

EARTH BOND

A detailed illustration of a dragon with dark blue scales and large, leathery orange wings. The dragon is shown in profile, facing right, with its wings partially spread. It has a long, spiky tail and a fierce expression. The background features a vast, golden field under a sky with soft, orange and blue hues, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the distance, there are silhouettes of mountains or hills.

**A WEBNOVEL
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)**

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Chapter 1

13 May 2017, 12:51 EDT; Washington, DC

He didn't like all the attention.

The commuters were usually numb to most anything as they made their way back to work, but even the biggest Ipod Zombie was looking at him as he walked by, mainly because he was more than a head taller than the tallest of them, towering over the commuters, able to see as far down the street as he wanted because the only things in his way were the lamp posts. The trench coat and large hat concealed his form, and a pair of large visor-like sunglasses covered the entire upper half of his face. He knew he looked exotic to them, but he couldn't afford their attention, because everyone looking at him would attract the attention he did *not* want, the surveillance cameras on almost every corner. Those cameras were mainly used by the DC police, but they were also tapped by the federal agencies, and it wouldn't take them long to catch him if they were using the updated facial recognition software. They knew his face, but he was the best suited for a job like this, so they decided to risk it.

A pitched battle in one of the most heavily covered cities for the media would *not* endear him very much to Ferroth when he got back.

He moved with certain confidence past the Foggy Bottom metro stop, as an endless line of federal workers stepped off the escalator on their way to the federal office buildings that dominated that part of the city, returning to work after lunch, and while they looked at him, few of them noticed the fact that the ground shivered with every step he took, as if he were carrying a piano on his back. It was no piano he was carrying, only a rather old, ratty-looking briefcase, swinging lightly by his side as he moved towards

the headquarters building for the Department of State. The damn techheads they'd been hiring lately were just too good, and had closed down most of his backdoors, so it forced this, a personal visit to get past the formidable firewalls they'd put up so he could undermine all their computer security and let them back in.

He was of a mind to find whoever they'd hired to redo their computer security and either strangle him or take him to dinner. He hadn't had any serious competition from anyone out in the world since that Chinese hacker found his way into their system.

A dead Chinese hacker.

If only they'd let him bring some *real* tech out here, he wouldn't have to do stuff like this. But the rules were quite clear about that...out in the world, he could only use what they used. The laptop in his briefcase could be bought in just about any store, and it was his curse that he was both good enough with their anachronistic tech and software to do the job, but also young enough to actually be able to go out into the outside world without attracting *too* much attention.

Not for much longer, though. He figured that in ten more years, he'd be too big to pass the feasibility test. By then, he'd be upwards of eight feet tall when out in the world, and that would just be *too* much attention. He was pushing it as it was, but he couldn't trust something like this to the other youngers.

His cell phone chirped, and he touched the bluetooth in his ear.
"Stone."

"ETA?" a deep, gravelly voice asked.

"Two minutes. Are the goods ready for shipment?"

"They're boxed and ready for pickup."

"Watch for the delivery truck," he said, then he killed the call without another word. But that too was the rule; no cell phone communication from

home could last more than 27 seconds, else they might be able to put a trace on it. The phone would have cut off automatically at 27 seconds, and he wouldn't be able to call back for another 17 minutes, until the automated sniffers and trackers the CIA and NSA used reset back to standby.

He moved with the flow of foot traffic past several office buildings, until he was where he needed to be, the State building. It was old and had intriguing architecture like many buildings in D.C., but it was also surrounded by a stout wrought iron fence behind crash barrier pylons to prevent a speeding car from trying to ram the fence and slam into the building. Armed guards flanked the main entrance, and there were cameras everywhere. The man called Stone passed by the main entrance and walked down to the corner of the building, catching a glimpse of the White House down Pennsylvania Avenue, then crossed the street to a tiny spot of green, a low concrete wall holding a little grass and a tree, which was used by many as a seat. Several suited federal employees were there, sitting or leaning on the wall, talking, smoking cigarettes, or reading from newspapers or tablet computers. He couldn't sit on the wall like they were, it would crack if he tried to sit on it, but the area was well known enough as a place to sit and be idle that he wouldn't attract any undue attention if he paused there. He set his briefcase on the low wall and opened it, then opened the laptop nestled inside. Long, slightly strange-looking fingers spread over the keyboard, only three fingers and a thumb with large knuckles and thick, narrow nails, and they moved with flowing grace as he leaned over the wall and typed out lines of raw code, basic commands that governed the laptop trying to access the internal wireless network of the State Department, which just barely reached that particular corner. It was a slight flaw in their system, a wifi transceiver placed just a bit too close to one of the windows in the ground floor office facing the wall and tree, which just allowed the transceiver to pick up wireless when facing that particular window, a window that didn't have a wifi-absorbing coating like most of them did.

They hadn't updated their internal security yet, he saw as his laptop started negotiating with their network. Good. They probably hadn't thought

that one of them would actually dare to come to Washington and try to invade their system in person.

As it were.

It took him all of nineteen seconds to crack their security protocols and gain access to a standard login prompt, and since he had the login ID and passwords for 248 different State employees, he had his pick of which to use. He selected a GS-9 secretary's login ID that happened to work in the IT section of the building, and would have access rights to where he needed to go.

Lines of code flashed back and forth across the screen in the form of alphanumeric symbols as the man called Stone quickly gained access to the part of their computer system that handled the transmission and reception of top-level cables and communications, the protocols that ambassadors and high-ranking State officials used when communicating the most sensitive information.

They *had* upgraded their security. Accessing the part of their system he needed demanded that he use a hard terminal, a computer inside the building and physically connected to the network via a hard line, and only certain terminals had permission to access that area. If any other terminal tried, it would set off an alarm.

Easily thwarted now that he was inside the system using their own network.

It took him six minutes to dance around their security protocols, eventually fooling the system into believing that his wireless-connected laptop was actually terminal I5-715, one of the 15 computers that had permission to access the part of their network that he needed. In reality, he *was* I5-715, since he'd hacked that particular machine using their network and was using it as a zombie, as a proxy through which his commands were being relayed. It had taken a bit of work to get there, since the 15 computers that could do what he needed to do were *supposed* to be isolated from the main network, but like any large, complicated network, there were always

small holes that could be exploited by someone who was patient and careful. That one particular computer was the only one of the 15 that had a sync program for an Ipad3, and that was the hole he needed to slip through and gain access to it. Hacking one of their floating, wifi-enabled Ipads got him within reach of that particular box, and he seized control of it.

Once he had access, he uploaded a rather innocuous little program that attached itself to the core code of their main communication system's pending updates and then wrote itself into the next scheduled security patch, appearing for all intents and purposes to anyone who looked at it that it was simply a part of the regularly scheduled update it used as a piggyback. State updated their system via a hotpatch every three days, changing their codes and keyset protocols for their formidable Liberty Six encryption algorithms as a soft update rather than a hard one, which would force the program to shut down and restart. They utilized a hard patch every month which forced a program restart, and other than that, the computers that ran the communication software was up and running at all times. He'd carefully timed his upload so the patch would be sent out before they had a chance to check it and find his addition. In fact, the patch was scheduled to push out in four minutes. Since no computer on earth could crack Liberty Six, the only way to get around it was to hack the computers that governed the keysets used to decrypt it, giving *them* the decryption codes along with everyone else. Ironically enough, they couldn't use Liberty Six to defend the main computer that handled all the security updates that told the State computers out in the world which keysets to use. Liberty Six was purely a data encryption algorithm, which let invaders like him thwart the computer security they employed to protect their computers, attacking it the only way they could, and in the only place where it could be done.

That done, he went back and covered his tracks by wiping out every trace that he'd been there, backtracking through every computer he'd hacked in their network to erase all traces that he'd accessed them. He then introduced a virus into their main server that would cause it to infect their logs and erase the record of his wireless computer accessing their network, covering the flaw he'd used to gain access to their system. He may need to

use it again someday. After he finished that, he zeroed out the hard drive of the laptop using a datawipe utility so it eradicated any trace of what he had used it for, and turned it off. It had served its purpose, and he'd just drop it in a trash can or something on the way back. He had no more use for it.

And that was that. His addition to their patch would give them access to State's top-level cables again, letting them monitor American communications to ensure that nothing about *them* was being discussed. The hack patch included a new spider he designed would point out cables containing pertinent keywords which would be of interest to them. He ran the wipe program on the laptop to zero out the hard drive and wipe out all traces of the programs that had been on it, and after it was done, he turned off the laptop, closed it, then closed the briefcase and picked it up. His mission was accomplished, and now he had to get the hell out of Washington before something bad happened.

Or...something bad was already happening.

He noticed the guards by the front gate suddenly look around, a finger to their earpieces, and he knew that something was going on. He didn't move swiftly or jerkily, he simply turned and started down Pennsylvania Avenue with some tourists, making no sudden moves that would draw a trained eye or a camera to him. His size already drew attention to him, but if he moved like he was doing something wrong, people would notice it. He padded along, glancing over at the Washington Monument and the metal framework of scaffolding surrounding it, ongoing repairs from the two earthquakes that had damaged it, one six years ago and the second one just last year. He cross the street, stumbling a little when the edge of the curb cracked under his foot, and he silently cursed and fell in behind a family of Japanese tourists, chattering away in their language on their way to the White House most likely. That was the *last* place he wanted to go, camera central on top of the surveillance from all the Secret Service. He noticed a black SUV roll by fairly quickly, one of the "no, I'm not *really* government!" types, then he crossed Pennsylvania at the corner and reached the edge of the Mall that led from the White House to the monument. He paused at the edge of the sidewalk, looking at the gravel pathway and all

that grass with a bit of trepidation, but he had little choice. He couldn't cross in front of the White House else the Secret Service would pick him up—if they weren't watching him already—and he had to stay out in the tourist areas. Gritting his teeth, he moved away from the gravel and instead started down the grass, where at least he wouldn't leave quite so obvious a trail. The green grass would partially conceal that dirty little secret.

The secret that behind him, he left deep divots in the ground, his feet sinking almost to the ankle in the soft earth before he pulled it up and took another step.

It would have been worse on the gravel, where he'd have left a trail so obvious that the cameras would pick it up, and then he'd have hell to pay if he managed to get back home. But the soft earth also made it slow going, almost like walking through mud, and he had to be careful not to drag his feet to plow up the grass and leave brown tracks behind him that would look unusual enough to attract attention. The trench coat was helping hide his high-stepping gait, which would have earned him undue attention due to anomaly-tracking software in the programming that governed the automated functions of the cameras. They tracked anything they deemed strange automatically, letting a pair of eyes at a monitor determine if the unusual movement or behavior was normal or a potential risk. It was all part of the security upgrades after the foiled terror attack in 2014, when that maniac anti-abortion nutcase tried to run into the Capitol with a suicide vest he'd built using plans gleaned off the internet. He'd been stopped at the security checkpoint, but it still killed 14 people along with him when he blew himself up rather than be captured. Now, the cameras would notice behavior their programming deemed anomalous, like pacing back and forth, looking around too much, or standing in one place staring at one location for too long before moving. They would even take notice if someone took too many pictures of the same place. Now he had to fool those cameras, who would zoom in on him if he high-stepped his way across the Mall like some soldier on parade.

It took several minutes of careful stepping to get to the area of the Mall around the monument, where he mixed in with many more people, both

residents and tourists alike. A group of youths were playing frisbee on one side, and a family was moving from the monument towards the World War II memorial on the other. He stopped to adjust his hat, blew out his breath, then put his free hand in his pocket and turned towards the sidewalk that led up to the monument, getting concrete back under his feet so he didn't leave a trail behind him.

And then one of the kids playing frisbee tripped and fell behind him.

He glanced back and saw that the kid had stepped in one of his footprints. He was on his stomach, rolling over and grabbing his ankle, then the others trotted over and teased him in a good-natured manner. But then one of them saw the hole, saw another, then another, then looked back the way he had come.

"What the hell?" he mused, then he looked back the other way. The man called Stone started walking, but he knew that those holes led right to him. "Jesus, mister, why are you punching holes in the grass?" he called.

The man called Stone didn't acknowledge him, just kept heading for the sidewalk, but he glanced at a police officer that was hurrying over to the fallen teenager, and he uttered a sibilant, hissing sound.

"You okay son?" the aged, brown-skinned man asked, reaching down.

"Fine, officer, just stepped in this hole."

"Yeah, there's a bunch of them," the same young man that called after him said, his voice sharp to Stone's ears. "They're like footprints or something. That guy there made them. He must be carrying a freakin' safe under that trench coat for his feet to sink into the ground like that."

He frowned just as he reached the sidewalk, stepping up onto it and feeling it hold his weight. He turned towards the monument and started towards the very gentle hill upon which it was built.

"Hey! Hey you, hold on a minute!" the officer called. Then he heard those words he did not want to hear. "Officer requesting backup, north

walkway,” the man said in his radio, low enough for just about anyone but him *not* to make it out from that distance.

He debated for a furious minute. The teenager had planted the seed of doubt, had noticed that he was *much* heavier than he looked, and had attributed it to him hiding something under his coat...just like the Capitol Bomber had done. If he was stopped, he'd be searched, and neither he nor whoever searched him would like that much at all.

He didn't have to get very far. Better a mystery and them dredging the river for a day or two over being discovered. He exploded into a swift run, his long legs carrying him far from the officer in just a matter of seconds, startling him enough so that by the time he thought to call again on his radio, Stone was nearly a hundred yards away and opening that distance with every step. He ran up the hill and around the ring of flagpoles, staying on the paved sidewalks and walkways, then down the far side, heading for the street.

And another black SUV screamed around the corner to his right and down that street, moving to cut him off.

He frowned deeper and moved even faster, a ground-eating lope that would make an Olympic sprinter hard pressed to keep up with him, racing the SUV to get past it before it get in front of him. The driver sped up as well, and for a second he wasn't sure who was going to win. But the driver slammed on the brakes to try to slide to a stop in front of him and misjudged the distance, allowing him to turn just slightly to the left and get around the Expedition. The door of the SUV opened just as he neared it, and he saw a young woman boil out, a face he knew, carrying a high-powered rifle.

“It's Stone!” the female barked suddenly.

All semblance of normalcy was shattered when the woman lowered her rifle and took a shot at him as he hurtled in front of the SUV, dashing out into the street. The red-hot round spiraled just inches in front of his face, which both surprised and amused him that they'd actually try to *shoot* him.

But, that particular woman was relatively green as they measured things, and was reacting out of reflex. Tourists and pedestrians just enjoying the sunny May day scattered in every direction at the sound of that gunshot.

The SUV screeched, and he glanced out of the corner of his eye to see it jump the curb and race after him as he ran out over the grass. The soft earth slowed him down, making it like he was running through sand, which let the SUV start gaining ground in short order.

Tossing the briefcase aside, he lunged forward as if diving into a foxhole, but instead of falling to his hands he put his foot under him, stretching his leg almost impossibly forward, and then launched off of it like an uncoiling spring. In three bounds, he was moving faster than any human could possibly run, tearing divots out of the earth with each pace, starting to pull away from the SUV, weaving back and forth to prevent them from lining up another shot at him. He leapt up and over a group of startled tourists, half of which were trying to get out of the way of the approaching SUV and the other half all but rooted to the spot in morbid fascination.

But his goal was denied when three more SUVs sped towards him from ahead and to the left, seeking to cut him off from the river. They'd had other units ready...they'd known he was there! He turned to the right, immediately changing his plan, angling for the street he knew led to the onramp for I-395, which crossed the Potomac at the 14th street bridge.

He reached the street and sped up even more once he had something other than soft earth under his feet, with four SUV's hot on his tail, all of them flashing blue and red lights like police cars. He slipped around a sedan in front of him, skipped aside as a truck cut him off as it changed lanes to give right of way to the police cars he thought were behind him. The suit-clad man in the truck gaped when he charged past, moving faster than the truck, and the man glanced down at the truck's speedometer and realized he was going 27 miles an hour. Ahead, two police cars screeched to a halt in the intersection, trying to block him, and that just made him smile darkly.

Silly humans.

The two DCPD uniforms were halfway out of their cars with guns drawn when he bore down on them fearlessly, then he hurdled the hood of the left car with the grace of a gazelle jumping a fallen log. The SUVs behind him were slamming the brakes, blocked by their own backup, and that let him open enough of a lead on them to be confident he was going to reach the bridge first.

Then a bullet smashed into the back of his knee.

The bullet did no harm, bounced off his hide without penetrating, but the shot was perfectly placed, absolutely precise, unlocking his knee just as he came down on it and causing him to tumble to the ground. A shot like that? Price had to be in one of those SUVs, few others had that kind of accuracy. He slid and tumbled down the pavement wildly, tearing his hat away, breaking his visor, scouring holes in his trench coat from the friction of being pinned between the asphalt and his weight. He slid into the back of a car that had stopped for a traffic light, crushing a deep dent in the back bumper and trunk hood, shattering the brake lights. His weight drove the car forward into the car in front of it. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, and realized that he heard screaming around him. Two pedestrians were pointing at him and screaming, and a third was pointing a cell phone's camera in his direction, hitting the button in a frenzy.

Damn it all, Ferroth was going to peel him out of his hide one little strip at a time. Not only had he blown cover, but now what happened was going to be all over their news and media. Twelve military-garbed people carrying high power rifles were charging towards him, trying to reach him before he got his senses back after the collision, trying to capture a prize like him alive.

Manhole cover. There was a manhole cover not twelve paces to his left, right in the middle of the street, even with yellow lines painted over it. Of course! That was just as good as the river! He rolled to the side, kicked off with his feet, the slid across the asphalt right up to the steel disc. He slammed his fist into the edge, making the other edge pop up, then he grabbed hold of it and flipped it aside like it weighed almost nothing. He

gave the twelve government agents a dark smile, then he dove headfirst into the hole.

He landed in ankle-deep water in a narrow circular drainage pipe, and he saw a flaw in his brilliant plan...the pipe wasn't all that big. If it narrowed down on the way to the river, he was going to be stuck in there. A shadow in the entry above told him they were debating coming in after him, and that spurred him on. The downslope would lead to the river, since storm drains used gravity to empty out, and he ran as fast as he felt safe in the narrow confines of the drain pipe, which was so cramped he couldn't even hunch, he had to all but scamper on all fours. Behind him, three gas grenades bounced down into the bottom and started unleashing their contents with loud rushing sounds, and that just made him go faster. Bullets were no problem, but gas was another matter.

The man called Stone was all but chased down the pipe by a cloud of dark green gas billowing behind him, expelled at high pressure by the three gas grenades and having no other way to go in the narrow confines of the pipe, channeling it right to him. The only upside was that the gas had to be pouring from the open manhole cover, preventing the agents from chasing him themselves. He could easily kill them all outside of the view of the cameras and the tourists and civilians and they knew it, but it would not have been the first time they did something silly in their zeal to either catch or kill him. They considered a few slaughtered units of agents a fair price to pay for getting their hands on him.

Oh yeah, this would be his last field mission, that was for sure. Ferroth was going to all but chain him to a console after this. What was left of him, anyway.

Almost as if thinking about him brought him forward, his bluetooth chirped. "Stone!" Ferroth's voice called, the transmission garbled due to him being underground. "What happened?"

"It was a trap," he replied. "They somehow knew when and where I'd be. They have the *entire* Hunter team here, and they boxed me in."

“They are broadcasting you *live*, you idiot!”

“Not at the moment they’re not,” he replied in a dry manner, turning in a junction to continue moving downslope.

“This is no time for jokes! You do whatever you have to—” his voice cut off, having hit the 27 second time limit.

Well, he could take that to mean that he could *completely* blow cover if he had to in order to escape.

Good. Maybe the Department would back off if they had an idea of what they’d *really* been chasing for the last six years.

Something hit the water in front of him, and there was an explosion of green gas ahead. They’d figure out where he was going and cut him off! He turned back to the junction and went the only way he could, two clouds of green gas joining in the junction box behind him, and he moved into a much larger pipe, oval instead of circular, large enough for him to stand erect. It moved downslope as well, a major drainpipe that emptied out into the river, and he raced down it before they could reach it up above ground and block him off.

He was right to worry. He heard a gas grenade hit the water not five steps behind him as he ran down the pipe, heard a froth of water as it expelled its pressurized payload underwater, but now he could see the daylight at the end of the pipe. It had a grate over it...like that was a problem. He lowered his head and charged through the water with the gas billowing out behind him, then jumped up and turned, then struck the grate with both feet. The grate shuddered and then tore free of its mounts, spinning out into the water of the Potomac River with him just behind it. He turned in the air, rotated towards the shore, and saw Price, Wilson, and Juarez all at the edge of the cherry tree path, rifles in their hands, looking at him. Price had his rifle up, pointing it at him. He hit the water on his back and bounced like a skipping stone just as Price pulled the trigger, then felt the bullet strike him just under and between his collarbones.

That *fucking* Price and his unnatural aim! He'd shot his amulet, and those things weren't as bulletproof as he was!

The instant the crystal in the amulet was shattered, he felt himself being released from the confines of the form which it was designed to enforce on him. His wings exploded from the back of the tattered trench coat, his tail snapped out behind and between his legs, his neck started elongating and his head changed shape even as he tumbled backwards. His body elongated, enlarged, ripped through the trench coat so fast that the sturdy material shot away from him like a snapped rubber band.

A human had hurtled out of the pipe, but it was no human that hit the water and plowed a deep frothing furrow in the surface of the Potomac. It was a reptilian creature with mottled scales in asymmetrical, camouflaging patches and lines of brown, black, and tan, membranous wings similarly mottled, and a long tail capped at its top with long, slender, blood red crystalline spikes.

Kell the Earth Drake, known by his alias Stone to the humans who chased him, quickly sank under the surface, more furious than anything else. The agents in the NSA department that specialized in catching hackers and cyber-terrorists, called the Hunters, really didn't know what he was, since they'd never seen him outside of his magically induced form, but they knew he *always* wore that amulet, and Price had probably decided to shoot it to either make him mad or see what it did. All they knew about him and his organization was that it was some kind of ultra-secret, ultra-exclusive group that tapped the surveillance and security of other nations and organizations, leeching intel off of them for their own, unknown goals. Naturally, the government wanted them stopped, tried to find out who they were and why they did what they did, so they became a primary focus for the ultra-elite computer counter-espionage team, the Hunters. They did know, however, that the four field agents of that shadowy group were all extremely strange, almost unnatural to their thinking. They were all very tall and had nearly superhuman physical traits...which they actually did, since they weren't human. They'd shot at the four agents and seen their bullets do nothing at all. They'd chased them in cars and found that they

could run on foot at nearly 45 miles an hour, which, on crowded city streets, was more than enough to escape from them. They knew that they were unnaturally heavy and supernaturally strong, since Stone had shouldered one of their SUVs in Dallas last year and knocked it on its side. They even knew the codenames they used; Stone, Shale, Onyx, and Jasper.

He turned towards the middle of the river and pushed his wings against the water, using them like flippers the way that the water dragons did, but a bubbly line zipped by his head, another shot from Price. He *knew* that they knew that bullets wouldn't hurt him, they'd learned that lesson years ago, and it was one of the main reasons that only the earth dragons were allowed to go out into the human world. Earth dragons couldn't be harmed by anything of their own element, and that meant that metal bullets, metal of the earth, would do them no harm. The Hunters didn't know exactly *why* bullets wouldn't hurt him, but they knew they wouldn't. They'd shot him enough times to learn that it wasn't some kind of body armor they'd never seen before.

He didn't have long. He was no water dragon, he couldn't breathe water, but he could get a *long* way away from them before he had to surface. Kell was probably the best swimmer among his kind that wasn't an earth dragon, taught by the water dragons in how to swim fast and efficiently, and he used that training to flee the scene beneath the muddy waters of the Potomac River. His wings weren't much use anywhere but in the water, where he'd learned how to use them like flippers, letting him swim with some impressive speed. Some earth dragons were very bitter about having wings but being unable to fly, were even more bitter about being the only dragons without any innate magic, but Kell—or Stone, as he was called in the department because that was his codename as a field agent—wasn't one of them. Magic was the past, it was history. It had some uses, but technology was the path to the future, and it was why he and the other earth dragons had embraced it. Without their technology, the colony would still be in the stone age, lacking both creature comforts and necessary fallbacks like food storage, which made them more secure and less vulnerable to some kind of disaster that might wipe out their food

production. He turned into the sluggish current and fanned his wings as if he were flying, which propelled him through the water faster than anything but a high-performance speedboat could manage. There were three scions close to Washington, and the closest of them, the one used for emergencies, was at the falls upriver. It was actually behind the falls, placed in case this exact kind of worst case scenario happened, a field agent losing his transformation amulet, letting them stay in the river and out of sight but still reach a scion to get back home. It was magical, one of the few real uses for magic, but he wouldn't snub his nose at it. It was either a scion or a two month swim to get back to Draconia.

He wondered just how many had seen him change form. He knew that the three Hunters did, but it had been so fast, he'd dropped into the water so quickly...would they believe what their eyes told them? They were usually of a habit to wear minicams with their headsets, so did those cams catch his transformation? If they did...shit. *Nobody* out in the human world knew about the dragons, and if it turned out that they saw him, well, maybe he shouldn't take that scion back home. Maybe he should just hide as far from anything he could find and eke out what existence he could until they forgot about him.

After six minutes of steady swimming against the sluggish current, he had to come up for air. He ghosted up to just under the surface and pushed his snout out, exhaled sharply and inhaled deeply, then dropped back down, letting his one and a half tons of weight drag him down without resisting. He'd sink like a rock straight to the bottom if he didn't swim. And it turned out that his move was a good one, for not five seconds after he started sinking, a pair of propellers shot right over where he'd been, the kind used in the fast-response boats the Coast Guard kept in the Potomac since 9/11. There was also a sonar net in the river to try to catch minisubs, but he didn't make the kind of noise they'd be looking for when he was in the water.

It took him nearly an hour of careful swimming and cautious breaths to reach the shallower water near the falls. The water was clearer but the current was faster, and he walked along the bottom as he felt the presence of the scion up ahead. He reached a deep section just in front of the waterfall

and paused to look out above the water's surface, bringing just the top of his head out like an alligator, though his curved, backswept horns and the bony spikes along the center of the back of his head would make him a but more ostentatious than an alligator. He saw no people on the rocks overlooking the falls, since it was a national park and was a destination for locals. He submerged his head and pushed out into the deeper water, using his wings to keep himself steady against a current that first tried to push him to the surface, then tried to drag him down. He sank his claws into the rock at the base of the falls and pulled his head out, then he saw two Hunters appear at the top of the waterfall and to the left. Wilson and Edwards.

He dropped back down, debating. They weren't moving, he could see just through the water, and they were going to see him when he climbed out of the water and into the waterfall; the waterfall wasn't so thick to let him climb up into the downstream without being seen. But he couldn't try to use one of the other scions. This was the only one that would let him reach it via the water, and if he tried the one in Woodbridge or the one in Bethesda, he'd have to get out where he could be seen. And waiting underwater for nine hours wasn't going to work. He could swim, but spending that much time underwater was going to make him so tired that he might not be able to *make* it to one of the other scions. His only viable option would be to get in the shallowest part of the rapids here at the falls where his body was under but he could stick his snout out to breathe from time to time and wait it out...and that didn't seem all that appealing. Having to hold himself against the current was going to be tiring, and if they had Hunters here, then they might bring more, and they might spot him. Even with the turbulence in the water, they might spot his silhouette or notice the disrupted water flow as he displaced the natural current.

Well, there *was* one other option. If they were going to see him no matter what, then he may as well make it count.

Yeah, that appealed to him. Besides, he rather liked Edwards. She was an alright human despite being a Hunter.

He drifted back to the edge of the deep water pool, set his hind legs against the rock lip, then pushed off with all his might.

The sudden eruption of white water at the far end of the drainage pool got the two humans' *immediate* attention. They both flinched as he leapt out of the water and drove his claws into the wet rock, then scampered up the rock face so quickly that the two barely had any time to react. In mere seconds, he went from underwater to launching up and over Edwards and Wilson, spraying them with water, then he landed behind them, cutting them off. He turned before they could reach for the pistols in their web belts, and snapped his wings out and brought his tail around, bringing to bear his main weapon.

The two of them were almost trembling, staring at him with utter awe, and not a little fear. He was the size of a large car if one discounted the tail, standing just over seven feet at the shoulder, his body from nose to tail nearly 24 feet long, sleek and muscular, built like a panther rather than a heavy, plodding animal like a rhinoceros. His lines were graceful, sinuous, making him appear to be agile and fast, not heavy and bulky. His hide was a series of camouflage-like patches and lines and streaks of browns, blacks, and tans, though his face had more symmetry, and the only color about him that wasn't earth-toned were the red crystal spikes that grew from the flattened top of the tip his heavy, muscular tail. His backswept onyx horns glistened from the wetness, and his glowing amber eyes regarded the two soberly. He slowly folded his wings back and took a less aggressive posture when neither of them drew their weapons, the tall, burly black man and the willowy blond woman staring at him in shock.

"Jenny, you're looking well," he said sibilantly, using their language through his very differently-shaped mouth.

"S-S-Stone?" she gasped.

He gave a single nod, sitting on his haunches sedately. "I'm never going to see any of you ever again, so I decided that if I'm going out, I may as well go out in style," he said ruefully. "I'll be chained to a computer

terminal for the rest of my life, if they don't just throw me in a cell and forget I ever existed."

"What *are* you?" Wilson asked.

"I'm an earth drake," he answered honestly. "A dragon," he elaborated after they looked at him blankly. "It's been quite an eventful six years, hasn't it? Dallas. London. And we can't forget Mexico City," he chuckled. "I'm the one that sent your team the case of tequila."

"We thought so," Edwards said, getting over her shock faster than Wilson. "Are the other three like you?"

"I will say nothing on the matter," he replied with a wolfish smile. "All I really have to say is this. Though we do things you might consider to be hostile, we have no hostile intent. Everything we do revolves around making sure we stay a secret. The dragons disassociated themselves from humankind over a thousand years ago, and it's probably the one thing on which all the dragons agree. I'm technically supposed to kill both of you since you've seen me, but I'm not going to do that," he told them honestly. "We may be on opposing sides, but I've never had any malice towards any of you, and I will not kill a defenseless creature. Besides, I used to have fun playing cloak and dagger with you. You made boring assignments much more exciting," he said with an impish, yet chilling, grin. A grin that was nothing but ivory fangs and long, sharp teeth. "You came here for extraction," Jenny reasoned, her mind starting to work again.

"Something like that, though they'll remove the doorway once I use it since its location is compromised," he said honestly. "So. It was a pleasure getting to know you, in our special little way, and I wish both of you well in the future," he said. Wilson flinched and almost went for his pistol when Stone stood back up, then stepped up until his head was just in front and above them. "Keep an eye on your facebook page, Jenny. I might drop you a line from time to time, at least if I'm not thrown in prison when I get

home,” he winked, reaching out with his taloned forepaw and patting her lightly on the shoulder.

“You—You could stay here,” she blurted. “We wouldn’t throw you in prison!”

“No, you’d have very noble intentions, and your bosses would make all sorts of promises, but we both know I’d eventually end up in some lab on a dissection table,” he replied bluntly. “The dragons disassociated themselves from humankind for a good reason, and despite a thousand years of separation, those reasons are still just as valid as they were the day the decision was made. You have changed, grown, matured, but you haven’t matured *enough*. When you do, we will approach you as friends. Until then, we will remain hidden, and as long as you don’t search for us and leave us alone, we will cause you no trouble.” He ambled past them, and they turned to watch him. He paused and looked back, his expression sober. “But if you *do* look for us, then don’t be surprised when the hand you stick in that hole gets bitten.”

He then launched himself off the rock face, his wings snapping out for just a moment to alter his path, then he landed right in the waterfall. He knew they were watching, but there was no help for it. He pushed his head into the gateway of the scion, a magical portal between the human lands and Draconia, and he was sure they got a great view of him looking for all the world like he was wriggling into a cave behind the waterfall.

He’d just broken about fifty different rules, but hell, maybe some good would come of it. The humans were *almost* ready for them to approach them...maybe knowing they were there might help them take those last few steps.

13 May 2017, 06:47 Draconian Mean Time; Scion Aerie, Draconia

“Are...you...*out of your mind?*” Ferroth raged the instant he got through the scion, in the portal aerie over the main headquarters. Stone shook the water off himself, then gave the larger earth dragon a cool, distant look, the rising sun backlighting Ferroth’s mottled tan hide and backswept gray horns. “You revealed yourself to two bipeds! They could execute you for that!”

“If someone other than you knew, probably,” Stone replied, folding his wings back. “They had a trap set. They had the entire Hunter team there, and Gaia knows who else I *didn’t* see. How in the hell did that get past us, Ferroth? I thought we had the entire city under surveillance!”

“Don’t push this back at me, whelp!” he snapped as Stone started towards the ramp that would lead down to the main headquarters. Above-ground draconic architecture was short on walls and large on open flat places, but since headquarters held most of their computers and other equipment, it was an enclosed building to protect all their gear from the rain, and built on the slope of the volcano by compromise with the council. They didn’t want the department to be underground, and besides, it needed to be as close to Scion Aerie as possible, so they built it directly under the aerie. He came out from under the sloped roof and looked down at the lower half of the south side of Draconia. Dragons and drakes were soaring through the air, fire and sky dragons with a few water dragons heading either to or from the water, and the water in the bay teemed with water dragons going out for their daily fishing expeditions.

It was the way of things. The five orders of dragons each had a role, a part they played here on the island. The water dragons were fishers and providers, bringing them the bounty of the sea. They also chased away the boats and nuclear submarines that sometimes ventured too deeply into their territory. Earth dragons raised crops and tended large numbers of domesticated livestock, but the earth dragons were also the only connection the colony had to the outside world, for they were the only ones permitted to leave Draconia and venture into human lands. Since they lacked magic, didn’t even have a breath weapon, the earth dragons had embraced technology, advancing it past the humans in many respects. Fire dragons

were the soldiers, the defenders, the claws of the Council, and the sky dragons hunted wild game from the air when and where they could, staying far from human territory, and searched the skies and the seas for potential enemies as well as manipulating the weather to help hide their island and deter ships that got too close. Chromatic dragons considered themselves the ruling class of dragons, the nobility, and really didn't do much of anything. Technically they were the magicians, the most highly magical of the dragons, and they also taught those with more than basic aptitude in the magical arts. Earth dragons didn't get along very well with the fire, sky, and chromatic dragons, who looked down at them as *barely* dragons, but if they came close to being friendly with anyone, it was the water dragons. They worked with the water dragons more than anyone else because both kinds were providers for the island, worked with some sky dragons when it came to surveillance, but barely interacted with the fire and chromatic dragons at all...and they liked it that way. Earth dragons did *not* get along with fire dragons, for a myriad of reasons, and they had even less reasons to get along with the chromatic dragons.

“Well, I’m gonna look at *someone*,” Stone replied tersely. “I walked right into a trap, Ferroth. Can you blame me for doing what I did? What, you wanted them to capture me?”

“That doesn’t explain that stunt at the scion! Our cameras caught every word!”

“I’ve known them for six years, Ferroth,” he shrugged his shoulders as they walked. “I had to say goodbye, at least in my own special way. And they would have seen me anyway, they were stationed there to see if I came up and over the falls.” He looked up at the older drake. “Besides, I thought they might appreciate just *what* they’ve been chasing for six years,” he chuckled.

“This isn’t a game, whelp, and that was *not* your decision to make!” Ferroth snapped. “I knew I should have sent Jasper!”

“Jasper doesn’t know their computers as well as I do,” Stone said simply.

“Jasper wouldn’t have revealed our greatest secret to our potential enemies!”

“Think about them as enemies, and that’s what they will be,” Stone said calmly as they came down the curved ramp. “I never thought of the Hunters as *enemies*. They were just doing their job, the same as I was. The humans aren’t the blood-crazed violent psychopaths the fire dragons think they are, Ferroth, you know that. There are some reasonable ones among them. Many reasonable ones, actually. I think it’s about time we started trying to reach out to those reasonable ones.”

“That’s not your decision to make, whelp!” Ferroth raged, stomping a foreleg down and making the ramp shudder. “The Council itself is demanding an immediate report. Now what should I tell them? Huh?”

“I’d be honest if I were you,” Stone noted. “I’ll just go back to my terminal and wait for the hammer to fall.”

Ferroth glared at him, his glowing amber eyes narrowing. “You’re a little *too* calm about this, Stone.”

“I did what I thought was best at the time,” he replied. “If I didn’t have confidence in my abilities, you wouldn’t send me out in the field. Sure, I shouldn’t have talked to Jenny and Wilson at the end, but I had to say goodbye to my worthy foes,” he chuckled. “Given the trap they set for me, I think it’s just blind luck I managed to escape.”

“What did happen? We didn’t see everything, just some jittery images from their media.”

“They were waiting for me,” he replied grimly, then he described what happened. “When they forced me across the ground, it did me in. A teenage human tripped over one of the holes my feet left, and it alerted the police. Once he called it in, the Hunters converged on me like a pack of wyverns. They had *all* of them there, Ferroth. They knew I was coming and they sat

waiting like a hunter sitting behind a blind. I'm still trying to figure out how they knew where I was going to be." He looked up at his superior. "Did they *see* me?"

Ferroth glared down at him. "Yes," he replied. "A news chopper caught you falling into the river, and they're doing frame by frame analysis of it on every major news network as we speak. There's this wonderful still image of you flat on your back, wings out, just before you went under. How the hell did that happen?"

"Price shot my amulet," he said, pausing to tap his empty-socketed amulet still chained around his chest. "He's got the aim of a bloody elder wyrm, Ferroth. He dead centered it."

Ferroth grunted, nodding his serpentine head. "I thought they were supposed to be sturdier than that."

"I don't think sky dragon magic is quite up to the task of repelling a fifty caliber sniper round, Ferroth. It shattered my amulet with no trouble."

"Did you cover your tracks other than that?"

"Laptop zeroed, and the disposable cell is at the bottom of the Potomac," he answered. "And what's more important, the program was inserted. It should have updated out to all their servers by now."

"It did," he growled, almost reluctantly. "We have access again."

"Then at least I accomplished the mission," he shrugged as a sky dragon descended down and hovered with her talons just over the floor, just in front of the archway leading inside, shivering her wings before folding them to her sides. Like most sky dragons, she would not put her feet on the ground unless absolutely necessary.

"Chief Ferroth, the Council wants to see you. *Now*," she declared, looking down at Stone with hard, glowing azure eyes. Stone had always distantly admired sky dragons for their beautiful scales and sleek bodies. Whip-thin and long, with large, beautiful wings and shimmering scales that

could change color to make them all but invisible in the air, sky dragons were the masters of the air. They were like dancers in the air, agile and beautiful, and could fly at supersonic speeds thanks to their magic. They were technically allowed to leave Draconian territory, since they were allowed to hunt on uninhabited islands and some few sections of South America, and they often did aerial reconnaissance for the earth dragons, but they rarely came down lower than 60,000 human feet when they did so to protect themselves from fighters; few fighters could operate at that altitude. They were very different from the fire dragons, who were hulking brutes, burly and powerful, and had tempers to match their brutish appearance. Where sky dragons embodied the beauty of a dragon, the fire dragons embodied their brutish ferocity.

“Don’t get too comfortable in front of your terminal, Stone,” Ferroth growled. “I have no doubt you’ll get your own summons in short order. In the meantime, start on your report, and don’t leave *anything* out.”

“I will await it with bated breath,” he replied dryly, using a human idiom he knew that only Ferroth would understand. The sky dragon floated up and put her forepaws on Ferroth’s shoulders, then she picked him up and carried him up into the air. It was the only way an earth dragon could fly, carried by a sky dragon. Their wings would let them glide for short distances, but they were incapable of ascending because they were just too heavy, and they had no magic that countered that weight and allowed them to fly.

But Stone was working on a solution to that little problem. If their wings couldn’t generate lift, then they just needed something to generate that lift for them. And human technology had advanced the science of jet engines to where a small engine generated sufficient thrust to get much heavier objects into the air than an earth dragon.

The door, a large steel construction, opened as he stepped onto the pressure plate...and it would *only* open for an earth dragon. The technology in the door made sure that only earth dragons could use certain entrances, and in a way, it was part of the inferiority complex that many earth dragons

possessed. If they were relegated to using the ramps and using doors, then *only* they would use them. Besides, not every dragon was allowed in headquarters, and the door intimidated the younger flying dragons from thinking to try to see what was in the building. He stepped into the main entryway and past the two burly fire dragon guards, who gave him wicked, black-toothed smiles as he stepped on the ID sensor, which read the unique scale pattern on the palm of his right forepaw.

“We heard you’re in serious trouble this time, earthy,” one of them sneered.

“And yet I’m still here,” he replied blandly. “And I’ll *still* be here long after you two jackwagons get fired.”

The two fire dragons turned and glared, but the door closed before they could think to say anything. Good old fire dragons, their brains were always about two steps behind their muscles.

“Kell! Kell, it’s all over headquarters!” a young water dragon said with a playful expression on her rounded muzzle, bounding up to him with her glowing emerald eyes narrowed with amusement. “Did you *really* talk to the humans?”

“At that moment, I figured what the hell,” he shrugged as she fell into step beside him.

“What happened? How did your amulet fail?”

“It didn’t fail, it was shot out by one of the Hunters,” he replied, tapping it as they ambled by several large desks, where earth dragons sat on their haunches, reared up at desks and studied monitors. “Someone blew it big time, Sella. I got sent into a trap. It’s just luck I got out in one piece.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “They had the *entire* Hunter team there,” he told the very young water dragon, one of his few friends outside the earth dragons. She wasn’t sleek like the sky dragons, but she had a kind of smooth symmetry

about her that made her body slide through the water like a shark, and unlike any other dragon species, she had no horns, no spines, and no visible scales. Her scales were tiny, making her hide look like skin, and she had a cartilage fin-like crest that started just over her eyes and trailed halfway down her neck, horizontal flukes on the end of her tail, and webbed feet to help her in the water. Water dragons had smaller wings than other dragons, even earth dragons, but they could fly. Not very well, but they *could* fly. They were much more comfortable in the water, however. They used their wings primarily in the water, where the rounded edges of the wings pushed them through the water with effortless grace, letting them swim with unparalleled speed and agility. Sella was the *only* water dragon that worked in headquarters, and the two of them had known each other since they were little hatchlings, since the farm his sire and mother owned was right on the coast, and they'd been friends with Sella's family pod who cultivated kelp and oysters in the little cove just off the shore from their farm. Because they'd known each other since they were hatchlings, she was about the only dragon in the department that called him by his name rather than his work alias. "Are the others back?"

"They got recalled when you got spotted on TV," she replied, looking up the slight difference between their heads with a sly smile. "Why are you even in here? We thought they'd take you straight to the Council."

"They called Ferroth, so odds are I'm next," he replied. "Besides, they probably have to give the fires time to calm down else they'd try to roast me right there on the aerie."

"Not that it'd do much good," she winked. That was another reason the fires really hated the earth dragons, their fiery breath weapons didn't do much to them at all. Earth dragons were highly resistant to heat, and on the ground, in fang to claw combat, a fire was no match for an angry earth dragon. And they *knew* it. Earth dragons were smaller than all the other dragons and significantly smaller than fire dragons, but when they were riled, they were worse than enraged wolverines. Every dragon knew that when an earth dragon turned and brought that tail into play, it was *over*. The only protection they had was staying *way* out of range. The spikes on an

earth dragon's tail were as hard as diamonds and would go right through just about anything, and they could launch those spikes, whipping their tails around and releasing them like a trebuchet launching a boulder. A tail spike was like a thirty pound spear or javelin, complete with a point and razor-sharp edges. Stone could fire his tail spikes nearly a hundred yards and have enough behind them to punch them through the sheet metal of a car, and it was a skill that every earth dragon practiced until they were deadly accurate. The old myth of the manticores from human legend was actually derived from earth dragons and their tail spikes.

"I'm sure they'd try anyway," Stone said blandly as they entered a long, wide passageway on the far side of the main office, leading to a second room filled with earth dragons. Sella worked out in the main chamber, but this second chamber was where the higher security data was analyzed and where Ferroth and the other supervisors and managers had offices, and the rest of the building was filled with their computers and other technology. The lower floors were where earth dragon scientists experimented with new ideas and theories, and the upper floor was where all the communications for Draconia were handled, as well as monitoring all human satellite communications. Those dragons literally watched TV all day. The building was the nexus of the use of technology on the island, where technology was analyzed and studied, where the technological ventures of the earth dragons were directed and controlled, and where they maintained surveillance and observation of the humans. Stone and the other three field agents also had offices off the sensitive data room, way down at the end, and that was where he was headed.

Dragons other than earth dragons scorned technology as a rule, but if you took their TVs away, there'd be a general revolt all over the island. Dragons thought very little about humans, but they *loved* their entertainment media. TV shows, movies, even *Dancing with the Stars*, they were hits all over Draconia.

"I'd better get back to my desk before they miss me. See you later?" Sella asked.

“If they let me live,” he grunted, which made her smile reassuringly, nudge him with her head, then turn and amble back towards the main room. Other dragons weren’t as graceful on their feet as earth dragons...but then again, walking around was *all* earth dragons did. Practice made perfect.

No other drake or dragon was brave enough to talk to him as he moved through the sensitive information chamber, where analysts and observers went over intelligence gleaned from the human governments, where the first chamber went over more general information and monitored the internet for any possible hint that someone knew about Draconia. The island itself was about as remote as remote could get, deep in a void of empty trackless ocean in the South Pacific, nearly a thousand miles south of Hawaii, the closest land to it. It was a volcanic island about the size of Guam, with a subtropical climate, fertile soil, and rich seas that supported the dragons completely. Magic kept the island hidden, even from satellites, but technology kept them in the know about what was going on out in the human world, as well as supplying certain luxuries like TV, internet, and electric lights to dens and burrows all over the island.

If only Hawaii knew that 10% of their internet traffic actually came from Draconia, using them as a gateway. And that was all thanks to the earth dragons.

His office was tiny, with a small window that looked out over the south bay, and it was cluttered with pieces of equipment, computers, and several experiments he’d been working on in his spare time. Like most earth dragons, Stone was intensely curious and inquisitive, and that curious nature made them naturals when it came to dealing with technology. Nothing was ever *good enough* for an earth dragon. They were forever tinkering, trying to improve things, and that endless search for the nebulous goal of perfection drove them to expand their technological skills beyond the humans who had introduced them to the very technologies they used. Even the humblest earth dragon farmer was forever studying his land, tinkering with his tools, trying to come up with a better, more efficient way to plant and harvest, constantly seeking to improve himself in his chosen profession. Dragon field agents like Stone brought technologies back to the

island, and there they were taken apart, analyzed, then duplicated and improved. Dragon computers were a good twenty years ahead of human computers, built on the north side of the island in the factories—a major issue of contention with the other dragons—with all of their equipment, and the coveted TVs that every dragon on the island owned. Dragons hated those smoke-belching factories, but failed to appreciate that their TVs and computers came out of them.

That was probably one of the reasons earth dragons didn't see humans quite the same way most other dragons did. Earth dragons went *out there*, interacted with the humans on a direct level. It let dragons like Stone see that while humans still had many of the unfavorable traits that caused dragonkind to remove themselves from human interaction a thousand years ago, there was still something about humans that earth dragons admired. In a way, they were kindred spirits, nonmagical beings with a nearly overpowering curiosity about things.

He started on his report, speaking to his terminal and allowing it convert his words into a text file, describing everything that happened with as much detail as he could muster. He described everything as it happened, even what he was thinking or feeling, from the moment he exited the scion in Woodbridge to the moment he wriggled through the emergency scion in the waterfall. After he finished his report, he then began his own analysis of his mission, stressing the fact that he'd walked right into a trap, how the Hunters had been ready for him, had effectively boxed him in, forced him into the sewers, then even had a means to smoke him out...literally.

A sky drake stepped to the open archway leading to his office. In the building, they had to walk. It was a rule, and they didn't like it all that much. "The Council has summoned you, Stone," he declared, quite haughtily.

"Fine, I'm done with my report," he replied, saving it and putting it on the main server.

"I'll take you to them."

“I’ll walk, thank you very much,” he replied immediately.

“I was told to take you to the Council,” the sky drake replied indignantly.

“Then you can either walk with me, or I’ll pin you to my tail and drag you,” Stone answered coolly. “If I can’t walk, I don’t go.”

“I’m going to make sure the Council understands that *you* are responsible for us being late,” he retorted.

“That’s fine with me,” Stone replied.

The haughty sky drake didn’t walk with him, but he did hover in the air near the ramp as Stone set out for the council building at the top of the extinct volcano, one of two volcanoes on the island. The north volcano was active, and erupted quite often, but had never erupted violently. Like Mount Kilauea in Hawaii, it was a steady, consistent volcano, sending the occasional lava flow down its slope to expand the northern side of the island a little bit. The older lava flows were where they’d built their factories, so they weren’t covering over any farmland or housing. Stone wasn’t afraid as he walked up the rarely-used ramp to the council building, but he wasn’t looking forward to what he knew was coming. The Council would be looking for blame, and they wouldn’t want to look any further than him.

The council met in an open aerie at the top of the extinct volcano, with graceful arches around the circular platform where the nine dragons that made up the Council sat. Two of each element were represented, one a drake and the other a wyrm, with one of the chromatics because chromatics didn’t have drakes, only wyrms. The chromatics were the most haughty, snobby, obnoxious, and arrogant dragons of them all...at least to earth dragons. Chromatics were the most magical of all the dragons, and they looked down on the earth dragons even more than the fires did. Chromatics also didn’t *do* anything, they just sat around and congratulated each other on their superiority while demeaning the elemental dragons.

The sky dragon landed and bowed his long neck gracefully. “Esteemed Council, Kell of the earth drakes. Many apologies for our tardiness, but he refused to allow me to carry him.”

“Some earth dragons don’t like to be carried,” one of the earth dragon council members chuckled. Her name was Anthra, and like any elder wyrm, she towered over the young earth drake. She was the oldest and largest of all the earth dragons. Stone was barely half the size of a fully matured wyrm, but he would never be as big as she was. She was a wyrm, and he was a drake. They were entirely different kinds of dragons. “And I’m one of them. I’ll keep my feet solidly on the ground, thank you.”

“We’re not here to discuss earth dragon peculiarities,” one of the fire dragons said haughtily. “We’re here to get to the bottom of this catastrophe and ensure it never happens again.”

“If you don’t want it to happen again, try sending us out with amulets that can take a bullet,” Stone said, tapping his empty-socketed amulet. “Mine got shot out. And here you go, one self-caused catastrophe.”

“Don’t foist your failure on *us*, little drake!” the sky wyrm, snapped, his long neck swinging down from his dais to glare at Stone.

“We earth dragons just get to the point, esteemed council member,” he replied bluntly, looking up at the large, sleek dragon fearlessly, staring him right in the eyes. “I’m not *blaming* the sky dragons, because I can’t think of any magic short of a water dragon’s strongest protections that could have saved my amulet. You did your best, but things just went perfectly wrong. These things happen. But if you want to know what happened, the simple truth of it is that my amulet was hit by a bullet. It shattered the crystal, and its magic failed. No amount of talk or dancing around that matter is going to make it anything other than what it is.”

“And just why were you being shot at, earth drake?” one of the water dragons asked, the water wyrm. “Isn’t the point of the field service to be *discreet*?”

“I walked into a trap, esteemed council member,” Stone admitted. “I had absolutely no idea they had figured out where I was going to be. In that respect, the fault is squarely on me and the intelligence service. We thought we had better intelligence on their movements and were completely unaware that they’d pulled all their Hunter units in to one place, and once I was there and performing my mission, I hadn’t considered the fact that they knew I was there, so I took no extra precautions. But, be that as it may, the simple fact of the matter is that they somehow figured out that I’d have to go to the State Department in Washington and they set a trap for me there. And it was a good one,” he chuckled ruefully. “My worthy foes among the Hunters may be human, but they’re *not* stupid.”

“Then explain what happened, my young drakeling,” the earth drake Geon asked. “As completely as you can.”

Stone nodded, then used the computer there in the aerie to bring up his report. He went over it in detail, explaining, describing, telling them everything, all the way up until he reached the scion.

“And what earthly explanation do you have for revealing yourself and us to the very humans who hunt you down?” the chromatic dragon snapped in a sneering voice, the feathery antenna-like growths beside his horns swaying as his head jerked. “You should have just entered the scion and taken the risk that they *might* see you, not climb up there and introduce yourself in your natural form!”

“That was my decision, council member, and I take full responsibility for it,” he said simply. “They may chase me, but they do it because it’s their *job*. They don’t take it personally, just as I didn’t take it personally that they chased me. They had their orders, I had mine. And I’ve interacted with them enough times in the past to understand them a little bit. There’s been more than a bit of witty banter going on back and forth between the field agents and the Hunters, and I’m not the only one that does it. Hell, we even post on each other’s Facebook pages. They know us, we know them, and we don’t take it personally. Out there it’s a job, but when it’s over, it’s over.”

“Shooting you isn’t taking it personally?”

“They know they can’t hurt me with bullets,” he shrugged. “Most often, they shoot at us to slow us down. Hit me in the knee when I’m running and I’ll drop like a felled ox, which is exactly what Price did. Odds were, when he shot me at the river, he was trying to slow me down so they could catch me.”

“So why *did* you talk to them, drakeling?” the earth drake asked curiously.

“I really can’t answer that rationally,” he said honestly. “I’ve known the Hunters for six years, esteemed council member. I knew I would never be allowed off the island again after I got back, so, well, I just wanted to say goodbye. Face to face. Not *all* of them are bad. Hell, I’d probably bite Price’s arm off for all the times he’s shot me, but that’s more out of irritation than anything else.”

“So you have emotional attachment to the bipeds?”

“More like a respect for the worthiness of my adversaries,” he replied. “The Hunters have been a thorn in the side of all the field agents, but there’s not one of us who doesn’t respect them and their abilities.”

“That’s not an explanation,” he pressed calmly. “What emotion caused you to abandon a thousand years of tradition and stern law and reveal our existence to the humans, drakeling, knowing that we could have you killed for doing such a thing?”

“Well,” he said, then he sighed. “I think the law’s too strict,” he admitted. “I think that with the advancement of the humans and the maturation of their societies, it might be time to start *talking* to them. We should do it very slowly and very carefully, but it’s time to open the doorway, if only just a little. And since I knew I was going to all but be chained to a terminal in the office after this no matter what, I figured what the hell? They were going to see me when I entered the scion, they were *right there*. So I finally told them *why* we do what we do. I told them that

we don't mean them any harm, we just want to make sure they don't find us, and like any other intelligence organization on the planet, one way we do it is by monitoring the human governments. And I didn't want them to see us as *monsters*," he sighed. "That me being a drake didn't change who they thought I was. They were going to see me no matter what, so I didn't want them to draw the worst conclusion, to see a big scary *monster* climbing into the waterfall. I *know* them, esteemed council member. We may be on opposite sides, but I know them very well, and I've never seen them as enemies. I've seen them as, as, *opponents*. Friendly rivals. I just wanted to say goodbye, I wanted them to understand that we never meant them harm, and I felt they deserved receiving that face to face. My *real* face," he added, then he looked at the floor.

The nine dragons of the Council were silent a long moment. "You are dismissed," the chromatic said shortly. "You are under house arrest until we decide this matter."

"As you decide," Stone said, bowing his head, then he turned and started out of the circle of raised daises, moving much slower than he did when he came in.

They never thought to escort him there or put him under guard, because dragons were a very orderly lot. He would wait in his burrow until they told him what they were going to do...because what else was he going to do? He couldn't hide from them, and since he couldn't fly, he certainly wasn't going anywhere. He was no sky dragon, able to fly off, or a water dragon, who could slip into the sea and vanish, or a fire dragon, who might fight if faced with punishment. Stone launched from the side of the aerie and used his wings to glide down to the southwest side of the island, landing with a short hop on the ancestral farm of his line. His sire and mother still farmed that land, but he had a small burrow on the edge of their farmland, on a little knoll overlooking the cove that held Sella's family pod and their small but successful kelp farming operation. Like all dragons, he lived underground, but the expanse of his burrow was no cave. The walls were squared off and lined with concrete, dug out by his own claws when he reached the age of adulthood, forming a spacious four chamber burrow

that was big enough for him and all of his equipment. Like every burrow on the island, he had electricity and running water, fans that circulated the air in the back chambers to keep them from getting too dank, and he employed dehumidifiers in his computer room to keep the dampness and saltwater air from adversely affecting his equipment. His burrow was a bit cluttered, experiments and gadgets laying on most surfaces, including a half-built General Electric GS-300 turbofan jet engine in his workshop, built with parts he was producing one at a time with the help of a couple of friends of his. It was something he played with when he had spare time, thinking to see if a jet engine could give an earth dragon the thrust needed to fly.

It was a spur of the moment decision, a very un-dragon thing to do, but it was in the past, and now he had to live with it. He sighed and sat on his haunches in front of his computer and turned it on, then put his forepaws on the modified keyboard to take his draconic hands into account. Since his thumb was completely reversed on his paws, he could only effectively type with three fingers. He did all his computer work in English, something of the common accepted language of the internet, and utilized a modified English language keyboard. "Access TV, on," he called absently, which caused his television to turn on. "Channel one fifty," he added, changing it to CNN. And of course, there was a picture of his tan underbelly in a still image with the bold letters *MYSTERY ANIMAL IN WASHINGTON SEWER* underneath it. They had a zoologist droning in the background, then a hand pointed at parts of his thin stomach, trailing up his body.

"Clearly this is a reptile of some kind, but this reptile is nothing like anything I've ever seen," the woman said. "It's hexapedal, something absolutely unheard of."

"What does that mean, doctor?" the reporter asked.

"It has six limbs, not four," she answered tapping the large TV monitor deliberately. "Back legs. Front legs, and over its front legs are a second set of limbs, which are clearly wings. The only animals with more than four legs are insects and arachnids. This is an entirely unseen branch of the

reptile family. Not just a hexapedal reptile, but one evolved for flying. It almost looks like a dragon,” she mused.

Stone grunted. “Access TV, Channel two ninety-six,” he called, turning it to something a little less educational...Cartoon Network. Johnny Test was on, and a little zany, mindless chaotic fun would do much for his mood. He found that they hadn’t shut him out from the internet, so he surfed around absently, almost mechanically checking the usual sites for new information, mainly about computers and programming. Stone had a knack for their archaic computer architecture, one of their best when it came to their computers, which was why he was almost always sent on the most technically difficult assignments.

But his mind wasn’t in it. He left his computer and laid down in the entrance to his burrow, looking out over the kelp beds of Sella’s pod, watching as her family tended their plants with care and attention. Sella’s mother, Shii, waved to him before going back under, and he nodded to her. He kept pondering just how the humans were going to react to a picture of something they’d never seen before, and in a place they’d never believe it would be. The government would know much more, since he’d talked to the Hunters, revealed certain truths to them, and he wondered if they’d be honest or if they’d cover it up. Probably cover it up. He still couldn’t exactly figure out what possessed him to *talk* to Wilson and Edwards. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now, looking back on it, it was about the last thing he should have done. Earth dragons weren’t known for making such hasty decisions. Methodical and organized, that was an earth dragon, always with a plan and almost never surprised.

Almost never. He sure as hell didn’t expect to be facing the *entire* Hunter corps. And that little fact had gotten past the intelligence they had in Washington.

He seriously doubted they’d have him executed. No dragon had been put to death for over six hundred years, even when they did things far worse than what he had. Odds were, they’d sentence him to penance...which meant not all that much to earth dragons. He grew up on a farm, he wasn’t

afraid to push a tiller, and being denied magic was nothing but a big joke to an earth dragon. The punishments they invented were to make other dragons live like earth dragons for a while; no magic, no flying, working on a farm with nothing but your own forepaws and muscles.

He supposed that it said much about how the other dragons really saw the earth dragons. If their punishment was to make misbehaving dragons live like an earth dragon, he supposed that they felt that the life of an earth dragon was an eternal punishment. They certainly didn't think much of them. Ferroth had contacts in the council, and the other council members treated Anthra and Geon like afterthoughts. One of the earliest memories he had was his parents telling him and his clutchmates how to handle the comments and teasing from the other dragons, that earth dragons were above acting like *them*. Keep to your own kind, do your work and be proud of the work that you do, and answer the prejudice of the other dragons not with anger, but with pride. But, the instant it went past words, use your tail spikes and don't hold back. If they're willing to do you harm, then you fight to kill.

The greatest cause of death of juvenile fire dragons was tail spike injuries.

His sire ambled up the knoll towards him. Keth was a mature drake, sensible and grounded, a very practical dragon with an uncluttered view of life that served him well. He was a farmer, it was all he ever wanted to be, and he was proud to be one. Keth sat on his haunches by the entrance to his burrow and looked down at him with parental care. "So, Kell, you really got yourself in trouble this time," he noted lightly, using Stone's given name. Keth never called him by his work name.

"Just a little bit, sire," he replied, putting his head back on the grass at the entry to his burrow.

Keth chuckled. "You always were a little hot-headed, my youngling," he noted, patting him on the hindquarters with the underside of his tail. "What exactly happened? We've only heard rumors."

“Pretty much what the rumors said. My amulet got shot out and human news cameras caught me out of my disguise. Didn’t you see that picture of me on their TV?”

“I’ve been out in the fields today, youngling, I haven’t had time for TV.”

“Well, it’s not a very flattering picture. I was on my back about to fall into the river. And, there’s more to it than that,” he sighed. “I actually talked to a couple of humans, let them see me, and I didn’t kill them.”

Keth clicked his teeth. “Isn’t that against the rules of your department?”

“Just *slightly*,” he snorted. “But it certainly seemed like a good idea at the moment.”

“Decisions made rashly often do, but once you have time to think them over, you find out that they were actually very poor ones,” he said sagely. “Ten seconds of consideration can save you months of regret, my youngling.”

“I know, but I was looking at the end of my career as a field agent,” he sighed. “I knew it was over as soon as Price shot out my amulet. I knew they’d never let me off the island again.”

“You like it out there, don’t you?”

“I guess I do,” he said, rising up onto his elbows. “The humans are a very curious species, sire. They’re walking contradictions, and I find myself both repelled by their base natures and intrigued by their capabilities, often at the same time. Going out among them is dangerous, exciting, and it always seemed much more interesting than sitting in the office hacking government and corporate computer networks. They build such beautiful things, but also do such horrible things to each other. But then again, we can’t really talk much about perfection in our society either,” he grunted.

“We are who we are, Kell. We’re earth dragons. We shouldn’t be bitter at what we don’t have, but proud of what we do.”

“It’s too bad the other dragons can’t act like that,” he said pointedly, looking up at his sire.

“The problem is *them*, Kell, not *us*. Eventually they’ll come to understand that. Until then, we carry on and do what we do best.”

“And spike anyone who touches us,” he finished.

“Of course,” Keth said with a lazy smile, then he sat down. “Now tell me what happened.”

Again, but much less mechanically, he described what happened, spending much more time talking about his conversation with Wilson and Edwards. “I still don’t entirely understand why I did it, sire,” he sighed. “I just...just wanted to *talk* to them. Just once. Let them see me for who I am and not be afraid of me, because they were going to see me anyway. I know it sounds weird, but I’d spent six years sneaking around them, and I’d come to know them from our taps and surveillance. They weren’t really all that bad.”

“An odd position to take. Haven’t they tried to kill you several times?”

“I’m sure they meant it, but since they *couldn’t*, I guess I didn’t take it personally,” he chuckled. “They were never enemies to me. They were *people*, people just doing a job.”

“And of course, they would think that you were no less for having no magic,” he said sagely.

Stone blinked and looked up at his sire.

“Let go of your resentment, my youngling. It will make your life much less irksome. You are an earth dragon. Embrace who you are. Rejoice in what you *can* do, don’t pine over what you can’t.”

“I never really thought of it like that,” he sighed. “I guess the humans *do* take me seriously, when here, I’m just an *earth dragon*,” he reasoned.

“You feel important out there, but what you fail to understand is that you’re just as important *here*, my youngling,” Keth said sagely. “Our talents lie in different directions than other dragons. They may not be as flashy or impressive, but they’re no less important. Believe me, if the earth dragons left, the other dragons would miss us in short order. We can do without them. *They* cannot do without *us*.”

“They don’t believe that.”

“And that’s one reason why we’re better than them,” he said lightly, giving Stone a toothy smile. Stone chuckled and sat back up on his haunches.

“Thanks, sire. I do feel a little better now.”

“Then my work here is done, and I have other work that needs me. I’ll have your mother bring you something to eat after a while.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“See you later, my youngling. Be well.”

“Be well,” he replied as Keth stood up, turned, and started down the knoll.

Maybe that *was* why he loved field work. Out there, there wasn’t magic, there wasn’t every other dragon over his head looking down at him and scorning him for what he was. The humans took him very seriously, respected him, had even formed an elite government agency to hunt down him and the other field agents. That made him feel...*important*. Where here, he was just another grounder plodding along on his ramps, doing those things that the other dragons felt were far beneath them, both figuratively and literally. Out there, he didn’t have to always keep an eye above him for things the other dragons dropped, usually on purpose. Out there, he wasn’t sneered at by any dragon that decided to come down off the volcanoes and

mill around on the lowlands like a dirty grounder, their version of slumming, but more like them looking for trouble. Outside of Sella and her family pod, he didn't really even associate with dragons outside his species, but the relationship between Keth's family and Shii's pod went back four or five generations.

Out there, he didn't feel...*lesser*, even when he knew that he was more than equal to other dragons despite what they saw as his limitations.

But, his sire was right. If the earth dragons left, it would leave a gaping hole in Draconia. The other dragons didn't appreciate how much their lives and lifestyles depended on the very grounders they scorned. The howl of anguish would be monumental if the TVs went dark. Even the snooty chromatics loved their TV.

For him, though, there was nothing to be done but sit, wait, and worry.

14 May 2017, 1912 GMT; Dawnmist Village, Draconia

At least Sella hadn't abandoned him.

She visited him that evening and sat with him at the entrance of his burrow. The relationship between him and Sella had always been complex, maybe a little too close as other dragons reckoned things, since relationships between the species was highly frowned upon. But with them, it was just friendship. They'd been best friends since they were both hatchlings, meeting when Sella and her clutchmates used to climb up onto the shore to be brave and adventurous, and Kell and his clutchmates used to jump off the little cliff there behind the south field and swim around in the deeper water, but still well away from the kelp beds. They played together as hatchlings, and when they matured, Sella decided to go work in the intelligence building at her parents' suggestion, since they wanted at least one of their brood to understand the technology that the earth dragons were bringing back to Draconia. She'd been there ever since, starting out as one

of the TV watchers and report filers before the computers became commonplace, then moving on to become one of the many analysts that searched the internet for any hint that someone knew about them. Sella's job was to literally sit in front of a terminal all day and look at websites their spiders flagged, looking for any indication that someone out there knew about Draconia, or had managed to infiltrate the island's computer network. Her family couldn't really use any of the computers, but at least the earth dragons had figured out how to get some waterproof lighting down for their undersea den. But, Shii was a wise dragon in understanding that even if the water dragons couldn't really use the computers or much of the technology underwater, it was still wise for them to know how it worked. After all, they didn't live their entire lives under the waves.

Water dragons were the only ones that even came close to appreciating the earth dragons, because water dragons weren't quite as arrogant as the others. They had much in common in their belief in the family unit, loyalty, the value of hard work and the pride in a job well done, and the knowledge that they were the providers that kept the rest of the island fed. Hatchlings grew up healthy and strong because of the earth dragons and the water dragons, never wanted for food, and a healthy body fostered a healthy mind. Since they both occupied the low coastal areas, they were neighbors as much as the fire, sky, and chromatic dragons were neighbors up on the volcanoes, them favoring their high caves while the earth and water dragons favored burrows and sea caves under the ground and below the waves. But, there was still a bit of haughtiness. Since water dragons had magic and could fly, they saw their ground-bound earth dragon neighbors as the runts of the litter, to be watched over and protected because they lacked what all the other dragons possessed. Earth dragons, naturally, resented being treated that way, and it was one of the only real points of contention between the two species.

But Shii's pod never treated them that way. The two families had been friends for nearly as long as the dragons had been on the island, trading gifts on the solstice days, celebrating the day of Gaia together, often basking on the sandy beach just down from the family burrow and talking

of affairs. It was Sella and her siblings that taught him how to swim so well, taught him how to use his wings like flippers, and made him probably the best swimmer on Draconia that wasn't a water dragon. It was Shii's pod that had come to mourn when two of his clutchmates died in an accident, had helped them through the hard times when a fungal infection wiped out their crops, and the crops of nearly half the earth dragons.

Now that he recalled, that was one of the few times that the other dragons took any notice, when they suddenly found themselves on rations to get them through until new crops could be harvested. And of course, it was the earth dragons' fault that it happened. Why the crops failed didn't matter as much as the fact that the earth dragons were the ones that tended them.

Sella had went back home to rest through the night, and Stone worried his way through the night, still laying just at the entrance of his burrow along the earthen ramp that led down to his concrete floor, a little drainage grill at the edge to catch any water that managed to get down that far. Tending the ramp was one of the little chores, almost a daily ritual for many earth dragons, filling in the divots and smoothing it out, sometimes bringing fresh earth in. The smell of the fresh earth on the ramp permeated the burrow and brought a peculiar contentment to earth dragons. That smell was the smell of *home*. The mist of the morning that gave their part of the island its name settled in just before dawn, casting the sea in steely grays, and then the sun rose around the volcano and burned it away. It was quite lovely in ambient light, but it was the swirls of heat in the water as a warm water current mixed with a cold water current just off shore that was even more interesting to watch at night, when it was dark enough for his eyes to shift into the thermographic spectrum. Earth dragons could see heat just like the monster from the *Predator* movie, but it tended to get overwhelmed by visible light, so it was really only useful in low light or darkness. And in a bit of rare species pride, earth dragons were the *only* ones with thermographic sight. It would do water dragons no good in the water, fire dragons even less in their superheated dens, and sky dragons even less than that high up in the air. Chromatics were the only ones that might still find it

useful, but they spent too many years in the light, reading their books, and the ability was all but bred out of them.

Earth dragons had even adapted it into monitors that used heat instead of light, monitors that *only* they could see. Any computer that displayed sensitive information used infragraphic monitors, to keep other dragons from getting too curious. Earth dragons were very secretive, and old habits died hard. Besides, only earth dragons had that much interest in technology and the outside world.

He was honestly surprised when a sky dragon and two fire dragons landed not far from the entrance of his burrow. He didn't expect them to come to a decision that fast. Usually it took the council a week to decide when they'd next meet. For them to make a decision in a single day was almost unheard of. He stood up and regarded the much larger sky dragon, and the even larger fire dragons, with a calm stare.

"Kell, son of Keth, of the farming clan, the Council of Nine demands your immediate presence," the sky dragon declared.

"Well, this was too fast to be good," Stone grunted, shivering his wings.

"Don't get any ideas, grounder," one of the fire dragons sneered. "We're here to make sure you get there, even if we have to drag you out of your hole like a scared rabbit."

"You're going to look awfully cute with one of my spikes in your forehead, ashtongue," Stone retorted in a cold voice, bringing his tail around and showing him the seventeen slender blood-red spikes of crystal, just waiting to be used.

The two very large fire dragons bristled, one of them actually roared, but it didn't phase Stone in the slightest. He was half the size of the fire dragons, but like most earth dragons, he wasn't afraid of the fire dragons, and he made sure they *knew* it.

“Were they absolutely necessary?” Stone asked the sky dragon, who was glaring at the two fire dragons.

“The fire dragons on the council demanded it,” she replied with a grunt. “I will take you there, drake.”

“I’ll walk, thank you. I don’t like to be carried. Feel free to come with me. If anything, you’ll keep those two alive.”

Both fire dragons snorted out a gout of flame.

“I can see that,” she replied dryly, putting her delicate feet on the ground.

The sky dragon was clearly annoyed at the slow pace, but it wasn’t because Stone was hedging or dragging his feet. He started up the series of ramps that led to the Council Aerie with a confident, steady gait, but even his steady walk was too slow for a sky dragon, who could be there in a matter of seconds. The two fire dragons stomped along behind him, and Stone made sure to snap his tail back and forth randomly, keeping their attention firmly affixed that most dangerous part of an earth dragon’s anatomy. Like any earth dragon, the muscles that governed that tail were some of the strongest in his body, and would give the spikes he launched some formidable power.

“Any idea of what they decided?”

“I wasn’t there when they discussed the matter,” the sky dragon answered. “But they spent almost all night debating the issue.”

It took him nearly an hour to climb up to the aerie, where the nine raised platforms formed a circle around the center. Several aides to the council were present now, sitting or standing by their benefactors, and he was a bit surprised to see Shii sitting between the two daises holding the water drake and wyrm. She gave him a steady and strangely reassuring look. He ambled out to the middle of the circle and bent his neck low. “I report as summoned, esteemed Council,” he said calmly.

“Kell of the earth drakes, we have spent many hours in debate over what is a suitable punishment for your actions,” the chromatic declared, peering down at him with a dark expression. “And while some of us entirely disagree with the decision that was made, it is not our place to go against the will of the majority.”

Well, if the chromatic didn’t like the decision, then it might not be as bad as he feared.

“The short of it, my drakeling, is that while you broke our laws, you didn’t do so with malice in your heart,” Geon said, causing him to turn to look in that direction. “Your action was the rashness of youth, and it is thus that we often let the rashness itself serve as part of the punishment. I am sure that you have considered what you have done and realized, after having time to look back at things rationally, that you were wrong.”

“Yes, esteemed Council member,” Stone said with honest regret. “I should never have done it.”

“So while there must be punishment, the punishment, like the crime, will not be done with malice,” the water wyrm continued, causing him to turn slightly. “Your job is highly dangerous and puts much pressure on you, young drake. We understand this, as much as we understand that because of the limitations of magic, *only* the youngest adult drakes may undertake the dangerous tasks for which you are responsible. It would be cruel of us to thrust such young drakes into such dangerous tasks and then be harsh with them when their youth finally catches up with them, and they do something rash.”

“Which is exactly why I have advocated from the start that we *not* use earth drakes,” the fire wyrm said harshly.

“Only earth drakes have the skills and temperament to perform the dangerous tasks of which we ask them, Hirrag,” the water drake retorted in a calm yet authoritative voice. “If we were to send a fire drake out into the human world, I have no doubt that we’d be counting the dead by the time he returned.”

“Until this incident, the four earth drakes we task to send out into the world have performed with excellence,” the earth wyrm declared as the fire wyrm puffed out his chest. “Forty-three years of perfection! And only now, in a moment of crisis, do we question the abilities of the earth drakes who made only one poor decision in forty-three years of thinking quickly and in situations nearly as dangerous? And let us not forget that the core of the matter is that the events that revealed us to the human world were *not his fault*,” she declared, stamping a foot down on her dais. “His transformation amulet was broken, and that was beyond his control! If anything, his quick thinking and calm reaction to such a drastic situation was commendable!”

“It was in his control to put himself in the position where they could break it!” the fire drake retorted.

“We will not rehash old subjects!” the chromatic barked, slapping his tail on the dais loudly. “Kell, son of Keth of the farming clan, you will face open rebuke by the Council, to be read openly at all monthly circles of all communities so that all Draconia may know your shame,” he declared, fluttering his iridescent, multicolored wings. “You are also hereby removed from field service,” he declared, giving him a slight, malicious smile. “You will be reassigned to other duties within the intelligence department. Such is our decision, in a vote of five for, four against.”

“That’s *it*?” Stone blurted, then almost immediately bowed his head.

“Do you want *more* punishment, drake?” the chromatic wyrm said icily. “I will gladly give it to you!”

“Uh, no, esteemed council member. I just wasn’t expecting something so...lenient,” he said honestly, which made the earth dragons smile slightly.

“You will report to Chief Ferroth and be briefed on your new duties,” Anthra told him in a gentle voice. “Do us proud, my drake.”

“Yes, esteemed council member,” he said, bowing his head to her. That was a dismissal, so he turned and started towards the ramp with as much speed as dignity would allow, before someone dragged him back in the

middle of that circle and decided to give him what he was expecting, like being chained on penitent's aerie where young juveniles would harass and torment him for amusement, or being locked in a cell for a few decades, or even something drastic like having his wings cut off or even public execution. But as he walked, he pondered just *why* they had been so lenient. In honesty, they shouldn't have been. He was expecting something much worse than *that*, but they let him go with what was barely a slap on the wrist. A public rebuke didn't mean all that much to an earth dragon, since they were at the bottom of the social ladder anyway. And he already knew that his time in the field was over, he knew that the instant Price shot out his amulet. Odds were, *nobody* would be going out again for a few years, until they made sure that never happened again and gave the humans time to calm down a little bit.

Shii landed just behind him and rumbled up, then nuzzled the side of his head fondly. "I'm glad to see you, my young friend," she told him, looking down at him with her glowing green eyes. "I'm sure that's quite a relief."

"You spoke for me, Shii. Thank you," he said honestly.

"Of course I spoke for you, my young one," she smiled gently. "Are our families not friends?"

"What...what were they *really* going to do?" he asked.

"You were always the clever one, Kell," she said soberly. "The debate was raging between execution and losing your wings down to a year chained on Penitent's Aerie, though the chromatic and fire dragons felt that nothing short of execution was real punishment for an earth dragon," she snorted.

"And what changed their minds?"

"Something you said yesterday," she answered. "Elder Anthra was quite eloquent. It seems that the council has been debating opening some discreet diplomatic channels with the outside world for some time. She also

drove home the point that the main issue, them getting a picture of you, was beyond your control. Your speaking to the humans wasn't exactly a smart thing to do, but by then the damage had already been done, and in a way, your words to the humans helped assuage some of the damage. When you told them that you tried to show the humans that you weren't a monster, that they had no need to fear you, it resonated enough to sway the sky drake to voting for you rather than against you. Your acts were rash, but your heart was in the right place, and that mattered very much when it came time to decide how to punish you for it."

"Well, that's something, I suppose," he grunted, looking up at her as his mind worked. If they were *that* close to killing him, then this "new job" of theirs was probably going to be something on the far side of suicidally dangerous. After all, he was now expendable. "And what new job do they have for me?"

"Something I think you'll like," she winked, then she leaned down and nuzzled him with her muzzle. "I'll let your boss explain things to you, my young one. I have to get back to the kelp beds. You know how Surrall makes a mess of things when I'm not there."

"Thank you, Shii. It's always good to know who your real friends are."

"Any time, my young friend. Good luck to you." She turned and spread her wings, then vaulted off the platform and turned west, heading home.

They took him straight to Ferroth's office when he got back to headquarters, which was a large room with a big window looking out over the bay. It was neat, spotless, two computers on his desk and lines of archived data in shelves along one wall, in black boxes and all neatly labeled by date and location. "Chief, what the hell is going on?" Stone asked as he closed the door with a flick of his tail on the button, causing the steel door to lower down.

"Whelp, you have no idea how close you came to the jaws of a fire wyrm," Ferroth told him with a dark growl. "And they'd have fought over

the chance to get to kill one of us without fear of retaliation.”

“I figured that out already. So, if they spared me the execution, what hare-brained idea do they have that’s probably going to get me killed anyway?”

Ferroth gave him an amused look. “You always were a smart one, Stone,” he said as he ambled over to his desk and sat on his haunches, the reared up enough to put his forepaws on the keyboard. “You’re going back out in the field.”

“What? They said I was pulled from field service!”

“As a field agent, yes. I promoted Girk. And I guess I should stop calling you Stone, that’s *his* alias now.”

“Girk? He doesn’t know Pascal from Java!”

“He’ll learn,” Ferroth replied. “And he’s not that bad. Anyway, we’re sending you out on a special mission.” He tapped his keyboard, and an infragraphic emitter dropped down from the ceiling and the lights dimmed along with the window darkening, letting them shift into thermographic vision. The emitter painted the blank wall in the colors of heat, blues and greens, reds and whites, and it was as sharp and detailed as anything he could see in ambient light. “Stone—Kell, your mission is going to be very dangerous, and you’re not going to get any help or backup from us, so you’re going to be on your own. As you can see on this map, this human dwelling is your primary objective,” he said, using a pointer that placed a black dot of cold on the thermal image. “This is the listed address of Jenny Edwards.”

“They want me to kill her?” he asked, his stomach dropping a little.

“They want you to make contact with her,” Ferroth replied. “You have said that this particular human seems most approachable, so we decided to start with her. You are to go out, rendezvous with her, and make official contact. Your mission is to bring her back here.”

“Do *what*?” he gasped, snapping his head to Ferroth.

“Bring her here. The council wants to speak face to face with a human, and they have selected Jenny Edwards. They want to discuss what happened in Washington with someone from their side and make certain assurances. They want to open at least one diplomatic channel to the outside world,” he said, glancing at him.

“Alright,” he said, shivering his tail a little. “When do I go in, and what do I have?”

“You leave at three o’clock local time, and you get no tools or backup,” he replied. “You go *as a drake*. It will be night there, so you have to cross sixteen miles from the Woodbridge scion to Annandale without attracting undue attention, make contact, then bring her to the waterfall scion and use that, since she already knows where it is.”

“I don’t even get a hider?”

He shook his head. “They don’t want to risk anything falling into human hands, not even a hider amulet,” he replied. “Since you singled her and Wilson out, there’s a good chance that they have security presence at the least, military present at the most near or at their dwellings. You very well may be walking into a trap. We do know that she’ll be home at the estimated time of your arrival. Her debriefing is done and all the Hunters have been granted leave as their bosses discuss the issue, and she has a husband and child. That fact makes us almost positive she’ll be home.”

“Well, have the sky dragons done any reconnaissance?”

“Of course they have, and they’re still doing it,” Ferroth snorted. “They haven’t reported anything, but we know they’re not infallible. And there are no civilian cameras in Annandale we can hack and access, so you’re going to do this more or less blindly.”

He looked at the map, a little intimidated. Cross sixteen miles of heavily populated territory without detection, reach Jenny’s house, convince her to come with him, then bring her back to Draconia? And do it with no

hider? It was...it was...it was *insane*! “Well, why can’t a sky dragon drop me off there?”

“We asked, they won’t risk a sky dragon coming that close to the ground in human territory,” Ferroth growled. “They have no problem with *you* getting caught as long as *they* don’t get caught.”

“So I’m the sacrificial lamb,” Kell grumbled, looking at the map.

“You opened your mouth, now you live with the consequences,” Ferroth said simply. “Once you get her back here, you are completely and solely responsible for her welfare, her protection, and responsible for her actions,” he added. “You will be the liaison between the Council and her. She will stay in your burrow while she’s here, and when the time comes, you will return her to her dwelling unharmed.”

“We’re going to let her run around and see everything?”

“We are,” he replied simply. “The Council feels that if she sees how we live, it might foster some good will between us and the humans. After all, nothing in our home or our lifestyle is overly militaristic, and they feel that if they see your family’s farm, it might foster a sense of similarity with some human cultures. They don’t want her to think of us as monsters, Kell, and it’s hard to see earth dragons working the land as overly dangerous or frightening, unless you’re a weed.”

“Wait a second. If they won’t drop me off on the ground, will they drop me from the air?” Kell asked.

“Fly you from *here* halfway across the world? What do you think they’ll say?” Ferroth asked caustically. “They won’t come close to the ground to pick you up at the scion, so if they’re going to carry you, they’d have to pick you up *here*. And if they’re carrying you, they have to fly low and slow, which lets every radar from here to Washington pick them up.”

Kell grunted, slapping his tail against the floor lightly in irritation. “Alright. You say I have two hours?”

“You leave at three our time. That will make it nine at night over there.”

“Alright,” Kell said, nodding his head. “Let me go study the maps of northern Virginia and get ready.”

“I’ll call you when it’s time.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Chapter 2

14 May 2017, 21:04 EDT; Woodbridge, Virginia

He'd never felt so *exposed* in his life.

Kell stepped out of the scion gateway into a small clearing surrounded by forest, which was just off U.S. Route 1 and only a half mile from the onramp of Interstate 95. He was stepping out into a murky, surprisingly chilly May evening, the sun down and the moon yet to rise, which caused him to see everything around him as varying shades of green, blue, and yellow. He shivered a little, which had nothing to do with the cold. He'd never felt so vulnerable before out in the human world, and it was strange that he'd feel much more secure when the amulet forced him into a much smaller body.

He already had his route planned out. It was a series of back roads, utility access roads for power lines, nature trails, and open farmland that would take him all the way to Annandale, leaving him two major problem areas. The first would be crossing Interstate 95, and the second would be in Annandale itself, when he'd be forced to cross 236, which was a heavily traveled thoroughfare, the main artery linking Annandale with Alexandria and the interstate. The rest of the time he'd be on back roads, which were not lit for most of his route. That darkness, along with his camouflage coloration, would help him avoid detection from passing motorists.

He was a little annoyed...they could have just moved a scion gateway to Edwards' house, but noooo. That did require some effort on the part of the chromatics, some time, and they wanted this done with almost shocking, un-dragonlike haste. To move the scion to an unresearched location would have taken them a couple of days to accomplish, and they weren't willing to

wait a couple of days. They wanted to talk to a human as quickly as possible, before ideas started getting out of control or they humans started doing something rash or silly. The dragons were moving with haste to prevent the humans from moving with even more haste, and they trusted their ability to react quickly to the situation far more than they trusted the humans' ability.

There was no point stalling. He had a long way to go, and he had to get there at a reasonable hour. He didn't want to have to wake her up. It wasn't like he could walk up to her front door and ring the doorbell.

The moonless night made his trip much easier. His mottled hide blended with the dark shadows and the roads he'd chosen when he had no choice but to use them were the least traveled, turning 16 direct miles into a 33 mile journey that sent him as far west as Manassas so he could maximize his time in the woods, out of direct sight. He occasionally had to stop and get off the road as cars approached from in front, but he had little trouble with cars from behind, since an earth dragon could easily run 60 miles an hour on the ground and sustain that speed for hours at a time. He could sprint at upwards of 100 miles an hour, but he couldn't hold that pace for more than two miles. If anything, in those rare instances he was on a road, he had to be careful to keep a certain distance from cars in front of him. The majority of the time, he was on forest pathways, along the cut-down access areas for power lines, skirting backyards where they abutted the woods, doing anything and everything in his power to stay out where he'd easily be seen. It was why his chosen path was so roundabout, so he could maximize the cover the woods provided, and despite the area being a major suburb of Washington, there were stretches of woods almost everywhere and most of them were connected. Only in those rare instances where he had to cross from one wooded area to another or fences forced him on a road did he move out in the open.

The darkness of the night only worked in his favor, for he could see anyone else far before they could see him. Earth dragons may have no magic, but they had some tricks, and one of them was the ability to see heat. It wasn't the infrared scope vision the military used, it was more like the old

Predator movie. The world around Kell was painted in the colors of heat, reds, blues, whites, yellows, oranges, and it was so clear that he could make out every blade of grass in the clearing, every leaf on every tree. His thermographic vision, a necessity for a species of dragon which preferred to live underground, was his ace in the hole, to use a human saying, his advantage that would let him see any humans long before they got close enough to see him. The occasional bright light or headlights from a car would interfere with his thermographic vision, though, so he had to be careful. Light didn't blind his heat-seeing ability, but seeing in visible light tended to overwhelm the heat signatures, force his eyes into the visible spectrum. As long as the light was dim enough, however, he could see *both* light and heat. His thermographic vision had a range of nearly half a mile, and that was more than enough to see anything coming at him, since mammals stood out in a cool May night like beacons.

Getting across 95 turned out to be far easier than he feared, since he crossed over it on a bridge, but getting across 236 was as hard as he feared it would be. The road was heavily traveled, and their headlights would outline him if he crossed with a car anywhere near him. He was forced to wait behind a closed restaurant for nearly half an hour until there was enough of a void in the traffic for him to scamper across and head down the road that led to Jenny Edward's house.

He reached it about twenty minutes later, a rather nice colonial with a big yard, sitting on an intersection between two rural roads about a mile from 236. There were no cars in the driveway, the garage's two doors were closed, and there were lights on both downstairs and upstairs. He crept over the yard's fence and went around to the back of the house, then reared up on his back legs and stretched up just enough to look into one of the upstairs rooms that had a dim light on. He saw a bedroom of a child past the window, a young boy sitting on the bed playing with a stuffed animal, dressed in pajamas...and most likely awake when he was supposed to be asleep.

The boy gave him an idea. Children were often much more receptive to the unusual than adults.

He reached up and rapped his talon on the window gently. The boy looked around, and when he rapped again, the boy turned to the window. He couldn't see much but Kell's horns, since his eyes barely came over the bottom of the window, but the young blond boy ambled up to the window and looked at him, his mouth agog. "Hi," he said in a calm tone. "Is your mom home?"

He nodded mutely.

"Could you go find her and ask her to come to the back door please? I need to talk to her."

The boy stared at him for a long moment, then turned and ran towards the open door. "Mooooom!" he screamed as he hurried around the corner and out of sight.

Kell stepped back and dropped back to the ground, then sat down and turned towards the door. Not twenty seconds later, it opened hurriedly, and Jenny Edwards almost jumped out. She had a pistol in her hands, then she whipped it up to a firing position and scanned it across the back porch, peering out into the darkness. She stared out for a few seconds, then slowly lowered her weapon.

"Hello, Jenny," he called.

She gasped and brought the weapon up again, then lowered it as she turned towards him. "Stone?" she gasped.

"It's me," he affirmed, stepping up enough into the light coming from the open back door so she could make out his head. The light caused his eyes to start to glow. "I see you're alright."

"What are you doing here?" she said in a strained voice, looking up at him.

"I...came to make you an offer," he said, stepping more into the light, folding his wings back, then he sat down in front of her. "Because of what

happened, the council wants to speak with a human. They asked me to come to see if you'd like that chance."

"*Me?*" she gasped. "Why me?"

"Because, in a strange way, I trust you," he replied calmly. "You're also a very intelligent human who has the guts to stand up to what will be a very strange situation, I've seen how you handle yourself out in the field. You have the courage to do this. And because you're a high ranking member of your government, what we tell you will go straight to them.."

"What, what do they want to say?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure they'll explain a few things to you," he answered. "And you can take those words back to the government. When *you* tell them, they will listen."

She looked at him in shock for a long moment, then he saw that her mind was starting to work. She pondered furiously for another moment, then she let go of her pistol with her free hand and lowered it all the way, the barrel pointing at the red tiles of her back porch. "You're taking me *there?*"

He nodded. "I figure you'll be gone for about a day or so," he answered.

"Right now?"

"Not absolutely right now, but soon would be good," he replied. "I really only have until sunrise. I'm going to be just a *little* noticeable when the sun comes up."

She looked up and down, her brows furrowing. "Why aren't you, you know? Stone?"

"Because they weren't sure if there would be a few dozen army soldiers hiding around the house," he replied. "I talked directly to you, and we didn't know if they'd take precautions to see if I'd do it again, to try to

kill me. They didn't want me to come with *anything* they might take from my corpse."

She swallowed and looked up at him. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "They sent me here expecting a trap. Part of my punishment for breaking the law when I spoke to you," he said ruefully. "Now, I'm the sacrificial lamb."

"Can, can I warn someone that I'll be gone?"

"Warn everyone you want," he replied. "This isn't exactly a secret. I'm not going to kidnap you, you know. Tell the people who need to know."

"Jenny, what are you—holy god!" her husband cried as he stepped up to the door. He looked to consider running back into the house, but after a flinch, he just stared past his wife and at Kell with shock all over his face.

"As you can see, I wasn't lying, Greg," she said with a nervous chuckle. "This is *him*."

"Greg Edwards," Kell said calmly, nodding his head. "I am Kell of the earth drakes."

"So that's your real name," she mused.

"Stone is my alias. There's a new Stone now," he shrugged. "I got fired."

"Sorry," she said with a rueful, sheepish smile.

"It's Price's fault, not yours. Now if it was him they sent me to, I'd be doing my best to make him wet his pants."

Jenny burst out in helpless laughter.

"So, Jenny, what do you say? Want to see something no human has ever seen before?" Kell asked lightly.

"Can I call my boss? Warn him? Tell them that your, uh, people want to talk?"

“Just don’t take all night. I have to take you to the scion, and it’s going to be a long and nervous run for me. It’s best if you take your car and meet me there, I don’t think you’d like to walk, and trying to ride on my back when I’m running that fast may be even less fun.”

“Run? Why not fly?”

He looked her right in the eyes. “Earth drakes can’t fly.”

“But, but, you have wings!” Greg blurted.

“So do ostriches,” he replied offhandedly.

“Fair point,” Jenny mused. “Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you where you’re going when you’re in your car and ready to go,” he replied. “I trust *you*. I don’t necessarily trust anyone you talk to not to have something waiting for me at our destination.”

“Let me put this up and get my phone,” she said, then she hurried past Greg and into the house. The human looked at him nervously, gave a quavering chuckle, and took a step back.

“So, uh, I, uh, think I’ll help Jenny find her phone,” he stammered, then he turned and fled back into the house.

Kell chuckled and laid down on his belly. He really couldn’t do anything but wait. He laid there for about a minute, then the little blond boy from upstairs peeked around the doorframe, gawking at him. “Hello again, little one,” Kell said gently, which made the boy hide behind the door. “It’s alright.”

He peeked around. “Are you weally a dwagon?” he asked.

Kell nodded. “I’m an earth drake.”

“What’s a dwake?”

“It’s another word for dragon,” he replied.

“You’re weally big.”

“And you’re really small,” he said, putting his head down on the red tiles, close to the door. The move put his glowing eyes more at a level with the young human. “What’s your name?”

“Davie.”

“My name is Kell,” he replied. “Now that we know each other’s names, there’s no reason to be afraid of me, youngling,” he called gently. “I don’t bite, I promise.”

He giggled and stepped out from around the door, but didn’t come out onto the deck. “Mommy and Daddy say I can’t go outside after dark.”

“Then you should stay inside, youngling. Always obey your parents,” Kell told him. “How old are you?”

“Four,” he answered, holding up his hand.

“Four, eh? Wow, you’re quite the little man, aren’t you?”

“How old aw you?”

“I’m sixty-two in your years. Among the dragons, I’m barely considered an adult,” he replied.

Jenny came into the kitchen with her phone at her ear, then hurried over and nudged Davie out of the doorway. “Yes, I’m looking right at him, Yancy,” she replied in a hurried voice. “He said that his, uh, *they* have asked for one person to go talk to them, and they chose me. I don’t know why, you’ll have to ask them!” she barked at the phone. “He said I’ll be gone about a day or so.”

“I think. If it’s longer, we can let them know,” Kell amended. “We’ll just leave a message on a facebook page somewhere.”

She repeated that. “Of course I’m going, dickhead!” she blurted, which made Davie giggle.

“Mommy said a bad word,” he relayed.

“Upstairs, pumpkin,” she told him, swatting him on the backside. “So, warn who needs to know that they’re trying to open diplomatic channels, and I’ll give a full report when I get back.” She closed the phone without listening for a reply, then handed the phone to Greg, who had come up behind her. “What do I need to take?”

“Two changes of clothing would be wise, as well as something nice to wear when you talk to the council,” he replied. “You’ll be staying in my burrow, and I don’t exactly have a human bed, but we’ll think of something.”

“I’m staying with *you*?”

“I have complete responsibility for you,” he replied calmly. “As long as you’re *there*, you’ll be with me. It’s my duty to provide you hospitality.”

“Uh, I’ll get the hiking backpack, honey. And the sleeping bag,” Greg offered, glancing out the door at him.

“That sounds like a good idea,” she agreed. “Just wait here, let me get what I need.”

“Where else am I going, silly?” he asked, which made her laugh.

She was gone about fifteen minutes, and he had no doubt she was packing her backpack with cameras, bugs, anything she could think of that would help her gather as much intelligence as possible...not that they’d do her much good. She’d be in for a nasty shock when she tried to use them: trying to take anything electrical through the scion rarely turned out well for the device if it was turned on, and the scion destroyed the battery anyway unless it was placed in a container hardened against EMP, so it would be useless on the other side. She eventually returned to the back door, a sturdy metal-framed backpack slung over one shoulder. “Alright, I’m ready. Where am I going?”

“I told you, I’ll tell you in your car,” he said, standing up. “I’ll meet you around the front.”

He padded around the house, and saw the garage door open. She backed her car out of the garage and stopped, and he curled around her hood and looked in from the driver's side. "Alright, meet me at the walkway where they have all the cherry trees, over by the Jefferson Memorial," he told her. "I'll take you to the scion from there."

She nodded. "I should be there in about half an hour."

"It's going to take me longer, so just wait for me," he told her. "I can't just run there down the streets, you know."

"That's true," she agreed with a chuckle, putting her car in gear. He watched her pull out and into the street, then she started off. Kell looked into the garage and saw Greg standing there, holding Davie, looking both amazed and nervous. "Watch her facebook page, Greg Edwards. If she'll be late, a message will be posted there."

"A-Alright. Take care of her. She's the love of my life," he said, his heart in his eyes.

"I promise you, I will bring her home safe and whole," he replied soberly. He then turned and bounded off into the darkness, his body melding into the shadows thanks to his camouflage coloration, and he was gone.

It took him nearly an hour to get there, again using wooded tracts and rural areas, passing to the west of Arlington and reaching the river. He slipped in and swam down past Roosevelt Island and under the bridge, then he approached the walkway along the tidal basin, where the cherry trees were planted. She was standing on the walkway, near the rail, looking out into the river. "You're smart to look this way," he called quietly from the dark, lapping waters.

"I figured your only way across was to swim, and you've proved you can swim," she replied with a nervous tilt, trying to be light and playful.

"Well, you're about to get wet, Jenny," he warned. "Now you're going to ride on my back."

“We’re going back!” she gasped.

“I’ll let you decide where we’re going. We’ll get you dried off when we get there, so don’t worry.” He climbed up enough to get his head over the rail. “Climb over and do your best to get up in front of my wings.”

“Alright,” she answered, snapping the buckle between the armstraps on her backpack in place. She climbed up and over the rail, then put a hand on his neck and stepped carefully from the rail to his shoulder. She showed some agility as she swung her leg over around his neck, then leaned down and grabbed hold just behind his head.

“Mind my horns,” he said as he slowly climbed back down into the water, then he heard her gasp. “What?”

“It’s fucking *cold!*” she complained.

“Sorry. I never considered that you might be cold. Well, we shouldn’t be wet for long,” he promised as he turned upriver. “I’ll swim fast.”

“Please!” she agreed.

He kept his head and neck above water as best he could as he swam upriver, using his wings to propel him as fast as a boat. Jenny was quiet as he carried her, felt her hands shift on his neck, her legs shift over his shoulders. “I never thought in my life I’d be doing anything like this!” she told him.

“Well, Alice, the rabbit hole goes down much further,” he told her.

“I’m surprised you know about that book!”

“I loved it. I read it some ten years ago,” he replied.

“Why can’t you fly?” she asked.

“I weigh too much,” he replied. “My wings can’t generate enough lift to get me off the ground. I can glide short distances, but that’s about it.”

“I never thought about that.”

“Even dragons obey the laws of physics, Jenny,” he chuckled.

It took him about twenty minutes to get to the shallow, faster-moving water near the waterfall. It was pitch black, but to his eyes, he could see the forest to each side of the rocky gorge, saw the heat of birds...and saw four human-shaped heat signatures on the Virginia side. They were huddled together, one of them looking around with what were probably thermo goggles or low-light. If they were infrared, they wouldn't pick him up very easily because of the water and his thick hide and scales, which were highly resistant to heat, either external heat coming or his internal heat escaping. To thermo, an earth drake was only slightly warmer than his surroundings, but it was enough for earth drakes to easily see each other, their thermographic sight was that sensitive. If they were low-light, they had a pretty good chance of seeing him. “Your friends are persistent,” he told her.

“They're here?”

“Four, on the left,” he replied as he approached the deep pool, the sound of the waterfall loud in his ears. “Now we get very wet, Jenny. Hug my neck as tightly as you can, stay under the sweep of my horns no matter what.”

“Alright, I'm ready. Let's do this!”

He slipped across the pool and climbed up the rocks under the waterfall, then put his nose into the scion. He felt the portal open, the rock turn insubstantial around his snout, so he climbed quickly into the passage with Jenny clinging to his neck and his wings folded over her to protect her from the heavy, pounding cascade of water. He heard her gasp as they got fully into the passage, and then they were out, standing on the aerie platform with bright, warm sunshine pouring down around the covered platform. “Oh...my...god,” Jenny breathed from behind his head, no doubt looking around.

“Welcome to Draconia, Jenny,” Kell told her. “You can climb down now.”

Almost immediately, two sky dragons alighted at the edge of the platform and approached, their steps a bit uncertain with their paws on the ground rather than in the air. Kell curled his body a little around Jenny, almost defensively, as she gawked at the two sleek, elegant sky dragons, who happened to be *much* larger than he was. “I’ve brought her,” he told them in the language of the dragons. “Could you ask a water dragon to come and help her dry off? The water’s a bit cold.”

“It will be done,” one of them replied, then he turned and swept into the air with a single beat of his wings, quickly diving out of sight.

“This is a sky dragon, Jenny,” he told her in English. “Most likely here to make sure you arrived safely, and then tell the council that you’ve arrived. The other sky dragon went to fetch a water dragon to help you dry off.”

“Good, that water was fuckin’ cold,” she said, her teeth chattering a little.

“Are you alright other than cold? Any trouble coming through? A human has never used a scion before.”

“It made me a little dizzy, but I’m okay,” she answered. “Where is this place?”

“It’s an island, somewhere in an ocean,” he told her simply.

“Well, that’s fair enough. Sorry I asked.”

“Ask all you want, you’ll only get the answers we want to give you,” he chuckled. The sky dragon returned, and a water dragon ascended up over the platform and landed. He gave Jenny a startled look, but then he approached. “And this is a water dragon,” he told her. “He’ll help you dry off.”

“How is he—“ she started, then she gasped when the water dragon gestured, and all the water in her clothes, pack, hair, and on her skin was pulled away, along with the dirt that had been suspended in it, leaving her

immaculately clean and as dry as she'd been before getting into the river. "Amazing! How did he do that?"

"Water dragons have innate magic that controls water," he replied calmly. "Yes, I said magic, Jenny. Magic is a very real thing, and the dragons still practice it."

She gaped at him, then laughed ruefully. "I was about to say that there's no such thing as magic, but I'm sorta standing her talking to a *dragon*," she said.

"Keep an open mind, Jenny. It'll take you far here," he replied with aplomb.

"You are to take the biped back to your burrow and give her time to rest," the larger sky dragon told him. "The council will see her at two hours before sunset."

Kell nodded as Jenny shifted her backpack a little, doing the conversion. It was a little after 4:00pm local time, and the sun would set around 9:20. That gave them around five hours or so. "They want me to take you home so you can get some rest, and I can prepare you for dealing with the council," he told her. "It's going to be quite a hike, and most of it will be downhill. Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll be alright, I don't own this pack to keep it in a closet," she answered. "Besides, you'll carry me if I get tired, won't you?"

He chuckled. "I guess I would at that," he agreed, carefully moving away from her before turning towards the ramp. "Let's go."

Jenny was looking in every direction as they climbed down the ramps leading to the ground, staring at the many aeries along the slope of the volcano, at the few buildings, at the many holes in the side of the volcano that he told her were the dens of dragons. He pointed out the other kinds of dragons to her, the fire and chromatic dragons, then he pointed down the ramp to the lowlands, which were a thousand feet below. "My family lives

down there, near the coast,” he told her. “We earth dragons like to live down there, where we have earth under our feet.”

“I see farms down there,” she breathed, shielding her eyes from the sun as she peered down.

“We *do* have to feed ourselves, you know,” he told her lightly. “My sire and mother are farmers, and I still live on our family farm. You’ll meet them pretty soon.”

“Your family’s a bunch of farmers?”

“What else should they be doing, Jenny? Stomping around roaring at each other?” he asked lightly, which made her laugh.

“I hadn’t really thought of it.”

“We’re just like the humans that way, Jenny. We have our farmers, our factory workers, our bureaucrats, and so on and so on. In reality, our society isn’t all that different from yours outside of the fact that we don’t have money.”

“You don’t? How does that work?”

“We barter for our goods,” he replied. “A factory worker receives a food allotment for his day’s labor, which he can trade for other things he needs. The harder the job, the more food a dragon earns for his labor. When you get down to it, food is our primary source of currency, because it’s the one thing any dragon will accept as part of a trade.”

“So farmers are rich here, eh?”

“Not as rich as you think,” he grunted. “But I’ll explain that later, if you want.”

“Oh, I want. I want to know everything!” she said with exuberance, almost jumping up and down.

“We can’t tell you *everything*, but I’ll tell you what I can,” he chuckled.

It took nearly half an hour to get down to the ground, after they stopped twice to give Jenny a chance to rest. A very young sky dragon came down and hovered about twenty feet over them before darting off, something that Jenny noticed quickly. “How do they stay up like that?” she asked him.

“Magic,” he replied.

“Oh. Ohhhhh,” she breathed. “So they can levitate?”

“Something like that,” he nodded.

“What do you do?” she asked. “Is that thing where you looked like a person what you do?”

“Earth dragons don’t *do* anything,” he told her, looking her in the eyes. “We have no magic.”

“But all the other dragons do.”

He nodded simply.

“Well, that sucks,” she blurted.

“You share that opinion with quite a few earth dragons,” he said blandly as he stood back up.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you,” she said quickly.

“I’m not insulted,” he replied. “Unlike most, I don’t see the allure to magic. Technology is the way to the future, not magic. Besides, as my sire always says, be proud of what you *can* do, don’t pine about what you *can’t* do.”

“Sounds like he’s a smart man—er, dragon.”

“He’s very wise. You’d never think he’s just a common farmer if you met him off his land,” he chuckled. “I think you’ll like him, Jenny. I know he’ll like you.”

“I’m going to meet him?”

He nodded. "I told you, I live in a burrow on our farm. I don't live *with* my parents, but they're close by. They like to keep me close so they don't have to travel far to visit."

"How long have you been here? On the island, I mean."

"Since we withdrew from human lands," he answered as a small group of young earth dragons rushed up, gawking at Jenny, then they ran off. "We stayed to ourselves until we started seeing the airplanes flying overhead. That got us curious about what the humans were up to, so we've been keeping an eye on things ever since."

"Ah, I wondered what brought you out."

"Seeing something not a dragon in the air was a bit of a shock," he chuckled. "I remember the first time I saw one. We had no idea what it was, and since I was barely a hatchling, I had nightmares about it for a month afterward. For someone that young, it was a bit traumatizing, like you taking Davie to a horror movie."

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-two in your years," he replied calmly. "Among the dragons, I'm barely considered eighteen. I'm a very young adult, but I *am* an adult. We're still about ten miles away from our farm. Are you going to be alright?"

"That far? Wow," she breathed.

"Then I'd better carry you," he chuckled, leaning down. "Up where you were when I got you wet."

"You don't mind?"

"Better than baby-stepping along so I don't leave you behind."

She laughed as she uncertainly put her foot on his upper leg, then hefted herself up and threw a leg over the base of his neck. She took a more

proper position, sitting astride like he was a horse. “I never thought I’d be riding a dragon.”

“Trust me, they’ll be talking about this for *years*,” he told her as he started at a much faster pace.

“I hope they won’t make fun of you.”

“Not if they want to live, they won’t,” he replied in a voice that made her burst out laughing.

It took him about twenty minutes to get back to the farm, coming up the little knoll and to the entrance to his burrow. “Well, here we are,” he told her, laying down. “This is where I live.”

“In there?” she said, looking down.

“Dragons like living in caves, or underground in the case of earth dragons,” he told her. “We’re like the hobbits from Lord of the Rings. Just really, really big hobbits. My first act as an adult was to dig out my own burrow. The builders came along behind me and installed concrete because I rather like it, and the amenities like power and water, but it’s the drake’s responsibility to do the actual digging. It’s a rite of passage of sorts. Until I dug out my burrow, I wouldn’t be considered an adult.”

She laughed ruefully. “You have quite a view,” she said, looking out over the cove, then she flinched when something broached the water, just a single wing of a water dragon. “What was that?”

“A water drake,” he replied. “I think it was Ralla, but I’m not sure. A family pod lives in that cove, where they farm kelp for a living. They’ve been friends of my family a long time, for generations.”

“Interesting,” she breathed, shielding her eyes to look out over the water.

One of the water drakes broached the water and landed on the edge of the little cliff that formed the coast, and he saw that it was Shii. She ambled up towards them confidently, and Jenny impressed him by holding her

ground as a *much* larger drake than him approached. “Jenny, this is Shii, the matriarch of the pod.” He then switched to the language of the dragons. “Shii, this is Jenny, the human the council asked me to bring here.”

Shii leaned down on her front legs, bringing her head down and within maybe a foot of Jenny’s body. “Tell her welcome for me, my young friend,” she told him as Jenny stared at her fin-like crest on her head.

“She bids you welcome, Jenny,” he told her. “I know, she looks much different, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah,” she replied, reaching out a tentative hand. Shii just closed her eyes and nudged her nose forward, and let Jenny touch her snout. “It’s smooth.”

“Don’t pull your hand the other way or you’ll lose your skin,” he warned. “Water dragon hides are smooth in one direction, but like a cheese grater in the other.”

“Like a shark,” she mused, stroking Shii’s nose.

“Exactly like a shark,” he affirmed.

