head full of *other things*. Like the taste of his skin lingering on my lips.

Frowning, he stared at me as if trying to figure me out.

“We just kissed,” he said.

“We did.”

“I liked it. I liked it a lot.”

I loved him already. “Me too.” I had to be honest, but how? “You’re very young, Ansel.” I didn’t know how to continue. I’d wait for him for years if he needed it. But how could I declare my undying devotion to him when he had no

idea what it meant and how it was even possible? With everything I had, I yearned to kiss him again.

“Does it bother you?” he asked. “My age, I mean.”

“That I want you even though I could be your father? It does bother me. You’re younger than most of my students and going through a lot right now. It’d be horribly selfish of me to put my desire first and not think about how it may affect you. I’ve never done anything like this, never dated anyone so much younger than me. I’m afraid to do something wrong. To hurt you.”

He bit his lip, grinning adorably. “You want me.”

“That’s what you’re taking from what I said?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I’m an optimistic person.”

“Does it bother you that I’m...”

“Not human?”

“Um. That.”

Another shrug. “Not much. When you’re not the dragon, you’re just a normal guy, right? I mean, you teach math.”

A laugh bubbled up from my chest before it broke and became a heavy sigh. I had no idea what to do with myself having Ansel here, alone. Could I tuck him into my bed and sleep curled up at the foot of it like a dog? Because I wanted that. I’d do that until he let me touch him.

“That look on your face,” he said, frowning. “What are you thinking right now?”

Heaven, help me. He had me in the palm of his hand.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“That’s not what you’re thinking.” Damn him for being so clever.

“Ansel, this is more complicated.”

“Then explain.”

Where to even begin? I sat on the edge of the kitchen table, and my surroundings seemed to shrink in on me. What if he

rejected me? What if I scared him away?

“I’m attracted to you. A lot. And the dragon is drawn to you. It’s a little overwhelming for me.”

Ansel leaned on the counter, facing me. His cheeks were tinted a deep pink, but his voice didn’t waver when he spoke. “I’m drawn to you too. After we said goodbye in front of my parents’ house, I kept thinking about you nonstop. About the dragon, that I stroked his face. It was you. I touched you and couldn’t stop thinking about that. Now, we kissed.” He inhaled, his chest rising. “I like you. I’ve never felt like this about anyone.”

Of course my little omega faced this head-on. Was it bad that his confession made me ecstatic? I wished I could be brave like him.

“There’s this thing. Among dragon folks.”

He waited for me to get it out. I had to tell him. If I were to treat him as my equal, I had to tell him everything.

“We find mates for life.”

The words, even though I said them quietly, seemed to boom through the space before they slammed into the walls around us and bounced back to knock the air out of my lungs.

Ansel blinked, mute.

His expressive face fell, turning completely blank. Unreadable. Time seemed to stop, but I kept talking, breathless.

“And with the way I feel about you, I think I’ve found *you*. I had my suspicions at the cabin. But when we flew together, when you touched me in my dragon form, I knew. The pull we feel toward each other will get stronger. You’re...my mate, Ansel.”

I inhaled, my constricted chest aching around the cool air. Ansel pulled back, straightening his spine, and my stomach clenched. Was I messing it up?

“Mates? For life?” I could read the syllables on his lips more than I could hear him.

I'd wait. I'd wait for however long he needed, and the prospect filled me with peace. But I couldn't look on as he grew afraid and distant.

With my head bent, pleading with him even as I said something else, I prepared for the worst. "You're only nineteen. You're so young, sweetheart. You've barely lived outside the golden cage you grew up in. I'd hate for you to feel like I'm putting you into another before you've had the chance to fly."

My bare feet pointed at his polished leather shoes, the lines in between the tiles on the floor like pathways from me to him. The invisible strings tying me to him tightened with each passing second. The room was silent except for Ansel's ragged breaths and thumping heart.

"I flew with you." His voice cut through the quiet. "It was the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me."

When I lifted my gaze, he pushed off the counter, took two small steps toward me, and put his palm on my overheated cheek.

"I want you to kiss me again. Is that bad?"

Oh Lord, I was shaking. "No. It's not. But...the bond between us...will feel stronger the more time we spend together."

"I don't want to be away from you."

I made a pained sound when he dragged my head down for another kiss. His plush lips against mine, his scent, his hand on my jaw...

"I hate that Valentin stole my first kiss," he whispered against my mouth. "It should have been you."

He was killing me.

Didn't he get it? This was it. He was a mere nineteen years old, dammit, and he was bound to a dragon for the rest of his life. After only a few days together, every kiss and every touch were sealing his fate.

"Ansel, it's for life."

He stepped back, his hand falling away. His expression crumbled. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” I’d rather cut my heart out with a fork. “Please, don’t go.”

“But if I stay, our bond will grow stronger, and you don’t want that.”

He didn’t understand. “I do, Ansel. I want that.”

He lifted his chin defiantly. “So you think I might not want that. Is that what worries you?”

“Well, yes. I crashed into your life when you already had so much to deal with. Now I want to claim you and hide you in my lair like it’s the Middle Ages.”

When he smiled, so gentle and beautiful, I felt my eyes burn.

“You’re *my* dragon.”

This time, he opened his mouth into the kiss, teasing my tongue with his. My chest rumbled with a growl. He must have felt how hard I was, but I didn’t thrust, didn’t dare to rub against him even as I ached all over. The last thing I wanted was to make him feel pressured to do anything he wasn’t comfortable doing.

To avoid the contact, I lifted him onto the counter. We could kiss, but I could hide my groin under the edge.

Exploring my mouth, he played with the hair on my nape. I let him learn what he liked, then I kissed along his smooth jaw and under his ear. He tilted his head to give me more space. I mapped out his neck, the graceful line to the base of his throat, and the hollow between his collarbones.

“I don’t want to stop,” he said, breathless. “I want you too.”

Tugging the open collar of his shirt out of the way, I opened my mouth over the soft skin in the crook of his neck and shoulder.

My Ansel moaned, fisting my hair.

You're sealing his fate. This is it. He won't be able to ever leave you...

But the voice of my conscience got weaker and weaker.

He won't be able to ever leave me. He's mine.

The sweet scent of Ansel's slick filled the room as I felt the tension in him rise. He grabbed my head with both hands and pulled me into another kiss. This time, he sucked on my tongue, instinct taking over. I stepped between his thighs while he scooted on the counter, dragging himself closer. His hard cock pressed into my stomach.

Slow down. He's never done anything like this before. He's innocent. The dragon didn't have any scruples, though. Innocent. A virgin. Take, claim, mark.

My shoulder blades itched, wings ready to burst out of my body, and my skin grew hot all over. My erection seemed to pulsate with my heartbeat. I could distinctly feel my knot, even deflated, as it ached, coiled tight.

Claim my mate, fuck him, send him into heat. Knot him. Breed.

On a wild moan, Ansel tore his mouth away.

“Pascal... I want...”

My mate needed me. I could see his passion like a mirror image of my own agonizing desire. We were burning together. All my fears and reservations got charred in the fire, the dust blown away.

“Whatever you want. Tell me.”

A flush of arousal glowed on his cheeks and neck. “Can you make me come?” he blurted and bit his lip. He was trembling, his breaths coming out choppy.

Sweet heaven.

“Yes, love. Of course.”

He looked on with blown pupils as I took off his shoes one by one. I put him on his feet and undid the button on his slacks. Surprising me, Ansel swiftly shoved his pants down

along with his underwear. Trembling all over, he gripped the counter with both hands, bare from the waist down. He looked so eager yet fragile on his socked feet with his knees wobbling.

Holding his gaze, I knelt before him.

The hem of his shirt caressed my face as I mouthed his cock. It was slim, in proportion to his small frame, but so hard it seemed to throb on my tongue. Ansel cried out, then bit his fist. With his other hand, he held on to the edge of the counter, his knuckles white.

“Nghhh!”

Tightening my lips, I slid up and down his perfect little cock. Then I slowly sucked him in all the way, until his cockhead nudged the back of my mouth. He fit like he’d been made for me. I pressed my nose into the soft thatch of hair and swallowed, my lips tight around the base of his erection.

Claim him.

I squeezed his ass cheeks, holding him to me when he bucked helplessly.

Ansel’s cry pierced the air, ringing through my apartment and echoing in my skull. I closed my eyes. His body grew taut in my hands, and his cum flooded my throat. I drank him in, my own cock throbbing painfully in the confinement of my jeans.

I couldn’t describe the taste, only what it did to me. Something squeezed my heart and released it, restarting the rhythm. I was changed, irrevocably.

I sucked until he stopped shuddering and his cock softened, then I kissed up his flat belly. Ansel hugged my head to his middle.

His scent drugged me. I forgot about everything—his age, my age, why he was here in the first place... What mattered was the bare skin of his ass cheeks against my palms, his cum on the back of my tongue, the imprint of his cock in my mouth, and his desire in my lungs.

I wanted more. I wanted to make him yell my name in ecstasy.

Massaging his ass cheeks, my fingers swiped through wetness that I hadn't tasted yet. That wouldn't do. I lifted Ansel into my arms and carried him to the sofa. I laid him on his stomach, and he parted his thighs.

"I'm not going to fuck you, love. Not tonight."

He nodded against the pillow and closed his eyes. His trust in me humbled me.

I kissed the two small hollows on his lower back, then the top of his crack. Then I licked through his crease, lapping up the abundance of slick he'd leaked during his orgasm.

His moans sounded like music. He spread his legs wider and tilted his hips up, offering himself to me. The tiny pink star was open, but it would barely fit my pinkie. I teased it with the tip of my tongue and pushed against it to feel the firm ring of muscle. It resisted, but Ansel made the most beautiful sounds of pleasure when I pressed harder.

Claim my mate.

With my fingers spread, I pulled his ass cheeks further apart and pushed my tongue into him.

Ansel groaned from deep within.

"Oh, Pascal...oh!"

His slick. I could drown in him and die happy. He tasted sweet, like unknown fruits and flowers and rare white wine. The juices he leaked were thick like honey, clinging to my tongue and to the roof of my mouth, blending with the flavor of his cum. I shoved my tongue deep and wiggled it, trying to tease out more, and Ansel cried out.

"Oh my God. *Oh my God!* Aaah..."

He scrambled to push his ass against my face, so I grabbed his hips and held him to me like a damned meal. His hole loosened further, opening for me and begging me. His slick all but gushed out of him.

I licked him and kissed and gulped, insatiable.

The sweetest pleasure covered me whole, tightening every muscle in my body, then setting me free. I came in my pants, humping the sofa cushion, my tongue inside my sweetheart's perfect body.

Ansel didn't even notice. He rocked and ground against my mouth, his hole clenching on my tongue.

I couldn't stop.

The world could go down around us, and I wouldn't be able to tear myself away. Buried between Ansel's ass cheeks, I tongue-fucked his hole, drank his slick, then made him come again. And again.

His hands and feet twitched, his nails raking over the sofa cushions. He made deep animalistic sounds. The tones got higher as he got close to another peak. This time, his ass fluttered, the muscles trembling with electricity. It went on and on. I shoved my tongue as deep as I could. As Ansel shook, a jet of his slick filled my mouth. Spasms racked his body, broken wails spilling out of his throat.

That was the ecstasy I needed my mate to feel in my arms. He lost himself, orgasming for the longest time. I licked him through it until he collapsed.

Panting, he lay spread out on my sofa, only in his black ankle socks and his now wrinkled shirt rucked up under his arms. I ate him up with my gaze, storing every detail in my memory. Planes of pale skin, the twin curves of his waist, his plump, flushed ass cheeks with fading finger marks where I'd held him, the vulnerable pink crease, and in the middle, his open hole. His rim was reddened, gaping right in front of my face and glistening with wetness. A rosebud dipped in honey.

I'm going to put my cock in there. Soon.

It twitched, so I soothed it with a fingertip. *Not yet, but soon.*

A pool of Ansel's cum stained the sofa cushion. His back lifted with deep breaths, and a shudder went through him. An

aftershock? His hole clenched one last time, releasing another drop of fresh slick. It trickled down his taint.

My virgin mate, utterly debauched.

Careful not to put too much weight on him, I covered his body with mine. He pressed his round ass into my stomach when I nuzzled his back.

With my mate sated, his cum and slick filling my belly, the dragon was content. Happiness fizzled in my veins.

When his breathing calmed down, Ansel rolled under me, blinking sleepily.

“What about you?”

“I came in my jeans. Your taste did that.”

“Oh.”

“You need to sleep, love.”

He'd been through so much today. No wonder he was all but passing out.

He exhaled, and his eyelids sank lower until he peered up at me through mere slits of his pretty eyes. “Okay.”

I gathered him into my arms and carried him to my bedroom, where I sat him on the edge of the bed. I unbuttoned his shirt while he gazed at me, sex drunk and adorable. Kneeling on the floor, I took his socks off. I rose, kissed his nose, and tucked him in.

Naked.

My mate is naked in my bed.

“I'll be right back.”

He nodded, his eyes closing already.

I showered quickly, soaping up to get the mess off my groin before it got crusty. Then I brushed my teeth and put on a pair of clean boxer briefs. In the living room, I stripped the cum-stained cushion cover. I lifted the fabric to my face and inhaled the scent deeply. I was tempted to lick it but was sane enough to go throw it in the wash instead. Tomorrow, I could

suck my mate and eat his cum for breakfast. Warm and fresh from his pulsating cock.

I brought two glasses of water to the bedroom and left them on the nightstand. My mate was deeply asleep already, his features slack and swollen lips parted. His lavender-tinted eyelids quivered. He must have been dreaming.

After staring at Ansel in my bed for I didn't know how long, I lifted the blanket and curled around him. He snuffled from his dream but didn't stir.

A VERY GOOD MORNING

Ansel

OH MY GOD. *Oh my God!*

I was naked in Pascal's bed, wrapped in his arms. He was still asleep, and I didn't dare move. I didn't want to.

What he'd done to me... We'd had sex. Sex! Not, like, full-on, cock-in-hole sex, but I didn't think I could consider myself completely virginal anymore. Not after he'd sucked me off and licked me, making me come over and over until I'd passed out.

That had been *epic*.

His tongue on my ass, *in my hole*, had been the best sensation I'd ever felt in my life. I was addicted after the first try. Soft and wet but firm enough to stretch me and reach into me. Teasing and tantalizing one second and bone-deep satisfying the next. When could I ask him to do it again? Could I wake him up now and beg him?

Holy...

Wow.

The more awake I felt, the more aroused I was getting. Wasn't it embarrassing?

He smelled so good, and he was so warm; his skin pressed against mine along my back, my thighs, my legs. I could feel the elastic band of his boxers against my ass cheek. But not his groin.

He'd told me he wouldn't fuck me, but at some point, we'd do it, right? We were together now. One day, I'd feel his cock inside me. I wanted to see it. Maybe hold it in my hand. Could I suck it? Would I want to?

Pascal shifted, his arm tightening around my chest. My heart thumping faster, I stuck out my ass just a little. *There*. Something hard poked my ass cheek, right next to my crease. Excitement warring with nerves, I inched back a little more.

The thing was huge.

Groaning, Pascal rocked against me, then stilled, and his breathing evened out again.

His cock was now pressed against my thigh, only the thin cotton of his briefs separating it from my body.

I didn't dare move.

How long was it? I couldn't tell. I wanted to wiggle against it and feel the hardness slide between my ass cheeks.

I was getting wet and not like after a random sexy thought. This was a whole other level. My hole gradually loosened, tingling subtly. It was slippery *even on the outside*. With how relaxed I was, I couldn't hold the slick in.

Should I be ashamed? I was so horny I was leaking.

Yes. I wanted to have sex with Pascal. Without a doubt. Maybe not right now—because that would make me nervous—but soon.

I lay still like a statue, letting it unfold in my head. Closing my eyes, I let the fantasies flow unchecked. He would tug his briefs down and hold me tight, my back to his chest. The tip of his cock would nudge my slick hole, and he'd push, forcing my ass to open. It would hurt, but he'd soothe me with kisses on my neck. He wouldn't stop until he was inside me all the way, then he'd stay there. I'd feel him *everywhere*. I'd be overfull, a little afraid, maybe uncomfortable, but then my body would slowly get used to him. When he started moving, it would feel good. Even better than his tongue.

A hollow sensation grew inside me. More wetness trickled out between my ass cheeks, spreading along my crease. Maybe I shouldn't fantasize about this with Pascal right here, but now that I was in the middle of the daydream, I couldn't make myself stop. My slick would make everything feel good, so he'd slide in and out of me easily. I'd come so hard my ass would clench tight around his cock. He'd lose control and fuck me, grunting and growling. He'd push in deep...a sting of pain...and another wave of pleasure washing it away...

I almost gasped when the fantasy of his cum coating my insides flooded my mind.

I wanted that. His cum. I wanted it as deep as I could get it.

His hand slid down my side and to my belly.

Was he waking up? His palm circled my lower stomach, and he kissed my nape.

"What are you thinking about, Ansel?"

Your cum in my hole when you deflower me. No way was I admitting to that.

"Morning," I piped up.

"Good morning, love."

He shuffled away a few inches and pushed on my shoulder, so I lay on my back next to him. The slippery wetness between my ass cheeks smeared around with the movement. He propped himself up on one elbow and studied me. I felt my cheeks heat.

"How are you?" His eyes were glinting with mischief.

Wet, aching, horny, ashamed. So horny.

He could tell, couldn't he? I bit my lip. "I'm...great."

He leaned in, his lips brushing my cheek. "I can smell your slick, Ansel," he whispered into my ear, "and I can hear your heart."

I groaned. The tone of his voice was enough to make me shiver.

He kissed a line from my ear to my chest until he found my nipple and took it between his lips. I nearly shot off the bed.

“It’s like a compulsion.” A teasing bite. “When you’re aroused, I need to make you come.”

Suddenly, my nipple was in his mouth. He pushed a hand between my legs and let out a deep growl when he found me dripping with slick. *Busted.*

His fingers circled my hole. I was writhing and moaning, begging him with my entire body.

One long finger breached me, and Pascal purred against my skin.

He pushed through the ring of muscle, grazing the ultra-sensitive tissue. I whimpered. Only one finger. But it took over my senses, and I was lost, untethered, so acutely aware of the invasion that everything else ceased to exist. The finger curled, circled some magic button inside me, pumped in and out, and circled again. The amount of slick I leaked was mortifying. I must be staining the sheet.

Pascal thrust his finger into me faster, his knuckles hitting my rim. The lewd smacking sound got drowned out by my groans. He rubbed the front wall of my hole, and I saw stars.

Just one finger, sawing in and out, faster, faster...

My mind went back to the fantasy of Pascal fucking me, of his cum filling me. The slide of his finger through my flesh was a promise of so much more. My nipple throbbed in his mouth, the sensation shooting down into my groin, all the way to the tip of my cock. I gripped my cock and squeezed it.

Aching all over, blind and helpless, I ground on Pascal’s finger, trying to get him deeper. My hole throbbed around him, clenching and releasing... I whined. Not enough. His finger, which had felt massive a minute ago, was too thin now. I craved to feel used, stretched, taken...

At the best possible moment, Pascal added a second finger and pushed, filling me up in one rough thrust of his hand.

The relief was indescribable. On a deep groan, I slumped, every muscle relaxing except for my rim, which spasmed erratically around Pascal's fingers as my body worked to suck them in. He let go of my nipple and wrapped his mouth around my cockhead, sucking the cum out of me.

I relished the fullness. Without thinking about how it might seem, I reached down and grabbed his wrist. I held his fingers lodged inside me while he licked my flagging cock.

When the tingles dispersed, my grip on his hand loosened, and he pulled out of me slowly. He folded my thighs to my chest and ran his tongue through my crease. The first few licks were smooth, but then I felt the texture of his tongue. He'd cleaned me up, lapping up all the slick my body had released. Then he dipped his tongue inside me and tenderly kissed my rim, making me shiver with an aftershock.

He rose above me, so huge and magnificent. It felt as if he'd hypnotized me. He was all I could see. All I could think about.

Those emerald eyes, his rakish smirk, and his golden stubble. I'd never seen anyone or anything more beautiful than Pascal gazing at me with passion and mischief and *ownership* after he'd made me come.

From somewhere deep in my brain, an instinctual urge rose. *Empty. I'm empty. Grab my legs, lift my hips, spread my ass.* I fisted my hands, fighting it.

It became too much. How he made me feel, how much I already liked him, all the pleasure he'd given me... He was about to kiss me.

"I need to brush my teeth," I blurted.

Pascal's intense expression gentled. He chuckled and lay down next to me, sprawling on his back. He gazed at me, smiling.

"How are you, Ansel?"

"I'm..." Were there even words for this feeling? "No idea." But I was smiling, unable to stop, this huge ball of energy growing inside me until it burst. I laughed. "Good?"

Pascal cupped my cheek, his inhumanly beautiful eyes roaming my face. Then he leaned in and pecked the tip of my nose. I exhaled with a mix of relief and disappointment.

“There are new toothbrushes in the cupboard under the sink and clean towels on the lower shelf. You can take the bathrobe. It should be on the hook on the door.”

I gave him a quick kiss on his cheek and scrambled off the bed. I hurried to the bathroom, my mind swirling.

Was I falling in love? Was this how it was supposed to feel? Because it made me giddy and terrified and exhilarated all at the same time.

Then I realized that Pascal had spent the entire evening and morning making me feel good, while I hadn't done anything for him. I needed to fix that.

I wanted to see his cock.

Dragons mate for life. Have you forgotten about that?

No, I wasn't going to think about that now. If it were true—and Pascal wouldn't lie to me—I had the rest of my life to come to terms with it.

I grinned at myself in the mirror, my cheeks pink and eyes glistening. I felt free and alive but safe, which was a combination I'd never thought possible. Didn't safety only come with restrictions and compromises? But Pascal was both entirely safe and the grandest, wildest adventure of my life.

When I exited the bathroom wrapped in a bathrobe, my heart fluttered at the sight of him in only his underwear. Lord, he was a beast. I'd seen him naked before, but I hadn't looked properly, had I? Now, I ate him up with my eyes, desire twisting my stomach as if I hadn't just come my brains out. Round muscles covered his shoulders and chest, but he didn't look chiseled like a bodybuilder. His body was that of a dangerous predator, honed by nature and not by hours at the gym. He looked like he could crush boulders, and I felt so small facing him. Why was that so hot? The front of his boxer briefs stretched over his massive erection, drawing my eyes. He walked toward me, huge, dangerous, powerful, aroused...

but before I could reach for his cock, he swiftly kissed my temple and slipped past me.

“Just a minute.”

The scent drifting from his naked skin. The heat of his body.

I shuddered. Yes, I wanted him again. Or still.

What began as a secret fantasy was now gathering strength and swiftly becoming a need. I wanted Pascal to fuck me. Wrap that huge body around me and fill me up. Would it hurt? Why did that seem like a good thing? He was so big. If he put his cock into me, would my stomach bulge?

Fucking hell, I could see it. Tiny me on my hands and knees, Pascal hulking over me, his hips thrusting against my ass, my stomach distended... For some insane reason, the Pascal in my mind had thorns on his head and wings like the dragon. His tail swished through the air as he fucked me, and I came screaming, my cum jetting from my cock...

I realized I stood frozen in the middle of the room with my hand on my belly. I was hard again.

My overactive imagination was now fully invested in my budding sex life.

Oh Lord.

Well, better this than anxiety.

Could I distract myself somehow?

I went to the kitchen and drank some cold water. Then I checked my phone. There was nothing from my parents, which made me suspicious, but I shoved those thoughts to the back of my mind, right next door to the mate thing. I didn't want to think about anything complicated and life-altering. I was horny and excited. I only wanted to think about Pascal. I gave up on distraction and let my mind wander back to those boxer briefs stretching over his cock.

THE VAGUE DEFINITION OF VIRGINITY

Ansel

WHEN PASCAL CAME BACK to join me in the kitchen, he wore cut-off sweats and a threadbare T-shirt. The outfit made him look younger and revealed enough of his glorious body to make me salivate.

Swallowing hard, I put my phone on the table and stepped into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around me like we'd done it a thousand times already. Since the moment he hugged me in front of his building last night, I hadn't felt even a slip of anxiety. I was calm to the marrow of my bones, more at home than I'd ever felt at my parents' house.

"I like the way you smell," I said. He made me feel so free and relaxed. I could say anything, do anything. I could be myself with Pascal. Maybe I could even be honest about my unrelenting sexual appetite.

"Can I kiss you now?" he asked.

Instead of answering, I tilted my face up and stretched on my toes.

He tasted of toothpaste, and we tangled our tongues together. When I pushed him against the counter, he let me, grunting into my mouth.

"Ansel, you don't have to..."

But I was already on my knees.

His sweats hid nothing with his cock like a damn iron pole. I fumbled getting the elastic waistband over it and down.

Pascal sucked in a breath and gripped the counter.

Holy...penis.

Fantasies were one thing, but this... This was bigger than what the alphas had in the porn I'd seen. Should I be afraid? I wasn't. Just thrilled and eager.

The scent did things to me. I leaned in to breathe in more of it, my cheek brushing the length of Pascal's cock.

Pascal's cock. In my face.

My hand trembled when I caressed the thick shaft slowly up and down. My fingers didn't meet when I wrapped them around the base. The lower part felt thicker. A knot. Of course, he'd have a knot. One day, I'd be in heat. He'd come inside me, and the knot would grow and stretch me... I squeezed, feeling around the small bulge. Pascal hissed. A bead of wetness appeared at the tip of his cock. Without thinking, I darted out my tongue to taste it.

“Sweetheart!”

With my mouth hovering over his cockhead, I glanced up. Did I do something wrong?

But Pascal gazed down at me with hunger, mouth parted, brow furrowed, eyes shining.

“Ansel.” He said my name with such reverence; my heart stuttered.

I took him in both hands, sliding them up and down, pointing his cockhead at my lips.

I know how to do this. In theory.

I opened my mouth and guided his fat cockhead inside.

Oh wow. So smooth and firm and... *Oh.* I swirled my tongue around and sucked on it. Mhmm. That felt nice.

I have Pascal's cock in my mouth.

I sucked and tried taking him a little deeper. I must have been doing it right because it made him moan.

His desperate sounds traveled through my bones. I was fully hard under my bathrobe, my hole loose, but the most acute need was hunger. Not for food. I was physically hungry for Pascal. The feel of him in my mouth and my throat, the little drops sliding into my stomach. So hungry.

Stroking up and down, I sucked on the head. More liquid leaked out of the slit and onto my tongue. It felt thicker. I pulled back to taste it properly—like cream with a little bit of salt and a hint of pine. Delicious.

I took him back into my mouth, and this time I didn't pull away. I licked and sucked, drawing out more of Pascal's precum, then experimented with swallowing around his cockhead. I managed to get half of his cock into my throat before it went too deep, and I gagged. Strangely, the gagging only aroused me more. I teased my throat, pushing myself harder, just on the edge of what was unpleasant. And *that* soothed my hunger. Good to know. A little deeper, pressure all the way in the back, *relax into it*, swallow. *Oooh*. I bobbed my head, feeling the firm cockhead poke in my throat, then I closed my lips firmly around the girth and sucked hard.

