



Immortal BONDS

❖ DADDY'S LITTLE SINS ❖

A.W. SCOTT

IMMORTAL BONDS
A PNR MM DADDY ROMANCE

DADDY'S LITTLE SINS

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THE SCOTTVERSE

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*For those who've been told they had to be **one way** and chose to ignore the suggestion.*

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DEAR READER

This story is set in my San Noctis world. You do not have to read His Needy Mate first, however, you might enjoy this book more if you do. There is a lot of crossover in this one.

Please note this is the alternate universe version of my book, Hear Me. You're going to get similar vibes with an all new setting/storyline.

Get a snack. Grab a drink. Settle in.

And most important of all... enjoy!

XOXO,
Allie

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CHAPTER 1

THALRIC

THALRIC BLINKED HIS EYES OPEN, taking in the expanse of land before him. *Ah, San Noctis.* Home. While it wasn't his current home, it was the one he grew up in. The same one where he'd gotten into trouble and learned lessons about what being a dragon really meant. His family had come from money thanks to his great-grandmother's doing. She'd been a witch, and her magical gifts brought wealth to the family line.

She'd put her skills to use for the many, many centuries she'd lived. And the domino effect meant that his family never truly had to work in the sense that others did.

That didn't mean they were lazy, of course. In a group of overachievers, it was no wonder that his sister had gone on to marry the king and produce heirs. While his other siblings took over different hordes of dragons, he himself left San Noctis under his sister's guidance and taken up residency in one of the further towns that needed help getting situated.

Mira Saint, his beloved sister and queen — *former queen now* — had met her husband and fallen in love quickly. Their fated bonding paved the way for growth unlike the hordes had ever seen.

Mira had come to him shortly after her marriage, when she was pregnant with their eldest child, and asked him to help take care of a town that struggled to maintain peace. They didn't have anyone ruling over the horde.

None could be selected for voting, and with her pregnancy she didn't feel safe traveling that far.

He'd eagerly taken up the mantle and gone to lead the dragons in need.

At first, it had been difficult taking over when others didn't know he was capable of the job, but he'd proved himself quickly. He'd shown where his skills were and convinced everyone that he could guide them.

It was different than he'd expected his life to go. Thalric had been somewhat of a loose character in his younger years. He'd done any and everything he could to get a rise out of his family members. It was a joy for him.

In his late teens he wised up and got more serious, realizing how important his family was and that him being the odd one out made things difficult for the others. He found his stride, and he built a life that he loved.

It was great until Mira started dating Silas, her fated mate. The roles that came with the title of being a royal shifted for everyone in the family.

There was no room for error. All eyes were on them.

People were watching him everywhere he went, and it caused the structured life he'd started to build to become even more so.

The way he carried himself became arrogant and boastful. He would preen in the presence of others, making sure their gazes were directed towards him so that the rest of his family could live in peace.

It was a self-sacrificing maneuver that worked a bit too well.

Until one day he looked up and realized he had no clue who Thalric Nyxwing was at all. He'd been living a performative life for so long that he didn't know how to claw his way out of it.

Life now was simply focused around two sets of time. The first being whenever he was around anyone: He would put on his charm and make them believe he thought himself the greatest dragon to ever live. And then the second being when he was alone. He could be quieter then, relaxing and soaking up his personal time.

Thalric shook his head internally as his dragon began to descend. The beast snorted at him, since he could tell what he was thinking. It came in handy often, but the damn animal always loved to give him a hard time when he got too introspective.

More than once the dragon had suggested they stop the ruse. He believed no one would care one way or the other how Thalric really was.

They might have even embraced it. Fear was a bitch, sadly. Thalric worried what the changes would mean for everyone in his life.

Mira was no longer ruling. It was his nephew, Romilly, who'd taken charge. And from what he'd heard, he was also mated to a human. A human that Thalric was very close to meeting.

His dragon swooped down quickly, tucking its wings, and heading towards the landing pad at the castle. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts he missed looking over most of San Noctis and remembering all his old haunts.

Hopefully, he'd have a chance to make some time to go see them in person. He wanted to remember those old times. Maybe even let his guard down a bit if no one else was around.

Unfortunately, he would not be alone for a while. Several people were on the platform, ready to greet him. His dragon crouched, and he immediately released his hold so that Thalric could transform into his human form. The deep emerald of his dragon faded away, revealing his lightly tanned human skin.

He stretched, letting his muscles get some relief, as he cast a spell in his mind to clothe himself. He knew that his sister would have something ready for him, but he preferred his own garb when out and about. It helped him perform better, if you will.

When he opened his eyes, he was sheathed in a dapper suit, and his hair was combed back away from his face. His beard and mustache made the ensemble even more potent. He noticed a few women fanning their faces and even a couple of men rubbing their chests like they wanted to eat him up.

Thalric ignored them. He only had eyes for one person.

"Sister," he said in a soft voice.

Mira didn't hesitate. She ran to her brother, looking every bit the young girl he was raised with. Not an ounce of the posh queen to be seen. He spread his arms and braced his legs, though it didn't help in the wake of how strong she was.

He'd forgotten. *Oh, how he had forgotten.*

Mira's arms wrapped around his neck, and he lifted her off her feet, his arms banding around her waist. He'd spun her around, and she giggled much as she did years ago.

"I have missed you," she said into his shoulder, where her face was buried.

"And I have missed you. It has been far too long."

She pulled back, hands on his shoulders, as she nodded, her face going stern. "The last time you were here, the children were all smaller. They are grown now. They're doing adult things. Romilly is king. Where have you been? Why have you not come sooner?"

Thalric furrowed his brow. "Where have I been? I've been exactly where you told me to be. Helping the dragons settle and find their peace. I've been leading them as you asked."

She frowned. "Thalric, honey, that was a century ago. Those people are fine now. They can vote in a new ruler. You don't need to stay any longer."

Thalric froze, his body locking tight at the news. He hadn't come to San Noctis looking for a chance to move home. He'd come to support his sister with this council vote, as was his right as an extended member of the royal family.

An office of this nature was so much more.

"You're serious?" he breathed out.

She pushed at his body, urging him to put her down. When she landed on her feet, another figure stood right behind her. He looked up to spot Silas

standing there with a grin.

"Look what the cat dragged in," he teased.

Thalric scoffed as he shook his head at his brother-in-law. Silas and he had grown close throughout the years given that they had to communicate often about royal matters and decisions made by the king. He found a connection with the other man. Someone who understood what he was going through trying to lead the people he'd been placed with.

"Yes, well, it's your lucky day. I got dragged in, as you said, and you get to enjoy my presence." He let the part of him that always put on a show come out. He pulled his shoulders back, letting his massive chest expand, the muscles rippling even beneath the suit he wore. He heard gasps and could feel the weight of others' eyes on him even more.

Mira rolled her eyes, letting him know he wasn't fooling anyone with the show. She'd never call him out on it. It would do neither of them any good for others to think he was playing a game with them or something.

"What your sister is trying to tell you," Silas said, drawing Thalric's gaze back to him, "is that we only ever meant for your stay there to be temporary. We had hoped you would be back to see the children grow and spend time with us. Maybe take a mate of your own. Someone special."

Thalric could feel his eyes starting to sting. He knew he was moments away from sobbing if he didn't get control of himself.

Mira must have seen it too, because she poked him in the chest. "We're not doing that today. Just know the offer stands, and I will have someone in place there tomorrow while you're here. They could take over and everything will be fine. We'll even send for your things, so you don't have to go back."

She beamed up at him, and he had no fight against what was going to happen. It was inevitable. He would be returning to San Noctis. He'd get to return home. His heart leapt at the idea.

"Let's go inside. These people have work to do. The longer you stand here looking like *that*, the more they are going to be distracted."

At Silas's words, the people around the space rushed to work. He chuckled good-naturedly. The former king wouldn't be angry. He knew the effect that Thalric had on others. He suspected it was more to give Thalric a break.

"Lead the way," Thalric said, extending his arm for Mira to hold and bobbing his head in Silas's direction. "Show me what all I've missed."

And while he had at one point in time lived in the castle for a very short while, he hadn't been back in many, many years.

Mira was correct in that he should have returned sooner. He could see it with every hall they passed, every piece of their lives that he didn't know about. When they came across Hadrian and Eden in a playroom, he nearly stumbled over his own two feet.

"Is that Uncle Thalric?" Hadrian asked, his voice showing how incredulous he thought the notion.

Eden snorted and shook his head. "It can't be. That old geezer would look nothing like this now."

For a moment he was affronted. How dare this little shit say that? But then he saw the smirk in Eden's gaze. The humor laced there gave away his nephew's teasing.

"You can't speak out of turn. I can show you a thing or two if you'd like. Prove to you why I am the best uncle." Thalric lifted his hand, waving it around, letting sparks fly from it. It was a simple spell, magic that didn't take much out of him, but you would have thought he set the room on fire.

Eden jumped over the couch and stumbled forward. His mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you did that. I always thought that I had imagined it as a kid. Like, you know, people who believe in things that don't actually exist. But you *did* have magic like that. It's so cool."

Hadrian came over next, though he was much slower about it. He was staring at Thalric with a sort of hesitation. He didn't know why, given that they were family and he loved his nephew even if he hadn't been back in a while.

And despite them being in a room that was very clearly for age regression — a thought that sent Thalric spiraling — he didn't care about that part so much right now.

He was with family and he was happy.

Hadrian tipped his head to the side, then waved his hand towards where Thalric was still shooting sparks. Eden had moved closer, his face nearly getting hit by the tiny bolts. "You don't have to put on a show here with us."

The sparks died instantly, and Eden scowled over at his brother. "Excuse me, I was busy with something," he said.

Hadrian grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him over, tucking Eden to his side in a hug. "Hush now, I need to talk to our uncle."

When his gaze came back to Thalric's, he could see Hadrian was different than Eden in a lot of ways. His boldness, one of them. If he suspected correctly, the boldness was a bit of an act, much like his own.

Eden had been carefree and every bit as bratty as Mira had shared with him through the years. Hadrian had always been more reserved, a bit of a jock who liked to work out, much like Thalric, and he kept to himself in a way that made people think he was dumb.

Thalric knew better. No one in their bloodline was dumb. Not all may be gifted with magic, but they were *not* dumb. Silas's side was brilliant too.

"I'll drop my act if you drop yours," he said, his gaze a challenge.

Eden poked his head out from where Hadrian had tucked him to his side. "Deal," he stuck out his hand quickly before Hadrian could stop him, and Thalric shook it, a smirk building. He forced it back down because he had just agreed not to play a role.

Hadrian smiled, then released Eden and stepped forward to hug Thalric. "It's good to see you, Uncle T."

Thalric choked out a laugh that was damn near a sob at the nickname his nephew had used when they were younger. Anytime they spoke, he would

only ever use initials of his aunts and uncles because their names were hard for his little mouth. It had been ages since he'd heard it, though.

Their communication dropped the older the boys got and the more active they were doing other things. They had roles to play, and he hated himself a bit for letting it go so long.

"It's good to see you, too, Hady."

Hadrian's body shook against him as he chuckled. They weren't the only ones who had nicknames. Hady was short for Hadrian, but also for Hades — because when he was little, Hadrian could get into trouble and be a little devil if he wanted. Usually it was led by Eden, who was sometimes called Lucy, short for Lucifer.

Aside from all of that, it was good to hold his nephew. When Eden joined, it felt right. Mira and Silas stood in the corner of the room, Mira dabbing at her eyes as Silas held her close. His brother-in-law's smile was out of this world. He was absolutely pleased to have Thalric there, and with the offer hovering over him, he knew that if he just chose to stay, it would be fine.

"But would it?" his inner voice asked.

His dragon chuffed, as if to tell him, "Yes, you idiot, it would be fine."

When the boys pulled away, Mira came over and dragged Thalric from the room. They promised to see him later at dinner. Mira kept going through the castle, talking endlessly about the changes since the last time he was there, and also about the developments with Romilly and his human mate, Archer.

"You'll get to meet them later," she said. "They work together during the day and then have some time alone. It keeps them balanced, and Romilly's dragon basically demands it. It's much, much easier to just go along with whatever he wants. Happy dragon mate, happy horde, as we say."

A part of Thalric ached at that. He had a happy horde, but he wasn't happy. Not authentically so. If he left, and they could remain happy and functional, maybe he could find a bit of happiness in San Noctis. He had missed this place. The magic within the castle alone was fueling him. He could feel his body humming as it soaked in the history of his family. Mira had done a good job of keeping things steady and alive.

They rounded a corner, and Thalric froze. A figure stood in an open doorway. Immediately, Thalric knew who it was.

"Soren," he called out.

Soren raised their head. A slow smile formed as they shut the book they were holding and strode forward. Thalric was pulled into a jarring hug, as Soren was more affectionate than Hadrian and Eden had been, at least initially. It made sense, given they were one of the older ones. They probably had better memories, longer memories of Thalric being around — the few visits he did manage when they were young being the case.

When Soren pulled back, they clapped Thalric's shoulder. "I'm so happy to see you, Uncle. It has been too long." They turned to Mira and Silas. "You have offered to let him stay, yes? That we can put someone else in that town of his? I don't want him to leave. In fact, I demand he doesn't. I could use his help with the Fae."

Thalric's interest tingled at that. "You're still having issues," he drawled slowly.

Soren nodded, their brow dipping for a moment before straightening out. "Yes, and I could use outside assistance. I know Father and Hadrian have done their best to make connections, but maybe someone with your ability to mask would be better."

Thalric jerked. "My ability to mask?"

"Yes, you have a gift for charming people left and right. Anyone and everyone believes you're the perfect specimen of a dragon, and I think we could use that in our talks with the Fae. I might have the ability to help with emotions, but natural charm in discussions is better. The Fae won't feel any magic happening. They've made sure to tell me I cannot manipulate anyone, and I haven't so far. I've been damned tempted, but I haven't."

Thalric wanted to laugh. He should have laughed at the exasperation in Soren's tone. What he did instead was blink wildly and give a slow nod. "If I stay, I could help... I guess."

Soren's smile grew even more somehow. "Excellent, then. I imagine I will see you later at dinner. I'm off to do some research." They lifted the book in

their hand and strode back through the open door of the library.

Thalric wanted to follow. He loved books — so much so that back home he had his own miniature library. That would be hell for anyone who moved his stuff later, he thought, but didn't vocalize it. No need to give them hope that he had decided to stay. It was still pending.

"We should probably get you settled. We've done a lot of walking and talking and some reunions. You'll see the others at dinner. I imagine you want some rest."

Thalric could have told his sister that he didn't need to rest. He'd used his magic to give his dragon full control while he slept during the trip. He knew it would be exhausting to stay awake. His human body would have crashed the minute he landed otherwise.

He shrugged, then took her hand, which she extended his way. Thankfully, Silas had never minded the affection between the two of them like some possessive dragon mates might have. He and Mira had always been close, possibly closer than the other siblings they grew up with. As a result, they were touchy-feely. It was just who they were.

Up until that moment, Thalric hadn't realized how much he missed it. He had understood how starved he was for this level of affection. How, despite the charm and charisma he could pour out in waves, he had not connected with anyone on a level he needed, on a level he craved.

Mira led him to a room on the same hall as the rest of the family. Granted, it was a massive hall, the rooms spaced out so that no one felt like they were on top of one another.

"This will be yours," she directed, pushing open a door to what he presumed was a guest room. What he found instead was a space that looked pretty much identical to what he had back home.

"How did you—" he started, spinning around to look at the space.

She clasped her hands together in front of her and swung her body side to side. "I have my ways, big brother."

The tease in her tone was welcome. He loved his sassy sister. She didn't get to express that part of herself much anymore. "Well, it looks great, and I can't thank you enough."

She bounced over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You can thank me by staying."

He shook his head, turning to look at Silas. The other man raised his hands. "Do not look at me to defend you. She will get what she wants. It is just a matter of whether you agree, or whether she forces your hand."

"Forces my hand?"

Mira looked up at him. "Romilly found his mate here in San Noctis, and I suspect my other children will find theirs soon too. Who's to say there isn't a bit of magic left for you?"

Thalric only just managed to keep his expression neutral. What she was suggesting was phenomenal. It was a dream. Everything he could have wanted.

But it was so far-fetched that it didn't seem possible. He pressed a kiss to his sister's forehead, then released her and stepped away. He faked a yawn that neither of them believed.

"I think I should get some rest. I'll see you later. Maybe send me a text when dinner's ready."

"Of course," Mira said easily, before wrapping her arm around Silas's and dragging the man out of the room. "Love you, bye!" she shouted, slamming the door in their wake.

Thalric shook his head and dropped down onto the edge of the bed. He pulled out his cell phone, making sure that the ringer was on for whenever she told him it was time to eat. He wouldn't be asleep, but he might be a touch distracted.

He opened the one app he allowed himself. The phone was mostly for business and to keep in touch with family when he made time. But the app was his indulgence. It was his favorite thing because it held his favorite person.

He shot off a message: *"How are you doing this afternoon, boy?"*

Then he waited for the reply.

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CHAPTER 2

CREIGHTON

CREIGHTON STOOD in line at the café, angry at himself for running late that morning. Had he simply gone to bed on time instead of crafting yet another Gnome for his collection, he would not be in the mess he was in.

While he loved the café because of their dedication to all species that lived in San Noctis, he also didn't like how many people would be there. The morning rush was full of all different types of people, people that Creighton typically avoided.

Thank goodness he'd remembered to put in his blockers before he left the house. As a vampire, he had a very heightened sense of smell. Imagine a thousand times that of a normal person and several times over other supernaturals. That was his burden to bear. A disability he'd been born with and had managed for all of his many years.

While everyone else could sniff each other to their heart's content and tell what someone was thinking or feeling in the moment, he was forced to rely on people being honest when they spoke. Part of the reason that he had his shop and kept to himself outside of business hours was because he didn't know who he could trust. He hadn't learned anyone well enough to be able to pick it out.

He looked around the space slowly, not letting his gaze linger on anyone for too long, lest they think he was trying to engage them in some type of

challenge. Creighton wouldn't challenge anyone. He was a softy through and through.

If anything, he was a pacifist, keeping to himself and not even letting others acknowledge his craft when they found out what he did. It was easier for him to be behind the scenes, to not let others know who the man behind the crafts was. He'd survived as long as he had because of it, and he would continue to do so.

The people in front of him stepped forward, giving room for Creighton to follow. He glanced at the menu though he knew what he wanted. He got the same thing every time. The espresso with mocha and two shots of type O. He preferred it to the other blends they had because it just added a hint of sweetness with the chocolate.

He knew he should probably dial it back a bit, but he was tired of rules, tired of other people managing his life. It's why he'd left his family behind and come to San Noctis all those years ago. He needed the freedom, the lack of judgment. No one would tell him he was being a baby in San Noctis. Most people didn't even notice him, which was great. Exactly what he wanted.

The few that did were typically telling him how much they loved his work and asking if he had any availability on his calendar. As a professional stuffy designer, he kept busy. People often reached out to him to craft work for their children.

There was also a subset of people who wanted the items for themselves. Those were his biggest customers. His most loyal, because they came back time and time again, any chance they got, whether it be for a new stuffy or to gift a friend.

And the Daddies...

Creighton sighed aside as he thought of them. What he wouldn't give to have one of his own. One who would spoil him endlessly, who would see a need and fulfill it before he ever had to ask.

Creighton didn't know if he would ever get such, especially since he couldn't scent anyone. If he had a fated mate, which several vampires did,

then he would need to be able to smell them to confirm it.

His fear of being exposed like that was working against him. If he couldn't scent them to know, he had to rely on them to approach.

He couldn't see that happening, of course. He never went anywhere. Never allowed himself to be in spaces with people because they would inevitably ask him about his blockers.

You couldn't see them when you looked at Creighton. Still, he often had to adjust them, or if life was really being a pain, he would need to sniff several times to get them to settle.

Speaking of which, he discreetly squeezed his nostrils together, feigning as if he had a headache so no one would ask what he was doing. Picking your nose wasn't acceptable in human spaces, nor in supernatural ones. The nose was a powerful tool. It helped supernaturals navigate every layer of connection.

Finding out his didn't function properly, that he had a disability, often made people treat him differently. And he did not want that.

Before he knew it, he was at the front counter and facing the barista.

"Your usual?" she asked.

He smiled softly, reaching up to adjust his glasses. "Yes, please, Amy."

The young girl smiled and took his payment. He moved out of the way so the next customer could go. He only had to wait a moment because everyone in the café knew him, and most knew about his blockers as well. They knew how shy he was. After so many years of coming in, they had mastered his order as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"We have it ready for you."

He took his drink from a different barista, Matt, and took a sip right there at the counter. He closed his eyes, sighing at the rich, smooth feel of it on his tongue.

Yes, this was what he needed. Coming here would be worth it for him to have the delicious drink. It would be worth it for him to withstand the

awkwardness of being in the rush hour.

He waved goodbye to the others as discreetly as possible and slipped out of the building. He was standing on the sidewalk looking out at the town that was very much awake and bustling, more so than he usually got to see it, and froze at the sight of a man in the distance.

"Who is that?" he whispered to himself. He'd never seen the individual before.

Creighton wasn't one to boast, but he did know pretty much everyone who lived in San Noctis. He had come across their paths, either through his business or through multiple connections over the years. The degree of separation between people *wasn't* as thick as one might think.

As Creighton stared at the man, he felt a warmth spread through his body. *What was going on?* he thought to himself. He didn't understand how this person could have him feeling this way.

Sure, he was handsome, with a big, broad chest and more muscles than Creighton usually saw on people. It wasn't off-putting, which surprised him. If anything, he had the urge to go up and touch the other man.

He wouldn't, obviously. That was rude. He didn't just go pet people.

Still, he thought about what it would feel like to run his hands over those broad shoulders. He thought about what he could possibly learn if he approached this big, majestic person.

Majestic was the perfect word.

Creighton didn't need to see their dragon form to know they were someone regal, someone who had held lots of power. Maybe they were there for the talk with the council. Creighton had heard a bit about it through his customers that had been coming in lately.

After a surprising reveal of treason from one of the council members, they needed to have a vote to see who they could bring on next. They needed to be someone trustworthy with a good upbringing.

Heck, maybe this guy was one of the people looking for a spot. Creighton didn't know and was really confused as to why he even cared.

He shook his head and was about to move on when the man started to put on a show, what could only be described in its most basic form. Magic sparked from his hands and wove around him in the crowd that had gathered. They oohed and clapped happily any time the sparks grew in size or speed.

It was mesmerizing. Creighton could very much acknowledge that. But it was also odd — very braggadocious of this man to just perform magic out on the street. They might have been in San Noctis proper, where there weren't many humans around, but you still had to be careful.

And what if someone didn't want to see magic just out and about? You had phobias and allergies.

He nearly laughed at himself. *An allergy to magic, really.*

Creighton pushed away any and all thoughts about the man as he turned towards the shop. Whoever he was, he could continue to dance for attention on the street with his magic. He wasn't for Creighton. That was for sure. Anyone who enjoyed performing like that was far and away not his type of person.

He made it to his shop rather quickly, despite how busy things were. The place was tucked away between two other very busy stores. Sometimes people walked past his door and didn't even realize he was there. Creighton loved when that happened. He had more than enough orders online to keep him busy, so he didn't technically need the storefront.

But some things from his past were ingrained in him, like the need, or rather, the belief that if you didn't have something physical to show your work, then it wasn't real. And yes, digital had grown epically; however, if anyone from his past life were to see him, they would mock him had he not had a real store.

Creighton hated the idea of anyone finding him in San Noctis. He didn't want those memories. And part of him hated that he had folded to their ways by continuing to live the way they would have wanted.

One day he would truly find his way out. Then he could absolutely not have to deal with anyone else's expectations and the memories of people he didn't like.

Inside his shop, he turned on the lights and flipped the sign to open. He moved around the store, shuffling the few stuffies he had out so that they were the most presentable. The dragons were always big sellers, of course, given where they were. Wolves were pretty popular too. And he got the occasional request for fairies and Fae, and even a human or two, which was never fun given all the details that went into those.

At the end of the day, it paid his bills. And if his favorite thing to make wasn't something he offered others, then that just meant he got to keep it all.

He reached down into his bag and squeezed the Gnome stuffy he had on a key ring attached inside. It soothed him, as it always did, acting as a grounding tool. He slipped his bag off and put it in his office in the back.

With nothing specific on his to-do list, he did one last check of the store and then grabbed the material for one of his orders waiting in the queue. This one was a request for another dragon. This one, though, was meant to have rainbow polka dots, and it was for a cute little girl who had been born fairly recently to one of the families he had served since his arrival in San Noctis. They had purchased dozens of stuffies from him through the years. While they were all for children, it didn't hurt that they were such prominent figures and had influence over others. His business boomed, and he never once complained about having to make yet another dragon.