Shii rose up a little, then she reached out with her taloned forepaw. Jenny didn’t flinch as Shii touched her shoulder, then patted her hair very gently. “It’s not like I expected it to feel,” she mused.

“She likes your hair,” Kell told her. “Most dragons are fascinated by hair, since we don’t have any.”

“They’ve seen humans before?”

“On TV,” he replied. “TV’s all the rage on the island right now.”

“Seriously?” she asked, looking at him.

“I’ll show you mine,” he chuckled. “They may not speak English or the other languages we hear on the stations, but that’s what closed captioning is for.”

Shii patted Jenny's shoulder again, gave her a fanged smile, then carefully backed up a few steps. "Tell her to be well, my young one. I have to get back to the beds."

"She says goodbye," he relayed.

"Bye," Jenny said, waving her hand. Shii mirrored her move with her forepaw, then she turned and bounded back to the edge and dove in.

Jenny was *wildly* curious he brought her down into his burrow and saw that thing were both wildly different and strangely similar. His greeting chamber was bare, with only designs etched into the concrete to serve as decoration, but his living chamber had a TV in it, several of his computers, and a refrigerator and counter for preparing food, with a trapdoor in the floor nearby that led to his storage cellar for food. "That's one seriously big TV," she noted as she set her pack down. "Nowhere to sit."

"Drakes don't need couches or chairs," he told her lightly as he ambled past. "You can sit on your sleeping bag if you need to."

"I think I need to," she said, carrying her pack over in front of the TV, near his desk, set it down, and got on her toes and looked over the top of it like a toddler, though the desk wasn't *that* high for her. It was about five and a half feet off the floor, and Jenny was about 5'9", fairly tall for a human female. "What kind of computer is that?"

"We build them here on the island," he told her. "Part of those factories I mentioned. When we find human technology that works for us, we adopt it."

"Internet access?"

"Naturally. You could post on facebook if you want. In fact, you should let Greg know you're alright," he mused. "Computer, wake up," he called in dragon, which caused the monitor to blink on. Jenny gasped as she looked at the home page for CNN.

"It's English!"

“If you want to surf the web, knowing English helps,” he mused as he came over.

“Webcam?”

“Seriously?” he asked lightly.

She laughed. “I guess a webcam wouldn’t be a good idea,” she admitted. “What were you doing on CNN?”

“I like to read up on the news,” he told her. “Remember, up until yesterday I was a field agent. Knowing what’s going on in the human world was a vital part of my job.”

“True,” she agreed, looking down at the keyboard. “English, but not qwerty.”

“I can only type with three fingers, a qwerty isn’t very ergonomic,” he replied, coming over and putting his paws around her waist, then hefting her up onto the desktop. She sat daintily on the edge, leaning on a hand and looking back at the monitor as he sat on his haunches in front of it. “This computer is based on the new octocore dual-channel AMDs, but we use a locally developed operating system that’s heavy on graphic interface and is fully customizable, like a GUI-based linux,” he told her with a chuckle as he brought up Facebook, then her own page. “Alright, go ahead.”

“But you use an Android-based browser.”

“Hey, it works,” he shrugged. “If something already works, why make something else?”

She looked down at the keyboard, then used two fingers to a key to slowly punch out a post, having to pause often to look for letters. *At the hotel. Fantastic view and very friendly locals, she typed. Will have my meeting later today. Not sure when I’ll be home, but I’m doing fine.*

“Nice and vague,” he said with an approving nod.

“I doubted you’d let me get specific,” she chuckled.

“You’re right. So, we have a few hours. Want to rest a little, eat something, or go over what to expect?”

“How about you show me what channels you get on that,” she said, pointing at the widescreen 80” TV hanging from his wall.

“Any channel that comes off a satellite,” he told her. “Access TV, language English,” he called, and its indicator light blinked. “It’ll react to you. Just say the words ‘access TV,’ then a channel name or number.”

“I just realized something,” she said, looking around. “Power!”

“Of course. How do we run our computers and TVs without electricity?”

“How do you generate it?”

“Geothermal,” he replied.

“Clever.”

“Praise Iceland, not us. They gave us the plans for it. Not intentionally, but we thank them all the same,” he replied.

“Be glad they don’t sue you,” she chuckled.

“If they only knew,” he said dryly as she slid down and dropped to the floor.

“Access TV, uh, Fox News Channel,” she called, and the channel popped up on the TV immediately. She pulled her sleeping bag off the top of her pack and dropped it on the floor, then sat on it and looked up at the TV for a while. “So, not to sound nasty, but how are we handling the bathroom situation?”

“You’ll have to use mine, which is basically a hole in the floor in that chamber over there,” he told her, pointing with a clawed finger. “Toilet paper, well, that’s going to be a problem. I have some dust cloths, I guess those will work.”

“What’s in that room?”

“My workshop,” he replied. “I tinker with the technologies we find in our field work. And that other door is the room where I sleep. Feel free to look around,” he assured her.

“After I rest a minute. That was a long walk, and I didn’t realize that downhill was even more tiring than uphill, until you gave me a ride and I didn’t have to walk anymore.”

“You either pull yourself up or keep yourself from going down too fast,” he replied as he stepped over to her, then laid down with his head about even with her. “So, what do you think so far?”

She leaned back on her hands. “I’m not sure what to think. Magic dragons that watch TV and surf the web. This is pretty high up on the freak-out meter,” she replied, which made him rumble with a chuckle.

“We’re not the dragons from your legends,” he told her lightly. “I don’t slay knights and eat damsels in distress. I hack top-secret and encrypted networks for a living,” he said dryly, which made her splutter.

“That just seems so wrong,” she admitted. “So, why *did* you pick me?”

“Because you’re not a politician and you’re not a diplomat,” he repeated. “You’re a real person, and I want the council to see a *real* person, not someone groomed to be as smooth as possible or as glib as a snake oil salesman. I wasn’t blowing smoke when I told you that, Jenny. You’re smart, observant, and you don’t scare easily. You’ll be able to handle speaking to the council, and since you *are* a government agent that they’ll take seriously, that’ll let you take what you learn straight to them and file a report in person. You can take what you learn with you and tell them everything you’ve seen here and assure them that we’re not an enemy. We just want to be left alone, Jenny. We’re not interested in money, or power, or prestige. We just want peace and quiet.”

“So, everything you and the others do is just about being left alone?”

“More like making sure the humans didn’t know about us,” he replied. “If you didn’t know we existed, then clearly you wouldn’t try to bother us. But now some of you *do* know about us, so I guess the council wanted to make sure we put the best foot forward, as it were. The field agents will still be out there hacking your networks, but they’re not doing it to take anything over or steal anything. We do it to make sure your encrypted, top-secret communications don’t have anything about *us* in them. No more, no less.”

“They will now, though.”

“And we’ll be watching to see what the governments have to say where they don’t think we can see it,” he said simply.

“Not if we stop you,” she said lightly.

“Good luck with that,” he snorted derisively, which made her splutter and then laugh.

“Hey, we weren’t *that* bad,” she protested.

“Not at all, but like any team playing defense, you could only *react*,” he told her with a slight smile. “How many times did you catch up to me? Nine?”

“Ten,” she corrected.

“And how many times do you think I’ve gone out there?”

“Probably way more than ten,” she admitted with a slightly rueful look.

“*Way* more,” he agreed. “But we didn’t just write you guys off, Jenny. The field agents have a *hell* of a lot respect for the Hunters. Enough that we were under orders to immediately abort our mission and return if we knew you were in the same *city*. But sometimes, for critical missions, we had to stay, and that’s when you’d track us down and that merry chase would begin,” he noted, giving her a light look. “So, how did you know I’d be in Washington?”

“Sherlock Holmes,” she replied with a smile. “We eliminated all other possibilities, so what was left was the truth, despite it seeming implausible. We figured out what you’d been trying to do in Brussels, and realized the only other option you had was the State building. We weren’t sure if you’d actually try it, but since it was the only place it could be done, we decided to stake it out and see if you were that brave.”

“Clever.”

“Thank you,” she said, bobbing her head a little. “We spotted you on a street camera just outside the White House and mobilized.”

“I knew I shoulda went back to Foggy Bottom,” he grunted.

“Nah, you’d have walked right into Juarez and Holmes,” she told him.

“I coulda just rolled their SUV over like in Dallas,” he shrugged, which made her laugh.

“That scared the piss out of them,” she told him. “We just could not figure out how the hell you did it. We even brought in those guys from Mythbusters to see if they could figure it out.”

“Now you know.”

“I surely do,” she nodded.

“Hello!” Keth called from the entry chamber, which made Jenny sit back up and look in that direction.

“My sire,” Kell told her. “In here!” he called.

Keth ambled into the living chamber and paused as he saw Jenny sitting by him, then he nodded. “I see the rumors were true,” he said in English as he came in. “Welcome to Draconia, madam. I am Keth, patron of my family and humble farmer of the earth drakes.”

“Lieutenant Jenny Edwards, nice to meet you,” she replied.

“So, what do you think so far?” he asked as he came in and stood on the far side of Kell.

“I think I haven’t seen nearly enough to draw conclusions,” she replied.

“Very wise, young miss, very wise. Watch, listen, and learn, *then* decide. It prevents rash decisions that you may come to regret later.”

“He always talks like that,” Kell grunted, then he wheezed when Keth thumped him on the hindquarters with the bottom of his tail, which made Jenny giggle uncontrollably.

“You’re not so grown that I can’t still spank you, whelp,” Keth warned with a smile.

“I may be little, sire, but I’m mean,” he replied blandly, which made Jenny laugh.

“What do you grow, Mister Keth?” she asked.

“Call him Patron, not Mister,” Kell injected.

“Just Keth will do,” he smiled. “And I grow most anything I can get seed for,” he replied. “My current crops are potatoes, eggplants, pumpkins, and radishes, I have seed back for cabbage, lettuce, squash, and sunflowers, and I’m getting ready to sow some carrots and wheat.”

“Dragons like carrots?”

“Earth dragons do,” he smiled. “We eat plants more than meat.”

“Sire doesn’t grow food to sell outside the village,” he told her. “So he raises crops only for other earth dragons.”

“Call it my one shortcoming, dear,” Keth said lightly. “When the other dragons treat us as equals, I’ll gladly plant crops for them.”

“And you’re the one that always tells me to let go of my resentment,” Kell accused.

“My protest to the way things are is more subtle,” he chuckled.

“So, now we’re getting down to the dirty underbelly,” Jenny noted. “The other dragons don’t like you?”

“We’re smaller than the other dragons on the average, we can’t fly, and we have no magic, so some of them don’t really even think of us as dragons,” Kell said sourly.

“It’s a prejudice, my dear,” Keth said calmly. “They only see what we *can’t* do, and that prevents them from truly understanding what we *can* do.” He sat on his haunches. “Often, a prejudice born of a perceived difference is the hardest to overcome, especially when that perceived difference makes you feel like you are more than one you’re comparing yourself to.”

She gave him a long look, then nodded soberly. “That’s quite profound, Keth.”

“A drake has nothing but time to think while he’s tending his crops,” he smiled. “As long as we earth dragons are content with who we are, then the problem lies with them, not with us. We forgive them their petty prejudices, though that doesn’t mean we have to be sociable with them. The earth dragons are far different from the others, and magic is but one aspect of it. Life walking on the ground and tending crops and livestock with our own forepaws lets us see things more clearly than they do. While they ponder matters important to them, we ponder matters important to us, and most of the time those things have nothing to do with one another.”

“But, aren’t you friends with those water, uh, water drakes?”

“Oh yes, but that’s because of years of interaction. Shii’s pod understands earth drakes far better than other water dragons because of the bonds between our families. Shii and her pod respect us for what we *can* do, they don’t pity us for what we *can’t* do. They understand.”

“That’s what Kell said. Be proud of what you can do, don’t pine over what you can’t do.”

“Something I’ve had to tell him at least once a day since the day he hatched,” Keth noted, which made Kell flick his tail in irritation. “What you may see as a handicap, others may see as a blessing,” he told her.

“I can understand that. My cousin is deaf,” she nodded. “And it doesn’t cause him much trouble. He has a good job, a wife who loves him, great kids. He’s got a good life despite that.”

“Then you understand, my dear,” Keth smiled, then he stood up. “Now, you must come meet Kanna!”

“My mother,” Kell supplied. “We can’t stay long, sire, Jenny needs to rest and prepare to meet the council.”

“I think I’d like to meet Kanna,” she said, standing up.

“First off, if you want to be formal, call her Matron Kanna. Second, bring your sleeping bag, mother will talk you into a coma,” Kell warned.

Jenny laughed.

“I’m going to tell her you said that, youngling,” Keth warned with a light expression.

“I’m sure she’ll expect to hear it,” he retorted blandly.

The two earth drakes walked very slowly to allow Jenny to keep up, as she looked around as much as she walked forward. They skirted the edge of the potato field, close to the coast. “How do you deal with the saltwater ruining your crops?” she asked.

“You’re a farmer, my dear?” Keth asked brightly.

“My grandpa was,” she answered.

“We use soil treatments we’ve devised over the years to leech the harmful salts out of the coastal tracts between harvests without damaging the earth’s fertility,” he told her. “This is volcanic soil, though, so it has a lot of natural compounds that help break down the salt as well, so we don’t have to treat the soil often. Crops we plant after a treatment don’t have any

problems with the salt before we harvest. Then we just treat any salt that builds up from storms and such during a fallow cycle and replant.”

“I was wondering. You usually don’t see farms this close to the ocean. I could throw a rock into the cove from here.”

“The island is only so big, so we have to maximize available space, my dear. Besides, this is only the edge of my farm. We farm all the way up the slope, and quite a ways to the north,” he pointed back towards the volcano. “Those tracts are in a fallow cycle. Most of the radishes are up on the north slope, about a half a mile past the burrow.”

It took them about ten minutes to reach the burrow of his parents, which was much larger, and also had more than just his parents in it. The burrow was very old, passed down over four generations, and where Kell’s burrow was lined in concrete, their burrow was hewn out of natural volcanic rock. Three hatchlings, chest high to Jenny, boiled out of the entrance, jumping and bounding, then they saw Jenny and almost fell over gawking. “My younger siblings,” Kell told her. “Kav, Kitta, and Konn.”

“Hatchlings, this is a most special guest,” Keth said gently in dragon as they scurried over and looked up at Jenny with undisguised awe. “You will treat her with your best behavior, and you will *not* be rough with her. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sire,” the three said in almost perfect unison.

“Jenny, this is Kav, this is Kitta, and this is Konn,” Keth introduced. “They don’t speak your language, so be patient with them.”

She leaned over a little, hands on her knees, and smiled down at the three awestruck hatchlings. “Hello there,” she crooned in a motherly voice. They didn’t understand her words, but they did react to the timbre of her voice, losing some of their fear. She took a hand off her knee and reached out to Kitta, who flinched a little when she touched her fingertips to the top of her head, between her small horns. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

“She looks like the things on the TV,” Kav said.

“She’s a human, Kav,” Keth nodded. “She’s just like the people on the TV.”

“See, I told you they were real!” Konn said triumphantly, reaching over Kitta’s neck and pushing his brother.

“Boys,” Keth warned before they started rough-housing; juvenile earth drakes were *extremely* rambunctious. “Now all of you go bring in the baskets, and then you can go play,” he ordered.

“Aww, can’t we talk to the human?” Kitta protested.

“Work always comes first, young lady. Now hop,” Keth ordered.

“Yes, sire,” they said in unison, and Jenny pulled her hand up just in time to keep her wrist from getting caught between Kitta’s horns and broken as the three drakelings turned and headed for where the baskets from harvesting radishes were sitting.

“Where are they going?” Jenny asked.

“They haven’t finished their chores, so they’re back on the proper path,” Keth said simply, patting Jenny delicately on the back with a finger. “Now come in, come in! Kanna will make you something to eat, so you’ll have the strength to face the council.”

“You know, I’m surprised you speak English, Keth,” Jenny noted as they walked down the ramp. “And you speak it very well.”

“Thank you. When Kell won his position in the intelligence division, he had to learn English as quickly as possible. We helped him study, and it sort of rubbed off on us,” Keth chuckled. “Trust me, my dear, we’re very much the minority on Draconia. But, I admit, it makes watching TV easier. No reading subtitles,” he laughed.

“Do you study other languages?”

“Me? No, I barely had the time to learn English,” he said dismissively. “Kanna! Kanna, come greet Kell’s guest from the human world!”

Kanna ambled out into the greeting chamber. She was slightly smaller than Keth, and unlike most earth drakes in that she was almost all one color, a slate gray, with just a dark streak down her spine and a wedge of dark scales over her eyes that narrowed to a point at the base of her snout. “Oh, hello there,” Kanna said in accented English, bobbing her horned head. “I’m Kanna, matron of the burrow.”

“I’m Jenny Edwards, ma’am, it’s nice to meet you,” Jenny replied.

“Such a darling little thing,” Kanna smiled. “You humans are cuter live than you are on the TV.”

“Well, uh, thanks, Matron Kanna,” she replied, a bit uncertainly.

“Just Kanna dear, no need for such formality with one not familiar with our ways. I heard you’re going to talk to the council,” she urged.

“That’s why Kell brought me here,” Jenny replied.

“Well, you absolutely cannot go stand before those brutes without a full belly!” she declared. “Come with me, dear, and well fill you up in short order!”

“Mother feeds anything and anyone who wanders in. It’s bait for the trap so she can talk you to death,” Kell said lowly to her, which made Jenny smile.

“I can still hear, youngling,” Kanna barked as she ambled away.

“Well, I’m not all that hungry, but I’m curious to see what dragons eat,” Jenny said.

“You’re going to be disappointed,” Kell warned as they started towards the feeding chamber.

Kanna was halfway into the pantry when Kell and Keth led Jenny into the room, which had a long counter on the side, the pantry in the back, and a ramp leading down to the cellar. A refrigerator stood by that entrance, the

bow to human technology. “That’s one big refrigerator,” Jenny noted. “Another idea borrowed from us?”

Kell nodded. “For meat and dairy. A few earth dragons make a killing making cheese and butter.”

“Now, I have about any vegetable you’d care to eat, Jenny,” Kanna called from the pantry. “And we have half a cow left in the refrigerator if you’d prefer meat.”

“I wouldn’t open that if I were you,” Kell warned as Jenny approached the refrigerator. It was about eight feet tall, but the handles were more than within her reach. “When mother said half a cow, she was being literal.”

“It’s not butchered?”

“Earth drakes don’t cook their food, and bones and fur are just flavoring,” he told her.

She shuddered a little and gingerly took her hand off the handle. “I… think I’ll stick with the vegetables.”

“Smart girl.”

Kell again picked her up and set her on the table as Kanna carried a basket of assorted vegetables, the handle between her teeth. Inside were onions, potatoes, radishes, eggplants, and pumpkins, and the root vegetables still had clumps of damp, dark earth clinging to them. Jenny turned and sat cross-legged by Kell on the table, then picked up a potato and brushed some soil off of it. She looked at Kell as he reared up and put his forelegs on the table. “You don’t peel them?”

“Earth dragons eat things as they are,” Keth told her. “And as our name suggests, a little earth on our food only makes it taste better,” he winked. “Now, if you want to deal with gourmet dragons, then you want to speak to the chromatics. They adore the food made from those cooking shows they show on TV, though they won’t watch it themselves. Chromatics have a revulsion to the human technology.”

“They do?”

He nodded. “They won’t even let the builders run power lines to their dens and libraries. I find it a little amusing that they hate technology and human things, but they love the food made from cooking shows on the TV.”

“I guess the fires cook their food...if charring it half to ash counts as cooking,” Kanna mused, which made Kell chuckle.

“And water dragons eat it raw too, if they live in the water,” Jenny reasoned.

Kell nodded.

“So, did you eat human food out in the field?” she asked him.

“Enough to get used to it,” he replied. “I love french fries, but meat tastes funny when it’s cooked. I was a Subway veggie delight kind of drake.”

“Bread, now there’s something I can eat cooked,” Kanna agreed. “Kell brought some back after one of his missions, and he almost caused a riot. There wasn’t enough to go around.”

“And now several earth dragons raise wheat for milling, and bakeries have popped up in every earth dragon village on the island,” Keth finished.

“Huh,” Jenny mused, no doubt filing that bit of information away for her report. She pulled a pocket knife from her jeans and started peeling one of the potatoes. “Maybe you should learn how to make it, Misses Kanna.”

“Oh, I do, but flour is very expensive,” she said, clicking her teeth a little bit. “We’ll have all the bread we want once Keth manages to barter some wheat seed.”

“I’m still working on it, lifemate,” he said absently. “I only need maybe another barrel full and we’ll have enough for a starter crop.”

“So, what do you do out in the human world, Jenny?”

“Oh, my job is to chase him around,” she said lightly, pointing at Kell.

“She’s one of the agents the government put on us field workers,” Kell elaborated.

“And they picked you to come talk to us. Interesting,” she hummed.

“Kell picked me,” she said. “I still don’t entirely understand why myself.”

“You will once you’re back in the human world,” he replied.

“Our little Kell is a good judge of character,” Kanna said confidently. “If he thought you were suited for it, then you are.”

“We’ll see, I guess,” she said, cutting a piece of potato away and popping it into her mouth. “I’m not sure what the council will be like, or what they want to say.”

“They take themselves far too seriously,” Kanna sniffed.

“There are nine dragons on the council, my dear,” Keth explained. “Each race of dragon is represented by one council member.”

“Nine? But there’s only five kinds of dragon.”

“There are nine kinds,” he smiled. “Among the elemental dragons, there are drakes, and there are wyrms. We look exactly the same, but we *are* different.”

“Wyrms are larger,” Kell added.

“The chromatics have no drakes, only wyrms, so they only have one council member,” Keth continued. “They spend most of their time sitting up on Council Aerie discussing matters, and they more or less allow the dragons to look after themselves. We know what to do, so it gets done.”

“So you don’t have much of a central government.”

“Not really,” he nodded. “We have a village council that handles affairs within the village, and among the water dragons, the pod matriarch and

patriarch have authority in all matters concerning the pod.”

“The fires are more like a dukal fiefdom,” Kell continued. “The biggest, meanest fire dragon rules his territory, and he holds it by force. Any dragon living in his territory bows to his rulership or they get run off.”

“And the chromatics think they rule *everything*,” Kanna snorted.

“Well, what happens if the fire dragon starts stealing things?”

“Then its up to the dragons living in his territory to do something about it,” Keth replied. “More than one fire dragon has been ganged up on and chased out of his own territory. The fires play a dangerous game, since they have to use force to hold their territory, but if they use *too much*, they’ll be run off by the dragons living there.”

“No, I mean, what if a fire dragon came down here and tried to steal your crops?”

All three earth drakes chuckled. “That is something they dare not do, and they know it,” Keth smiled. “Fire dragons may have the reputation for being the bullies among the dragons, but *no* dragon wants to anger an earth dragon. We can be extremely nasty when we’re angry.”

“Despite you having no magic.”

“Magic isn’t a universal defense,” Keth said with a vicious little smile.

“But, they could just fly away.”

“They have to land eventually,” Kell said darkly.

“Anyway, this is just my guess, but odds are the council will give you an accounting of themselves,” Keth said, popping a giant onion into his mouth. “And try to explain our position to you. The dragons don’t want to meddle in human affairs, but we also don’t want humans to meddle in ours. They will most likely offer you the bargain of you leave us alone, we leave you alone.”

“Oh, you meddle, alright,” Jenny said, looking at Kell.

“Only to make sure you don’t meddle with us,” he replied. “Besides, every nation out there spies on every other nation. Why should we be any different? Because we’re not human?”

“Well, it makes it a lot more ominous for you being dragons,” she said. “I mean, up until yesterday, we didn’t even know you existed. Now, it’s like you know everything about us, but we don’t know anything about you.”

“The mystery is always feared until it is solved,” Keth nodded. “Which is why you are here now. It’s why they sent you with Kell instead of bringing you straight to the council. They want you to see *real* dragons in our *real* lives, so you understand that at the ground level, we are not that much different from you,” he told her.

“And the council is going to see a *real* human, not a diplomat groomed to look as good as possible. Your answers will be honest, genuine, and that will let them see the truth of things,” Kell added.

She took another bite of her potato. “We’ll see,” she noted. “What are the ones on the council like?”

“Far too full of themselves,” Kanna repeated disdainfully. “Even the earth dragons, may Gaia forgive them.”

“That describes just about every politician alive,” Jenny mused.

“Some things cross species boundaries. Arrogance in politicians is one of them,” Keth nodded, which made Jenny laugh.

“So, what’s a day in the life of a good old common earth dragon like?” she asked, looking at Keth.

“Much like any farmer, my dear,” he replied with a fanged smile. “I get up before dawn and tend my fields. But, it’s not so strenuous that I have to toil all day, so I have time to visit the neighbors, run errands, give the hatchlings their lessons, and so on. Would you like to see the farm?”

“Sure,” she replied. “At least after I finish this.”

“I’d better carry you, it’s a lot of land, and you can’t wear yourself out before going to the council,” Kell reasoned.

Kell carried her after they finished their snack as Keth showed her the farm. They had five different major tracts spread out with the burrow in the center, and Keth was quite elaborate describing the land, its fertility, the best crops that grew in certain tracts. “It’s the second largest farm in Dawnmist,” he said proudly. “Held by our family since we came here.”

“Where’s the village?” Jenny asked.

“We’re in it now, dear. Dawnmist is the name of the twelve farms around us, which forms the village. We have no collection of houses or shops like you might expect. We don’t like living all piled up against each other. We have four shops in our village. The toolmaker, the baker, the builder’s shop, and the general store. They’re not together. Each one is on the farm of the family that started it.”

“So, what do dragons have in their general store?” she asked curiously.

“It’s not far from here. We can show you.”

“Yes!” she said immediately.

“You’re going to be disappointed,” Kell warned.

“Oh hush,” she retorted, slapping his scaled neck lightly.

Like most earth dragon architecture, it was only architecture in that it was underground. The general store was a large chamber dug out deep enough to be under the rock, lit with fluorescent lights in four rows on the ceiling. Jenny stayed on Kell’s back as they walked along the four aisles, where assorted common items dragons used in their daily lives were. Some of the items Jenny could identify, but some she couldn’t. “What’s that?” she asked, pointing. Kell looked back at her and then in the direction she was pointing, then he chuckled.

“It’s what you’d call a scratching pad,” he told her. “Keeps the talons clean and sharp.”

“Do you purr too?”

“I eat cats, you know,” he said darkly. “They taste like chicken.”

Jenny laughed. “Do dragons keep pets?”

“We have some domesticated livestock, but not pets in the way humans keep them,” he answered. “Most small animals are terrified of us, for obvious reasons, and really small animals like dogs and cats wouldn’t last long in a dragon’s burrow. One wrong step and you’re scraping your pet off the floor with a spatula.”

“What kind of livestock do you keep?”

“Cows and pigs, we brought with us when we came here, but there’s also an indigenous animal to this island that’s something like a giant sloth that we started to manage once we got here, they live in the forests on the northeast side of the island,” he replied. “Since we started moving around in the human world, we’ve added Asian water buffalo, emus and ostriches for their eggs, and saltwater crocodiles, which are mainly the water dragons.” He turned into view of Gev, the shopkeeper, who gaped at Jenny like she was some kind of monster. “We’ve just managed to get our paws on some buffalo, and they seem to do alright on the island. They haven’t started breeding in numbers yet, but they like the grassy plain on the southeast side of the island. We weren’t sure if the climate would be too hot for them, but they’re adapting much quicker than we expected.”

“Buffalo, eh?”

“They taste *way* better than cows. If we can sustain the herds, we’ll probably keep the cows for milk and eat the buffalo.”

“Is that a *human*?” Gev asked in a nervous voice as they approached his counter.

“Invited by the council,” Kell replied immediately. “They want her to see common everyday aspects of dragon life.”

“It, it doesn’t have any diseases, does it?” he asked, getting a bit jittery.

“None you have to worry about,” Kell replied, switching to English. “Jenny, this nervous drake is Gev, the shop owner. Don’t make any sudden moves or you’ll scare him back into his burrow.”

“He’s afraid of *me*?” she asked with a laugh. “He must be twelve feet high and thirty feet long!”

“To the average earth dragon, humans are as much a mystery to us as we are to you,” he told her simply. “I work out in the human world, Jenny. Very few earth dragons understand humans the way I do, and like sire said, when something’s a mystery to you, sometimes you’re afraid of it just because you don’t understand it.”

“I didn’t think of it like that.”

“Aren’t human women afraid of mice?” he asked lightly.

“Not *this* human woman,” she retorted.

“But the principle is the same,” he chuckled.

“Alright, I’ll give you that. So, dragons are afraid of people?”

“Some are,” he admitted. “But they’re losing it, because of TV. Then again, some things on TV make dragons *more* afraid of people,” he grunted as they passed Gev’s counter. “But those are the ones that haven’t figured out that all the violence is just fictional, that the average human isn’t running around with an assault rifle in his hands, shooting at anything that moves.”

“Dragons are drawing conclusions based on what they see on TV. We’re doomed,” Jenny grunted.

Kell chuckled. “Only the silly ones. Would it surprise you to know that the most popular show among dragons is Dancing with the Stars?”

“Actually, yeah, that does surprise me.”

“Now, we’d better get you back to my burrow so you can rest a bit. It has to be like midnight for you, and the council wants us to be there in

about three hours, and an hour of that is going to be the climb up to Council Aerie.”

“Yeah, but I’m used to going without sleep,” she replied. “Sometimes a stakeout requires some long hours.”

“Be that as it may, there are some things we need to talk about so you’re not walking in there blind,” he told her.

“True.”

He said goodbye to his parents and carried Jenny back to his burrow, setting her down in front of the TV as he pondered just what to tell her... mainly because he really had no idea exactly what the council wanted to say to her. She took off her sneakers and leaned back on her hands, sighing and wiggling her socked feet as he laid down beside her so his head was just to her left. “I hope I didn’t tire you out,” he said.

“I don’t wear sneakers often. I knew I should have worn my boots. I’m gonna like what’s in the backpack even less.”

“A dress?”

She shook her head. “A pant suit. The best I have, rolled up so I hope it won’t wrinkle. Complete with heels,” she grunted.

“That’s gonna be fun wearing hiking up to the aerie.”

“I might just have you carry me, if you don’t mind. I’d be limping by the time I got up there.”

“So, what did you think of the store?”

“I think I didn’t see half as much as I wanted to,” she replied, then glanced at him. “You hustled me out of there pretty quick. I almost thought you were trying to hide something.”

“I wasn’t sure how Gev was going to react if you did anything that might startle him,” he grunted. “I don’t think bringing your impaled corpse up to the aerie would put me in very good standing with the council.”

“Impaled? Your horns face backwards, how would he manage that?”

“Spike you,” he replied, bringing his tail around. “Other dragons have magic and breath weapons, but we have *these*,” he told her.

“They certainly look intimidating,” she chuckled, looking at the seventeen individual spikes of edged crystal growing from the flattened top of the end of his tail, slender like javelins but strangely jagged like crystals, all of them blood red.

“It’s why the other dragons don’t mess with us,” he told her, sliding his tail back behind him. “That and our reputation on the island as being mean as a rabid wolverine when we’re angry. It’s not entirely true, though.”

“I can’t really imagine you acting like that,” she mused, looking at him. “Then again, with everything we did to make you angry, well, I couldn’t believe you’re that bad.”

“It’s a reputation we cultivate,” he chuckled. “It also prevents most foolishness. Just about every earth dragon is taught from an early age that you meet *any* kind of violence brought on you from one of the other dragons with deadly force, even violence started just to bully or taunt us. A bully will continue to bully until you drive four or five spikes halfway through his gut. After a few fatalities among each new generation of fire dragons, the survivors learn to leave us alone. That’s given us a reputation for being barbaric and savage, but we let them think that because it saves more lives than it takes in the long run. Not even fire dragons are as quick to kill as an earth dragon, but the equalizer is that an earth dragon will never attack to kill unless they’re attacked first. We actually hate violence.”

“Seems like your society isn’t as harmonious as I first thought.”

“Not even close,” he admitted with a nod. “At least when it comes to being down here on the lowlands. Up on the mountains, it’s nothing but harmony and self-congratulatory patting on the back over how superior they are compared to us.”

“Your father was right, you do have to be told that saying at least once a day,” she chuckled.

“Persecution syndrome runs deep in the earth dragons,” he grunted.

“But you’re the ones that do the electricity, aren’t you?” she asked sagely. “And the computers.”

He nodded. “They have their magic. We embraced technology, and even though they won’t share their magic with us, we share our technology with them.”

“It sounds to me like you’re the better people, not them,” she said, rocking back on her hands a little.

“And you’ve just earned the instant and eternal hatred of the majority of the council,” he chuckled darkly. “If you said that to them, the fire wurm would probably roast you where you stood. So, you’d best keep those kinds of opinions to yourself when you’re in front of them. Don’t go up there and show favoritism just because you’ve spent the day with me. Hell, the only reason they had you go with me is because I speak English and I understand humans much better than most any other dragon because I’ve done field work.”

“I’ll be neutral and objective,” she promised. “Now, I think I’m gonna have to brave using your bathroom.”

“Just be careful. You can literally fall into that hole,” he warned. “Let me fetch my dust cloths from the workshop.”

She was gone for about five minutes, then came back laughing. “Okay, that was nervous,” she declared. “I didn’t realize you have a sewer system.”

“We earth dragons do,” he replied. “We recycle the waste as fertilizer for our fields at a processing plant over on the peninsula.”

“Power, running water, sewers, you earth dragons have it all,” she mused. “What do the other dragons do when they need to go?”

“You don’t want to know,” he said dryly, which made her laugh.

She pulled out her pantsuit and laid it out so it could unwrinkle, and he used the smallest container he had to bring her some water. It was the size of a bucket for her, but she had a canteen in her backpack, which she filled using the bucket. “You thought ahead.”

“When you said you didn’t have human beds, I figured you wouldn’t have human dishware either. I have an entire camping set in the pack. Alright, tell me about the council.”

“It’s much like sire described. Nine dragons, and they sit on raised platforms forming a circle. You’ll stand in a gold circle in the middle. It’s considered polite to turn to face whichever dragon speaks to you. Council isn’t all that formal, and the members will often talk over each other and even argue in front of witnesses. Expect them to be pretty snarky to you.”

She laughed. “Snarky. You really are fluent in English.”

“Thank you. They’ll tell you whatever it is they want you to know, and probably ask you a whole bunch of questions. I really don’t know what they want to say, so your guess is as good as mine.” She came over and stood by his head, which put her head over his. He raised his head so they were eye to eye. “Most likely they’ll be fishing for what you think the humans will do now that they know about us, and since you’re a government agent, what the government might do. Feel free to be as honest or as evasive as you feel necessary. We won’t tell you everything, so don’t feel like you have to tell us everything. And expect a few of the dragons to try to intimidate you,” he warned. “The fires and chromatic especially. They’ll think you should just fall down and worship them because they’re *dragons* and you’re not.”

“I don’t scare easily.”

“Which is why I picked you over some of the others,” he nodded. “I once saw you kick Price in the groin. That made me like you immediately.”

She laughed brightly. “He brought that on himself,” she winked. “Alright, so, I’ve seen what earth dragons do. What do the other dragons

do?”

“Water dragons are a lot like us,” he answered. “They farm underwater plants and do a lot of fishing and fish farming. The earth and water dragons basically feed the island, and if there’s any other dragon we earth dragons can get along with, it’s the water dragons. They live right next to us earth dragons and we have a lot of common interests. The sky dragons used to do a lot of hunting, like giant raptors, but it’s so far from anywhere that has game large enough for them to hunt from here, they had to stop when we moved to the island. They keep their hunting skills sharp by going on hunting expeditions in places we know are uninhabited by humans and conducting competitions and such, but when it comes to doing real work, they spend most of their time doing a lot of aerial reconnaissance, keeping an eye on the ocean around the island looking for ships, and sometimes they fly out over human lands and check things out for us when we can’t get a good enough image using satellites or a field agent can’t get close enough to get good ground-based intelligence. The fire dragons are what you might call the army. They’re very aggressive and love to fight, so if there’s any fighting that has to be done, they do it. They’re also the claws of the council. If the council has to intervene in a matter or arrest a dragon for crimes, it’s the fires they send to apprehend the perpetrator. They’re like the military and the police rolled up into one. The chromatics don’t really do much of anything,” he snorted. “They spend almost all their time studying magic, and they don’t really contribute anything to the island. I mean, at least the fires *do* something, but the chromatics don’t do *anything*.”

“Almost like a caste system,” she mused.

“We do what we’re good at,” he shrugged. “Earths farm, build things, and play with human technology. Waters farm and fish. Skies fly, fires fight, chromatics, well, they read. That’s draconic society boiled down to stock.”

“That does make it easier to remember. Do the other types like each other?”

“There are some frictions, but nowhere near what they have for the earth dragons,” he replied. “About everyone thinks the chromatics are snobs, for example. Fire dragons only really get along with their own, because their idea of recreation is to beat each other over the heads with their tails,” he snorted, which made her giggle “The fires love to watch human sports on TV, especially football, like totally obsessed with it. They once tried to organize a football league of fires and adopt the rules for dragons, but...it didn’t go well. The football field burned for days,” he mused, which made Jenny laugh. “The fastest way to get on the good side of a sky dragon is to complement them on their coloration. They can change it at will, like a chameleon, so it says you like the work they put in to look attractive. They’re rather vain. Water dragons are the most laid back of all the dragons, just letting things flow by, and it takes something truly incredible to make a water dragon lose his temper. And as you’ve seen, earth dragons have a love for socializing and conversation, but at our hearts we’re creatures of the land. We farm, we build, we endlessly tinker to try to improve things. There’s not a day that goes by that sire doesn’t go up the slope and look down over his tracts and try to come up with a way to make them more efficient. And he’s been doing that for a good hundred years,” he chuckled.

“What about chromatics? Do they have any little quirks I should know?”

“Never, *ever*, even *pretend* that you believe you’re as good as they are,” he said with deadly seriousness. “Approaching a chromatic as an equal will earn you that chromatic’s eternal and undying hatred. They are the vainest, most conceited, stuck-up, overbearing, obnoxious, and arrogant living beings on the face of this earth, and I’m not exaggerating in the slightest. They’re also extremely petty, and will take revenge over the slightest insult, either real or imagined. The chromatic on the council will be forced to treat you with respect because you’re a guest, and you’ll see the strain of it on his face and in his voice every time he has to be nice to you. If you forced him to give you a complement, he might spontaneously combust right there on the aerie,” he said, which made her laugh again.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. “Alright, so, tell me about a day in the life of Joe Dragon when he’s not a farmer,” she urged. “Just a typical day on the island. What’s life like here? You know, just *life*.”

“Well, I’ve always had something of a unique job, but I’ll tell you what it’s like for me,” he told her as she sat down. He spent over an hour describing just another day to her, from waking up to helping Keth with a few chores before work, then heading to work and spending his day either searching the web or news for hints that humans knew about dragons to preparing for missions out in the human world. He then expanded it by telling her about the dragons that did the monitoring, then telling her about the evening gathering of the twelve elders of the village every day so they could discuss the day and spread any news of importance. He told her about the regular visits from Shii’s pod of dragons, how the hatchlings played together on the beach, how the water hatchlings taught the earth hatchlings how to swim, and made Keth’s family the best swimmers that weren’t water dragons on the island.

“For me, it’s all about the job,” he told her. “I really enjoyed being a field agent, because I got to see new things, investigate possible new technologies and ideas we could adapt for use here on Draconia, and of course, for the last six years I’ve had to dance around you guys,” he smiled, nudging her with the side of his head. “You humans have that saying, married to your job. In a way, I’m married to the intelligence department. It’s all I ever wanted to do. Even now that I’ve been exposed and removed from field work, I still look forward to going to work just to *be there*. That, and I have the feeling that they’ll put me in charge of training new field agents, since I’ve been out there and I have personal experience. After all, now I’ll have plenty of time,” he chuckled ruefully. “What about you? How long have you been married?”

“Eight years,” she replied. “Greg doesn’t entirely understand my job since it’s so classified that I can’t even tell *him* about half of what I do, but he’s very giving in his support for me. He’s a good man and a wonderful father for Davie, and I love him very much.”

“Was being a spy what you wanted out of life?”

“I’m not a spy, I’m counter-intelligence,” she smiled. “I *hunt* spies.”

“How did you end up there?”

“The same way most of the others did, at least sort of. Most of the guys are ex-SEALs, ex-Rangers, you know, elite special forces. I got there through the Marines. I was a computer specialist in the Marines, where my main job was either conducting or defending against cyber warfare,” she told him. “They offered me the job on the Hunter team while I was in because of those skills. Well, technically, I’m *still* in. I was never discharged, and my time in the Hunters counts towards my enlistment where retirement’s concerned. They had to train me in the small unit tactics they use, but since I’m a Marine, they don’t think I’m a fifth wheel. I’m one of the computer specialists on the team, but I can still shoot a gun.”

“I’ve seen you do it,” he chuckle.

“Anyway, I’ve spent the last six years of my life chasing *you* around,” she told him, nudging him on the jaw with her hand. “There were some times when I wanted to hang you from a yardarm by your toenails and lower you into a vat of acid.”

“Then I was doing my job,” he chuckled, then he looked up at the clock on his TV. “It’s about time for you to start getting ready,” he told her. “By the time you get dressed and we walk up there, it’ll be just about time.”

“Alright,” she said, climbing up onto her feet. “Where can I change?”

“Anywhere you feel comfortable,” he replied. “I’ll wait here for you.”

She looked rather smart when she emerged from his sleeping den wearing a sober gray pantsuit with a white blouse and tack tie under the blazer. She reached down and adjusted one of her low heels, then pushed her bangs out of her eyes and regarded him. “So, do I pass the test?”

“You could show up naked and they’d never really know the difference,” he chuckled. “But you do look rather impressive.”

“I’m glad I brought that sleeping bag now,” she said, looking back at his sleeping den. “You sleep on a pile of dirt!”

“I’m an earth drake, silly,” he told her with a chuckle. He came over and laid down, putting his head on the floor. “Now up with you, so I can throw you off the ramps halfway up.”

“I’m gonna be watching you now,” she replied teasingly as she put her heeled foot on his shoulder, then swung her leg over and settled herself on the base of his neck.

He came up out of his burrow and turned for the ramps that would take them up the mountains, and again, Jenny did nothing but look around, looked up, studying, watching everything. Other earth drakes, having heard of Jenny through the rumor mill, had gathered at the edges of Keth’s farm, and they all but followed them from a discreet distance as Kell made his way to the first ramp, pointing and whispering. The sky too got populated as sky dragons drifted down and looked at the human, then zipped back up into the air. Even a single chromatic did a lazy pass at low level, his scillinting eyes locked on the human, then he turned back towards the mountains and the thermals that would let him regain altitude more easily.

“I’m suddenly very popular,” Jenny mused.

“The rumors have hit the general population,” he replied absently as he put his foot on the base of the ramp. “And you’re the first human they’ve ever seen. Of course they’re curious.”

They curled around the base of the mountain for a while, then switched to another ramp that turned back the way they came, then reached the landing for the intelligence building, which Jenny didn’t miss. “That’s the only *real* building I’ve seen. What’s in it?”

“The intelligence department,” he answered honestly. “We decided to build walls and everything so rain couldn’t damage our equipment.”

“Too bad I can’t go in there.”

“I could take you, but you’d be a little disappointed. And you’d cause a riot,” he chuckled. “It’s just a few big rooms where earth drakes either watch TV or surf the internet, searching for any indication that humans know about us. But now they’re seeing what the humans say now that they *do*.”

“There has to be more than that.”

“Of course there is,” he murmured, which made her laugh and pat his neck.

Everything wasn’t all smooth, however. About where he’d switch to another ramp, a fairly large red wyrm landed heavily just in front of them, making the ramp shake, blocking access to the ramps. He snapped his wings back aggressively and narrowed his glowing red eyes. “They *did* bring a human here,” he growled. “How could they!”

“Move,” Kell said in a steady and dangerous voice. “Now.”

“Don’t order me about, you filthy grounder!” the red barked, smoke billowing out of his nostrils. He flinched, however, when Kell quickly turned sideways, the spikes on his tail extending out nearly a foot and spreading wider to ready them to be launched, and cocked his tail back threateningly. “You wouldn’t *dare*!”

“I’ll pin you to the mountainside if you don’t get out of my way, ashtongue,” Kell hissed.

The fire dragon growled menacingly, head low and wings tight against his sides to protect them. But when Kell shivered his tail, the fire flinched again, then turned and launched himself off the edge of the ramp.

“What was all that about?” Jenny asked, a bit quaveringly, from behind his head.

“He took issue that the council brought a human here,” Kell replied shortly, retracting his spikes and pulling them back into a resting position.

“And you scared him off?”

“I told you, earth drakes have a very nasty reputation,” he told her with a dark chuckle. “And we don’t threaten or grandstand. I told him I’d spike him if he didn’t move, and he knew I meant every word.”

“But he was all the way over there.”

Kell relaxed a single spike, then turned and whipped his tail to the side. There was a crimson streak across the platform, then the spike drove almost halfway into the side of the volcano with an audible *thok*.

“We have a long reach,” he said dryly as Jenny gawked at the spike embedded in the mountainside.

“Wow!” she gasped, then she laughed. “Who needs a breath weapon!”

“And that’s why the other dragons don’t mess with us,” he said simply as he started up the last ramp leading to the aerie. “Even a juvenile earth dragon can kill the largest fire wurm if he has good aim. I may be small, but these are the equalizer,” he told her, bringing his tail around and shaking the tip ostentatiously.

“How far can you shoot them? Do they grow back?”

“About a hundred yards for me, and yes, they grow back,” he replied. “I’ll grow a new spike to replace that one in a few hours, since I only lost one. And we don’t shoot them. We use our tails like a catapult and launch them. It’s a practiced skill.”

“That’s one hell of a catapult,” she said, looking back as they passed the embedded spike.

“Gotta love physics,” he mused.

“That smoke I saw means that fires breathe fire?”

“Naturally,” he answered.

“What do sky dragons breathe?”

“Lightning,” he replied. “But they can also breathe out a cloud of water vapor that looks like a cloud if they want to hide themselves. Water dragons breathe a jet of pure water, but the way more dangerous way they do it is as steam.”

“Steam?”

“Steam. And don’t discount it. It’s a jet of pressurized steam hot enough to melt lead, and it’ll scour the flesh off your bones if you take the full force of it. Not even an earth drake hide can stand up to it, and we can take a full blast of fire from a fire dragon and just shrug it off like it was rain. Water dragons have the most dangerous breath weapon of them all.”

“What do chromatics breathe?”

“Energy,” he replied. “They call it pure magic, but it’s more like a cone of concentrated radiation.”

“Huh. Well, the old myth about dragons breathing fire is partially true,” she mused.

“All that fire in them cooks their brains and makes them stupid, some of us think,” Kell grunted, which made her laugh.

The confrontation with the fire wyrm must have gotten back to the council, for two sky drakes darted down and took up positions behind and to each side of Kell as he ambled his way up the curving final ramp that led to Council Aerie. Jenny kept glancing back at them, he could tell from the way she kept moving on his neck. Their presence kept them from talking, for some odd reason, so it was with silence that he saw Council Aerie slowly rotate into view as he ambled up the curving ramp. “There it is,” he told her quietly. “We’ll wait on the edge until they call you up. Until they do, we just wait quietly.”

“Okay,” she said, then she took a deep, cleansing breath.

“Just relax. They won’t hurt you. But remember what I told you,” he said seriously.

“I will.”

When Kell brought her up to the landing of the aerie, all nine council members turned and looked at them. He leaned way down on his forelegs and allowed Jenny to climb down, then he sat on his haunches and curled his tail almost protectively around her, thumping the flattened tip against the stone floor absently.

“You are early, Kell,” Anthra called.

“It’s a long walk, esteemed council member, and I wasn’t sure how long it would take for a human,” he replied. “Better early than late.”

“You let her ride you like a common beast of burden,” the fire drake snorted disdainfully.

Before Kell could respond, Geon cut in. “It’s an even longer walk for a human, cousin,” he said urbanely. “That Kell would carry her was simply showing good manners and hospitality, as is only proper. Besides, should she have to walk it herself, she would have been exhausted by the time she got here, and that would be quite rude of us.”

“We should have offered a sky drake to carry her,” the water wyrm noted.

“Carry a *human*? You would never have found a volunteer!” the sky drake retorted indignantly.

“At least it shows that the earth dragons understand the responsibilities of hospitality,” Anthra noted lightly.

“Being beasts of burden suits you, grounder!” the sky wyrm shot back.

“Order!” the chromatic barked sharply, and it was a good thing he intervened, else Geon and Anthra would have charged across the aerie and filled that sky wyrm with so many holes he’d look like a pasta colander. Being called a grounder was an insult, and for a *council member* to throw it in open council, well, that was almost unheard of.

“What’s going on?” Jenny whispered as the dragons started arguing despite the chromatic’s attempts to restore order.

“The sky wyrm almost got his hide perforated,” Kell replied in a low tone. “He called the earth wyrm a grounder. It’s a very big insult to an earth dragon.”

“What started it?”

“Me carrying you,” he replied. “It seems a couple of them thought it was below my dignity.”

“I’d have passed out halfway up the mountain if you hadn’t,” she replied.

“They don’t understand that,” he nodded.

“Are they always like this?”

“Some days they’re worse,” he answered honestly with a sigh, which made her grin like a little kid.

After the shouting died down, the chromatic sat on his haunches and looked back over at Kell and Jenny. “If you would forgive us,” he said in perfect English. “But council for us is somewhat rough and tumble. We speak freely and speak our minds, and it often leads to such...outbursts. If you would stand forth, honored guest, we would most eagerly wish to discuss with you matters of great importance.”

“Go ahead, I’ll be right here,” he whispered, patting her on the shoulder with his forepaw. “Remember.”

She nodded, tugged on the tail of her blazer, then started into the circle of podiums holding the nine dragons of the council. She stepped into the gold circle in the middle, then, unsure of what else to do, she snapped to attention like a Marine, then bowed at the waist like a Japanese businessman. “My name is Lieutenant Jenny Edwards, uh, esteemed council members,” she began. “I’m a member of the Hunters, a special division of the National Security Agency of the United States, tasked to protect

American interests against computer criminals and cyber terrorism. Up until yesterday, I was one of the people who were actively hunting your field agents, because their actions were perceived as a threat by my government. And now I'm here, though I'm not entirely sure why I was picked."

"Kell picked you, honored guest," Anthra replied gently in perfect English, which made Jenny turn towards her. "He felt that you would be best suited for this grave task, for your bravery in the face of the unknown and your status as a ranking member of the American government. Your words would be heard by the right ears when you return."

"That we wished to speak to you is not much of a stretch," the fire wyrm declared haughtily, which caused her to turn again. "With the bumbling of the earth dragons causing a field mission to go awry that led to our secret being discovered, now we must at least introduce ourselves discreetly to the humans, which we will do through you and your government."

Anthra narrowed her eyes at the fire wyrm, but said nothing.

"The greatest thing we wish to tell the outside world, honored guest, is that we mean you no harm," the water wyrm said sedately. "In fact, what we wish for is isolation. We only watch the human world to ensure they don't know of us. But now that they do, we want them to know that we will leave them alone if they leave us alone."

"It's not that we wish to be rude neighbors, but our past history with the humans has been very contentious and violent," Geon told her. "We withdrew from human lands to protect both sides and avert a war that would have been horrendous and ghastly. We've lived apart from humans for a little over one thousand of your years, and we have come to decide that continued separation is best for both sides. There is a great deal of fear and uncertainty on both sides, dear guest. The earth dragons know much of humans and their society, but the other dragons *don't*. So, we wish to maintain the situation as it is, with us being on our island and the humans free to rule the rest of the world."

“It would please us greatly if you would explain this to your government, and allow them to spread our words to the others,” the water drake continued. “We are willing to *talk*, but it must be as it is here and now, done carefully and in a controlled situation, and only when it is absolutely needful.”

“You have spent the day with earth drake Kell of the intelligence division, honored guest. What did he show you?” Geon asked.

“He took me to his family’s farm and let me meet his parents,” she replied, looking up at the earth drake. “We walked around his family farm, and he took me to a store in his village, though he didn’t let me stay long. The shopkeeper was afraid of me,” she said with a rueful chuckle.

“And what did you learn of us while you talked with his family?”

“That I see a lot of similarities,” she answered honestly. “Kell’s sire, Keth, he reminded me of my own grandfather in some ways. He’s very wise.”

“But there are also differences. Did they frighten you?”

“At first,” she replied honestly. “But as I learned more, they didn’t seem quite so frightening.”

“And what would you find frightening about us?” the fire wyrm said in a booming voice, stamping his feet on his dais. Jenny turned to face him, and she didn’t flinch or recoil when the wyrm’s head came down quickly, stopping not five feet from her.

“Well, you’re much bigger than we are, for one,” she replied without showing fear. “And you look *really* different, and a little scary. Forgive the observation, but since you look like big, scary animals to us, my initial concept was that you wouldn’t have, well, a *society*. Not one I’d recognize. I thought it would be completely alien to me, something I wouldn’t even imagine might exist. But when I looked down from the ramps for the first time and saw farms, I was amazed. I think that was when it hit me that I was being too hasty about drawing conclusions.”

“A wise young biped,” the sky drake nodded in complement. “What did he tell you of our culture?”

“About anything I asked about,” she answered, turning to the drake. “He showed me what an average dragon does during his day, and he described the five orders of dragons, and what each one does here on the island.”

“Done from the perspective of an earth dragon, and their many prejudices against the rest of us,” the chromatic snorted.

“Well, he *is* an earth dragon, so what point of view do you expect him to have?” she countered, which made Anthra grin. “What I’ve seen here on the island is while we look very different, we actually organize our societies in much the same way. There’s some commonality here, and it might be the way we can talk with each other. When I was walking around Keth’s farm, I realized that if I just replaced the dragons I saw with people, and replaced the burrow with a farmhouse, I could be walking through farmland in Iowa. Keth’s concerns and cares and worries are no different from the farmer in Iowa, since they do the same thing, raise crops. And if you’d have brought a farmer from Iowa here instead of me, he’d probably still be down on the farm talking with Keth, comparing farming techniques and learning from each other.” She pointed at Kell. “I understand Kell because, in a way, we both have the same job. We both work with computers, and that gives us a lot of common ground we could use to build a relationship. His job was to invade our computer networks, and our job was to stop him, but it was still basically the same thing. I’m sure there are many other points of commonality between us and you we could use to get to know each other better. And as Keth said to me, once the mystery is solved, the fear of the mystery will fade.”

“And his personality doesn’t scare you?” Geon asked.

“Not at all,” she replied. “Though he *looks* different, he *acts* in a way I completely understand.”

“Well, Kell is a field agent, trained to understand human society and be able to socialize effectively with humans. Did you feel the same way about Keth?”

“Not at first. He seemed...*different*. I wasn't sure what to expect. But after talking with him a while, I came to like him. Like him a *lot*. He's very smart, and I learned a great deal about more than just dragons after talking to him.”

“But, her point is a good one. There *are* some common points between us and the humans we can use to cultivate a relationship,” the water wyrm murmured, shivering his wings. “After seeing our island after a day, what do you think of it, and of us?” he asked gently, leaning his head down.

“I think that what I've seen isn't even scratching the surface of what's really here,” she answered, which made the water wyrm nod sagely. “But from what I've seen so far, I'm encouraged that we can find a way to talk to each other.”

“Do we seem to be a threat to your people?” the chromatic asked.

“One on one, maybe,” she replied honestly. “You're *very* intimidating face to face. But you wouldn't really scare a guy in a tank. Besides, I haven't seen all that many dragons. There are *way* more of us than there are of you.”

Anthra nodded. “And thus why we seek to talk first,” she said honestly. “We are actually a very small nation compared to your America, or China.”

“The fact that you guys can do magic might frighten some people, though,” she noted. “Some human religions consider magic to be evil.”

“Magic is not *evil*,” the chromatic snorted. “It is a proud and noble tradition practiced since the dawn of civilization. It was even practiced by the humans. It might still be, we are not entirely sure.”

“If they do, they don't tell anyone,” Jenny replied. “I've really only seen one instance of magic, when a water dragon dried me off when I first

got here, but it would be enough to scare the pants off some people.”

“What do *you* think of magic, Lieutenant Edwards?” the water drake asked.

“I think I don’t know enough about it to form any kind of real opinion,” she replied immediately.

“But it doesn’t frighten you?”

“Not really, no,” she shook her head. “What it does do is make me *wildly* curious. I have no idea what it can do, and though we don’t believe in magic, there’s a little kid in me that used to daydream about magic and amazing and fantastic things.”

“Your religious beliefs do not scorn magic, as you said some human beliefs do?”

“Well, I guess they’re *supposed* to, if I were to take them literally,” she said after a moment. “But I’m not *that* religious.”

“And other humans might accept the idea of magic despite their religion?”

“Probably. There’s a bunch that would accept the idea of it no matter what.” She paused a moment. “Exactly what *is* magic?” she asked. “I saw what the water dragon did, but Kell said that it can do a lot more.”

“Magic is the harnessing of the energy of Gaia to perform tasks and services otherwise impossible to do,” the chromatic replied, almost like a professor.

“What is Gaia?”

“She is the earth, honored guest,” he replied. “The earth is a living thing, and she will grant us her power if we ask it of her the right way. It is both a skill and a natural talent. Only those with the talent may draw forth the magic, but *anyone* can learn of magic and understand the *skills* required to harness and channel those energies.”

“What exactly can it do?”

“That depends on the natural aptitude of the user,” he replied. “Among the dragons, each have certain natural talents concerning magic. Sky dragons excel in magic that enacts change or confuses the senses, and a group of sky dragons together can influence the weather. Fire dragons excel in the use of magic as a weapon, raining destruction down up on their foes. Water dragons excel in the use of magic as protection, invoking its power to protect them from harm. Earth dragons have no magic,” he declared a bit haughtily, looking right at Kell with a slightly malevolent look. “We chromatics are highly attuned to magic, and can use it in a variety of ways unreachable by the others.”

“So, that trick with the water was some kind of protection?”

“There are other natural abilities dragons have concerning magic that depend on their species,” he told her. “All water dragons can control water itself in a minor way, as fire dragons can control fire, and sky dragons can control the wind. And any dragon can study the ways of magic and learn to use it in ways not dependent on their species, expanding beyond their racial abilities, up to the limits of their natural talent.”

“Oh, okay. I understand,” she nodded.

“I am very glad that you do, honored guest,” the chromatic nodded. “Magic is, in its own way, who we are. If you cannot understand the magic, then it will be very hard to understand us.”

“Well, Kell didn’t tell me that, but then again, I didn’t ask,” she mused. “When he told me he had no magic, I was a little reluctant to ask him more questions. I thought it might offend him.”

“Earth dragons are different than the rest of the dragons,” the fire wyrm sniffed. “Full of strange ideas and of a contrary disposition. They are very *un-dragon* in some of their exotic notions.”

“It’s merely a different point of view, Hirrag,” Anthra murmured. “Since we don’t have to study magic, it gives us time and opportunity to

examine other things. And the electric lights and TV that we installed in your den are a couple of those exotic notions you decry in public, yet enjoy in private.”

The fire wyrm glared over Jenny’s head at Anthra.

Jenny looked about to say something, but her glance back at him told him that she was taking his warning not to show bias seriously. “Now, honored guest, tell us truly. How will your people and your government react to knowing of us?” the chromatic asked intently.

“The people, I can’t really tell you,” she replied. “Not precisely. Different people are going to react different ways, I guess. It’s all going to be about how you’re *presented* to them, and that’ll depend on the media. The media has a lot of influence over the opinions of the average citizen. If they paint you as friendly, most people will accept it. But if they paint you as dangerous enemies, that’s how they’ll see you. So, as far as Joe Everyman is concerned, controlling how the media presents the idea of the dragons is going to be critical as to how the people accept the idea of you. As far as my government goes, I have a pretty good idea. First they’ll act like you’re some kind of enemy, because they know absolutely nothing about you and it’s pretty evident you’ve been spying on us for a long time. But then, after you and them talk a little, they’ll calm down a whole lot. Once they realize what I’ve seen here, that the dragons really have no desire to conquer anything past your island, they’ll realize you’re not a threat, at least in a military manner. They won’t be too happy if the earth dragons keep sneaking around hacking our top secret computer networks, but that’s like any other country spying on its neighbors, I guess. China does it, Russia does it, they all do it. Even my country does it, they just won’t admit it.”

“Will your report to them assuage some of that initial hostility?”

“Some of it, I think so,” she nodded. “It’ll make them more curious than afraid, but that won’t stop them from drawing up potential battle plans for fighting a horde of dragons.”

Anthra and Geon laughed. “Horde of dragons,” Geon repeated with amusement. “I know you meant it with all seriousness, honored guest, but the very idea of it is highly amusing to us earth dragons.”

“Us as well,” the water wyrm smiled. “The only time we form a horde is when the currents bring the sardine schools back each year.”

“That’s alright, I don’t mind,” Jenny assured them. “The one thing they will do no matter if they like you or not is try to find this island,” she told them. “They won’t be able to stand not knowing where you are, or how you’ve gone so long without anyone finding this place.”

“We can handle that,” the chromatic told her. “They haven’t found us yet, and our magic will ensure they never will.” He smiled down at her. “And I’m sure you’ve discerned at least a rough idea of where we are,” he noted lightly.

“Somewhere in the Pacific, if I don’t miss my guess. Probably south Pacific.”

“We will neither confirm nor deny that observation,” Anthra said with a slight smile.

“The time is growing late, and I think we have explored the intent of our meeting sufficiently,” the chromatic decided, looking towards the sun, which was heading for the horizon. “You may stay until morning if it is your desire, honored guest, or return to human lands at any time you wish. Either way, Earth Drake Kell has been commanded to return you to the human lands, as we have promised you.”

“I’ll stay for a little while, I’d like to ask Kell more questions about things that I don’t think the council would find very interesting,” she replied, looking over at him. “Shop talk.”

“Then by all means, enjoy your time here, honored guest,” Geon told her warmly. “You may leave any time you wish up until sunrise.”

“I declare this council to be concluded. Is there objection?” the chromatic called. When there was silence, he slapped his long, feathery tail on the floor. “Then we are concluded, and will meet again at noon tomorrow. Gaia go with you, council members.”

The nine dragons turned and stepped down off their platforms and then scattered into the air, launching off the edges of the platforms. Geon and Anthra, however, ambled up behind Jenny as she walked back towards Kell and slowed down to match her pace, and Anthra lowered her head down close to Jenny’s left. “Kell prepared you well, honored guest,” she said lightly. “You handled yourself with dignity and courage. That will even impress the chromatic.”

“He told me what to expect. He was pretty much well right about everything,” she replied.

“We’re not quite as majestic as you expected, are we?” Geon asked. “Bickering like hatchlings right in front of you.”

“That surprised me a little, but he warned me about that, too,” she answered.

“Kell is a very clever young drake, much smarter than his short years suggests,” Anthra said, smiling towards him. “But his years have yet to teach him wisdom or restraint. Those can only come with time and experience.”

“Do you require anything for the rest of your stay, honored guest? Is Kell’s burrow sufficient for you?” Geon asked.

“It’s fine, esteemed council member,” she replied. “Outside of having nowhere to sit, it’s just fine.”

“We’ll have to attend that matter. Get some human furniture in case we invite another human here,” Geon noted. “Perhaps build a more suitable dwelling for a biped so they feel more comfortable.”

“It’s a good suggestion, cousin,” Anthra nodded. “I’ll have the building department look into a suitable location. Somewhere close to the ramps. The field agents will know what to put in it to make a human comfortable. And maybe some conveyance so they don’t have to rely on us. Perhaps a golf cart,” she mused.

Kell lowered down on his front legs when Jenny reached him, and she put her foot on his elbow and upper foreleg and pulled herself up and onto the base of his neck. “You show much consideration to carry her, my drakeling,” Anthra said to him.

“It’s not a bother, esteemed council member,” he said dismissively. “I’d be a poor host if I made her walk all the way back down. For a human, that is a *very* long and exhausting walk.”

“You could always glide down for me,” Jenny said hopefully.

“Absolutely not,” Kell said instantly. “If you fell off, there’s no way I could possibly catch you, and I won’t risk your life that way.”

“I’m not going to fall off,” she protested.

“You have nothing to grab hold of and my neck’s too thick for you to lock your legs around,” he stated bluntly. “The only reason you haven’t had any trouble is because I’ve been careful not to move in a way that might throw you off, and I don’t have half that much control over it when I’m gliding.”

“He’s right, Lieutenant Edwards,” Anthra said with gentle adamance. “It’s far too much of a risk to your life.”

“Then I seriously need to get a saddle,” she declared, which made Anthra and Geon both laugh.

“Oh, they’d *love* to see me wearing a saddle,” Kell grunted darkly. “I wouldn’t be able to grow my spikes back fast enough.”

Jenny patted him on the neck. “But I’m a guest. Aren’t you supposed to go out of your way for me?”

“It’s a long way to the ground from here, Jenny.”

She laughed brightly. “That’s the Stone I know and love,” she said teasingly, patting his neck.

Anthra and Geon opted to launch off the side and glide back down to the lowlands, leaving Kell alone with Jenny as they started the hourlong trek back down to the burrow. They discussed what the council had to say while he carried her, even as curious dragons swooped in close to get a look at Jenny or hovered a few hundred feet off, as was the case of several sky dragons. They discussed everything they’d talked about and a few things that the council hadn’t asked her that Kell had expected, like what kind of action they might take about field agents that continued to go out. They then moved on to more idle chatter, talking the shop Jenny referenced up on the aerie, talking about computers and programs. Jenny knew a little about his preferences and style in analyzing the traces he left behind when he hacked networks, and they got into quite a debate about the exploits in the newest version of Javascript when he got back to the ground. She also probed his general knowledge of computers and programming, and realized quickly that he was as educated as she was despite not having a degree from Northwestern.

“I’m surprised you’re basing off the octocores,” she said as they reached the knoll holding his burrow. “They’ve only been out for two months, and yet you said they’re the baseline for your in-house chipsets. You couldn’t set that up in two months. How did you pull that off?”

“I stole them,” he admitted. “A small box of them, actually, when they were still in prototype stage, so we’ve had more time to baseline off them. AMD never admitted that some corporate spy stole some of their cutting edge prototypes.”

“They told *us* when it happened,” she noted. “We thought China did it, like when they hacked Apple and stole the source of their Mac OS. We’ve been on the lookout for pirated copies of the chips.”

“There won’t be any,” he told her lightly as he stopped at the entrance and leaned down so she dismount. “We don’t use anything we steal for anyone but ourselves, so you can assure AMD their patents and profits are safe.”

“Sounds like you did a lot more out there than just hack government networks,” she chuckled as she climbed down.

“I was a busy little drake,” he said with aplomb.

Jenny changed in his sleeping den as he poured out more water for her. “You must have quite a chip factory to be able to manufacture CPUs,” she reasoned.

“It’s mostly automated, and can’t make more than a couple dozen a week,” he replied. “And most of the equipment in there we stole,” he admitted with a slight smile. “Our mission when they started the intelligence division and we started adopting human technology was to be as self-sufficient as possible with the technology we adopt. We build everything here on the island, for obvious reasons. It’s not like we can import them.”

“Actually, that might be useful to you, and you could settle some fears out in the world if you opened yourself up to some trade deals,” she mused.

“What would we trade, Jenny? All we have here is food, at least as far as a human would care.”

“No natural resources? Coal? Gold?”

“Not that we’d trade,” he replied. “Besides, this is a volcanic island, Jenny. Unless the volcano spews it out or the water dragons can salvage it from shipwrecks they find, we don’t have it. Hell, most of the metal and steel we use in our factory buildings came from shipwrecks the water dragons salvaged. We have plenty of food and volcanic rock types, but coal, iron deposits, and so on, zippo. But if there was a market for lava rocks, we’d have that cornered.”

“Dunno, tourism, maybe. Some people would pay a fortune to be where I am now, walking around with dragons,” she chuckled.

“Please,” he snorted.

“Well, water dragons could make a killing salvaging gold coins from old shipwrecks,” she mused. “The law of the ocean is you find it, you own it.”

“They won’t approach that close to the continental shelves, mainly because of the sonar nets they have set up, and that’s where most of those kinds of shipwrecks are,” he told her. “Not that they make the kind of noise the sonar nets look for, but we take no chances. The same reason the sky dragons won’t overfly human territory without explicit permission, the water dragons stay only to the open deep ocean and some uninhabited islands nearby. The wrecks they find are in deep ocean.”

“They can dive that deep?”

“All the way to the bottom of the Marianas trench,” he nodded as she sat on her sleeping back again. “Water dragons are completely unaffected by water pressure. They can even dive and ascend rapidly without killing themselves.”

“So we *are* in the Pacific,” she smiled.

“I won’t confirm or deny,” he replied lightly, putting the bucket down beside her.

“Hmm. I have a strange question.”

“What?”

“If we asked *very* nicely and made some serious concessions about security, would the water dragons be interested in helping us with some underwater projects?”

“Well, that would depend, I guess,” he replied, sitting beside her. “I guess a water dragon could do things no human diver could do.”

“I could imagine the oceanographers having a fistfight over who got to talk to one of them first,” she laughed. “They probably know way more about the ocean bottom than we do.”

“They do,” he replied with a nod. “Sella’s told me about some things down there even I don’t believe.”

“She’s been down there?”

“It’s a dangerous place, but she’s old enough,” he replied. “She has her job that keeps her from going out too far, but just about every water dragon goes on expeditions out to the deep water a few times a year. They hunt giant squid and sperm whales and some other things down there, and they’re always on the lookout for shipwrecks they can salvage for the steel. She once brought back a starfish that was about twenty feet across. She still has it. It died coming up due to the pressure change, but it didn’t explode, so she dried it out, had us encase it in plastic, and now it sits in her sleeping den. Underwater, of course,” he chuckled.

“Where did you get the plastic?”

“As many water bottles are floating in the ocean? It’s not hard,” he snorted. “We scoop it up from the water and recycle it. There’s a massive trash float out in the ocean that’s mostly plastic bottles and such, and the water dragons go out there when we’re low on plastic and harvest it. A few days of work nets several tons of plastic you humans just toss away, and that lasts us for a few months.”

“Well, glad *someone’s* both cleaning it up and using it,” she mused. “How do they see down there? Magic?”

“Sonar,” he replied. “They’re like dolphins that way, they have a sonar-like ability, but it only works in the water. It’s as sharp and detailed as sight is. *Nothing* can sneak up on a water dragon in the water.”

“Neat.”

“Water dragons are very adapted to their element,” he chuckled. “Just like we are.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well, as you’ve seen, we live underground,” he replied, motioning around at his concrete-lined burrow. “We can dig out anything. Our claws are harder than steel, can tear right through steel for that matter, and we can dig through the basalt and lava rock here on the island without any problems. You saw the rock walls of my parents’ burrow?” he asked, and she nodded. “My burrow’s a little shallower and in an area with deeper soil, so the builders lined my burrow with concrete for me after I dug it out. They didn’t have to, I could have fortified the earthen upper areas myself, but I kinda like the concrete. Our department’s all concrete, and I like my burrow to remind me of work. Anyway, our village council chambers and what you’d consider to be public buildings and infrastructure, it’s all underground, and some of the older farms have tunnels leading to them, like our own farm. Keth has a tunnel just by our main storage chamber that leads from the farm right to the council chambers, because he’s on the council. Our power transformers, power wires, network nodes and splitters and switches and a few control computers, everything, it’s all underground. There’s a village of sorts under our feet that you can’t see, five main galleries holding the council chamber, the water works, the main power substation, an emergency storage silo for food, and the node for this part of the island’s computer network. Add those to drainage tunnels and escape tunnels, several natural lava tubes and natural volcanic-created voids and caverns, as well as quite a few dead-end dummy tunnels meant to confuse and trap invaders, and there’s quite a honeycomb of tunnels under us. All those chambers and most of the tunnels are interconnected, and they’re up under the north slope, going under the volcano. The computer node chamber is right under our farm, so I have easy access. I’m the one that maintains it for the department,” he told her. “We like to leave the ground above as open as possible for our farms, but besides that, we’re a subterranean species of dragon at our core, and if we’re not working the land or building something, we like to be under the ground, far more than

any other dragon,” he explained, looking down at her. “Other dragons just *sleep* in caves and dens, but we *live* under the ground. It’s who we are. We originally came from the caves and tunnels under the earth, and that part of us is still in here, yearning for the dark places and the feel of earth and stone all around us,” he said, patting his chest meaningfully.

“We *are* the earth, Jenny. We are the children of Gaia in a way that the other dragons can’t understand. They respect her and revere her, but she is our mother, and we yearn to be close to her. Earth dragon legend says that all dragons originally came from the earth, came from under the ground, but the open spaces and bounty of the land above brought us out into the sun, and over time, we started diverging, split into the five species as dragons explored the world and found value in other aspects of the world Gaia provided to us. But while we earth dragons reveled in the bounty that Gaia provided us above ground, found that we had ties to the land the other dragons had lost over time and had a special knack with the plants and animals around us, we could still hear the song of the earth, and didn’t stray far from our mother. Legend says that Gaia granted the other dragons magic when they abandoned the earth to help protect them, since they’d left the cradle of Gaia and her protection. And while she didn’t give us magic, we kept the blessings she granted us to allow us to be one with her. We still have our claws, which can tear through solid steel and give us the ability to climb virtually anything, and our jaws, which can shatter solid rock, and our thick hides that can resist the heat and pressure deep under the ground as well as the breath of a fire dragon, and our tail spikes, which protect us against enemies. According to our legends, the other dragons had those things as well, but when they strayed away from our mother and stopped listening to her song, she granted them other means to protect themselves, Gaia took the blessings of the earth and replaced them with magic.”

“Sounds like quite a legend,” she said. “What about the other dragons? Do they have legends like that?”

“Of course they do,” he smiled. “Each dragon species has a different legend of creation, and most of them think *they* were the first dragons. The sky dragons believe that we originally were all sky dragons, for example,

and that we lived high in the clouds. But the allure of the earth seduced the other species, caused them to put their feet on the ground, and the different aspects of the earth below called to certain dragons, to form the other four species. The fire dragons believe that we came from a giant volcano, and the other species were the weaker dragons who couldn't hold their positions in the caldera. The further away we were driven from the heat of the volcano, the more we changed, until we diverged into the other four species. The water dragons have the most interesting legend. They believe that the dragons have *always* been five different species, and that the water dragons were called up from their original homes on the ocean floor by the coaxing of Gaia to look over, protect, and provide for the other dragons, mainly those incapable of providing for themselves. As to what the chromatics believe, we have no idea. If you think *we're* secretive, you haven't seen the chromatics in action. They won't even tell us their *names*."

"Hmm. Is that why your eyes glow?" she asked. "You said that dragons came from underground, *all* of them. Does that glow light up the caves deep underground?"

He shook his head. "The glow is a reaction to the light, like shining a light in a cat's eyes in the dark. No light, no glow," he told her. "If it were dark, you wouldn't be able to see my eyes. We earth dragons can see in what you'd call a thermographic manner, seeing heat as various colors, like infrared goggles. It's how we move around in the tunnels, down in areas where we haven't installed lights. Since we're a subterranean species by nature, it's more or less natural for us to be able to see down there, where natural light will never reach. Like the other blessings of Gaia, though, our legend says that the other dragons originally had our vision, but over time, the other dragons lost their thermo vision. It doesn't do sky dragons any good high in the clouds, it's no good for water dragons where the water is all the same temperature, and since fire dragons surround themselves with fire and magma, heat vision would burn out their eyes, so they lost it over time," he chuckled. "But we never lost it."

"But you do use lights," she said, looking around.

“We can’t *read* by thermographic vision unless the book generates heat in the form of letters,” he pointed out.

“Oh. Well, if you read a lot, that’s a problem.”

“Some burrows don’t have lights, but sire and mother prefer them. Then again, it’s a little uncomfortable for earth dragons to watch TV when the TV’s the only light source. It monkeys with our thermographic vision in a way that gives us eye strain. As a matter of security, though, the village beneath has lightning but only turns it on when there’s a need to read. The other dragons are afraid to venture into the tunnels because even their magic doesn’t let them see far, but *we* can see *them* from far away.”

She chuckled. “Eye strain in dragons, now I’ve heard everything.”

“It’s not the only reason. Since we’re smaller than the other dragons, we don’t build our tunnels with them in mind. The fire wyrms won’t even fit in our entry tunnels. They’re sized so Anthra, the largest of us, can just *barely* squeeze through. Down there, the claustrophobia gets to them, cause they’re in long tunnels with no side passages that are so small they can’t turn around. They’re effectively helpless until they reach a chamber, so they won’t come down there for any reason. And that’s *exactly* why we built them that way.”

“Clever.”

“Thank you. When they treat you the way they treat us, you take precautions.”

“Hmm,” she mused. “If you came from underground, why do you have wings?”

“We’ve always had wings,” he shrugged. “It’s possible that our legends are wrong, though. I mean, we earth dragons *do* believe in science. It’s entirely possible that the earth dragons *could* fly at some point, but gave up the ability in exchange for becoming subterranean. But, since our wings are handy for gliding, we never lost them,” he told her. “And underground, in natural caverns, being able to glide is a lot more useful than you think.”

Down there everything's in three directions. Sometimes you have to glide over a chasm to reach a different tunnel mouth, and that sure as hell beats climbing down one side and climbing up the other."

"So, why *can* the other dragons fly? They're just as heavy as you are. Hell, they must be even heavier, since the other dragons are bigger than you are."

"Magic," he replied. "Magic negates some of their weight, gives their wings enough lift to pick them up. In the case of the sky dragons, that magic is so powerful it lets them levitate, makes them effectively weightless. Since earth dragons have no magic, there's nothing to counter our weight, so here we are."

"Well, that does explain it," she chuckled. "I really should tell Greg I won't be back until tomorrow," she noted.

"Sure," he said. They went over to his desk, and he again picked her up by her waist and put her on the edge of the desk.

"What time is it in Washington?"

He looked at the clock. "About four in the morning," he replied.

"Hmm, that puts us in the same time zone as Hawaii," she mused, giving him a slight smile.

"That's an awful lot of real estate you're talking about there, Jenny."

"Just getting confirmation," she winked.

"Kell!" Sella called from his entry chamber.

"It's Sella," he told Jenny as she started typing using a single hand, making a Facebook post. "In here!" he warned. Sella ambled in seconds later, and she took notice of Jenny, punching keys on his keyboard as she leaned on one hand over it.

"I thought you'd went home already, honored guest," she said in English. "I'm glad I got a chance to meet you."

“This is Sella, the only water dragon that works in the department,” Kell introduced. “And my oldest and best friend.”

“We’ve been nipping at each other since we were hatched,” she smiled lightly as she came up to the desk. “I thought you might like to have a swim before it gets dark, Kell. Since your guest is still with us, she might enjoy it as well.”

“Well, what do you say, Jenny? Feel like taking a swim?”

“I didn’t bring a bathing suit,” she objected.

“You don’t need one here,” he shrugged. “As you might have noticed, this is a clothing-optional island. Dragons don’t wear clothes, you know.”

“You mean go *naked*?”

“Who’s here to see you that’s going to care?” he asked pointedly.

She looked at him, then burst out in rueful laughter. “Alright, I’ll give you that one, but *I’ll* care,” she told him. “But I have a spare pair of panties and a bra, I guess I can wear those.”

“I’ve always wondered why humans wear clothes,” Sella mused.

“Custom, I guess. Maybe way back when it was to stay warm,” Jenny replied as she went back to the keyboard.

Jenny finished up and posted it. She’d been vague once again; *Meeting over, it was very productive. Will stay for a while to visit with an old friend, got an invite to the beach. Be home this afternoon. Love you, baby.*

“I hope you like the water, honored guest,” Sella grinned as Jenny dropped down to the floor. “Else we water dragons will have nothing to do with you,” she finished airily.

“I love to water ski, so I’m not afraid of the water,” she replied.

“You will be after she’s done with you,” Kell warned.

“Don’t warn them, you’ll ruin my fun!” Sella gasped, thumping him with the flared end of her tail, which had flukes on the sides. Like whales, she flipped her tail up and down for propulsion.

Jenny came out of the burrow with them in a pair of beige panties and a bra, then Sella put her clawed forepaws around her waist, spread her wings, and then launched into the air. Jenny gave a scream of surprise as his friend floated just high enough to clear the shore, then she dropped Jenny unceremoniously into the deep pool by Kell’s knoll. “Sella!” Kell protested as he bounded up to the edge, and saw Jenny broach the surface, whipping her hair over her head, then she shook her fist at Sella.

“I’ll get you for that!” she warned, which made Sella laugh as she turned, folded her wings, then dove into the water about thirty feet from where she’d dropped Jenny. But Jenny gasped when Sella came up under her, quickly finding herself straddling Sella’s neck.

“Sella, no!” Kell barked. “You’ll flay the skin off her!”

“Oh! Oh, that’s right,” she said quickly, turning still. “I totally forgot that your hide isn’t as tough as an earth drake’s, honored guest. Let me sink under you, just be *very* careful. Try not to slide forward.”

Sella submerged again, leaving Jenny treading water in the pool, and Kell dove in from the little cliff at the base of his knoll. “How long have you known each other?” Jenny asked as Sella’s head emerged from the water.

“Since we were hatched,” she replied. “We used to play on that beach right there,” she added, nodding her snout towards the beach behind Keth and Kanna’s burrow. “Me, him, my clutchmates, and his, Gaia keep them,” she sighed.

“What happened?”

“They died in an accident, long ago,” she replied sadly. “I still miss them. They were very dear to me and the pod.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Kell,” she said with honest emotion, patting his head when he reached her.

“It’s why my parents keep me close,” he told her. “I’m the only one of the three of my clutch that lived to adulthood. So they’re maybe a little protective,” he said lightly. “But I indulge them. They’re my parents, after all, and I understand why they do it.”

“We used to play whenever work didn’t keep us away. We teach his family how to swim properly, and show them things that most earth dragons never see,” Sella grinned. “Kell is the best swimmer on Draconia that’s not a water dragon,” she said with a bit of pride. “And he can hold his breath long enough to dive pretty deep, deep enough to see many of the sea’s secrets.”

“I’ve seen him swim, I do no doubt it,” Jenny agreed.

“We almost don’t think of him as an earth dragon,” Sella said, a bit airily. “We think of him as a mud dragon.”

Kell whacked her on the snout with the underside of his tail, which made Jenny explode in laughter, sink down too far, then cough as she almost inhaled a mouthful of water.

Jenny turned out to be a good swimmer. Kell carried her along with him as he dove to the bottom of the deep pool, a natural harbor of sorts in the cove where it was twenty feet down right on the shoreline, and Sella helped her pick at the oysters lining the bottom that her pod cultivated, using her water magic to open the oysters in search for pearls. Jenny actually found one, a pretty large one, and she held onto it as Sella brought a large warm water lobster over from the channel where they liked to stand and feed, watching it scurry over the oysters. Sella showed off maybe a little bit, swimming fast circles around them, using her water magic to carry Jenny along, even let her sit cross-legged on the surface, which surprised her a little bit. Kell then put her on his back and carried her as they swam out of the cove and out into the open water, swimming faster than just about any boat could go, easily keeping up with Sella as she slapped her tail on

the surface and occasionally leaped out of the water like a playful dolphin. They stayed out for about an hour, until the sun was brushing the sea in what was turning out to be a spectacular sunset, then they took her back and sat on the beach with her as they watched the sun go down.

“This place is beautiful,” she said quietly as she leaned against Kell’s flank. He was all but curled up around her, his tail wrapped around, and Sella was half-laying over his wings, her head close to Jenny. “You should build a hotel and charge people ten thousand dollars a day to stay here.”

“That would be far too nervous for us,” Sella chuckled. “But yes, this is a beautiful island. We’ve lived here so long, though, sometimes we don’t stop to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us.”

“That’s about true for anyone anywhere they are,” Jenna replied. “I’m just surprised I’m not still shaking like a leaf. I mean, here I am using a *dragon* as a backrest.”

“One reason why I picked you,” Kell chuckled. “Could you imagine Juarez where you are?”

“He’d have fainted about six hours ago,” Jenny grunted, which made Kell chuckle. “What do you do in the department, Sella?”

“I inspect websites our spider bots flag for possible evidence someone out there knows about us,” she replied. “But since yesterday, my job got *very* hectic. The picture they got of Kell sets off the spider, and it’s all over the internet.”

“I can imagine. You’re famous, Kell.”

“Please,” he snorted, which made Jenny laugh.

“I can guess that my job is going to change now that our secret is out. I’ll most likely be inspecting sites to see *how much* they know about us.”

“You’re all still a complete mystery. All we have is that picture. Me and Wilson are probably the only people that know more than that,” Jenny

replied. “And I doubt the government’s gonna declassify the report I’ll give them anytime soon, so that’s all they will know for a while.”

“What do you intend to say?”

“Everything I’ve seen, heard, and witnessed, as well as my own assumptions and observations,” she replied honestly. “The people that make decisions have to know as much as they can so they don’t make ones based on bad opinions. Kell’s sudden appearance scared the pee out of quite a few government people,” she admitted. “To keep them from acting in fear, I have to make you as *little* of a mystery as I can.”

“Wise,” Sella nodded, looking down at her.

“It’s what Keth said that’s sticking with me,” Jenny said. “That a mystery isn’t quite so scary once you solve it. So I have to bring the solution to the mystery to the government to keep them from doing anything stupid.”

“Stupidity isn’t restricted just to your people,” Sella told her. “I’m sure you’ve seen how they treat Kell, and the other earth dragons.”

“I’m starting to get a pretty good idea of it,” she grunted with a nod.

“It’s a sad thing,” Sella sighed. “But, to be fair, the earth dragons don’t help the problem. They’re so secretive and defensive,” she said, nudging Kell. “If they were a little more open, maybe some dialogue could be opened, and the others would understand the earth dragons a little better.”

“They don’t like us, so we’re not about to go around and tell them everything,” he replied immediately.

“But if you *talked* to them, maybe they wouldn’t dislike you so much.”

“We’ve tried that, Sella, and it didn’t work. As far as they’re concerned, whenever we try to open that dialogue, all they do is marvel over the talking livestock,” he grunted.

“I think that you only fail at something when you stop trying,” she pointed out.

“Then we failed,” he growled. “When you beat your head against a rock long enough, Sella, either you break the rock, or the rock breaks you. We stopped beating our heads against that rock long ago, to save our own skulls.”

“Well, we’ll leave that for another time, I’m sure we’re boring our guest,” Sella said, patting Kell on the belly.

“I’m thinking more along the lines of that sleeping bag,” Jenny said with a yawn. “I didn’t realize how tired I was until we sat down.”

“You’ve been awake for over twenty-four hours,” Kell told her. “I think the adrenalin has faded.”

She laughed. “That’s no lie,” she agreed.

“Then I’ll let Kell take you to get some sleep, Jenny,” Sella said, turning her head down and nuzzling Kell fondly. “See you in the morning, friend.”

“Rest well, friend,” Kell returned.

“It was nice to meet you, Jenny Edwards,” Sella declared, reaching down with a forepaw and holding out a taloned finger to her. Jenny chuckled and took hold of her talon and then shook it, then Sella turned and headed back for the water.

“I like her,” Jenny declared as she hopped over a wave, then submerged.

“I’ve known her almost my whole life,” he said with gentle warmth.

“So, are you and her...?”

He shook his head. “We’re just friends,” he replied. “But if she were an earth dragon, then she probably would be.”

“What difference does that make?”

“It makes a huge difference,” he told her as she got up. “We’re not like the different races among the humans. There are fundamental differences. If other dragons ever found out about it, the entire island would go up in flames. Even our parents would heavily disapprove.”

“Huh. I didn’t think they’d be that way,” she said. “Keth and Kanna seemed very wise and mellow.”

“It’s not that they disapprove of Sella, it’s just that there are some traditions that don’t change, Jenny, no matter how much we do. If dragons of two different species became lifemates, it would be the equivalent in your society of finding out that the pope is secretly married to a muslim mullah.” They started for his burrow. “Besides, where would we live? I can’t very well live underwater, and she can’t live for extended periods of time *out* of the water. Water dragons need to be in the water or they fall ill. And most importantly, we could never have children. The differences between the dragons are far more than skin deep, Jenny. We *are* five separate and distinct sub-species of dragon. Nine, actually, but drakes and wyrms of the same type can interbreed. That’s a taboo as well, though. Drakes stay with drakes, wyrms stay with wyrms.”

“Hmm,” she mused. “So, is there some lucky earth dragon girl out there that has your eye, Kell?”

“I’m married to my job, Jenny, I told you that,” he chuckled lightly.

“Uh, you *do* have a social life, right? I mean dragons in general?”

“It’s a little more formal than human dating, but yes. Earth dragons pick their mates themselves, and we have extended courtships as we get to know each other, see if we’re compatible for being lifemates. It can take decades to finally formally bond, and all dragons take picking a mate *very* seriously, Jenny. We mate for life, and if our mate dies, we never rebond. For us, *til death do us part* is *literal*.” They turned down the ramp to his burrow. “A widow might have a romantic relationship after the mate dies,

but it's what you might call casual. There's only room in our hearts for *one* mate, and once a mate takes up residence there, they never leave."

"That's beautiful in a way," she said, looking up at him. "Are all dragons like that, or just earth dragons?"

"All dragons are to a certain extent," he answered. "Fire dragons are a bit more casual about mates, often cheating outside the bond, and their relationships are very contentious and sometimes violent. Most of the incidents of violence on the island are a fire dragon husband and wife fighting." Jenny laughed. "I know, but despite all the hostility and clawing, the bond is true. And the fighting is just a form of reinforcement of their bond, in a strange way. The mates continually demonstrate their worthiness by showing their bravery and fighting prowess."

She yawned and stretched as they entered the living chamber, and she picked up her pack and sleeping bag. "Alright, I'm *really* sleepy," she said. "I'm starving too, but I'll eat when I get up."

"You should have said something," he said. "I have several loaves of french bread in my pantry."

"One of the perks of being a field agent?"

"I can go to the supermarket," he chuckled. "I attract a hell of a lot of attention when I do, but hey, I had the money."

"Where did you get it?"

"The water dragons salvage more than steel off the ocean floor," he replied. "The department keeps gold, gems, paper money we manage to recover and clean off, those kinds of things. We try to buy what we need first, but if we can't buy it, we steal it instead."

"I wondered if you thought about doing that when you told me about the salvaging."

"Like I said, we try to be as self sufficient as possible," he said. "Alright, do you want to stay in here?"

“No, I’ll sleep in your bedroom. I’m curious to see how you do it,” she smiled.

He chuckled. “You’re going to be very disappointed.”

Jenny did go to his bathroom to change into fresh clothes, then she brought her pack and bedroll to his empty sleeping chamber. It held nothing but a large mound of earth, dug out in the center to form a hollow, and Kell was already curled up in that depression. Jenny laid down her mat and bag, then she climbed into it. “Kell? Thank you for a very eventful day,” she called.

“You’re welcome, Jenny. I hope it helps both of our races.”

“I think it will. I came here wildly curious and a whole lot of afraid. I’m not afraid anymore, not in the slightest.”

“And that’s exactly what we were hoping,” he said. “Lights off,” he called, and the electric lights fixed into the ceiling blinked out, as did every light in the entire burrow.

“Voice recognition software?”

“Based on, appropriately named, the Dragon speech to text program,” he affirmed. “We tweaked it a little bit.”

“So, you have a computer program that understands dragon language.”

“We do,” he agreed. “Don’t get any ideas, though, they probably won’t give it to you.”

She chuckled. “Game on, Kell, game on. I know you’re here now, and I know you have internet access. I *will* find a way in.”

“I hope you enjoy disappointment,” he murmured as he put his head down.

He expected a snappy comeback, but the change in her breathing told him she’d already dropped off. She’d crashed hard after getting off her adrenalin-induced active phase, and now she desperately needed sleep. He

closed his eyes and remained still, so as not to disturb her, using the quiet time to organize his thoughts and consider the monumental import of the events of the day.

Things were going to change after day, change *drastically*, and not just for the dragons. A quantum shift in the fundamental thinking of mankind, their belief that they were the only intelligent species on the planet, was going to be challenged when Jenny got back to Washington and started telling them about what she'd seen.

He could only hope that she convinced them that that quantum shift in their lives could be a *good* one.

15 May 2017, 06:27 Draconian Mean Time; Dawnmist Village

Jenny slept completely through the night, so much so that Kell had to wake her up just before sunrise. She jumped a little when she first saw him, startled in her half-awake daze when she saw him. He made her some bread and potatoes for breakfast as she went to the restroom and changed into jeans and a tee shirt, then packed up her backpack and set it by the entry to the welcoming chamber and sat with him and shared bread and potatoes with him, set on a cloth spread on the floor like a picnic.

“So, how is this going to work?”

“You don’t need me to go through the scion with you,” he told her
“And it’s about noon in Washington right now, so you should be just fine. When you get back, find the closest phone you can. Nothing electrical you brought with you is going to work,” he warned with a slight smile.

“You tell me that *now*?”

“I figured you’d have tried taking pictures by now,” he chuckled.

“Nope. I didn’t bring anything but my phone, and it’s in my pack. You showed me a lot of trust bringing me here, I didn’t want to violate it.”

“Well, your phone is fragged, so I guess we owe you a new one,” he told her.

“It’s waterproof.”

“The scion destroys electronic equipment if it’s turned on,” he told her. “Now if your phone was off, then just replace the battery and it should work just fine, unless it has a plasma screen. If it does, your screen is burned out and you’ll have to replace that too.”

“I’m not sure if I turned it off or not.”

“Good luck,” he chuckled as he bit off the majority of a loaf of french bread. “Anyway, we’ll drop you off in a clearing in some woods just off U.S. one in Woodbridge, so you won’t have to go far to find a phone. There’s a Seven Eleven just a block to the north. I’m sure they can let you use theirs. And just to warn you, once you exit the scion, we’ll move it,” he told her. “So any agency that decides to camp that clearing is going to be in for disappointment.”

“Exactly what is a scion? I figured that it’s some kind of magical gateway.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” he replied. “The chromatics create and govern them. It’s highly advanced magic, though, so it’s not like we have scions behind every rock. There are three scions near Washington, but that’s only because of how important Washington is and how dangerous it is for us to work there, so we have to have multiple escape routes if things go bad.”

“I’ll keep it a secret.”

“Liar,” he teased, which made her laugh.

“You don’t eat much, do you?” she noted as he picked up the handle of the platter in his teeth and carried it to the counter then reared up on his

back legs and took it in his forepaws to set it down.

“Not much,” he replied. “But we’re earth dragons. Fire dragons are *pigs*. It’s where most of our food goes,” he grunted. “I eat about two loaves of bread for breakfast. A fire dragon would eat about twenty, and still be hungry.”

“Well, there’s how you put them in their place,” she chuckled. “Stop feeding them.”

“It’s been done before,” he nodded as he came back to the cloth. “The food riots of 1760 were a violent and tumultuous time on the island. The earth dragons and water dragons decided to hold their harvests back from the fire dragons after a fire dragon torched an earth dragon farm, and the council refused to punish him for it. The fires tried to take the food by force, and it got very bloody in a hurry. The water dragons helped the earth dragons defend their farms, and it was just too much for the fires. They sulked about that defeat for *decades*,” he grunted. “They were going to push it even further, but then the water dragons stated that they’d stop feeding the sky and chromatic dragons as well if they didn’t put the fires back in their place. That stopped it *immediately*. That’s an instant voting majority on the council.”

“Why didn’t they punish the fire?”

“Because at that time, just about anyone could do just about *anything* to an earth dragon, and the council wouldn’t do anything about it,” he said darkly. “It always came down to a seven to two or five to four vote, depending on if the waters felt that it was a real crime or just something blown out of proportion. After the food riots, the council started taking crimes against earth dragons much more seriously, but only because the waters had put their foot down and told them to put an end to it. By ourselves, we can’t do much of anything here,” he growled. “Geon and Anthra may be on the council, but they’re powerless because of the voting block formed by the fire, sky, and chromatic dragons. We need the water dragons to support us in about anything we do, and that means that virtually

all votes concerning earth dragons come down to a five to four split, and always against us. I'm honestly amazed they didn't pass their original punishment for when I broke the law. It was five to four *against* my punishment. I came one sympathetic sky drake away from summary execution, or having my wings cut off and chained to Penitent's Aerie for a few years so anyone who had the urge could fly over and torment me," he told her.

She whistled. "I had no idea."

"I all but owe my life to Anthra, Shii told me that she convinced the sky drake that what happened wasn't my fault," he told her. "I instead got a public rebuke and turned into bait when it came to making contact with you."

"Well, I'm glad you're alright," she said honestly, looking up at him.

"I'm glad I'm alright too," he said ruefully, which made her chuckle. "Now, it's close to sunrise, so we'd better get going. It's a long climb up the ramps."

She shouldered her pack and came out with him, then he leaned way down on his front legs and presented his leg so she could climb up. She didn't catch it in the gloom of the predawn, but then climbed up on his neck. He turned and started for the ramps in relative silence, with only the sound of the waves crashing on the beach and a warm, gentle breeze. "I'm going to miss this place," she sighed. "It's beautiful."

"I take it that means you didn't mind the company?"

"Not one bit," she replied, patting his neck. "You need to get Skype or something so we can talk."

"I have it. And I'll even get a webcam, just for you," he promised, which made her chuckle. "But I'll just make it fun and hack your home computer some day."

"I'll be waiting for you to try," she replied with friendly swagger.

“Then let the games begin,” he declared, which made her laugh.

Once they reached Scion Aerie, the platform over the intelligence department building, he let her get down and pointed out the swirling gateway of magical energy that she’d be using. “Remember, a block north, you’ll find a Seven Eleven,” he told her.

“I’m surprised they’re not here to see me off.”

“They’re watching every move we make, and don’t think they’re not,” he replied. “Besides, they wouldn’t bring themselves to showing you that much consideration. As far as they’re concerned, when they dismissed you on the aerie, that was that. They’ve had sky dragons watching us the rest of the time.”

“I never saw them.”

“You won’t. When a sky dragon doesn’t want to be seen, you won’t see them...unless you’re an earth dragon,” he chuckled. “They can’t see into my burrow, but any time we were outside, they were telling the council everything we did.” She turned to look up the foot or so difference between their heads. “I hope that things go well for you, Jenny,” he told her. “I’ll keep in touch.”

“I learned a great deal, Kell,” she said, reaching up and patting him on the snout. “About you, the dragons, about everything. And I’m not afraid of you.”

“That’s more than we could have ever hoped for,” he said simply.

“You’ll say goodbye to Keth and Kanna and Sella for me?”

“Of course,” he promised. “Keep your eyes open, my friend. I’ll keep in touch, but it won’t be obvious. Only someone like you will catch it.”

“You bet I will,” she smiled, then she buckled her pack straps. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“Just step into it, and the next step you take will be on the other side,” he told her.

“I couldn’t just back up into it?”

He shook his head. “Only a dragon can activate the scion from the other side, it wouldn’t react to you,” he told her. “But on this side, it’s an open doorway.”

“Oh, okay. Goodbye, Kell. Take care.”

“Gaia embrace you, my friend, and keep you safe and healthy.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the nose, turned, and then stepped into the gateway of magical energy. Her body quickly shimmered and vanished, and he knew that she was already in Woodbridge.

It was good. The council wanted to show the humans that they didn’t have anything to fear from them, and he felt that they had done just that. With Jenny’s report to her superiors, he hoped that a discreet dialogue could be opened between the dragons and the United States, which might be the first stone in the bridge that would close the gap between them. The humans were wondrous creatures, a paradox in some ways but intriguing and fascinating in others, and he felt that more open channels between their two races would lead to prosperity for both sides.

But that hinged on the humans, and how they digested what Jenny had to tell them. For the dragons, it was back to business as usual until the humans made the next move.

Chapter 3

15 May 2017, 14:14 EDT; Woodbridge, Virginia

It was almost surreal coming out of the scion and ending her almost dream-like expedition to the most exotic place in the entire world.

Jenny blinked against the bright sunlight, found the day a bit chilly compared to the tropical warmth from which she had just come, going from sunrise to afternoon in two steps, and turned quickly to see the magical swirl of light fade behind her, and then wink out. Almost automatically, she reached out behind her and found that Kell had been honest about the scion, that it wouldn't open for her, but she just *had* to give it a try.

Kell...he seemed so, so, so...*normal*. She knew she shouldn't attach anything like that to the dragons, that Kell had been extensively trained to be capable of socializing with human beings due to his field work, and that odds were he acted completely differently when humans weren't around. But it made him so *approachable*. She had found him highly intelligent, charming, friendly, and funny in a way. He had a definite *personality*, and that anthropomorphized him far more than the simple fact that he could talk did. She was confident that once just about anyone got past the fact that he was about seven or eight feet high at the shoulder and some twenty-odd feet long, they'd lose their fear of him after they talked to him for a little while, just as she had.

But, she had a mission to complete. She saw the cars on U.S. 1 through a thinning of the trees on the far side of the little wooded lot, which were actually quite commonplace in the Virginia suburbs, and started for it. She stepped through about five yards of trees and came out along the side of the road, and to the north, right where he said it would be, was a 7-11

convenience store. She walked along the side of the busy road as her mind whirled over what she'd seen and how she needed to organize it for her report, and that distracted her enough to be surprised when she was in the parking lot. Phone booths and pay phones were almost a thing of the past, so she went into the store and approached the counter. "Excuse me, my phone broke and I'm a little stranded at the moment. Could I use your phone to call for a ride?"

"As long as it's local," the teenager behind the counter said.

"I'm calling Arlington, is that local from here?"

"Yup," he said, handing her the phone sitting behind the counter.

She dialed up the headquarters for the Hunters, the direct contact number for her supervisor, Yancy. Yancy was a grizzled veteran of the CIA and NSA, was once an actual spy, but now rode a desk as he wound his way down into retirement. That didn't make him a bad boss, however. He was sharp as a tack and knew the ins and outs of the political jockeying in the intelligence bureaus like few others, and when Yancy prepped them for a mission, it was always thorough and exact. Yancy had never sent them into a situation where they didn't know exactly what they were doing and exactly where they were going. "Yancy," she said immediately when he heard him pick up.

"Thank god!" he exclaimed. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, boss," she replied. "I'm in Woodbridge, in a seven eleven on U.S. one. I need a ride."

"I'll have someone there in three minutes, probably a local police unit, depending on what we have where," he said immediately. "They'll bring you straight to the office."

"Got it, boss. I'll be waiting. Boy, do I have a *lot* to tell you."

"Save it for when we're secure," he said quickly.

“Thanks, hon,” she said to the teenager. “They’re sending someone to get me.”

“Hope everything’s okay,” he said to her.

“Just fine,” she smiled.

Not two minutes later, a Woodbridge PD squad car screamed onto the lot with lights flashing and siren wailing, and one of the two officers inside jumped out and rushed into the store. “Mrs. Edwards!” he called.

“Right here, officer. They told you where to go?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said quickly, offering for her backpack. “We’ll get you there as quickly as possible.”

“Then let’s get going.”

“Yes ma’am!”

The lone police car turned into a procession of a dozen cars, local police and federal unmarked units, all with lights and flashers blaring, getting her to the NSA annex building in Arlington where the Hunters had their office as fast as they could. Cars blocked intersections so they could pass, and once they were on the interstate, they screamed down the left lane at nearly 100 miles an hour. Jenny sat in the back with her pack, still organizing things in her mind so she could write her report, and quite certainly give an oral report to someone important sometime soon. There had been a lot of information to absorb, and the training they’d given her when she joined the Hunters in observation had served her well on the dragons’ island. She’d seen *much* more than Kell had showed her, and all of that was going to be passed on to her superiors.

They had her in front of the unassuming office building about 25 minutes after picking her up. It was about three blocks from the national cemetery, one of the many office buildings along that stretch of Arlington, close to the river and with a view of the monument and the scaffolding surrounding it. It was a white building with a rounded front, dark glass in

four stories along the curve, and a large parking lot behind a wrought-iron, seemingly decorative fence. It was actually a high security building, filled with the offices and headquarters of several branch offices within both the NSA and CIA, and the two guards armed with MP-5s at the checkpoint gate made that abundantly clear to any onlookers in a hurry. Yancy and half her team were already out by the curb when the police car pulled up to the front, and Wilson opened the door for her.

“Am I glad to see you, mookie!” he said, giving her a rough bear hug when she got out.

“Whuff! Ribs, Tom, ribs!” she wheezed.

“Thank you, officer. But you were never here,” Yancy told the officers in the front. “Understand?”

“Yes, sir!” the driver nodded. “Good luck, ma’am,” he added, then his partner rolled up the window and the car headed back for the gate.

They herded her into the building quickly, Wilson carrying her backpack for her as she was all but surrounded by her team. Juarez kept a hand on her shoulder and Price was sweeping anyone out of their way as they headed for their offices, which were on the second floor and not far from the entry. They had a dedicated part of the underground garage where they held their vehicles, but they carried their weapons and stored most of their gear in their offices. Nobody in the building would give them a second glance to see a unit of armed, combat-dressed people moving through the halls...not in *that* building. Yancy swiped their door open, then they moved into the main office, filled with computers, surveillance equipment, and other things they used in their job as counter-espionage against computer criminals. Jenny had a desk out in that open area along with most of the others, but hers was covered in computers and printouts of computer activity, since she was one of four computer specialists on the team. They did the technical work, and the other 8 members of the three four-man Hunter teams did most of the chasing and shooting. Most of the combat members knew a lot about computers themselves, necessary for the job, but

Jenny, Derringer, Michaels, and Petrovski were the four dedicated computer experts, the eggheads, on the team, and it was to them that the most difficult or perplexing problems were brought. All four of them held doctorates in computer science. Though Jenny was well versed in small arms tactics and they wouldn't bat an eye over sending her into a combat situation, Wilson was her partner and primary bodyguard, the muscle to go with the brains. He was a very big, athletic, and almost monstrously strong black man with a wide but attractive face who was grizzled and professional, but he had a nearly big-brother attachment to Jenny. Sometimes he was a bit *too* protective of her. Price and Juarez were the other members of her squad, they also had 6, 8, and 10 man Hunter squad configurations depending on the perceived difficulty of the mission at hand, and there were also times when the entire 12 members of the elite team were mobilized...such as for when what happened just a few days ago.

"Back off, you mugs!" Yancy barked. "Price, get her class A's out of the closet. Jenny, get yourself a shower and clean up, because you have to be at the White House as soon as you're in uniform. You're going to be briefing the President."

"But I haven't even written my report!" she gasped.

"They don't care," he replied. "They want you there *now*."

"We'll get you ready, mookie," Tom Wilson told her, patting her on the shoulder. "Let's go, people!"

A bit surprised, Jenny hurried through the side door to their locker room, and the showers just past them. The locker room itself was unisex, but they had separate showers and dressing benches where they could go back out to the lockers in panties and bras...or at least she did. Petrovski often paraded out there naked, much to the appreciation of the guys. There were only two women on the team, and that wasn't enough separate the locker room, but it was enough for them to cordon off two showers behind a wall for them to use. She and Petrovski had their own personal showers, where she had her shampoo and body wash, and she quickly washed the

Pacific salt off of her as she more seriously organized her thoughts, with a little nervous trepidation. Now she was going to brief the *President*. With no preparation, with no slideshow or Powerpoint presentation or visual aides, no script. Just get up there and talk about what she saw in front of a dozen or so of the most powerful people on the planet. Petrovski brought her Class A's out when she stepped out of the shower, and put a towel around her. "We can't wait to hear about what you saw," she said with a grin. Petrovski was the daughter of Russian immigrants and was almost unnaturally tall for a woman, 6'3", but she was a *genius* when it came to computers on top of being built like a brick house and with a face that could be on the cover of *Elle*. Instead of becoming a supermodel or an actress, she had instead earned a Ph.D. from USC in computer science and now was a Hunter, chasing down cyber criminals, when she wasn't torturing the guys in the locker room by walking around naked. She enjoyed making them cover their groins to hide the erections after she finished getting dressed; she was a very salty and slightly sadistic woman that way..

"It was amazing," she replied. "Absolutely amazing!"

"Don't start, or I won't be able to sit down til you get back," Petrovski laughed.

"I can't believe they're not even giving me a chance to write a report," she fretted as she dried off.

"The whole government's been in a tizzy since you left," she replied. "Every agency is on high alert." "It's all for nothing, *they* aren't any real threat," she said calmly as she took the bra Petrovski offered.

"No, nothing, nothing, not til you can tell me *everything*," she protested.

"It's not like we can't talk while I dress."

"But you can't tell me everything in ten minutes," she countered.

"More like three hours," she mused.

“Then hush. We’ll be here waiting til you get back.”

It took her maybe ten minutes to get into her Marine uniform, and they had her in an armored limousine and on the road five minutes later. Two Secret Service agents were in the front seat, and they had two police cars both ahead and behind with two motorcycle units at the ends, a full motorcade. All other traffic was cleared out as they came over the bridge and into the district, and not four minutes after that, they were pulling up to the White House. She gawked a little when an agent opened the door for her, then a man in a suit hustled her right inside. “Bob Reeves, chief of staff,” he said hurriedly as she was hustled into the door. “You’ll be giving your report in the situation room. We have some still images of the animal ready on the overhead in case you need to refer to them, but outside of that, I’m afraid we have little in the way of a prepared presentation. I’m afraid you’re going to have to wing it, Lieutenant. I know it’s a bit unfair, but the President demanded your immediate report as soon as you got back, powerpoint be damned.”

