

The background of the entire image is a dark, starry space. In the center, the back of a person is visible, with their arms outstretched horizontally to the left and right. The person's skin is a light, warm tone, and their hair is dark and curly. The overall effect is ethereal and celestial.

Dragonmen 2 *Mate Test*

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Dragonmen II

Mate Test

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Chapter 1

High Duke Torrance Zelan took another long drink of his hot, bitter brew and thought moodily over his trip into the dragon world. Some days there wasn't enough coffee in the universe to help wake a man up. This would be his second trip after visiting his cousin Jorlah for his mating ceremony. Now he was visiting the southern provinces to meet with the king and discuss mining rights. The High King, his uncle, wanted the rare mineral that was only found in this area of the galaxy. It was a necessary component for the processors in the new warp drives. As he was already semi-familiar with the planet and had a personal connection with dragons, his uncle thought he would be the perfect representative.

Tor was holding back his opinion until he met the Southern King. Larien would've liked this trip. His lover venerated dragons. Dear, sweet, gentle Larien with his hard body and sweet voice was a man who dreamed of seeing dragons fly.

"You would've loved this baby." Tor whispered to himself.

Swallowing hard, the Duke held his back tears. It was times like these he wished he'd followed his lover into the afterlife instead of lingering on. Larien's loss hit him like a fist to the stomach.

Only his family kept his feet firmly grounded from leaving this plane for the next. He couldn't leave his little girl and two boys. Although his heart remained tattered and bruised, he loved them.

"Did you say something, my lord?"

The Duke sighed, pressing his face into his hands, discreetly wiping away the tears with the heels of his palms. The cold glass of the window cooled his heated skin and he pulled out another sigh. Even though he couldn't see the star field outside the window, he knew it was still there. When Baroy flew through the cosmos at night he took Tor along for the ride in his dreams. It was the only way he could see anything. Dragon bonded as a child; Tor's vision relied solely on what the dragon wanted him to see. Subsequently, his ability to see flashed in and out like a poor intergalactic transmission. Sometimes it was excruciatingly clear but most of the time it was complete blackness.

"Nothing important, Pietro. I was thinking of how Larien would've loved visiting the dragons."

The elderly man grunted in agreement. The sound of coffee pouring lured the Duke back to the small dining table. "Mr. Jall always dreamed of dragons. He would be proud that you went to visit them in his stead."

Speechless from the lump in his throat, the Duke nodded.

Pietro cleared his throat. "He also would've wanted you to move on with your life."

Tor laughed. "Very subtle, Pietro." He picked up his coffee cup and waved the servant away. "You may retire for the night. Thank you."

He could feel the servant staring at him. Larien always said Pietro's gaze was frigid and that his grey eyes must be chipped from polar glaciers to achieve his icy looks. One of the benefits of being mostly blind was that he could ignore those icy stares.

"Remember what I said, Master. Mr. Jall lived for your smile. Don't disappoint his memory by forgetting how to."

With that parting shot, Tor heard the door softly close.

You are sad this evening.

The Duke heard the sweet whisper of Baroy's voice echo through his head. The space dragon's voice was a soft buzzing sound; comforting and abrasive. Tor's life had changed forever when he bonded with the baby dragon at the tender age of five. As far as he knew he was the youngest being, human or not, to survive a matching with the rare breed.

I am missing my mate. He mentally sent back to the dragon.

You are missing your lover, the dragon corrected. *You have yet to meet your mate.*

That doesn't make it less painful.

No it doesn't.

A burst of laughter ripped through him.. "If it hurts this much to lose a lover, I don't want a mate."

It isn't a matter of want. It is a matter of fate. You will meet your mate soon. I have foreseen it.

Chills shivered up and down Tor's spine.

The dragon was never wrong. The creature was even more accurate than Tor's daughter, Alexandra, who was a born seer.

I don't want a mate. He said again. He wondered if saying it enough times would make the nebulous male vanish from his future.

His heart still cried for Larien. Tor wasn't ready to risk his love again.

All things happen in their time.

Great. Just what he needed; more sage sayings from the cryptic dragon.

Tor felt the dragon leave his mind. "I'm surrounded by beings with great parting lines." Sighing, the Duke took another drink of coffee. In times like these, Tor could almost feel Larien. As if he was still beside him. The Duke whispered to the empty room, "I will never forget you, my love."

He didn't care what the court thought a "natural" mourning period meant. In his heart, two years were simultaneously a blink in the cosmos and a crawling eternity of sorrow.

* * *

The landing was uneventful. The spaceport had the same stagnant air and echo of other spaceports.

A tall body brushed against Tor's right.

"My lord." A smooth voice spoke. His hand was wrapped around a huge, muscular arm.

The small scar beneath his fingers and his voice gave the man away. "Greetings, Crillon." He said to the cat shifter. Crillon was one of the twin cats he rescued from the streets. Crillon's knife wound on his left arm always identified him. As a courtesy to the Duke, Crill always wore short sleeves so that Tor would know who was escorting him.

Tor felt eyes staring at him. Leather brushed up against his arm as the guard leaned closer. "You did not sleep well?"

"I rarely sleep well these days."

Crill patted his hand. "It'll get better with time, your grace."

"That's what everyone tells me."

Crill cleared his throat and shifted his feet. "Pietro has gone ahead with the house staff to prepare your room."

"Thank you Crill. Sounds like you have everything ready as usual. What's my schedule?"

If anyone knew about his day it would be Crillon. Besides Pietro, the man was the closest thing to a walking calendar.

"Nothing planned this afternoon, your grace. I know how space travel tires you, so we'll go straight to your room with a quick tour of the castle on the way. Tomorrow you'll have breakfast with the King and other delegates. Everyone will be given a tour of the mines."

"What do we know about the others?"

The weapons decorating the cat's body clinked softly together with each motion. A sound Tor always associated with friendship and safety. "I have downloaded their files so you can listen to them tonight while you rest."

"Thank you Crill, you're always so efficient."

"Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you, your grace." Crill's voice was eager. The tone suggestive of other things he'd like to help the Duke with. Tor knew it was more habit than invitation. His other half, Dillion, was also a member of the Duke's staff. Between the two of

them, Tor knew they were looking for a female third and weren't opposed to tasting others on the way to their groom's day.

"I think you've done enough for now." Tor had a rule about not taking advantage of his staff, however that didn't stop them trying from time to time.

* * *

The castle was big, as most castles are. As Tor walked through the building, his dragon sight flickered in and out. It was a labyrinth of hallways; endless hallway after endless hallway. The cavernous rooms echoed with each word exchanged. It took several minutes to get to the guest wing. The thick tapestry and tall stone walls overshadowed him.

He put his faith in Crill to lead him forward as Baroy entered his mind.

The castle is surrounded by dragonkin. I have warned them to be friendly or die.

Way to make friends, Tor sent back, amusing himself. Space dragons were extremely protective and their power was incredible. It didn't matter that Baroy was circling the planet. He could still pinpoint Tor's exact location at any moment in time and annihilate any signs of danger.

Baroy could push his powers through the Duke's body. It was a painful process that Tor actively avoided, however he'd be lying to himself if he denied the ability from time to time.

About the time his tired mind started to lose track of where he was, they reached his chambers.

"Here we are, your grace." Crill opened the door and Tor was pleased to be greeted by his staff. Whenever he was in a strange place it was comforting to have the same people around him.

Sighing, he allowed Pietro to undress him. The servant guided him into bed and smoothed the fine linen sheets over his body. The soft whispers from his staff lulled him into a deep slumber.

Chapter 2

Morning was not his time of day. Baroy had traveled through his thoughts all night, a voyage through the stars to explore the galaxy surrounding them. A psychic piggyback that exhausted Tor as much as the journey exhilarated him. He loved traveling with Baroy because he could feel what the dragon felt; the flow of space and the pull of planets. He watched the birth of stars and saw asteroids shatter. By the time morning came around, his mood was severely altered.

At home, Tor didn't rise until afternoon but his uncle had warned him that the King was an early riser. Out of respect, Tor rose much earlier than usual, letting his servants dress him in his formal leathers.

Pietro informed him that dressing in leathers for breakfast was the correct attire for dining with the King. "You want him to see you for the powerful force you are, after all you represent the High King. Pietro was very proud of his position as the Duke's right hand man and felt that Tor's appearance was a direct reflection on him. Tor never left his bedroom looking less than immaculate.

It was a small price to pay for the amount of devotion Pietro bestowed on him. He reminded himself of that the third time Pietro brushed imaginary lint from Tor's jacket. He somehow doubted the King would downgrade their agreement due to one piece of lint. He didn't comment though, he didn't have time to soothe Pietro's ruffled feathers.

The brown leather pants laced up on the sides leaving an inch of skin exposed. The matching leather jacket covered his white silk shirt. A dragonhead was carefully worked onto the back, its design carried out through the pants so it looked as if a dragon was wrapped around his body. It had taken a master leather worker over a year to make the custom set. The boots discreetly hidden beneath the pants were made from scales shed by Baroy. They were iridescent and flame proof. He had dragon armor that fit over the entire outfit but Tor didn't feel he'd need them to face the King. As far as he knew breakfast wasn't a battlefield.