He knew that when the shop closed and he had time to himself, he would work on what he wanted. Looking over at the half-finished Gnome in the work-in-progress bucket he kept, he smiled. This one was bigger than he usually did. He wanted it to be a pillow he could sleep with, something to cuddle. He wanted a big, soft place to land.

For some reason that idea brought forth the man he had seen in the road, the one who'd been bragging to everyone and showing off. *I bet he would be a good cuddler*, Creighton thought to himself. He froze at the thought, his sewing machine stopping abruptly. He almost cursed because the dang thing was so picky. He didn't want to mess up the project he was working on.

Thankfully he hadn't.

He still couldn't shake his thoughts away, though. The man had a grip on him. Had the magic been some type of hypnosis? Was everyone who saw it affected? Is that how he got people into his bed?

Creighton felt an overwhelming sense of anger at the idea. Not at being duped, which is what he should have felt. He didn't like the idea of other people going to bed with the man. His jaw started to ache from how tightly he clenched it, and his muscles were bunched. He knew he wouldn't get anything done in that state.

He took a moment to close his eyes and breathe in and out slowly. Then he did what he should have done when he arrived at work that morning and went to his closet where he kept all his favorite Gnome-related items. He pulled out the slippers and blanket and took them over to his chair.

Thankfully, his desk was covered on one side, so he was able to kick off his shoes and slip his feet into the slippers and throw the blanket over his lap. Anyone who came in would just see a man working at a sewing machine surrounded by stuffed animals. They wouldn't know about his obsession, about his wonder, about how he enjoyed being Little.

As if on cue, his phone buzzed from where he'd placed it on the table. He slowed the machine back down and looked over, smiling when he saw who it was from.

Tell me about your morning. I'm sure you've been at work for a while now.

The text was through an app he had gotten on a whim one night. After talking to a client, he'd let it slip that he was interested in having a Daddy like his client had, and they had suggested an app for him to meet a partner.

It was supernatural only, which helped his worry over things. The one person he actually felt a connection with and worth continuing talking to lived far, far away. The bonus of that was what kept him replying. It's what kept him answering each message and engaging, sharing bits of himself he never would have done had the person been closer.

Picking up the phone, he responded: I actually haven't. I overslept this morning and got a late start. Then the café was busy, and I got distracted on

my way out. I just got started. But my coffee's good, and I have a blanket.

That's good, boy. Which blanket? Send me a picture.

For a moment he froze, because he'd been really careful not to let it slip how much he loved Gnomes to his kind-of, sort-of Daddy. The man did boss him around, and he enjoyed it. Both of them did, from the conversations they had, and it was all consensual.

Yet for some reason, despite all the talk about pacifiers and diapers and being made to eat certain foods, he had not shared this part of himself. He had not let his guard down.

Carefully, he eased his chair back and took a picture of his lap, adjusting the blanket so that it was only partially visible. He had to wait a while for a reply, which sometimes happened with the man. But instead, he got multiple texts back-to-back, several with emojis and gif reactions. And then finally words that made his heart race.

You're so amazing. This is adorable, and I'm going to think about it every day, often, to get me through.

Creighton's cheeks heated, and he had to take his glasses off for a moment to fan his face. "Holy hotness," he whispered to himself, happy he was alone in the shop.

His phone buzzed again, and when he put his glasses back on to look, the man had replied with a photo of his own. It wasn't as direct as what Creighton had sent. At first, he couldn't tell what it was, but then he saw the bright spots flaring in the corner of the image and the grass where little fairy houses stood. He knew they'd be empty. It was very rare that those houses were ever filled because of how the fairies had built their own villages. Seeing one in the wild wasn't going to get you a connection with one. But it was still adorable.

He wondered why seeing magic in this state didn't bother him when the man in the road had. Maybe it was because his pseudo-Daddy had told him he could use magic. They hadn't fully discussed their species other than to say they were both supernaturals.

It made sense now. If he was Fae, then he would have magic. Feeling like he'd put the pieces together, Creighton replied with a bunch of heart emojis and a gif of a man swooning.

That is adorable.

After he sent it, he waited.

You forgot something.

He bit his lip, hesitant. They only used the endearment a few times in all the months they'd been speaking.

He paused. Had it been months, or was it already over a year?

He calculated backwards, noting when he remembered first downloading the app, since it wasn't long after that he met this man. Holy crap. It had been almost two years. In fact, it was coming up very quickly.

They hadn't done anything for their one-year anniversary. Probably because neither had really acknowledged it, and time was a precious thing for his Daddy. So Creighton wasn't a brat — he felt a strong itch to tease the other man, but he was exhausted, tired down to his bones from the range of emotions he'd had today so far.

He texted back: *It looks amazing, Daddy. So cute* — and added a wink at the end.

Good boy, he got in reply.

And the shiver that tore down his spine was quick and fast. He had to put his phone down again. How did one person he'd never met have such an effect on him? How did a stranger control so much of his mood?

Creighton didn't have the answers for it. He didn't think he wanted to know the answers either. For the time being, he could just enjoy the company of the other man, the connection they had, and hope that one day he might be brave enough to share more of himself — to share who he was and where he was. And really, really far in the future, if his Daddy didn't find his fated mate, maybe they could even meet.

It was a pipe dream. But Creighton was used to keeping his head in the clouds. He didn't have the ability to fly. But his mind could soar leagues above reality.

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CHAPTER 3

THALRIC

Earlier that morning at the castle

THALRIC STRODE towards the dining room, a tiny hint of nerves running through his system. His dragon told him to calm down, that nothing was going to go wrong. This was his family, after all. The worst that could happen is someone poking fun at him, not a death threat or anything, and it wasn't his life that he feared for.

The night before, when he'd arrived, he had told Mira he would be down for dinner once she called, and he had texted a bit back and forth with his boy to make sure that he was doing okay that day. The Little he'd met through an online app he discovered one night when he couldn't sleep had been one of the greatest gifts he'd stumbled across.

Little Biter, as the boy's handle was, had been in need of someone who could lead him without being too demanding. He needed a firm hand, but he had only seen other Daddies on the app who were looking for a brat to tame. Thalric wasn't a big fan of brats. It had never been his choice of partners, though he had met several through the years.

He much preferred someone who liked the things he liked: the solitude and the time together to just be. He wasn't sure he'd find it when he signed up, but as fate or luck would have it, he'd come across Little Biter, and it had been wonderful ever since.

There were daily check-ins that were a highlight for him, and he usually made sure to have time for them, with the few exceptions where his duties kept him away for days at a time. He was always regretful of that, and had he known where his Little lived, he would have flown to him and groveled at his feet.

But he hadn't had to.

The boy was understanding, telling him that he liked the solitude at times too and never once judging him for a job that was tedious. Thalric loved that about him. He loved a lot about his boy, actually, though he'd never voiced it, because his boy was shy — rarely ever going so far as to call him Daddy, as they had agreed upon — almost like he was afraid it wouldn't last, so he didn't commit to it.

Meanwhile, Thalric had called his boy every tempting nickname under the sun. He had used endearments left and right, wanting him to be comfortable, because he couldn't decide what fit the boy best.

Thalric often wondered if maybe meeting him in person would help, or even just hearing his boy's voice. He had a feeling it would all click into place, but that wasn't the option just yet. So he held his tongue and kept patient.

In the midst of texting his boy, which was usually his morning and nightly ritual, he'd fallen asleep, his body more tired than he thought it was. He missed the phone call, and when Mira came to check on him and he was passed out, she left him be.

All that meant he had missed out on meeting Romilly and Archer. The next morning he woke up early and headed down to breakfast in order to meet them, and hopefully he'd get to know them truly as they were now.

When he entered the dining room, he frowned because there was no one there. He looked to the side where one of the helpers stood.

"You know where everyone is? I seem to have lost my family," he joked.

The man gave him a wide-eyed look, his mouth opening like he was going to respond, but then Silas came up behind him and gripped his shoulder.

"Hey, Thalric. Breakfast is a tricky situation sometimes. I'm sure you wanted to meet Romilly and Archer."

Thalric nodded, sinking into the familiar warm embrace of his friend and brother-in-law. "I was hoping to meet them. I know I passed out last night."

Thalric waved his free hand. "Oh, don't worry about it. Mira said you looked exhausted, and it was a long journey. You deserved the rest."

At that moment, Thalric's stomach made a ferocious noise. Both men looked down at it before they shared a look.

"You clearly also need some breakfast."

"Yes, that's why I'm in the dining room," he said, with enough sarcasm for Silas to laugh.

The young man who had not managed to speak to him continued to stare wide-eyed at the pair.

"Come with me. We'll go see Belinda in the kitchen. I'm sure she has something she can whip up for you."

"And what about you?" Thalric threw back.

"I wake up long before now, and I've already had breakfast and coffee and gone for a run."

Thalric frowned. "All of that before now? That's too early."

"No, it's not. You're just used to sleeping in later. You are who people expect of you, and you get away with it."

"But you're not the king anymore. Romilly is. So why are you still getting up?"

Silas pushed the door open to the kitchen area, motioning for Thalric to go before him. He spoke as he followed. "Because I did it for centuries. You don't break habits easily, or at least I don't. So early mornings it is. Besides, Mira gets up early too, so it works out."

The tone in which he said that made Thalric wrinkle his nose. "Dude, that's my sister. We've been over this."

"And she's my wife," Silas replied easily. "You can infer whatever you want from what I say. But I'll have you know that we have four children together. I had to, you know, to get that to happen."

Thalric put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes, singing out, "La, la, la," as if it would take away what he'd just heard. He was mostly just messing with Silas. He was quite aware of the fact that his sister was not a virginal maiden tucked away in a tower, like he probably would have enjoyed her to be, until he died many, many centuries from now.

At the same time, he understood that he would not have such wonderful nephews otherwise. He was still trying to figure out what in the world to call Soren because of their pronouns. They'd said nephew was fine, but the dimming in their eyes proved otherwise.

Thalric shook his head to push away the thought for now. He'd have to do some research and figure it out.

"To what do I owe this visit, Your Majesty?"

A woman with curves for days stood in the kitchen with an apron on and her hair up in a messy bun. She had a spoon and was stirring something in a large pot. Thalric was drawn to the scent. It was intoxicating, whatever it was. He moved to get closer, but Silas put a hand out. "Don't mess with her while she's mixing."

"Hello, Belinda. This is my brother-in-law, Thalric. I don't think you two have met since you came on after his last visit."

She stopped stirring and wiped her hands on her apron, then extended one over the counter. "Nice to meet you. You're kin to Mira, right?"

"Yes, I am," Thalric replied easily, immediately noting the woman was human.

When he turned to his brother-in-law, Silas was smiling wide. "Belinda is very trusted. She has kept our secret for a long time, at least in human years. And she is intent on continuing to keep it. Plus, the way she cooks is a dream. I'm never hungry, and I'm always left wishing my stomach was bigger, so I could put more down."

"Is that so?" Thalric asked, his stomach tightening yet again.

Thankfully, this time it hadn't made a sound. Belinda eyed him as though she'd heard it, though. She moved away from the enticing concoction and went to a cabinet. When she opened it, it revealed a host of appliances, and when she opened one door, there was a steaming plate. He couldn't help but stare at it. It was covered in meats and cheeses and bread, with a pile of eggs so tall he worried they would tumble over.

"How did you have that ready?" he asked. "Magic?"

His fingers itched to perform some of his own.

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Belinda shook her head as she extended the plate to him. "No, not quite. Your voice carries from the dining room. Since no one else is in there, I was able to hear that you needed breakfast, and voila! I had it ready. These are just leftovers from this morning, reheated. Don't think that I somehow concocted an entire meal in a matter of seconds. I do not have that skill."

Thalric acknowledged what she said and what she didn't say. She confirmed that she was human, and that she didn't have any power to overtake him or to be a threat. He liked that there was subtlety to her affirming what his brother-in-law had said.

He eased onto a stool at the counter and dug in as Silas spoke with Belinda about the menu for the day. He didn't hear anything or pay attention to them. The food was all-consuming. With every ounce of his being, he had to force himself from moaning and groaning out loud like some type of scandalous movie star.

It was that damn good.

He finished quickly and eased his fork down, pushing the plate away from him. "Thank you so much, Belinda. I'm stuffed and amazed. It's so good."

She took his plate and her lips kicked up to one side. "I know. And you're welcome." She turned away from the pair as if dismissing them.

Silas must have thought the same, because he took Thalric by the elbow and led him out of the kitchen. "Do you have plans today?" Silas asked him.

Thalric shook his head, pulling his elbow free and shoving his hands into his pockets. His plans had been to see Romilly and Archer, to meet them and hold a conversation, maybe see if they needed help with anything, since he was still waiting for a moment when the council would convene.

There had been some holdups and currently candidates were coming forward wanting to be selected to be voted on by the horde, according to the gossip he'd caught wind of. It was much more tedious than Thalric thought it would be. Granted, he'd been out of the royal sphere for a while, and this particular horde was very diplomatic, so he should have known better.

"I don't have anything else on the agenda," Thalric told Silas. "My plans are derailed, and I truly considered just walking around town for a while, at least until dinner. Do you have something you need me to do?"

Silas mirrored Thalric's pose, putting his hands in his own pockets, though he rocked back and forth on his heels as he did it. "I have nothing, not for you, and I think it would be good if you did some exploring. Maybe see some places you used to visit, see some familiar faces and realize this is where you're meant to be."

Thalric could have argued with Silas, reminding him that he hadn't decided to stay and nothing was official. Maybe explained to the them that all the old places he visited were probably long gone and taken over. Before he could, a feminine voice echoed down the hall.

"Your Majesty."

Silas turned, and a figure was striding towards him, a stack of papers in hand. "Ah, that's Shae — Romilly's assistant and somewhat of an advisor. I should go see what she needs. My gut tells me it's a moment I'll need to

pretend I'm king again. Oh, what fun!" He shook his shoulders slightly and left Thalric standing in the hallway, watching his retreating form.

When the two figures connected, they immediately turned and went in the direction the woman had come from, their heads bent together, talking about whatever was on the papers she held.

Thalric wasn't offended in the slightest. He knew how tough it was for his brother-in-law and sister. He'd only lived a fraction of what they went through trying to control all the hordes, as well as managing their own. He'd merely been a vessel to maintain some order.

With nothing left, he took off for town. He wandered as he said he would and was doing a pretty good job of blending in. But then someone from his past — a schoolmate — saw him and shouted out his name.

The moment people heard the name that Mira formerly went by, they understood they were in the presence of someone connected to the royal family. He flipped the switch, his mask in place, and began to dazzle everyone around him with stories and magic sprouting from his hands.

At one point, his dragon stood up excitedly, wagging its tail as if it were some type of dog or something. The excitement nearly made him freeze, but he was too practiced at keeping things together when his other side wanted to take over.

What has you distracted? he asked the beast.

The reply was clipped. *Good smell. Close. Need.*

His dragon picking up on a favorable scent was rare, though not impossible. It could be anything from a person who is friendly and happy or a delicious meal being cooked nearby. Odds were on the food.

Several more minutes of entertaining the people had him exhausted. Thankfully, they all begged off, saying they needed to get to work or back home to their families. He didn't let his guard down just yet, even if he wanted to. Taking off, he let his dragon lead him — the direction unclear. It took a couple of blocks and one direction change into a café for his dragon to sigh in relief.

Thalric took a deep breath and with it, he suddenly understood.

Mate.

His dragon whispered the word reverently and with hesitation. They could tell that the scent was old, not recent enough that he would suspect the person still there. And within the scent, there were notes of other things — things he wasn't familiar with. Who was it? Who had it been?

He didn't have long to think about it before a young barista was waving him over. "What can I get you, sir?" He hadn't even thought about the fact that he'd walked into a café with no intentions of buying anything.

Instead, he glanced up at the menu to see what they had. His eyes widened a bit, realizing they had something for everyone, literally. There were options to add in blood and more protein, things that would enhance magic, and even a varied line of teas meant to cure ailments.

Why hadn't his sister told him about this place? It was adorable and quaint. Plus, he saw more than one thing he wanted to try.

It took him a second to pick just one, and when he told the girl his order, she said that he had made a great choice and that it would be out soon. He stepped away, moving down the counter. It was there he picked up more of the scent.

Okay, so whoever it was had come in, ordered, and moved down to wait for their order. He contemplated many questions all at once. Were they a regular? Could he find a way to run into them again? Was their scent stronger somewhere else where he could track it?

His dragon was strong, and if he did a spell, he probably could find them.

But he was hesitant. As much as the idea of locating his fated mate appealed to him, there was one major problem. His Little Biter. He'd fallen in love with him.

They didn't need to see each other in person for him to know it, and the thought of no longer being able to communicate with him — of having to delete the app and spend the rest of his days with someone else — made his heart ache. It made him so sad he wanted to drop down and cry.

The barista came over with the drink in hand, her smile in place. She took a breath in as if to speak and froze.

"Sir, are you okay?" she asked softly.

He gulped, nodding, because he didn't have the ability to speak. He took the cup from her, which she was slow to release.

"I don't believe you, but I also don't know you. If you need a minute to sit, the café is open. But if you want privacy, there's a park nearby. I'm sure you can probably get some space there. Really let yourself feel your feelings."

Thalric knew what she meant. Unfortunately for him, he could not do such a thing. Now that he'd been spotted out and about, it was only a matter of time before the entire horde knew he was there. He would have to be on if he stayed outside of the castle walls. Even knowing that, he understood he had to take a moment to regroup.

He dropped into a chair near the fireplace in the corner of the café and pulled out his phone. He exchanged texts with his Little Biter, checking in on his boy and teasing him gently. It eased some of the ache in his heart, while also furthering his decision to delay finding his fated mate. He didn't want to be torn. He couldn't understand how fate would give him this type of situation.

For now, he would hold strong, wait it out. If things exploded later, he would deal with the consequences. Besides, if he stayed in San Noctis, he would run into his fated mate anyway. Maybe that meant he shouldn't stay.

Fuck.

What was he going to do?

CHAPTER 4

CREIGHTON

"THE FUN HAS ARRIVED."

The door to Creighton's shop slammed open at the announcement. He looked up, eyes wide and body full of terror. It wasn't because of the words that were said. It was the fact that someone had barged into his space so abruptly.

He blinked a few times, then realized it was not a threat. No, it was very much not a threat.

"Eden?" Creighton asked, voice full of confusion.

"That is me," the young man said as he skipped further into the store.

"What are you doing here? I thought you would have a courier come pick up this order."

Eden spun in a circle, letting the fabric of his long shirt fan out. It was gorgeous. Creighton had a touch of envy. He didn't want to wear flowing pretty things, but he did love that Eden had the freedom to be who he wanted to be. He was careful not to let it show. Eden would have him changed and dressed in a quick flash. No reason to get the other man involved. He didn't know how to take *no* as an answer.

Creighton took another moment to catch his breath and then stood from his desk. He went into the back where he kept completed orders and pulled out

the one designated for Eden Saint. The royal prince was one of his best customers. He had found Creighton through an event where Creighton had donated some items, and where Eden was apparently volunteering as part of his royal duties. They quickly bonded. Both of them being Littles and loving stuffies helped.

Eden always let Creighton have creative control. He would simply say what type of animal or creature he wanted, and Creighton would design it. They exchanged texts back and forth to verify the photos and then they were a wrap until Eden sent someone to come gather them.

Others would have seen it as a pretentious move, sending a courier for something they could get themselves. But Creighton understood why it was such a big deal.

Being a royal meant that Eden was observed often. He was put on a pedestal, and if he took one step out of line, others would call him out for it or make a big deal. The fact that Eden was a Little who often struggled to be Big made things more difficult.

"Here it is." Creighton held out the bag of stuffies to the other man.

Eden yanked it, pulling it to his chest and hugging it for a moment. Then he opened it up and pulled out the bright yellow sunflower stuffy.

"Oh, it's gorgeous!" Eden cooed, petting at the various leaves that Creighton had painstakingly put together. It was not only realistic but very large.

Creighton smiled and thanked Eden for his praise. Eden spent a few more minutes lavishing love on his gift before putting it back in the bag. Then he looked at Creighton somewhat hesitantly.

"I have another project for you, but this one is a bit different."

"Okay." Creighton adjusted his glasses and grabbed his notebook. "Tell me what you need. I will take care of it."

Eden chewed on his bottom lip for a moment before grabbing the bag attached to his side. He reached in and pulled out some folded papers. "I need you to make both of these, please."

Creighton took the papers from him and, while watching Eden's face, unfolded them. Eden's gaze immediately dropped to the images, so Creighton followed. He separated them since there were two different photos and pondered over why they seemed familiar.

"Do you want these two dragons?" Creighton asked to clarify.

Eden nodded rapidly. "Yes, those exact dragons, please. And they need to be the same size. I can't have one bigger than the other. They'll think I'm playing favorites."

Normally, Creighton would think that Eden was speaking about the stuffies. But this time it felt more like he meant the dragons themselves. The backgrounds in the photos were familiar to Creighton.

They were here in San Noctis. It would be a little odd to craft a dragon in the form of someone who lived in town.

Then again, to Creighton's knowledge, Eden never took his stuffies outside of his play area or his bedroom, whichever he felt was their home. Basically, the castle was a safe place for the animals and creatures that Creighton made for him. Unless one of the people it was modeled after went into the castle, they wouldn't know.

Creighton hummed in lieu of answering, because he wasn't quite sure what to agree to. "When would you like them?"

Eden quickly responded, "Before the council vote, if possible."

Creighton's eyes widened. "I don't even know when the council vote is. Is it soon?"

Eden nodded slowly. "Yeah, like really soon. As in I'm going to have to pay a lot for the rush fee for this."

Creighton closed his eyes tightly, murmuring to himself. He was careful to make sure that Eden couldn't hear him. He knew that dragons could pick up on the smallest of noises, but he needed to complain for a moment about the predicament he was in. The change wasn't going to upset his work schedule. It would, however, interfere with some projects he had lined up for himself.

"I can do it. But tell me one thing. When exactly is the council vote?"

"They speculate in the next week? Possibly like four or five days from now?"

Eden rocked side to side as if that would somehow alleviate the news he had just given Creighton. This man — this Little, who was his friend and client — wanted him to make two full-sized, detailed dragon stuffies in that time?!

He already knew he was going to have to hunt down the fabric for them because he didn't have anything in his arsenal to match them. They were gorgeous. One blood red, so much so that it made Creighton's teeth ache, and the other a silver that practically glowed.

Was he going to need glitter for this? He hated using glitter on stuffies. It was a pain to get to stick, and even when it did, you still had that texture. He hid his scowl by dipping his face closer to the photos.

Eden managed to remain quiet as he waited. He rocked side to side and tapped his feet a bit, but he didn't utter a word. Not until Creighton nodded once and eased the papers down.

"Okay, it's decided. I'll do it," he said to let Eden know and to affirm it to himself. He'd made the commitment. His projects could wait.

Creighton went ahead and calculated the cost of what it would take to get this done in time for Eden. The other man didn't so much as blink at it. He simply handed over a pile of cash and said that the rest was a tip.

If it were anyone else, Creighton wouldn't have taken the money. For Eden, it was a drop in the bucket. And he knew Creighton was good for the job. With as much work as they'd done together, there was no way Creighton wouldn't have it finished and perfect just the way he wanted.

And then Creighton spoke with his friend a bit longer. They talked about games and how they were feeling in their Little mindsets these days. They kept up with one another, often checking in to see if they wanted to have a playdate. He had refused so far, but temptation was growing.

Eden snapped his fingers. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you the craziest news. My uncle is in town."

"Your uncle?" Creighton repeated.

"My uncle. And he's staying with us until after the council vote. He says he's here on business, but I think my mom and dad are going to convince him to stay. Which would be so cool."

Creighton nodded along, though he didn't truly know the other man or have any say in the matter. "I'm happy for you, you know. If that's what you want — family sticking together and all that." Creighton faked a laugh.

Eden caught on instantly, of course. His gaze settled on Creighton like a weight, heavy and observing. "When are you going to tell me more about your family?" Eden pressed.

Creighton could feel the sweat forming on his brow. He knew that if he spoke of them, if he said even one word, it would be bad. He didn't want to deal with those repercussions, what that can of worms would unleash.

"It's not even worth mentioning," Creighton finally said. "We're nothing like your family, and I am here solo, as you know, so all is well."

All was not well. Creighton knew it. Eden knew it. Hell, the stuffies in the room knew it, but neither acknowledged it.

Eden was about to leave when Creighton's phone went off, the specific sound he had set for the app and his Daddy ringing through the quiet space. Eden watched as Creighton looked over to the device and a smile bloomed instantly on his face.

Leaning across the desk, Eden tried to look at the screen. Creighton had to push the phone against his chest to stop the other man.

"What are you doing?" he asked him.