“I think I can manage it, sir,” she said as they hurried down elegantly decorated hallways, filled with rich woods and antiques, moving so fast she could barely appreciate where she was. An aide handed her a visitor’s badge almost as an afterthought, which she clipped to her jacket.

“There’s a remote on the podium ready, just hit the on button and an image of the animal will come on the screen behind you.”

“I got it, sir.”

A pair of elaborate double doors opened, and what she expected was in front of her. It was a long table, and at the end of it sat the President of the United States, Jack Walker. A republican just into his first term, he won election on a platform of moderation and fence-mending after the highly chaotic eight years of Obama, eight years of complete gridlock and some of the most poisonous, dirty, even personally destructive politics ever seen. Jenny hadn’t voted for him, but from what she’d seen so far, she wasn’t unhappy that he won the election. He’d already calmed down the political

vitriol, mainly by lambasting his own party over the dirty tactics they used against the former president. That soothed democrats who were preparing to do the exact same thing to the republican president, gearing up to turn Walker's first term into a slugfest of complete Congressional gridlock, and had fostered some bipartisanship in Congress. Walker was trying to mend fences, and for that, she highly respected him. She saluted smartly after coming into the room, and then was immediately ushered over to the podium by the chief of staff. She paused and looked at the members of Walker's cabinet, two four-star generals, and dozens of aides and staffers standing along the walls behind the table. A spotlight came on, making her blink a little bit, and she picked up the remote control.

"I'm Lieutenant Jenny Edwards, Mister President, a member of the Hunters, a computer counter-terrorism and cyber crime investigation unit attached to the NSA."

"We know who you are, Lieutenant," Walker said in a calm voice. "I'm sure you can understand that we are just *slightly* interested in what you have to say, so the floor is yours."

"Uh, yes sir," she said, turning on the projector, showing the image of Kell splashing into the Potomac. "I'll do my best to be linear, sir, but forgive me if I jump around a little. As you might expect, this creature is called a dragon," she began. "His name is Kell, and he's what they call an earth dragon. Just as I'm a part of the intelligence community, *he* is a member of *their* intelligence community, specially trained to enter our society and conduct missions of observation, and sometimes espionage, against assorted targets, both governmental and corporate. The primary mission of these dragon operatives is to discern the level of knowledge we have of *them*, ensuring that they stayed a secret, as well as investigate human technologies in search of ones that they could adapt to their own use."

"My first question, which is fairly obvious, Lieutenant, is how did something like *that* run around without us knowing?" Walker asked.

“Well, this may sound outlandish, sir, but the simple answer is *magic*,” she replied, using a laser pointer to highlight the fuzzy picture, the amulet chained around his chest. “This device here is what they call a hider amulet, which cloaked him in an illusion that made him appear to be a human being. One of my teammates shot out the amulet by sheer luck, which caused him to be revealed.”

“Magic?” someone called.

“I saw it for myself, sir, and it’s *very* real,” she replied soberly. “The dragons can do magic. It’s how their agents hide among us, and it’s how they transport their agents back and forth from their home, and how they’ve kept their home hidden all this time. Anyway, sir, as you know, they reached out to us. Kell was sent to my home by their government to invite me to their home island, so they could explain their actions to us. They picked me because I’m a Hunter, and they felt that the government would listen to me when I got back...which it seems they were correct about,” she mused, looking around. “I spent a little over a day on their island, sir. They didn’t try to hide anything from me. They were very open and honest, so much so that they had me stay with Kell in his home, and I also met his parents, siblings, and some of his friends.”

She turned off the projector. “I spent over a day observing the dragons in both formal and informal situations, and the insight of Kell about the other dragons proved to be highly accurate when I spoke to others. In a basic overview, their society is divided into five major sections, almost like a caste system, which are racial. There are five basic races of dragon; earth, water, fire, sky, and what they call chromatic. Within these five major divisions are a further division into two types of dragons, drakes and wyrms. Kell is an earth drake. A wyrm looks exactly like a drake, but is larger. These dragons look very different from one another and have very different capabilities and outlooks. I only really got to observe the daily life and social customs of the earth dragons because my host was an earth dragon, but I learned that the five species don’t interact overly much, each staying to their own. And there are some inter-species frictions between the dragons that I’ll explain in more detail later. Each dragon has specific

talents that they use within their society. Earth dragons are builders and farmers, what you might consider the main labor force. Earth dragons are also the only dragons in their society who are trained in modern human technology. Water dragons are primarily farmers and fishers, providing food. Sky dragons are hunters and watchers, keeping aerial reconnaissance over their home island. Fire dragons are their primary military presence, the dragons that do the fighting. And the chromatics are apart from the others, pursuing purely scholastic goals. The earth and water dragons feed the entire population, the earth dragons provide infrastructure, the sky dragons keep watch over the ocean for human ships, and the fire dragons train for combat. The chromatics contribute to their society only with their magic.

“Their government is very weak and decentralized. They have a council that represents the five species of dragons that serves as their central government, but it is fractured and divisive. I personally witnessed their members arguing with each other. Supplementing this central government is a series of local councils and such where dragons in a locality more or less govern themselves. The council of dragons oversees all aspects that affect all dragons, but all other issues are handled at a local level. Law enforcement is split between local governments and the council. Local and minor matters are handled locally, but severe or egregious acts are sent to the council to decide punishment.

“Societally, the dragons are much like us. They organize themselves by their species and each species has its own culture, much like the different cultures between human nations. I spent my day with the earth dragons, and from my observation, if you dropped an earth dragon on a farm in Iowa, he’d have absolutely no problems associating with the farmers he’d find there. Earth dragons organize themselves around their labor pursuits, builders, farmers, factory workers, intelligence gatherers, but they consider themselves a singular society despite these specializations. They farm, they build things, and they are highly intelligent and well versed in our technologies, which they observe, copy, and even steal as necessary. They have a power grid on the island provided by a geothermal electric plant, a sewer system, and factories that produce durable goods such as televisions,

computers, and refrigerators for local consumption. They share these technological comforts with the other dragons. The earth dragons are solely responsible for the intelligence department that sends their field agents into the human world. The earth dragons are also the only ones that speak any human languages. If we are to open channels with the dragons, Mister President, we have to go through the earth dragons. They aren't the ones in control, but they're the ones that have control of the door. It would behoove us to ensure we keep them friendly and amenable to us.

"The water dragons are family based and solely devoted to fishing and farming underwater plants and marine animal husbandry. They have little interest in things outside of these pursuits. Physiologically speaking, they have diverged from the other dragons to where they have no horns, no scales, nothing like the earth dragon you've seen. They almost look like sharks with legs but with the tails of dolphins. Of note for this briefing is that the water dragons scour the ocean floor for shipwrecks, which they salvage for the steel and whatever the ships might contain. They bring them back to the island, where the earth dragons recycle the materials for island use. Most of their steel comes from shipwrecks, and they scavenge plastic floating in the ocean for their use."

"Exactly where do you think this island is located, Lieutenant?" the President asked.

"I know for a fact that it's in the same time zone as Hawaii, sir," she replied. "I would place it somewhere in the south Pacific, south of the Hawaiian islands. The island's climate is tropical, and the island is mountainous and holds an active volcano. According to Kell, the dragons use magic to hide the island from us, and can even fool satellites."

"Thank you. Proceed."

"Yes, sir," she nodded, taking a moment to regain her train of thought. "The water dragons and earth dragons have something of an informal alliance," she continued. "Since both are providers, they have more things in common than with the other dragons. In fact, the earth dragons are highly

dependent on the political power of the water dragons for basic protection and rights. The earth dragons are seen as second class citizens among the other dragons because they're incapable of flight and have no magical capabilities. The water dragons are their only protection against the other dragons from a political standpoint. Without the support of the water dragons, the earth dragons would be at risk of exploitation from the other species.

"The sky dragons are completely organized around their ability to fly," she continued. "Their bodies are evolved for it, and everything they do in their society revolves around it. Their primary mission is aerial hunting of wild game and keeping watch over the ocean around their island for human incursion. Kell told me that they also organize hunting expeditions into uninhabited territory, probably in South America. Of note is that the sky dragons are forbidden to overfly human-inhabited territory unless on specific reconnaissance missions. According to Kell, they can alter their coloration to make them all but invisible from the ground, and I would assume they have some kind of magic that defeats radar, since that seems to not be an issue for them. From what I observed, they seem to be somewhat independent from each other, more a collection of individuals rather than a collective whole, but with certain customs and observances that bring them together for specific reasons. They're like eagles, solitary and proud, but they'll gather in some instances in a common interest.

"Fire dragons are large, heavily built, and possessed of aggressive instincts and a volatile temperament," she continued. "They exist only to fight, be it each other, other dragons, or whoever the council tells them to fight. They double as police in certain situations, sent to apprehend dragons who break their laws. Their entire internal society is based on the subjugation of other dragons to their dominion. A fire dragon rules a section of volcano like a gang boss, and he rules purely through strength and intimidation. The fire dragons have an extremely hostile relationship with the earth and water dragons, to the point where there has been conflict between the two groups in the past. I only saw three fire dragons up close while I was there, and I'd rather not get that close to them again," she said

honestly, putting a hand on her stomach reflexively. “They were very belligerent and openly hostile to the other dragons. One even threatened *me*. If we open ties to the dragons, sir, we should be *very* wary of the fire dragons.

“The chromatic dragons exist somewhat outside the structure of the other four,” she continued. “Their only function is to study and perform magic, and from what I observed, they are highly arrogant and conceited. From a social standpoint, they think themselves akin to nobility, and they contribute nothing concrete to the island’s society outside of their magical services. Kell described them as, and I quote, the most obnoxious, conceited, self-centered, arrogant living things on the planet. From what I observed from the only chromatic dragon I interacted with, this was an astute and correct observation. They see themselves as the rulers of all the other dragons, and are highly hostile to anything or anyone who challenges this view. Much like the fires, sir, if we interact with the dragons, I suggest we be *very* careful around the chromatics.” She cleared her throat, and before she could say something, an aide brought her a bottle of water. “Thank you,” she said with a nod, taking a drink, then continuing.

“Overall, my impression of the dragons was very favorable. Their island wasn’t very large, and from my observations, there can’t be more than perhaps ten to twenty thousand of them. From a military standpoint, they’re not much of a threat. They don’t have huge numbers, and while an individual dragon could kill the average soldier, he’s not going to be walking all over a tank or a fighter. From what I learned, dragons are immune to harm from their own element, so that means that bullets will kill anything but an earth dragon just as easily as it’s going to kill a human being. In a military confrontation, an individual dragon poses a threat to a small unit or a unit without armor or heavy weapons, but they’re no match for organized and armed infantry.

“They were very open with me, almost shockingly honest, and the one thing they wanted me to relay to you, sir, is that they’re not looking for trouble. They conduct their field operations mainly to keep a passive eye on us, to see if we know about them, and if so, how much we know. That’s

changed now that they've been exposed, but the core of it is basically the same. They offered a simple bargain, sir, and I quote: 'you leave us alone, we leave you alone.' Their primary interest is in isolation from human society, and while the earth dragons have a keen interest in human technology, the other dragons have little or no interest in us outside of ensuring that we don't bother them."

"You said yourself that they conduct espionage against us. That's not exactly a friendly act," one of the generals said.

"Every nation conducts espionage, general, even our own friends," she said simply. "The worst crimes they've committed is the theft of technology. For example, it wasn't the Chinese that stole the prototype octocore CPU chips from the AMD research facility, it was the earth dragons. They copied the design and started producing them for their own use. They've also stolen the plans Iceland used for their geothermal electric plants, and some other things. The one thing I can tell you, mister President, is that the earth dragons are just as intelligent and technologically savvy as we are," she said, looking at him. "I spent a couple of hours debating computer issues with Kell, and he taught me quite a bit. He knows *more* about computers than I do, and I have a doctorate in the subject. We have an honest opportunity to learn from the dragons, mister President. If we can approach them the right way, we could establish some permanent diplomatic ties...but it will have to be through the earth dragons, since they control the means by which we can communicate with them. If there's one type of dragon I suggest we try to cultivate a friendship with, it's them. From a social standpoint, the earth dragons are the *most* like us. There are some pretty big differences in culture and personality, but an earth dragon and a human in the same room would be able to strike up a conversation, where the other kinds of dragons would not. They either don't care enough about us to try, or don't feel that we're worth their time."

"And what threats did you see from them while you were there, Lieutenant?" the President asked.

“From a military standpoint, very little to none, sir,” she replied. “As I said, they’re too few in number, and outside of the earth dragons, they have almost no interest in our technology. A fire dragon would attack our infantry by breathing fire on them, or landing to attack with fangs and claws. That’s not much of a threat to a man with a heavy machine gun, as long as they keep the dragon at range, sir,” she surmised. “From an intelligence standpoint, the earth dragons are very formidable in that their interests and ours coincide. The other dragons are highly intelligent, but their dismissal of technology as below their notice more or less removes them from any worry from our point of view. The earth dragons are the ones interested in our technology, so they’re the ones we’d have to watch, at least from the counter-espionage perspective. I spent six years chasing them as a Hunter, sir, even though I had no idea what they were. They are intelligent, patient, methodical, and thorough. They have a greater understanding of some aspects of our technology than *we* do, taking our initial ideas and improving them, building on them, surpassing us if they have enough time to study it. From a political standpoint, we should keep ourselves well clear of them, sir,” she said honestly. “Their society is fractured and volatile, unstable, and from what little I saw while I was there, there’s tremendous potential for the whole thing to go up in flames at the slightest provocation. The earth dragons are highly resentful of their treatment at the hands of the fire, sky, and chromatic dragons, and despite the danger involved in provoking them, it’s just a matter of time before one of the other dragon races does exactly that. The last time it happened it sparked bloodshed between the earth dragons and the fire dragons, which required the water dragons to intervene and end it by using their underestimated political power to all but put the sky and chromatic dragons into a headlock and make them do what they wanted them to do. Were it not for the water dragons, there would have been an open war between the fire and earth dragons. We *really* don’t want to get involved in the middle of something like that, sir, it would get very messy very quickly.

“In my humble opinion, sir, we should accept their offer of we leave them alone they leave us alone, but try to establish discreet and possibly clandestine contacts among the earth dragons. I came to learn while I was

there that while the earth dragons are an oppressed part of their population, the earth dragons are the most formidable of them all, because they are open to new ideas and adapt quickly to changing situations. They also have an honest curiosity about humans and an appreciation of our accomplishments that make them far more amenable to us than other dragons. If we want any allies among the dragons, mister President, it's with the earth dragons. But to garner those relationships, we run the risk of inciting the wrath of the other dragons, who see earth dragons as something only slightly better than the livestock they manage. They would see us courting the friendship of the earth dragons as either a betrayal or proof that humans are no better than the earth dragons, which might permanently poison any future attempts to negotiate with them. But in my opinion, sir, that's a risk worth taking. If we could learn anything from the dragons, or gain any permanent friendships or alliances, it will be with the earth dragons. They have the most value to us if we seek to gain anything from the dragons."

President Walker was quiet a long moment. "Can you describe their magic?"

She paused a moment. "I only saw two active instances of it, mister President. A water dragon used a magical control of water to dry me off after I got there, and of course, there's the scions, the magical gateways they use to travel between their island and our civilization. Kell said that they can move the doorways of the scions as needed, but I counted the scions when I was there, and there were only nine of them. So they only have nine doors, but they can move the doors where they need them to go. The dragons were quite liberal about explaining the magical powers of the dragons when I was at their council, when I professed curiosity. According to them, the water dragons have a natural talent for magic that protects, the fire dragons have talent in magic that destroys, the sky dragons have talent for magic that changes things or hides them from the senses, and the chromatics study more advanced forms of magic that exceed the others. It's the chromatics that created and govern the operation of the scions, for example, and I would assume that they're the ones that keep the island hidden from our satellites and from passing ships, using advanced magic."

“But you got no solid information on the exact capabilities and limitations of this magic?” one of the generals asked.

“No sir, they didn’t go into that much detail,” she shook her head. “But magic’s not something we have to worry about as long as we’re only dealing with the earth dragons. They can’t do magic at all. Kell was rather scornful of magic, which leads me to believe that *he* thinks that technology is more useful than magic. However, Kell demonstrated a strong bigotry against magic and the magical dragons, nearly open hostility, so it might be his personal prejudice talking. In this case, I can’t depend on his observations. I’d honestly have to get more information to answer that question with any precision, General.”

The President talked under his breath with one of his cabinet members. “Alright, Lieutenant, what other observations did you make? I don’t care how minor they are, go over absolutely everything you remember.”

“This might not be very linear, mister President,” she said, looking up at the ceiling as she gathered her thoughts. “I might jump around a lot.”

“Just take your time, Lieutenant, we have all day, and you have complete control of this briefing. Take as little or as much time as you need, nobody’s going to pressure you. And if you repeat yourself, that’s fine too, sometimes you remember a little more after you think something over two or three times.”

She nodded with a grateful smile.

For nearly four hours, Jenny stood before the President of the United States and told him absolutely everything she could remember from her trip, from things as important as their architecture to things as minor as the beauty of the island and the smell of the air. She tried to describe her conversations with Kell as exactly as she remembered, even bringing in a whiteboard so she could make rough drawings of their architecture, Council Aerie, the outside of the intelligence department building, even a rough diagram of the chambers in Kell’s burrow. She even attempted very crude and poorly done sketches of the dragons to demonstrate how they looked

different from one another, but then a google search of paintings and drawings of dragons let her equate some of the images with the actual dragons. She told them about Kell coming a whisker from being executed for being the one that exposed the secret of the dragons to humanity, then elaborated with the tale Kell told her of the food riots to further explain the social situation on the island concerning the earth dragons and to further explain the political and cultural ties they had to the water dragons. She described her interactions with the two water dragons that knew Kell, Shii and Sella, and spent nearly an hour describing Keth and Kanna, and impressing upon the President that Keth was like a wise old grandfather, filled with good advice and astute observations, and the single most unscary dragon that lived. She even used several of his sayings in her presentation. She even told them about her cavorting around in her underwear and swimming with Kell and Sella, blushing a bit as she did so, then described laying on the beach with them to watch the sunset. "I know it sounds strange, Mister President, but I was entirely at ease with them by then," she finished. "I had absolutely no fear of Kell or Sella, and I don't think I ever will. They were bigger than me, and could have killed me with a single bite, but I'd actually laugh at myself if I even tried to imagine either of them doing that now that I know them. I felt completely comfortable with them, and I think *anyone* would have after talking to them a while." She then remembered the confrontation with the fire dragon, and she acted that out with a surprised staffer, then drew a rough sketch of one of Kell's tail spikes in their three rows of five, seven, and five. "He flicked it off his tail like a catapult, and it sank a good three feet into the side of the mountain, solid volcanic rock," she told them. "He said it was an earth dragon's primary defense, their most dangerous weapon. After seeing him do it, I have no doubt that it is," she chuckled. "At close range, I think he could punch one of his spikes through tank armor, but that's a moot point. The earth dragons are pacifistic by nature, at least up to a certain point."

"What point is that, Lieutenant?"

"They believe in doing no violence until violence is done to them. *But*, if violence is done to them, then they react to that violence with immediate

deadly force. When I heard him say that, it reminded me of President Roosevelt and his saying of speak softly and carry a big stick, mister President. That is the mentality of the earth dragons. Incite no violence, but when violence is brought to you, fight to kill. Kell explained that it was that reputation that kept the other dragons from harassing them. The other dragons are honestly afraid of the earth dragons in that respect. They may believe they're superior to the earth dragons, but when they're face to face with one, they are very careful *not* to provoke them. When the fire dragon threatened me, Kell chased it off, and I saw it for myself. Kell was not even half the size of the other dragon, but a single ultimatum and threatening posture made the fire dragon turn and run away. The other dragons consider the earth dragons to be barbaric, savage, and in a way, it festers the enmity they feel for them. It's hard to feel superior to someone that you know can kill you if you make them angry. They're like little wolverines," she smiled. "Smaller than the other dragons, can't fly, no magic, but if a dragon tries to assert his sense of superiority over them with physical violence, that dragon gets ventilated in short order."

That made the President chuckle.

"It seems that they'd only have so many shots with them," the general mused, looking at the rough sketch Jenny had made of Kell's tail.

"Kell said they grow back, sir," she answered his unspoken question. "When he gave me that demonstration, he said the spike he used would grow back in a matter of hours. Exactly *how*, I didn't ask. But later that night, I looked at his tail and saw that it had indeed grown back, and looked no different than the other spikes on his tail. I didn't notice up until that point because I was still preoccupied by my conversation with the council."

She went back over several points, repeated herself quite a few times when she went back over some of the nuances she remembered when she was before the council, then described for the second time the sense of *wonder* she felt looking down from the ramps that first time, seeing dragons flying in the sky above and level to her, looking down and seeing the orderly farm plots, the waves lapping against the beach a thousand feet

below, and the warm wind caressing her, and realized that every preconception she had drawn about what the dragons might be like was wrong.

It was there that President Walker interrupted her. “I think we can take a break now, Lieutenant,” he said. “I don’t know about you, but after four hours, I’m ready for a cup of hot coffee, a bearclaw, and a trip to the bathroom.”

She laughed despite herself, then immediately blushed and gave him a contrite look. “Sorry, Mister President.”

“Even I like to joke from time to time, Lieutenant,” he chuckled, standing up. “Let’s take fifteen, everyone. And nobody get between me and the men’s room!” he warned as he cut a fast pace towards the door. Jenny hurried down to the Ladies’ room herself, then was surrounded by the President’s cabinet members and staffers, asking them questions they couldn’t really ask during the briefing, more trivial things than anything else, then one asked if she’d thought to bring anything back from the island.

She laughed ruefully. “I have to admit, it never once crossed my mind,” she admitted. “I didn’t –no wait! I *did* bring something back!” she said quickly. “I found a pearl in an oyster and I put it in my backpack!”

“A pearl?”

“Not a very big one. It was in an oyster bed that the water dragons cultivate. Sella, the water dragon, she sorta urged the oysters to open and I found it.”

“Lucky you,” one of them noted.

“I totally forgot about that pearl,” she chuckled. “I never thought I’d go diving for pearls with dragons on a tropical island when I woke up yesterday morning,” she laughed. “It was as beautiful as any Hawaiian beach, but they didn’t have any palm trees. Hmm, I just now realized that,” she mused. “It was more than warm enough for them. Maybe they cut them all down or something.”

“Maybe they just don’t like coconuts,” a staffer noted.

“Or maybe palm trees are poisonous to them,” another mused.

“Anything’s possible, really,” Jenny said as the President returned to the room. “I guess those are those little things I’m supposed to remember. Kell said they had forests on the north and east sides of the island, but I never saw them. I really only saw his family’s farm and the view going up the ramps to the aeries, which are on the south side of the island.”

“Was the dragon warm to the touch?” one asked.

She nodded. “I seriously doubt they’re cold-blooded,” she replied. “His hide was really tough but not hard, you could see his scales but they were strangely smooth to the touch, like a snake’s scales, and you could tell by touching him that he was solid as a rock, all muscle. But it was his horns I liked best. They really made him look, well, majestic.”

”What was it like to ride him?” someone asked.

“Like riding a horse with no saddle,” she replied, taking a huge bite of the bearclaw they’d put on her podium while she was gone, finding herself suddenly ravenous. “He didn’t bounce around, his gait was smooth, so it made it real easy to stay up there without sliding around. But then again, he knew I was up there, and he said he wasn’t moving in a way that might make me fall off,” she remembered. “Even when he faced down that fire dragon, I never so much as wobbled on his neck. He even managed to turn sideways and threaten the fire dragon with his tail without me falling off,” she chuckled.

“Was that frightening?”

“Not til after it was over, since I had no idea what was going on until he told me,” she replied. “They weren’t speaking English.”

“Remembering a few more things, Lieutenant?” President Walker asked.

“A few, sir.”

“Then we should open it for general questions, I’m sure someone has thought to ask something that we haven’t already,” he said as everyone took their seats again. “So, anyone at all, any question. Nothing is too small or trivial. If you thought of it, it’s a question worth asking and answering.”

Jenny spent three more hours answering a barrage of questions from the two dozen or so people in the room, often making new drawings, answering everything as best she could, even to strange questions like how did she feel when Kell told her about his relationship with Sella and how it could go no further than it had. She answered everything as thoroughly as she could, often taking long moments in thought before offering a response. Eventually, however, it was pretty evident to everyone there that she was getting tired, and paused more and more to drink water, and then coffee, and the questions had turned repetitive. The President sat up and patted the table to get everyone’s attention. “I think that about covers the questions,” he said. “The Lieutenant looks a little tired, and we could use a break to go over the tapes and audio. So, let’s call it a day. Lieutenant, damn fine work,” he complemented. “I’d like as detailed a written report as you can muster as quickly as you can get it done, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll get to work on it immediately, sir,” she said with a nod.

“Take her down to the cafeteria and give her anything she wants,” he told one of his staffers. “She’s got to be starving, and a good meal always gets my energy back up for those long nights.”

“With all due respect sir, I need to get back to my office so I can start my report as fast as I can, while everything’s fresh. I’ll just order a pizza or something. But I’m truly flattered by the invitation sir.”

He chuckled. “That’s what I like to see, real work ethic,” he smiled. “Alright. I’ll make sure you have all the pizza you can eat by the time you get there. Good work, Lieutenant. Very good work.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. She snapped to attention and saluted along with the generals when the President stood up and left the room, then his aides descended upon her as others carted the four whiteboards out of the

room; they hadn't allowed her to erase anything, not even her mistakes. They wanted everything left inviolate for further analysis. They didn't hustle her back down the halls, but they didn't dally about either, and she didn't want to. She needed to get started on her report as quickly as she could.

There was an entire *stack* of pizzas from Pizza Hut sitting in the office by the time she got back, and not one person had left. "When they delivered the pizzas, we figured you were about done," Price grinned as Wilson clapped her on the shoulders. "How did it go?"

"Long and exhausting, but I don't have time to rest. They want my written report *yesterday*."

"Well, grab a slice and then get to work on it, Edwards," Yancy told her, his weathered old face cracked into a smile. "And you'd better call Greg, but remember that this is all classified."

"He already knows about Kell, since he sorta saw him at the house," she said. "I already told him he'd better not say a word or I'd shoot him myself," she added, which made them laugh. "But yeah, I need to tell him I'm back, and I probably won't be home tonight. I have a *lot* to do."

"I can't wait to hear about this," Juarez said eagerly.

"Later!" Yancy barked. "Where's that report on the hack of UBS by Anonymous, Juarez? It's not on my desk!"

"I'll finish it, I'll finish it," he grumbled, grabbing a slice of pizza and heading for his desk.

At her own desk, which faced Wilson's, she wolfed down a couple of slices of sausage pizza, composed herself, then started writing her report. Like any good geek, she could type very fast, so the pages started stacking up quickly as she started with a general overview and summary, then got more into the meat of each subject as she went back through it. The briefing to the President had actually helped her a great deal when it came time to do the report, since it let her really think everything through, organize it,

classify it by importance, then put it all down in her word processing program with efficient speed. More and more slices of pizza found their way to her desk, the coffee pot filled, emptied, and refilled again, and the others ran out of endurance and headed home, leaving her and Yancy alone in the office. Wilson had replaced the battery in her phone and she found to her delight that it hadn't been burned out by the scion, so she called Greg before she started and ensured him she was back and well, then called him every couple of hours as she did her report to update him on when she might be home. She said goodnight to Davie after it was past his bedtime, still typing page after page of her observations, with only the TV in the background and Yancy's voice droning from his office as he talked to person after person on the phone, all of it over special encrypted lines.

At one in the morning, she did the final edits on her report, leaned back in her chair, then sighed in relief as she saved it, copied it to a thumb drive, then got up and headed for Yancy's office. The leathery old man was still in his chair, a phone glued to his ear and cigar smoke wafting from the half-smoked stogie in the ashtray by his workstation. "I'm done, boss," she called.

"Good, cause it's the White House on the phone," he told her. "She's finished, Mister Secretary. I'll have the thumb drive sent immediately by courier. It'll be there as fast as the courier can run the red lights." He pressed a button on a little console at the back of his desk, a summons for one of the government couriers that were stationed down in the lobby. They got a lot of use in their office building, since many of the things they and several other tenants did would *never* be sent out by phone or by the internet. Only by courier, using nothing but hard copies, would that information be secure. It was also why Yancy and every other agent in the office had two computers on his desk. One was "hot," connected to the internet, where the only sensitive work they did on them was work that required internet access, such as tracing hack attempts and other similar work. The other computer was "cold," which had no internet access, no wifi, no wireless, and even had a hardened outer case to isolate the internal boards from any and all EM radiation. They used those computers for

everything that didn't absolutely require internet access, which protected all the data on them from external espionage attempts. "You look wore out, Jenny. Go on home, Greg's probably worried sick."

"I'm alright, boss," she said, then she yawned. "What time do I come in tomorrow?"

"You don't," he replied. "A car will pick you up at your house at nine-thirty sharp. Be ready for it, and be in uniform. They're taking you to John Hopkins for a full physical and probably a thousand needles stuck in you," he grinned.

"What for?"

"Standard operating procedure," he said with a dark smile. "After that, you have a three o'clock appointment in the Pentagon for a briefing with the joint chiefs. And then back to the White House for a follow-up briefing immediately after you're done at the Pentagon."

"Suddenly being the one he picked isn't feeling as exciting as it did a day ago," she grunted.

Yancy gave a grating chuckle. "Welcome to the downhill side of that once in a lifetime assignment, kiddo. The debriefings. Lots and lots and lots of debriefings. You'll feel like a wrung-out sponge when they're done. Expect a couple of weeks of this shit, then things'll settle down some. But at least you'll get driven around like a bigwig as long as they need you," he grinned. "Enjoy those limos while you can, you'll get the full treatment until they wring everything they want out of you. Then it's back to rush hour traffic."

"Oh joy," she grunted.

He chuckled gratingly. "So go home, get some sleep. You'll have a long day tomorrow."

"Sounds like it."

16 May 2017, 21:40 EDT; Arlington, Virginia

She was *exhausted*.

Jenny flopped down into the chair behind her desk, remembering why she loved the Hunters so much now...no Class As. Marine Class A uniforms looked very sharp and impressive, but they were *not* comfortable, not in any way. The slacks were much worse than the skirt, so she'd opted for the skirt today, but that meant wearing hose, and she *hated* hose. But hose weren't as bad as the scratchy Class A slacks, so it was the lesser of two evils.

She'd barely got three hours of sleep last night, then she was off to the races. Greg had taken the next few days off because she was going to be too busy to keep her appointments, like picking Davie up from preschool, and that was a load off her mind as she was whisked off to John Hopkins for a four hour physical, where they did absolutely anything and everything they could think of. CAT scans, tests, tests, and more tests, they stuck a needle or a camera just about anywhere they could find room for it. They even gave her tests that had absolutely nothing to do with anything, like a pap smear, searching for *anything* that might be anomalous compared to her last documented physical. Her job required some pretty extensive physicals every six months, including psychological tests, so at least they had a lot of records to study.

The others were all done for the day, except Yancy. Price, Juarez, Michaels, and Douglas were out on a mission over in Los Angeles, doing some on-site inspections of the L.A. Federal Reserve computer network, searching for holes or exploits that hackers could use to gain access to the system, one of the jobs they did. They weren't only counter-espionage and hunted cyber criminals, but they also conducted security inspections of critical and highly sensitive government computer networks to ensure they couldn't get hacked. Everyone else was in the office, working on various crimes that required their rather special touch, usually revolving around

elite hacker groups like Anonymous and the People's Brigade, a government-sponsored Chinese hacking ring. But unlike other government agencies, the Hunters went out and captured the offending hackers...or killed them. Price wasn't the team's sniper just to impress them on shooting ranges. He'd killed 14 targets in the 8 years she'd been on the team, and all of them were government-backed hackers who had protection from their sponsoring government, shielding them from arrest or prosecution.

What a day. Four hours of needles, then four hours in front of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, more or less rehashing what she'd gone over the day before. Then three more hours in the White House, this time with powerpoint slides that had artist's remakes of the rough sketches she'd drawn, and more talk about magic.

Magic seemed to be the one thing they were most worried about. She hadn't really seen what it could do, but the fact that the dragons had magical capabilities that were unknown to them really worried both the President and the Joint Chiefs. They wanted to know *exactly* what it could do, what limits it had, and what potential threat it posed to America. That the chromatics could open gateways that bridged thousands of miles and hide an entire island from both ships on the water and satellites in space, it really concerned them. Admiral Yates showed personal concern for the abilities of the water dragons, and the safety of America's naval fleet should they somehow get into conflict with the dragons. That a water dragon could conceivably attack and sink a billion dollar nuclear submarine or an even more expensive aircraft carrier was of major concern to him, even more so than the possibility that water dragons could salvage highly sensitive technology from sunken vessels. They'd lost two nuclear submarines in the Pacific, one public knowledge and the other kept secret, and it was possible that the water dragons had found those wrecks, giving the dragons some weapons-grade nuclear material and a nuclear reactor to study, disassemble, and possibly copy for themselves.

She wasn't sure what to think about it. Kell had been highly scornful of magic, even though he used it in his job as a field agent, but Kell also had a prejudice against it. It *had* to be fairly strong if they could hide the island,

create the scions, and of similar concern were the potential magical powers of the fire dragons, since any conflict with the dragons would be primarily fought against the fire dragons. If it gave the capability for the fire dragons to fight at range, it might not be quite so easy to battle them with a conventional army.

She scrubbed her face with her hands, looking at the clock. She really should go home, but she had a couple of follow-up reports to write for the Joint Chiefs and the President. Poor Davie hadn't seen her more than once in the last few days.

But, the brand new Major's oak leaves on her shoulders were at least a little compensation for all the hard work. By order of the President himself, special field promotion straight to the rank of Major, effective the instant she set foot before the Joint Chiefs. Marine Corps General Brad Tanner had been the one to pin on her oak leaves, which was a high honor for her. It was a pleasant surprise, letting her completely skip Captain, which she was in line to get before the field promotion. Her job didn't let her rise through the ranks as fast as other officers, since she couldn't devote time for the promotion tests and was theoretically outside of military command while attached to the NSA, but at least now she was only slightly ahead rankwise of where she would have been if she hadn't joined the Hunters. Most officers with her time in service were Captains by now, with just a rare few reaching Major below the zone, and officers like her who were still First Lieutenants due to either incompetence or no time to devote to their careers. Now she didn't look like a bad officer, behind in rank compared to her time in service. It was something of a silly vanity, but some vanities weren't rational.

She still glanced at the gold flashes on her shoulders...it was going to take time to get used to it.

She was typing out the report for the Joint Chiefs as Yancy barked at someone over the phone, probably the L.A. team, when her hot computer woke up from sleep mode...without her touching it. She glanced at the screen and saw her usual linux desktop, WINE icon blinking indicating it

was running a couple of Windows processes in the background, then a new window popped up of its own volition. She stopped typing and looked at the window, lines of raw code scrolling down the screen, then a new window popped up.

She gasped. It was Kell! His symmetrically colored face appeared in the window, with a modified headset mic close to his fanged maw. She could see that he was in a room she'd never seen before, a room with walls, reared up in front of his desk, with his brand new webcam. There were two shelves behind him holding books about computers and programming, hardware manuals, and boxes...it must have been his office at work.

She snatched up the headset and mic for her hot computer and gawked at the screen. "How did you do that!" she gasped.

"Magic, of course," he said dryly, which made her laugh. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, but there's *no way* you could hack my work box!"

"Really? What are we doing now?"

She spluttered out a laugh. "I'm gonna figure out how you did it!"

"Please," he snorted. "*They* want to know how things went. Your side is keeping it so hush-hush, not even we can find anything. So, I was ordered to give you a call, in our own special little way."

"I really can't tell yet. I haven't finished with all the briefings. But they *are* listening, Kell. They're listening very hard. They took me straight to the President himself when I got back, and I briefed him *personally*."

"Good, that's exactly what we hoped would happen," he breathed in relief.

She glanced towards Yancy's office. "They seem amenable, Kell, but some of them are *very* nervous about your magic," she told him. "I spent three hours with the joint chiefs today discussing the possible ways your side could use magic if we had armed conflict. Since I didn't really see any

magic while I was there and I don't know what it can do, they're acting like you guys have nukes."

Kell chuckled. "Magic can't do *that* much. Only the chromatics can do anything you might call flashy. The average dragon's magic isn't so strong that they'd favor it over their own breath weapon. Magic is the fallback after they use up their breath weapons, not the first choice."

"Anyway, how about you? What are you doing now?"

"At the moment, not much," he replied. "I've been doing spider duty with the other grunts while they decide what to do with me. Ferroth is considering me as a field trainer, but the council is starting to meddle in the department. Before, Geon oversaw the department, but the chromatic is starting to butt his snout in our business. They've never done that before, and Ferroth's not the only one that doesn't like it one little bit. By the way, Sella says hello, and both she and sire are already trying to lobby to allow you to come back for a visit."

"I wouldn't mind at all," she smiled. "So, things are settling down?"

"Just entering wait and see mode, that's all, outside of the council starting to put their snouts in *our* business," he replied. "They've suspended all field work until further notice, and naturally, the other field agents blame me," he snorted. "But, it's giving my replacement time to get a little better training. He was *not* the one I'd have chosen to take over my job. Not only is he a klutz at programming, but he's an annoying little suck-up."

"So, the new Stone is a weenie?"

"Cataclysmically so," he grunted, which made her laugh.

Yancy came barreling out of his office, and before Jenny could react, he was looking over her shoulder. "I knew it!" he proclaimed. "Well, it's nice to see the dragon face to face, Mister Kell," Yancy said.

"My boss, Yancy," she smiled, patting the hand he put on her shoulder. "The mastermind behind us almost catching you sooo many times."

“I know who he is,” Kell said, nodding as he shifted his head slightly. Those glowing amber eyes made it hard to tell exactly *where* he was looking. “You should lay off those cigars, Yancy.”

The leathery old man laughed. “When I’m dead,” he retorted, which her mic picked up. “What brings you by?”

“*They* wanted to know how things were going on your end,” he replied, his deep voice rumbling through the speakers. “Needless to say, it’s the only thing they can talk about right now. In fact, it’s the only topic of debate at every council circle on the island, not just *the* council. Oh, and they read my public rebuke. Like I care,” he snorted, which made Jenny chuckle.

“Not much to say, and we probably shouldn’t tell you if there was,” Yancy replied easily. “What about your side?”

“Waiting to see what you do,” he replied. “And you get a vacation. No field work until further notice, so you can concentrate on those guys you can actually catch.”

“Now you just went and made this a personal challenge, Kell,” Yancy said in his gravelly voice, which made Jenny laugh and Kell narrow his eyes in amusement.

“I tell you what. I’ll set up my replacement so you can nail him, because he’s an annoying yes-drake who doesn’t know Javascript from Android.”

“We might make a deal or two about that,” Yancy smiled darkly.

“You can send me a gift basket,” Kell noted. “Speaking of gift baskets, congratulations on the promotion, Jenny. Reward for good work?”

“I guess. The President gave me a field promotion this morning,” she said, rather proudly. “The Marine Joint Chief himself pinned on my oak leaves. I was really flattered.”

“You’re moving up in the world.”

“As long as she doesn’t get a big head,” Yancy growled, which made her laugh.

“Well, I’m glad you’re getting your due, friend,” he smiled. “I’m gonna have to cut it short, I’m about to lose my uplink hack.”

“Satellite? Damn you, evil drake!” Jenny said lightly. If he was using a hacked satellite uplink, it was going to be impossible to trace him. His trail would end at that satellite, and all they’d have would be a map of the earth’s surface that the satellite was covering at that particular time. His signal could have come from *anywhere* under its coverage.

“I’ve been doing this for a while, silly,” he grinned, showing off all those sharp teeth. “I’ll leave you to tear your box apart trying to figure out how I did it,” he winked. “That’s my promotion present to you.”

“Bastard,” she teased, but she was grinning.

“I’ll be in touch. Gaia embrace you, my friend.”

“Good luck at work,” she replied, and the chat program shut down of its own volition. Then, just to tweak her nose, she supposed, the speakers started blaring out that old, old Michael Jackson song, *Somebody’s Watching Me*.

“Isolate that box and run a scan, I’ll start a sweep of the building network,” Yancy said quickly. “I want to know how he penetrated our security *right now*.”

“You got it, boss. But I have to finish my reports,” she fretted.

“I’ll call in Petrovski to go over your box,” he said as he hurried into his office. “But get it off the network and snapshot it in case he left a disk bomb in it.”

“Yes sir,” she said quickly. She unplugged it from the network, then used a laptop to take an image of the computer’s hard drive and current RAM contents, then she disconnected it and carried the box into one of the work rooms and placed it in a hardened steel box to protect it from any

wireless signals, which might trigger a virus or other program left on the computer when it was next turned on. Petrovski would go over the computer drive sector by drive sector and its logs when she came in, searching for how Kell hacked her box, while Yancy studied the traffic logs for the building's network to search for how he got past the building's firewalls and other security.

If anything, it proved that Kell and the earth drakes were every bit as formidable as she portrayed them to be, if he could hack her personal computer behind a network security layout that was considered top-secret, a layout even Anonymous couldn't crack...and they'd *tried*. The Hunters didn't control the building's computer security...but after this, Yancy would probably demand they take it over.

Kell's hacking of her box and the information she brought him went straight to the White House, Yancy warning them over the phone even as he ran a scanning sweep of the building's internal network. Jenny could hear him both typing and talking to someone over there over the phone as she came back and returned to her report, but her mind wasn't on it now. What Kell said tickled at her in a curious way, so much so she stopped typing and made of bridge of her fingers over her keyboard, leaning her chin on it. The council was starting to meddle in the department. The dragons that scorned technology and probably had absolutely no idea what the department did and how it worked were starting to interfere with its operation.

That was a sign to her, a sign that things were about to deteriorate on the island in a hurry. She remembered what Kell said about his punishment, that he came a whisker from execution. She also remembered what he said about how they *used* to treat the earth drakes...and that meant to her that they were going to be far harsher with both the earth dragons and the fact that they'd made a mistake than they needed to be. It seemed to her that the other dragons had finally realized that the earth dragons were doing a *lot* more than they realized they were doing, that it was more important than they first thought, and they were starting to think that they didn't like it, didn't like it one little bit. The chromatic had probably stepped back and realized that the earth dragons were the *only* ones that understood the

technology, understood what they were doing, and his arrogance would lead him to believe that they weren't capable of doing anything on their own, not something *important*, something that would impact more than just the earth dragons. The little bit of trust he'd shown the earth dragons had been destroyed when Kell had been exposed. At the worst, he'd think that everything the earth dragons were doing was part of some earth dragon plot of some kind, since he'd be naturally suspicious of *them* the same way the whites were suspicious of the blacks during the civil rights era. The secret being exposed had been an error by the earth dragons, Kell had been discovered, and now that they'd made a mistake, the other dragons on the council wouldn't trust them to do *anything* without direct supervision. They would insist on worming their way into the department, probably into the builders, maybe even start nosing around the earth dragon farming operation, because their prejudices were going to run away with them.

They were overreacting.

The earth dragons had erred, and now the other dragons would insist on subjugating what were once earth dragon operations under the control of dragons who "knew what they were doing," which was just political speak for "we don't trust you because you're so inferior to us." That was going to piss off the earth dragons harder and faster than just about anything else the council could have done, and the earth dragons wouldn't stand for it. They would resist the council's attempt to take them over, and that was going to make things ugly in a hurry.

She had her hand on the phone before she realized what she was doing, business card out they gave her, and she was direct-dialing the White House chief of staff. "Reeves," he called.

"Sir, it's Lieu—Major Edwards," she said. "I think Yancy told you that Kell made contact, but what he said is setting off all kinds of flags in my brain. I think we need to talk."

"I'll send a car immediately."

16 May 2017, 16:37 Draconian Mean Time; Department Headquarters

Kell wasn't the only one that was storming around the office in a huff.

Ferroth was *livid*. There was no other way to describe it. The mature earth drake was biting the head off anyone that looked like they weren't doing their job to his satisfaction, storming and stomping around both main offices, which was just his version of walking it off. Just about every department worker now had an eye on the clock, waiting for quitting time so they could escape Cyclone Ferroth.

The sky dragon who had floated into the sensitive office had been quite terse about it, that the council wanted to see Ferroth immediately, and of course, the chief headed straight for the aerie. He returned two hours later in something almost approaching abject rage. It took Kell and Jasper to drag it out of him, and when they heard it, they were just as furious.

The council had voted, five to four, to effectively remove Ferroth as the chief of the intelligence department. They were sending a chromatic dragon to replace him, and he was demoted to deputy chief.

That was, by far, the absolute *worst* thing that they could have done. For one, Ferroth had built the department from the ground up, and he knew it like no other dragon. For another, this chromatic they were sending would have *absolutely* no idea just exactly what the department did or how it worked. The dragon probably didn't even speak English, and his magic *would not* translate written English into draconic...and if he couldn't read English, he'd be effectively useless as the department chief. And that know-nothing jackwagon was going to waltz in here and try to change everything around.

And what was even more infuriating, at least to Kell, was that he'd have to take orders from an arrogant jackwagon like *that*.

Kell ambled out of his tiny office and into the dimly lit sensitive data room, where it was just light enough to see, but not so bright that their

thermographic vision was blinded by the light. How was this chromatic going to even read the monitors? All important information was *only* displayed on infragraphic monitors and wall emitters, part of the security protocols that Ferroth had instituted when he started the department. It was because at that time they had fire and sky dragons in the main rooms who were doing work for them, and the idiots would spread everything they saw and overheard all over the island. Intelligence was about two things: learning what was important, and *keeping what was important away from those who had no need to know*. Even back then, Ferroth understood the need for security, even on the island, because as the earth dragons started exploring human civilization, those damn fire dragons spread all kinds of rumors about what they were discovering that were utterly wrong and often fabricated to make the humans appear to be barbarians or demons. Ferroth got the fire dragons out of the analysis rooms and into the entry rooms and put the wrath of Gaia down on the sky dragons that did the recon flights, telling them to keep their mouths shut about what they saw until they understood exactly what they were seeing. Ferroth had built them up into the operation they were now, with 127 earth dragons and Sella gathering information, studying human technology, monitoring human activity, and filtering what they learned out to the building dragons when they adopted a new technology.

Just what did this chromatic think he was going to accomplish here? He had no idea how anything worked. He had no idea what they did. He probably couldn't even use a computer. He'd be useless, worse than useless, and his uselessness would infect the department like a disease.

"Kell," Jasper called. Jasper was one of the four field agents, a small but wily and highly capable young earth drake. Her real name was Kammi, and she was the most capable of the three other field agents—well, four since he wasn't an agent anymore—but so long as she was a field agent, she would go by the name Jasper both out there and in the department.

"Jasper," he said as she bounded up to him, a dragon's version of a jog. "What's going on?"

“That chromatic is here,” she told him. “He’s out in the low security room now.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll stay there,” Kell grunted.

“I wish,” Jasper agreed, looking towards the hallway leading to the low security room. Jasper was a very petite drake, small for her age, but that was an advantage as a field agent. Under a hider amulet, she was only 6’3” tall, and she attracted very little attention, unlike Kell, who had been pushing 7’4” under a hider amulet, and knew his career as a field agent had had only maybe two more years before he was just too big. At least before Price came along and shot out his amulet, anyway. Kell had always admired Jasper’s coloring, since her camouflaging pattern was much more symmetrical, almost like tiger stripes, and she had an adorable black band over her eyes, like a raccoon. “When do you think we’ll be doing field work again?”

“I really don’t know, Jasper,” he murmured as several dragons came down the hallway. Two fire dragons were leading the chromatic wyrm, and Ferroth was walking beside him. The chromatic was very small, meaning he was rather young, but he was still larger than Ferroth, who was fairly large for an earth drake. This chromatic had shimmering green scales on his head and neck, which turned turquoise at his shoulders and then shifted into dark green at his tail. Like all chromatics, his wings’ leading edges were covered with prismatic scales that shimmered and refracted rainbow colors of light. Like all chromatics, he had those feathery growths over his eyes and beside his horns, like ostrich feathers, and a row of several of them at the end of his tail like a little fan, which gave the chromatics their somewhat derogatory nickname *fluffies* among the earth dragons.

“This is the sensitive information room,” Ferroth said in voice Kell knew was very reluctant. “If it deals with important human events, current field work information, current technologies we’re studying, or major events on the island, it moves through here. These workers help the field agents prep for their work by doing research for them, and they also keep

all the research timetables organized. And there's one of our field agents. Jasper," he called.

She looked up at Kell with a scathing look, then padded over. Kell followed her. "This is Jasper, one of our four field agents."

"She's barely a hatchling," the chromatic snorted.

"We can only use young drakes for field work, due to the limitations of the magic that conceals them in the human world," Ferroth told him, almost shortly. "These drakes are highly trained for their jobs, however. They apply before they're even released from their parents, and we vet them thoroughly before one's selected."

"Clearly your vetting process is flawed, for it to fail so utterly," the chromatic said haughtily. "Oh, and so I finally meet the rebuked face to face," he said, looking at Kell. "I'm glad you're here. As my first act as the new department chief, you're fired."

"*What?*" Ferroth snapped.

"He failed utterly as a field agent, is the direct reason humans now know of our existence, and I will not suffer incompetence in *my* department," the chromatic sniffed. "Maybe *you* can tolerate surrounding yourself with failures, Ferroth, but I will not."

"Now hold on one second!" Ferroth raged.

"Would you like to be next, Ferroth?" the wyrm asked, fixing the earth drake with a challenging stare.

"He won't, but *I* will," Jasper snapped. "I *quit*. I won't serve under a know-nothing gas sack who'll run this department into the ground and then blame everyone else when it's all on fire. Chief, you can hire me back once *he's* gone," Jasper snorted, turning and marching back towards her office. "Because as sure as Gaia embraces us, he won't last long," she called loudly.

Kell laughed, which caused the chromatic to fix him with a nearly unholy stare. "I'll clean out my office, and wait for you to hire me back, too," Kell said, smiling maliciously at the chromatic. "Just hold out, chief, because once things go to hell around here, they can't blame anyone but *him*," he added, pointing at the chromatic.

Unless, of course, that was exactly what they wanted. There was a chance that the chromatic was here to do just that, run the place into the ground, basically ruin it and all the work they did. The chromatics detested technology, felt it was against dragon ways...which was all fine for *them* to say since they could do magic. Kell considered that as he followed Jasper back to the offices, then he looked around his very much lived-in office and pondered just how he was going to clean it all out, then he reared up and started taking some of his books down off the shelf and stacked them on his desk.

Well, the chromatic might run the department, but that didn't mean that he controlled what they did.

The idea of it bloomed in his mind quickly. Kell could get back into the department's computers any time he pleased, because, like any good hacker, he'd set up several back doors for himself in the department's network so he could look around without anyone knowing it was him. Maybe he should keep an eye on what was going on, as well as back up everything that was important on his computers at home. And of course, from *outside* the department, he could help the chief get rid of that idiot, actively work against him. The idea of it appealed to him, because, hell, he'd be unemployed. It wasn't like he'd have anything else to do outside help his parents out on the farm.

He could hear Ferroth all but screaming at the chromatic, trying to hold his temper. If Ferroth managed to get through the first week and still have his job, Kell would be honestly amazed. But he had to do just that. If Ferroth wasn't here, the whole department would go to pieces, and he needed to be there to fix the damage that that idiot caused, both after he was gone and while he was doing it. Ferroth could go behind the chromatic and

fix things he tried to break, quietly countermand ridiculous orders, do anything and everything he could to mitigate the damage to the department the chromatic would cause.

The chromatic appeared in his doorway. “What are you doing? I told you that you’re fired,” he snapped.

“Most everything in this office is *mine*,” Kell replied. “I brought it back from human civilization or bought it with my own allotments.”

“So *you* say. Nothing leaves that office until a detailed inventory is put before me that *proves* you own it. And nothing from *outside* should leave this office regardless. Human...things have no place on Draconia,” he said with a sneer.

And that confirmed his suspicions. He looked right at Ferroth, grimly, and Ferroth nodded slightly behind the chromatic. He knew too.

Well, since he was already fired, a little youthful rashness was exactly what was needed here. “Really? If human things have no business on Draconia, as far as you’re concerned, then why are you heading the department that *brings* human things to Draconia?” he challenged. “Why would you volunteer for a job where you’re surrounded by human things, wyrm?”

“Don’t speak to *me* with such disrespect!” he said angrily.

“Since you just fired me, I can speak to you however I damn well please,” he shot back. “What are you going to do? Fire me?” He turned and picked up more books and put them on his desk. “I’ll take what belongs to me and I’ll say whatever I please, and I don’t give a damn what you have to say about it. You’re not the boss of me, chromatic, and you never were. You’re nothing but a tail-licking sycophant of the council chromatic. I bet he’s your uncle or something, that’s the *only* way you could rate a job like this,” he said, looking the chromatic up and down.

That was about every button a chromatic had. The wyrm snarled in barely contained fury, then he turned his head. “Fire dragons!” he shouted.

“Remove this filthy *grounder* from the building!”

The entire sensitive room went deadly quiet.

“You’d better watch it, fluffy, you’re *surrounded* by filthy grounders,” Kell said with a dangerous hiss, his tail snapping.

In the main office beyond, there was the sounds of dozens of tails being thumped against the concrete floor.

The fire dragons arrived, however, and the chromatic carefully backed up so he didn’t turn his eyes away from Kell. “Remove him from the building. By force if necessary,” he ordered. “Immediately!”

One of the fire dragons grinned eagerly, since it was the same pair he’d insulted just the other day “You’re *ours* now, grounder,” he crooned.

“You want to play with me, ashtongue?” Kell snapped, bringing his tail around and extending his spikes. “Be careful. I play rough.”

“Kell!” Ferroth barked. “Stand down! I’ll cordon the office and send what belongs to you to your burrow. You *will* get back what is yours. So go ahead and go home, *now*, and I’ll take care of it. That’s an order.”

“Yes, chief,” Kell answered, retracting his spikes and sweeping his tail back behind him again.

“Kintel, you stand post at this door and let no one in or out,” Ferroth called.

“What are you doing? I give the orders here!” the chromatic boomed.

“You have a conflict of interest in this matter,” Ferroth said coldly. “And *no one* is going to going into that office until department property and Kell’s personal property are separated by a neutral third party. And if you don’t like that decision, then let’s go to the council *right now*,” he said, narrowing his glowing amber eyes at the chromatic. “I’m sure they’d love to hear how you cost me my best two field agents within ten minutes of coming into the building.”

Ferroth and the chromatic got into an argument as Kell came out of his office, and the very nervous office supervisor Kintel went into his office and stood quite deliberately in the doorway. The fire dragons tried to crowd him, but a few aggressive snaps of his tail made them back off in a hurry. He padded towards the low security room with them following him, and saw that all activity in the room had stopped. All the drakes were reared up behind their terminals, watching as Kell padded through the room, heading for the archway that led to the outer door.

Out in the antechamber, the two fire dragons stopped by the entry and gloated. “Guess we’re here long after you’re gone, grounder,” one of them taunted.

“I’ll be back. You’ll be gone with that tail-licking chromatic,” Kell hissed as the outer door opened.

Kell glided down and onto the farm, landing with a couple of short hops by his burrow, then went straight down into it and to his computers. He used one of his back doors to get into the system, then he started up his archiver, made sure he had plenty of storage disks, then started backing up the *entire* database. It was going to take nearly six hours to back up the database, he saw, so he made sure that the carousel on the archiver was full, then went over to his parents’ burrow. His mother was in the kitchen, pouring freshly harvested potatoes into a basket the earth drakes over in the forest made, getting ready to store them in the cellar. His younger siblings were helping her, Kav and Konn carrying another basket to the doorway leading to the ramp down to the storage cellar and Kitta dragging a full basket of the large onions that Hett’s family grew over on the other side of Dawnmist. Hett and Keth often traded harvests, for Hett had a knack for onions, growing them larger and sweeter than anyone else, and dragons *loved* onions. He traded his special giant onions for Keth’s giant radishes and potatoes, but would be trading for wheat once Keth got enough seed to plant a starter crop, harvesting the wheat for more seed rather than for flour.

Keth had closed the last deal just yesterday to secure enough seed for that first crop, and that crop’s seed harvest would keep them rolling in

wheat and bread until Gaia swallowed the earth and ended all things.

“That looks a bit heavy for you, little sister,” Kell said lightly, picking up the onion basket with his teeth.

“Aww! I can get it!” Kitta protested.

“Suuuure,” Kell drawled through the basket handle.

“Come help me sort these potatoes, my daughter,” Kanna called. “Why are you here so early, Kell? It’s not dinnertime yet.”

He waited until he came back up before answering. “I need to talk to you and sire,” he said. “The council is meddling with the department.”

“They are? What happened?” she asked.

“They demoted Ferroth, put some half-whelped fool chromatic in as chief, and his first act was to fire me,” he said darkly.

“You got *fired*?” Kanna gasped.

“Oh, that’s not the half of it. That fool chromatic lost Jasper before he even met her. She quit right in his face,” he said with a dark chuckle. “He fired me, and she quit on the spot.”

“That’s not good,” Kanna said, clicking her teeth.

“No, mother, it’s not good at all,” he said as Kav and Konn bounded by him. “I think the council put him there to run the place into the ground.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because the chromatics don’t like technology,” he replied. “And now the humans know about us, and naturally, *we’re* the ones to blame for it. Well, to be honest, we are, but I think that Jenny coming here really spooked a few dragons, and now they’re going a little crazy.”

“Such a wonderful little human,” Kanna mused. “I do hope she gets to come back. I enjoyed her visit.”

“Yeah, we didn’t even get to talk to her!” Kitta complained. “When we came back from chores, she was gone!”

“She only had one day, Kitta, she couldn’t spend it babysitting you three,” Kell said, a bit teasingly.

“Hello! May I enter?” a voice called. Kell looked towards the entry chamber; it was Jasper!

“Jasper! Come in!” Kell shouted.

She ambled in, shivering her wings. “I guess you can call me Kammi now,” she said with a rueful laugh. “I thought you’d be here, Kell. We gotta talk.”

“I know. You know my mother and siblings.”

“It’s nice to meet you again, Matron Kanna,” she said, bobbing her head. “May I enter?”

“Of course, of course!” she said. “We’ll get you something to eat right away!”

“I’m not really hungry, matron, but I appreciate the offer,” she declined. “I saw what you were doing in your burrow,” she said. “I’m sorry to enter without permission, but I *really* had to talk to you. I thought you just didn’t hear me.”

“That’s alright,” he said dismissively. “You’re a friend, Kammi.”

“I’m doing the same thing too,” she said with a slight smile. “I’m downloading everything I can get my claws on and storing it. I *know* that rainbow fluffputz is going to ruin everything.”

“Fiendish minds think alike,” Kell chuckled.

“We need to stop him, Kell,” she declared. “You and me, we gotta *do* something.”

“I know. I’m going to talk to Ferroth after he calms down, see what he wants us to do. How many back doors do you have in the network?”

“About ten. You?”

“Around fifteen,” he answered. “We can keep an eye on things from outside for Ferroth, and I think I’d like to know exactly what the council is talking about up on that aerie,” he mused.

“I’ll speak with Geon,” Kanna offered.

“He won’t tell you everything, mother,” Kell grunted. “Unlike those other snakes, he’s honorable. Hmm. I hope that Ferroth gets me my stuff out of my office soon. I have several micro-cams.”

“I have a bunch in my burrow,” Kammi told him. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Have Sella place a few where I can see what’s going on in the department, and maybe place a couple up on Council Aerie,” he grunted.

“You want to *spy* on the council?” Kanna gasped. “Son! That’s very improper!”

“They’re trying to destroy everything we’ve built, mother!” he retorted. “They put that idiot fluffy in the department to either control what we do or run the place into the ground so they can kill the technology program. They’ve never liked it, they won’t even let us run electricity up to their libraries,” he fretted. “And what happened with me gives them the perfect excuse to stick their noses in our business and try to take over the department.”

“Uh, Kell, they sorta already *did* take over the department,” Kammi pointed out.

“Not so long as the drakes in there can’t stand that jackwagon they haven’t,” he replied. “If worse comes to worst, I’ll let Ferroth run the department out of my burrow,” he declared. “As long as we don’t lose our internet access, we can do almost everything we’re doing in that building

somewhere else. We can move the researchers over to the factories. The analysts can just do their work from their home computers, well, except for Sella. We call a council of village councils and arrange to grant them their food allotments under the table, as the humans say, so they can keep getting paid for their work.”

“That’s going to alert the council that we’re working behind their backs,” Kammi pointed out.

“They may have control of the department, Kammi, but they *don’t* control what we do on our own,” he said bluntly.

Keth ambled into the kitchen, and he looked very troubled. He barely glanced at Kammi, then blinked and smiled. “Jasper, it’s good to see you, youngling,” he said. “You must visit more often!”

“I’ll have plenty of time now, Patron Keth,” she said sourly. “There’s some big news going around.”

“Yes, yes, I’m surprised you’ve already heard.”

“Heard what?”

“The council is increasing the tithe,” he said, shaking his head. “By nearly double!”

Kell traded a dark look with Kammi. The tithe was how the council paid all the dragons, taking a percentage of every farm’s harvest, which was then distributed out to dragons who were officially employed by the council in positions that were in the interest of the island as a whole. Factory workers, the department, dragons working for the council, and all the non-producing dragons received food based on that tithed collection. Keth, in his form of protest, only grew food that other dragons didn’t really like, making them eat something bland and tasteless to them in return for them taking nearly a third of his harvests. Potatoes, radishes, eggplants, and pumpkins were what he primarily grew, and with the exception of pumpkins, the other dragon species weren’t all that fond of his crops.

“They just told me. Double! I’ll have to increase my crop production just to have enough left over for us! I’ll have to completely redraw my field rotation schedules, and maybe hire a helper or two. It might be too much for just the family.”

“What possible reason would they have to increase the tithe?” Kammi said angrily. “It’s not as if the other dragons are starving! Those damn fire dragons are fat enough as it is, gorging themselves on *our* food!”

Kell was quiet a moment. It wasn’t about increasing food allotments to the dragons...it was about *control*. The council was pulling on the noose they had around the necks of the earth dragons, making them heel. They were going to make them work harder in the fields, take control of their operations, maybe even take over the factories, take control of everything the earth dragons did and helped them prosper.

“Did they increase the tithe on the water dragons?” he asked quickly.

“Yes, and Shii is most put out,” he replied. “She said that she’ll have to send some of her pod out to hunt in the deeper waters more often to meet the new quotas. Their kelp may be in demand, but it’s not a rapid harvesting crop. And the oysters are nothing but a hobby for them, for family consumption. Water dragons are the only ones that like them anyway.”

“What reason did they give?” Kanna asked.

“They said that we must prepare for possible farming disruption should the humans cause us trouble,” he replied.

“That’s ridiculous! We have a year’s worth of food stockpiled!” Kanna protested. “It’s the law!”

“Now they want two years’ worth,” Keth said with a frown.

“So, after we put back the required food, the tithe returns to normal?” Kell asked.

“They didn’t mention that.”

“I’d go find out, sire. Right now,” Kell said. “If they don’t sunset the tithe, then they’re up to something else.”

“I’m not usually quite that suspicious, youngling, but you do have a point,” he said, nodding his head. “Let me go talk to Geon. He’s an old friend, he’ll tell me what’s going on.”

Keth turned and left the kitchen, leaving Kell and Kammi looking at each other in trepidation. “You thinking what I’m thinking, Kell?” she asked.

“They’re pulling on our leash,” he replied. “And trying to drive a wedge between us and the water dragons.”

“That’s what I think,” she nodded in agreement.

“What do you mean, youngling?” Kanna asked.

“They’re just asserting their dominance,” Kammi told her. “They’re putting their snouts into the department, they’re forcing us to grow more food, which will make us work harder and keep us busy. They’re all in a tizzy over the humans discovering us, and this is how they’re punishing us for it. They’re punishing *all* the earth dragons for *one* mistake,” she declared.

Kell nodded. “And I’m that earth dragon, so I feel just a little bit responsible,” he said with a low growl.

“The council itself said that it wasn’t your fault, my son,” Kanna said. “Why punish you for what was beyond your control?”

“Because I’m an *earth drake*,” he replied icily.

“That’s all the reason some of them need,” Kammi agreed. “And they’re hoping that the increased tithe makes the water dragons mad at us,” she continued. “Because they’ll see what’s going on the same way we will, and what the council hopes is that they think that they’re working harder because of *our* mistake. Trying to sow dissent, break the alliance between us and the water dragons.”

“My. My, I think that could be possible, that the water dragons might be angry at us,” Kanna fretted. “Let me go speak with Shii, my younglings. See where the water dragons stand. Shii is highly respected in their circles, and she’ll know what they think of things. Kitta, the burrow is your responsibility in my absence,” she declared to the youngling, who almost beamed in pride.

“I’ll take care of things, mother,” Kitta declared. “We’ll have everything in the cellar before you get back.”

“My good daughter,” she said with a smile. “If Keth comes back before I do, tell him where I am.”

“I will, mother,” Kitta said, then she turned. “Clutchmates, stop playing around! We have work to do!” she barked imperiously. “Now help me sort these potatoes so we can store them!”

“We’ll go back over to my burrow and figure out what to do,” Kell said. “Kitta, send someone over to get us when sire and mother return, okay?”

“I’ll make sure of it, brother,” she replied, then smiled when he patted her on the back.

“Keep them in line, sis,” he chuckled. “Come along, Kammi. We have a lot to talk about.”

“We surely do,” she agreed, filching a rather large potato out of the basket and popping it into her mouth, which made Kitta giggle a little.

Back in Kell’s burrow, he and Kammi discussed the issue in detail as his computer worked to archive everything they had in the database, working every angle, bouncing ideas off each other. They added Sella to their discussion when she hurried into his den after her work shift, and she agreed with most of what they were thinking, as well as bringing news back from the department. “They almost fought right in the sensitive room,” she told them. “Kintel told me about it. The chromatic tried to order the fire dragons into your office, and Chief Ferroth all but threatened violence

should they do so. The chromatic took severe offense at being disobeyed, and he and Ferroth very nearly fought.”

“Too bad they didn’t, the Chief would have ripped that little fluffball apart,” Kammi grunted, which made Kell chuckle and nod.

“It will be it for me in the department, I’m afraid. Matriarch has ordered me back to the pod,” Sella grunted. “She said she doesn’t want me in there right now.”

“I’m not entirely surprised,” Kell said. “Did you hear? They doubled the tithe.”

“They did *what*?” Sella gasped.

Kell nodded. “Sire told us. He’s very angry, and from what he said, the village council is furious.”

“Matriarch must need me to help the pod if they raised the tithes,” Sella said thoughtfully.

“Most likely,” Kell agreed. “That or just get you out of the department. It’s gonna get ugly in there, friend.”

“It already has,” she replied. “Things went downhill from when Chief Ferroth threatened the fire dragons. The new chief threw a fit when he found he couldn’t read the monitors in the sensitive room, accused the earth drakes of intentionally concealing information, then said that the department drakes were being willfully disobedient and disrespectful.”

“We’ve used the heat displays since the department started,” Kammi snorted. “But he was right about them not showing him one whit of respect. He called the lot of us filthy grounders right in the open room!”

“He did not!” Sella gasped.

“As loud as you please,” Kammi growled. “Kell made him mad, and he showed his true colors. Everyone in the department will fight him tooth

and talon, because he turned absolutely *every* earth drake against him with that one insult. He'll have to fire *everyone* to get any cooperation."

"Which might just be why he was sent there," Kell frowned. "Take over the intelligence department, fill it with *their* dragons, not *us*."

"Then the whole thing falls apart, and the dragons have no way to talk to the outside," Kammi surmised.

"Which might be *exactly* what they want," Kell pondered. "If we can't talk to them and they can't talk to us, they might think that that'd be the end of it. But it doesn't work that way with humans. *We* know that. *They* probably don't. They know about us now, and they'll search for the island, if only just to know where it is. And if we suddenly go silent, they'll fear that it's a sign we're about to get aggressive. Jenny said that their leaders are afraid of magic, and that fear will drive them to either find us or ensure we're not a threat to them."

"I have a sat dish in my burrow, we won't be cut off," Kammi said.

"I have one too, and my own generator," Kell agreed. "So at least we can warn Jenny what's going on, and she can warn the humans. If things start going downhill here, they may not *want* to get involved with us."

"That might calm the council down, if the humans tell them they don't want to open channels," Kammi noted.

"Maybe, but the humans *will* want those channels. A silent, unknown enemy is a *threat*. You know how they think."

"Yeah," Kammi agreed.

"Hello, the burrow. May I enter?" Ferroth called from the entry room.

"Thank Gaia," Kell breathed. "We're in here, and we need you, Chief!"

Ferroth ambled into his living chamber, looking like a thunderstorm just looking for someone to rain on. Kammi bounded over and nuzzled him fondly, getting a pat on the shoulder, and Ferroth came in and sat down,

then reared up so he could use his forepaws in a gesture. "I'm amazed I survived that," he declared.

"We are too," Kell said. "What happened after we left, chief?"

"Not much more than the chromatic throwing a temper tantrum," he replied. "Sella, I'm glad you're here. I *really* need to speak with your matriarch. Could you go get her?"

"Of course, chief. And I'm sorry, but she removed me from the department. I was recalled to the pod."

"I understand, hon, and it's probably a good idea. I don't want the water dragons getting mixed up in what's coming. Just leave it to us."

She nodded, then turned and bounded out towards the entry.

"Shii?" Kammi asked.

"I need to talk to the water dragons, and Shii has high rank among the pod leaders," he replied. "Half the reason I rallied so hard to get Sella was to get a contact with her mother."

"Always playing the angles," Kammi chuckled.

"Part of being the chief, something that idiot chromatic will never understand," he growled. "What are you working on over there, Kell?"

"I hacked the department and I'm downloading the entire database," he replied with a slight smile.

"So am I over in my burrow," Kammi admitted with a laugh.

"*Fantastic*. I knew I could count on you two," he said with a big smile, thumping his tail on the floor. "I was going to have you do just that. I know both of you put back doors in all over the network. I know where most of them are, and I hid them just in case this chromatic convinces someone with any experience to go over things. We have to protect those access points at all costs."

Kell suddenly laughed. “All that training the council had you give us, and now we’re using it against *them*,” he declared.

“And more to come,” Kammi added. “Kell wants to plant cameras on Council Aerie.”

“Getting eyes and ears up on the aerie isn’t a bad idea,” Ferroth agreed. “But getting them there would be hard. They keep magical alarms up on the aerie when the council’s not in session. But if we could find a way to do it...”

“Geon,” Kell said.

“No, he’d never do something like that. Even if he’s violently opposed to what the council’s doing, he won’t betray their trust.”

“So, what’s the plan, chief?” Kammi asked.

“The plan is, I do everything I can to oppose that stupid fluffy within the department while you two protect all the work we’ve done from the outside,” he replied. “And speaking of outside, I want you two to pick a good unbreakable encryption and start using it between each other and with me.”

“I have the Liberty Six encryption algorithms from the U.S., they’re the best I’ve seen yet,” he replied. “I’ll set up a set of keysets and email it to your home computer.”

“Yeah, I’d suggest using Liberty Six, it’s the best encryption out there,” Kammi agreed.

“Good, good,” he nodded. “Something *serious* is going on, and it goes beyond the department. My sources tell me that the council is making all kinds of decisions that have Geon and Anthra absolutely furious, and they’ve only announced one of them so far.”

“The tithe,” Kell and Kammi said in unison.

“I figured you’d hear about it, your sire being a farmer,” Ferroth nodded. “It’s nothing but a flimsy excuse to punish us, and piss off the water dragons in the bargain.”

“My mother went to go speak to Shii about that. Odds are, she’ll come with Shii when Sella brings her.”

“That’s fine, your parents can keep a secret, Kell,” he replied easily. “In fact, Keth might be *very* useful. He has contacts with just about every farmer on the island. And the farmer’s rumormill can move information just as secretly and effectively as magic can.” He clicked his teeth. “We can’t stay here very long, though. The council already has the sky dragons watching me, and probably you two as well. They know I’m here, and they’ll see Shii come here.”

“Sounds like we move to night activity,” Kell noted.

He nodded. “They can’t see that far in the dark, and we have the advantage. So, we only have a couple of minutes when Shii arrives, or else we’ll arouse suspicion.”

“Shii will be discreet,” Kell said.

“I know she will,” he agreed. “If they ask, I came here to ask you to summon Shii so I could find out why she recalled Sella from the department,” he told them.

“Sounds workable, chief,” Kammi nodded. “Totally believable.”

“Once you finish copying all the databases, I want you two to spread moles all through the network,” he told them. “Log scanners, sniffers, keyloggers, spiders, traffic nets, anything and everything you can do that won’t bog down the network or arouse suspicion. I want to know *everything* they do. Kell, I want you to hack the computer in the fluffy’s office and access its audio so you can eavesdrop on what he does in there. We can’t do anything about that fluffy using his magic to talk to his overseers on the council, but anything else he does, I want to know about it.”

“I can have that set up in an hour,” Kell nodded.

“Kammi, I want you to hack the computer the council keeps at the aerie,” he said. “Just be *damn* careful when you do it. Same thing. Mole the utter hell out of it and enable its audio so we can listen in.”

“Be done by sunrise, boss,” she replied cheerfully. “If we can get a camera up there, we’d have both audio and video.”

“It’s risky, but may be worth it,” Ferroth grunted. “Once I leave this burrow, not a word. By then, they’ll have magical scrying going on all of us, so all communication has to be over computers, in English, and encrypted whenever possible. As you know, their magic can’t detect active technology, not even the image on a monitor,” he said with a dark smile. “That’s our one extra spike we have held back after throwing the rest. They can use magic to spy, but their magic can’t do *jack* if we use only our computers to talk. Kell, your family’s been on this land longer than about any dragon’s been on a farm. How old is your parents’ burrow?”

“Pretty old. Hundreds of years.”

“Old enough for them to build it to prevent magical snooping?” he asked pointedly.

Kell started to say something, then he laughed. “I think it is!” he said brightly. “Our great-grandsire was the one that dug it out, right after the food riots! And if he asked, Shii’s pod would have warded it against magical scrying!” Warding was a protective magic, and as such, it was within the sphere of talents of the water dragons.

“Good to know that old paranoia is going to support modern paranoia,” Ferroth said with a dark smile. “Kell, find out if your parents’ burrow is still warded. If it is, we can use it to talk freely.”

“They’ll help us,” Kell said confidently. “And I’ll ask Sella to check it out. She’ll be able to tell if it is.”

“Good. Ask around *quietly*, Kell, find out how many of the old farms still have warded burrows or store cellars. We need to know each and every one of them.”

“I’ll see to it,” Kell nodded.

“Kammi, your sire runs the TV factory. I want you to have him tell you *immediately* if the council starts interfering with his factory,” he told her.

“Sure thing, chief.”

“And I want you to ask him if, in the future, he might have room on the line to build a few things that might get lost in all the paperwork,” he said lightly.

She grinned. “Oh, you bet he would,” she replied.

“Good. That’s the first thing you do after leaving this burrow, young lady.”

“I’ll have an answer on your computer in the form of a routine activity report by sunrise, chief.”

“Good idea, make it one of those extra-boring ones filled with lots of numbers,” he said, which made her laugh.

Sella came back into his room, and Shii and Kanna were behind her. They were all dripping wet—Shii’s pod had an air-filled cave in their undersea den just so they could visit—and Shii looked a little intrigued when she saw Ferroth in the room with them. “Excuse us not announcing ourselves, my friend, but daughter Sella said you were expecting us?”

“We were, matriarch, please come in and be welcome,” Kell said, assuring her that custom hadn’t been violated. Water dragons were big on customs.

“Officially, Matriarch Shii, I’ve come to ask about why you recalled Sella from the department. But that’s not all I’m here to talk about.”

She nodded gravely. “Well, officially, I recalled her because I need her help in the pod, due to the increase in the tithe,” she answered. “Unofficially, I want her out of the department if you aren’t the one in control of it. Now, what else did you wish to discuss?”

“The same thing Matron Kanna did, Matriarch. We’re trying to figure out where the water dragons stand over this tithe increase. Have you heard what else is going on?”

She nodded. “Geon and Anthra are but a single step from boycotting the council. Our own members are nearly as furious, but they won’t tell me why. Something serious is going on up there on that aerie, and it does not bode well. Not well at all,” she grunted.

“I thought you might, Matriarch. You’re highly respected and hear many things others don’t,” Ferroth said.

“The water dragons are very angry over the tithe, but as yet, they don’t blame the earth dragons for it,” she said. “And I will work to ensure they *do not*.”

“I couldn’t have asked for more, Matriarch,” Ferroth said gratefully. “Matron Kanna, may I come to call tomorrow afternoon? I’d like to discuss certain matters with you and Patron Keth, and formally apologize for getting Kell fired earlier today.”

“Of course, Chief Ferroth,” she said easily. “I’ll prepare a special meal for you.”

“I’ll bring an atonement present,” he said automatically. “I can’t stay any longer. They already have the sky dragons watching me, and I’ve been here long enough to get the answer I sought concerning Sella. Matriarch, Matron, thank you for your answers, and it would please me to ask you for your discretion.”

“You have it, Chief Ferroth,” Shii said with a single nod.

“Of course, Chief. You’ve been a good friend of our family, and Kell thinks much of you. It’s our honor that you’d trust us so.”

“It’s at times like these that the bonds of family will be most important,” he told them. “And the friendship between the earth and water dragons.” He stood up and shivered his wings, then folded them back. “You know what to do,” he said, looking at Kell and Kammi.

“It’ll get done, chief, that’s a promise,” Kammi answered.

Kell watched Ferroth leave, and it suddenly hit him just how *damn smart* Ferroth really was. Even when he was building the department, he must have foreseen that a day like this may come, that the council and the magical dragons may try to tear down everything the earth dragons built, and he’d prepared for it. Even such moves like hiring Sella, bringing in Kell, they were all machinations, furtherances of his goal, because even though Kell was a good worker and had honestly earned his position, he also had *connections*, contacts and friendships far beyond just the department. Through Kell, Ferroth got access to Keth and Kanna, and that was a *formidable* asset, for Kell’s family was old, established, and respected among the earth dragons. Kammi’s ascension in the department was also becoming clear. Again, it wasn’t because Kammi was bad at her job, she was actually an outstanding field agent, but her father ran the TV factory, and that gave Ferroth access to its production line. Ferroth had cultivated those connections, built them, and now that his department was under siege, he was going to pull on every string he had tied around the island.

Kell realized that Ferroth had to be one of the most savvy *politicians* on Draconia, building his network of power, and now falling back on it when his position and his life’s work were under attack.

Kell’s admiration and respect of his cantankerous boss went up a few *dozen* notches on the tree.

“I have a lot to do, and the chief’s right, they can’t see us congregating or they’ll get suspicious,” Kammi said, leaning over and bumping her cheek

against Kell's neck. "Matron, Matriarch, please excuse me. Don't be a stranger, Sella, come visit me sometime!"

"I'd be happy to, Jasper."

"Kammi now, at least until I get my job back," she grinned. "I'll get right to work on the list, Kell. Email me your keysets as soon as you can."

"Sure thing, Kammi," he replied, and she bounded out after Ferroth like an exuberant puppy.

"I see that my suspicions were correct," Shii mused. "The council made a grave error today. They have incited Ferroth, and they are about to find out that his fangs are far longer than they anticipated."

"I was thinking the same thing," Kanna agreed with a nod.

"Speaking of inciting," Kell said lightly. "Please excuse my rudeness for a moment, Shii. Sella, I need you to do me a favor," he said, speaking English. If they were scrying against him with magic, him speaking English would thwart anyone who couldn't speak it. For them, English was going to be their secret language.

"Sure, Kell. What is it?"

"I want you to go to our family burrow and assense it," he told her. "Ferroth is fairly sure it's old enough to be one of the burrows the earth dragons had the water dragons ward after the food riots. He wants to know if it is, and if so, if the wards are still in place."

"It is, and they are," Shii said, speaking heavily accented English, which startled Kell. "She's been teaching us," she said, which made Kell laugh ruefully.

"I'll let him know later tonight when I email him," Kell said, then he went back to draconic. "Chief left me a pretty long list of things to do, so please excuse me. My burrow is yours, but I cannot be a proper host right now," he said delicately, which was a very polite way to ask them to leave.

“Of course, my young friend. I have my own tasks awaiting me,” Shii said. “Come, Sella. We have work to do.”

“Yes, Matriarch,” she replied, bobbing her head. “Swim tonight?” she asked him.

“I’ll be here,” Kell answered. “Come get me when you have free time.”

“I think a family gathering might be in order,” Shii said. “We can bring some tuna my younglings caught this morning.”

“We just got some onions in from a trade,” Kanna offered. “Those big sweet ones you really like, Shii.”

“At the beach an hour before sunset?” Shii offered.

“It’s an engagement,” Kanna nodded with a smile.

“Sounds good, I do love those onions,” Shii said, leading the other two females out of his burrow.

Kell went over to his computer, reared up and leaned back to sit on his haunches and tail, then started a new process and accessed the Liberty Six encryption algorithms he’d stolen from the CIA last year. They’d used them for about a month before changing them in a way that made it impossible for Kell and the department to eavesdrop, at least until they got the new keysets; that was what made it so good. Even if one had the algorithms, unless they also had the current keysets, it was totally secure. Every time the CIA changed their keysets, Kell or one of the other hacker specialists had to invade the CIA’s network and get them.

But, he then realized that with him out of the department, he was no longer going to be the one contacting Jenny in an official capacity. That made him start another process and use a nifty little program based on an Iphone app that located her cell phone, and he saw she was in the White House when he brought up a map.

Worked for him. He dialed her number, then set his headset over his earholes, and when she didn't pick up, he used another little program that forced her phone to pick up. Her voice was muffled as she talked, and he realized she had her phone in her pocket, probably had the ringer disabled so she wouldn't be disturbed. Well, Kell was never one to leave things lay, so he forced her phone to ring.

"What the? I turned it off!" she protested, her voice becoming more clear. Kell activated her speaker phone function.

"Of course you turned it off. Next time, buy a more secure phone," he called. "Good evening, Mister President. Please pardon the interruption."

"*Kell!*" she gasped.

"Well then, it's good to finally hear your voice, Agent Kell," a different voice called, distant, harder to hear. "I'm President Jack Walker."

"I didn't entirely mean to bother you while you were busy, but something very important came up that impacts everything," he said as he started typing. "Mister President, I'll no longer be the one contacting the humans in an official capacity. I can't tell you for sure who that new dragon will be, but it won't be me, and odds are, it won't be an earth dragon."

"What happened?"

"I got fired," he said simply. "They don't know I can do this, but then again, the jackwagon they put in as the chief of the department wouldn't be able to count his toes with a calculator."

"Why did they do that?" Jenny asked.

"Ferroth certainly didn't," he said. "Ferroth is so angry he could chew through the volcano. He almost spiked the chromatic right there in the office. The head of it is that there's a new department chief, a chromatic, and he decided that I had no business keeping my job after being exposed. The tail of it is, the council is trying to take over the department, and this chromatic is their lackey."

“Well, we thank you for the heads-up, Agent,” President Walker said, his voice much stronger now; Jenny must have brought the phone close to him. “Care to enlighten us on what exactly is going on?”

“I’d be happy to, sir,” he said easily. “Because it’s important for the humans to understand what’s going on right now. I don’t want you to be surprised over what might happen.”

“Then please, go ahead.”

“Certainly. After you discovered me, the council, to use a term, freaked out. They brought Jenny to Draconia to show the humans we mean no harm, but what’s more is that the council had an apoplexy. They blame the department, and I guess we do own that blame, but now there’s more going on. We think they’re blaming *all* the earth dragons for just one mistake by one of us...me. They’re trying to take over the department by installing this new chief who has no idea what we do or how anything works, and he’ll purge the department of anyone not loyal to the council. Which honestly means he’ll have to fire every single earth drake in the building and replace them with other dragons. That’s exactly what we think he’s been told to do. Get rid of the earth dragons and replace us with more *competent* dragons,” he snorted. “My,” Walker breathed.

“Odds are, sir, the next official contact you get will be from the chromatic. He’ll probably decide that something that important requires his personal attention. I’m sure Jenny—Major Edwards described the basic personality of a chromatic?”

“She did. What is his name, and how do we address him?”

“A chromatic will never tell you his name,” Kell replied. “It’s part of their customs. They won’t even use nicknames or handles.”

“Alright. I can remember something that simple,” he said with a light chuckle.

“The punishment is going far past the department,” Kell said darkly. “They’ve doubled the tithes.”

“Tithes? What are those?”

“Oh, I must have not explained that to Jenny,” he grunted. “It’s a tax of sorts they place on the farms and water dragons. The council claims a portion of every harvest or catch, then distributes that tithed food among the non-producing dragons in the form of payment for services rendered. In actuality, they just take our food and give it to the fires, skies, and chromatics so they don’t have to do any manual labor,” he said with a grunt. “Anyway, the council announced today they’re doubling the tithe, which is going to force us to work much harder to produce enough food to meet the tithes and have enough left over for ourselves. Some dragons working in factories and in other places might even have to return to their family farms so there’s enough labor to meet the demand the tithes will put on them. Sire himself said he’ll need one or two more hands to meet the tithes, so I’ll probably be splitting my attention between the farm and my work for a while. Their official reason is that they want two years’ worth of food stockpiled in case some kind of incident with the humans disrupts food production. Anyone with a brain can see, though, that it’s nothing but a punitive measure. They’re pulling on the leash they have around the earth dragons and trying to drive a wedge between us and the water dragons in one fell swoop, because the water dragons are just as ticked off as we are. They have to meet those new tithes too. We were afraid that the water dragons would blame *us* for *their* tithes being increased, but from what we’ve learned so far, they aren’t. So in that respect, all the council really did was tick off the water dragons for no good reason, and that’s never a very smart thing to do. The water dragons rarely if ever involve themselves in politics, but when they do, it usually takes the council a few years to recover from the butt-whoopin’. They hit hard and go for the throat.”

There was a long silence on their end, so Kell continued. “So, what you need to expect, Mister President, is that your next official contact with us is going to be with a dragon that barely speaks English and will be mortally offended if you don’t fall down and grovel before him.”

“I understand.”

“What are you going to do about it, Kell?” Jenny asked.

“Oh, we’re going to do something about it alright,” he growled ominously. “I may be fired, but I have so many back doors into the department, they’ll never keep me out. I’ll undo everything that chromatic does from outside, and I’ve archived every byte of data we’ve compiled over the years so we have a backup in case the chromatic tries to purge our databases. Me and Jasper are going to work together. She quit the instant we found out they demoted and replaced Ferroth, so me and her are going to start spying against our own department,” he chuckled. “Ferroth will do what he can from inside to block the chromatic, at least until the fluffy wises up and fires him. Then the fangs get bared and things get nasty,” he said darkly.

“Fluffy?” Jenny asked.

“What we call the chromatics. You saw one, Jenny. Is it a stretch?”

She chuckled. “I guess not,” she agreed.

“Ferroth gave me and Kammi—Jasper a list of things to do, and I have a few thing I’ll be doing on my own. One of those things is finding out *why* they want to split the earth and water dragons up. They must have some reason for not wanting the water dragons to take our side, and I want to know what it is.”

“What can we do to help, Kell?”

“You? Just play nice with the chromatic and let us go about kicking his feathery tail out of our department,” he replied strongly. “You can’t show any favoritism, Jenny, I told you that. If the chromatic thinks you prefer dealing with us over him, he’ll hate you until the end of time. And the first thing he’d probably do is ensure that the council thinks that all humans are psychopathic maniacs that eat live hatchlings and wear dragonhide underwear. That chromatic is in a position to *permanently* destroy any chance you have to reach any kinds of agreements with the council. Tread very, very lightly.”

“I understand, Kell,” Jenny replied evenly.

“Well, Major, it seems your observations were dead on,” Walker noted.

“I didn’t pick her because she has nice hair, Mister President,” Kell said lightly. “Jenny’s the smartest human I’ve ever played the game against. You should listen to her, she won’t steer you wrong.”

“I’m starting to agree with you, Agent Kell,” President Walker replied.

“Just Kell,” he said easily. “And let me apologize again for bothering you. This was important, and I love proving to Jenny that she can’t protect anything she owns that has a microchip in it from me,” he chuckled.

“I’m working on that,” she retorted.

“Your toaster is next,” he warned, which made Walker laugh raucously.

“If I get burnt toast in the morning, I know who to blame!” she called.

“You’ll take whatever I do to you because you can’t stop me,” he teased.

She laughed. “I’ll sic your mother on you!” she threatened.

“Okay, the fangs are bared now, and you just earned yourself something black and smoking for breakfast,” he retorted, which made her and Walker both laugh. “Anyway, I have to go, I’ve barely scratched the surface of what Chief told me to do. Gaia embrace you, my friends, and it was good to meet you, Mister President.”

“You as well, Kell,” his voice replied.

“Be careful, friend,” Jenny said sincerely.

“I’m an earth dragon, we define careful,” he replied lightly, then cut the connection.

17 May 2017. 01:17 EDT; The White House

“Well, Major, that was about everything you warned us that might happen coming to a head in short order,” Walker said as his aides scurried around. Jenny felt a little uncomfortable sitting in the Oval Office, in a plush antique chair facing Walker’s rather formidable desk. Hot cups of coffee were on that huge mahogany desk, something that Walker had held onto since his days in the army, a hand-built desk by his grandfather, who had been a furniture maker by trade. He’d made the desk for Walker as soon as he’d learned he’d earned his way into West Point, and Walker had moved it from assignment to assignment over his military career. It was a little banged up and scratched here and there, but in a way, that desk mirrored the President’s personality; well-traveled, wise, and with a vast pool of experience from which to draw. The desk story was one of Walker’s stump speeches during the election cycle, so Jenny and just about everyone else knew about it.

“I don’t really like being right, and I’m surprised it happened that fast,” she fretted. “The dragons seemed to me like they didn’t move very fast about anything.”

“Well, what do you think happens now?”

“Now? The earth dragons retaliate,” she replied immediately. “You heard Kell. They’re not going to let the council get away with it. They’ve had a taste of independence, of real power in their society, and they won’t give it up. They’ll fight tooth and nail to keep control of the department, because it’s the focus of all their power they’ve managed to gather since it was created.”

“Who do you think we should send to the island if we can arrange another meeting?”

“The Secretary of State at the least,” she replied. “Maybe even the Vice President, if the Secret Service would allow it. Someone of high status, who can negotiate in good faith. Dragons are big on status.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Congratulations, Major, you’ve just been transferred directly to the office of the Secretary of State,” he told her.

She laughed. “I’d rather stay with the Hunters, sir. But if you want me to go, I’d jump at the chance. I really want to go back.”

“You’re the only human being with any kind of face to face experience with the dragons, Major. That you’d be there is the mother of all obvious statements. Secretary Kent will need your expertise. I’ll arrange a meeting so you and him can start preparing for a possible diplomatic visit.”

Jenny was looking at her phone. “Yes, sir. Just how did he *do* that,” she mused under her breath.

“You said that the earth dragons knew more about some of our tech than we do. That was a good demonstration of it,” Walker chuckled. “You’d better turn it off. Maybe even take out the battery.”

“Yes, you’re right, sir. He might have left something on it. I’ll have to go over it later,” she said, turning the phone over to remove the battery.

“I’ll have the service issue you a secure phone,” Walker said. “We’ll just transfer your number over.”

“Yes sir,” she nodded. “But somehow, I get the feeling he’d hack that one too.”

“Probably,” Walker chuckled. “He seems to like you personally. Sounded like he did it just to tweak your nose.”

“I hope so, because I like him,” she replied. “And yes, he did. He hacked my work computer and had it play *Somebody’s Watching Me*. He has a quirky sense of humor.”

“At least he *has* one, Major, and one we can understand. That he does is one indication that perhaps we and they can find common ground and get along.”

“That’s true, sir,” she nodded seriously.

Chapter 4

18 May 2017, 11:46 DMT; Dawnmist Village, Draconia

No matter how much he loved computers, there was just something... satisfying about working the land.

Kell reared up on his hind legs and settled into an erect sitting position, sitting on his haunches and base of his tail as he looked down the rows of radishes ready for harvesting. Their family had carefully managed their radishes over the centuries to turn them into absolute giants compared to the radishes humans knew, much like Hett's family had managed to produce the gigantic sweet onions that were in heavy demand just about everywhere. Their radishes were what the other dragons would call earth dragon food, with a flavor that only earth dragons savored, and Keth's radishes were bigger and more robust than any other grown radish on the island. Among the earth dragons, Keth's radishes were nearly as popular as Hett's onions.

The island's climate allowed them to grow food year round, in a carefully managed schedule of land usage that Keth oversaw with both precision and endless tweaking and adjusting to maximize land usage and crop production against expended labor and resources. The food grown on Keth's farm could feed all of Dawnmist were it not for the tithes, which before the increase had taken about 50% of the yields. But with the tithe increase, it meant that nearly 85% of all the food they grew was going to be taken by the council to both feed the non-producing dragons and store towards calamity. Keth had already drawn up a new planting schedule, and while the rest of his family was busy planting new crops of radishes, carrots, potatoes, and cabbage on the center slope and north tracts, Keth was sowing their starter crop of wheat on the most fertile tract they had, the

north lower slope tract. Kell and Kitta had been tasked to harvest the south coastal tract of potatoes and the south slope tract of radishes.

Harvesting potatoes was a simple affair in one way, a complex one in another. The trick of it was to pull the potato plant, remove the potatoes, then replant it without damaging the plant's production capability, and it was a skill that earth dragon potato farmers practiced to the point of precision. Human potato farmers just yanked the plants up using machines and then replanted new ones, which made it more efficient from a harvesting standpoint, but a potato plant would produce potatoes for *years* if properly managed, and earth dragons weren't all that intent on squeezing every last drop of blood out of their potato crops the way for-profit human farmers were. A potato tract had a producing life cycle of two years in Keth's land management scheme, and the plants were usually pulled up and immediately replanted somewhere else to let the tract lay fallow and regenerate, mixing in mature plants capable of withstanding the shock of transplant with new plants they cultivated in a seedling tract close to the burrow. Kitta especially had something of a knack for potatoes, able to identify plants with enough harvest-worthy spuds to dig it up, and she could extract the potatoes often without uprooting the plant. She'd dig around it, pluck the potatoes, then replace the dirt after mixing in a special fertilizer Keth had invented that lessened the shock of it on the potato plant and allowed it to recover and produce more potatoes very quickly. That let the plant continue to produce potatoes.

But not for much longer. According to the new schedule, they were going to completely harvest the south coastal tract and let it lay fallow for half a season and plant a new tract on the northwest upper slope.

Harvesting radishes was even easier...all he had to do was pull them out of the ground. He'd worked his way across about a quarter of the field already, because it was a simple affair to just reach around the radish and into the ground, grab it, then pull it out the bulb. Drop it in the yoke baskets he was using and set at strategic points on the field, then haul in the baskets when he was done. The radishes were fat, juicy, and healthy, and the smell of the earth and the tang of the radishes made him hungry enough to pop

one in his mouth every now and then, harvesting them directly into his belly.

At least in that respect, they were lucky. The island was so far from anything else that they had no damaging insects on the island, but since they *did* have bees, a very curious indigenous bee population that had survived on the flowers before they arrived, they had no problems pollinating their crops. Kell had never seen any instance where bees lived on such a remote island like theirs, but they weren't complaining. The bees on their island weren't exactly the honeybees that humans thought bees to be, but when it came to pollinating, they were just as prodigious as honeybees. Since they didn't have to defend their crops against weevils, beetles, or anything like that, all they had to do was make sure the sea salt didn't harm their crops and keep the soil fertile, and it was almost easy to farm on the island.

Of course, they did have conventional honeybees now. They were one of the animals they imported onto the island once they started exploring human civilization, and they seemed to coexist with the native bee population without too much friction. The native bees were almost like earth dragons in that they were burrowers, living in excavated hives in the forests on the northeast side of the island and flying all over the island in search of flowers. They stored their honey underground, which made it impossible to extract the honey without destroying the hive, and all attempts by the earth dragons to coax them into above-ground hives had failed. Any queen they brought out and trapped in an above-ground hive that would give them access to the honey died within days. Some earth dragons kept hives of European honeybees for both honey and crop pollination, but Kell's family didn't. Gev's family did, honey being one of the food items their farm produced, and their bees were quite happy to wander over and share pollination duty with the burrowing bees that flew down from the forest.

It had taken him about half the night to do everything Ferroth wanted. By far, the hardest thing he had to do was hack Ferroth's old computer in his office, which the chromatic had inherited. Though he wasn't a computer specialist, Ferroth *really* knew his computers, and he had defenses in his

computer that didn't exist anywhere but in a field agent's box. It took Kell nearly four hours to finally crack Ferroth's box, and it was why he had Kell do it rather than Kammi. But once he was in, he made sure that the chromatic couldn't so much as pass in front of it without him knowing. Ferroth had a webcam on his box, and Kell had control of that, his microphone, a keylogger and mouse tracker, a syslog that would track every process the computer ran, and a data sniffer that would track the raw data transmitted to and from that computer. At that moment, a process on Kell's third computer was mimicking everything Ferroth's computer did back in his burrow using a mirror utility...which would be about nothing. The chromatic had absolutely *no* idea what a computer was or how it worked, and from what Kell had seen on the webcam that morning, he was afraid to even get very close to it.

Even as Kell owned the chromatic's box, he and Kammi both owned the entire network in the department. He actually came across some of her work as he was planting some data sniffer programs in some critical switches in the network to track dataflow. She had already been hard at work subverting the department's computer network to her whim and will, so he did his work to add a second layer of surveillance, then he stress tested their network over the night to make sure that his and Kammi's work wouldn't slow down the network to the point where it would be noticed. Their shadow programs in the network caused a 13.6 microsecond delay in overall network performance, which was the equivalent of the entire network running through two extra switches...that wouldn't attract any undue attention. And if it did, the only dragons that would notice it would be dragons that wouldn't say anything about it if they realized what was going on.

It took him until nearly sunrise to get everything done, make sure it worked, then cover his tracks, so he was a little slow getting started. Earth dragons didn't sleep much, maybe three to four hours a day, but they *really* didn't like to miss what little sleep they did need. And earth dragons weren't like some other dragons, who slept for the sake of sleep. If they weren't asleep, they were doing something. He yawned and looked out over

the ocean, saw several shimmers that had to be Shii's pod leaving the cove, four of the seven water dragons in her family heading out to sea to fish. It would be led by either Shii or Surrall, the matriarch and patriarch of the pod, leading their children out for a day of hunting for schools of fish in open water or fish along the coral reefs surrounding their island and the four uninhabited islands within 60 miles of theirs. Those islands were basically palm-covered rocks in the middle of nowhere, but all four of them had extensive reef systems with lots of fish. Kell didn't doubt that Sella was among the three children heading out with their parent to fish. She was probably a little rusty due to working in the department and needed some action to get her fishing skills back up to fighting trim.

Sella was the oldest of the five children still in Shii's pod. Her clutchmate in the pod was Ralla, a rather energetic male water drake who was entertaining the possibility of striking out on his own to form his own pod, if he could find suitable territory. Their third clutchmate Jiima had struck out on her own to start a pod with her lifemate, with their parents' blessing. They had had Kell, Keth, and Kanna excavate out a small underwater den for them about a mile to the south in a favorable spot, and now they were a pod of two working to increase their numbers. Water dragons didn't often ask earth dragons to dig them dens since they preferred underwater sea caves, but Keth's family were all great swimmers and could do underwater work. It was something of a specialty of theirs, and they'd dug out three of the chambers in the ancestral den of Shii's pod. Ralla's intent to start his own pod as well would also be with the blessing of his matriarch and patriarch, at least once he found a lifemate. The others were like his siblings, younglings, three clutchmates who were a little older than his siblings and were still learning the art of open sea fishing. They were Jerral, Hura, and Kii, and they were the fastest friends with Kav, Kitta, and Konn. Watching a moment showed him that all three younglings had been left behind, no doubt annoyingly so to them, left in charge of the kelp beds that lined the shallower, sheltered side of the cove. The kelp was a variety that actually did fairly well in the warmer waters surrounding their island, where most kelp species preferred colder waters. And like most plants the dragons managed, Shii's pod had cultivated and carefully crossbred their

kelp so it reached oversized, almost gigantic proportions. They had to fight a constant battle with the warm-water lobsters that loved to sneak over from the reef and eat the kelp, but the most daring of those lobsters usually ended up being a water dragon's snack.

He yawned again and got back to work, dragging a yoke basket along behind him, hooked over the spikes on his tail, efficiently pulling the giant radishes out of the ground and either lobbing them into the basket or sliding it over and dropping them in. His mind worked as his forepaws did, pondering just how he could get cameras up onto Council Aerie and around their magical alarms. The problem was, the council's aerie was the highest point, which would prevent him from just planting a camera on an overlook and zoom it in. Any camera placed had to be *on* the aerie, and even more, it had to evade the notice of the sky dragons. Sky dragons had raptor-like sight, able to count the individual hairs on the fur coat of a mouse from a hundred feet up, and even a microcam *would* be noticed unless it was hidden cleverly. Cameras in the department were no problem, they had closed-circuit surveillance cameras in the main rooms that Kell had already hacked, but they didn't see everywhere. Ferroth wanted 100% coverage, even in rooms like the research labs where they had no cameras, and Kell had no doubt that Ferroth was spending part of his day installing micro-cams anywhere the regular cameras couldn't reach.

A thump on the ground behind him made him turn, and he saw Kammi folding her wings after landing from a glide. She spread them back out and shivered them before folding them again because the shoulder satchel she had buckled around her left wing had slipped, then started on the way over to him. "Hey Kell," she said lightly.

"Hey Kammi. What are you doing here?"

"Keth hired me as a farmhand," she grinned. "It seems that your family needs some help with the crops due to the tithe, and he offered it to me since I quit the department. So, where do I start?" she asked.

Kell just had to chuckle. Clever, clever Ferroth, making sure that Kell and Kammi had a perfectly viable reason to spend a lot of time together, which would let them plot to their dark little hearts' content. Though communication over computers was secure, it wasn't all that fast, and it restricted them their burrows or to cart around tablets, which would look a little strange out on the farm. Although cell phones were quickly catching on with farmers for quick and efficient communication with family and farmhands on distant fields, for them to suddenly speak nothing but English while using them would look strange, and they couldn't draw that kind of attention to themselves at the time. Keth commonly used a tablet to track his schedules and land planning, a gift from Kell on Gaia's Day a couple of years ago, and Kell was trying to convince them to start using the cell phones he'd bought for them, which used the island's own private cell phone network. But as yet, Kanna hadn't quite adapted to the "new-fangled thing," as she called it, and Keth wouldn't bother carrying a phone if Kanna wasn't using hers.

"Well, grab a basket and start pulling radishes," he said, pulling another out of the ground.

"Wow, I haven't done anything like this in a while," she chuckled as she looked back and forth, then bounded up to the end of the rows he was harvesting.

"Don't tear them up!" Kell barked. "Grab and pull, keep your claws out of it!"

"I can handle this!" she shot back.

Despite not having done any farm work in a while, Kammi was efficient and solid. She kept up with him as they harvested, moving side by side after finishing his rows and moving up and down the tract, filling two dozen yoke baskets with radishes. They finished in midafternoon, then used yoke bars to carry the baskets over their necks and upper backs just forward of their wings, four or six baskets at a time, balanced on the yoke bars. Kell maximized every trip by carrying a yoke bar with two attached baskets in

his mouth. As they worked, they talked, making sure to speak English to defeat scrying. The scryer would hear their words, but the nature of scrying magic was such that they couldn't use magic to translate what they heard. If they didn't *speak* English, they would have no idea what they were saying. And despite how secretive the chromatics were, the department knew for a fact that none of them spoke English. With the exception of Shii, they knew *every* dragon that could speak English, and with the exception of Shii, Keth, and Kanna, all of them worked in the department. Some dragons had picked up broken English from the TV, learning it via hearing against reading subtitles, but they weren't anywhere near fluent.

The baskets were carried down to the main storage chamber, a huge barn-like chamber dug out not far from their burrow, a deep, very wide, low-ceilinged chamber which was nearly half full with radishes, pumpkins, eggplants, and potatoes. The pumpkins and eggplants were fairly perishable and were awaiting pickup by the tithe collectors, so they were stored near the entry of the chamber. That didn't stop Kammi from filching a pumpkin, biting it a few times before she broke it into enough pieces to swallow. Like many kinds of reptiles—though dragons weren't entirely reptiles, more related to birds or dinosaurs than modern reptiles—earth dragons didn't exactly chew their food. If it was small enough to swallow, they swallowed it whole. If it wasn't, their sharp teeth were designed to chop it up into manageable pieces, which were then swallowed. She wiped a bit of pumpkin flesh that squirted between her teeth and onto her chops, then grinned at him with pumpkin seeds stuck to her fangs.

“You are gonna get *so* fat if you keep working here,” he accused.

She laughed. “I’m still a growing girl,” she said primly, wagging her tail a bit.

“Well, you’ve pretty much well eaten your entire allotment for the day,” he told her.

“I have *not*!” she countered, pushing at him with her shoulder as they went back for more baskets.

“Girl, you ate nearly a basket full of radishes. They go in the *basket*, not in your mouth!”

“And you weren’t doing the same?” she countered.

“Not half as often as you were,” he retorted. “And it’s *my* family’s farm. You’re just the hired help!”

“Oh, lick my tail, you dust-sniffer,” she taunted cheekily, putting her nose up as she sauntered towards the ramp. Her swagger turned into a desperate dash when Kell lunged after her, and he chased her all the way back to the radish field.

Kammi was one of the smallest earth drakes on the island for her age, but she was *fast* when it came to running for her life, Kell discovered.

Despite more horseplay than was normal for drakes their age, they got all the radishes into the storage chamber before the others finished their daily tasks, and they did what earth dragons do, which was go help the others finish their tasks. They helped Kitta finish harvesting potatoes, then the three of them helped Keth sow the last of his brand new crop of wheat, which he carefully logged in the tablet computer Kell had given him, which he used in his farm management. It was dragon made and had a touch screen that could resist the razor-sharp points of an earth dragon’s claws, as well as being highly durable. And on their farm, the unit being completely waterproof was a necessity, for Keth often dove down to see Shii without removing his shoulder satchel. When they finished that, they helped the others gather up their tools after they finished planting their assigned crops, then they headed back for the burrow, talking and laughing as Kav and Konn chased each other around. Kammi got along very well with his parents and Kitta took an immediate liking to her.

Kammi hung around, knowing that Ferroth was coming to call later that evening, and she interjected herself quite seamlessly into his family’s workings. She helped Kanna gather up what she wanted to serve for dinner, then she played a little bit with Kav and Konn as Kanna did some actual cooking. She had a bread oven, something Kell had brought back for her

from the outside world, and she was kneading dough on the counter using flour they'd bartered from Bruk's family, mixed with some spices Kell had brought to give the bread a burly, seasoned flavor. Bruk's family had built a small flour mill on the edge of their farm, and they did very well for themselves bartering flour and milling services for wheat on top of the farming they did. Kammi even taught the hatchlings some English as they sat in front of the TV, translating for them as they watched *Bushtail* on TV, one of the newer cartoons on Cartoon Network. Kell preferred the older ones they showed, like the long-running, venerable *Johnny Test* and Looney Toons.

Ferroth arrived an hour before sunset, as was proper, carrying a small gift in one forepaw and moving along on his other three legs. He handed the gift over to Kanna with a nod, then came over to Kell and Kammi as Kell tormented Kav, holding him down on his back and tickling him as his younger sibling struggled. "I see Keth didn't waste any time hiring you, Kammi," he said.

"I got word of it this morning," she replied. "He came to visit the factory about lunchtime, and hired me."

"Slick, chief, slick," Kell complemented as Kav squealed in laughter.

"Age has advantages, whelp," he said with a sly smile. "So, did you get everything done?"

"Everything on my list," Kammi replied. "How was work?"

"I spent half the day up on Scion Aerie trying my best not to go back down there and murder that incompetent fluffputz," he growled, which made Kell laugh.

"Did you plant the cameras?"

"I didn't tell you I was doing that."

"You didn't hire us because we're dumb, chief," Kammi grinned.

He chuckled. "True enough. Yeah, I got most of the department covered. The cameras are controlled by a ghost process floating through the network. I'll let you two find it on your own."

"I love a challenge," Kammi said lightly.

"So, it sounds like he was being monumentally stupid," Kell prompted.

"Oh, *slightly*," Ferroth growled, which made Kammi giggle a little. "He's decided to completely reorganize the entire department."

"How so?"

"He dropped a book on the conference table when he called the supervisors together," he grunted. "He'd written up a new organizational plan which completely eliminates the media observation center and cuts the internet surveillance unit by half."

"That's over sixty drakes!" Kammi protested.

"Fired, effective at close of shift today," he frowned. "He said he's not keeping staff that does nothing but sit and watch TV and listen to satellite radio all day, and that the webpage watchers can just get more efficient."

"But we need them now more than ever, with us being exposed!" Kammi exclaimed. "We have to know what the humans are saying, what they're doing! He should be adding temporary staff to help!"