As usual the procession that went with him was larger than necessary. Two bodyguards, four warriors, and three personal servants followed him. He knew there were at least ten more of his people somewhere around the castle but he had no idea where. He knew they switched places to cover the twenty-four hour call Pietro insisted was necessary for Tor's comfort.

After what seemed like forever they reached an entryway wide enough for him to pass with a servant on either side.

Tor's stomach growled.

"Follow me, my lord." The familiar voice was Sally; the only female staff member who traveled with him. Sally whispered, "You are a few spots down from the King."

A long metal cylinder was placed in his hand. He felt the displacement of air as she curtsied before him. He spent some time in his youth trying to stop this habit but was overruled by his staff. "Your coffee, my lord."

Tor grabbed it like the lifeline it was. "Oh, I love you Sally." He said giving his servant a kiss on the cheek as she passed.

"I'm getting him coffee tomorrow." He heard someone hiss behind him.

He popped open the cylinder and downed the hot bitter liquid. Sally had mixed it with the perfect amount of rich cream.

"Mmmm." He let the sound roll across his tongue as Pietro seated him.

* * *

King Naron Dragane almost choked on his toast when the Tor entered the room. The picture he had seen beforehand hadn't done the man justice. Tousled honey-gold hair surrounded by perfect sculpted cheeks and full pouty lips. And while the King saw formal leathers every day he had never seen them look so damn good.

The molded leather was an unusual color, the same as Tor's hair, both cut to protect and show off that finely formed body. Fuck what workmanship, both the body and the clothing!

When the Duke tipped back his head and drank from the canister, Naron barely held back the urge to leap over the table and mark his throat. The sexy sound Tor emitted made Naron's dick turn harder than his planet's famed stones.

"Your grace." He greeted after the sexy man was seated. There were several guards, an older man, a woman and so many extra people surrounding the Duke that Naron wondered what they all did.

"Your highness." The Duke's voice was smooth and sexy. Dark glasses covered his eyes preventing the King from seeing Tor's expression.

"On my planet it's considered a courtesy to bare your eyes." The King said in a hard voice. At that moment there was nothing he wanted more in the universe than to see the gorgeous creature's eyes.

"Forgive me King Naron." Tor seductively said. "I wear glasses for the protection and comfort of others. I was dragon struck as a child."

That was one rumor confirmed.

“What happens if you take off your glasses?”

The Duke shrugged, an elegant motion. “Nothing much.” There was a hesitant pause and he shrugged once again. “My eyes unsettle most.”

“We are all dragonkin here, I’m sure we can stomach your eyes.”

There were murmurs of agreement among his men; some unfriendly. The beautiful man unknowingly challenged his people with his words.

“Come here and stand before me.”

Without hesitation the man slid out of his seat. Naron didn’t miss the unfriendly looks cast at him by the Duke’s staff. It was clear they didn’t like his tone.

Tough.

A cane was pressed into one elegant hand and two of the largest men the King had ever seen stood on either side of the Duke. Not that the Duke was short, but these men were massive.

With matching scowls, they wore thick black leather collars with large silver rings embedded in them.

Cat shifters.

Naron could tell by the reflective shine in their eyes. They were twins by the looks of them; extremely rare in the shifter race. While cats had litters, cat shifters rarely had more than one at a time.

Unlike his people, the Duke obeyed swiftly and without a frown. Naron wondered what else the young man would be so obedient about. His cock pulsed in his pants when he thought about the golden haired beauty accepting his other orders. After all, he did outrank him.

The Duke stopped on the other side of the table leaving his grimacing bodyguards standing by his seat.

“You were forewarned your majesty.” The beautiful man said as he stood before the King.

Hmm. Maybe not quite so obedient.

“Remove them.”

The Duke slid off his glasses and lifted his head so the King could look into his eyes. At first Naron thought the Duke’s eyes were completely black but then there was a flash, then a series of flashes. In the space of a few seconds he saw galaxies move in those magnificent eyes. For the first time Naron felt the Duke’s power pour over him. The rumors were true. Those amazing eyes were dragon struck.

Space dragon struck.

But it wasn’t the beauty and power of those eyes that pulled at him. It was the sorrow.

This beautiful dragon-bonded man was burdened with so much sadness it was a miracle he could stand.

“Your majesty.” His page nudged him, snapping him out of his trance. Naron blinked.

How much time had passed?

“You may put them back on. I don’t think my people are ready for the power of your eyes.”

Or that much pain.

Tor nodded. His body language calmed and he smoothly slid his glasses back on, returning to his seat.

Naron watched with amusement as the Duke was quickly wrapped in the bosom of his people. The two guards stepped to hover over Tor as if he was in danger of imminent attack. One man sat him down and another brought him a covered dish and yet still another reached to refill the silver canister on the table.

The King bit his lips, trying not to smile as the Duke did the first aggressive thing he’d seen. Tor fucking growled. Tilting his head he could just hear the servant’s low placating voice.

“I have more your grace. Fresh.”

A nervous smile graced the servant’s face as he made a production out of producing a fresh cup and an elaborate silver hammered pot. Black liquid came pouring out and some fresh cream was added.

Curiosity made him ask, “What do you drink, your grace?”

“Divinity.” Tor answered before taking another sip. A smile lifted one corner of the man’s kissable lips. “Would you like a cup?”

“Yes. I believe I would.” Anything that made Tor smile was worth tasting.

The chatter at the table went to a hush as the Duke accepted a second cup from his servant. Instead of sending it over like one would expect a royal to do, Tor brought it over himself. Naron watched in amazement as the Duke took the crooked arm of one of his shifters and traversed the table without difficulty. With natural grace, Tor slid into the empty seat beside him.

The consort chair.

Naron was going to speak but he couldn’t force himself to turn the man away. This close the man was even more appealing. Tor’s scent made Naron’s head spin. Male heat and leather.

“Here, I had it prepared like I do mine but you might like a little sugar.”

The King tried to still the rapid pounding of his heart as he accepted the cup. He felt like a schoolboy with his first crush. Discreetly he wiped his suddenly moist palms on his pants before accepting the offering.

He leaned forward and got a whiff of the Duke's natural scent.

Suppressing a groan, the King took the cup, careful not to touch those elegant fingers. He was certain contact with the Duke would end with a very public display on the dining room table.

"Take a drink." Tor encouraged., Naron took a tentative sip of the black liquid. Many flavors exploded on his tongue; bitter and smooth.

Oh. So wonderful.

He turned back to see the wide smile of the Duke.

"Good isn't it."

"Yes. What is it called?"

"Coffee." There was that beautiful smile again before Tor said with a smug tone, "I might be persuaded to part with some during our negotiations."

"Splendid." However, now was not the time to tell Naron that the only non-negotiable thing was his leaving the planet. Ever.

For the first time in his life, the King's dragon half was alert. Naron was the first royal to have no active dragon. He couldn't shift and rarely felt the enhanced attributes associated with dragonkin. It was a great source of disappointment to Naron's father before the man died. The presence of the Duke and his bond with the space dragon brought out a dragon half he hadn't thought he had. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the man was most probably his mate. Unfortunately, he already announced the Mate Test and it was too late to back out now.

"Enjoy your coffee." Torrence said before standing to go back to his seat.

Naron resisted the urge to stop the younger man. He needed to exhibit no favoritism until at least a few trials were passed. It wouldn't be congenial to show the others that he had already chosen.

Despite the deep yearning to bask in the presence of Tor, the King let him go. Every sip of the bitter, smooth coffee had him yearning a bit more. Conversation on both parties resumed. He nodded and pretended to pay attention. However, his gaze constantly returned to the young golden-haired man.

One of the courtiers leaned a little too close to the Duke for the King's comfort.

A low growl rolled out of his chest.

"Calm, my King." Maelin, his master guard, whispered behind him.

"Find a new spot for Lord Mell."

“Yes, your highness.”

* * *

Tor was in the garden playing the violin when he was interrupted.

“The King’s guard is here your grace.” Pieta said.

Tor stopped playing but the lullaby still resonated in his head. Yes, Alexandra would like this one.

His daughter was quite the lullaby connoisseur.

Focusing his attention again he shifted his mindset in order to deal with the guard.

“Did the King want to see me?”

He could feel the shift in the air as the guard’s stance relaxed. “The announcement for the consort petitioners is coming. The King wants everyone to be there.”

Consort announcement? He hoped he hid the disquiet that announcement gave him. He’d felt an attraction to the King when they’d talked. It was disappointing to hear the man was getting married soon.

“Sure. Okay.” Tor tucked the violin into its case and gave it over to Sally. “Would you...”

“Take this to your room?” She finished for him, her voice soft and teasing. “Of course, your grace.”

“Thank you.”

Her skirt softly shuffled as she dipped into a deep curtsy. Then Tor’s violin was lifted from his hands as he heard her move away.

“She’s a beautiful woman.” The King’s guard said in a nice baritone.

“Yes.” Tor said with a smile. He heard the guard shift uncomfortably.

“You’re very polite.”

Tor tilted his head towards the guard’s voice. “I hope so. Thanks to my mother. She’d turn in her grave if she knew I was rude to people. The guard laughed, a nice rich sound that caused Tor’s stomach to warm. Mmmm. Nice.