Eden laughed, leaning further over the desk, his hands stretching to grab the phone. "I want to know what made you smile. That was so cute. Give me, give me! I want to see who it is and thank them."

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"You will not," Creighton said, locking his phone in an instant and shoving it into his back pocket. He crossed his arms and stared at Eden. "I do not need you intervening in anything."

"It's a Daddy, isn't it?" Eden whispered.

Creighton was about to deny it when Eden's eyes lit up.

"Oh yes, it is. I can sense it."

"Crap."

He'd forgotten all about Eden's ability to read his emotions. Given how little they saw each other in person, it was no wonder he didn't remember. But now Eden knew what he'd been keeping to himself, and when Eden knew a secret, Eden became more nosy than usual.

"I won't talk with you about this. It's super personal, and I still can't make heads or tails of it."

"But you'll tell me when you do know," Eden said, drawing the words out slowly. "Because I am a great friend and supporter and as a Little myself, I might know a thing or two about luring a Daddy in."

Creighton's brows rose. Eden wasn't mated, and he had no Daddy that he played with regularly. So his words didn't make much sense. It didn't make any sense, really. Creighton wouldn't argue it though because Eden was a world-class arguer. Instead, he smiled and nodded, letting things go.

"Well, if you don't mind, I'm going to get back to work. I now have two new orders to finish." Creighton waved the pictures of the dragons at Eden, who stared at them longingly for a moment before shaking off whatever had come over him.

He gave a bright, blinding, and totally unbelievable smile to Creighton, then waved and skipped out of the store with his bag in hand.

Creighton sat there for another long moment, not quite sure what to make of the entire interaction. Something was going on with Eden Saint, and he had no idea what it was or how it was going to change things.

Was the horde ready for Eden to find his mate? And what would happen once he did?

Romilly's mating had changed things already. Another Saint going down that road would be interesting to watch pan out.

Creighton examined the photos again after his mind let go of the thoughts of Eden. He went over each dragon inch by inch, noting where anything specific was. He estimated how much fabric he would need and any other resources he might want to get to make these dragons perfect. With how Eden had looked at the photos, he knew that they were special.

Whoever they were and whatever they were to Eden, it would behoove him to make sure nothing was amiss.

Once he had his list of needed supplies, he grabbed the photos and the list, stuffed them in his bag, and closed his shop early. He would need to find the fabric necessary to complete the projects. Thankfully, he was on track with his other orders and didn't have anything pressing.

It was a decent walk to the fabric store across town in San Noctis. Given most of the area was wooded, he took a few shortcuts here and there, diving into the trees and back out with his quick speed. Vampires were fast — incredibly fast — which meant the trip itself was short even though the journey was long. It also meant that he wouldn't be in the woods with anyone who might want to harm him for any extended period of time.

He could outrun any shifter that came after him. A good thing, since he wouldn't have smelled them on their approach with his blockers in place.

The minute he walked into the fabric store, he was greeted by the workers. They knew him well and since he was one of their biggest customers, he got preferential treatment.

"What are you in for today?" the sales associate asked as they came up.

"I need some specific fabric colors. One a shimmery silver and the other a blood red. It's for a special project."

For a moment, Creighton considered showing the pictures to the other person. Then he remembered that these were based on real dragons that lived in San Noctis, and he didn't want to risk outing Eden or the order itself.

It wouldn't take much for someone to piece together who ordered it and where it was going. Then he'd be liable for Eden's secrets — them being exposed and the potential backlash that could be faced if these people found out. In reality, he probably should not have been making the stuffies at all.

But Eden was a friend, and the way he looked at the images made Creighton feel okay about it. No one made that type of face for something they hated. It wasn't like he was creating voodoo dolls or something. There was admiration there, and longing.

The clerk led Creighton over to the first batch of fabric. The silver was an easy match. The first few he picked up were rough, but the fourth was absolutely perfect. He didn't even need to pull the photo out to know. It was unique enough that he could sense it.

Creighton was then led to another section where the red was supposed to be. Instead of finding a perfect match like he had hoped, he was left astounded. "There's barely any red fabric here," he said, pointing to the pitiful shelves.

The clerk grabbed the back of his neck. "Not a lot of people ask for anything red these days. You know we have a low vampire population."

He did know. Part of the reason he moved to San Noctis was because they didn't have many vampires. In fact, he might have been the only one. He didn't see anyone else. And anytime he ordered at the coffee shop, it seemed as if they didn't use blood often enough to have it stockpiled like the other ingredients.

Creighton shook his head, pushing away the thoughts. "Do you have any other reds? Because this isn't going to work."

The sales associate looked out of the front store windows. Creighton knew they weren't ignoring him. More like they were probably cataloguing whatever inventory was in back so they could answer his question properly. He appreciated that, especially when the man blinked a few times and then turned back to him and said, "Actually, I might. Give me just a second."

He left Creighton standing there in the store and went through the back double doors. For a moment, Creighton stared at them, sending all the goodwill he could towards the worker in hopes that he would return with what Creighton needed.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, when he returned, he had a bundle of fabric in hand that Creighton immediately knew was it.

"Yes," he said. "This is perfect."

"Good," the other man said, "because I had to climb all the way to the tippy-top to get it."

"The tippy-top?" Creighton asked incredulously, since the store wasn't all that high.

"The shop is run by someone with magical powers. So the back is a bit of a warehouse situation where things are up really high sometimes, especially if they're not used often."

Creighton nodded in understanding. It would make sense for a store like this to have reserves and not have them easily accessible, especially for something they didn't use often. He pushed away his questioning stare in order to thank the man properly and pay for his fabrics.

He had one more store to head to before he could go back to his shop and get his work done. He'd be pulling some pretty long nights until Eden's gifts were ready.

The minute he was back outside, he felt a shift in the air. Like something was hovering nearby, or a change in the atmosphere. He chalked it up to being inside for too long. The journey back to his store was nerve-wracking. Every street he took felt like more and more eyes were on him. He cursed his inability to smell, because had he been able to pick up scents, he would

know if there was more than one person or if he was simply having a moment of paranoia.

Maybe thinking about Eden's two dragons and the potential conflict it was going to cause had him in a state of unnecessary duress. By the time he made it back to his shop, Creighton's nerves were shot. He didn't want to be alone, but he also didn't want to try and go somewhere with people. That was exhausting even just as a thought.

He took a moment to gather himself, then sat down at his station to get started. He didn't have much time, and quite frankly, this was going to be a tedious job, the time constraint making it all the more important he get it done.

Why did Eden need these two dragons before the council vote, and was he going to regret taking on this job?

Time would tell.

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CHAPTER 5

THALRIC

MEETING his nephew again for the first time with his mate was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Thalric had been looking forward to the exchange, yet it seemed the universe was determined to make things complicated.

Every single instance in which he tried to get time with the pair was met with an obstacle. Either they were busy spending time together and bonding, or they were in a different meeting with council members discussing options.

Meetings that, by all rights, Thalric should have been a part of, except Mira, his dear, sweet, wonderful sister, had become obsessed with spending time with him. She had forsaken a lot of her duties as queen in order to gather him up, sometimes with Silas. Other times with one of the kids, they would go round and round doing everything they used to do in their childhood like playing hide-and-seek or baking together in the kitchen.

He found himself a big brother again. He didn't mind, obviously. He loved his sister.

But he *had* come with a purpose. He'd come for assistance and answers. The more time he spent distracted, the less likely it would be for him to truly be active in the situation at hand.

The whole reason he came meant, of course, that the first time he met Romilly and Archer, it was because of a meeting. He'd finally told Mira that

he needed to learn more about the council's wishes, and he couldn't do that if they were bonding. She'd pouted for a moment, but with help from Silas — who had come to fetch Thalric for the meeting — they convinced her that she could spend more time with him later.

It was a compromise that they were very happy to make. If only she would let him go.

On the way to the meeting, the tension between Silas and Thalric was palpable. "What has you all ruffled?" Thalric asked.

"It's nothing that you've done. Sorry if I made it seem that way. I'm concerned about the children. Maybe you could help."

Silas paused in the hallway. His hands went to his hips as he met Thalric's gaze head-on. "I'm worried about my children. Not Romilly, of course. He has his mate and is balanced. He's coming into more power every day. But Soren, Hadrian, and Eden are all still unmated and seem to be diverging in directions that I don't know how to navigate."

Thalric would have normally smirked at the words. What parent didn't want to micromanage their children? He may not have been a father, but he was an uncle, and he knew that the urge to step in was hard-fought. Besides, who was he to judge his brother-in-law for what he wanted in regard to his children?

"I think that everything is going to be fine, and I believe you know that as well. Fate will give them their mates when it is time and she deems it so. Until then, you can just be a guide for them. Be the support they need. Show them love and peace and all the other fancy words that they tell parents. Be open to them and all will balance out."

Silas took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're right. There's something in the air, something that's building and brewing. and I can't put my finger on what. I know it involves one of my children, but I'm lost." He adjusted his coat. "I just feel like something is coming."

Thalric smiled, his voice turning teasing. "You said someone in the family. It could be anyone. Me or one of the other siblings Mira and I share."

Silas squinted at him. "Do you know something? Is that why you look all cheeky right now?"

Thalric mimed zipping his lips. "I know nothing. I was simply making a point that your words were vague enough to be interpreted any which way."

They turned their focus back to the meeting they needed to get to. The council wouldn't start without them, but it was best to be there and get whatever was going on over with.

Inside the chambers, Thalric got his first glimpse of Archer, the human mate. What he saw made him smile. He was precious. The cutest little button of a man. Perfect for Romilly. It was no wonder fate had put them together. He didn't wait for Silas to introduce them. He confidently strode across the space, eating up the distance until he was right in front of Romilly. He would have pulled the other man into his arms and hugged him as he had the rest of the family, but this was the king of the hordes, after all. The one in charge of it all.

Romilly smiled at him, and it took Thalric by surprise to realize his nephew was as tall as he was. "You've grown," was the first thing he said.

"You haven't," Romilly joked back.

They shared a laugh and then embraced. It was a quick, brief hug since it would do no good for the king to get all emotional right before an important meeting. When they pulled apart, Romilly placed his hand on Archer's back. "This is my mate, Archer. Archer, this is my uncle, Thalric. He lives in one of the far-off hordes and has been managing it for a number of years, and if we have it our way, he'll be moving back here after all is settled with the council."

Archer waved, and Thalric's heart warmed at the cute Little movement. "Hey there, darling. You sure are precious — perfect for my nephew. I want to say welcome to the family since I wasn't here to say it before, and I want you to know that if you have any problems with any of these knuckleheads, you just let me know. I will take care of them. It's my uncle duty to do so."

Archer giggled. "They've already gotten me into trouble."

His voice was light and airy, yet further proof of his match to Romilly's deeper tone. For a moment Thalric was jealous, deeply so, but he pushed it away. He didn't want his scent to give off anything, and he also didn't think it benefited him in any way to say anything.

He was happy for his nephew. Overjoyed that the man had found someone to love to the end of his days, someone to spend his life with and maybe one day grow a family with. Human or not, he was perfect. Thalric didn't believe in all that no-interspecies mess some people toed. You loved who you loved and whatever they were fit.

His Little Biter wasn't human, yet he wasn't a dragon, and he still cared for them. Then again, he didn't know what his Little Biter was. He suspected vampire given the name, but maybe he was just someone with an oral attachment to chewing on things.

He brought himself back into the conversation. Archer and Romilly were discussing the ways that Hadrian and Eden had been getting into trouble.

Thalric interrupted them. "And Soren doesn't do any of this?"

Romilly shook his head. "You know Soren has always been much more serious about things. They are very focused, and I don't foresee that changing anytime soon."

"Not even if they get a mate?" Thalric teased.

Romilly's brow dipped, and Archer pointedly looked away. *Hmm, that was interesting.* "Soren has no mate, and I won't speculate on whether or not they will have one anytime soon. It's their decision and their heart." Thalric noted how diplomatic it sounded. His dragon grumbled agreement, and he turned his focus to the rest of the room.

The council members were watching them, very obviously so. He greeted the ones he knew through his years of growing up with the council in place, and the ones he had not met in person but had corresponded with were also welcoming.

"Shall we convene?" Romilly asked the group as a whole.

Chairs were brought out for Silas, Thalric, and a few other elders within the horde as the council members took their seats. Thalric watched closely as Archer had not been given a chair, and Romilly had not let go of his mate's hand. When the king sat upon his throne, he tugged Archer down into his lap. Thalric had to blink a few times to make sure what he was seeing was real. When he looked over at Silas, the former king just shrugged.

"It's what they want."

Huh, he thought — it's what they want, and they get to have it. Could he have what he wanted? Being mated to his Little Biter was what he wanted. He also wanted to be his authentic self all the time. Not the mask he put on for everyone else.

Speaking of which, he hadn't dialed up the charm when he walked into the council room. His focus had been too much on Romilly and Archer. He had wanted to grasp the moment for what it was since they had slid past each other multiple times, like two ships crossing in the night, and he had really wanted to set down anchor and block their path so that they could meet.

With that accomplished and conversations starting about what they would do to replace the council seat, he found himself at peace. He hadn't pretended to be anyone else. Hadn't thrown out all the posturing he normally did, and people accepted him.

In fact, they seemed more open to the idea of him contributing because of it. Had he been shooting himself in the foot this whole time? Was he holding onto old notions based on previous experiences?

It was something he would have to think about more in-depth. For the time being, he'd continue on without the fanfare. Life was much easier that way.

"I suggest that we hold an election as planned. Candidates can come forward — no more than five — and the horde will split their votes between them," one of the council members said.

"I think that splits the vote up too much," another chimed in.

Romilly didn't say a word. He had his arm around Archer, banding the young man to his lap. Looking closely, Thalric could see his thumb stroking

against the young man's ribs. It looked to be a soothing measure. Whether it was for Romilly or Archer was their business.

"What do you think, Thalric?" Silas said, breaking his concentration.

"About the fact that you want to introduce five candidates — I think it's a bit much. Three could really do it. Five lends more possibility to a tie, and what if you don't have five people that are qualified and you have to fill those spots anyway?"

"I'm sure we have qualified people," one of the council members said, their voice full of disinterest in Thalric's opinion. At least that's how he perceived it.

"I'm sure you do, councilman." He didn't wait for the man to fill in his name. "However, it is best to prepare ahead of time. Three people — three solid, most-likely-to-handle-the-job-well candidates being brought before the horde and voted on makes sense. If there is a tie and you have a runoff, you take it down to two and go from there. I really truly think you'll find your winner that way."

The group murmured as if to agree with him. Even the council member who'd been reluctant nodded along.

"Then who will the candidates be?"

The room erupted into chaos, voices speaking over one another. The volume rose quickly as people not only rejoiced at the options but also questioned the motives of some. It took Romilly whistling and his dragon coming forward for it to stop.

Thalric's dragon came out in response, happy to see a family member. The magic in the air also danced, and to Thalric's surprise, he saw it hovering around Archer. Yet another mystery he didn't have answers to. He was told that Archer was human, but if he had magic running through his veins, maybe he wasn't so human after all.

Or maybe it was the castle protecting Archer from all the *big, bad dragons* in the room.

"The candidates could nominate themselves and the council can whittle it down to three. How does that sound?"

Everyone pondered it for a few moments. It looked as if they were about to come to an agreement when Soren entered the room. Their gaze met each person individually, as if challenging them to question why they were there.

"You have something for us?" Romilly asked. The smirk he wore said he was happy to see Soren but also that he truly hoped his sibling had something of use for them.

"Because of this meeting and knowing what would happen — you all arguing relentlessly — I took it upon myself to poll the people of the horde and ask them who they think should run."

"We hadn't even discussed it," one of the men said.

"You've discussed it now," Soren replied, unbothered by the challenge.

Romilly waved his hand at his sibling. "Tell us what you found. Do you have candidates that would fit?"

Soren stepped forward, extending the papers to Archer since Romilly was further back. When Archer turned the pages to his mate, Romilly's eyes widened. The siblings shared a look, and Thalric got the distinct impression that there was a lot more to the list in Romilly's hands than they were letting on.

The rest of the room had to know too, but they would not be able to inquire about it. It paid to be family, because he was going to get the answers. He couldn't not know. He hated secrets.

He almost laughed at himself, because he was keeping plenty of secrets. He should probably say instead that he loved gossip — and gossiping about family was enticing.

"Are there three candidates listed?" one of the only women on the council asked. Thalric remembered her from his youth. She was a very strong-willed dragon. She took no one's shit, and she was still very beautiful, despite what he knew had to be centuries of age showing.

"There are," Romilly stated slowly. He then listed off each name while the council and family listened intently. When he finished, there was silence for a solid minute. Then voices began to rise again, as if they had not been told to calm down mere moments before.

Whoever these people were, they were causing a fuss. He knew if the council felt this way, it was likely others did too. Maybe he needed to stay a while longer — or was he just making up excuses? He pushed the thought away, instead looking to Silas to see how he felt on the matter.

The former king hadn't spoken up. Instead, his eyes were on Soren and Romilly, where they were sharing some kind of silent conversation. Thalric had no doubt that Romilly was mind-linked to his sibling. That type of bond from the king meant he could speak to everyone at once or to individuals, and since Thalric heard nothing in his head and Silas did not appear to either, he knew it was a one-to-one conversation.

The spell was broken a few moments later when a shout echoed from down the hall. All eyes turned to the cracked doorway Soren had come from. They waited, and waited, and then waited some more, but nothing else happened.

Had someone made noise just to distract them? And if so, who was it and why?

"As it stands, these will be the candidates. My sibling has gone through the effort and work of talking to the people for us, and it saved the headache of having to take multiple votes. We know people don't want to show up for these things — they have to miss work and family time. I'd rather get it out of the way as quickly as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the group chorused before filing out of the space.

Silas, Romilly, Archer, and Thalric were the only ones left. Soren had also slipped out, taking the pages with them. That was interesting, Thalric noted, standing up and moving over to where Romilly and Archer sat.

"Is it always this tedious and thrilling?"

Archer laughed and tucked his head into Romilly's chest. Romilly stroked his mate's hair and shook his head. "No, not typically. There's always some

drama, but this is an extraordinary circumstance. I'm sure you heard what happened with Nicholas."

"I did," Thalric responded. "Well, he's rotting away in a cell these days. The council is happy to not have him here — he manipulated a lot of them — but they're also hesitant to make the wrong choice because they fear being in the same position as him."

Thalric crossed his arms. "How could they be in the same position as him unless they commit treason and try to kill your mate? It's really quite simple — if they behave, they live; if they don't, they suffer."

Romilly smiled up at his uncle — or down at his uncle. "I'm glad to see that you're on the same page as me. It will do great when I bring you on to my advisory team."

Thalric shook his head and laughed. "You Saints are relentless. I have been told by more than one of you that I'm staying, and I have yet to agree to a single thing. Your mother, my dear sister, has already made a room that looks like the one I had back in the horde."

"Back in the horde." Romilly was still smiling, and Thalric couldn't quite figure out why. Silas was chuckling beside him, his hand over his mouth.

Thalric looked at Archer. "Do you know what these two are going on about?"

Archer nodded rapidly. "You said 'the horde,' not 'my horde,' which means you don't claim them. Daddy always says 'my horde.'"

Archer quickly threw a hand over his mouth, his eyes going wide.

Everything in the room froze, and static filled Thalric's ears at the title. It was one he longed to hear from his own mate, and knowing that Romilly and Archer had that type of connection had him envious beyond all measure. It made him happy for the pair, of course, but also fully aware of what he was lacking.

"No need to apologize, little one," Romilly said. "I have a feeling my uncle also wants a Little of his own."

Archer's hand fell away as his jaw dropped open and he looked Thalric over.

In response, Thalric eased his arms to his sides, making himself as unthreatening as possible. "He's right. Just as my nephew has a little one, I would love a darling boy all my own."

You have a darling boy all your own, he told himself. No need to discuss that with family though. Not with the complication of the scent from his fated mate and the Little Biter situation.

"When you find yours, can we be friends?" Archer said, completely oblivious to the inner turmoil Thalric was going through.

He chuckled softly. "Yes, of course."

Archer clapped, then burrowed into Romilly's chest. Romilly wrapped one hand under Archer's knees and placed the other behind his back and stood. "I believe my mate is tired. We're going to go take a nap, and we'll see you both at dinner."

"It was nice to see you again, Romilly, and very lovely to meet you, Archer," Thalric said before they were able to leave.

Archer turned slightly and stuck his hand out, waving it. His other thumb was in his mouth, and Thalric admired the sweet boy, happy that his nephew had a person who fit his every need, his every desire.

After the two left, Silas gripped the back of Thalric's neck. "You will find yours one day. Don't reflect on the negative or be sad that it hasn't come. Fate does not make mistakes, and she will lead you in the direction you need to go."

Thalric wanted to agree with him. If it had been three years ago, he would have. But since finding his Little Biter and falling in love, he questioned fate often. At one point he thought maybe his Little Biter could be his fated mate.

Maybe this was the method in which they would meet and grow together, then fall in love and live happily ever after.

But as more time went on and they hadn't seen each other in person, his belief in that became less and less. And now, here in San Noctis, having picked up the scent of his mate in person, he felt hopeless. Like there was no possible chance of his dream coming true.

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CHAPTER 6

CREIGHTON

EVER SINCE CREIGHTON sent the picture of his knit blanket, he'd felt more connected with his online pen pal. The hesitancy he felt before over whether or not to call the other man "Daddy" and indulge in his Little side too much had faded. It was as if he only needed to be a little vulnerable to see if the other man reacted well. Once he had, Creighton could be more himself than ever.

He'd taken to sending messages more often, sometimes initiating before his Daddy ever had the chance to. He still got his good morning and good night texts, of course, and his Daddy would see to it that he ate and drank properly throughout the day. And more than that, he got to speak his mind about things. Life and the weather, whether he saw a future with children, what he wanted to be doing in five and ten years, what he wanted to be doing in a century.

They were supernaturals after all.

Every conversation held a bit of magic to it, and Creighton could feel himself falling in love with this man he had never met. A man who hadn't seen him, who didn't know who he was or what secrets he held.

Since leaving the vampire compound he grew up in, Creighton had been a loner. It was intentional. He didn't want anyone to find him from his past. And the more vampires he came in contact with, the higher the likelihood of it happening.

He found it easier to live amongst the dragons. They were kind to him, never once judging his lack of reaction to their emotions or making him feel like he was an outcast.

Creighton was finishing the final touches on Eden's dragon stuffy when a customer walked into the store. Out of habit, he glanced up and smiled at the man. The customer was tall and broad-shouldered like most dragons. His eyes were bright too. Not glowing as if his dragon were coming to the surface, but very obviously his creature was playing a part in whatever he'd come in for.

"How can I help you?" Creighton asked softly, setting the dragon off to the side. Eden was going to be thrilled that he had beaten the deadline. It helped that Creighton was eager to get the project done so he could focus more on his Daddy and showing off his collection of Gnomes.

He had a plan. He would make the Gnomes part of the conversation in cute ways. It would alleviate more of the distance between them. At least he hoped it did.

The man in his shop glanced around for a moment before locking eyes with Creighton. It would have sent a chill down Creighton's spine had it not been for the gentle smile the other man offered.

"Hi, I'm here because my dragon said I should be." The way he said it, as if it were a question, made Creighton giggle. The man laughed in return, and the tension broke.

"Does your dragon have anything else to say about why you're here? I, as you can see, make stuffed animals for people. Do you have a child or loved one who would be interested?"

The man scratched the back of his neck and blushed. With the pale tone of his skin, it made his reaction all the more obvious. If his body language hadn't told Creighton there was something about what he said that made the man uncomfortable, then that definitely did.

"I'm so sorry," he started, only for the man to hold a hand up and stop him. He stepped closer into the store, lessening the distance between them. "It's not you. I'm not used to telling other people what I have going on." The

man paused to look around. "Do you have some type of secret-keeping method? Are you like a doctor where I can tell you things and you don't share them with others?"

Creighton tilted his head. "Yes, I don't have people I could tell, but sure — share what you're thinking. Maybe I can help."

The man took a deep breath. "I'm a Daddy, and I think my dragon wants me to buy something for my future boy."

Creighton blinked, because he didn't really know what to say to that. The man continued on, not paying him any mind.

"I haven't even met anyone. There's no special person in my life that would fit this, and I don't have a fated mate. It's like my dragon knows something it doesn't want to share with me. It's confusing." The man ran a hand along his jaw. The day's worth of scruff there, and the bags under his eyes as he moved even closer to Creighton's work desk, made Creighton feel a sense of empathy towards him.

Whatever he was going through, whatever his dragon was dragging him through, was interrupting his life, making him not sleep well, and it was showing.

"I'm sorry that it's difficult for you. I have a lot of Daddies who shop with me, though most do it online. Do you want something kind of generic? Maybe that would make your future Little happy."