Pascal groaned.

“Ansel. Ansel, love... Wait.”

His voice broke. I retreated a little but refused to let go. With my lips wrapped around him, I looked up.

“I'm going to come soon if you continue like that.”

Wasn't that the point?

I sucked until I gagged again. Working his length with both hands, I took him deep and deeper still, saliva dripping down my chin. My throat would be raw—why did that seem like the best thing?

His sounds made me feel invincible.

“Ansel!”

Oh!

The jet of cum took me by surprise. I jerked back on instinct but didn't close my mouth, and another spurt hit my

lips and tongue. I could feel Pascal's relief as if it were mine. On an exhale, I closed my eyes and held on, letting him paint my face. I stroked him and lapped at his cockhead even as it spurting more. I was a mess, cum everywhere, on my cheeks, chin, across my nose, running down my jaw, and dripping onto my chest. There was so much of it. My mouth overflowed with it. In my hypnotized state, it took me a while to register the taste.

When I did, my lower body throbbed.

I gulped and licked my lips, then I took Pascal's cockhead back into my mouth and sucked hard.

"Fuck!"

He bucked, and more cum bubbled out.

Absolutely delicious.

I licked him, then scooped the streaks from my cheeks and ate them too.

Pascal gazed down at me, dark and dangerous.

His gaze flashed with something almost like anger. He grabbed me as if I weighed nothing, threw me on the table, and rucked up the bathrobe he'd lent me. I could only hold on to his shoulders as he shoved his tongue into me.

Was there anything more to life than this feeling?

I doubted it. With more pleasure, my brain would short-circuit. My body opened as if he'd pushed a button, and he licked into me deep, stroking my insides.

He made me come in seconds.

I bowed on top of the table, shouting and convulsing. He held me by my thighs, eating me out like he was trying to get the last dollop of ice cream out of the cone. My hole clenched and clenched, but he didn't stop. My legs began twitching, and my toes and fingers tingled. Would I hyperventilate? Worth it.

It was by far the longest, most intense orgasm of my life. And I could still taste his cum.

With a deep sigh, Pascal finally relented. He kissed my opening, nipping tenderly, then licked through my crease one last time before sucking up the drops of cum on my belly one by one.

The ecstatic sensations in my lower body slowly dispersed into a warm, relaxed feeling that weighed on me like a cozy blanket.

He braced his arms by my shoulders and loomed above me. I let my legs fall and dangle over the edge of the table. I'd died and been reborn during that orgasm. Which century was it anyway?

"Where in the name of the devil did you learn to suck cock like that?" Pascal asked, scowling.

I blinked. Oh yeah. I'd done that to him. "I've seen some videos. I didn't like watching them much because the way the alphas treat the omegas in porn weirded me out, but it gave me some ideas. I wanted to try. Sorry. I just went with what felt good for me. Um...was it okay?"

He gave out a broken laugh. "Okay?" Shaking his head, he scooped me up and hugged me to his chest. "You sucked my brain out through my dick. I'm mashed potatoes. The way you licked my cum at the end... Fuck, Ansel, you're dangerous."

"So it *was* good?"

"It was incredible."

I puffed up with pride. "It was incredible for me too. I didn't think I'd like it so much. I'd love to do it again if you let me."

"Ansel, my love, you can suck my cock whenever you please. It's yours. I can give it to you in writing. Unlimited access, twenty-four-seven, three hundred and sixty-five days a year."

I giggled. "Don't you need to work?"

"I'll find a way to smuggle you into my office and make you a little nest under my desk."

Snorting with laughter, I hid my head in the crook of his neck and shoulder.

“I should make you breakfast now,” he said.

“I feel quite full.”

He leaned back and tapped my nose with his finger. “Cum jokes? Really? You’re awfully brazen for a virgin.”

Oh yeah, that. My cheeks burned, and my ears must have been signaling traffic.

Pascal’s expression gentled. “I’m just joking, sweetheart.” He pecked my lips. “You’re absolutely perfect. Amazing.”

“You too.”

He caressed the side of my face and put me on my feet. “Breakfast.”

I fixed us two cups of coffee while Pascal rooted in his fridge. Then he made me sit down and wait while he scrambled eggs and toasted bread. He even prepared fresh veggies, tomatoes and cucumber, and three different kinds of cheeses.

“Pascal?”

“Yes?”

“Um. About the thing you said.”

“What thing?” he asked as he sliced the cucumber.

“Me being a virgin.”

His shoulders tensed. “Oh. I just assumed, based on what you said about your first kiss. But it doesn’t matter to me. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want—”

“You were right. I hadn’t done anything before last night.” I took a sip of coffee. “Does the term virgin still apply, though? Um. Your fingers were in me, and I sucked you off.”

Pascal paused, but I couldn’t see his expression since his back was to me. Then he shrugged and resumed slicing. “People have different definitions, but it’s of no consequence, really. The whole concept of purity is an archaic way of

thinking. I'm sorry I alluded to it." He sounded tense, almost nervous.

"I don't mind. It was kinda hot when you called me that." I liked the undercurrent of ownership when he'd been unguarded. Did Pascal feel possessive of me because he'd be my first? I liked that too.

"Okay," he muttered after another pause.

"So let's say I am a virgin because we haven't had full-on intercourse."

Pascal put the slices of cucumber into a bowl and grabbed a tomato. "Um. Sure."

I gulped more coffee and braced myself. "Can we... remedy that soon?"

"Ouch!"

I jumped at his exclamation. Pascal hit the tap with his elbow and put his hand under the stream of water. I shot out of my chair.

"What happened?"

"Just a little nick. It's okay. There's a first aid kit above the fridge. Can you get it for me? Just so we don't get blood in our breakfast."

"Sure."

I had to climb onto a chair to reach the cupboard, but in a minute, Pascal's finger was taped up. The cut was tiny, so it should soon stop bleeding. With how fast he healed, it would probably disappear entirely in an hour.

We sat down for breakfast and began to eat in a silence that felt tremendously awkward. I wondered if I should repeat my question. He wasn't handling any sharp objects now, so maybe it was a better time than before.

When I'd knelt for him, I'd felt so empty inside. I wanted Pascal plain and simple and saw no reason to wait. I was just about to open my mouth when Pascal sighed.

"There's stuff we need to talk about."

That didn't sound good. "Okay?"

"When you and I have sex, your body will react." He spoke slowly as he studied his toast.

I grinned. "I certainly hope so."

Pascal snorted. "You're a menace, Ansel. What I mean is, as a dragon mate, you will have certain symptoms that might take you by surprise."

I blinked. "What did you call me?"

"A dragon mate." He gazed at me with tenderness. "My dragon's mate."

I had no idea why, but the term made me feel warm inside.

I had my own dragon.

Pascal was mine. He'd said it was for life. How did one even start unwrapping that?

"We call the first few weeks bonding," he continued, getting serious. "During the bonding phase, your body will change, as will mine. You will lactate a little, clear milk coming out of your nipples. It's nothing to worry about. It'll feel good and cease after a few weeks. Your lower belly might swell, and you'll experience heat-like sensations."

My head was buzzing. "Heat-like?"

"Um. Arousal. Slickness. Sensitivity to certain scents and tastes. We'll both be very...drawn to each other."

"Hornier than we already are?"

His lips twitched. "I don't know. Maybe."

I shuffled the information around in my head so it made sense. "So I'll feel a little like in heat. Stuff might come out of my nipples, but it'll go away again. That's it?"

"Not entirely."

Pascal spread butter on another slice of toast and handed it to me. I bit into and chewed as he kept explaining.

"Your heat will come soon, depending on where you are in your cycle."

I swallowed. “I have no idea where I am since I haven’t had my first heat. Last time I was at a doctor, he said there were no signs yet.” I must have looked worried because Pascal put his hand over mine on the table and squeezed reassuringly.

“You’ll be healthy, Ansel. All dragon mates are. You’ll even live longer than other people.”

“How long?”

“Over a hundred years.”

I am bound to a mythical creature. For the rest of my life. Which will be suspiciously long.

Studying the man in front of me, I raked my mind for something bad. Some fear, doubt, a sense of foreboding or entrapment.

Pascal gazed back, patient, his eyes soft. Loving.

It must have been the bond affecting me already because I couldn’t for the life of me find anything to worry about. My mind was circling back to the possibility of sex and how much I wanted it with him. I pushed off the table and walked around to sit in Pascal’s lap. He hugged me to him, and I gave him a brief kiss.

“And those changes in our bodies, that starts when we... make love?”

He blew out a breath. “It’s happening already. It’s the pheromones. The...eh...dragon community... We have some books about these things, and there’s a specialized doctor in the city. He’ll tell you when your heat will come.”

I chuckled. “A dragon doctor?”

Pascal’s big shoulders lifted under my hands as he shrugged. I stroked the round muscles over his T-shirt. My big alpha beast. Huge. *Everywhere.*

“He’s a dragon mate himself and helps other omegas who’ve bonded with dragon shifters.” He was talking about the doctor. Right.

“But you said I’d be healthy.”

“Yes. But some things are different for you now. Like heat cycles and...um...fertility. You’ll need contraception during your first heat already. We should probably call tomorrow and book you an appointment.”

Oh. I hadn’t even thought of that. It was like another realm opened in my mind. *Contraception. Pregnancy.*

“That means we’ll be able to have kids together one day?” Suddenly, that felt vital.

Pascal’s face lit up, eyes twinkling, lips curving, and I knew my answer. “Yes.” He wanted that. His hand even drifted to my belly. I liked the warm touch.

“And will they be like me or like you?”

“They’ll be shifters.”

I squinted at him. It was all starting to make perfect sense. The logic cut through my sexed-up, hazy mind with perfect clarity. “This whole bonding thing, my body changing, me being healthy and living longer, the way I’m attracted to you and want you, that I can get pregnant during my first heat already... All of that is nature’s trick to make sure your kind procreates. You seduce human omegas and knock them up with little dragons.”

I said it half joking, but Pascal looked guilty.

He bit his lip, rubbing my stomach. “I didn’t invent evolution, I promise. It’s the same for people. With heats and ruts and the drive to breed.”

He had a point. And I still wanted to have sex with him. “Maybe.”

“How do you feel, Ansel? You might notice some changes already.”

I exhaled through my nose, looking into his now familiar eyes. “Yes, there are changes. I used to suffer from anxiety, but it’s just gone. I used to feel hesitant about sex, but I want you so much it’s insane. I should be afraid and confused, but I’m not. I trust you with everything, Pascal. I don’t know how it’s possible, but I just do.”

He petted my hair, frowning as he inspected my face.

“Why are you worried?” I asked.

“I guess I’m waiting for you to freak out.”

But I felt great. Sitting in his lap, mellow after orgasms and my belly full of a wonderful breakfast, I had nothing to complain about. A small part of me kept insisting I should be freaking out, but when was the last time I’d felt this good? I was...happy.

“The bonding, us becoming mates for life,” I said, “that’s already happening, correct? That’s why I feel like I know you. That’s why I trust you.”

Pascal glanced down. “Sex will speed up the process. We won’t be able to leave each other’s sides, not even for a few minutes, and we’ll be...making love a lot.”

“And the downside?”

He smiled briefly, but it looked a little sad. “I don’t want you to get overwhelmed.”

“I think it’s a little too late for that.” I stroked his scruffy jaw. “Aren’t you overwhelmed?”

Pascal swallowed. “Ansel, sweetheart, I’m a mess.”

“How?”

“I ache for you all over even as I’m holding you. You’re all I can see, your scent is all I can breathe, and your taste is constantly in the back of my mouth. When I touch you, I feel like I’m burning up and floating on clouds at the same time. I don’t think overwhelmed is a strong enough word for what you do to me.”

His words filled my heart and spilled into my veins. The green light in his eyes must have hypnotized me long ago because I was a different person than who I’d been on Friday.

I’d lived my life in a bubble, the world around me obscured and distorted. Now I could see everything much sharper, in bright colors. Pascal’s lips tightened with worry, the

expression already familiar to me, like I'd known him for years. Then his face softened with tenderness.

He traced the shape of my mouth with a fingertip and kissed me, stroking my tongue with his. I lost myself in the moment. I forgot about all those strange things about to happen to me. They didn't matter.

Pascal was all that mattered.

I wanted to give myself to him and feel him inside me. I wanted to make love.

AN HOUR LATER, my papa ruined my mood.

Pascal had to sort out something work related and was sitting in his office with the door slightly ajar. He said it would only take half an hour. Stupid me, I looked at my phone again. I hadn't heard the message when it arrived during our breakfast. Now it glared at me from the screen.

Papa: *You need to call your father before he sends someone to get you.*

My stomach in knots, I scooted off the sofa and tightened Pascal's bathrobe around me. I padded to the terrace and closed the door so I wouldn't disturb him. The morning was bright, the air fresh and cool high above the noisy city streets. I took a few calming breaths and dialed.

My father answered without a greeting. "Ansel, explain yourself."

"I told you everything already. I'm not marrying Valentin."

"I know where you are."

"How?"

"That's not important."

A lightbulb went off in my head. "Do you have a tracking device in my phone?"

"That's not important."

“Father! I could sue you for that!”

“It’s an app. Not a device. Which is why we didn’t know where you were when you didn’t have signal. I regret that mistake. I should have used a proper GPS tracker, but you had always been true to your word before, so I didn’t see the need. Until now.”

He was unbelievable. “You’ve been stalking my every move.”

“Do you think we’d let you go on vacation by yourself without being able to check on you?”

“I am of age, Father.” Which was a fact my father chose to perpetually ignore.

“You’re with that man, aren’t you?”

“His name is Pascal. He’s my boyfriend.”

Silence stretched. I checked my screen, but the call was still on. “Hello?”

“How long have you known him?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“I already know all about him. He’s a college professor twice your age. You’re a student. I’ll have him sacked tomorrow.”

I rolled my eyes. He would do that, no doubt, but I wouldn’t let him. “He teaches at a different college.”

“I can make his life hell, Ansel.”

“You won’t. If you try hurting him in any way, I’ll sue you for spying on me. Publicly.”

“Don’t you dare!” I heard it in his voice. He was trying to sound threatening, but he was floundering, grasping at straws.

“Father, you don’t want to hurt me or Pascal, not really. You think you must protect me. You want a good life for me, and I’m grateful to you and Papa for that. Except you can’t enforce *your* version of a good life on me when I want something else entirely.”

At my mild tone, he remained quiet. Was I finally getting my point across?

“Why did you want me to marry Valentin, Father?” I asked gently.

“He’s the best choice.” Terse and matter-of-fact. He was so sure his perception of the world was the only objective truth. I almost felt sorry for him.

“No, he’s not. I don’t like him. I don’t want him. Not at all.”

“How can you know what you want? You’re a child.”

“So you’d marry off a child?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he sputtered.

“Just think about it for a moment. According to you, I’m old enough to get married but not old enough to decide to whom. Are you aware how medieval that sounds?”

“Valentin has been a family friend for years. And now you’re with some stranger doing God knows what...”

“Father, I’m safe,” I told him imploringly. “Pascal is a good man. He has a respectable career, he’s well-off, from a nice family, and responsible. He cares more about me being happy and safe than Valentin ever did.”

“How can you say that? Valentin—”

It seemed I had to be blunt. “Father, Valentin forced himself on me. He kissed and groped me in the garden at the party, ignoring that I tried to push him away. I had to step on his foot so he’d let go. Only the risk of being seen made him stop. He doesn’t care about me. At all. He wants my body and status, but nothing else. Would you give me to a man like that?”

My father was silent. I could easily imagine the conflicting feelings warring inside him. He wanted me safe and happy, but he also needed to be right. He was afraid of the growing rift between us but could never admit to feeling anything other than anger. In his world, alphas didn’t have feelings.

My poor father.

“Come home, Ansel, and we will talk about it.” His voice grew softer, but he still managed to sound commanding.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t trust you to listen. I’m staying at Pascal’s for the time being. I’ll call you in a few days when we’ve both had time to think.”

A frustrated grunt came from the speaker. Maybe I’d learned something from my papa over the years of watching him handle my father. I didn’t have to convince him. I only had to stand my ground long enough for him to relent.

“This is not over, Ansel.”

“I feel good. I haven’t been anxious at all. Do you at least care about that?”

Another grunt.

“Have a good day, Father.”

Resigned, I ended the call. He did worry. He just didn’t know how to express his worry outside of controlling my every move and shouting commands. He’d have to learn.

I messaged Howard, asking him to sneak into my room and get my wallet, laptop, a few course books, and maybe some clothes. I doubted he’d do it, but it was worth a shot.

SEDUCTION

Pascal

I FOUND Ansel in the kitchen, immersed in his phone.

“Everything okay?”

“Oh, hi. Yes. I talked to my father. He seems to have calmed down somewhat. Ha! There it is.” He tapped on his screen. “And done.”

“Huh?”

“My parents had a tracking app on my phone. It took a while to find it, but I’ve just deleted it.”

“A tracking app? Seriously?”

“I know! It’s illegal.”

“Damn right it is.”

“They know about you.”

I balked. Did Ansel’s entire family somehow know about shifters? But Ansel laughed. “Not about you being a dragon. Just that I’m with you. My father doesn’t like it, but he also knows that there’s nothing he can do about it.”

“That’s good, I guess?”

Ansel nodded, grinning. “He has to accept that I’ll be making decisions for myself from now on. It’ll take him a while, but he’ll get used to it.”

“You’re amazing, love.”

Aside from a slight blush, Ansel ignored the praise. He wasn't used to compliments, was he? With his looks and intelligence, how was it even possible nobody was praising him all day every day?

"Can we go out for lunch?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Don't you have to work more?"

"I'll sort it out in the afternoon."

"Okay."

I took him to my favorite Italian place, and we shared a pizza with buffalo mozzarella and cherry tomatoes. Ansel all but inhaled the food.

"I didn't realize I was so hungry. I don't normally eat this much." He looked sheepish as he dabbed his lips with a napkin, wiping away a speck of tomato sauce.

It might be the bonding. And we should check when his heat would arrive because he'd need a contraceptive. I was just about to open that conversation when Ansel's phone chimed. He grinned at it excitedly.

"That's Howard, our driver. He texted he's on his way with my things. I wasn't sure he'd bring them. Can we go back?"

"Sure."

I paid the bill while Ansel nipped into the toilet. Then we walked hand in hand back to my place. Ansel squeezed my palm and grinned up at me.

"This is nice."

I lifted his hand and kissed the back of it, and he blushed.

"I agree."

I noticed a few people staring at us. It made me wonder if it was because of our visible age difference or because they recognized Ansel. Or maybe they stared because they were wondering what such a beautiful young omega was doing with the likes of me. Ansel smiled, carefree, rubbing my fingers

with his and leaning against me as we made our way through the lunch-break crowd.

Then the elevator door closed behind us, shielding us from curious strangers. Ansel stretched on his tiptoes to kiss me.

Ever so slowly, it began sinking in—how immensely lucky I was.

I had to take it slow with him so he wouldn't feel trapped, but that was all just temporary. We would have a lifetime together.

AFTER WE'D COME BACK from lunch and Ansel's things got delivered, we sat in companionable silence at the kitchen table and worked for a few hours.

During fall break, while I didn't have any lectures, I had a pile of assignments to go through and endless emails to answer. Always those emails. Most of the time, I could just refer the students to the syllabus or the online course system. Why didn't people try to look things up themselves before emailing their professor?

Ansel had his own coursework. Except he kept glancing at me, nibbling on the highlighter he was using to mark stuff in his advanced French grammar book, and I couldn't focus for shit.

What he'd said about his innocence, all coy and curious... Ansel was seducing me. My virgin omega, my sweet young mate, was intentionally seducing me.

He looked so cute yet so sexy; it was doing my head in. My brain was still scrambling to accept that I was acutely, painfully attracted to a nineteen-year-old omega, and my body was on fire. The niggle of shame, instead of turning me off, only made it worse.

Ansel peered at me from the corner of his eye and tapped the highlighter on his plush lips.

I exhaled harshly through my nostrils. "Stop that."

He squared his shoulders and twirled the highlighter between his fingers. “What?” The embodiment of innocence, all of him. The little minx.

“I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I pushed the laptop away and put my elbows on the table. “You are playing with fire, young man.” I used my sternest teacher tone, glaring at him.

“What are you going to do, Professor Pembroke? Bend me over your knee?”

I groaned. “Don’t you ever call me that again. Ever.”

“I’m sorry,” he piped up.

“I’m having enough trouble accepting that my mate is two decades my junior. If you studied where I teach, I wouldn’t be allowed to look at you.”

“I know. Luckily, I’m at Wintringham. You can do much more than look at me.”

Then he stood and smoothly straddled me in my chair. His ass pressed on my groin, and I got hard in a nanosecond.

Ansel leaned in and kissed me.

“I think it’s hot.”

“What’s hot?” I asked, resigned. I grabbed his ass and massaged the firm cheeks. He was irresistible. Lithe but round in the right places.

“That you’re older and so much bigger than me.”

I buried my nose at the base of his throat. “Fuck, sweetheart...”

“That you’re experienced, but I’m not.”

“Ansel, you’re torturing me.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. Nibbling on that damn highlighter and peering at me from underneath your eyelashes. Saying stuff.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose.”

I leaned back and squinted at him. “No? And what have you been thinking, huh?”

“Um.” A lovely dark flush spread on his cheeks. “I...was thinking about sucking you. About how much I liked doing it.”

“Argh!”

He kissed the hollow in front of my ear and rocked his hips. “You came on my face.” His voice wavered, and he shivered, but that didn’t deter him. “And I ate it all. I liked it.” The dichotomy of him being a little ashamed and nervous but saying those things anyway made it all even hotter. His tongue touched my cheek. “I like your taste. Your cum.”

“Please.”

He suckled on my earlobe. “What do you want me to do?” His throaty voice in my ear, his ass grinding on my erection, I couldn’t form words. “You gave me unlimited access, remember?”

How he tried to sound confident, but he couldn’t quite hide his nervous excitement... I broke.

“Suck me, Ansel. I’m begging you.”

He grinned victoriously and slid onto the floor right there, under the kitchen table. He opened my jeans and pulled my cock out, then licked the head. I slumped in the chair.

Ansel licked along my length and sucked me into his mouth. Like before, he tested how deep he could take me and choked from time to time, moaning afterward. His little mouth worked up and down my length, his lips stretched, his tongue dancing along the underside. It was all amazing, but the best thing was his hunger. He was eager and impatient, slurping up my precum and gagging with my cockhead lodged in his throat as if sucking my dick was his life’s most important mission.

I was close to exploding, shaking on the precipice, when he pulled off.

He crawled from underneath the table to straddle me again. I'd been so lost I hadn't even noticed he'd taken off his pants and underwear.

Before I could react, he held my shaft in his fist and rubbed his opening with my cockhead, smearing his slick all over.

My heart smashing against my ribs, I grabbed his hips to stop him.

“Ansel, wait.”

He tensed and bit his lip. His eyebrows drew together.

“I want it. I'm ready.”

“No, love. Not like this.”

I did have some willpower left after all. Small mercies.

Ansel's expression crumbled, and he looked down, his cheeks heating up in shame. He braced one hand on the table and was about to climb off me. I couldn't let him. The disappointment and hurt in his face were unbearable. Oh Lord, he was on the verge of tears.

“Ansel, I want you. I do.”

“Then why...?”

I put two fingers on his lips.

“If you mention my age again,” Ansel mumbled against my fingers, “I'm going to get so mad.”

“It's not just that, even though it's a part of it. You've only just left your old life behind. Don't you need some time to process it?”

He squinted at me, annoyed, but didn't say anything.

“I want you, Ansel. My balls are on fire, okay? And I hate myself for saying no to you because it's fucking torture.”

His lips twitched, his expression undeniably smug.

“But we should wait. Take it slow.” I caressed his lips and cupped his cheek. When I gazed at his youthful, innocent face, my chest hurt like a fist was squeezing my heart. “You're so

young, sweetheart.” My voice faltered and broke into a whisper. “I’m terrified of doing something wrong, of hurting you in my haste to claim you. I need you to be happy and safe. Please, let’s just wait. A few more days, a week. Let’s see how you feel then.”

“I want you too. I can’t imagine being away from you, not even for a minute. My nipples are oversensitive, and I’m slick all the time. That’s the bonding, isn’t it? You said the bonding was already happening. Why do we need to wait?”

“Because when we have sex, it’ll get a hundred times stronger. The bond will get so intense we’ll forget about everything but each other. I’ve seen it happen to others. We’ll lose ourselves for weeks.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It’s only been a few days.”

He frowned. “What day is it anyway?”

“Wednesday. Sweetheart, we met on Sunday morning. Last night, we kissed for the first time.”

Ansel sighed and leaned his forehead against mine. “It feels like it’s been longer.”

I ran my hands up his back. “You need time,” I said pleadingly, willing him to understand. “And I must give you what you need.”

He nodded slowly, rubbing his forehead against mine. “But it aches, Pascal,” he murmured.

I must give him what he needs.

Even though the conversation had dampened my arousal, Ansel’s pleading tone made me hard again. I held him under his ass and around his back and stood from the chair. He clung to me when I carried him to the bedroom.

I laid him on the sheets, and Ansel gazed at me with heavy-lidded eyes as I undressed us both.

“We’re not going to fuck,” I said.

Ansel pouted but remained quiet.

I kissed a path from his ear to his nipples and suckled on them until he was writhing. Then I finger-fucked and rimmed him, making him come three times in a row. He pulled on my hair, wailing and whimpering, joyous and full of life. I gorged myself on his cum and slick.

“Will you come into my mouth?” he asked, looking drugged.

My gorgeous virginal mate asks me that and whines needily, and I'm going to deny him?

I knee-walked up the bed, and Ansel gripped my thighs, straining to get my cockhead into his mouth. When I came, he gulped down everything and lapped up the little that escaped down my shaft.

Then he sank into the pillows, licking his lips. “I love how it tastes.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I gathered him into my arms, tucking his head under my chin.

Bodily fluids. Pheromones. Bonding. It all worked against me. I shouldn't have let him eat my cum if I wanted us to slow down, dammit. But he didn't have lover's milk yet, so that was something.

“Love how you smell,” Ansel whispered, nuzzling the base of my throat. He kissed the spot, then licked it.

I held him tighter.

WANT

Ansel

I FELT CHANGED. Not because of what was happening to my body—even though that was a *trip*. I'd entered a new era in my life by refusing to do what my parents wanted. Which inevitably meant I'd made some mess along the way.

Now I needed to clean up after myself.

I'd told Pascal I needed to make this call. While he looked as if he didn't want to let me out of his sight, he gave me privacy. Standing on his terrace overlooking the business district, I dialed Valentin's number.

It took a while, but he finally answered.

"Ansel, darling. I was just thinking about you. How is the weather down on Juliane Beach?"

Ugh. Just hearing the endearment felt like a slap in my face. "Hello, Valentin. I'm back in Ardaine."