“What’s your name?”

The man cleared his throat. “Maelin, your grace.”

“You’re the King’s guard?”

“His Master Guard, sir.”

How odd.

“Forgive my curiosity Maelin, but why did the King send his Master Guard to fetch me? That seems a job better suited to a page.”

“He wanted to make sure you came.”

Puzzled, Tor followed. Hoping everything would make sense eventually.

The guard led them back to the throne room. Tor took the twins and Pietro with him so that he wouldn't be jostled, and besides Pietro could charm down the moons. His persuasive skills were unsurpassed. It was Tor's custom to always have a group that consisted of strength and persuasion. You never knew what would be required in any given situation.

Baroy flashed him sight giving Tor a second of vision to see the inside of the room. A crowd was forming as the King stood tall and fine at the bottom of the stairs. He was leaning against an enormous chair that was obviously the throne. The throne dominated the room but next to it sat a smaller chair. That must be for the King's new consort.

Tor felt a pang. At one time he looked to join with his heart's chosen. Now he was alone. Hopefully the King had better luck.

The crowd fell silent.

"I have called everyone here for the reading of the potential consort list. My page will read the names and when your name is called I want you to come forward and stand to my right.

A new voice spoke.

"There are five contenders to the co-throne of the Royal House of Drakeen. Lord Salen Mell, Lord..."

Tor's became sidetracked when Baroy spoke into his mind.

Tor.

What?

I have located the mineral. How much do you need?"

Do not take it?

Why? It's not like they really own the planet?

"His Grace Torrance Zelan."

"What?"

Tor snapped back into the present.

"Go up on stage, your grace." Pietro whispered in his ear.

Frustrated with his dragon and more than a little confused, Tor let Dillion lead him to the other men.

"These five men will compete to be my mate." The King announced when Tor reached his place with the others.

When had he agreed to that? Tor's mind furiously churned trying to figure out when he signed up for this. Unless.

Your uncle.

Baroy's voice confirmed his thoughts. His uncle didn't send him just for minerals. By sacrificing his nephew, the power hungry man was hoping to secure a permanent way to the mineral. Some sacrifice. The King wasn't his beloved Larien but he was as sexy as anyone Tor had ever met.

Thoughts of his dead lover sent his spirits spiraling downwards.

Focus Baroy reprimanded.

The King's page was announcing the rules of the consort contest. "Each contestant will go through a series of tests to help prove he is the perfect consort for the King. The perfect consort will be able to satisfy the King physically, match the King mentally and be able to defeat his opponents physically. The first test will be the kiss. If the King isn't attracted to you physically you will be immediately eliminated."

Naron carefully watched Tor's reaction while also glancing at the others to make sure he didn't look like he was singling any one man out. It was difficult to do, especially when his every cell was crying out for the golden-haired man.

What the page didn't mention were the unofficial tests; the tests that would truly prove the metal of the man.

Naron hid his frustration when he saw that the Duke was the last contestant. He knew that Maelin purposely put them in that order. He didn't want the King so lust-blinded from kissing Tor, that he was unable to judge the other four men competing for the throne.

The first was Lord Mell, a red-haired man with a vicious reputation as a master swordsman and a short temper. Only royal connections kept the man from prison.

Surprisingly Mell's kiss was pleasant enough that he couldn't eliminate the man, even though the man's mustache bristled against the King's skin. It didn't detract from the fresh mint taste of the man's mouth. He briefly touched lips with the man, checking to ensure that there was no natural revulsion.

Naron gave the smug man a nod before letting Maelin lead him to the King's right.

Next was Lord Robert Gallywyn, a pretty brunette with brilliant blue eyes. If he had never seen Tor, Lord Gallywyn would have been his choice. The man was sweet-tempered and quite beautiful. Lord Gallywyn might have cool beauty but the Duke had a fire that drew the King like dragon moths to a flame. Gallywyn's kiss was cool, soft and lovely.

Naron let him go with a light hug and a smile. There was a smattering of applause from his subjects.

From Gallywyn's expression, the kiss had a greater impact on the brunette than it had on the King.

Lord Liex came up for his turn. The man had dirty blond hair and hard grey eyes. Not difficult to look at until you saw that Lord Liex had a permanent sneer.

"Is there a problem?" Naron asked the blond.

"I'm not a lover of men." Liex scoffed.

"Then why are you here wasting my time?"

For the first time there was uncertainty in the man's eyes. "I will make a good King-consort and you could have as many lovers as you wish. I won't refuse you your pleasures."

The man really thought he would accept this. "I can have as many lovers as I wish now. You're dismissed."

Liex flinched, quickly leaving the courtyard. A nod to his house guards had them following the man to make sure he left. Some people were just born stupid. You couldn't blame them for it but you didn't have to live with it either.

The next man was Sir Bertam Cant, a green-eyed baron from the northern province. His kiss was pleasant yet brief. The nervous look in the man's eyes told the story. He gave the man a nod and received a blinding smile that warmed his heart.

The Duke stood quietly by his side, the heat pouring off Tor's body heated up an entirely different region than his heart.

"You're next, your grace." Dragons were flying about in his stomach, big flaming dragons.

"You'll have to call me Tor or at least Torrance. I never kiss people who call me by my title."

A nervous laugh burst out of Naron. That silky, smooth baritone voice sent shivers down Naron's spine.

He sucked in his breath.

"It's your turn Tor."

A slight smile curved those perfectly formed lips. With a delicate flare the Duke handed off his staff to one of his servants and stepped towards the King. There was no sign of hesitation when Tor slid his hands around the King's back, pulled him against that strong lean body of his and took Naron's lips in a no prisoners kiss that weakened his knees.

There was no measure for this kiss. How could you compare a soul touching experience to the almost rough tumblings of before? All other kisses had been a watery prelude to the main course.

With lips, tongue, and teeth the Duke took over Naron's mouth. Consuming him in a willing bonfire. The kiss had such a resounding echo

in his soul that it took a moment to realize that Tor's lips had left his. Blinking and slightly confused, Naron's vision came back into focus. There was a silence in the room as he forced himself to step back.

"Please join the others." If his voice cracked a little it was beyond his ability to fix. It was barely within his ability not to drag the handsome Duke back to his quarters. He licked his lips, savoring the flavor of Tor's mouth. He felt his dragon half shift restlessly under his skin as if wanting to grab the golden man and hide him in a pile of treasure so no one could gaze on what was his.

One of the Duke's men stepped forward and led him to stand near the others. Naron noticed that the others gave Torrance a wide berth as if afraid he would do something. Or maybe it was his gigantic bodyguard that caused the problem.

Chapter 3

“Gentlemen, we will begin the day with a tour of the mines.” A light tenor announced.

Crill whispered in his ear, “That’s Sparrow, the King’s page.”

A low growl echoed in the cave.

“Is there a problem your highness?”

What the hell was his problem now? He couldn’t step a foot forward without upsetting the King. Since the announcement that morning, the King had been in a touchy mood.

“This tour doesn’t need to include your entire entourage.”

Oh. Damn.

Tor was slightly humiliated, but didn’t show it. “I need Crill. My vision often flickers. If I don’t have a guide I can become disorientated.”

Yeah, that was sexy. He was sure to be picked as consort. But then he reminded himself, that wasn’t his goal. He didn’t want to be trapped on this backwards planet no matter how sexy its ruler was. He just had to keep reminding himself that each time the King came too close to his body and he became tight with need. He also had to remember not to inhale around Naron, because his scent was too tempting.

“I will act as your guide.” The King announced, as if settling the matter.

“Thank you, your highness. I appreciate the offer but Crill is used to accompanying me and knows my needs. I don’t want to take attention away from the others.”

He didn’t need the other contestants to see him as competition but more importantly he didn’t want for the King to see him as the poor blind guy who needed assistance. It was pride; pure and simple. Tor couldn’t set it aside. It was one of the few things he had left.

Tor wasn’t technically blind, he did have occasional flashes of vision but for all intents and purposes he might as well be. He was careful not to search his feelings for why it was so important for the King to consider him on equal footing with the others.

Right now he just wanted to make the mine deal and head the hell out. However, since his uncle signed him up for the consort contest, it would be a while before he saw the back of this planet.

“As you will.” The King said in response to his refusal. Tor could hear the coldness creeping into the other man’s tone. His usual diplomatic grace was really deserting him this time.

Fuck.

Just as he was thinking of ways to get on the King's good side again, Baroy's voice shouted into his mind. *Earthquake coming. Get out! I'll hold it as long as I can.*

Naron hid his despair behind a cold façade that he perfected over years of court life. Was it so wrong to yearn for the touch of his soul mate?

Determined not to let Tor's rejection hurt him, the King spent the next few minutes discussing mining and the kingdom's use of the various minerals. He saw the Duke talking to his guard; their two heads intimately together. Naron's beast growled at the sight.

"Is there something I can help you with, Tor?" He asked in a snappish tone.

"We need to leave."

Disappointed, the King nodded thinking that Tor's man must've received a message that made him want to go. Then realizing Tor couldn't see him said, "I understand. Let my steward know when you want to reschedule." He knew the Duke's uncle would want him to tour the mines so he could make a good trade agreement. The High King would have to get used to missing the Duke since Naron wasn't giving Tor clearance to leave, ever.