The man's gaze wandered around the room again, then turned back to Creighton. In an instant, his eyes snapped over to the dragon Creighton had been working on.

"What is this?" the man questioned, stepping closer.

Creighton snatched up the dragon and moved it away. "It's for a client," he said boldly. His insides shook as fear lanced through him. He didn't need to go up against a dragon, and he couldn't tell if the man was going to be angry with him. He'd have to wait for a physical sign.

The man shook his head, and his brows knit as he stared at the dragon in Creighton's arms. "I understand what you're saying, but I think I should

know who ordered that."

Creighton moved the dragon behind him so that the man would no longer stare at it. When their eyes met, Creighton could see that the man wasn't angry, but he did want answers. Answers Creighton couldn't give him.

"Sir, I don't know who you are or anything—" Creighton started.

"My name is Darius. I am part of the Beckettier family."

Creighton's entire body froze. He knew that name. Was familiar enough with it to understand they were important. What he was struggling with was the fact that this man wanted to know why Eden had ordered this dragon. It didn't make sense unless — Creighton gasped and pulled the dragon back out in front of him. He held it up, looking from it to the man.

"Is this you?" he asked, drawing the words out slowly.

The man nodded slowly. "It is, and I really want to know why someone is commissioning you to design a stuffy of my dragon. I know it's mine because of the distinct color. That and the way my wing has a certain shade different from anyone else in my family."

Creighton didn't have to look at the stuffy in his hands to know the man was right. He'd been working on it, and the shade had been a difficult task, one he was very proud of, but it seemed it had been a dead giveaway. Creighton cleared his throat as he eased the dragon back down towards the desk. He didn't think the man would take it, especially since he wanted answers.

Creighton clasped his hands together in front of him, trying to prevent the man from seeing them shake. "As much as I would like to tell you who it is, I can't. Just as you asked for privacy, I also allow that for my clients. The person who asked for this presented me with a photo, and that's really all I can say."

The man cursed softly and turned away from Creighton. He paced the length of the store, his eyes glowing, flickering back and forth between his human and dragon self. When he finally stopped, there was enough distance between them that Creighton felt safe about the situation. He didn't think he would be hurt.

While vampires could heal, he never liked risking what would happen to his blockers and their effectiveness. Being overloaded was miserable.

"I will respect your policy. You protecting what I have told you is just as important as this person also being protected. I do ask one thing, though."

Creighton tilted his head and eased back down into his seat. He jumped up when the man came closer, not wanting to be in a lower position before him.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

"I would like to send a message with your order, if at all possible. Just a note letting them know I would be interested in meeting them. If they're so interested in my dragon, maybe they'd like to see him in person."

Creighton hesitated. It didn't seem like too bad of an idea. Maybe Eden would find it sweet. Or maybe it could cause an international incident with the royal family. He didn't know what to do, but he could at least take the note. He would think on it, and in the day or so he had left to finish the project, he would come to a final decision.

Creighton cleared his throat. "I will allow you to write a note. I really need to think it over on whether or not I'll give it to this person. I'm not sure what your intentions are, or really what theirs entail, but I can hold on to it and maybe I will feel like giving it to them when I see them again."

The man gave Creighton a gentle smile. "Do you have a pen and paper I can use?"

After pulling open his desk drawer and handing the man the sheet, Creighton picked up the dragon and went back to working on it. He was in the hand-sewing stage, piecing it all together bit by bit. The man took a while.

From the corner of his eye, Creighton could see him write a little bit and then stop, add another sentence or two and pause again. By the time he finished, Creighton was almost done with the dragon. He'd picked up speed knowing that the man was there and wondering what to do. The more his mind whirled, the faster his hands moved.

When the man handed him the folded piece of paper, Creighton took it along with the pen. "I'll put this in the envelope right now," he said, then did just that. Once it was sealed, he turned the envelope over. Creighton almost wrote Eden's name on it but stopped himself.

The man chuckled and snapped his fingers good-naturedly. "Almost. I'm glad you caught yourself for the sake of their privacy, but me and my dragon are a bit disappointed we didn't get lucky."

Creighton shook his head, though he was smiling. "It's going to work out," he told the man. "You and this person will probably meet at some point. I don't know when, but hopefully soon. Maybe you're meant to be, or something. Anything."

The man hummed. "Or maybe they're my fated mate."

Creighton had thought of that. He considered whether Eden knew the man before him was his mate, and that's why he was getting the stuffy. Or maybe Eden simply had a crush.

It had to be tough being a royal and dating. You couldn't just go out like anyone else. And being on an app, like the one Creighton used, was risky too. Even if you made a connection, meeting up with that person could lead to disaster.

Creighton pushed the thoughts away as he told the man he would consider the letter offer once more and tucked the envelope away.

Before he left, the man looked around the space. "I would ask if there's anything I could get the person you're making that for, but I feel as if them requesting my dragon is enough for now. Maybe I'll stop by in a few days. Will you have sent it by then?"

"I will have sent the dragon, yes. The note is to be decided," Creighton said matter-of-factly.

"Thank you," the man told him before opening the door and leaving.

Creighton watched through his shop windows as the man turned and moved down the sidewalk. Once he was out of sight, Creighton slumped in his

chair, exhausted. What in the world just happened, and how was he going to explain this to Eden?

He suspected a courier was going to come pick up the package, not Eden himself, which meant he had to either try and relay this by phone, get the package to the courier along with the letter and hope the courier didn't read it, or make a trek to the castle himself.

Creighton had never considered that as an option, partly because he was a vampire — which wasn't always welcome in places like that — and also because he didn't need to be around anyone royal who might recognize him from his previous life.

He'd hoped it had been long enough that no one cared any longer. Maybe they'd all moved on, and he was simply a folk tale.

His phone pinged, and he looked down to see a message from his Daddy.

What are you up to, Little Biter? You've been quieter today.

Creighton smiled at his phone, ignoring the looming decision over the letter and what it meant for himself, Eden, and the man who'd come into the shop. He began typing back.

I have been busy working, Daddy. I had a big project that was on a tight deadline.

I see. It's the one you've been doing every night while we've chatted.

Creighton sent back a smiling emoji.

Yes, Daddy. That's the one.

Do I get to see this project? Are you able to share anything?

Creighton bit his lip. He probably shouldn't share the dragon with his Daddy. That would be breaking confidentiality, right?

Except his Daddy didn't live in San Noctis, and it was likely he didn't know these dragons. It wouldn't do anything, right? He thought about it for a moment longer before deciding it would be okay.

"I guess I'm doing this," Creighton muttered to himself as he snapped a photo of the dragon on his desk. He zoomed in close to make sure nothing in the background would give away where he was. Not that his Daddy would be able to find him, but still. He wasn't ready for that conversation.

Creighton sent the picture, then waited.

The response he got made him laugh loudly in the quiet space of his shop.

Oh my goodness. Little biter, they're gorgeous.

You create magic, baby.

I'm so honored you shared this with me. I'd love to see more of your work.

The color alone is mesmerizing.

Creighton blushed with every bit of praise given to him. His chest warmed, and he wished, not for the first time, that he and his Daddy could see each other in real life, that they could be together and cuddle and do all the things he longed to have.

But he wasn't brave enough. He didn't believe he was as talented as his Daddy said. Even with a successful business under his belt, he didn't have positive things to say about his own work like that.

Eden had told him he was far too humble, that if he could take a bit more pride in his work he would be even more successful. *"You could do world domination, stuffy style,"* Eden had said in those exact words.

Creighton didn't take anything Eden said like that to heart. He knew that the other man enjoyed his stuffies along with his other clients, but world domination via stuffies was far-fetched. And Eden had a knack for the dramatics.

Thank you, Daddy. I like them.

It was quiet for a few minutes, so he put his phone down, not knowing what else to say. He turned back to the dragon stuffy and the letter. In a few short stitches, the project would be finished. He would need to let Eden know it was ready and decide just how they were going to connect to get it to him.

Meanwhile, there was so much else going on. The man who had entered the shop, the pending dragon council vote, the unease amongst the horde, his own worries about how things would end up, and so much more. It was like his mind could memorize every single inconvenience and inconsistency and magnify it a thousand times. He shook his head and prepared to finish his project.

While he longed to talk to his Daddy more, he had no clue how to continue the conversation. He didn't want to brag about his projects, and he had no clue what his Daddy was up to.

"Oh, wait. That would be good." He sent the text.

What are you doing right now, Daddy? Keeping busy?

A reply came instantly.

It's been busy, yes. I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you. I was thinking of a way to let you know that you should take compliments as they're intended. I think you don't value your work or yourself, and that won't do.

Creighton gulped, amazed that the other man could see so much when they couldn't actually see each other. Then again, he'd learned a lot about his Daddy through text over the years. They'd discussed all the basic first-date conversations. Then they'd talked about the deeper things you might share with a best friend.

There was very little he didn't know other than, of course, where his Daddy was, what type of species he was, and what he did for a living.

Oh, and of course, his real name. Though "Daddy" was the perfect title, knowing someone's real name gave it a bit more formality.

Creighton bit his lip and stared at the phone.

I'll try to work on it, I guess.

Oh, you absolutely will, Little Biter. I'm going to make sure of it. Together, we will show you how to embrace your skill in a way that shows pride. Humility is great, but sometimes you need to stand up for yourself.

Creighton sighed, leaning back in his chair as he stared at the device in his hand. How in the world was his Daddy going to manage this? And what did that mean he had to do? The unknown was very scary, and Creighton wasn't sure he liked it much.

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CHAPTER 7

THALRIC

THALRIC FROWNED DOWN at his screen. He didn't like the way his boy spoke about himself, about his work. He could tell that Little Biter wasn't confident in the beautiful creations he'd made. Those were the types of things that people paid really good money for. Things that Boys and Littles everywhere would love to receive. He understood his boy was shy.

That had been proven time and time again through the months. He'd had to pry most of the facts he knew about his Little Biter out of the boy in some way or another. But this was very different.

When he'd made the promise to get his boy to understand how to be proud of his work without being an asshole, he had been speaking on the fly with no true direction of where it was going to go. And now he had to deliver.

"What are you frowning about, Uncle T?" Eden said from where he'd dropped down beside the other man.

"I just have a friend who's not really confident in themselves. I want to help them get better about it, but I'm not quite sure how to do that."

Eden chuckled. "Yeah, I know someone like that too. It's very frustrating. I tell him all the time, you have a great skill and you're not making the most of it. But does he listen to me? Nope, not one bit. I can't complain too much though, considering his lack of trying harder to be famous means that I get to keep him to myself."

Thalric hummed, thinking of what it would mean to have his Little Biter all to himself.

Eden took a big sniff and groaned. "Come on, old man, we're supposed to be having playtime, not thinking about naughty bits time. You can do that somewhere else, not in my playroom."

Thalric pushed down all the thoughts he had of his Little Biter and instead focused on his nephew. Eden being Little made sense to anyone who came into contact with him. The moment Thalric had seen the playroom, he'd known for sure that it was Eden's doing. Every bit of it screamed the reflection of his nephew's outstanding personality.

"Ah, that's right. Where were we?"

"We were about to save the prince in the castle."

Thalric focused on Eden and the game. Keeping himself preoccupied would do him some good. Later, he could formulate a specific plan to get his Little Biter to understand just how skilled he was.

They'd been playing for a little while when a text came through on Eden's phone. The Little yanked it off the shelf where it had been sitting and pulled the device up close.

"Were you expecting someone?" Thalric asked. They'd been deep in their game, and for Eden to jump like that must have meant it was someone important.

Eden read whatever was on the screen, then squealed and did a little happy shuffle. "It's ready, it's ready. I can't believe it's ready," he sang.

Thalric put the toy in his hand down and faced his nephew. "What's ready? You sure are happy about it."

Eden looked from his phone to his uncle, biting his lip.

"Whatever you tell me will remain a secret, I promise. Unless it's something that's going to hurt you — of course, I won't allow that to continue."

Eden rolled his eyes. "It's not going to hurt me. Far from it."

He turned the screen around to reveal a stuffed dragon. A stuffed dragon that looked oddly similar to one he'd seen earlier that day. One that his Little Biter had put together.

"Where did you get this from?" Thalric asked his nephew, working hard to keep his voice even. There must have still been some type of accusation in it because Eden pulled his phone back and held it close to his chest.

"I didn't say. It's my secret, my friend. Why do you want to know?"

Thalric had to fight with his dragon to not push further with his nephew. It wasn't Eden's fault that he was reacting the way he was. It could be a coincidence. Purely a random connection. Just because it was similar didn't mean that his Little Biter and the person who made this were the same.

"I was asking because I know someone who also makes things like that. I was shown one earlier today. It was just so similar I couldn't believe it. I had to know if it was a small-world moment or if I was imagining it."

Eden paused, staring at his uncle with a sort of curious intensity. "I don't know if I should tell you. You still look a little dazed."

Thalric paused for a moment, weighing out what he should and shouldn't say to his nephew. Eden wasn't the best at keeping secrets, but it seemed he might have had some of his own. If Thalric was reading the situation right, Eden had a reason for getting these dragons, and it wasn't anything he wanted getting out.

Thalric sat down, letting his body go lax and his muscles loosen. He rolled his shoulders, clearing away the tension. "I met someone online years ago. We have kept in touch, but it has never gone past anything but texts. I've never even heard their voice."

Eden sat with eyes wide, watching his uncle.

"They are the one I was just talking about. The one I worry doesn't have enough confidence in what they do. They sent me a picture today of a dragon with features and stitchwork like the one in your photo. If you knew who it was, then I thought for a second maybe it was fate's way of bringing us together. It could be the perfect timing for it all to pan out. I don't know. Maybe I'm just a fool."

Eden shook his head quickly. "You're not a fool, Uncle T. It could totally be fate. What if you're the next Saint meant to fall in love? I mean, I totally thought it was going to be me, but things change."

Thalric snorted at the incredulous way his nephew spoke. "You were convinced fate had you next in line?"

Eden shrugged. "I mean, I was going to help her along, you know. Maybe she needed it."

Thalric smiled, grateful that his nephew was such a fun person to be around. He could have been with anyone else when this conversation happened and might have felt wrong for expressing himself or judged. Instead, Eden agreed with him and saw the potential.

Of course, Eden didn't know that Thalric had already caught the scent of his fated mate. "You don't have to tell me anything for sure, Eden. But does the person you know live here in San Noctis?"

Eden nodded slowly. "They do. Why do you ask?"

Well, it was now or never. "Because the other day I was in town, and I caught a scent. That scent drew my attention, and I ended up following it to the local coffee shop. I don't know anything past that because they'd already left. But if my guess is correct, then the person whose scent I caught is someone important."

"Actually, your fated mate," Eden finished, his voice breathy and full of wonder. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe this is happening. That it's really happening. And I get to be the one to put the pieces together to figure it all out." Eden's voice rose with each word. Thalric could see the wheels in his nephew's head turning a million miles an hour.

"I can't say that your friend and the person I caught a hint of at the coffee shop are the same. But it's possible, of course. And if they happen to be my Little Biter—" Thalric didn't catch himself in time.

Eden froze at the nickname. "Did you say Little Biter?"

Thalric hummed noncommittally, but there was no taking it back.

"Oh, this is perfect. It's actually real and happening. And I have zero doubt that your Little Biter and my friend who makes my stuffies and the person you smelled are actually the same." Eden fanned his face, acting as if he had done some type of strenuous workout.

Thalric couldn't help but laugh. "Why are you so worked up about this?"

"I just — I love love, you know? And seeing my friend happy is going to be wonderful. And if he becomes part of the family, then maybe you'll actually stay in San Noctis, because if you take him away from me and he can no longer make my stuffies, I'm going to murder you." The sweet tone Eden had been using faded as the threats arose.

Thalric's brows rose. "Is that so? He means that much to you?"

"Well, yeah, but he's really shy, and I've wanted to be better friends with him, but he basically goes to his shop and goes home. I don't know. It's complicated."

"It sounds like it," Thalric noted. "Now then, how are we going to arrange a way for me to meet this friend? Because personally, if he is the man I've been talking to, I need to meet him as soon as possible."

Eden hummed, tapping his chin with his finger. "I mean, he did just tell me that my order was ready. So maybe I could convince him to bring it to me instead of sending someone to get it. That way he could be here, and you could catch his scent, and I can introduce you, and then you can follow up from there." He nodded to himself. "Yep, I think that'll work great."

Thalric shook his head. "I don't know that that's exactly how it will go. There are a lot of factors involved here."

"Factors schmackers. At the end of the day, we've got to believe, you know, because I really think that this could be the thing for you. He could be your one. And I want you happy, Uncle T. More than anything."

"More than anything?" Thalric asked, eyes sparkling with glee.

"I mean, maybe not anything. I've got a couple of dragons of my own to contend with."

It wasn't the first time Thalric had heard hints that Eden had his eyes set on two men instead of one. The fact wasn't all that surprising given how rambunctious Eden could be. He needed all the people he could get — hopefully both of them Daddies. If you added another Little with him full-time, well, that could be too much for one person to handle. It was going to be a lot with Eden as it was.

"Speaking of which, have you decided on a plan? You've gone quiet on me, Nephew," Thalric said, waiting for some sign that Eden was ready to help.

Instead of responding, Eden started typing away on his phone. He stuck his tongue out, nibbling at it as his expression moved from thoughtful to curious to happy. "Okay. I sent him a text explaining that with everything going on with the council and stuff, I really, really could use his help. And if he would bring me the new dragons, I would be eternally grateful."

"And?" Thalric said.

"He already responded." Eden turned his phone around, and Thalric could see that the message said: *I can come later in the week if you're okay waiting.*

"You need to confirm when, okay? We've got a lot to figure out before then."

They would have a lot to do before his arrival. Thalric immediately went into Daddy mode, wanting to have the situation perfect for his boy. He knew his Little Biter was shy, and if Eden's words were true, then he was the same in real life. That meant he had double the obstacles ahead of him. What would his Little Biter think if he discovered that Thalric was in town, that they were in the same place for once, and that the possibility of them meeting was higher than ever? Would he take the news well or would he try to run and hide? Thalric wasn't sure. It could be either, especially since his Little Biter was secretive about himself.

A part of him wanted to ask Eden to explain more about his possible mate. He wanted to know if his suspicions about his Little Biter being a vampire were correct. He wanted to know what the other man looked like and his favorite things. If Eden really was his friend, he would know all of this, but

it would be cheating in a sense. It already was somewhat deceitful since he knew how they were connected and his Little Biter didn't.

"Uh-oh," Eden said. "You're feeling guilty."

Thalric shrugged. "I can't apologize for how I feel. I don't want him to think that this is somehow me trying to manipulate him and make things work out. I don't want him to feel forced or that I pushed his hand. He has not once mentioned meeting me, though I've thought of it a million times. I didn't feel it was right to bring up."

"Okay, but what if he never does? What if you go a century and you still don't know anything more about him than what you share online? Do you really want that to be the case?"

"Of course not," Thalric said instantly. "But I also don't want to lose him by pushing him away."

Eden crawled closer to his uncle and got up on his knees. He placed his hands on Thalric's shoulders, holding him steady. "You're never gonna know if you don't take the chance, Uncle T. Be brave. Be yourself."

"Be myself," Thalric repeated, though he phrased it like a question.

"Yeah, not the guy who performs for everyone, the one that's boasting and showing off. Be you, Uncle T. Like you are here, except not uncle-y, because that would cross some boundaries that I don't want to think about."

That made Thalric snort. He always laughed a lot when he was around Eden.

"Alright, you laughed. I consider that a handshake, so it's settled. You're gonna be brave, and I'm gonna convince my friend to be brave, and we're all gonna be in the same place, and once I know you two are not going to like explode into flames, then I'll leave you to have your private moment. I do suggest not doing anything in public spaces though, because the helpers might see, and it could get a little awkward later." Eden made an expression that Thalric instantly knew meant he was speaking from experience. "Not that I'm speaking from experience, of course, but Romilly and Archer are — yeah."

Thalric instantly knew the expression meant the newly-mated couple were happy and healthy in their relationship. He didn't think he would have the same problem, though he'd never experienced a fated mate bond. Maybe he should ask his sister. She would tell him what he wanted to know, hopefully without too many details.

"Thank you, Eden," he said. "I appreciate you helping me with all of this, because I don't know if I would have done it on my own. That or I would have gone headfirst and messed it up before it really had a chance."

Eden wrapped his arms around Thalric, hugging him tight. "Of course. I always got your back. Besides, if it all works out, I still get all the benefits. It's honestly probably more selfish than anything."

Thalric tickled Eden's sides. The young man started giggling uncontrollably as he yanked himself away, trying to escape the hold.

"Oh, selfish, huh? You're just a greedy little thing, aren't you?" Thalric continued to tickle his nephew for several minutes, letting himself simply enjoy the moment of play between them.

He could worry about meeting his Little Biter later. He could make all the plans and set everything in motion. For now, he would accept the relief that playing with his family could bring. He had missed San Noctis. He'd missed the Saint family. And maybe, if fate really had brought all of this together the way he hoped, he wouldn't have to miss them anymore.

CHAPTER 8

CREIGHTON

CREIGHTON WAS SHOCKED to find that Eden wanted him to come to the castle to deliver his order. The other man enjoyed getting out of his royal obligations often. He'd told Creighton as much when he'd come by to visit, but for some reason this time was different.

Creighton didn't mind the trip. The castle was beautiful to look at as a non-royal. Though it did bring up some not-so-fun memories of his own family. He understood that just because one set of important people were horrible didn't mean that all were.

Eden had proven that himself with how kind he'd been to Creighton. From their first meeting, Creighton knew that he was lucky to have found a kindred spirit in the other man.

But what Creighton worried about most was whether everyone would be that way towards him. Was Eden the oddball of his family? Could he find himself in the midst of some heated drama? Would they judge him for his inability to scent them?

It wasn't something he could know, and it definitely wasn't something he could ask either. Eden might not take offense, but Creighton had manners. He swore he did.

Creighton carried the boxes with the two dragons in his hands as he approached the gate to the castle. He always made sure to seal his creations.

It was partly to help prevent any outside scents from hitting them, and also the powerful spell he used would remove his own scent as well.

At least what might be detected of it anyway. It was all a precaution, one he took very seriously as part of his business. While it wasn't a problem for him with his blockers in place, he knew it could be an issue for his customers.

With Eden's request being so different, Creighton opted not to bring the letter with him. He'd keep it safe for a later time when they weren't surrounded by other people. At his shop they'd have had privacy for Eden to react to the note. Here, it might be different.

With the boxes in his hands, he didn't have the ability to knock or press a button to signal his arrival. Thankfully, there was a camera at the gate and some guards.

Upon seeing him, they let Creighton in. Their smiles were cordial, almost welcoming. Was he misreading things? Was his paranoia getting the best of him?

The driveway was long, and it was no surprise when Creighton saw a cart heading his way. When the man stopped before him, he looked Creighton over from head to toe, then spotted the boxes. "You are here to see Eden, correct?"

"Yes," Creighton answered, dipping his head and lifting the boxes slightly. The handles on them made it convenient, but they were still cumbersome given how big the animals were. "I'm here to deliver these," he added when the other man didn't speak.

"Yes, I've been made aware. Please climb onto the seat and hold your merchandise carefully. I will take it slow."

Creighton rushed over, not wanting to cause any delay, and got onto the seat as instructed. It only took a second for the man to get the cart going again. They were off and heading towards the front entryway of the castle. Creighton held the boxes tightly and glanced around at the beautiful landscape. It was something out of a fairy tale, truly. He couldn't imagine calling this place home all the time.

How did one ever decide to leave? Why would Eden want to be away from something so magnificent?

His own home, where he'd grown up, had been lavish, but it had also been dark. There was an ominous sort of presence to it that came with his vampire upbringing. They preferred to be mysterious creatures, and any time they could reinforce the stereotype of being formidable, they did.

Dark accents, eerie buildings, and flat-out rudeness were most of what he had encountered in his life.

The man who'd driven him stopped at the front and cut off the engine. "Come with me. I will show you where to go." His voice left no room for argument, so Creighton climbed off and followed behind him.

"I didn't get your name, sir," he said while trying to keep up with the pace of the young dragon. He sensed that this person was a dragon based purely on their size and stature, plus most of the people who worked in the castle were dragons. It just made sense. Eden had mentioned that a few humans also hung around, but that they were very trusted and long-standing staff members.

"My name is Dion. You don't need to know that, though. If something is necessary, one of the Saint family will call me to come help."

Creighton shook his head as he finally fell into step beside Dion. "It's not about having someone to get you. I simply think it's polite to know someone's name. How else could I greet you?"

Dion stopped. He turned to look Creighton in the eye. His stare was even more intense the second time around. "I see why Eden enjoys your company. A good heart is necessary in this world. Remember that."