"Oh. Are you getting impatient, then? I'm busy tonight—"

"I don't want to see you. We can sort this out over the phone."

"Beg your pardon?"

"You've never asked me, but I need to give you an answer anyway. No. I don't want to marry you."

My announcement was met with dead silence at first. Then a deep sigh.

“Ansel, are you unwell?”

I laughed at the absurdity of the entire situation. “I’m very well. In fact, I’ve never been better. I don’t want to marry you, Valentin. I won’t. I already said the same to my father. I figured you deserved to know, so that’s why I’m calling you.”

“You sound different. Have you been talking to your therapist? I know your anxiety can get severe, and I swear I don’t mind. These days, there are prescription drugs that don’t affect—”

“Valentin, listen, please.” I sank into one of the patio chairs. This would take a while. “I’m not anxious, and I’m not crazy. I just don’t want you.”

“Let me talk to your father, darling. I’ll call you back.”

I should have kept it together, but frustration got the better of me. “No, Valentin. For once in your life, listen to what I’m saying. *I don’t want you!* I’m in love with someone else. In fact, I’m at his place right now. I only put on a bathrobe so I could call you, but as soon as I end this call, I’m taking it off and going back to his bed.”

I listened to Valentin’s puffing breaths, waiting for the information to penetrate his thick skull.

“Ansel, this is unacceptable,” he said in a stern tone. “Your father has apparently glossed over the severity of your condition.”

I didn’t have any patience left for this man.

“There’s no condition. No relationship. No engagement. You tried to marry me against my will, even forced yourself on me, and I find you repulsive. I’m done. Goodbye, Valentin.”

Groaning, I ended the call. I was so mad. Not even at Valentin—in his egocentric little bubble, he didn’t know any better—but at my parents. This was the man they wanted me to marry. This was their best effort to secure a happy life for their only child. *The best choice*, my father had said. Fuming, I typed a message to them both.

Me: I told Valentin there's no engagement. He seems to believe that I'm mentally ill and refuses to accept my no. I would appreciate it if you didn't encourage him in his delusion. I don't understand how you could ever have thought I'd be happy with that man. It pains me that you know me so little. Don't contact me unless there's an emergency. I need some time for myself.

Then I turned off the sound on my phone, walked inside, and left the device on the kitchen counter. Pascal emerged from his office, wearing only his cut-off sweats and nothing else.

I stepped into his embrace and nuzzled between his pecs. The smell of pine and forest soil settled in my lungs. Relief and peace permeated my entire being. I couldn't be angry when Pascal was near—it was physically impossible.

“How did it go?”

“Valentin thinks I'm crazy, but I don't care. I told him in no uncertain terms that there's no engagement and never has been. Then I messaged my parents so they're prepared if he contacts them. Now I'd like to forget about everything entirely.”

“Dinner and wine?” Pascal asked.

I kissed the center of his chest. “And then we go back to bed?” I couldn't quite hide the want in my tone.

He chuckled. “Are you sleepy, my sweet boy?”

I lifted my head, meeting his emerald gaze. He was grinning down at me, glowing with possessive desire.

“I'm not tired,” I said.

“Maybe you want to go back to bed after dinner and let me eat *you* as a dessert?”

“What can I say? Now that I know how it feels, I might crave it every day.” I licked my lips. “Multiple times.”

He leaned down to kiss me, and I welcomed his tongue into my mouth. Then my stomach growled, making Pascal break the kiss.

“I need to feed you before I make you come again.” He said it in a low, rumbly voice, and my spine tingled. I could only nod, my insides quivering with all kinds of hunger.

A tall glass of ice water calmed my libido enough to focus on practical matters like deciding what to eat for dinner. After inspecting the contents of Pascal’s fridge, we started making potato gratin. I peeled potatoes while Pascal buttered the baking pan and grated cheese.

“How come you’re so used to working in the kitchen?” he asked. “Your family has staff for these things, don’t they?”

“We do. But I always liked food and cooking, ever since I was a kid. Our chef sometimes let me help, so I learned. We’d make brownies and pancakes. Then I learned the basic stuff from Granddad when we were at the cabin or camping.”

“That makes sense. I figure they don’t have cooking classes at Wintringham.”

I snickered. “No. But we do have an etiquette class and an entire course on fashion and style for omegas.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. I mean, fashion and style is all very nice, but do you think anyone ever talks about the omega rights movement or social justice in class? Not a chance. Because that would be liberal indoctrination. Instead, let’s teach our omegas to look pretty and behave. God forbid they think for themselves.”

Pascal was quiet for a moment, and I started to worry he didn’t agree with me until he spoke again.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have to, but I’m curious. Why didn’t Valentin believe you when you told him no?”

That was what had been going on in his head.

“I have an anxiety disorder,” I said. “I’ve been going to therapy basically ever since I hit puberty. Valentin seems to

think that makes me incapable of deciding for myself what I want. Never mind that I've never felt as healthy and as strong as I've done these past few days. He suggested my *condition* might be behind my behavior."

Pascal looked stunned. "But that's ludicrous."

"Like most alphas, Valentin believes the sun shines out of his ass. How could anyone not want him and be of sound mind at the same time?"

Shaking his head, Pascal resumed grating. "He was raised to believe omegas exist only to please alphas, so he expects a well-behaved Wintringham omega to just nod along and smile."

"Exactly." I paused, squinting at him. "How come you're not like that? Your family is wealthy, right? And you're even older than Valentin. You should be the embodiment of an entitled alpha."

Pascal blushed, looking so cute I could have climbed over the table to smooch his stubbly face. "Well, yeah. But I was raised by a dragon mate."

"Your omega dad. Who's human."

"Yes."

"But the dragons are strong and have, like, magical powers." Thinking out loud, I tried to make sense of it. "And humans are not. So technically..."

"We should be even more dominant in our relationships than people."

"I guess?"

Pascal shook out the cheese grater and put it into the sink. "My main instinct is to make my mate happy," he said casually. "It's like that for all dragons. My parents did everything together, helping each other, and I grew up thinking that every marriage was the same. I only realized much later how unfair life was outside my little bubble."

I pondered his response. "So what you're saying is that I got lucky?"

He snorted out a laugh. “I hope you’ll still think that in thirty years.”

Thirty years.

I watched him move around the kitchen, doing mundane things like chopping vegetables and wiping the countertop, and I allowed myself to venture there in my mind.

Would I marry this man one day?

Would we cook together like this in five years? Ten? Thirty years?

He’d be seventy, and I’d be fifty. Presumably, we’d have adult kids. As old or even older than I was now.

Maybe the reason I wasn’t freaking out was that I was unable to imagine the magnitude of it.

“Ansel, about your anxiety, if I do something...”

“It’s gone. I’ve never felt as good as I do now.”

My reply seemed to appease him. Maybe I’d been high on adrenaline ever since I drove up to Granddad’s cabin, but I wouldn’t question my luck.

After placing the baking pan into the oven, Pascal threw the dish towel over his shoulder and glanced at me, smiling.

“Do you want a light beer?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

THE DINNER WAS EATEN, the dishes were in the dishwasher, I’d showered and brushed my teeth, and finally, I lay naked in Pascal’s bed again.

He arranged me on the pillows, stuffing two under my hips and folding my legs to my chest. I held myself spread out for him with my arms hooked under my knees.

“Comfortable?” he asked, patting my ass cheek.

I nodded. I felt exposed, but I liked it. Offering my body to Pascal seemed natural.

“If you change your mind...” I began, but he silenced me with a kiss.

He traveled down my body, lingering on my nipples and around my bellybutton. He bypassed my cock and mouthed my balls, suckling on them gently. When he pressed his lips to my opening, I was panting with desire.

His tongue in my hole made me chant his name and curse in a way I hadn't known I had in me. But then he added a finger alongside his tongue, tenderly stretching me. I wailed, and my cum sprayed my stomach. Pascal licked it off, pumping two fingers in and out of my twitching hole.

I couldn't restrain myself. The words just flew out. “Fuck me, please, Pascal.”

He gave out a growl, which sounded promising, but then he said, “How about you imagine I'm preparing you for my dick?” His whisper was dark and menacing. I shuddered with aftershocks.

“We can't fuck yet because I'm a virgin, and you're too big for me.” Where did that come from? Had I been possessed by a demon? An incubus in that case.

“Mhmm.” A teasing bite to my nipple. His fingers stilled deep inside me. “I love how smart you are.” He bit my other nipple, and I shuddered. “You're so tiny.”

“I want your cock, please.” Maybe it was a game, but I meant it.

“We can't fuck, love. I'd hurt you.”

“Stretch me out,” I gasped.

“I will. I'll train your hole, my sweet virgin. When the time comes, your body will swallow my dick to the hilt.”

He licked my erection, painted a figure eight on my taint, and shoved his tongue into me again. He did something with his fingers, taking them out and putting them back in. I felt pressure on my rim. Not enough to hurt, but my body resisted.

Pascal had two fingers inside me, and he pulled them apart. Was he using one from each hand? He must be. His

tongue slid in and out along his fingers while he pulled and held still and pulled some more.

The stretch felt fucking incredible. An empty ache deep inside my hole niggled and teased, but my rim was getting the workout of a lifetime.

I couldn't call myself a virgin after this by any stretch of the imagination—ha, pun intended—but this was a game, right?

“Pascal. I'm so full.”

He lifted his head and appraised me, licking his lips.

“Breathe, love.”

More pressure.

He watched, fierce and hungry, focused on my ass.

“Three fingers. You're so wet.”

How deep was he? Something bulky popped inside. Knuckles. More pressure. He slid out and pushed in again, and I moaned at the exquisite sensations flaring from my hole.

“I'll come!”

“Good. Come all over my hand.”

He went faster, driving his fingers into me with more force. My body opened to the assault like a damned flower. I moaned on each thrust, relishing the fullness, my rim stretched like rubber. Something tickled and itched deep inside me, too deep for Pascal's fingers to reach...

“Fuck me!” I sobbed. I'd gone insane from lust. “Fuck me, please!”

Pascal fell over me and caught my mouth in a bruising kiss. He pumped his hand hard and fast. Lewd smacking sounds filled the room. Faster. Faster. His knuckles drove in and out on a river of slick. Harder. More.

Finally, I exploded.

He fluttered his fingers and rubbed the front wall of my hole while I spasmed with the release.

But I wanted his cock! The itchy, empty place deep inside me throbbed and ached as if I hadn't come at all.

“Pascal, please.”

“Shh.”

He knelt above me, his hand still in my hole. Maybe now he'd do it?

Except he stroked himself instead. In seconds, he covered my groin with streaks of his cum. It looked amazingly hot. His white seed stained my softening cock and blended with mine on my underbelly.

But I wanted more. Needed more.

Half satisfied, half frustrated, I ran my hand through the mess and smeared it into my skin like lotion. How come Pascal didn't feel the same need as I did? He slowly pulled his fingers out, and I slumped on the pillows. I wasn't hiding my disappointment well.

“What is it, love?”

“I thought you were going to do it after all.”

He laid his head on my chest, hiding his face from me.

“You're killing me.”

“It's weird that I seem to want it more than you.”

Pascal bit and licked my nipple.

“Ansel, there's only one thing I want more than to be balls deep in you right now.”

“What is that?”

A chaste kiss to my other nipple. “For you to be safe and happy.”

I hugged his head to me. He suckled on my nipple, soothing the itch I'd felt for the last day or so.

“I'll be good and wait.” I sighed. “Is three days enough?”

He chuckled against my skin.

WHAT THE HELL?

Pascal

WHEN SOMEONE BANGS on your door at four in the morning, it can't be good.

"Pascal?" Ansel sat up on the bed, disheveled and sleepy.

"Someone's at the door." I grabbed my sweats from the floor and slipped into them. Another salvo of loud knocking came from the hall.

"What's going on? Who's that?"

"Maybe a neighbor needs help. Please, stay here."

Ansel blinked, frowning. I kissed his forehead and went to open the door.

Big mistake.

In my defense, my building had a doorman and security, so the last thing I expected was an intruder.

Three men burst into my apartment before I could ask them what they wanted. Two of them were muscly alphas in dark jackets, white shirts, and black ties. They flanked a third man, also an alpha, but he was leaner, wearing a silver three-piece suit and a haughty sneer.

"Can I help you?" I asked, my eyebrows raised. I backed toward the bedroom, placing myself between them and Ansel.

The fancy one in the middle cast me a disgusted glance and looked around. "Ansel? Ansel!"

Ah. I had a suspicion who that might be.

“You’re trespassing, gentlemen,” I said. “I hope you want to avoid a physical confrontation.”

None of the men paid any attention to my objection. I held my phone in my left hand. Without looking at my screen, I dialed nine-one-one.

With a swift kick I didn’t anticipate, one of the goons knocked the phone out of my hand.

Well, that was unfortunate. I assessed them, calculating who I’d better take out first and how to do it so I wouldn’t end up in jail.

“Ansel!” the leader called again.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed my mate at the door to the bedroom, wrapped in my bathrobe.

“Take your things,” the leader said. “We’re going to your parents.”

Ansel gaped for half a second before his face transformed into the most glorious image of fury I’d ever seen.

“Valentin. Are you insane? It’s four in the morning!”

“If you don’t want to pack, I’m taking you as you are.”

He took one step toward my mate, reaching out.

That flipped a switch in my head. I saw red. Avoiding jail didn’t seem so important anymore.

Shoving one goon to the side with my left arm, I gripped Valentin’s collar. I lifted him off the ground, and he yelped, feet kicking in the air. A loud sound of fabric tearing followed. His jacket must have split at the seams. I threw him backward against one of my armchairs. It toppled as he tumbled over it. He fell with a grunt.

The other thug charged at me, reaching into his inner suit pocket. Did he have a gun? I didn’t want to find out.

I threw myself at him, pinning him to the carpet under my weight. His shoulder popped when I wrenched his arm to the

side. He roared, face scrunching up in pain.

A body landed on my back, an arm locking around my throat. I peeled it off and flipped the man upside down. Holding him by his calves, I shook him. His gun clattered to the floor, so I kicked it under the sofa before dropping him. He crumpled into a pile with a pained whimper.

“Pascal?”

Ansel stood frozen, mouth open, looking around at the three men writhing on my living room floor.

“We should probably call nine-one-one,” I said.

Bending over, I checked the alphas for any other weapons. I found a taser in the other goon’s inner suit pocket, so I threw it across the room and into the kitchen sink, where I knew a baking pan was soaking after our dinner. It landed with a splash.

“Pascal, how did you even...”

But before Ansel could finish the sentence, the elevator dinged in front of the apartment. Three men in dark suits filled the hallway.

Their guns were drawn.

It only took a split second. I jumped over one body, grabbed Ansel under my arm, and sprinted to the terrace. Angling Ansel so I shielded him from the intruders, I pushed the sliding door open. Then I lifted him high in the air.

“Onto the roof!” I yelled.

Ansel gripped the edge and swung himself over it while I supported his leg. I jumped and pulled myself up. My mate gaped at me, his hair fluttering in the wind.

“Now what?” he yelled. He pointed to the other end of the roof. “There’s a door. Can we check if it’s locked?”

Shaking my head, I dropped my pants.

“Oh.”

Ansel stumbled backward a few steps as my body transformed, claws shooting out and wings spreading. He got a little pale, but then he dove between my front legs and snatched my sweats from the ground.

“I’m ready!” he cried.

I cuddled him securely to my chest. With Ansel in only a bathrobe, tucked against my skin, I rose high above the cityscape. I shielded him from the cold as well as I could and flew toward the first secure place I could think of.

We landed on Davidson’s lawn maybe ten minutes later. The mansion was dark aside from a dim light coming from the first floor and a few lamps on the front facade.

I shifted back, and Ansel handed me my sweats so I could dress.

“Where are we?” he asked, looking at the imposing building.

“Davidson is a friend. We can stay here tonight before we figure out what to do.”

He stepped closer to me. “Is he a dragon too?”

“Um. Yes.”

“Okay.”

With that, my brave little mate began strolling casually toward the house.

He’s incredible.

Shaking my head in awe of my Ansel, I caught up with him and threw my arm around his shoulders. He was shivering, no doubt cold after the flight even though I’d done my best to keep him warm.

Before we could reach the wide double door, a blond, blue-eyed shifter approached us. He must have come running from the other side of the house.

“You’re lucky I recognized you from the party last week,” he said.

He wore blue checkered pajama pants and a white T-shirt and stood barefoot on the lawn.

“I’m sorry. We had an emergency, and I didn’t know where to go.”

The alpha offered me his hand. “Terrance Harbinger. I’m Mr. Leonard Sullivan’s security. And you’re Pascal Pembroke.”

“Yes. Nice to meet you officially. This is Ansel, my mate.”

Terrance shook Ansel’s hand. “Can you explain about the emergency?”

“My ex and a couple of other men barged into Pascal’s home and tried to kidnap me.” Ansel spoke evenly, calm as ever. It didn’t even surprise me anymore. “Pascal incapacitated them.” He threw me an accusing glance. “I’m still processing how you did that, by the way.”

Terrance looked at my mate with confused admiration. Good. I wasn’t the only one baffled by the cool way my Ansel handled the most alarming crises.

“When more men came, carrying guns,” Ansel continued, “Pascal climbed onto the roof and flew me here.”

“I’m sorry about that. I’m sure Mr. and Mr. Sullivan will happily extend their hospitality.” Terrance gestured toward the house and began walking, so we followed. “We have a security system that alerts me if someone or something breaches the perimeter of the house, even from the air. Next time, you’d better call to say you’re on your way.”

“My apologies,” I said. “I lost my phone in the scuffle and had to shift in a hurry.”

Ansel scoffed. “I sincerely hope there won’t be a next time.”

The bodyguard chuckled. “Come inside. I think Mr. Davidson Sullivan is awake.”

My friend met us in the atrium of his impressive home. He told Terrance to go to bed and led us to his living room, which doubled as a pool house. He stopped by the bar and poured us

each a glass of neat whiskey. He seemed to think it was a remedy for all ailments and drank it like some people drank tea.

Ansel sipped from his glass, grimaced, then put it back on the table. He eyed Davidson warily.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” Davidson said after listening to our story. “Can I help in any way? We have connections in the Ardaine community to both the police and the FBI.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Ansel said. “I hope that it’s just a misunderstanding. This man, Valentin Lyon, seems to think that the only reason I could have said no to him is that I’m mentally unstable. He waltzed into Pascal’s home with the intention of delivering me back to my parents. Unless he lied, of course.”

Squinting, Davidson leaned forward. “An ex?”

“Something like that. We were never truly together, but his version of events differs from mine.”

Davidson smirked. “I know the type.”

“Can I use your phone to send a private message? Neither of us managed to bring ours.”

“Sure.” Davidson unlocked his device and handed it to Ansel.

“Thank you,” Ansel said with a polite nod and stood. “I’ll be right back.” He ambled to the other side of the room, tapping on the screen.

Davidson gazed at him with a soft smile on his usually surly face.

“How old is he?”

I sighed. *I’d better get used to it.* “Nineteen.”

My friend let out a quiet whistle. “Damn. He seems clever, though, and very calm, considering.”

“He’s brilliant.”

“When did you meet?”

“Last Sunday. The morning after your garden party.”

“Really?”

“I crashed into the forest during a storm in Cross River. I landed right behind Ansel’s cabin, where he was staying, hiding from his overbearing parents. He found me in dragon form and saw me shift.”

“You’re kidding.” My friend turned to me with wide eyes. “And he didn’t run for the hills?”

“No. He helped me down the slope to his cabin, made me tea, and questioned me about my flying habits and diet.”

Chuckling, Davidson shook his head. “Born to become a dragon mate. Congratulations, my friend. He seems lovely.”

“Thanks. Now I just have to figure out what to do with the suited-up thugs who might want to shoot me.”

Ansel walked back, and I reached out for him. He settled on my lap and laid his head on my shoulder.

“I messaged my parents. Thank you.” He handed the phone back to Davidson. “What should we do now? Can we finally call the police?”

Davidson seemed to weigh his words carefully. “The community tends to sort these things out ourselves if we can. It makes things easier to explain.”

“Like a college professor single-handedly incapacitating three alphas in three seconds and then disappearing via the rooftop,” Ansel said. “I can see how that might raise some suspicion.”

Davidson grinned at my mate. “You get the picture.”

Just then, Davidson’s phone vibrated in his hand.

“I imagine this is for you.” He gave the device to Ansel.

Ansel glanced at the number. “Damn. I thought they’d be asleep.”

He answered the call.

“Hello, Father.”

I locked my arms around him in case he needed the support.

“Wait. Let me speak, Father.”

Davidson raised his eyebrows at me, grinning. Yes, my mate was a damn firecracker. I was so proud of him.

“Let me speak!” Ansel said loudly. He pushed to stand up, so I released him from my embrace. He was fine on his own. “Valentin broke into Pascal’s home with two other men and tried to kidnap me. We ran away via a fire escape and a door on the rooftop. We took a cab to a friend’s place.” He gestured helplessly at me, and I shrugged. It was as good an explanation as any.

Then his eyes widened. “You can’t be serious. That’s insane!”

The muffled voice in the speaker rose. Ansel listened, pacing in front of us.

“This could all have been avoided if you’d only talked to me about it.”

He rolled his eyes and paused, listening some more.

“I understand perfectly what you’re saying, but it’s no excuse. We thought they were there to kidnap me. Can you imagine how dangerous this could have gotten? How dangerous it already was! What if Pascal had a gun and shot one of them? You need to communicate these things, Father.”

After another shorter pause, he sighed, seeming resigned.

“Yes, we will. Thank you, Father.”

He politely said goodbye and ended the call before handing the phone back to Davidson. “The alphas with the guns that came later were my father’s.”

“What?” Davidson gasped, outraged. “Your father wants to kill your mate?”

“No! Nothing like that. They were surveilling the apartment for my safety. When they saw Valentin enter with

his entourage, they followed. They restrained Valentin and called the police.”

“So they were on our side?” I asked.

“Sort of.”

“We should contact the police with our version.”

“Probably.”

“No chance of keeping it under wraps now,” Davidson said. “What Ansel told his father about the door on the roof sounded reasonable. I’d stick to that tale. There was a door, wasn’t there?”

“Yes. Although it could have been locked,” Ansel said. “But I guess we don’t have any other options.”

It took a while to get hold of the right people. Clearly wanting to be done with the case as soon as possible, they accepted our statements on the phone and asked us to be available next week for more questioning. Apparently, Perrault Sr. had already prepared the ground for us, his security readily cooperating, so we were off the hook for now.

I hadn’t hurt any of the men enough to justify legal action against me, plus it had been a clear case of breaking and entering since they’d cuffed our doorman to his chair. Valentin would probably make bail, but Ansel would get a restraining order against him with the help of his father’s connections.

It was almost dawn when Davidson showed us to one of his guestrooms. I cradled my mate in my arms and listened to him falling asleep. It was a long time before I drifted off to join him in dreamland.

LEONARD SULLIVAN

Ansel

AT FIRST, I didn't remember where I was. But before I could panic, I noticed a small Post-it on the pillow next to me.

*Didn't want to wake you up.
Come find me. <3 P*

I smiled.

After showering in the en suite, I dressed in yet another bathrobe and walked out. I looked in both directions, unsure where the kitchen might be. Sunlight spilled into the house through large floor-to-ceiling windows in the atrium. It must have been around noon. Then I heard quiet music from the left and followed the sound.

Passing alongside the pool, I noticed Pascal standing outside on the patio with a coffee cup in his hand. I searched the glass walls for a doorknob. There had to be an exit somewhere. Should I turn back and use the main entrance?

As I was looking for a way to get to my alpha, I nearly bumped into a man rounding one of the potted palm trees.

“Oh, sorry.”

I gaped, taking him in. I'd never met anyone as outrageously beautiful as this omega. He was tall and willowy, with golden hair, a perfectly symmetrical face, full lips, and a

noticeable baby bump. He wore white linen pants with a loose cream shirt and was barefoot. I paused at the collar around his neck. It looked unmistakably kinky but also sophisticated, the leather pale and the buckles delicate. The omega had to be older than me, but not more than twenty-five. He assessed me, narrowing his eyes as if he wasn't sure whether to trust me. But then he smiled brightly and offered me his elegant hand.

“You must be Ansel. My name is Leonard. Davidson is my husband.” He had a melodic voice, like a radio presenter, and moved with confident grace. Then it clicked in my head.

“You’re a dragon mate too?”

He could answer so many of my questions! I stepped closer to him on autopilot, but Leonard let out a tense chuckle, leaning away. I was being pushy, wasn't I?

“I’m sorry, it’s so new for me. I only met Pascal when he crashed behind my cabin on Sunday morning. And now... Everything is happening so fast. I want to be with him, he’s great, but it’s so fast! Was it like that for you as well?”

Leonard tilted his head toward me and whispered conspiratorially, “I got pregnant a week after I met Davidson.”

Shocked, I pointed at his stomach. “Um...”

“This little bean is my second child. Our firstborn, Rufus, is out in the garden with Davidson.”

He jerked his chin toward the glass walls behind him. Outside on the green lawn toddled a boy, maybe two years old. Davidson shuffled behind him with his hands outstretched. The huge shifter loomed above the child, looking even bigger in comparison. Abruptly, the child began running, but Davidson caught him and swung him through the air. My Pascal stood to the side, grinning at them, looking unbearably cute.

“Davidson and I have been together for nearly three years now,” Leonard said next to me. “But the beginning was wild.”

“How wild?” I breathed.

“We bumped into each other at a sex party. I panicked and ran away but got intercepted in the street by robbers. Davidson shifted, took them out, and flew me here. I thought I’d been kidnapped by a pterodactyl. Do you want coffee? Something to eat? You must be hungry.”

I was still processing what he’d said. “Um. Coffee with milk would be great. Thanks.” *A...sex party?*

Leonard led me through the maze of pillars and potted plants to a large kitchen area. The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a view of the patio from another angle. Pascal stood with his back to me. I wanted to go to him, but I also wanted to talk to Leonard.

“Just a second,” Leonard said. Then he pushed a glass panel aside and opened a previously invisible door.

“Pascal, your mate is awake,” he called to the men on the lawn. “I’m borrowing him for a little while.”

Pascal spun around, his eyes locking with mine. I waved, and he waved back. It felt wrong to be separated from him, but I forced myself to be rational.

“Papa!” the toddler shrieked, stretching out his chubby hand toward us.

“Play with your dad, Rufus. I’ll be right with you.”

The kid frowned, obviously not happy with the plan, but when Davidson rocked him and lifted him high in the air, he giggled.

Leonard closed the door, ambled to the coffee machine, and picked a white mug from the shelf above it. “They’ll be fine for twenty minutes without us,” he told me.

“Your kid is cute.”

“Thanks. He’s a darling. The separation anxiety is getting better now too. He gave us hell after my heat when we left him with his grandparents for six days, but such is life.”

“I feel for him. I might have a case of separation anxiety myself.”

A nostalgic smile lit up Leonard's beautiful features. "Yes. The first week of bonding is the worst. Or the best. Depending on how you look at it."