To Naron's surprise the Duke reached over and grabbed his arm, pulling him along. "You don't understand. We all need to go."

Not giving the King a chance to object, Tor wrapped his hand around his guard's bicep. "Let's go Crill."

"Yes, your grace."

Naron dug in his heels. A surprisingly powerful grip yanked him along causing him to stumble after the Duke and his guard.

"Don't turn stubborn your majesty, we're leaving. Now!" Naron glanced back, pleased to see the others were following. He'd hate to leave anyone behind.

"Where are we going?" Since digging in his heels wasn't working and the Duke was much stronger than he suspected, he hoped conversation worked in calming the other man down. The guard took it all in stride as if his master acted this way every day.

Maybe he did.

"Some place safe. Less talking more walking. We need out of here now."

Tor pulled them both into the elevator and tapped his foot impatiently as the others boarded.

"Why are we leaving?" Naron asked.

"What's wrong with the Duke?" Gallywyn asked.

“Has he gone insane?” Lord Mell asked glaring at Tor.

Tor ignored the questions. Naron admired how the gorgeous man stood straight and proud, not letting anything disturb him. Despite his ire at Tor’s highhanded way, he felt a burst of desire for the commanding man.

“Would you like to explain to us why we’re leaving?” Lord Mell asked in a scornful voice. “Last I checked you weren’t in charge of this mission.”

The shifter snarled and pulled back his coat to show the other man his weapon and his willingness to use it.

“Stand down Crill.” Was Tor’s calm response. “I’ll explain once we’re above ground.”

There were a few mutters but no one said anything else.

The elevator opened and Tor pulled Naron out still not letting him go. As they stepped out of the elevator an ominous roar shook the earth.

Tor wrapped an arm around Naron’s waist and pulled him along in a fast run. Naron dared to look back. A hole appeared in the earth swallowing the mine’s entrance and the elevator shaft they had left seconds ago.

Sir Cant exhaled, “Holy dragon mother.”

The group stopped several yards from the scene of destruction.

“How did you know that was going to happen?” Lord Gallywyn asked, looking at the Duke with stars in his eyes.

Naron growled, instinctively moving in front of Tor. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see that the Duke was rubbing Naron’s shoulder with one hand and holding onto his guard with the other.

The beast inside the King hated that Tor wanted anyone else to guide him, but his human side understood that the Duke needed to have the familiar to be at ease.

“Baroy felt a disturbance coming and warned me to get out.” Tor said in a calm, soothing voice

“Who’s Baroy?” Lord Mell scowled at the Duke.

“My dragon.”

“For those that don’t know, his grace is dragon struck.” The King said unconsciously stroking Tor’s arm. “His bondmate is a space dragon who I believe is circling this planet as we speak.”

“Yes, Baroy is above and he can tell what happens on any planet I’m on. He’s very powerful.” Tor released his guard and patted the King’s hand unaware of how they were creating a look of unity before the others.

“Why didn’t you tell us what was going on?” Gallywyn asked, his eyes lit with curiosity.

"I didn't want to panic anyone." Tor said, idly stroking the King's arm. An unconscious gesture that made Naron harder than the minerals he mined.

Unable to help himself the King leaned over and kissed Tor on the lips. "Thank you for my life and everyone else's. If you hadn't listened to your dragon we would all be dead."

Tor shrugged. "I always listen to my dragon."

"Always." That thought was chilling. "What if he tells you to leave the planet?"

"Then I leave the planet." Tor said.

"Do you have any control over him at all?" The thought of a space dragon running wild above them made Naron uneasy. Space dragons weren't known for their even temper especially when dealing with their bondmates.

"I don't control him. We don't have that kind of relationship. We are partners of a sort. He flies through the galaxies and explores new planets and I work for my uncle. We don't have to be in the same area to work together. He can see through my eyes and I usually see through his. That's why my eyes look so strange. They reflect whatever Baroy is seeing."

"How far can you communicate?" Lord Gallywyn asked.

Tor frowned. "What do you mean?"

Naron patted the Duke's tightening hand.

"I mean if he can go through galaxies at what point do you lose communication?"

The King remembered that Gallywyn had a background in the natural sciences and probably found Tor fascinating. Naron also found the Duke fascinating but for far different reasons.

"There is no limit. It's like talking in your own mind. You can't leave your own mind, so Baroy can't leave mine."

Gallywyn stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I'd love to talk to you more about this later."

"I'm at your disposal." Tor bowed.

"For discussion only." Naron said glaring at the other man. He wasn't about to lose Tor to anyone else especially another consort contender.

Gallywyn gave the King a small smirk. "Of course, your highness. I wouldn't dare trespass." He looked Tor up and down. His carnal gaze was surprising in a man who appeared so shy. "Despite the temptation."

"Let's get back to the castle for our midday meal before continuing our tour. I need to report this to the mine director."

"Don't take him to task, your highness. It was a shifting of the earth that caused the disturbance not poor workmanship of the mine."

“Then he will have to work on making sure he can compensate for the shifting earth, won’t he? We were almost killed down there. That isn’t acceptable.”

The King’s heart pounded when he realized Tor might have gotten trapped in a mine. What if he was separated and couldn’t get help. A blind man buried alive in a mineshaft was enough to make the King break out in a cold sweat.

“You aren’t allowed to go into the mines without a guide. That goes for everyone.” Naron said, making sure the others saw his expression. “After what just happened I’m having all of them inspected before we do any more tours.”

There was a round of nods from the others.

“Would you like Dillion to consult with you?” Tor asked. “He’s Crill’s twin and he has a specialization in planetary movement and structure.”

“I didn’t know there was such a thing.” Naron said.

Tor smiled. Naron was enthralled. “My men all get to choose a specialty when they come and work for me. Dillion has always been fascinated with the earth while Crill here is more an above ground kind of man. He studied weather patterns and animal habitats.”

The pride in Tor’s voice told Naron that the Duke did more than just offer education to his employees, he actively supported it. No wonder his people adored him.

Education was expensive and shifters rarely had the means to educate themselves. Their planets were too primitive to support formal schooling and it was unusual for them to leave their homes.

Stroking his hair, Crill looked down at the Duke, “His grace has given my brother and I many great opportunities.”

“If you don’t remove your hand from his hair your brother can examine the ground at your burial site.”

Crill bared his fangs at the King, but he stopped stroking the Duke’s head.

Shaking his head, Naron motioned for everyone to board the hover craft. “Let’s get back to the castle and have a bite to eat.”

Tor took another bite of the flaky pastry and gave a little hum as he licked his lips. The King’s chef was a master. Tor tilted his head to the right, a silent indication he wanted whoever was on wait service for the meal.

“Yes?” Sally’s voice spoke in his right ear.

“Give my regards to the chef and tell him this is some of the best food I’ve ever eaten. Also, find out if he can be bribed away.”

“Tor!” The King’s tone of outrage made the Duke smile. Sally giggled. “I’ll see what I can do. The usual package?” “Yes.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to try and steal my chef.” The King demanded.

“I heard once that all was fair in love and war.” Tor smiled. He’d smiled more today than he had in the past two years. As much as he didn’t want to be a King-Consort there was definitely something appealing about Naron.

Tor could still taste the man’s flavor on his lips.

Damned if he didn’t want another taste. Would it be outside protocol if he pounced on the man? After all, one of these lucky bastards would get Naron for life, so why shouldn’t Tor at least get a taste before he left?

The thought of Naron spending each day and night with another man in his bed unsettled Tor.

That’s because he’s the one. An insidious voice said inside his head. *Shut up Baroy!*

You just don’t want the truth because you are afraid of losing another lover. Trust me this one will be much harder to lose. Dragonmen are a hardy breed. After all, they are distantly related to me.

The smugness of his dragon made Tor want to punch him.

Temper. Baroy’s voice mocked him.

“I thought you liked the food.” Naron’s concerned voice startled Tor.

“Sorry, what?”

“You are frowning over your food. I was wondering if you decided against stealing my chef.”

“No. I was frowning over a different matter. I’m still enthralled by your chef.”

“I’d rather you were enthralled by me.” The King said in a low voice, so the others couldn’t hear.

“Your highness.” Lord Mell’s voice broke into their conversation. “Could I get your opinion on something?”

“Of course.” Naron brushed Tor’s cheek with his lips and whispered “I’ll see you later.”

Tor decided he didn’t like Salen Mell. There was something in the other man’s voice that made him uneasy.

This was the type of man who would take the King for everything he could and then break his heart. It was in Naron’s best interests if Tor eliminated the other man from the running before he left. Maybe the King would be better off with Gallywyn or Cant. He made a mental note to get to know the other two better; to determine which would be best for the

King. They were both sitting on the far side of the King so he didn't have a chance to interact with them this evening.

He didn't like the thought of Naron being left with the creepy Mell guy when Tor left. The King seemed like a nice man who was following traditions to find his mate. Tor was a strong believer in the traditions of his people.

"Its time for your phone call, my Duke." Dill whispered in his ear. The change from Crill to his twin indicated the changing of the guards for the night. The twins never slept well if Tor was still up; feeling it was their duty to look after him. They took their duties to him seriously. He'd saved them when they were kittens and they never let a day go by when they didn't return the favor.