Creighton shivered the moment Dion turned away. What was with all the ominous chit-chat? He needed to get to Eden and then get out. His anxiety couldn't handle all this back and forth.

They finally reached a grand doorway after walking through the beautiful, gilded halls of the castle. Creighton had admired the various artwork as best he could while also keeping up with the young man beside him. The guy was fast. That much was for sure.

"Here we are," Dion said. "He is inside and waiting for you. Go on in. He'll be happy to see you." Before Creighton could say anything else, Dion was already turned away and leaving.

Creighton paused for a moment, his hands still full, and reached up to knock on the door. Before he could attempt it, Dion returned. "Ah yes, I almost forgot." He turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Your friend is here," he called out loudly. Then he scurried away once more.

Creighton knew supernatural beings were fast. He himself could move quickly when necessary. But the way Dion appeared and disappeared spoke to something else entirely. Like maybe he was more powerful than someone in his position might normally be. It was something he would have to sit with and think about. No way would he mention it to Eden just yet.

Inside the room, he realized why Eden had asked him to come. "Wow," he said softly as he stepped through the door. He bumped it with his hip to close it behind him. Maybe this was a secret area, and Eden didn't want anyone to know.

Or maybe it was soundproofed because no one else wanted to hear him when he was playing. Because that's exactly what the space was. It was a playroom. A playroom that screamed Little space. Creighton wandered deeper into the area and noted all the various toys and pieces that completed the space. It was a dream for someone who regressed. No detail was left out.

"This is amazing," he said out loud, this time not censoring his volume.

"I know, right?" Eden popped up beside him, voice excited and high-pitched.

Creighton, as anyone would do in his position, screamed and threw his hands up. Eden cackled but reached out to catch the boxes before they fell to the ground. Creighton was too busy holding his hand to his chest to notice anything falling.

"You just scared me so bad," Creighton said as tears formed in his eyes.

Eden, who'd been giggling, stopped abruptly. "Oh no, I upset you. I'm sorry. That wasn't part of the plan."

Creighton bristled for a moment at the word plan. Was all of this some giant ruse? Had he misunderstood Eden's company and friendship? It wouldn't be the first time he'd seen someone and thought they were being nice to him, only to find out later that it was meant to be a joke — one he had not been let in on.

Eden shook his head as if he could read Creighton's mind. "I just mean that my plan was only to scare you a little bit, not to make you cry."

Creighton wiped his eyes, happy to know that this wasn't some evil trick. His anxiety had spiked with the jarring act and was only just now regulating itself. "It's okay," Creighton forced the words out. "Really, it's fine." He didn't want to lose a client and a friend to his pitiful nature.

Eden crossed his arms, or at least attempted to. The boxes clanged together, reminding him that his hands were full. "It's not okay. I did something mean, and you have all the rights in the world to tell me that I'm a big booty head."

Creighton cracked a smile at that. "A big booty head?" he teased back.

Eden smirked while nodding. "Yes. And I think that there might be something in here for me. Is that right?"

Creighton nodded, then hung back while Eden dropped onto the floor and folded his legs, one box on either side of him. When Eden didn't immediately open it, Creighton was concerned that maybe he'd gotten it wrong. Instead, his friend looked up at him, his eyes somewhat glazed, and said, "Will you help me? I'm kind of scared, to be honest."

"Scared of what?" Creighton asked as he dropped down across from Eden. He placed his hands in his lap and set his satchel — which had been hanging across his body — beside him. It carried some basic things: his phone, in case he got a text from his Daddy; his keys for the shop and his house; some knickknacks that would calm him if need be. Oh, and one of his small Gnomes. He always had a Gnome on him. That was the way.

Once the bag was beside him and his hands were in his lap, he focused his full attention on Eden. "Tell me what you're thinking," Creighton pressed, unsure of how he could help.

"It's just that this is a really big deal and something I've wanted for a long time. Now that I have it, I'm scared it's not going to be as special, or that everything won't work out the way that I've dreamed of. There are a lot of variables involved and now that it's all about to happen, I'm lost."

Creighton tilted his head slightly and bit his bottom lip.

Eden smiled and shook his head. "It's okay, you can say whatever you're thinking. I know that I'm a lot. My family tells me all the time about how greedy I am. Two mates is too much."

Creighton straightened at that, his brow dipping. "It's not greedy. You want two mates, yes, but if fate allows it, then how is that greedy? That just seems like destiny and stuff, you know?"

Eden perked up at the mention of fate. "You believe in it? In fate, in mates and all that? I know some vampires don't."

Creighton shrugged. It was true — some vampires did not believe. They went out of their way to make life a living nightmare for anyone who did. Reason number two billion why he never fit into his family.

"I believe that the universe, that fate, guides us to where we need to be. I wound up in San Noctis because this was supposed to be my home. This is where I am the most relaxed and can create my Gnomes, create my art."

Eden bounced on the spot, clapping his hands. "And I'm so glad you wound up here because I need your art. Lots of it, all the time."

Creighton did a slow pan of the room, spotting several of his creations out and about. "I do see some familiar faces."

Eden giggled, then reached for both boxes at the same time. Part of the design of the box that Creighton had worked hard on was the ease with which one could open it. People who might be disabled or have differences in their ability to handle things didn't need to fight with packaging. They deserved access to their stuffies without difficulty. More than one of his clients had thanked him for it over the years.

That ease allowed Eden to rip them open at the same time. He released another squeal as he parted the lids to reveal the near-perfect replicas of

what he'd requested. "They're perfect," Eden said. He lifted them out of the boxes in unison and held them close, burying his face in them. There was no scent on either — Creighton knew that — but from the way Eden sighed, you would have thought they smelled like the men they were modeled after.

"So you like them?" Creighton asked.

"Yes, I love them. They're perfect. How did you get this so accurate?"

Creighton shrugged. "I took my time, and the photos you gave me were perfect. I could see every little detail on them."

Eden looked up from where his face was buried in the animals. "I'm so, so thankful to you, Creighton. You have no idea how much I needed this. I can never say thank you enough. I could never pay you enough for what you've done for me."

Creighton's eyes went wide. "You've already paid me so much. What do you mean? I don't need any more money. Keep it." His voice rose with panic. He didn't want to be indebted to the prince, and if he was paid more, that's exactly what it would feel like — a debt.

"I won't pay you more if you truly feel you don't need it, but I really think you should reconsider. This craftsmanship, this work, is priceless. Truly, I'm indebted to you."

The words had Creighton releasing a snort of indignation, and that was when he heard the door behind them open.

"Oh, my uncle's here. Uncle T, look what my friend made me." Eden held up the creations, proud as ever, while inside Creighton felt a buzzing he'd never experienced before.

What is that? he thought to himself before turning to look over his shoulder.

In the doorway stood a man. *A gorgeous man.* He was broad and tall, and power radiated off his body in every direction. Creighton could practically see it. He had a million questions about who this Uncle T was. Eden had never mentioned him. In fact, he could have sworn that there were no relatives in the castle that weren't immediate family that weren't a direct line to Mira and Silas Saint.

The man stepped further into the room, letting the door close behind him.

It took Creighton a moment to find his voice. There was so much power, so much energy, he felt like he was floating. "Hi," he whispered.

The big man stared at him. His eyes were golden, like honey. It was enchanting. Creighton had the urge to crawl over to him and pull his face down to get a closer look. He shook his head to clear the thought. He didn't need to startle anyone. It wasn't necessarily arousal he was feeling, but curiosity — a depth, a wonder — that hadn't been there at any other time in his life.

The man whom Eden had referred to as Uncle T stepped forward slowly, like he was approaching a wild animal. When he reached the two of them, he stopped and dropped to his knees. Creighton's mouth fell open. The position was far more submissive and endearing than he expected from the man.

"These are amazing," he said to Eden, though his gaze was still on Creighton.

"They are, aren't they? My friend is the most talented ever. He made these just for me based on pictures. Can you believe it? Pictures! You should totally get him to make you something."

The man raised a brow while staring at Creighton, then looked away briefly to face his nephew. "You think so? What should I get him to make?"

Eden hummed. "Anything you want. He can do it, I swear. Look around at all these stuffies. Oh, and he's got his own personal collection. Do you have one with you?" The way Eden said it didn't register at first.

"Have what?" Creighton said.

"Do you have any of your stuff with you? Like one of your Gnomes?"

The way Eden said the word made Creighton giggle. It also did the wonderful task of breaking the trance he'd been in, staring at the older dragon in his presence. "I do. I don't typically show people, though."

The man dipped his head in understanding, then softly whispered, "Would you make an exception for me? I'm quite interested to know. Gnomes are one of my favorite creatures."

Creighton's smile was blinding. "You like them too? I've never met anyone else who loves them like I do. That's amazing. I can't believe it. I'm so excited. Let me get it out." He reached into his bag blindly, not wanting to look away from the man. When his hands wrapped around the familiar shape, he pulled out his tiny Gnome and extended it towards Thalric.

"See, this is just one. I have a lot of them."

The minute he held it out towards the other man, he knew he was in big trouble. Because those glowing eyes shone even brighter, and the way the man didn't touch the Gnome but admired it closely, careful not to get his scent on it, but appreciating every little detail, made Creighton squirm with excitement.

"This is truly magnificent," he said in a whisper. "You deserve all the praise for your work, if my young nephew hasn't already said as much."

"Oh, you bet your butt I have, Uncle. I was just trying to convince him to charge more, because this is crazy, right?"

Creighton blushed at the praise. He wasn't used to people paying him this much attention, to people telling him how wonderful he was.

"What is your name?" the man said.

Creighton froze for a second, not sure why that was suddenly something so scary. Then he took a deep breath and answered. "I'm Creighton. And you are?" he replied, eager to know who this man was.

"My name is Thalric," he said. His voice remained soft, and the way the word glided off his tongue sent a shiver that Creighton couldn't suppress. What in the world was going on with his body, and how did he get it to calm down? He didn't want to make a fool of himself, not when he'd been so graciously invited to the castle. Something was going on, and he had to figure out what.

CHAPTER 9

THALRIC

THALRIC STOOD in his room taking deep breaths as he contemplated whether or not his nephew's plan was going to work. It had been a great idea when Eden first proposed it. The thought of getting his Little Biter to the castle to meet in person would reveal if the other man could possibly be his.

Scenting was a big deal in shifter communities, and if his Little Biter wasn't compatible in some way, then it was best that he knew before he got any deeper into things. He chuckled darkly. He was already too deep into it. His heart was split in two. His natural instinct, his urge, was to seek out his mate, to find and claim the person fate had deemed for him.

But at the same time, he'd become obsessed with his Little Biter. Being a Daddy to him was the highlight of Thalric's life, really. He couldn't even say it was simply the days that felt better with him. It was all of it. Every last bit.

Thalric's phone buzzed with a text letting him know that Eden and his friend, Thalric's Little Biter, were in the playroom together. All he had to do now was go to them and see. Just walk into the room and he would have answers to everything that had plagued him for so long.

While it all seemed simple, it was still scary, still nerve-wracking, because this could be the start of something amazing or it could be a disaster.

Since he wasn't sure which, Thalric took a few more moments to gather himself before striding down the hall of the castle towards his nephew's playroom. The closer he got, the harder his dragon pressed to come forward.

Normally, he wouldn't have minded. His beast occasionally had the urge to be set free, and Thalric would indulge him. At the moment, though, he was flustered. "Not now," he muttered to himself.

The people who passed him gave him a wide berth. The staff knew he was different from the Saint family as a whole. They had been around him long enough to understand he came from a different horde. Not by origin, but he'd lived there long enough that his habits and mannerisms had changed.

Even so, he realized he was probably being a bit of a disturbance to the natural order of things. He pushed back against his dragon hard enough to get the other part of him to settle down. Once that was in order, he focused on keeping his heart rate steady.

When he reached the door to the playroom he froze. His dragon rose up and everything in his world went still.

Mate.

The smell was unmistakable. It was the exact same one he'd caught wind of while in the coffee shop. The same one he'd wondered how to track.

That must mean... His mate and his Little Biter were one in the same. Thalric hadn't needed to be worried about his heart being shared by two people. Fate had ensured his emotions were safe. Relief swarmed him as he closed his eyes, taking in the scent around him once more before facing what lay ahead.

After gathering himself, Thalric pressed the door open and stepped inside. The moment the door opened, Eden spotted him from across the space and held up two stuffed dragons that, even from afar, Thalric could tell were amazing.

The next few minutes passed in a blur as Eden encouraged his uncle to come look at them up close, and Thalric fought against his beast's desire to immediately claim the adorable Little vampire seated across from Eden.

Eventually, everything in his body settled enough for him to compliment the work and to agree with Eden that his friend should charge more. After exchanging names, Thalric was at a loss for what to do. His gut reaction was to let Creighton know they were mates and to begin the bond, but there was a sort of hesitancy in the air.

A part of Creighton that didn't immediately jump to be in Thalric's arms. Eden was too wrapped up in his own happenings to notice, and it wasn't like he could just say something to Creighton in front of him. He needed to be careful, needed to play it safe.

So instead, he convinced Creighton to show him the Gnome, and with that, the idea formed. "Would you like to meet a Gnome?" Thalric asked hesitantly.

The bright smile Creighton had given him when he said he also loved Gnomes brightened even further at the question. "I could meet them?"

Thalric nodded slowly. "Yes, you can, if you want."

"I want, I want," Creighton said eagerly, clapping his hands and bouncing much the way Eden typically did when in his Little mode. Thalric's heart warmed upon seeing such an action. Whether his boy knew it or not, he was everything that made him Thalric's perfect boy. Even so, it would possibly be too much too soon if Thalric pressed him. He couldn't risk his fated mate running away.

Eden managed to pull himself away from the dragons in his arms to join the conversation. "Oh yes, you should definitely take him to go see the Gnomes. They will be happy to have someone who appreciates them."

Thalric sniffed the air. "I appreciate them."

Eden rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but you've been so busy helping with everything that you haven't gone to see them as much as you usually do."

Thalric merely nodded at that. It was true. Growing up, after Mira had married Silas and they'd moved into the castle, Thalric had found a fondness for the Gnomes. It was part of the reason his Little Biter's obsession with them was so adorable. He'd always intended to take his boy to meet them. He just figured that he would be aware of said meeting as it

happened — that he would know he was with his Daddy and having a special moment.

Instead, there was this sort of anonymity happening that couldn't be avoided. Not with how tense Creighton had been when Thalric first arrived. He would never push his boy, never give him cause to hesitate over his feelings of comfort.

Once it was decided they would go see the Gnomes, Creighton rose, and so did Thalric. Eden stayed with his dragons in hand, in no hurry to do anything. Thalric would have normally laughed at the adorable image of his nephew being enamored, but he was caught up in his own experience.

How could he keep Creighton forever? How could he show this young man that they were meant to be in every facet of the word?

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Because they were. He would not live another day without knowing his mate, without protecting him and seeing to it that the adorable vampire had everything he ever wanted.

Not wanting to make things awkward, Thalric focused on asking Creighton questions as they walked: little facts about Gnomes that Creighton would know, things he had already shared with his Daddy over text.

Part of Thalric hoped that maybe Creighton would see the connection and realize he'd already shared a lot of this information with someone. But he also wanted to be sure he didn't push for too much too soon.

So rather than press further, he let himself be surprised along the way, pretending as if he'd never heard any of it, even though he'd memorized every fact the moment his boy had shared them.

Creighton kept up his information sharing the entire way to the observatory. When they reached the doors, he paused, his wide-eyed gaze moving to Thalric. "We're here?" he asked before swallowing thickly.

Thalric took a chance and held his hand out. "We are, and if you'd let me, I'd love to introduce you to them. They are very friendly and will be happy to know you're a fan. You can even show them your work." Thalric nodded towards the Gnome still in Creighton's hand.

He had left his bag behind — whether consciously or subconsciously — and that gave Thalric hope that he could maybe convince his boy to stay longer. For dinner. Or forever. Whichever seemed better fitting. He shook his head, muttering under his breath so Creighton couldn't hear him berate himself for being foolish.

"What was that?" Creighton said, his eyes wide as he turned to look at Thalric.

"Nothing. I'm merely excited for you. It's a big deal."

Creighton nodded but didn't say anything further. Then he clasped Thalric's hand and instantly settled. His gaze moved from their clasped hands to Thalric's face, and the dragon had to work hard not to show any type of reaction. One wrong move and it could be over. He didn't want that.

"Better?" Thalric asked, his voice soft.

"Yeah," Creighton said, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

Silly mate, Thalric thought. One day, he would tell his mate what was happening and it would all make sense. When he could share the truth of their connection, there would be no question. "Let's go inside then. No need to delay."

Creighton took a deep breath and gave an affirmative nod. Thalric opened the door, leading them inside. He would happily lead his mate anywhere. This was only the first of many visits to the observatory, he guessed, because as much as he knew his little mate would be happy to meet the Gnomes, the Gnomes would also want to keep in contact with his Little Biter.

"Where are they?" Creighton asked when they walked inside and no one immediately came to them.

Thalric chuckled. "We have to get closer to where they are. They will come out, don't you worry. But this first area is more for people who want to leisurely stroll through rather than sit and chat with the Gnomes. They can be a talkative bunch."

Thalric would forever remember the look of utter contentment on his mate's face at that news, like he'd been waiting his whole life to meet these creatures, to get to know them and share his love for them.

With their hands clasped, Thalric led Creighton through the observatory until they reached the area where the Gnomes typically congregated.

"Let's have a seat here," he said, his voice gentle. He tugged Creighton down and pulled him close to his side.

Creighton didn't fight. He was too riveted by the space, by how many obvious Gnome touches were around. If you knew about Gnomes, you could see where their influence was here, where the little pieces of them were ingrained into the very soil among the plants.

The space that his sister and her family had crafted was beyond compare. He'd forgotten how much he loved it, how peaceful it was to be here. When he wasn't trying to maintain his position in the horde, he was often just trying to recover enough to do it all again the next day. But here, in the safety of the observatory, he could simply be.

He had his mate beside him, touching him, and his heart was so full. The quiet of the space was wonderful.

Creighton was buzzing with energy, and it amused Thalric. The calm, quiet, shy man was long gone, and in his place was this jittery boy, happy to meet the creatures he loved so dearly.

When the first Gnome slipped out of the tree line, Creighton's entire body went still. Thalric turned to look at him and smiled at the wonder on his boy's face.

He couldn't sense Creighton's emotions. They didn't have a mate bond yet. He hated that he was missing out on what had to be an overwhelming flood of joy inside the other man. Part of him was angry to be missing it, but he had a feeling it would not be the only time he experienced such a thing.

His mate was adorable and clearly loved the Gnomes so much. Thalric suspected it wouldn't be long before they were back visiting the Gnomes again.

Maybe next time, the mate bond would be in place, and he would feel those emotions in real time. He planned to have a very long life with his mate.

For now, it was time to sit back and enjoy watching his boy flourish.

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CHAPTER 10

CREIGHTON

CREIGHTON COULDN'T BELIEVE what was happening. How had his life come to this? What had he done to be so blessed as to meet a Gnome in real life? He watched as the small-bodied being came forward, taking in their features and noting how accurate all the information he'd seen online and in books had been.

There was no mistaking this Gnome, no missing the fact that it was real and alive and right in front of him. He was giddy with excitement, happy to be experiencing this. And then he realized that more were coming out.

An entire group of Gnomes was pouring out of the trees.

Creighton's jaw was practically on the floor, buzzing with a level of happiness he couldn't quell. He didn't want to come across as too eager, but he sure wasn't able to control himself with everything happening.

"Are you happy?" The voice beside him was startling for a moment. He'd forgotten that Thalric was there. The big man had gone quiet the moment the Gnomes started to appear. It felt nice because Creighton didn't have to try to fit into a mold. He didn't have to pretend to know what was going on or say the right words. He got to exist.

"It's amazing. They're amazing," Creighton forced the words out. His body tingled with awareness, and his heart beat faster than he could ever remember. "I'm so happy," he said, his voice breaking slightly.

"Good," Thalric said. Their fingers were still laced together and Thalric gave his hand a squeeze. It was encouraging, and it made Creighton happy. The connection was peaceful.

Somehow this man, this person, had come into his life and presented him with an alternate life from what he'd been living. He was kind and giving, and in the few short exchanges they'd had, Creighton found himself ready to bend over backwards.

He wanted to be everything Thalric wanted and needed.

He froze at the thought. Why did he want that? He'd never craved affection or anything of the sort before. Why was he suddenly having the urge to be romantic with this man? What had changed?

He didn't have time to analyze it because the Gnomes were upon them, and the moment they were within range, several of them walked straight up to Thalric. They hugged him, and Thalric, though seemingly surprised, returned the gesture.

"It is good to see you again too, friends."

Creighton's heart warmed. These Gnomes were happy and friendly with him. This wasn't just a chance meeting, or Thalric bringing Creighton along of his own desire, though there was no doubt Thalric's decision to come see them now had something to do with Creighton, since he had said, "Do you want to go see them?" and not "I'm going, do you want to come?" It was all semantics, and Creighton didn't feel like parsing through all the details just yet.

"It is good to see you," the obvious head Gnome of the group said. "It has been too long, and we know you've been here long enough to come by."

Thalric dipped his head. "Yes, but I have been trying to navigate everything. My apologies."

The Gnome gave him a nod as if to assure him it would be okay, then turned to look at Creighton. "Who are you?"

Creighton's voice was completely gone. He hadn't expected to actually meet Gnomes — hadn't thought he would get a chance on this visit — so he

didn't really have words.

"This is Creighton," Thalric said, squeezing his hand. "He is a big fan of yours."

The Gnome grinned wickedly. "Is he?" The others tittered with laughter.

Creighton felt warm. He cleared his throat and found his voice. "I am," he said. "It's an honor to meet you."

The head Gnome snorted. "An honor. That's new. Usually, people don't even know that we exist, and we have to explain everything to them."

Creighton shook his head quickly. "Oh no, I know everything. You don't have to tell me anything unless it's like a fun story about your life that you maybe wouldn't have had in a book or on a website or something like that."

The Gnomes stared at him with a wonder-like expression, their faces making it very clear that they were shocked to find someone so interested in them.

"Did I say something wrong?" Creighton asked after a long moment of quiet.

"No, sweetheart," Thalric answered quickly. "They're merely surprised, is all."

The word sweetheart took a moment to register in Creighton's mind, and when it did, he blushed even deeper. Thalric stared at him for a long moment, but it was the sound of a clearing throat that had them both glancing back at the Gnomes.

"I see," said the one in charge. The others were nodding along like something had been decided while he and Thalric were looking at one another. "In that case, we welcome you, friend. Anyone who is close to Thalric is a friend of ours as well."

Creighton practically swooned. "Really?" he said, his voice just above a whisper.

"Of course. Now, would you like us to tell you more? To share stories, perhaps, like you asked?"

Creighton bobbed his head quickly and leaned forward as if somehow having his face closer to them would give him a better chance of hearing. The Gnomes chuckled but didn't comment on his enthusiasm.

"To begin, we have to go back to a time before, when things were different."

The Gnome started his story, and Creighton was riveted from the first word. Every piece and part was new information to him. Definitely nothing he could have gathered on his own. He was very thankful for each detail shared with him.

He understood intrinsically that this was a big deal, that he was getting access no one else had outside of the Saint family. And he would never tell anyone what he was told today. There would never come a time when he felt like giving away these secrets would be beneficial.

His mind became lost in all the details as he listened. It felt like being read a bedtime story, and he wanted to soak it all in. He wanted to feel connected. And that was easy to do with Thalric watching over everything.

The big man wasn't listening to the Gnomes. Creighton assumed he'd probably heard the stories before. Thalric was focused on Creighton, his gaze never leaving the side of his face. He didn't have to turn to look to know. He could feel it.

He could feel everything. Emotions warred within him, and he could feel more than he usually could. He sniffed, knowing that nothing would normally happen when he did, except there was a scent.

Just a hint of one. A sort of breeze, a gentle wind. It came over him, and he shivered.

Strange.

His blockers always worked. For him to be able to pick up a scent meant that something far more powerful was at play.

Was it the Gnomes? he wondered. Could their magic be part of what was happening? The idea died instantly, because while Gnomes did have scents,

it didn't make any sense as to why he would suddenly be experiencing this. If anything, it should have happened when he first came into the room.

He sat there quietly, trying to make sense of everything while also keeping his focus on the story. He didn't think they would quiz him, of course, but it was more respectful to hear what they were willing to share than to dismiss them.

Plus, he might never get the chance to do this again. He needed the lore, needed the details to keep him company later when he was alone again.

The thought stopped him cold. Alone. That was what he would be. Without anyone else, he would be by himself.

No Thalric.

No Eden.

It would be quiet again, and while it had never bothered him before, Creighton found himself dreading it now.