"How was it for you?"

"I was close to my heat, and the bonding affected me strongly, so even though I was afraid of Davidson, I couldn't keep my hands off him. It took only a week for me to go into heat. He bred me on the first day. I already loved him so much I'd have died without him. So if you need to talk about how fast things are going and how overwhelmed you feel, I'm not sure I'm a good reference."

He talked so casually about it. I could barely keep up. "Pascal said there's contraception..."

The coffee machine quieted, and Leonard handed me a mug. "Don't worry, Ansel. I wanted to have a child with Davidson. But you don't have to do anything you don't want to. We can book you an appointment with Dr. Clearbridge, and he'll give you an IUD."

"IUD?" I thought I knew what that was.

"A device that gets inserted into your womb before the first heat wave. It's a standard contraception method when pills won't work for some reason, and they won't for you. With the IUD, you'll be fine. How old are you anyway?"

"Nineteen."

With his eyebrows raised, Leonard blinked a couple of times. Something in his face shifted. "Nineteen?" he breathed.

"Um. We haven't yet... Pascal insists on waiting. Taking it slow." I chuckled helplessly.

Leonard exhaled. "Goodness." Then he threw an arm around my shoulders. "Okay. Let's talk. Do you want a drink?"

"It's not even twelve."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Dear Ansel, you do need a drink. We'll find you something to go with your coffee. There

are fresh cookies in the lounge area that Rufus hasn't found yet. We'll talk, and we'll have a good, hearty lunch later."

At the bar, he poured me a shot of sweet liquor that tasted of hazelnuts and cocoa. It was delicious. We sat by the pool, and I scarfed down a cookie. As breakfasts went, the combination was outrageous, but I liked it.

Sipping his decaf with oat milk, Leonard began talking in a soothing tone.

"Ansel, are you still a virgin?"

"Technically." My ears got hot. I must have been beet red in the face. "We've done stuff."

"Hands? Mouths?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Are you lactating?"

"Not yet. But my pecs...are tight? Sensitive nipples."

Leonard sighed, looking at me with a sadness that made me feel uncomfortable. Was there anything sad about my situation? Why?

"I'm not completely clueless," I said defensively. "I've got a dildo and seen some porn. I even gave Pascal a blow job."

That only made Leonard look sadder. "Oh, darling."

I gave out an exasperated laugh. "Seriously, stop this. It's enough that Pascal refuses to fuck me because he thinks I'm too young."

"He's just trying to protect you."

"From him? That makes no sense. I think I'm falling in love with him."

"Of course you are. You'll love him more every day for the rest of your life."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

Leonard rubbed his neck, then leaned back against the sofa cushions. He stroked his belly in a seemingly instinctive, circular movement. "It's possible I'm projecting. I was a

complete mess when I met Davidson. Upon meeting the dragon, I broke down horribly. It took me days to put myself back together. See, the constant sex we were having was like a drug. I couldn't think. I wanted him, but I was terrified of him. A part of me wanted to hate him, yet I craved feeling him inside me nonstop. Thinking back, it was probably the craziest week of my life. The pregnancy grounded me."

"I'm not afraid of Pascal," I managed.

"That's good. But look at it from his perspective. He's heard all these stories about dragon mates going into shock or trying to reject their mates during the first few days. Then he bonds with a nineteen-year-old virgin. He's terrified he'll do something wrong."

The "nineteen-year-old virgin" made me scowl at him, but he only laughed.

"Are you telling me that you're not nervous at all about what's happening to you?"

I sipped more of the sweet liquor and shrugged. "A little. But I trust Pascal."

Leonard patted my knee, the gesture a little awkward.

"When I was at my worst, crying several times a day, Davidson called another dragon mate. You'll get to know Lawrence soon. He's the nicest omega you'll ever meet. Talking to Lawrence was one of the things that helped me the most." He exhaled loudly. "Except Lawrence is not here now. I'm not a very...compassionate person, but I'll do my best."

"Okay." I found it strange he would say something so unflattering about himself. He seemed nice enough, but I didn't know him at all, of course.

"We'll start from scratch. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Happy? Excited. I'm still jittery from the break-in, but I know I'm safe with Pascal."

"Scared, maybe?"

"The dragon doesn't scare me."

“No? Pascal loves you and will take care of you. You are indeed safe. But he’s also a monster that you never imagined even existed.”

I laughed. “I kinda knew a little bit.”

Leonard raised his sculpted eyebrows. “Oh? How so?”

“My granddad believed in dragons. He told me stories about them when I was little. I thought they were real until I was about nine. So when I found Pascal in the forest, it was like my granddad was pulling a practical joke on me from heaven.”

“Then I guess you were better prepared than I was.”

“Maybe. When we flew together, it was like a whole new world opened for me. I loved that.”

Leonard’s eyes got bigger. “He already took you flying?”

“Not exactly. My car got flushed down a hill, so we had no way to get out of the national park. Pascal changed and flew us to his car.”

“Hm. That would explain your lack of fear. Spending time with the dragon increases the bond.”

“He says that was when he knew for sure. I had no idea. I just liked him.”

“And how are you doing physically?”

I squirmed. “There’s a lot going on.”

“Your belly and pecs are bloated. You’re wet most of the time and horny.”

My face in flames, I nodded. Leonard didn’t mince his words.

“After the physical bonding, the symptoms will disappear. But you might go into heat very soon. I don’t know if you not having actual intercourse can delay that because you must be soaking up each other’s pheromones anyway. There’s a doctor downtown who specializes in dragon mates and shifters.”

“Dr. Clearbridge. You’ve told me, and Pascal mentioned him as well.”

“Yes, that’s him. We should book you an appointment as soon as possible, so the heat doesn’t come as a surprise. You’ll need the contraceptive.” He paused. “Unless you want a child already?”

“Lord, no.”

He grinned, and I felt myself blush.

“No offense, just...I’m not ready.”

“None taken. I was twenty-seven when I met Davidson. My situation was different.”

That made him, what, around thirty now? “You look much younger.”

“It’s one of the perks.” He winked. “Anyway. We need to book the appointment.”

Leonard put his coffee cup on the table and pulled a thin silver phone out of a cargo pocket on his linen pants. Everything about him screamed designer, but he had a great, understated taste. Did he work in the fashion industry?

He lifted a finger for me to wait as he made the call.

“Hello. Leonard Sullivan here. I have a dragon mate sitting next to me who’s very young and new to the community. We need to book him an appointment for a routine checkup and to determine the date for his first heat.”

He listened for a few seconds, then handed me the phone with an encouraging nod.

My heart started racing. “Um. Hello?”

“Hello, my name is Germaine. I’m a nurse at Dr. Clearbridge’s office. Leonard says you need an appointment.”

“I think so. Ansel Perrault.”

“How old are you, Ansel?”

“Nineteen. My birthday is in March.”

A soft clicking of a keyboard followed. “Are you experiencing any early signs of an upcoming heat?”

“I don’t know. Um. The bonding is affecting me, so I guess I have no idea how I’m supposed to feel.”

“I understand. Can you describe the symptoms for me? How soon did lover’s milk appear after the first intercourse with your mate?”

Oh Lord. “I don’t have the milk. We haven’t had intercourse. Yet.”

The nurse didn’t react to the information other than presumably typing it up. “Some other signs? Unusual sensations?”

“My stomach is a little bloated but nothing too bad. My chest is getting sensitive, so the milk might come soon. I’m slick all the time. And...” I paused. Did he need to know everything?

“Heightened libido?”

“Yes. Very. I was surprised by that.”

Leonard grinned next to me.

“Don’t worry, Ansel, you’re okay. Just to be sure, I’ll book you in for early tomorrow morning.”

“So soon?”

“The timing of the first heat for a young dragon mate can be a little unpredictable. It’s just to be on the safe side.”

“Where’s the office?”

“Fulson Street, north of the business district.”

“Okay. I think I know where that is.”

“I have a time slot for you at seven thirty. I’ll send you all the details as a message on the number you’re calling from. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Can I take Pascal with me?”

“Pascal?”

Why did I think all the shifters knew each other? “My alpha.”

“Of course. He’ll have to come. The bonding won’t allow you to be apart.”

True. I was antsy just sitting in the house while he was outside.

“Good. Dr. Clearbridge will see you tomorrow,” Germaine said. “He’ll explain everything you need to know.”

“Thank you.”

“Have a lovely day, Ansel.”

“You too.”

I handed the phone back to Leonard. Apparently, I had an appointment with a dragon doctor. I downed the rest of the creamy liquor and grabbed another cookie. Leonard eyed me thoughtfully.

“Davidson told me what happened yesterday. You seem to be taking it quite well.”

I smiled around a mouthful of cookie, chewed, and swallowed before speaking. “You have no idea. Usually, I’m a bundle of anxiety. Years of therapy, panic attacks, insomnia.”

My companion frowned. “You’re not anxious now, are you?”

“I miss Pascal. Which is ridiculous because he’s right there.” I glanced over my shoulder through the glass walls. Pascal caught my gaze and smiled uncertainly, so I smiled back. “But it’s not the same anxiety I used to experience.”

“What changed?”

“I think it’s a combination of things. I’m learning where my anxiety comes from. I spent most of my life indoors, my every movement controlled and restricted. My parents had high expectations of me, and I fulfilled them flawlessly, but I was unhappy and didn’t know things could be different. I’m taking control of my own life now. It’s scary but also exciting and invigorating. I’m nervous about the future, sure, but the

stifling anxiety that seemed to follow me everywhere is gone. Being near Pascal relaxes me too.”

Leonard’s face changed. He was still smiling at me, but it looked different from before. I realized his earlier smiles were polite and careful. This one was genuine.

“I know what you mean. I’m bound to Davidson for the rest of my life, but he set me free.”

I wondered if I might have set myself free even before I met Pascal. I liked the idea of that. In any case, being tied to Pascal now didn’t feel like an entrapment at all.

Leonard stood briskly. “Bring your coffee. I have one more thing you need.”

I followed him along the indoor pool, carrying my mug with me.

He led me through the atrium to a large study where the walls were lined with an impressive book collection. I noticed a few first editions of great value and was going to ask about them, but Leonard pulled out an inconspicuous little paperback.

“This might become a tradition.” He smiled at the battered copy and handed it to me. I took it with my free hand and read the cover.

Mating and Procreation of Dragons

“It’s a hand-me-down. Lawrence got it from his omega father-in-law, and I got it from Lawrence. Now it’s yours. It’s interesting reading and contains some images. I recommend opening it in private.”

My cheeks heated. I cradled the paperback to my chest. “Thank you.”

Leonard winked and gestured to the door. “I imagine you’d like to return to your mate.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, I needed Pascal. Never mind I’d spent the night in his arms, I needed a hug.

A YOUNG DRAGON MATE

Pascal

ANSEL BURST out of the house holding an old book. He all but ran to me, and I caught him in my arms. I breathed a sigh of relief at the feel of him. He'd stayed in the same house, but still, I'd missed him. The bonding was making us ridiculously clingy.

He tilted his head up, and we kissed until Davidson cleared his throat behind me.

"Sorry," Ansel whispered and bit his lip.

"We'll get out of your hair now," I told my host.

The child, Rufus, squirmed in Davidson's arms. "Papa!" Davidson put the toddler down, and he ran toward Leonard, who stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Leonard caught his son and kissed his cheek.

"Stay for lunch," Davidson said. "It should be ready within minutes."

I glanced down at Ansel, who grimaced, fingering the sash of his bathrobe. "We're a little underdressed," he murmured quietly.

But Davidson heard him. "Don't worry about that, Ansel. I'm sure Leo has something that will fit you if you want. Since wardrobe is your only concern, I insist you stay and let us feed you."

"Thank you. That's kind of you."

THE LUNCH WAS DELICIOUS, but we couldn't have much of a conversation with our hosts, given that we were constantly interrupted. Rufus seemed to be a well-behaved child, but he was, after all, only two. The concept of waiting until another person finished a sentence wasn't yet familiar to him. Both of his parents were preoccupied with him, so Ansel and I mostly just smiled at each other and ate in silence.

When we were about to leave, Davidson offered to send one of his men with us, and we readily agreed. I wasn't keen on riding a cab wearing only sweats and a borrowed T-shirt, not to mention we didn't even have a bank card or a phone.

We made it back to my flat at three in the afternoon. The doorman observed Ansel curiously while he opened the apartment for us, lamenting my bad luck.

"They cuffed Theodore to the chair, and I heard they pulled guns on you."

"We're just glad nobody was hurt," I said, willing the man to leave us alone already.

"What a world." The doorman stuffed the spare key into his pocket. "We're having the panic button reinstalled. It was too far away to reach."

"That's good. Thank you."

"What a world," he repeated, shaking his head, as he finally began shuffling toward the elevator. "You do have your key now, don't you? They didn't take it?"

"Here it is." I scooped it up from a bowl on the shelf and waved it at the man.

He gave a nod. "Good. Good."

"Thank you," Ansel called after him.

The doorman waved and stepped into the elevator. When it went down, I closed the door and exhaled.

Dressed in jeans and a simple cotton shirt he'd gotten from Leo, Ansel carried my bathrobe under his arm together with

the book. He cast the bathrobe over an armchair, and with the book dangling from his fingers, he stretched to hug my neck. I roped my arms around his slight form and kissed his temple.

“Let’s just sit for a while,” I said.

He looked distracted as he walked with me to the sofa. I pulled him onto my lap, and he curled up, laying his head on my shoulder.

“Leonard booked me an appointment with the dragon doctor tomorrow.”

“That’s good. I was about to bring that up again.”

“He says my heat could come whenever, and I’ll need the contraceptive.”

My poor Ansel. I’d turned his life upside down. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? I’m not. A few days ago, my options were Valentin or a heat teacher. Now I have an alpha I want to spend my heat with.”

He played with the paperback in his hands, fingering the page edges but not opening it. The cover said *Mating and Procreation of Dragons* and featured an illustration of a dragon mate in heat with a swollen belly and rounded pecs.

“I haven’t seen one of these for years,” I said.

“You know it?”

“Yes. It’s like a sex education textbook for dragon shifters.”

Ansel ducked his head. “I’m a little afraid to open it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“You already know most of the things in there. The main stuff anyway.”

“No big surprises?”

“Maybe small ones.”

“Can we open it together?”

“Sure.”

Methodical as ever, Ansel opened the book on the first page. He turned the title page, copyright, and dedication, then paused on the contents.

Introduction

Fertile Dragon Pairings

Becoming a Mature Dragon Alpha

Omega Dragon Mate

Finding Your Mate

Bonding

Heat Cycle and Breeding

Young Dragon Mate and First Heat

Ansel pointed at the line, running his finger to the page number.

“I guess this one is for me,” he said quietly and paged through the book to get to the chapter.

I read over his shoulder.

In his notorious essay, Terrestrar (1923) encouraged dragon alphas to actively search for their mates among young omegas before their first heat. “A mate can only be devoted to his dragon if he’s never been tainted by a human alpha’s seed. A bond to a tainted omega is bound to be fragile and unhappy. To avoid accidentally creating such a bond, a dragon alpha ought to copulate uniquely with virgins before their first heat.” Terrestrar devotes an entire chapter to recommended seduction techniques, stating a dragon alpha should “overcome resistance if such arises. To make sure a bond is created, a dragon alpha releases into the omega’s breeding channel no less than three times. If the omega’s chest does not swell with milk within three days after the gift of dragon seed, he is not worthy.”

Ansel scoffed but didn't say anything. Shame crept up my spine. He had to be horrified. Luckily, the next paragraph saved me from explaining myself.

Even in the nineteen twenties, the essay caused outrage. The idea of shifters deflowering or even raping young omegas in search of a mate disgusted the dragon community. In the heavily industrialized society, relationships with the human populace had long become more sustainable. However, Terrestrar's work played an important role in that it spurred other dragon researchers into action. A comprehensive and truthful guide about mating and procreation of dragon shifters was indeed needed. The way a young mate should be treated became a focal point of a dragon's ethical values.

Five years later, Andreasen published Dragon's Love (1928), which was later translated into more than twenty languages. While parts of the text are now heavily outdated, the gist of Andreasen's approach is timeless. The short but groundbreaking work defined full consent and emphasized equality in a bond, putting dragon shifters decades ahead of humans in the global omega liberation movement. "An alpha might feel a bond developing long before his omega realizes any connection. If that is the case, the alpha is to wait. Forcing the omega to realize the bond before he is ready will frighten or even repel the potential mate. Consummating a union before a dragon mate desires it creates irreparable damage to the bond. A true mate will come to his dragon." (Andreasen, 1928)

Ansel looked up at me, and a corner of his mouth curved up. Wordlessly, he gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and returned his attention to the paperback.

He turned a page and tensed. I gulped. I'd forgotten how detailed some of the illustrations were.

Two identical omegas stared at us from the picture, standing side by side. Their faces were pretty, lips puckered, eyes heavy-lidded. The omega on the left had a flat chest and stomach and a soft little cock. His nipples were small and pale. In the center of the picture was an anatomical drawing of the

omega's womb—a pink triangle with a short channel leading to it. The mouth to the womb was tiny and clenched tight, seated high up the omega's tight hole. The inscription said *Dragon mate before his first heat, virgo intactus, with a dormant uterus.*

The omega to the right had a slightly protruding belly and rounded pectorals. His nipples were larger and a darker shade of pink. His womb was drawn enlarged, the mouth bigger, resembling puckered lips. His hole was wider, the tissues drawn swollen. The devilish illustrator had added small specks of white liquid to the anatomical part, representing traces of alpha cum in the omega's hole and on the mouth to his womb. One pectoral was also drawn transparent with highlighted mammary glands. *A bonding dragon mate on the brink of his first heat.*

Ansel stared at the images, transfixed. This was about to happen to him. Was he afraid? But he just turned the page calmly and read on.

When Andreasen penned Dragon's Love (1928), the age of consent in large parts of the country remained sixteen, but its increase was already widely debated. Andreasen urged alphas who suspected a bond to an omega younger than eighteen to keep their distance until the omega was legally and mentally able to consent.

Since the sexual revolution, dragon alphas have felt less pressure to find a mate early in life. Bonds with young omegas before their first heat did occur, albeit less often. The number of forced bonds was steadily declining. Today, it's negligible.

“What's a forced bond?” Ansel asked.

“It's when the alpha breeds an omega who isn't his bonded mate. The omega can get pregnant, and a bond might develop over time. It used to be a common practice a few centuries ago. If a shifter couldn't find a dragon mate, he would impregnate a human omega and hope for the best.”

“And it's wrong?”

“Well, let’s say he got an omega pregnant and met his true mate later. He would then leave the omega and any children they might have had for the mate.”

“Oh.”

“Dragon alphas have to be patient, or they could hurt a lot of people.”

“How did you...do it before you met me?”

“I had a few short relationships when I was very young, but nothing serious. Before I moved to Ardaine, I had a friendly deal with an omega couple. They’re both shifters and bonded to each other, so I...helped them during their heats.”

“But you’ve been alone all this time?”

“Single for seventeen years.”

He exhaled. “Wow.”

“That’s how it is for dragon alphas. Some get lucky already in their twenties. And then you have men like Davidson. He waited for Leonard for more than two decades.”

Frowning thoughtfully, Ansel turned his attention back to the book.

Hobbes (1982) followed thirty mated dragon alphas over the course of ten years. Two of them bonded with omegas aged seventeen and eighteen respectively. Both alphas realized the bond early on but waited for more than a year before romantically approaching their mates. Due to the small number of couples involved in the research, the results can’t be deemed representative, but Hobbes (1982) reports that after the initial intercourse, both young omegas experienced a more gradually intensifying bond while the alphas were already deeply devoted to their mates. The bodily bonding symptoms were also delayed and progressed slowly, taking a full forty-eight hours to develop, as opposed to the usual twelve to twenty-four. However, both omegas went into heat mere weeks after the initial coitus and got pregnant immediately. Hobbes writes that the alphas in these bonds “suffered more profoundly when separated from their mates and were fiercely protective. It remains to be confirmed

whether an early bond creates a bigger strain on the alpha, who might feel heavy responsibility for the well-being of his young mate.” (Hobbes, 1982)

“Probably good we have the appointment tomorrow, huh?” Ansel said.

“Oh yes.”

“For the sake of being absolutely transparent, I’m not ready to have a kid.”

“I don’t have any expectations of you, Ansel. We have time. Years and years, in fact.”

He smiled wanly at me. “Do you feel responsible for me? Because you don’t have to.”

I gave it serious thought. “When Valentin burst in here last night, I only cared about you being safe. But that’s natural.”

“You don’t feel like you have to, I don’t know, coddle me because I’m so much younger than you?”

“Ansel, I’ve been in constant awe of you since I first laid eyes on you.”

He jerked back, his nose scrunching up.

“Don’t look so shocked. You’ve been through a lot, but you’re brave and levelheaded. How you handled the conflict with your parents, how unafraid you were facing the dragon, and how you acted last night—if anything, I might fear you need me less than I’d like to pretend.”

Ansel gave a surprised chuckle. “I wouldn’t have stood a chance against Valentin’s men last night, that’s for sure.”

“What I meant to say, yes, you’re twenty years my junior. But the more I know you, the less it worries me.”

At that, he smiled and gave me a peck on the lips.

“The book is interesting. I want to read it all.”

“I should work anyway. Do you want me to leave you in peace?”

“Not really.” He tapped his lips with a fingertip. “Can you bring your laptop here?”

“Sure.”

I needed to be close to him as well.

We made coffee and settled in companionable silence on opposite ends of the sofa, our legs tangled. Ansel continued reading while I replied to emails and went through my notes on the upcoming lectures.

Sometimes, I heard his heartbeat accelerate, but I tried not to let it distract me. But then his scent intensified, and the letters seemed to dance in front of my eyes.

This was why dragon shifters were strongly encouraged to take leave during bonding, even when they worked from home.

MATING AND SATISFACTORY BREEDING

Ansel

A YOUNG DRAGON mate might realize the bond in various ways. For some, it would be the first time they experience physical attraction. Collins (1979) conducted qualitative interviews with a large number of dragon mates during his research. He lists attraction to scent and voice as more important than purely visual appeal. The younger the dragon mate, the more intense was his perception of physical attraction. This can be attributed to relative inexperience with sexual arousal.

A dragon mate lacking previous experience would feel shocked and overwhelmed by his desire, and he would act on it impulsively. Younger dragon mates would more often mention shame when voicing their sexual appetite. At the same time, the couples had penetrative bonding sex at a higher-than-average frequency. Collins (1979) concludes that dragon mates before their first heat would have heightened libido and crave penetrative intercourse more often than older omegas while at the same time feeling less secure in their sexuality.

The way the book was written should have been a major turnoff. It reminded me of my course literature. But noticing the word *penetrative* repeatedly made me squirm. The joke was not lost on me. I was reading a book that explained why I was so horny, while reading it made me even hornier.

I peered at Pascal, who seemed fully focused on his laptop screen. I understood better now why he wanted to take it slow,

but I only wanted him more. I swallowed a frustrated sigh and read on.

The young dragon mates in Collins's study mentioned a feeling of safety or belonging when meeting their alphas, even before the relationship became physical. They were less likely to go into shock or to attempt rejecting their mate when encountering the dragon.

Abandoning his usual terse, scientific tone, Collins (1979) wrote as follows: "I spoke to nine omegas who bonded before their first heat. All of them experienced intense heat within weeks of the initial mating and got pregnant immediately. Three couples were unaware of the fact that the first heat was fully fertile for dragon mates, and the pregnancy came as a surprise. One omega gave birth to twins on the night of his nineteenth birthday. It is concerning that, with the medical advances the global dragon community has made, effective contraception for dragon mates is yet not accessible. We boast about equality in dragon families, fancying ourselves ahead of humans when it comes to omega rights because we incorporated unambiguous consent into our mating tradition. However, we cannot claim to be fully equal in our bonds if young dragon mates do not have the right to choose when they become fathers."

The first intrauterine contraceptive device effective in dragon mates of all ages appeared on the market six years later (Isaacson, 1997).

Rydén (2018) writes that many dragon mates still had lover's milk during their first heat. The first-heat omegas in his study admitted to demanding repeated breeding. Rydén states that a young dragon mate would crave staying locked in breeding with his alpha for extended periods of time.

I had no idea what that meant, but as I turned the page, a piece of paper fell on my stomach. It must have been wedged inside the book. I put the paperback aside and opened the folded flyer.

Holy shit.

The spread showed seven illustrations of couples during sex. Seven different positions. In three of them, the omega was on top in the alpha's lap, sitting with his front or back to the alpha's chest or crouching astride his hips, pushing his ass down. The omega's insides were drawn transparent, with an inflated knot in his hole and an enlarged womb. The cockhead was jammed in the mouth to the womb, and a splash of white spurted through the channel, drops reaching the open womb.

In another position, the alpha was fucking the kneeling omega from behind, holding him by his hip and around his chest. Again, the splash of cum was there, right in the middle.

Next was classic missionary. Then missionary again but with the omega's hips elevated on a mound of what looked like pillows and his legs folded to his chest.

And standing up. The omega was spread out on an elevated surface, legs in the air, head thrown back. He clutched at his little belly with both hands while the alpha was coming inside him. Into his womb. Breeding him.

Recommended positions for satisfactory breeding.

My hands shook, and I dropped the flyer. Satisfactory. Breeding.

Not daring to look at the other side, I quickly stuffed the flyer back into the book and closed it with a smack.

The noise made Pascal look up.

“Ansel? Are you alright?”

Am I?

My heart was pounding, blood rushing in my ears. I felt like I was about to burst out of my skin.

I didn't think. I had no room in my head to think. I scrambled to my knees and attacked Pascal's pants.

“Oh...” He put the laptop aside but didn't stop me when I fished his cock out and stuffed it into my mouth. It hardened within seconds, and I moaned with relief.

I closed my eyes and just sucked.

I needed it more than I needed to breathe.

“Ansel, sweetheart.”

He petted my hair as I bobbed my head, letting his cockhead jab into my throat. I didn't seem to have any gag reflex when it came to Pascal's cock. I angled my head so I could take him even deeper.

“I'll come, love.”

Oh, please, yes.

I worked his length with both hands. There seemed to be little ridges under his cockhead that hadn't been there before. Or was I just now noticing them? This time, I was prepared. I readily swallowed each spurt of cum, Pascal's groans of pleasure the most rewarding praise I could have gotten.

My groin tightened, my hole throbbed, and my skin prickled as I sucked the cum out of his slit.

Suddenly, something inside me snapped. I moaned around Pascal's cock. My hole fluttered, and slick released into my briefs.

I was coming.

Whimpering, I trembled through the unsatisfying peak. It left me open and soiled and aching with emptiness.

With one last lick, I released Pascal's cock.

“Please,” I whined.

“Come here.”

He tugged my pants and underwear off and lying back on the sofa, he guided me to straddle his face. Then he swallowed my cock.

I bucked. “Empty!”

But Pascal was already there. He filled me with two fingers and stroked my hole, curling and uncurling his fingers. His knuckles stretched me and rubbed the right places, and I lost myself.