The Duke wrapped his hand around Crill's arm and allowed the other man to help him rise.

"Leaving so soon?" Lord Mell's voice was rich with satisfaction.

"Yes. I must make a phone call." Tor was careful to keep all emotion out of his voice. It wouldn't do to make the man think he was getting an edge on him. Lord Mell struck him as the type of person who would exploit anything.

"And what phone call is so important it tears you away from your future consort?"

Want me to kill him? Baroy's voice whispered.

Tor smiled, knowing that the sleazy man would think it was for him. "That would be personal business. Good evening."

Naron watched the Duke leave with his entourage. The group that followed him only seemed to get larger the longer he stayed.

"How many people does he have with him?" Gallywyn asked, coming to stand beside him.

"I'm not sure." The King grinned. "I don't know if he even knows."

He was startled when his steward marched into the room. Sparrow's cheeks were flushed and his eyes flashed with rage. "He did it. That pilferer convinced the chef to go back with him."

Naron started laughing and couldn't stop. He wasn't upset about his chef. He had no intention of Tor leaving his kingdom so there was little worry that he'd lose his prized chef. You had to give the Duke credit. He got what he wanted. Naron just hoped the man wanted him.

"What is the next test?" Lord Cant asked. Lord Cant never said much and he wasn't as aggressive as Lord Mell, as beautiful as Lord Gallywyn and completely lacked the magnetism of the Duke. He was just what he

appeared, a mild-mannered gentleman who was there because his father sent him. Naron gently smiled and answered.

“Minerals. I will ask you to identify different types of stones. It is a key component as my spouse to know the different elements that are traded as commodities.”

A smile spread across Lord Mell’s face. “I don’t think that will be very challenging for those of us who grew up here. We’ll have the edge over the pretty Duke.”

Naron had to remind himself that it would hurt his reputation if he punched out one of the consort contenders but inside he made a vow that even if Tor didn’t work out for whatever reason he would never choose Lord Mell. There was slyness in the man’s eyes that the King didn’t trust.

* * *

Tor let the shifter take him back to his room. It was late and time for his phone call to his children.

“Alexandra is on first.” Pietro said, placing the holographic projector on the table so that the Duke’s image would transmit clearly if he sat on the bed.

“Good evening, papa.” Alexandra’s bright voice soothed Tor’s jangled nerves. He didn’t even know he was tense until the sound of his daughter released it from his shoulders and back.

How he loved his children.

“Good evening, poppet. How was your day?”

“I had a vision.” Alexandra said. Tor listened for any sign of anger or fear but didn’t hear any. His little girl was a powerful seer and sometimes her visions were terrifying for someone her age. She went to the Seer temple once a week for help and discussion with the head Seer but Tor refused to allow her to be put there permanently. He wanted his little girl to have a childhood before she took on her seer duties. If Tor had his way her days would be filled with candy, sunshine and ponies. Unfortunately the gods and goddesses had other ideas and broke up those bright childhood memories with images of the future. Not all of them were happy ones.

Alexandra’s mother, Livia, supported Tor’s decisions and together they tried to make sure she had as balanced of a life as any child seer could.

“You were with a man and you were happy.”

“What!” Tor tried to focus. You’d think he’d learn never to get distracted when talking to a six-year old. She bounced around subjects like a hyperactive rabbit.

“I saw you last night in my vision.” Her voice sounded low and dreamy. “He’s so handsome and he looked at you just like Larien used to.”

Alexandra was also hurt when Larien died. She’d only known him by brief visits and holographic calls but the pair had bonded. Tor thought she was mostly upset that she had no vision of his lover’s death. Larien had died when the spaceship he was in came out of warp and hit an unexpected meteor. He’d been going to visit his parents for his monthly visit. Two years later Tor, still got presents from Larien’s parents on his birthday and he sent them flowers on the anniversary of his lover’s death.

“What did he look like?”

“He had dark-hair and pretty blue eyes. He was quite handsome but not as handsome as you daddy.” She said in a burst of loyalty. “There was the shadow of a dragon around him. I think he can shift.”

Tor shook his head. “If it’s who I think you’re talking about, I heard he couldn’t.”

“Maybe he just needs the right reason.” Alexandra said.

“Maybe. Now were there any other dreams we need to discuss?”

“Nope. Let’s talk about my new pony.”

For the next few minutes Alexandra and her father discussed her studies, which were light in deference to her age. They idly chatted about her time at the seer house and how pretty the flowers were in the garden and of course her new pony.

A bell chimed, stopping the little girl midway through her sentence about a blue butterfly she saw that morning. Because of the difficulty of timing in intergalactic transmissions and the extravagant cost, each child only got fifteen minutes.

Mitel got on the phone next.

“Hi papa.”

“Good evening, Mitel.” The younger of his two sons, at the age of eight, Mitel was a serious child who worked hard at his studies and pleasing his father.

“I mastered my first level of levitation.” The young lord burst out.

“Congratulations, son.” Tor warmly said.

Mitel had the ability to move things with his mind. He’d been trying to move himself since he learned to walk with little success. That he reached first level was a huge achievement.

“How are your other studies going?”

“Fine. The tutor you sent is amazing. I think he likes mother.”

“Ahh.” Tor wasn’t surprised. The tutor, according to Sally, was gorgeous. The more he thought of settling down, the more he decided he needed to find someone for his children’s mother.

“Is she seeing anyone now?”

“She saw some guy named Lord Jessum for a few weeks but when he told Alexandra she was just imagining her visions, mother sent him away.”

“Good.”

The pair discussed Mitel’s fencing lessons and his studies and then he exchanged places with his brother, Cadin.

“Good evening father.” Cadin cheerfully said. Where Mitel was serious and studious Cadin was all jokes and fun. The problem with Cadin was that it was hard for him to settle down. His talent was to manipulate fire and with that much energy burning through him it was difficult for him to sit down for his studies. Tor instructed their new tutor to give Cadin most of his lessons orally, outside, so he could walk and burn off some of his excess energy. It was just short of torture to put his extremely active son at a classroom table for hours on end.

“So who’s the new guy?” Cadin asked abruptly.

“What new guy?” Sometimes he felt he missed a completely separate conversation than the one he was having.

“The one Alexandra saw in her visions.”

“I think its King Naron.” Tor said. “But I can’t be sure. Your great uncle signed me up for a consort contest. If I win I’ll be his consort.”

Tor didn’t hide his relationships with his children. They were an essential part of his life even if he couldn’t be there physically.

“Would you like that?” Cadin asked, taking on a serious note. Do you like the King and how does Baroy feel about that?” There was a bit of tension in Cadin’s voice when he mentioned Baroy. All the children had mixed feelings about the dragon that prevented them from spending time with their father.

“He’ll be fine. He never had any problem with Larien.” He avoided the question about Naron. He didn’t want to discuss his conflicted feelings about the King.

“That’s true. Are you coming to visit soon?”

Tor could hear the little boy coming out from the child who was trying so hard to be a man.

“I’ll see if I can visit once this consort business is finished.”

“What if you win the consort position?”

Tor laughed. It’s not a prison. I can still come visit. I’ll just bring the King with me.

“Very well.”

That must’ve settled the matter for Cadin because he dropped the subject in order to discuss his studies, which more interesting now with the new tutor (the one that liked mother) and the new neighbor’s daughter who was apparently ‘cute’.

After the children were done he talked to Livia.

“So I hear there might be a new man in the works.” Her teasing tone made Tor blush. He could feel the redness rushing to his cheeks. A friend since childhood, there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t share with the only woman he loved. His mother died when he was very young so Tor has no memory of her. And although he didn’t hold romantic love towards the mother of his children she held a special place in his heart.

“The King. Uncle entered me into a consort challenge.”

“And how are you doing?” He could tell from her teasing tone that she was enjoying this conversation a little too much for Tor’s comfort.

“I’m doing well enough, but I heard that you also have an admirer.”

“Those children talk too much.” Livia said. Her tone was disgruntled but held no anger.

“And how is your guest.”

“He’s very pleasant and quite handsome which I’m sure you found out before you sent him to me. What’s up Torrence?”

“You’ve been alone too long Liv. I want you to have some happiness.”

“And what about you? Aren’t you entitled to happiness? Despite what our little seer said, do you think you’d enjoy being a consort? It would tie you down and you do enjoy your trips.”

“Like I told the kids. This isn’t a life sentence. I can always leave.”

“Call me if you need anything. And I’ll keep you updated on news of the tutor.”

“It’s a deal.” Tor laughed and said goodnight.

After he hung up he remembered.

“Blast! I forgot to play my violin for Lexy.”

“You can play her the song tomorrow.” Dill said. “Let’s get you settled in for the night.”

Tor allowed his servants to undress him and put him in his silk pajama bottoms. He never wore a shirt to bed so it was a quick change and he was tucked into bed.

As he drifted off to sleep he heard his servants singing an old courting song.

Chapter 4

“Today we are going to identify minerals.” The King announced to the room at large. There was a long table with four seats and a covered mound placed on the table before each chair. Please be seated gentleman.