"Well, see, that makes sense, Kammi, so naturally he won't do it," he replied, which made Kell chuckle ruefully. "He's also cut the staffing for technology research, firing at least one drake on every project."

"And what reasoning did he give the council for all this?" Kell asked.

"Saving on food allotments the council doles out to the department. He said to them, and I quote, 'they're earth drakes, they should be digging in the dirt with the rest of their kind, growing their own food instead of taking it from the mouths of more important dragons'."

"That little punk!" Kammi snapped. "I'm gonna spike him *so* hard!"

“Get in line, I get first launch,” Ferroth growled. “Geon almost spiked him right there on the aerie, and I mean literally,” he said with a dark chuckle. “Anthra was the only thing that saved that fluffy’s tail. Jussa, the water wyrm, called for an immediate vote to fire the chromatic citing obvious and blatant prejudice against the very drakes he was hired to oversee, which naturally failed five to four. But the fact that he called for the vote so quickly made the chromatic end council immediately, before that idiot said something that got the sky dragons angry and caused a vote flip. The fires do anything the chromatic says, but the sky dragons can be a wild card. They can be notional sometimes.”

“Well, we figured they put him there to basically run the department into the ground. He certainly didn’t waste any time proving it,” Kell grunted.

“And he’s not even trying to hide what he’s doing,” Ferroth nodded. “So, I’ve already made some arrangements to get the fired drakes on in factories, where they’ll just be doing their department work in offices in the factories. The factory managers have already signed on. I’ll also have some of them do their work from their burrows. The rest already told me they’re going back to family farms, because the increased tithes means that their families need their help to meet them.”

“Allotments?”

“I’m still working on that,” he said. “Most of them agreed to go on reduced pay while we fix this mess, but they still need to eat. So I need to talk to Keth and have him help me get a meeting together of the council heads of all the earth villages. We can hold it over in Blackstone village, their council chamber is warded. It’s just gonna take a couple of days to set up, and we don’t hide what we’re doing. As far as the fluffies are concerned, the council leaders are meeting to discuss the increased tithes. If we can organize allotments for the fired department workers out of our own stores, there’s not a damn thing the fluffies can say about it. What *we* do is *our* business.”

“Well, Keth’s right in there,” Kell urged, pointing towards the kitchen. “You’d better get his attention before dinner does.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Be back in a bit,” he said, turning and ambling into the kitchen.

“Did you get any info about warded burrows?” Kammi asked.

“Afraid not, I was busy most of the day,” he said. “I plan on going out tomorrow. Sire is going to have me run errands for him in the morning.”

Ferroth returned a few minutes later, sitting down by Kell. “Did the department try to contact Jenny?” Kell asked.

Ferroth shook his head. “Not yet, but the chromatic doesn’t even know *how*. When he fired you, he fired the only drake that had the contact numbers, at least after some scoundrel deleted the contact records out of the system.”

Kell laughed brightly. “Well, there’s ammunition.”

“I know. The first time the council asks him to contact the humans, I want to be there to watch him squirm. Now, give me a report on what got done today.”

Kell and Kammi told him everything that they’d managed to do, including harvesting the radish field, which made Ferroth chuckle a bit. Kammi had finished everything on her list, but Kell had yet to locate the warded burrows. “I’ll be doing that tomorrow,” he told Ferroth. “Sire is sending me out on a bunch of errands, so I’ll do the asking around while I’m out.”

“I’ve already compiled a partial list,” he told them. “I’ve been sending out in-house emails asking anyone who knows if a burrow or storage chamber is warded, to let me know. Since it’s all on the computer, they can’t scry it out,” he chuckled. “I’ve gotten back sixteen locations that I confirmed are still warded and about thirty probables, you know, burrows and storage chambers old enough but the residents aren’t sure if they were

warded. It's easy enough to find out if they're warded. I have a ward-sensing crystal in my office that still works, you know, one of those ancient ones the chromatics made to detect warded areas, and I just take it with me into the burrows. When it goes dark, then the burrow is warded."

"How in Gaia's embrace did you get your paws on *that*?" Kell asked.

"It wasn't easy," he smiled lightly. "I've had it for a few years. Part of my arsenal of little tools that I thought might be handy someday."

"I'll say," Kell laughed.

"Clever," Kammi smiled, sliding her tail up and over Kell's to nudge Ferroth's hip.

"I'm not a whelp, whelp," he replied lightly. "As soon as we have a complete list, we'll start making plans to use those areas. Mainly, I want to move some of our operations into the warded areas where we have room, so we can keep doing department work without the chromatics looking over our shoulders. Primarily technology research. I figure that fluffy's gonna completely kill the research department by the end of the month, so I want the teams to have somewhere to go."

"Leave me that crystal and I can check out some places when I'm out running errands."

"I'll get it to you by sunrise," he nodded. "Just be careful with it. I only have one."

"I'll be careful," he promised.

Ferroth and Kammi both stayed for dinner, since it had long been earth dragon custom for any hired farmhands to eat with the owner's family after work, sharing in the bounty they had helped harvest. Actually, farmhands by custom lived in the burrow with the farm owner's family, but Kammi had her own burrow and would probably decline such an offer. Kanna had gone out of her way to feed Ferroth quite a meal, with sweet onions, hard boiled ostrich eggs, warm loaves of bread, and even a buffalo she'd

managed to get her paws on ...and that wasn't easy. There weren't enough buffalo for them to really start harvesting them for food yet, but yet Kanna had managed to call in enough favors to get one. Ferroth didn't talk work or shop at the table, another long-standing earth dragon custom, leaving worries elsewhere and taking the time to *enjoy* the meal.

After dinner, however, they sat in one of the deeper chambers in his parents' large and expansive burrow, some eighteen chambers not counting storage cellars or the mushroom growing chamber, one of the larger burrows in Dawnmist because over the years it sometimes had upwards of 16 dragons living in it. They were well away from the entry ramp, and they discussed the day's events in greater detail as they waited for Keth to return from the nightly meeting of the village council. Those daily meetings usually only lasted about a half an hour, as they talked about anything important that might have happened that day or made deals between themselves, but Kell had the feeling that they were going to have a long meeting that night, so he wasn't expecting to see his sire for a while.

Keth was back earlier than Kell expected, but later than usual. He came in and sat down by Kammi, patting her on the shoulder. "What did council have to say, sire?" Kell asked.

"Going over the many rumors flowing through the farms right now," he replied. "I talked to Javan, Ferroth, and he's interested in this council of councils you've proposed. He'll make the rounds among the other council leaders tomorrow and spread the word, but he needs a day to meet."

"Three days from today, if we can manage it," Ferroth replied. "At the council chamber in Blackstone village. That chamber is warded. Tell him that the *official* reason is to discuss the increased tithes, but that the *real* reason is, well, the real reason."

"I'll tell him first thing in the morning," Keth assured him. "Kammi, I know you have your own burrow, but I'd be a rude employer if I didn't offer you a chamber in ours," he told her.

“I’ll stay in my burrow, Keth,” she told him, looking up with a smile. “But I do appreciate the offer. I have way too much stuff to move,” she laughed.

“I’d be afraid to try to move all my junk,” Kell grunted.

“I’m even an even bigger pack rat than you, Kell,” she told him. “I collected stuff from all over the human world. And it’s not far from here, so it’s not like I’ll be inconvenienced.”

“Well, you do good work, so keep it up.”

Kell gave her a sly look, but she whacked him with the underside of her tail. “Don’t say it!”

“I don’t have to say a word now,” he replied lightly.

“Did the council say anything I need to know about, Keth?” Ferroth asked.

He shook his head. “We were just discussing the rumors of what happened on Council Aerie today, and some of the other rumors we’ve been hearing. I do intend to bring up real business tomorrow, however.”

“What’s that?”

“I...don’t like what I’m seeing from the council,” he said. “It’s almost as if they are trying to deliberately provoke us. I remember the stories my grandsire told me of the food riots, and this has some of the same feeling of what led up to that. So, I’m going to request to be allowed to move our farm stores into the emergency silo. We can label everything so we know which is ours and which is part of the village emergency food stocks, but if we put it down there, out of reach of the others, they can’t try to take it. And they also won’t know how much food we have stockpiled and try to claim a portion of our past harvests as part of the new tithe.”

Ferroth gave him a look. “That’s a damn fine idea, Keth,” Ferroth agreed. “I’m sure they’ll let you do it. And if *you* do it, other farms may do it too. And right now, it’s becoming clear that we’d better take everything

that's ours and put it as far out of reach from the council as possible, because I don't doubt that if they knew how much food you had in your cellars, they'd try to take half of it."

"We can move it at night, when the sky dragons can't see," Kammi proposed.

Keth nodded. "It's not that far from our main storage chamber to the tunnel I use to reach the village, but it's still best to do it at night."

"Did Geon tell you if the tithe sunsets once we reach the new reserve level?" Kell asked.

He shook his head. "He said that the wording of the edict the council passed was vague on the matter, and he intends to get clarification. He was supposed to bring it up today, but then they had that chromatic up there," he sighed. "And Geon completely lost his composure. He's still absolutely furious."

"I don't blame him one bit," Kammi snorted. "Did Geon really try to spike him?"

"He told me that if Anthra hadn't have jumped down and interposed herself, he *would have*," he replied grimly. "And for him to be *that* angry, to have violent intent without violence being done to him first, that's saying something."

"Are the earth dragons still considering boycotting the council?" Ferroth asked. "Shii mentioned that they're thinking about it."

"Geon is suspended from council meetings for three days for his outburst, but Anthra said that we won't know what they're doing if we're not up there, so she's going to stay."

"They *suspended* him?" Ferroth gasped. "I didn't hear that!"

"That's because they did it just before ending for the day," he replied. "It's another thing that concerns me. The fire wyrm has all but attacked

other council members right on the Aerie and had nothing done to him, but they suspend Geon for a single violent outburst.”

“Well, the fires are just like that, so I guess I could see them cutting him a little slack,” Kammi said sagely. “After all, self control isn’t exactly a fire dragon trait. But it must have shocked them to see *Geon* that mad.”

“And the fact that Geon would have killed that snarky fluffy if he’d have had a clear throw,” Kell added.

Keth snorted. “I’m not one to believe in conspiracy theories, but I’m getting *very* nervous. And the more I hear, the more I see, the more nervous I get.”

“It’s well placed paranoia, Keth,” Ferroth told him. “The other dragons are up to something, and they have it out for us. They’re making us work harder, they’re trying to take the department away from us, I don’t for a minute believe that they’re not doing it on purpose. That chromatic is up to something. He has a *plan*, and I want to know what it is.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that he moved *way* too fast after Kell was exposed for it to be a reaction to the humans finding out about us. He had his lackey in place in the department two days after, and like I told Kell and Kammi, his tail-licking fluffy sycophant dropped a *book* filled with his new organizational plan on the meeting table this morning. He could not have thought that up and written it out overnight. He had it ready *before* he took over the department. This is something they’ve had planned for a while, I’m sure of it. The chromatics hate what we do, and I guess they’ve been planning this for a long time. And once Kell was exposed and the humans learned about us, well, it was the perfect opportunity to put their plan into action.”

Keth was quiet for a long moment. “I believe you have a point, my friend. But angering the majority of your food producers is not a good idea.”

“They think we can’t do anything about it,” Ferroth snapped. “Look at the worst case scenario, Keth. We get angry enough to stop feeding the others. There’s another food riot, but this time we go underground. Well, we have to come out *eventually*,” he said pointedly. “We can’t farm underground, and there aren’t enough mushroom farmers to feed all the earth dragons. And meanwhile, they just use the food stockpiles and wait us out. At the best case, the water dragons support us and help feed us, but they can’t feed us *and* themselves, not even if they stop sharing their catches with the other dragons. Besides, how would they get it to us? They’d have to come out of the water.”

“No they wouldn’t,” Kell and Keth said in unison. They chuckled and looked at each other. “You tell him, sire.”

“There’s a lava tube that opens underwater,” Keth explained. “It runs under our farm, and it’s fairly deep. We never really bothered to dig down to intersect with it, but all of us, at one point, have dived down to it and explored the lava tube. It runs up into a very large natural dome chamber that looked to be part of the original magma chamber of the extinct volcano. When the magma receded, it left that dome chamber, and it never collapsed. It would take us maybe a week or two to burrow down to that tube and open it to the burrow. We’ve always pondered doing it, to give Shii’s pod a back door into our burrow, but it’s a lot of work for what they can do in twenty seconds if they come out onto the beach, so we never really did it.”

“Where’s the opening?”

“In the cove,” Kell said.

“And the dome chamber at the end? Do you use it?”

“Nobody does,” Keth replied. “The only way in is through that lava tube. The other tubes all collapsed over the years.”

“Is the air good?”

“It has ventilation,” Keth replied.

Ferroth rapped his talons on the floor. "Can you show me this cavern?"

"I guess, but you'd better be able to swim," Kell told him. "And I mean hold your breath a long time and swim *very* fast. It's nearly five minutes underwater to get to where there's air. A good four hundred meters of the tube is flooded."

"That far?"

Kell nodded. "We've all done it, but then again, we swim a lot. I can hold my breath a good six minutes, eight if I prepare beforehand, that's enough to get to the dry part."

"It's not a swim I'd attempt anymore," Keth chuckled. "I don't swim as often as I used to. I might drown trying to make it. Kell is probably the only one that could make it without any worry. The hatchlings aren't that good at swimming yet, and Kell swims with Sella every evening. He can hold his breath longer than any of us."

"Kell, I'm going to get you a waterproof thermo camera and some gear, and I want you to dive down to that tube *tonight*," Ferroth said. "I want to know where that lava tube is, map it in relation to the surface, and I want to see that dome chamber."

"Sure, chief," Kell said. "It's no problem."

"I have some ELF gear in the department that will penetrate the ground," Ferroth said. "It's part of that mine communication rig that Slate brought back, we thought we might be able to adapt so villages could transmit messages using ground waves, but it didn't pan out because of the distances. But for this, I think it might work. Kammi, you handle the surface side of it. As long as Keth doesn't mind, you could get into the deepest chamber in the burrow and probably be able to reach Kell in the tube."

"She's more than welcome to use our mushroom cellar," Keth said. "It's the deepest chamber in the burrow."

“Not a problem, chief,” she replied. “If we end up using it, Kell can drop some directional bouncers along the tube so we can get conventional signals down there. We just install a new network node at the lava tube mouth, run some data cables down there to hook it to the network, and the signal can jump the bouncers and reach the cavern.”

“That’s fairly clever, young lady. I knew there was a reason why I hired you.”

“Clearly, it was my good looks,” she said lightly, which made Ferroth chuckle.

“If this chamber pans out, it might be *very* useful,” Ferroth said intently.

“What for?”

“An emergency evacuation shelter,” he replied. “If there’s no way in except through the water, well, we just find some way to get the earth drakes into that cave without digging any tunnels, and not even the chromatics will try to find a way in. If they can even *find* a way in. And if that doesn’t work, then we can be fairly sure that anything we put in that dome chamber won’t be found. It’ll be the ultimate hiding place.” He stood up. “Let me go get the gear. Kammi, you get things ready for when I get back. Run an extension cord down to the mushroom cellar and clear the floor so you can get the ELF transmitter on bare rock. It has to be pointing down.”

“We’ll have the hatchlings help her clear some floor space,” Keth said. “Kanna, round up the hatchlings, they have a chore to do!” he called, ambling out of the chamber.

“Do whatever it is you do to get ready to hold your breath, Kell, I’ll be right back,” Ferroth said, then he hurried from the chamber.

“So what *do* you do?” Kammi asked with a smile.

“Just hyperventilate,” he shrugged his wings. “I trained myself for deep diving because there’s a lot of really interesting things down there. Well, to dive deep, you have to be able to hold your breath a while if you’re not a water dragon.”

Ferroth returned about an hour later, a yoke bar holding two boxes of equipment. “They have guards at the department now,” he growled. “They tried to stop me from going in!”

“That punk fluffy’s moving fast,” Kammi grunted, taking one of the boxes off the chain, which made the other drop to the floor and the yoke bar slide off Ferroth’s shoulders. “So, which of the four secret entrances did you use?” she asked with a grin.

“The cafeteria trapdoor, and you’re not supposed to know about those, young lady,” he replied, which made her laugh.

“You hired us because we’re curious,” she retorted playfully.

“By the way, there are *six* secret entrances, so you weren’t curious enough,” he told her, patting her on the head like a hatchling. “Now, I’ve been here too long, and they just saw me go to work and come back, so I have to leave. Send me an email on what you find out down there.”

“Will do, chief,” Kell said as he opened a box. “If they ask about what you brought?”

“Your personal possessions from your office,” he replied.

“Got it,” he nodded, pulling out a thermo camera with a horn band, designed to clasp around the base of a horn or over the head if he was using a hider amulet. He’d used cameras like that before, and they were indeed completely waterproof. Kammi and Kell took the ELF gear down to the mushroom cellar, a dank, musty chamber deeper than any other where the hatchlings cultivated mushrooms for family consumption; it was a hobby of sorts of Konn’s. Like any mushroom cellar, there was almost as much dirt on the floor as in the troughs, which had large mushrooms growing from dark soil. But the dirt had been cleared from a section in the middle of the

room, down the wide walkway between the two inside troughs, and it was there that Kell and Kammi set up the ELF rig, making sure its plate-like antenna was squarely on the smooth bare rock of the chamber floor. Kell placed the portable transmitter in a watertight bag, placed it in a shoulder satchel he often used when diving with Sella and her pod for collecting interesting trinkets from the ocean floor, then buckled the satchel on, tugging it in place so it hung just under his left wingjoint and behind his upper left foreleg. “Remember, you have to bolt that to the wall facing up when you get down there,” Kammi said, looking over the manual.

“I was there when Ferroth was tinkering with this system,” he assured her as he locked the camera onto his right horn. “You won’t get any camera feed, so I’ll set it to record and you can look it over when I get back up.”

“Okay. I’ll have this set up and ready by the time you get down there and get it set up on your side.”

“Sounds good. I’ll try to check in in about twenty minutes.”

“I should be ready by then,” she said, plugging the included laptop into the rig, setting a mic and earphone over her head, then plugging it into the laptop. “We’re gonna have to build those bouncers, we can’t pull them out of the department.”

“Pshaw, that’s hatchling play,” Kammi said seriously as the laptop booted. “I’m more worried about running the network and power cables down into the cove without attracting attention.”

“Yeah, that’s gonna be fun. Alright, on the way. Talk to you in twenty.”

Kell left the burrow and trotted down to the beach, and wasted no time wading in and then dropping off the beach shelf and into deeper water. It was after sunset, but his thermographic vision was enough to get him over where the tube was, which was about halfway between the family burrow and his own, back about twenty yards from the beach, along the steep drop-off that formed the deep cove. He took nearly a minute breathing deeply and quickly, until he was almost light-headed, then he took in a full breath

and dove down. Underwater, his thermographic vision was hampered by the uniform temperature of the water, all but blinding him, but he knew his way around the area enough to find the lava tube by paw-walking down the steep underwater cliff until his paw pushed into emptiness. He nosed into the tube and got in the center, which gave him just enough room to use his wings to propel him along the tube. His legs kept him centered in the tube as his claws scraped on the bottom of the circular tunnel, the tube ascending at a very gentle angle. After nearly six minutes, his nose and head broke the surface, and he could see again, see the cool greens and blues of the smooth-sided lava tube, but with enough clarity to make out the ripples in the rock.

The lava tube was roughly circular and was about twenty feet across, so Kell really had to reach to get the ELF mobile transmitter against the ceiling of the chamber. He pressed it up against it and then hit the clamp, which caused spring-loaded jawed clamps to grip the rippled roof of the tube. It couldn't find enough grip to stay up for the first six tries, as he reached, stretched as far as he could to reach the top, and he had to shift it around until he found a spot where the serrated retracting anchors found enough purchase to keep the unit in place. He turned on the unit, dropped back down, and turned on the mobile transmitter that would use the ELF unit as a relay to the surface, then set the mic close to his maw. "Kammi?"

"I can hear ya loud and clear," she replied immediately. "Your signal is five-by-five."

"It won't be for long, this mobile transmitter only has a range of about two miles," he told her, settling the mic headset in place a little better. "Homing beacon working?"

"Yup, I've got a dot," she replied. "Start up the tube and I'll map the tube's layout in relation to the static transmitter."

"Well, that's fairly easy, it's almost perfectly straight and with a very slight upward angle," he replied as he started up the tube. "It ends under the volcano, about four miles away."

It had been a long time since he'd been in the lava tube, and it was exactly as he remembered. The tube was strangely clean and dry, no dust, no water, just the saltwater smell from the water entrance drifting slowly up the tube. The walls of the tube were almost like obsidian, with only those gentle, small ripples, hard and naturally reinforced, and naturally impermeable to water. The tube had survived the dozens of earthquakes that had struck the island over the millennia the dragons had been there, still strong and unbroken, the stone under his feet warming as he climbed up its length. Kammi reported changes in signal strength as he moved, but after about two miles, her voice became garbled and then cut out when he reached the limits of the mobile transmitter's range.

He'd have to install cellular transmitters in the mobile side of it, those had *much* more range.

The dome chamber under the volcano was much as he remembered. The dome above gave the chamber strength, and that strength had prevented the vast underground cavern from collapsing since the volcano had gone extinct. The chamber was nearly 100 meters wide at its widest point and was slightly oval, about 70 meters wide along its narrow side, and the very top of the dome above was nearly 150 meters overhead, making the chamber much more vertical than horizontal, and that vertical nature was why it hadn't collapsed over the years. The vertical chamber and domed ceiling gave the igneous rock within the old caldera strength, and Kell could tell by studying it that the magma chamber had emptied out very slowly when the dome chamber was formed, at least until it reached the current floor level, then the bottom of the magma chamber got plugged and trapped the remaining magma inside, which cooled and hardened much more quickly and formed the irregular floor. The walls had cooled slowly, much more slowly than the floor, and it let them harden to where the basalt of the walls was thick, strong, and durable, capable of supporting the void deep within the volcano, support all those hundreds of thousands of tons of weight from the rock above without collapsing. The lava tube that brought him there wasn't the only tube leaving the chamber. There were two others that were more or less near the floor, but the other two tubes were blocked

from collapses not far from the dome chamber. One of them went due west, and the other went southeast, towards Blackstone. The tube leading back to his farm went southwest. The floor of the chamber wasn't level, it was very irregular, filled with strange hexagonal columns that rose up from the floor in varying heights at the center, but the floor turned into a jumble of twisted rock that looked frozen in mid-churn when it was lava closer to the edges, making the place something of a challenge to navigate. Kell had to hop from spur to spur, move along the crests of those frozen waves as he took thermo footage of the chamber for Ferroth, then he had to climb the hexagonal spires in the middle until he was on the highest one, panning the camera around.

If they did anything with the chamber, leveling the floor out some would be their first task.

After filling the camera's memory with footage, he started back down the gentle slope of the lava tube. Kammi's voice reached him, broken and garbled, when he was about halfway back to the water, and after another minute she became intelligible. "Kell! Kell, come in! Kell!"

"Calm down, I'm fine, I'm back in range," he answered.

"You've been out of touch for an hour!"

"It's a big cave," he told her. "I'm about two miles from the water. Am I bringing the mobile unit back?"

"Chief didn't say, but I'd guess yes. You can always take it back there if we use it again."

"Works for me, we can tinker with it and increase the range on the mobile transmitter," he replied.

When he got back to the ELF unit, he reared up and released the anchor clamps, then packed it back in its bag and in his shoulder satchel. He waded into the water and again prepared himself, breathing deeply, then he submerged and swam back out into the cove.

He was still dripping when he got back to the burrow. Kammi raced into the entry chamber and almost tackled him. “You scared me!” she complained. “Now let me see what you recorded!”

“Pushy, pushy, pushy,” he drawled, which made her glare at him, then laugh.

They took the camera to the computer he’d given his parents, then downloaded its memory. The camera’s resolution wasn’t nearly as good as an earth dragon’s eyes, but it was good enough for Kammi to make out the main features. “That’s a big lava tube,” she noted when the image first came up.

“That’s a good thing,” Kell said. “If it were narrow, I wouldn’t be able to make it.”

Kammi fast-forwarded through his trek up the tube, then studied the dome chamber. “Wow, I wouldn’t have thought something that big would be that deep underground,” she mused.

“It was the way it formed, the walls are strong and the domed ceiling gives it strength,” he reasoned.

“The floor is warmer than the walls,” she said. “Maybe that volcano isn’t *entirely* extinct. There has to be magma under there to warm it that much.”

“Possible. It might be a feeder vent for the active volcano, or another, deeper lava tube draining the volcano’s magma chamber out into the ocean.”

“Still, Kell, that’s really something. How long has your family known about it?”

“Shii’s pod found it a long time ago, and they told our ancestors about it,” he shrugged. “And we’re typical earth dragons, Kammi. We keep our secrets, even from the other earth dragons,” he smiled.

“We should get some ground-penetrating radar down there, see if there are any other tubes or chambers,” she mused as she studied the image. “That floor’s gonna be a problem.”

“We can level it out some, as long as we don’t get too close to the walls. I wouldn’t want to risk possibly undercutting the foundations. That’s a lot of rock that’d fall in on us if that thing collapsed.”

“No doubt,” she agreed. “Alright, I’ll zip this up and email it to Ferroth, then I’ll head home.”

“I can do that. You have a long day tomorrow since I’ll be running errands, so go get some rest. Can’t let you get too exhausted doing all that manual labor,” he teased lightly.

“I can work you into the ground and you know it,” she retorted. “I’m younger than you, that gives me energy you old geezers just can’t match.”

“You’re younger by only five years!”

“Younger is younger,” she replied airily. “So you go rest your rickety old bones and prepare for all that dreadful walking around and leave the real work to drakes that can get it done without keeling over.”

Kell whacked her across the base of her tail with the underside of his own. She laughed and leaned up, nuzzling him under his chin with her snout, then started for the steep ramp up to the hallway that connected the lower chambers in Keth and Kanna’s burrow. “See you in the morning.”

“May be afternoon, I’ll be getting an early start. Sire’s got errands for me all over the island, and that’ll also give me time to do some looking around.”

“Good luck.”

“You need it more than me, I’ll make sure sire gives you so many chores you won’t be able to walk afterward,” he called, which made her laugh and waggle the spiked end of her tail at him as she ascended up out of sight.

19 May 2017, 05:58 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Kell hadn't pulled a cart in a *long* time.

Like most carts, it had a yoke bar that fit in front of the wings, just over his shoulders since his wingjoints were behind his shoulders, with a latch that let him open one side to get in and out easily, letting him pull it along behind him, his tail up under and between the wheels and his spikes brushing against the back end of the cart. The cart was filled with vegetables that Keth had bartered for other things, and Kell's job was to go around and complete all the transactions. And it was literally going to take him all the way around the 21 mile wide island. He had to trade some pumpkins with Trag's family to the north for a basket of cabbages, then he had a basket of radishes to trade with Rumm up on the northern farms just by the lava flows, trading them for two baskets of squash. From there he had a basket of radishes to trade with Grex's forest-dwelling family for two of their woven yoke baskets, and that would mean walking across the lava flows, which would take him close to the factories. From the forest, he had two baskets of potatoes, pumpkins, and eggplants that he was going to trade for two pigs over on the eastern side of the island, where most of the livestock was managed and the earth dragons were ranchers more than farmers. From there, he had to go to the southeast peninsula and trade five loaves of Kanna's bread for a bag of special fertilizer that Keth wanted for the newly sown wheat crop. That would make him walk the entire island's circumference, but that was fine with him, because he was going to spend some time visiting burrows, talking to other farmers, and quietly checking to see which ones were warded and which ones weren't. Kell figured that it would be sometime after five or six when he finally got back to the farm.

But, it worked fairly well. Kell made sure to stop and talk to every drake or wyrm he came across as he pulled his cart along the paths between

farms, paved so carts didn't rut it out, just chatting as earth dragons tended to do, and while he talked to them, he asked them about burrows and storage chambers, how old they were, and so on. He wasn't sure if he was being scried against, so when a dragon told him that a burrow or chamber might be old enough, he asked to take a look, telling them he wanted to compare its excavation to the walls of his own family burrow. Once he was in, he looked at the crystal that Ferroth had delivered to him via Kammi and checked to see if it was warded. If it was, he marked it on a list of farms in his tablet computer and then moved on. He also got all the trades done, spending some time to chat with the trading partner, many of which gave him words of support despite his rebuke. "We know they only did it to save face," Grex told him when he managed to get around to picking up the baskets, nearly an hour after noon. "They had to blame *someone*, and since you were the one on the mission, they pinned it on you."

"Thanks, Grex," he replied as he put the baskets in the cart.

"And I'll be there."

"Huh?"

"I'm the council leader for Darkwood village," he said simply.

"Oh. Oh, good," Kell nodded. "Sire or Javan talked to you already?"

The earth wyrm shook his head. "But it got around to me," he said, and had to say no more. The farmer's rumormill was as efficient as any spell of sending or cell phone.

"Alright."

Fortunately for him, the pigs he'd been sent to pick up were already dead, so he didn't have to herd around a couple of obstinate future dinners. He also found out that they weren't the only ones that were angry over what was going on up in the department. "My son did nothing wrong at all, and they fired him!" Hrada fumed to him, the soil specialist wyrm shivering her wings.

“Tell me about it, Matron,” Kell told her. “I’m one of the ones that got fired, too. He worked in the computer room, right?”

She nodded. “Sixteen years of exemplary work, and not even a warning! It’s, it’s a *scandal!*” She looked at him. “And oh, what he told me about what happened in the department when that chromatic took over! We’re not letting them get away with it, are we?”

“We are not,” he said with a very serious expression, which made her smile slyly and pat him on the base of his neck fondly.

“Good, good. You need any help around your farm, Kell, you let me know. Hren needs to find a position, since I really don’t need another hand on our farm, and we don’t raise enough food to do more than test my mixtures. Hran’s going to need an allotment.”

“Patron Zered over at Longfield Village said he was looking for an extra hand,” he mentioned. “And he has an excellent reputation.”

“He is? I must go talk to him!” she declared. “Your fertilizer’s right there, young one, if you’ll excuse me. I need to get to him before anyone else does.”

“Certainly, Matron. Good luck.”

Kell collected up the fertilizer and left her bread in the entry room of her burrow, which was custom. Since they didn’t have doors, the entry chamber was like a human dwelling’s porch, the one chamber that visitors were allowed to enter without permission. The custom was so prevalent and ancient that no earth dragon would even think of venturing deeper into a burrow uninvited, unless the dragons were friends and there was an honest need to do such a thing. The fact that Kammi and Kell were good friends was the only reason she ventured into his burrow, and she made sure to tell him she did it and apologize at the earliest opportunity. Other dragons had different customs since they didn’t live in excavated burrows and nobody had doors except the chromatics, who used magic to seal their dens when they weren’t in them, but all dragons had strict rules about not entering the

den of another dragon. Entering a den without an invitation was a fast way to die. Kell wouldn't even enter the underwater lair of Shii's pod beyond the air-filled cave without explicit permission, and their families had a friendship that went back a thousand years.

The fertilizer and the pigs made the cart much heavier, and the last leg of his around-the-island trip was upslope half the way, so he was a little tired by the time he came back down the gentle slope and passed by Letann's farm, who were their next-farm neighbors to the southeast, pulling in nearly 13 hours after leaving by the clock on his cell phone, a phone built on the island and would only work on the island. Only the department drakes really used them, one of the things he carried around in his shoulder satchel. He waved a wing to Letann and his family, who were busy tending rows of lettuce, hurrying because of a threatening bank of clouds to the south. Kell hadn't noticed it until then, and it made him hurry back to the farm, all but racing to get the cart back in its underground chamber; he didn't want to get the uncovered box of fertilizer wet. He got the cart back into its storage chamber about five minutes before the rain reached them, and he paused to let the rain pour down over him and wash the dust of the long journey off of his hide. Keth and Kammi came over to him as a rumble of thunder rolled across the farm. "I was starting to worry, youngling," Keth said lightly.

"I spent more time talking than I expected," he replied. "But everything's down in the cart. The fertilizer you ordered isn't covered, so I'd wait out the storm before bringing it out."

"Good work, young one," he smiled.

"Did you work her til she fell over like I told you to?" he asked, looking at Kammi.

She grinned at him. "I'm not even tired, but you look about ready to fall over, old geezer," she taunted.

"You pull that cart all day," he snorted as he ambled by, flexing his wings to get some knots out of the muscles near the joints, heading for his

parents' burrow.

After eating dinner with the family and Kammi, he returned to his burrow and got Ferroth on the phone, settling his bluetooth in place as he sat in front of his computer. "Chief," he called. "Can we talk?"

"We can," he replied. "You get all your chores done?"

"I did," he replied. "I have something here at the burrow that belongs to the department. I need to give it back, but I won't come within spike throwing distance of that fluffy or something very graphic is going to happen."

"You and about a hundred other drakes," he growled in reply. "I'll come get it before work in the morning." As he was talking, he emailed his list of warded burrows and chambers to Ferroth's home computer. Ferroth was silent a moment. "I'll be there around sunrise," he said, then a reply came acknowledging it, and asking for a chat session.

"If I'm not here, I'll leave it in the entry chamber for you," he said as he ended the call and opened a chat program, and Ferroth accepted the query, which caused his window to split into two fields, his text and Ferroth's text. *What's up, chief?*

First off, it's now official. You and Kammi are being watched, he warned. They have sky dragons staking out your farm and everything going on around it, and that means that they're also probably trying to scry against you. So be very sure that you maintain security at all times.

I'll warn my parents and Kammi, he typed in reply. *Are they watching anyone else?*

Kintel. He got fired with the staff reductions in the office, Ferroth answered. *But nobody else. Now, I want you to go with that idea for that tunnel and chamber project,* he continued over the chat; it was a real-time linux terminal program, so he saw the words as Ferroth typed them, quickly and efficiently. *What equipment do you need?*

We should have everything we need already as far as equipment goes, but we'll need about half a mile of sealed dual-plex cat cable, a watertight repeater, and marine grade power cable. Half the lines will be underwater. We can build the node in the dry part and set up bouncers along the tunnel if necessary, but it might not be. The signals should carry down the tunnel, it's fairly straight. We can test it when we get down there and see.

Draw up your plans for it. I want you two to build it as fast as you can.

Why the rush?

I told you yesterday, they have plans. I don't know what they are, but I want to have our own plans in place before they start acting on theirs, and one of those plans is that project.

Got it, chief. We'll have to do the work at night if they're watching the farm.

I know. Get the equipment together and get ready. I'd like you to start on it tomorrow night.

Can do. Let me call Kammi and see what gear she has.

I also got your camera idea up and running, he continued. Anthra "broke" the Aerie computer today, and the repair tech had orders to install a webcam after he repaired it. Kammi shouldn't have much trouble adding it to her toys.

Slick.

Thank you.

Did you learn anything eavesdropping?

Not today, council only met for about ten minutes. I'm surprised you didn't listen yourself.

I've been really busy today, no time. I spent all day literally walking a circuit around the island, pulling a cart.

All that work, you must be exhausted.

Don't start, chief, Kell typed. I'm getting enough of that from Kammi. The little twerp.

There was a long pause, and Kell could just imagine Ferroth laughing. She's cheeky, but she's good at her job. It's why I put up with her mouth. The lot of you are a bunch of egotistical primadonnas, managing you is like herding cats.

It takes a special kind of drake to be a field agent, Kell typed with a dark smile Ferroth wouldn't see.

Enough witty banter, whelp. Get your gear together and I'll make sure you get what you asked for. I want it done in two days.

Before the meeting?

I want it in place, just in case.

Understood. Logging off, chief. Night.

Get some rest.

Kell logged off and put the computer back in sleep mode, then checked his other six computers in his burrow to make sure all his processes were running, including the mirror process of the chromatic's computer. He then hacked into the department network and added another mirror for the audio and video from the Aerie box, setting it to record everything, 24 hours a day, allocating space on his storage server back in the workshop so it would record three days' worth of feed and then write over the days unless he saved that data elsewhere. He then went back to the family burrow through the rain, and found that Kammi was still there, playing with the younger siblings, wrestling with Kav and Konn like a hatchling herself. He'd never realized that Kammi was so...*playful*. She was like a rambunctious juvenile, not a young adult. But, he couldn't deny that she was a very good field agent, that she knew when to stop playing and start being serious. "You talk to the chief?" she asked, then she lunged down and bit Kav's wingjoint,

which made him squeal in laughter and struggle under her as Konn locked his jaws on her foreleg, trying to tug her off.

“Yeah, he said he wants us to run the network down to the tunnel,” he replied, sitting on his haunches near the action. “I figure the two of us have the equipment already, so I told him we just need the data and power lines to run down there.”

“Yeah, I got a wireless node transceiver in my burrow, and we can build a couple of bouncers out of spare parts,” she said after letting go of Kav. “Where do you think you’re going, hatchling?” she asked tauntingly as Kav tried to wriggle out from under her; she was all but laying on top of him.

“You are so gonna get it!” Kav threatened with a youthful giggle as Konn continued to tug on her foreleg.

“Yeah, I’ll be afraid in about twenty years,” she retorted, putting more weight down on him. She yanked her foreleg, dragging Konn across the floor, then swiped him with her tail and knocked him on his side. He used his wing to help get him back on his feet, but she just smacked him down again, forcing him to let go of her foreleg if he wanted to get back on a stable base. But, the instant he did let go, she slid her tail up under him with her spikes almost laying flat against her tail and flicked him halfway across the chamber. He landed lightly on his feet, then bounded right back into the fray, leaping on her back, right between her flank-covering wings. “Such a brave little hatchling,” Kammi said teasingly, then she used her wings to pin Konn in place on her back before he could do much, squeezing him between them. She then straightened her spikes and curled her tail almost impossibly tight, coiling it over her back like a scorpion, tapping Konn on the back with the tips of her spikes.

“You wouldn’t!” Konn declared, looking up over his back and seeing her tail, coiled and ready to strike..

“Try me, lizard,” she retorted lightly.

“I’m no lizard!” he barked, then he hooked his claws on her wings and tried to squirm forward, out of her pinioning grasp. He *almost* made it before Kammi flattened her spikes again and thumped him, the tip of her tail whipping him right on the hindquarters, making him yelp as he popped free of her and slid down her neck and got hung up behind her backswept horns. She just tilted her head back and pinned him, her horns pressing on his shoulders and wingjoints as his claws scrabbled, trying to find purchase. Konn showed some defiance by turning his head and biting the top of Kammi’s snout.

“Ow! That hurt, you little earthworm!” Kammi protested, snapping her head and neck to the side and shaking him off.

“I’d say that’s why he did it,” Kell chuckled, watching as Konn got his feet back under him and crouched down, his tail shivering as he prepared to leap back on top of her. “War’s over, brother, I need her now,” Kell called.

“Lucky, lucky,” she said teasingly, getting up off Kav, who darted away laughing. “You two have some time to think up some way to keep me from whipping your tails all over the burrow.”

Kell took her to the TV chamber, where Keth and Kanna were watching TV, watching NHK out of Japan. They didn’t speak Japanese, but like all channels, the department added draconic subtitles so they could keep track of what was going on. “Sire, mother,” Kell called. “Chief brought us news.”

Kanna turned off the TV with a voice command as Kell sat down beside them, Kammi beside him. “Chief said that the council has the sky dragons watching the farm,” he warned. “Mainly they’re watching me and Kammi, but they’re also watching everything we do, everyone who visits, and so on.”

“Under whose authority?” Kanna demanded.

“I’d say the chromatic took it on himself,” Kell replied. “There’s no way the council would approve something like that.”

“Well, the nerve of him!” Kanna said hotly. “They have no right to watch us like that! We’ve done nothing wrong!”

“No, but the chromatic probably thinks we *will*,” Kell said. “He knows we’re the chief’s drakes, and we’re probably still following his orders, so they’re seeing what he’s having us do.”

“They won’t see anything,” Kammi said smugly. “Now that we know they’re watching, well, anything important gets done at night.”

“Kammi, youngling, I want you to move into the burrow,” Keth said immediately. “If they’re watching you, then that means that they are not your friends. And given how the chromatic is flexing his wings at the moment, I will take no chances. They might try to arrest you if they think you’re acting on Ferroth’s orders outside the chromatic’s control. And that they *will not* do on *this* farm,” he said adamantly. “Over in your own burrow, you have no family, no protection. You’ll have both here.”

Kammi smiled gently. “Aww, Patron Keth, that’s so very kind of you,” she said warmly. “But I have so much stuff,” she complained.

“Actually, sire makes a point,” Kell said. “I wouldn’t put it past the chromatic to ignore sacred dragon traditions and send someone into your burrow, Kammi. They might even take all your equipment. You heard what that idiot fluffy said. They might decide to start confiscating human technology, and they’ll start with you and me. So, since we might *need* the gear in your burrow, we’d better put it where they’ll think *really* hard before they try to take it. Not even the council chromatic will try to take our gear with it all being on the farm. He’d run the risk of the entire village showing up on Council Aerie with their spikes out.”

Kammi grunted, then nodded.

“Kell makes a good point, youngling,” Kanna agreed. “And we’d be happy to have you. The hatchlings adore you.”

“Well, I guess I can move in,” she said. “But we’d better move all my stuff tonight. I don’t want them to see what I have in my burrow. I’m not

supposed to even have about half of it.”

“That sounds familiar,” Kanna said, glancing at Kell.

He rumbled out a chuckle. “What can I say, I’m a pack rat,” he said shamelessly.

“If we’re going to do this, let’s start,” Keth said. “Lifemate, round up the hatchlings. The more paws are helping, the faster it gets done.”

It took four trips with all three farm carts to empty out Kammi’s burrow. She only had a three chamber burrow, but it was so cluttered with electronics equipment, tools, gear, and her collection of stuff from the human world that it verged on being a disaster area. Her sleeping den had so much stuff stored in it that she could barely make it to her sleeping mound. She actually had far more gear than he did, including seven computers laid out on a long table in her work chamber, by far the largest chamber of the three, but he had to give it to her, she knew exactly what she had and where it was. She just had too much stuff for not enough burrow, and hadn’t gotten around to digging out a couple of new chambers. That would have required her to empty out one of her burrow chambers to make room for carting out the dirt and rock, and that was a major project when one had that much stuff.

“Well, at least I can enlarge the burrow before I move back in,” Kammi chuckled as she scratched out her ownership mark on the wall of the entry chamber. That mark warned anyone who entered the burrow that it was owned, and that the owner would be coming back to inhabit it later.

“We can help you with that, youngling,” Keth told her as Kell stacked the last toolbox on the cart.

The final trip back also showed Kell that the council was *really* watching what they were doing. A somewhat mature chromatic and two fire wyrms were standing in the road as they carted the last of Kammi’s things back the family burrow, a magical light hovering over the chromatic’s head that illuminated everything to a good fifty meters around him, so bright that

it made Kell's eyes hurt a little as they approached. They refused to get out of the way, forcing Keth, who was leading the procession, to stop. "What goes on here?" the chromatic demanded.

"It is of no concern of yours," Keth replied in a calm yet commanding voice.

"It is a concern of ours if we *say* it is a concern of ours!" the chromatic snapped in reply.

"I must have missed the proclamation that made the chromatics the rulers of all they survey," Keth said in a dark manner, which made the chromatic bristle. "We are on personal business which is just that, personal. Now stand aside."

"Do not order me around, grounder!" the chromatic sneered.

"Move. Now," Kell said in a dangerous voice. When the chromatic turned and looked, he saw Kell low on his front legs, leaning down, back legs high, and his tail was up and his spikes were ready.

"Stand down!" the chromatic barked imperiously. "You have no right to threaten me!"

"You're the ones threatening *us*," Kell growled in a low tone. "And we earth dragons don't take threats very well."

"We are on our own business, and if you don't like that, then that's tough," Kanna said strongly, pointing at the chromatic with the thumbclaw on her wing. "You have no right to stop us and harass us this way!"

"So, you either give us a *damn* good reason for being in our way, or you're gonna leave a trail of blood all the way back up the volcano," Kell finished, flaring his spikes in a way that made both fire wyrms suck in their breath, readying to unleash.

"Youngling," Keth called in a calm voice, then he turned to the chromatic. "My son makes a valid point, chromatic. Explain yourself, or stand aside."

“I have no need to explain myself to *you*,” he sneered. “I’m acting on official council business. If you don’t like it, take it up with them.”

“And yet you haven’t explained what that business *is*,” Kammi pointed out in a low voice.

“I have orders to inspect the contents of those carts,” he declared.

“For no reason?” Kammi asked, then she laughed scornfully. “If you weren’t serious, you’d be funny!”

“Orders or no, you have no right to search my farmhand’s belongings,” Keth agreed, narrowing his eyes. “They are *hers*. To violate her possessions is the same as violating the sanctity of her burrow, and I will not permit it.”

“You? Will not *permit*?” the chromatic laughed scathingly. “I am acting on direct orders from the council! To disobey me is to disobey *them*!”

“Prove it,” Kell said flatly, flaring his tail spikes in a way that made the smaller fire wyrm flinch.

“I will have to do no such thing,” he retorted. “We are on official council business, and I will not be ordered about by *grounders*! *You* will obey *me*!”

“Make me,” Kell hissed, flaring his spikes and cocking back his tail.

“If you are on council business, then I demand that our council members be summoned to validate your claim,” Keth said calmly, but his eyes were hard as he stared at the chromatic.

“How *dare* you!” the chromatic almost screamed.

“You show up here and treat us like criminals, making unreasonable demands and offering no sensible reasoning for them. So, I will settle for nothing less than Anthra or Geon confirming your story, right here, right now,” Keth declared. “Send one of your fire dragons to get them. And you

will not touch those carts until I hear that you have such authority from our council members *personally*.”

The chromatic looked about half a step from being enraged. His feathery antenna were shivering violently, and he had his wings pulled so tightly against his flanks that Kell was surprised he didn’t rupture a tendon. “Fire wyrms, seize those carts, by force if necessary,” he finally said, in a voice quivering with rage. “They are interfering with official council business!”

The fire wyrms didn’t look all that enthusiastic about that order, facing down four adult earth drakes and three hatchlings, all of which had their spikes out and ready. One of the wyrms glanced around, then took a step back. “Chromatic,” she said nervously. “They have *hatchlings* with them.”

“So?” he demanded, whipping his head back to stare at her. “Are you afraid of grounder *hatchlings*, wyrm?” he asked scathingly.

“She means, you are threatening harm to our younglings, and we’ll fight to *kill*,” Kammi hissed, snapping her tail back and forth. “And I’m aiming right at *you*, fluffy.”

The chromatic was furious, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew that any attempt to raise mystical protections would provoke an immediate attack, and he was at point blank range. *He* was the vulnerable one here. “I—I am going to inform the council about this outrage!”

“I’ll save you the trouble, chromatic. I’m summoning *our* council members as soon as I return to my farm,” Keth said coldly. “And there will be an accounting. If you wish to inform the council about this, then feel free to wait on my farm. Two of its members will be there to discuss the matter with you.”

The chromatic glared cold, merciless death at Keth, then he turned, bounded twice as he unfurled his iridescent wings, then vaulted into the dark sky, his light dwindling quickly as he ascended. The two fire wyrms

backed up nervously as Kell and Kammi stalked forward, tails ready, then they turned and fled into the air as well.

“Aww, we coulda taken them, sire!” Kitta protested.

“Save it for when you’re older, hatchling,” Kammi told her.

“Let’s get these carts to the farm before that chromatic returns with more fire dragons,” Keth said immediately. “Kav, Kitta.”

“Yes, sire?” Kav asked.

“Do you know where Anthra lives?”

“I do, sire, I do!” Kitta replied.

“Then go get her. Tell her what happened. Ask her to summon Geon and bring her to the farm. Stay together and run as fast as you can.”

“Yes, sire, right away!” Kav said with sudden pride, to be given such an important task, and the two younglings turned and raced away as fast as they could run.

“Are they safe doing that, Patron?” Kammi asked.

“It’s not far, and right now *we’re* in far more danger. We have the carts,” he replied simply. “Now let’s get them back to the farm as fast as we can.”

They almost ran back, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t talk. “You think the council really ordered it, lifemate?” Kanna asked.

“Of course not,” Keth snorted as he bounded along with the cart bouncing behind him. “The council isn’t in session right now, remember? How could they meet and then vote to do such a thing so quickly? They were trying to bully us, and nothing else,” he fumed. “But when Anthra hears about this, she’ll demand that chromatic’s head on a platter for invoking the council’s authority without permission.”

Kell was looking over at Kammi, who looked just as grim. Being field agents, they were very well versed in such games, and it worried Kell that they'd resort to something like that so quickly. They'd seen them moving Kammi onto the farm, and they wanted to see just *what* she was bringing, and maybe try to find out why she was there.

Ferroth was right. They already had a plan, and they were executing it.

And they needed to find out what it was as quickly as possible.

18 May 2017, 21:45DMT; Dawnmist Village

Anthra was something of a tight fit in the burrow.

The entry chamber was the only place where they could receive her, since the rest of the burrow was designed for earth drakes. Earth wyrms were actually rather rare, less than a quarter of the earth dragon population, so many earth dragon underground works weren't exactly designed for wyrms unless they were intended to be public. Dawnmist's public tunnels were designed so Anthra could just barely fit, and that was the norm.

The younglings had brought her before they'd even started unloading the carts, and after they heard that Geon was busy with an issue on the other side of the island, Keth was icily calm as he explained what happened. Kell could tell that he was furious, absolutely furious, but it wasn't his way to display that kind of emotion outwardly. He was the kind of drake that focused his anger towards correcting the issue that caused it. Kell could understand why he was angry, though. Keth was actually a very proud drake, proud of his farm and proud of his profession, but in a way, he was somewhat sheltered. He didn't associate with any other dragon races outside of Shii's pod, and to be treated that way, to be ordered around like that, to be talked down to in that manner, and to be so blatantly lied to, it was almost like a spike to his paw. He wasn't used to being disrespected so openly, so *scathingly*, and he found he did not like it one little bit.

Anthra wasn't so reserved. She went almost banged her head on the ceiling rearing up when Keth told her what the chromatic did. "He did *what?*" she snapped.

"Tried to go through Kammi's possessions," Keth replied icily. "He said it was on orders from the council. But the council has no reason nor the *authority* to order such a thing. Not when Kammi has done nothing wrong. And there's also the fact that I know that the council only met for a few moments today. They could not have done such a thing."

"There were no such orders from the council!" she said hotly. "At least not by vote, there was not!"

"Then the chromatic was either lying, or he was acting on the orders of the council chromatic," Kell said. "I'd bet he was told to do it."

"So would I, but I'll have this chromatic's fluffy tail in front of me first thing in the morning," she said, her eyes narrow and her fangs bared. "He will give an accounting of himself, and he'll either tell me who gave him those orders, or I'll make sure he spends at *least* a month chained to Penitent's Aerie."

"Well, while you're at it, you can make them give you an accounting of the other stuff they're doing, like trying to spy on us."

"Doing what?"

"Ferroth told us," Kell answered. "They have sky dragons watching us and the farm, watching everything we do. Half the reason we were moving Kammi's burrow at night was so they didn't see. But they must be using magical scrying as well, so they saw it anyway."

"He didn't tell me they were doing such a thing. They have no right to do so!"

"Well, they're doing it," Kell told her. "And it's because we were field agents. We have training in spying and general underpawed deeds, we're loyal to Ferroth, and now the two of us are both running loose and living on

the same farm, where we have plenty of time and opportunity to plot. I think they realize now that firing us was actually a bad idea, because it put us outside of their control.”

“We’d have quit anyway,” Kammi grinned.

“Well, *you* did. I was the one that got fired,” he chuckled. “They *know* we’re loyal to Ferroth, and they know he’s giving us orders, but they don’t know what they are since their magical scrying can’t eavesdrop on technology, and they can’t scry in this burrow because it’s one of the old burrows that’s magically warded. They see us as a threat, see me and Kammi in the same burrow as an opportunity for us to plot in secret, and they want to neutralize us. Them trying to see what Kammi had in her burrow was the first step. They know we’ll be working with Ferroth to try to take the department back from that fluffy, and they’ll try to stop us. The first step is knowing what we can do, and when it comes to us, what we can do depends on what kinds of tools we have available.”

Anthra looked down at Keth. “Well, it will *stop*,” she declared. “Keth, I want you at the Aerie at sunrise,” she told him. “You will give testimony in this matter. And I’ll speak to Ferroth concerning this spying on you,” she said rigidly. “It’s going to stop *immediately*.”

“They’re not going to stop what they’re not telling the council they’re doing, Anthra,” Kell said respectfully. “But it might help if they know *you* know what’s going on. It might make them a bit wary.”

“Well, I’ll get to the bottom of it,” she said angrily. “Excuse me, friends, but I need to go talk to Geon and my staff, get ready for tomorrow. Remember, Keth, sunrise.”

“I’ll be there, Anthra,” he promised with a nod.

Anthra had to navigate a little to get turned around and leave the burrow, all but having to wriggle out of their entry. Keth and the hatchlings helped Kammi settle in to her new room, Kanna storing some of her things in one of their storage chambers deeper in the burrow, but Kell was at the

computer, getting Ferroth's attention. When he had it, he described what happened over text. *Anthra won't get anywhere*, Ferroth typed efficiently. *But she'll scare the chromatic.*

Yeah, Kell agreed. *He'll just deny all of it, and there's not much she can do about that.*

It'll help us though, because he'll have to move a little less obviously. I have your things ready, and they'll be there before sunrise. I want you to get that equipment installed ASAP.

Will do. Anything else?

Not yet. I'm trying to get more information before we start to move. Right now I just want to get the basics in place. You know.

Yeah, Kell agreed. The first rule of a field mission was to know where to go if something went wrong, to have an escape plan. The escape plan was the most important plan the agent could have. Ferroth was following field work by the numbers, preparing the escape plan, as it were, by getting that cavern under the volcano hooked up to the network, so they could communicate with the outside. If they needed to hide anything, or anyone, Ferroth wanted everything in place so it could be done quickly.

Any movement on that front?

Not yet, Ferroth answered. *The fluffy isn't talking to his bosses in his office, or if he is, he's using magic. You know a mic won't pick that up.* That was true enough. The sound magic made wasn't *real* sound, because magic was, at its core, the magic of life. Only a living thing could hear a magically created sound, and no camera could pick up a magical image or illusion. The only exception was the magic of change the sky dragons used, for they changed a thing *physically*, and that allowed a camera to see the magical result. But, that restriction worked both ways. Magical scrying couldn't read a computer monitor or see a TV screen, couldn't see anything generated by any kind of video display equipment, not even an old fashioned light projector. The image was nothing but a vertigo-inducing

blur when seen through scrying. When scrying picked up sounds generated by a speaker, it sounded like a broken violin competing with a chainsaw and a bull rampaging through a china shop. The why of it was something of a mystery to Kell, it had something to do with magic and the intent of communication behind the images and sounds, but he wasn't flicking his tail at it at the moment. The fact that scrying couldn't read a computer screen was all to their advantage...though a clever dragon could watch him type, see which keys were hit and puzzle it out. But, since all computer keyboards were in English, the dragon would need to be fluent in written English to figure that out.

English was the language used on the majority of internet websites as well as being the language used by their closest inhabited neighbor, Hawaii, so anyone that worked in the department had to know English. Quite a few knew other languages as well, all the major languages used online so they didn't have to depend on translation software, but English was the big one. Kell himself also spoke Arabic, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, given he did a lot of field work in Asia and the Middle East, and Kammi spoke just about every major language used in Europe because she did a lot of work in Europe. They worked all over the globe, and they tried to cover all the major languages among the four field agents...and since he'd been working in the department for nearly 20 years, he'd had time to study up on human languages.

Anthra is having sire go up there in the morning, Kell related. I get the feeling he's looking forward to the chance to dress down the council.

No doubt.

Well boss, if we're gonna get this done, I'd better start, Kell typed. I can get the gear down there, and once we get the cabling, we can hook everything up tomorrow.

Good plan. Get to it. Email me your progress in the morning.

Will do. Night chief.

Good luck, Ferroth typed, then he logged out.

It took Kell only about half an hour to track down the gear he'd need, pack it in a watertight box, then haul it over to the burrow. He picked up the node transceiver from Kammi, and she decided to go with him out to the beach. "Why are we doing this now?" she asked, using the prepared speech they'd thought up.

"Because Sella doesn't want to miss her TV show," he replied. "It won't take long to fix. Their TV is in an air-filled cave, so it's not like it's in a watertight case."

"Water dragons with an air-filled cave?" Kammi chuckled.

"It'd be kind of hard for us to visit them if they didn't have one," Kell replied. "Now deep breath. Their den is actually fairly deep, and you won't be able to see very well down there. Just follow me, I can swim down there with my eyes closed."

"Lead on," she said, then Kell stepped off the beach shelf and dove down.

Kell dropped Kammi off at Shii's pod den, in the air-filled cavern. It did indeed have a TV, a computer for Sella's work, and had a fairly sophisticated ventilation system. The cave relied on air pressure to keep the water out, so what they did was install a device the Chinese Navy had invented that extracted oxygen out of the water, like a reverse concept of the aerators used in fishtanks. This one didn't oxygenate the water, it instead pulled the oxygen suspended in the water and injected it into the atmosphere. That had required them to install some water circulators so water flowed constantly into and out of the den opening, which also made sure that the water deeper in the den didn't stagnate if the drakes stayed in the den for a long time. Because of their relationship to Kell's family, Shii's pod den was probably the most elaborate and technologically equipped on the island. It had multiple chambers, excavated out by Kell's family over the years, underwater lighting, an air chamber for visiting, a TV, refrigerator, a computer, and water circulation pumps. Kammi got to know

the hatchlings and Ralla as Kell prepared himself, then dove back down and headed for the lava tube with Sella leading him, her carrying the box so he didn't have to struggle with it. He followed her into the lava tube, then up the long tunnel to reach the air. Sella turned and looked back nervously, unable to see in the utter darkness and robbed of her sonar since she was out of the water, then she sighed in relief when she heard him broach the surface. "I thought I lost you for a moment, friend," she said as he came out of the water, then nudged her tail with his snout. She jumped and laughed. "I can't see a thing."

"I can," he replied calmly, sliding past her. "But we're not going much further. I just want to take the box up about twenty paces or so, just in case high tide raises the water level in here."

"Good idea," she mused. "You'd better take the box."

"You can just wait there, friend. I'm not going far at all."

"Another good idea," she chuckled, offering the box out blindly. "Here."

Kell carried it up a ways and set it down, then came back to where Sella was sitting, her tail sliding back and forth on the curved floor. "I may need your help installing this, Sella," he told her when he got back. "I can't bolt the cables to the ceiling all the way up, not without it taking four or five nights."

"I don't mind helping," she replied. "But exactly what are you doing in here?"

"We're installing a network node," he replied. "And we'll also have a power feed as well, but I need to talk to the builders. We might have to set up a transformer, given how far we'll have to stretch the lines. I don't think we can just string line all that way and have reliable power on the other end."

"For what purpose?"

“An escape route,” he replied. “There’s a chance that we’re going to run afoul of the council, friend. Well, I’m not about to let them cut off my wings and chain me to a basalt block, so we’re setting this place up as a safe house of sorts for anything, or anyone, we may need to hide.”

“You think it’ll get so serious?”

“Oh yes,” he growled darkly. “They’re trying to take away everything we’ve built, Sella,” he said simply. “And we’re not going to just sit on our haunches and watch them do it. *We* built that department. You, me, Kammi, and every other earth drake that works there. Ferroth built it from the ground up, literally, and I’m not going to let some technophobic fluffy march in and dismantle everything we’ve built over the last fifty years. If worse comes to worst, we’ll just move the department down *here*, where they can’t touch it. They can’t tell us what to do, Sella. If we decide to relocate the department down here, then as long as we don’t use the scions, what can they say?”

“Not much,” she chuckled, feeling him slide by her, and she turned around. “But you think they will.”

“I *know* they will,” he growled. “This isn’t about the humans finding out about us, friend. I think me being exposed was the *trigger*, not the *cause*. They had a plan. They were waiting for an earth drake to be discovered by the humans, and when it happened, they put their plan into action. Ferroth said that the day after he took over, the fluffy dropped a book holding his new organizational plan on the conference room desk. He couldn’t have possibly written it in one night, not after having only one day to see how the department operates. And what was his first action after taking over? Reorganizing the department and firing half the staff. Well, I for one believe that it’s not going to stop there. The fluffies hate the technology we bring in from the human world, Sella,” he told her as he waded into the water. “I think they intend to shut down the department, close the factories, even turn off the electricity. They want to get rid of everything we’ve brought to the island.”

She was quiet a moment as they waded down into the water, and Kell's feet left the floor. "I doubt it'll get that far, friend, but you do have a point. Want me to carry you out?"

"And have you tease me over it for the next six years? No," he replied blandly, which made her laugh. "You'll have to be stuck behind me, going rrrrrreeeeceaaaaaallllly ssslllllooooooowwww," he drawled, then he ducked his head under and started down the tunnel.

19 May 2017, 05:24DMT; Dawnmist Village

There was something to be said for Ipods.

Well, a ripoff of the iPod built on the island anyway.

Thanks to Apple, Steve Jobs be cradled in Gaia's arms, Kell was listening live to the council as he watered Keth's prized wheat field, using an electric pump that Kell had built that pressurized water from the family cistern. They desalinated seawater for island use, piped it to any burrow or den that asked for it, which augmented the natural water supply coming from the two small rivers on the island and a natural aquifer formed by a segment of volcanic rock filled with earth; the volcanic rock was impermeable, trapping the water in the bowl, probably an ancient caldera that collapsed down. Watering the plants was just fine for the desalinated water, but when it came to drinking water, every earth drake on the island preferred the natural water, for it was full of volcanic minerals that made it delicious to an earth drake. One of those rivers flowed through the forest, the other flowed out on the southeast plain, and the aquifer was on the northwest side of the island. There were some smaller streams, one of which flowed on the northern edge of their farm and provided them their drinking water, but the fact that it rained almost daily removed the need for irrigation. But, Keth wanted the wheat field kept well watered, so he wanted

it watered manually once in the morning to supplement the usual afternoon rains.

Kell was listening to a live podcast of what was going on, and his tablet had the video running an Ipad app, which he had in the wristcase that put the tablet on his left foreleg, just over his wrist, letting him look down at it like a human would a watch and watch the action. Keth was standing in the middle, describing what happened, and the camera had a good angle of it. The aerie computer was between Geon and Anthra's daises, and the camera was fixed and set to look at the middle, so all Kell could see was Keth and the two sky dragons on the opposite side of the council ring. To the earth dragon's left would be the fire dragons, and to the left would be the fire dragons. The fire dragons were temporarily moved to be across from the earth dragons after the food riots, moved to get them further away, but they'd been moved back to their original position some eighty years ago to return the original sense of balance, the opposing elements on opposite sides of the aerie. The chromatic's lone podium stood between the sky and water dragons.

He knew his sire, and while Keth spoke calmly and eloquently, he could hear the undertones of outrage and humiliation under his testimony. Keth had probably never been treated like that before, treated like a *grounder*, something Kell had to deal with almost every day due to his job. Keth stayed on his farm, stayed among the earth dragons, stayed where he was a highly respected member of society. It had been a rude shock for him to discover that his status and respect among the earth dragons meant *nothing* off the lowlands.

After Keth was done, he moved out of camera view close to Anthra and Geon's empty dais, moving to stand behind it as an invited guest of the earth dragon council members, where the four or five drakes and wyrms that acted as Anthra and Geon's staff also sat or stood, taking notes, preparing papers, one of them using the computer supplying Kell his feed. The earth dragon quadrant of the aerie was always a beehive of activity, usually more so than the staffs of the other council members. Earth dragons

were meticulous, thorough, and that made Anthra and Geon usually the best-prepared council members on the aerie.

Kell paused to listen as the council chromatic spoke, then the same chromatic that had accosted them the night before landed on the aerie. “A most fanciful story, Keth of the earth drakes,” the council chromatic declared. “But I have summoned your so-called confronter to give the truth in the matter. And I would have brought this up myself, had Anthra not been so irritatingly insistent,” he sniffed. “So speak of the events of last night.”

“Yes, esteemed council member,” he said, bowing his neck, his feathery antenna dipping. “I had been late returning from an engagement tutoring a water dragon in magic on the south shore. She’s a rather young drake and not a very good flyer, but she’s quite talented, so we make a special exception for her. The moon was covered by the clouds, so it was too dark for me to fly safely, and there’s little light on the lowlands. I was searching for the main ramp leading up onto the volcano, and thought to ask a passing family of earth drakes and their farmhand for directions. But as soon as I approached, they threatened me,” he said smugly. “I was quite at a loss. I had done nothing but ask where the ramp was, and they were threatening to use their spikes on me! I grew frightened, so I decided to risk flying and I escaped.”

“You didn’t demand to see the contents of the carts?”

“No.”

“And there were no fire dragons with you?”

“No.”

“Thank you. You are dismissed,” the chromatic said easily. Kell watched the chromatic bow his head respectfully, then leave the circle. “So, I put it up for discussion that Keth of the earth drakes has willingly given false witness before this council,” he declared.

“*What?*” Anthra snapped. “You have but one witness, chromatic, where I can call upon others! If anyone has lied to this council, it is *your* witness!”

“And I am sure we can speak to the water dragon who received tutoring,” the chromatic said smoothly. “She will place the chromatic on the lowlands at the time of the incident, and will testify that he was alone.”

“And just how would she know *which* chromatic gave her tutoring?” Anthra shot back.

“It is a simple matter to discern,” the water wyrm said calmly. “I move that both witnesses be interviewed under magic to divine truth.”

“Yes, I will second that!” Anthra said hotly. “But *only* if the questioner is a neutral party!”

“Are you saying that you don’t *trust* the chromatics, Anthra?” the council chromatic asked.

“Given that one of them has just lied in my face, and I suspect you are in collusion with the witness to give false testimony, not in this matter!” she retorted.

“Well, I refuse to permit one of the chromatics to be subjected to magical interview if *not* given by another chromatic,” he said easily. “The divination of truth is highly advanced magic, and not easily accomplished by other dragons. The possibility of error is too great.”

“Are you saying that we’re not *capable* of magic of that level, chromatic?” the sky drake, Hinado, asked, a bit archly.

“In this case, sadly, yes, esteemed council member,” he replied. “Divination is one of the most difficult magical arts, because it can easily be misinterpreted. Only a master of magic who has studied the arts of divination for several decades has the skill, and I know of no dragons other than chromatics that have the skills necessary for the task.”

Kell could barely make out Keth's voice, murmuring to Anthra behind the camera.

"There's an easier means to discern truth," Anthra declared. "Chromatic."

"Yes, esteemed council member?"

"You said you approached a family of earth drakes and their farmhand."

"Yes."

"Were they speaking?"

"No, not really. The small ones were lagging behind, and the largest female kept looking back at them."

"Then how did you know one of them was a farmhand?"

The chromatic blinked. "What?"

"It was a simple question, chromatic," she pressed. "You stated before this council that you approached a family of drakes and their farmhand. If they weren't speaking, how did you know one of the drakes was a farmhand?"

The chromatic paused for a long, long moment. "I've seen her before. She once worked in the department, and I knew she wasn't related to them."

"How?"

"What?"

"How did you know that they weren't related?" Anthra pressed. "That could have been *her* family."

The chromatic looked quickly to the council chromatic, who was off camera.

"Do not look to him for your answer! Now speak!" Anthra barked.

“I was told,” he said in a low voice, looking at the floor.

“You were *sent* there, weren’t you?” Anthra pressed. “Answer!”

He was quiet a long moment. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Who sent you?”

“Deputy Chief Ferroth of the department,” he replied. “He suspected the former field agent of theft of items from the department.”

That made Anthra laugh scornfully. “Describe him,” she said. “If you have seen him, then you know his distinguishing marks. Describe them to me. Now!”

The chromatic was quiet far too long.

“I submit that this chromatic has perjured himself before this council, by his own admission,” she declared.

“Perjury? I heard no such perjury,” the chromatic said smoothly.

“What outrage is *this*?” Anthra boomed. “The chromatic admitted to his perjury *himself*!”

“All I heard was you harassing him into making a statement to satisfy you and prevent further harassment,” he said. “I say he has spoken the truth, and I assert that it is that earth drake that is the liar. Unless you agree to divination by a chromatic, then you cannot prove me wrong, where I can prove *you* wrong by simple declaration. Shall we call for a vote?” he asked lightly.

“Oh yes, let us vote,” Jussa the water wyrm said flintily.

“Fine then. The matter before us for vote is this: has the chromatic brought false witness before this council? I vote no.”

“No,” both fire dragons said in unison, parroting their master, Kell noted darkly.

“Aye,” Jussa called.

“Aye,” the water drake agreed.

“By rules of council, I cast a vote for both myself and the earth drake by proxy. In both cases, the vote is aye,” Anthra declared.

“No,” the sky wyrm said lightly. Since Kell could see her, he saw the wicked little smile of amusement on her face when she turned to look at the sky drake.

“Aye,” he said in a low voice, then he raised his head and stared at the wyrm defiantly. “I vote aye,” he replied in a much stronger voice. “What? He lied to our faces, Ivaiya!” he protested, looking up at the sky wyrm. “It’s as obvious as the sun in the sky! How can you *not* think so?”

And *that*, Kell saw, was how he was going to find out what was going on. The sky drake knew what they were planning, and from the looks of it, it did not sit with him, not one bit.

Kell heard the chromatic growl. “In a vote of five for and four against , the issue is confirmed,” he said shortly. “As to punishment—“

“I put forth the punishment of summary execution,” Anthra stated, which made the chromatic in the circle gawk at her in something approaching terror.

“*What?*” the chromatic gasped.

“You tried to execute one of my own for a *far* lesser transgression,” she said defiantly. “If it is good enough for us, it is good enough for you.”

“You think exposing us to the humans was *lesser* than a simple mistruth?” the chromatic said hotly, and Kell could just imagine his feathery antenna quivering violently.

“Firstly, even *you* were forced to admit that what happened was beyond the earth drake’s control,” Anthra snapped in reply. “Secondly, if we do not set an example that lying while standing before the council will not be tolerated, then it will happen again. A single harsh punishment will warn others who have similar dishonorable intentions. If you wanted to execute

an earth drake for a series of events beyond his control, then I say that executing a chromatic who *willingly* and *blatantly* stood before this council and lied to us is more than equitable.”

“Harsh, that is wise, but I fear your intent is a bit too extreme, old friend,” Jussa said mildly. “Execution is a bit too severe for this case, but I have no objections to a full year of magical Interdiction and assigning the chromatic to a farm. Perhaps a little grubbing in the dirt like his earth dragon cousins will teach him and the other chromatics the value of honest work and pride in a job well done.”

Kell almost trampled one of the seed rows, he was laughing so hard. Jussa wasn’t going to let them get away with what the new department head said the day before!

“I would rather *die* than live as a *grunder*!” the chromatic, still before the council, said hotly.

“That can be arranged,” Anthra said in an evil tone.

“Order!” the chromatic barked. “Even that is too severe for this case!” he protested. “If a public rebuke was enough for exposing us to the human world, then a public rebuke will serve here.”

“Yes, but the second half of what was done to Kell was sending him out into the human world with the very real possibility that he would be killed,” Anthra said flintily. “I will settle for a public rebuke and a month of Interdiction, to be served on a farm of *my* choosing. Two punishments for an earth drake, two punishments for a chromatic. And I will not be moved on the matter.”

“That seems fair to me,” Jussa murmured. “I will support such a punishment.”

“I would suggest two weeks of Interdiction and two weeks chained upon Penitent’s Aerie,” the sky drake offered. “The quiet will give the chromatic time to contemplate his crime and understand the severity of it.”

Anthra was quiet a long moment. “That is fair,” she finally said. “I accept the offer, only so long as he serves his Interdiction on the farm first.”

“I see nothing wrong with that,” the water drake mused, his voice almost silky.

“It seems a suitable punishment,” Jussa agreed, then he gave a watery snorting sound. “And it sends a stern message that lying to this council will not be tolerated.”

The two sky dragons were looking at the chromatic, the wyrm annoyed, the drake expectant. “Then it will be put to vote,” the chromatic growled. “I vote no.”

“I vote no, but with exception,” the fire wyrm said. “The proposed punishment is too lenient. Make it execution, as our esteemed earth cousin proposed, and I’ll vote aye.”

“I vote aye, also with exception,” the fire drake said, which made the sky wyrm gawk at her like she was a troll. “What? The guilt was proven, and a message must be sent that we will not tolerate disobedience to council law. If we show leniency, we show weakness, and we lose respect. Anthra actually has the right idea. Such a crime *deserves* severe punishment, including the option of execution, because it was premeditated and would have caused us to pronounce unjust punishment upon an innocent drake. This was no act of impulse, as my kind are so unfortunately apt to commit, this was the deliberate intent to bring harm to another and use this council to do it. But since it seems that execution will fail a vote, I think that a month of punishment is *barely* adequate.” That actually fit with the mentality of a fire dragon, Kell mused, so it was no surprise she would vote against the chromatic in this case.

“By rule, I vote by proxy for Geon. Both earth dragon votes are aye.”

“Aye,” Jussa murmured.

“Aye,” the water drake mirrored.

“No,” the sky wyrm stated haughtily.

“I vote aye,” the sky drake finished.

“Then by a vote of six for and three against, the matter is passed,” the chromatic said in a truly ugly voice. “The public rebuke will be read at every village and pod council session during their next scheduled meeting. I will take charge of the penitent, and he will begin his punishment at sunrise tomorrow.”

“I will be here to take charge of him,” Anthra said flintily, which made the punished chromatic flinch.

“I think this is a good time to rest and reflect. I move for adjournment. Any objections?” There was silence. “Then we are adjourned until sunrise tomorrow.”

Kell saw the sky dragons flit up out of view, and heard the other dragons moving around. He was about to turn off the tablet, but the chromatic had not moved, was looking towards where the other chromatic would be, and that made him pause. He watched as the council chromatic came into view, and after looking around, he turned his head to the smaller wyrm and struck him with his forepaw, right in the face. “How could you fail such an easy assignment!” he hissed.

“They had younglings with them, master,” he replied in a whiny voice. “They intended to fight to kill!”

“Then you should have simply killed them!” he hissed in reply.

“Kill *seven* earth drakes, three of them *hatchlings*?” he gasped. “It would have started a mass riot of the grounders!”

“You let me worry about the grounders,” he replied in a savage hiss. “Already, I see that this has been long overdue! Did you hear them? Speaking to *us* with such *arrogance*? Demanding punishment of *us*? We should have never allowed the department to be formed!”

“How does that matter, master?”

“It certainly matters!” he snapped in reply. “Before they started the department, the grounders were happy to dig in the dirt and take no interest in important matters! But now, they’re starting to have *ideas*, starting to believe that they have the right to meddle in the affairs of their betters!” he growled savagely. “We need to put them right back on their farms and take any silly idea that they should do *anything* else out of their tiny little brains! Look at where things stand now! *Hundreds* of grounders working in the department, working in the factories, working with the building circle, and those are grounders *not* producing food, taking food out of *our* mouths! But what’s even worse, they’re starting to think for themselves!” he said in a heated voice, staring down at his smaller companion. “Can you believe the *arrogance* of those filthy grounders?” he raged. “The Gaia-cursed little worms standing before us believing they are our equals!”

“I know it is shocking, master, but they do have two of them on the council,” the smaller one said wheedlingly.

“Another ridiculous idea!” he snorted. “I have no idea what my grandsire was thinking when he permitted them places on the council when it was formed! And now I have to sit here and listen to those two dirty, stupid grounders talk like their opinions *matter*,” he said with a spittle-spraying hiss. “When this is done, student, the grounders will be back where they belong, and if I have my way, they’ll never set foot off their dirt again! I’ll have the ramps demolished, the department building razed, all their factories burned to the ground, and they’ll do nothing but grub in the dirt and be happy doing it, just as they were before!”

“It will be a great day, master,” the smaller one said.

The council chromatic leveled a flat stare at him. “You should be lucky you only get two weeks of interdiction,” he snapped. “For so miserable a failure, I should have allowed the grounder to bite your head off!”

“But, but master, you never told me they’d *question* me!” he protested. “I wasn’t expecting it! They were supposed to just take my words for truth,

and then the council would condemn the grounder instead of me! I wasn't supposed to get in *trouble*!"

"Yes, Hinado did vote against you," the chromatic hissed, referring to the sky drake. "I'll have to do something about that. But still, you should have at *least* tried to be convincing! And it should never have gotten here! You were facing stupid, inferior *grounders*, student, and you couldn't handle the situation! You let dirt-grubbers make the chromatics look like fools before the entire council!"

The smaller one drew himself up. "If *you* had been staring at the cocked tails of seven grounders, master, you would have done the same thing," he said, almost defiantly. "It doesn't take brains for them to throw those spikes, and you know how barbaric they are! They would have *killed* me!"

The council chromatic glared down at the smaller one. "When you show fear to an animal, it will attack. Report to the library and stand before the council of seven, then explain your failure to *them*."

The smaller one bobbed his head, then turned and unfurled his wings as he left the view of the camera. The council chromatic watched the smaller one go, then turned his back to the camera, spread his wings, and vaulted up out of sight.

Well, well, well, well, well. Kell tapped the screen of his tablet, then used the menu to save the entire conversation to his desktop in addition to its normal storage on his server. That confirmed all his suspicions. The chromatics did indeed have a plan, and their plan was nothing short of destroying everything the earth dragons had built for themselves in the last fifty years. The chromatic in the department would *reorganize* it out of existence, and they'd find some way to shut down the factories, maybe even go so far as to shut down the power plant, completely stop using any and all technology. The chromatic wanted to turn the earth dragons into little more than slaves, doing nothing but toiling on the farms, and have no say in

dragon affairs. To be the happy little drones collecting pollen from the flowers for the queen bee.

Maybe sixty years ago, before that first plane flew close enough to the island for them to see it, the earth dragons *were* happy doing nothing but farming. The chromatic thought it to be a weakness, but the simple fact of the matter was that earth dragons were part of the earth, and using the earth to feed themselves wasn't a chore for them as much as it was a privilege. In earth dragon society, to own your own farm was the highest status a drake or wyrm could achieve. But now, with their exposure to human technology, perhaps the chromatic was right that it gave them *ideas*. Those ideas were to improve themselves using a tool and to build something for themselves, improve their condition, which it had done. Farmers used computers to manage their farms now. Electricity brought lights, refrigeration, electric pumps for water hoses, powered tools the builders used. The introduction of technology had improved the life of the average earth dragon, but it had also *expanded* them, showed them new things, new ways to think, and new ways to grow.

And that was what the chromatic so desperately feared. The chromatics didn't *want* the earth dragons to improve themselves. They wanted the industrious little workers that were happy to farm, and rarely looked any higher than their fields unless they were checking the weather. They didn't want the earth dragons to think that there was anything other than farming, anything other than feeding the other dragons, anything other than living at the bottom of draconic society.

They didn't want the earth dragons to sit on the council.

Kell shut off the hose and ambled back towards the spigot, finger already on the bluetooth strapped to the side of his head. "Chief," he called in English when Ferroth answered the phone.

"Kell. Did you get my package?"

"In my burrow," he replied. "I'm going to email you something in a few minutes. Watch it as soon as you can."

“Oh, there’s no need for *that*,” he replied.

“You were watching?” Kell asked.

Ferroth chuckled darkly. “I’m making a copy to show to the council leaders, Geon, and Anthra as we speak.”

“Well, now we know what they’re up to.”

“And now we know how to stop them,” Ferroth agreed. “We’ll probably lose the computer on the aerie after this, but it will have been worth it.”

“It did its job,” Kell chuckled in agreement as he wound the hose back on its spindle. “We suspected it was going to happen.”

“I’m coming down as soon as I finish. When Keth arrives, have him wait for me.”

“I will. He should be here any minute, it only takes a few minutes to glide down from the aerie.”

“I want your project done *tonight*,” he ordered.

“It’ll be ready by sunrise,” he promised. “While you’re setting things up, I’ll go down and do everything but the last part. We’ll do that tonight.” He glanced up and saw Keth descending for a landing at the edge of the carrot field. “Sire is back. I’ll tell him to wait for you.”

“Alright. Be down as soon as I get this done.” He bounded out in a slow jog to meet his father, who was folding back his wings and turning towards the burrow.

“Sire,” Kell called.

“Youngling,” Keth nodded. “Did you get the wheat watered?”

“Yes, but that’s a moot point right now,” he said, then he switched to English. “We need to go into the burrow, right now.”

Keth looked at him, then nodded. Kell turned and tapped out a number on his tablet, which made his phone call Kammi. “Kell,” she said distractedly.

“Come in,” he told her. “Bring mother and the younglings.”

“Alright. Be in soon,” she replied, and he cut the call.

“I have some fairly serious news from the aerie,” Keth said darkly.

“I figured, but save it for when we get in,” Kell told him, looking up pointedly. Keth glanced towards the volcano, then nodded and fell silent.

Once they reached the entry chamber, however, Kell started. “I was watching the council session using the computer on the aerie, so I saw it all, sire,” he began as they moved towards the living chamber. “But what you *didn't* see after council was over is what matters. I'll put it on the TV, you might not appreciate it trying to watch it on my tablet screen.”

“What happened?”

“Just watch,” he said, already tapping on his tablet. By the time they got to the living chamber, the TV was on and the video was queued. Kell went to get water as Keth sat down and watched what happened after he left, and he gasped more than once as the council chromatic ranted.

“Unbelievable!” Keth said in outrage, his wings snapping halfway out and half-flapping a few times. “I never dreamed that they would take things so far!”

“They haven't even started taking things far, sire,” Kell growled. “You heard him. He wants to tear down everything we've built and stick us all back on the farms, then strip of us everything, even our place on the council. He wants us to never think a single thought and be happy little slaves.”

“Absolutely outrageous!” Keth nearly roared. “Just wait until council tonight! I will take this to them and let them see it!”

“Let’s wait for Ferroth before we make any decisions, sire. He’s on his way down right now. He wants to talk to you.”

“And I want to speak with him! I should have spiked that disgusting *liar* right there on the aerie!” he raged. “And to think that I thought I couldn’t be much angrier after he tried to make *me* look like the criminal!”

“I should queue up the entire council session for mother and Kammi,” Kell mused. “They need to see it all in context. It has much more impact that way.”

Kammi hurried in and nuzzled Keth. “Patron, I’m so glad you’re back!” she said honestly, rearing up and putting her forepaws on his shoulders. “Did it go well?”

“It went far beyond anything I would have imagined,” he growled.

“Uh oh,” Kammi grunted, looking at Kell.

“They tried to paint it like sire was *lying*,” Kell told her. “I recorded it, I want you and mother to watch the whole thing. Including the bombshell at the end.”

“Seriously?” Kammi gasped, and Keth nodded. “Well, get it ready, friend,” she called, putting her forepaws back down and turning to face the TV, sitting beside Keth. When she did so, Kell had to take notice again at how petite Kammi was; she was truly a very small earth drake...something like him. He was smaller than the average drake of his age as well. It had been to his advantage as a field agent, so he wasn’t complaining, however. Among earth drakes, size wasn’t much of an issue. Kanna came in with the younglings hopping behind her, Kav and Konn nipping at each other as Kitta carried a basket in her mouth.

“Just in time, mother,” Kell said. “Alright, Kammi, start it. Watch what we recorded from the council, mother. It’ll make your spikes pop right off your tail.”

“Alright, youngling,” she said, sitting beside Keth, who extended out his wing and placed it over her back.

“Access TV, queue start,” Kammi called, and the video started. Kell drank his fill of the rather tasty water they piped in, filtered through volcanic soil and with many minerals in it that earth drakes in particular found delicious, as well as necessary for health. He could almost hear the bristling as the council chromatic tried to frame Keth, and Kammi laughed brightly when Anthra trapped the chromatic that had accosted them with his own words. “I knew that big wyrm was smart.”

“I saw you talk to her, lifemate. You suggested it, didn’t you?” Kanna pressed.

“I must admit, I did,” he replied modestly.

Kammi laughed when the fire dragons voted against the chromatic concerning punishment, but her laughter faded when the chromatic started his rant. He heard both her and Kanna gasp, then Kammi’s tail spikes snapped out to full length and spread like a bristling porcupine as she listened to his plans for the earth dragons. “How *dare* that arrogant, feather-headed...*asshole*!” she screamed in English at the end, unable to find a suitable curse strong enough in the rather polite dragon language.

“Is this what the chromatics truly believe of us?” Kanna said frostily. “They shall never eat a single bite of food off *this* farm ever again!”

“I want a copy of this to take to the village council, youngling,” Keth said in a steely voice.

“Hello, the den! May I enter?” Ferroth called from the entry chamber.

“Come in!” Keth called, and Ferroth ambled in, his face dark and grim.

“Did Kell tell you?”

“He *showed* us,” Kanna said, her voice almost trembling. “This is an outrage beyond words, Chief! We must *do* something!”

“Oh, we’re going to do something,” he replied grimly. “Keth, can you speak with Javan and convince him in the strongest possible terms that the council leaders must meet *today*?”

“I certainly can,” he replied with a nod.

“Then that’s the most important thing you can do today, my friend. We need to meet an hour before sunset at the council chambers in Blackstone village. Kammi.”

“Yes, chief?”

“Go to Blackstone village and set up a projector in their council chamber so we can screen that video. I don’t know if they have one. Go see what they have and get it ready. If anyone asks, be honest. You’re setting up equipment for the meeting.”

“You got it, chief!”

“*Now*, whelp.”

She laughed. “Fill me in on what I missed, Kell,” she said, then she stood up and bounded out of the chamber.

“Won’t the sky dragons see her?” Kell asked.

“A moot point right now,” he replied. “They already know that the earth dragon council leaders intend to meet, to discuss the increase in the tithes. They don’t know that we chose Blackstone because it’s warded, they think it’s because it’s the largest of the earth dragon villages. That she’s setting up AV equipment for it won’t be much of a stretch.”

“I guess it wouldn’t be,” Kell mused.

“Now *you* go do what I told you to do,” Ferroth said, pointing his wing thumbclaw in Kell’s direction.

Kell chuckled. “I’ll get right on it, chief,” he replied. “I’ll get everything done but running the cable. We have to do that at night.”

“Make sure to bury it all the way into the water.”

“I already took that into account,” he replied. “Sire, mother.”

“Work hard, work well, youngling,” Kanna told him.

Kell returned to his burrow and gathered up the tools he’d need to set up the wireless node, then possibly install bounce repeaters up the tunnel length. He packed a very small external battery so he could turn on the wireless node and check its signal strength to the cavern along with his tools, then, as was his habit, he checked all his computers to ensure they were running their usual processes.

And that gave him a little pleasant surprise. On his main computer in his living chamber, there was an extra process running that he hadn’t started, with a dialog box asking him if he wanted to allow the process to fully execute. He set his watertight work toolbox down, something he needed given he handled all the technology for Shii’s pod den, and brought up the process. It was started remotely, and after studying the data it uploaded into his RAM and hard drive, he saw that it was a simple executable that was supposed to play an audio file over his speakers, but his computer’s internal security had throttled the process to a passive state. He brought up the raw code of the executable, and in a comment line, there was a teasing little message meant only for him. *Now I get to burn your toast.*

Jenny! Kell laughed brightly and ruefully. She’d really done it! She’d figured out the shadow piggyback they used to tap into Hawaii’s internet access, got access to the island network, and tracked down his computer! He checked the logs and saw that she’d managed to get in using the *department*, bouncing off a department network address that his computer’s security wouldn’t inspect quite so severely as any other traffic. He knew she was smart, but *damn*, did she ever prove it!

Now he’d have to upgrade the island’s security. If Jenny could figure it out, so could someone else.

He killed her process, deleted it, then used his programs to track down her cell phone. It was a new phone using her old number, probably something he wouldn't be able to hack so easily, but he wasn't going to hack her this time. She was in Washington according to GPS, in the State building rather than the White House, and she was stationary. He dialed her number just like anyone else, then set it to his bluetooth and went back to what he was doing. "Hello," her voice called.

"You're a clever biped," he said lightly.

She laughed. "I told you!" she replied. "No more burnt toast for me!"

"Okay, okay, so it's Kell five, Jenny one," he told her as he locked his toolbox lid and ensured the rubber seals were proper. "I might call you later to have you show me how you did it."

"When you show me how you hacked my work box," she taunted in reply.

"Blame your government's outdated security protocols for that," he snorted. "Things going okay? Are you a Colonel yet?"

She laughed again. "Still a Major," she replied cheekily. "I'm over at the State Department right now, eating a late lunch...early dinner, whatever. I lose track of time every day now with all this extra responsibility."

"New assignment there at State?"

"Sorta, yeah. I'm still a Hunter, but since I was *there*, if there's any official visits, you know, they want me on the diplomacy team. Since I was there."

"Well, there won't be," he told her darkly as he attached the carry straps to his toolbox, then hefted it up between his wingjoints, then reached back and grabbed the dangling straps. "In fact, you may not hear from any of us again for months, even me. Maybe years."

"What's going on?"

“I won’t go into detail—actually, I should go into detail, but not here. Not now. They’re watching me.”

“Oh. *Ohhhhh*. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, they don’t speak English, and they can’t use magic to spy on me if they don’t speak English too. It’s a limitation of scrying magic, but one that works in our favor. I really shouldn’t even be talking to you from here, but I don’t think they’ve learned English in four days, so I’ll risk it.”

“Be careful. When can you call back safely and explain what’s going on?”

“Actually, everything I need to explain what’s going on will be emailed to that phone in about ten minutes,” he said, going back to his computer and sitting on his haunches. “I just need to add some subtitles so you can understand what’s going on.”

“What format?”

“Ipod video,” he said as he brought up the council recording. He ran an extra program that would convert the draconic to English subtitles, the same program the TV office in the department used to add draconic subtitles to human TV, then ran the video so the program could add the subtitle text to the file. “Show this to your President when you can, so he understands what’s going on here, Jenny. I don’t want him to see our sudden silence as anything ominous or threatening. It’ll be because we’re just a *little* busy here on the island, not because we’re plotting against the humans.”

“I’ll take it there straightaway,” she answered. “I’m an important person now, Kell, I can walk into the White House whenever I please,” she laughed.

“Not so important that I can’t own you, human,” Kell teased.

“I’m learning how to give back as good as you give me,” she taunted lightly.

“When I have time to concentrate on it, I’m gonna whip your butt all over the web,” he told her, which made her laugh. “The only background you need to understand the context of the video is this: Kammi came to work as a farmhand for my family after she quit the department, and we were moving her into sire’s burrow.”

“Why?”

“Well, earth dragon custom is that farmhands live with the farm owner in the burrow,” he explained. “It’s why sire’s burrow is so big, it might have sire’s family and two or three farmhands, and possibly *their* families in it too. They may be employees, but as long as they work for the farmer, they are considered adopted family. Well, Kammi, or Jasper as you know her, had a ton of stuff, so it was quite a chore to haul all her crap out of her burrow and over to sire and mother’s. Sheesh, and I thought I had a lot of stuff,” he grunted, which made her chuckle. “While we were moving the last load, a chromatic and two fire wyrms stopped us and demanded to inspect the carts we were using to move her things. We told them to go to hell, and it turned into a confrontation after the chromatic told the fire wyrms to use force if necessary, and since we had Kav, Kitta, and Konn with us, we did *not* take that kind of a threat very well. We faced them down and made them run away without going through Kammi’s things. What you’ll see on the video is what happened the morning after that happened.”

“Wow,” Jenny breathed.

“No, save the wow for after you see the video,” he told her darkly. “Once you see it, you’ll understand *everything*.”

“You’re worrying me.”

“I’m worrying too,” Kell told her. “Okay, the file’s ready, and I got a ton of stuff to do, friend. I’ll email it to you, and you take it to your President right away.”

“I’m already on the way there,” she told him. “I’ll drop you an email later, okay?”

“Works for me, at least as long as I’m able to reply. Just watch the video, Jenny. You’ll understand.”

“I will. Goodbye, Kell, and good luck.”

“I’m going to need it,” he said evenly, then he ended the call. He pulled the bluetooth off, saved the file, then dropped it into an email and sent it directly to Jenny’s phone. He buckled the straps of his toolbox, flexed his wings to make sure they weren’t fouled by the box or the straps, then he ambled towards the entrance. He’d get one of the pod’s water drakes to help him, he was fairly sure that at least one of them could spare a little time.

Because, he had a foreboding feeling in his gut that they were going to *need* that secret cavern, and need it *very* soon.

19 May 2017, 17:07 EDT; The White House

She *hated* being right.

Jenny sat on a tramcar in the top secret underground system of private subway cars that ran between the major centers of American politics. The line only had three stops, with the State Department on one end, the White House in the middle, and the Capitol on the other. That Jenny would even *know* about the subway line put her in the top .008% of government officials, and to be allowed to ride on it without escort put her in an ultra-elite group that only numbered about 40 people. In just a matter of days, she had been catapulted into the highest echelon of government, if only because she was the *only* human being on the face of the earth that had the experience and knowledge that she had.

She watched the video once it arrived on her phone, pulling it out of her private email box and downloading it to her phone, then she watched it

as she waited for the subway car; it was always parked at the White house and security doors in the subway tunnel were closed when the system wasn't in use, but when she came down and showed her ID and asked for the car, the operator called the car for her. It only took the car five minutes to arrive, and she watched the rest of it riding the car back to the White House.

Kell was right that she understood when she saw the end of the video, and she saw that everything she'd feared would happen was indeed happening, just not for the reasons she thought. The chromatics were engaging in a systematic attempt to drive the earth dragons into what she could only call slavery, and they were doing exactly what they had to do to start it. The department was the White House of earth dragon political power, and if the chromatics wanted to strip the earth dragons of their power, then they only had to take over the department, then use that position to dismantle the organization the earth dragons had created.

Two Secret Service agents met her at the door when the car stopped, and she nodded to them. "I need to see the President," she told the men, who were always down at the terminal, guarding a potential entry point into the White House at all times.

"ID please, ma'am," the other one warned.

She patted her upper chest and felt her ID tag, but when she looked down at it she saw it was her State ID, not the ID they gave her for the White House. She then patted the pocket of her uniform blazer and felt it. "Damn, sorry," she said, pulling it out and showing it to them. The taller one took it, turned it over, then handed it back to her with a nod. "They gave me a different ID to wear over at State. Thank you, Agent," she said as she clipped it to her epaulet. "I'd rather not be shot today."

"No problem, ma'am," he said with a nod and a slight smile. "Go on up the stairs and wait with the agent there for an escort to arrive."

"Yes sir, thank you," she replied, shouldering her purse and hurrying towards the staircase. A lone agent was up at the door, which was in the

basement of the building, and a staffer arrived quickly and took her to an elevator that led up to the ground floor, and they then transferred to another elevator that took her directly up to the private residence on the third floor. The staffer escorted her to a richly furnished living room, where President Jack Walker was sitting on the couch beside his wife Julia, watching TV. Julia was a pattern southern belle, tall and with big breasts and perfect hair and very pretty, but she was also a very shrewd woman who had been in politics herself. The two of them had met and married when they were both senators in the Tennessee state senate. President Walker wasn't a native Tennessean, he was actually from Michigan and had moved to Tennessee after retiring from the Army—actually had just stayed in Tennessee because his last post had been in the state before his retirement, but Julia Walker was born and raised in Memphis. Julia was also twelve years younger than President Walker, a fact they didn't bandy about very much.

“Major,” Walker nodded. “They said you needed to see me?”

“Yes sir,” she replied. “May I access the closest computer you have? I have something you need to see.”

“We can go to my study,” he said, patting his wife fondly on the leg. “Be back soon, Julia.”

“Of course, honey,” she smiled, kissing him on the cheek.

In his private office, just off from his bedroom, he allowed her to sit at the desk and access his computer. He stood behind her watching as she brought up her email and downloaded the video. “This is surveillance camera footage of a meeting of the dragon’s council,” she told him as she waited for the White House’s cyber security to inspect the file and permit the download. “It’s totally genuine. Kell sent it to me himself. I think Kell planted the camera on their aerie, the angle is strange and you don’t see much, but it’s not what you see that matters. It’s what they’re saying.”

“They were speaking English?”

She shook her head. “Speaking dragon, but Kell added English subtitles for me.”

“And you can trust that he says it’s really what they were saying?”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “He has no reason to lie, Mister President,” she said simply. “If anything, if I think what happens next happens, it proves he’s trying to keep things as calm as possible between us and them.” The file downloaded, and she brought it up in a window, silently cursing the Windows OS they used. Walker gasped a little when the still image of the beginning of the video appeared. “What kind of dragon is that?”

“The one standing in the circle is a chromatic. See the feathery antenna, and the plumage along the sides of his tail?” she said, pointing. “These long, slender ones standing on the podiums are sky dragons. This one is the wyrm, and this one is the drake,” she added, pointing them out. “From what I remember, the chromatic and water dragons are on podiums off camera to the right, and the fire dragons are to the left. The footage was taken from the earth dragon podiums. Kell must have planted a camera on their podium, probably with their permission.” She clicked **PLAY**, then leaned back in his chair and let him watch.

“That’s a strange language. Lots of hissing,” Walker mused as the audio picked up.

“They don’t have human mouths, it’s not a surprise. I’m more surprised Kell can speak such good English without lips,” she noted absently. She let Walker watch and read the subtitles, then once the council chromatic came into view, she paused it. “This is the important part, sir,” she said, then started it again.

After it was done, Jenny stood up and let him have his chair, then went around the desk. He sat down and looked at the still image on the monitor, the end of the video. “You say this is genuine?”

“I can’t one hundred percent vouch for the translation, I’m relying on Kell for that, but like I said, he has no reason to lie. He told me that very soon, he may lose contact with me. After seeing that video, I see why. He was warning us that if they go silent, it’s because they’re dealing with internal issues. If what that chromatic said is what they’re trying to do, it’s going to start a war between the chromatics and the earth dragons. The earth dragons won’t just sit down and let themselves be pushed back onto the farms, Mister President. If Kell is any example of earth dragon mentality, they’ll fight.”

He was silent a long moment, then he looked at her. “You’re right, I did need to see this, though there’s not much we can do about it.”

“I think there is,” Jenny said, leaning back in the chair.

“How so?”

“Well, remember when Kell taunted me about hacking my phone? Well, I managed to hack *his* personal computer,” she said, a bit smugly.

Walker laughed. “Well done, Major! Did you learn anything?”

“No, his internal security was actually way too tight for me to manage to do much more than start a process on his box, which his box’s security throttled.”

“That’s Greek to me.”

“His security didn’t let me in, but it did let me shine a flashlight in his window and let him know I was there,” she said, which made him chuckle and nod. “But what I *did* get was a hard response delay time from their Hawaii hack back to their island.”

“And?”

“To cut out the technical jargon of it, sir, it means I can calculate a physical *distance* between that connection and Kell’s computer, based on time delays involved with computer data transfer over fiber optic cable and the number of hops my trace went through on the island. They can’t use a

wireless or satellite broadcast to connect to the internet, the island is too far and satellite hacks would be detected eventually. What I suspect is that they had the water dragons run a fiber optic undersea cable all the way to Hawaii, then a field agent figured out some way to splice it into the existing fiber optic cables in a way that whichever comm company that owns the cable can't detect. They're very good at our tech, sir, I wouldn't put it past them at all. Anyway, I can use the time delay for signals to travel from Hawaii to their island to get a distance, then we can look for their island along the south side of the circle you'd draw on the map of that distance out from Hawaii. The island would have to be along that arc *somewhere*, and even if they're hiding it with magic, well, us overflying the island might provoke a response. They might attack the plane. And if they do, then we know they're close to where the plane was when they did it."

"Well, that does help, Major, since we *do* want to know where that island is. But how is it going to help in this situation?"

"I told you earlier, sir, that if there's anyone on that island we want to make our friends, it's the earth dragons. They're smart, they're technologically savvy, and they're the most like *us*. Well, one of the major problems they have is that they're *stuck* on that island, sir. Because they can't fly, the only way off is to swim or use a scion, and the chromatics control the scions. The chromatics no doubt think that since they're all but holding the earth dragons prisoner, they can eventually force them to do what they want them to do. Well, what if we just *happened* to have an aircraft carrier and a hell of a lot of transports not far from where their island is, and I just *happened* to get a message to Kell telling him that the United States would offer the earth dragons asylum if they wanted to flee the island?"

"Try to lure the earth dragons to our side?" Walker asked, his eyes widening.

"Not lure them to our side, more like help them out of a bad situation," she replied. "They won't want to just move right in with us, sir. They may like us, but even the earth dragons are very wary of us, even afraid of us."

But, what if we offered them a small island in the Hawaiian chain, one of the national park islands far away from human civilization, or maybe some nice open prairie in Kansas or Colorado, and let them move in? I think they'd be just a *little* appreciative," she noted lightly. "And if things turn badly for them on their island, they may need a way to escape."

"And risk starting a war with the other dragons," Walker pointed out. "They won't take kindly to us interfering in a purely internal matter."

"That is a risk, sir," she nodded. "But we should at least look into the possibility of it. Making a plan for it doesn't mean we have to commit to it."

"I'll give you that," he said after a moment. "I want you to calculate out that distance and get it over to the joint chiefs, and I'll have them start searching along the terminal arc for the island."

"I already have it, sir, I figured it out just before lunch," she said, taking a piece of paper out of her uniform blazer. "It's nine hundred and seventy-four miles from Hawaii, if they're using the kind of fiber optic cable and repeaters I'm familiar with. I'd think that they are, since they stole that technology from us in the first place. So, the Air Force and Navy can just search along this arc," she said, pointing to the map of the Pacific ocean and the half-circle she'd drawn on it to the south of Hawaii. "It won't be perfect, but it'll be a good starting-off point. The island should be within a hundred miles of either side of that line."

"Good work, Major," he smiled, taking the paper and looking at it, then pressing an intercom button on his desk. "Send up a courier with a tablet, and call Admiral Yates and tell him I want to see him as soon as he can get here," he said.

"Immediately, sir," a voice replied from the speaker.

A man in a suit appeared at the doorway. "I have a video on my desktop. Get a copy of it over to the CIA for analysis."

“Yes sir,” he said, coming in with a tablet, then he used it to copy the video onto it.

“Major, have your Hunter team purge this video completely from the internet,” he told her. “I want it deleted off every mail server that handled it.”

“We can do that sir, no problem,” she nodded. “Do you mind if I keep the copy on my phone? I want to study it.”

“You have the clearance, Major,” he smiled with a nod.

“Do you need me to stay for Admiral Yates?”

“Please, he might have questions.”

She sat on a chair to the side after they moved to the Oval Office, and Walker handed Yates the map she’d printed out and marked. “Major Edwards believes it should be within one hundred miles of that arc line, Admiral. Coordinate with Air Force Space Command and find that island. When you do find it, *do nothing*. I just want to know where it is. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, looking at the map in his hand.

“What assets do we have available in the Pacific?”

“We have three carrier task forces in the theater at the moment, sir. Task Force One is on exercises with the Australians. Task Force Two is on reserve at Pearl and Task Force Three is currently off the coast of Japan. Outside of that, sir, we have most of the Pacific fleet performing various exercises and deployments across the Pacific.”

“Subs?”

“Six attack submarines currently operating in the North Pacific, four boomers in various locations,” he replied.

“Have Task Force Two brought to a readiness state,” he ordered. “Call in two attack subs to Pearl, and bring a boomer close to Hawaii, but

otherwise continue its usual deployment activities.” He glanced at Jenny. “How many military and civilian transports could we muster to Hawaii at short notice, Admiral? Ships with plenty of open, flat deck space?”

He paused a moment. “I’d say about five Navy freighters that meet that restriction, sir. If we called in some favors, we could get a couple of the container supercarriers, they have lots of open deck space.”

“Would that be enough, Major?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, sir,” she replied. “Simply assuming that they’re one fifth of the population, you’d have anywhere between two thousand and four thousand. Assume just for caution’s sake that each one is about thirty feet long and weighs two tons.”

“I have no idea what kind of cargo you’re talking about, sir, but your best option is a container carrier,” he said. “Something thirty feet long and weighing two tons sounds like a full cargo container. My freighters could handle the tonnage, but if this cargo is that big, they’d run out of room to store it. Naval freighters aren’t set up to handle cargo containers the way civilian freighters are, since they have to dole out their cargos to ships at sea.”

“I rather doubt they’d appreciate being stacked like cargo containers, Mister President,” Jenny murmured.

He chuckled. “I’m not talking cargo containers, I’m talking *dragons*,” he told Yates. “I’d like you to draw up a conceptual plan to evacuate between two and four thousand dragons from their island. Figure out what kind of ships you’ll need to carry them, defense for those ships against both airborne and underwater threats, supplies on hand to feed them, and so on and so on. I’d like a preliminary plan outline as soon as you can draw one up. This isn’t an *operational* plan, Admiral. It’s a *contingency* plan. I’d like to have this plan ready in the event that it’s needed, but unless something truly drastic happens, it won’t be needed. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.”

He nodded soberly. "I understand completely, Mister President. Major, I need your input for the planners."

"I can be at the Pentagon as soon as I'm done here, Admiral. I don't have any other meetings today."

"Then you'll come back with me," he said, and she nodded.

"I'll have you briefed on why we're drawing up this plan tomorrow, after the analysts go over some new information," Walker told him.

"Understood, sir," Yates said. "Anything else?"

"No, I'll let you two go take care of it. Major, be back here in the morning."

"Yes, Mister President," she affirmed, standing up.

"Major," Walker mused, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe I should have made you a Lieutenant Colonel instead."

Jenny laughed. "Not that I'd ever turn down a promotion, Mister President, but you might make me think I'm far more important than I really am," she said with a disarming smile. "Now, if you *really* want to reward me, you can give my husband and son a tour of the White House. My husband is wildly curious about this place, since I can't really talk to him about anything I do here, and won't even describe any room that's not on the public tour."

"Done and done," he smiled. "I'll arrange a private visit and tour for your husband and son."

"They'll be thrilled, sir," she said with a disarming smile. "Greg deserves a reward for being so understanding. The poor man didn't really even know what I did for a living until after we were married."

Walker laughed. "And he married you anyway, despite that dark secret?"

“It’s the dimples, sir. He couldn’t resist,” she said with a cheeky smile. “Besides, I told him the truth about not telling him about it. I told him that I couldn’t even tell him what I did unless we were married. I think he got so curious, he married me just to find out.”

Walker laughed. “I think I’d like to meet your husband now, Major. He sounds like an interesting man.”

“With all due respect to you two gentlemen, he’s the most wonderful man in the world,” she said honestly and warmly.

“Then he’s a lucky man to have you, Major,” Yates said with a friendly smile. “Now, we’re wasting daylight, so let’s get over to the Pentagon and get a meeting going, so you can get home to your husband and son before sunset.”

“Of course, sir,” she said.

19 May 2017, 20:37 DMT; Council chambers, Blackstone Village

It was a little cramped, but earth dragons weren’t particularly claustrophobic.

There were 31 dragons in the council chamber that was used to only accommodating 15, and since 8 of those dragons were wyrms, it meant that there wasn’t much empty space. Of the assembled dragons, 18 were council leaders from the 18 separate earth dragon villages, four were the factory heads of the factories on the island, Geon and Anthra, Ferroth, Keth, Kell, Kammi, Kanna, and two highly respected farmers in positions like Keth’s, not council leaders but universally regarded as among the wisest of earth dragons. One was Hrada the fertilizer specialist, and the other was an earth drake from Goldcrown village who was the oldest earth drake alive in all their 13,600 years of recorded history, the venerable and universally revered Jengo. Jengo had been born before the food riots, had been a near-adult age

adolescent when it happened, and he'd lived nearly fifty years longer than the previous oldest earth drake ever known, the oldest known dragon alive not counting the chromatics, who kept their ages secret. He was still spry enough to work his small farm. The palsy in his forepaws and the fact he could no longer grow tail spikes betrayed his vast age, but his voice was still strong and his mind sharp and clear, and no earth dragon discounted the advice he issued. Jengo might live another fifty years, and reach an age almost unimagined among dragons. Most earth drakes lived about 200 years on the average, but Jengo was an astounding 303 years old, a full 51 years older than the previously known oldest earth drake, who had died at 252. His 300th birthday had been an earth dragon holiday, and the entire earth dragon population had attended his celebration. At 62, Kell was only just barely past what was considered an adult, which was around 50 years of age.

There was one other dragon there, which made many of the earth dragons a little wary and a little curious. Shii sat sedately beside Kanna, and the water drake looked sorely out of place, and completely blind because they had no lights on in the council chamber. She'd already seen the video, however, and she could hear the audio just as well as any earth dragon. The others weren't sure why she was there, but since Javan had vouched for her, they accepted her into the meeting.

Kammi was sitting at the computer, running the infragraphic projector she had installed before the meeting, and Keth and Kell were sitting beside her as they watched the surveillance video and listened. Earth dragons were usually polite and reserved, but more than once, Kammi paused the playback for the assembled dragons to settle down. The loudest shouting came after they saw the chromatic rant, heard what he had to say, and just one look over at Anthra and Geon showed him that the next council meeting they attended was going to be *quite* lively. They both looked utterly furious.

Kammi ended the video, then Ferroth got up in front of the assembly, sitting on his haunches on a small raised section at one end of the room.