I fucked his mouth and rode his fingers as if he'd plugged me into electricity.

This orgasm wasn't weak.

It stormed through me, overloading my nervous system. I collapsed over Pascal's head.

He softly suckled on my cock and pumped his fingers into my hole.

"That book is dangerous," I managed, panting.

"Nngh."

"Sorry." I pushed myself up, sliding out of Pascal's mouth.

"No need to apologize." Pascal grinned and licked his lips. "I quite enjoyed that. Shower?"

We showered together. As he skimmed my skin with soapy hands, I shivered, my body like a live wire. He got to his knees and rimmed me, and I came on his tongue, the images from the flyer flickering through my head.

I hoped Pascal would relent soon and finally fuck me because chances were, I'd lose my mind before we got there.

THE FATHERS

Pascal

ANSEL SAT DOWN NEXT to me, and I sighed with relief at having him within reach. I grabbed his hand, he squeezed mine, and we waited. The buzz of air-conditioning and muted noises from the streets below seemed loud in the silence.

When the door to the office opened, I stiffened. Dr. Clearbridge walked in, frowning at a printout in his hands. “I’m afraid I can’t really give you a specific date.” He sank heavily into his chair and lifted his gaze above the rim of his small reading glasses.

He was an elderly omega with sharp eyes and a quick smile. I felt like he could read my mind after seconds in the room with me. He seemed nice but made me uncomfortable, as if I were a kid in the headmaster’s office.

“Haven’t you had intercourse yet?”

I sucked in a breath at the blunt question.

“No,” Ansel answered before I could. “Pascal worries about me feeling rushed or overwhelmed. We’ve been intimate in other ways, though.”

Clearbridge smiled. “Very few couples have such self-control.”

“Is it somehow dangerous for me to have sex already?” Ansel asked.

“Of course not.”

My mate side-eyed me, and I sank lower into the chair.

“Well, Ansel, let’s see.” Clearbridge spread the paper on the table and clicked a few keys on his laptop. “The bonding is ongoing. Your hormone levels are indicative of rapid changes, but the development is not linear. I’m getting different results from your blood than from your slick sample. I attribute it to the relatively unusual bonding process you’re going through. Direct stimulation of the mouth to the womb might speed up the development, as will increased pheromonal exchange.”

“So us having or not having sex affects how soon the heat will come?” I asked.

“Yes. But even if you abstain from penetrative intercourse, Ansel will go into heat within the next ten days.”

“I need the IUD, then,” Ansel said.

“I would definitely recommend inserting it as soon as possible.”

“Can we do it now?”

Clearbridge glanced at his computer. “I have another patient in twenty minutes. If you feel ready, we can do it. Otherwise, I have an empty slot at fifteen thirty.”

Ansel patted my hand. “I’m ready.”

“Very well. I will insert a small tube through the mouth to your womb and implant the device through the tube. This can be painful, but since you’re bonding, the breeding channel is already widening, so the discomfort will be brief. I’ll give you something intravenously for the pain and to relax your muscles, just to be sure.” He turned to me. “Pascal, the analgetic and muscle relaxant will make your mate drowsy for a few hours. He isn’t allowed to drive today.”

“Oh. Okay.” I was still processing what he’d said about the pain. But before I could ask about that, the doctor glanced from me back to Ansel.

“You’re free to engage in sexual activities, but the mouth to your womb might be tender after the insertion. Since you’re bonding rapidly, any small tears in the tissue will heal within a

few hours. You should be fully healed and comfortable tonight. Any questions?”

What tears in what tissue? My mate would get hurt during the procedure? What the fuck?

“Are there alternatives?” I asked, my voice too loud.

Clearbridge cast me a compassionate look and opened his mouth to answer but my Ansel patted my hand. “It’s okay, Pascal.”

“Shall we?” The doctor gestured for Ansel to follow him.

I stood as well, but Clearbridge pinned me with his clear gaze. “Wait here, Pascal. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

A lifetime later, Ansel returned, a little pale, his eye glazed. He moved visibly slower. I shot up and curled my arm around his back.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure.” He grinned. “A bit wobbly.”

“As I said, no driving today,” Clearbridge said, winking, “or operating heavy machinery.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Ansel looked up at me. “Can we go home now?”

It didn’t escape me that he referred to my apartment as our home.

“Thank you, Dr. Clearbridge,” I said emphatically. I had no idea how Ansel was going through all this so breezily because my head was spinning.

As we turned to the door, the good doctor squeezed my shoulder.

“He’s doing great,” he mouthed. “Don’t worry.”

I hugged Ansel in the elevator. Closing my eyes, I pulled his scent into my lungs and tried to repeat the doctor’s quiet words in my head. *He’s doing great. He’s doing great.*

“Pascal, I might need to breathe at some point.”

“Oh, sorry.” I loosened my hold.

Ansel tilted his face up. He looked amused for some reason. “The doctor said I should be patient with you.”

“Huh?”

“He said that all dragon alphas get overprotective, but with a bigger age difference, like ours, it’s worse.” Then he patted my cheek. “You’re lucky I find it cute.”

Cute.

I was all but ripping my hair out worrying about him, and he found it cute. Not knowing how to respond, I let out a small frustrated grunt. Grinning, Ansel stretched on his tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

He’s doing great.

BACK AT HOME, I parked in the garage and helped Ansel out of the car.

“It’s fading quickly. I’m not dizzy anymore.”

I trusted him but wouldn’t take any chances. Holding him around his back, I led him to the reception area.

We stopped at the door.

Four men stood at the reception desk, surrounding our poor doorman. One of the men gestured wildly, his voice carrying through the hall.

“My son is up there! Either you let us in, or I’m calling the police!”

Ansel stepped away from me but held on to my hand. “Father.”

The men turned to face us.

The alpha who I assumed was Bernard Perrault, Ansel’s father and the CEO of the Perrault concern, stared daggers at me while his omega husband eyed me up and down with a cold, calculating expression on his well-groomed face.

The two alphas flanking them must have been bodyguards. Their faces were impassive, their dark suits identical, and they

waited, rigid like statues.

“We need to talk, Ansel.”

My mate looked up at me. “Are you okay with them in your apartment? We don’t have to speak to them.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

Ansel hesitated before lifting his chin defiantly. “You can come up, but the staff stays here.”

After Ansel’s father told his men to wait, we piled into an elevator.

I’d never survived a minute as awkward as the ride up, with Ansel and me standing behind his parents, staring at their stiff backs. They didn’t say a word.

I opened my apartment and gestured for them to enter. They remained standing on the edge of my living room, looking around with thinly veiled judgment.

Holding my hand, Ansel faced them. “Aren’t you going to sit down?”

Ansel’s papa made the first move toward the living room lounge group, and his father followed. They took the armchairs, while Ansel and I settled on the sofa together.

Ansel’s father stared at our intertwined hands murderously, but my little mate seemed undeterred. He even took my hand in both of his and cradled it in his lap.

“So? I assume you’ve come to apologize to Pascal,” he said. I swallowed a grin. He was incredible. How did I even deserve a man like him?

“Absolutely not,” Ansel’s father spat. “He should be grateful for the intervention of our security team. Valentin and his men could have beaten him to a pulp.”

“Actually, he incapacitated all three before your men arrived.”

Ansel’s papa raised his eyebrows at me, but his father remained scowling.

“What did you want to talk about, Father?”

Bernard Perrault squared his shoulders. “You will sever all contact with each other, and Ansel will return home with us today.”

My mate’s heartbeat accelerated, but his voice didn’t waver. “Oh? Will you carry me out over your shoulder? Drag me by my hair perhaps?”

“You will come with us voluntarily.”

“Because?”

“Your assets are already frozen, and I have my legal team revising your grandfather’s will. Even if we can’t prove he wasn’t of sound mind when he penned it, you won’t see your money for years while the process is ongoing.”

Everything was said methodically, with coldness and intent.

I had no idea how seriously Ansel’s father meant his threats. What *he* didn’t know was that it was physically impossible for Ansel and me to be apart. Whatever threats he voiced or even executed, Ansel and I were inseparable. Besides, I wouldn’t calmly look on as Ansel’s parents stripped him of his inheritance.

“I’m perfectly capable of providing for Ansel for however long he needs me to,” I said. “You’ll only spend a fortune in legal fees for nothing.”

Ansel leaned against me and sighed. His voice sounded teary when he spoke. “You know what’s sad? I think our relationship is salvageable. But if you continue threatening me instead of talking to me, you’ll lose me.”

“You’re not acting in your best interest!” The alpha’s booming voice cracked and broke on the last word. He was bleeding helpless frustration. His face scrunched up as if he could taste something sour, and he shot up from his seat and began pacing.

Ansel squeezed my hand reassuringly as if I was the one needing support. When I glanced at him, he gave me a faint

smile.

His papa put one leg over the other and lifted his chin in a movement so like Ansel's it was eerie.

“How did you meet my son?” He sounded casual, even showing genuine interest.

“I had a hiking accident in Cross River National Park. Ansel found me and let me recover at the cabin for a couple of days. We got to know each other and created a bond.”

Ansel's father scoffed and resumed pacing, but his papa observed me with curiosity.

“A bond. How very romantic.”

I couldn't tell if he was mocking me or being serious. People created bonds as well, didn't they? Maybe not as strong or as constant as dragons did, but it wasn't a foreign concept to them.

“Your father and I have been discussing your situation, Ansel,” his papa continued, “and we deem it best not to insist on your marriage to Valentin.”

My mate let out a broken laugh. “Since he's in jail after breaking in and assaulting us, I think that's wise of you.”

“Don't be sarcastic. It's unbecoming to a young omega.”

While Ansel's papa spoke, his alpha father braced his hands on my dining table, his back to us. What was going on in his head?

“And what are your plans now since you're virtually penniless? Your father has not yet excluded the possibility of reporting your relationship to Mr. Pembroke's dean. Mr. Pembroke here might reconsider taking care of you if you cost him his employment.”

“Again, a threat. Two strikes out of three, Papa. One more intimidating remark, and I'll be asking you to leave.”

Ansel's papa pursed his lips and exhaled through his nose. “What are your plans?” he asked, his voice tight.

“I want to finish college. I’m changing my major from business to foreign language.”

Ansel’s father made a derisive sound but didn’t say anything, still facing away from us.

“You never deemed a college education of any value for an omega,” Ansel said, “so it shouldn’t matter to you what my major is.”

“Your father was hoping that since you showed no genuine interest in the business, your husband would. We expected you to either marry Valentin or attract a suitable alpha at Wintringham College.”

“Are you telling me that if I were interested, you’d groom me to take over the company? Me, an omega?”

At that, Ansel’s father spun around to face him. “Of course! What did I work for all these years? To go to my grave rich? It doesn’t matter that you’re an omega. It’s not the nineteen fifties anymore, is it? But you think a two-hundred-year-old French children’s book is more interesting than our company’s financial report!”

I thought any book would be more interesting than any financial report, but I held my tongue. It didn’t seem like my remark would be constructive.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Ansel asked, visibly stunned.

“There was no point. It has been obvious since you were a child that you take after your grandfather.” He said it as an insult, but Ansel grinned.

“Maybe one of your grandchildren will inherit *your* talents. You’re not even fifty. You don’t want to retire yet, do you?”

Ansel’s father froze, gaping at his only omega son. The mention of grandchildren seemed to have knocked the air out of his lungs. I glanced at Ansel’s papa, who was observing Ansel with bemused respect. My mate looked smug.

The silence stretched.

Bernard Perrault closed his mouth and swallowed.

“You’re...pregnant?”

Ansel’s papa groaned and shot his husband an incredulous glare. “Bernard, for heaven’s sake, use your brain! He hasn’t even had his first heat yet. Let alone the second. How on earth could he be pregnant already?” He shook his head and released a long-suffering sigh before turning back to Ansel. “In any case, it’s not appropriate for you to be living together after a mere week. You should return home, Ansel.”

“I can’t, Papa, even if I wanted to.” He smiled at me softly. “And I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I was at a doctor’s this morning. I’ll be going into heat soon.”

Ansel’s papa raised one eyebrow. His father, still flabbergasted, went pink. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

“But that’s not acceptable,” he said, sounding weak.

Ansel’s papa tilted his head to the side and gifted his husband with the bitchiest sneer I’d ever seen. “I don’t think even you could order away a heat, dear alpha.”

Didn’t he just say that sarcasm was unbecoming to omegas?

“But we can’t just let them...” Ansel’s father pointed at us with both hands, pleading with his husband. “This is preposterous!”

“What do you suggest instead?”

Ansel and I simply waited for his parents to duke it out. It would have been highly entertaining if Ansel’s well-being weren’t at stake.

“A... a...” Bernard Perrault swallowed, thinking so hard his head must have hurt. “A heat teacher! I’ll fly Walter Sébastien himself here in our private plane if I have to.”

“Sébastien retired years ago, darling. There are others with even better reputations, but that’s beside the point. Are you

going to drag your son away from an alpha he's chosen and put him with a heat teacher? Really? You said yourself it wasn't the fifties anymore."

"We can't just leave him here!"

At that, Ansel's papa shrugged. He gazed at his husband, his expression resigned, and waited.

Bernard Perrault gazed back, stunned. Then he glanced at me, at Ansel, and back at his husband.

"You suggest we just leave?" he asked in a whisper. We could hear him as well as if he'd spoken in a normal voice.

Ansel's papa turned to Ansel. "Your father and I need to talk some more. We'll be in touch."

With that, he stood and gripped his alpha's elbow, tugging him to the door.

We followed them to the elevator. Ansel's father kept throwing murderous glances vaguely my way but didn't say a word.

"We'll meet again," Ansel's papa told me with an elegant tilt of his head. The elevator door glided shut behind them.

Ansel twirled around and strode back to the living room. Laughing, he collapsed on the sofa.

I closed the door to my apartment and leaned my back against it.

"That was..."

"Something else," Ansel finished for me.

I pointed behind me. "Was your papa on our side? Did I understand it correctly?"

"No. He was on his own side, as usual. Papa is very pragmatic. He saw no better solution, so he decided to leave us be."

"And your father let it happen?"

"My father decides about *everything*. Always. If my papa lets him."

I chuckled. “Wow.”

“I know. They’re a trip. It took me years of therapy to decode the dynamic between them.”

“I honestly don’t know if that went well or if it was a catastrophe.”

“Oh, it went well. Don’t worry.”

I walked over and sat next to him. “How are you feeling, love?”

Fluidly, Ansel slid into my lap and laid his head on my shoulder.

“I’m fine. Just tired. I think it’s still the meds Dr. Clearbridge gave me.”

“Do you want to go to bed? But you should eat something first.”

“Probably. I’m not very hungry.”

“Soup?”

He looked up, and I got stuck on the small hollows by the corners of his lips. He had such flawless lips—the ideal shape, the enticing color. “That would take a long time to make,” he said.

Oh. We were talking about lunch. “I have something in the freezer, I think.”

“Okay.”

I heated up chicken soup I’d frozen a couple of weeks ago after cooking a big pot on a rainy Sunday. Ansel inhaled a full plate.

“I must have been hungrier than I realized.”

“You look half asleep.”

“I don’t want to go to bed alone.”

I grabbed my laptop and tucked it under my arm. “Then I’d better keep you company.”

Ansel curled up on my bed, one hand on my thigh, and fell asleep quickly.

FIRST TIME

Pascal

MY MATE SLEPT FOR HOURS. The stress of the last few days must have caught up with him. When my phone beeped with a message from Hugo, I left the bedroom noiselessly.

Hugo: *How's the mate situation? Have you told him yet?*

Of course, my friend had no idea what had happened.

Me: *He's here. Been with me since Tuesday night. He knows.*

Hugo: *Congratulations, my friend. See? You didn't even have to wait a single day.*

I was about to type a reply when something occurred to me. I dialed instead.

“Hi, Pascal! Are you going to invite me to the wedding?”

“Not yet. Hugo, theoretically, if someone told the dean I'm in a relationship with a nineteen-year-old student, that could become awkward, right?”

My friend hummed. “Maybe. But he's at a different college, so formally, it shouldn't be a problem. Formally. Do you think someone will tell on you?”

“Ansel’s parents are not excited about us being together. There is a possibility his father might try to make life difficult for us.”

“Is he well connected?”

“Ansel’s father is Bernard Perrault.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. Ouch.”

“Call the university president.”

“What? You mean I should try an even faster way of getting my ass sacked?”

Hugo chuckled. “Tell him Ansel’s your mate and ask him what to do.”

“But he’s human. I met him.”

“Felix Figueroa is the husband of Governor Figueroa and a dragon mate.”

I was truly and completely uninformed, wasn’t I? “Our governor is a dragon?”

“Dear Pascal, you need to start caring about the community a little more. You’re clueless. Last time, you left Davidson’s party before even saying hi to me and my husband.”

I winced. “I’m sorry.”

“We’ll live. We’ll go on a double date with you and your mate soon. But the Figueroas were both there, you know.”

“I hate mingling and small talk.” Hugo was right, though. Had I paid attention, I could have easily cleaned up this mess myself. “Even so, I can’t just call the university president on fall break with a personal issue.”

“Go via Davidson. He’s your friend, right? Well, Davidson and Governor Figueroa are good buddies, which you would have known if you had hung around at the garden party. Leonard Sullivan and Felix Figueroa do yoga together. Call Sullivan, then Figueroa, and lay the groundwork. If Perrault

contacts the dean or the president himself, at least they'll be prepared. You can even phrase it that you're trying to warn them because Ansel's father might harass them."

"Fucking politics," I grumbled.

"Stop whining and make the call. I quite like you and would be sad if you got fired for nothing."

"Thank you, Hugo. Really."

"Yeah, yeah. Next time, consider trying harder with the mingling and small talk, okay?"

Properly humbled, I thanked my friend again and said my goodbyes.

Davidson didn't reply at first, but he called me back after ten minutes. He gave me Felix Figueroa's home number and told me to wait for a message. He would call first and prepare him.

I put my phone on vibrate and tiptoed to the bedroom. Ansel was still asleep. Careful not to disturb him, I slowly sat on the edge of the bed. My mind went back to the nights at the cabin, where I'd watched him sleep just like this, terrified by my own feelings.

My sweetest mate. So young and tiny, yet so fierce.

"I love you," I whispered and smoothed his hair with a featherlight touch.

I sat staring at my omega until my phone vibrated. Quietly, I left the bedroom. Instead of Davidson's text, it was a call from an unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Pascal Pembroke? This is Felix Figueroa."

"Dr. Figueroa, thank you for calling me."

"First things first. Congratulations on finding your mate," Figueroa said cheerfully. "I hope you'll be able to bond in relative peace now."

"Thank you, sir." I exhaled. Would it really be so easy?

“I recommend you formally declare the relationship via an email to the dean of the faculty on Monday morning. Be brief and straight to the point. While the relationship is not in direct conflict with the policy since Ansel is not a student at AUC, you deem it best to be transparent in order to avoid confusion and so on and so forth. If the dean’s reaction is unfavorable, contact me directly on this number.”

“I will, but I hope I won’t have to disturb you again.”

“Wait.” He paused, and I glanced at the bedroom door. Maybe it wouldn’t be so easy. “Your mate is young, right? Before his first heat?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, my face burning. “Yes. He’s only nineteen, sir.”

“Then he’ll go into heat soon. Take two weeks leave for a partner’s heat, then declare the relationship.”

Fucking...phew! “Thank you for your understanding, sir. I truly appreciate your help.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to see our community in Ardaine growing. I checked on you, and it seems to be a lucky recruiting for the mathematics department. We’re happy to have you on board. Now enjoy your weekend.”

“Have a lovely weekend, sir.”

I ended the call somewhat stunned. I had grossly underestimated how tightly knit the Ardaine dragon community seemed to be. I quickly typed a message to Davidson, thanking him for saving my clueless butt.

The door to the bedroom opened, and Ansel padded out on bare feet. He looked adorable in my oversized T-shirt. When I opened my arms, he leaned into my embrace with a sigh.

“Sorry I slept so long. I didn’t mean to.”

“You were exhausted, love. You needed a good nap.”

“How come you don’t need to sleep?”

“Five hours is usually enough for me. It’s a dragon thing.”

“Huh. And I’m hungry again. Is that normal?”

“Sure.” I tried to visualize the contents of my fridge, then gave up. “Let’s order something.”

“Great idea. What would you like?”

“I’m not picky.”

Ansel glanced up at me sheepishly. “Can I have a burger?”

I grinned. “You can have whatever you want.”

Ansel nuzzled my pecs, his voice muffled. “I’m starving.”

Smiling, I thumbed the app open and quickly searched for a highly rated restaurant nearby that would deliver Ansel his burger.

“Fries?” I asked.

“Yes please. And coleslaw if they have it.”

I added a cheeseburger for me with sweet potato fries and thumbed the app close. “Done. It’ll take twenty minutes. The doorman will let us know when it’s here.”

“Awesome.”

At that, Ansel slid down my body, taking my sweats with him. Before I could say anything, his warm mouth enveloped my cockhead.

I gripped the sofa’s backrest for support.

I’d always be one step behind him, but I didn’t mind in the least.

Ansel sucked me hungrily, making yummy noises. He put my free hand to his hair and looked up, encouraging me to thrust.

When I carefully sank into his throat, his eyes rolled back with pleasure. With one hand, he held the base of my cock, and the other worked between his ass cheeks.

He was fingering himself, the little incubus.

When he came, groaning as he sucked hard, I lost it.

I released into his eager mouth as he gulped everything down. Kneeling at my feet, he rested his head on my thigh.

“That’s better,” he said.

I snorted out a helpless laugh.

When the food came, he demolished the burger with the same appetite he’d sucked my cock.

AFTER DINNER, we cuddled on the sofa. Ansel straddled me, and we kissed. Nothing urgent, just gentle nips and caresses of tongues, but I felt the tension gather in him.

“How are you feeling?” I murmured against his lips.

“Fantastic.” He licked my jaw, his soft tongue scraping over my stubble.

“You know what I mean. The past few days have been a roller coaster.”

Ansel leaned back and sighed, his expression getting serious.

“And yet, the only thing I keep obsessing about is making love to you.”

I looked down at our intertwined hands. “Do you understand why I wanted to wait?”

“I do. After reading parts of the book Leonard gave me, I understand it even more than before. But I think we’ve waited long enough. I know it’ll make me go into heat, but that’ll happen anyway sooner or later. You don’t have to protect me from yourself, Pascal. In fact, I don’t want you to. I trust you. Now you have to learn to trust me.”

It made sense. *You’re only agreeing with him because you want to finally fuck him*, an evil voice in my head whispered.

Ansel caught my chin and lifted my face so our gazes locked. My beautiful mate was looking at me with desire.

“I need you, Pascal. I need you to make love to me.” His tone didn’t allow any argument.

I didn’t want to resist him anymore. Even if I’d thought I should, I wouldn’t be able to fight it.

He placed a tender kiss on my parted lips. “I want you so much it hurts.”

I hugged him to me and stood, cushions tumbling to the floor behind us. I kissed Ansel as I carried him. In the bedroom, I laid him on the sheets. He gazed at me, hopeful and earnest, and I let the yearning flow through me freely.

We both needed it.

My raw hunger stared back at me from his eyes, just as strong.

“Right now?” I asked, breathless.

Ansel nodded and struggled out of his T-shirt. His pecs were round, his belly swollen. It didn't matter that we hadn't fucked yet. We were saturated with each other's essence, so the pheromones must have been affecting us since day one. We couldn't prolong it anymore without causing each other pain.

Naked, Ansel waited, his cock curving up between his parted thighs. His nipples were tight peaks, sticking out, vying for attention.

I stripped in front of the bed while his expression grew hungrier.

The dragon purred as I crawled onto the bed, caging my mate with my arms and legs.

Ansel's eyebrows drew together, the tiny crease between them deepening. With his lips parted, he looked a little afraid, but then he wrapped his nimble hand around my dick and stroked.

I hissed at the touch, and Ansel's expression brightened.

“You're mine, Ansel. There's no turning back.”

“And you're mine. All of you.” He squeezed my cock as he said that. “Now fuck me.”

Mischief flashed across his features, and he dragged his teeth over his lower lip.

I dove for his mouth as I grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the mattress. He kissed me back. Spreading his legs, he lifted his hips, rubbing himself on me.

“Damn, you’re horny,” I muttered against his lips and thrust, pressing our cocks together. “Horny. Little. Virgin.”

Ansel whined and sucked on my tongue. Our chests brushed when he bucked under me. I knew what he needed. I just had to let go of all the preconceived, romanticized ideas about what a first time should look like. I had to trust my instincts and read Ansel’s body language.

I held him down as I sucked his nipples, alternating sides. Tomorrow, he’d have lover’s milk. When I sucked hard, pulling on them, he groaned from deep within. “I love it when you do that.”

Traveling down his body, I let go of his wrists. Ansel fisted my hair with both hands, pulling almost painfully. As soon as I caught his cockhead between my lips, he shoved his cock into my mouth to the hilt.

My poor, needy omega.

He’d lost control. Moaning wildly, he pushed off the bed.

“Please, Pascal. Please...”

Holding his hip to still him, I found his rim with my fingertips. It was open, covered with oily slick. The little ring clenched and loosened when I rubbed around it.

I sucked and slowly pushed two fingers inside him.

On a guttural groan, Ansel went limp, his entire body going soft with relief.

He must have felt so empty. I gave him measured, deep strokes, massaging his inner walls while I swallowed around his cock. He took me beautifully, not even a sliver of resistance, just soft, warm flesh, oily slick, and happy sighs.

A few more thrusts and he sounded ecstatic. His cum poured down my throat as he doused my hand with juices. His ass pulsated, inner muscles throbbing.

I'd soon feel *that* around my dick.

"Want to be on my knees," he slurred. "You behind me."

His wish was my command.

He was shivering when I rolled him onto his stomach and tugged his hips up. On his knees, his chest on the bed, he waited. He trusted me with everything.

"If it gets too much, you move away."

He nodded, his face rubbing against the pillow. I could see his profile; his eyes were closed, and he panted through parted lips.

I was tempted to check again how stretched he was, but then I reminded myself that he was my mate. A dragon mate. He wasn't as fragile as he looked.

Even so, when I lined up with his opening, I paused. He was so small. So slim. His ass cheeks barely filled my palms. My thick cock looked like a weapon, the ridges getting more pronounced by the hour. Pointing at the center of his delicate body, it looked unnatural. But Ansel rocked back until his slick opening brushed my cockhead.

Like a kiss.

His hole clenched and widened again in response to the first touch. He mumbled my name.

Holding him by his hips gently enough to feel it if he tried to move away, I pushed.

He was mine after all. I owned his body, head to toe.

One day, I'd breed him. I'd fill him up, make his belly grow round and his chest swell with milk and love.

With that thought, I pressed my cockhead inside him. The slick rim stretched like rubber, tight but yielding, and clamped around the ridges.

We groaned in unison.

I stilled, poised above him, with just my cockhead in the heaven that was his flesh. Ansel whimpered needily.

“Love, tell me. Tell me...”

“Pascal, please. Fuck me already!”