Lord Mell, Lord Gallywyn and Sir Cant all sat while a beautiful woman, looking at Tor in adoration sat next to him.

Did the man not have any ugly servants? For a man who was blind the Duke had stunningly beautiful servants.

“It is important that my mate can identify the minerals from my kingdom. As part of your responsibilities you must be able to trade with other nations and other worlds and know what you’re talking about. This is a skill that can be taught but it’s important to know if you have a feel for the minerals. I want each of you to close your eyes and pick a mineral from your pile and tell me what it is and how much it would be worth on the open market.”

“Lord Mell, you start first.”

Mell pulled off his cloth and blindly picked up a stone. He opened his eyes and announced. “A Callin sapphire.” He held up the blue stone so onlookers could see it. “Without a proper microscope I would say it’s worth about thirty-two credits.”

“It is a Phaseis sapphire and it is worth three thousand credits.” Naron said. He was careful to keep all emotion out of his voice but he saw the Duke’s faint grin and felt a rush of adoration fill him.

There was a row of chatter through the audience and a few outright smirks.

“Fear not Lord Mell, you will have two other chances. Lord Cant?”

The nervous lord closed his eyes and picked up a green rock.

“Lystone, worth about fifty credits.” He said upon opening his eyes.

“Excellent.” Naron said in surprise.

Lord Cant beamed with pride, nodding at the crowd as they applauded. Naron noted that few supported Lord Mell as consort he added that in the negative column for the man. Good public image was important for any consort.

“Lord Gallywyn.”

The slim brunette gave him a shy smile before looking over the rock in his hand. “Jaspit diamond.” He said, regarding a particularly ugly stone in the rough. Worth about five thousand when cut properly.”

“Excellent.” Naron mentally crossed his fingers as he turned to Tor. He hoped the younger man had something he could do.

“Now Tor, because you are blind you may have your shifter friend help you. I believe you said he studied minerals.”

“I don’t need anyone to assist me with stones.” Tor scowled. “They sing to me.”

Naron bit his lower lip to hold back his shout of glee. It was a rare ability to be an earth whisperer. If Tor did indeed have that skill it would explain why a space dragon bonded so easily with him.

Dragon’s were tied to the songs of minerals. Even space dragons were called to celestial bodies. Tor’s ability would make him an especially valuable consort. The King had to work hard to keep a wide smile from spreading across his lips.

Damn the man was perfect.

Tor picked a smoky grey stone from the pile and held in his hand. He let out a low hum.

“Quartz from the Freely region. It would be worth a great deal but it has a flaw running down the middle, making it essentially worthless.”

“What!” Naron marched forward and snatched the stone from Tor. He held it up to the light but didn’t see anything in its smoky layers. “Bring me an eye.”

A page scurried off and returned with a round piece of glass designed for a jeweler to identify flaws in any rock. The King placed the eye next to the rock and examined it closely. By the dragon goddess Tor was right. There was a fine crack running right down the middle of it.

“He’s right.” Naron said not bothering to hide his astonishment. He flashed a glare at Finnel, his chief procurer. He would have a talk with Finnel later. Who knew how many other stones were flawed?

“With those results I declare Tor the winner of this contest.” There was no point in continuing. It wasn’t a fair contest with a stone singer in the mix.

There was polite applause; a disgruntled expression crossed Tor’s face.

Blast. Tor didn’t know why he couldn’t resist showing off for the King. If he’d just proclaimed it the wrong stone or even a good quality he would’ve been out of the running. But there was something about Naron that called to him. He wanted the man with an unhealthy passion. More than he’d ever wanted anyone. Even his beloved Larien.

“I will have him.” Lord Mell hissed in Tor’s ear as he passed. That man would do anything to get the King as his consort.

“Don’t worry, my Duke.” Crill said, stroking Tor’s back. I’ll keep an eye out for that man. I don’t like how he looks at you.”

“Here’s your coffee.” Pietro stepped forward and placed a cylinder in Tor’s hand.

“You’re a gift from the gods, Pietro.” It felt too early to be doing this stuff. The fact that he continued to win wasn’t helping him either. He let his guard lead him off to breakfast so he could work on his proposal for purchasing minerals for the high king. King-consort or not his uncle wanted that contract and what his uncle wanted, he got.

* * *

King Naron was reviewing some papers when there was a knock at his door.

“Come in.”

He was surprised when Sir Cant came through the doorway.

The man was obviously uncomfortable. He could barely meet the King’s eyes.

“I’ve come to withdraw from the consort contest.” Sir Cant blurted.

Naron set his papers down and gave the other man his complete attention. “Why do you want to withdraw?”

The younger man came forward. “May I be honest?”

“Of course. Would you like to sit down?”

“N-No.” He stammered. “I mean no thank you. I just want to get this over with. As much as I respect you as King, I don’t think I would make a very good consort. You are looking for someone like Lord Mell who has a strong personality, or Lord Gallywyn who is pretty or perhaps Tor who is both. I don’t want to be a consort. I’m only here because my father said he would disown me if I didn’t try. Being away from home made me realize how much I miss Timothy.”

“Timothy?”

Cant blushed. “He’s the Miller’s son back home.” The shy young man straightened his back. “Watching his grace get through a day and talking to his people about him made me realize I’ve been a coward all this time. If the Duke can run an empire and deal with a space dragon without his sight, I can stand up to my father and tell him I’m going after the man I love.”

“What if he disowns you?”

Sir Cant stubbornly said, “Then I learn how to help out my husband in the mill.”

“Good for you.” The King stood and slapped the younger man on the back. “If your father disowns you, let me know and I’ll see what I can do

about finding you a position with the assessor's office. You have a good eye for rocks."

The young man flushed from the praise. "Thank you your highness and good luck with your consort contest. I look forward to seeing his grace the next time I come."

The younger man was gone before the King had a chance to realize what he'd said.

"I guess I'm not as subtle as I thought." Cant's words had Naron thinking. He called for his steward.

Sparrow rushed through the room with his quick birdlike movements that earned him his nickname. They'd used it so long that Naron couldn't remember the man's real name if asked.

"I'd like you to bring me one servant from each consort contestant. Bring me their manservant."

"Who do you want from the Duke's pack?" Sparrow smirked. It was a source of amusement to the page that the Duke had so many men.

"Bring the older gentleman, I think his name starts with a P."

"Pietro. Yes, that's a good choice." The page said then blushed when he realized he was confirming the King's pick. "I-I'll just go get them one at a time."

When the page left, the King went back to his paperwork to wait until the first servant entered. It was a common fact; to know the master you ask his people.

Two hours later he learned that Gallywyn was a sweet if scatter-brained master, Mell was a hard but relatively fair man and that Torrence could do no wrong even if he rolled Pietro in oil and set the man on fire.

His exact words.

Naron sighed and rubbed his eyes. It was time for bed. He wondered how the Duke spent his night and if he had any company. There weren't any rules about having sex while in the contest but he hoped Tor wasn't seeking relief with any of his people.

Noran changed into his sleep clothes. He always slept in comfortable pajamas because he never knew when an emergency was going to pull him out of bed.

* * *

Naron was having the strangest dream. Tor was calling for him. He couldn't see the man because of the fog but he could hear his voice.

“Come to me, my love.” The Duke called to him. Which was strange since he didn’t even know if the man felt more than a mild attraction. He certainly wouldn’t expect to be the man’s lover until they got to know one another better.

Still, Naron was drawn to the sound of the Duke’s voice and the longing held in those sensuous tones. He wanted to be the man’s lover, badly.

In his dream he searched for Tor blindly in the fog. Was this how Tor felt in his daily life? Unable to see and uncertain of his surroundings? Sympathy for the beautiful man filled the King.

As he walked, he thought he heard voices but the sounds were faint and far away. He ignored them knowing that he would soon reach Tor. He carefully walked through a doorway and up to a bed. The Duke was lying there asleep making Naron wonder who had called him. Exhaustion dragged him down. Yearning for rest and comfort, the King slid into the Duke’s bed and rested his head on the man’s bare chest, then wrapped his arm around him.

* * *

Tor was having the most wonderful dream of lying in Larien’s arms again. His lover’s mouth brushed his in a tender kiss softer than any he remembered.

Memories of his lover’s death started him struggling.

He almost panicked. There was no way his guards would let anyone harm him during the night. It was one of the reasons he had round the clock guards. He mentally reached out to his dragon.

Baroy

Yes

The dragon’s immediate response made Tor suspicious that the creature had been expecting his call.

What did you do?

You have been unhappy I got you what you wanted.

Tor would’ve argued but at that moment the body lying on his shifted. A hard body wrapped in silky fabric slid across his naked chest scattering his thoughts to the stratosphere.

“My beautiful man.” The whisper in his ear made him harder than a Trillion diamond. A soft kiss on his cheek caused him to groan.

He wasn’t sure the King knew where he was or what he was doing. Baroy had the ability to cloud a man’s mind. Tor had only experienced the dragons’ effects a few times on his enemies. That he did it now on the

King was curious but with Naron pressed against him, Tor couldn't get his brain to function enough to stop the other man.