“Alright, we know what they intend,” he said. “The chromatic wants to destroy everything we’ve built and put us all back on the farms, then try to strip of us our council seats. Now, the big question is, what are we going to do about it?”

“I’m going to spit that arrogant fluffy on the end of my tail, that’s what we’re going to do about it,” Anthra said hotly.

“As much as I’d love to do the same, killing their council member isn’t going to stop what they’re doing,” he replied. “I don’t think it’s just *him* doing it, Anthra. This is something the chromatics as a whole have had planned, and they’re acting on that plan. They’ve taken over the department and are dismantling it as we speak, and the factories will be next. Then the power plant. Then they’ll find some reason to raise the tithes again, force more and more of us onto the farms, and make the water dragons angrier and angrier to try to foment discord among the food producers. I think they’re trying to provoke some kind of radical response, which will give them an excuse to do something like completely remove earth dragons from the council. My dear Anthra, they may be *trying* to make you so angry you try to kill the council chromatic. That would certainly get you thrown off the council, and probably chained to Penitent’s Aerie on top of it.”

She blew out her breath. “Possible,” she acceded.

“It sounds like you have a plan, Ferroth,” Nenvi of Darkwood village noted.

“I do have a plan, council leader,” he nodded. “And as plans go, it’s fairly radical. Since they’re trying to completely destroy everything we’ve built, even threaten our very way of life, then we must move with a similar radical objective. Simply put, drakes and wyrms, we execute a similar operation to the original food riots. We withdraw from the surface, but this time, we take *everything* we possibly can with us, and we dig so far down, so deep, that they can’t possibly dig us out. We ensure we take enough food with us to outlast their food stores, then wait for them to starve. After they’ve been eating the trees in the Darkwood for a few months because

there's nothing left, they'll start to see reason. We have little power here on the island, friends. Because we're earth dragons, the others look down on us. Some don't even think we're real dragons, and as you heard from the chromatic, they believe that it gives them the right to treat us like slaves. Well, I am no slave, and I never will be," Ferroth hissed, which caused a clamor of tails slapping the floor in approval. "But in one respect, we *do* have power, friends, it's the greatest power that any dragon race can wield here, and that's that *we* produce the food. The water dragons certainly do so as well, but even Matriarch Shii, a fast and long-time friend of the earth dragons, will accede that the water dragons can't feed *all* of the dragons. It is the only power we have, friends, the only move we can make, and I say that we use it. We starve the other dragons into submission."

"Here here!" Javan shouted, which started a riotous, thunderous assent that Ferroth spent nearly a minute trying to calm down.

"You've thought this through, Ferroth. Tell us your plan," Jengo said in his aged voice.

"It comes in three stages. Kammi," he called, and she brought up the PowerPoint presentation he'd downloaded to the computer. PowerPoint graphics didn't translate well to infragraphic, but Ferroth had prepared it with that in mind, using simple shapes and bold text. "The first thing we do is consolidate," he said. "Keth had the great idea of pulling all his personal stores out of his burrow and storage chambers and putting it in his village's emergency food storage silo, which puts it out of reach of the other dragons. The first thing we need to do is consolidate all a village's resources into a central location that's both underground and easy to defend. I know every village has an emergency storage silo underground for storing food that farms give to the village as a whole and help by taking a farm's overflow, giving the farmer extra storage capacity, and now we bring those into use. And not just food. Spare computers, equipment, accounting ledgers, records, anything at all we don't want to lose, it has to be underground and out of reach. The village council leader will be responsible for inventorying the assets and reporting it back to this body, which I guess we can call the Earth Council. No offense to you, Matriarch," he smiled at Shii, though she

couldn't see it. "You certainly will have your place here as an emissary from the water dragons. Anyway, every farm should move its own stores into the village, which puts it out of reach of any sudden raid or inspection from the chromatics. You know they'll start invading the farms, searching for food, and when they find it, they'll demand to take part of it as the tithe. The more they make us work, the more they keep us under control, so they will search for *any* excuse to take as much food from us as possible, both to feed themselves and to force us to work harder just to put food in our own mouths.

"The second thing we need to do is give ourselves a means to move things outside of the view of the other dragons. The other dragons can all fly, which puts them out of reach of us. Well, it's now time to build a transportation network that puts *us* out of reach of *them*. Every village has, at one time or another, kicked around the idea of tunneling to another village's public chambers, if only to avoid crossing someone's farmland with cart tracks and robbing them of available arable land. I know that my own village had a tunnel excavated halfway to Lonehill Village before the idea was abandoned. Well, we need to connect all the villages underground, to be able to move around without anyone being able to see us, and move assets from village to village outside the eye of the sky dragons. The builders need to sit down with a map of the island's underground passages and figure out the fastest means to dig one tunnel, and one tunnel only, between the villages, like a circle, a beltway. We put this tunnel under the villages, and this tunnel doesn't actually connect *to* the villages so much as it comes close enough for a connecting passage to be dug from one common village chamber down to the tunnel. We make the tunnel only just big enough for Anthra, and we hide the entrances into the tunnel in each village public chamber system as best we can. It will be our subway system, the way we can move dragons, supplies, and equipment hidden from the eyes of the sky dragons."

Kammi switched slides, showing a rough, simplistic cross-section of the extinct volcano. "The third thing we do is prepare our sanctuary," he said, pointing. "Underneath the extinct volcano, there's a very large dome

chamber, the emptied out magma chamber. This chamber has only one way in or out, and it's large enough to house nearly a thousand dragons without any modification, as long as they're very friendly," he said lightly, which made a few of them chuckle. "With some excavation and building some platforms and floors to maximize the vertical space, it can house *all* of us, as well as all the food stores we have. The advantage, like I said, is that there's only one way in. The drawback is that the only way in is through a three hundred pace long underwater lava tube," he explained.

"And that is why I am here," Shii said calmly. "My pod has agreed to help evacuate earth dragons into the underground cavern if it becomes needful. Only one earth drake we know can swim the tube without drowning, but with us helping, we can get all of you into the dry part of the tube safely by draining the water from the tube temporarily and giving any dragon that can reach the entrance a way in that doesn't risk being drowned trying."

"It must be one of yours, Keth," Javan noted. "You're the only earth drakes on the island that spend so much time in the water."

"Kell," he replied modestly. "I used to do it as well, as could Kanna, but we haven't done it in years. I'd honestly be afraid to try now without training for it. There is no room for error, there are no air pockets. If you don't make it, you drown."

"My plan is to get a builder team into that cavern and let them start preparing it. We send them in with all the food, water, and supplies they need to last on their own for at least twenty days without having to come out, and as Matriarch Shii has said, her pod is willing to help us by ferrying supplies and equipment into the lava tube, as well as cart off the waste rock and dump it in the deep ocean, out of sight of the others."

"My family can help as well," Keth said mildly. "Kell can swim deep enough and far enough to carry a load of waste rock. Shii's pod always did call him a mud dragon," he said lightly, which produced quite a few chuckles. "Given the need, I'll be doing a lot more swimming after my day

is done for the next few weeks, getting back into trim. My goal is to be able to swim the lava tube by mid-June, and once I can do that, I can carry waste rock myself.”

“This chamber is so deep that I don’t think that even the chromatics could use magic to get at us,” Ferroth explained, pointing at the image projected on the wall with heat. “And with some excavation and building, we can turn it into a deep refuge that can house us all. The builders will need to survey the area, and if possible, excavate an entire city for us, with plenty of storage room, living quarters, room to set up some manufacturing, moving as much of the factories as we can underground, set it up so it can hold everything we need to last for two years underground. We’ll need generators for electricity, ensure there’s sufficient ventilation to provide enough oxygen for all of us, and so on and so on. The cavern is huge, but it’s only a raw material at this point. We need to refine it in order to make it useful, adapt it for our use.

“The chromatics want nothing less than to put us in slavery,” Ferroth growled. “So we need to be ready to take this to the extreme, my friends. For us, that extreme is to go underground with as much food as we can manage and wait them out. If we can outlast them, if the other dragons start to go hungry, then we win. They’ll be forced to accept *our* terms on coming out and resuming our farming. We’re the ones that feed *them*, and just like in the food riots, we have to use that fact as our greatest leverage. The water dragons can’t feed themselves and all the others on their own, and Matriarch Shii can explain what’s going on after it happens so the water dragons don’t think we’re simply being melodramatic.”

“Were they to know the truth, the water dragons would stop feeding the chromatics entirely,” Shii stated. “But to tell them would get word to the chromatics of what you intend, so it must be kept secret for now. When the proper time comes, I will tell them the truth.”

“Yes, it must, and thank you for understanding that, Matriarch,” Ferroth said. “That’s the first stages of the plan, my friends. We prepare to exercise the only power we have, the worst thing we could possibly do,

because the worst is what *they* are trying to inflict upon *us*. We dig down, we dig deep, and we get ready to starve them into submission.” He motioned for Kammi to bring up the next slide, which was a map of the island. “The key to this is going to be secrecy, my friends, and that means we have to defeat the sky dragons spying from the air and the chromatics using magic to scry. Simply put, if it’s something important, you do it only at night. Sky dragons can’t see at night. Waste rock from the subway tunnel has to be disposed of carefully, so as not to arouse suspicion. And as far as passing information, that’s what this map is for,” he said, motioning. “Each of these marked burrows or chambers is one of the old ones left over from the food riots. These chambers are all warded against scrying. If you must pass on *any* information, you do it *only* in one of these chambers. I have printed maps of these locations ready for each of you, and it’s your responsibility to keep those maps secret until you’ve had time to memorize the locations and then destroy the maps,” he said intensely. “If any other dragon finds one of those maps, they’ll piece it together very quickly that we’ve mapped out all the warded burrows, and they’ll know we’re planning something. We absolutely *can not* let them think we’re planning something until we’re ready to execute our plans. The key to any operation is twofold, friends. One side of it is preparing a plan. The second part of it is preventing your plan from being sniffed out by the enemy. It falls to everyone in this chamber to keep everything that we speak about in this chamber an absolute secret. When you filter down your orders, you tell *only* those who need to know, you tell them *only* in a warded area, and you tell them *only* what they need to know to carry out your plans. The diggers of the beltway tunnel don’t need to know *everything* about why they’re doing it. They just have to do it, and be told that they can’t tell anyone that they’re doing it. Most earth dragons will keep a secret, but any secret is only as good as the number of dragons that know it. The more that know it, the less of a secret it is. That’s what we’ve learned in the department, my friends. Secrecy is your advantage, and you must protect it. It’s a lesson the chromatics have entwined in every aspect of their entire culture, to the point where they won’t even tell us their *names*. We have to be just as secretive as the chromatics if this is going to work.

“Now, that’s what we do secretly. Openly, I want to play into their paws, so to speak,” Ferroth said, as Kammi advanced the slide. “Openly, I’m going to carry out a plan that’s basically a diversion, letting the chromatics see us fight them, plot, but it’s nothing but a cover for what we’re *really* doing. They’ll expect us to resist, so that’s exactly what we’re going to do. I already have a series of plans drawn up for combating chromatic interference into our business, and it *should* keep them distracted enough to let us carry through with our main plan without detection. The first thing I’m going to do is instigate an incident at the department that effectively makes every single earth drake walk out. It’s exactly what the fluffy wants us to do, what he’s been goading us into doing, so we’re going to give him what he wants *before* he’s ready for it, before he’s trained any other dragon to do anything we do in the department. What I’d like from the council is to organize things so my department drakes can continue their work from their own burrows, or in offices in the factories, until the time comes that we go underground. In effect, the department is going to abandon headquarters and become independent, spreading out and doing our work all over the island, then it will relocate in the dome chamber once we go to ground. The factory heads have already given their blessing for us to set up there, mainly our researchers so they have access to equipment they can’t really keep in their burrows, but they’re going to need allotments. We still need to keep an eye on the humans, continue our research, but they need to eat.”

“I think that’s reasonable, Ferroth,” Garex, leader of the council of Yellowspine village, rumbled. Garex was the second largest earth wyrm among the earth dragons. “The council leaders can sit down together and hammer out private allotments from village common stores. They won’t be getting fat, but they won’t starve.”

“The factory heads need to get together and discuss how they’re going to handle both chromatic interference and how to move at least some of their production equipment underground,” Ferroth continued. “When the department folds, they’ll look to the factories next. But, since not just earth dragons benefit from the factories, they’ll have a lot harder time closing

those down. But on the second level, we're going to need some of the raw materials the factories use to go underground with us, so it means there's going to be a crunch on viable resources while we split it up and hide what goes underground. We have enough steel, copper and aluminum stockpiled from our field agents collecting it from the human world to run the factories for another six months, and that's what we have to protect the most. *All* of it should go underground *now*, and it can be brought out to the factories as they need it instead of being stored in the factories. But that still doesn't change the fact that we'll be facing a critical shortage of steel, copper and aluminum, and also possibly plastic if the chromatics tell the water dragons to stop collecting floating plastic when they're out fishing. So, one thing I need all of you to do is to go around and collect *anything* that has plastic or metal in it that's no longer used, and bring it to the refrigerator factory. They can tear the items apart, separate the resources, then send it underground," Ferroth told them. "We need to conserve the off-island resources we have, and the factory drakes can literally recycle our old junk for use in new equipment. Shii, I know your pod is small, but if they come across any discarded aluminum drink cans on the ocean floor, could they gather them? Every little bit helps, and we're lowest on aluminum right now."

"We can do that easily, Chief," she answered with a nod, nodding not exactly in his direction since she couldn't see.

"While you're doing that, friends, also figure out how much of your factories you can move underground and not compromise your production. We'll need to be able to produce while underground, but not as much. If we could establish just one production line underground from each factory, it *should* be enough to let us build anything we might need once we're down there," Ferroth continued. "Just remember, the chromatics *will* eventually manage to shut down your factories, and when they do, they'll probably lock them up to keep you from getting your equipment. Expect them to start meddling not the day after the department folds. So plan ahead."

"We can do that," Kammi's father nodded.

“Speaking of the department, chief, how is the island TV network going to work if there’s nobody in the department running it?” someone asked.

Ferroth grinned wolfishly. “It *won’t*,” he replied. “At least not for the other dragons. I’m already working to install an auxiliary TV control station in the TV factory, where we’ll pipe out TV for *only* the earth dragons. But since the main TV control center is in the department, operated by the earth dragons, well, the other dragons lose their TV. That should cause some problems for the chromatics, when the other dragons realize that without the department, there’s no TV. That means no sports. The fire dragons may riot.” A few earth dragons chuckled. “The island’s computer network is also run from the department, but we can manage that by remote. As long as they don’t turn off the servers, we can keep it going. If they do turn off the servers, it’ll take us about a week to get things back up using a new main control site. We’ll need the water dragons to help with that, Shii, to move the cable.”

“We can help with that, Chief,” she assured.

“What about the stores the council has?” someone asked, “Don’t they have a year’s worth of food stockpiled for emergencies?”

“Yes, they do,” Anthra stated. “But we know where it is, Geon and I. And with a little digging, we could open a tunnel into the warehouses and steal it, or destroy it.”

“Very clever, Anthra,” Ferroth grinned.

“We may have no magic, but the other dragons will learn *quickly* that nothing that rests upon the earth is safe from us,” she said in a tight voice, trying to control her anger. “They can’t store their food in the clouds.”

“They know we dig, but they don’t know how *good* we are at it,” one of the council members said proudly. “And my village has some of the best diggers on the island. We’re at your service, Ferroth.”

“Not just yours, Gradla. Each village needs to send its best diggers to connect the villages. That’s miles and miles of tunnel we have to excavate, and do it quickly. We’ll need our best tunnelers to do it fast and make the tunnels stable. As long as we have no setbacks, I figure it’ll take eighteen teams of tunnelers working at all hours of day and night about three weeks to build the beltway. The builders will oversee the project, keep each team on the right course, and each team will tunnel out from its village to the next closest, meeting up the tunnels underneath. Blanva, think your builders can manage that?”

“Easily,” he snorted. “I can have the plans ready by morning.”

“Isn’t that going to short-hand the farms?” someone called.

“Yes,” Ferroth said grimly. “I want all of you to go back and filter it down to the farmers to do their best this rotation with whatever hands they have available, but don’t go out of your way to paw over any tithes if possible. Don’t harvest anything you can keep in the ground. Do everything you can to resist giving up the increased tithe, but don’t try to harvest at night, don’t *look* like you’re working against the tithes or you’re doing anything unusual, just delay harvesting any food until the last possible moment. We make it *look* like we’re more than willing to meet the increased tithe, while we do everything we can to avoid giving up our food and finishing our preparations under the ground, where they can’t see it. We give them no reason to look any harder than they already are.”

“What every farm should do is prepare to *harvest* their extra crops this rotation, but we make sure that we’re ready to go underground before harvest time comes,” Anthra said. “Everyone put off your harvests as long as possible, and when you do harvest, it goes straight underground to feed *us*, not *them*. So, if you haven’t planted yet, focus on foodstuffs that can be stored extended periods of time. Granjia, how many of the large freezers can your factory produce without attracting any undue attention?”

“Maybe two or three a week,” she replied.

“Do so. Send those freezers down into the deepest villages and into that secret cavern under the volcano. We put them as far out of reach of the other dragons as possible. The ones that go to the secret cavern, make sure you package so they’re waterproof so we can get them in and have them still work.”

“It will be done, esteemed council member.”

“I don’t want to rely on technology down in that cavern, Anthra,” Ferroth warned. “It’s going to take time to build a power plant that operates underground, so we can’t rely on electricity at first. If they shut off the power and we’re relying on food kept in freezers, we have a problem.”

“True, Chief, but we should still put some down there,” she replied. “If only because some of the crops already planted are perishable.”

“True. We wouldn’t lose all that much if we lost them, since they’d rot anyway,” Ferroth grunted.

Anthra looked to another wyrm. “Fenval, I want you to mark thirty of each of our ranch animals, your best stock, and when the time comes, we’ll hide them underground,” she said. “When we do this, the dragons will eradicate the herds, because we can’t take them all with us. Eating all our herd animals will be their first act. The animals we take with us will consume *our* food, and shorten our ability to outlast them. We’ll need prime stock to rebuild the herds. I’m fairly certain we can feed thirty of each of our livestock animals.”

“I can arrange it, Anthra,” the wyrm nodded.

“One thing we have to consider is that the chromatics will send out the sky dragons to hunt, and use the scions to send dragons out into the human world to steal food,” Ferroth said. “If they get desperate, it’ll be an option. That’s going to cause friction with the humans.”

“Not that will be an issue any time soon, but when the comes and if I can, I’ll warn Jenny,” Kell called. “So at least when some news crew gets

video of a half-starved fire dragon doing his best to eat an entire herd of cattle, they'll know why he's doing it."

"The sky dragons can't possibly hunt enough to feed all of them," Shii noted.

"It would come down to how much the water dragons feed them, Matriarch. The sky dragons might be able to supplement it enough to hold them over and outlast us."

"The water dragons won't be feeding *any* of them," she sniffed. "When you go underground, we will dive for the deep water and leave the others to fend for themselves."

"All of the water dragons?"

"Most of them, and those that remain would be so overworked within a week that they'd abandon the effort," she replied. "Though not all water dragons are as close to the earth dragons as my pod is, water dragons respect our earthen cousins, and will support them in their actions once they understand what caused them to go to such extremes. In many ways, the water and earth dragons occupy the same rung in draconic society. Both our races focus on our food production as our primary duty, and neither you nor us involve ourselves in the affairs of the others. We may have magic, but what is to stop the chromatics from looking at *us* as their next group of slaves, because our magic isn't as *strong* as theirs?"

"That's a fair point," Anthra mused. "But they'd never do that to you, Matriarch. The chromatics know that unlike us, *you* can simply quit the island and move somewhere else. Us, well, they know they have us trapped on this island. There's no way for us to get off without us building boats they'd see and then destroy, so the chromatics most likely believe that they can do anything to us they please. After all, what are we going to do? Swim away? And as long as the council chromatic plays on the bigotry the sky and fire dragons have against us, they can get their way. As in all things since the council formed, we will lose the vote five to four."

“Not after this,” Geon growled. “After this, the earth dragons will demand *four* seats on the council, so they can never simply out-vote us again.”

“I have a simpler idea,” Anthra said. “We have one thousand four hundred and seventy-two earth dragons at the last census, which makes us the most populous dragon race, by nearly two hundred over the water dragons, who are the next most populous. By percentage, the earth dragons alone represent twenty-seven percent of the total island population. So, I will demand that each council member be given votes representing their *proportion* of the total population. That gives us and the water dragons, the next most populous race at twenty-four percent, a solid voting majority of fifty-one percent, but still allows the other dragons to out-vote us if our successors get too full of themselves and the water dragons don’t support their proposals.”

“I wouldn’t attach votes to population like that, Anthra,” Ferroth said grimly. “I wouldn’t put it past the others to realize that the simple way to change the numbers on the council is to kill off earth dragons. Geon’s idea of demanding the council be reworked so the earth dragons can’t simply be outvoted all the time by an alliance of those that hate us is the better way to go.”

Anthra considered that a moment, then nodded. “Perhaps give *every* dragon race the power to veto if both drake and wyrm support a veto, so they can kill any proposal without a vote.”

“That might work,” Ferroth agreed. “That way any dragon on council can shoot down something ridiculous or harmful to *their* dragons, and force anything that *does* go through to at least have enough support to not get vetoed. I’d leave the specifics of it up to you. You and Geon are, after all, our best politicians,” he smiled.

“The day after tomorrow I might turn into a killer,” Geon growled. “I may have to go to council after my suspension is over without spikes, and pray they don’t grow back before we’re done.”

“You’re not the only one,” Anthra said in a frosty tone. “I have to actually face that backbiting fluffy tomorrow, cousin, and do my best not to bite his muzzle off.”

“Anyway, we’ve been here long enough to talk about the tithes, as they think we did,” Ferroth said. “We have to end the meeting or we’ll attract suspicion. Spread it through the villages that we discussed the tithes and worked up a plan of village crop sharing in case one village runs into a shortage, and leave it at that. If anyone asks why Matriarch Shii attended, it’s because it involved the tithes, and that means it involves the water dragons as well. Matriarch Shii was here to speak for the water dragons about the tithes. And remember, *silence*. When we leave this council chamber, nobody speak of this unless you’re in a warded chamber, and even then, you *only* do it with someone that was here. Always remember, the more people who know what we’re doing, the better chance the chromatics have of finding out about it. For this to work, we have to blindside them with it. So silence, silence, *silence*,” he said intensely, sweeping his gaze across the room. “If anyone has any questions, bring them to Anthra or Geon, but make sure you do it in a warded area.”

“Matriarch,” Anthra said. “Might it be possible for you to ward my burrow? It’s relatively new, and I’d rather not have the fluffy listening to anything that goes on in it.”

“I would be happy to do so, esteemed council member,” she replied. “I know all the proper enchantments. But explaining why I’m visiting your burrow might not be easy.”

“Bring Keth with you, we’ll simply make it a social call where you decided to tag along,” she said.

“I’d be happy to help, even when I’m not needed,” Keth chuckled. “Would right now be something of an inconvenience, Shii?”

“Certainly not,” she replied. “In fact, it is a perfect time. The moon is full tonight, and my powers will be strong.”

“Then it seems, Matriarch, that we should further discuss the tithes in my burrow,” Anthra said lightly.

“That is a most excellent suggestion, esteemed council member. Now someone lead me out of here. Not being able to see is quite annoying,” she said, which caused quite a few chuckles.

“Someone turn on the lights,” Ferroth called. “No need to cause the Matriarch any further discomfort.”

“Geon’s burrow is already warded, so that won’t be an issue, Matriarch,” Ferroth supplied as the lights came on, and all of them blinked a few times to adjust.

“My grandsire had it done after the food riots. He never trusted the other dragons after what happened, and now I see he had good reason,” Geon grunted. “If the sky and fire dragons don’t know what the chromatics are doing, they’ll still support it, if only because it brings *us* misery. And that will make them happy.”

“Ivaiya knows what they’re doing,” Kell noted. “I could tell watching her. The look she gave Hinaldo, the sky drake, when he voted against the chromatic said it all. The chromatics told her what they’re up to. I believe they did Hinaldo as well, but it’s not sitting well with him. Anthra, you might make some inroads if you talk to Hinaldo. He’s always been a wild card on council. If he’s against what they’re doing, you might be able to break their majority when they cast a critical vote. It’ll not only help us, it’ll mess up the chromatics’ plans. If they can’t ram anything they please through council, it will slow them down, and right now we need time to get everything ready.”

“You’re right, Kell,” she nodded. “I’ll speak with him tomorrow.”

“Kell, go lay those cables. Kammi, help him,” Ferroth ordered.

“Sure thing, chief,” Kell nodded.

“Ralla and Sella will help you,” Shii called. “Just go get them.”

“We’re gonna need them,” Kell noted as the two young adults turned towards a different exit.

Chapter 5

26 May 2017, 15:49 DMT; Dawnmist Village

There were few things that moved faster or with more dedication than earth dragons with a purpose.

Of course, a majority of the dragons doing the work didn't know exactly *why* they were doing it, but they were told to do it, they were told it was of critical importance that it got done, and that it was just as important that they told *no one* what they were doing. And, earth dragons being earth dragons, they just smiled conspiratorially and asked for the plan of action.

Six days ago, just before sunrise, Kell had finished the network node that gave them connectivity into the underground cavern, and it was now heavily in use. It was how the builders in the cavern communicated with the outside, using nothing but email and real time text chat. They had been down there for four days, and in those four days, they had made *astounding* progress. It only took them two days to level out the floor, carve out some parts, fill others in, then pave the whole thing with large, flat stones to form a flat, level floor. Since then, they'd been building floors in the vertical dome chamber, and from the plans Kell had seen, they'd be able to build nine floors that spanned the entire thing, anchoring it to the floor rather than the walls, then building it so that it took up all the space and simply gave the thing nowhere to go. Just as Kell suspected, the builders didn't want to dig into the walls, even sink bolts into them, because of the tremendous weight the walls were supporting. They'd solved the lateral anchoring problem by simply building the floors to exactly fill the volume of the imaginary plane of the floor, fixing it so the walls contacted the floor at every point all the way around without the floor being actively secured to them. All the bracing and support came from struts underneath and pillars

sunk into the floor, as well as the fact that the walls prevented the floor from moving even an inch. The work was done so precisely that Kell couldn't even get his clawtip between the floor and the wall. It was a very clever bit of engineering, and Kell could admire the cleverness of the lead builder to come up with it.

Moving supplies in and out wasn't as hard as they thought it would be. At first, supplies were lowered down from the cliff overhead, the bundles wrapped or boxed or packaged to be waterproof. The water drakes in Shii's pod would then carry the supplies up the tube and leave them at the waterline, and the earth drakes would come get them. The only trick had been getting the supplies out to the water without being seen...at least for four days.

The tunnelers had done a lot of work over the last week, and the first thing they did was create a new side tunnel off the tunnel that ran from Keth's farm to the council chamber and ran it right under Kell's burrow, to the cliff at the edge of the little knoll upon which his burrow was situated. They then opened the tunnel to the outside, but made sure to open the tunnel five meters *under* the waterline, most of which Kell had to do himself, since most earth drakes couldn't work underwater very long. They dug out to the water, and Kell carved out the last of it to open the tunnel to the cove. The tunnel sloped sharply down to the bottom of the deep harbor-like cove, right by the oyster bed, and it was that tunnel that they used to ferry the supplies the builders needed. The tunnel flooded up to the natural ocean level, so the supplies had to be carefully slid down the ramp and into the water, where Shii's pod would pick them up and take them up the lava tube.

The other tunnels were well into construction as well. The Dawnmist tunneling team had completed their circuit of the ring tunnel Ferroth had envisioned, tunneling out to Three Hills village, the next village over. Granted, the distance between Dawnmist and Three Hills was the shortest between any two villages, but the Dawnmist drakes just ran right down the part of the tunnel that the Three Hills drakes had excavated and started helping them in their project to tunnel over to Breakwater Village. Kell

wasn't surprised at all that the Dawnmist tunnelers had connected *perfectly* to the back end of the Three Hills tunnel, for one of the best engineers on the builders had drawn up the plans, and there was a builder team drake on every tunneling team using GPS and underground locators to make sure they were exactly where they were supposed to be digging.

What to do with the waste rock was an issue, but earth dragons were clever. Some of it was crushed down as much as possible and hauled to the water treatment plant for their filters, and more was taken to the desalinization plant to filter the water it produced. Another use for it was actually useful; because of the projected increased traffic of carts and wagons, a decision was made by many villages to pave their cart paths with cobblestones to prevent road damage and rutting when they got busy, so they needed plenty of stone to cut into blocks to use as paving stones. In several villages, there were teams of drakes seating cobblestones on the most used cart paths, and amusingly enough, those paving projects were moving with nearly as much speed as the tunneling going on under them. Basalt was quite useful for claw cleaning due to its hardness and abrasive nature, so scratching slabs started appearing in general stores all over the island so earth dragons could keep their claws clean and sharp. And all over the island, earth dragons everywhere suddenly just *had* to have rock gardens filled with dark volcanic rocks often sculpted into shapes by the dragons building the gardens, surrounded by both white and black sand. The black sand was hauled in from the many beaches ringing the west side of the island, the leeward side of the natural ocean current that turned right on the east edge of the island, and the white sand either harvested from the eastern beaches or dredged up from ocean floor by enterprising water dragons to trade for foodstuffs the earth dragons grew. There were several white sand beaches on the island, but the owners of those beaches that were part of someone's farm weren't about to give up their sand...and Kell's family was one of them. The eastern current and tides in the past had brought white sand up from the water and deposited it into the cove to give them a large, pristine white sand beach that ran just behind the family burrow, and *nobody* was going to shovel up their beach and haul it off to be someone's rock garden. The rock gardens were all the rage, and there just *happened* to

be plenty of spare rock available to build them, as well as causing quite a run on sand and irritating the builders, who had been harvesting sand from those beaches for their concrete.

So far, there was no indication that the chromatics knew what they were doing. Kell and Kammi were watching through a series of cameras that had been placed all over the island, including ones watching every library and major gathering place used by the chromatics. Kell and Kammi were being watched too much, but Slate and Onyx were still working in the department, and they had the training to know what to do...and there was *nowhere* that an earth drake could not climb. As long as it was somehow connected to the ground, an earth drake could get up there. Slate and Onyx had planted the microcams over three nights, gouging tiny holes out of the bare rock of the volcanoes with their claws and hiding them inside, expanding their surveillance capability. Though the chromatics didn't name themselves, they *did* look differently enough to identify, and Slate and Onyx had been watching the video and assigning codenames to the chromatics, then tracking their movements via the cameras they had scattered all over the island. With them banned from field work, it actually gave them something to do at work, and since the chromatic couldn't see their monitors, it wasn't like they were in any danger of being caught.

The department was still operating, but Ferroth was both literally and feigning to be at the end of his clawtips with the chromatic. In the six days since dropping the reorganization plan on them, two thirds of the department had been fired, and those who were left were so overworked that there was palpable tension in the air, tension that was not in any way feigned. Each research team was missing three drakes now, and the internet surveillance unit had had its staff reduced by another 20%. There was open grumbling in the rooms of the department now...which was just what the chromatic wanted. He had yet to hire any other drakes to come in, which told Kell that when the earth drakes finally had enough and went on strike, the chromatic would just have the doors locked and shut down the department entirely. After all, he just had to stand before council and whine

that the earth drakes abandoned him *before* he could train anyone else on what they were doing, so until they came back, the department was defunct.

Not that it mattered. Geon had told him yesterday that Essan, the water drake, had flat out asked the department chromatic if he intended to even *run* the department the last time he came before them to justify his further staff reductions. That made the chromatic just smirk. And, that got him called up for yet another vote to be fired, which naturally was shot down five to four.

But the water dragons were more than a little annoyed by what the chromatic was doing to the department, to the point where they finally pulled what Ferroth was hoping for...they demanded that the chromatic make contact with Jenny, because after so many days with no communication, the humans had to be getting nervous about the silence. That put the chromatic in quite a quandary, for when he got back to the department, he found that the *only* one capable of contacting the humans was Kell. He was the only one that knew the numbers, know *how* to call them, and created quite the amusing little scene yesterday evening, when the department chromatic was forced to come to his burrow and ask, through a tightly clenched jaw, just how he was supposed to go about making contact with the human world. Kell immediately cursed him out and threw him out of his burrow, which prompted a visit from Jussa and Geon that morning. "We know you have no reason to do anything for the chromatic, but *we* need to have the ability to contact the outside world, young earth drake," Jussa said calmly, putting his clawed forepaw on Kell's shoulder, just in front of his wingjoint.

"You see what he's doing!" Kell protested. "He's not *running* the department, he's *destroying* it! If I don't help him, it might just get him fired, and that's exactly what I want!"

"We're fully aware of what he's trying to do, young one," Jussa said, his glowing turquoise eyes narrowing. "And you leave that little bit of business to us. For now, however, we need to contact the outside world, if only to let them know that we didn't forget about them."

“How about a compromise,” Geon offered. “You show *me* how to do it, and fix it so I can make contact from the computer on the aerie.”

“Now that I can do,” he said immediately. “I’ll set you up with a phone emulator that will let you call human phones.”

“Then come to the aerie, young one, and install what you need to install.”

“Let me get the programs on a flash drive I can take up there. Be right back,” he said, hurrying into his workshop.

And so, Kell returned to the aerie and installed a phone emulation program on the aerie computer. He made sure to glare at the council chromatic about half the time, who seemed both slightly annoyed and amused at Kell’s open hostility. Kell trained Geon in how to use the programs, how to use the bluetooth headset that he would strap over his earhole, and put Jenny’s contact numbers in the computer’s address book. “Just tap her name and it’ll call her, and this button disconnects the call when you finish. This computer doesn’t have a microphone, so you can’t use the speakerphone function, it’ll only work over the bluetooth. Odds are, they’ll give you new contact numbers, esteemed council member. Did you see how I programmed the address book?”

“I did, young one,” he nodded. “I feel confident I can add new listings on my own. But if I can’t, I’ll call you and have you come up.”

“That is the jurisdiction of the department,” the council chromatic said evenly.

“Your lackey fired everyone who could *do* it, so if you don’t mind, I’ll have a drake I can trust handle something this important,” Geon shot back. “Something this delicate is not something I’d put in the paws of an incompetent.”

The chromatic bristled at Geon’s sideways insult.

“Remember that you have to speak English, esteemed council member,” Kell said. “If you don’t feel comfortable doing it, there’s any number of drakes in the department that can act as a translator for you.”

“No, I’m fairly sure I can handle it, young one,” he smiled. “I’ve been studying English for a while now, preparing for the possibility of this very day. What time is it where the human is?”

“They’re six hours ahead. This clock here is on their time,” he said, pointing to a secondary clock on the screen.

“Are there any diplomatic titles I need to know?”

“With Jenny, not really. Call her Major Edwards, it’s her rank and family name, and that’s considered a respectful mode of address for American humans. If she brings in someone else, they’ll identify themselves. In American government, a diplomat’s title of station is often also a proper mode of address. If one of them is introduced a secretary, like the Secretary of State for example, call them Mister or Misses Secretary. If they introduce you to the president, then call him Mister President. If she brings someone into the conversation that isn’t introduced with such a title, then call them sir or ma’am if you don’t use their names.”

“I understand.”

“Then you’re good to go,” Kell nodded. “If you have any problems, just send a sky drake for me and I’ll come back up and fix it.”

“No, stay for a moment, young one. I’d like you available as I make this first call, just in case.”

“Of course,” he nodded, skittering to the side and sitting on his haunches.

“Kell, is there a way we can all hear what she says?” Anthra asked.

“Yes, Anthra. There’s no external microphone for Jenny to hear what you say, but this button here will play what Jenny says over the external

speaker, so everyone can hear it,” he said, pointing at an icon on the screen. Geon nodded and tapped it, then he tapped Jenny’s address listing.

“Very good, young one. Would you translate what they say for those of us who can’t understand her language?” Jussa prompted.

“I’d be honored, esteemed council member,” Kell said, nodding his head low.

In all, Geon handled the initial contact fairly well, and so did Jenny. She didn’t freak out when someone other than Kell introduced himself over her phone, Geon identifying himself as the earth drake council seat, and Jenny immediately conferenced in both the Secretary of State and the President. “Warn them that the whole council will hear what you say,” Kell whispered to Geon in English, and he nodded and started out right with it. “Mister President, Mister Secretary, Major Edwards, I speak on behalf of the council of dragons, who are all listening,” he said in English. “We wished to make this, uh, call to ensure you that we do in fact wish to maintain a light diplomatic contact with the outside world. We are, how do you say...touching base?”

“That’s the proper term, esteemed council member,” President Walker replied, which Kell translated for the others. “I must say, you speak excellent English.”

“I have studied it for some time,” Geon replied modestly. “But unfortunately, not all of us have the time to study as I have, so we have a translator here for the others.

“I fear that this call will be very brief, exalted friends,” Geon said. “It was as much to test our ability to call you as it was to let you know that we are still here.”

“I understand. Has the council made any decisions of which we should be aware?” the president asked.

“Not at this time, Mister President,” Geon answered. “We are still in debate over such matters. Earth Drake Kell did make mention that you

might wish to give us an alternative number of contact, so as not to constantly bother your Major Edwards. She is the only means of contact we have with you.”

Kell heard Jenny’s voice, unintelligible in the background, but it was muted by the president’s voice. “As a matter of fact, we can give you a contact number for the Secretary of State, who *should* be managing something as important as diplomatic contact between our peoples, esteemed council member,” Walker declared. Kell listened as the Secretary of State, a man named Andrew Kent, gave Geon a new contact number that would directly ring the State Department’s highest levels, which would then be routed immediately to at least a deputy secretary, if not Secretary Kent himself. “Major Edwards certainly handled the responsibility with excellence, but even she will admit that she’s not really the one you should be calling,” Walker said. Geon programmed the new number into the computer, then he ended the call with flowery farewells. Kell left the aerie as soon as he could, and that rounded out his morning.

His afternoon had been spent on the farm, while Keth and Kanna did a favor for Shii...or so anyone watching would think. His parents and the younglings had been swimming for hours every day since the meeting, both regaining their swimming endurance and practicing holding their breath. Officially, Keth and Kanna were digging out an expansion of the main living chamber in Shii’s underwater den and the hatchlings were learning the family skill of underwater excavation, but in reality they were just getting back in swimming shape, and his siblings, well, they really *were* learning the art of underwater digging, as well as being extra paws on hand to help with carting out the waste rock. It wasn’t that his parents were out of shape, no earth dragon really was, but it was a different kind of endurance they had to train to do any extensive underwater work or long distance swimming. Kell was probably the most fit earth drake on the entire island, because he swam more than any other drake, he was the one that did most of the underwater digging for Shii’s pod, and he had trained himself to dive deep and hold his breath for very long periods of time, even while performing heavy activity. Kell’s muscles were like solid rock, but where

his endurance kicked in was that he could perform extensive activity underwater before he had to come up for air. All the water dragons knew that if they needed anything dug out underwater, that it was Keth's family they needed to come see. It was something of their specialty, and it was no secret. And Keth's family had made some good food trades by doing their rather specialized form of excavation. After all, Shii's den was one of her pod's points of pride and status. Shii's den was one of the largest pod dens on the island, a fully excavated den with multiple chambers, even an air chamber, electricity, and water circulation pumps, and all but the original underwater cave had been dug out by Keth's ancestors, Keth, or Kell.

And it was just *coincidence* that Keth's family was carrying out a large amount of waste rock from the cove, far more than their excavation of Shii's den would entail.

Shii wasn't complaining. She'd been wanting that chamber enlarged for a while, but hadn't gotten around to asking Keth to do it.

So, while his parents and the younglings were off playing in the cove, Kell and Kammi had been stuck with all the manual labor. The lack of harmful insects on the island cut out a lot of their work, but the rich, fertile soil lent itself to the quick infestation of weeds, mainly the fast-growing sawgrass that covered about any part of the island that wasn't bare rock or forest, so much of a farmer's day was spent weeding out the farmland. Kell weeded out both radish fields and the carrot field while Kammi weeded out the potato fields, then watered Keth's prized wheat field as Kell went over to the cove and looked down from the little cliff directly over her pod den entrance into the water. Kav and Kitta appeared, carrying baskets of waste rock, using their wings to "fly" through the water, just as Shii's pod had been training Kell's family for generations. The two of them quickly swam out to the entrance of the cove and vanished in the shimmering, undulating water, and a sleek water drake ghosted out of the entrance. It was Ralla, he could see, and his friend broached the water and looked up at him. "What goes on, Kell?" he asked.

"Nothing, just checking on the progress," he replied.

“It goes smoothly,” he replied. “The younglings can stay under far longer than I expected.”

“How are sire and mother doing?”

“Fine, fine. It’s apparent they haven’t done any digging for a while, but they stay down longer with each breath,” he smiled.

“The chamber?”

“About half done,” he replied. “Keth did mention that he will have you run some new power lines later. Keth had to pull some of them off the wall.”

“I can fix it, no problem,” he nodded. “You should tell Matriarch that this is her chance to get anything else done, since they’re training the younglings,” Kell grinned.

Ralla chuckled. “I think Matriarch is sizing up just that possibility, friend,” he grinned back. “She keeps studying a stretch of floor in the food storage chamber. I think she’s pondering a storage chamber there, maybe a live storage area for lobsters and crabs.”

Kell chuckled. “Well, this is her chance,” Kell repeated. Kammi was bounding up, causing Kell to glance back at her. “I think work is calling, friend,” he said.

“Same here. Patriarch is taking us out to fish the deep waters to the north. There were sightings of giant squid,” he noted.

“Good luck,” Kell nodded.

“You should say that to the squid, not to us,” he grinned, then he sank back into the water before Kammi arrived.

“Kell!” Kammi called, then she slid to a stop just behind him. “Kell, we have a problem!”

“What?”

“There’s a chromatic and two fire drakes poking around the main storage chamber,” she said quickly.

“He’ll be disappointed,” Kell noted. Keth had had all his food stores moved to the village silo already, which had taken the entire family and Shii’s pod nearly a full night to move. But luckily, the tunnel to the village was literally right beside the main storage chamber, so they didn’t have to move the food outside and in the open more than twenty paces. “But he shouldn’t be here.”

“Go sic him,” Kammi grinned. “I’ll go warn Keth. I don’t think they’re *that* deep.”

“Not at all. Just remember, the air chamber is on the right wall as you enter the pod den,” he told her. “You can see the water’s surface from underneath. They’ll see you swim in, and a water drake will come to the air chamber to see what you want.”

“Got it,” she said, bounding past him in two half-leaps, then diving off the two meter cliff and into the water. Kammi swam with her legs and with her tail a little, not her wings, which showed the fundamental difference between Keth’s family and about every other earth dragon. Kell turned and galloped to the main storage chamber, and just as Kammi described, there was a very young chromatic female inside the storage chamber with two young fire drakes escorting her, no doubt chosen for the assignment *because* they were all small, and would have to enter underground chambers.

“What do you do here?” Kell called sternly as he came down the entry ramp.

“We’re conducting an inventory of all farm stores,” the chromatic replied in an absent voice, looking around using a magical ball of light. “Is this your farm’s main storage chamber?”

“By whose authority are you making this inventory?” Kell demanded.

“Why, the council’s, of course,” she sniffed, stepping deeper into the chamber, until her light reached the far end.

“And *when* did they decide this?”

“A matter of hours ago, I believe,” she replied. “I was pulled from my studies to perform this...errand,” she said distastefully. “Are there other storage chambers? This one is empty.”

“They’re *all* empty,” Kell said bluntly.

“You work on a farm with no food?” she asked, honestly confused.

“We moved our stores to another storage area,” he replied evenly.

“For whatever reason?”

“None that concerns you, chromatic,” Kell said with narrowing eyes. “What we do is our own business, and is none of yours.”

“There’s no reason to get all snippy,” she said, a touch crossly. “I have no more desire to be here than you do for me to be here. I just want to get this busy work done so I can return to my studies. Are you the patron of this farm?”

“No,” Kell replied. “I sent our farmhand for the patron. He should be here in a matter of moments.”

“Very good, then,” she said, coming back towards him, her feathery antenna-like growths twitching. “Might we go back outside? I find these low-ceilinged chambers...oppressive,” she said, looking up.

Kell led the chromatic and her fire drake lackeys up the ramp, and saw that Keth was running up to the entrance, water dripping off him. The chromatic looked to him when he arrived. “You are the farm patron?” she asked.

“I am,” he replied.

“I’ve been tasked by the council to conduct an inventory of available food stores on the farms in this village,” she told him, taking a book from her shoulder satchel. “Could you tell me, Patron, where your stocks might be located so I can inspect them?”

“We moved all our stores in preparation of the next harvest, which will be large,” Keth said evenly. “I’ll need every bit of storage space I have here to hold it. But I keep a detailed inventory of all stored goods in my computer. I can show you what I have without you having to go to where the food is.”

“That’s perfectly acceptable,” she replied mellowly. “If you say you have it, then as far as I’m concerned, you have it. Where you keep it is not my concern.”

“Then I invite you to my burrow, young chromatic.”

“You two, stay out here,” she told the fire drakes. “I won’t need your assistance.”

“Fine,” the larger one, a male, said. “Is there anywhere we can get some water, earth drake?”

“Kell, bring our guests some water,” Keth said as he led the chromatic towards the burrow entrance.

“Why are you all wet, Patron?” the chromatic asked.

Keth chuckled. “I’m doing a favor for our water drake neighbors, digging out a chamber for them in their den,” he told her.

“Hmm. Perhaps, Patron, I might barter such a service? My den is entirely too small, and I’ve yet to learn the magic to enlarge it.”

“We can talk about that after you finish your inventory,” he said lightly as they vanished down the ramp.

“Would you prefer piped water or spring water?” Kell asked soberly. Not that he wanted to show hospitality to fire drakes, but Keth had given

him an order, and he had to follow it.

“I don’t care, anything.”

“I have a water hose not far from here.”

“Good enough for me,” he said with a nod.

Kell led the two fire drakes to the hose, where they both drank quite a lot more than Kell would have expected...but then again, both of them had more than a little steam issuing from their nostrils after they drank. After that, the two of them just sat on their haunches and talked with each other, so Kell went back to weeding. They weren’t going to cause trouble, and Keth had the chromatic in paw.

But why they were there didn’t surprise Kell all that much. Ferroth had said that the chromatics would start nosing about the farms, the factories, preparing to start meddling in *all* earth dragon affairs, not just the department. And Ferroth had been right, as had Keth. Keth had feared that the council would want to go through his food stores, and the chromatic was here to do exactly that. But, at least this particular chromatic didn’t seem as stuck up as most of her kind.

Kell didn’t get much weeding done when he got there, since he had Ferroth on a chat program, typing using only three clawtips since his tablet was strapped to his lower foreleg. He warned Ferroth of what the chromatic was doing, and his chief wasn’t surprised at all. *Geon warned me as soon as they had the vote. The chromatic managed to pass through an order to have all farm stocks inventoried. They’re getting ready to try to take our food,* Ferroth typed. *To force us to either farm or starve.*

I’m not surprised, Kell answered, his three fingers dancing over his tablet’s touchscreen with calm efficiency. *It also tells them where it is in case they simply try to steal it.*

Not all that much, Ferroth answered. *Nearly half the farms have moved their stores to village silos. That’s a fact that chromatics won’t ignore. It might make them suspicious.*

The one here didn't care at all. Keth keeps an inventory on his computer, and that was good enough for her.

Chromatics not doing all the legwork will care, Ferroth answered. They'll see the earth dragons hiding their food. That's going to raise an alarm.

It still needed to be done.

True enough. And after this, I'll push to have the rest of the farmers move their stores. A little visit from a chromatic is usually enough to make nearly any earth dragon get suddenly paranoid.

Kell chuckled. Sire sure thought fast. He told the chromatic he moved all his stocks to clear storage space for the next harvest.

That's actually a pretty good excuse, I'll filter it down to the others, Ferroth replied.

Keth came out to the field after the chromatic left. "That's enough weeding, young one," he said. "We need you to help with Shii's den."

"Sure, Sire," he replied. "We can let Kammi do it all. The little jerk needs to be worked," he noted.

Keth laughed. "She is a saucy little thing," he agreed. "Was she like that in the department?"

"Oh yeah," Kell chuckled as he turned to follow Keth back to the burrow. "Chief always thought that the smaller a drake was, the more attitude he had."

Keth looked back at him pointedly, which made Kell laugh. "Yeah, yeah, I know," he grinned toothily. "I just prove his point."

"More than," Keth drawled.

Kammi got stuck with all the weeding, and Kell dove down to practice the family's one unique skill, underwater excavation...and Kell had been taught well by Keth and Grandsire Kirt. Kell worked on one wall while

Keth and Kanna worked on the opposite one, and the younglings both helped where they could and watched, studying how it was done. It was actually easier to dig out wet rock, since the water cooled off the claws and lubricated the gouging, up to a point, and not even volcanic basalt could stand up to an earth dragon's claws. The younglings watched as Kell gouged out deep furrows in the rock at regular intervals, staying down well after they had to go to the air chamber, then when they had to go *back* to the air chamber, then he showed them the real trick. After gouging out deep, foreleg-length rents in the rock, he turned sideways, hooking his forelegs on the edge and his back legs on one of the rock shelves, then he snapped it off with a powerful kick. The large slab of basalt that resulted was pulled out, and he snapped off the other slabs. The trick to it, he taught the younglings, was knowing the rock and knowing your own strength, understanding how thick one could make the slabs and still be able to break them out. After the slabs were removed, Kell started on the next section down, and would systematically work his way all the way across and down the wall. And once all that was done, he'd start on the fresh wall he'd just created, digging it out more. The chamber would expand by stages, by the length of Kell's legs. And the slabs of basalt he created would be useful for other things, since they were of uniform thickness and could be smoothed out with a little work.

By an hour before sunset, Kell had dug two passes into his wall, and since he was to dig three passes, he was nearly finished. The younglings dragged themselves up into the air chamber and laid there, panting, as Shii served some kelp and fresh-caught fish to Kanna. "Be patient, younglings, digging while holding your breath takes practice and training," she told them. "Would the rock not wear my own claws to the nub, I would be helping you."

"Your claws are suited for digging fish out of the ocean bottom, not clawing out solid rock, my friend," Kanna chuckled, then she turned her head up and gulped down a medium-sized fish whole.

"We're not done yet," Keth said. "I promised the slabs to Javan for paving. We need to pull them out and stack them on the shore, he's sending

a drake to collect them in the morning.”

“Feeling up to the *main* task now, Sire?” Kell asked.

“Actually, I think that after just a few more days of this, I’ll be able to make it,” he answered with a nod. “I forgot what good exercise this is.”

“And I get an expanded living chamber out of it,” Shii remarked lightly, offering kelp to the younglings, who attacked the bowl like it was the last food left on earth.

“The reckoning will come, my friend,” Kanna replied with a teasing smile. “I’m going to demand a whole month’s worth of daily tuna catches for this.”

“It’s worth the effort,” she replied.

Despite all the heavy work, after he ate dinner with Shii, he went out to swim with Sella, and she took him out of the cove and they dove down along the steep slope of the underwater part of the island, which was literally a mountain sunk into the sea. Sella pushed him a little, making him dive down to the limits of his range, down to where the water swallowed up the light and forced him to rely on Sella’s magic to light the way, but it was worth it when they reached what she was bringing him to see...it was a shipwreck. The water dragons had found another sunken ship and dragged it to the island, and they’d set it on one of the rock shelves along the side of the island, one of the places they could put such a thing without it sliding back down. They’d come back in the morning and haul it over to the factory, where the earth dragons would cut the ship apart and salvage any metal out of it they could. The ship was a fishing trawler, one of the big 25 meter models, the net cranes torn off from its sinking and the bridge windows shattered and bridge roof crushed. From the look of it, the ship had settled on the ocean floor upside-down, from the flattened-out top of the bridge. The ship still had its paint, the wood had yet to rot out, some of its netting was still clinging to anchors like forlorn spider webs; the ship hadn’t sunk that long ago, and that meant that the metal would be useful. Kell gripped the side, felt strong steel under his claws, and nodded to Sella

that it was a good find. He kicked off from the ship and headed for the surface, which took him nearly two minutes to reach, breathing deep as Sella surfaced beside him. “They found it two days ago,” she told him.

“It can’t have been down there long,” he told her. “Did they find any bodies?”

“Bone fragments, which they buried with honor,” she answered.

“We’ll see what nation it’s from when they get it up into the light,” Kell said.

“We’ll go see now,” she winked. “Let’s go back down.”

“Alright, give me a minute,” he replied, then started breathing deeply.

“I’ll carry you so you have more time to investigate,” Sella offered.

He nodded without replying. When he was ready, he dove back down, then grabbed Sella’s tail and let her pull him, since she could swim much faster than he could. Submerging that deep that fast always made him feel a little squeezed, but earth dragons were built to withstand pressure, be it the pressure of the earth over them or the water around them. Luckily for earth dragons and water dragons alike, they couldn’t develop the bends from rapid descents and ascents, were immune to the pressure-induced injuries suffered by other living things. Kell wasn’t sure if other dragons had that little boon, but he wasn’t complaining. The ability to deal with great pressure only put another mark in the column in Kell’s mind that the earth dragons did indeed originate from deep under the earth, born in the deepest womb of Gaia. They reached the wreck much faster that time, and Sella used her water dragon magic to make her body glow with a bright bioluminescence, something they used in the abyssal depths in addition to their sonar. She was his living lantern, staying close to him and the boat both as he swam down to the stern. The ship’s name was in Japanese, which he could read, and realized that he’d heard about this particular boat on the news. NHK had reported about it late last year, because the son of a prominent politician had been aboard. Kell swam to the squashed bridge

and set his feet and forelegs and pulled the roof up, then looked in when Sella got close. The bridge was pretty mangled from the roof collapsing on it, including what Kell identified as a skeletal toe near where the wheel would be. Kell pointed and bent the roof back more, then Sella used her water magic to pull the bones out. There was nothing but the toe, two metatarsels, a couple of knobby ankle bones, and the broken end of the shinbone, held together by half-eaten, tattered ligaments. The rest of the bones had either been crushed, imploded, or had been separated off, the ligaments eaten out or ruptured, then drifted away in the current. Like most sinking victims, what was left of the body after the tremendous pressure at the bottom of the ocean imploded the air-filled parts and shattered the bones and circulatory system, the body fizzing like a carbonated soda as suspended air in the blood was wrung out of it like a wet rag, was promptly eaten by the scavengers. The marrow in the bones also had a tendency to implode, which shattered most of the larger bones. After the scavengers ate the flesh holding the shattered bone fragments together, the remnants tended to drift apart. Only the smaller bones tended to survive the rapid pressurization that came with being trapped on a sinking steel ship, like the ankle bones and metatarsels in Sella's forepaw.

Those were the kinds of things human documentaries didn't explain about deep sea sinking victims. If the body sank too fast, like being trapped on a ship, there wasn't much left by the time it reached the bottom. And that only lasted as long as it took the scavengers to find the wreck. Sella closed her forepaws over the bones reverently as Kell searched for any other bones, half-wriggling into the crushed cockpit, but they were the only ones. He pointed up, and Sella held her forepaws out and turned her nose down, warning him she was going to go bury the bones in the mud at the base of the island mountain. That was water dragon custom, to honor the dead taken by the sea, even human dead. Kell nodded and kicked off the boat, heading for the surface as Sella turned down the slope and headed for water far too deep for Kell to follow.

He almost choked on water when he surfaced and found a very young sky drake hovering about two meters over where they'd dove down. He

looked up at the sleek drake with annoyance. “What?” he demanded.

“I was starting to think you drowned,” the drake said lightly, slowly rotating so he was almost upside-down, looking down at Kell. “I was about to find a water dragon to go get you.”

“They’d have laughed once you found one,” Kell told him. “What are you doing here?”

“Hinado sent me,” he replied. “They’re watching you, Kell of the earth drakes.”

“I know they are.”

“They intend to kill you if they catch you alone,” the drake told him.

“What?”

“Hinado told me,” the drake nodded. “He told me to warn you, and to watch you. Hinado told me to tell you not to leave your farm alone, you or the female field agent, Jasper, and that it might not be safe to be alone on your farm either if you’re far away from others. Always keep someone with you. They won’t attack you on the farm, since they’d be seen. But if they think they can kill you where nobody can see it, they will.”

“Why?” Kell demanded shortly, but he knew why. Kell was a field agent, he had training, and he was *dangerous*. That, and his family had humiliated the chromatics in public, and chromatics were almost legendary for their pettiness when it came to such things.

“I don’t know. I just know what Hinado told me to tell you. I already warned the female, and she told me to tell you to come back to the farm.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” he grunted.

“I can carry you if you like.”

“I’ll swim,” Kell said shortly. And he’d be making the swim underwater, for that matter.

“Don’t drown,” the sky drake said lightly, then it flitted up into the air, turned his body upward, gave one mighty flap of his huge wings, and rocketed into the sky with almost shocking speed.

Kell wasn’t entirely surprised. The council chromatic and the department chromatic both knew that Kell and Kammi were out there, they’d been trained in such things, and they were living on the same farm. They were Ferroth’s drakes, drakes with special training, and they were a threat to the chromatics’ plans. Them, Slate, Onyx and the new Stone, Ferroth, probably even Kintel since they were watching him too, they were the earth drakes that would work hardest to oppose the chromatics, and had the training to actually make nuisances of themselves.

One thing was becoming clear. If the chromatics were willing to start killing earth drakes, then the earth drakes had better be ready and willing to kill the chromatics.

Kell made the swim back to the cove underwater, deep enough underwater so they couldn’t see his silhouette, surfacing only long enough to take another breath and dive back down. Not even a fire dragon could get at him twenty meters underwater, where he could swim far faster than any other dragon would expect from a drake that wasn’t a water dragon. He got up enough speed to vault up out of the water and land on the small cliff behind the burrow entrance, and Kammi was already racing up to him. “Did the sky drake find you?”

“He did,” Kell replied. “I’m a little surprised that Hinado would care.”

“Who knows. Patron already ordered you back into the burrow,” she said. “He said to pack your things. You can’t be alone.”

Kell growled, then nodded. “They’d see me being alone in my burrow in the middle of the night as a perfect opportunity,” he reasoned. Then his eyes narrowed. “Or...a perfect *trap*,” he said. “We need to talk to Ferroth.”

“He’ll be here any minute. I already called him.”

Kell stretched out his wings and flapped them a couple of times to shake the water off, then folded them back against his flanks as they started down the ramp into the burrow. “Well, I hope he gets here quick.”

Ferroth already knew, Kell found out when his chief got there. “Hinado told me himself,” Ferroth grunted. “He just *happened* to be near the department when I finished for the day, and dropped a note in front of me as he passed over. His note made it pretty clear they’re watching *him* too. I guess he’s *too* much of a wild card on the council, and now the chromatic is playing hard-claw to bring him under control. There’s one particular sky wyrm watching the farm, young ones, and he has orders to try to kill you if he thinks he can do it without anyone seeing it. This means that from now on, neither of you go out alone, and you don’t go out *together* by yourselves unless someone else is with you. It’d only take a sky wyrm a quick moment to do it, so don’t ever drop your guard.”

“Yeah,” Kell growled. “Snatch us up, break our wings, then drop us from about a thousand meters. Not even we could survive a fall like that.”

“Just about. So keep one eye *up* at all times. You know they make no sound when they dive, and you won’t see them until it’s too late. It’s how they hunt, after all.”

“We were kicking around the idea of setting a trap for them using my burrow, chief,” Kell said. “If they think I’m in there alone, they might try.”

“That would just initiate a confrontation and perhaps a backlash that we’re not ready to deal with right now,” Ferroth said. “We’re not *ready* to start moving openly, whelp. When we are ready, that might be useful, though. We let them see you move back into your burrow, then have a few earth drakes in there waiting for them.”

“I’ll need an excuse to move back in, if I’m not supposed to know about the sky wyrm,” Kell mused, looking at Kammi. “Well, I guess your idea will work for me,” he said.

“What?” she asked.

“It seems that I suddenly became completely unsatisfied with my burrow,” he said with a slight smile. “It’s entirely too small, so I want to enlarge it. And I can’t leave all my stuff in there while I’m digging out new chambers, so I’ll just have to move everything over here while I’m renovating.”

“Sounds workable to me,” Kammi grinned. “Well, now I get to look through your stuff,” she winked.

“I want you to ask Matriarch Shii for a very special favor,” Ferroth said. “This might just be a ploy to get the two of you in the same burrow, to make it easier to get at you. I want you to ask Shii to enspell the corridor leaving the entry chamber of the burrow so that if anyone other than the burrow’s occupants passes it, it sets off an alarm. That kind of magic is more than within a water dragon’s ability.”

“After all the work we’ve done on her den, she’d *better*,” Kell grunted, which made Kammi laugh.

It wasn’t Shii that answered his call for magic, it was Patriarch Surrall. Surrall wasn’t much of a kelp farmer, but he was an *amazing* fisher, and he spent most of his time out in the deeper waters, chasing down schools of open-water fish and diving deep for giant squid. Kell actually didn’t see Surrall very often, for he was out late and left early, but he held something of the honor of being one of the most experienced giant squid fishers among the water dragons, and something of an explorer. Surrall found more shipwrecks than any other water drake, because he was constantly exploring tracts of ocean floor to which he’d never been before. Surrall knew he wasn’t very good at tending the kelp, so he left that to Shii and did what he did best, and it worked very well in their pod. Their younglings got a great education from both a farmer and an open-sea fisher, which made the drakes in the pod very versatile. Sella and Ralla could tend the kelp beds or join the pod on a fishing expedition with equal skill, and their younger siblings were learning those skills quickly. Kell had always had a certain youthful admiration for Surrall, admired his adventurous spirit and his ability. He was a drake of great talent, but never bragged about it, even

while exuding that confident aire of a drake that was good at what he did and *knew* it. “Patriarch,” Kell said with honest warmth, nuzzling him under his chin when he came down the ramp. “It’s so good to see you! I didn’t know you were in!”

“Just got in a few minutes ago,” he said. Surrall was something of a rogue among water drakes, which Kell always equated to James Dean. He was a rebel, outspoken, but as water drakes measured things, he was a highly charismiotic and physically attractive drake. His crest was long and sleek, his body a perfect blend of water-sliding smoothness and muscular power. He also had something of a temper, a rarity among water drakes, and often spoke rashly and spoke his mind. It was for that reason as much as anything that it was perhaps best that Surrall spent most of his time out in the vast open ocean. Despite those flaws, though, Surrall was a true friend and a powerful, loyal ally to those he deemed worthy of his respect. “Lifemate said you asked for some magic?”

“Please,” Kell said, then he explained what he needed, and more importantly, why.

“Are you serious?” Surrall demanded with sudden heat.

“Afraid so,” Kell replied. “Things are getting very serious around here. Didn’t Shii explain what was going on?”

“Of course, but I didn’t think it would really go anywhere. We’ve seen these little spats rise up before,” he grunted. “You’re absolutely sure they intend to kill you?”

“Chief believes so, and I trust him,” he replied. “He said he got the information straight from a dragon on the council. He trusts the source.”

“By the heavy water,” Surrall growled. “Then you need more than a simple alarm. I’ll fix it.”

“Nothing outrageous or exotic,” Kell warned. “Chief said what we’re not ready for an open confrontation yet, and you enchanting the burrow to make a chromatic explode might tip our plans too soon.”

Surrall chuckled darkly. “That was exactly what I was going to do, but if you want subtle, I can do subtle,” he said, grinning toothily. “Go get me some onions while I take care of it. I think that’s a fair barter.”

“After all the work we did on your den?”

“That was for *Shii*, not me,” he grinned. “How much time do I spend in there?”

Kell laughed. “That’s a point. Alright, onions it is.”

Kell fetched some giant sweet onions while Surrall worked his magic on the lone corridor leading from the entry chamber. Water dragon magic was silent, and only really required the exercise of willpower, but like many magic-using dragons, Surrall had this habit of gesturing while he was exercising his ability. It wasn’t entirely necessary, but Sella did it too, and she’d told him that it often helped her concentration. Though what Surrall was doing was silent, was completely hidden for that matter, the effect his work had on the very walls of the burrow was not quite so stealthy. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the entire corridor began to glow with a soft azure light, then the radiance shimmered and then vanished when Surrall slapped both forepaws down on the floor. “There,” he said. “It should last at least a few months, Kell.”

“What will it do?” he asked.

Surrall grinned. “If anyone but your family, your farmhand, or one of us venture into this corridor without permission, it’ll sound an alarm that nobody *in* the corridor will hear, and the magic infused into any invader who enters this corridor will cause any magical attack or breath weapon cast within the burrow to turn back against the user.”

“Wow, you can do *that*?” Kell gasped.

Surrall grinned. “You think I *just* fish out there in the open water, Kell? I *practice*.”

“No wonder Shii sent you!” Kell laughed.

“I do have certain skills,” he said, looking at his forepaw claws lightly, which made Kell laugh.

“Well, you earned your onions,” Kell grinned. “Come on in and we can talk while you eat, fill you in on what Shii might not have told you.”

It turned out that Surrall had found the boat resting on the ledge. Surrall told him about finding it the day before, only about two hundred miles from the island, and calling in some other water dragons to haul it back to the island. He also noted something that got Kell’s attention. “There’s a couple dozen American Navy ships not far from where I found the shipwreck,” he noted as he swallowed another onion. “And I mean it’s an entire task force. Carrier, two attack subs underneath, twenty or so support ships, the whole school of fish. I surfaced to take a look, and the deck of the carrier is loaded to the gills with Hawkeyes and choppers. Not a single fighter in sight.”

“Hawkeyes?” Kell asked.

Surrall nodded. “I know what they look like. They had seven of them that I could see, and there’s no telling how many were on the other side.”

Hawkeyes were the new Naval recon craft. Smaller than the Air Force version, the AWACS, but with a huge operational range, they were designed to be a carrier-based forward operations and surveillance platform, searching for enemy ships and planes and coordinating aerial attacks on them. They could land and take off from a carrier deck, if only just, and could also be refueled in the air for extended missions. What made Kell take notice was the *number* of them. A carrier usually only had two or possibly three Hawkeyes attached to it, and one was almost always in the air, providing eyes in the sky to hunt for threats to the carrier. If the deck was holding that many, the big planes taking up so much space, planes whose only mission was reconnaissance....

The Americans were hunting for the island.

“They’re searching for the island,” Kell said, to which Surrall nodded. “They have a very rough idea of where we are, generally, so they’re

bringing recon planes down here to comb the ocean.”

“Won’t do them any good,” Surrall grinned. “Not even their technology can find the island.”

“It’s not their technology that worries me,” Kell grunted. “How far was the task force?”

“About a hundred human miles,” he replied. “North-northeast. I think they came down from Hawaii.”

That was fairly close, as Kell reasoned things. Their island was exactly 1,027 miles from Hawaii, and there wasn’t a single island within a thousand miles in any direction outside of ten tiny, windswept rocks that were both charted and known to be uninhabited, islands the water dragons fished due to their reefs. Easter Island and the Galapagos were far the the east, the Solomons far to the west.

“Huh, well, we sorta expected this was coming,” Kell grunted. “As soon as they learned about us. If you’re looking for an uncharted island, this stretch of the Pacific is actually a good place to start. Far from the usual shipping lanes, no inhabited islands in a thousand miles in any direction... it’s the likely spot.”

“That is is, Kell,” Surrall nodded, swallowing another onion. “Why does it worry you? The island can’t be seen by bipeds, and their technology can’t penetrate the island. Only the living can see the island, and the island is specifically warded so bipeds can’t see it.”

“That’s true, Sirral, but it doesn’t hide the island’s *presence*,” he fretted. “The island does make an ocean current turn. The humans will see waves crashing on what looks to them to be open ocean. If we’re running the incinerator, the smoke it generates could be seen. I think active sonar would get a reading, because I don’t think the chromatics enchanted the island a thousand years ago with the idea sound could be used to find it. And if the volcano erupts for real, they’ll see its plume if they’re really watching the region. Hell, they might find it by studying heat distribution

graphs in the atmosphere and seeing that *something* is heating the air around the island. There's several ways I can think of that the humans might find the island, without ever having to *see* it. They've just never had a reason to actually use those tricks until now, when they *know* they're looking for something they can't see."

"Hmmmmmm," Surrall mused. "The Americans were banging away with active sonar when I saw their fleet. It was what drew me to them. What do you think they'll do if they find us?"

"At first? Nothing," he replied. "Humans are very curious, and it really chafes their scales that they don't know *where* we are. We really pose no threat to them, and only the upper crust of the American government knows we even exist."

"But I thought you were caught on TV."

"I was, but they *still* don't entirely know what to make of it," he replied. "Remember, they only got about a second and a half of footage of me, taken from a distance. The news networks still run the occasional piece about it, mainly because the government has clamped down and won't answer any questions. So, the silence from the government incites that human curiosity. The news people think that the government is hiding something...which naturally they are," Kell chuckled. "The only ones that know the truth are the highest levels of the American government," he said as he took an onion for himself. "Maybe a hundred humans total. The government keeps us a secret, even from itself. Odds are, if those ships are out here to look for us, they don't know exactly *what* they're looking for. They were probably just told to search for anything anomalous. Strange sonar readings, unusual clouds, smoke, anything out of the ordinary. They may have been told as much as that they're searching for an uncharted island, one that can't be detected by instruments for whatever reason they decided to tell them. Their sonar can't pick you up, can it?"

Surrall wagged his head. "From a distance, no. From up close, yes, at least if we're not shielding ourselves from sonar with magic. And if they

did pick us up, they'd mistake us for whales. After all, we don't make any *mechanical* sounds. And if we feel like they might know we're there, we dive deep. That's something no sub can do. When we do that, most likely they just think we're small whales."

"Do you know if they can pick up *your* sonar?"

He gave Kell a look. "I don't think so. I've never really thought about it. No ship or sub has ever reacted when we get within sonar range."

Kell rapped his claws on the table. "I have no doubt the sky dragons know about them by now," he mused. We'll have to see how the council reacts when they're told."

They moved his things out of his burrow at sunset, after Keth returned from the daily council, which took nearly four hours. Kell returned to his original chamber in the family burrow and set up his computers and important things, but stored everything else in the lower chambers and in a couple of the farmhand chambers. Kell's old chamber in the burrow was more like a little apartment, actually. It was a three room suite of a living chamber and two side chambers only accessible from the living chamber, the side chambers dug out by Kell himself when he was younger. Kell put his important stuff in one side chamber, set up the other for sleeping, and put all his computers on tables and shelves in the main chamber, having to run two new switches down to handle all the traffic. Between him and Kammi, they were now a major traffic jam on the island's computer network.

Keth looked into his chamber as he got his last computer up. "Just get back from council?" Kell asked.

"Yes, young one, and I have a message for you, from Ferroth. He said that he wants you and Kammi both to stay underground as much as possible, and try to only come out at night. And even then, you do *not* go out alone. If you do come out in the daylight, then have no less than three others with you."

“Sound advice,” Kell nodded. “I’m surprised you’re taking this so calmly.”

“Let’s just say that you’d better not cross paths with your mother, young one, or she may chain you to the wall,” he said dryly, which made Kell chuckle. “You know how she is.”

“I know, but I’m an adult now, and I can take care of myself,” he replied evenly.

“Parents often only see that when they want to see it,” Keth smiled. “Tomorrow, you and Kammi finish the work on Shii’s den, and I’ll have the younglings finish the weeding. That should keep you out of sight.”

“Kammi won’t be much help. By the time she gets to the chamber, she can only last about thirty seconds before she has to go back for air. I’d be better off doing it myself.”

“I heard that!” Kammi called from the passageway outside. “I’ll prove you wrong, Kell!”

“We’ll just turn the TV on for her,” Kell said with a slightly malicious smile at his sire. “We’ll turn it to Sesame Street. That should be about her grade level.”

“Oh, you are *so* gonna get it!” Kammi threatened, coming into view around Keth.

“Talk is cheap, Kammi,” Kell teased. “Tomorrow you prove you’re worthy of working in *this* family.”

“I’ll prove it or drown trying!” she declared.

“We’ll make a mud dragon out of you yet, young one,” Keth said lightly, bumping her on the hindquarters with the underside of his tail.

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When Kammi said she'd do good work or die trying, Kell didn't quite expect her to take that declaration literally.

Twice, one of the water drakes had to literally save her life, carting her off to the air chamber after she nearly passed out trying to last as long as possible clearing waste rock for him as he dug out the last pass of the wall. She was almost maniacally determined to prove to Kell she could do it, even though she had absolutely no exposure to the kind of work they were doing. Exerting one's self underwater while holding one's breath wasn't just something a drake picked up, it was a technique, a skill, that had to be trained and developed. And since Kell's family was about the only one that practiced their unique form of burrowing, they were the only ones that really knew how to do it.

But, Kammi did learn. He taught her the technique, and by lunch, she was digging her own lines on the other end of the pass, just only about a minute of work at a time.

After he broke off the last slab and smoothed out the wall with his horns, using them like a grinder to scrub the bumps off the wall, he climbed up into the air chamber while the water pumps pulled the suspended rock dust out of the den and made it flow out of the entrance. Kammi was already in the chamber, panting a little as the TV droned in the background, her head bowed a little as she got her breath back. "I never thought that could be so hard!"

"It's why not every drake does it," Kell nodded as Ralla burst from the water and landed on the stone by Kell. "Ralla."

"Kell," he nodded in reply. "Done?"

"Yeah. How was the fishing?"

"Good, we came across a school of migrating shimmerscales," he replied. "Patriarch and Sella are dragging in the catch now." Which meant that they were using their control over water to literally net the fish, pulling

them with them as they returned to the island. “Are you going to try to drown yourself again, Kammi?”

Kammi gave him an annoyed look. “I wasn’t *trying* to!”

“It’s much harder than it looks, what they do,” Ralla smiled at Kell. “They just make it *look* easy. But, at least now you have a *very* good idea of just how long you can stay under before you drown,” Ralla smiled lightly.

“Oh, bite my tail, Ralla!” Kammi huffed, which made him laugh.

“Patriarch said you can’t leave the den until sunset,” Ralla warned. “Well, *she* can’t. Keth sends word that he wants you to go help the builders, in *there*,” Ralla noted, pointing towards the lava tube, which meant he was pointing at the wall.

“I can help! Can you get me in there, Ralla?” she asked.

Ralla clicked his teeth together a few times. “I think I can, but it won’t be entirely free of danger,” he warned. “You’ll have to hold my tail while I swim. If you let go, you won’t be able to make it out.”

“I can manage,” she said, almost defiantly.

“I’ll come up behind you, just in case her paws can’t back up her mouth.”

Kammi growled at him.

“Deep breaths, Kammi,” Ralla warned. “You’ll be under for at least three minutes. And remember, you *cannot let go*,” he said intensely.

She nodded and started to hyperventilate, a trick Kell had taught her that morning.

It was something of a stretch for him to swim up the lava tube when starting from the pod den, but he’d done it before. Ralla left him far behind as he raced up the tube with Kammi holding onto his tail, almost clamping her jaws on his hindquarters, Ralla’s wings catapulting him up into the bluish murk and past his very limited thermographic sight range while

underwater...which didn't extend much past looking at his own paws, and now the very slightly warmer water around the cables bolted to the ceiling, running up the tube. The electricity in them generated heat, and that heat warmed the water just slightly, giving his vision something to actually see. Outside of the two cables on the ceiling, he could barely make out the lava tube walls around him, since they were cooled to the temperature of the water, but he knew the tube well enough to know where he was within it.

Kammi was panting with her tail and back legs still in the water when Kell surfaced, and Ralla was sitting on his haunches in front of her, a slightly amused look on his face. "Wow...didn't think...I was...gonna make it," she wheezed.

"And to think, you have to go back *out*," Kell said lightly as he walked up to where he was just behind her.

"Matriarch can probably do that, she's better with water magic than me," Ralla said. "I don't want to be the one that drowns her, after all," he said, giving Kell an amused look.

"And I thought water dragons were nice," Kammi growled, but she was giving him a smile.

The only reason they had him work with the builders was because it kept him underground and out of sight. He and Kammi really had no idea what to do, so they fetched and carried, did manual labor, and brought news to the builders that didn't involve typing on a computer. They had the floors half done, and a group of six drakes were mapping out some chambers underneath they were going to excavate. They were definitely of a mind to turn the dome chamber into the center of an underground city of earth drakes, capable of holding them all, storing their things, and making anything they needed while in their self-imposed exile. The builders showed him a map of their soundings using ground-penetrating radar, and they saw that Kammi had been right that there was magma under them. It was a feeder vent branching *way* out from the volcano on the north side of the island, a vent that had yet to break free of the earth, just an extending

feeler of magma that was slowly melting its way along a natural boundary of rock, and would eventually punch out underwater about three miles north of Dawnmist, not far from Three Hills village...in about 30 years, according to the estimates of the builders. That magma was under pressure, so they had to be careful about digging anywhere near it else they'd rupture the feeder and magma would invade their sanctuary. But, the magma also presented the opportunity to build an underground geothermal power plant, and the builders were doing further tests to see if it would be feasible.

Ferroth still kept in contact despite being underground, having the builders call Kell to the computer as he and Kammi helped carry some steel struts from a storage area. *Hinado wasn't lying*, Ferroth typed. *There have been three sky dragons circling the south side of the island all day, keeping your farm in sight. And there's more.*

I'm almost aflutter.

Don't be. Hinado resigned from the council, he typed. *The sky wyrm had a replacement all but waiting behind him. He's a complete idiot named Beyori, and he does whatever Ivaiya tells him to do.*

That's a surprise.

It's even more of a surprise when I tell you that Hinado is gone, he stressed with italics.

For real?

Real, Ferroth replied. *A camera tracked him leaving his den about an hour ago, and he's nowhere to be found. His den is empty. I'm almost positive he fled the island.*

"Holy shit," Kell gasped in English. Hinado fled the *island*? What could scare him so badly that he'd do something like that? But, if anyone could do it, it would be a sky drake. The world was big, and a solitary sky drake in a small cave, their amazing flight ability giving them a huge range, Hinado could easily survive on his own just from hunting. As long as he wasn't spotted by other sky dragons, who would try to capture him and

bring him back to the island once the council declared him a runaway, Hinado could survive for decades, maybe even the rest of his life, in his lonely self-imposed exile.

If anything, that told Kell that the chromatics weren't playing around. The chromatic said that he'd do something about Hinado, and it seems that that was exactly what he did. He didn't kill Hinado, but whatever it was he either did or was about to do scared the sky drake so badly that he ran away and hid.

It seems this game just got really nasty, Kell typed, frowning.

Oh, it was serious the instant it started, Ferroth replied. *There's a council meeting scheduled for first thing in the morning, and Geon told me that the department chromatic is coming up to propose more changes. I don't know what he has planned, but it might be the last spike. The earth drakes may go on strike tomorrow afternoon.*

We were planning it anyway.

I wasn't planning it this soon, he answered. *But depending on what insanity the chromatic came up with this time, I might not be able to stop a mass walk-out. If it happens, tell Keth that I'd like him to hire three or four department drakes as farmhands.*

Kell knew where he was going immediately. The new Stone, Slate, and Onyx. *With me and Kammi all but trapped underground, he just may need them to do real farm work,* Kell noted.

I'm not talking about the other agents, Kell. They've been marked same as you and Kammi. I found out an hour ago, when a sky wyrm took a shot at Onyx as he was gliding home after work. He just barely missed. I sent all three of them underground, and they don't come out.

Shit.

Yeah, shit. Does your burrow have room for three or four new farmhands?

Easily. We can stack their non-sensitive stuff in the main storage chamber. Hell, it's empty anyway. What about Kintel?

He's working as a direct aide to the Earth Council. He never leaves Blackstone village. And I mean he does not come above ground, Ferroth stated. Slate, the new Stone, and Onyx are working to build an alternate network control system in the computer factory, and when they're done, they go underground too. There was a pause. I guess I shouldn't call them that anymore. The field agent program is effectively dead, at least for now.

Only temporarily, chief, Kell assured him. What about us?

You stay right where you are, whelp. I'm having everything you need sent down to build a computer network to service the entire sanctuary, including the chambers they haven't dug out yet. You and Kammi get to work laying the cables and setting everything up. And if you come out, you stay UNDER WATER. That ONLY applies to you, Kell. Kammi is stuck in there, she can't swim out by herself. I know you can get out, so if you do come out, you stay with the water dragons. You do not come out of the water. I spent too much time training you whelps to let you get snatched and dropped.

If they're after us, chief, they'll be after YOU, Kell stressed.

Oh, I know they are, Ferroth replied. But I can't go to ground, I'm needed here. I'm just being very, very careful. As in, I'll be walking home with about ten department drakes, talking about work, and I'll have friends over for the night.

I'm glad you're taking steps.

I'm not a fool, whelp, Ferroth retorted, typing quickly. I sent out a department-wide email warning everyone to watch their backs, and move about in groups whenever possible. We're not the only ones that have extensive training in human tech. They might go after the researchers, or the network admins. The fluffy knows exactly who does what here, and he

might tell the council fluffy just who he has to kill to hamstring the department.

Well, we'll just have to bitterly disappoint them.

My thoughts exactly. Now, you should get the first spools of cable you need with the evening delivery. That network is your responsibility, Kell, yours and Kammi's. Plan it and build it. I have every confidence you'll do it right.

We'll do you proud, chief, Kell typed.

I know you will. Send me emails with your progress.

Got it. Be careful up there, chief. Be very very careful.

I will And he logged out.

Kell turned enough to put his forepaws down, sitting on his haunches, flexing his wings a little from their folded position just above his flanks, angled down to partially cover them when he didn't have them tucked in tight. The chromatics were certainly moving swiftly, and moving with purpose...and Ferroth was right. There were about twelve drakes in the department that more or less ran the whole thing, the senior technicians and the drakes with extensive training, like Kell and Kammi. Kill those twelve drakes, and those left behind would be hard pressed to keep everything running as smoothly.

"Kammi!" Kell shouted, and she bounded up from where one of the builders was explaining how the floors were built. "Chief sent us orders. We're to stay in here and design and build the computer network we'll use down here."

"Cool! Finally, a chance to do something fun!" she said with a broad smile.

"I'll tell sire you said that," he teased.

“Like you’ll remember in five days,” she said scornfully, still smiling. “Let’s go inspect the plans so we can plan things out!”

“This place needs a name,” Kell mused.

“Well, it’s our sanctuary, and we’re building a city, so it’s Sanctuary City, of course,” Kammi said lightly.

28 May 2017, 18:38DMT; Sanctuary City

The department was officially on strike.

Kell scowled as he read the emails that Sella had sent him, which she got from Bredda, one of the drakes in the department, who was there when everything happened.

It started with the council meeting. The department fluffy had arrived with a sheaf of parchment, and laid them out one by one, explaining all the redundant and useless aspects of the department that he was correcting. To the fluffy’s thinking, the entire media observation center really served no purpose, after having observed its operation for close to two weeks. With it being fairly clear that the dragons being discovered was being clamped down by the human governments, relegating dragon chatter on the internet and the media to curiosity or conspiracy pieces, the fluffy concluded that the entire media observation division of the department was therefore completely unnecessary, and thus it was his intention to shut it down. The remaining divisions, the chromatic continued, only served tertiary purpose, and nothing of any solid or concrete value to the dragons as a whole. His exact wording was “this place is a building filled with younglings pursuing immature dreams and fantasies and searching for any means whatsoever to avoid taking on any real duty or responsibility in draconic society.”

That almost got him spiked.

After two whole weeks of “careful observation,” most of which he spent firing drakes left and right, he laid forth a proposal to cut the entire department down to 14 drakes, whose sole responsibility would be the TV center and the computer servers, which were needed to communicate with the outside world. Everything else, the fluffy declared, was redundant, unnecessary, frivolous, or outright harmful to draconic culture. The fluffy made it clear he wanted to shut down the TV service as well, if not for the fact that doing so would create a backlash not even the council would be able to easily deflect. Too many dragons liked to watch TV for them to just turn it off, and though the fluffy thought it was detrimental to dragon society, since the majority liked TV, the majority would rule in that regard and the TV service would be kept.

The only reason it managed to pass was because the fire dragons wouldn't lose their TV.

Things more or less exploded at that point. Geon and Anthra had a conniption when they lost the vote five to four, but Ferroth was the one that really got to dress down the council. He called the chromatic about thirty different names, then defiantly told them that they could eat their own wings, that the work the earth dragons had taken on would not stop just because *they* said it would. He told them flat out that the department would reform *independent* of council control, and there wasn't a Gaia-damned thing they could do about it. What earth dragons did on their own time was their own damn business as long as they didn't communicate with the outside world. Their surveillance of human media and the internet and their research into human technologies would continue on as they had before, even if the department drakes had to do their work after a long day in the fields. He then looked the department fluffy in the face and told him *he* was fired.

Kell almost wished he could have been there to see that.

The declaration, naturally, set off the council chromatic. He forbade Ferroth from reforming the department, to which Ferroth just laughed in his face and demanded to know just on *whose* authority he could make such a

declaration, to so rule a dragon's life that they would tell them what they were and weren't allowed to do in the privacy of their own burrows. When the chromatic called for a vote, Anthra shot him down in short order, invoking an obscure bit of council law that forbade the council from doing just that, from making law against what a dragon could do in the privacy of his own den or burrow. The council was not formed to rule dragon life to the smallest detail, only to rule in matters of import that impacted *all* dragons. Since what the earth dragons intended to do only affected earth dragons, the council had neither the right nor the legal standing to intervene so long as they didn't attempt to return to field work. As long as Ferroth didn't try to communicate with the outside or send out field agents, as long as he kept his operation small and allowed it to impact only the earth dragons that worked for him, the council had no *authority* to prevent him from reforming the department on his own.

The council chromatic was trapped by council rules, and as such couldn't do much more than glare at Ferroth and warn him that what he was doing would only come to a bad end. That was when Ferroth turned his tail to the chromatic and told him to go bite himself, then he marched out of the circle without being dismissed.

Ferroth got back to the department before the chromatic did and spread the news, and what happened next *did* rightfully anger the council. The earth drakes kicked out all the fire dragons by force, then they stripped the place of anything even remotely useful and left the building, leaving *only* the computer servers intact. And those, Ferroth put behind a locked door.

So their vote to protect their TV didn't help the fire dragons. The TVs were showing nothing but static two hours later...which was actually exactly what the chromatics wanted.

By noon local time, the department was empty. The earth drakes had marched out like human protesters carrying their computers or pulling carts with other gear, and Ferroth led the procession right down to the TV factory. Ferroth had the TV jockeys set up their equipment there, then three technicians went out and severed the cables leading up the mountains. And

four hours later, just a few minutes ago actually, the TVs were back on in earth dragon burrows, but were out everywhere else.

Kell settled on his haunches and base of his tail, pondering all the news. Ferroth was doing what he said he would, making open moves that would throw off the chromatics, the diversion hiding the main plan...but *Gaia*, he really knew how to rake a dragon in the genitals. There was no doubt that the fire dragons were howling mad and would cause all kinds of trouble, but it so perfectly played into the chromatics' paws, as far as they would see things, that they might just miss the fact that what Ferroth was doing was nothing but a diversion. The earth drakes had had a hissy fit and had marched off, leaving the department gutted and effectively defunct, but Ferroth's declaration that they would still do much of the work of the department on their own time meant that the chromatics had to find some way to violate the ages old tradition of not interfering with what a dragon did in his own burrow. That would risk them running afoul of the other members of the council, who might not like the unsettling direction things were going, and force them to tread lightly.

The one thing it did that worried Kell was that it angered the fire dragons, who weren't exactly well known for discipline or self control. There might be some ugly incidents where fire dragons came down to vent on the earth dragons, blaming *all* of them for the actions of the drakes in the department. Fire dragons *really* loved their sports. In a way, the TV service *did* impact all dragons, since it was a service the earth dragons provided to the whole island, not just themselves. The same could be said for the electricity. Kell could see an angle of attack the chromatics could use to try to force *some* of the earth dragons back into the department, the ones that ran the TV network...but they wouldn't. They didn't *want* TV back on. They saw the earth drakes shutting off the TV as doing exactly what they wanted the earth drakes to do.

The only email he got from Ferroth explained in very curt terms that the department was shut down, and he'd better get that network built, because it was going to be needed. He also mentioned that they were building a second major gateway and server farm in the computer factory,

and that one would take over for the department as soon as they could get it up and running. A locked door wasn't going to stop the chromatic for long, even though he couldn't touch those computers or else the council would be unable to contact the American government. It was the only part of the old department left, and at that moment, it was the only part that the council and the chromatic actually needed.

Things were going faster than Kell expected. The diggers had better get that beltway tunnel finished quickly, and Ferroth and the council drakes had better start shipping food down into the sanctuary soon. With as much as they had to move, they had to start moving it *now* so it would all be here when the time came for the earth dragons to disappear.

Shii and the pod would *not* be happy when that time came. The poor drakes would be run ragged carting stuff back and forth.

Kell told Kammi about it as he went back to the big blueprint style plans the builders had made, which Kammi had cheekily added the name *Sanctuary City* to the top corner. They were going to lay the cable along with the power lines, just making sure the two cables were shielded from each other. Kell had wanted to use the power lines themselves and just run the network on a different frequency, a tried and true technique, but that required some modulation equipment and special dual power/network switches and splitters they currently didn't have and couldn't build with the parts they had available. Besides, they had plenty of network cable.

"Chief has some fangs to say it to the chromatic's face," Kammi noted as she traced a projected power line with a clawtip.

"Chief never does anything without thinking it through. He wanted the fluffy to know what he was doing, probably so the fluffies watch *him* instead of the rest of us. You know he'll be a splinter under their scales, just knowing he's up to something but not sure what it is or how to stop him."

"He's all but putting up a spotlight on himself and holding up a big sign saying 'pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,'" she laughed, quoting the old *Wizard of Oz* movie.

“Just about,” Kell agreed. “He’s taking an awful risk, though. The fluffies will be furious that a grounder is so blatantly and *publicly* disobeying them. And they already put a sky wyrm out to try to kill him if they could catch him alone. They may just be a bit more direct.”

One of the builders came up to them. “Kell,” he said, holding a rolled-up map in one paw and walking with the other three. “Matriarch Shii just delivered this. It has your name on it.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking it from the earth drake, sitting upright on his hanches and the base of his tail, and unrolling it carefully with his paws, doing his best not to poke holes in it with his claws. It was from Ferroth, and it was a map showing the locations of the four warehouses holding the stored foodstocks held back for emergencies. Scrawled across the bottom was the order *have it planned out and ready to be dug by the morning* in Ferroth’s pawscript, his draconic runes sharp and exacting. “Actually, this is for the lead tunneler,” he said, offering it back to the drake. “It shows the location of the council food warehouses. Geon and Anthra want that tunnel planned for us to tunnel up and steal that food, by tomorrow morning.”

The drake grinned toothily at him. “I’ll run it right over.” The drake took the map and bounded off as best he could on two legs and a forepaw.

“I’m almost annoyed I’m stuck in here,” Kammi growled. “Chief needs us out there. He needs veteran drakes that have experience dealing with danger. That’s us, Kell.”

“I know, but with the fluffies trying to kill us, we do what we can where we can,” he said sagely. “Chief wants this network built, so we’ll build it, and make him proud.”

“Now you sound like Patron,” she grinned.

“After sixty-two years, maybe *something* he said sunk in,” he replied, which made her laugh.

By evening, they had all their main cables planned out, and switch locations marked. They organized with the tunnelers so they could dig out

little storage spaces for switches, which really only took about two minutes to claw out. He and Kammi were pulling cable off the spools, laying them out and getting them ready to be laid when the lights flickered, then winked out. “Well, hell,” Kammi growled, looking up at the second floor, which was their ceiling, where they had fluorescent lights installed. “You check the main circuit breakers, I’ll start up the generator and send chief an email that we’re tracing it down.”

Managing the industrial power supply wasn’t actually Kell’s job, that was the builders, but he and Kammi did help them as everyone basically dropped what they were doing and tried to track down the reason the power failed. It was when they were checking the cable running up the lava tube that Sella bounded towards them, looking a little tired. It was a four mile walk uphill from the water, and while water dragons were powerful and tireless swimmers, their legs usually didn’t get quite that much exercise. “Kell,” she called. “Friend, Patriarch wants you to come out.”

“Alright. Did you tell him I can’t come out of the water?”

She nodded. “He’s waiting in the den. So is Chief Ferroth and your parents. I also bring news, important news. The power is out.”

“We already know that,” Kammi noted.

“No, it’s *out*,” she said. “There’s some kind of problem at the power plant. The whole island is down.”

“Oh. Oh, okay!” Kammi laughed. “And here we thought the problem was in the cavern.”

Sella shook her head. “Chief told me to tell you to expect a generator to be brought in. The builders need to find a way to pipe out the exhaust.”

“We can do that, no problem,” one of the earth drakes nodded. “There are a few natural vents near the top of the dome that open to the crater in the mountain above. Traveling that far, any smoke from the exhaust will diffuse.”

“Chief said that *only* Kell must come,” Sella said as Kammi started with them back down the tube.

“Aww! You can carry me out, Sella!”

She shook her head. “He was very explicit. He said that with Kell out, *you* have to keep working, that it’s too important for both of you to stop.”

“Sure, you go ahead and go out and do important stuff while *I* get stuck in here doing the grunt work,” Kammi growled as she turned and stomped up after the builders, in a bit of a huff.

“She’ll get over it,” Kell chuckled to Sella as they turned back down the lava tube.

“Hold on, Kell, I have a supply list, you can take it with you!” one of the builders called, bounding down towards them. “No power means no comm, so you’ll have to take it out there.”

“No problem, Grent.”

Kell took the list with him, in a watertight box he put in his new cargo-net style shoulder satchel, something one of the builders had whipped up for him to carry things underwater. He started down the tube with Sella as she told him about her day fishing, doing what most humans would probably disapprove of, hunting whales. Contrary to popular human belief, even the vast blue whales weren’t the top of the food chain, simply too big to be eaten by something else. The water dragons preyed on *everything* else in the water. And because of that fact, most of the whales had learned to avoid the region around the island, despite several rich feeding areas. The risk of encountering water dragons on the hunt was too great, even for a blue whale. Kell swam down the tube with Sella behind him, pushing him playfully to make him go faster, then she wriggled past him, grabbed hold, and carried him the rest of the way. Ferroth and his family were in the air cave when he and Sella broached the water, along with Shii and Surrall.

“About time,” Ferroth grunted.

“You walk four miles up and four miles back, chief,” Sella retorted, which made him grin toothily at her.

“What did you need?” Kell asked as he climbed out of the water, noting that the lights were on, then shook it off his wings. Before Ferroth could answer, however, another dragon broached the water. It was Essan, the council’s water drake, and behind him was Jussa, the water wyrm. Jussa was too big to easily fit in the air chamber, so he stayed in the water with his head and neck out as Essan climbed up onto the floor. Beside Jussa, Geon erupted from the water and almost flew onto the floor, and Anthra’s head popped up as she took hold of the edge. She too wouldn’t be an easy fit with all the other drakes in the room, so she stayed in the water, the two wyrms all but blocking any other drake from getting in. “Uh oh, this can’t be a good meeting,” Kell noted.

Essan gave him a dark smile. “Astute, Kell, astute,” he agreed. “Jussa?”

“Did they get the power back on?”

Keth shook his head. “They’re running off the generator in our burrow. Remember, we linked our burrows for that very reason.”

“Oh yeah. Good, I think the water dragons might not like sitting here in the murk with just the diffused light from the water,” he noted.

“I’m not afraid of the dark, young one,” Essan said with a light look.

“I’ve already defended the area against scrying, so we can start,” Surrall replied.

Ferroth turned. “Access TV, enable local wifi. Locate program Chief sixteen twelve by wifi,” he called, causing the TV to access the network servers for the file. “It’ll take it a minute to load up from my tablet.”

“What matters most is what I’ve found out about tomorrow,” Jussa began. “The council chromatic intends to try to push through a motion to supplant the computer and TV factory chiefs in favor of chromatics.”

“You nailed that, chief,” Kell growled. “You said not the day after the department folded, they’d go after the factories.”

“This has gone too far,” Essan snapped. “The chromatic had *no* intention of ever *running* the department. He was put there to dismantle it!”

“The chromatics don’t *want* the department, Essan,” Ferroth told him. “They don’t want *any* human technology on this island. They’re executing a plan that they hope will completely remove all technology from the island. They started with the department, and now that the earth drakes have had enough and walked out, they’re going after the factories. After that, they’ll go after the power plant. This is all a carefully planned operation to use the council to effectively vote everything the earth drakes have managed to do over the last fifty years out of existence.”

“I would have scoffed at that idea two days ago,” Jussa frowned. “But not now, not after I saw how the department chromatic behaved. He *provoked* the walkout.”

Ferroth nodded. “I couldn’t keep what few were left after this morning. They stormed out, and they took everything they could carry with them, which I heard didn’t sit well with the chromatic. He’s trying to get the council to declare them all thieves for stealing department property.”

“He’ll have no luck there,” Jussa declared.

“What’s more important for us earth dragons, they don’t want the earth dragons to do anything other than farm. They even want to strip us of our council seats.”

“Impossible!” Jussa said. “The council is set by the most inviolate of draconic law, even predating the island!”

“Well, the chromatics are going to *find* a way,” Ferroth growled, and the TV finally got an image...and image he knew too well. It was the council chromatic preparing to strike his sycophant and go on his rant. “This happened after the council that punished the chromatic for perjury, Jussa, Essan. The computer on the aerie captured it. Watch, and listen.

Access TV, play queue.” Kell had seen it many times already, so he watched the faces of the water dragon council members. The outrage quickly turned to incredulity when the chromatic ranted, then became even more outrage, especially from Essan.

“I *never!*” Jussa said heatedly.

“That’s what they think of us, friend,” Geon said darkly. “To them, we’re nothing but slaves.”

“Oh, there will be a reckoning for this,” Jussa hissed, his crest flushing with blood and turning purple.

“Actually, Jussa, we’d prefer it if you didn’t declare war,” Anthra said, reaching over with her wing and patting him on the back. “Needless to say, since we know what they’re planning, we’re taking steps.”

Geon nodded. “The earth dragons are currently carrying out a plan to answer this outrage,” he told them. “But after what happened today, and what’s going to happen in the next couple of weeks, we decided we needed to tell you two. We might need your help. Surrall and Shii and the drakes of their pod have been a great help to us, but there’s only seven in their pod, and we’re running them ragged. We might ask other water dragons for help, and that means you have to know what’s going on behind the scenes.”

“What do you intend to do?” Jussa asked.

“Starve them,” Keth said bluntly, which made both water dragons on the council look at him. “The earth dragons will do the only thing they *can* do, esteemed council members. We will go underground, and there we will stay. We will not farm for them. We may not be able to leave this island, but we can put ourselves out of their reach.”

“We’re currently building an underground city that is *only* accessible from the water,” Ferroth told them. “That’s what Matriarch Shii and Patriarch Surrall have been helping us with, ferrying supplies in and out for us. But their pod is only seven, and they *do* have to feed themselves,” he said apologetically, looking at Shii. “When it’s ready, the earth dragons will

put ourselves out of reach of the chromatics. We'll go underground with every scrap of food we can muster, and we'll starve them until they submit."

"Make no mistake, friends," Anthra said darkly. "The earth dragons will *not* be moved from this path. If we all starve to death deep under the volcano before the chromatics submit, then we die. At least then, we will be free of their attempt to control us. We will *not* live under the yoke the chromatics are trying to snare around our necks. You heard it from the council chromatic. They want to put us back on the farms against our will and strip us of our places on the council, take away any kind of say in our own lives. They want to make us *slaves*. There are too many of them to fight, especially if they involve the fire and sky dragons, so we will do the only thing we can, go underground. And we will *not* come back out until we are absolutely sure that we emerge from our sanctuary as *equals* to the other dragons."

"I can't deny you your right to do this, but I think that it might be taking things to an extreme," Jussa said. "Yes, this requires dramatic action, but that might be *too* dramatic, my friends. Even if the others capitulate, the enmity it fosters may never fade."

"Jussa, they *already* think the worst of us," Kanna declared. "Will it matter if they dislike us even *more* than they do now?"

"That's a fair point," Essan sighed. "And I can understand your desperation, friends. So long as the council chromatic holds the majority vote, he can push through anything he pleases. He will destroy the infrastructure your drakes have built, one vote at a time. As it is abundantly clear he has already begun. It took his sycophant less than three weeks to completely destroy the department. If he gets control of the computer and TV factories, they won't last long."

"He *won't* get control of them," Ferroth said darkly. "The factories are *not* an island-wide issue. They were built by earth dragons, are staffed by earth dragons, and the only interaction the factories have with others is to

barter their finished goods. The council chromatic has no legal standing to try to replace the factory chiefs with chromatics. After all, it was *not* a council vote that built the factories, like it was with the department. The earth dragons built the factories on their own.”

“He must have some way around that,” Essan protested. “To even bring it up for a vote, he must have one.”

“Even if he does somehow manage to get it through the council, he still won’t take over the factories. The earth dragons will *protect* the factories, esteemed council members. We saw what the chromatics did to our department, and we won’t *let* them take over our factories.”

“They’ll just send in the fire dragons,” Jussa warned.

“Let them,” Ferroth grinned. “I didn’t say we’d *fight* them, esteemed council members. I said we’d *protect* the factories. The council can send a chromatic to the factory, but the council chromatic probably doesn’t realize that the factory chief can just ignore him. He can even throw him out, because he *owns* the factory. Just because the chromatic scared Hinado off the council, completely off the island from what I’ve heard, it doesn’t give them absolute power. For the chromatics to take control of the factories, they’d have to find some way to take them away from the drakes that *own* them. And I’m not sure the fire dragons would go for that, not after you bring up the point that it would set a precedent that would let the council just walk into any fire dragon’s den and take it over. Fire dragons are *very* territorial over their dens, they’d see that as a direct threat to control over their territory.”

“I have contact with Hinado,” Jussa said. “He’s much better at magic than they think he is. He’s holed up in a small cave on an island. He said that a group of chromatics led by Ivaiya tried to *kill* him.”

“Ivaiya did?” Geon gasped.

Jussa nodded. “Not even a sky wyrm can keep up with a sky drake in the air, they’re just too fast, so he outran them and escaped. So, Chief,

you're entirely correct that Ivaiya knows what the chromatics have planned, and she's helping them carry it out. Perhaps she is the key to learning their full plan."

"I'm already working on that," Ferroth noted. "Just leave it to me."

"In this matter, of course," Jussa nodded. "But we come back to the simple fact that the chromatic must have already considered these problems, and has a way around them. He wouldn't be moving against the computer and TV factories unless he was confident he has the fire dragons' votes."

Ralla emerged from the water. "Chief, esteemed council members, I bring important news," he said quickly. "The builders are desperately looking for you, Geon, Anthra."

"What for?" Anthra asked.

"The power plant was sabotaged," he replied, which made every dragon at the meeting stare hard at him. He looked around nervously, then continued. "They had an earth drake bring the news here, thinking that Kell would know where the chief is, and he would in turn know where you are. The generators in the power plant were sabotaged, all three of them. They require extensive repair."

"Did they tell you how long?" Geon asked quickly.

"Weeks," he replied. "The main turbine arms are totally melted, and it threw molten metal all through the insides of the generators. They told me that such a thing could not happen naturally. The generators were attacked and destroyed, most likely by magic."

"By Gaia's talons!" Geon snapped. "Well, chief, *now* we know what they had planned next. I never expected this! Even the chromatics rely on the electricity, it stores much of our food!"

"And without it, most of that food will go bad and rot," Ferroth growled. "Which shuts down the factories and gives them justification to try to strip the food off the farms, all in one wingbeat. I should have considered

that!” he raged, mainly at himself. “But I didn’t think they’d be willing to dismantle the power station until last, since so many dragon dens use it for lighting.”

“But why push through a takeover of the factories if they intended to sabotage the power?” Essan asked.

“Because with us in a tizzy over getting the power back on, we’d not pay much attention to what’s going on up there. I bet the chromatic thinks that Geon and Anthra won’t even show up for council tomorrow, since far more than just *us* rely on that electricity. And of course, with the power being down, *we* will get the blame,” Ferroth grunted, to which just about everyone nodded. “He could simply vote in his chromatics into the factories while the earth dragons aren’t there to object, and easily pass the measure five to two. Ralla,” he said. “Go to the power plant and tell them that we’ll be there as soon as we can. Tell them to get a report on the damage and the estimated materials needed for repair ready as soon as they can.”

“I’ll take care of it, chief. I’ll bring back their reply in case you haven’t left before I return,” he said, dunking back down into the water.

“Sella. I know it’s a long walk, but go back into the cavern and tell them what happened,” Ferroth said. “Tell them to do what they can to deal with only running on a couple of generators. And tell Kammi to change the plans, that we’re relocating the server network into the cavern rather than the computer factory. Tell her that we’ll be bringing the servers out of the department in three days, and they’d better have enough cable laid to at least get them up and running.”

“I’ll forgive you making me run if only because it’s so important,” she said with a light smile, then she dove into the water.

An earth drake popped his head out of the water almost the same instant that Sella dove in, gasping for breath. “I almost drowned getting down here,” he said.

“Onyx!” Ferroth barked. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s crazy, chief! They sent about twenty of us out to find you, and I suspected you might be at Kell’s. Well, they weren’t here, but I know Sella enough to know about this air chamber, so I took a guess. A good one,” he grinned. “I saw that Ralla found you. Did he tell you?”

“He did,” Anthra replied, looking at the drake as he crawled out of the water. Onyx was a very sleek earth drake, small for his age just like all the other field agents, but he was thinner than the others. Sometimes he almost looked malnourished. Onyx’s camouflage pattern was probably the most chaotic of all drakes Kell knew as well. Every earth drake had random patches, but most of them had at least some kind of symmetry to their coloration, like Kammi’s tiger stripes or the symmetrical bands on Kell’s face and flanks. But Onyx’s hide looked like a mad painter just threw buckets of paint at a canvas.

“They need you at the power plant, chief. It’s a mess!”

“Did you see it?”

He nodded. “One of the generators all but exploded,” he told them. “The other two caught fire, and two of the main steam pipes ruptured. It’s hot enough in the building to melt lead right now. I don’t see how it could have been anything other than sabotage. One generator, yeah, that could fail, but not all three at the same time.”

“I’ll come to assense the area,” Jussa offered. “I’ll be able to tell if magic had a part in it.”

“We’ll welcome your expertise, Jussa,” Anthra nodded, then she turned to Kell. “Kell. They boast that you are the best swimmer among the dragons that isn’t a water dragon. Is that true?”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” he replied. “The pod always did call me a mud dragon,” he said ruefully, which made Surral and Shii smile at him.

“Then you must prove it,” she told him. “With the power off and the plant sabotaged, it’s going to throw all our plans into disarray, as I’m sure the chromatics intended. But it also means that from this point forward, we

will no longer have contact with the humans. We have to accept the possibility that we won't get the power back on before we go underground. In fact, it would behoove us if we *don't*," she said simply. "It gives us justification to move our factory machines underground without having to explain why the factories aren't making things anymore, move our raw materials, move everything we can. It also means that we have no computers, and that means no contact. Kell. Young one. I want you to do the most dangerous thing I've ever asked any drake to ever do. I want you to swim to the nearest inhabited island and make contact with the humans. Do your best to give them this message, young one; we will not be in contact for most likely one or two years, and that we'll be in a state of what they might call civil unrest. I'm sure you understand what I mean?"

Kell nodded soberly.

"Good. I know it's a terrible burden, young one, but you're the only one with the right training and the right contacts within human government that we can send."

"He doesn't have to go far, nor alone," Surrall said simply. "There's a group of American navy ships not far from the island. I'll go with him, help him get there, and I'm sure *they* can help him get his message directly to the government."

"How far away are they?"

"About a hundred *pann* or so," he shrugged. "Only a couple of hours away by water, at least for Kell. He could probably swim all the way to Hawaii if he had to, so getting to those ships will be hatchling play for him. He's swam out farther than where those ships are with me before."

"Then you must do so, young drake," Anthra told him. "Warn the humans that we'll be out of contact, probably for a long time, and explain *why*."

Ferroth scratched at his wingjoint, then snapped his wing out suddenly. "Whelp, hold on," he said. "This is an opportunity," he said. "If you're

going out to make contact with the humans, and it's contact the others won't know about, then we may as well use it. Whelp, if we asked the humans for help, what do you think they'd do?"

"It would depend on the help," Kell said, to which Onyx nodded in agreement.

"What if we asked them for food?" he asked. "That's it. Food. Enough food for us to be absolutely sure that we could outlast the others. The water dragons would have to help us get it here, but I think we could arrange something. The humans just go somewhere we designate and dump it over the sides of their ships, the water dragons collect it, then they bring it back."

"That has some potential," Jussa noted. "If we lose the freezer units, we lose about a quarter of our stored food. The chromatics will use that as an excuse to increase the tithes even more, most likely using the excuse of trying to centralize all food stores in the wake of the power disaster, which will make it harder for the earth dragons to do anything other than work even harder on their farms just to feed *themselves*. I'm sure the chromatics will conveniently ignore earth dragons when it comes time to disperse allotments if they're the ones in control of all the food. If the humans barter us some of their food, it would take a great deal of uncertainty out of all of this."

"Well, we can't really *barter* for it, Jussa. We don't really have anything they want," Kell said ruefully. "I'd have to beg charity from them."