"What's wrong?" The question drew his attention.

"I don't know what you mean," Creighton answered quickly.

"What is it?" Thalric's tone was firm. He wasn't asking. He was stating a fact, and he wanted answers. The Gnomes had gone quiet. They were watching the exchange. Creighton would have been embarrassed if Thalric hadn't taken his chin in hand and tilted it up. While he wanted to hide, he understood the other man was being clear.

"It's just that I—" he paused. "I don't know why but—" he paused again.

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No one rushed him. It was as if they were all waiting to see what he'd say.

Creighton closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he let the confession fall off his tongue. "After this, I have to go home and be alone, and now that I have met you and the Gnomes, I don't like the idea as much."

The hand on Creighton's chin warmed, and he opened his eyes with a start. *What in the world?*

"My apologies. Your words triggered my dragon into responding. He wanted you to know that you don't have to be alone."

"I don't?"

"You don't," Thalric said.

Creighton shivered at the promise in Thalric's voice. "Okay," he agreed easily, because what else did you do? The man said he wouldn't be alone. While it might have been foolish to anyone else, he trusted Thalric in a strange way. The man intrigued him in a way that no one else ever had, and probably ever would.

"It's settled then. Now you can return to focusing on the joy of your visit with the Gnomes."

Looking back at the gathered group before him, Creighton smiled sheepishly. "Yes, my apologies. Please continue. I want to know about you and your customs."

The Gnomes picked back up without drawing any focus to the fact that he had been distraught just moments before. It was a relief to know that he could simply have a moment to regroup, and no one would judge him, that they wouldn't think any less of him.

Creighton squeezed Thalric's hand, thankful for the other man. Thankful for the entire experience he was having.

As the rest of the afternoon wore on, he found himself more and more thankful because his life was beautiful. It was great. He didn't need to worry that he was too much for the Gnomes, that his excitement would be misconstrued in any way. They were honored and spoke to him as if he was someone important in their world, and he liked it. He liked being of value to other people.

When the sound of a grumbling stomach made everyone pause, Creighton shyly hid his face and ducked down.

"It's okay," Thalric said. "It's getting to be dinnertime anyway. Come, I must feed you."

Creighton bit his lip. While he didn't want to leave, he needed to respect that Thalric had already done so much for him. "We can come back another time," the other man said, as if reading Creighton's mind.

"Yes," the Gnomes said in unison. "We would like that."

The dimming smile he had returned quickly to its full wattage. "I would like that too."

With the promise made, Thalric stood and, in an odd turn of events, lifted Creighton off his feet. He yelped for a moment but settled quickly after being placed back on his feet. The Gnomes said their goodbyes, and he watched them disappear back into their homes. When his stomach growled again, he reluctantly agreed it was time to go.

It wasn't until they reached the dining room that Creighton realized his mistake. He'd been so caught up in the moment with the Gnomes that it hadn't even registered that Thalric was leading them to eat.

As in to eat with people.

As in Thalric's family. The Saint family.

Sure, he knew Eden, but the rest of them? No thanks. He wasn't brave enough. Before he could go into a full-blown panic, a hand on the back of his neck calmed every part of him.

"It's going to be okay." The soft voice felt like a warm hug. "I've got you. My family will love you."

Creighton sighed at the reassurance. He needed it. Families were hard. His own, damn near impossible. "Okay," he whispered.

They walked through the open doors and into the dining room. Immediately all eyes turned to them. Creighton would have frozen, but he saw Eden

waving at him excitedly. The other man's joy, along with the warmth still radiating from Thalric, gave him the confidence to move forward.

The family was seated at a large, ornate table. He could tell it was meant to host many, and even though it was grand, it still held warmth.

"Hello," Mira Saint greeted him, standing and coming over. "And who are you?"

"That's my friend!" Eden shouted to the group before Thalric could speak.

Thalric shook his head and chuckled. "This is indeed Eden's friend, Creighton. He's also a very talented artist. The stuffies that Eden has in his playroom were made by Creighton's hands."

The praise was different than any he'd heard before. Creighton often brushed off compliments because they were intense on his emotions, but this time he soaked them up. He embraced the way it felt to be praised by someone. Surprisingly, he found himself liking it more and more with every minute.

What was it about Thalric that intrigued him so much, and did the other man feel even an inkling of the same curiosity?

Nothing could happen between them, of course. It wasn't like that. He would never get his hopes up in that way. But he couldn't deny that he really liked the idea of there possibly being more between him and the other man.

It was a dream. Something that would probably never happen. But it still thrilled him.

"Welcome, friend of Eden and talented artist, Creighton," Mira said, looping her arm through his and trying to pull him away. Instead of being able to move, though, Mira found herself caught in a stare-off with her brother. "You have to release him," she said to Thalric, amusement laced in her voice.

"I don't," he replied.

She raised her brow. "I see. Well then, why don't you lead him to a spot at the table? Maybe the one beside you?" She shook her head at his caveman tendencies.

Thalric didn't respond to the verbal jab. He simply did as she suggested. Creighton was led over to one of the few empty spaces at the table and made to sit. The moment he dropped into place, Thalric quickly pulled out the chair beside him and positioned himself as close as possible.

The people around the room stared at them with curious expressions. He didn't know what to make of it. This all seemed so different and not at all what he had pictured. He turned his head, hoping to maybe get some answers from Thalric, but an array of servers walked in.

Creighton bristled because the way people treated those who helped them spoke of how they truly were. He believed it with his whole heart, and he worried for a moment that the Saint family would disappoint him.

The opposite was true. He was overjoyed because the entire family greeted the people helping them warmly and by name. They patted their hands and rubbed their cheeks. That was mostly Mira, of course. She was a doting mother to all.

Creighton felt a sort of longing. His own mother was not that way. He'd never experienced it, but maybe if he played his cards right and spent more time with the Saint family, Mira would begin to mother him too. He would not turn down the affection.

After all, he had mentioned not wanting to be alone, and suddenly he found himself promised time with a man he was a bit besotted with. "What are you thinking about?" The words were whispered to him, though Creighton could tell from the knowing grins on everyone's faces that they had heard just fine.

He shook his head, not wanting to voice it.

Thalric smiled gently and reached out to rub his thumb across Creighton's cheek. It felt different from what Mira had done. This wasn't an endearing touch; it was full of heat, and he couldn't attribute it to Thalric's warm body temperature this time.

"I'm sure I can convince you to tell me later," he said, his voice a rumbling growl that did things to Creighton.

Oh boy, he thought. This was complicated.

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CHAPTER 11

THALRIC

THALRIC WAS on the edge of his control. His dragon was beating at the walls of his mind, pleading to come out and claim what was theirs, to make it known to everyone in this space that they didn't even need to look Creighton's way lest they face his dragon's wrath.

Everyone was to be kind, though not too kind.

He knew he was being overzealous. There was no guarantee that his mate would accept him. No promise to ensure that the two of them would be anything more than two people in the same space.

Yet his heart, his body, knew. It understood that this was his forever, that this was his person, the other half of his soul. All he needed to do was be patient.

But patience wasn't his strength.

It never had been.

Many times in his life, Thalric had jumped ahead. He'd gone the opposite way of which he needed to, because he simply didn't have the capability of doing less, of shifting his emotions and perspective.

His role as brother to the queen, as brother-in-law to the king, put him in a place where he had to make important decisions at times. His horde required a lot from him.

Was it any wonder that he struggled now, seeing his mate for the first time, to get himself together? One wrong move and he could lose his forever.

Dinner dragged on. Thalric listened and joined the conversation, but he would barely remember a thing later. He simply went through the motions, doing what needed to be done, focusing on getting his mate fed and entertaining his family, before getting some alone time with his mate again.

At least he hoped for alone time with him.

When the final plate had been retrieved by the staff and everyone thanked them, he watched as Creighton checked the time on his phone. He frowned, and part of Thalric wondered if that was because he was upset he hadn't received a message from his Daddy.

Thalric decided to test the theory. When Eden got Creighton's attention, Thalric turned and typed out a quick message to his boy through the app. He put his phone away and turned back to Creighton, the boy was already looking down at his phone and smiling.

His heart warmed seeing the reaction in real time, but it also burned a bit because his mate had no clue that he was sitting right there. That the person he'd been spending the afternoon with was the same person he'd been bonding with for months, for years.

Creighton responded, and Thalric could feel his phone vibrate in his pocket. Thankfully enough was going on that Creighton didn't notice the connection. He would have to check it later. For now, he wanted to soak up the in-person time he had.

Creighton got Eden's attention and asked, "Where's my bag? I know I left it in your playroom. Can we go get it before I leave?"

Eden cut his eyes to his uncle for a moment and shrugged. "I mean, yeah, but I thought you were gonna hang out more with Uncle T, so I put all of your stuff in his room."

Creighton frowned for a moment but nodded anyway, as if what Eden said made sense. It didn't. It was a very obvious ploy to get the boy inside Thalric's space. He'd have to thank his nephew later. Spoil him and make sure he got whatever he wanted.

Although, given the two-mate situation, promising his nephew anything he wanted might turn out to be trouble. Thalric would think more on it later. He needed to focus.

"I can take you," he said to Creighton, who had turned back to look at him.

"Okay."

Creighton turned to Mira and Silas. "Thank you for allowing me to stay for dinner," he said respectfully.

Mira smiled, and Silas replied, "You're always welcome here, young man, no matter who you're here to visit."

Thalric scowled at his brother-in-law, who was quite amused. He had no doubt his sister and her husband had to know what was going on.

If Romilly and his mate Archer had been in the room, or even Hadrian or Soren, he might have been called out entirely. Eden was too busy playing matchmaker to care.

"Speaking of which, where is everyone else? I figure the newly mated are in need of privacy, but my nephew and nibling missing is a travesty," Thalric stated, coming out of the haze that being around his mate had caused. Between that and fighting with his dragon, he had to work extra hard to keep himself balanced.

Mira scoffed. "Well, Romilly and Archer are indeed still settling into their mate bond, of course. Those two are just adorable. Soren is pouting in their room after receiving news from the Fae. I figure that is who you meant as nibling. They will love that. And Hadrian is—" she turned to look at her husband.

Silas shook his head. "Hadrian is busy. He will be joining us tomorrow as he had a meeting tonight he could not ignore."

Thalric wondered what the couple wasn't saying. He also wondered why Soren was pouting, but the longer he asked questions, the more time he would spend around these people when all he truly wanted was to be alone with his mate.

"Well, send them my love. Tell them I miss them. You'll have to tell me how Soren reacts to the nibbling name. It only just came to me as I was thinking of their location moments ago." He stood and held his hand out to Creighton. The other man slipped his fingers into Thalric's with ease, like they'd been doing it far longer than just that afternoon.

Mira's eyes homed in on it, and she smiled. "We will share it with them, and Creighton — you will have to come back for another meal. You need to meet the rest of the children and the human mate who is now part of our family. It's only fair."

Creighton tilted his head slightly. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Mira waved her hand quickly. "Oh no, sweetheart, you can call me Mira."

Creighton's eyes widened. "I don't think that will work. That's too informal."

Mira stared at him, clearly gearing up to push her way. Thalric coughed to draw her attention away. She hummed, then said, "We'll figure it out. For now, just skip the 'Your Majesty.'"

"Yes, ma'am," he said quickly.

Thalric tugged Creighton's hand because he knew saying "ma'am" would probably open up another can of worms. He needed to get out of there. He could hear Eden laughing and Silas chuckling as they left the room, while Mira mumbled about his rudeness. Creighton was smiling, though Thalric could tell he was also confused.

"I don't understand what just happened," Creighton said.

Thalric shook his head as he led his mate to his suite. "It was nothing. My sister lives to tease, and she would have gone on and on with you. Trust me — growing up with her, I rarely won an argument."

That made Creighton giggle, and it warmed Thalric's heart to know he could bring joy to his mate. Even if it was to his own detriment, he would continue to tell stories that painted him in an amusing light.

"I appreciate you taking me to see the Gnomes today," Creighton said as they neared Thalric's rooms. He glanced over his shoulder where the boy was keeping a slower pace behind him. They were still connected, but he would have to remember to walk slower if he wanted to make it easy on his boy.

"I think that you see something wonderful in this, but it's truly an honor to have been with you while you got to meet them. To know you love them so much, to see the appreciation in your gaze is a reward all its own."

There was a bashful look in Creighton's gaze. Before his Little Biter could reply, Thalric pushed open the door to his suite and waved Creighton in. Their hands separated, and Thalric hated himself a bit for letting it happen, but he also wanted to close the door and keep Creighton in his space for as long as he could. Not as an intimidation tactic, but because when he left, Creighton would smell like him.

He had been wondering why Creighton hadn't responded to him, why he hadn't shouted mate from the rafters the way Thalric so badly wanted to, but then he remembered his interactions with other vampires, how some people had to use blockers when scents were too overpowering, how it took finding their mate for it to balance out in a more manageable way. He never thought that random bit of knowledge would be useful, but it gave him the patience he needed.

And if he could discreetly send his mate home smelling like him, then maybe anyone else who might have interest in his boy would step back. It was the next best thing to a mate mark. Thalric's dragon was adamant it needed to be done. He wouldn't rest until their mate was enveloped in Thalric's scent.

"Your space is beautiful," Creighton remarked softly, his eyes moving around the room, taking in the design Mira had crafted for him.

"It is meant to mimic my horde, the one I had been stationed at."

Creighton turned to look at him. "Had been stationed at?" he questioned.

Thalric swallowed thickly. "Yes. I'd been assigned to help there, but my family, with this visit, has decided it's time for me to return home. I had

been reluctant, but now—" He took a few slow steps forward, closing the distance between them. "Now I think I might truly need to stay. It's best for me if I'm here in San Noctis." His voice had dropped to a whisper.

Creighton swallowed thickly and took a deep breath in, as if to steady himself. When he did, it was like a switch had flipped. His eyes widened and his fangs elongated. His pupils glowed red.

"*Mate.*" The word came out with a slight lisp from how far his teeth had extended.

Thalric closed the gap between them. He lifted his hands and gently cupped Creighton's jawline. "I much prefer when you call me Daddy, Little Biter."

Creighton sank into his touch, eyes closing as euphoria poured off him in waves. Their mate bond was solidifying. It was building and growing, bringing Creighton to his suite, to his space. It had been the final key to unlocking it.

"But I don't... the blockers... and you—" Creighton stumbled the words out one after another.

"I know, I know," Thalric said in a soothing tone. "Come here."

Creighton moved forward at the same time that Thalric tugged, and the young boy's head fit perfectly under Thalric's chin. His thin arms wrapped around Thalric and Creighton nearly shook with emotion.

"I've got you, Little Biter. Daddy will take care of everything. Me and my dragon will take care of you. You are my mate, my destined one. Nothing will ever cause you harm."

Creighton pulled back and looked up. His eyes still glowed and his fangs were still down, but there was a clarity to him, like something Thalric said had pulled him out of the stupor.

"Anything?" he asked.

Alarm bells went off in Thalric's head. Something or someone had bothered his little mate. It had been a problem in the past or maybe was a current

issue. He would see to it that it would be a non-issue from now on. Creighton kept his gaze locked on Thalric's, waiting for an answer.

Thalric removed one of his hands from Creighton's back and held the side of his jaw, making sure his boy couldn't look away. "I will do everything in my power — in the power of my siblings and this palace and the royal name — to keep you safe. I will tear apart anyone who dares to come near you meaning harm. And if there are those who have wronged you in the past that you want taken care of, I will do that as well. There is no task too great for me to do in your name."

Thalric felt the shiver that tore through Creighton's body. He could feel the hardening length pressed against him. Thalric groaned. "Little Biter."

"Daddy," Creighton whispered. "Me bite," he said in a voice that made Thalric release his own shiver.

"Oh yes, you can bite me all you want," Thalric said.

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CHAPTER 12

CREIGHTON

THE BLOCKERS CREIGHTON had used all his life were nowhere to be found. The scent of his mate, of Thalric, was everywhere. *But we should call him Daddy*, a voice in his mind — his own — encouraged him to sink into the relationship they already had.

All the late-night text messages and shared thoughts, the hopes and dreams he'd revealed to a man he thought was halfway around the world.

With no control, and the familiarity making him reckless, Creighton turned his head and bit into his Daddy's wrist. He kept his eyes focused on the bigger man, and when his Daddy groaned, his head falling back as pleasure swept through him, Creighton rejoiced.

This was magnificent. Having a partner was better than he could have ever imagined.

He'd gone so long believing he'd end up alone, that no one would ever find him in San Noctis. Definitely not his mate. He'd also assumed that said mate would be a vampire as well. It wasn't that interspecies relationships didn't happen; it was just rarely seen with fated mates.

He sucked down the big dragon's rich blood, ingesting it far too fast but unable to stop himself. His Daddy tasted delicious. He felt the warmth move through him.

Every other time in his life that he'd fed on another being, it had been transactional at best. The connection was meant to satiate a need, not to build one.

This time, though, Creighton could feel the essence of himself changing. He wasn't sure if it was the mate bond slipping into place or his body relaxing, knowing that his Daddy was there. He didn't even have time to analyze how all of this had happened.

All he knew was that the scent had broken through his blockers and the man before him had called him Little Biter. Only one other person knew that name. If he were more present, he might have paused and questioned it. Instead, he continued to drink for another long minute. Then he pulled back and licked his lips.

Daddy was still watching him, though his eyes were glowing brightly. The dragon in him had come forth. Creighton reached a hand up to adjust his glasses and said softly, "Hi, Daddy."

The big man before him groaned yet again, then pulled Creighton up off the ground and into his arms. He scrambled to grip his Daddy's shoulders, to wrap his legs around him in a way that would give him some stability. He needn't have worried. His Daddy banded one arm behind his back and the other under his bottom. He couldn't get away even if he wanted to.

"*Mate*," the dragon growled.

Thalric's gentle voice was gone. The soothing tone he'd been using was lost to his passion. Creighton didn't mind. In fact, he kind of liked it.

"You are mine," Thalric demanded. "I will protect you to the ends of the earth, to the ends of every realm."

Creighton nodded quickly, licking his lips again, hoping to be able to taste more of his mate's blood.

Not one to miss anything, Thalric smirked. "You may have another taste, but I want one first."

Creighton's brows dipped. "You drink blood?" he muttered quickly. It wasn't that he minded, of course. He was just curious. He'd never met a

dragon that drank blood for pleasure.

Thalric shook his head and walked them over to the empty couch. He dropped down, bringing Creighton with him.

"Daddy," Creighton squealed, giggling at the way they both bounced on the furniture.

"Yes, Little Biter?" he growled back.

"What are you — oh." Creighton's voice cut out as he felt the hard length of his Daddy beneath him.

There was no mistaking the arousal. It matched his own, which he'd been ignoring because of his desire to drink from his mate. But now, with his bloodlust sated, the rest of his body was on board and eager.

He grabbed his shirt and lifted it over his head. His glasses got hung up, and he grunted in annoyance before his Daddy chuckled and helped him free. Once his glasses were back on his face and his chest bare, Creighton smiled shyly at his Daddy.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"I've got you," Thalric answered without hesitation. His firm response, with zero hesitation, ramped up Creighton's arousal. He felt as if he were going to combust.

"Daddy," he groaned, shifting his hips forward.

The other man didn't acknowledge his words with an audible response. Instead, he let his hands roam over Creighton's body. He paid attention to every detail of his boy's skin. At least, that's what it looked like to Creighton. He couldn't read the other man's mind, had no clue without words what he was feeling.

"Daddy," Creighton repeated, this time more firmly. "Please."

His Daddy took pity on him, leaning forward to wrap his lips around one of Creighton's pebbled nipples. He grunted, arching his back into the touch, wanting more. "Yes," he panted.

His Daddy hummed, and his hands went to Creighton's hips, helping him rock forward. Creighton was happy to comply. There was no chance of him stopping what was going on between them.

He wanted more, always more.

As his erection hardened even further, he whimpered. It felt like his body would snap at any moment, that it was only mere seconds before everything became too much and he came apart.

His Daddy pulled back and their eyes met. Creighton suspected his own were glowing, his vampire nature right at the surface. It matched the way his Daddy was looking at him — all passion and eagerness.

"You're going to come like this. You're going to make a mess of yourself, and then I'm going to take us into the shower and clean you thoroughly."

The final word was said in a way that left no room for argument. His Daddy had plans. Plans that involved Creighton being bare.

"Yes, Daddy," he answered, giving his full agreement and consent.

With that, his Daddy tugged him forward again and again. His mouth met Creighton's, and the kiss was perfection. He tried to avoid hitting his Daddy's lips or tongue with his fangs, but Thalric didn't seem to mind. In fact, it seemed as if he wanted it to happen.

Creighton got his first hint of blood and damn near leaped off his Daddy's lap. In his aroused state, with them kissing and their bodies working in tandem, it was making his blood sweeter. It made him taste like everything Creighton had ever loved in life. He whined and moaned, whimpered and thrashed against the other man.

Creighton pulled back as his orgasm crashed forward. "Daddy!" The word rushed out of him on a breath.

"Yes," Thalric groaned. "There you go."

The praise, the power of his mate's words, made Creighton's orgasm go even longer than usual. He felt like he was coming and coming nonstop.

When it finally ended, he collapsed forward, his body spent and his emotions wrung out.

His Daddy hummed, kissing the top of his hair. He could feel the sweat there. His curly hair was a mess, he was sure, and his body pliant in all the ways that mattered. Creighton had to force himself to regulate his system. While he didn't actually breathe, his body needed to return to a normal state. He wanted his fangs gone, wanted to be of a clear mind as they spoke about what came next.

"I can sense your worry," Daddy said. "You needn't be scared. I will be by your side every day for the rest of my life."

Creighton couldn't quite believe his words. How could he promise such a thing, especially when he had obligations?

Now knowing who Thalric was — that he was the man on the other side of his screen, his messages — it was clear that his visit was supposed to only be temporary. Thalric had a life in his own horde, a place, and while he had mentioned that his family wanted him here, Creighton couldn't merge the two ideas.

It didn't seem possible. Even if it were, what would make Thalric stay with him? What did he have to offer the other man aside from being his mate?

Thalric pulled back, his hand moving to Creighton's face and shifting him so they could look each other in the eye. Creighton wanted to hide. He wanted to bury himself back into his Daddy's chest and pretend as if everything would suddenly be okay, that he wasn't getting emotional. Except he very much was getting emotional, and his Daddy knew it.

"Talk to me, little one," he said. "I want to know what troubles you."

Creighton bit his lip for a moment. Could he really admit the truth to this man? Could he share as vulnerably as he had when he didn't have a name or a face to put to him? He didn't know, but he had to try.

Creighton dipped his head, then said, "I'm worried about you having to leave. Your horde needs you."

Thalric smiled softly and shook his head. His hands, which had been holding on to Creighton's hips, squeezed. "I am going nowhere, Little Biter. I had already been considering my family's idea for me to stay. It seemed selfish, and I didn't want to be that way. I felt as if I had to take care of the horde I'd been assigned all those years ago. But with my fated mate here, I don't need any other reason. You are it. You are my purpose. You are my passion. And you will be that, no matter what."

Creighton struggled still to believe the words. "But what about your responsibilities and all your stuff?"

Daddy chuckled. "I can always have someone else run the horde. My sister and brother-in-law are fully capable of assigning another person in charge. Besides, I had people under my command who I delegated tasks to. I was more of a figurehead than anything. They could handle it without me."

"And your stuff?" Creighton pressed, because that was his big hang-up. If they could, by some means, put another person in charge, Thalric would still need to go back and get all of his belongings.

His Daddy responded right away, as if the answer had already been in the back of his mind. "As I said, my sister is good at getting things done. She has already told me that she can get me my things. At least the sentimental ones. Everything else about my place has been recreated here. Look around. This is my home. It's only been brought to San Noctis through my sister's diligence."

Creighton looked around the room, taking in all the finer details. It did very much seem like a space his Daddy would want to stay in. He thought about the future, what it would mean for him to have a mate, to have his Daddy in San Noctis full-time.

All the stress and worry he'd held onto could be soothed. He would have someone to come home to at night, someone to love and cherish him. He could find peace, *true peace*, and protection. His Daddy had said he would be protected above all else.

That thought alone made Creighton want to cry. He had never been properly protected, and he wanted it so badly.

They sat in silence for a moment, and Creighton was about to say that he understood it would be good for his Daddy, but the other man must have sensed the conversation continuing, because he gripped beneath Creighton's bottom again and stood.

"Time to get clean, Little Biter," he said.

Creighton didn't get a chance to argue. His Daddy strode into the bathroom and turned on the hot water. The entire time, Creighton stared at his neck, wanting to bite his Daddy there, wanting to get a taste straight from his vein, the one pulsing rapidly.