Well then...

I inched forward, amazed that it was even possible while knowing deep in my soul that this was right.

Ansel moaned, sighed, and moaned louder when I pulled out an inch and thrust back in.

Ever so slowly, we began moving. I couldn't fit more than half of my cock inside him, but it was enough.

He made these deep guttural noises on every thrust.

My beautiful little virgin. *So fucking horny.*

My cock glistened with his slick.

His ass was open, stretched into a wide circle around me. His body welcomed me in, soft and willing. With every other slide in, his rim clenched on my length, and he cried out.

“Ansel, love.” What did I want to say?

“Take me. Deep.” A guttural groan. “My first. Take my... nghh.”

Did my innocent omega enjoy dirty talk?

“That's right. Your first cock.”

“Uh-huh. Pascal...oh!”

He did indeed.

“I'll come inside your tight, virginal hole, my little mate.”

A deep flush covered his shoulders as he fisted the bedding. He began meeting my thrusts, pushing back, and his sounds got louder and louder.

“I'm your first.” I thrust just a little harder. Ansel yelled, euphoric. “And your last.” I barely recognized my own voice. “You're mine alone. Nobody else will ever touch you.”

He fumbled to reach between his legs. The next second, he was orgasming. He came in a series of spasms, loud and glorious, screaming his ecstasy for the entire city to hear.

LUST

Ansel

I WAS FLYING AGAIN. This time, there were no mountains, only the blurry white of the bedsheet and small flickers of light dancing in front of my eyes. On my knees, bent over and exposed, I flew like a fucking rocket.

I was so full. Pascal pumped inside my guts, huge, pushing my organs aside, but it didn't hurt at all. My hole was stretched around him, gaping like a damned crater. He massaged the inner walls, sending waves upon waves of orgasmic delight flaring out into my entire body.

Sex was amazing. No wonder people went bonkers because of it, having too much or too little. I never wanted to stop, but Pascal's rhythm faltered, and then he let out a pained groan.

His fingers dug into my ass cheeks, and his cock jolted inside me.

His cum.

The awareness set me off again—Pascal was pouring his release into me. I was coming around him, my ass sucking the seed out of him, and we were flying together.

Fractured ideas flashed through my head while my body soared. About what he'd said, being my first and my last. That I belonged to him now. That I wasn't a virgin anymore. He'd taken me. Claimed me. My dragon. His cum was filling me. I hoped there was a lot of it. Like when he'd come on my face and into my mouth and I could barely swallow it all. Now it

was filling my guts in spurts. I tried to feel it. Find it inside me.

Lord, I'm full. I'm so full. Yes. More. God, I love this.

Pascal laid us to the side and cuddled me to his chest. With my nerve endings buzzing, I couldn't move of my own volition. He stayed in me, and I loved that.

This is what a bond means. Being tied together so completely, I feel him reaching into my heart.

My lips tingled, but I managed not to slur. "I did it. I seduced you."

He chuckled. "Ansel, you own me. I'm just your lowly serf for the rest of my life."

"Good. I like that."

"Of course you do." He got serious. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh. It was...is...great." I wiggled carefully, testing the weight of him inside me. Then I reached down to touch the base of his cock. Maybe a little more than half of him was in me. But if we fucked often enough, I'd be able to take him, right? "We'll be doing this a lot. I want you to stretch me so you can fuck me to the root."

Pascal groaned and pressed his forehead against my temple. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

"But you like it?" I tried to clench around him, and he hissed. It amazed me how much power I had over him. I'd always assumed that sex would make me feel helpless and somehow inferior, like those omegas I'd seen being used and humiliated in porn. But with Pascal, I felt invincible.

My big, dangerous alpha, *my dragon*...

"I love you, Ansel."

I stopped breathing. Everything came into sharp focus—Pascal's hands on me, his cock in me, the cum leaking out, his lips on my cheek. His breath fanning my face.

My sex haze cleared because this was more important.

Pascal meant it.

And I couldn't come up with anything to lighten the moment. We'd just made love for the first time, and it would change me.

Exhaling slowly, I let his words settle in my heart. Then I put my hand on his cheek, stroking him soothingly.

"You feel so good in me, Pascal," I whispered. "Like you belong. I'm in love with you."

He tightened his arms around me, then we lay there until he softened and slipped out of me.

THE SEX SEEMED to have restarted something in my mind. I was in a great mood, energized but relaxed, and just plain happy. We made sandwiches as late-night snacks and ate them on the terrace.

We sat wrapped in blankets on Pascal's patio chairs. One couldn't see any stars above Ardaine, not even when the sky was clear. The city's glow outshone everything. The skyline glimmered, and I wondered about those two and a half million people out there. How many of them were dragons? How many humans knew about them? Were there any other creatures living in hiding?

I glanced at Pascal, about to ask him, but his expression caught me off guard. He looked tense, pleading, his glittering eyes pinned on me, and his sandwich half-eaten on a plate in his lap.

"Pascal, I'm fine, I promise."

He smiled self-deprecatingly and looked down at his food. "Sorry."

"You have to start believing me when I tell you something."

"It's not about lack of trust."

"What then?"

"I guess I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop."

“You’re afraid I’ll freak out? I think I would have already.”

He sighed and glanced at the city in front of us. “I keep switching between bliss and fear, I guess. I might be afraid to be happy.”

“That’s inconvenient. I’m very happy right now, and I’d like to share that with you.” I kept my tone playful, but Pascal looked contrite.

I put my empty plate on the tiled floor and reached for his hand.

“This evening has been magical. This entire week. I don’t regret a thing, and I don’t see that I ever will.”

He met my gaze, and his chest expanded with a deep breath. “And physically? How are you feeling?”

Was there a way to describe it? “Amazing. The sex was... perfect. I’m not sore or anything, not even a little bit. Just relaxed and low-key horny.”

Pascal chuckled. “That seems to be a constant state for us.”

“Yes. I like it.”

“Okay.” He picked up his sandwich again and ate it with his left hand, holding mine with his right.

Maybe I could distract him. “Can I ask some questions?”

“Of course.”

“About the dragons.”

He chewed and swallowed. “Sure.”

“And you’ll answer them all?”

“I will.”

“Last time you said you couldn’t. What changed?”

“You’re part of the secret now, Ansel.”

That I was. Huh. And wasn’t that just marvelous?

We talked until late. Pascal told me stories and anecdotes from dragon history, about how the Chinese dragons were based on a species of shifter that had disappeared around the

fifth century, that the first Godzilla movie was a secret shifter joke, and that the director was a dragon mate. He explained about different colors, sizes, horns, and talons, and the differences between various dragon nations. He told me about his brothers and their mates. His parents met when his dad worked as a park ranger and his omega papa went camping with some college friends. Two bears had wandered into the camping ground, and the friends had called for help, but before his dad arrived, his papa had chased the bears away, banging a couple of cooking pots together.

He told me about the dragon families in Ardaine, about Davidson and Leonard, the Bracknells, and about Governor Figueroa and his mate who was the AUC president. Pascal's closest friend in Ardaine was his colleague Hugo, a physicist and a dragon alpha.

By the time we went to bed, he seemed to be in a better mood. He didn't stare at me with the same worry as before.

Without having to talk about it, we got under the covers naked. I cuddled to his chest, told him again that I loved him, then he held me as I fell asleep.

I WOKE up in the middle of the night to a pressure in my chest. I was lying on my stomach, Pascal's hand possessively on my ass. I didn't want to wake him, but the sensations in my torso were becoming oppressive. I turned to the side, and Pascal's hand slid over my hip to my groin, his fingers bumping the base of my cock.

Focusing on my breathing, I inspected what was wrong. As soon as I changed position, it felt better. But something was off, and it wasn't the sticky feeling between my ass cheeks because I didn't mind that one bit. I palmed my right pec and sucked in a breath at how swollen it was.

It was happening. What Pascal had said about the... lactation.

I pinched my nipple out of curiosity. A sweet sensation flared from it, the ache immediately receding. So I pinched it

again.

Oh wow.

The tip of my nipple felt cool. When I brushed over it, a drop of wetness clung to my fingertip.

“Ansel?”

He was awake.

His strong fingers found mine, then my pec...

“Ansel...”

He cupped it and hummed, kissing my neck.

“There’s this...tension,” I began, not knowing how to continue.

“Uncomfortable?”

“Only a little.”

“Can I help?”

“I don’t know. How?”

He turned me onto my back and brushed my lips with his.
“Close your eyes.”

The room was dark, so it didn’t make much of a difference, but I obeyed.

The first lick over my nipple made me jolt, a flurry of tingles spreading through my chest. When Pascal sucked my pec into his mouth, I cried out.

In seconds, I was aroused, my ass leaking and cock throbbing. The tension in my pec got worse, bordering on pain, but I trusted Pascal.

He pulled rhythmically, dragging my nipple deep into his mouth.

Then something gave way.

“Oh...oh! Oh God!”

Desperate to make the glorious feeling last, I grabbed his head and held him to my chest. Liquid squirted out of me,

through the oversensitive tip of my right nipple, and the sensation blew my mind. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as heat and ice and more heat chased each other through my torso. My left nipple itched and tingled, a cool trickle of what must have been milk dribbling down over my ribs.

The strangest thing—it aroused me to the brink of insanity, but I didn't want Pascal to fuck me. I just needed him to keep going.

“Suck the other one,” I blurted, surprising myself.

He let go with a pop and attacked my left nipple. Growling, he sucked hard and gulped down what my body gave him. He squeezed my right pec, and milk bubbled out.

And I came.

Like a freaking fountain.

Stuff poured out of me, my slick, my cum, the milk, and Pascal feasted on me, licking and sucking. He swiftly folded my legs to my chest and slurped up my slick, licked my cock, then sucked my nipples again. It felt dirty and glorious.

A sudden flare of yellow light blinded me. Pascal must have hit the switch by the bed.

“Want to look at you when I fuck you.”

I blinked, trying to adjust to the sudden brightness.

Then I was full. So fucking full. Pascal rose above me, burrowing into me, his hard cock digging deeper. Holding me spread out under him, he rolled his hips and dragged his cock through my flesh.

“Beautiful,” he muttered and thrust harder.

My body wasn't mine anymore. I couldn't control my muscles at all. Everything opened and loosened, making space for my mate. Milk, slick and cum leaked out of me, smearing everywhere. I lay squashed under my monstrous mate but I was weightless...

Pascal pulled out and thrust in, pulled out, let my hole gape helplessly as he stared at it, and drove his huge cock into me

again. I tensed around him.

He must have been deeper than ever before. He touched something in my center—a soft, squishy spot. I cried out when burning pleasure exploded from there.

This wasn't like what we'd done before. No gentle lovemaking. He held me down and *fucked* me. His face contorted into a snarl; he pumped his hips, filling me up, stretching me out, and owning me.

“You love this, don't you?”

I nodded frantically, my teeth rattling. Could I be high on sex alone?

“You're still smelling of my cum, but you need it again.”

Yes. Oh yes. Fuck me full.

My womb. That was what felt so good. He was fucking into the sealed mouth of my womb.

“You look so fucking innocent. So damned young. Look at you, all smooth and pale. Such a pretty little cock and tiny pink hole. But you're horny for dragon dick.”

Hell, yes. Pascal had turned me into a sex addict with the very first thrust.

“You want it hard, sweetheart?”

That question. Why was it so freaking hot when he said stuff like that? I couldn't reply, but I didn't have to. My entire being screamed *yes*, and he felt it. His cock dug into my guts as his words singed my skin.

“Come for me, omega. Come on my dick.”

High-pitched whines filled the room. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that it was me making those noises. The orgasm exploded from my womb. My hole clutched Pascal's cock, trying to hold it in as it shuttled in and out of me. But he was relentless. He fucked me through the peak and caused another, fiercer and longer. My voice grew hoarse.

When he fell between my legs and licked into my mouth, I was shaking all over. Arms wrapped around me, he circled his

hips slowly, stretching me out.

“This isn’t possible,” he murmured. “You can’t be real.”

I grabbed his ass cheeks, holding him to me. It was imperative he stayed inside me.

“Still coming...” I slurred.

Pascal growled and rocked us together, carrying me through the storm. The pressure inside me intensified for a few heartbeats, then every cell in my body sighed with relief. The spasms slowly abated. Breathing deeply, I mellowed around the invasion in my guts. How could something so violent feel so right? His cockhead was pushed up against my womb, the pleasure lingering.

A powerful aftershock made me shudder, an echo of an orgasm. I moaned from deep within, then all but passed out. He kissed my forehead and lifted me from the bed. In the shower, I finally woke up from my sexual trance.

Pascal knelt at my feet and put my leg over his shoulder. I sagged against the tiles. He lapped at my open hole and tongue-fucked me gently before soaping me up everywhere. After taking me viciously earlier, he now worshipped me with tenderness. He rinsed me everywhere, then mouthed my soft cock and suckled on it, looking up at me with adoration. He kissed up my stomach, licked my nipples, and hugged me under the spray of warm water, wet skin on wet skin.

“My sweetheart,” he rasped into my ear. “I’m so in love with you.”

This wasn’t just happiness. I was close to delirium.

He wrapped me in a towel and held me upright while I brushed my teeth. Then he scooped me up and took me back to bed.

As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep as if I were drunk.

AFTER A FEW HOURS, I woke up again, my cock hard and hole empty.

I didn't question the urge. In my head there was no space for anything else but lust. I turned on the lamp, and Pascal blinked at me, awake.

"Need you," I said. He simply smiled and threw the cover off his body.

What time was it?

It didn't matter.

My alpha lay spread out on the bed, the firm planes of his torso and smooth skin free for me to explore and stroke and kiss. I took a tour. I kissed and massaged his bulging pectorals, nuzzled his stomach; I gave a kiss to his cock and continued down his thighs. I found little birthmarks and stored them in my memory.

Then I straddled him, held his cock firmly, and sank down onto it. The big cockhead stretched me, my rim widening and shrinking, and widening again as I rocked carefully. I lowered myself further down, savoring the ridges popping in one by one. The fullness overwhelmed me, the pleasure almost too much to bear, so I leaned back, bracing myself on his thighs. Now the ridges dragged along the front wall of my hole. The angle was perfect.

I rolled my hips, chasing the sensations, my cock waving in the air and balls drawing up. Pascal's cockhead and those ridges rubbed me just right. I opened my eyes in time to see my cum fly in an arc and splatter high up on Pascal's chest.

He groaned, his fingers digging into my thighs, but he didn't take over. He let me set the pace.

The orgasm swelled and mellowed out, so I sank lower. And lower still. More than two-thirds of him were inside me now. When I arched my spine, my stomach protruded. The distortion looked vicious. When I moved, the bulge traveled up and down, reaching to my bellybutton.

It looked wrong but felt amazing.

As I watched, I became mesmerized by it. I palmed it, caressed it, reveling in the sensations.

I rose and sank, and rose, and sank. Slow. Slower. Watching, taking it all in. His cock was so slick, so hot. But that was all me. My slick pouring out of me, making him all slippery, so he could press even deeper.

Deeper.

My belly looked swollen. It stung. The firm cockhead pressed into something deep inside my guts, my inner muscles tightening around it. My body still resisted, and that wouldn't do.

I pushed down with force.

A shout tore out of my chest as his cockhead stabbed into my core. I almost crumpled. Almost. My hands on Pascal's stomach, I regained balance.

Breathe.

The sharp sting of pain lasted only a second. I breathed slowly, willing myself to relax. He was in me. I was sitting on his hips, and he was in my body all the way.

God, he felt huge. The pressure reached into my ribcage. And it was good. Incredible.

I shifted only an inch. Where it had hurt before, the most exquisite sensation bloomed, flaring into my entire body.

“Aah. Pascal... Pascal... Aaaaah...”

The syllables just spilled out in no order whatsoever. I lost control. I fucked myself like mad, making Pascal's cock push that button again and again. I heard him say things but didn't understand a word, as blood boiled in my veins and my throat got raw from all the noise I was making.

Harder. Faster. I rutted and bobbed on top of him, my insides throbbing. This was *fucking* in its true meaning—furious and raw and senseless.

Then it all exploded. Impaled all the way, I yelled and shook, every nerve ending sizzling and crackling. I would have split into pieces if Pascal hadn't flipped us over and hugged me.

“Shh. Shh, my love. I got you.”

He wrapped his arms around me and slowly pumped into me. To the hilt.

“My beautiful mate. My everything.”

In and out. Slowly.

The pleasure simmered in my core, endless.

“I love you, Ansel. I love you, my omega.”

His cock jerked in me, filling me with his cum. We thrust against each other, our bodies effortlessly synchronized. Pascal kept coming, deep in me, pouring his magic into me while I soaked it all up, letting it change me.

We stilled, my legs wrapped around his lower back, his balls nestled in my spread crease, his cockhead somewhere in the middle of my body. Pascal lifted his head.

His pupils were narrow now, and his irises shone golden. It didn't scare me.

“You have the dragon's eyes.”

“It's just me. All of it is me.”

“I know.”

He thrust once more, his gaze fiercely possessive. I moaned for him, so full of him, my body wasn't mine anymore.

“You're so deep,” I managed.

Pascal thrust again.

“That's because you're tiny, my love.”

I chuckled brokenly. “And you're big.”

With a playful growl he pulled out of me. I flopped onto the bed like a deflated balloon. I missed him yet felt relieved a little too. I was content to just lie there, a pool of cum in my stretched ass and every muscle in my body loose.

But Pascal wasn't done with me.

His mouth closed around my nipple.

“Oh my God.”

He sucked the milk out of me in a lazy rhythm, one nipple, then the other, then going back to the first one. I couldn't move. Jellified, I let him feed from me until the sky outside got lighter before dawn.

The nursing kept me under the spell, and I relived our lovemaking in my fantasies.

“I want to do this every day.” I was hoarse, my voice barely audible, but Pascal heard me.

He hummed and licked my nipple. He opened his mouth wide and sucked the flesh in. Milk trickled out, the sensation most gratifying. He swallowed and sucked harder.

“We'll make love, you'll come deep inside me, then we'll do this.”

“Mhmm.”

I cupped his nape and held him to my pec. His cum was leaking out of me and onto the bedding. I didn't care. I liked being stained and used. I would roll in his cum and lather it all over me.

“I want to suck your cock in the morning.”

“Uh-huh.”

He switched to the other nipple. The trickle of milk was weakening, but he managed to tease out a few more drops. Then he kissed up my chest and shared the taste of my milk with me.

“Shower?”

“I don't want to.”

He grinned. “You'll be all crusty and itchy.”

“Who cares?”

Pascal scooped me up and carried me. In the shower, he tucked me to him and washed me—my crease, my balls, and my cock. I held on to his shoulders, half asleep.

We lay wrapped in each other on his bed, and I imagined our time together spreading out in front of me, with lazy cuddling, walks, Pascal's hand wrapped around mine, his voice in my ear, long lovemaking with candles flickering around us, and raw fucking in broad daylight.

I wanted everything.

MY BIRTHDAY GIFT

Pascal

IT WAS Saturday afternoon and my fortieth birthday. I hadn't told Ansel because it wasn't important. I didn't want him to stress over it. But somehow, it felt symbolic.

We'd spent the night and morning intermittently sleeping and making love. As the day progressed, I could smell his scent changing. His body had transformed already. When I rimmed him, his pucker was all swollen, his hole soft, and as he came on my tongue, his orgasm lasted longer than ever. He released all over himself, his torso dotted with pearls of seed.

He panted, staring at the ceiling. "I really need to shower now. I'm all sticky and sweaty."

"Do you want me to help?" I asked from my spot between his spread legs and nipped at his softening cock.

Glancing down at me, he bit his lip. "Not this time? Need to pee and...stuff."

I chuckled at his embarrassed expression. "Go."

Ansel rolled off the bed and hurried to the bathroom.

I downed a glass of water, turned onto my back, and stroked myself lazily. He'd be back soon enough.

Lord, we were such horndogs. How many times had we done it since yesterday? I'd lost count.

I have an insatiable nineteen-year-old mate, and I've spent twenty-four hours doing nothing but fucking him.

I bit the inside of my cheek so I wouldn't laugh in an empty room like a crazy person.

Ansel returned from the bathroom naked, eyes big and watery, cheeks pink, his cock pointing right at me. And I knew.

The first heat wave had come.

A little stunned and very needy, Ansel seemed to glow. I could have felt like a pervert, a dirty old man, eating him up with my gaze. But I let all that go. My young mate ambled toward me, aroused and beautiful, eager to breed, only mine.

My birthday present.

I sat up on the bed, tugged him into my lap, and slid him right onto my dick.

Ansel sank down on a muted cry and leaned back, staring at me with his mouth open. His body all but swallowed my cock.

"The wave came on so fast," he whispered breathlessly.

"Good." I smiled at him and caught his lips in a kiss.

Massaging his ass cheeks, I rocked him in my lap. His slick bathed my cock, leaking out from our tight joining. I brushed my fingertips along his rim and licked them.

Ansel caught my wrist and darted his tongue out. We kissed around my fingers, tasting his heat slick together.

"Oh God, Pascal, that's so good."

"It's just you. Your heat."

"I need you so much."

He began riding me, sinking down with force, his ass cheeks smacking against my thighs.

"Pascal!"

His cries got louder, and I helped him move faster, lifting him by his thighs. He arched his back, sitting down hard, and his cock sprayed my stomach with heat cum. It was just a small load, but enough to scoop up a few drops with my

fingers. We tasted it together like we'd done with his slick. It drove Ansel wild. He licked my fingers and sucked on my tongue, whining and bucking in my lap.

I could have lost control. With his virgin heat cum on my taste buds, I could have half-shifted and reamed him until he fainted, but I was hypnotized by the way he moved. Ansel chased his own pleasure, taking what he wanted. I'd never seen anything more beautiful than my mate riding my cock into euphoria.

In barely a minute, he came again, his hole milking my erection. His head thrown back, he wailed, his hips jerking.

“More. I need more.” He looked drugged, and when he tried to thrust, his thighs trembled. My poor darling. He couldn't fuck himself as hard as he needed.

Luckily, his alpha was a dragon. I could pound his ass for hours and never get tired.

I swung him to the side, laying him on his back, and *fucked* him. His belly seemed to bulge on each thrust. Milk poured out of his nipples in rivulets, and he rubbed his stomach and palmed his little cock.

His face was scrunched up, tongue darting out, so I fed him some of his milk. He sucked on my fingers gratefully.

My sweetest little mate. Unrestrained, horny as hell, greedy, in heat.

When my knot grew, Ansel dug his fingers into my sides. His eyes flew open.

A flash of fear crossed his face, but then his expression went slack with bliss. His ass clenched and fluttered, squeezing my knot fiercely. Ansel came one last time, shivering.

“Love you. Love you so much... God, I love you...” His murmurs slowly quieted as his body went soft.

I rolled onto my back, taking Ansel with me. He curled up on my chest and wiggled on the knot with a sigh.

“Mhmm. Full.”

“Yes, you are. As full as you’ll ever be.”

“So good.”

“Uh-huh. Feels amazing for me too.”

“Love your cock.”

“I love you, Ansel. You’re my everything.”

He hummed contentedly and fell asleep a second later, even as my knot pulsed inside him. He might have been coming in his sleep because his inner muscles spasmed from time to time, and he moaned.

I lost track of time. I let my mind wander to the happiest places—logic could take a hike. I savored the wet warmth hugging my knot and the feel of Ansel’s skin under my hands. I petted his ass and sides and imagined breeding him. I thought of how he’d look pregnant, all small and cute with a big belly. I even thought of fucking him while he held his round stomach. The milk would dribble down his ribs, not clear but pearly white. The fantasies made my knot throb and more cum bubble up from my cock. It would drench the mouth to Ansel’s womb and make it soft and malleable.

After one or two more heat waves, I’d breed him for real. I didn’t think about the contraceptive. The dragon wasn’t bothered by such mundane things. We would breed. Period.

And I’d marry Ansel as soon as possible. My omega. Forever.

Eventually, the knot went down. My cock slipped out of Ansel’s body. A gush of liquid doused my thighs, but I didn’t care.

I’d shower and change the covers later. Letting Ansel rest was more important.

THE PAUSE between waves gave us time to cook a proper dinner. Ansel felt uncomfortable wearing clothes tight against his skin. Dressed only in my old T-shirt, which reached to his knees, he looked good enough to eat. While the rice cooked

and the sauce simmered, I lifted him onto the kitchen table and rucked the T-shirt up just to steal a few drops of his milk.

“This should be weird, but it isn’t.” His breath caressed the hair on top of my head. “It makes me horny.”

I smiled into his skin and sucked harder. The milk flowed easily now. A few pulls were enough to get it going. Ansel hummed.

“Seriously,” he murmured. “So horny.”

I looked up to see him pouting.

With a grin, I toppled him onto his back and lifted his legs over my shoulders. Ansel squealed, grabbing the edge of the table.

When I pushed my tongue into his hole, he groaned happily.

“Yes. Like that.”

Purposefully, I tongue-fucked him until he came, then I licked him clean and sucked his nipples, drinking his milk until the timer went off.

Rosy-cheeked and smiling, Ansel set the table.

We were about to sit down and eat when my phone rang.

Without thinking, I opened the video call only to see my parents’ beaming faces, too close to the camera.

Shit.

“Happy birthday!” they yelled.

I glanced guiltily at Ansel, who was gaping at me.

“Hi Pa, hi Dad.” My voice sounded too enthusiastic. I swallowed. “How are you?”

“Good. We’re good,” my alpha dad said. “Are you celebrating? Where are you?” They always thought one had to be loud when speaking on a video call. I turned the volume down.

“I’m at home. Just about to eat dinner.”

“Alone?” my omega dad cried. “It’s your birthday!”

“No. I’m not alone.”

I sat down and looked at Ansel. He was still shocked, but when I gestured for him to come to me, he walked over, fingering the hem of my T-shirt nervously.

“Come here,” I whispered. “They don’t bite.”

I tugged him into my lap and angled the phone camera so he’d be in the frame with me.

“Dad, Pa, this is Ansel.”

My mate’s formal upbringing kicked in immediately. “Good evening, Mr. Pembroke. And Mr. Pembroke.”

My pa stared with his mouth open and one hand on his chest while my dad leaned closer to the camera, squinting.

“Who’s that young man?”

“Ansel is my mate, Dad. I found him only a week ago.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mr. Pembroke.” Ansel’s impeccable manners didn’t disappoint, even though his voice wobbled.

“Hello, Ansel,” Dad said, stunned.

Then all hell broke loose.

Pa started sobbing, then he laughed, apologized, and sobbed some more while Dad screamed at my youngest brother, Pete, to come meet my mate. They began handing the phone around, to Pete, his mate, and then my grandfather, who happened to be visiting. My poor omega kept telling everyone how nice it was to meet them and how kind they were to be welcoming him into the family. After receiving three separate invitations to stay over the Holidays and New Year, we finally said goodbye and ended the call.

Ansel slumped in my arms. “Oh Lord.”

“I’m sorry.” I kissed his cheek. “If it helps, you were amazing. They’re going to love you.”