"Then you'll do it," Ferroth told him bluntly. "You go in there and put your wings and nose on the floor and beg if that's what you have to do. Think about it, whelp. With no power, it gives the fluffies the perfect opportunity to take *all* the food, and if they do that, we lose. If we can beg enough food out of the humans, we can still go underground and outlast them, even if they have the fire dragons dig out the village silos and take the food by force. Until we get that food in the cavern, it's vulnerable."

“Then we start moving it into the cavern *now*,” Geon declared. “This very minute.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Ferroth nodded. “Onyx. You’re about to take a very long and dangerous swim.”

“I’ve been wanting to see that cave,” he grinned.

“Tell them to get ready to accept as much food as we can get down there. Tell them to stack it anywhere they can find, but they’d better find somewhere to put it all. You’ll be down there until Kell gets back, while you’re there you help Kammi with her work on the new network. Understand?”

“I got it, chief, I’ll take care of it,” Onyx nodded.

“Matriarch, could you summon one of your pod to take him?”

“The younglings don’t have the strength. I’ll do it myself,” Shii declared, standing up. “Come with me, young earth drake. I’ll get you to the cave.” When they reached the edge, she put her paw on his tail to stop him. “Deep breaths. Breathe deeply until you get light-headed, then dive in. I’ll come in behind you and carry you. Mind that we’ll be underwater for over two minutes, and you either make it or drown. So be ready.”

He nodded, then started breathing deeply and rapidly. They watched as he hyperventilated, sucked in as much air as possible, then dove into the water. Shii dove in right behind him, and she had hold of him and whisked him out of the den in a single stroke of her wings.

“We’d better do the same, young friend,” Surrall noted, standing up. “It’s a fair swim to the human ships.”

“You understand what we need, and what you have to do, Kell?” Geon asked.

He nodded. “Tell them what’s going on and beg food from them. If they agree, where do we have them drop it?”

“Surrall, you help him arrange that,” Jussa said. “You know these waters better than just about any other water dragon. I’m sure you already have several ideas of where the food could be dropped so it’s easy for us to retrieve but doesn’t give away the island’s location.”

“I do, esteemed council member,” he nodded confidently. “We can tell you when we return.”

“Be careful out there, whelp,” Ferroth said. “And make us proud.”

“I will, you trained me after all,” he grinned at Ferroth. “I can do the job, chief, don’t you worry about it. As long as the navy doesn’t shoot me when I get on the ship, it should go fairly well.”

“There’s a trick I’ve been practicing,” Surrall said to Kell. “Since we’ll be evacuating earth dragons that can’t swim as well as you can, lifemate and I have been working on a way to let them breathe while submerged. We think we have a viable technique.”

“So I’m the test subject.”

“At least you won’t panic if it goes wrong,” Surrall grinned.

“Alright then, let’s get this going,” Kell announced. “You ready, Patriarch?”

“Sure am. Are you?”

“I *am* the mud dragon,” he said with a quirky smile, which made Surrall laugh.

Chapter 6

29 May 2017, 22:48 DMT; 902 nautical miles south-southwest of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Surrall's trick was at least partially effective, if a bit creepy.

Using his control over water, Surrall created something of a magical bubble of air around Kell's head that actively diffused oxygen from the water and scrubbed the carbon dioxide out of the air the same way the air scrubbers in their den's air cave did. Kell spent the waning daylight about ten meters under, deep enough that a sky dragon couldn't see his silhouette, breathing using the air bubble. The air bubble did allow him to breathe, but that far down, the water pressure all but smacked the air out of his lungs if he tried, which required Surrall to further use water magic to ease the pressure so his chest could expand. That tired Surrall out faster than the water drake anticipated, but by then the sun was going down, so it became a moot point. Once it got dark, Kell swam just under the surface and poked his head out for air as necessary, using his wings to propel himself through the water at about 50 knots, so fast that only a speedboat could hope to keep up with him. Kell wasn't just the strongest swimmer of the earth drakes, he was also the fastest swimmer. He had so much experience at it thanks to his deep friendship with Sella, he could swim circles around anything but a water dragon.

Surrall guided him as they swam back to where the ships had been, then the water drake left him to tread water as he searched for where the ships had gone. About twenty minutes later, he came back and guided Kell southeast about 35 miles, where the carrier and its supporting task force were steaming at about 5 knots to the south-southeast, moving at a somewhat lazy pace as ships like that reckoned things. A carrier was no

speed demon, but it could do 15 knots if they were very serious about it, and probably even faster if they were *really* serious about it. The carrier was surrounded by 12 other vessels, destroyers, cruisers, logistic ships, and with an attack sub lurking beneath the waves. Surrall and Kell wove through the ships about two hours after sunset, coming up behind the carrier, who was in the act of turning into the wind, a sign that it was about to launch aircraft.

“I’ll need your help getting up there,” Kell said. “How high do you think you can get me?”

“High enough,” Surrall replied. “I couldn’t possibly carry you in the air, but I can get you high enough to reach the deck.”

“Sounds like a plan. Just stay close, dear friend. If I run into any trouble, I’ll just dive off. After I get things arranged, I’ll come to the edge and wave you up so you can join us.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things. Alright, ready?”

“Yeah. Fire when ready.”

Kell knew how he was going to do it, so he wasn’t surprised when the water around him suddenly *grabbed* him, then he was catapulted out of the ocean like a clay pigeon...and in a way, he *felt* like one. If their proximity radar keyed on him, he might eat about 2,000 depleted uranium slugs from their Phalanx system. Those wouldn’t kill him, but being hit by them wouldn’t be very pleasant. He waited until he reached the apex of his ascent to spread his wings, then turned and angled so he would glide down onto the back end of the carrier. He almost missed because the ship was still turning, but he also didn’t approach without the ship detecting him. There was a blaring alarm as their landing radar picked him up, as he turned and tried to arrest his descent as much as possible since the deck was sliding out from under where he was aiming, and he just *barely* managed to hit the edge, his back legs scrambling and his tail hitting the nets they had under the edge to catch falling debris or inattentive sailors, landing just to the side of the painted and lighted runway. Several deck workers pointed in his direction as he ambled out from the edge, getting his tail on the deck, and

spotlights from the conn tower fixed on him quickly. He flinched from the bright lights, but made no hostile moves, just sat down on his haunches, folded his wings, and waited for someone to approach. When two green-shirted men did edge towards him, he looked at them calmly. “Summon your ship captain,” Kell shouted in English, which made the one on the left stagger back and fall down. The other one turned and fled, and the one on the deck scrabbled backwards on his feet and elbows, then turn, roll to his feet, and run screaming.

Kell sighed. *Humans.*

About two minutes later, a company of Marines reached the scene, armed with assault rifles. They spread out around Kell and kept him covered, barking orders at him not to move. He just sat there, his tail swishing back and forth a little on the deck as he regarded the men without fear, then focused his gaze on a man in a duty khakis that had some oak leaves on his collar. He wasn’t the captain, but he was high-ranking, given he was a Lieutenant Commander. “Do you speak for the captain?” Kell shouted as the man approached, but he stopped dead when he heard Kell speaking English.

“I-I do,” he stammered, then they both paused as a Hawkeye flew low and slow over them, obviously aborting an attempted landing.

“Then have your captain call in to your central command and get hold of the office of the Secretary of State,” he replied. “Have him tell the Secretary’s office only this: Kell of the earth drakes is on board this ship, and wants to talk. They’ll know what to do, and they’ll give you orders. Do you understand?”

“I—Yes, I understand,” the officer said.

“Then go. Time is an issue here, bipped,” Kell ordered. The man gawked at him, then turned and fled back towards the conn tower. Kell glanced at the Marines around him, some of their guns shaking from nerves. “Put them down, boys. You couldn’t hurt me with them anyway,” he said easily, laying down on the deck to look less threatening. He focused on one

young Marine that had a fleur-de-lis drawn on his helmet. “Saints fan?” he asked the young black man, which made the soldier blink.

“How do you know that?”

Kell chuckled. “I know all about the human world. I’m a Giants fan, personally. Among my kind, though, it’s the Los Angeles Dragons that are the most popular. For obvious reasons,” he said easily, which made one Marine give a nervous chuckle. “I still can’t believe they changed the name when they moved the team from Jacksonville. I didn’t think that the Jaguars was a bad name at all.”

What ensued was a rather nervous five minute discussion about football between Kell and the burly black man, talking about the retirement of Drew Brees some two years ago and the collapse of the team since then. Finally, though, an older man came across the deck, running towards him as fast as possible. The man was in a naval khaki duty uniform, and the eagles on his collar told him that this was the ship captain. He pulled up short just behind the Marines and gawked at Kell for a moment, then cleared his throat. “The Secretary of State told me to welcome you aboard, Ambassador Kell,” he said nervously. “My name is Captain Bradley. What can we do for you?”

“First, you can get me down into the hangar. I can’t be seen on deck,” he replied. “Second, you can set up a feed so I can communicate with the Secretary from down there. Third, you can stop the ship right where it is. Fourth, you can tell the Marines to put their guns away before one of them does something silly,” he sniffed. “And fifth, you can let me call forth my fellow dragon, who needs to be there when I speak to the Secretary.”

“Marines, stand down!” the captain barked. “This is a welcome guest of the Secretary of State! I’ll need to return to the bridge to relay the orders, Ambassador. Sergeant, escort the Ambassador to the nearest aircraft elevator,” the captain ordered of one of the Marines. “See to his comfort until an officer arrives to take charge of the situation. We’ll take you down to the hangar deck and set up a conference call so you can speak to the

Secretary of State, and I'll have the ship set anchor at this position. Is that satisfactory?"

"More than, Captain, thank you," Kell said, standing back up, which made several Marines take a couple of wary steps back. He turned and looked down over the side, and saw Surrall lurking in the water. He waved a single wing to Surrall calmly, then the others gasped when the sleek water drake rose up into the lights and landed on the deck beside Kell, shaking the water off his wings before folding them. He motioned for Surrall to follow, then turned and started for the stern aircraft elevator with a surprised Marine hurrying behind them. "Calm down, Sergeant," Kell said easily. "And congratulations, you and your men just got catapulted into a security clearance *way* past Top Secret," he drawled, which made the Marine laugh despite himself.

"I was thinking something like that myself," the man agreed. "How men in black suits may show up on board any minute."

"Nothing quite that dramatic, but only a very few in your government know about us, and you can safely assume you'll be sworn to secrecy," he said, glancing back at the man with some amusement.

They reached the elevator, and Kell got in the middle of it and sat down, Surrall giving the deck elevator a suspicious look before doing the same. The Sergeant stood about ten feet from them, finally slinging his weapon back over his shoulder, and the elevator started down. "If you don't mind my asking where nobody can overhear, exactly what are you?"

Kell chuckled. "I'm an earth drake," he replied. "A dragon. My larger friend is a water drake."

"Dragons are real?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Kell replied lightly, which made the man chuckle.

"Are, are elves and such real too?"

“I couldn’t tell you,” he replied. “If they are, they keep themselves hidden. But who’s to say if they are or not?” he shrugged.

“Both of you are dragons?”

He nodded. “Patriarch Surrall here is a water dragon. I’m an earth dragon. We may look differently, but we are cousins in that we’re both dragons. Excuse him that he doesn’t speak very good English, but mind that he probably *does* understand what you’re saying,” Kell said lightly, glancing at Surrall.

“Enough to understand about half of it,” Surrall chuckled in draconic. “I wasn’t as attentive as lifemate in Sella’s lessons.”

The elevator opened to a large hangar deck, which started with a huge chamber where planes were pulled from the deeper hangar spaces and staged for the ride up. Several officers were already there, and one of them was setting up a computer on a table and podium that had been hastily dragged from some room somewhere. A couple of enlisted technicians gawked at Kell and Surrall as they slowly walked forward, then they went back to setting up a large TV monitor on the table, preparing a video conference, Kell surmised. A Commander scurried up to him and bowed. “Ambassadors, I’m Commander Jordan, the ship’s first officer, or exo,” he introduced. “We’re setting up a video conference for you to speak with Secretary Kent, it should be ready in just a few minutes. Do you require anything?”

“No, I’m fine,” he replied as he sat on his haunches. “Do you need anything, Patriarch?”

“I’m good,” he replied, sitting as well.

“Did, uh, you have a good flight?” the Sergeant asked as the exo hurried over the desk to fuss at the techs to move faster.

“Yes, the three or so seconds I was in the air was very enjoyable,” he said with a cryptic smile, which confused the Sergeant, and that made Surrall laugh. The exo, seeming to finally notice the Marine, called him

away, to stand on the far side of the table until they figured out what to do about him.

It took the techs about five more minutes to get everything set up. The TV blinked on, and Secretary of State Kent's face appeared in a split screen with Jenny, who gave him a bright smile. Kent looked a tiny bit groggy, and his tie was a little askew, betraying the fact that it was only about five in the morning in Washington, D.C. Jenny was clearly sitting in front of her computer at home, but she had her uniform on. "Is the Captain there?" Kent asked.

"He's on his way now, Mister Secretary," the exo replied from off camera.

"Very good. Whoever is in command there, clear the room of all but absolutely essential personnel at once and secure the area. Delta protocol, officer. Delta protocol."

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Clear the hangar deck!" the exo boomed. "Lieutenant, Ensign, you stay, everyone else off the deck! Close the hangar doors! Raise the elevator and secure it on the upper deck! Sergeant, place guards at all entrances to this hangar, and those men have authorization to use deadly force if anyone except Captain Bradley or those he designates tries to enter this hangar!" the exo told him.

"Aye aye, sir!" the Sergeant replied, yanking his radio off his belt and calling his squad.

It took the naval people about ten minutes to get everything sorted out, all the hangar doors closed, the elevator raised and for the captain to arrive. Once they had everything situated, the captain told the Secretary he could commence, and Jenny gave him a laugh. "How did you *get* there, Kell?" she asked immediately.

"It was a very long swim," he said dryly. "Patriarch Surreal here came with me, he's how I got up on the ship. Mind that the Patriarch only understands broken English, and I'll be translating for him. First thing,

Mister Secretary, understand this. We are not here. If the council somehow makes contact with you, do not mention this visit. I come as an emissary of *only* the earth and water dragons. Do you understand?"

"A little unorthodox, but that's alright," he replied, nodding into the camera.

"Oh no," Jenny breathed. "What happened?"

"Nothing good," Kell growled, sitting on his haunches and stretching out his wings absently. "The department is gone, Jenny. The fluffies shut it down."

"Already?"

"They're not hiding what they're doing anymore. They bullied Hinado, the sky drake, completely off the *island*, and the sky drake they replaced him with couldn't count his toes with a calculator. He votes however Ivaiya votes, and that gives the chromatic an unbreakable majority. He can put anything he wants up for a vote, and we can't stop him. So they're not being subtle anymore."

"Oh dear," Jenny fretted.

"Oh, it gets better," Kell growled. "Did you watch that video I sent you?"

"You know I did. I showed it to the President as fast as I could get to the White House."

"Then you have an idea of what's going on?"

"Fairly," she nodded. "The chromatics are trying to take apart everything the earth dragons have built."

"Exactly. The earth dragons are preparing to go underground and *stay* there, the water dragons are going to dive into the deep water and leave the others to fend for themselves, and it's our plan to starve the other dragons into submission," he told them evenly. "*We* provide the food. If we stop

feeding them, if we go on strike and put ourselves out of their reach, we hope that they'll have no choice but to come to terms with us. As long as we have enough food to outlast them, then they either submit to our demands or starve."

"Like the food riots," Jenny breathed.

Kell nodded. "But this time there will be no political negotiations," he said in a grating tone. "The water dragons won't bail out the others this time. They know what's going on, and they're on our side. The earth dragons will accept nothing less than complete submission to our demands, and guarantees sworn before Gaia herself that the other dragons will *never* bother us in this way again. We will return to farming and return to feeding them, but it will be on *our* terms, not *theirs*."

"I was afraid something like that happen," Jenny sighed.

"Oh, it's already escalating. Today, the fluffies somehow sabotaged our power plant," he told her in an icy voice. "The damage is severe. We may never get the plant up and running again, not with things the way they are now, given I don't think we can repair it with parts we have available on the island. The island has no power, and the chromatics are going to use that fact to try to take complete control of everything. With the power gone, we think they intend to try to force us to give them *all* the food, since we'll lose a quarter of our stocks to rot once the freezers warm up. If they get control of the food, then they'll have us. It also hamstring the earth dragons' ability to communicate quickly and secretly. No power means no computer network, and that means no phones, no messaging, no emails, nothing. We've already had to fall back to sending messengers, and that's a very dangerous thing to do right now. A message is only as secure as the messenger carrying it. It also means that the council can no longer call you," he stressed. "If the dragons want to communicate, it'll have to be like this, face to face. I seriously doubt the council will send an emissary to talk to you, so expect nothing but silence from the council from here out.

“So, that’s basically where things stand among the dragons, Mister Secretary,” Kell finished. “We’re about five wingbeats away from what you might call a civil war. The earth dragons won’t stand for the chromatics trying to destroy everything we’ve built, and we intend to go underground, out of their reach, and stay there until we starve them into submission. The only thing you might have happen is, after a while, there may be reports of dragon sightings, when hunger drives the dragons to leave the island in search of food. I know for a fact that when we go underground, the chromatics will give the sky dragons permission to hunt, so there will be sightings of them diving on game, and possibly livestock. Until we force them to swear before Gaia herself to leave us in peace, the earth dragons will not come back out. It’s just going to come down to who has more food on hand when we go underground,” he said with a sigh. “And that’s one reason why they sent me here. We need your help,” he said evenly.

“Exactly what help do you need, Kell?” Kent asked.

“Food,” he replied. “If the chromatics do indeed use the loss of power on the island to try to take control of all the food, we won’t have everything in place to go underground with enough food to outlast them. We need all of our stored stocks in addition to at least a portion of the harvest of this rotation’s crops to have the food we need, but the chromatics are moving so swiftly that they might force us under before we can manage it. They already suspect that we’re moving against them. In a way, I think this attack on the power plant was as much an attempt to disrupt our computers as it is a ploy to take our food, an effective double-pronged attack. And when it all happens, we’ll be trapped underground while they have the sky dragons to help feed them, and if worse comes to worst, they can use the scions to go out into your world to steal food. We won’t have that luxury. The earth dragon council members sent me here on their own to beg food from you so we can survive what’s coming,” he said in a humble voice.

“All you want is food?” Kent asked.

Kell nodded. “The council has enough food stockpiled to last the entire island a year. Factor in the fact that only the sky, fire, and chromatics will

be eating it as well as a loss of about a quarter of the stocks with the loss of the freezers, that number stays at about a year. We'd have to match those stores, and we just can't do it without all of our stored stocks and a portion of our next harvest, which we'll have to harvest and take underground without losing it to them. We can do that easily, but things are moving fast here, Mister Secretary. The chromatics have a plan, and they're executing it. We're doing everything we can to slow them down and throw them off track, give us enough time to harvest the food we need and take it underground, but right now, I have to say it, they're *winning*. In just a few weeks, they've raised the tithes to where we have to wear our claws to the nub just to meet it and feed ourselves, they've shut down the department, and now they've destroyed our power plant. They'd already been nosing around the farms to see how much food we have stored, and we're all certain that they were seeing how much we had in preparation of sabotaging our power plant, to take what food we have in the name of replacing what they lose to the lost freezers and further lock us down on our farms and force us to spend every waking moment trying to raise enough food just to survive. When they do that, we'll have to go underground, because we'd have to fight them to prevent them from taking our food. Right now they can't get at our stocks, we're moving it all underground, but they'll demand it. And when they do, we'll have no choice but to go underground ourselves. We can't really fight the others and win, there's too many of them. But *we* grow the food, so all we have to do is stop feeding them and starve them into submission. As long as we can outlast them, we'll force them to do what we want. But as things stand now, Geon and Anthra aren't certain we can do that...so here I am," he sighed. "We don't really have anything we can trade, Mister Secretary. All we can do is beg for your help," he said, lowering his nose and wings to the deck, the pose of a humble dragon begging something of another.

President Walker's face appeared on the monitor between the Secretary and Jenny. He was sitting in his situation room, and despite the early hour for them, looked alert and somewhat chipper. President Walker was definitely a morning person. "Kell, good to see you," he said easily. "I've been listening to an audio feed while my aides set up the video. I heard

everything you told Secretary Kent. I think we can see ourselves clear to give you food aid,” he said. “Completely off the books, of course,” he added lightly. “You just tell me how much you need and where to deliver it, and I’ll see that it gets done.”

Kell sighed explosively. “You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that, Mister President. I’ll have to figure out how much we need. They didn’t really give me a number, things were too crazy and I had to get out here quick. They had to get me out here the instant we found out about the sabotage, because right now, time is our greatest enemy.”

He glanced off camera for a second. “How *did* you get out there?” he asked curiously.

Kell laughed. “I’m not known as the best swimmer among the earth dragons for dog paddling around the cove, Mister President,” he replied. “I can swim all the way to Hawaii if I have to. And if I couldn’t have made it, well, I’d like you to meet Patriarch Surrall, the patriarch of the pod of water dragons that live in the cove by our farm,” he said, nudging his nose towards Surrall. “If I’d have tired out, he’d have brought me the rest of the way...then teased me about it for the next ten years,” he said dryly, which made Surrall laugh and nod in agreement. “He doesn’t speak enough English to talk, but he does *understand* enough to more or less follow what we’re saying. I will be translating anything he doesn’t understand.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Patriarch,” Walker said with a nod.

“The honor, mine is,” Surrall replied, bowing his head.

“Surrall’s here to help plan when and where the food is dropped,” Kell explained. “He knows these waters better than just about anyone.”

“Tell them I’ll need the most detailed nautical charts they have of this entire region,” Surrall told him in draconic. “I want to see just how much they *do* know while I’m here, and I’ll pick a nice spot that works for both of us.”

“Easily done,” Kell nodded, then switched to English. “Patriarch needs nautical charts of this whole region,” he said. “He needs to find the place he wants you to leave the food, and it won’t be easy since there’s nothing but water around here.”

“Captain, you have hard charts, right?” Walker asked.

“Yes, Mister President. Commander Jordan, go get our charts. Bring the charts to cover two hundred miles in every direction.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Jordan barked, then he hurried towards the nearest door.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to meet you while I was there, Patriarch,” Jenny said.

“I spend most of my time out fishing,” he said, which Kell translated. “But the pod told me of you, human, and I must admit, I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to speak to you.”

“Mister President, it might be a good idea to have Jenny on the ships that bring the food,” Kell noted lightly, glancing at her. “Just in case there needs to be another face to face meeting, you understand. She can be there to calm things down. I almost got shot getting up on this carrier,” he noted lightly.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Walker agreed. “Major, you and the Secretary both will be on the relief ships, just in case there’s a need for diplomacy.”

“I’d be honored to be there,” Kent said with a genuine smile.

“Now, let’s figure out how much food you’re going to need,” Walker urged.

“Well, if we go with the worst case scenario and the council somehow prevents us from moving our foodstocks and takes it, enough to feed about fifteen hundred dragons for a year,” Kell replied. “Earth dragons actually don’t eat all that much compared to the other dragons. Assume that an earth

dragon eats five times as much as the average human and we can work with that.”

“Alright. It’ll have to be non-perishable staples. Rice, grains, cheese, that kind of thing.”

“That’s actually preferable,” Kell said. “Most earth dragons have never eaten food that’s not right out of the ground or off a ranch before, with the exception of bread. We should avoid things like MREs and boxed foods, anything but rice that has to be cooked, we can handle cooking rice, and focus on raw foodstuffs, like rice, potatoes, cheese, anything we can store without refrigeration that’s not processed. About the only processed food an earth dragon has ever eaten is bread, butter, and cheese. Cheese, well, if you’re going to include that, make sure there’s a lot of it. To us, cheese is a dessert, and it’ll be eaten quickly,” he chuckled.

The exo returned with his arms full of rolled-up maps, and he and the technicians methodically unrolled them and placed them on the floor in front of Surrall. When enough of them were down for him to know where things were, the exo pointed out their current location, and Surrall studied them for a moment, then reached out and tapped his clawtip at one spot on a chart. “Here,” he said in English. “It’s the best place,” he told Kell in draconic. “Deep, well away from the island, and it’ll let us bring it straight to the tube without having to go around the island. We can come right up the slope and into the tube.”

Kell nodded. “He said that’s the best place,” Kell said evasively. “The boxes need to be able to float, or at the very least, not sink to the bottom. They can just be dropped over the side, and the water dragons will bring them home. They have to be dropped at night, when the sky dragons can’t see what’s going on. If the sky dragons see humans dumping boxes over the sides of their ships, they might get curious.”

“Captain, how long would it take freighters to reach that position from Hawaii?” Walker asked.

The captain moved a few charts out of the way and put his finger on that spot when Surrall moved his claw, then marked it with a pen. “In a very rough estimate without knowing how much cargo we’re talking about and what kinds of ships will be hauling it, about four to six days, Mister President,” he replied after studying it for a couple of moments. “It’s about a thousand nautical miles south-southwest of Honolulu, and the average freighter steams at anywhere between seven to thirteen knots when it’s at full speed, depending on its load, engines, and age. Just assuming that the freighters do ten knots at full speed, that’s about two hundred fifty nautical miles a day. Factor in a little extra time for unforeseen delays, and four to six days.”

“How long do you think it’d take to gather up and pallet the supplies, Mister Secretary?” Walker asked.

“Maybe a week, sir,” he replied. “The main point will be finding waterproof boxes to put it in. If not for that, I could have a thousand tons of relief supplies palleted and ready for shipment from our international disaster response warehouse in ten hours.”

“Only the rice and food that’ll be ruined if it gets wet needs to be waterproof,” Kell mused. “The rest of it, well, it won’t matter if it gets wet. The water dragons can just dry it off of it when they get it home. But since rice won’t keep after it gets wet, that has to stay dry.”

“Hmmm, in that case...I think I can work something out,” he said quickly. “Excuse me for a moment, I’m going to make a couple of calls to see if it’ll work. Be right back,” he said, then he got up out of his chair and vanished off the monitor.

“I’m surprised it got so ugly so fast, Kell,” Jenny said as they waited.

“Like I told you, we think the fluffies were just *waiting* for the chance to do this,” he grunted, sitting on his haunches and spreading his wings upwards stretch them a bit, a move that almost mystified the humans in the hangar. “They’ve moved swiftly and with purpose ever since I got exposed. So swiftly that we’re having a hard time countering them now. They know

exactly what they're doing, while we struggle to figure out what their next step is and try to counter it. None of us saw the sabotaging of the power plant coming. It took all of us completely by surprise."

"Why so?" Walker asked.

"Because we're not the only ones that use electricity, and like I said, about a quarter of our stockpiled food is frozen in cold rooms underground," he replied. "When they destroyed the power plant, it didn't click for us until we saw what would happen, and how it would all play right into their talons. The other dragons will be mad at *us* because the power failed, that their TVs and their lights and their radios don't work anymore, and the chromatic on the council can use the failing freezers as an excuse to annex the food earth dragons store on their farms. And if they do that, then we earth dragons will have so little left we'll have to devote every waking moment to harvesting enough food just to keep from starving, because the increased tithes are *still* in effect. We'd lose almost all of our harvests to the tithes, and with all our own stores taken by the council, we'd be on the edge of starvation. Right where the fluffies want us," he growled. "They're trying to drive us to the point where we're at subsistence farming, scrabbling just to feed ourselves, which will all but put us in slavery. It's almost ironic that the dragons that grow most of the food would be the only ones starving, but that's exactly what will happen if this plan the chromatics hatched carries through."

"We wouldn't let you starve, Kell," Surrall said easily.

"That may be, friend, but can your pod feed *all* of us? It won't just be my family staving," Kell answered in English. "Besides, the fluffies would take your catches as part of the tithes. And if you outfish the tithes, they'll just raise them," he reasoned. "The tithes aren't there to raise food stockpiles against disaster, they're there to *starve* us," he said with a growl. "Starve us and impoverish us. With no foods to barter, we'd have nothing."

"Probably," Surrall grunted in English.

Kent returned, sitting back down and adjusting his microphone. “My aides assure me we can come up with something that’ll work, but we’re running short on inventories to meet the demand. Ambassador Kell, given that it seems that the water dragons will be helping you, do you think you’d need the *entire* year’s worth at once?” he asked.

“Not really,” Kell shrugged, looking at Surrall. “I don’t think the council realizes that I can swim this far. Since only earth dragons speak English and can speak to the humans, I don’t think they realize that we’re doing this right now. As long as we could find some way to contact you if we need more help, we could only ask you for help when we need it.”

“We’ll get back to that in a second,” Walker cut in. “Kent, pack up what emergency supplies we have available and get it to Hawaii, where we’ll find some ships to put it on and get it out there. I’ll have Admiral Yates organize that. Captain Bradley, since you’re already neck deep in this, I want you to oversee the operation personally,” Walker ordered. “Turn your task force back to Pearl and rendezvous with the freighters if they leave before you get back. If you get back before they leave, then you incorporate them into your task force and escort them out.”

“Aye-aye, Mister President,” Bradley said quickly, almost saluting. “I think we can also solve the contact problem, I can leave a single destroyer here, at this location, which Ambassador Kell can use to make contact. They’ll know exactly where it is, and the destroyer can relay back the message. They can just sit on the helo deck. Since the Ambassador made note that he can’t be seen from the air, we’ll cover the helo deck against aerial observation.”

“That’s a good idea. Do it,” Walker nodded. Kell repeated that to Surrall in draconic just in case he didn’t understand it all, and Surrall frowned a little.

“Leave a lone ship out in the open ocean this close to the island? Not a good idea,” he said. “The sky dragons may get antsy with the sudden upheaval on the island. That destroyer needs an escort.”

Kell repeated that. “Surrall thinks you shouldn’t leave the ship by itself, not with the chaos coming on the island,” he summarized. “He said you should have at least two ships. The sky dragons won’t get any funny ideas if there are two ships.”

“If you think it best, then that’s how it’ll be,” Walker said. “Captain, leave behind two ships, and I’ll have some CAP from Pearl patrol a hundred miles north of the area in case the ships make a distress call, so they can respond. We’ll just have to make sure the freighter crews have the clearance to do this, given they might come into contact with you.”

“Actually, the freighters won’t really see anything,” Kell said. “They just dump their cargo over the side and leave. Just make sure the pallets float,” Kell chuckled. “If the pallets go down to the bottom, it’ll ruin the food.”

“Actually, that’s part of the idea we have,” Kent nodded. “We’ll vacuum wrap the food that can’t get wet and attach floatation buoys to the pallets, so they stay underwater but don’t sink to the bottom. When we see the buoys go under, we know the dragons are collecting the pallets, and we can leave them to it.”

“Good idea, Arlan,” Walker nodded.

“Tell them that the water dragons will be watching for their convoy,” Surrall told Kell. “And when they reach the location, to have your Jenny stand out where we can see her at sunset every day until we’re ready. We’ll give her a sign, and then they can unload the food.”

Kell relayed that. “When the water dragons let you know they’re there, Jenny, have them unload the pallets. The pod knows what you look like, so they’ll point you out and probably be the ones to make contact.”

“I can do that,” she nodded.

The Secretary’s aides piped in with raw numbers, how many tons of food, how many pallets, and so on and so on, and Kell realized just how much it was going to cost...*millions* of dollars. And that was just the food

they had on hand at that moment. Add in the operational costs of the ships to bring it, jets to fly cover, a sub underwater...the dragons were costing America a *lot* of money. He suddenly felt almost ashamed to ask for it, since it would be so much. But, Ferroth and the council dragons were right, they *needed* it. If the chromatics took their stored food, they'd either starve or be forced under the chromatics' claws. And either way, everything they'd ever built would be destroyed, and they would be serfs laboring on farms to grow food they wouldn't even be allowed to eat.

Anthra was right. He'd rather starve to death deep in Gaia's embrace than live under the rule of the chromatics.

"We need to go soon," Surrall told him quietly. "We've done what we came to do, and we're needed back on the island."

He nodded to his larger friend as Kent spoke again. "We can have the disaster warehouse in full gear within the hour," he said, looking at one of his aides and nodding. "Undersecretary Gray estimates they have two hundred tons of emergency relief supplies that meet the restrictions. He's already having them separate it out and package it for transport. With your permission, Mister President, I'd like to get Secretary Masters of Interior involved. We'll need to buy up some potato crops, since Ambassador Kell made specific mention of that crop. We can pull in some potatoes and get them out to the earth dragons."

"Yes, earth dragons do love their potatoes," Jenny chuckled, giving Kell a smile.

"Damn right we do," he agreed. "But, Patriarch reminds me that we can't be here much longer. Right now, we're both very much needed back home," Kell said evenly. "They need every set of claws they can muster right now."

"We can handle things from here, Kell," Walker told him. "But we could send you back with a satellite phone so you can call."

Kell shook his head. "It won't work on the island, and besides, you could add a GPS program into the phone to find my location," he said bluntly.

Jenny chuckled. "I told you he knows better, Mister President," she said, giving him a wink.

"Well, then we'll stick with the destroyers," Walker said with a slight smile. "If you need to contact us, Kell, either swim out or send a water dragon to the ships with a written message. Captain Bradley will make sure they have proper orders so they won't shoot at them."

"It'd be me, sir, I'm one of only two dragons that speak enough English and can actually get to the ships. But, if we need to talk to you again, I'll just swim back out here," he chuckled. "Certain snarky patriarchs not needed," he added, bumping Surrall with the underside of his tail, which made Surrall laugh. "As long as the destroyer captain doesn't mind me gouging holes in his hull climbing the side, anyway."

"I think he'd mind that, Kell," Walker mused.

"How did you get up there without clawing up the carrier?" Jenny asked.

Kell looked over at Surrall. "He punted me," he replied. "Used the water like a slingshot and got me high enough to glide to the deck."

"That's pretty clever," Jenny said with admiration, nodding at Surrall, who just preened.

"Don't encourage him," Kell said lightly, which made Surrall nudge him with his shoulder. "I'll tell the earth dragons that you're willing to help, and in a way, this may work out. I'm not sure we could have found places to *store* an entire year's worth of food, not at this particular moment. We've barely started building our underground sanctuary, and if we manage to pull in our own foodstocks without the council taking them, what little room there is in there is going to be taken up. But, for what it's worth, my friends, *thank you*. After fifty years of moving among you, afraid of what would

happen if you found out about us, it makes me happier than you could possibly understand to see that our faith in the *humanity* of the bipeds was not misplaced. In our hour of need, you have reached your hands out to us, and for that, we are eternally grateful. This day, you may have saved the entire way of life of the earth dragons. For that, you will be part of our histories and lore for all time, and those histories will speak kindly of you.”

“I don’t see it quite that way, Kell,” Walker smiled. “I see this as a first step towards a more permanent relationship with your island. When this is over, and the earth dragons have won their independence, I hope to have an embassy there. We won’t intrude on your lives, but since we *do* know you’re there now, we *would* like diplomatic contact. A single ambassador living in a little cottage, maybe on the edge of your farm, I don’t think that’s much to ask in return.”

Kell chuckled. “If the earth dragons have their way, Mister President, you’ll get exactly that,” he said simply. “But we have to go now. We have to make arrangements, and they need me for my claws and strong back right now, not my ability to speak English.”

“Then we’ll call this done. In ten days, Kell, have the water dragons at the rendezvous point. It’ll take us three days to get the food there, then I’ll give them seven days to get it down, because little problems always come up and slow things down. So, ten days from today, we should be there.”

“We will waiting,” Surrall said haltingly. “Be waiting. We will be waiting.”

“I’ll be there on the ship, Patriarch. Look for me when you’re ready to start,” Jenny added.

Surrall smiled toothily at her. “Sella adores you, Jenny Edwards,” he told her. “I see why.”

“I actually miss her,” Jenny chuckled. “A single day just wasn’t enough on the island.”

“Sounds like we’re done, then,” Kell nodded, looking to the captain. “Captain Bradley, could you lower the elevator for us, please? We’ll just jump off from here.”

“Certainly, Ambassador,” he said with a nod. “Exo, have them lower the elevator. I’ll leave a destroyer and cruiser here, Ambassador, at this exact location. If you need us, come here.”

“We’ll do that, Captain, and thank you,” Kell nodded. “Have your ship crews stay alert, Captain. When things explode on the island, the sky dragons might get rash. Keep your men alert.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” Bradley replied. “Any tips on how we protect ourselves?”

“Keep your men inside as much as possible, and electrically ground anything you need to run. A sky dragon would attack a ship with its lightning, so keep your men inside and out of harm’s way. Your radar won’t pick them up, and you’ll never see them until it’s too late, so the only real way to go about it is to not give them the chance in the first place.”

“They’re that fast?”

“They’re even faster,” Kell said simply as the elevator started to descend, the whine of the motors cascading across the hangar. The hangar doors opened, and the elevator deck came into view. “Mister Secretary, Mister President, thank you again,” Kell said, nodding towards the monitor. “Jenny, drop me a letter when you come with the supplies, the water dragons will get it to me.”

“Of course I will, my friend,” she smiled.

“We have to go,” Surrall said again, nudging him with his wing.

Kell nodded. “Ten days, we’ll be there,” he promised.

“And as long as nothing goes wrong, so will we,” Kent answered. Surrall turned and bounded towards the open doorway, the elevator deck

almost down, then he jumped atop it and vaulted out into the emptiness beyond, spreading his wings to glide down to the water.

“Good luck, Kell,” Walker said seriously.

“We’ll need it, Mister President,” he grunted, then he nodded to the captain, turned and did the same. He vaulted over the low guardrail at the edge of the elevator and opened his wings, then glided in a steep slope down to the water. He folded his wings and dove in, then went deep and turned to follow Surrall, who was going southeast instead of southwest, not turning towards the island quite yet...which was probably wise. They had to have sonar, and their sonar might pick Kell up. It would never pick up Surrall unless he wanted it to, but Kell couldn’t manipulate the water to absorb the sound waves the way Surrall could. Kell spread his wings and pushed off, speeding off behind Surrall, following his glow in the darkness, quickly leaving the ships behind.

29 May 2017, 23:32 HDT; 902 nautical miles south-southwest of Hawaii

“Sonar has them, sir, depth twelve feet, bearing one six three and moving away at forty-three knots,” the exo relayed from the bridge, which had active sonar fixed on the dragons.

“That fast? Holy—“ Bradley breathed, then realized that the President was still on the conference.

“Kell said he was a fast swimmer, that proves it,” Walker chuckled. “Get here as fast as you can, Major. We need to talk. Secretary, get it done.”

“At once, Mister President,” Kent replied.

“I’m on the way right now, sir,” the Major answered.

“Any other orders, Mister President?” Bradley asked.

“Just get back to Pearl as fast as you can, Captain,” Walker replied. “Official orders are coming down the pipe, but you already know what to do. Leave two ships, and make sure they stay alert, but don’t get trigger happy. I don’t want them shooting at Kell.”

“I’ll brief the ship commanders personally,” Bradley nodded to the monitor.

The President’s feed cut out, and then the Secretary of State, but the Marine Major was still on, looking to about to cut the feed. From what Bradley had figured out, the Major was the specialist here, the one that *knew* about these dragons. Knew them personally. “Major,” Bradley said before she disappeared. “Is there anything important I need to send down? I don’t want my ship captains doing something foolish.”

The Major smiled, a cute dimpled one. “Just be polite,” she replied.

He glanced towards the open hangar door. “I never thought anything that big could move that fast,” he breathed.

“Those are the *small* dragons, Captain,” she said lightly, then her feed cut out.

They were *small*? The smaller one had to be seven feet high, the bigger one ten feet high. And that was *small*? Bradley wasn’t sure he wanted to see a *big* one.

30 May 2017, 13:15 DMT; Sanctuary City

It had been a long swim back, but one filled with hope rather than worry. If the humans were going to help them, then it solved a whole lot of problems as long as they could keep the human involvement secret. The biggest concern had been them being forced underground without enough food to survive, but as long as they were careful about how they got the food aid into the cavern.

But there were other things to worry about, and much more immediate. The council was supposedly in session at that very moment, and they had no idea what they were discussing. They figured that it started with the power plant, and would end with something explosive. With Onyx there—well, Jirran, there were no field agents anymore—they had all the cables cut and tipped, and were laying it out along with power cable they hoped to use soon. The cavern had no power, but the water dragons had brought in two diesel generators for them to use for their powered cutting tools the builders used for precision work, which they'd use to test the network when they had the core of it built. One rack of servers were also in the cavern, brought in by Sella, and they already had them installed in racks and placed on the second floor of the tower they were building inside the cavern. They were two thirds done with it, and the second floor was one of the few places they could go to stay out of the way. They cordoned off a portion of it for the computers, and that would be the permanent network control center. Once they got in the rest of the servers, they'd fire it up and configure the initial network control servers.

He hated not knowing what was going on. What they were doing was important, but now more than ever, with whatever was going on up on that aerie transpiring at that very moment, he wanted to be *out there*. They were cut off in the cavern, with only messengers to bring them word from outside. They did have the ELF set up with a battery-powered transceiver for emergencies, but they wouldn't use that unless it was something dire. So, while he was almost aching for news, he didn't want it coming over the ELF. He focused on the job, like being out on a field mission, staying alert, keeping aware of his surroundings...because he had a *very* bad feeling.

He wasn't the only one. Everyone in the cavern knew what was going on, and now everyone was working with almost frenzied dedication. Kell wasn't the only one that had virtually no sleep last night, coming in and giving his report to the council dragons, then heading straight to the cavern and getting to work. They had yet another floor up and were building the supports for the next one, getting higher and higher, closer to the domed ceiling, and tunnelers were frantically digging out chambers under the floor,

to the sides, building the extensive network of chambers and galleries that would house 1500 or so earth dragons and store all of their possessions and equipment. The completed floors in the main cavern would barely hold everyone, but not their stored food and gear, so they were doing it right, building an entire city deep under the volcano. The cavern would be main storage for their equipment, living quarters for drakes that needed to be close to that equipment, village council leaders, and headquarters for their council and government, and the excavated galleries would be mainly food storage and other living quarters for everyone else. Everyone would be cramped for a while, until they dug out enough chambers to make it more like a real city...at least if things happened the way Kell suspected they would.

He had no illusions about it. He expected everyone to be down here within ten days. The chromatics were drunk with power, had destroyed their power plant, and they weren't going to be subtle or coy about it now. The fire dragons voted with the council chromatic because they really weren't smart enough to think for themselves, and now they had two sky dragons that were either all for the chromatics' plan or were too stupid to understand what it meant. Ivaiya's hatred of the earth dragons seemed so intense that she was willing to shatter a thousand years of peace, and with them running Hinado off the council, off the *island*, the council chromatic now had free reign. It wouldn't take them more than three days to say or do something that infuriated the earth dragons, things would snowball, and the earth dragons would go to ground. That was what he expected, and it was what Ferroth expected as well.

The symbol of that came down the lava tube and up the ramps. Food was already being brought in, and it was a fairly efficient system they were using. The earth dragons were carting it to either Dawnmist or Three Hills, the two villages connected by tunnel, and from there it was being taken to the ramp. Water dragons were carrying it from the ramp to the water's edge in the lava tube, and earth dragons in the cavern were hiking the four miles down, picking it up, and bringing it for storage, using either yoke baskets or one of the ten carts they'd managed to get down so far. From what Kell

heard, it was piling up at the end of the tube, since the others could move it faster than they could store it, but as long as it was *down here*, it was safe. It was pretty safe in the village silos as well, for they were deep, but it was just a matter of time before the other dragons either found a way to use magic to get at the food or just dig up the silos. Fire dragons were actually good diggers, since their claws could handle the wear, and their size was an advantage when it came to something simple like digging a giant hole to get at food buried underground.

Kell knew little about magic, but he *did* know that it would be a major undertaking for the chromatics to use magic to get at the silos. Sella explained that the earth itself was *highly* resistant to the use of magic, and stone was especially hard to affect. It was why anyone but a chromatic that knew enough magic to affect earth would hire an earth dragon to dig something out rather than use magic, because, simply put, an earth dragon was *far* more efficient. That would give them some time, since the silos were still so deep that even with magic, it was going to take them a long time to get there. It would probably be faster for them to have the fire dragons dig it out than try to use magic.

That was why the cavern was so perfect. It was *so* deep, maybe a mile underground, and with no entrance but through the water tube that required a four mile hike through a tunnel that was too small for the fire wyrms, it seriously hampered any attempt by the others to reach them. The fire dragons would have to dig for *months* to get them out, and that was even assuming that they'd know where to dig. That far underground, not even scrying would reach. There was too much stone between the chromatic and its target.

He *hated* not knowing. They could be fighting up there for all he knew, the chromatics could have ordered the fire dragons to attack the farms, Anthra and Geon might have killed the fluffy right on the council aerie, he had no idea, and that drove him crazy. For an earth drake whose very job it was to find things out, being in a position where he *didn't* know was both unusual and infuriating. All he could do was finish the project, build a computer network they couldn't even use for some time, then help the other

builders in any way possible to prepare for the mass exodus they all knew was coming.

There was no doubt now. Before, they were planning for the *possibility*, that there was a slim chance the chromatics would either see reason or be thwarted by the council somehow. Now, they knew it was going to happen. The chromatics had showed their hands when they sabotaged the power plant, showing that this was now all-out war. They were using the council and working outside of it, and they wanted nothing less than to totally destroy the entire earth dragon way of life and turn them into farm-bound slaves.

He had a chill go up his spine when saw a light in the lava tube, then Geon coming out of the lava tube, carrying a yoke basket filled with food. Kell rushed up to him as another drake took the basket and headed for where they were storing the food, and saw that Geon looked very grim. "It was bad," Kell predicted.

"Oh, it was bad, alright," he replied as Sella came up behind Geon, who was carrying a battery powered undersea lantern, hanging around her neck like a medallion. "The chromatic started council by saying we're so incompetent that we blew up our own power plant, and it went right down the volcano from there."

"And the bottom line?"

"There'll be four hundred drakes in here by midnight, working to make it ready," he replied.

"Well, not that I'm not glad to see you, Geon, but you could have sent a messenger to tell us that," he said.

"Oh, I'm here for good," he growled. "I was kicked off the council."

"*What?*"

"I told you things went downhill," he grunted. "Not that the council will be meeting any time soon anyway. Anthra has a maximum of five days

to name a replacement before any official votes can be made, so she's going to use the whole five days, tell the village councils not to hold elections until the evening of the fourth day. The longer we can stall the council to remove any illusion of legality of what they're doing, the more time we have."

"What got you kicked off?"

"Oh, the two spikes in the base of the chromatic's podium," he said darkly. "The other two missed. I really need to work on my aim."

"You tried to spike the chromatic?" he asked, almost stunned.

"You bet your tail I did," he said with a vicious expression. "He did exactly what we were afraid he'd try to do."

"The food?"

He nodded. "He called for a vote to annex private earth dragon food stocks to replace what they'll lose when the frozen food thaws out. That was about when I gave him something far more immediate to think about."

"You did it on purpose."

"Yup," he nodded. "That was our strategy. Me trying to murder the council chromatic would distract the council from the vote, and we were right. Now Anthra can delay the council by five days while she drags her tail organizing the village council votes. I was *supposed* to miss, but Gaia help me, when I loosed my spikes, I wanted to kill that unmitigated ass. The important thing is that the vote was never made, and now we have five days to stall before they can make it. We have five days to move all our food down here," he declared, then he looked at Kell. "And you need to go back to your farm, Kell. Anthra has a *lot* to go over with you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because *you* are my replacement."

"What?"

“We decided that we needed you on the council. We debated any number of candidates, but your field training and your thorough understanding of technology is going to be useful to Anthra, Kell. You may be young, but you’re smart, and you have enough experience in high-pressure situations for us to trust that you’ll know what to do.”

“Why not Ferroth?”

“Because Ferroth has too much to do to be tied up with council,” he replied. “While he works in the background, you’ll be the public face, but you won’t be a figurehead. Me and Anthra are very proud of you in how you’ve handled yourself through all of this, Kell. If anything, the last two weeks or so have proved that trust in you is not misplaced. So, young one, I’m sending you the message, go back to your farm. I’ll be taking over down here, and I’ll make sure everything gets done. You’re needed up top.”

“But they’re trying to kill me.”

“And that’s why you won’t set foot outside until the voting is done and you’re elected to be my replacement,” he replied simply. “Once you’re named to the council, though, they won’t *dare* touch you. Not even the council fluffy would have the fangs to try to have you killed when you’re on the council, it would start a complete riot among the earth dragons. And, it will give you complete freedom to move around. *No place* except a private den or burrow is denied access to a council member. Not even a chromatic’s library.”

“Oh. Ohhhh,” he breathed.

“We chose you for more than one reason, young one,” he chuckled. “Anthra will explain everything to you.”

“Alright. You coming or staying, Sella?”

“Coming, they need me to ferry baskets,” she replied. “The esteemed council member wanted to discuss some things.”

“Being the only water dragon that’s fluent in English, we had a lot to discuss with her,” Geon smiled.

Kell and Sella headed back down the tube, moving out of the way of a convoy of earth drakes carrying yoke baskets. “Can you believe this insanity, friend?” he grunted to her. “*Me*, on the council?”

“What’s insane about that, friend?” she said lightly. “You would have ended up on the council some day.”

He looked back at her, and she just smiled. “You’re funny.”

“I’m being serious,” she replied. “You’re one of the smartest dragons I know, Kell. You’re smart, you’re dedicated, and you’re capable. You’ll be a great council member.”

“For what, maybe five days?”

“Then for those five days, you will do what you do best, dear friend,” she said warmly. “Make us proud of you.”

“Pft,” he hissed through his teeth. “I think this is a bad idea. I’m needed down here.”

“You’re needed where you’ll do the most good, friend, and that’s right up there, in the middle of everything. It’s what you were trained to do, and it’s where I know you want to be, despite what you’re saying now,” she said lightly.

“I think that’s a little *too* much in the thick of it. Besides, when I try to spike that fluffy, I *won’t* miss.”

“That may be one reason they’re putting you on the council,” she said, her smile a little malicious when he glanced back at her. “The chromatic *knows* you have something of a reputation for taking no foolishness, friend. He might ponder his own mortality knowing that there’s nothing between you and him but empty air.”

“Okay, *that’s* a good reason to be on the council,” he corrected, which made her laugh.

Sella ended up carrying him, if only because his presence in the tube slowed down the food movement efforts. And it wasn’t just Shii’s pod moving baskets and boxes of food. Several water dragons Kell didn’t know passed them, carting their stocks into the cavern. Kell risked the very short distance between the shore and his family burrow, vaulting out of the water and running straight for the ramp, water streaming off of him, and made the ramp without a sudden shadow appearing over him. He found Anthra in the entry chamber, a little cramped in the small room. She looked back over her wing at him and smiled. “I see Geon made good time,” he said.

“With all due respect, Anthra, this is crazy,” he told her.

“Sometimes crazy works,” she replied evenly, which made him laugh despite himself. “We have a lot to go over, Kell. You have to learn the rules of council, and five days is cutting it close. Many of them have absolutely nothing to do with us, but you need to understand them if the chromatic tries to use them himself. We’ll discuss it here for now, but when the sun sets, you’ll move down to the village, where we can talk in a less confining situation,” she said, looking around. “I’ve already told all the village council leaders that they will elect *you* to the council, but to publicly seem to debate any number of some two dozen different candidates. The other dragons know we can be almost silly when it comes to deliberating on such issues. It took them almost two months to elect Geon, but council rules only prevent votes for five days. So after five days, you need to be on that council. I can only cast votes by proxy for the earth drake if there *is* an earth drake on the council. With the seat vacated, all votes are considered abstained from the earth drake.”

“I understand, and I think this is a very bad idea, Anthra. But, if I have to do it, then I’d better learn how to do it right. So let me go get my tablet so I can record these lessons, then we can start.”

“Good idea, young one,” she nodded. “And ask Kanna if she could bring me something to eat, please?”

4 June, 2017; 04:42 DMT; Dawnmist Village

This. Was. Insane.

Kell was sitting outside of the sleeping chamber he'd been using down in the village since moving down here, his shoulder bag hanging off his wingjoint and feeling both nervous and ridiculous. Last night he had been formally elected to the council by a majority of village councils voting him in, and with the vote proclaimed valid by Anthra, it meant that he, Kell, was now the youngest dragon *ever* to serve on the council of dragons.

For five long days, he'd been preparing for this. Anthra had come to the village at dawn every day, and spent the entire day teaching him the intricacies of council, both its defined laws and rules and also its customs and peculiarities. But, she didn't just teach him the rules, she explained *how* they came to be. For example, he had known that the council was not allowed to meet unless the sun was in the sky, but he *didn't* know that it was a rule set up so that the flying dragons didn't have to risk flying at night. He also didn't know that at the time of the council's creation right after the arrived on the island, the council was actually held on a high knoll on the north side of the island that had subsequently been buried under a series of lava flows. They had met there to both give them a sense of being somewhere high, but also giving earth dragons access to the council circle. After lava destroyed the original aerie, a new one was built at the very top of the volcano with the idea that the highest council of law on the island should meet on the highest point on the island. Back then, there were no ramps, and the earth dragons had to climb the volcano in order to reach the aerie. By the second day, Kell was actually enjoying the lessons, for they were a lesson in draconic history as much as they were a set of laws and rules about council dragons, their responsibilities, and their privileges.

And they had privileges. For one, as Anthra had already told him, no place that was considered public could be denied to a council member. A council member couldn't intrude on someone's den, but if Kell wanted to walk into one of the chromatic libraries, they had to let him in. For another, a council member was given the privilege of an unlimited allotment, so long as they didn't give that food to anyone else. Council members got to eat as much as they wanted. And also as Anthra hinted, the very fact that he was a council member gave him both protection from typical dragon spats and the ability to summon other dragons as his personal escorts and bodyguards. No dragon was allowed to willingly harm a council member, not even in personal disputes, with the lone exception of a council member invading the private den of another without permission. But, if he wanted to feel safe, or safer, he could demand fire drakes escort him, and a sky dragon could be summoned at any time he was on the aerie as a dispatch for carrying messages. The earth dragons on council didn't bother with fire drakes, earth dragons were more than capable of taking care of themselves, but Anthra and Geon did employ sky drakes to carry messages for them.

He really didn't like the idea of this. He'd have to face down the chromatic that had first tried to have him executed, then probably arranged for the sky dragon that was assigned to try to kill him. He'd have to look him in the face and be if not polite, then distantly courteous. But, one of the only good parts of this was that the other dragons didn't know that the earth drakes had selected a replacement. When Kell mounted the podium on the aerie, it would be the first and *only* indication that a decision had been made. He'd have to engage the chromatic and Ivaiya in what could only be called verbal warfare, doing anything and everything he could to stall, delay, or block votes. The tools he'd have on hand for that would be few and far between, since the chromatic was currently the chair of the council for the next two years, and was the one that could officially call for votes. The chair changed every three years, but since it required a vote to attain the chair, the chromatic had held it for the last 25 years. If the chromatic called for a vote, then they had to vote. But there were *some* ways that council members could either slow down or block a vote. Anthra and Geon had used one of the more radical and desperate ones to stop all votes for

five days, but all they'd talked about yesterday was the ways they could block or stall those votes from here out, as long as possible, to give the earth dragons every possible second to move their food, equipment, and supplies into the cavern. Anthra and Kell had planned a couple of equally radical and desperate ideas themselves, but in reality, it was all they could do. In their situation, radical and desperate was their only real option.

But at least that was easier now. The subway tunnel had been completed through nearly two thirds of the villages due to the incredible diligence and effort of the tunnelers, and what was most important, it connected those villages to Dawnmist and the tunnel that got the food into the cavern. They didn't have to move the food by cart out where it could be seen anymore, making it look like typical farmer bartering, sending food to Three Hills and Dawnmist and carting back seedlings, fertilizer, pots, jars, TVs, anything that might be part of a barter that *wasn't* food. With the tunnel open from Darkwood village all the way around to Breakwater village, it gave them exactly what they needed to move large amounts of food without having to make it look inconspicuous. They already had 63% of their food underground, and they'd have the rest of it in the cavern in three days. So in reality, they only had to stall the council over the food for three days. And when they allowed small chromatics to search for the food and find nothing, well, that was *their* problem. Anthra had already set up a cover story, and everyone was ready for it. When she gave the signal, fires would erupt from every earth dragon village on the island, and Anthra would declare that the earth dragons burned their foodstocks rather than hand them over to the council, as a matter of protest. Things would go downhill rapidly after that, but it would at least be a viable enough excuse to allay any suspicion as to where the food went until all the earth dragons disappeared.

Not that there were that many visible now. There were 553 earth dragons in the cavern, working feverishly to prepare it for the other thousand, and nearly half of them were underground, moving supplies and equipment. The farms only had one or two drakes on them to keep up appearances and manage what crops they'd be able to harvest before they

went underground, which would have to be harvested and carried straight to the cavern. Most of the fields were getting a little weed-choked, and Anthra had just shifted more dragons to the farms the day before to get them under control; if the other dragons saw the earth dragons neglecting their fields, that would throw up a major red flag, as the humans would say. They had to maintain the illusion that they had no idea what was coming, that they weren't making any plans, even as Ferroth distracted the others with his very visible little operation going on over in the computer factory...which might be one reason the chromatic wanted chromatics in the factory. To keep an eye on Ferroth more than anything else.

Javan ambled up to him and nodded, patting him on the flank with his wing. "It's the big day, esteemed council member," he said lightly.

"Don't call me that," he grunted. "We all know this is just part of a plot, even *they* will."

"But that doesn't make you anything less than a council member right here, right now, Kell," he said simply. "You *are* an esteemed council member."

"For the next five days."

"Then make them eventful ones, my friend," he said simply. "Let them know you were there."

"Now that I intend to do," he said with a dark nod, then he turned for the public tunnel that led to the nearest ramp up the volcano. Anthra met him at the end of the tunnel, sitting by the edge of the Lewenn farm, and she stood up when he came out. "Morning, Anthra."

"Morning, Kell. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," he sighed, which made her chuckle.

"You'll do fine. Remember, you *are* a council member. Don't let them try to bully you into silence. You know the rules."

"Thanks to you."

“That’ll just put them even more off guard,” she smiled wolfishly.

They discussed the coming day as they walked up the ramps, as the murky predawn yielded to bright, warm, sunny early summer day, promising to be a beautiful one that would usually make his sire almost happy to be alive. But right now, Keth and the rest of his family were doing what everyone else was doing, putting only one or two on the farm to keep up appearances while everyone else carried boxes and baskets of food. The other dragons and their aides and lackeys were already there by the time they arrived, as were Anthra’s own staff of earth drakes, and the other council members looked almost absently at the two of them...at least until Kell sighed, reared back, then jumped up onto the raised podium that was the seat of the earth drake. Anthra climbed up onto hers, then sat sedately on her haunches as the other dragons stared at Kell.

“I should have the fire wurm just kill you now, drake,” the chromatic said with dark, eager amusement.

“Fellow council members, might I introduce the new seat of the earth drakes, Kell, son of Patron Keth and Matron Kanna, resident of Dawnmist village,” Anthra declared. “The village council leaders elected him by majority ballot yesterday evening. I witnessed the balloting, so I declare it valid.”

“Well, something of a surprise, them electing someone so young,” Jussa said, looking over at him with a smile. Jussa was to his immediate right. “But often, our earth drake cousins see things we do not. So I bid you welcome, my friend. Serve with distinction.”

“Are you serious? They put a *hatchling* on the council?” Ivaiya said hotly. “He has no right to be here!”

“I have more right than *you*, Ivaiya,” Kell snapped in reply. “At least *I* was elected by a majority of my earth drake peers. You were *chosen* for that seat by your father.”

“How dare you!” she shrieked, snapping her wings out and almost knocking the sky drake Beyori off his podium.

“While I sit upon this podium, I dare all kinds of things,” Kell replied, glaring across the aerie at her. “The earth drakes chose me because of my training in technology and my history as a field agent, which will be experience that will be needed in the time to come. I was selected by my race by our own established methods, they were legal, and now you’re stuck with it, and with me. I’m not going anywhere, and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“So, a half-whelped youngling presumes to speak to his elders as an equal?” the fire wyrm, Hirrag, snorted, smoke billowing from his nostrils.

“I *am* your equal, Hirrag,” Kell retorted. “My podium isn’t lower than yours. On this council, we all stand as equals...unless you perhaps consider yourself *more* equal than certain others?” he asked flintily.

Hirrag bristled, glaring past the fire drake and Anthra at him. Anthra just gave him an amused look, enjoying his sideways insult. “Well, if Anthra upholds the legality of the selection, then it’s a settled issue,” the chromatic said easily, all but giving Kell a vicious, eager smile. “The council recognizes Kell, son of Patron Keth and Matron Kanna, as the earth drake seat. Serve long, serve well, earth drake.”

“Serve long, serve well,” the other dragons mirrored, some of them quite reluctantly.

“So, now that all that business is settled and out of the way, let’s return to matters of importance. We’ve had five days for the investigation into the failure of the power plant to progress, and I will be introducing witnesses into our debate to enlighten us. But first, there is open business before us. There is the matter of the proposed vote that was never completed before the *last* earth drake so quickly left our presence,” he said, giving Kell an amused glance.

And that was Kell's cue to employ the first stalling tactic he and Anthra had worked up. "I object to such a vote," Kell declared. "Because I wasn't *on* the council when the vote was brought forth, I demand that all testimony and reports related to the vote be repeated, so I may make an informed decision."

"There *were* no reports or testimony," the chromatic chuckled.

"Then how can you make an informed decision if you haven't even allowed the council to investigate the matter? Since I have the right to object to the vote, I also have the right to demand a formal inquiry into the matter. I will not make my decision based on hearsay."

The chromatic gave Anthra a dark look. "I see you prepared him well for that seat," he said acidly.

"Oh, you have *no idea* how well prepared he is for this task, chromatic," Anthra purred. "I had five days to prepare the candidates for the council seat. No matter who ended up on that podium, he or she was going to be ready."

"Kell correctly cites council rules," Essan mused lightly. "He has the right to demand a formal inquiry."

"Preposterous. I invoked the rules of disaster in the matter," the chromatic said with annoyance. "That supersedes a call for inquiry."

"The rules of disaster are binding for only three days after invocation," Anthra shot back with a dark smile. "That was *five* days ago. The rules of disaster are no longer in effect, and since this matter is *already* on the floor, it cannot be set aside for a different vote without the mandatory period of ten days before it can be brought again. So choose, chromatic. Invoke the rules of disaster and force a delay of this vote for ten days, or call a formal inquiry," she challenged.

"Clever," Jussa said, giving her a look of sly respect. "She has your tail pinned to the floor, chromatic. Either call for an inquiry or retire the matter for ten days."

The chromatic glared at Jussa. "I call for an official inquiry," he growled.

Anthra looked down at Kell and winked her glowing amber eye, which made him smile slightly in return. Just as Anthra suspected, the chromatic had forgotten that rather obscure rule, and they'd used it to stall him.

They literally spent the rest of the day haranguing over the composition and goals of the inquiry. The chromatic naturally tried to stack it completely with chromatics, which the earth and water dragons fought tooth and talon. But when it came down to the goals of the inquiry, Kell and Anthra had to be somewhat careful. The inquiry couldn't be allowed to go in and *look* at the food, so they had to define the goal strictly to studying the need for the council to take the drastic action of all but stealing the private food of farming earth dragons to move to the official stores. Anthra lobbied heavily for an alternative option to be studied where the food would be annexed only if certain conditions were met, such as a natural disaster or nothing short of human soldiers landing on the island in war machines and attacking them. Of course, Kell and Anthra lost every argument they made, but they were expecting to. Anthra had told Kell to be a incendiary as possible to provoke emotional outbursts, and he more than enjoyed getting under the scales of the other council members, who really hated the idea of such a *young* dragon being on that council. They didn't think he was old enough to debate any matter of importance, but while Kell was intentionally provoking them, he also blindsided them with highly logical arguments and positions that made it clear to them that his youth did not make him stupid, often right after saying something that got them mad, as if to rile them up then hit them over the head with *logic* while they were all huffy, which made them feel stupid on top of angry. His training as a field agent actually helped him, letting him react quickly and calmly to shifting arguments, think rationally and make proper decisions quickly. Sessara, the fire drake, seemed particularly riled at Kell but also strangely impressed by his reasoning, as well as his ability to inflame the other council members even as he met them head to head in the realm of debate and showed he wasn't going to be backed into a corner. The twenty minute argument he had with

the chromatic demonstrated the fact that Kell wasn't going to be pushed around, because he literally shouted down the chromatic, then used a few aggressive slashes of his tail to make the chromatic flinch away from him, show the entire council that the chromatic was *afraid* of him.

The council only had one short break for a meal, and the rest of the time was spent in a state of constant contention, as the staffs of every council member worked feverishly as the council debated, working quickly to research positions, study council law, or send runners or sky drakes to contact potential witnesses. By sunset, Kell felt physically drained despite having done nothing but sit all day, when the setting of the sun forced the council to end. It had been continued by the chromatic so they'd pick it right back up in the morning, but it gave everyone involved a night to prepare more researched, formal arguments. He and Anthra stepped down off the podiums as the sky dragons vaulted high into the air, and Jussa stepped off beside him and patted him on the back and wings with his own. "I think you're going to do fine, young Kell," he chuckled. "You certainly have the bravado of youth. There were a couple of times I thought Hirrag was going to charge across the aerie at you."

"So did I, why do you think I spent almost the entire council with my spikes out?" he replied, which made Essan laugh.

To his surprise, Sessara ventured over as the water dragons launched off the edge of the aerie, her boxy snout just inches from his, her glowing ruby eyes boring down into him, reinforcing the fact that Kell was, by far, the smallest dragon on that aerie, even when taking the aides into account. He met her stare almost defiantly, which just made her laugh. "I thought the earth drakes were crazy when I saw you climb that podium, Kell. I don't think they're crazy now," she told him, then turned and clawed into the air with her wings, heading north and towards the active volcano.

"Well, that's the closest thing you'll ever get to a complement out of a fire dragon," Anthra mused as the two of them watched her disappear under the platform. "Your sire invited me over for dinner, so I'll see you as soon as I speak to the village leader over at Darkwood. He had a matter of

importance to discuss with me, and we have our own matters of importance to discuss.”

“Alright. See you there,” he said, spreading his wings, bunching his legs, then jumping out into the abyss. His wings caught the air, and he quickly angled into a descending glide that would bring him down on his family farm. Keth and Kanna were standing out waiting for him as he landed, bounding to a stop between the wheat and carrot fields, and his younger siblings charged out of the burrow and almost gang tackled him.

“Kell! Kell! How did it go, Kell?” Kav asked excitedly.

“Our brother the council member!” Kitta declared, hanging off his neck by her claws. “Lenva was so jealous when I told her!”

“Shame on you, lording it over our neighbors,” he chided, which made her giggle. “Sire, mother,” he said as he carried his siblings over.

“How did it go, young one?” Keth asked.

“It was very nervous,” he replied. “Anthra said that it would be a little while before she gets here for dinner. She had an appointment with the council leader over at Darkwood.”

“That’s fine. We’re going to eat on the beach, Anthra invited Shii’s pod to join us so she can get to know them. So, tell us about your first day as our council member!” Kanna said happily.

“Not you too!” he complained, which made her laugh.

“A mother has every right to be proud when her son is named to the council!” she protested. “I couldn’t believe it when Javan brought us the news this morning!”

“I’m surprised the earth drakes didn’t riot when they found out someone *my* age was elected,” Kell chuckled.

“There was some curiosity about it, but no earth drake that knows you thinks it was a poor decision,” Keth said simply. “You may be young, my

son, but you are everything a council member should be.”

“For however long I manage to make it before I follow Geon’s path and spike that arrogant fluffy,” he growled, which made all of them laugh.

The public subterfuge out of the way—everyone in his family knew the truth that he was chosen days ago—they moved to the beach. Shii’s pod had caught some tuna, one of the most sought-after kinds of fish among the earth dragons, and they brought it to the meal along with choice vegetables from Keth’s stores, a cow they’d bartered, and other bartered foodstuffs to make it a banquet as much as a meal. Kell sat among friends and family and related most of events of the day to them, along with the incredible tension that existed up on that aerie, tension that Anthra and Geon had dealt with for *years*. The recent movements by the chromatics only ramped up the tension that was always present, and after just one day, his respect for Anthra and Geon went even higher than the volcano. “I swear to Gaia herself, I thought that the fire wurm was going charge across the platform more than once,” he told them with a nervous chuckle. “He *hates* me. Every time I talked, you could see the smoke come out of his nose. I think he was stoking up just *hoping* I gave him a reason to breathe on me.”

Sella laughed, nudging him with her shoulder. “I’m sure the water dragons there would have put you out,” she smiled.

“But that’s the way it was all day. I don’t see how Anthra doesn’t have ulcers by now.”

“Well, if it was that stressful, I should take you for a swim to help you relax. Unless you’re too pompous to swim with the commoners now,” she teased.

In answer, Kell turned and used his tail to hook her, then he snapped her right off the beach and into the water. The others laughed as he bounded across the beach and dove right at her as she surfaced, driving her right back under the water. The water frothed and splashed as the two of them mock-fought just under the water’s surface, the occasional wing or tail splashing out of the water then slapping back down into it. But fighting

Sella in the water was a sure way to lose, so it wasn't long before she had him pinned to the bottom, grinning at him in the fading light of the sunset. She always won in the water, but he got a few good bites in on her, including a nice one right on the base of her neck. She let him up and let him surface to breathe after he admitted defeat and surrendered with dignity. Sella knew him so well, she knew *exactly* how long he could stay down, even after something like a little mock-fighting. When he surfaced, he saw Anthra coming down onto the beach as Surrall and Shii lit several torches with magic, illuminating the beach for the water dragons. "I'm sorry I'm late, but thankfully I'm no later," she said. "Kell, whatever are you doing?"

"Not being allowed to let my new station go to my head," he replied dryly, glancing over at Sella, who laughed, submerged, and came back up underneath him, carrying him over to the beach.

"Can't let his high and mightiness swim under his own power," she said tauntingly. "Such *important* dragons doing manual labor? Unthinkable!"

"I'm gonna bite you somewhere painful and long-lasting, Sella," he warned, which made everyone laugh.

"Ooooh, tuna! I love tuna!" Anthra said brightly when she looked down and saw the food they'd laid out on a large canvas tarp to cover the sand, used for just such things. Earth dragons didn't mind a little earth on their food, but water dragons didn't like sand all over their food.

They curtailed serious conversation in favor of eating, for it was a long-standing tradition not to speak of weighty matters during a meal. After the meal, however, Anthra sat and discussed the day's events with Keth, Kanna, Shii, and Surrall as Kell took a quick swim with Sella. They couldn't really discuss anything sensitive outside, not with the very real possibility that the chromatics were scrying against them, so Anthra was just telling them about their day's wrangling. He came out and sat with them when she started talking about tomorrow. "We should have everything settled about

this inquiry by tomorrow, so we'll move on to the power plant," she said darkly. "That's not going to be any less contentious. The day after it happened, the chromatic said in open council that it was gross earth dragon incompetence that led to the accident."

"That was no accident," Surrall stated.

"We know, but he's already declared he's bringing witnesses to testify, most likely a long string of fluffies that will lie through their fangs, as well as the plant owner and operator, which he'll try to make look like a total idiot."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Oh yes, he'll be ready to testify."

"Did you ever find out what caused it?" Shii asked.

"We did," she nodded to her. "The real wrangling is going to come when we tell the council what needs done to repair it. We don't have the parts we need on the island, and we can't make them. With no department, the council will have to authorize the field mission to acquire the parts. We're not sure they'll let us."

"How long will it take them to fix it?"

"Weeks," she replied. "They have to completely rebuild all three generators."

"What will we do without the generators?" Kii asked.

"As best we can, youngling. Ferroth believes we can build some wind turbines to generate electricity, we have all the materials we need for that. Until we find a solution, we have to go back to the way things were sixty years go, when we had no power. It wasn't all that long ago," she chuckled, looking down at the hatchling. "But it was before your time, little one."

"I remember when the builders ran the power lines to into the burrow," Kell mused. "I spent hours just watching the light turn on and off. I think

that was when I got so fascinated by human technology, seeing that light just turn on when I hit a button. It was like...like earth dragons finally had magic,” he said.

“You have magic, dear friend,” Sella told him warmly, leaning on him til he fell over, then draping herself half over him like she tended to do. “It’s right here,” she added, tapping his head with her claw. “If anything, the last fifty years have proved that the earth dragons are far more clever than anyone else ever believed. Well, anyone but us,” she winked. “Our pod has known the secret of the earth dragons for generations.”

“Yes, and I think that scares some,” Anthra said dryly. “Before, nothing had ever caught our fancy other than our farms, at least until we saw the planes in the sky. I guess for the other dragons, it’s a dangerous thing to dream.”

“What about before?” Sella asked. “I know the histories of the water dragons before the island. What did the earth dragons do?”

“Exactly what we do now,” Anthra told her. “We have *always* been farmers, Sella, since the first day we came out of our tunnels and saw the sun. As the humans spread across the land, we retreated further and further, until most of us were in northwestern Europe. In Sweden and Norway mostly, farming the high valleys. But even there, the humans started encroaching, and it very nearly came to war when the chromatics came to us and told us of their plan to move *all* the dragons far, far from humans, to a place they would never be able to reach. It seemed that the humans had learned the secrets of iron, and they were actually *killing* dragons,” she mused. “The humans breed so fast, like flies, we knew we’d never win a protracted war with them, and all attempts to parlay had failed, so the dragons decided to move to this island. And we’ve been here ever since,” she said simply.

“What happened between the chromatics and the humans to make them enemies? Didn’t the chromatics teach humans the secrets of magic?”

“They did, but the rise of the catholic church destroyed magic in the human civilization,” she answered. “The Catholics deemed it witchcraft, and they murdered all the human magicians. Not that I hold hatred in my heart for them, they are simply wrong, but it was a grave blow to the chromatics. It wasn’t long after the second Pope ordered the magicians killed for being demons spawned of Satan that they adopted their ways of secrecy. The church leaders completely eradicated all references of the dragons from human history and told the church to teach the humans that dragons were evil, and that caused us to eventually leave human lands,” she told them. She didn’t notice that she had the rapt attention of all six youngling. “We got along with the Celts and the Vikings, traded with the Vikings, but as the church spread into Scandinavia, even we saw that eventually they’d come after *us* as well, so we agreed to move to this island with the others.”

“What was it like in the human world?” Kav asked.

Anthra laughed. “I’m not *that* old, young one,” she smiled. “My great-great grandsire was, though, and the stories have passed through my family. He was just a hatchling when the sky dragons carried his family here. The only one here that has first-paw knowledge of the human world is right there,” she added, pointing at Kell, who was still under Sella.

“Not the human world our ancestors left, that’s for sure,” Kell chuckled, then he looked up at Sella in irritation when she bit lightly at his horns. “You’re going to break your teeth doing that.”

“Mine grow back. Do yours?” she challenged lightly.

“Would you like to grow a few back?” he retorted. “Bite harder.”

The fun was interrupted, however, when three earth drakes padded down onto the beach. “Anthra, we’re here,” one of them called. It was Fredda, the earth drake that managed the power plant.

“Just in time, Fredda,” Anthra nodded. “I need him now, Sella, so leave him be.”

“Saved by work,” she teased lightly, then she let him up.

“*You* were saved,” he snorted playfully as he regained his feet. Kell and Anthra then left the picnic with apologies, and started around the island to get a first-paw look at the damaged power plant. As they walked. Fredda and her two technicians described the damage to them, then discussed how it had happened. “Oh, I have absolutely no doubts,” Fredda growled. “What happened wasn’t *natural*. Each of the turbines is isolated from the others. They have their own control systems and everything. For all three to suffer a catastrophic failure with absolutely no warning, it’s just not possible.”

“No warning at all?”

“Not a single light or alarm on the board,” Nevrel, one of the two technicians, answered. “The first indication we had that anything was wrong was when generator number two more or less exploded. It’s a miracle no drakes were killed, with all the steam pouring out of it.”

“Generator one went out not ten seconds later, then generator three,” Govit continued. “There was some damage to number three from the explosion of number two, but the damage was *external*. We found no damage from the outside going in that went deep enough to reach the turbine driveshaft, and that’s what failed on all three.”

“Some kind of design flaw?”

“Well, the Iceland plants haven’t exploded and they’ve been running longer than ours, so I’d say no,” Fredda replied. “And all three turbines haven’t been run the same number of hours. What kind of miracle would cause all three to fail at once when they don’t have the same service hours?”

“Alright, so we can reliably rule out any natural or design issues. That just leaves sabotage.”

“Magical sabotage, it had to be.”

“Jussa found no evidence of magic in the generators, so if they used magic, they were very subtle about it,” Anthra said as they trotted down the path.

“They wouldn’t have to use the magic in the *generator* to have it fail like that,” Govit challenged. “The turbine arms reached such high temperatures so fast that they all but melted. What if the saboteur used magic to raise the temperature of the steam entering the turbines, like, say, to the melting point of the steel of the driveshafts? It would soften the shafts, and at the speeds they turn, that would make them bend, then they’d shatter the generators from the inside. Just like they were.”

“The pieces of the shafts we’ve recovered *were* warped,” Fredda grunted. “That could have done it, and I don’t think that would leave a magical trace.”

“It might, I don’t know. I’m not familiar enough with magic to know,” Anthra noted.

“Maybe not magic,” Kell said darkly. “Wouldn’t a fire dragon breathing on the steam pipes coming into the plant accomplish that? What temperature is the steam when it comes into the building, Govit?”

“One hundred sixty degrees Celsius at two hundred pounds per square kilogram of pressure,” he answered. “That temperature and pressure has to be precise, because that’s actually how we control the RPMs of the generators. They govern steam temperature and pressure in the well building to send steam over to the generators at optimum parameters. Anthra, would Jussa pick up the use of a breath weapon?”

She shook her head. “That kind of magic is very subtle, he might have missed it. But wouldn’t the pipes show evidence they were superheated by a fire’s breath?”

“Yes they would,” Govit replied immediately. “And we didn’t check *outside*.”

“Wouldn’t have the plant’s safety systems shut things down when they detected the superheated steam?” Kell asked Fredda.

“They should have,” she replied. “Any variation outside operating parameters is supposed to trigger an emergency shutdown. But half of the sensor system is in the pipe exchange building over the pipe wells. They were put in a separate building for safety reasons. If the fire dragon attacked the pipes between the transfer building and the generator building,” she said, trailing off. “It might have not been enough time. That superheated steam rolling in right out of nowhere, behind where the first bank of sensors said the steam leaving the well building was normal, the system may simply have not had enough time to initiate a shutdown. The superheated steam would have caused an RPM spike even as the heat thermally expanded the turbine, making it seize in the driveshaft, then the whole thing would blow up with all that pressure and energy and nowhere for it to go.”

“Isn’t there a last-ditch relief system?”

“It’s designed to relieve *pressure*, not *temperature*, Kell,” she replied. “The sudden temperature increase would raise the pressure, but not enough to cause a full emergency vent. It would cause the valves to *partially* open to try to reduce the incoming pressure. But it wasn’t the pressure that caused the damage, it was the *heat*. The generators were never designed for thousand degree steam to boil through them, and the manual heat gauges we have registered a heat spike of nine hundred twenty-seven degrees Celsius right before the whole thing went up.”

“Gaia’s claws, *that* hot? About the only thing that *could* get something that hot is a fire dragon’s breath,” Anthra blurted.

“That should have triggered an automatic shutdown,” Kell fretted. “And it should have showed up on the boards.”

“Well, all six operators swear to Gaia herself they saw no warnings and didn’t hear any alarms.”

“Then maybe Jussa didn’t look for the magic in the right place,” Kell said, looking at Anthra.

“The operators?”

He nodded. “Wouldn’t hiding the lights and muting the sirens count as magic that confuses the senses?”

“Sky dragon magic,” Anthra growled.

“But that doesn’t explain why the system didn’t automatically shut down,” Fredda pressed.

“True, but it does answer why nobody saw anything amiss until the generators started melting,” Anthra said.

They arrived and immediately started investigating. They had a portable generator hooked up to the computer control system so they could get some data, some logs of the event, and Kell pored over that as Anthra inspected the building. The majority of the mess had been cleaned up, but the three destroyed generators still stood on their cement pads, the middle one shattered from within like a popped balloon, and the generators to each side with blackened pits and scars all over them. The left one’s back end was mangled, and the right one looked to have been engulfed in flames, leaving it blackened and twisted. Strangely, the computer’s logs showed no evidence of an attempt to automatically shut down until after the catastrophic event began. Whatever happened had to happen so fast that everything was working normally, than BAM, instant chaos.

Sky dragons...that got him to thinking. He sat on his haunches in front of the computer terminal and tapped away on the draconic keyboard, entering a series of parameters to test something of a theory. “What are you doing, Kell?” Anthra asked.

“Seeing if I’m right. Fredda, did the plant have surveillance cameras?” he shouted.

“No, Kell,” she replied from down on the floor. “We never saw a need for them. Silly of us, wasn’t it?” she called ruefully.

“Well, that would let them in,” he grunted.

“What do you think happened?”

“Not fire dragons. *Sky* dragons,” he replied. “And more than one. You know more about sky dragons than I do, Anthra. How many does it take for them to control the weather?”

“It depends on what they’re trying to do.”

“So, how many would it take to change the natural behavior of steam? After all, steam and clouds are the same thing, just much hotter.”

She blinked. “Maybe five,” she replied. “You think *that’s* how they did it?”

“I think it’s a distinct possibility,” he replied, adding more data to the computer. “You heard Fredda. The turbines depend on the steam pressure to manage their RPMs, meaning they’re basically a flywheel system. If a group of sky dragons attacked the steam *inside* the generator, they could blow the whole thing up without any systems seeing anything wrong. They could either super-pressurize it or superheat it, either would cause the generator to melt down. Or, they could *stop* it,” he said. “If the steam suddenly stopped, the driveshaft would all but shatter, going from whatever RPM it runs to dead zero in a heartbeat.”

“That doesn’t account for the heat.”

“I know, so I think they superheated the steam *inside* the generators. I remember what they said, that it was hot enough to melt lead in here after the pipes ruptured. They wouldn’t have to have any technological skill or knowledge to understand that if the thing runs on steam, then attacking the steam it runs on will break it. They didn’t have to know how it worked.”

“Sky dragons, eh? Why didn’t the earth dragons see them? Their cloaking magic doesn’t hide their heat.”

“Because they keep the lights on in here all the time,” Kell replied. “I’ve been here enough to know that. Too bright to see heat.”

“Ah, that’d do it,” she agreed. “And if there were sky dragons in here when the generators blew, there might be some evidence of it, something the other dragons wouldn’t be looking for.”

“Well then, go show them what to look for while I finish this,” he said lightly.

“I am your senior on the council, whelp,” she replied lightly, thumping him with her tail. “Now I see why Ferroth complains so much about you and the other field agents.”

“If we weren’t saucy, we wouldn’t be able to do our jobs,” he replied lightly. “We were not chosen for timidity.”

She laughed. “I can see that. But yes, let me go look around. You finish...well, whatever that is.”

Kell’s suspicions turned out to be right. When he plugged in the data for a sudden superheating of steam *inside* the generators, the computer predicted effects that were pretty much down on the main floor right now. The exhaust pipes carrying the steam back to the condenser were the ones that all ruptured, due to the intense heat and the sudden pressure that heat induced, further backing his theory. And when Anthra found a fragment of a single shimmering scale and a few drops of blood in the far corner, where they’d yet to clean up, he knew it was sky dragons. One of them was injured by flying shrapnel, something that would *not* happen to an earth dragon, since earth dragons couldn’t be harmed by metal, even metal moving at high speeds. Oh, they felt the impact when fast-moving metal hit them, but the metal itself would not penetrate their hides. The only metal that could kill them was metal with enough pure force behind it to carry enough kinetic energy to kill, like a train or a fast-moving semi. But an earth dragon caught in the building when the generators failed wouldn’t have been wounded by flying shrapnel. It would have bounced off of them, maybe left a burn if the metal was molten, might have left some bruises

under the hide from the kinetic energy, but there wouldn't have been blood, and there wouldn't have been any lost scales.

Besides, the scale fragment was *obviously* from a sky dragon.

It took them about two hours to piece it all together. The sky dragons had entered through one of the large doors they tended to leave open to get fresh air into the building, and had stayed up by the ceiling of the huge room until they acted. They used their combined power to affect weather to attack the *steam* in the turbines, affecting what was to them was just a really hot cloud, superheating the steam flowing through the turbines that turned the generator arms. That superheating flash-expanded the driveshafts and turbine blades, caused the shafts to seize in the drive train cavity, then *BOOM*. The injury of one of the sky dragons disrupted their magic, but it had been enough to destroy the other two generators, making it so hot inside that it melted the copper wiring of the generators, caused an electrical short that arc-welded sections of the interior drive cavity and thermal expansion-induced seizure, and that shattered the main drive shafts without making the generators explode. But it did sling molten copper all over the place.

"Alright, we're done, Fredda," Anthra told her. "Clean it up as best you can and do whatever repairs you can manage with what you have. But, until we can get clearance for a field mission to go get the proper parts, I'm afraid we're down," she sighed.

"Well, we might be able to get *one* generator working," she said speculatively. "If we cannibalize everything and take what steel we have and machine a new main turbine shaft. I'll paw-make the shaft with my own claws if I have to."

"Do what you can, Fredda."

"I will, esteemed council members," she said, dipping her snout a little.

Kell and Anthra left the power plant on their own and discussed it on their way back to Anthra's burrow, which was closer, and then discussed

what would happen tomorrow. “We can’t stop them setting whatever terms for the inquiry they want, but they’ll want to make it fast,” she told him.

“I know. Then we’ll fight about the power plant. And from there, who knows.”

“Welcome to being an earth dragon on the council, young friend. It’s a daily exercise in futility, and a constant challenge to maintain my composure in the face of blatant bigotry and discrimination.”

“I never knew your job was *this* hard,” he grunted. “I have way more respect for you and Geon both now, Anthra.”

“You’ve only had one day under your claws, but there’s hope for you, young friend,” she chuckled. “You certainly aren’t afraid to speak your mind.”

“It’s going to get worse tomorrow,” he said lightly. “I’m going to have the staff bring up some visual aids. I was chosen because I understand technology. The council is going to find out just *how much* technology I understand tomorrow. They can discount all the witnesses they want, but when *I’m* the one up there explaining things, they’ll find I’m much harder to ignore.”

Anthra laughed. “They know that now,” she told him, bumping him fondly.

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Kell was *not* looking forward to this.

The staff for the earth dragons were already there, so Kell told them what he needed and let them go get it, then jumped up onto the podium as the sky dragons flitted down and alighted on their own. Ivaiya glared viciously at him, but Beyori just looked around in slack-jawed disinterest.

Kell flapped his wings a couple of times to settle them and folded them over and against his flanks, staring right back at Ivaiya.

“You won’t be on that podium long, grounder,” she sneered.

“You’re right. I won’t,” he replied evenly as the water dragons rather clumsily made their landings, then climbed atop their podiums. “But *you* won’t have anything to do about it when I leave, windeater. Until such time that I feel my contribution to this council is done, you’re stuck with me. And I hope every time you look over here, it boils your blood, seeing an earth drake smarter than that winged imbecile there beside you that shares your blood,” he said with a vicious smile.

She hissed at him, showing him her fangs, but he was not impressed. “Don’t like me, Ivaiya? Good, because I don’t like you either,” he told her as the fire dragons landed. “The fact that you don’t like me tells me that I’m doing everything right so far.”

“You should watch your words, young one,” Hirrag grumbled as he stepped up onto his podium. “That the earth drakes put someone *your age* on that podium makes me doubt what little sense they have.”

“Time will tell if it was a wise choice or not,” Kell replied with a level stare as the chromatic descended, then landed just behind his podium. He climbed atop it easily and sat down.

“If we’re all here and ready?” the chromatic asked easily, looking to be in quite a good mood. That wouldn’t last long, Kell reasoned with a slight smile to himself. “Very well, then, let’s continue. Clerk, read back the last five minutes of yesterday’s discussion, please, so we know where we left off.”

Much as Anthra predicted, the final dispensation of the inquiry was formed without anything the earth dragons wanted in it. It was staffed completely with chromatics with the objective of doing nothing less than tallying the predicted loss of stored food due to the loss of power and calculating how much would be required to cover those losses...which

would be just about *exactly* what the chromatics knew the earth dragons had stored, since they'd been able to go through their inventories. The inquiry was then released to perform their task, and the chromatic reserved time in the afternoon on tomorrow's council meeting for the chromatics to report their findings. After a short break so the staff could finalize the records, they moved to the next order of business, the power plant. "I've assembled a list of witnesses to give testimony in the matter—" the chromatic began, but Kell cut him off.

"No witnesses will be required," Kell interrupted.

"And why do you say that?"

"Well, who *are* these witnesses, chromatic? Other chromatics? Is there a single earth dragon on your list?"

"Of course not," he replied airily. "We need *expert* testimony. The plant's earth dragons will be called after the expert testimony so they can be held in account for their failure."

Kell's spikes flared and spread out almost involuntarily. "So, the drakes that *built* and *operate* the power plant aren't experts?" he asked pointedly.

"Given they let the thing blow up, I'd say no," he replied easily, which made the fire and sky dragons laugh.

Kell jumped down off his podium and nodded to the dragons behind it. "Well, it's a good thing I'm here, then," he said simply, looking up at the chromatic. "You see, chromatic, *I'm* the field agent that went out and acquired the technology that built the power plant. It was one of my first assignments. So, I happen to know quite a bit about that power plant and how it operates. Last night, after studying the remains of it, I figured out what happened that made it fail."

"Oh really? And just what was it, then?" the chromatic asked lightly.

He looked right at Ivaiya. "Sabotage," he replied. "By *sky* dragons."

“How dare you make such an accusation!” Ivaiya shouted, snapping her wings out and staring down at him.

“Not only do I stand by it, we have proof of it,” he replied easily. Two earth drakes brought a large piece of slate up. “I’m going to show you *exactly* how it was done.”

“I think we can dispense with the theatrics,” the chromatic said dryly.

“No, I want to hear this,” Jussa said, looking down at Kell with open curiosity. “And how are you so sure it was sky dragons, Kell?”

“A combination of things. I managed to get the plant’s computers back up, so I know what the conditions were at the time of the attack. The physical evidence left behind backs up my theory, and of course, we found a fragment of a sky dragon’s scale and some blood in the generator room,” he said, smiling darkly up at the sky wyrm. “All that flying metal wouldn’t have made an earth dragon bleed, but sky dragons aren’t quite as immune to flying shards of half-melted metal as we are. Haven’t been any incidents of sky dragons going to the chromatics for healing in the last few days, eh Ivaiya?”

She glared unholy death at him.

“I didn’t think so,” he murmured as the two grinning earth drakes erected the slate. “Now, Jussa, this is how it was done.”

For nearly twenty minutes, Kell scratched out drawings on the slate the explained exactly how the generators and the plant operated, explaining in detail how the systems worked without getting too technical, letting the earth drakes holding the slate turn it to show the other dragons after he made new drawings. He made sure to point out that the three generators were on separate systems, that the only point of commonality in the entire process was the main boiler where the steam that came up from the underground pipes was collected, and how it had to go through multiple control points that would have detected anything anomalous before it reached the generators. Once he explained how it all worked, he then

explained how it was sabotaged. “Since the steam *inside* the turbine was the steam that was attacked, it bypassed all the safety systems and sensors, and since each generator is fed steam by an independent system, a malfunction in one steam system could not have possibly bled over into the other two. It’s also why only the steam pipes leading *out* of the generator turbines burst, and why there was no warning at all when the generators failed. The blood and scale fragment were found here, which makes sense if the sky dragon that shed them were up near the ceiling and to the side, being flung back after generator two exploded. I have the plant drakes inspecting the girders near the roof for any sign they were struck by a dragon. Most likely, they’ll find a few more scale fragments. The sky dragons used their collective ability to influence the weather to affect the *steam*, which really is nothing but a really hot cloud, superheating it inside the turbines, which made them either explode or seize up and shatter from the inside out. How many sky dragons would it take to enact that kind of magic, Ivaiya? Five? Our estimate is five, but we’d like some confirmation.”

Ivaiya stared coldly at him.

“I don’t expect an answer anyway,” he said dismissively, nodding to his assistants, then turning and jumping back up onto his podium as they carried away the slate. “I may not know as much about magic as you do, revered council members, but I know enough about the *technology* I personally brought to this island to figure out how it was sabotaged.”

Anthra gave him a highly approving look, almost grinning, and the two fire dragons looked at each other, then turned cool glances in Ivaiya’s direction. As Kell and Anthra suspected, the fire dragons didn’t know about the plot the chromatics and the sky dragons had going, just voting with them because it was what they usually did due to their bigotry against the earth dragons. That the sky dragons sabotaged the power plant was news to them, and Kell had made a convincing case.

“Give the chromatic’s aide the scale fragment, Dralt,” Anthra called. “We’ll offer it up as evidence. I’m sure that one of the magical dragons can use magic to discern just *which* sky dragon shed it, and once we know that,

we can summon him to the aerie and interrogate him. Which will be done *here* and *now*, while we all see that that scale fragment does not get mysteriously lost or somehow misplaced.”

“I find your entire tale to be quite an exercise of imagination, Kell,” the chromatic said, a bit archly. “And I discount it. We have experts that will testify in this matter, which you are *not*.”

“Well, *I* don’t discount it,” Sessara said darkly. “It makes sense to me, and I’ll admit I’m not the smartest dragon on this aerie. Or perhaps I’m too dumb to understand the truth of things, chromatic?” she asked archly, giving him a hard look. “I say divine that scale fragment to find out who owns it, then interrogate that sky dragon right here.”

“We have blood in the building as well, if the scale won’t do,” Kell spoke up lightly. “It’s still on the wall.”

“That won’t be necessary. This is a complete fallacy at worst, a poor attempt to blame the sky dragons for the failure of the earth dragons at best, and I will not waste this council’s time on such a ridiculous and blatantly biased theory,” the chromatic snapped. “Our experts will explain exactly what happened, and where proper blame should be laid.”

“I think it just got explained to me, pretty damned effectively,” Sessara shot back. “I find that the earth drake’s argument has merit. If the plant is laid out as Kell described, I have to agree that it’s impossible for *all three* generators to fail at exactly the same time unless it was done deliberately.”

“We’ll show you the plant, Sessara,” Anthra offered. “So you can see that Kell’s drawings are fairly accurate.”

“Sessara speaks truth,” Hirrag agreed. “I seriously doubt the earth dragons intentionally blew up their own power plant, so I want to know who owns that scale fragment.”

The chromatic glared at Kell, who just waggled the spiked end of his tail in the chromatic’s direction. “Amazing how a little thing like explaining how the plant works *before* your so-called experts could come up here and

muddy the issue makes things so simple, isn't it?" Kell asked with a darkly amused smile.

"I'd have to agree with the young earth drake," Jussa said mildly. "If that is the way the plant works, then sabotage is the only possible answer. So, I also demand the owner of that scale fragment be identified."

The chromatic glared all around the council aerie. "Well, I find it to be utterly ludicrous, and I reject the entire presentation as blatant lies," he hissed, turning and slapping the end of his tail at Dralt's paw, making him drop the scale fragment. The chromatic then turned a clawed finger to the fragment, and it burst into flame. "I have no doubt they found that piece of scale laying on the mountainside and devised this entire fantasy to divert proper blame!"

"My, you wouldn't be destroying that scale because it belongs to *Ivaiya*, would you?" Kell asked in a sudden moment of insight. "An elder sky wurm, I'm sure she'd have the magical training to do something like affect the steam in a turbine with just a few other sky dragons to help her."

"Shut your maw, you filthy grounder!" Ivaiya spat, sparks dancing along her teeth. "I should kill you for such an insult!"

"Just because we don't have magic, it doesn't mean we're idiots, windeater. If you want to keep playing these little games, you'd better understand that. An earth dragon hatchling could have seen through your pathetic little plot. Oh wait, I *am* a hatchling in your eyes, so I guess that means you just got outsmarted by a grounder hatchling."

And that did it. Ivaiya sucked in her breath, which made Kell tamp his feet a little and crouch in anticipation. He had to wait for her to actually attack him. If he didn't, then the chromatic could twist everything around to blame him. But if Ivaiya breathed at him first, then what came next was completely beyond the chromatic's ability to spin. But he knew she was committed to it, was too angry to stop herself, so he didn't think she was just trying to fake him out when she snapped her neck forward. An incandescent, almost painfully brilliant bolt of lightning blasted out of her

maw, sizzled across the aerie, but it hit nothing but empty air. Kell was in the air over the lightning, having jumped clear of it, and Ivaiya's eyes tracked him even as he turned in the air with a single flap of his wings. She spread her wings quickly to launch off the platform, but Kell's tail had already snapped over him, and all seventeen of his spikes were in the air. They pounded into the aerie floor in a rapid staccato like a machine gun's bullets, sprouted from Ivaiya's platform, and seven of them struck her starting at her shoulder and going half across her back at a diagonal angle towards her opposite back foot. She shrieked in pain and shuddered, then collapsed onto the aerie, a faint gurgle issuing from her open maw.

By the time Kell landed on the floor just behind his podium, Ivaiya was already dead.

"Murder!" the chromatic gasped as Kell jumped back on his podium.

"She loosed first, she got what she deserved," Jussa said, his glowing turquoise eyes a little wild given how close that lightning bolt came to *him*.

"I don't play, fluffy," Kell said coldly, glaring at him. "The next dragon that tries to do that is going to be put right on the floor beside *her*. You understand?"

The chromatic looked quite beside himself, because this was a direction he obviously hadn't considered. Kell's constant badgering and contentious bickering became crystal clear to him in that moment, Kell could tell. Kell had *baited* her into attacking him first, and she finally took it. And now Ivaiya was dead, and the chromatic had lost his primary conspirator among the sky dragons.

Just as Kell and Anthra had planned.

And as soon as Beyori spread the news among the sky dragons that Kell had killed Ivaiya, they would be enraged. They'd come after him, try to kill him despite the fact that he was on the council, and that too was something that Kell and Anthra had planned. In fact, they were counting on it.

“This is not over,” the chromatic hissed. “Beyori, make the necessary arrangements for Ivaiya, and inform the sky elders that a new sky wyrm must be seated,” he said, almost choking on the words. “We will adjourn for the day out of respect for her, but tomorrow, you *will* stand before us to answer for this crime,” he sneered at Kell.

“What crime? Self defense?” Essan asked archly. “We all saw it, chromatic! She tried to kill him *first*! Had she tried to hit *me* with a lightning bolt, I’d have killed her too!”

“This council is ended!” the chromatic almost screamed, then he turned and vaulted into the air, flying north as fast as he could possibly go, an iridescent streak.

Beyori just stared at Ivaiya’s corpse, her blood spreading across the polished basalt stones, the seven spikes protruding out of her back and the two gory wounds in her neck where she collapsed onto the spikes embedded in the floor. “I don’t know what to do,” he finally said.

“What you were told to do,” Essan told him, a bit coldly. “Arrange for sky dragons to come for Ivaiya so she can be put to rest in the traditions of your kind, and tell your elders that a new wyrm must be named to the council. Go!” he barked, and the slack-jawed sky drake turned and streaked into the air.

“You have fast reflexes, young one,” Anthra noted to him. “Had she turned that against me, I would not have been able to get out of the way. I didn’t realize what she’d done until the bolt already went by.”

“I’m young, Anthra,” he replied with a grim look at the corpse. He’d never killed another dragon before, but he did not in *any* way feel even a whit of remorse over it, even though they’d been *planning* for this, that he would have to kill someone on the council. She got what she deserved. “Youth does have some advantages.”

“Let us go to the village councils and inform them of this. I have no doubt that this is the end of it,” she said darkly, looking at the corpse. “It’s

been a long time since a sky dragon was killed by an earth dragon. The earth dragons need to know.”

“I’d keep them underground if I were you,” Hirrag said absently. “The sky dragons will be out for blood.”

Again, more or less just as they planned. “Dralt, Vedrik, Hunva, spread the news as quickly as you can. Tell all earth dragons to go to their village council chambers, and for no reason should they go outside until they receive clearance directly from us. Right now, I don’t want to see a single earth dragon outside, and they’re safest in the villages, well more out of reach of the sky dragons than a burrow would be.”

“At once, Anthra,” Dralt said, and the three earth drakes bounded off the edge of the aerie.

“I’ll go to Blackstone, you go straight to your farm and warn your family, then meet me for the council of council leaders,” she told him.

He nodded. He jumped off the edge and dove, his wings spread as he hugged the side of the volcano just in case Beyori came back, knowing he didn’t have all that much time. As soon as the sky dragons heard that he’d killed Ivaiya, they wouldn’t *care* that she attacked him first, and this was part of their plan. The sky dragons on the warpath put all the earth dragons underground, out of sight, where they could continue their preparations and have a perfectly viable excuse not to be tending their farms. They had prepared plans for him to kill either a sky dragon or a fire dragon, but it worked best with the sky dragons. They were actually far more vindictive than fire dragons were. He landed at the base of the volcano at a dead run, and he held it, running straight for his family burrow. Kitta and Kav were weeding the wheat field as he charged in, and Konn had just went down into the burrow. “Come in right now!” Kell screamed. “Sire! Mother!”

“What is it, youngling?” Keth asked, coming out of the main storage chamber not far from the burrow.

“Grab anything you don’t want to lose and head for the village council chamber, right now,” he said quickly. “We don’t have much time.”

“What happened?”

“Ivaiya tried to kill me,” he said bluntly. “Now she’s dead, and the sky dragons will be in a complete rage as soon as that idiot Beyori gets back to them and spreads the news. They know I did it, so you have to be deep underground with everything that matters *now*,” he said intensely. “They’ll come after *you* for it if they can’t get at *me*.”

Keth frowned, but he did turn towards the burrow. “Alright,” he said. “Come in, younglings!” he screamed. “Kanna is with Shii, go get her.”

He charged over to the cliff and dove in, and was in the air chamber mere seconds later. Kanna wasn’t in it, but he found her quickly deep in the den, marking the floor in their main storage area for that live holding tank Shii had been pondering. Kell clamped his jaws on the end of her tail and yanked her, then he dragged her back to the air chamber as fast as his wings would push the water. “What do you think you’re doing, youngling?” she said, a bit indignantly.

“Ivaiya tried to kill me in open council,” he declared to her and Shii. “I killed her, and we may have ten minutes before the sky dragons find out and come looking for me. So go back to the burrow and grab anything you can, then head for Dawnmist. They can’t get at you that deep underground.”

“Go. Go now!” Shii barked. Kanna nodded, then dove back into the water. “So, it’s come to this,” she told him.

“Just as we planned. But I didn’t say that,” he told her seriously.

Shii gave him a sly look. “Earth dragons. So clever,” she murmured, then she slipped her head back under the water.

It was mad chaos in the burrow as they gathered up anything they could throw into baskets, knowing that anything they left behind would be trashed by a furious pack of blood-crazed sky dragons. They collected up

what was most important, however, and Keth and Kell herded the younglings across the short distance between the burrow opening and the Dawnmist tunnel. Kanna brought up the rear with two yoke baskets, a third hooked on her tail, and a fourth being drug behind her, things she refused to lose, forcing Kell to rush over and add to the three yoke baskets he was already carrying. “Go, mother go! Look!”

He pointed, and coming just over the volcano were a couple dozen huge-winged silhouettes.

“Go!” he screamed in honest fear. That close? It was going to be race. He chased Kanna’s tail across the yard, breathed a sigh of relief when she lunged into the tunnel, and he saw the shadow cover him as he literally dove into the tunnel himself. A jagged bolt of lightning blasted into the ground just outside the tunnel mouth, just barely missing him, and he all but pushed Kanna down the tunnel, knowing what was coming next. Keth knew too, set just in front of them, and when they passed him, he turned and snapped his tail when the sunlight at the end of the tunnel was blocked. There was a squeal of pain as his spikes found purchase in the sky dragon that had been preparing to launch a lightning bolt down the tunnel, and he brought up the rear as the three adults herded the three younglings deeper down the sloping tunnel. “Faster! Faster!” Keth barked, turning often to look. Sky wyrms wouldn’t fit in the tunnel, but the smaller sky drakes would, and they might be mad enough to actually come in after them. When they reached the curve, however, they relaxed a little. It put them out of direct line of sight with the tunnel mouth, and that deep in with no way to turn around, the curve would discourage all but the most fanatical sky drakes.

“By Gaia’s love, are they insane?” Kanna said fearfully, looking back at the curve. “You’re on the *council*, Kell! If they killed you, it would be summary execution! They could be killed for just *trying*!”

“They don’t care, mother,” he growled. “They don’t care that Ivaiya tried to kill me *first*. They only care that a grounder killed one of their own, and now they want revenge. Anthra and the staff are already spreading the

word. In an hour, every earth dragon will be underground, and they'll *stay* there til this gets sorted out."

"And all this time, I thought the fire dragons were the most dangerous ones," Keth said darkly.

"Not even. If we kill a fire dragon, as far as the others are concerned, that fire dragon was weak and deserved to die," Kell grunted as he pushed Kanna's rump. "But sky dragons believe that they're so far above us both literally and figuratively that we *couldn't* kill one of them. Well, I just did, and now all their feelings of invulnerability just came crashing down on them."

"True," Keth nodded as the two of them herded Kanna down the tunnel. "Move, lifemate, move! They might come in after us!"

"I'll run ahead and warn anyone in the village, sire!" Konn offered.

"Do that, youngling," he agreed. "Kitta, help your mother. Kav, go with your brother."

With both Kell and Keth pushing her, Kanna had no choice but to hurry along, as both the males constantly looked back to see if a sky drake was insane enough to actually chase them. But there was no light coming up the tunnel behind them, and there were earth drakes carting food down the tunnel, heading for the side tunnel leading to the water. "Listen carefully," Kell said, stopping them. "Go back and get a gang of earth drakes, then go up and collapse the entrance of the tunnel at the surface of our farm," he told them. "Do it fast, and watch out for any lightning bolts coming down the tunnel."

"What happened, Kell?"

"I killed Ivaiya, and now the sky dragons are out for my blood. They can't find that side tunnel, so collapse the tunnel coming in from the farm, then build a hidden door over the side passage entry," he told them. "Be *thorough*."

The drake gaped at him, then nodded vigorously. “At once, esteemed council member! Come on, let’s go!” he barked to his companion.

Not three minutes later, a large gang of young earth drakes, some covered in dust from digging other tunnels, raced up the tunnel past them. Five minutes later, as they reached the main common chamber of the village, they heard the distant rumble as the earth drakes undermined and collapsed the tunnel. The rumbles were continuous as they collapsed more and more sections of it, backfilling the entire length of tunnel leading up to the side passage, exactly as he ordered them to do it. From there, they’d build a wall over the side passage, make it look like the rest of the wall, but it would actually be a door into the tunnel leading to the ramp. The other dragons *could not* find that ramp, then they’d realize the earth dragons had been using the water to move things. That might get them to start searching the water, and they might find the lava tube entrance.

Javan met them as they came into the main common chamber, racing up to them. “Is it true, Kell?”

He nodded. “Ivaiya tried to fry me on the aerie, and I killed her for it. Right now there’s a flight of sky dragons tearing our farm apart. I had drakes collapse the tunnel leading to the farm, and they’re building a door over the side passage right now.”

“Quick thinking,” he agreed with a nod. “Well, others are starting to trickle in, so let’s get things organized. Is Anthra coming here?”

He nodded. “She’s spreading the word in the northern villages. We’re giving the word, Javan. We’re evacuating to the cavern.”

Javan grunted and nodded. “I expected that. I’ll get everything organized. Do the water dragons know?”

“They will very soon,” he replied. “Shii knows what’s going on. As soon as we get word to her, she’ll warn the water dragons, but we won’t be doing the actual evacuation until the sky dragons calm down a little. Even at

night, it'll be hard to hide a stream of water dragons moving through the cove if they're watching the place like a hawk, looking for me."

"Alright. Excuse me while I get our plan in motion. Beldvar! Beldvar, activate the evacuation plan immediately! Beldvar!" he shouted, racing into the passage leading to the council chambers.

Kanna looked more than a little frightened, so Kell and Keth both paused to comfort her. "It's alright, mother," Kell said. "I'm sorry it happened quite like this. I didn't want you to get caught up in it this way."

"It's alright, young one," she said, giving him a brave smile. "It's just—I've never had anyone *attack* me before. It's actually a very frightening experience."

"One I hope you never endure again, mother," he said gently, nuzzling her. "Leave the fighting to the fighters, not the mothers."

"I certainly agree with that," Keth agreed. "My lifemate is the most precious thing on this island, and she must be protected at all costs."

"Such a dear," Kanna said, giving Keth a loving gaze.