"I can scent your arousal, mate," his Daddy said, voice filled with humor. "What has got you so eager?"

Creighton tore his eyes away from the pulsing vein to look at his Daddy. The minute their eyes connected, he blushed. There was no denying that he was captivated. He started, in an attempt to find the words, then paused again. Daddy smiled, not pushing him to go faster, just listening and waiting.

Creighton closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then pushed the words out. "I was thinking about biting your neck. What you would taste like from there."

His Daddy's eyes flashed that bright color yet again, and Creighton whined in response. Oh, how he wanted.

"Soon, Little Biter," his Daddy agreed. "You can have me soon, but I must get you clean first. Then I need to get my scent all over you again. I want everyone to know you're mine."

"I'm yours," he said.

His Daddy nodded, and Creighton sank into the hold, letting his mind go blank as his Daddy washed him. He trusted Thalric. Trusted his Daddy, implicitly.

Nothing bad would happen to him in Daddy's arms.

CHAPTER 13

THALRIC

IN ALL OF THE MANY, many years he'd been alive, Thalric had never experienced anything quite like being bitten by his mate. The lust he'd seen in his mate's eyes had stolen his breath.

He would have done anything to keep that glazed look in place. Anything at all.

But he didn't need to go out of his way. His mate merely wanted his blood. Thalric was happy to give it, happy to be connected even further to his sweet boy.

At first, he'd thought the Gnomes would give him away. The way they had bowed to Creighton was a show of respect, one they'd only give to people they believed worthy of it. Since Creighton didn't notice, Thalric didn't bring it up. No need to let that secret out before it was time.

Creighton had been too enamored with the Gnomes. His excitement was palpable, and Thalric believed that the magnificent creatures he considered friends were very happy to know that there was someone out there who appreciated them, who saw the beauty in their world and wanted to know more.

Creighton was unique. He was special. Thalric wanted to ensure his boy understood that, wanted his boy to feel how much he meant to him.

Their time together in the bedroom had made Thalric ravenous. He wanted more of his mate, wanted to wrap him up and keep him close always. Creighton trusted his Daddy.

While he might not know Thalric as he was in person, he still knew enough about the other man to be able to say with confidence that he was safe.

And now Thalric had Creighton in his arms. His boy was half naked, and while he'd been somewhat hesitant because he thought Thalric would leave after this visit, he'd believed Thalric's explanations and then sunk into a sort of dazed state.

Thalric chuckled softly to himself, not wanting to jar his boy. The water poured in the shower, and he needed to get himself unclothed and get the rest of his boy's outfit off.

First, he took Creighton's glasses off. The delicate item worried him. He felt as if they would break if he stared at them for too long.

With Creighton's glasses off, Thalric was able to convince his boy to lean against the counter as Thalric dropped to his knees and opened his boy's pants. He eased everything down, taking extra care to not hurt Creighton.

His boy was still semi-hard, and even though he was a bit out of it, he could probably still feel what was being done to his body. Thalric got his pants off along with his socks and shoes, then sat his naked boy on the counter while he stripped his own clothes off at a much faster pace.

Creighton watched him, still dazed, but Thalric could sense the lust riding off his mate. His cock hardened, happy to know that he was bringing pleasure to his boy in some way.

When he was fully bare, he lifted Creighton from the counter and walked them both into the shower stall. Water poured down all around them, and steam filled the space. It felt wonderful on Thalric's stiff muscles. While he had relaxed after getting to his boy and having things work out, he could admit that the tension he'd held had been there for a while.

Now that it had all passed, he could admit that maybe he'd been feeling more nervous than he expected.

The water beat down around them, and Thalric held his mate close. "Little Biter," he said, when the small vampire nuzzled against his chest.

The water running down Thalric's skin had felt glorious a moment ago. Now it was arousing, because every single drop that came, Creighton would lick up. Thalric groaned as his mate's tongue swept over him again and again. How could anyone resist his boy? He was thankful not to have to fight anyone for his boy's attention, but he still pondered over how anyone could pass him up.

Creighton continued to lick at his skin as Thalric tried to get his boy clean. There was no use in fighting how good it all felt. No way to ignore just how amazing Creighton's mouth felt on his skin. When they had been kissing earlier, his mate had nipped Thalric's mouth. He could taste the blood, but it was quickly sucked up.

As Creighton's kiss turned frenzied, Thalric wanted more of that — more drugging kisses and writhing bodies — but they had to get clean first. He needed to make sure his boy was cared for.

He also had the sneaking suspicion that his boy was tired, and that maybe if all played out well, he could convince him to lie down for a while. Creighton was pliant in Thalric's hands.

With surprising efficiency, Thalric was able to get his boy soaped up and rinsed off in no time. He had to contend with his throbbing erection, but it was fine. He doubted it would go down anytime soon anyway, considering how intoxicating it was to be around his Little Biter.

Creighton stumbled out of the shower, and Thalric only just managed to catch him. When he stood him upright, his boy wrapped his arms around Thalric's waist and nuzzled into his chest yet again. "Sleepy, Daddy," Creighton mumbled.

He smiled at the baby voice. His boy was full of surprises. All those nights he'd wondered if he would ever hear his Little Biter's voice. All those times he'd considered whether or not he'd get to hold him. It was worth it to be here now, to be with his mate.

Thalric managed to get them out of the bathroom, dried, and into the room. Then he slipped one of his shirts over Creighton's head and eased his boy into bed. He went back into the bathroom to hang up their wet towels and to retrieve Creighton's glasses.

When he turned to look in the mirror and caught sight of himself, he chuckled. His hair was a mess, and he looked as if he'd been thoroughly ravished.

He could understand now why Romilly wasn't around much since finding his mate. If it weren't for the council vote, Thalric would demand that he and Creighton have some time to settle in.

It only seemed fair, but he had responsibilities. And since he knew where Creighton was and trusted his mate, he knew the other man wouldn't run away. They had time. They would get to explore together.

He turned off the lights and climbed into bed beside his mate. Creighton immediately rolled over, snuggling into his broad chest. Thalric slid his arm around his mate and then used his other to lift Creighton's thigh onto his. The position put Creighton pressed against his side.

Feeling him there and not going further was something akin to torture, but he knew that his boy was exhausted. He'd said as much, and his body was sinking deeper and deeper into an unconscious state as time wore on.

Creighton needed to be rested before they went any further, before Thalric put his mark on Creighton's neck and claimed him forever. The bond was already forming. It had started before Creighton's blockers had faded.

There was no denying that Thalric could feel Creighton's emotions, which was why he knew for a fact his boy was exhausted. He could tell when he was anxious and when the tension inside of him was seconds from snapping.

Thalric didn't want to cause that type of disruption, and his boy would do better in conversation, in all of it, once he slept.

Creighton hummed as he rubbed his face like a cat against Thalric's chest. Thalric rubbed along his side, then used his other hand to hold his boy's head steady as he leaned down to kiss those beautiful curls.

"Rest, Little Biter. We will talk more once you have slept."

Creighton mumbled something under his breath, but it quickly disappeared as he began to softly snore. Thalric fought back the laugh that came up. It would disturb his mate, and he would never forgive himself if Creighton was offended.

As he lay there, as still as possible, listening to his mate's soft snores, Thalric went over the events of the day. He thought of it piece by piece and replayed it in his mind in a loop. He was on his second run-through when a voice in his head brought him up short.

Uncle, Romilly said, gently prodding as if he didn't want to disturb anything.

Internally he scoffed, to which Romilly chuckled and said, "I know this is probably awkward, but I didn't want to come into the room and disturb you."

"Good," Thalric replied. "I'd hate to have to kill you for looking at my mate."

"I see," Romilly said. "So the Gnomes were correct that you have found your mate."

"The Gnomes knew?" Thalric questioned, his voice laced with sarcasm. Of course they knew. Gnomes were far more powerful than people gave them credit for.

Romilly hummed, not picking up on the tone. "They did. When I took Archer to visit them, they informed me that you had found your mate and would be staying. They were overjoyed at having you close again, and honestly, that only made them more rambunctious with Archer. I had to practically drag my boy away before they started planning some elaborate surprise party for you."

"Why would you ruin their fun like that?" Thalric teased through the mental connection.

If an eye roll had an audible noise, it would have been the sound Romilly made. "Don't encourage them. My point is simply that I want you to know

that I support you, whatever that looks like. We can replace your station at the other horde, and I will absolutely welcome your mate with open arms. Eden informed me as well that he's a good guy."

"He's the best," Thalric replied, his voice gentle.

"Yes, the mate bond does make you instantly trust them," Romilly started, but was cut off when Thalric interrupted.

"No, I already knew him. We met online and had been talking, but had never seen each other or met in person. He's the man I've been slowly falling in love with for years."

It was quiet for a moment, then another voice came in.

"Mr. Uncle, you made Daddy tear up. He told me I had to connect to your brain, but it's really hard because I'm human, so please no crying."

The unmistakably little sound of Archer's voice made Thalric smile. The sweet Little was adorable. He'd hoped that once he and Creighton were out of their newly-mated phase, as well as Romilly and Archer, the Littles could get together and spend some time with one another — maybe in the playroom with Eden and Hadrian about, though Hadrian had been absent as well.

So much was going on in the castle, so much going on in San Noctis. It felt as if every day brought some new question or revelation. His horde had been in an even state for a long time. They didn't need him.

San Noctis didn't truly need him either, but maybe he could find a way to be useful here too. He was going to move no matter what after realizing his mate was here. His Little Biter.

The idea that he would face a new challenge was appealing. It made him want more.

"Go love on your Daddy, Little Archer. I'm going to make sure my mate is rested. Maybe tomorrow the two of you can play together," Thalric said softly. He didn't want Archer to feel as if he was being given a command. That would be one way to upset his nephew even more.

Sounds fun. The words were the last thing he heard before the mental bond cut out.

When it was just him in his mind again, he sighed and let his head sink deeper into the pillow. New beginnings awaited him. Come morning, he would find out just what that meant.

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CHAPTER 14

CREIGHTON

CREIGHTON WOKE UP WITH A GROAN. His cock was rock hard and throbbing, and his fangs had descended. He ached to bite into something. No, not something.

Someone.

His mate.

Just like that, the reality of it all came into focus. His mate was here. He knew who his mate was, and he'd bitten him in a sort of claiming act. Creighton, for a moment, was horrified.

Sure, he had permission, but they were both in shock. They were both dealing with the knowledge that they had just found their mate.

Were they being rational? Did they truly know the depth of what they were agreeing to? Had he taken advantage of his Daddy?

Creighton shivered at the thought that he might have done something wrong with his mate. That he might have misread a situation. His panic stopped when he felt a hand run up his back.

"What's wrong?" Thalric said in a sleepy voice.

"Why do you think something's wrong?" Creighton said, horrified to know he'd woken the other man up. Taking advantage of him was bad and

interrupting his sleep was even worse.

Thalric hummed. "Can feel it," he mumbled. "Can feel you," he added.

Creighton paused. He could feel him. Could feel his panic. It sounded like it could be a lie. Like the man was trying to pull his leg or something. But when he closed his eyes and listened, he could feel it too. Could feel the way his mate was drowsy, then fighting the urge to go straight back to sleep.

"But how?" he whispered. "How can I?"

Thalric rumbled, and the move vibrated Creighton's head where it lay against his chest. "Mate," he said, voice thick. "You are my mate. Therefore, I feel what you feel."

"But usually you have to exchange bites before that happens."

Thalric chuckled at that. "Yes, but I'm a powerful dragon, and you're a vampire. One who I believe to be much stronger than you let others see. Am I right, Little Biter?"

The man's voice was intoxicating. It made Creighton want to simply agree with everything he said, but he caught himself before nodding along. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said instead. "I'm just a normal person."

Thalric didn't immediately agree with him. In fact, he didn't say anything to agree or disagree. Creighton wondered if he'd gone too far, if the little white lie wasn't so little when speaking with his mate, or if Thalric could feel his power the way he was saying. Would their bond reveal the truth of Creighton's past?

Creighton groaned, not looking forward to that discussion. He never wanted to have to explain his past or why he didn't live with his family anymore. They were trouble, plain and simple, and he didn't want to be around them.

Not to mention, they didn't understand the fact that he was gay. To them, it only made sense that he carry on like them. That he produce more heirs for the family line and behave how they wanted.

Creighton couldn't. He spent the first half of his life trying. He really did. But there comes a point in everyone's life where the mask slips away, where they can no longer pretend.

For Creighton, that mask slipping away led to his need to leave.

"One day you will tell me all of it," Thalric rumbled as he lifted Creighton higher up the bed and nuzzled against his cheek. "You will tell me, and it will be handled."

Creighton hummed happily. The promise of those words, the threat behind them, was petty of him to enjoy... but he really, really loved it.

The two of them lay together, cuddling, whispering back and forth about how good the other one felt, how comfortable they were, how relaxed it all was.

Eventually, though, the need for more overtook Creighton. It made him ravenous. How could he not want more with a man like Thalric beside him, beneath him?

Creighton whimpered as he pressed against his mate. "Daddy," he whined.

His Daddy was happy to be there, happy to pull him closer and rub against him.

"Need you. Want you."

As soon as he said the words, Creighton was placed onto his back with Thalric hovering over him. They kissed, and it was everything and more. Creighton sank into it, into the touch and feel of his Daddy. The other man's hands roamed all over Creighton, stroking his skin, squeezing. When those large hands wrapped around Creighton's cock, he jolted.

"Oh, Daddy," he panted.

Thalric took those words and ran with them. He stroked faster while lavishing attention on Creighton's neck, tasting him, licking and sucking, no doubt leaving marks. Even though Creighton's skin was golden brown, it could still bruise. He had no doubts that it would, but his mate was making sure anyone who saw him knew he was no longer available.

"Please," he panted.

Thalric pulled back and tore at their clothes. Soon enough they were naked, and it gave Creighton a sense of relief to have his body bared to his mate. Thalric leaned down until their skin was touching, and he began to rut against Creighton. Their cocks were lined up, but neither was touching them directly. They simply let the natural friction bring them both closer and closer to their release.

Creighton whined. He wanted more, wanted everything. He wasn't sure that he could have it though. Not when there was still some truth not yet shared.

His Daddy wasn't taking no for an answer, though. The next moment, he felt the weight shift on top of him, and Thalric was moving down his body until his mouth hovered over Creighton's cock. His Daddy licked his lips, staring at Creighton's length like it was the most delicious thing he'd ever seen.

"Daddy," he whispered. He was too focused on the look in his mate's eyes, the way that he seemed ready to fall completely apart, to say anything else.

His Daddy swallowed him down nearly whole. It was an overwhelm of euphoria. He arched up, crying out at how good it felt. He craved more of this. His Daddy made him feel so good. So, so good.

"Daddy," he panted. "Please."

Thalric hummed. His mouth wrapped around Creighton's shaft as his head bobbed up and down, over and over again, practically sucking Creighton's soul out of his body. At least, that's what it felt like. It felt like he'd never find balance again. He was seconds away from coming when his Daddy pulled off.

"No, no, no, no," he reached out as if to stop the other man.

His Daddy shook his head. He quickly crawled back up Creighton's body and took his mouth in a passionate kiss. Creighton kissed him back recklessly. Their tongues tangled together, and it felt like nothing could be better than this. He wasn't even mad that he'd been left hanging, that he was on the edge without reprieve.

But then his Daddy pulled back, and in the man's hand was a vial.

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"What's that?" Creighton panted.

"It's to open you up. The castle's Fae healer made it for me. He's become part of the horde in a sense."

Creighton's eyes went wide. "The Fae healer as part of the horde?"

It was not unheard of for him to come across the Fae. He'd seen several in the shop over the years when they'd come to San Noctis. A few were regulars who ordered from him and had it shipped. But to know that the royal family was using one for their own efforts was different.

"Little Biter," Thalric said, his gaze moving from the vial to Creighton. "Would you like me not to? I can find something else."

"No, it's fine if you think it's okay. But when did you—?"

Thalric smiled, and it was almost a sheepish look. Creighton giggled.

Thalric cleared his throat. "I wanted to be prepared in case."

"In case of what?" Creighton asked.

Thalric stared at him, gaze steady. "In case I met you."

"Me?" Creighton asked, astonished.

"Yes. I — well, I suspected my Little Biter was here after speaking with Eden about his dragons. He showed me the picture, and I made the connection in my head."

"And you didn't know I was your mate?" Creighton whispered, unsure of how he felt about it.

"I didn't, but fate knew that we needed time together before we met. She knew that I had to build a connection with you, that we had to trust one another, that we needed to share about ourselves before we were put in the romantic entanglement that comes with a mating bond. Can you agree that it was best this way, mate?"

Creighton nodded slowly. He could see why it was better.

"You want me to use this, then?"

Creighton nodded again.

"No — you must use your words." Thalric was more firm that time.

Creighton swallowed and said, "Yes, please, Daddy. Do whatever you can. I want you inside me."

Creighton watched his mate transform at that. His body didn't change — it was his demeanor that shifted. The glow in his eyes was familiar, but the speed at which he moved and the attention he lavished on Creighton was still so new.

Creighton's lower body was lifted and pillows placed beneath him. The vial was uncapped, and as he watched, a few drops fell from it into his body. Thalric capped the vial and tucked it away in the nightstand before he came back. He kept his eyes on Creighton's face as his fingers pushed against Creighton's rim.

It should have burned. Should have felt like a stretch. Creighton knew this much from his own experience.

None of that happened.

It was like his body *literally* opened up. The ease with which he spread was astonishing.

Thalric gave him a grin that was pure heat. "Yes, I know, Little Biter. The vial is meant to make it easy to stretch you. It only takes away the pain, so the pleasure—"

His mate didn't get to finish the sentence, because as his fingers curled, every ounce of Creighton came to life. He groaned long and loud as his

back arched up and his fingers clawed at the sheets.

"Daddy."

Thalric grunted. He pumped his fingers in and out a few more times, then pulled out and ran his hand along his shaft. He lined the crown up with Creighton's entrance and pushed in with one solid stroke.

Creighton was full. He was so, so very full.

"Mate," Thalric said, his voice that familiar rumble. The dragon was on the edge. Creighton's vampire nature was at the forefront too. His fangs descended, and his eyes glowed.

"Daddy," he said, garbled around his canines. "You. Need you."

At Creighton's insistence, his approval, Thalric began to move in earnest. The thrusts were so hard they shook the bed, made the headboard pound against the wall, and Creighton had to hold on for dear life.

There was no reprieve, no slowing down. The two of them were too wound up. Creighton's cock bobbed between them as the scent of the room shifted, changing as their pheromones released.

"My mate. My Little Biter. My Omega. Mine." With every word, Thalric's hips punched forward.

Creighton tugged at his mate, wanting him closer, wanting to bite him again, needing it. But instead of taking what he knew his mate would offer, Creighton tilted his head and said, "Mark me, Daddy. Please finish the bond."

Thalric had no hope of stopping. His jaw opened wide, and he leaned down to the exposed area. The tearing of skin was a sharp pain that quickly evened out as the dragon sealed their fate.

CHAPTER 15

THALRIC

THE MOMENT his teeth sank into his mate's neck, Thalric felt the world open up before him. He gained a sense of clarity that had not been there in his many centuries of life. His dragon roared with excitement. He had no doubt that the rest of the house — all of the Saint family — could feel it. It wasn't an audible sound, but the bond surely had to be exploding with his joy.

Creighton went quiet beneath him. He continued to thrust his hips as pleasure rose and rose until his boy clamped down around him, his body gripping Thalric's length in a way that gave him no chance to stop the impending orgasm. It crashed through him, tearing up his spine like fire coming from his dragon's mouth.

He was overwhelmed, and he was captivated. This was his mate, the person he got to spend the rest of his immortal life with. He was bonded to him now, completely connected.

No one could take him away or challenge this.

Creighton sank blissfully deeper into the bed as his muscles went lax. Thalric slowed his hips until he was simply still inside his mate. He pulled his teeth free and licked the wound, making sure it would heal.

Vampires could heal themselves, but a mate bite was often tricky business, and it was always best to seal it with saliva, both as a sign of consent and as

pure joy in being able to lay claim to the place where his mark would stand, where the scar would be right next to the bruises he'd made for his boy.

"Yes," he thought. "Everyone will see and know. They'll smell me on you. Know that we are together in every way."

He stayed where he was for a few moments, hovering over his mate, watching the slow movements of Creighton's chest as his energy came back to a gentle hum.

Thalric focused on their bond, on the way it slipped into place, how he could feel every bit of his mate. It was like there was no more veil between them.

Every bit of their connection was visible.

Every bit of Creighton was visible.

So when he came across darker areas, he paused. He didn't want to intrude, didn't want to go where he shouldn't be. But then a very sleepy Creighton said, "Go ahead, Daddy. I don't want to have to say it out loud."

With Thalric's dragon side and the magical bond between them, he was able to weave through Creighton's memories, through his subconscious. It wasn't like a movie playing, but the emotions were very clear. How old he was, who he was with, that sort of thing. So Thalric went about piecing together what he could. What in the world did his mate not want to say to him?

The rip of pain tore through him as he unveiled the first layer. He wanted to scream out, to fight someone, to let his dragon forth and tear them apart. Creighton's hand came to his cheek, grounding him, giving him comfort.

"It's okay," he said softly. "It's the past."

Thalric shook his head, closing his eyes tight as he continued through. Every jarring memory, every dark spot was revealed to him. All the pain and the hatred, the fear, the unacceptance his mate had faced.

Creighton had been through so much. He'd been hurt by people he thought would love him, people who should have loved him. His own family.

When he finished, Thalric pulled back and opened his eyes. His mate was there, tears forming. "Do you hate me now?" he asked.

Thalric scooped him up into his arms and rolled them onto their sides. He squeezed Creighton as tightly as he could without hurting him. "I could never hate you, Little Biter. Never — you hear me? You are everything, the other part of me. I'm furious for what you've been through, for the people in your life who treated you that way."

Creighton nodded. "My family. They're not nice people."

"I could tell that much," Thalric said, not sarcastically, just plainly, because feeling his mate's pain had been horrific. He wasn't joking about going back to deal with anyone who had done him wrong.

"My family is powerful amongst vampires, you could say." Thalric hummed, letting his fingers run down his mate's back, encouraging him without saying anything else.

"Well, I didn't fit their picture-perfect lifestyle. I didn't fit the image they wanted to show others, the need to continue the family line. It was all lost on me. I'm not an Omega, not in the way that dragons have Omegas. It's different for vampires."

Thalric nodded and pulled back. One hand cupped his mate's cheek. "I know what I said before, but I don't expect you to be a dragon Omega. You are mine, pure and simple. The rest are unnecessary titles."

Creighton's brow dipped. "But you're an Alpha. The entire Saint family is powerful, and you deserve partners who balance you."

Thalric shook his head quickly. "No. I need someone who completes me in the sense that you're my mate, my fated one, the person that I've fallen in love with before I ever saw you. I'll continue to love you. Omega or not, dragon or not, none of that matters at the end of the day. Fate knew this and gifted you to me. Gifted me to you. We have each other. We are what the other needs, through thick and thin and every single event that happens from now on. We'll be there for one another."

Creighton was silent for several long minutes. Thalric let him sit there with the words. He knew his boy needed to absorb what he was saying, that he

needed to settle into the new reality of what was going on between them.

"But you and the horde and—"

Thalric put his hand over Creighton's mouth. "I already told you that they will be reassigned. While you were sleeping last night, Romilly connected to me in a mind link and reinforced that promise. He is already looking for someone to replace me. You don't have to worry about me leaving. That's not an issue."

Creighton nodded behind Thalric's fingers still pressed against his mouth.

"Now, if we want to talk about something that might really be an issue," Thalric started, "we could talk about your work. Right now, as it stands, you've got that storefront, which is great from what I hear. Eden says it's lovely. But anyone could walk in. Anyone could get to you and harm you. They could flirt with you." Thalric's voice took on a dark edge as the thought alone made him furious.

Creighton giggled and pulled his mate's hand away. "No one is going to flirt with me. They haven't. They come for the stuffies and they leave. That's it."

Thalric hummed, not quite believing it. "And as for my work," Creighton continued, "I have to keep it. There's no way around it. That's my store."

Thalric waited for a moment before he rebutted the notion. He'd already been thinking about this. From the moment he suspected his Little Biter and the stuffy maker were the same person in San Noctis, he needed to come up with a solution. And it was quite simple, really.

"What if you started to wind down the shop? I could come to work with you, and we could get everything packed up."

"You can't go to work with me. You have to deal with the royal court," Creighton said, waving his hand around since he didn't have the words to describe what he was trying to say.

Thalric shook his head. "That can wait. I am thinking more along the lines of me being with you. The court will convene when it convenes. That, or you could text me all day. I need to have eyes on you, ears on you. If I lose

contact, my dragon is going to go feral and tear apart the whole damn town."