“It was lovely to meet them. Your poor papa. You should have prepared him, but he seemed happy, right? And your alpha dad is so nice.” Compared to his father, just about anyone would seem nice.

“I should have prepared *you*.”

“That’s okay. But I’m mad at you because of something else.”

I ducked my head. “I know.”

He sat up and glared at me. “It’s your birthday. Your *fortieth* birthday. And I don’t even have a present for you!”

I had nothing to say in my defense. I nibbled on his neck instead.

“Stop distracting me. The dinner is cold. We’ll have to microwave it. You’re going to have microwaved curry and rice for your fortieth birthday dinner.” From the tone of his voice, it was clear how dismal Ansel thought the situation was.

“Today, when the heat wave started...” I began and nuzzled under his ear.

“Yes?”

“You came to me, smelling of heat, trembling. Your cock was hard, and you were blushing.” I kissed the side of his throat and nipped at the tendons there. “And I thought that you were my birthday present. You, in heat. It made me so happy.”

Ansel made a noise, something between a scoff and a hum.

“I can’t even go out and buy you a cake,” he said, his tone softening.

“We can get a cake delivered. We’ll eat it for breakfast tomorrow. In bed.”

“You should have told me.”

“I’m sorry. It just didn’t seem important.”

He caught my face between his hands. “It is important. You are important.”

I pecked his nose. “I love you, Ansel. This is my happiest birthday ever.”

That made him smile.

He forced me to sit while he heated up our portions. He opened a ginger beer and poured it into a couple of champagne glasses. Then we had ice cream for dessert. Ansel sat in my lap and fed me spoonfuls between kisses while I stroked his naked thighs, feeling like a king.

When his next heat wave came soon after dinner, I threw him over my shoulder. He giggled all the way to the bedroom. His laughter turned into a lustful moan when I pushed my cock into him.

“Pascal, I love you. Aah. Yes. So good. Love you so much.”

I had everything I’d ever wanted.

Like a goddamn king.

HEAT

Ansel

FED AND SATIATED, I sprawled on my back. Time held no meaning, but it seemed to be getting dark outside.

Pascal lay on his side next to me, propped up on his elbow. He stroked my stomach, circled my belly button with his fingertips, and cupped my pecs one after another. He brushed my nipples with his thumb and resumed rubbing my stomach. In silence, he watched me, smiling softly, and I looked back. We'd made love face to face, my legs over his shoulders, until we'd come together. We'd thrust against each other, kissing and petting, until the knot went down. Now we rested. Maybe we'd do it again soon, maybe we'd fall asleep and fuck in the morning...

Who had I been before I met Pascal? I could barely remember.

Relaxed like never before, I melted into the mattress and basked in his touches. My hole was loose and dripping with his cum, so I should probably shower but didn't want to move.

"My little virgin is no more," he whispered, glancing at me with a mischievous grin.

I giggled. "Professor Pembroke finds purity an archaic concept." I faked his deep, serious tone, and he rolled his eyes, laughing. "I knew you got off on it!"

"What can I say? I'm a dirty old man. And I asked you not to call me professor."

“Why?” I batted my eyelashes innocently. “It’s hot.”

“You’re dangerous.” He snorted, shaking his head. Then he raised one eyebrow. “Don’t you want to clean up?”

I bit my lip. “I like your cum in me.”

“Mmm. I like that too. Very much.”

Pascal leaned over and kissed my nipple, and I sighed, my eyes closing. He kissed and nipped, then sucked my milk. I drifted away, satisfied to the marrow of my bones.

THE NEXT HEAT wave woke me in the middle of the night. I begged Pascal to take me from behind. When he did, I clawed at the sheets, delirious with pleasure.

“Why do you want it like this?” *Thrust.* “Even your first time.” *Thrust. Thrust.* “Like an animal.”

I couldn’t speak.

Pascal paused and languorously rolled his hips, his cockhead massaging the mouth to my womb. My skin prickled all over my body.

“Why? Are you my little nympho, Ansel? My horny animal?”

“It was a fantasy.”

“Yes?” A long, slow thrust.

I whimpered. “A fantasy I had. Before.”

“You imagined us like this?”

I nodded into the pillow. “Uh-huh. It was hot.”

“How about I breed you like this as well, huh? Do you want that?”

Heat shot up my spine. I recalled the pictures in the flyer. The splash of cum in the omega’s womb.

“Yes! Please, Pascal. Please!”

Holding on to my waist, my alpha fucked me hard, his balls slapping against mine, slick splattering. Ecstasy made me mute. I couldn't moan or shout anymore. I gasped for breath, locked in an endless chain of orgasms, my muscles quivering and nerve endings singing with joy.

I lost my sight. Awareness of time. I lost sensation in my hands and arms. My lower body alight, I only breathed.

I heard Pascal growl and snarl.

The orgasm imploded into a single spot in my middle. I froze, eyes squeezed shut and mouth screaming soundlessly. Then Pascal's cock jerked in me, and I felt a tug, as if he was joined with my inner organs.

Because he is.

He was lodged in the channel to my womb. He'd fucked me open, and now he was coming into me, breeding me.

The awareness lasted only a second. Then all my thoughts drowned in absolute euphoria.

His knot grew, locking us together, but I must have passed out.

When I came to, I was lying on my side with Pascal spooning me. He stroked my stomach, which felt distorted.

I tried to stretch, but an instant orgasm shot through me.

Moaning, I shivered through it.

"Don't move, love," Pascal whispered. "We're locked."

Locked in breeding.

I waited for the pleasure to fizzle out, then took stock.

Pascal was in me all the way, his huge knot stretching me out. Deep satisfaction spread through my core, which I knew was his cum in my womb. Then there was the place where his cockhead sat lodged in my breeding channel. The delicious feeling lingered in there, my body poised, waiting for more.

I rocked back, and it shifted, sliding deeper just a tiny bit. I groaned with another sharp peak. Tendrils of the climax

traveled down to my toes.

“Naughty boy,” Pascal rasped into my ear. “You should stay still. You’ll exhaust yourself.”

But I’d found the sweet spot. Just tiny little fucks, barely half an inch back and forth, slowly, even slower. I could stay in the breeding orgasm for minutes on end. I only had to breathe.

“Fuck, Ansel. Fucking hell. You just won’t listen.”

My inner muscles clenched, squeezing Pascal’s swollen cock.

“Punish me, Professor Pembroke?” I gasped the words. I was impressed with my ability to speak at all even as I was still climaxing.

“Little brat. You’ll make me come again.”

Pascal thrust hard, pressing the knot deep into me.

My eyes rolled into my head.

I managed to stay awake for a few more seconds, enough to feel his pulse. Then reality fell away.



MY HEAT LASTED ONLY five days. Pascal said it was shorter for dragon mates but more intense. I had nothing to compare it to, but oh hell yes, it had been intense.

There were periods of time that I remembered only vaguely, as if I’d been drugged or drunk. Other memories were incredibly sharp. Like when I’d sat on Pascal’s cock, locked with him, his cum in my womb. Before he’d softened entirely, another heat wave had come. He’d flipped us and thrust a few times before breeding and knotting me again. I hadn’t known when one climax ended and another began.

I remembered lying curled up between his legs, suckling on his soft cock, half asleep. I’d nursed him for what felt like hours. Late at night, lost in our bubble, I would hold him to

my chest and comb my fingers through his hair. He'd make love to my nipples, kissing, biting, sucking, until my chest was flat. We'd found a position where he could breed me and suck my milk at the same time. I'd lie on my back, and he'd hold my ass in his lap. Impaled all the way, I'd drift in and out of consciousness while he'd knot me with his lips wrapped around my nipple.

This morning, I'd thought I'd had the last wave because the latest one had lasted only a short while, and Pascal's knot went down after a few minutes. But now the familiar warmth spread around my middle as I was soaking in the tub.

"Pascal!"

He burst into the bathroom just as I was drying up.

"One more?" he asked.

I nodded, and Pascal grinned.

"Come here."

He scooped me up as I was, still wet from the bath. The towel fell to the tiled floor.

I held him around his neck as he carried me to bed.

Nuzzling my face as he went, he murmured, "How do you want it?"

"Face to face. Want to kiss you."

He reached between us, guiding his cock into me in an expert move while rolling me onto my back. After these past few days, we'd become so skilled in this dance we moved in flawless harmony. I hooked my arms under my knees, spreading myself open, while Pascal slowly thrust, filling me to the brim. His cockhead nestled against the mouth to my womb, making us both moan into the kiss.

"I thought it was over," he whispered.

"I'm glad it's not."

Because after this, I wouldn't go into heat for another two years.

I'd miss the rush, the complete and senseless joy, even the fainting. During the heat, I'd thought of nothing and no one but Pascal. I'd immersed myself in his love and all the pleasure. I wasn't ready yet to face the outside world.

“Go slow. Want to savor you.”

Brushing his lips against mine, he pulled out to the tip and gently glided back into me. He stilled, nestled in me, and licked into my mouth. The kiss went on, deep and filthy, while we rocked, fused together.

He wouldn't be able to breed me anymore, that part was over, but the pressure on the mouth to my womb made me soar anyway. I came like that, barely moving. My alpha became the center of my universe.

The climax simmered, making me shiver.

Pascal began thrusting, slowly but forcefully. I might have disintegrated around him, but when his knot grew in me, everything came into focus.

I cradled his beautiful face in my hands and look into his eyes as his pupils grew thinner and the gold in his irises flared.

“My dragon.”

I wasn't sure if I said it out loud.

Pascal seemed to fall into me, and I gathered him close, holding him to my heart as he shook and moaned.

“My alpha. I love you, Pascal.”

That I did say.

He took deep breaths, his nose buried in the crook of my neck, and he clutched me to him by my ass cheeks. His knot throbbed inside me.

“Ansel...”

For a long while, I lay there, soaking up all the love.

My heat was ending, but we'd only just begun.

THE NOTEBOOK

Pascal

RETURNING to work after Ansel's recovery was surreal. I emailed the official letter, disclosing my relationship with Ansel. The dean replied that he understood my concern, but since my partner wasn't an AUC student, it wasn't any of his business.

I'd had a couple of lectures, then visiting hours in the afternoon. Ansel, who had his own courses to attend, was supposed to meet me at home.

When I spotted him on the green in front of the department, waiting for me, I could barely contain my joy enough not to whoop. I'd missed him horribly. How would I cope being away from my omega for hours every damned day?

I scooped him up into my arms and kissed him. He giggled, squirming.

"What are the university policies on professors and PDA on campus?"

"No idea. Don't care." I hid my face in his neck and breathed him in. "Not that I'm complaining, but what are you doing here?"

"We finished early, and I missed you."

"Well, thank heavens. I was going crazy without you. The dragon still insists you shouldn't be out of my sight. This will take some getting used to."

“I have an idea what we could do during the weekend. It could be something to look forward to.”

I threw my arm around Ansel’s shoulders, and we wandered toward the parking lot.

“As long as it involves being together twenty-four-seven and lots of naked time, I’m in.”

“Um. I’m not sure about the naked time because it’s going to be cold. But sex, definitely.”

“Oh?”

“I’d like to go to the cabin. The weather is supposed to be nice, so maybe we could even fly again?” He said it carefully, as if unsure what my reaction would be.

“I’d love to. Let’s do it. After sundown, we can go flying over the range and on Saturday, we could do a hike.”

Ansel beamed up at me. “Awesome.”

He looked adorable, all blushing and excited. I leaned down for a quick kiss.

As I was pulling my car keys out of my bag, Ansel made a startled sound.

I looked up. “What?”

“That guy there seems to be shooting daggers at me. Do you know him?”

I glanced at where Ansel had been looking only to find Jason Jacobson scowling at us from the edge of the campus parking lot.

“That’s one of my students.”

“What’s his problem? Have you let him fail?”

“No. He, um, hit on me once, and I told him no.”

Ansel snickered. “That would do it.”

I opened the car door for him, and Ansel fluidly slid inside. I walked around the vehicle and joined him.

“I figure the rumor mill will now start rolling,” I said as I started the engine. “Good thing I emailed the dean earlier.”

“Probably. Better safe than sorry.”

“And how was your day, my omega?”

“Long. Boring.”

“Oh?”

“Are you going to make it better?”

“Can I? How?”

“How about when we get home, first thing you do is push me up against the closed door and fuck me?”

I laughed. “I think I can manage that.”

I stepped on the gas, keeping the speed slightly above the limit.



WHEN WE ARRIVED at the turning point below Ansel’s cabin on Friday afternoon, strong wind swooshed through the forest, bending branches and setting leaves aflutter. It was supposed to calm down before nightfall. Yes, this time, I’d checked the weather prognosis properly. Ansel’s car had been towed a few days ago; only broken branches and tracks in the mud remained.

We took our bags and set out on the trek to the cabin. The largest was the duffel containing a harness for flying that Hugo had lent us. Now that I wasn’t limping, the trip was quick and easy, even with the extra gear.

“You’re sure we’ll be able to fly up tonight?” Ansel asked as we passed the lake. The strong breeze dragged his hood off his head.

“If not tonight, tomorrow morning for sure.”

“No thunderstorms.”

“No, definitely no thunderstorms.”

“Okay. But we’ll eat dinner first.”

We’d brought a casserole for tonight that we’d only have to heat up. Ansel started the fire, and I prepared the bed for later. The big wooden chest took up most of the floor space in the cabin, making it hard to move around.

“Ansel, can I put some of our things into the chest?”

“Sure. Just check it for spiders and stuff first.”

I might have gotten slightly carried away reorganizing. When the chest was cleared out and our gear was neatly folded inside it, I moved it to the opposite corner, under the coat hooks by the door. It just made more sense that way.

“This is better, right?”

Ansel glanced around from the stove. “Sure.” He froze, staring at something on the floor where the chest had stood before. “What’s that?”

It looked like an old notebook, bound in canvas. I picked it up, wiped it off with the rag I was already holding, and handed it to Ansel. He turned it in his hands. There were no inscriptions on it.

“It must have been underneath the chest,” I said.

Frowning, he opened it. “It’s my granddad’s handwriting.” He sounded awed. “Come, look.”

I stood next to him and read over his shoulder.

November 2, 1997

The weather is abysmal. Didn’t venture outside.

November 3, 1997

The wind cleared the sky, strong moonlight. Spotted two shadows above the lake. They obscured the stars. Again, the forest fell silent, like the animals knew. Do dragons hunt mammals?

“He really did come here to watch the dragons fly,” I said.

Ansel remained quiet, just turning pages.

February 19, 1998

They get bolder when they think the park is empty. One was sitting on top of West Hook. Clear silhouette visible after sunset. He remained unmoving, just looking around. Was he simply enjoying the view? Flew away after twelve minutes. I had to return to the cabin since the temperature was dropping quickly.

Below was a rough sketch of a dragon sitting on top of a sharp cliff, wings folded.

March 6, 2000

Two years without a sighting. Have they become more careful? Have they moved away from Cross River?

May 15, 2000

I've been looking for nests up in the mountains. Ten days on the range with no results. Feeling like a fool.

June 18, 2000

Nothing. They're gone.

Ansel made a small sound, something between a laugh and a sob. I ducked to look at his face.

“Sweetheart, you okay?”

He sniffled. “I wish I could tell him about you.”

Tears brimming in his eyes, Ansel hugged the notebook to his chest.

We sat down on the bed, and I held him as he went through the sporadic journal entries until he found his own name.

Ansel is here with me. Bernard didn't want to let him go but relented in the end. It's such a joy to have the little sprout running around.

Ansel laid his head on my shoulder and read on.

On the next page, one date was underlined.

July 3, 2012

They're back! A clear silhouette of a large dragon against the moonlit sky. Ansel was asleep in his sleeping bag. Probably a good thing.

The very last entry was from August 2015. The notebook ended there, so maybe Ansel's granddad started another?

Bernard didn't want to let Ansel come with me, claiming the child needed to attend a gala and learn to build connections. Such nonsense. He's only thirteen! Luckily, Remy interfered. He's awful to the child but occasionally shows more common sense than my thickheaded son.

"Who's Remy?" I asked in a whisper, not wanting to startle Ansel, who seemed engrossed.

"My omega papa."

The nights are warm. We're taking the sleeping bags and going to the range to look for the fliers. Ansel thinks I'm crazy but indulges me. He's a rare soul with a good heart. I haven't given up. I want him to see.

Ansel flipped the back cover as if looking for a nonexistent extra page. But that was the last entry.

He sagged against me, and we sat in silence.

“Do you know where the place is?” he asked after a long while. “The West Hook.”

“Yes. It’s not the tallest but it’s the sharpest peak on the range. It’s not accessible for climbers. Your granddad must have seen the dragon from far away. Did he by any chance use binoculars?”

“He had several for birdwatching.”

“Or dragon watching.”

Ansel chuckled weakly, then sighed. “Can we go there? To the West Hook.”

“All the way to the top? Sure. But it’s already pitch black outside. Let’s fly in the morning. The sun comes up at seven thirty. If we leave at six thirty, we’ll make it there and back before sunrise. You’ll need to dress very warm, though. That high up, it could be freezing.”

Understandably, my mate was subdued during the evening, but he ate his dinner and wanted to make love like every night. I didn’t question him or push him to talk to me. Instead, I spent an hour and a half bringing him pleasure in every possible way there was. By eleven, he was sated and relaxed, resting in my arms in our joined sleeping bags.

“He’d have liked you. Not just because you’re a dragon, even though he’d have been thrilled by that.” Gently stroking my chest, he kissed my chin. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that if his granddad were alive, he’d never be allowed to know I was a dragon.

“I love you, Ansel.”

He rolled over and dragged my arm with him, hugging it. Curled up in my lap, he kissed my fingers.

“I love you too, Pascal. Today was strange, but I’m okay. I hope you don’t worry about me anymore.”

Ansel was my everything, the point of my existence, so of course I’d always worry. But more than anything, he made me happy.

I kissed his nape and held him, listening to his breaths until I was sure he was asleep.

IN THE MORNING, we ate cereal for breakfast and dressed in a hurry. I shifted with Ansel watching. He didn't even flinch. Then he helped me fasten the harness, put on his own gear, and climbed onto my back.

After we made sure all carabiners were clipped in, I lifted carefully, turning my head so I could see him with one eye. He clutched the harness and wobbled as I waved my wings.

“Whoa!”

“You good?”

“Yes.” He looked around at the treetops and grinned wide. “This is way cooler than sitting caged in your claws.”

“Then hold on. It's going to get windy.”

Ansel whooped as I took off along the mountainside. The sky was cloudy today, already brightening with the upcoming dawn.

I flew along the range for a while, taking the scenic route before landing on top of West Hook. The peak was so sharp there was barely enough room for me to stand on all fours.

“Should I unclip?” Ansel asked.

“Indulge me, sweetheart, and stay up there, okay? All carabiners will remain locked.”

Ansel harrumphed but remained in the harness, sitting astride my shoulders. I turned my head and bumped his chest with my nose.

“Some of the rocks are loose. It's safer for you like this.”

“Okay. I hear you.” He patted my nose. “The view is incredible.”

The White Bear, Cross River's tallest peak, rose to the left, its pale cliffs tinted lavender in the morning light.

“There!” Ansel called suddenly, and I checked where he was pointing.

Below us to the right was a rocky slope that gentled into a meadow. Lower down, just above the line of trees, was a small shelter, just three low walls and a roof built from rough planks, with a circle of rocks in front of it for a fireplace.

“When you think about the shape of the cliff and the angle, Granddad must have been down there when he spotted the dragon sitting here. Is it a cottage?”

I’d forgotten my human mate couldn’t see so well and so far in the dim predawn light.

“No. Just a small shelter. It’s falling apart. A part of the roof is missing.”

“Oh. But he could have been there, right?”

“Possibly. Do you want to have a look?”

“Yes.”

“Then hold on.”

I pushed off the cliff and dove down, circling above the shelter. I landed a few yards away, and we gazed up at West Hook. The silhouette of the mountain rose above us like a giant eagle’s beak.

“It must have been here,” Ansel said.

“I still don’t understand how he could have spotted us. People aren’t supposed to be able to see us without direct sunlight.”

“I can see you just fine as long as you’re right in front of me and I know it’s you. But you get kind of glimmery along the edges. As if you were emanating heat and the air shivered around you. We can try it. I get down, and you fly up now.”

“What’s the time?”

“Five minutes after seven.”

“Okay. A quick experiment. Then we must head back.”

Ansel climbed off my back and sat down on a rock by the shelter. I flew up West Hook, landed for a minute, then returned to him.

He was shaking his head when I came closer.

“So?”

“As soon as you took off, you just vanished. I couldn’t see a thing until you landed right in front of me. It was like you dispersed into thin air.”

In a way, it calmed me.

Ansel’s granddad was an oddity. An exception. And it bugged me that we might never find out how it was possible he could see what no other human could.

FAIRY LIGHTS ON THE ROOFTOP

Ansel

SPENDING time with Pascal at the cabin had been wonderful. In the car on the way back, we made plans on how to improve it, but Pascal never suggested anything that would ruin the magic for me. We'd need a bigger bed, maybe with some drawers underneath for storage. For a brief second, I'd wondered how we were going to get it there, but then I'd remembered my boyfriend wasn't human and could probably carry two beds under his arms like shopping bags without breaking a sweat.

Coming home together had its own kind of magic as well. My stuff had slowly migrated to Pascal's apartment. I now had my half in the closet, shelves in the bathroom, and my nightstand. Pascal had offered to remodel the study so I could have my own desk in there, but I preferred studying in the kitchen, with the coffee maker *right there* when I needed it.

We left the duffel with the harness in the hall and unpacked our outdoor gear. Some of it went straight into the washer. By the time we were done sorting stuff, it was already eight in the evening. We couldn't be bothered to come up with anything complicated for dinner, so we ordered a pizza and ate it lounging on the sofa while watching a rerun of a nineties' comedy show.

When the box was empty, Pascal grabbed me by the waist and pulled me into his lap.

"Can I fuck you right away, or do you need a minute to digest?"

I burst into laughter. “I think I need a minute. Thank you for your consideration. And how about a shower? I must smell.”

He nuzzled under my ear and inhaled loudly. “You do. Like something I’d love for dessert.”

“C’mon Pascal, shower.”

He scooped me up and carried me to the bathroom. After soaping me up everywhere, lingering in places, he kissed me under the spray until I got breathless. Thing was, Pascal could simply hold me up on his hands. He lifted me by my ass, pushed me against the tiled wall, and got on his knees. I braced myself in the stall corner, my legs folded to my chest and feet dangling, and just hung there while he rimmed me into nirvana. He pushed his tongue into me on a rumbling growl and ate me out until I lost it, my cries echoing in the bathroom.

Later, we lay on the bed, me the little spoon, and we moved languorously, his cock sliding in and out of me. I felt gloriously full as Pascal rubbed my stomach, his big hand sure and possessive over my womb.

The slow fucks made me feel the precise path of his firm cockhead through my flesh, every thrust igniting a fresh blaze of pleasure. The milk had disappeared, but my nipples remained sensitive, and I pinched them now, delight shooting down into my underbelly.

“Ansel, sweetheart.” Pascal groaned, rolling his hips, sheathing himself deeper inside me. “This is bliss. You make me so fucking happy. You have no idea.”

My grin broke and turned into a moan when Pascal thrust a little harder. “I do...have a pretty good idea.”

“I love you. I’m going to come like this. Slow and easy. Just feeling your perfect little body squeezing my dick.”

He did something with his hand, pressing on my belly while thrusting inside, and I gasped. “I’m close.”

“Good. Come for me. Want to feel it.”

“Pascal. Love you...”

“Come, sweetheart. Give it to me. That’s it.”

The orgasm rose, my inner muscles spasming around Pascal’s cock, and he gave out a guttural groan. He pushed into me to the hilt, his cock jerking with the release, and my body took it as a signal to let go of *everything*. I quivered and shuddered, fireworks going off in my head, my muscles and bones disintegrating until the only tangible thing that remained was the hard erection deep inside me, tethering me to the real world.

Pascal rocked me lazily, keeping me full, as I slowly regained consciousness. He kissed my neck and nipped at my throat, his hands smoothing up and down my torso.

“I love how small you are. I could carry you around in my pocket.” His voice was deeper, even a little evil, and it made me shiver with aftershocks of pleasure. “Then I’d impale you on my dick, and you’d go off like a fucking rocket.”

It was possible I wasn’t quite sane yet. “When you’re in me, you take over everything. Nothing matters but your cock.”

“My sweet young mate. I don’t want to stop. Want to keep fucking you.”

“Don’t stop.”

The cum and slick were leaking out around his girth, making filthy squelching noises. He gathered speed and strength, and my body loosened more, echoes of the earlier climax chased away by fresh desire. I was raw and oversensitive, my hole overflowing with liquid, the tissue swollen, my gland throbbing, balls empty...but I wanted more.

Pascal braced himself above me, turning me onto my stomach, and thrust harder. I tilted my hips up so I could get him deeper. Our skin slapped together, and our cries got louder.

The second time we came, it felt wild and animalistic. I reached back, digging my nails into Pascal’s thigh, and he bit my shoulder.

I sank into the mattress, completely blissed out. I couldn't move a muscle, but joy flowed through me freely, filling me up where Pascal's cum couldn't reach.

Soft kisses rained on my neck and down my spine. His cock slipped out, but the sensation of satisfying fullness lingered. He stroked my shoulders, down my ribs, over my lower back. Kissing and caressing my ass cheeks, he hummed happily.

I wanted to tell him how great it felt and how much I loved him, but I was too relaxed to speak. Then I must have fallen asleep.

I stirred to a warm sensation on my ass. Pascal was wiping me off with a wet towel. I heard steps, then the bathroom door creaked softly. The bed dipped, and my alpha roped his arms around me.

“Love you,” I whispered.

“Sleep, sweetheart. It's late.”

“You keep taking care of me.”

He kissed my forehead. “It's my pleasure.”

I forced my eyes to open and found his gaze in the dark. My hazy brain didn't quite work as it should, but I had something important I needed to say. “I do love you, Pascal. A lot. Really.”

He smiled, stroking my cheek with a finger. “I know. Now close your eyes.”

“Okay.”

I snuggled to his chest, breathing him in.



PASCAL WAS SUPPOSED to be already at home when I came back from a late lecture on Monday evening, but the apartment was dark and quiet.

“Pascal?”

Nothing.

I toed off my shoes, dropped the key into a bowl on the shelf, and hung my jacket.

“Pascal!”

I was about to pull out my phone to call him when I noticed something flickering on the terrace. A candle? Two candles. The door was ajar, so I opened it and stepped out.

“Pascal?”

“Up here.”

To the left of the door stood a short ladder leading to the roof. Pascal peeked from above, stretching out his hand.

“Come on up. It’s safe.”

Stunned, I began to climb. He grabbed my arm and supported me as I threw my leg over the rooftop edge and straightened.

“Oh.”

Candles and fairy lights flickered all around, covering the flat rooftop. In the center stood Pascal’s patio chairs, a little folding table, and a bucket with a champagne bottle sticking out of it. Two glasses and covered plates completed the setup.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked, but Pascal was nowhere to be seen.