Naron's mouth slid down Tor's body; licking and biting his way down to the Duke's morning hardness. With quick efficient motions he removed Tor's pants. Tor heard them fall to the floor but gave them no mind. He felt the King's mouth where those hot hands were touching.

Show him to me!

Tor rarely insisted on his vision because he preferred seeing what the dragon was seeing, but there was no way he was going to miss the sight of the King's mouth around his cock.

Jolts of electricity shot up his spine. Tor looked down to see the King up close for the first time. Black hair, as dark as space, fell around his face, in beautiful layers. This stopped Tor's ability to see the man's face. Unable to help himself, the Duke sank his fingers into the midnight silk of hair and lifted it to see. Damn his daughter was right! Naron was handsome.

The man's skilled mouth soon rushed Tor to his release. He tapped the King's shoulder to let him know. The man growled and gripped Tor's hips tighter. He wasn't going to let go of his prize.

Tor let out a cry as Naron swallowed his essence.

The Duke floated. His body and mind so relaxed that he barely understood the King's words.

"Mine." He thought he heard Naron say when a piercing pain ripped through his left shoulder.

The bastard bit him. His entire shoulder burned from the bite.

Don't move. He's marking you. Baroy's calm voice smothered his panic. He trusted the dragon to protect him even if the other man was truly harming him.

It still hurt.

The fog cleared from Naron's head as he pumped his mating toxin into the other man. Slowly his fangs retracted and he absently licked the point of entry.

The Duke's voice cut through the fog. "It's all right, Baroy sent you here." Long fingers stroked his head sending tendrils of warmth down his spine.

"Your grace." Pietro charged into the room with a tray containing a cup and a small carafe of coffee along with a plateful of pastries. "Oh. I'd better get another cup."

The man's nonchalance about finding a man in Tor's bed angered Naron. But he waited until the servant left before he addressed Tor. "There

will only be me in your bed from now on.” He growled. For the first time in his life his dragon DNA was taking over. He felt insanely possessive about the golden-haired man lying beside him. He wanted this man to know there would be no others.

Ever.

“What if I don’t want to be your consort?” There was a hint of true anger in the other man’s question. Naron knew it was best to proceed with caution. This was a grown man who was powerful in his own right. Even as he gave himself good advice, he didn’t follow it.

“Then you shouldn’t have entered the contest. I’ve claimed you and now your mine.”

Tor sat up, a scowl crossed his face. “Just because you’ve claimed me doesn’t mean I have to stay.”

Pietro returned placing the tray on the side table interrupting their conversation.

“Anything else I can get for you, my Duke?”

“Get this man out of my bed.” Tor said.

Pietro looked at the King and smiled. “I hear that you two are mates now. Congratulations.”

“How do you know that?” Really they hadn’t even left the bed and the story was already spreading.

“After so many years with the Duke, Baroy sometimes speaks to those of us who are closest to him. Unfortunately he didn’t tell me before I brought you your tray the first time, otherwise I would have brought the proper amount.”

Naron could tell that the other man didn’t like being wrong in his service.

“That’s all right, Pietro.” Tor said, shifting away from the King. Naron reached out and pulled him close again.

“I wouldn’t want you falling out of bed.” He murmured, tucking Tor into his embrace. He ignored the brief struggle as the Duke tried to escape. Tor sighed and leaned against him, resting his head on the King’s shoulder.

“I have never fallen out of bed.”

Pietro chuckled as he poured the first cup of coffee. “That is true, the Duke is extremely graceful. But there was the one time you spilled coffee on the ambassador of Rielan.”

“He was groping me.” Tor protested. “Waste of a good cup of coffee and I paid for that. I still get teased for my clumsiness.”

“I noticed that didn’t stop you from drinking it.” Pietro said handing the cup to the Duke. The entire procedure was done so smoothly it didn’t

look awkward. Naron felt a new appreciation for the Duke's staff. They thought nothing of serving a man who needed a little extra service. But then from what he learned most of them had never served anyone else.

"Some things I'm not willing to give up."

"We'll have some imported for you." Naron promised. The desire to provide for his mate was riding the King hard.

"That's not a problem." Pietro said, buttering the Duke's croissant. He handed it to the King with a wink. "The Duke has his own connections. In fact his coffee man should be here this afternoon."

"Excellent." Tor said, flashing the first smile the King had seen since the other man found out he was the King's mate.

He tore off a piece of pastry and held it up to the Duke's mouth. Those luscious lips took the food from his fingers and licked the tips sending a shaft of heat throughout Naron's body.

"I'll leave you two to your breakfast and tell the others not to interrupt you unless there's an emergency."

"You do that." The King purred right before he gently brushed his lips against the Duke's. The man tasted like coffee and butter, making the King imagine how this would be every day of the rest of his life. Although the kingdom was profitable, the King didn't have a servant come and wait on him hand and foot. Not only did the Duke have an overabundance of people to bring him everything, but his clothing and manner indicated a sense of elegance that only came from extreme wealth.

The King could like having breakfast in bed every morning if it came from the lips of this beautiful creature. Naron took the Duke's coffee from his hand.

Tor gave a soft sound of protest but the King covered it with his mouth.

"Shh. I'll give it back but first I want to enjoy you."

The Duke groaned when Naron rubbed his hands up and down his bare chest. Needing to feel their skin together, the King stripped off his shirt and pants and threw them to the floor. He needed to feel his mate against his skin more than he'd ever needed anything before. Again, Naron felt the presence of his dragon moving inside him. The description given to him by others of the dragon kin now made sense. Apparently he needed a mate to bring it out of him.

Sighs came from both men when their chests made contact.

"You are so warm." Tor said.

"It's the dragon blood."

He pulled open the side table and frantically searched for the bottle of oil provided in each guest room.

“Yes!” He exclaimed when his hand closed over it.

“Find what you’re looking for?” Tor’s voice was teasing as he stroked Naron’s face.

“Yes.” Naron kissed Tor.

He carefully prepared the Duke by pressing in one oiled finger after another. When he was satisfied that Tor was stretched enough he pushed his cock inside with slow careful motions.

“Harder, I won’t break.”

Naron let himself free. Letting out the wildness he’d unknowingly held inside for years. This was his mate. The one he could be himself with and not hold back.

He felt his incisors lengthen and pumped harder as he admired Tor’s lust-filled gaze. The blackness in his eyes bled away and for an instant he was looking into a pair of emerald green eyes. Naron lifted Tor’s legs and changed his angle, gripping Tor’s shaft, he pumped him in time with his hips.

Semen erupted from his lover and Tor’s eyes bled back to their normal star-filled gaze. Groaning, Naron followed his lover quickly over the edge. Gasping, he pulled out of his lover and toppled beside him.

“Give me a minute and I’ll clean us up.”

Tor’s hand came up and stroked Naron’s head. The gentle gesture had the King holding back his tears. He knew that the Duke didn’t love him, Pietro had explained to Naron about the Tor’s loss, but if he could at least come to feel affection, the King would take any scraps he could get.

Not looking at Tor, Naron went and got a clean, damp cloth and wiped them both down before setting it on the bedside table.

“That was wonderful, thank you.” Tor said.

Naron pulled the Duke towards him and settled Tor’s head on his chest.

“You’re very welcome. You know you have to be my consort now, I marked you.”

There was a long pause that had Naron squirming inside.

“I figured as much. Jory said that was how he was claimed. I sort of wondered why you didn’t just do a mate hunt like the Northern king.”

“Jory? As in the Northern King’s new mate Joriah?”

Tor nodded. “He’s my cousin by marriage.”

“Nice kid.” Naron said, stroking Tor’s head.

Tor laughed. “He’s not that nice, he’s got a bit of a temper on him but he’s still one of my favorite people, and you’re avoiding my question.”

“My dragon isn’t as strong as Rai’s. I’ve never even felt its presence until this week. I was a sleeping dragon until you came into my life.”

Naron smiled. "Now I know what the others feel when they see their mates for the first time and need to claim them."

"What do we do now?" Tor asked, snuggling closer. Naron felt a wave of happiness spread through him.

Maybe they could have a future after all.

"We make the announcement and go on with our lives."

* * *

Walking to midday meal, Naron couldn't stop the smile spreading across his face as the Duke walked by his side.

Things were looking up. He found his mate and for the first time in his life he actually felt like one of the dragonkin.

Sparrow rushed up to him, his skin unnaturally pale.

"Your highness I need to speak to you privately." The young man nervously said, shooting glances at the Duke.

"Whatever you have to say can be said in front of Torrence. He is my mate and will officially be my consort by the end of today."

Sparrow leaned forward to whisper in the King's ear. "It's about the Duke."

"If you have something to say about me feel free to share." The Duke said in a dry voice.

Tor wondered what got the king's page in a lather. He could tell by the stuttering and shaky tone that the man was upset about something.

"Is there a problem?" Crill's deep voice interrupted.

"Sparrow feels there is something the King should know about me."

Crill gave a choking sound, a cat's laughter. "I'm sure he will want to explore those on his own."

"Trust me, he's already explored everything I have." Tor grinned. His heart still pained for Larien but he was starting to think the King could help ease away the hurt and give him something worthwhile to live for.

"Oh I'm sure there's plenty I haven't completely examined." Naron offered with a soft laugh.