Kell got everyone organized to prepare for the evacuation, but Anthra claimed him when she arrived, escorted by the council leaders of the other villages. They all retreated to the Dawnmist council chamber, which Shii had warded for them just two days before. "Alright, it's come," Anthra declared to them. "This is the chance we've been waiting for. We evacuate to the cavern while we have a very good reason for staying underground and out of sight. If we do this right, they won't have any idea what happened to us. What I need all of you to do is stall," she told the council leaders. "The chromatics *will* send someone down here to find out what's going on, try to get me and Kell to come out. That's not going to happen. I want all of you to gather up everything you need and start moving it here to Dawnmist, and I also want you to collapse every tunnel leading out of your villages except for one. And you put guards on that tunnel and do not let *any* chromatic past, for any reason. Once a village is completely evacuated

and is no longer needed, then you collapse every tunnel leading into it, collapse the tunnels between the chambers, collapse the dummy tunnels to confuse anyone who digs in, then collapse the chamber entrance holding the subway tunnel entry. No matter which way they turn, let them see nothing but empty chambers and collapsed tunnels, which will confound them to no end and make it almost impossible for them to figure out which way we went. Is that understood?”

They all nodded.

“We need the factories cleared out immediately. Are the tunnels to the factories finished?”

“All but the TV factory, and that should be done by tonight,” one of them answered.

“Fredda will need help transporting parts for the generators, send a group to help her. Some of them are very heavy.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” another drake called.

“Bring the marked livestock down into the tunnels and abandon the rest. Dralt.”

“Yes, Anthra?”

“I hate to say it, my friend, but you’re the sacrificial lamb. I want you to take a message to the chromatics. Use the secret tunnel up to the department, then leave it on Scion Aerie. It’ll be noticed there. Just *be careful*,” she hissed. “Tell them that the earth dragons refuse to come out until the sky dragons who attacked Kell’s family farm are identified and executed for attacking a council member.”

Dralt blanched at her. “Are you serious?”

She nodded. “That gives us all the justification we need to stay underground, because they’ll *never* do it,” she said. “All of you, hold to that line if a chromatic tries to enter your village. We don’t come out until the

sky dragons are punished for the attack on our council member and his family, and if they don't like that, they can choke on it."

Ferroth bounded into the room, a little out of breath. "I'm sorry, I was at the power plant," he said. "Are we going?"

"We are, old friend," she replied with a nod. "We evacuate to the cavern."

"Good," he grunted, sitting down by Javan. "We should have everything arranged. I was just telling the others what to tell the chromatics if they try to enter the villages, Ferroth."

"I heard that part. They'd better fortify their villages. The sky dragons are rampaging across the Dawnmist farms as I speak, searching for earth dragons. Keep everyone deep underground until the bloodlust fades."

"We're planning on that. We're also going to be getting everything down into the cavern while they're venting," Anthra told him. "How long to get all the supplies into the cavern?"

"Two or three days, not counting the factory gear," someone replied.

"And to get the rest of the earth dragons down?"

"That'll take a day," Kell supplied. "As long as the water dragons send enough to do it."

"Then we set our schedules to be completely down in the cavern in six days," she declared. "That gives us plenty of time to get everything down, it allows us to meet the humans for their supplies, and get those supplies stored in the cavern as well."

"The humans do need to be warned," Kell grunted. "I thought to use my satcom dish and a portable generator in an emergency, but with us all stuck underground, that's not gonna happen. We need to send Sella to the human ships, she can carry a message written in English and toss it up onto the deck. I'd go myself, but right now, I think if I set foot out of this cavern,

even ten *dran* underwater, the sky dragons would be all over me. They *know* I swim, so they may be searching the water for me.”

“You’re safest right here, Kell,” Ferroth grunted. “You don’t want to be within twenty meters of the surface right now.”

“What is a meter?” someone asked.

Ferroth grunted a chuckle. “Sorry, we tend to use human measurements in the department. Twenty meters is about a hundred and thirty *dran*. Patriarch Surral will have to handle the human food drop.”

“He can do it,” Kell assured them. “He’s seen Jenny, he knows what to do.”

“Chief, one thing I want you to do while we’re down in the cavern is teach *everyone* English,” Anthra said. “I’ve been pondering this, and if worse comes to worst and it looks like we may starve to death before the other dragons relent, then we will have to flee the island. I think the humans would help us. If that does come to pass, I want every earth dragon ready for it by being able to speak the human language.”

Ferroth nodded. “It won’t be that hard. English is easy to learn, and it’ll give everyone something to do down there.”

“Do you really think it’ll come to that, Anthra?” someone asked.

“No, but we wouldn’t be earth dragons if we didn’t prepare for *every* eventuality, Gloratt,” she replied, which caused a rumble of chuckles through the room. “Jukra.”

“Yes, Anthra?”

“Did you make plans to tunnel into the council’s food stores?”

“Yes, we finished them.”

“Then get ready to carry them out,” she replied. “But there will be a small change. I want you to tunnel up into the stores from Blackstone. It’s the closest village. I don’t want a direct tunnel opened between the outside

and the cavern. We'll either ferry the food through the tunnels, or if it doesn't look like we can accomplish that, then we'll destroy their stored food to deny it to them."

"It'll be easy to change," he nodded. "The drakes that do it will need some support."

"We'll arrange it with the water dragons," she replied. "That or we leave them enough food and supplies to complete the mission, then they retreat back to the cavern."

"Either or, I just don't want my diggers left up here with no help or support."

"We'd never do that, old friend. Every earth dragon is important," she said with warmth in her voice. "But they have to do it quickly. We can't force the water dragons to stand sentry at the ramp entry when they too must prepare for their deep dive. Remember, they're with us in this, and once we're all safely in the cavern, they have to be freed to retreat to the deep water. So it has to be done quickly."

"I'll put my best tunnelers on it," Jukra replied. "Give us eight days."

"I'll hold you to that. So, that's it. Everyone, return to your villages and begin the evacuation plan. Remember, as soon as you get back, collapse all but one tunnel leading out. It is time to dig in, friends, and stall until we are gone, hopefully with them having no idea of it."

Ferroth came over to them as the others filed out, nudging Kell on the shoulder. "So, you spiked Ivaiya, I heard," he said with a vicious smile. "Good work, whelp."

"The chromatic all but went to pieces when he killed her," Anthra noted clinically. "I get the feeling that her death crippled his other plans, and that just helps us more. He was relying on the sky dragons, and Ivaiya's ability to order them around. And now the sky dragons are out of control. Hmm, yes, sending Sella to those human ships is only wise. They might attack them if they know they're there. Kell, my young one, I want you to

retreat to the cavern as soon as you think it's safe to try. You're the one they're after, so we have to get you so deep underground that they think you've swam away if they try to find you with magic."

Kell grunted. "Not until it's pitch black out there."

Kell did what he could in the village, even if it meant carrying supplies around to get everything ready for when they started ferrying it out again. More and more earth dragons arrived in the Dawnmist chambers, either bringing supplies or preparing to evacuate to the cavern to help work on it. After about two hours, Shii appeared, bounding up to Kell with relief. "Thank Gaia, young one!" she said, nuzzling him. "We feared the worst for you!"

"We're all alright, friend," he told her. "Are the sky dragons still rampaging?"

"All over the island," she replied grimly. "Many of the farms are on fire, Kell. They're burning the farms to draw out the earth dragons. The fire dragons are trying to stop them, but they're just so fast in the air," she said, almost helplessly.

"Well, now we know how the average sky dragon thinks about us," Kell grunted.

"Ivaiya was highly respected among the sky dragons, young one. They are taking her death personally."

"Then they should blame her, she's the one that opened up on me *first*."

"If only such silly things like reason mattered at times like this," she said with a dark smile "You aren't safe up here, young friend. We have to get you into the cavern immediately. They know you're in here. I saw several sky dragons actually trying to dig."

He almost laughed, trying to imagine a sight like that. "Well, it's not exactly safe right now."

“I can get you there safely, young one,” she assured him. “They’ll never see you.”

“Then my life is in your paws, Matriarch. Let’s warn the chief and my parents.”

Shii led him back up the tunnel, and he saw that the drakes had done good work. They’d caved in the tunnel all the way up to the side passage, and were already at work building the secret door to hide the passage in case they dug the tunnel out. Shii led him all the way to the ramp, then she extinguished her little ball of soft magical light when she waded into the water. “Wait here until I come back for you,” she told him. “I’m going to prepare the way.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Stir up the sediment just enough to make it hard to see into the water,” she replied. “They’ll only see very vague silhouettes through the silt and sand. They won’t be able to tell you’re not a water drake.”

“Clever.”

“Age brings wisdom, young one,” she smiled, then she submerged. Kell sat on his haunches and prepared for a long swim, hyperventilating, so much so that he was nearly dizzy when Shii returned. “Quickly,” she said in a hushed voice. “There are sky drakes right over the cove.”

He nodded and slid down into the water, and once he was clear of the narrow opening, a single thrust of his wings rocketed him through the cove. He stayed just behind Shii’s vague form ahead of him, hard to see through the stirred-up sand and silt, then followed her as she followed the bottom of the cove, turning along the wall that held the lava tube, whose overhanging top made it absolutely impossible to see from any downward angle. He grabbed her tail and let her carry him up the tube, the distance quite familiar to him now, so much so that he knew when they reached the end before his head breached the surface. He took a deep breath of both needed air and relief, for it had been a nervous swim until he reached the tube.

“I’ll leave it to you from here, young one,” she told him. “They need me outside.”

“Thank you, dear friend,” he said sincerely, nuzzling her again.

“Any time, my young one,” she said warmly, patting him on the shoulder. “We must protect our mud dragon,” she said lightly.

He blew out his breath as Shii slipped into the water and vanished, feeling a little overwhelmed for a moment. It was the first quiet moment, the first chance to collect himself, and he just had to sit on his haunches and rest a moment, get things organized in his mind. They’d planned for this, planned for the sky dragons to try to retaliate to try to kill him, but they didn’t count on *this*, sky dragons rampaging all across the island, burning farms, looking for *any* earth dragon to kill. He was glad beyond measure that they’d prepared their plan to put all the earth dragons underground, because that had probably just saved dozens, maybe hundreds of lives. Earth dragon hides were resistant to fire and sky dragon breath weapons, but they were vulnerable to being snatched up, getting their wings broken, then dropped. The sky dragon ran the risk of getting spiked, but they were so fast in the air, the earth dragon wouldn’t have much of a chance. By the time the earth dragon registered he was under attack, he’d be a thousand meters in the air and the sky dragon would be trying to snap his wings. Then it was a long fall to the ground.

This was not the way he wanted this to go, but they were stuck with it. He had hoped that they’d try to kill only *him* then stew on it when he was out of their reach, but this, the rampaging of sky dragons in what could only be called a riot-level fury, demonstrated a stark truth to Kell. The other dragons may *never* accept the earth dragons as equals. The amount of fury out there exposed the dark cancer in the sky dragons, and the chromatics for that matter, showing him just what the earth dragons meant to the sky dragons. In a way, it reminded him of the American civil rights era, where he was the black man that said just one thing wrong, and now all the angry white men were hunting for him with a rope, and would torch the house of any black man they came across while they were looking. It was the same

kind of rage, the rage of a race that thought it was superior suddenly finding out that while they may think themselves superior, it didn't mean they were invulnerable.

But, this was definitely it. The simple truth was, the earth dragons *couldn't* come out now, not until the sky dragons calmed down. But when they did, if the earth dragons saw all the damage they caused, saw that the sanctity of their burrows had been violated by invading sky dragons, it would start what could only be called a war between the two. It was best for everyone involved that the earth dragons retreat to their cavern, to their sanctuary, and stay separate from the fury of the sky dragons and the machinations of the chromatics for a while. Everyone needed to calm down, and since this was what they'd planned for, it was the chance they needed. The earth dragons would simply leave behind the hate and the bigotry, they would retreat to their sanctuary, and there they would stay for a while. It was time for the other dragons to understand that while the earth dragons had no magic, they did have power, and that power came from the earth. Gaia provided to different dragons in different ways, and she had provided to the earth dragons the ability to provide for themselves and for others.

The sky dragons had made the choice for all the others. They had attacked the farms, spurned the good will of the earth dragons in providing their food for them, and now they had to live with those consequences. But if what Shii said was true, it might be the end of the island. This very well might create such intense discord and enmity that the dragons simply would no longer be able to live together.

And the sad thing was, that idea did not bother Kell in the slightest. He *liked* the idea of being free of the other dragons, especially the chromatics, maybe move to their own island, and simply *live*. Live without the hate, live without the bigotry, live without the others constantly trying to either run or ruin their lives. Live under their own rules, live where he'd never have to keep an eye up for falling debris or worse or ignore the snide comments of dragons who thought they were better than him simply because they could fly. He'd hope that the water dragons would come with them, or at least some of them would, but not all water dragons were Shii's pod. If dragon

society imploded and broke up, they'd probably return to the deep water. He could admit, he'd miss them. He and his family were very close to the water dragons.

Only time would tell.

He sighed and stood up, then turned and started the four mile walk up to the cavern. There was still a lot to do, and they would need his help.

5 June 2017, 21:01 HDT; 974 nautical miles south-southwest of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

They had to be the weirdest orders he'd ever received.

Commander Hank Parker, captain of the destroyer *U.S.S. Ingraham*, scanned the horizon with his binoculars from the bridge of his ship, as the last sliver of sun vanished over the horizon. That they'd be picketed out here in the middle of nowhere was strange enough, but if the rumors were true, they'd had some kind of sea creatures on the carrier yesterday, *talking* sea creatures, who had been quickly taken below decks and stayed there for some time. That much, Parker thought might be true. He'd heard the same story from too many people before the task force commander ordered total radio silence, even between the ships, and there were some rumors that a few people on the carrier had video of it. And not long afterward, the rest of the task force takes off for Pearl like a bat out of hell, leaving him and the missile cruiser *Hamilton* behind with orders to stay at that exact position and keep on the alert. Now they had to keep in constant contact with Pearl, and keep active channels open with a flight of F-18's flying CAP north of them, be ready to call them in at a moment's notice. Why, he wasn't told. He was just told to do it.

For what, they weren't told. They were only given two orders about the situation. First, to keep in a state of readiness, if not general quarters then just one step under it, and second to keep everyone off the deck at all times.

Nobody went outside during the day for any reason, unless the ship was on fire. They had to stay inside until it was fully dark, and only then could they go out and do the daily maintenance and training ships required for peak operation.

The strangest order, by far, was one he was given by Captain Barnett personally over crypto phone. He was to wait there until relieved, and that he might be contacted by someone *very strange*. He wasn't told who it might be, or how it would happen, only that it would be highly unorthodox. The captain told him that it was for security reasons that he wasn't told exactly who it might be, but if that contact was made, then he'd understand why complete secrecy was being kept. The one thing that was impressed upon him by the captain was not to be trigger happy. The contact might startle him and the crew, and he was not, under any circumstance, to open fire on *anything* unless he was absolutely positive that he was attacked first. And the captain meant that *being attacked first* meant something exploded, something was on fire, that kind of thing.

The weirdest fucking orders he ever got, but he was going to follow them.

"About time, sir?" his exo, Lieutenant Commander Gary Nessmeyer, or Nussy, asked. Some called him the Loch Ness Monster, which Nussy took in good fun. He *was* six feet six inches tall, so in a way, that moniker fit him. Nussy was the tallest man on the ship.

"They said complete darkness, it's still too bright out there," he replied. "Radar and sonar?" he asked for the fifth time in six minutes.

"Clear, sir," his radar tech called.

"I really would like to know what it is we're watching out for," Nussy grunted as he scanned the water with his binoculars."

"Sea monsters, if the rumors are true," Parker replied as he slowly turned to the north. "This whole mission has been fucked up since we left Pearl. We steam down here with the carrier stacked to the rafters with

Hawkeyes, and then they suddenly turn around and leave us here just in case *someone* contacts us. I'd just like to know what the fuck is going on."

"What were we supposed to be looking for down here?" Nussy asked.

"According to the briefings, we were looking for an uncharted island. Why they didn't just run a satellite over here and get some pictures is beyond me. Maybe it's just some kind of strange training exercise."

"Who knows anymore, ever since—holy *shit!*" Nussy gasped. Parker yanked his glasses down just in time to see this gigantic grayish-blue *thing* land on the deck, water pouring off its flanks. It had wings, long slender ones that were rounded in the back, and it flapped them a couple of times before folding them back. It was long and sleek, with a diamond-shaped head and a large crest atop it, and a fluked tail. The ship rocked just a little as it settled with the weight of that thing on the deck, just forward of the bridge tower. Glowing blue-green eyes, like turquoise, turned up to look at the bridge calmly, and he saw that the thing had some kind of metal tube in its mouth. It spat it out then sat calmly on the deck, its tail hanging over the side, and picked up the tube in a prehensile forepaw and looked back up at the bridge.

"Do not fire! Do not fire!" Parker screamed as several men shouted and recoiled. Holy shit, was *this* what landed on the carrier? Was this what he was picketed down here to contact? It was dripping wet, it had to have come in from the water...why didn't sonar pick it up? "Everyone stay at your positions, and *DO NOT FIRE!*" he screamed at the top of his lungs. The thing down there raised the tube, then reared up on its back legs, sort of half-sitting, half-squatting on its haunches and the base of its tail, gaining a vertical base as it crooked a clawed finger at the bridge with its other forepaw. Parker gaped at it a moment, swallowed, then handed his binoculars over to Nussy without looking, which basically just punched him in the gut. Nussy grunted and leaned over a little, wheezing as he took the glasses, and Parker moved to the door and opened it, then stepped out onto the balcony ringing the bridge.

“This is for you,” the creature said, speaking English. That almost made Parker fall down. It could speak, and speak *English*! “Information for your government, get this to Secretary of State Kent as quickly as possible. I tell you now, human, turn your ships back towards Pearl Harbor and steam at full speed. You are in danger here.”

He swallowed and put his hands on the rail, looking over at it—its head was almost level with the bridge, some sixteen feet off the deck. “Danger?” he almost croaked. “From who?”

“From the sky dragons,” it replied. “Come daylight, you must be gone from this place. They know of your ships here, and very well may attack you.”

“Sky what?”

“Sky dragons,” it replied, crooking its head a little to the side. “They didn’t tell you, did they?” it said, then it laughed. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Your military keeps secrets even from itself, often for no good reason. The scrolls inside will explain everything,” it said, stretching, rearing up on its feet and holding the tube out to him. He reached out with both hands and took it, dragged it over the rail, and it settled back into that half-sitting position. “But I am telling you now, human, leave quickly. Tell your superiors I have told you this, and they will order it of you, but you must understand that if you are here come morning, you will be attacked. We don’t wish to see you come to harm, so you must leave.”

“I—I understand,” he swallowed.

“I must go. I took a risk coming up here before it’s fully dark, but every minute counts right now. I didn’t have time to write this in the scrolls, so listen carefully, and repeat this to the Secretary of State.”

“Go ahead.”

“The mission must proceed, but approach the rendezvous point with great caution, and take all appropriate cautions to protect against a sky

dragon attack. A water dragon like myself will contact the task force if any changes to the plans are needed. Do you understand?"

Parker was a bit scattered, but he repeated back its words, almost verbatim, which caused it to nod. "What's going on? If you don't mind my asking."

It looked over at him calmly. "The sky dragon council member tried to kill the earth dragon council member, but was killed instead. Now the sky dragons are in a fury. They attacked the earth dragon farms in retaliation for the loss of the sky wyrm, and the earth dragons have retreated underground. There is a state of civil unrest among the dragons at this time, and will probably persist for some time."

"I have no idea what any of that means, but I'll pass it along," he said.

"They will understand what it means. What it means for you, human, is that you are in danger here. You must be as far from here as possible come the dawn. Make that clear to them if they tell you that you must stay."

"I will. Thank you, uh...."

"Sella," it replied, showing its fangs in what was either a smile or some kind of threat display...and those were some *long* fucking fangs. "I must go now. Be well, human." And with that, the gigantic animal turned and jumped off the side, making the ship rock just a tiny bit. They heard the splash as it hit the water, and he looked out in the gloom for just a second before cradling the four foot long tube in both hands and running back to the bridge. "Sonar!"

"Nothing, sir! I have no tracks!"

"What the fuck?" Nessy said. "I saw it jump in the water!"

"Well, now we know why we were put here," he grunted, hefting the tube. "I need to talk to Captain Jones right now, and get Pearl on satellite crypto. Helm, plot a course back to Pearl at full speed." Captain Jones over on the cruiser actually had command of the area...odds were, that *thing*

chose to jump up onto the destroyer because it wasn't as high, and they had an open flat area on the deck in front of the bridge where the missile cruiser did not. It would be Jones' decision as to what to do, but if he had his way, he'd have his bow pointed at Pearl and his engine at full speed. "And get them to get a chopper out here to pick this up," he added, hefting the tube.

6 June 2017, 04:58 PDT; VIP Billeting, Pearl Harbor Naval Station

Yawning, Jenny sat up in the surprisingly comfortable bed and scrubbed her face as the courtesy phone continued to ring. She glanced over at Greg, who was just starting to stir from the noise, having to chuckle a bit. Even after all these years, it took a hell of a lot to rouse that man out of bed. Sometimes he was worse than a little kid when it came time to get him out of bed in the morning, but she was just glad he was here. After getting a tour of the White House, the President offered to fly him and Davie out to Hawaii with her as they finalized the preparations, giving them a couple of days on the beach and taking tours of naval ships while Jenny worked with Secretary Kent, overseeing the packing of the relief supplies. As hard as she'd been working since Kell burst into her life, it was very sweet of President Walker to arrange it so her husband and child could be close to her, as well as give them a couple of days in Hawaii. They'd taken Davie to the beach yesterday afternoon and had quite a nice time.

But now, work was calling, since it was an hour before she was supposed to get up. She picked up the phone. "Major Edwards," she answered.

"Major, Secretary Kent needs you at the field office as soon as you get dressed," Kent's main aide, a very organized older woman named Ross, replied. "They made contact last night."

"They did? Why wasn't I told?"

“The Secretary felt that you could use a night off, Major,” she said warmly. “But we’ve just received some written missives from *them*, so he’d like your opinion in the matter. A chopper just dropped them off five minutes ago.”

“Alright, I’ll be right there,” she assured them, then hung up the phone. Greg groaned almost like a teenager when she turned on the light, grabbing the pillow and putting it over his face.

“It can’t be morning already!” he complained, rolling over on his stomach.

“It is for me,” she replied. “Our friends made contact with the ships last night.”

He rolled back over and moved the pillow, looking at her as she got out of bed. “Really?”

“That’s what Ross said. They delivered some papers that they just got here, so I’m going to go read them.”

“Well, don’t forget that we’re going back today.”

“*You’re* going back,” she said lightly over her shoulder as she opened the closet, where her uniforms were hanging. “I’m going to spend a week or two on a freighter, hoping that Kent doesn’t get seasick like he did in the speedboat.”

Greg laughed sleepily. “Now I know why they say never barf anywhere but over the leeward rail,” he noted. “Two weeks surrounded by hunky sailors, I’m getting jealous.”

“I’m taking my Glock,” she noted lightly, which made him laugh.

“Good.”

Years in the Hunters had trained her in the art of the fast dress, going from nightshirt to uniformed in less than five minutes. Greg sat up so she could give him a deep kiss, and she giggled as she swatted his hand away

from her breast. “Not now, you silly man,” she told him. “Don’t make me go stand in front of the Secretary of State with something else on my mind.”

He chuckled and kissed her again. “What can I say, it’s Hawaii,” he replied lightly. “Now don’t forget that we’re going back at ten.”

“I’ll make sure I’m there to see you off, honey,” she smiled down at him. “Tell Davie I’ll be there to see him on the plane when he wakes up.”

“Will do, sweetheart.”

She left him in bed and hurried to the car that was waiting outside for her, which was there at all times of the day or night. Sometimes she felt sorry for the drivers that had to basically just sit in the car all night and stay awake, just in case she was called out, but that was why the Navy seaman earned his paycheck. The seaman, in his whites, saluted when she came out and approached the sedan. “Where to, ma’am?”

“Ops center, Seaman,” she replied as he opened the door for her.

The ops center was the main headquarters building for the fleet on Pearl, several rooms of which they’d taken over to organize their operation. Secretary Kent had taken over a guest office off the briefing room to coordinate loading the supplies, which was now complete, and he was behind his desk when she arrived, spreading rolled-up pieces of paper the size of a wall map across his desk. “Jenny,” he nodded as she came in, Ross putting a book down on one end. “We just got these in. Sella delivered it to our picketed ships last night. They had some weather issues, so it took them a while to get them here.”

“Have you read them yet?”

“It took three men to unseal the metal tube she had them packed in,” he laughed. “But she did deliver a message outside whatever’s in these. She said the sky dragons are out of control, and that the ships had to bug out or be attacked.”

“*Please* tell me they told them to retreat.”

He nodded. “Steaming for a rendezvous with our fleet,” he replied. “Holy shit, this writing is huge,” he laughed as he looked down.

“Think about the size of the hand that wrote it, Arlan,” she said lightly as she came up to his desk. But her light mood evaporated as she read the scroll-like parchment.

Mister Secretary:

There has been a violent incident on the island that has completely destabilized basic societal structure. The sky wyrm attacked and tried to kill the earth drake member of the council right in the middle of open council, but was instead killed herself. In retaliation for the loss of their highly respected and powerful member of sky dragon society, the sky dragons first tried to kill the earth dragon seat, but after he escaped underground and was beyond their reach, they launched what can only be called a complete attack on every earth dragon farm on the island. They are in a bloodlust over the loss of Ivaiya. The farms are all burning, the ranch herds are all dead, and the earth dragons are hiding deep in their villages, afraid to come out.

The earth dragons have made the decision to retreat to their sanctuary. We water dragons will assist them, and once they are safe deep within the earth, we too will retreat from the island, diving deep and far out of reach of the others.

Because of this, the relief convoy must be especially careful. The water dragons will still meet you at the proper place and time, but keep your sailors alert as they sail south. The sky dragons will eventually calm down, but until they do, your ships may be attacked.

I’ll bring you more information when we meet, and will make sure to get there early enough to more thoroughly explain things to you and Jenny. Remind her that she needs to be visible from the water

around sunset on the proper day, but do NOT let her stand out in the open. I'll be looking for her. Please have a place ready for me that's covered so I'm not visible from the air, I'll be coming up onto the ship so we may talk.

Kell will not be with me. He was promoted to the council of dragons—it was a surprise to all of us, someone so young being elected to the council—and it was Kell that Ivaiya tried to kill. Right now, the entire sky dragon race is out for his head, and the only safe place for him is exactly where he is now. He sends his regrets to Jenny that they won't be able to see each other, but the sky dragons know he can swim, and they're scouring the seas looking for him because they can't find him with magic, so they believe he swam out from the island to escape them. It's just not safe for him anywhere the sky dragons can reach him.

Just in case I'm not able to be there at the rendezvous point, the second scroll contains some basic draconic phrases you can use to parlay with the water dragons. I included all the phrases I thought might come up in such a situation. My matriarch speaks passingly decent English, and my patriarch understands broken English but can't really speak it, so if it's not me, it will be one of them. But if they can't arrive either, it's best we cover the eventualities.

Time grows short, and I must be on my way to deliver the scrolls to your ships. Gaia embrace you, Mister Secretary.

Sella, daughter of Shii and Surreal

“Well, shit,” Kent growled as they finished reading.

“It's everything I was afraid might happen, happening way faster than I expected,” Jenny grunted. “I'm a little surprised, though. They would never have put Kell on the council unless the earth dragons had a plan.”

“Why not?”

“He’s far too young,” she replied. “If they wanted him on the council, it was probably to do something very specific. And if he killed Ivaiya, that may be what he was there to do, incite some kind of rash reaction to give the earth dragons a chance to retreat to their cavern without raising any suspicion. Half the council already had a heavy bias against him, and for him to be *on* the council, well, I’m not surprised one of them tried to kill him. Being forced underground really just helps the earth dragons. Now they can retreat to their deep cavern without having to put on appearances, but the loss of their crops means that they won’t have the food to outlast the others. They’ll need more than one relief shipment.”

“Well, that’ll be up to the President,” Kent noted, moving the paper and looking at the second scroll. “So, this has dragon language on it,” he noted. “I think both of us had better memorize everything on this paper, Major.”

“Sella even added pronunciations,” she mused. “She’s a smart one. I’m looking forward to talking to her again, I liked her a lot.”

“Ross, can you get some secretaries to transcribe both these papers into the computer, then print out the language lessons for us?” Kent asked.

“Surely can, Mister Secretary,” she nodded.

“When you’re done recording both papers, send them to CIA for analysis.”

“Yes, sir.”

He pondered a moment. “And have the Air Force bring a satellite over the area. If the farms are all burning, as Sella mentions, they may see the smoke on a satellite pass. That’ll give us an idea of where the island is.”

“I’ll take care of it, sir,” Ross nodded, hurrying from the room with the two large pieces of parchment.

Jenny leaned back in her chair, frowning as Ross carried the two large pieces of parchment out. Things seemed like they were completely out of

control on the island, but the fact that they put Kell on the council just kept nagging at her. Kell was highly intelligent, brave, and he wasn't intimidated by his elders, but more than all of that, Kell was *capable* of killing another dragon, both physically and mentally. If Ivaiya attacked him, he would kill her in a heartbeat, without hesitation or remorse. It was who he was, and while it wasn't necessarily a good personality trait, it was who he was. It was really the only reason she could see them electing Kell over any number of older and wiser drakes, like Keth. Jenny would expect to see Keth elected to the council *long* before Kell. But instead of his wiser elders, Kell was elected instead...which told her that he'd been there for the sole reason of setting things up so the earth dragons could retreat to their sanctuary without rousing suspicion. It was really the *only* reason she could see him being there.

But still, for things to go to hell so fast, and all over one fight...it showed her that she'd been right about the dragons. Their entire society had been built on a foundation of sand, and the first good shake had collapsed everything. Kell had killed Ivaiya, and now the sky dragons were on a rampage, destroying everything that the earth dragons called their own since the earth dragons themselves were out of reach. She had no doubt that the factories had been burned, the department building burned, everything they'd built over the last fifty years had been leveled, and all done with the chromatics sitting up on the top of the volcano and smirking over how the earth dragons had brought the ruination upon themselves rather than them having to do any more to bring it about. It had probably made the council chromatic's day when he heard that Kell had been elected to the council, hoping for something just like that to happen...but the joke would be on him when, once the smoke cleared, they found out that the earth dragons were *gone*. If the earth dragons did it right, and she was positive they would do it right, the other dragons would have no idea where they went. The sky dragons would destroy everything the earth dragons had built, but when they had nothing left to destroy and the chromatics actually started trying to put things back together, they'd find nothing but empty burrows and abandoned villages.

Would that upset the chromatics? Most likely, she pondered. That they'd managed to vanish under the chromatics' noses without any warning would make them a little disconcerted, but the loss of their food-producing slaves would concern them...and once the water dragons made their position clear and abandoned the other dragons to their own hunger, they'd *really* get concerned.

But, if she had her way, some of the earth dragons would never return to the surface of that island. Maybe even all of them. There was a fairly good-sized island about midway through the Hawaiian chain that was owned by the government, the island districted as a national park and wildlife sanctuary, with plenty of forest and some flat area that could be converted to farmland. She was rallying hard to have President Walker offer that island to any earth dragons that wanted to leave, because it was perfect. The island was large enough to hold all the earth dragons and it was very remote; the closest town or village was 47 miles away, a tiny fishing village on one of the other small islands on the tail end of the chain. It put the earth dragons deep in American territory, under U.S. military protection, and what was most important, in a position where if the earth dragons made any deals with any nation, it would be with America.

Simply put, Walker and the CIA didn't want anyone with the technical skills like those demonstrated by the drakes in the department under anyone else's banner. If the Chinese ever managed to get to the dragons, make deals with the department, the damage to the rest of the world—and especially to America—could be incalculable. She'd told the President right out that if there was anyone on that island they needed to make their friends, it was the earth dragons. And helping them in their hour of need, offering them amnesty against those that would oppress them, it was as much to fold the earth dragons into America as much as it was to help them. It was only the right thing to do to help them, but if helping them also advanced the American cause, then there was nothing wrong with that.

Nothing wrong at all.

Chapter 7

6 June 2017, 23:32 DMT; Sanctuary City

Things were crazy.

Kell sat on his haunches by the lava tube entrance, zip-tying a wire bundle in a junction access box that Kammi and Jirran had installed earlier, which held both network cabling and power lines. Anthra had set a deadline of three days to get everything into the cavern and all the other earth dragons evacuated, all of which could really only be done at night. Ever since it got dark, the water dragons had been ferrying a continuous chain of supplies into the tube for them, as well as carting out waste rock that resulted from the excavation deeper down. Just about all the water dragons were milling about the cove and the waters beyond it, some using magic to hide what they were doing from chromatic scrying, drakes carrying the supplies up, wyrms carting the waste rock out to dump. Only drakes were in the tunnel, however, since the tunnel wasn't large enough to let two wyrms or a drake and a wyrm easily pass each other. The drakes swam in with the supplies, handed them off for bins of waste rock, then they handed those off to the wyrms and other drakes to dump out in the ocean.

But, not all the waste rock was being dumped. The number crunchers had already set up a rationing system, and everyone, from Anthra down, was going to be supplementing their daily diet of calories with rock. Earth dragons could eat earth, rock, stone, even metal, but it did little for them once they reached adulthood; like every earth drake alive, Kell's bones were built from the basalt rock of the island, eaten when he was a hatchling. But, what it *could* do was fill the belly and stretch their supplies even further, allow them to subsist on something just over starvation rations without feeling like they were being starved.

He felt, in a way, personally responsible for most of this. It had been Anthra's plan, but *he* was the one that had killed Ivaiya, and now most of the earth dragons were looking almost terrified. Though no earth dragons had been killed, there had been several close calls and a couple of injuries. The earth dragons had never seen the sky dragons act like that before, and it was a total shock to many of them. For that matter, the average earth dragon had never in his entire life even *spoken* to a sky dragon. The sky dragons stayed high up on the volcanoes, and the only ones that ventured down to the lowlands were ones on official business from the council or the occasional rare sky dragon "slumming it," or looking for trouble. The vast majority of the time, it was the fire dragons lurking around the lowlands looking for an earth dragon to bully, but once in a great while a sky dragon decided to get in on the fun...which lasted all of up until the spikes started flying. Then, it wasn't quite so fun anymore. Usually, the only interaction that came between the earth and sky dragons was when earth dragons dodged the excrement the sky dragons expelled while flying. And now, the sky dragons were acting like fire dragons, on a complete rampage all over the island, rioting over the death of Ivaiya and the fact that she'd been killed by an earth drake.

He hadn't seen it, but the water drake that came down the tunnel told him about it. Every farm on the island was on fire. Every single one. The ranches were littered with dead livestock, which would probably be eaten before they rotted. The factories were in ruins, the power plant destroyed, and that was where most of the injuries occurred. The earth drakes had carted off every piece of equipment they could manage before the sky dragons turned from the farms to the factories, and the last ones to leave were hit by lightning. Earth dragon hides were fairly resistant to sky dragon breath weapons, but it would still cause injury. Everything the earth dragons had built over the last fifty years was gone.

Just as the chromatics planned.

Not satisfied with obliterating everything the earth dragons had ever built, the sky dragons had invaded earth dragon burrows and destroyed everything they could find within, and now, according to the water drakes,

the sky dragons were circling high over the island, still screaming in outrage, hunting for any earth dragon that dared peek its head out of a hole. The fire dragons had tried to stop them at first, the water drake told him, but after a few hours, they simply landed and allowed the sky dragons to rampage...right about the time the sky dragons turned from the farms to the factories. Of course, when it came time to do the chromatics' dirty work for them, the chromatics told the fire dragons to stop, and that let the chromatics get what they wanted without taking any direct blame. They probably hadn't planned it the way the earth dragons had, but when the opportunity presented itself, they took it.

But now, the chromatics were starting to poke around the ruins of the farms, the water drake had told him. Kell had the feeling that they were starting to piece things together, that the earth dragons had taken all their food deep underground *before* the riot, and that meant that the earth dragons could, in their view, hold out down in their villages for quite a while. That gave them the opportunity to pass all their planned laws putting the earth dragons into a status of serfdom or slavery without resistance from the absent earth dragon council members, having to only deal with the objections of the water dragons, but it also probably concerned at least a few chromatics. Having a new slave race didn't do much good if they couldn't coax the slaves out of their deep villages to do any farming for them.

Then again, Dralt should have left that ultimatum on Scion Aerie by now, so they knew that the earth dragons had no intention of coming out until the sky dragons were both put back in their place and the ones that attacked Kell's farm were arrested. That was something they'd never do, so it would allow them to stall, to stand off until all the earth dragons were safely underground. They'd laugh at the ultimatum, and would laugh at the retreat of the earth dragons even deeper underground...until the earth dragon team tunneling up into their stores did their job.

That group had orders to tunnel up into the series of storage silos and chambers as fast as possible, *before* the chromatics started taking stock of them, and either steal the food or destroy it. Ferroth had built vapor bombs

for that task, using up some of their diesel fuel and fertilizer stockpiles, but the results would be worth it. If they couldn't steal it, they'd burn it to deny the others the food they had labored so hard to grow.

There were no two ways about it; the dragons were now at war with each other. But it would be a cold war, a Mexican standoff, as the humans would say. The earth dragons would be at a disadvantage since they'd be trapped in their cavern, but in reality, they'd be in a far better position. The chromatics could allow the other dragons to leave the island to hunt, but that would put them at direct odds with the humans the first time a sky dragon attacked a ranch's livestock, or a fire dragon ripped down the wall of a grocery store to get at the food inside. The earth dragons had a trump card to play, and that was their clandestine contacts with the human world. They could *ask* for food rather than steal it, and so long as the water dragons helped them get it into the cavern, they were in a position of complete safety.

And contact was something that he was pondering. Once they got the power back on, all he needed was a satcom dish and he was in business. There were several at the department, all destroyed, but if he could get one of the little portable dishes out somewhere and conceal it, use the cables they'd already laid leading out as the cabling for the dish, he could set up something that would get them back in contact with the human world.

But, a satcom dish was the one thing they didn't have right now. He hadn't thought to get one of his out of the burrow when they hastily packed what they could, there were far more important things to get, and nobody else had thought to bring one to the cavern either...after all, that deep underground, a satcom dish wasn't exactly high on the priorities list, not compared to things like food. That was easy to fix, at least once his message got outside and Sella got word that he wanted to see her. She would know what he wanted, what it looked like, and she could go get one from the humans. The kind of dish he wanted was standard issue for Navy SEAL teams and other mobile infantry units.

But, the power had to come back on first. Right now, they wouldn't spare the electricity to set up a satcom, not when every minute of emergency generator power had to be devoted to the construction effort. They were already building a new geothermal plant deeper down, Fredda was already building a new, smaller generator using parts carted off from the power plant and raw materials they'd already brought down, and they had the piping and raw materials needed to build a geothermal generator. They were even drilling down towards that lava feeder, getting close enough for its heat to boil the water for use in the generator. Once they got one generator online, they could start worrying about other things, but that would be at least a month in the future. Building an industrial generator from scratch using piecemeal scrap wasn't for the weak, and Fredda was about the only one with the expertise to pull it off.

There were a few little things to worry over, too. For one, for some strange reason, Kell's spikes had not grown back. Usually after launching all 17 spikes, a drake would have at least grown back four or five by now, but nothing. The sockets on the top of his tail were empty, not even a bud. The spikes were actually made from an earth dragon's blood, crystallized from the minerals floating in it, which was why they were the color they were. But so far, nothing. He wasn't all that worried about it with everything else going on right now, but it was something that wasn't right, something not right about his own body, and it kept nagging at him any time he had a moment to think about anything other than his work.

For another, everyone kept calling him *esteemed council member*. He'd made it abundantly clear to *everyone* that his record-short tenure of two whole days on the council was over, and they could kindly stop calling him that or he'd have a reason to use his spikes once they grew back. Killing Ivaiya was his official resignation from the council, and even if that wasn't enough, he'd be ejected from the council by the others the first time it met. Kammi, that little punk, was doing it on purpose just to rile him, and since she was calling him that, so was everyone else. He was of a mind to drag her off into some unused side tunnel and thrash her. He didn't need his spikes to put that little jerk in her place.

He finished tying up the cables and replaced the cover plate of the junction box, using his claws in a very delicate operation that turned the spring-loaded clasps that held the plate in place. They had most of the cabling in place, and Jirran was up with a few of the department drakes installing the servers. They had no power for them yet, but when they did get the power going again, they'd have everything in place and ready to get their computer network running. He had to admit, Kammi and Jirran had really busted their tails getting everything ready, laying all the cable for the main cavern and even running cable to the completed chambers deeper down, digging out cavities for switches and wireless transceiver nodes, expanding the planned network down into the new chambers often even as they were being excavated.

Sella appeared in the tunnel, staying out of the way of the hastily moving drakes, using a small magical ball of light over her head to be able to see, but not so bright that it interfered with the heat vision of the earth drakes around her. Her bioluminescent glow wouldn't work out of the water, like her sonar, and that little bit of magic was something so basic that the vast majority of dragons could cast it. She smiled at him and bounded up when she saw him, his body coming out of the gloom from her perspective, nuzzling him fondly. "Dear friend, you wanted to see me?"

"I always want to see you, friend, but I had a reason this time," he chuckled.

She laughed. "I should hope that you'd want to see me," she teased.

"I want you to make a special run out to the human ships for me," he told her. "There's a very specific piece of equipment I want you to bring back. It's an absolute guarantee that they'll have it."

"Surely, what do you need?"

"One of those tiny portable satcom dishes," he told her. "None of us thought to bring a dish down, things were too crazy, and we're going to need at least one to re-establish contact with the humans once we get the power going."

“I can get one for you,” she nodded. “Where are you going to set it up?”

“That...we’ll need your help with,” he said. “You know of a place out of the water that the sky dragons won’t see it?”

“Right now that would be easy,” she sighed. “Things are a *mess* up there, friend. The fires are still burning, and have spread to the Darkwood.”

“No!”

“Some water dragons tried to put the fires out when the sky dragons set them, but the chromatics forbade it,” she told him. “They said that *all* the earth dragons had to suffer the consequences of your actions. Needless to say, that put the water dragons at immediate odds with them. Tomorrow’s council meeting is promising to be positively explosive. Jussa and Essan are infuriated.”

“Losing an entire rotation’s crops, they have reason to be even if they didn’t know what’s going on,” Kell grunted, sitting on his haunches. “But that plays into the chromatics’ plans. I just hope that Jussa and Essan don’t do anything so rash it interferes with this operation. They have to keep their outrage at a set level. If they give the chromatics reason to start coming after the water dragons, the fact that most of them are congregating in the cove might make them start looking hard at what’s going on, and that’ll ruin everything.”

“I’m sure they’ll be careful,” she assured him. “There’s a contingent of water drakes readying to put out the fires in the Darkwood despite the chromatics, I was going to join them. But, given what you need of me is more important, I’ll be heading for the open water.”

“Be careful,” he warned.

“Of course I’ll be careful, dear friend,” she replied, nuzzling him again. “I’ll bring back what you need by morning. Then I will sleep all day,” she said with a yawn.

“Poor baby, having to do so much work,” he teased.

“This is all *your* fault, friend,” she teased lightly, poking his shoulder with a claw. “Now, let me get started. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Be careful,” he repeated.

“Always,” she replied, turning and heading back down the tunnel.

He returned to the network control center on the second floor of the cavern’s constructed flooring, where the department was going to set back up. Jirran was sitting in front of the server rack, sliding blade servers into it one by one, as Kammi handed them to him. “Isn’t it silly that we’re installing computers we can’t turn on?” he noted as he came in.

Kammi laughed. “I was thinking the same thing myself, esteemed council member.”

“Call me that one more time, Kammi, and I won’t be the only one without any spikes.”

She laughed and flashed him a fanged grin. “You should talk to a healer about that, Kell. I’ve never heard of it taking so long for them to grow back before.”

He glanced at his tail absently. “When I have time,” he said. “Did you guys start the cabling out to the generator room?”

“Not yet, we figured that’d be a three drake job,” Jirran replied as he locked another server blade in place. “Did you talk to Sella?”

“She’s on her way out now to get us a dish,” he answered.

“Now we just need power,” Kammi grunted.

“I have something of an idea about that,” Jirran said as he closed the server case. “Until they get the geothermal up, I was thinking of a gravity fed waterwheel style generator.”

“Really? And are you going to stand there and pour the buckets over it?” Kell asked lightly.

“Don’t have to,” he replied. “They opened into a deeper lava tube yesterday morning that has water running through it. It solves our water problem, for one, and it also opens to a flooded lava tube that opens to the sea, which gives us two ways in and out. They were debating moving things through *that* tube, but it’s about eight kilometers north of the cove and nearly six hundred meters under the surface. A couple of drakes almost drowned when they opened into it,” Jirran grunted. “It had been sealed off, and when they broke in, it gave the air in there an escape path. The water roared up to equalize with sea level, flooding the chamber they were excavating. Lucky for us the chamber they dug is above sea level, so the water drained back out.”

“Where’s the water coming from?”

“The surface, I imagine, and it’s a torrent. It must be an underground stream that eroded into that lava tube and diverted to drain into it, and over time, the air suspended in the water built up in the tube, pushing the seawater down. I guess when the pressure got too much, it backed up into the underground stream like air bubbles in a water cooler. The water solves the water shortage issue, but since it’s flowing downhill, we might be able to come up with a waterwheel-style generator to hold us over.”

“Hmm...that has possibilities. Let’s go take a look before we tackle the cabling.”

“Sure, we’re done here anyway,” he nodded.

The water did have some promising applications. They’d broken into the ceiling of the tube while excavating out a storage chamber, which was a good thing or all that water would be flooding the tunnel, and the tube through which it flowed was very steep, nearly a 50 degree angle. It flowed in a steady, brisk current, almost like a water slide, and it had more than enough speed to turn a water wheel. The tunnel leading to it smelled of saltwater, the water geysering out when the air suddenly had a new way to

go, and he could see the ocean only about 8 meters below where they'd broken into the tube. "Damn," Kell grunted. "We need to talk to the builders about this, sound out this tube and break into it higher up, give us more room. We could hook up a couple of water wheels, build a transmission gearbox to get the generator to turn at sixty hertz, and of course, there's all that water that they can collect from down here, so it doesn't interfere with the water wheels," he mused. "We need to get Geon to look at this, he's the one in charge."

"But I thought you were, esteemed council member," Kammi taunted.

She made a wonderful squeal when he turned and thwapped her with his tail hard enough to knock her into the hole, and she was small enough to fall in without getting hung up. He heard her hit the water below, cursing and shouting, which made Jirran almost roll over on his back laughing. "Kell! You're a dead drake when I get out of here!" she threatened from the bottom. He looked in and saw that the current was too fast for her to easily climb out, so she pushed out of the water and drove her claws into the side, then into the ceiling, glaring at him as she started climbing up the steep tunnel upside-down, clawing her way towards the opening.

"You should run before she gets out of there," Jirran told him with a grin.

"Oh, I have to give her a sporting chance to catch me," he replied cheekily, but he did start backing up as she got her head up to the entrance. He turned tail and bolted when she wriggled out of the hole, and tore off after him, cursing loudly the entire time.

The game ended abruptly when he literally plowed into Geon, knocking both of them to the carved-out tunnel floor. Kell laughed when Geon gave him a cool look, even as Kammi left deep scratches in the floor from her claws as she came around the corner. "Just the drake we were looking for," Kell told him lightly. "We need you to see something—*whuff!*" he wheezed when Kammi plowed into him, knocking him off Geon and making them tumble across the floor.

“That wasn’t funny!” she snapped, but gasped when Kell bit her on the wingjoint.

The two of them wrestled in the passageway for a moment as Geon looked on, both confused and amused, at least until Kammi managed to get Kell on his back, holding him down, panting as she glared down at him with her tail cocked over her head like a scorpion’s; that seemed to be a little trick she’d picked up, for most drakes didn’t have that kind of flexibility in their tails.

“Alright, younglings, enough,” Geon said with light amusement. “Now what’s so important that the two of you are fighting over it?”

Kell laughed and pushed his forepaws up against Kammi’s chest. “Jirran had a pretty good idea, we need you to go over it.”

“And it explains why you two are scrapping like angry clutchmates?”

“Some things you just do for fun, Geon,” Kammi grinned at him, which made him laugh anew.

Geon had seen the lava tube, but he looked intrigued as Jirran explained his idea. “We could dig out a couple of chambers higher up without interfering with the tube, then pierce it and set up some old-fashioned waterwheels,” he explained. “That’d turn a generator, and we could get some power down here while Fredda builds the thermal plant. It wouldn’t be much, barely a third of the wattage we’d need, but it’ll do for emergency power.”

“I think that’s a very good idea, Jirran,” he nodded, looking up the tube. “Where does this tube lead?”

“Nobody climbed up it, I don’t think.”

“Someone should,” he mused, then he turned and looked pointedly at Kell.

He laughed. “Me? Why me?”

“Because you’re one of the smallest drakes, and if anything, we all know *you* can swim,” he said evenly. “So if you get swept down into the water, we know you won’t drown getting out.”

“Alright alright,” Kell grunted. “I think we’re the only ones that would fit in the hole anyway.”

“I know I wouldn’t,” Geon chuckled as Kell advanced to the hole, then wriggled through and drove his claws into the top of the tube, much as Kammi had done, to prevent anything from interfering with the smooth flow of the water down the tube. Him gouging out holes in the bottom might cause the water to start to froth. The tube was about eight meters wide across the center, which was more than large enough for him, but not wide enough for him to spread his wings...which meant that down in the water, he wouldn’t be able to swim down the tube very fast at all. So there would be no escaping through this tunnel for him, he’d drown long before he even found the end, he suspected.

Kell climbed up nearly four hundred meters, by his reckoning, following a gentle curve in the tube, and as near as he could tell, he was either even with or slightly above the dome chamber, but a good hundred meters to the side. The tube *should* have led him back to the dome chamber, since it was the caldera holding the magma from which the tube had been made, but it instead seemed to be angling to go *above* the dome chamber... perhaps there was a secondary magma chamber over the dome chamber at one time, one that made the lava tube. Most tubes like the active one under the dome chamber were made at the border of two different ages of rock, the lava melting along the border between them, and a pause to study the rock showed him that this one was no different. Back when the volcano was still building, rising out of the water, this tube was a lava flow down the side of the steep-sloped volcano that got covered over by subsequent eruptions, but the lava kept flowing long enough to establish the tube and harden the walls to prevent its collapse over the millenia.

He eventually found the end of the tube, and was amazed by what he saw. The tube opened into a small ovoid chamber that had a stream pouring

into it from a waterfall in the ceiling, a small pond in the floor, and the edge of the pond drained into the lava tube. As near as he could tell, the water drained down from the small lake that was in the extinct crater at the top of the volcano, then it poured out of that hole in the ceiling, pooled in the natural depression in the middle of the chamber, then drained into the tube to prevent the entire chamber from filling with water. The water pouring from the ceiling almost exactly mirrored the rate the water poured into the tube, which was only logical to him given this was a closed system. The air was still and a bit stale, smelling of sulfur, telling him that the chamber was airtight, that the water pouring from above had no air voids.

But it wasn't the pond or the waterfall that amazed him. On the far side of the chamber, there was writing scratched into the wall, some of it very old, almost eroded away. *Banna found this cave*, the top line read, *it's mine so go away*. Under that was more writing scratched into the wall, and more, each line a water dragon who had found the cave and added his or her name to the list, as well as the year it was found. Banna never listed the year he found the cave, but the earliest given year, barely legible due to erosion and the fact that it wasn't scratched that deep into the wall, was 936 years ago. The last name on the list almost made him laugh; *Surrall found this cave*, 17,382. That was 84 years ago, by the draconic calendar. Of course Surrall would find this cave, Surrall explored everything everywhere, making the long, and for him, dangerous climb up against the steep current.

Getting up had been far easier than getting down. The water drakes had probably just slid down, and had all kinds of fun doing it, but Kell wasn't willing to try that. He ended up backing down the tube much more slowly than he climbed up it, taking nearly half an hour to get back to the breach the tunnelers had made into the tube. The others were still there, and they looked a bit relieved when he climbed down into view. "What's up there?" Geon shouted up the tube.

"A small cave. Water dragons have been up there, they scratched their names in the walls," he called back. "Surrall is one of them."

“Actually, that works for us,” Geon said as Kell got back to the hole. “If they know about it, then now they know there’s more than one way in here. We’ll have to ask Surrall where the entrance is. But right now, let’s have Jukra sound out the tube and find a good place to breach it so we can siphon water and set up those water wheels.”

“He could probably siphon it from right here,” Kell mused, looking out at them from inside the tube. “They already made the hole.”

“It’s a bit too close to the water,” Geon said, looking down past Kell’s head. “There’s no telling how far the water comes up during high tide. We may get seawater in our drinking water.”

“It shouldn’t be hard for them to set that up, just tunnel in up under the tube, breach it, let the water drain down into a holding tank and pipe it out from there,” Kell mused as he wriggled out of the hole. “Any overflow just goes right back down the tube.”

“That’d work, but we’ll let Jukra do the planning, it’s not our area of expertise,” Geon noted.

After coming back out, they ran the cabling down to the generator room, and then he detoured over to visit his family. They’d already been assigned a living space in the newly excavated areas, an apartment of sorts of four chambers with a greeting chamber, and it had at least a few of the amenities. There was no refrigerator or running water, at least yet, but they’d managed to get some earth somehow to form some beds, and Kanna had moved the possessions they’d saved from the burrow into the apartment. She was still fussing with it when Kell came into the apartment, moving an empty basket at least five times before deciding to leave it near the wall. That, he could tell, was a very visible sign of how upset she was. Kanna was not the kind to be indecisive about anything. She didn’t respond immediately when he nuzzled her, then she closed her eyes and sighed. “Care to talk about it, mother?” he asked, sitting down.

“If only there was anything to talk about, young one,” she sighed again, sitting beside him. “Shii came in to see us. She told us about the

farm. All that work lifemate put into the tracts, planting our first crop of wheat...gone. Everything is gone.”

“I know, but it’s not just ours. They destroyed *all* the farms, mother,” he told her grimly. “But it’s going to be alright. We can replant once we starve them into submission. We can make the farm better than ever before, it’ll just take a little work, that’s all.”

“I know we can, but it won’t ever feel the same,” she said soberly, leaning her shoulder against him. Since she was bigger than he was, it almost knocked him over. “It’s almost like...we’ve lost something, my young one. Maybe our innocence, I don’t know what. But when we come back out, even after we win, it won’t feel the same. It will be a hollow victory...if you can even call it a victory. There will be no winner in this.”

“I know how you feel,” he agreed. “It may take centuries for the earth dragons to speak to the sky dragons again, or the chromatics. I’ve been wondering if, after this, we should just leave the island. Go somewhere else, start over.”

“No, this is *our* island, young one. If anyone leaves, it will be the *others*. After all, they can fly.”

“I guess that’s the main problem,” he chuckled ruefully. “Maybe if we could fly, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Don’t wish for what will never be, young one,” she chided him wanly. “Now, I know you have work to do, so you’d best be back to it.”

“You’re far more important than mere work, mother,” he told her. “I know things look bad now, but think of what we’re fighting for, and think of who we are, mother. We’re earth dragons. They can burn our farms, destroy our factories, look down their snouts at us all they want, but it will never change the fact that the fault lies in *them*, not in *us*. Despite having everything we don’t, they can only look down at us and *envy* the simple joy we possess, try to make us as miserable as they are. And when this is over, when they beg us to come out, we will go right back to our farm, and we

will make it better than ever before. We may still be on the ground, but our heads will be held higher than theirs, because we stuck to our ideals and proved to them just who the better dragon is.”

“Young one, I never wanted to be *better* than the other dragons. I just wanted to be *equal*,” she said simply, patting his forepaw.

“Well, after this, we will be,” he answered. “After we prove to them that magic isn’t the only form of power in the world.”

Keth ambled in, carrying a yoke basket filled with pumpkins, with the hatchlings romping around his legs. “You should be out working, young one,” Keth chided him gently. “They need all of us right now.”

“What are you doing out there, sire?”

“Carting rock,” he replied. “I only came home to bring our first allotment. They need you, lifemate.”

“Alright,” she said, standing up.

“What are you going to do, mother?”

“Carry waste rock, same as the others,” she replied, then she glanced at his tail. “You should see a healer about your tail, young one. You should have at least *budded* a couple of spikes by now.”

He brought his tail around and looked at it. “Yeah, I know. When I have time, I will, but it’s not that important right now,” he replied. “And you’re right, I’d better get back to work.”

7 June 2017, 06:29 DMT; Sanctuary City

It had been a long time since he’d stayed up so long with so much activity, and like almost everyone else in the cavern, he was dead tired. But, it had been worth it, because the last load of supplies were being brought in.

The cavern was crowded now. Most of the earth dragons were now in the cavern, doubling as carriers, carrying the supplies with them as the water drakes brought them to the tube. There were dragons, boxes, baskets, and crates everywhere, as the dragons waited to be assigned living quarters and they tried to figure out where to store everything.

That in itself had been quite clever. Instead of Shii and Surrall teaching the other water dragons their little trick, they decided to instead drain the lava tube of water all the way to the entrance. It had taken the combined efforts of four elder drakes and wyrms to maintain for hours at a time, but it made things much faster and easier. The water drakes only had to carry the earth dragon to the entrance of the tube, only about 60 meters, and then they could simply walk from there, carrying the last of the foodstocks or supplies, equipment, or materials they'd need down in the cavern. It had taken some wrestling to get some of the heavy equipment down into the tube, navigating it through the subway, but once they got it in the lava tube, it was just a long hike carrying a couple dozen tons of equipment...uphill the entire way.

The secondary entrance was now in use as well. The entrance to that was 600 meters deep, running parallel to the mountain slope for about 450 meters then leveling out some until it reached the mountainside, so anything the water dragons brought up to them during the daylight came that way. The tube, according to Ralla, widened as it leveled out deeper down, and it was useful for things the water dragons could easily carry. Only drakes brought things up that way, and some of them had to climb out into the room, turn around, then go back in, since it was a very tight fit for the larger drakes. They weren't wriggling through, but when a 35 foot long drake has to turn around in a 25 or so foot wide tunnel...well, that could be a problem. To avoid any scraped crests or sprained wings or tails, they were just climbing up and out of the enlarged hole, then diving back down. They even had a system in place so only one drake was in the tube at a time, placing a marker at the tube entrance that warned any drake with a load of supplies that there was another drake in the tube.

Jukra was already hard at work on both Jirran's idea and the water supply. The idea to just build a big tank under the tube the break into the bottom of it was exactly what Jukra was going to do, and he'd already sounded it out and started tunneling towards his proposed excavation area. They were also tunneling higher up to build the waterwheel generator, an idea Fredda had not only endorsed, but nearly licked Jirran on the face over thinking up when they told her about it. They were going to build two waterwheel chambers, one for the generator and one for an old-fashioned water-driven grain mill. They were cutting millstones out of basalt, and it would let the humans send them raw grain on top of flour, since the grain could handle being submerged where the water would ruin the flour.

Kell had spent the entire night running around like someone hammered a nail through his tail, and he hadn't been the only one. There was so much that needed to be done, and often Kell was doing his own work and three other jobs at the same time. Earth dragons came up the lava tube in a constant stream, carrying both everything they owned and whatever extra they could carry, so many of them were exhausted by the time they reached the main cavern, carting sometimes three times their own weight uphill for around five miles. But even that was little respite, for as soon as they had a living assignment, they carted off their things, came back out, and did whatever they could to help. In an earth dragon family, if one drake still had work to do, then *nobody* was finished working, and that same sense of community and support existed in the cavern among all the earth dragons. So long as only one earth dragon still had work to do, then everyone was going to be helping until it was done. Sometimes that was a blessing, but when it came to technical jobs, sometimes too many paws interfered more than it helped.

At least they weren't alone long. More members of the department arrived, and as they did, they were put to work. Cable got laid out to new chambers faster, power lines were laid out, and things got organized when Kintel arrived and started taking control of things. Things got even more orderly when Ferroth ambled in, looking around in amazement with his front legs bowed a little from the weight of four large steel boxes hung in

front of his wings, then he marched straight for the ramp to the second floor of the interior building where he knew the department was setting up, and once he was there, it was almost like old times. His barking voice echoed through the chamber as he set up workstations, organized cable running details, assigned drakes to Fredda and the power drakes to help lay power lines, and basically just did what the chief did, take charge and get things moving. There was a cheer through the cavern when Anthra arrived, pulling a piece of heavy machinery all by herself, a huge thing that probably weighed five times she did. But Anthra was more than just the elder wurm, she was also a very physically powerful dragon, and she had little trouble dragging the thing in, dragging it on a sled behind her by chains wrapped around her wingjoints. The factory drakes came and took possession of it and wrestled it down a wide passgaeway leading deeper down as she came up the ramp, and the first thing she did was check in with Ferroth and Geon, who were together in the new department offices.

As the last drakes marched up the tunnel and into the cavern, he looked down the tube and felt the air displacement. The water drakes had flooded the tunnel again, pushing all that air back up the tube, a brisk, cool wind that smelled of the sea. He was taking a turn as the check-in drake, checking gear and supplies against a list of everything they had, then checking it off when they arrived. It was an easy job that basically just let him rest a little and still do something, and as soon as he felt more energetic, he'd pass the duty off to someone else that could use a break. As Kell inspected the four boxes the two drakes had been carrying, he checked off the last six items on the list, and realized that he was done. That was everything they were brining from the surface, at least today. There was more coming tomorrow along with the last of the earth dragons, as well as possibly the invasion team carrying in food they stole from the council stores. From what he'd overheard, those drakes would be in position to carry out the operation tonight.

And tomorrow night, the food aid from the humans would start to arrive. Tomorrow would be the rendezvous, and the water dragons were ready for it. They'd been tracking the human ships, and from what Kell had

heard, the freighters should be at the rendezvous point this morning, in just a couple of hours. They'd made pretty good time, but that also meant that they'd have to sit out there and be possible targets for the sky dragons. He just hoped they took precautions, though Kell rather doubted that even a furious sky dragon would attack a task force of some two dozen or so ships. The carrier was out there on top of a bunch of warships, all protecting the freighters in a classic convoy formation, according to Surreal.

Kell yawned and pointed the two young drakes, a mated pair, to the assignment station where they could check in and get some quarters, then he clamped the checklist in his teeth and headed for the department. It had become the unofficial control center for the move, where Geon and Anthra spent most of their time last night as things were brought in, and the department drakes were keeping track of all the logistics with old fashioned papers and checklists rather than computers. He went up the ramp, skittered out of the way as Fredda all but ran over him, heading for the industrial tunnel leading down to her operation, then padded into the main office. Geon and Anthra were sitting on their haunches, listening as Ferroth went over some notes on a clipboard, the chief reared up and sitting on the base of his tail so he could use his forepaws. Kell gave over the clipboard to Ferroth when he reached them. "That's everything moved in, chief," he reported. "Everything on the list is accounted for."

"Good work, whelp," Ferroth replied as Kell yawned again and sat down. "How are we on living space?"

"It's getting tight, chief," Kintel replied, referring to a sheet. "We don't have enough burrows dug out for everyone, and we're already out of space here on the high-rise. About a hundred twenty dragons are going to be camping out on the floor of the main cavern for a while."

"Well, that won't be too long," Anthra said. "And they can help dig out their own burrows. Food?"

"We've got a distribution system already in place," Kintel replied. "Everyone's going to have to supplement the food with rocks and stones,

but nobody's gong to starve."

"And the water, is that working?"

"Jukra says he can get that tank dug out by tonight," Kintel replied. "We have more than enough water since they broke into that tube. We're storing water in the barrels we brought already, putting it away in case soemthing happens and that tube runs dry."

"Didn't we bring that desalinization equipment?"

"Sure, but it takes a lot of power, far more than an emergency generator can put out," Ferroth replied. "Once Fredda gets the power going, we can switch to desalinization if that water source runs dry. We were looking at strict water rationing until they found that water tube. It was a gift from Gaia, that's for sure."

"I noticed that almost all this stone is impermeable," Anthra said.

"Which is why this cavern isn't flooded with fresh water seeping down from the surface," Kintel noted. "And probably why it's even here at all. If water could get down in here, it would erode out the walls, make it unstable, then the whole thing would have collapsed long ago."

"Most likely," Geon agreed. "How many dragons are left on the surface?"

"Ninety-one," Kintel replied, referring to a sheet. "Mainly factory workers still breaking down some equipment to fit it through the smaller tunnels and the invasion team."

"Did you get them those bombs?" he asked Ferroth.

The chief nodded. "They have them and know how to use them," he replied. "They'll steal what they can, then burn the rest. Those bombs are designed to saturate an area with high-intensity flame, they'll do the job. As long as the teams remember to collapse the tunnels behind them after they arm them, they'll be alright."

Ralla bounded into the room. “Anthra, Geon,” he called. “I have a message from the surface. It’s important.”

“What is it, young friend?” Geon asked.

“The council chromatic seeks a parlay with you, Anthra,” he replied, looking up at her. “Immediately.”

“Well, he can go chew on his tail,” Anthra replied bluntly. “How did you get the message?”

“A juvenile chromatic entered the tunnels of Blackstone and delivered the message,” he replied. “They relayed it to us, and I brought it.”

“Then take this message back to them, so they can deliver it to the chromatics. They have our terms. Until they are met, he can go to hell.”

Ralla grinned. “They don’t know what that is, but I’m sure he’ll understand that it’s a no.”

“He’ll figure it out,” she sniffed, which made Kell chuckle. Ralla turned and hurried back out, and Kell yawned again. “Are you alright, young one?”

“Just tired, esteemed council member,” he replied. “I’ve been awake for...I have no idea how long.”

“The supplies are in, and you’ve done more than your share. You should go rest.”

“But there’s so much more to do,” he protested.

“And others will do it. That’s an *order*, young one. As I recall, you resigned from the council, so you can’t backtalk me anymore.”

He laughed. “I knew there was a drawback to that.”

“Yes, certain young drakes who think they know everything don’t know everything anymore,” she teased lightly. “Go get some sleep.”

“I’m not going to say no,” he admitted.

Wanting to sleep was one thing, but finding a quiet place out of the way of everyone else, well, that wasn't quite so easy. He had an assigned burrow of his own, not living with his parents, but it was a single room within the high-rise, and with everything going on, it was just too loud for him to rest. He found his parents' burrow similarly noisy and chaotic as his family settled in after a long night, and milling around in an exhausted haze provided no opportune nooks or unused side chambers where he could curl up and get some uninterrupted rest.

He wasn't quite sure how he ended up there, but when he finally rose up enough out of his exhaustion to take stock of things, he found himself in the small cave at the top of the water tube, where the air was a bit stale and smelled of sulfur, but there was no noise but the falling water. He didn't remember climbing the water tube, which would have drained what little energy he had left. He drank from the feeder pool for the tube, finding the water to be rich with minerals, very tasty to an earth dragon, then he curled up beside it and let the steady rush of the water falling into the pond lull him to sleep.

It was dark. He was sitting in a dry, perfectly spherical cave, a bubble of void surrounded by solid rock, with no visible entry tunnels. The air within was hot, sulfurous, smelling of molten rock, and the heat in the air made it hard to make out the details of the cave's spherical walls.

How did he get in here? There was no way in that he could see, not even a hole at the very top. The air was stale, but there was oxygen in it, he didn't feel like he was suffering suffocation. It was almost like a prison deep in the earth, a place from which the only option for escape was to dig.

"You have come home," a voice drifted through the sphere, a dragon's voice, deep and powerful, almost shaking the walls. *"Why?"*

He looked up, looked all around, but could see no other dragon. By the voice, it had to be a big one, maybe a fire wyrm, but the voice was warm, rich, gentle.

“Who’s there?”

“You have come home. Why?”

It was a dream, he realized. He’d been exhausted, remembered curling up and going to sleep, and now he was dreaming. But, despite knowing that, he also found that he couldn’t wake up.

“You have come home. Why?” the voice asked again, more expectantly this time. It wanted an answer.

“I don’t understand.”

“You have returned to the embrace. Why?”

The embrace. Gaia’s embrace, some earth dragons called their dens, referring to them being underground. The voice, it was referring to the dragons in the cavern. He became suddenly wary, aware that this might be magic of some kind. A chromatic might be behind that voice, trying to figure out what was going on.

“You fear me.”

“You’re a chromatic, trying to trick me.”

“I am chromatic,” the voice affirmed. *“As am I earth, fire, sky, and water. Why would you fear a chromatic, youngling? Are you not dragon, as they are?”*

He snorted. “They certainly don’t think so.”

“Explain.”

He thumped his tail on the floor in irritation. “If you’re a chromatic, then you already know. It’s not going to work, fluffy. This grounder isn’t falling for it.”

There was a shimmering in the air, almost as if something were moving, but he couldn’t see it. A sky dragon, perhaps, using some new spell

to cloak its heat from him? *“You have lost your spikes, youngling. What has happened?”*

“What do you mean, what happened? Everyone knows what happened. Ivaiya tried to kill me, and I spiked her!”

“You killed another dragon?” the voice asked.

“Out of self defense!” he retorted indignantly.

“Why would this Ivaiya attack you? You are dragon, as he was.”

He snorted again. “She,” he corrected, then curled his tail around and looked at the empty sockets on the flattened top. “Some dragons think we earth dragons are far *less* dragon than they are,” he growled.

“Ridiculous.”

“I’ve never heard a chromatic say *that*,” he said darkly. “Now I know this is some kind of spell.”

“Humor me,” the voice said, dryly.

“Alright,” he said, figuring that the more he stalled, the better chance he had the spell would end and he’d wake up without passing along any information. “The chromatics hate us, think we’re not real dragons, because we have no magic.”

“Ridiculous. Earth dragons have magic, young earth drake. They have the most powerful magic of all.”

“Really,” he said with so much sarcasm that it almost dripped from his maw.

“Not all magic is what can be cast in a spell, or what can be seen with the eyes,” the voice intoned, taking a gentler tone. *“A lesson the chromatics should understand more than any other dragon.”*

“Well, it’s a lesson that only the water dragons seem to take to heart. They’re the only ones that don’t hate us.”

“Then, in time, they are the only ones who will not touch their noses to your feet, begging for your favor,” the voice noted lightly. “If they are truly your friends, keep them warmly in your heart, young earth drake. They will need your love with you returned to the embrace. And so, you will answer me now, young one. Why do you return to the embrace?”

“To escape the other dragons and their plans to enslave us,” he blurted.

There was a light, almost tittering laughter. *“Clever, the earth dragons were always very clever. You have put the unyielding stone between you and them. In time, they will remember what it seems they have forgotten. In time.”*

“Remember what?”

“Why you believe the earth dragons have no magic,” the voice replied lightly. “But this is not seemly. An earth dragon should not be without his spikes, yet yours refuse to grow back.”

He blinked. How did the chromatics know *that*?

“There is guilt within you, young one. You have done something that lays heavy on your heart, and because of that, your spikes will not grow. You feel unworthy of them.”

He was about to protest, but then he sighed and lowered his head. “It’s all my fault,” he said quietly. “I was the one the humans exposed. I’m the one that triggered everything. I’m the one that had to kill Ivaiya. I know it wasn’t my responsibility, but I’m right in the middle of it all, and I can’t help but feel responsible for it. The farms are all burned, the factories are gone, our lives are all in chaos, the earth dragons are in hiding...and I just can’t help but feel that it’s my fault.”

“Is it your fault?”

“I...I don’t know. No. Yes. It’s all so confusing,” he blurted. “The humans expose me, reveal the dragons to the humans, and the chromatics begin a plot to destroy the department, dismantle everything we’ve built

over the years,” he said, blurting it out, almost as if he needed absolution from *someone*. “Then I had to kill Ivaiya, even though I was the one that provoked her on purpose, because I *had* to. And when she was laying there with my spikes in her back, all I could do was look at her and feel *glad* she was dead,” he said, looking down. “She hated us earth dragons so much that she helped the chromatics bring down everything we’ve built, but when I killed her and felt nothing for it, I became no better than her. I’ve always hated the others because they hate us...and that’s wrong,” he said in a low voice. “But I can’t help it. I shouldn’t hate them just because they hate me, I should listen to my sire and mother, but...I just can’t,” he whispered. “It wasn’t wrong to kill her, but it was wrong to feel nothing over it.”

“Then you have grown this day,” the voice declared. “And, I believe, you have proved worthy of your spikes. Rest your weary conscious, young one. To meet hate with hate is a fruitless endeavor, as it only feeds the fires that burn between you and sows in your heart a discord that has held the humans in its furied grasp for thousands of years. This, you have learned this day. But neither must you nuzzle those that despise you. Meet not hate with hate, but neither must you meet hate with love. You are not demanded to give to those who refuse to give back.

“Matters are unseemly,” the voice declared, and the shimmering seemed to move again. “The chromatics have forgotten, or perhaps they refuse to remember. But it is of no moment. Some time separate from them within the embrace will open their eyes to the reality of their situation, as it will for you. You are welcomed back within the embrace, earth dragon,” the voice intoned formally. “You are welcomed home. As you have provided, so now may you be provided for, as it should be. So have you served, so now you will be served. Remain within the embrace, my young drake. Remain within the embrace, and all will become clear. Remain, young one. Remain.

“Remain....”

Kell’s eyes snapped open, and he gasped as his head jerked up. He was too far out of the cavern, too close to the surface, that had to be it. The chromatics had found him, had used magic on him while he slept, tried to

get information out of him. He scrambled to his feet and turned towards the hole, but as he did so, he suddenly stopped. Gaping, he brought his tail around to where he could see it.

His spikes were regrowing. All seventeen sockets had a bud, and one of them was nearly a quarter of its usual size.

How long had he been asleep? Days? It should have taken almost a day to get that much growth! The others must think he was either lost or dead, and his family would be frantic! He swung his back legs and tail down into the tube, then he started back down it, going far faster than was safe, almost desperate to get back down to find out how long he'd been asleep, assure his family and friends that he hadn't gotten killed or drowned or ran off... after all, he was one of only three dragons that could get out of the cavern alive without help. It was entirely possible in the eyes of the others that he swam out, for some unfathomable reason. He slipped and was carried nearly a hundred meters down the tube before his claws stopped him against the fast current, and he had to struggle against that constant, strong surge of water against his shoulders and chest as he got out of the flow, returned to his precarious hanging grip on the ceiling of the tube.

He reached the hole, climbed down past it, then climbed through the wider opening, widened for the water drakes, then ran down the passageway. He had no clock, no watch, and though usually an earth dragon had a good internal sense of time, it was clear that he'd had magic used against him, so there was no way he could depend on his internal clock. He could have been asleep for *months* up in that cave, held in a magical slumber as the chromatics tried to pry information out of him, then just kept him asleep to keep him out of their feathers. But he slowed down, then stopped when he reached the main tunnel and saw drakes carrying supplies, including food, packing everything away. He hadn't been asleep for days. Hours maybe, but not days. He headed straight for the department, running up the ramp and into the office, and saw Ferroth and Kammi poring over a large diagram that represented the network cabling. "Whelp, Anthra told you to get some sleep," Ferroth told him.

“How long was I gone?” he asked quickly.

“Not even an hour,” he replied, glancing at him. “You must *really* be tired if you have no idea.”

Not even an hour? That was impossible! His spikes had regrown. They couldn’t have grown that much in an hour!

He brought his tail around to look at them, just be sure he’d really seen them, that it wasn’t some kind of delusion, but he froze when his tail came around and the tip came into view.

The center spike of his tail, the middle spike in the row of seven, was the most grown of them all, just past a quarter of its usual length, and it was not red. It was clear, like pure quartz, like a diamond, shimmering in the light that they were using to go over the diagram.

“Damn, Kell, when your spikes decided to grow back, they didn’t mess around,” Kammi laughed when she looked at him. Kell touched that clear spike with a claw and could feel the pressure in his tail, and a few taps ensured him that it was just as diamond-hard as the rest of the spikes. It was just clear instead of red.

“You grew back a shanker,” Ferroth noted. “Happens from time to time.”

“A what?”

“That odd-out spike. A shanker.”

“I’ve never seen it before.”

“Me either,” Kammi added.

“You’ve never thrown all seventeen spikes at once before either, have you?” Ferroth asked.

“Uh, not that I can recall,” Kell replied. “Sire told us never to do that unless our lives depended on it.”

“That’s why. Sometimes, not often but sometimes, when you grow back all your spikes at once after loosing all of them at once, one or two of them come in off-color. Orange, pink, purple, clear, sometimes even black,” he explained. “I once grew a black shanker, and it took it almost a month to go away. I’d loose it as soon as it was grown enough to release, but it kept growing back in black over and over,” he chuckled. “Finally, I got a normal spike in to replace it, the shanker just fell out on its own and a normal spike grew in. Just give it time, and you’ll get a normal spike in to replace that shanker, whelp. Until then, enjoy your individuality,” he said with a slight smile.

“And just why did you have to throw all your spikes, chief?” Kammi asked lightly, giving him a look.

“None of your business, whelp,” he replied, which made her laugh. “Didn’t you not have any spikes when you left?” he asked Kell.

“That’s what got me so upset,” he said. “I had a dream that I think was magic, and when I woke up, this. I thought I’d been asleep for a whole day.”

“Magic? What do you mean?”

Kell sat down and told Ferroth everything he could remember from the dream. “I think it was a fluffy,” he surmised. “I was up in that cave where the water comes from because it was out of the way, and I think I was too close to the surface, close enough for them to use magic on me. I think a fluffy was trying to find out where we were, but I didn’t tell him anything. But the weird thing is, the fluffy in the dream told me I’d get my spikes back, and when I woke up,” he trailed off, holding the tip of his tail up.

“Well, don’t worry about it, that kind of magic requires the caster to be very close. Even up in that water cave, you were still a good half mile away from any fluffy, and that’s way too far. That kind of magic requires a fluffy to be very close to you, like in the same burrow. So, it was just a weird dream, whelp. Scratch it up to how tired you were, sometimes you get some really strange dreams when you’re exhausted. A little odd that they’d grow

that fast, but then again, how long did it take for them to start growing in the first place? Maybe they just caught up, and since you were worrying over it, naturally you'd dream about it."

"Maybe," Kell grunted.

"Go back to sleep, whelp," Ferroth ordered. "You'll feel better after you rest."

"Yeah, you old geezers need your sleep so you can keep us with us younger drakes," Kammi taunted.

"Yeah, yeah, I see who's going to be the target for this shanker once it grows enough to release," he said, which made her laugh.

Again, Kell left the department, threading through the busy chaos of drakes moving things, looking around, working, but his mind wasn't on them. All he could think of was the dream, how real it felt, how alert he'd been within it. If it wasn't a fluff...then what was it? Just a truly bizarre and vivid dream brought about by his exhaustion, and perhaps his disquiet over everything that had happened? He couldn't deny that he did feel a little better...not quite as guilty. Almost as if the figment in the dream had granted him the absolution he craved, or perhaps, through the dream, he had granted some measure of absolution to himself. This mess was still more or less his fault, but at least he understood that it wasn't *entirely* his fault. Instead of going back up to the cave, he instead went to his parents' burrow and borrowed their sleeping mound. He was sure they wouldn't mind, and besides, the smell of the earth relaxed him, calmed his chaotic thoughts, brought a curious peace to him. He wondered idly just how they'd gotten the earth in, earth smelling of growth and fertility, but then his exhaustion again overwhelmed him, and he fell asleep.

But this time, there were no dreams.

7 June 2017, 15:02 HDT; 1,134 nautical miles south-southwest of Pearl Harbor

“All stop!” the cry came across the bridge of the freighter.

Jenny pulled her binoculars up from where they were hanging by the strap around her neck and immediately started scanning the sky as best she could from the bridge window. They’d arrived at the designated coordinates earlier than planned, but that was just because things had gone so smoothly for them. They had no problems at all loading up the emergency supplies in the three freighters, taking three so if any one ship was sunk, they’d have some food aid to deliver, all three ships from the American Merchant Marine fleet of freighters. All three were small container carriers that also had grain holds, dual-purpose vessels, with the grain holds in the bow section and the container hold amidships, with deck space closer to the bridge also used for carrying cargo containers. The ship she was on was only four years old, and was highly modern and actually not all that bad. Her quarters were small, but then again, everyone’s quarters were small on a cargo ship, but they had a nice kitchen and dining room for the 23 crew members, an exercise room, and a TV room with satellite TV piped in from a dish on the bridge tower. They also had internet, which she used to keep in touch with her husband and son via Skype, so it was almost just being in a floating motel. Secretary Kent was on the aircraft carrier, which is where she would have been had Kell not specifically told her to be on one of the freighters. She had a crypto shortrange radio for talking to Kent, one of the gadgets of the Navy SEALs, so she stayed in constant contact with them.

So did the freighter captain. His name was Brian Dawkins, and he was almost shockingly young, only 35, but he knew his business when it came to running his ship, and his crew was professional and competent. He was also somewhat rakishly handsome, and rumor on the ship was that he had girlfriends in every port of call on the west coast and most of the Asian ports they visited. He was intensely curious about their mission, but when she flatly told the captain to back off, he’d not asked another question.

Dawkins regarded the destroyer that pulled up to the port and stopped, which was only about two hundred yards, almost uncomfortably close when

it came to ships at sea. “Alright, so, here we are with nine hundred and sixty tons of food, about three thousand tons more in two other ships, holding position in the middle of one of the most desolate tracts of ocean in the South Pacific,” he mused. “You realize the closest land is about a thousand miles away?”

“We’re not delivering this cargo to land, Captain,” she replied, then she saw movement. She scrambled for the ship’s deck PA and keyed it. “Get off the deck!” she shouted. “Get off the deck right now!” She looked at him. “I told you to keep your men inside during daylight hours!” she told him.

“Yes, another of those strange orders that makes no sense, yet you act like the ship will sink if we disregard it,” he said dryly. “Greer was out there on my orders, Major, because there are *some* things that have to be done no matter what time of day it is.”

“Not right now there’s not,” she said shortly, scanning the sky. A pair of F-18s drifted across her view, part of the active combat air patrol, or CAP, the Navy was using to hopefully discourage any sky dragons from getting any idea. There were eight planes up there, and they’d been flying CAP over the convoy since it pulled out of Pearl.

“If you’d explain *why* it’s so important, maybe we wouldn’t think it’s so ridiculous.”

“That’s on a need to know basis. The only thing *you* need to understand is that any man outside at this particular time, in this particular place, goes out there at his own risk. If he dies, the government will not be responsible. Is that understood?”

“What, are we in some kind of secret war here? I don’t see any other ships.”

“You won’t see them until it’s too late,” she told him, slowly rotating to the west. “If you see them at all.”

“Them who?”

She fell silent as a slight shimmer in the air lanced across her view. She tried to track it, but it was already gone, and she had her radio up. “Kent, to the east,” she said. “Tell the captain to turn everything he’s got east, see if he gets any readings.”

“Radar’s clear,” Kent told her. “What did you see?”

“A shimmer,” she answered. “I think they know we’re here.”

“They said they’d know we were here,” he reminded her.

“They *who*?” Dawkins demanded.

“If you see who, I’ll explain it. But if they don’t show themselves, then it’s classified,” she replied bluntly.

“Well, whoever they are, they’re nuts for flying planes with a carrier parked half a mile away, surrounded by missile cruisers,” Dawkins said with dark amusement.

“I never said they were planes, Captain,” she said absently, scanning her binoculars back and forth, trying to find that shimmer again.

“Visual track of another shimmer, to the south,” Kent reported to her. “Make sure everyone is off the deck.”

“Captain, make absolutely sure your men are inside, and keep them away from the hull,” she told him.

“Why, in God’s name?”

“To prevent electrocution,” she responded, taking a step back from the wall herself.

“From what? There’s not a cloud in the sky!”

“Captain, this is the part where you just keep your mouth shut and do as your told, for your own safety,” she told him in irritation, lowering the binoculars and looking back at him. “Listen, I don’t like being a bitch, but I have my orders, and so do you.”

“Even when those orders make no sense?”

“Welcome to being in the government,” she told him, which made him laugh despite himself. “Trust me, they make sense. Maybe not to you, but they do make perfect sense.”

“You’re the Major,” he said, picking up the PA mike. “Everyone make sure to be well inside the ship. Stay away from hull because of a threat of,” he chuckled. “Electrocution. We stay inside until sundown. So everyone take a break, watch some TV, and relax, cause it’ll be a long night.” He put the mike down. “I haven’t told them that we’re just dumping the cargo over the side,” he said dryly. “I’m sure the crew’s going to love hearing that, that we have to crane over pallets and drop them into the water. What, are we feeding mermaids or something?”

“Or something, Captain,” she replied, scanning the sky with her binoculars again.

If she hadn’t been trained to deal with it, it would have been nervewracking. But, she’d staked out hacker havens for days at a time with the Hunters, so she had the patience and discipline to keep her eyes open, stay alert, even though they’d only seen those two shimmers. The fleet was parked assumedly somewhere relatively close to their island, and the sky dragons were most likely still stirred up, still angry because the earth dragons had eluded them. But, they’d seen no smoke in the distance, and still couldn’t see any, so they had to be some distance away.

Jenny kept one eye on the clock and the other on the sky, constantly searching with her binoculars, hour after hour. Captain Dawkins left the bridge for a while and then returned to find her still doing the exact same thing, at least until Kent called her on the radio. “Jenny, they’re here.”

“You saw them?”

“Not them. *Them*. Look over your port rail.”

She glanced at Dawkins, then dared to open the side door leading to the outer walkway, the outer deck beside the bridge, and looked down over

the side. In the water, she could see a crested head looking back up at her. It was Sella, she recognized her. Sella nodded only once, then her head slipped back under the water. She sighed in relief and quickly went back inside, closed the door, and backed up from the wall. Dawkins was looking at her curiously. But Dawkins' eyes bulged, and he gave a shrill scream even as she felt something shudder under her feet, falling backwards out of his chair. She whirled around—

And found herself staring eye to glowing azure eye with a sky dragon. It was looking right in through the bridge windows, its huge wings spread, blocking the view of the ship's deck, taloned forepaws gripping the rail of the little wraparound outer deck. She put a hand to her chest and took a step back, but she paused, turning her head sideways a little. This dragon...it looked, looked familiar.

The council! It was one of the dragons on the council! The sky drake, Hinado!

No, not anymore, Kell said that the sky drake was run off the island by the chromatic in punishment for voting against them. But it was here right now, staring into the bridge, looking right at her.

“Hinado!” she gasped, then clumsily fumbled for the deck PA. “Hinado!” she called, which made the dragon stare narrow-eyed at her. She used the draconic Sella had left for them words that almost sounded like a rumble of hissing growls. “No attack! Peace! Peace!” she said quickly.

“Sella!” Hinado cried, looking away from the bridge, then he rattled in draconic so quickly she couldn't hope to keep track of it.

“What the fuck is that!” Dawkins squealed from behind his chair, and the smell of urine was suddenly in the room. Well, so much for the brave ship captain, she mused darkly.

“Now you've seen them, Captain,” she said calmly, putting down the mike. “That is a *dragon*.” She went back to the port door, and Hinado ghosted around to it as she opened it. “Hindado, peace,” she said in

draconic again. “Sella!” she screamed. “Sella, I need you, like *right now*!” she cried in English. “Hinado, Jenny Edwards,” she said, touching her chest. “Remember?” she asked in draconic, secretly *so* grateful that Sella had thought to add that word to her little primer.

He nodded, then Dawkins screamed again when Sella appeared, launching up over the side and landing on the deck, deck space they had specifically kept clear for a water dragon. They were going to tie a tarp over the area to hide it from the air, but with Hinado staring her right in the face, that was now a moot point.

“Hinado!” Sella called, looking up at him, then she chattered at him in draconic. The hovering sky drake looked down at her, then at Jenny, then at her again, and answered. “He said that six sky dragons were about to attack the convoy, but he ordered them away when he happened to see you on one of the ships,” Sella told her in English. “The sky dragons will still obey him. He wants to know why you are here, Jenny Edwards, and he wants to know *now*. He thinks you intend to invade the island.”

“What? That’s ridiculous!” she blurted.

Sella chattered at him, but Hinado cut her off with a harsh barking command. He turned to look at Jenny, and she gasped when he reached out and grabbed her, wrapping his taloned forepaws around her torso and hips, then picked her up off the deck. His neck was too long for her to look down at him with her in his paws, but all he did was bring her down to the deck and set her down, gently, beside Sella. He landed and folded his huge wings, so long that the tips extended well past his tail, giving both of them a hard look as he chattered commandingly in draconic.

“He says that he knows that the humans are up to something, and it must have something to do with the earth dragons,” Sella translated. “He says that it can’t be coincidence that the *only* water dragon that speaks English would happen to be with the ships.” He chattered again, pointing a clawed finger right at Jenny. “He says that the humans should not be here,

not right now, for their own safety. You would have been attacked had he not seen you on the ship and moved to intervene.”

“Jenny! Jenny, we have a visual! Should we open fire?” Kent asked over the radio.

“No, no, don’t fire!” she replied quickly through the mike clipped to her epaulet. “This is *Hinado*, Arlan!”

“He demands to know why you use his name,” Sella translated after he barked at her.

“Tell him to save his ass,” she replied bluntly, pointing towards the destroyer that was close to them. Hinado looked, then saw the business end of several Phalanx guns pointed at him. “Make them stand down, Arlan,” she said over the mike. Seconds later, the guns pointed away. “Now tell him that we can’t tell him why we’re here, but we’re not trying to stir anything up on the island more than it already is. We know what’s going on, and the only reason we’re here is because we were asked here. But also tell him that he needs to speak to Secretary Kent, not to me.”

Sella translated, then Hinado barked at her some more. “He would know where this secretary is.”

“On the carrier,” she replied. She gasped again when Hinado wrapped his paw around her, then he rose up into the air by his magic and spread his wings. He reached down and put a paw on Sella’s back, just between her wingjoints, and Sella too rose up off the deck. Hinado was somehow using his magic to make Sella float, like him, then a single wingbeat catapulted them away from the freighter and towards the carrier. She gaped as she looked down past Sella and saw a missile cruiser zoom below her dangling feet, and before she knew it, Hinado was landing on the empty deck of the carrier, setting her down gently. “He wants Kent out here,” Sella said.

“Arlan, can you see us?” Jenny asked over the radio.

“Oh yes.”

“He wants to talk to you, so come out.”

“Holy God, I hate direct face to face negotiations with something that could eat me,” Kent breathed, which made Sella bark out a laugh. Hinado chattered out her, she replied, and Hinado laughed as well. Arlan came out of the conn tower and hurried over the metal deck towards them, Ross beside him on one side, and Captain Bradley on the other. Kent came out to them, then gave a short bow. “Hinado, I’m Secretary of State Arlan Kent, we welcome you to this place for peaceful negotiations,” he said in draconic, which made one scaly brow on Hinado’s face rise, then he looked pointedly at Sella. She said something to him, which made him snort and sit on his haunches, which wasn’t all that much since his body was so long. he had to be fifty feet long, but when he was on the ground, he was only about ten feet high. “Louise Ross, Captain Bradley,” he motioned to his companions. “Sella, it’s good to finally meet you.”

“You as well, Mister Secretary,” she nodded. “Hinado demands to know why you’re here with warships.”

“What did you tell him?” he asked Jenny.

“Only that we were invited here, and that we know what’s going on over on the island. I didn’t say who invited us.”

“Well, esteemed council member,” Kent began, and Sella quietly translated as he spoke, “first, let me say that we’re here with purely peaceful intentions. Kell got word to us of what happened on the island, and out of concern, we brought ships here in case the dragons asked us for assistance.”

“He would know how Kell managed to speak to you,” Sella translated. “The water dragons on the council have been speaking to him with magic, keeping him up to date.”

“Kell *swam* out here and contacted a naval ship that was operating in the area,” Kent replied. “He knows humans enough to understand that since we know you’re here, that we’d get very concerned, maybe even fear the

dragons attacking, if we lost contact. To fall silent before an attack is a long-standing human tool of warfare. He wanted to assure us that the dragons weren't preparing to attack."

Hinado seemed to digest that, then looked at Jenny. "And why is a diplomat and the only human with knowledge of us on a warship, sitting out here waiting for something?"

"For just this, esteemed council member," Kent answered smoothly.

He barked at Sella. "Did the earth dragons send for you?" she said. "Are you removing them from the island?"

Kent blinked. "Dear me, no," he replied.

Sella looked at Hinado as he spoke, then back to Kent. "Well, you *should* remove them," she said as he talked. "They are not safe on the island. Understand that I had no love in my heart for Ivaiya, and Kell did us all a favor when he killed her. I believe that what the chromatics are doing is wrong, and for that belief, I was banished from the island and very nearly killed making my escape. They've let their arrogance blind them, much as Ivaiya's hatred of the earth dragons blinded her, and it is a path they're taking that leads to disaster. It's *already* a disaster. I overflowed the island yesterday and everything is in ruins, all the farms are burned, the factories burned down, and after the earth dragons come out and see what has been done, there may be war, but a war they cannot hope to win. As strong and physically powerful as earth dragons are, they know that they are no match for the fire and sky dragons, not out in the open, and so long as the earth dragons can't be out in the open to tend their farms, *everyone* will starve. It's why they retreated underground when the unrest began. You should find a way to get the earth dragons off the island. I can't control the sky dragons while they're on the island, but I *can* order them to leave these ships alone. They will obey me at least that much."

Jenny stepped up to the sky drake. "Trust me?" she asked in draconic.

He looked at her, then to Sella, then lowered his head down close to her and nodded.

She reached out and put her hands on his snout. “Trust me,” she said again in draconic, then switched to English. “The earth dragons are safe, Hinado. They will be safe. We’re not here to take them off the island, but they did ask us to come to this place to help ensure their safety. The earth dragons don’t want a war with the other dragons, and they asked us to help them force a peaceful end to this situation by bringing them equipment and goods to replace what they lost when the sky dragons attacked.” She motioned to Sella. “Sella is here to pick up the equipment, and take it to the earth dragons.”

Hinado looked at Sella, who said something to him. “For what purpose? What do the earth dragons intend?” she asked for him.

“Food and equipment, nothing more, what they need to hold out underground until empty bellies make the sky dragons come back to their senses.”

Hinado narrowed his eyes, then hissed out a chortle. “Earth dragons always were far more clever than the chromatics believed,” Sella translated for him. “They intend to starve the island.”

“They do,” Jenny admitted.

“Then they have prepared for this,” Sella translated.

“They have,” Jenny nodded.

Hinado laughed earnestly, a rumbling sound. “Then so be it,” Sella translated. “It won’t be quite that easy, but if the earth dragons have planned for it, then they understand what they have to do, and how long it may take.”

“Years,” Jenny said, and when Sella translated, Hinado nodded soberly at her.

“Then I’ll keep the sky dragons away from this place so Sella and the other water dragons I saw can get what you brought,” Sella translated, looking slyly at Hinado. “I don’t have the same regard for the earth dragons as the water dragons do, but I do respect their rights under sacred draconic law. The chromatics want to take everything away from them, force them to return to their ways before they discovered technology, and that is foolish. You cannot ungrow your scales. Technology is a tool, nothing more, nothing less, no different than magic in its way. There is room on the island for both.”

“Hinado, this may be of advantage to both of us,” Kent said quickly. “Kell told us that the chromatics banished you from the island. We’ve brought aid for the earth dragons, but what aid can we give *you*?” he offered. “Food? A means of communication? Tools? Just ask, and we’ll do what we can.”

Hinado looked at Sella when she translated that, then he gave that rumbling chuckle again. “Seeing the chromatics starve for what they did to me is all that needs be done,” Sella translated. “I won’t reveal this little game the earth dragons are playing because it helps me get my own revenge against the chromatics.”

“Hinado, with Ivaiya dead and the new sky drake on the council being a complete idiot, can you see of any way of trying to bring the sky dragons back under control, under *your* control?” Jenny asked. “You said the sky dragons that were here obeyed you. Can you get them to stop attacking the farms?”

“There are no farms left,” Sella said before Hinado could reply. “The entire island would be an ash-choked wasteland were it not for the afternoon rains, Jenny.” Hinado spoke again, and she translated. “The sky dragons at the island, no, they won’t obey me, because Ivaiya declared me banished. Out here, they obey out of fear. They know I can kill them if they don’t obey me. Out here, it is the law of the jungle, as the humans say on the TV. Ivaiya tried to kill me, and she was the only sky dragon on the

island I feared. But Kell took care of her,” she said as Hinado chuckled evilly.

“With Ivaiya dead, just who says you’re still banished, Hinado?” Jenny asked.

His eyes narrowed when Sella translated, then he gave Jenny a toothy grin. “That’s true,” Sella said, nodding. “He says that you have a point, and there might be something he can do, but it won’t be quick or easy. But, with what’s coming, he might prefer being banished. At least *he* will eat well. With the earth dragons in hiding, the chromatics will make the sky dragons help the water dragons feed the island, and they’ll take most of the food for themselves and the fire dragons. At least being banished, he can eat everything he can catch.” Sella spoke to him, and his head rose up quick, then he laughed. “I told him the water dragons will refuse to share their catches when the time comes, and leave the island for the deep water,” she told Jenny and Kent with a sly smile. “He says that what the earth dragons have planned may not take years if the water dragons side with them against the chromatics,” she translated when Hinado spoke again. “And the sky dragons will revolt when the chromatics attempt to force them to feed them and the fire dragons by themselves.”

“Then there’s your window, Hinado,” Jenny told him. “That’s when you step in.”

He looked at her, nodded slowly, then nodded more vigorously as he understood what she meant. “Yes, yes, you are very cunning, Jenny Edwards,” Sella translated, giving her a bright smile. “You think like a dragon. No wonder Kell chose you to be the emissary to the island.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” she laughed. “But if the sky dragons are in disarray and angry at the chromatics, you can use that to reassert your authority, right when they’ll be looking for leadership, with Ivaiya dead and the chromatics forcing them to do all the work. If the sky dragons turn against the chromatics as well, it will leave them no choice but to bargain

with the earth dragons for their return, and it brings the situation to a peaceful end without anyone else getting hurt.”

“Yes, yes, you speak wisely, Jenny Edwards,” Sella said as Hinado talked, Hinado’s face thoughtful and a little impressed. Jenny had to marvel at how *expressive* dragon faces could be, and even more so, how she could identify those expressions. “I think there is something I can do. I will keep the water dragon council members informed, and through them, I believe it will get back to the earth dragons,” Sella said, smiling as Hinado looked pointedly at her.

“That’s something that everyone except the chromatics will be glad to hear,” Jenny told him. “I think even the fire dragons will turn on the chromatics once their bellies are empty.”

“They will,” Sella translated, “at least after some time. But the humans should be extremely wary, Jenny Edwards. The chromatics will mollify the fire dragons by allowing them to leave the island. No ships should be in this area, and they may use the scions to allow fire dragons out into the human world to forage for food. Should that happen, there might be confrontations with your people.”

Jenny and Kent traded glances. “We’ve considered that possibility, Hinado,” Kent said. “We’re making plans to deal with it.”

“I would simply ask that you try to not use deadly force if possible,” Sella translated. “Our fire dragon cousins can be brutish, even mean, but they are not evil. They’ll just be hungry.”

“Our plans were to use food to bribe the fire dragons into not causing widespread destruction,” Kent noted. “If the chromatics let them out using the scions, to simply feed the fire dragons and tell them they’ll get all the food they wanted as long as they didn’t take any back to the island with them. That way, the fire dragons are sated, and the chromatics starve.”

Hinado gave Kent a look, then laughed brightly. “Very clever, human!” Sella said for him, also smiling.

“But, what we’re lacking is an ability to speak to them,” Jenny said. “You can help us with that, Hinado. The earth dragons had a translation program for the computer, that translates dragon language into English and back again. I would ask, more or less beg, that you bring us a copy of that software. We’re going to need a way to communicate with those fire dragons when they start to appear, because I *know* they don’t speak English. We’d much rather talk to them than fight them, and you can help us prevent bloodshed.”

Sella and Hinado chattered at each other for a moment, then Sella nodded. “I’ll explain the need for it. I’ll *make* them give it to you, Jenny,” she told them. “Often, earth dragons hold onto things they think are secrets long after the need for it is gone. But I can make Kell do anything I want,” she said, almost smugly. “And I know for a fact he has that software.”

“Hinado can bring it to us at a place and time of his choosing,” Kent continued. “And that solves the only real issue we had. If we can communicate with the dragons coming out of the scions, we can prevent violence.”

“You will get it,” Sella said for Hinado. “I know this human. I can find her using magic, no matter where she is,” Sella said as Hinado pointed at Jenny. “When Sella gets this software, she’ll give it to me, and I’ll bring it to you.”

“How does that work?” Jenny asked curiously.

“Dragon magic,” Sella translated. “When I use it, I will know which direction you are in and exactly how far away you are. Not many sky dragons have the skill to use such a spell. It’s highly advanced magic.”

“I wish I could spend a day or two speaking to you about magic, esteemed council member,” Kent chuckled. “To say we are *highly* interested in magic is an understatement.”

Hinado looked at Jenny lightly. “Then send this one,” Sella said, then her eyes widened and she gasped. “She has the potential to use magic!

Jenny, that is wonderful!” Sella squealed, almost girlishly. “We knew the humans once used magic, we taught it to them, but to know that the talent hasn’t left humanity, that’s a wonderful thing!”

“Me? I could use magic?” Jenny asked, almost stunned.

“With proper training and several years of dedicated study, yes,” Sella translated, grinning at her.

“But, I’ve never had anything *magic* happen before!” she protested. “Shouldn’t I have, like, zapped someone or something by now?”

Sella laughed, and so did Hinado when Sella translated. “Magic doesn’t work that way, Jenny. It can *never* be exercised unless you know exactly what you’re doing. It would be years before you managed to cast your first spell, but if you dedicated yourself to it, eventually, you could learn magic. Only dragons can use magic without extensive training, and only their racial abilities. To learn any other kind of magic, that also takes dedication and study.”

“You mean you *knew*, all this time, I could do magic?” she asked, giving Sella an almost accusatory stare.

“Not me, I don’t have that kind of training,” Sella protested, then translated. “Hinado said that to assense someone like that requires touch. When he picked you up to bring you here, he sensed it in you. He said you could be a formidable magician with fifty or sixty years of dedicated study.”

Jenny laughed nervously. “Well, that almost ruins the whole thing, knowing I’d be a great magician about the time I’m walking around using a cane,” she said, giving Sella a rueful smile. “And the only place I could learn it would be the island, where they don’t exactly like humans.”

“But at least now you know, and now *we* know that the humans have not lost Gaia’s favor,” Sella translated. “When the time comes, that will make a difference, Jenny Edwards. A great difference.” He turned to Kent and continued to speak. “Hinado says that when the time comes, he will tell the other dragons of this. But, for now, he commands me to bring Jenny

something. A beginner's guide to magic, as it were, which explains the basics, since now we have reason to share our knowledge. It will be written in dragon, but the translation program will help you translate it, when you get it."

"That would be *most* appreciated, Hinado," Kent said eagerly. "We have an almost overpowering curiosity about magic."

"The book is for *Jenny*, Mister Secretary. It is her decision if she wishes to share what is within its pages."

"Of course, of course," Kent said quickly.

Hinado chattered at Sella, who nodded. "Our time here is done. Jenny, I'll bring you that book in a few hours, I have to go get it. The software will take a little longer. Sometimes, wresting one of their treasured secrets from the earth dragons can be a chore."

"Alright, Sella," she replied, then was almost knocked to the deck when Sella bounded over and put her massive paw on her shoulder, then looped her strong fingers around Jenny's waist as she said something to Hinado. The sky drake nodded, floated up over their heads, then unfurled his wings. In a single wingbeat, he rocketed into the sky, sending a gust of wind back down on the deck that pulled at their clothes and hair. In a matter of seconds, Hinado was gone, his body shimmering in the blue sky and vanishing, almost like invisibility.

"Holy cow," Ross blurted. "How did he do that?"

"Sky dragons are very fast in the air, Madam Ross," Sella said lightly. "Even your fighter planes would be hard pressed to keep up with them. I will fly you back to your ship, Jenny, and tell the water dragons. Mister Secretary, Hinado said it is safe to begin offloading the supplies. Jenny will call you when we are ready to start taking them, just give me time to warn the others we're starting. Ready?"

"I guess so," Jenny chuckled, putting her hands on Sella's fingers.

“Alright, here we go,” she said, then she kicked off the deck. She was much slower than the sky drake, flapping her wings as they went out over the water, carrying them up over the missile cruiser. Several sailors were looking up at them with astonished faces. She banked a little and returned to the freighter, flapping madly just as she reached the deck, then landing only on her back feet. She set Jenny down carefully, then dropped back to all fours once she got out from under the water drake. “It pleases me beyond measure to know that you can do magic, Jenny,” Sella said, almost knocking her down by nuzzling the side of her head against her.

“It’s kind of a shock, but also a letdown,” she laughed. “So, I find out I can do magic, but only after about five years of complete devotion to study, almost like going back to school. And I can’t even zap anyone by accident. That takes all the fun out of it!”

“Gaia may favor us, but she never gives us anything easily. For all things that matter, we must work,” Sella said sagely. “I’ll signal you from the water when we’re ready, and you can begin the offload. Just unload it as fast as you can, we have enough water dragons here to handle it, but start with the smallest pallets first. Some supplies we can only give to the earth dragons after dark, the largest ones. The small ones, we can take to them in the daylight safely. And since the humans have seen us, hiding is not an issue now,” she said, glancing up at the bridge, where Dawkins stood with his hands pressed up on the glass, his eyes wide and fearful.

“How many are here?”

“A few hundred,” she grinned. “We’ve been following your ships since early this morning.”

“I shoulda known,” Jenny laughed ruefully.

“We were curious why you brought three freighters. There can’t be *that* much.”

“No, but they split it into three loads in case sky dragons sank the freighter, that way we didn’t lose everything. It’s an old Navy trick dating

back to the convoys of World War two. Never put everything you can't afford to lose on one ship, because if it goes down, you're screwed."

"Ah. Clever," she nodded, then she backed away from Jenny. "Look for me in about ten minutes," she said, then she dove off the side of the ship. Jenny heard her splash into the water below.

Well, *that* was certainly enlightening. Kell had said Hinado was a wild card on the council, and it seemed that he was still a wild card, a banished dragon looking for revenge, and willing to help them to get it. But more than that, he put the traditions of dragon law above his own prejudices. There was no doubt he looked down on the earth dragons as much as any other sky dragon, but he believed in their law, and that law gave the earth dragons rights. It explained why Hinado turned on the chromatic when they started their plan to strip the earth dragons of their technology and their rights, and also explained why the chromatic completely ran Hinado off the island. If Ivaiya was the only sky dragon that could beat him in a fight, that made Hinado very dangerous if he decided to stop the chromatics with force. And with Ivaiya dead, it put Hinado in a position to wrest control of the sky dragons away from the chromatics, and put in place a leader that would make the sky dragons adhere to dragon law.

And then there was that little bombshell. She, Jenny Edwards, could do *magic*. It was almost like the fantasies of childhood came roaring back...at least until she pondered what it would take before she could ever do a single spell. Years of study, devoted study. Putting her career on hold, putting everything on hold, moving to the island where everyone would hate her, and probably training under the very chromatics she considered to be enemies to both the earth dragons and to humanity. It would be like college all over again, the long nights, the hours and hours in the library, no social life—no life at all, really. Just study, study, study.

At that point in her life, she wasn't sure if it was worth pursuing. She loved her job, she was happy with her family. Devoting all that time to learning magic, which the military would demand she use for them, it probably wasn't worth it.

But it was a nice feeling to know that she *could*, if she wanted. And she was just like Kent, she was intensely curious about magic. When Sella brought her that book, she'd be very eager to read it.

Chapter 8

9 June 2017, 11:10 DMT; Sanctuary City

Kell was in a mood.

Actually, he'd been in one since that bizarre dream, but everyone was so incredibly busy that he hadn't really had all that much time to ponder it. And the work just kept piling up, because as soon as they got one problem solved, four more would rear up. If it wasn't the unlucky drakes camping on the floor fussing over the hustle and bustle, it was Jukra flooding half the lower tunnels when his plan to build the gravity cistern for the water tube went just *slightly* wrong. And if it wasn't that, it was burrowing out the planned waterwheel generator room and building the transmission gearbox out of anything they could find, which was a real challenge given that gears that size weren't high on the list of priorities when they packed up their goods. Kell had a bunch of them in his burrow...but getting to his burrow would be even more of a challenge than building the transmission.

And then Sella arrives and drops an even bigger bomb on them. Hinado had intervened with the human ships, and Jenny could do *magic*. That revelation unsettled Kell for some strange reason, why he had no idea, but it just...did. It was almost like some kind of unwitting betrayal, that one of the humans he felt he could most identify with turned out to be one of *them*. He hadn't known it, she hadn't even known it, but the fact was still sitting out there. Jenny had magical talent, and with sufficient study and training, she'd be able to bring it out, cast a few simple spells. He wondered how Jenny felt about it, if she felt any different, if she was excited about it or didn't really care all that much. How she felt about it would influence how he felt about it, he supposed.

But he barely had any time at all to think about that, because the food supplies the humans sent them started to arrive. The water dragons were bringing it in using both entrances, staying to the water tube entrance during the daylight and moving in smaller boxes and bags, then using the main entrance once the sun went down, bringing it in entire pallets at a time. There was a lot of it at that, cutting even more into their precious empty space, until there were boxes and bags and pallets stored literally anywhere they could find room to put them. The department had a wall stacked from floor to ceiling with boxes of cheese, and many of the cramped private burrows were taking in some of their supplies as well. It was almost like a maze after they got everything in, forcing a dragon to step carefully among stacked boxes and bags in any open area, every room reduced in size because of supplies stacked along walls, even stacked along the tunnels. The wyrms found their personal space violated at every turn by the supplies, choking already small passages down to almost unpassable levels. Anthra, the poor wyrm, was all but trapped in the main cavern, since any attempt to go down any of the lower tunnels would leave a chaotic mess of overturned boxes in her wake.