I turned around and froze.

He knelt surrounded by flickering lights, holding a small box in both hands. My mouth went dry, and my belly flip-flopped.

“I wanted to do this properly.” He took a deep breath and blinked slowly. Only now did I notice he wore dress pants and a crisp white shirt and was clean-shaven. His smile was tentative but warm and loving.

“Ansel, sweetheart, I might be here for eighty more years. I want nothing more than to spend them all by your side, loving you, taking care of you, holding you when you need

me, and cheering you on from the sidelines when you fulfill your dreams. You're my mate, my treasure, and the love of my life. Will you become my husband?"

I couldn't answer because I choked up. Somehow, the magnitude of what was happening finally dawned on me in that moment. That I was now a part of this fairytale world where I could fly on a dragon's back, that Pascal, the most wonderful and beautiful man in the world, loved me and was going to love me until our last breath, that the ancient magic was now running through my veins as well, and that I would live a hundred years.

"Ansel?"

My mate looked concerned, clutching the little box in his too big hands. So I swallowed and tried to nod before wiping my face. Then I fell to my knees and kissed him.

MY FOREVER

Pascal

REMY PERRAULT WORE a glimmering golden suit and a black satin shirt. A large pearl and diamond brooch decorated his lapel. Bernard Perrault dressed spartanly compared to his husband in a plain gray suit, a white shirt, and a gray bowtie. They both looked around Davidson's lawn, wearing similarly somber expressions.

"It's risky to have an outdoor wedding this early in the spring," Remy said. A server was just passing us with a tray. I gestured for him, and he paused by the Perraults, waiting until they'd both gotten their champagne.

Bernard tilted his glass in Remy's direction. "Let's hope the weather holds."

Remy turned his clever eyes to me. "Ansel told me this morning the governor will be present. I didn't know you were so well connected, Pascal."

"I'm not," I told them honestly. "They're friends with our generous host, Davidson."

"But you and Davidson Sullivan are close friends, aren't you?" Bernard glanced at me with a mix of suspicion and begrudging admiration. Our relationship had vastly improved since Ansel's and my engagement, but it would probably never be cordial. "It's not like he lets just anyone organize their wedding on his property."

"Um, no. Leonard and Davidson have been very kind to offer us the grounds and the first floor for the weekend."

Remy leaned toward his husband conspiratorially. “There’s the governor, look!”

The Figueroas were walking directly toward me. I straightened my spine and did my best not to make a fool out of myself.

“Pascal, wonderful to see you again. What a beautiful day!” Felix enthused, shaking my hand.

I greeted the governor and introduced Ansel’s parents, who were all smiles and praise. I’d met with the Figueroas a few times since last autumn. The partying and mingling with the Ardaine community had become significantly less tedious with Ansel on my arm.

“And where is your lovely groom hiding now?” Felix asked.

“He’s somewhere in the house with Leonard. I’m not allowed to see him today until the ceremony at four.”

The governor glanced at his watch and smiled at me. “Only an hour left.” He patted my shoulder, exchanged a couple of formal phrases with my soon-to-be parents-in-law, then they both left to find some refreshments.

My dad and pa had already met Ansel’s parents at dinner yesterday. In his never-ending enthusiasm, my pa believed that everybody must be as excited about this occasion as he was, and he didn’t even seem to register the Perraults’ superior sneers.

“The park is just wonderful!” my pa cried and dragged me down into a violent hug. “Oh, it’s so beautiful. Look at me! I’m all teary-eyed again.” He kissed my cheek and holding on to my arm, he looked around. “Where is Leonard? He’s such a pleasant young man. And so gorgeous. I need to thank him for choosing those amazing flower arrangements.” He aimed his most maniacal grin at Remy Perrault. “Have you seen the orchard? It’s like the elves made it, I swear!”

“No, we haven’t had a chance to walk around yet,” Remy said in a measured tone. “We were just speaking to the governor and his husband.”

My pa beamed. “Oh, you mean Harry and Felix? Yes. They’re lovely, aren’t they? We met them at the Bracknells on Thursday, and they invited us for lunch on Tuesday. Such a lovely couple. Felix is a professor in criminal justice and the president of the university where our Pascal teaches. Very important man. Don’t you just love it when omegas succeed in something so essential? We miss our Pascal dearly, but we’re so happy he found such amazing friends here in Ardaine. Everybody is so kind and welcoming. Oh, and the Bracknells! Emanuel Bracknell is such a sweet man. There he is! We must go and say hi. We’ll catch up with you before the ceremony.” He squeezed Remy’s free hand and was already pulling my dad away.

Remy blinked, opened his mouth, and closed it again. Bernard only gaped. It was a standard reaction for anyone witnessing my pa’s joyous outbursts. But the Perraults seemed even more fascinated by who they thought were my “connections.” What they, of course, didn’t know was the reason behind the impressive guest list at Ansel’s and my wedding. Most of these people were dragons.

I survived greeting the guests and the small talk only because I had this vision of Ansel coming to me, blushing and smiling, nervous but happy. Like me, he couldn’t wait to get married and get the hell out of here for the two weeks of honeymoon we had planned.

When I finally stood in the orchard, and the music rose, my knees got weak.

This is it.

To my relief, both of Ansel’s parents managed to look proud and content as they accompanied their only son down the aisle. I smiled and nodded at them both, then I only looked at my Ansel.

He was breathtaking. His pants were ruby red, like my bow tie, and he wore an intricate lace shirt that outlined the angles and curves of his torso to perfection. His cheeks glowed pink just like I knew they would, and his eyes glimmered, reflecting the torches.

Grinning, he bit his lip when he joined me, and I caught his hands in mine.

“Ready?” I asked in a whisper.

He gave me a firm nod. “Let’s do this.”



Ansel

“I LOVE THE OUTFIT.” Pascal nipped along the collar of my lace top and smoothed his hands down my sides. “I hope you’re keeping it.”

“Sure.” I unbuttoned my pants and tugged them down over my ass. “I think you’ll like these as well.”

Leonard had helped me choose underwear, and damn, the man knew his stuff. Pascal paused, appraising the satin briefs. He slowly knelt and nuzzled my hardening cock.

“So pretty. I would fuck you in them but I don’t want to ruin them.”

I turned around in his arms. “Take them off.”

Pascal pulled on the waistband and laughed. “Holy hell!” he exclaimed as he slowly uncovered the lace jockstrap underneath.

“You can fuck me in this.”

“I love you.” The next second, his mouth was on my ass. I fell forward, bracing myself on the backrest of the lounge chair.

“Pascal, wait.”

“Ngh.”

Pulling my ass cheeks apart, he tongued my hole, and I wobbled.

“Wait a second.”

“Why?” he whined, making me chuckle.

“There’s something I want to do.”

He slowly rose, his lips skimming my back through the openings in the lace. Then he gently bit my shoulder.

“I’ve waited all day today.” Slight pressure on my pucker, and his finger slid in. “I’ve been polite and patient, even made fucking small talk.” He pushed his finger in and out, testing how wet I was—very—and pressed two back in. “I mingled, danced in front of a throng of strangers, and was attentive to our parents.” He pushed deeper, making me groan, and curled his fingers. A bolt of electricity shot up my guts, scrambling my thoughts. “I want to make love to my husband. *Now.*”

He began finger-fucking me in earnest, and my traitorous body went all pliant. I pushed my ass out for more. The lace stretched over my trapped cock, the slight chafing a surprising delight.

“Are you saying you don’t want my cock?” Low voice, right by my ear, teeth grazing my ear lobe... Those damn fingers.

What was it I’d wanted to say?

“Pascal, wait.”

He growled but stopped, leaving his fingers in me.

“Why?”

“I want you to half-shift.”

I felt the tension in him rise.

Slowly he pulled his fingers out, and I turned to face him.

Staring at me, dazed and aroused, Pascal put his fingers into his mouth to slurp up my slick. Then he loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt.

His eyes narrowed. “We haven’t done that yet.”

“I know.”

“Some couples never do that.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“You won’t.”

“How did you even find out about it?”

“I read about it. Then I talked to Leo.”

Pascal smirked. “Leave it to Leonard to put kinky ideas into my mate’s head.”

I lifted my chin. “I was curious so I asked him. It was my idea from the start.”

Something flashed in my husband’s eyes. *My husband.* Just thinking about him that way made me all warm and gooey inside.

“You want a monster to fuck you on your wedding night, my love?”

He’s going to do it!

I suppressed a cheer and started working on his belt buckle.

“I want *you*.” I glanced up and licked my lips. “My big bad dragon.”

Pascal shrugged out of his jacket and threw it over the lounge chair. His face grew serious.

“If it feels strange, tell me, and I’ll shift back.”

Yes!

I nodded, trying not to look too eager. But ever since I’d read about the possibility, I’d been fantasizing about it. How he’d look, how he’d feel, how *I* would feel being taken like that... I was a little afraid but that only made me hornier.

“We can pretend I’m still a virgin,” I mumbled under my breath.

Pascal made a sound, something between a groan and a growl, and suddenly, I was airborne.

“You’re a menace, omega. You look so innocent and proper, but out of the two of us, you’re the monster. A sex-crazed animal.”

“You love it.”

“I do. I adore you.”

He threw me on the huge circular bed, red rose petals flying around us. I hadn't even noticed the décor in the honeymoon suite and wouldn't look now. Not when Pascal was swiftly undressing in front of me.

“Look at you. The white lace clinging to your skin everywhere. Leave it on. Leave it all on.”

Naked, he stroked his cock and stared at me. I squirmed.

Would he change now?

“Show me your hole.”

The order made me instantly wetter.

I lay back and spread my legs, giving him just a peek of my crease.

“Like this?” I asked in a small voice. Pascal loved when I acted a little shy.

“I can barely see anything. Spread your ass for me.”

And I loved when he got all imperious and growly.

Holding my ass cheeks with both hands, I lifted my knees and pulled my crease apart. I imagined how I must look, the lace of the jockstrap framing my intimate parts.

“You're tiny. Can you imagine being taken by a dragon for your first time? It'll hurt.”

“I know. I'm ready.”

We'd played this game a few times, but it would never get old.

His chest heaved, and his hand on his dick stilled. With eyes pinned to my spread ass, he started changing.

I stopped breathing.

His skin darkened on his shoulders, and he seemed to grow, as if looming closer to me even as he remained in place. His shoulders widened and neck thickened. From his temples and forehead, thorns grew, framing his head. His cheekbones protruded and jaw sharpened.

And claws. His huge hands seemed even larger, and on each finger, he had a two-inch claw.

When his wings flapped, sending rose petals aflutter around us, I gasped.

He sniffed, his snake-like nostrils widening, and his reptilian eyes flashed with gold.

I was shivering.

“Are you afraid?” he asked, his voice deep and rumbling.

I shook my head. If anything, I was trembling with desire.

Was I crazy? Sick in the head?

No. I was a dragon mate. And Pascal was my dragon.

He’d never looked more like himself than he did now.

I forgot about the game we were supposed to play. It didn’t matter.

“I love you, Pascal. I want you.”

“Even like this?”

“Yes. More than anything.”

He took a step to the bed, filling the entire room. His wings spread above me like a canopy. They were dark brown with greenish streaks and black toward the tips.

“How do you feel when you’re like this?” I asked, eating him up with my eyes.

Pascal grinned, sharp teeth gleaming. “Invincible.”

Slowly, he began crawling onto the bed.

Fuck, his cock!

Huge, hard, ridged, with a bulging head. It looked darker and bigger than when he was fully human. Dangerous.

My ass leaked like a damned faucet.

Pascal ran a claw over the lace on my torso and circled a nipple.

“You’re beautiful, Ansel.”

“You too.”

Then he grabbed my hips and dragged me to him in a swift move that made me breathless. The next moment, he held me spread out by my ankles, and his cockhead was digging into me.

He took me. Half human, half dragon, he impaled me on his cock to the hilt.

I cried out with the sudden fullness, my chest tight and ass stretched to capacity. It felt like a fucking knot, except I wasn't in heat.

He barely gave me any time to adjust—but I didn't need any. His beastly noises echoed through the room, drowning out my whimpers and yelps. He moved like a machine, all the time staring down at me possessively with his golden eyes. His oblong pupils narrowed, then widened into dark pools, and I could have drowned in them.

His cock drove in and out of me, all but turning me inside out on every thrust, pushing on the mouth to my womb. Violent. Raw. Way too big. Amazing.

“One day, I'll breed you like this.”

I came screaming.

Pascal flipped me, manhandling me onto my knees, and took me from behind.

Eyes closed, mouth open, I moaned into the sheets.

Slick ran down my taint and balls. The jockstrap was soaked with cum. With the last shards of my sanity, I tucked it to the side, freeing my throbbing cock. But then my husband thrust harder, and I needed both arms to hold myself steady on my elbows and knees.

He curled over me, caging me in with his long limbs, his claws right by my face. His wings waved above us in time with the pumping thrusts in my guts.

“My tiny little omega.”

He sounded different, with dark, hissing undertones in his voice.

“My mate. So young and innocent.”

When he bit my shoulder, it hurt. He could easily draw blood with those teeth.

Maybe he had.

Oh, I'd like that...

“Come again. Squeeze my dick.”

It wouldn't take long. When I was like this, open and slippery, horny after not having sex in a couple of days, I could come three or even five times in a row.

“Horny. Little. Virgin.”

That did it.

Pascal sped up, giving me short deep thrusts, surrounding me from all sides. Overfull, pinned to the bed, shaking and helpless, I flew in my mind.

I flew on a dragon.

I didn't count orgasms. It wasn't possible. The pleasure rose and fell in waves for a long time, until I could barely hold myself on my knees. I was about to spread-eagle on the mattress when Pascal gripped my waist, holding me steady as he all but drilled into me. He wrangled one more climax out of my overloaded nervous system and snarled victoriously. Throat raw, I gasped mutely as my husband doused my insides with cum.

It took me a while before I came back from the high. I was conscious, but dizzy and tingly. Lying on my side, I stretched on the bed and reached back to pet Pascal's head where he tenderly kissed my ass cheeks. I encountered hard, smooth spikes.

Humming, I ran my fingers along one thorn, testing how sharp the tip was. Not very. I rolled, and Pascal scooted up the bed.

I took him in, the glorious, monstrous shape of his body.

“Do you mind staying like this for a while longer?”

His wing flexed when he shrugged, smiling softly.

“I like it. Up in Canada, I used to run like this sometimes.”

My eyes widened. “Really?” I imagined meeting a beast like him in the middle of the forest—would I be terrified or fascinated? Maybe both? Would I find him beautiful like I did now?

“It’s exhilarating,” he said. “Like being high on adrenaline but calm at the same time.”

“Why aren’t you in this form more often, then? At home, you can walk around like this all day. I don’t mind.”

He grinned. “I can see you don’t. But when the dragon is close to the surface, he wants to do stuff. Fly. Run.” He lowered his voice. “Fuck his mate through the mattress.”

“Like I said, I don’t mind in the least.”

“The sex feels even more intense when I’m like this.” He leaned in to kiss me. “But you know what the best thing is,” he murmured against my lips.

“Tell me.”

“How you look at me.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “What can I say? You’re hot.”

Running my hand down his chest, I opened my mouth to kiss him deeper. He tasted the same but felt different with how sharp his teeth were. His lips felt thinner and firm. And...oh! His tongue.

I moaned when he licked almost all the way into my throat.

After peeling the stained shirt and jockstrap off me, Pascal stretched on his back, wings spreading like a blanket on the bed. I took my time, exploring my beautiful beast of an alpha. I stroked and kissed his glorious muscles, memorizing every new detail. I counted the spikes and thorns, then put my palm against his. His clawed fingers were now twice as long as mine.

Then I lay between his legs and made love to his glorious cock with my mouth until he was hissing and bucking off the bed. He tore the sheet with his claws.

The second time we had sex was quiet and calm. I sat in his lap, and he gripped my ass, helping me move up and down on his cock. He wrapped his wings around me, and I leaned into them, marveling at the velvety texture.

We came together, kissing.

“Can you sleep like this?” I asked when we cuddled afterward.

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried it. I might shift back when I fall asleep. Do you want me to stay like this?”

I cupped his jaw and searched his strange eyes. “Only if you’re comfortable.”

He tucked me to his immense torso and threw his black tail over my legs, curling the tip around my ankle. It was heavy and warm, thick like my arm. Then he kissed my forehead.

“I’m great,” he whispered.

Smiling, I closed my eyes. I dreamed of flying with Pascal under a star-studded sky.

EPILOGUE

Pascal

Six years later

“ARE WE THERE YET?” Ansel asked for the fifteenth time. He was mocking me, grinning below the sleep mask he wore as a blindfold.

“No. Not yet. A few more minutes.”

I swung to the left onto what I hoped would be a familiar road for both of us soon.

“Are we there yet?” This time, he snickered out loud.

“Do I have to reply?”

“I think it’s good training for fatherhood. I’m going to keep repeating the question until you find a way of distracting me, and I forget about it.”

I reached over the center console and patted his cute little belly. “Almost there.” Twenty weeks left.

“And now? You’re slowing down.”

“I am.”

“We’re there?”

“Yep.”

I parked in the driveway and turned the key. The engine quieted.

“Stay put and no peeking.”

Ansel fidgeted but remained seated.

I walked around the car and opened the passenger door. Holding his hand and covering the top of his head so he wouldn't hit it on the doorframe, I helped him out of the seat.

“It smells nice. Is that jasmine?”

“I think so.”

The blooming bush grew by the patio on the western side of the house. I hugged Ansel's shoulders and guided him across the lawn to the oak tree growing in the corner of the small garden. There I pushed him gently onto the bench and sat next to him.

“What now?”

“You can take it off.”

Ansel pulled the sleep mask down and blinked. From this angle, the one-story building looked a little squat but cute. We could see part of the patio with a porch swing under the overhanging roof and two wicker chairs. The large living room windows reflected the sun, but the patio door was open, revealing a sliver of interior with a cream sofa and a blooming peace lily.

“What's this?” Ansel breathed the question, staring at the house.

“Um. We have the papers ready. If you like it, we can sign today.”

“It's ours?”

“Not yet. But it can be.”

A gorgeous grin lit up his face. His reaction was what I'd hoped for.

“It's perfect!” He shot up from the bench and hurried toward the house. He paused by the jasmine bush and smelled the flowers. “Oh, Pascal, this is amazing.”

My Ansel twirled around, let out a giggle, and leaped to the left to look inside through the kitchen window. “Can we go in?”

“Sure. We have around one hour before the realtor arrives.”

“Awesome. Father will have a fit!”

Ansel said it in a cheerful tone, without a hint of apprehension. He was taking great pleasure in provoking his parents, who were begrudgingly tolerating what they called his hippie lifestyle. There wasn't anything hippie about our apartment in the city or about this little house. But if it were up to Ansel's alpha father, we'd be moving into one of the grand mansions he'd wanted to purchase as soon as he'd found out about Ansel's pregnancy. But my Ansel wished for a quiet home in a more modest neighborhood.

I followed him through the house. With his usual clear-headedness, my husband pointed out which room would be best as an office and that it could double as a guest room, where our kids could sleep at various ages, and that we should get a sofa that wouldn't stain easily.

He was excited, his eyes glowing, and it made me so happy I actually felt a little pressure in my eyes. I blinked it away and hugged my Ansel from behind. He was looking through the living room window into the garden.

“The property is small but so private,” he said. “You barely notice the road from here.”

I petted his stomach and kissed his temple.

“I'm glad you like it.”

“It's perfect.” He twisted in my arms and tilted his face up for a kiss. “It shows how well you know me.”

I did know him. After six years, I felt like I could read his thoughts. But sometimes, he still surprised me.

Like now.

His eyes glinted, and one corner of his mouth curved up in a mischievous smile. Then his quick hand brushed the front of my jeans. “When did you say the realtor was coming?”

I growled under my breath. “I'm not fucking you now, Ansel. We don't have the time.”

Ansel shrugged, grinning. “It could be symbolic. We could call it a housewarming ritual?”

I tried my sternest professor glare. “That is preposterous, omega. Under no circumstances am I indulging you here when we don’t even own the house yet.”

He pouted. “You’re no fun.”

Grabbing his ass cheeks, I squeezed him to me. “And you’re uncontrollably horny.”

“It’s your fault. You’re all sexy, smell delicious, do all these wonderful things for me, *and* you’ve knocked me up. I’m hormonal and needy.”

“We can dedicate the weekend to saying a proper goodbye to our old apartment?”

Ansel arched one eyebrow. “How?”

I bent lower, nuzzled the crook of his neck, and grazed it with my teeth. “We’ll have wild, half-shifted sex on every possible surface,” I whispered into his skin.

Ansel shuddered and groaned. “My big bad dragon.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll be very bad for you. Monstrous.”

I bit him gently and was about to lick the spot when tires crunched on the gravel outside. The realtor had arrived.

I straightened, looking down at Ansel’s flushed, glowing face. “So we’re buying the house? Your parents will hate it.”

My husband squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “But I love it. We’re buying it.”

Then he stretched on his tiptoes and pecked my lips.

“Let’s get the paperwork done so we can go home and fuck.”

I laughed.

The End

WHAT IF...

ANSEL WENT INTO HEAT AT THE CABIN?

“ANSEL, I can try shifting. I’ll fly you to a hospital.”

“Too late.” I panted through another cramp. My pajama pants were drenched as if I’d peed myself, but it was all just slick.

When the pain abated, instinct took over. I flunk myself over the edge of the bed and straight into Pascal’s lap.

“Oh God.” He caught me, wrapping his arms around me. “I can’t do this to you, sweetheart.”

“I’m doing it to you.”

Want more of Ansel and Pascal?

[Join my Patreon](#) (the lowest tier) to get access to the alternative storyline I wrote for them. The four chapters include Ansel’s heat and a slightly different HEA.



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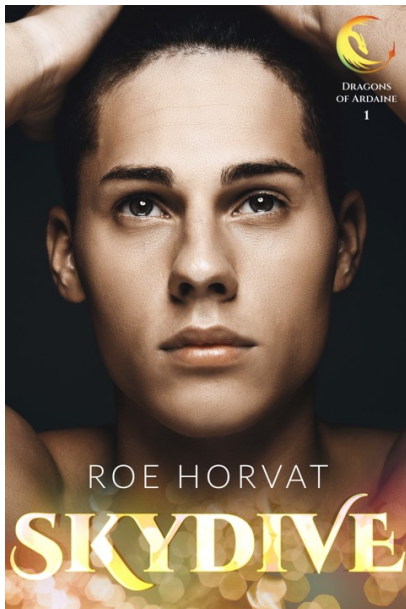
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DRAGONS OF ARDAINE

*Lawrie and Ernest's story is told in **Skydive**, Dragons of Ardaine Book 1, available on [Amazon and Kindle Unlimited](#).*



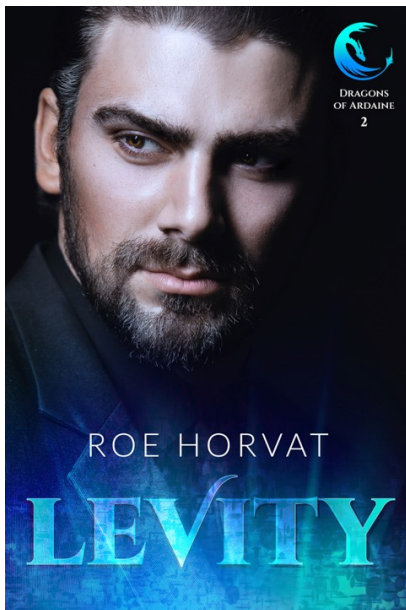
On New Year's Eve, Lawrie meets a deadly attractive, loaded alpha who's brilliant in bed and nice to boot. Pity Ernest travels so much and doesn't do relationships. Lawrie can at least enjoy one wild weekend. Except now it's the morning after, and things get weird. *Very* weird. Lawrie's body has changed overnight, warranting the freakout of a lifetime.

Ernest has been looking for his true mate since the eager age of twenty-one. After fifteen years, he's reconciled himself to restless traveling and hook-ups. The most recent one is a real treat—a certain Lawrence Winchester, a young omega with a sharp wit and an unusually intense scent. The thought of a mate doesn't even enter Ernest's head as he drifts through the night in a lusty haze. The morning brings life-altering revelations. Lawrie is the one—the signs are unmistakable. Now how to break it to him gently that he's stuck with Ernest for the rest of his life and that Ernest is, um, a slightly different species...

Skydive is a steamy, lighthearted MM omegaverse romance, featuring dragon shifters. HEA, standalone, high heat, mpreg.



Leonard and Davidson are the main characters in Levity, Dragons of Ardaine Book 2, available on [Amazon and Kindle Unlimited](#).



What's the point of staying alive when you can't live?

Half-naked in the arms of an angry, domineering alpha, Leo negotiates the limits for what's shaping up to be his hottest encounter ever. After months of hiding in fear, he's giving in to his desires, and it feels glorious. Except things go horribly wrong, and not only do his ex's goons attack him, but now he's being kidnapped by what appears to be a mythical creature. Or maybe he's gone insane. Because

dragons don't exist, do they?

Davidson has finally found him. The one. His mate is gorgeous, tastes like heaven, and outright asks for a spanking. He's also in acute danger, and Davidson must rescue him in dragon form, talons out. No wonder Leo is terrified of him. After their awful first night together, Davidson is determined to make things right and protect Leo with all his might.

Levity is an omegaverse erotic romance about a cantankerous dragon and a broken omega who are terrible apart but perfect for each other. The novel features dragon shifters, mpreg, and power exchange.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Queer fiction author Roe Horvat was born in the former Czechoslovakia which equipped him with a dark sense of sarcasm and a penchant for good beer. Roe traveled Europe and finally settled in Sweden. He came out as transgender in 2017 and has been fabulous since. He loves Jane Austen, Douglas Adams, bad action movies, stand-up comedy, the great Swedish outdoors, and all kinds of earthly pleasures. When not hiding in the studio doing graphics, he can be found trolling cafés and pubs in Gothenburg, writing.

Website: roehorvat.com



ALSO BY ROE HORVAT

Gay fiction and contemporary romance

The Layover

Dirty Mind

A Love Song for the Sad Man in the White Coat

Vanilla Clouds

Swiss Experiment (*The Layover short story*)

Those Other Books (gay erotic romance)

BUNDLE:

Adam Only

One in Between

The Other Book

Something More (short story)

Third One

Vacation (short story)

Beautiful Beast

Reunion (novella)

Naked (gay erotic romance)

Naked Weekend

Naked Games

Gay erotic romance/kink

Cabin Fever

Gay erotic fairytale/fantasy romance

Desires of a Monster

Omegaverse gay romance/paranormal

Precious

Devoted

Innocent

Teacher

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Unexpected

Trouble

Walter Sébastien's Notebook (short stories)

Omegaverse gay erotica

Hedonist (series)

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Skydive

Levity

Freefall

Multi-author omegaverse series

Perfect Match Agency

Cautious Match

Faraway Match