"Y-you might not know this but we m-monitor all transmissions in and out of the castle." The page stuttered interrupting the trio's banter.

"Good to know that you have security." Tor said still not understanding where this was all headed.

"Did you know that his grace has a wife and kids?" Sparrow blurted out.

"What!" Naron shouted.

“I do not have a wife.” Tor said.

“But you have children.” Naron said, his voice eerily calm.

“Of course I have children. My lineage has to be continued.”

“How many?”

“Three. I have a little girl and two boys.”

He could hear the King breathing fast like he was hyperventilating.

Tor reached out and rubbed the man’s back. “Breathe, your going to make yourself sick.”

Naron jerked out of his hold. “Are they all from the same woman?”

“Yes. Lila is the mother of all three.” Tor drew himself up straight. “I love my children and if you have a problem with that then I guess your dragon didn’t choose so well after all.”

“Don’t make me the bad guy here.” Naron said, his voice cold as ice. “You didn’t tell me you had children and that you were involved with their mother.”

“What do you mean involved?” Tor could match the King’s coldness. He’d been a politician most of his life. “I love Lila but we aren’t lovers and have never been. She is the woman I picked to be my children’s mother and she is an excellent one.”

“And when you get done playing consort are you going to go back to them?” Naron taunted but Tor heard the pain in the King’s voice.

Tor took a deep breath. “I can’t go back to them. I’ve never been near them physically for more than a few hours their entire life. Baroy can’t handle my blood ties to my children. He’s a territorial male and since we have been bonded for so many years he considers me his territory. He will feel the need to kill them if I am with them for more than a handful of time. So no, I am not going to rush back to my home planet and cradle my little girl in my arms or play ball with my boys. I’m not going to dance with my best friend who also happens to be the mother of my children because Baroy can smell her genetic mixture on my children and will kill her too. Does that answer your questions your highness?”

Naron held back his tears as he listened to the pain in his lover’s voice. To be unable to hold your children and then lose your lover was a tremendous burden to carry. No wonder there was so much pain in the Duke’s eyes.

Unable to see the Duke standing alone, Naron stepped forward and wrapped the man in his arms.

Tor’s body started to shake with sobs.

“Shhh. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You have me now. You’ll always have me. Shhh. You’ll make yourself sick.”

“I can take him back to his room.” The cat shifter offered.

Fangs burst from Naron’s mouth and he felt a burning rise from his stomach. The burn of flames flickered in his mouth.

“No! He’s mine.” He said in a low growl that vibrated. His dragon was just under the surface. Only the broken-hearted Duke kept him from changing completely. He wouldn’t leave the man alone.

With slow deep breaths he pulled the dragon back in and buried it deep. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully dried the Duke’s tears. “Come on beautiful, we need to announce our bond and then we can go back to bed.” He nervously swallowed. “I’d love to meet your kids some time.”

“I talk to them every evening. You can chat with them later.”

“Great.” The King said. He almost even meant it. He had follow up questions regarding the Duke and his dragon but he would save those for later when the man was less upset.

The pair entered the throne room to see Lord Gallywyn and Lord Mell already seated with an assortment of fruit and pastries.

“Good afternoon gentlemen.” The King said pleasantly. He led Tor over to the consort chair and seated him gently. “I am pleased to announce that after passing every test, the Duke has agreed to be my consort.”

Lord Mell jumped to his feet. “No! I demand a battle!”

“I already marked him.” Naron said with a smug smile.

“But is your dragon on him?” Technically bonding wasn’t complete until the King’s dragon appeared on the Duke’s back.

“Not yet. I marked him last night.”

“Then he’s not officially your consort and I can battle him. My dragon against his.”

“You know a space dragon can’t come down here.”

“Then he defaults.” Mell gleefully said. “I claim his life as forfeit so that he can’t finish the bond.”

Tor slowly smiled. “You might want to reconsider that your lordship,” the Duke said. “If my uncle finds out that you killed me without a proper challenge he will invade and destroy the entire kingdom. Is that what you are looking for?”

“N-no.”

“What does a challenge usually involve?” Tor asked.

“I shift into a dragon and either attack you or a dragon representative. Since you are bonded to a dragon it would have to be a dragon you were bonded to.”

“He’s bonded to me.” Naron said. Tor could feel the brush of the other man’s skin as he stepped forward at his side.

“Yes, but everyone knows you don’t have a dragon.”

“Everyone is wrong.” Naron said, his voice becoming deeper. “My bond is strong enough with the duke to bring my dragon forward.”

“Enough!” Lord Gallywyn shouted.

Tor tilted his head. Who knew the soft-spoken man had it in him?

“Give it up Mell. If they’re bonded enough to bring forth the King’s dragon then killing Tor will kill the King and if your goal is really to be King-consort and not King then you need to step away from this and go back home. Be a man and realize you were beaten.”

“I will not be beaten by a blind, pretty boy who snuck his way into the King’s bed!” Lord Mell screamed.

Tor heard something whistle through the air. Instinctively he put out his hand to stop it. The slap of a leather wrapped handle met his palm. He quickly closed his hands to catch it.

“You dare to throw a dagger at my mate!” A low growl filled the room. Tor felt the King shift beside him and the sounds of fabric tearing.

“I dare.” Mell rumbled.

Tor felt a strong arm wrap around him pulling him away.

“I think we want to be out of this.” Crill said as he rushed them to the side of the room.

The sounds of animals clashing filled the air. Snarls, screams and the slam of bodies hitting each other reverberated throughout the room.

“How is he doing?” Tor asked.

“Not bad.” Crill answered in a distracted voice. “Ohh. That had to hurt.”

Baroy, we need to protect my mate.

Yes we do.

The power of the space dragon whipped through Tor so quickly his feet left the earth for a moment.

Crill sneezed and stepped away. “Baroy?”

Tor nodded. He couldn’t speak as he assimilated the dragon’s power. His vision snapped into focus and he saw two enormous dragons fighting in the center of the room. The walls were ringed with onlookers; all who appeared to be cheering for the King.

Baroy’s vision let him know that the green dragon was his lover and the red one was Lord Mell.

Tor lifted his right hand and concentrated. A silvery ball formed above his palm. It grew rapidly and when it was the size of Tor’s head he flung it at the pair. Both dragons flew in opposite directions.

With sure measured steps, Tor stomped over to the red dragon lying stunned on the floor. He stopped at the creature’s head.

Baroy's ringing voice came through Tor's mouth as he spoke. "I am Baroy, master of the sky, guardian to dragon kind. I find you unworthy of your dragon spirit."

Tor placed his right palm on the dragon's nose. A red glow spread from the contact until it completely covered the downed beast before reversing and flowing up into Tor's hand and vanishing.

The red dragon slowly shrunk until all that was left was a naked man shivering on the cold marble floor.

"What did you do to him?" The King asked, staring down at his adversary.

"Baroy removed his essence. Now he will always be just a man."

"Wow. Space dragons don't mess around."

"Not when our mate is attacked."

"Can I get that mate part in writing?"

"If I can get your signature on that contract with my uncle."

"Anything you want, my mate. Anything at all." Naron smiled and for the moment Tor was able to enjoy the sight. "You're a very handsome man." He said.

"You can see me?" Naron's smile went from bright to incandescent.

"Unfortunately it's temporary." Tor looked at the King over from his head to his toes, enjoying every naked bit in between.

Pietro appeared through the doors carrying a robe. "Here you go your highness." The servant bowed. "Crill came and told me you might want something to put on. I'll go and prepare a bath for you two." He said before leaving again.

Tor sighed as the sleek beautiful skin vanished beneath the robe. It didn't matter though, his sight was already fading. Luckily he'd be able to feel the man for many years to come and frankly if it came between a choice of touching or seeing the King, he'd take touching every time.

"I don't believe I ever got my morning coffee." Tor commented as his vision flashed to a comet shooting through the solar system. He lost the delicious sight of his naked mate. Naron took Tor's hand and wrapped it around his arm without saying a word.

"I've never had any." Lord Gallywyn piped up. Where he'd been during the encounter Tor didn't know. And at that moment he didn't really care.

Thank you. He sent mentally to the dragon.

You are all I have, my friend. Baroy answered. *I will look after you and your new mate until the end of your days.*

"Well let's all get some coffee." Tor said.

He was newly mated, they'd routed the enemy and he really needed some caffeine.

"Does this mean I get to keep my chef?" The King asked, kissing Tor's cheek.

"Maybe. If you're really good I'll let him cook meals other than mine but you might have to earn it."

"Oh, I'll earn it all right." The King said in a seductive voice.

"What are we doing with Lord Mell?" Gallywyn asked.

"Throw him in jail and convict him of treason,." The King said, continuing to lead Tor away.

"I'll take him to your captain." Crill offered.

"Good idea." Naron agreed.

"We'll deal with him after some coffee." The Duke said.

Naron laughed. "Definitely after coffee."

The End

Amber Kell is a dreamer who has been writing since she was a little girl. Her first paying gig was when she was in third grade and wrote a poem about a rock. It won her a silver dollar award from her school's principle and was the last time she was paid for her poetry.

Other books by Amber Kell:

Dragonmen: Mate Hunt

Hellbourne Series

MoonPack Series

Bonding with Graven