Creighton smiled softly at that. Thalric could tell he liked the idea of the dragon going on a rampage. Even if neither one of them wanted to see San Noctis destroyed, it was still a romantic gesture of sorts.

"There is another option," Thalric started, "and it would still involve you and me packing your stuff up. But instead of closing up shop with nowhere else to go, you could work here in the castle. My suite is massive, and I could easily carve out space for you to work on your stuffies. If you went from a storefront to an order-only situation, you could work at your own pace from here. We could be together, and I could help you with things. The entire Saint family would support you, and anyone who visited might be interested in something you've made. You can't tell me that Eden and Hadrian don't have people coming by."

Creighton tilted his head. "I actually don't know. Eden and I mostly talk about the stuffies I've made for him or what I'm working on for myself. We don't really talk about the royal family's business too much."

Thalric nodded. "That's understandable, but still. You have to know that there is a reason for my suggestion, and it's not just keeping you close. Your safety is paramount. As the mate to a royal, even if it's a royal outside of the immediate family, a target will be put on your back. People may not even realize who you are when they first come across you, but the scent of me, the scent of someone connected to the Saint family, is enough to bring danger to your doorstep. I would never forgive myself if something happened."

Thalric rushed out the words one after another, hoping to cut off whatever ways his mate could find to get around his suggestion.

It was true. He didn't want to risk his mate's safety.

He didn't know if it would ever come up, but he couldn't take the chance. Why play fast and loose when you could play it safe? They might be immortal beings, but everyone could be killed, and those who wanted someone supernatural dead knew of those ways.

Creighton bit his lip, and his hands ran through the hair on Thalric's chest, as if he was soothing himself. It made Thalric happy. It also reminded him of something. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said.

He turned over to the nightstand. He'd gotten up once in the middle of the night to use the restroom, and he'd grabbed something for his Little Biter while the other man was sleeping.

When he turned back around with the Gnome in hand for Creighton, there was a sharp squeal, and the creature was snatched out of Thalric's hands. He watched as his boy hugged the Gnome to his chest and closed his eyes, rocking side to side.

Thalric took that moment to grab Creighton's glasses as well. When his boy opened his eyes, he motioned to them. Creighton tipped his head forward, and Thalric eased them on, careful not to poke his eye or get anything hung up in his curls.

With his glasses on and his Gnome in his arms, Creighton looked adorable. Thalric pulled him to his chest, and they lay there together. Thalric hummed an old song he remembered his grandmother singing. One that he and his sister had listened to many times. He knew Mira had sung it to her children when they were younger, that the boys knew it by heart and would sing along if he started it out loud.

For now, he wanted to use the song to comfort his mate, to bring him peace of mind, to let him know that their bond was going to become even stronger. Soon they would be able to speak in each other's minds, just like the Saint family did. When Mira married into them, she also gained some of those abilities, and they extended to Thalric. At first, he'd been unsettled by the idea, but now he was thankful for it. Who else got to say that they could connect to their mate on such a level?

Creighton eventually got hungry, and so did Thalric. "Would you like me to send for something, or do you want to go down and see what everyone is doing today?"

Creighton hesitated for a moment. "I don't know. Do I have to choose?" He spoke shyly, as if he was afraid of what the answer might be.

Thalric smiled at him. "You don't have to make any decisions. I can take over if that's what you feel is best."

Creighton beamed up at him. Then he leaned forward and quickly pressed a kiss against Thalric's lips. The move was innocent, and yet it aroused Thalric so much he groaned and had to take a steadying breath. "I need to let you rest more before we do anything," he said. "So we have to get out of this bed now."

At his insistence, Creighton scrambled out of bed and ran to the bathroom. Thalric chuckled loudly, pushing the blanket off and moving at a slower pace to gather what they would need. He picked out clothes for himself and then went into the closet to the area he had designated for his mate.

You see, in the midst of all those late-night conversations he'd had with his Little Biter, he had asked the most seemingly pointless questions at the time. *What do you like to read? Your favorite color? What size shoe do you wear? What is your favorite type of outfit?* It was meant to just pass the time. Information they shared because they didn't want to stop communicating. When the deep talks became too much, they'd go back to the more surface-level things.

Thalric had an entire bank of information on his mate, which meant that once he suspected his Little Biter was local, he had some clothes rushed to him. Things he knew might comfort his mate and make him feel welcome. Granted, he didn't know for certain it was his mate at the time.

Creighton poked his head out of the bathroom, his pink cheeks speaking of his confusion. "Daddy, I don't know what to do."

The rushed-out words made Thalric chuckle. He came out of the closet holding up an outfit. Creighton's mouth dropped into an "O." Then one arm came out of the door, and he made a beckoning motion.

Thalric shook his head and sat on the edge of the bed. "No — you come here, and I will get you dressed."

Creighton swallowed and hesitated for a moment. Thalric waited him out. This was all new. It was different, and if he wanted his boy to continue to trust him, he needed to have patience. As he waited, he thought of all the

things he wanted to do with his mate. All the ways he believed they could grow and spend time together that would comfort them both. The playdates they could have, the space he could make in his room for Creighton to be Little. He thought of the opportunities that would come with time, the way his mate would be able to make friends within their community, within their family.

As he got lost in his thoughts, an adorable Creighton slipped through the door.

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EPILOGUE

CREIGHTON

THE LOOK on his Daddy's face made Creighton incredibly happy. Even in his Little mind, he understood how important all of this was to their bond. Trusting Thalric in everything meant a great deal.

"Come, boy," Daddy called out. "Let me get you dressed. Then I'll feed you."

Creighton crossed the room carefully, each step measured. He felt like he was walking to the end of things. Like this was the final step towards his happily ever after. That wasn't the case. He had his mate. They were already bonded, between his bite to Daddy's wrist and then Daddy's bite to his neck.

It was done. Time would strengthen their bond. There was no reversing it, though. He was thankful for it, really. He wanted to always belong to Daddy.

When he reached Thalric, his mate, his Daddy slid his legs further apart and motioned Creighton to go between them. He was naked, utterly and completely bare, but he did as instructed.

For all the vulnerability it brought, there was also comfort. He didn't have to think, or rather, overthink. And he didn't have to ask if what he was doing was good enough. The smile on his Daddy's face, the joy he felt through the bond, and the heat pouring off the dragon, were enough.

When his Daddy didn't immediately put the clothing stacked beside him on Creighton, he felt a sliver of confusion. His Daddy must have felt the emotion because he shook his head and reached for the shirt. Creighton watched as he shook it out and eased it over Creighton's head.

The fabric was buttery-soft. It slid over him, and when he raised his arms up to push them through, he was rewarded with even more of that embrace.

Once that was on him, his Daddy picked up underwear, the exact kind that Creighton liked, and motioned for him to step inside them. A pair of matching pants went with the shirt, and Creighton couldn't help but gasp when he was fully ensconced in the material.

"Daddy," he whispered. He ran his hands over it, and for the first time since coming out of the bathroom, he realized his Daddy had brought the exact type of outfit he'd told him he liked. Loose, baggy clothing in deep autumn colors. The softness was a given, since Creighton preferred that.

His love of stuffies mirrored his own desires.

"Do you like it?" Daddy asked, his gaze trailing over Creighton even though his hands remained on his thighs.

"Yes, Daddy," he said cheerfully. "I love it. It's perfect."

Taking a chance, Creighton reached down and grabbed his Daddy's wrist, then brought it up. He used the hand to pet his chest and down his abs. He didn't go further. This wasn't about sex. It was about connection and understanding. "See how soft?"

His mate's eyes glowed, and his smile grew even wider. "I do see, my boy. It's perfect for you. I knew the moment I suspected you were here that I had to get things for you. If fate was so lucky as to bring you to me, I wanted you close and comfortable."

Creighton nearly melted at the words. His Daddy was so perfect. He thought ahead and planned for things since he knew Creighton inside and out because of their connection through the app. Daddy didn't care that Creighton wasn't a dragon and didn't hold any political weight in San Noctis. Nor did he care that Creighton's past was sad and often left him feeling down.

Daddy was prepared to take on all of him.

There were a few more moments of petting, and then his Daddy shook his hand to have Creighton release it. He tugged at Creighton's waist until he was sitting across one of Daddy's thighs. He wiggled a little to get more comfortable, then laid his head on Daddy's shoulder.

"I'm going to call down to Belinda to order you some food. You need to eat after all of that, and I don't think you want to try to face my family right now."

Creighton nodded, rubbing his face against his Daddy's shoulder. He was a bit exhausted from the night before, and that morning had been a lot. He wanted to have time alone with this man who was now immortally bonded to him. The other half of his soul. He needed to know they worked.

The voice in his head scoffed. *Of course they worked. It was a given.* The only thing he truly needed was time. People didn't understand that new mates needed as much time as possible to be with one another. It solidified the bond and soothed their inner beings. No matter what type of supernatural creature they were, there was a part of them that craved that unity.

Daddy kissed his head and then pulled out his phone. Creighton could hear him speaking with someone on the line. He heard mention of several different foods, all of which were his favorites. Again, yet another way his Daddy knew him. At some point he zoned out because he didn't need to know everything that was happening around him. His Daddy would keep him safe.

They sat there quietly together, neither one moving nor saying anything. Just soaking in the bond that hummed through them. The contentment that poured out of them both in waves.

A knock on the door sometime later drew Creighton from his peaceful daze. "Climb onto the bed, sweet boy. I'm going to get the food."

Daddy lifted him and eased him onto the mattress, where Creighton crawled towards the middle and sat with his legs crossed. He adjusted his glasses, which were a bit askew from how he'd been lying on his Daddy's shoulder.

He turned to look at his mate, who was halfway across the room, when the door opened of its own accord. A hand came through waving, and his Daddy chuckled.

"I don't want to see any naked bits, but I wanted to bring you breakfast myself."

The voice was Mira's.

"Come in, sister. I should have known you would intercept our meal."

The door pushed open further, and a cart rolled through, followed quickly by Mira. She was smiling, looking from one to the other. She discreetly sniffed the air and, if anything, became even happier. She bounced on the balls of her feet and pushed the cart over to her brother, who stood there with his hands on his hips, pants slung low, looking like a delightful snack that Creighton couldn't wait to take another bite out of.

He balled his fists, not wanting to let the aroma of his desire interrupt whatever the former queen had come to see about. He didn't think she would interfere in any way, but if she cast judgment, it could be devastating.

Daddy opened his arms, and Mira bounced over to them. They hugged for a moment, then she pulled away and looked at Creighton. Her hands pressed together under her chin. "I cannot say or express how happy I am that you're here, that you and my brother are now mated. It is an honor to have you as part of our family."

"Creighton Hale." Creighton's eyes widened. Hearing his former last name was a doozy. He had taken to not using it much with people. First name basis was fine, because people tended to think of someone by what their species was, so he was Creighton the vampire who made stuffies. "You know?" he choked out.

Daddy came over, but Creighton stopped him with a hand up. He needed a clear mind, and he would sink into the comfort of his mate's embrace too quickly. He could tell it bothered the other man from the way he went stiff. Mira put her hand on her brother's back as she approached.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to upset you. I only wanted to let you know that you are safe here, that I understand what you've been through, and that you are welcomed to this family. Anyone else you've known, any other life you've lived, is long gone. You will be Creighton Saint from here on out."

Daddy looked over at Mira. "He will be Creighton Nyxwing, as you know — that was your original surname."

Mira rolled her eyes, and it made Creighton giggle. "Of course, I remember my own name. Don't be daft. I was simply saying that he's part of the Saint family now, as you are. I believe when you formally announce yourselves as a mated couple, you should list your surnames as Saint, so no one misunderstands how important you are to this family, to this entire kingdom of people."

Creighton fought back tears at her pronouncement. It was everything he had ever hoped for in a maternal figure. He'd wanted his parents to love him, to accept him as he was, but he was never quite what they wanted or needed. He thought he'd never experience it.

Then came Mira Saint, a woman who by all rights didn't need to welcome him. She chose to. She chose him, just like his Daddy had. The app might have matched them through some magical algorithm, through fate itself. Still, it took intention to show up every single day, to text and to encourage someone, to love on them from afar without knowing anything more than details about their life; not what they looked like or how they sounded.

The siblings separated, and Mira held her brother's hands, swinging them side to side. "I won't stay long. I need to check on my other children, because currently, from what I understand, they're all scattered and struggling."

Creighton tilted his head, curious to know more. "Is everyone okay?"

Mira shook her head sadly. "I don't know that they are. Hadrian has been trying to keep Eden company and cheer him up. It doesn't seem to be working. Soren and Romilly are in meetings about everything going on with the Fae, and Archer is in the playroom that Romilly built him. That means Eden has been alone."

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Creighton perked up at that. "Does he want me to come play with him? I can do that, absolutely." He bounced a little, and Mira smiled at him. There was a soft growl, and when Creighton looked at his Daddy, he could see his dragon's glowing eyes. "Or maybe I'll stay here," he said quickly.

Mira laughed loudly — free and joyful. "Yes, I imagine you should." She let go of her brother's hands, then pushed him towards the bed as well. She rolled the cart the rest of the way over to them and then said her goodbyes.

When she was gone, Daddy laid all the trays of food on the bed. "You're okay with us eating here?" Creighton asked.

"If it gets messy, we will wash it. The comforter is up so it's not as if we're laying in our own lovemaking. Even if we were, I love the taste of you. It wouldn't bother me one bit." The salacious grin thrown Creighton's way made him shiver.

They ate, and his Daddy watched him take every single bite as he slowly ate his own food. Creighton would have pressed him to know why he wasn't diving in — the man had to be starving given what had happened between them earlier — but he was too enamored with his own meal to really question it.

Another knock at the door came right as they were finishing up.

"Come in," Daddy called out.

This time it was another Saint. Eden leaned through the door, his expression subdued. "Can I talk to Creighton?" he said.

"Of course you can, nephew. Come in."

Eden shifted through the door at a slow pace. The excited, energetic man that Creighton knew so well was nowhere to be found. With the door closed

behind him, Eden crossed the space and stood at the side of the bed. He paused there, looking at Creighton as if he wanted Creighton to read his mind.

"Have a seat. I'm going to get all this food put away, and you two can talk," his mate said as he stood.

Creighton shifted over a little and patted the space beside him. Eden clambered onto the bed and pressed the side of his body directly against Creighton's. "Can I?" he asked as he leaned over.

"Yes," Creighton said easily, understanding that Eden wanted to lean on him.

The connection was soothing in a way. Eden melted a bit, the stiffness he'd had drifting away. Daddy cleared up the food as promised and pushed the cart out into the hallway. He used his phone to call down to the kitchen to let them know they were done, then went to wash his hands before coming back with a damp cloth to clean Creighton's face.

Eden was quiet through it all, neither of them pressing at whatever had brought him there. He was free to just be. It was only when his uncle was finally done and settled back on the edge of the bed that Eden spoke.

"They've delayed the council vote again. There's tension between the parties, and it's reflecting in the horde. Romilly says he needs to do damage control, and Soren is more worried about the Fae than helping with it. Hadrian is stuck in the middle as well as working on something secretive for Dad. I feel so alone." The last part came as a whisper.

Creighton reached out and laced his fingers with Eden's, hoping it would offer more comfort. His Daddy took Eden's free hand. The three of them were connected, sharing energy and a warmth that Creighton hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"I'm sure they'll figure it out," Creighton said. "They have to, right?" His gaze went to his mate. He'd been involved in everything going on with the council, so he had to know something.

His Daddy shook his head slowly. "There is a lot more going on. I had messages on my phone this morning about it when I woke up. It's not

looking too good, but I believe it will come to a head. For now, I think they're just suspending it for a little while until things die down."

Eden gave a wobbly nod. "Yes, it's an indefinite pause. Since there's nothing pressing that the council needs to review, they said it could wait. That's not the way it normally works, of course, and I really, really wanted them to be done with this so I could work on my own situation." He paused. "On your stuff?" his Daddy asked.

"Yes. My mates are competing against each other, and they're not happy. I don't want them to hate each other before they find me and can love me."

Creighton bit his lip. He wanted to mention that Darius had come into the shop, that he knew about the dragon and maybe Eden already had one mate in the bag — but he couldn't risk upsetting Eden further. The dragons were meant to be a secret. The fact that Darius had put it all together so easily was not going to help the situation.

Eden vented a while longer and eventually drifted into sleep. Creighton helped his Daddy ease Eden down onto the bed. The pair of them stood beside it, watching as the other man slept peacefully. It was the first time he'd looked calm since he'd come into the room. Even leaning on Creighton's shoulder hadn't done much for him.

Daddy took his hand and led him out of that area of the room and into the more common space of the suite. There was a door in that area that led out into the halls as well, giving them two points of entry. With Eden asleep in the bedroom, they couldn't talk as freely, or they might wake him. His Daddy sat down on the couch and then pulled Creighton down onto his lap.

"My nephew is very troubled by what's happening. I wish I could give him some peace of mind."

"Well," Creighton started, "I do know something that might help, but I didn't want to share in front of Eden."

With his Daddy's encouragement, he explained the events that happened when Darius came into the shop. He didn't leave out a single detail, because any part of it could help them figure out what to do next. When he finished, his Daddy was smiling.

"I believe you're right, my boy. There is hope for Eden with all of this. If one of his mates is already invested in knowing who he is and why he had the stuffy made, then the other will only need a push forward. Since you know what the two dragons look like, we'll be able to find them both. We might even get to help."

Creighton's eyes went wide. "You want to help? Like play matchmaker?"

Daddy hummed. "Not just us. The rest of the Saint family. I'm sure they could all use some focus. Everyone has been scattered about doing their own thing. We need to bring them back together, and what better way than making sure Eden gets his happily ever after?"

Creighton agreed. They would find a way to help Eden.

Everyone deserved to be happy and with their mates. With one Saint already down and mated, and their own recent mating now established, that left only three remaining. If they got Eden taken care of, well then, there would be Soren and Hadrian.

Creighton didn't know what their romantic status was like. He assumed they didn't have anyone; it would have been mentioned. Or perhaps them not being around was because they were with their mate and keeping it secret.

Creighton pondered that thought as he rested against his Daddy's side. So many mysteries. It was a wonder.

Find out how Eden's story unfolds in [Their Greedy Mate](#).

Keep turning the page for a bonus epilogue set in Eden's playroom.

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BONUS EPILOGUE

EDEN'S PLAYROOM was lively in a way that made Creighton giddy. Dressed in comfy pajamas and holding his stuffed Gnome tight, he took in everything around him.

Hadrian was brushing through Eden's hair with delicate strokes while the other man admired his dragon stuffies. They were in their own little bubble of happiness.

Archer sat curled up in Romilly's lap, his mouth latched onto the other man's thumb like it was a lifeline. Romilly was speaking with Soren about something official for the hordes, though his gaze constantly shifted to the boy in his lap.

"What has you so happy, Little Biter?" Thalric whispered to his boy. He could smell the joy pouring off his mate.

Creighton turned to face his Daddy. "I'm happy to be here with everyone. It feels like family."

"We are family," Thalric insisted. "You and I are Saints now. There is no denying this truth."

The little vampire wiggled happily in his spot. It was an adorable sight for Thalric. He would never tire of seeing his mate happy. It was magnified by the fact that everyone seemed to be at ease in the playroom.

"Would you like to play with something, or do you want to relax, my mate? We can do whatever you desire."

Eden made a gagging noise, though he wore a smirk. “No talk of desire in the playroom. Only happy good times for LITTLES, Uncle T.”

“I second Eden’s decree,” Hadrian called out. He clipped a bow to Eden’s new braid, then faced the others. “We should do something as a group. It’s the only way Soren will stop talking business.”

Soren ignored their sibling’s prodding. The conversation with Romilly was necessary. They couldn’t wait for a time when everyone would not be around. After this designated family time—per Archer’s request—they had to go into a series of meetings.

Unfortunately, Romilly did not have the same focus as Soren. The king nodded to Eden as he shifted Archer to an upright position. “You have my attention now. What would you two like to do as a group?”

Thalric knew the instant Eden’s eyes focused on him that he would be made to entertain them all. Sure enough, his nephew clapped his hands and shouted, “Magic! Magic!” in his direction.

Creighton’s brow furrowed. He wasn’t sure what magic his Daddy would provide, but it was very obvious that’s who Eden was focused on. A glance at his mate solidified the fact.

“I’ll do some magic for you, nephew. In return, you must keep my mate company. I don’t want him sitting alone,” Thalric bargained.

Eden made grabby hands at Creighton. “Come here. You can sit with me and Hadrian to watch.”

“Can I come too?” Archer called out shyly. While he’d very much settled into being the king’s mate, he was forever fascinated by any mention or displays of magic. He had suspicions about his own abilities he wasn’t quite ready to tackle.

“Yes!” Eden pumped his fists in the air. “We’ll get into position, then Uncle T can do his thing.”

As the Littles gathered round, Thalric sent a look to Soren and Romilly. The two had managed to stop their business chat. Both their gazes were focused on Thalric, as if they too wanted to see his magic.

He never considered his powers worthy of the attention people gave it. It was fun to use, and it often helped him keep up his pompous personality.

With sudden realization, Thalric noted it had been quite some time since he last put on a face for the masses. He'd let himself be free after settling in San Noctis. Finding his mate also meant he no longer wanted to be anyone but his true self.

Creighton watched his Daddy closely. Something was going through his mind, and the Little worried it was bad.

"He's preparing," Eden stage whispered.

It broke through the tension Creighton felt. Hadrian hummed as if to agree. He wasn't sure if their uncle was actually preparing or if he'd become distracted by something else. It was best to back Eden up whenever possible though.

Romilly chuckled softly at his uncle's wayward thoughts. He had not meant to listen in on them. His intention had been to gently nudge the man into beginning before Soren let out a barb or huffed with impatience.

Their expression was neutral, yet their energy held notes of frustration. Soren knew they were being a bit of an asshole to the others. Leaving was not an option with Eden wanting more closeness. Besides, they so rarely had time to do such.

Romilly smiled when he felt the tension leave Soren. It widened further when he noticed how Thalric focused on the Littles. Most of Romilly's joy was attributed to his little human's glee. It bounced between their bond with a kinetic energy.

"I'll keep this simple, as we are inside," Thalric announced to the group. "Later, if you would like and my mate is up for it, we can go to the gardens or the observatory."

"The Gnomes!" Creighton cried out. He lifted his stuffie in the air, waving it side to side as if the others didn't know what the species in question looked like.

As a whole, the room lit up with happiness for the young vampire's excitement. This was a family. A unit. They understood one another's connection was more than blood. It ran into their life preferences too—hence the playroom.

“Yes, Little Biter. We can see the gnomes after we're done in the playroom and you've had a snack.” Thalric's tone held no room for argument.

Romilly spoke up next. “I agree with my uncle. Snacks for everyone, then we head to the observatory.”

“I have meetings after this.” Soren clasped their hands together. No one argued with them. It was clear to all they were running on fumes. Besides, of all the siblings, Soren was the least active in any kinky activity. They were likely dominant, and maybe one day, when their perfect mate arrived, they would be more open to lengthy playtimes.

Thalric took the lapse in conversation to mean he could begin. Focusing on the well of magic inside his body, he pulled at it, weaving it through his body until sparks came from his fingertips. Waving his hands around, he allowed the glowing entity to move around in a free-flow.

“It was you.” Creighton's voice was only a whisper. Even then, it pulled Thalric to a stop.

Everyone's gaze bounced between the pair. “What do you mean?” Romilly asked.

Creighton shook his head. “I was in town one day and saw you. From a distance, yeah. And you had that magic moving. People were all around you. I remember thinking this person was so full of himself doing magic like that in the street.”

Thalric's gut sank at the words his Little shared. He was embarrassed to be called out so accurately.

Before he could explain himself, Eden spoke up. “Sometimes people have to put on a brave face in front of others. It helps them protect who they really are from others who want to take advantage of them. You know?”

Creighton nodded. He did understand what his friend was saying. He'd just... well, he never really applied it like this.

Thalric waited for his mate's next words with unease. A moment that should have been simple magic and joy for the Littles had turned into a reflection of who he was. Technically speaking, it was who he was *before*.

"Can you start over, Daddy? I want to see the magic without interruption," Creighton eventually said after the longest pause in the history of the world. OK, so maybe not the longest, but it definitely took him a while to get himself in order.

Eden sighed dramatically. "Finally! Uncle T, start it back up. We're all ready to see you do The Thing." Hands waved around in a poor mimic of Thalric's motions.

The Littles shared a laugh, which made Eden beam. Romilly and Soren watched on with smiles of their own. They were more entertained by the others' excitement than Eden's teasing.

With a deep breath, Thalric straightened, lifted his hands, and called upon his magic again. Things were going to be just fine in San Noctis. He was exactly where he was meant to be.

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