After the food managers took inventory of everything and crunched the numbers, they estimated that the food aid from the humans would extend their foodstocks by five months. That still put them well behind the others, but the earth dragons still on the surface were working on that one. The food aid was more or less what Kell asked them to deliver; a lot of rice that they'd have to cook, flour in sealed bags so the water didn't ruin it, cheese, potatoes mostly, but there were some oddities. They'd sent them six crates of evaporated milk, for example, as well as five huge crates of chocolate bars, which looked to be the ones they put in MREs. They'd managed to send about 10 crates of onions and 16 crates of various canned vegetables, which most earth dragons would just eat can and all. The nicest thing they'd sent was about 20 huge sealed boxes holding loaves and loaves and loaves of French bread. Kent must have had his men fan out and buy every loaf of French bread they could find in the entire D.C. metro area to fill those boxes. That would have to be eaten quickly before it went stale, but it was a

nice treat for everyone after all the hard work and the chaos of being uprooted.

With the sound of rushing water and Kammi's incessant nagging droning in the background, Kell assembled a gear assembly inside the gearbox that Fredda had had built for them. Fredda was in the room as well, installing a custom shaft extender into the generator she'd built, taking their largest diesel-powered generator, gutting it, and using its main core as the base for her modified design. The generator would barely produce a tenth of the power they'd need, but it would do for running some critical things like power tools and a few computers, which would help them build the thermal plant faster. Once that was up, they'd have all the power they needed and the waterwheel generator would be an emergency backup. The transmission Fredda had designed, more or less on the spot, was rather ingenious in that no matter how fast or slow the water turned the paddlewheels that Jirran had built, the transmission would turn the crankshaft at a constant speed that would produce a three-phase, 220 volt, 60 Hertz power output. That was standard transmission power they used on the island that would get stepped up or down by the transformers they'd installed, giving them both three-phase 440 volt industrial power for the heavy power tools and also residential single phase 220 volt for use in about everything else. Getting the gears for the gearbox had been a real adventure, up to the point where about half of them had been paw-crafted by Fredda's power drakes and the machine specialists in Jukra's builder department. They'd literally used their claws to sculpt the gears out of metal stock, but they were virtually perfect, balanced and their ridges and teeth lining up exactly in the gearbox.

"Alright, this part's done," Kell said, closing the lid of the gearbox.

"Then go ahead and get the other part of it started," Fredda ordered. "I should be done with this by the time you get to the crankshaft. Got the tools you need?"

"Right here," he said, patting his shoulder bag. Kell was the one they'd picked to take the paddlewheel into the tube, climb up to where the crankshaft pierced the wall, and install it, because since he was the strongest

swimmer, everyone felt that he wouldn't have much trouble getting out if he fell down the tube and into the water. He'd have to do it against the water's current, holding it in place as he bolted it onto the end of the shaft, but he could do it.

Wrestling the wheel up the tube was an adventure, but it was even more fun installing it. It was on a rotating shaft that would let them pull the wheel up and out of the water stream for when the generator wasn't in use, so Kell had to hold it up and steady as he bolted it to the end of the shaft sticking out of a small hole they'd drilled through the tunnel wall. He almost lost the wrench twice as his tail kept drifting down and into the current, suddenly yanking him, but he finally got the last bolt secured. He tied them off using aircraft wire, ensuring that any bolt that tried to loosen only tightened the two bolts around it, an old trick they'd been using in human aircraft since their second world war.

"Alright, it's all wired up!" he shouted through the hole.

"I'll put in the sleeve and we'll test it out. Rap on the shaft twice if it doesn't work right," Fredda called through the hole. The hole was plugged by the sleeve around the shaft to keep it secure, fitting perfectly into the hole, then he climbed up and out of the way. The shaft was designed to rotate all the way up to the ceiling to give nearly three meters of point to point clearance between the wheel and the water, allowing for possible flooding of the tube during heavy rains, and he watched as the wheel first slowly rotated up and away from the water, reaching its high terminus, then it turned and went back the other way like the minute hand on a clock, rotating in an arc down into the water. The wheel sputtered and then started to turn, quickly matching the water speed and turning at a fairly fast clip, probably around 400RPM. The gearbox inside should adjust that rotational velocity to 60 Hertz. Kell watched for a moment as they probably tested the transmission, then the wheel rotated up and out of the stream. The sleeve came out, and Fredda's voice threaded in. "We're good! Come back!"

It took Kell a little bit to return to the generator room, where Fredda was bolting the sleeve into the wall as Jirran and Kammi fussed with the

transmission. “Working?”

“Yeah, it’s working,” Fredda replied. “Soon as we lock everything up, we’ll put it online.”

“We should all go get our laptops so they can charge,” Kammi noted absently. “Especially you, Kell. How much battery did you use up making a copy of that software for Sella?”

“I still can’t believe we’re just handing over our translation software,” Jirran grunted.

“Me either, but the chief told us to do it, so we do it,” Kammi replied.

“I can see the need for it. If the chromatics let the others out using the scions, the humans had *better* be in a position where they can communicate,” Fredda injected, tightening the last nut. “And it’s not like it’s going to be very useful to them anywhere else. The only books written in dragon are *here*.”

“True. What I can’t believe is that sky drake siding with us.”

“He has his reasons,” Kell noted. “I’m just glad there’s at least *one* dragon up there that still believes in the law. He’s as prejudiced against us as the others, don’t ever think that he’s not, but he believes in the law. One of the last of the honorable dragons,” he grunted. “When all this is over, he can help calm things down. We may even demand he be put back on the council.”

“Think we’ll get away with it?” Kammi asked.

“When this is over, we’ll get *anything* we demand, if it works right,” Kell replied as Jirran and Kammi closed the lid of the transmission unit, then started bolting it down. “Of course, it has to work right.”

“Famous last words,” Fredda chuckled. “An engineer *never* believes anything ever works right.”

“Neither do us field agents,” Jirran agreed.

They reattached the dummy load to the generator so it could run without being connected to anything, then Fredda used a manual crank to bring the wheel down. The generator started to turn, then the indicator lights on the side lit up as the power started to flow. “Looking good,” she said, checking the voltage indicators. “No shimmying, power output stable. Okay, let’s patch in the lines to the department and the thermal plant,” she ordered, actuating a heavy circuit breaker switch on the side. “Remember to tell the chief not to use the power unless he *has* to,” she warned. “We need to get as much power to the thermal room as possible so they can use their tools.” She turned to a juvenile wyrm by the entrance, who was larger than everyone in the room but Fredda. “Run to the thermal room and tell them we’re done. Have them send the tech in to oversee the generator, and that they should have power, and *not* to plug everything up and turn it on at once. One tool at a time!” she barked.

“Yes, Fredda, one tool at a time,” she nodded, then turned and bounded away.

“Why not use the intercom?” Kammi asked.

“Because it’s not turned on in the thermal room,” she replied. “I didn’t want *anything* active when we switch over the power.” The intercom would let the thermal room talk to the drake watching the generator, to turn it off or shunt new circuits as necessary. The operator would be like an old-fashioned human switchboard operator, only running power to those lines that had to have it, to save as much power as possible for tools they’d need to build the new plant, mainly for their drilling equipment. They’d been drilling using paw-cranked drills, and that was very tiring, even for an earth dragon. Getting the motorized drill unit going would speed things up considerably...though when it was running, they wouldn’t have enough power to run much else. Fredda had built a large power management console for the drake to use, allowing him to turn circuits on and off by pulling on a heavy breaker switch. Fredda studied the board, and nodded when needles started moving. “They’re starting to turn things on,” she declared, then the intercom crackled.

“Fredda, Fredda, you receiving?”

“Hear you loud and clear, Jukra. Why are you in there?”

“Helping out while my tunnelers finish the piping,” he replied. “We’re bringing up the tools. Warn us when we hit red, we’re gonna see how much we can run at once.”

“Just what I was going to order,” she nodded to the speaker. “Alright, bring things up. I’ll call out when we’re on the red line.” The three field agents watched for a few moments as Fredda studied the board, then she hit the intercom. “Stop!” she barked. “We’re on the red!”

“That thing’s pretty powerful for a jerry-rig,” Jukra chuckled in reply. “We’re running nearly half the tools.”

“Well, at least *one* field agent’s pretty smart,” Fredda teased, giving Jirran an approving look. Jirran preened, and both Kell and Kammi whacked him with the undersides of their tails, which made Fredda laugh. “Alright, take down what they don’t need and get to work. Priority on the drill.”

“Understood, I’ll keep them in line til you get back down here.”

“I’m not going anywhere until Gelvedd gets here,” she replied. “We can’t leave this thing unattended for a second, Jukra.”

“He’s on his way, so it shouldn’t be long.”

“You three can go, I can manage from here, and thanks for the help,” Fredda told them.

“We’re all in this together, Fredda,” Kammi replied.

The three of them talked as they headed back to the main cavern, what everyone was now calling the high-rise, sometimes having to squeeze through narrow passages choked with boxes or crates or pallets of rice. Sometimes it amazed Kell how fast earth dragons could move when they had reason, and the extensive catacomb of passages under the main cavern

was the perfect example. More tunnels were being excavated every *hour*, new chambers were being dug, as they built an underground city deep in the heart of the extinct volcano. When they were done, it would be spacious, have running water and power, and they'd be comfortable as they waited out the other dragons. They moved through the crowded ground floor of the main cavern and up the ramp to the second floor, and then into the headquarters of the new department...which was also the main headquarters for Anthra and Geon, who directed all earth dragon activities as their council members. Essan was also there, with two water drakes sitting on their haunches near him, and four very young earth drakes waiting near the door to run messages for the council or Ferroth. Kav was one of them, grinning and wagging his tail at Kell as they entered. "—are on their way back to Hawaii," one of those drakes said as they came in. "They should get back in about four days."

"And the book and software?"

"Delivered. I'm tracking the book as we speak. Sella has it and is on her way right now with both the book and the software, and should be there within an hour. Jussa laid the enchantments on the book so it can't be taken from the human himself."

"I wonder if they considered the possibility the book itself was enchanted," Anthra mused. "But, Jenny's the first human magician we've known of since we left their world, so we need to keep an eye on her. Both for our safety and for hers."

"Not that it'll help," Essan noted. "Humans can't do any magic without extensive training, or at least that's what our histories say. Unless something drastically changed in a thousand years, I'd suspect that it's still the same."

"When the time comes, she'll be very useful. It would behoove us to have a human here on the island, and I doubt even the chromatics will object if that human is a magician."

"Why so, Anthra?" Kammi asked.

“Because the humans have proved to be our friends, and having one here and within easy contact could be very helpful,” she replied. “Now, have you finished the generator?”

“It’s up and running, and they’ve got power down in the thermal room,” Kell answered. “Fredda enabled our power, but warned us to only use it when we have to.”

“Well, we need at least a *few* computers up,” Ferroth grunted. “Jirran, go activate rack one and the main database server rack, then go turn on all the switches between here and the thermal room so they can get main server access for their computers. It shouldn’t draw much power, and we can test out the wiring. Brall, go tell her we’re bringing some of the servers online, and we’re enabling network access for the thermal room.”

“At once, chief,” the juvenile drake called, then bounded out of the room.

“Try the backup generator room first,” Kell called. “If she’s not there, she’s in the thermal room.”

“Got it!” he shouted as he all but dove down the ramp.

“You two go help Jirran get everything going,” Ferroth ordered. “It may take some troubleshooting since this is our first time turning it on.”

“We figured,” Kammi smiled.

It took a while. Once the servers came up, they had to reconfigure them, remote enable the switches, then put it all together. Two hours of clacking away on keyboards and hunting down two connectivity breaks in the cabling later, they finally got the main database and remote program access servers up, one rack of servers enabled and ready to serve remote computers, and connectivity to the thermal room and the backup generator room both. Ferroth was right that it didn’t draw much power away from the emergency grid, but it was enough to make Fredda send a couple of testy text messages over her tablet once they got the wireless running. She then gave Ferroth a couple of short commands once they turned on the intercom

in the department, complaining about the power drain they were putting on her delicate and very emergency power grid. “You *need* computer access, Fredda,” Ferroth retorted into the speaker. “It should help you get it built faster.”

“Well, at least I can monitor the backup generator from here using the remote,” she grunted. “But don’t turn on anything else! Every server you bring up takes another power tool offline, and we need the power *here!*”

“We’re only enabling one power outlet for charging tablets and laptops, and they’ll charge two at a time on a rotating schedule,” he replied smoothly. “So get your own devices on the list we’re putting out up here at the department so you can get some charge time for your tablet.”

“I can do that down here,” she snorted.

“Then you’re knocking your own tools off, eh?” he teased.

“Lick my tail, Ferroth,” she retorted, and the click on the speaker told them she’d turned off the intercom mic on her side, which made Ferroth chuckle.

“What’s next on the list, chief?” Kell asked as he and Kammi came out of the server room.

“Kammi, you go help down in the thermal room,” he ordered. “Jirran, you and Girk monitor the network for now, make sure there’s no hiccups and tweak the settings for maximum efficiency. Kell, Jukra asked for you particularly down in the cistern. They have to do some more digging out, and it’s going to be underwater.”

“Sure thing, chief. Did Jukra ask for sire and mother too?”

“He should have, you three are the resident experts on underwater excavation,” he nodded.

“It’s good to have a skill, I suppose,” Kammi said lightly.

“Be lucky I don’t make you go too,” he told her. “We were just starting to train you.”

“Actually, that’s an idea,” Ferroth said. “Girk, you go to the thermal room. Kammi, you help Kell.”

Kammi gave Ferroth a dirty look, then obediently followed Kell out of the department.

Keth and Kanna were already there, digging out the bottom of the cistern when Kell and Kammi arrived. Other drakes on the excavation team were helping as best they could, mainly watching the two experts and learning their technique. Kitta and Konn were also there, since any opportunity to watch the family’s unique talent was a chance to learn. “Kell, I was hoping they’d get you down here,” Jukra said in relief.

“I had to finish what I was doing, but I’ll be happy to give you a paw. How much are we cutting out?”

“As much as you can,” he replied. “The bigger, the better.”

“We can take it to the mantle if that’s what you want, Jukra,” he said lightly, which made him chuckle.

“We’re not entirely sure. Just keep digging straight down until I tell you to stop, because they keep sending me larger and larger water volume numbers every hour. Is that alright?”

“The side walls?”

“They’re good as they are, just be careful when you reach the sides, don’t gouge too deeply into the walls or you’ll undercut the foundations.”

“We’ll be careful. Ready to do some real work, Kammi?”

“I can’t believe you told the chief about that,” she complained. “I almost drowned, you know!”

“Well, now you won’t be quite so silly, will you?” he asked lightly, which earned him a swat of her tail.

Kammi did prove to be very useful. Kell had taught her the basics, and she remembered those lessons. She couldn't stay down even a tenth as long as Keth's family could, none of them could for that matter, but when she was there, she was helpful. The other drakes helped by carting off the slabs of stone they dug out, using paw-cranked vacuum pumps to suck out the dirty water, sending it back down the tube as fresh water poured in to replace it, drakes managed the four underwater lamps they were using to light the effort since thermographic vision was heavily restricted underwater, and four drakes kept careful watch for any drake that might be in danger of drowning, ready to dive down and haul him or her up at the first signs of distress. The rock slabs they were cutting could be useful themselves, so Jukra kept them neatly stacked in the excavated chamber over the cistern where they'd install some of their water pumps and other equipment.

They got another curious helper after a couple of hours. Ralla appeared at the bottom, nodding at Kell and Kanna with a smile as they prepared to break off another slab, then helped the earth drakes cart it up to the surface. They followed him and once they surfaced, Kanna asked the question both of them had in mind. "What are you doing here, young one?" she asked.

"At the moment, helping you," he replied lightly. "I brought in some messages for Anthra and Geon, and they mentioned this project. I came to see if I could help it along."

"Well, you will be very helpful, young friend," Kanna told him. "You help Kammi, the poor dear's going to drown herself trying to make herself useful."

"She can be very determined, I've noticed," Ralla chuckled, giving Kell a sly look.

Ralla's help sped things up considerably, because of his water magic. He formed a breathing bubble near the bottom for any drake to use, the same trick Surral had used, but this one didn't require him to use any other magic to help them breathe. The only thing he told them was to exhale

before trying to surface due to pressure. The bubble didn't require his full attention but did require him to use all his magic to maintain it, so he gathered crumbs of rock and helped guide a vacuum hose while the earth drakes dug. He also stayed close to Kammi, who was again demonstrating her nearly bull-headed determination, pushing her lungs to the limit with every dive, trying to dig as much as possible before she drowned. But, in a way, Kell understood what she was doing, because every time she went back down after a brief rest, she could hold her breath a tiny bit longer. That was how a drake trained for diving, it was how Kell had trained himself, and the more she did it, the longer she'd be able to stay under. With the breathing bubble much closer to the work, things sped up for everyone, letting them dig at least fifteen meters out of the bottom by the time Jukra called them all out. Kell felt curiously happy after they came up, as if doing something familiar had brought everything into focus, the simple pleasure of a job well done bringing back a feeling of *normalcy* to his life.

"How far down did we dig?" Keth asked as he climbed out of the cistern.

"Almost twenty meters," Jukra said with an impressed nod. "And we couldn't have done it without your family's help, Keth. Nor you, Ralla," he nodded with a smile as the water drake surfaced. "I'd never have thought to dig the way you did."

"Different techniques are more efficient in the water," Keth replied simply.

"How much more volume does that give the tank?" Kell asked, treading water as Kammi climbed out.

"About twenty meters of excavation, bringing the tank depth to fifty-two meters, the tank is twelve by ten meters across," he answered, doing the math. "Gaia's talons, some six thousand cubic meters of water, more than enough," he snorted. "If we go through *this* much water in a day, there's something seriously wrong with us."

“Then we need to smooth out the walls and floor,” Keth declared.
“And we’ll be finished.”

“We can do that tomorrow.”

“It’s best to do it now, while we’re all here. It won’t take long,” he protested calmly. “Let’s take a short break to rest, and then we’ll finish.”

“Alright. Felker, get to work installing the draw pipe and casing for the pump while they’re taking a break, then we’ll finish the walls, flush the debris and silt out of the tank with Ralla’s help, and be done.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ralla nodded.

After a half hour to eat and rest, they dove back in and finished up, using their horns, tail spikes, and claws like files and sanders to smooth the walls, leaving behind that distinctive crosshatch pattern as they rubbed their diamond-hard ridged horns or bunched spike tips against the stone, grinding it away. The results were walls that were very smooth and perfectly straight, a flat, smooth floor that was slightly angled to the west because of how they intended to install the main draw pipe, and after they finished the main hatch and valve built under the water tube to shut off or regulate the water flow when necessary, the main water tank for their sanctuary was complete. All they needed now were the water pumps for the upper half of the city and power to run them; they had wanted to build the tank higher than the cavern and run a gravity feed to remove the need for pumps or relying on power to run them, but sounding out the tube and the rock around it forced them to build the tank just under the level of the main cavern, which would require pumps to get the water to the higher parts of the city, but allow them to use simple gravity feeds to get the water to the lower sections.

“Alright, good job everyone,” Jukra called as Kanna climbed out, the last drake. “Ralla, if you’d be so kind as to pull the water up through this pipe, we’ll flush the tank, then let it refill. Verkin, get to work installing the water pumps for the higher sections. Frekk, you handle the gravity feed system for the lower areas. Darba, you start drilling the water pipes out to the rest of the complex. Hukra, waste water pipes, latrine sewer pipes, and

the main wastewater collection tank for the treatment plant are your project. If we do this right, we'll have everything ready before they get the power down here."

"With the gravity feed system, we'll have water running to the lower areas before they get us power," Frekk chuckled.

"That won't do the main cavern or the top level burrows much good," Jukra replied. "The faster we get the water set up, the easier it'll be on everyone, so take an hour break and then get to it."

The whole family was tired after that; everyone but Kav anyway, who had been working as a messenger, so they returned to their assigned burrow and collapsed all over the main living chamber. Kammi was with them, rolling over on her back and stretching her legs up towards the ceiling, giving a low grunt. "I'm gonna feel *this* in the morning," she declared.

"I haven't dug out that much at one time in decades, but it had to be done," Keth agreed. "The faster we finish these things, the better it will be for all of us."

"At least you didn't almost drown this time, Kammi," Kitta noted lightly.

"Oh, lick my tail, hatchling," she retorted, which made Kitta laugh.

"Where do they have you living, Kammi?" Konn asked.

"In the high rise, a floor up over the department," she answered. "I'm sharing the burrow with three other females from the department, since space is at a premium," she said. "I think the snobby, important drakes like Kell are the only ones with their own burrows," she teased.

"Have you seen the room they put me in? It's half this size," he snorted. "I can barely turn around in there. Most of my stuff is *here* simply because there's no room for it there."

"We're going to dig out a room for you, youngling," Keth told him. "You won't be there long."

“I’ll be happy to take it, sire.”

“I don’t see why you didn’t simply stay here with us, Kammi,” Kanna observed. “You’re still our farm worker, young one. We didn’t release you.”

Kammi laughed. “I wasn’t going to impose on you like that.”

“Pft, we have enough room for you, so move in with us. You can sleep in the room we originally intended for Kell, until we can dig out a room for you. We like you, young one,” Keth told her. “And we’re happy to have you.”

“That’s very kind of you, Patron, thank you,” she said, rolling over on her wing. “I’d much rather be here than there. Those females they put me with are really annoying.”

“Who?”

“Cretta, Clee, and Cadigwen,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Kell burst out laughing. “No wonder,” he grinned. “The gossip sisters.”

“And they just will not shut up,” she complained, which made Kitta giggle, then bound over and jump on Kammi’s flank, hanging over her. She’d only been with the family for a few days, but all three of the hatchlings *adored* Kammi. Kammi pulled her down on her back in front of her and scrubbed her tan belly with her claws lightly, making Kitta laugh and squirm a little.

“Why aren’t you using the room?” Kammi asked him curiously.

“Because it’s where the family’s storing about everything we own,” he replied. “And since I’m in the department, like you, I could secure other quarters until I have time to dig out my own burrow.”

“Ah.”

“Well, I guess I’ll move down tomorrow, if you don’t mind. I’m too tired to do much of anything right now. I could sleep right here,” she yawned.

“We have anything if not time, young one,” Keth said with a nod. “Lucky for us there’s nothing behind the burrow, so we can expand it in that direction. We can have this place nice and large in no time, at least after everything important gets done and we have time to do for ourselves. Large enough for all of us.”

10 June 2017, 10:14 EDT; Arlington, Virginia

This was *it*.

Finally, after nearly a day of installs, reinstalls, tinkering, tweaking, and cajoling that involved all four of the computer geeks in the office, they had the software up and running. It wasn’t as easy as just dropping the software into their machines and running it, because though Kell seemed to use a version of Linux same as her, actually making a dragon program run on a human computer had taken some major work. But, they didn’t have doctorates in computer science for nothing. The rest of the team watched; though they all had some extensive computer training, and there were two other computer science docorates on the team, Yancy had decided that too many hands would ruin the cooking, so he assigned this task to Jenny and Petrovski, with Micheals and Derringer providing consultation when asked for it and observing everything.

The White House almost took both the software and the book away from her when she got back home. There was nearly a fight in the Oval Office between her, the head of the NSA, and the head of the CIA. Both of them wanted the program, and in typical government bickering, they *didn’t* want anyone else to have it. The CIA especially was vociferous about taking the book from Jenny, wanting it to study first, analyze it to the smallest detail, even what it was made of, and no doubt to have it disappear in their bureaucracy. President Walker had to almost smack Joseph Barker, the head of the CIA, because the man was literally demanding things of the *President*, as if Walker worked for him rather than the other way around.

Fortunately, Walker sided with Jenny in the matter. They'd given *her* the book, so it was her project, her responsibility. She'd never hand over the book, but after they got it translated, she was more than happy to hand over text files of that translation.

The book itself was highly interesting. It was huge, for one thing, nearly four feet tall, three feet wide, and about a foot thick. It was made of very heavy pages that weren't paper, they were some kind of very thin leather-like material, and the writing on it wasn't done with any kind of ink. It was almost like the words were *branded* on the paper. The characters weren't placed on the pages like they'd be with ink, they were instead recessed into the pages, and the texture was rough, like they'd been burned in. The characters were large, obviously written by a dragon's paw, but the characters were also very sharp and elegantly penned, so calligraphy was important. It was almost as if whichever dragon had written this book had used his own clawtip as his pen and magic as the means by which the words were penned. She knew that was how earth dragons drew on the walls of their burrows, gouging into the rocks with their clawtips, so it was no stretch that another dragon, like a chromatic, would use the same technique for writing in a book.

She and Petrovski watched the debug window as the program started up. It was indeed a stolen version of the Dragon speech to text software, one of the earth dragons had stolen the source code for the program from the company and then used it as a base, transforming it into their draconic to English translation program. It was the full version, providing both speech and text translation, and using this gem they'd have both a translation of the book, and with a little computer analysis of the program's database, they'd have a primer for learning the entire draconic language, both written and spoken. "Alright, let's see if it crashes this time," Petrovski said, picking up the handheld camera-style scanner they had tied to the computer. "Start it up."

"Alright, the cover," Petrovski began, then she took a picture of the letters on the cover. Jenny watched the four windows on the monitor of the computer.

“Come on, good juju,” Juarez murmured.

The program did what she programmed it to do. The earth dragons had altered it so the program could analyze a visual image fed to it either by a scanner or several picture file formats, isolate the draconic letters, then convert it into draconic text. Jenny saw that it was how they digitalized their books, scanning them and translating them into text files, and the issue they’d had was that the program didn’t like the scanners they’d been using. The scanner Petrovski was using now was the fourth one they’d installed on the box, but this one seemed to cooperate with the translation program. It recognized the symbols in the scanner image and converted them to three lines of draconic letters, then it exported that file to a new window and displayed it in English:

Primer Magickal:

Understanding Gaia and

Her Gift Treasured to All

“Well, it’s sorta working,” Price said as they looked at the monitor.

“Translation issue, it’s using some draconic syntax,” Petrovski noted. “Looks like draconic is like Spanish, adjectives come after the nouns, and the program’s not converting that into English syntax. Not every translation program is perfect. But the main point is, it’s *working*. We can iron that out later.”

“Alright, scan the book, ladies,” Yancy ordered. “We’ll get the file out to everyone who wants it. How about the translation program?”

“Give us about an hour and we’ll have a build we can release,” Jenny said, looking at him, “but only if we don’t scan the book. So pick which one you want us to do, boss.”

“We can spread the work around now. Jenny, Olivia, you focus on the program. Get it to where any idiot that knows enough about Linux can install it. Matt, Frank, you two scan the book. When all of you are done, we’ll courier it straight to the White House so they can decide who gets it.”

“No problem, boss, we can handle that,” Matt Derringer replied.

“Jenny’s the resident wizard,” Frank Michaels chuckled, which earned him a kick in the shin. The team knew about Jenny’s little secret.

The excitement over being able to *read* the book almost made it hard to finish her work. She and Petrovski worked side by side to clean up the program, Petrovski even fixing the adjective syntax issue, then they compiled it and copied to a thumb drive. “Good work, ladies,” Yancy said, taking the drive. “Now install a copy of that on every computer we have, and put it on another thumb drive and bury it where even the CIA snoops won’t find it.”

“Can do, boss,” Petrovski grinned. “Can I take a copy home? I want to study how they modified it in more detail.”

“As long as you don’t install it on a hot box,” he replied.

Jenny all but hovered over Michaels and Derringer as they scanned the pages of the book, then almost kissed Michaels when he handed her a thumb drive holding the converted file. She picked up the book and rushed with it back to her desk, then picked up the phone and direct dialed the Oval Office. Walker’s secretary answered, she transferred her over. “Jenny, you have news?” Walker asked over a speakerphone.

“We got the translation finished, sir, and I’m going to start reading right now,” she replied. “I think Yancy will be calling any minute to tell you a courier is on the way.”

“Good work, Major,” he replied easily. “I want you to call me as soon as you finish and give me your initial impressions, while it’s still fresh.”

“Provided I can understand it,” she laughed. “It was written by dragons, sir. There’s a good chance there might be critical information missing just because they consider it to be common knowledge.”

“Just do your best.”

“Yes, sir. I’m going to take this home with me, I’ll feel more comfortable reading in my own office. There’s too many distractions here,” she said, giving Michaels a cool look as he wiggled his fingers at her in what she guessed was some magical display.

“As long as you keep it secure.”

She took their build of the program home with her, along with the book and the text file, sat in her comfy chair in her office, exported it to a secure Linux tablet, then leaned back and started reading...and within the first fifteen minutes, she already had a headache.

The book was supposedly a basic manual for those who were just starting magical training, but it was like reading a dissertation by an astrophysicist. The subjects were complicated, convoluted, and she often had to stop and collect her thoughts as the book pulled her brain in four directions at once.

After five hours of diligent study, she finally managed to grasp the fundamental basics of magic. First and foremost, it was the magic of *life*. Life brought the power to be, and life fueled it, powered it. The life energy of every creature on earth, from a virus all the way up to humanity and dragonkin, the two dominant species on the planet, was the power source for magic. A magician tapped into this life energy and used it to create effects beyond the bounds of rational science. It almost sounded like the Force from the *Star Wars* movies, but according to the book, the collective life energies of every living thing on the planet had *its own* soul. According to magic, the planet itself was alive, and every living thing on the planet

was just a cell making up that cosmic body, much like individual cells made up her own body. An individual cell could die without the host body even realizing it. This collective entity, as the book called it, was what the dragons called Gaia, and to them, and to magic, she was a god. Not *the* God, but *a* god.

Sort of. It was here where the translation got a bit complicated. In the same paragraph, the book called Gaia both a god and a higher life form capable of death like any other living thing, which would make her not a god. But the book agreed that no matter what she was, she was as unaware of the beings living on the planet as Janet was unaware of the red blood cells in her body. She had consciousness, but it was beyond the understanding of the magicians. But the book *did* warn that magicians tapping into her power *were* noticed, and it was the rules of Gaia that governed the use of magic.

And there were some pretty straightforward rules, as well as some pretty obscure ones. The primary law of Gaia was that magic was *never* used to directly kill. To kill was the anathema to life, and Gaia *was* life. Magic could kill *indirectly*, like using magical fire to burn someone to death, but there was no spell in all of magic that, say, snuffed the life force out of him, or turned him to stone, changing him from something alive to something dead...which totally blew the myth of Medusa out of the water. Magic also could not *create* life. That was solely the privilege of Gaia. That meant that there would be no changing rocks into birds. Again, it might be able to do it indirectly, but the book made no mention of a specific example of such a thing.

The other main law of magic was proximity. A magician had to be physically close to the object she was affecting, and the further away she was, the harder she had to work to enact the spell. That told her that the scions on the island had to be magic of the highest order, since they linked what was close to what was very far away, and since far meant more magic, it must have taken the combined efforts of just about every chromatic to create a scion. And that explained why there were only nine. The effort it took to make one, it wasn't something they could just jaunt down and

accomplish easily. There were some exceptions to the rule, like scrying magic, but even scrying magic obeyed this fundamental rule at its core. A scrying spell was high-order magic, and while it let the magician reach much further with magic than with other spells, it still had a range limitation.

Magic also had to obey physical laws once the energy was manifested, within certain limits. The book was quite specific about that. Once it was manifested into the material world, it was like any other form of energy, and subject to the benefits and limitations of natural forms of energy if the spell mimicked them, such as fire or lightning. Magic that created a physical effect could be affected by physical objects, such as the aforementioned fire being blocked by a wall. The magical fire could set flammable materials on fire just like normal fire, behaving like regular fire in all respects save how magic fueled it or possibly propelled it. A magical fire wasn't easy to put out since it was being fueled by magic, the magic providing the heat, but it *could* be put out with non-magical materials if enough of it was thrown at the magical fire. That meant a lot of water, or perhaps a fire extinguisher. A magician could unleash a cone of fire at a target, using magic to induce non-physical movement in the fire while also fueling it, but that cone of fire could be blocked by a physical wall or a spell of shielding. A magical bolt of lightning could be thrown in a way so that it didn't just immediately go to ground, aiming it at a specific target, the magic giving it guidance beyond the laws of electricity, but if it hit a grounded metal object, the lightning would shunt to ground no matter what the magician wanted it to do. In that case, the physical laws of electricity overpowered the magic guiding the lightning.

She found it both curious and a little complicated that magic defied physical laws by its very definition, but was forced to obey some physical laws once it was brought into the physical world...and knowing which physical laws magic could bypass and which it couldn't was part of what being a magician was all about.

And as much as Hinado said, the book made it clear that those reading it was taking just the first step in a journey that would consume the rest of

their lives. Being a magician required *total* dedication to the craft, years and years and years of dedicated study, and cultivating a mental discipline that humanity would consider to be superhuman. A magician would have to concentrate on multiple things at once to enact magic, something the average human mind just wasn't capable of doing. Human brains were wired to concentrate on one thing at a time, so it would require some basic retraining of the fundamental operation of her brain just to *do* magic. In a way, she'd have to exceed human limitations and be capable of thinking about and concentrating on multiple things at once.

That was the most daunting thing she read in the book, and made her put her tablet in her lap and consider just *how* something like that would be possible. How could she alter the basic operation of her brain? Teach herself to, say, write with one hand, play paddleball with the other, tap dance, and recite *MacBeth* in Swahili while she blinked out *Romeo and Juliet* in Morse Code all at the same time. Sure, some people could multitask, like a singer playing a guitar and singing lyrics, but according to the book, she'd have to be able to concentrate on four or five independent things at the same time.

Which explained why magicians didn't accidentally use magic. The concentration and discipline it required was far beyond a magician unless he was fully intent on doing magic.

And the only way she could learn was from other magicians...which meant the chromatics. Or perhaps Sella, or maybe Hinado. She'd feel a hell of a lot more comfortable learning from Sella or Hinado than a chromatic.

There were some obscure rules of magic, as well. Magic was like a flowing energy source, and it had "tides." The time of day, the time of month, the time of year, and even more remote times all governed the ebb and flow of magic, going all the way up to a 5,102 year cycle. According to the chart in the book, the phase of the moon, the position of the planet in relation to the sun and the other planets, and the position of the sun in the galaxy all affected the power of magic. It smacked of astrology to her...and maybe astrology had its roots in magic. After all, if a magician wanted to

use magic at the peak time, then knowing the positions of the moon and planets was necessary...and the idea of “something good will happen when Jupiter is in Aries and Saturn is eclipsing Neptune” sorta defined the concept behind astrology. Magic could be used anytime, but using it during a “low” tide produced weaker results than using it at a “high” tide, and forced the magician to do more work to produce the same effect. The most powerful magic was reserved for those times when magic was most favorable...and again, it explained why there were only nine scions. If they could only make one at a time, and only when the conditions were proper, then it restricted the number they could make.

Magic was also influenced by the presence of certain materials. Certain materials were inherently “magic friendly” and were conducive to the flow of magic...and again, it was a curious contradiction. Crystals were the most useful materials, crystals of various kinds, which included most commonly coveted gemstones. But quartz crystal was also high on the list, which wasn’t precious. All crystals, the book read, were the most efficient at channeling magic, and some could *store* magic, which was the only physical material known to man or dragon capable of doing such a thing. But crystals weren’t the only things that were favorable to magic. Other things like salt (which were crystals), gold, silver, copper, platinum, mercury, sulfur, and iron, all of which could be magically forged into a metal called *orichalcum*...which tickled at her memory somehow. These were all *non-living* things, yet their presence influenced magical flow. All of these items made casting spells easier for the magician, made it less burdensome, and also had the benefit of enhancing the effect, making the spell stronger. The book mentioned here as it described these items that every human magician’s first major task was to procure for herself an item called a *talisman*, which was a necklace with a focusing crystal that would enhance her spellcasting capabilities. These talismans were unique to the magician, made of materials most “in sync” with the magician’s unique abilities, what the book called her *aura*, and was fashioned for her by her master and given to her at the completion of the first stage of her apprenticeship. A magician could use magic without her talisman, but it wouldn’t be nearly as strong, and magicians guarded their talismans

jealously. They represented a significant portion of their power, and to lose it was to a magician the same as losing her left arm.

Living things also enhanced magic. Various plants, animal parts like blood or teeth or fur, and the presence of living animals for certain spells, these could also enhance certain magicks, which depended on the type. For example, the book mentioned that holly berries would enhance a spell that lowered temperature, wolf fangs enhanced spells to hear better, and the presence of a bat enhanced various spells that diagnosed ailments for possible treatment. These organic materials the book called *familiars*, both the plants and the animals, while the non-organic materials were called *fetishes*.

And in the same paragraph, the book stated that materials such as lead, tin, titanium, selenium, and volcanic rock all *inhibited* magical flow. It also stated that certain organic materials inhibited certain magics, much the same way they could enhance others. The aforementioned holly berries enhanced a spell that lowered temperature, but they *inhibited* spells that produced light. Why, the book gave no reason, but that was the way it was. The inorganic materials that inhibited magic, the book called *insulators*, which reeked of electrical terminology. Electrically resistant materials were called insulators. But organic materials that might inhibit magic were still called *familiars*, and it was the magician's job to know which familiars might enhance or inhibit the spell she was casting.

Which explained why the earth dragons had decided to go deep under the volcano, putting all that volcanic rock between them and the chromatics.

Curious...why would rock in one form conduct magic, but rock in another form inhibit it? Why were some metals conducive, and some resistant? Was it some matter of chemistry? After all, the book stated that in some ways, magic followed physical laws, and chemistry was very much a physical science. Was the chemical makeup of those materials somehow favorable or unfavorable to magic? Most of them were elements, with the exception of salt and volcanic rock, like pumice, basalt, obsidian glass and the like. Salt was a simple compound, and there were different kinds of

salts, but the book made no mention if good old sodium chloride was as effective as potassium chloride, which was also technically a salt, commonly referred to as sea salt. If she remembered her high school chemistry, bromium could also form compounds considered to be salts, replacing sodium in the molecule, and chlorine could be replaced with other elements from its row of the periodic table...but she wasn't entirely sure. She'd have to google that and see just how many compounds were classified as salts.

Even more curious, the book mentioned that some inhibitors were materials used in the fashioning of magical objects. Strange...why would a magician put something into a magic item that *inhibited* magic, when the point was to create something that *created* magic?

Crystals...she pondered if the blood red crystals that made up the spikes in an earth dragon's tail were conducive to magic like most other forms of crystal were. Kell hadn't told her what they were made of, but they were *blatantly* crystalline, and the book said that most forms of crystal were conducive to magic, to varying degrees. She wondered if the chromatrics harvested discarded tail spikes for use in their magic, because she had the feeling that they didn't ask the earth dragons for them.

So, if she wanted to cast the most powerful spell and have it be as easy on her as possible, she had to wear gold and crystal jewelry and cast her spell at a specific time.

Most permanent magical objects were required to be made of mostly magic-friendly materials (with a few exceptions, so long as none of the extra materials were magic-inhibitive), could only be fashioned by a magical hand, and *all* of them, no matter how big or small, had a focusing crystal that formed the heart of the item. She remembered the hider amulet Kell talked about, how it had been destroyed when Price shot out the crystal, and saw that it followed what little she already knew about magic. But, according to this book, if she wanted to make a magical item, she had to learn the medieval skills of blacksmithing, silversmithing, and jewelry making. Only a magical hand could create the *materials* that made the item,

and a magical hand had to fashion the item. If she, Jenny, wanted to make a hider amulet, she had to craft it all by hand using ancient techniques, hand-making the setting and the chain, cutting the focusing crystal herself, putting it all together, *then* enchanting the item. Every part of it had to be crafted by a magical hand, even down to the point where the metal forming the item had to be melted down in a forge or foundry specifically set up by the magician and recast by the magician herself. Even the metal ingot that the magician had to start with had to be crafted by a magical hand. *Everything* had to be hand-crafted by a magical hand, *including* the tools used. If Jenny needed a hammer, than that hammer had to be crafted by hand, by a magical hand. That smacked of a curious catch-22 in her mind. How could she make anything if she had to make the tools, but she couldn't make the tools because she needed *tools* to make the tools? How could she fashion a proper forge or cast the proper anvil without tools to make them?

Magic, of course.

She paused, leaning back in her comfy chair, pondering. So, magic seemed to branch into things like astrology, and the forging of magic items sounded to her like the legends of alchemy. *That* was where she'd remembered orichalcum from, it was the mythical alchemical metal, and unless she didn't remember the old stories right, it was supposed to be what made up the philosopher's stone, the item that could turn lead into gold. Which seemed like a fairy tale, since lead was magic-inhibitive. It just added more and more work on her if she wanted to be a rounded magician. She'd have to study not just magic, but physics, chemistry, astronomy, and learn the ancient arts of blacksmithing and jewelry making.

No wonder Hinado said it'd take her fifty or sixty years to become a proficient magician.

The answer, of course, was specialization. The book made mention of it, that in the old times, certain magicians specialized in certain things. Some focused mainly on casting spells, some focused on manufacturing the materials used for magic items, and some focused on the skills of enchanting, which was imbuing prepared items with magical properties. A

magician could certainly learn all three major aspects of magic, but that would take quite a while, and to be honest about it, back then a woman wouldn't have been a very good blacksmith. People were much smaller back then, and the average woman wouldn't have had the strength to be a very good blacksmith. But a modern woman *could*. She'd have to hit the gym and bulk up a little, but she was certain that she could manage blacksmithing if she wanted to learn how to do it.

Then again, couldn't a woman magician back then just have used magic to swing the hammer for her? It only said that the *hammer* had to be crafted by a magical hand. It didn't say *how* the hammer was swung.

But, it was fairly clear that items fashioned for enchanting had to be crafted by *tools*, by hand, not by magic. The female magician of old could have theoretically used magic to swing her hammer, or imbue herself via magic with the strength required to swing the hammer, but the book stated plainly that the item had to be manufactured by hand, *without* magic. The magician couldn't simply use a spell that shaped the metal into the desired outcome, it would ruin the item. It had to be fashioned by hand, with tools if they were required, which seemed amusing to her since the average man wasn't really going to pound a piece of iron into the shape of a chain link with his bare fist. Again, a very curious contradiction.

Finally, the book started delving into the one thing that she and most everyone in the White House and Pentagon wanted to know, and that was exactly what magic could and could not do. Some of it, she'd already puzzled out, based in the rules of magic. A magician couldn't sit in a room in Arlington and look into the office of the Premier of China, but she could look into the next room rather easily. She couldn't kill with magic, but she could kill *using* magic. As to what magic could do, the book reversed that by saying what magic *couldn't* do, and left everything up to interpretation. Magic couldn't create life. Magic couldn't directly kill. Magic couldn't be used at great distances, had to be exercised in close proximity to the area of intended effect. Magic also couldn't affect that which was not *real*, the book warned. Magic could take over a man's body and make him a puppet, but it *could not* make him fall in love, for example. Thoughts and emotions,

desires and impulses, these were the realm of the mind, and that was an entirely different scope, the book noted. Magic could only affect what was real, or what *could be* real. So, magic couldn't be used to take over someone's mind, but it *could* be used to take over someone's body. There were some highly advanced magical techniques that would let a magician affect another's mind, but only in a very, very limited manner. And since it could affect what *might be* real, it could see into the future in a very limited and unreliable manner, since the future changed as often as waves crashed onto the beach...which was probably the origin of the myth of the Oracle of Delphi. She was probably a magician with a special knack for using magic to predict the future.

One thing the book did mention, almost in passing, as if it were an afterthought, that got her religion shaken to the core was that it said that magic could affect the soul, and that *every living thing* had a soul. The book defined a soul as the life-force, the spark of life that made the living what they were, and everything that lived had one, from a virus to a blue whale. Magic considered a soul to be a real thing, but only the most powerful magicians ever in the history of history had had the power to affect a living soul on a direct level. Like only three. Ever. In all of recorded history. It had even named them, but the names were excised from the book, which hinted to her that all three had been chromatics, the most powerful users of magic in the world.

What troubled her the most, however, was that the book also said that reincarnation wasn't a myth. Souls that sufficiently evolved were able to return to life, often in a higher form of life. A tree's soul might come back as a squirrel, then as a dog, then as a wolf, then as an elephant, then as a dolphin, then maybe as a human. The book described Darwin's theory of evolution almost to the letter, but applying it to *souls*, not to *species*. The book made no mention of things like Heaven or Hell, only saying that a disembodied soul was kept in Gaia's embrace until it had the chance to live again, and that a soul could try a higher form of life if it was sufficiently evolved, remain as it was, or even "slum it" and return to a lower form of life if it so wished, perhaps to see if there was more to learn from that

simpler existence. The soul could even refuse to live again, and remain within Gaia's embrace.

And naturally, the book stated that a soul could evolve no higher than a dragon, that dragons were the pinnacle of soul evolution, with humanity just one small step behind...but because dragons reproduced so slowly, that a great many human souls were capable of being reborn as a dragon, but just simply had to wait their turn...and after they died, they might have to come back as a human quite a few times before they had another chance. The book noted that most human magicians were probably sufficiently evolved souls to be dragons...or had *been* dragons in past lives.

That twisted her brain. Reincarnation was real? Souls could *evolve*? And she'd been committing mass murder every time she took an antibiotic, committing genocide against microbes, which according to the book had souls? Freakin' criminy, no wonder the Catholic church had so much trouble with magic, because this went against about everything Christianity professed.

Everything else, the book left deliberately vague, which hinted that such things were *possible*. She might be able to use magic to change a man into a frog, using that age-old fairy tale, but she wouldn't be able to fashion a love potion, since magic couldn't affect emotions.

Seven hours after she started, reading non-stop, she put her tablet down and digested what she'd read, making a few final notes in the spiral she'd kept handy. The one thing she'd taken from the book was how *hard* magic was, in every respect. It was exceedingly hard to learn, it was just as hard to use. A magician had to be nearly a fucking savant, capable of superhuman discipline and highly educated in multiple aspects, both purely scholastic and also downright blue-collar. A well rounded magician was a master of physics, astronomy, chemistry, philosophy, blacksmithing, jewelry making, possibly even botany and zoology. Magicians had to know so much about so many things, and that was just the preparation for the actual spellcasting. If she wanted to do this, if she wanted to learn magic, she'd have to devote herself to both training her brain to do things no other human brain could

do, and learn as much as she could about modern science, superstitious pseudo-sciences, and medieval craftsmanship.

Oh, and most organized Western religions would have *major* issues with the core teachings of magic, that the planet itself was a life form, that dragons were the highest form of life on the planet, and souls could be reincarnated and evolve. The Christians, Jews, and Muslims in particular would go up in flames. Those sounded more like Wicca and Buddhism, which shouldn't have anything to do with each other since they were from opposite sides of the planet. So, the Wiccans and Buddhists would find magic to be quite sensible, but a southern Baptist would have an apoplexy.

As she was ordered, she called the White House, and they connected her to President Walker. She glanced at the clock on the tablet and saw that it was nearly 9:00pm, and she was suddenly glad she didn't wake the president up. "What do you have, Major?" Walker asked.

"I just finished reading the book, Mister President."

"Your initial impression?"

"That magic is the hardest thing anyone would ever try to learn," she replied. "And its core tenets violate so many Christian beliefs that it might start a holy war."

Walker chuckled. "Seriously?"

"According to the book, the planet *itself* is alive, Mister President. That's the fundamental source of all magical power. It calls this entity Gaia, and specifically states that she's only *a* god, not *the* God. It even mentions *the* God, making it clear that they're two distinctly separate entities."

"Yeah, that'd definitely ruffle some Christian's feathers."

"Oh, it gets worse, but I'll leave that for my written report," she chuckled. "As to learning magic, it'd be the hardest thing I ever did," she said honestly. "The mental discipline alone is almost superhuman, and it has a lot of rules and conditions that you have to memorize."

“Bottom line?”

“From a military standpoint, magic almost seems a waste of time,” she answered. “It takes so much training, and magic is somewhat limited in the scope of a battlefield, since magic can be stopped by something as simple as a wall, and it takes a hell of a lot of magical power to do anything spectacular. It’d be useful, sure, but not as useful as a tank, and the tank would be faster to get on the field than the magician, because of all the training he’d need before he’s effective. From an intelligence standpoint, it’s far more useful. According to the book, magic can’t read a person’s mind, so we won’t have any magicians running around casting ESP spells on people. It states that things like thoughts and emotions aren’t *real* things, so magic can’t affect them, but it does say that magic that affects the *senses* does work, but it doesn’t exactly explain why. There are a bunch of strange contradictions like that in the book, where it says magic can do something and then turn around and says it can’t, often in the same paragraph. But, anyway, magic can let a magician in one room look into another room, would let a magician turn invisible, walk through walls, even fly, so that has some considerable potential. The drawback is that this kind of magic is highly advanced, which will require a lot of training, and the magician has to be *close* to anything he’s trying to affect with magic. A magician trying to use scrying magic has to be close to the room he’s trying to look into, for example.”

“So, the dragons can’t use magic to look into my office?”

“Not from their island, they can’t,” she replied. “The dragon would have to be close to the White House to try something like that.”

“What else did you take from the book?”

“That magic may be a pain in the ass to learn, but it has a lot of uses beyond our technological capability. When paired up with technology, it would create a formidable one-two punch, which is why I think the chromatics made a huge mistake doing what they did. Look at the dragons.

The earth dragons provided the tech, the other dragons the magic, and they built something amazing...at least until the chromatics destroyed it all.”

Walker was quiet a moment. “Alright, go ahead and write up a report on what you learned. I’m going to start reading the book myself as soon as I finish dinner, and we’ll meet with Admiral Yates in the morning and compare our notes. He’s reading it as I speak. So is half the upper tiers of government and most of the top brass in the Pentagon,” he chuckled. “Be ready to give a formal presentation on the matter tomorrow afternoon.”

“Can do, sir. Is the translation software working for you?”

“It is now, it took the techs a while to get it working.”

“Sorry, sir, we couldn’t export it to Windows on such short notice,” she said.

“That’s alright, they have enough Linux and Unix machines here in the White House. It’s another computer sitting on my desk until they figure it out, but it’s been interesting to play with. I always thought unix and Linux was all text based, but the user screen on the Linux computer has a much nicer-looking desktop than my Windows computer.”

“I’ll lure you away from the evils of Windows yet, Mister President,” she said lightly.

“Oh, if you don’t mind, please bring the original book with you tomorrow. I’d like to look at it again.”

“Certainly, sir, as long as the CIA doesn’t try to steal it,” she noted.

Walker chuckled. “No, ownership of that book has already been settled, Major. It’s *your* book. The CIA has their own copy of the book now, they don’t need the original.”

“Good, I really didn’t want to have to kick Barker in the nether regions.”

Walker laughed. “Now I see why I like you so much, Major,” he declared. “You’re so diplomatic.”

“Well, I guess a girl can’t go wrong when the President likes her,” she said winsomely.

“Get to work, young lady, and stop flirting with me,” Walker chided.

“I’m a married woman, Mister President. President or not, Greg would punch you in the nose if he thought you were getting forward,” she told him, which made him laugh.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Major,” he replied lightly. “Be here at eight.”

“On the dot, Mister President.”

She closed her phone and got up, stretched, then finally opened the door and went downstairs. Davie was sleeping on the couch, in his PJ’s, and Greg was sitting beside him, a cup of coffee in his hand as he flipped through channels on the remote with the other. He smiled when she came into the room. “He tried to wait up for you,” he said in a gentle tone, glancing down at their son.

“Then I guess it’s bedtime,” she said in a rich, nurturing voice, leaning down and putting her hand on his soft hair. He didn’t wake up when she picked him up, noticing that he seemed to get heavier and heavier every day, that her baby was growing up...and that made her both proud and wistful. He was such a smart boy, he had so much promise...and he was going to be so handsome, just like his father. She could see it already. She took him upstairs and settled him into his bed, sitting on the edge as she tucked him in, spending long moments gazing down at him with the love in her eyes that a parent could only hold for a child...*her* child. She’d so hoped that he’d have brothers or sisters by now, but despite them trying, they’d had no luck so far. She leaned down and kissed him tenderly on the forehead, then turned on his nightlight and crept from the room.

No matter how much work she had to do, she prayed that she *never* felt that she was too busy to tuck in her son.

11 June 2017, 03:02 DMT; beneath South Peak Volcano

Now things would get interesting.

Hota moved quietly up to the end of their ramped tunnel, the final leg of the bit of complicated digging they'd done to prepare for this. The tunnelers had finished the final tunnel up into the five major storehouses for the island's reserves just moments ago, and Hota, the overall commander of this mission, felt that now was the best time to do this. Each tunnel was prepared for the mission, for the drakes had tunneled high, came back down underneath, then tunneled up to the floor in the back corner of each warehouse, forming a flat sinewave-curve in the tunnel that would make it much easier to block off when the time came. Each tunnel also had five independent collapse points, set so just a good smack in the right place would bring the ceiling down, which would stall any attempt to dig out the tunnels and find the food they'd stolen and give them time to get it all into the cavern before the chromatics had any idea what was going on. Just over his head was the floor of the warehouse, of warehouse #2 according to the plans, which primarily stored potatoes, radishes, and turnips, the edges already scored and ready for a good push to dislodge it, which would settle back into place and be nearly invisible, hiding just how and where they had come in.

The plan was simple, to take everything not in a freezer they could safely, then burn the rest. The freezers were in another location, and with the power out, Hota had made a field decision to leave them be, let the fluffies have that food for as long as it would last, and focus on the food that would do *them* the most good. There were fourteen earth drakes at each of the five tunnels, one carrying the bomb and the rest almost prancing in place, waiting for the command to go. Luckily for them, the fluffies hadn't considered the possibility of the earth dragons doing just what they'd done, tunnel up to the warehouses, and the warehouses had no guards inside of

them. There *were* two fire drakes standing guard at the *entrances* to the warehouses, but they'd be behind a very large, very heavy closed door and far away. The teams already had orders to ignore the food close to the doors, that that food would be burned rather than stolen, to minimize the chance that a stray claw scraping on the floor might alert the guards that the stores were being plundered.

"Remember, everyone, complete silence once I lift this," Hota reminded them in a low voice. "Does anyone *not* know what to do?" Nobody responded. "Alright then. Bredli, send the signal."

Bredli, the youngest of the team, slapped his tail loudly against the floor, which send a pulse of sound back down the passage. In tunnels with rock walls, sound carried a *long* way, and in response Hota heard four other distinct tail-slaps; the signal was acknowledged. "Alright, go!" Hota hissed, then he lifted the floor stone up and out of the entrance and slid it aside.

The fourteen drakes swiftly and quietly began their task. Five stayed inside to act as a relay team to get the boxes and baskets over the incline and down to where the five warehouse tunnels converged, where the drakes not on the invasion teams would quickly rush the food back down to Blackstone, past all the deadfalls in a series of relays where no dragon had to move more than fifty paces in either direction, and a team of ten drakes at the bottom would hastily stack the food in the chamber holding the subway entrance. The relay system was the fastest way to move a lot of cargo at once, and speed was of the essence. The chromatics came and inventoried the warehouses at dawn every morning, so they only had maybe two hours to do their work safely, guarding against the possibility that the chromatic might come early. The invasion team started with the food closest to the hole as Fralda, the daughter of Fredda, quickly set the bomb down and enabled it. That bomb was her responsibility, and she would stand right beside it in case it had to be manually activated. She watched them with intense eyes as the team quickly got the closest crates and baskets into the tunnel, then started expanding out away from the entrance in an ever-expanding arc. Hota stood by the entrance and made hasty notes on a neck-hung slate on the number of crates and baskets they managed to get,

handing them off to Vran inside the tunnel as the others brought them to the tunnel, scratching a mark, then receiving the next.

Everyone froze when they heard something thump against the door, some hundred paces up the huge excavated chamber. Hota listened intently for a moment, then made a circling motion with his forepaw to get them going again. It was just one of the fire drake's tails bumping against the door.

After some indeterminate time of passing boxes and baskets down into the tunnel, Fralda got his attention, then patted her forearm three times. That was the signal that they were low on time, since she was the timekeeper of this operation. Three pats was the first warning; they only had thirty minutes. He nodded to her and repeated the signal as drakes brought him goods, and they nodded and stepped up the pace as much as they could without making noise, every drake being very careful not to scrabble their claws on the floor or bump things with their wings or tails. Fire dragons had very sharp hearing, which was why no invasion team was to come within twenty paces of the warehouse door.

Two pats.

Hota reared up on his back feet and fanned his wings, the second signal. Anyone not already grabbing a box could only grab one more. His team brought their last grabs to the hole, and they carried them down into the tunnel rather than hand them over, Hota marking each crate or basket with a mark on his slate. When the last of the runners was in the tunnel, Fralda gave one pat, and he nodded and retreated into the tunnel himself, taking hold of the edge of the floor stone. Fralda bent to the task of arming the bomb, which was already counting down on a timer. They'd have ten minutes once she hit that button, ten minutes to collapse the first segment of tunnel to block any backblow in case the bombs blew out the floor stone... but they shouldn't. The bombs were designed to explode *softly*, if that were possible, their intent to spread high-intensity flame through the room. They weren't meant to destroy with an explosion and shockwave, they were incendiaries, meant to set everything on fire. But, to spread that fire, they

did have to have some boom, and that was the balancing act Ferroth juggled when he built them. Hota slid the stone back in place and backed into the tunnel with Fralda right behind him, and Brenli slapped his tail twice to warn the others their bomb was armed and they were evacuating. Hota listened intently as he backed up, heard an answering pair of slaps, then another, then another, then another. That was all five bombs armed. He waited as Fralda studied her stopwatch, hanging around her neck, then clicked it. “Now!” she hissed in a low voice, then sprinted down the tunnel. He made absolutely sure sure that everyone was behind the safe line, turned and slammed his tail spikes first into the ceiling, then ran like hell. The ceiling, intentionally weakened, collapsed from the impact, sending a shower of heavy rocks and dust billowing into the tunnel in both direction. The sound of the collapse would certainly alert the fire drakes, as would the series of other collapses sending dust *up* the tunnel and into his face, obscuring his vision, but they’d timed it so the bombs would detonate before the fire drakes had a chance to do anything about it.

And Fralda’s timing was impeccable. The volcano shuddered as a dulled *THWOOM* rocked down the passage, and in rapid succession there were four more, filling the tunnel with dust, and Hota felt significant warmth against his tail as they retreated down the incline. “Hurry, we have three minutes to get past deadfall two!” he barked loudly, his voice competing with the echoes of the explosion. The rest of the deadfalls would take some actual work to make the ceilings collapse, a failsafe against the explosions triggering a premature collapse and trapping them in the tunnel section, but the movement of the air and dust down the tunnel told him that the other deadfalls hadn’t come down before their time. Their retreat down the tunnel and the collapse of the other deadfalls was also on a tight schedule, putting as many collapsed tunnels between them and any investigation as possible, giving them as much time as they could manage to get their stolen booty into the subway tunnels and complete the collapse of Blackstone Village...his home village.

He mourned destroying his home, but they could always rebuild. Deadfalls could be cleared, tunnels shored up, chambers made better. If

anything, it would give all the earth dragons the chance to do major renovations, and that always made an earth dragon happy.

At the convergence point, there was a bit of a traffic jam as the seventy drakes tried to filter down one tunnel, but they got it sorted out and hurried out of the small chamber they'd made at the juncture, which was the location of the second deadfall. Hota and the team leaders of the other four teams bent to the task of collapsing the ceiling of the small chamber, digging out critical support beams, then racing out when they heard the ceiling give a loud, reverberating crack. Another avalanche of dust raced down the tunnel after them, obscuring vision for a few moments, but a glance back showed Hota that the convergence chamber had completely caved in, which was exactly what they wanted. They may clear the first deadfall quickly, but even using magic, clearing *that* mess was going to take them at least a couple of hours.

"I'd say the bombs worked," Crald noted to him as they brought up the rear of the retreating column.

"Like a charm," he agreed. "I hope they did the job."

"Ferroth built them himself, they did exactly what he intended them to do," Crald replied sagely. "Step it up down there, eight minutes to deadfall three!" he boomed.

They collapsed their way back down to Blackstone, where the factory workers that had stayed out after finishing their job were helping to organize a large room filled with food. "Alright, everyone knows the plan!" Hota boomed over the commotion. "We have forty minutes to get everything into the subway! Anything not in the tunnel gets left behind, so move, move, move!"

Forming another relay, they passed down containers of food almost like a bucket brigade, as Fralda kept her full attention on her stopwatch. No doubt by now they'd found the tunnels into the warehouses and were trying to figure out how to either get past the deadfalls or divine exactly where those collapsed tunnels went, which meant that a cadre of smaller fire

drakes may be invading the Blackstone entry tunnels any minute. They'd find them all collapsed, but the earth dragons were taking no chances, valuing the lives far more than the food. Forty minutes was the maximum Hota felt safe to stay in Blackstone, so that was all the time they had to get as much food into the subway as possible.

The team tested that resolve when time ticked down, and when they were at one minute, there were still twenty baskets left. "But it's only twenty!" Fevil protested. "It won't take five minutes!"

"We are at time!" Hota snapped in reply. "Leave them!"

"But—"

"Get in that tunnel, drake, *now!*" Hota snapped, slapping Fevil's flank with the side of his tail. Fevil sulkily jumped into the tunnel, leaving Hota alone in the chamber holding the subway entrance. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling, taking measure, then turned and snapped his tail. Each time he did, a spike launched, piercing a support high in the ceiling. After the fourth support was weakened, the entire ceiling started to shift ominously, and that was his cue to get the hell out of there. He dove into the entrance and dropped down into the subway spur tunnel, and then dashed away just as the entire tunnel shuddered and a dull roar of dust and small stones billowed from the subway entrance, crushing the baskets left behind when the chamber collapsed, covering over the subway entrance, just as Anthra had ordered.

His hundred or so drakes all stayed still as the mini-earthquake ran its course, and as the dust started to settle, Fralda came up to him. "We're done," she declared, stopping her stopwatch with a press of a button.

"Thank Gaia it went smoothly," he sighed in relief. "Alright, everyone, let's get this moved over to the Dawnmist tunnel. It's a day's wait until it's dark enough for the water drakes to get it and use to safety. We have more to do, but damn fine work, everyone. That went perfectly."

“Just the way we practiced it,” Crald nodded. “Now let’s collapse the spur tunnel and get this going. Stravik, bring up the carts,” he shouted as the last echoes of the collapse rumbled through the tunnel.

11 June 2017, 07:10 DMT; Council Aerie

He simply could not *believe* how badly they had underestimated the earth dragons.

He couldn’t bring himself to admit it until he saw the destruction they’d wrought, and he *knew* it was them. The fire drakes guarding the stores had never seen anything, at least until the warehouse doors blew out with an explosion of fire that would have killed any other dragon had they been there. The stores were all a complete loss, at least what stores were left. Inspecting one of the warehouses made it clear that the charred remnants, fit only for a fire dragon, was *not* the entire stored inventory. Those Gaia-cursed earth dragons had tunneled up into the storerooms, stolen what they could, and set fire to the rest.

They’d had a *plan*.

And more and more, he started to see that their plan had been uncannily clever, far more clever than most would attribute to their simple, dullard cousins. Everything they’d done in the last couple of weeks came together in his mind, including the murder of Ivaiya, all of it an elaborate plot to go to ground with as much food as they could hide or steal. The ultimatum left behind on Scion Aerie made perfect sense to him now, and it made him suspect that there might be a few treasonous water dragons that had helped the earth dragons come up with their scheme...that kind of planning and ability was obviously far beyond them. It had to be Shii and her pod, the lot of them filthy grounder-lovers. Oh, he had plans for those water drakes, yes he did. They would live long enough to regret deeply the day they decided to make fools out of the chromatics.

But, that aside, one simple fact was now clear to him. The earth dragons weren't going to come out. They had most of the food, and they'd destroyed most of what they couldn't take with them. Those cursed grounders were going to try to starve the other dragons, out of nothing but pure spite. They had retreated into their villages, deep underground where magic couldn't reach, even deeper than the villages. *His* scrying could reach the villages, but they were empty. All of them, empty, and their tunnels were all collapsed, even some chambers collapsed, to slow down and misdirect any dragons that tried to dig out the cave-ins. The earth dragons must have dug down even deeper, beyond even his ability to scry, hiding far below the ground and feeling like they'd gotten the upper wing.

But they'd learn soon enough that they were *wrong*. Now that he understood the nature of his opponent, that just because they weren't very bright, it didn't mean that they weren't cunning and clever in their own way. They'd had a plan and acted on it, which had flustered the chromatics' own plans for the future. But they'd boxed themselves into a corner in that they were now all underground, deep underground, and the only food they were going to have was what they took with them. That proved that while they were cunning, their lack of intelligence hampered their clever little plot. They couldn't grow food down there. And while the other dragons were facing a short-term food shortage in the short run, in the long run they had the advantage in that they could procure food. The water dragons could still fish, the sky dragons could increase their hunting, and while magic couldn't create food, it could help them gather food even without the earth dragons.

And there was always the humans. They had almost unlimited food supplies, and that was a resource that they could easily tap.

Once the food they had ran out, the earth dragons would starve. And Gaia curse them all, they could starve to *death* down in their holes. Their deep hiding places could be their graves for all he cared. They could live without the earth dragons, he'd prove it to all the others. And as far as he was concerned, they'd be better off without them. It would just take a little more work for everyone else, including the chromatics, but they'd make it.

They *would* make it.

Sessara and Hirrag alighted on the aerie and took their podiums, looking very concerned. They'd just come back from inspecting the ruins of the storehouses, seeing the treachery of the grounders for themselves, and Jussa and Essan appeared up and over the edge of the floor, landing awkwardly behind their own podiums. The sky dragons were already there waiting, both the dim-witted Beyori and the newest member of the council, Ivaiya's younger cousin Peyora. Peyora was utterly enraged at the death of his cousin, and had been quite amenable to certain suggestions he'd made to him since his appointment. Peyora would back anything the chromatics had in mind, as long as it caused the earth dragons pain.

"If we're all ready for this emergency session to begin," the chromatic declared, slapping his tail against the floor. "First, the summation for our water dragon cousins. Over the night, earth dragon saboteurs burrowed up into the storerooms for our foodstocks and burned them out," he declared. "The tunnels they used were found, but they collapsed them behind them to prevent pursuit. Scrying leads the tunnels down into Blackstone Village, but like the other earth dragon villages, it's abandoned. The earth dragons have burrowed even deeper underground to hide from us, and it's clear now that they have no intention of coming out, not after *this* treachery."

"How much food do we have left?" Sessara asked.

"Four weeks," he replied. "At least stored. The earth dragons missed the freezers, and most of that food is still good. We've used magic to refreeze those stocks to preserve them. Those reserves will hold us over as we reorganize our food production to take the earth dragons out of our plans. They've made their choice, and I say let them suffer with it. They can stay down in their holes til they starve to death," he declared, which made Peyora nod vigorously in agreement.

"So, you would sacrifice an entire branch of the dragon race to soothe your own indignity?" Jussa asked calmly, which made the chromatic snap a

hot scillinting glare in his direction. “Is the pettiness of the chromatics so extreme that you would kill to soothe your bruised egos?”

“Watch what you say, wyrm,” the chromatic warned. “The earth dragons have betrayed the sacred covenant.”

“Only because *you* violated it *first*,” Essan told him. “You wanted to take everything away from them, even their own seats on this council, breaking the laws upon which all our ancestors agreed when we came to this island. They had every right to retaliate. Had you tried to strip *us* of our seats on this council, we would have done the same.”

“I have done no such thing!”

“Not yet, but it’s what you have planned,” Jussa said in a quiet, ominous voice. “We know *everything*, chromatic. We know you plotted with Ivaiya to force all the earth dragons back on the farms, and we know you had a plot ready to take the earth dragons’ council seats away from them. And we have a message for this council, from the earth dragons.

“They relate their defiance of this council and its decisions in the strongest possible terms, and they refuse to come out until the all of us, even we water dragons, are removed from this council and a new council formed. They demand legal protections against another attempt to destroy their work, and demand sacred vows before Gaia herself that the other dragons will leave them in peace. What they demand, my esteemed brothers and sisters, is *equality*, in every form of the word. And until they receive it, they will not feed any of us.”

“Equality? No filthy, Gaia-cursed, magic dead *pseudo*-dragon will *ever* be the equal of me!” Peyora screamed, sparks spitting out of his mouth. “I would see them all *die* before I agree to such an absurdity!”

“Their position is a bit weak to make such outrageous demands,” Hirrag hissed in a chortle. “Once they eat their food, what are they going to do? Fly away?” he asked, which made Beyori laugh wheedlingly.

“Their position is far stronger than you think, Hirrag,” Essan said dryly. “They’ve been preparing for this eventuality for quite a while. They have more than enough food stored to outlast the island, three or four times over.”

“And you’ve seen these stores?” the chromatic asked in a dangerous hiss.

“I have,” he replied simply. “They can stay underground for *years*, chromatic.”

“And the water dragons officially declare our support for their demands,” Jussa continued. “What they ask is nothing more than what we should have afforded them the entire time. Just because they can’t do magic, it doesn’t mean they aren’t *dragons*.”

“I should have known,” Peyora hissed. “You live beside them, of course you take their side. Are they your pets, Jussa? Do they slip you a little extra food on the side where we can’t see it, buying your favor? You are a true dragon, wyrm, yet you would put your support behind *false* dragons? To the void with all of them! They’re abominations that we should have exterminated millenia ago!”

“Really. And what makes them false dragons, Peyora? Does magic make the dragon? Am I less of a dragon than you because you can fly faster than me? Are *you* less of a dragon than *me* because you can’t breathe water? Are we both less dragon than Sessara because we can’t breathe fire? And are any of us even dragons at all if you measure us by our magic, since the chromatics have stronger magic than all of us combined? We are all different, but we are still dragons. The fact that the earth dragons can’t fly and can’t use magic only means that they’re different from us in a slightly bigger way. But at their core, they *are* dragons, wyrm. They are as dragon as any of us, *including* you, a fact that some dragons on this island have seemed to have forgotten...or perhaps they simply refuse to admit it.”

“Ridiculous!” Peyora snapped.

“Is it?” Essan asked. “It sounds to me like you think *we* aren’t dragons either, Peyora,” he said grimly. “Does living below you, down in the water, make us lesser than you? Are we dragons, wyrm?”

“Of course you are, you can use magic,” he snorted.

“Magic is power, wyrm, but the earth dragons have a different kind of power, the power of generosity, of kindness, of *caring*,” Jussa said blandly. “They have provided for us for centuries, they have done most of the work of us all and never complained, they have built many of the dens your dragons live in. They have done so much for us and asked for only kindness in return, but even that was too much for some on this council to give. You shame yourselves and our race with your petty hatred, and we will have nothing more to do with you.”

“The water dragons withdraw from the covenant,” Essan declared in a voice of doom. “Due to the treacherous violation of the sacred oaths by the chromatic and sky dragons, who have broken the vows that formed this council. This council is void, and we no longer recognize it.”

“So do we agree, wyrm and drake,” Jussa declared. “The water dragons withdraw from the covenant, and we do so with the contentment of knowing that we do the right thing. We would rather have the company of our *lesser* cousins than endure the arrogance of those who think that their differences make them *better* than their kin. We will not feed you, we will not help you. In this, all of you are on your own. And as you fall from the sky from hunger, know that this is what you have brought upon yourselves.”

“When the earth dragons accept *you* back into the covenant, then we too shall return. But until then, see how far your superiority gets you when your belly is empty.”

And with that, the two water dragons turned and vaulted off their podiums, and vanished under the level of the floor, leaving stunned silence in their wake.

“How...*dare* they,” Peyora hissed, but a barking growl from Sessara silenced him.

“Is what they say true? Did you *plan* this?” she demanded. “Did you intentionally drive the earth dragons underground, and cause them and the water dragons to stop feeding us?”

“Did you not vote right along with the rest of us, Sessara?” the chromatic shot back, which made her flinch. “That’s right, you believed in our vision for the future. Don’t look in only *this* direction. But it is of no moment. This does complicate matters somewhat, but we can endure. We *will* endure,” he declared haughtily. “We still have the advantage. We will starve the earth dragons into crawling back to us on their bellies, and then *they* will do what *we* want! After all, they can’t get any more food down in the ground, where we have the entire planet to provide. Gaia will provide,” he declared. “Now we must consider a new plan for food gathering and distribution, if the water dragons refuse to be part of the *true* dragon society,” he sneered. “We have several options available to us.”

Sessara and Hirrag looked at each other, then Sessara gave the chromatic a ruby-eyed glare. “No!” she snapped. “Answer me, chromatic! Did you break the sacred vows of the covenant?”

“I did not,” he replied darkly. “And you tread upon dangerous ground, fire drake.”

“Why, because I *question* you?” she shot back. “Is this council not where all dragons may come and debate as equals? Are *we* lesser than you, chromatic? Will *we* become your new earth dragons?”

“You’re being silly, Sessara.”

“I don’t think that she is,” Hirrag rumbled, giving the chromatic a cool stare with his glowing red eyes. “Is what the water dragons say true? Did you intend to remove the earth dragons from this council?”

“They never *belonged* here in the first place!” Peyora snapped. “They belong in their dirt! They belong in the void! Let them all die!”

“Silence!” the chromatic barked.

“It’s clear even to us dull-witted fire dragons that you had some kind of plan, chromatic,” Hirrag declared. “I see now, you had your chromatic take apart the department, and Ivaiya proved before the earth drake laid her out on this aerie that the sky dragons destroyed the power plant. Did they do it because you told them to?”

The chromatic glared at Hirrag. “Are you questioning me?” he demanded.

“Yes,” the wyrm declared, a gout of flame and smoke billowing out of his nostrils. “Did you tell Ivaiya to destroy the power plant?”

“I *did*,” he replied with a snap. “It had to be done! Did you not see how the *taint* of the humans and their technology was starting to erode the foundations of proud dragon society? We acted to prevent the complete destruction of our way of life! We *saved* the dragons from the corruption that has consumed the grounders, twisted them into something *not* dragon!”

“Then you *have* broken the sacred vows of the covenant,” Hirrag growled. “The water dragons are right. This council is voided, and we will not suffer your fate when Gaia punishes you for your crimes. The fire wyrms withdraw from the covenant, on the basis of the breaking of the sacred vows by the chromatics,” he declared.

“As do the fire drakes! We won’t become your new slaves!” Sessara agreed. “*You* figure out how you’re going to feed yourselves! We want nothing to do with you until you repent before Gaia!”

“As must we repent, for we had our own paw in this,” Hirrag said in a low, growling tone. “We *allowed* you to do this, and for that, we must atone. Much as I think the earth dragons are weak, and believe that it is the right of the strong to force the weak to submit, it is done with strength and honor, not with lies and the breaking of the sacred vows. We will not consort with *oathbreakers*,” he hissed. “Come, Sessara, we must prepare for the lean times ahead.”

“Lead on, Hirrag. You, I trust,” she said with a sneer at the chromatic, then the two fire dragons turned and vaulted into the air, leaving the stunned chromatic and sky dragons behind.

What...just happened? In mere moments, the entirety of draconic society, everything the chromatics had meticulously built over a thousand years...gone. Gone. Just like that. The chromatic sat on his podium, completely at a loss. This, this was something he had never even *considered*. The water dragons siding with the earth dragons? The fire dragons *defying* the chromatics? And both races withdrawing from the covenant? It, it was almost unthinkable!

But it was truth. He looked over the side of the aerie, and saw the water dragons all swimming out to sea...Jussa and Essan had come here only to deliver their proclamation, and on their return, the water dragons were leaving. They were going out to sea, perhaps to another island, beyond the control and guidance of the chromatics.

They would regret it. They would all regret it! They couldn't *survive* without the chromatics! They'd see, they'd see! The survivors would swim back and put their wings and noses on the ground in supplication, begging to be returned to the covenant! The chromatics only had to endure, wait out the earth dragons, and after they all starved to death, then that little complication would be out of the way.

Yes. Yes, they could do it. With the sky dragons remaining, they could hold out...more than hold out, they could prosper. They could *thrive*. After all, the chromatics weren't helpless. They could provide for themselves, there were plenty of fish in the ocean and most chromatics knew magic to harvest them from the sea...and the gathering could itself be turned into practice. It wasn't a complete loss. Already, plans formed in his mind to prepare for the return of the fire and water dragons, punish those who defied the chromatics, and make everything *perfect* for their new society, a society of purity, of magic in its most noble form, and purged of the human-tainted and the nonbelievers. They would build something to rival Camelot, rival Rome, maybe even rival Atlantis. They could do it.

He knew they could do it.

11 June 2017, 08:31 DMT; 12 miles west of Draconia

Jussa really didn't have anything to say, but there was no harm in listening.

That Sessara had actually managed to track him down spoke much more of her than he expected. Both the fire dragons showed little interest in anything related to the council, more concerned with flexing their muscles and demeaning everyone else, but the fire drake looked almost earnest in her expression as she flapped her wings madly to try to hover just over the water's surface. Like all fire dragons, Sessara had a phobia of the water, their bane, so it said something for her to try a hover with her back foot clawtips brushing against the waves.

"What do you want, Sessara?" he asked. "We've made our decision."

"We withdrew from the covenant too!" she told him in a frenzied tone.

That made his eyes widen a bit. He enacted his magic to create a solid platform of water, climbing up onto it, and Sessara dropped down on it with a slightly wild-eyed look, but her determination was clear on her face. "The chromatics broke their vows, Jussa. We couldn't support *that*!"

"But you supported everything else they've done, knowing what it has done to the earth dragons. What it would do," he said calmly.

"It's the right of the strong to dominate the weak," she declared pugnaciously. "But it's *not* the right of the strong to break their vows, nor support those who do! Word given is word honored! The chromatics have shamed the fire dragons!"

"Then I have much more respect for you now than I did an hour ago," Jussa replied, sitting on his haunches. "But what will you do now?"

She looked at him almost pleadingly. “We don’t *know*,” she admitted. “The water dragons are wise, Jussa! I was hoping you could give me some advice to take back to Hirrag and the other elders.”

“You’re serious. You would ask us for help.”

“We know we’re not that smart, Jussa,” she admitted, and he was surprised at her honesty. “When me and Hirrag returned to the caldera, looked the other elders in the face, we realized that we had no idea what to do, and neither did they. We’ve let the chromatrics make our decisions for us for so long....” she trailed off.

“There’s no reason to fear, cousin,” Jussa said in a soothing voice. “You will find friends in the water dragons. Return to Hirrag. Tell him that we know of a place, an island, where the fire dragons can go to sort things through in peace and quiet, and we will help you. We will share our catches with you while you decide on a course of action.”

“You would do such a thing?”

“You are our cousins, Sessara, and we will always support our cousins when they have the courage to do the right thing,” he said gently, putting his forepaw on her shoulder. “Do you know where the scarred rock is?”

“I do.”

“Then after you speak to Hirrag, fly there and meet me. I’ll show you where you can go. We won’t let you go hungry, little sister, and there, you can discuss matters calmly and decide what to do after taking the time to consider your best options. And there are options, Sessara. I have every confidence that you will discover for yourself that fire dragons are much smarter than they think they are,” he told her.

“You are a gift from Gaia, Jussa,” she said in a small voice, almost like a frightened hatchling.

“I am your cousin, Sessara, and we are family. To water dragons, family is everything.”

“Thank you, Jussa,” she blurted, pushing her head up under his chin and nuzzling him. “Thank you so much!”

“You’d best hurry, there is much to do and little time. I’ll meet you at the scarred rock.”

“I’ll be there soon with Hirrag,” she replied, then turned and vaulted into the air, flapping her wings briskly to gain altitude.

Jussa watched her go, then he chuckled lightly to himself. Well, well, well, he had little doubt that the chromatic had to be quite flummoxed about now. The water dragons leave him, and then the fire dragons whom he had long dominated finally find their backbone and defy him. Now he only had the sky dragons under his control. Admittedly, that would make it easier for the chromatics and sky dragons to survive, but without the council, without the covenant...what purpose did it serve? The chromatic had sought to put the earth dragons in their place, but instead he ended up shattering draconic society.

It would eventually reform, it would reform because over the centuries, the dragons had not only learned to live together, but felt more secure and content in the presence of their own, but it would look nothing like what the chromatic was expecting. The earth dragons had Gaia on their side, Jussa was certain of it, and she would ensure that it was the *chromatics* that were put in their place.

They’d needed a good taking-down for the last five or six centuries anyway.

He dissolved the platform and turned southwest, heading for the solitary pillar of rock, the core of a long-eroded volcano, some ten or so leagues from the island. It wouldn’t take Sessara long to tell Hirrag, and the fire dragons could fly faster than he could swim, so he’d best get started. It might unnerve them if they arrived and he wasn’t there waiting. He’d show them one of the tiny uninhabited islands southeast of the island, a place where the fire dragons could gather and discuss their options without the urgency of empty bellies clouding their judgment. Though they were

brutish and a bit dim, the fire dragons *did* have honor, and with enough time to mull things over calmly and rationally, they'd made good decisions.

And the water dragons would be happy to share their catches with them. They would gladly support any dragon who did what was right, even when it harmed themselves...and withdrawing from the covenant was certainly harmful to the fire dragons. For the first time in over a millennium, they'd have to think for themselves, make their own choices, and live with the consequences if they made the wrong ones.

But they'd do the right thing. He was sure of it.

Chapter 9

11 June 2017, 19:32 DMT; Lonely Rock, 41 miles southeast of Draconia

It had been over a thousand years since they'd called a council of this kind.

Every single fire dragon was in attendance, all 3,531 of them, elders, adults, juveniles, hatchlings, even 37 eggs carefully collected and carried away in slings, each dragon weighed down with shoulder satchels and sling packs with everything they owned that they didn't want to lose...which was more shiny useless trinkets than actually useful tools. Fire dragons were covetous as a rule, greedy for territory and greedy for the trappings that strength brought them, who considered their shiny gemstones and their treasures more important than their tools. The island made it possible for them to all attend the council, for it was a tiny island that was dominated by an extinct volcano, and the shallow caldera allowed the elders to meet in the middle while the other dragons stood or sat along the rim and down the shallow sides

Hirrag and Sessara, the council members, sat on large boulders set for them in the middle of the caldera, the place of honor for the strongest of their kind. They had won their council seats through trials of strength, defeating all challengers for the honor to be the highest-ranking fire dragons in their society.

Society...what had happened to it? Sessara pondered as she looked around at the elders gathered around their places of honor, the oldest and most powerful drakes and wyrms. There had been a time when the fire dragons were mighty and proud, and had cultivated themselves both

physically and culturally. They had read philosophy, had enjoyed music, had reaped the rewards of the tribute of food and coin and art from the humans who lived under their protection. A fire dragon defended her territory ferociously, and so long as the humans within their territory submitted, paid them a tribute, they were defended along with the territory. No bandit or thief would *dare* enter a fire dragon's domain, and while they demanded much of their human thralls, they were free to live in peace and security. No human needed to lock his door when he lived within the domain of a fire dragon. Those were the stories that her ancestors had passed down over the years since they had come to the island...and had lost themselves to the chromatics.

That much was abundantly clear, even to a dim fire dragon like her. They had allowed the chromatics to do their thinking for them, and it had damaged them. They hadn't had to think for themselves, and in a way, it stung at her fire dragon pride that she had allowed herself to be *ruled* by someone weaker than she. The council chromatic was no match for Sessara in combat, and he knew it, so he relied on trickery and deceit, manipulation, deceiving the fire dragons into doing what he wanted...and tricking them into losing a part of themselves in the bargain. The fire dragons were proud no longer. They had gone so long without thinking for themselves, that now, when it mattered most, they had failed to do just that. It had taken the generosity of their water dragon cousins to lead them to this place and share their catches with them, calming fears and filling bellies, which brought them to this moment.

"We have failed you, my brothers and sisters," Sessara declared with simple dignity, but emotion in her voice. "The chromatics have broken the sacred covenant, and in our arrogance, we failed to understand what they were doing. We even unwittingly aided them in their deceit. We, who believed we were the strongest of all dragons, allowed the chromatic to trick us. For this shame, I will stand down as the fire drake of the council when, or if, it ever reforms, and allow a more worthy drake to take my place. Such is my responsibility for failing my sacred obligations as a council member."

“As will I,” Hirrag nodded. “But until such time as the council reforms, we will continue to lead the dragons through this time of crisis. A change of leadership now would do harm to our cause. Is there any who challenge this viewpoint?” he asked in a booming voice. When no fire dragon answered, he nodded. “Then so be it. We are here to decide on our next course of action. Since this impacts every fire dragon, it is only fair and just that every fire dragon be present to listen to the debate. There are too many of us for all to speak, but there will be time when we will come among you and listen to your concerns and your ideas. This is the time that *any* idea may be brought forward to consider its worth,” he declared, looking at the dragons along the rim of the caldera.

“Clearly, our two most pressing concerns are food and shelter,” Hirrag boomed. “Our water dragon cousins are graciously helping feed us, so food is not as much a concern as shelter. Simply put, we have nowhere to go. We have hatchlings to care for, eggs to tend, and the threat of the sky dragons to our young demands that we have proper shelter. We adult dragons can handle staying outside in the elements, but our younglings need the shelter of a den, someplace too hot for a sky dragon to attempt to snatch our hatchlings. Our eggs will fail to hatch strong dragons without a volcano’s heat to incubate them,” he grunted. “But the conundrum is this; in order to find the shelter of a volcano, we may have to abandon the sea, and the generosity of the water dragons. We may have to sacrifice our available food for shelter.”

“There’s only one place we can go,” one of the elder wyrms stated. “The volcano to the north. It’s the only one like ours, that is constantly erupting. It’s the only place we can take our young so they will be safe.”

“But that volcano is squarely within human lands, and humans have access to it,” Sessara noted.

“This is a time of crisis, esteemed council member,” another elder said simply. “And we fire dragons should have no fear of the humans. We will *take* the volcano, and we will defend it!” he declared, which caused roars and stamping feet to echo off the walls as the fire dragons approved.

“And it’s close to the water, and the water dragons,” another called. “It solves both our problems.”

“But it causes many others,” Hirrag declared. “The humans are much like what you have seen on the TV, my elders,” he warned. “They are very clever now, and posses weapons that can do us harm. Taking the volcano may not be easy if they decide to retaliate in force. There are millions and millions and millions of them, my friend. They can overwhelm us the way a hive of mite ants can overwhelm a single wood bee. But, you are right about us needing that volcano,” he grunted. “It is the only place we can take our young where the sky dragons can’t reach them. Right now, our young must receive priority in all decisions.”

“So, the question is, how do we take the volcano without rousting the nest of humans that dwell around it?” an elder wyrm asked.

“We are fire dragons,” an elder drake declared adamantly. “We are the strong, and the strong have right to take from the weak!”

“This is not a wise fight to pick, Furraa,” Sessara declared bluntly. “For too long we’ve let the chromatics think *for* us. This is not a time to think with our fangs. The humans would be formidable foes if we fight them. We will lose fire dragons, and right now, we can’t afford that...and I don’t think it needs come to that. The human that the council summoned to the island seemed quite amenable. I see no reason why we can’t *talk* to the humans.”

“Ask favors from the weak?” one elder gasped as the others gave Sessara a hard look.

“*One* human is weak. An *army* of humans is strong,” she said simply. “The code makes it acceptable to negotiate with a foe of unknown strength if a fight needs be avoided, and there is no telling how many humans they will send against us if we invade their island and take the volcano by force. I was thinking of this for a while, and have something of an idea. I was thinking that we could make a deal with the humans. They allow us to stay on the volcano and offer up a tribute of food, and in return, we defend the

island and its humans from all threats, as we did in olden times. We can fashion dens for our younglings, incubation chambers for our eggs where it's hot, and wait until we may return to the island. Something tells me that we won't be exiled from the island for long," she mused, looking at Hirrag, who nodded. "We need only stay on the human island for a short time. The chromatics and sky dragons will have their paws full dealing with the earth dragons. They may be small and weak, but they are very cunning," she said, to which Hirrag nodded with a growling chuckle. "We all underestimated them. I could only see what they *couldn't* do, and it blinded me to the things that they *can* do, things they've already used against the chromatics to bind their wings. I think the earth dragons will beat them, and when they do, we can go home."

"It has some potential," an elder drake noted, looking at his fellows. "But we must talk about this some more."

"As we should, Groll. This is a problem that requires us to *think*, not to act. And it has been too long since we have thought for ourselves, so we must carefully consider this idea before we make any decisions. And any other idea that anyone might have that may work."

"An idea, esteemed council member?" an elder wyrm called.

"Speak," Hirrag shouted back.

"Why do we have to *leave* the island? It is the chromatics and sky dragons that have done wrong, not us! If anyone is to suffer for breaking vows, it should be them! I say we return to the island, then we just separate ourselves from them until such time that they repent!"

"It has possibilities, mighty elder, but what do we do about food?" Sessara asked. "The water dragons won't return to the island. They've made that clear. And unlike the others, we *can't* fish the sea, not with all that water," she said with a shudder. "If we fell in, we'd never get back out!"

"We eat *here*," he answered. "We ask the water dragons to bring their catches here, and we leave fire dragons here to defend the island against the

sky dragons. They may be fast, but they are no match for us if they must fight, and they know it.”

“The idea has potential,” an elder drake noted. “And I agree with the mighty elder. We are not the ones who have done wrong, so we should not be the ones to suffer.”

“What you overlook are the chromatics,” Hirrag grunted. “They will be furious at our defiance, and you know how they are. Any fire dragon on the island would be a target for vengeful chromatics, and I wouldn’t put it below them to attack our hatchlings, or even our eggs. I would feel much safer removing our eggs and hatchlings to that other volcano, where the sky dragons and chromatics can’t reach them.”

“Then perhaps a combination of both ideas might be the best course of action,” Groll offered. “A plan to remove our youngest and those in need of protection away from the island, while the strongest of us return and defend what is ours.”

“Even if we must fight?”

“It is they who have done wrong. I would see such a fight as merely dispensing Gaia’s justice for breaking the covenant,” he said simply. “But I doubt they’d have the courage to meet us in a contest of honor. Not even the chromatics and their magic are a match for the strength of the fire dragons.”

That earned roars of approval, and even Sessara had to agree with the reasoning behind it. They *should* return to the island, make it clear that they wouldn’t be driven from their volcano, but they also had to protect the hatchlings and the eggs. Hirrag was right; she would not put it past the chromatics to destroy their eggs in petty revenge. They were very spiteful creatures. “It does have promise, but it’s not something we can decide quickly or rashly,” she declared, remembering what Jussa said to her. “Let’s debate this idea before we make any decisions. I’m sure that all of us together can bring about the wisdom to do the right thing, as long as we take our time. There is no hurry. Our eggs will be fine for now, and this

island is safe enough. Let's take the time to do the *right* thing, not rush into an unwise decision."

"Wisely spoken, esteemed council member," Groll agreed. "We do have time before we must act. We should make the most of it."

12 June 2017, 08:01 DMT; Sanctuary City

It was almost like old times. All the field agents were reunited with Shale's return from the surface, him helping the factory drakes. Shale—Trekka now, since there weren't any field missions anymore—was the oldest of all the field agents, and the largest...and he would have been looking at retirement within the next two years anyway. He'd been preparing to retire and move into the department as a supervisor before all this happened, but that didn't mean that he was one hell of a good computer programmer and very smart. Trekka was also one of the most striking earth drakes, because his body was literally just two colors, black and brown, and he had no patches or lines. His back, wings, and upper flanks were black, and the rest of him was brown, with a defined if jagged line of distinction that ran down his sides. Unlike most earth dragons, his belly was brown, not tan. That line was even on his neck and face, with his eyes and top of his snout black, and right at the corners of his maw, the line between brown and black started. Trekka was the third best of the field agents when it came to computers behind Kell and Kammi, but in other aspects of being a field agent, he was better than them. When they needed something hacked and they needed their best, they sent Kell. When they needed something stolen and they needed their best, they sent Trekka. He was called the black shadow by most in the department, almost like a ninja from the human stories and TV, able to sneak through formidable defenses and steal what he was after without leaving any trace of who did it. It was that sneakiness they felt might be needed up top, so he'd been assigned to the factory workers bringing the last of the gear down. If anyone could have entered the

factories under the noses of the other dragons and stolen equipment without detection, it was Trekka.

The four of them and Girk, who was trying to ingratiate himself into the ranks of the field agents by virtue that he had been one for all of a couple of weeks, sat in a line in Ferroth's new office, listening to their boss grumble and bluster at Kintel. They were waiting for their assignments for the day, and Kammi couldn't help but yawn.

"Am I keeping you awake, whelp?" Ferroth asked.

"Yep, you are, chief," she replied cheekily.

"Gaia forbid I inconvenience you in any way," he drawled, which made Kintel chuckle. "What's on the agenda?"

"More of the same," Kintel replied, holding out a piece of slate and looking at it. "We have some lines to run to some freshly dug burrows, and that's it as far as our work goes. Anthra already finished the plans for storing the food the invasion teams brought back, so we don't have to worry about that. We do have an update on the transmitter."

"Any ideas about where we can put the dish?"

"Sella already placed it, and tied it into the datalines we have running out. We just need to hook it up to a radio and see what we get."

"Trekka, Girk, get that done," Ferroth ordered. "The transceiver's in the server room. Run it through server four on rack one and fire up the radio control program, don't directly connect it to the dish."

"Sure thing, chief," Trekka nodded, and the two of them filed out.

"That's it for us, at least as far as department work goes," Kintel announced. "Everything else is just the daily inspections."

"Jirran, you handle the PMI's on today's list," Ferroth ordered. "Kell, Kammi, you two handle running those new datalines. Kintel, you're today's mobile repair tech. We'll set Varda as today's board operator, and we'll send

the other drakes out to finish the connectivity tests on the lines we haven't activated yet. I know all of you want to start working on your own burrows, so as soon as you finish, you're done for today."

"Thanks, chief," Jirran said with a grateful smile.

"I'm not the only one that can't stand those little rooms," Ferroth grunted, which made Kammi nod vigorously. "Now that we've got everything more or less installed and in place, there won't be as much work for us. If we can get that satcom running we can get some work done keeping an eye on the humans, but that'll be when we get the power back on. And to be honest, unless Fredda asks for us, we'll leave her alone. That way we can do a little work for ourselves."

"Sounds good to me," Jirran said. "I've already marked the tunnel wall where I'm going to dig out my burrow."

"Smart move. You moving back in with your family, Kell?"

"May as well," he replied. "Right now, we need to stay together. We're even picking this one up," he said, nudging Kammi. "We need a maid, you know."

"Oh, funny, funny," she retorted, which made them laugh. "I'll have you know that your parents *asked* me. Clearly, they like me more than they do you, since they kicked *you* out!"

"Don't start the fight until after you're out of the office," Ferroth warned, which made Jirran burst out laughing.

It only took about three hours to lay the new lines to several excavated burrows, working alongside one of the power drakes who was doing the same thing with the power lines, and after they were done, they returned to the burrow. The others were out working, but Kell tracked Keth down, working on a tunneling gang, and talked about what he wanted done at the burrow, then he returned and the two of them got to work. Kammi was moving a little slowly, still a bit sore from the day before, but what they were doing wasn't all that demanding. Keth had drawn up plans for the new

burrow on a piece of flat rock in their sleeping chamber, and they used that as their guide. Keth actually had quite a vision for the burrow, intending to dig out a ten chamber burrow where each of the hatchlings got their own sleeping chamber, and they had a large storage chamber for their possessions. As requested by the engineering dragons, they were setting the waste rock out in the tunnel rather than trying to dispose of it themselves, and there was quite a bit of it by the time Kanna returned from her work. She was surprised to see a new chamber almost fully dug out, Kell and Kammi bantering with each other as they clawed away the hard, sturdy igneous rock. “So, this is what being a department drake is about, eh?” she noted.

Kell laughed. “Chief let us off early so we could start on our burrows,” he told her. “I think it’s his gentle hint that the civil management drakes want the rooms we’re using in the high rise back.”

“Gaia knows, we could use the storage space,” Kammi agreed. “Patron told us where to dig, Matron, so if we’re digging in the wrong place, blame him.”

Kanna chuckled. “No, you’re in the right place,” she assured them.

Jirran brought them the news as he came to visit after taking a break on his own burrow. “They got the radio working,” he told them. “We haven’t called the humans yet, but at least now we can.”

“Did they set it up for full satcom uplink?”

“They should have, why?”

“Because it makes it easier for us to let them know we’re at least back in touch,” he replied. “Kammi, do me a favor and bring me my laptop.”

Kell opened it on the floor and sat down, the other drakes gathering around as he typed a series of text commands. “Yeah, it’s up,” he noted, then he brought up his sat-hack utility. It took him about three minutes to hack an uplink, and then he used his other utility to call Jenny’s cell phone.

“You know, we should have told chief we were doing this,” Kammi noted lightly.

“Surprise can be good for the circulation,” Kell murmured, which made Jirran chuckle. He saw the call get picked up by an icon on his monitor, and then he heard Jenny’s voice. “Hello?”

“Welcome from the grave,” Kell said dryly.

“Kell! It’s so good to hear from you!” she gushed. “Wait, how are you calling me?”

“Emergency power and a satellite dish,” he replied. “We just wanted to let you know that we have at least partial communications back. We can’t run this all the time, but if there’s an emergency of some kind, we can call you and let you know.”

“Well, that’s good. Can we call you?”

“Not yet,” he replied. “I told you, we can’t run the uplink all the time. Eventually, you will, though.”

“That’s good to hear. I just got out of a meeting,” she said, then she paused a moment. “They’re already making all my plans for me.”

“What kind of plans?” Kammi asked.

“Who’s that?”

“Jenny, Kammi. Kammi, Jenny,” Kell introduced. “You know her as Jasper.”

“Ohhhhh, okay. You owe us a new SUV, Jasper.”

She laughed. “That was *your* fault, not mine,” she retorted lightly.

“Onyx is here too,” Kell noted.

“Hey Jenny. Did Hatch’s hair ever grow back?”

She laughed. “Yes, and is he ever pissed off at you,” she replied.

“It’s good to hear from you, Jenny,” Kanna called.

“Matron Kanna! It’s so good to talk to you again!” she said happily. “I hope everything went okay for you and the hatchlings?”

“Well enough. We’re settling in here in our new burrow. It’s going to take a lot of work, but it’s going to work out.”

“That’s very good to hear. Anyway, I have to go home and tell Greg that we’re moving,” she sighed.

“Moving? Where?”

“Hawaii,” she replied. “Honolulu at first, but then I’ll be placed on a tiny little island about in the middle of the chain. It’s about forty miles from the nearest fishing village. The CIA has a safehouse there, a little mansion with all the amenities for hiding important people that expect a little luxury. I got a new assignment that will completely detach me and my family from all of humanity in a mansion on an island five hundred miles from Honolulu. And it’ll be all mine...whoopie,” she drawled.

“Why are they moving you?”

“Magic,” she replied. “Whether I want to learn it or not, I just got *volunteered* to undergo magical training by the President himself,” she grunted. “He’s the CIC, how can I say no?”

“So, what does that have to do with anything?” Jirran asked.

“Well, their plan is to move me out to that island out in the middle of the oceanic boondocks and entice Hinado into coming to teach me, you know, somewhere where he’ll feel comfortable. They’re willing to bow to any conditions he demands. There won’t even be anyone else on the island but me, Greg, and Davie. Just the three of us, with visits by seaplane three times a week so they can deliver groceries and supplies. Their ultimate plan is to move me to *your* island and have me be the ambassador from the human race, but they want me to start learning magic as fast as I can, so that’s where things stand.”

“So, you learn magic, then go back and try to teach other humans magic,” Kammi surmised.

“That’s what they’re hoping for,” she agreed. “Be honest, guys. Would Hinado go for an idea like that?”

“He may,” Kell speculated. “Hinado’s always been something of a wild card, and he’d be a competent teacher. You’ll have to deal with the language barrier until he learns English or you learn draconic, though. There’s no magic that can translate languages, for some reason.”

“It’s because they’re based on thought, and magic can’t affect thought,” she replied. “Well, your translation program will help with the language problem. Olivia—Petrovski, she came up with a nifty little translation app for an Iphone based on your program. You speak English into the phone, and it translates it into dragon.”

“Clever, Jenny, clever,” Kammi said appreciatively.

“It’s not entirely working right yet, at least we don’t think so,” she laughed. “But give her a couple of weeks, and she’ll get it right. I’ll have to resign from the Hunters,” she said wistfully. “All those years I studied computers, and now I have to start all over again.”

“Nothing says you can’t study both,” Kammi told her.

“Yes, there is,” she replied. “I know magic may be easier for the dragons, but I read that book, and *shit*,” she breathed, which made Kammi grin. “It’ll be the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life!”

“That’s why I’m so glad we didn’t have to waste twenty years of our childhood in magic school,” Jirran chuckled.

“Oh, by the way, we may as well get you up to date on the island shenanigans, Jenny,” Kell noted. “The water dragons withdrew from the island yesterday.”

“You said they were gonna.”

“Yes, but so did the fire dragons,” Kell told her.

“What?”

“It seems that the chromatic admitted to their faces that he broke the vows of the covenant, the oaths the dragons took when they formed the council,” he told her. “I was a bit surprised when I heard about it last night myself, but it seems that the fire dragons finally found their backbones and defied the chromatic. I guess being lied to was a bit too much for them.”

“So, should I warn the President about an incoming invasion of homeless fire dragons?”

“I think it would be a good thing to pass along,” he agreed. “Right now, the fire dragons are meeting on a nearby uninhabited island, holding a council on what to do next. Odds are, they’ll turn right back around and return to the island. It’s not in a fire dragon’s nature to run from a fight, and they’ll want to defend their dens after what the sky dragons did to ours. I’m not sure if they’ve thought through how they’re going to eat, since the chromatics won’t share the food they have with them, but fire dragons aren’t exactly known for forward thinking or problem solving.”

“Oh dear, is there going to be fighting?”

“That’ll depend on the chromatics,” Jirran answered. “As long as the chromatics don’t push the fire dragons, the fire dragons won’t attack. In their eyes, they want to keep their distance from the sky dragons and chromatics, because they believe that Gaia will lower the boom on them for breaking the covenant. The fire dragons might try to take the food, though, and if that happens, there might be a confrontation. I hope not,” he grunted. “As things stand right now, we can all return to the island with a wary truce. But if the fire dragons and the chromatics start fighting, it may permanently destroy the peace. The chromatics would never forget the insult, and their spite would turn it into an eternal feud with the fire dragons.”

“Well, I’ll warn the President,” Jenny said. “What about the sky dragons?”

“They won’t tangle with the fire dragons unless they have no other choice,” Kell answered. “Sky dragons may be fast in the air, but their lightning actually does about nothing to a fire dragon. Much as we are highly resistant to fire dragon breath, the fire dragons are highly resistant to sky dragon breath. The only way they could fight would be with magic or with fangs and claws, and the fire dragons outmatch them in those areas.”

“So, it’d just be the chromatics against the fire dragons?”

“Yeah, and chromatics aren’t exactly geared for fighting,” Kammi answered.

“And the water dragons are gone?”

“Most of them. A couple dozen are staying close to the island in case we need them,” Kell answered. The satcom icon started to flash red. “We’re out of time, Jenny, they’re killing the uplink,” he said. “Someone will call back soon to keep you up to date.”

“I’m not the one you should be calling,” she chuckled.

“If I’m making the call, it’ll be to you,” Kell retorted. “And we gotta go. Good luck.”

“You too.”

He killed the call about a second before he lost the uplink, the satellite going out of range. “Alright, break’s over,” he declared. “Let’s get back to work.”

12 June 2017, 19:12 EDT; The White House

Jenny hung up the phone and leaned back in the chair in the employee dining room, pondering this turn of events. If the fires and chromatics got into a war, it could very well permanently shatter the island. Kell was right in that the chromatics had the petty spitefulness required to turn any

fighting between them into an enduring, eternal feud, and with them at odds, it would prevent the dragons from coming back together after the earth dragons starved the chromatics into submission.

She just had to hope that the fire dragons knew what they were doing.

She got up and went back upstairs after asking to see President Walker, and came in while he was eating in their residence dining room with his wife. "Sorry to disturb your dinner, Mister President," she said, "but Kell just called me."

"How?"

"A portable generator and a satellite dish," she answered. "They've rigged up some emergency power, and they were testing their satcom system by calling me."

"So *that's* why that water dragon asked for that SEAL comm unit," he mused.

"Just about. He gave me some news we need to know."

"I'm listening," he said, putting down his fork.

"The water dragons left the island yesterday," she began. "And in a bit of a surprise, the fire dragons did as well. Kell said that the chromatic admitted to their faces that he'd been lying to them, and they were angry enough to withdraw from the council. He said that right now, the fire dragons are all on a nearby island, debating what to do next. What it means for us, sir, is we'd better consider the possibility that the dragons reveal themselves to the general population. If they don't return to their island, I know where they're going to go."

"Where?"

"Kilauea," she answered. "It's the only other actively erupting volcano in the Pacific right now, and that's where fire dragons prefer to live. There's a very good chance that they might take over the volcano. And that volcano is smack dab in the middle of one of the most populated islands in the

chain,” she reminded him. “There’s no earthly way they’ll move in and not be noticed.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure enough to advise you to start up the contingency plans for public exposure,” she told him. “If they have nowhere to go, no food, no dens, it only stands to reason that they’ll head for the one place they think they can get both food and shelter, the kind of shelter they prefer. If I were you, sir, I’d put a contact team on that volcano and start the contingency plan.”

“I’ll give it some serious thought, Major,” he nodded.

Julia gave her a curious look. “I had a question, Major,” she prompted.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I read that book on magic, and a couple of things crossed my mind. Why don’t the dragons just make food with their magic?”

“They can’t,” she replied. “Magic can’t create anything alive. Food may not be alive, but it *was* alive. It’d be more specific to say that magic can’t create anything *organic*. They might be able to change a tree into a giant potato and eat that, but they can’t create food out of nothing, and they can’t change rocks into food either. Magic can’t create anything organic, and it can’t change anything organic into something that’s not. That’s why the earth dragons have always farmed. The only way dragons can get food is the same way we do. Farm it, buy it, or steal it.”

“Ohhh, okay. That does make a sort of sense,” she noted. “But that does open up my other question to a different interpretation. Let me find the notes I made about it.”

Jenny wasn’t surprised that Julia Walker had read that highly classified book. She was a very smart lady, and the President considered her to be one of his closer advisors. She knew almost everything that went on in the White House.

“Then I guess there’s a slight change in plans,” Walker decided. “Major, I’ll make arrangements for you and Kent to be near the volcano for the next couple of weeks. I also want your Hunter team to be on hand, just in case. They know you, you know them, so they can keep you safe. I’ll tell Yancy to get them ready for deployment.”

“That’s kind of you, sir. I really don’t want to resign from the Hunters.”

“Well, you have other duties now, Major, but that doesn’t mean I can’t find ways to keep them close,” he smiled.

Julia Walker was rifling through a small steno notebook, then she tapped it. “Here’s the other thing I was curious about,” she said. “According to the rules of magic, magic can’t change something living into something dead...something organic into something inorganic.”

“Well, yes.”

She was quiet for a long moment, looking at her steno pad. “And the earth dragons don’t *use* magic. Very, very interesting,” she breathed, tapping the end of her pen against her chin. “There’s something there. Some kind of mystery, or connection.”

“How do you mean?”

“From what I just heard, earth dragons shouldn’t be possible,” she told them evenly. “I mean, their tail spikes are a complete impossibility. There’s no process in all of biology that would allow a complex animal like a dragon grow crystals like *that* out of its body. Maybe some forms of microbes could do it, form basic crystals on a molecular level, but not something that highly evolved producing crystals that large and complex, not from a purely biological standpoint. But, what you just said means that it’s also an impossibility through *magic*,” she noted. “You just said that magic can’t change something alive into something dead, and I don’t think those crystals are or were living things,” she pondered. “You said that they have the consistency of diamond?”

“As hard as,” she replied. “I saw Kell drive one three feet into a volcano, so it had to be way harder than the rock it split.”

“So, it comes back to the mystery of just how they grow the spikes,” she mused.

“Well, their color leads me to believe that it has something to do with their blood. Maybe they’re made from elements in their blood, and they just pick up the color when red blood cells get trapped in the lattice. That or they’ve got pure iron interlaced into them, which is also possible.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t answer my question,” she said in a low tone. “There’s something...*different* about the earth dragons. I can’t quite put my finger on what it is, but there’s something about them in all the material I’ve read that just prickles at me like nettles. They’re nothing like any other form of life on this planet, as different from us as they are the other dragons. They are...*unique*. That has a significance...I just can’t figure it out yet. I need more information. Jenny, be a dear and learn everything you can about earth dragons for me, will you?” she asked lightly.

Jenny laughed. “I’ll get right on it, ma’am,” she replied. “Well, I’d best be on the way home, sir. I have to break the bad news to Greg.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind moving to Hawaii all *that* much, Major,” Walker chuckled.

“He will when he finds out where you’re ultimately putting us,” she remarked.

“Maybe, but he’s a trooper, Major, you said so yourself. He’ll do it for love of country...and being treated to all the trappings of the idle rich for a few years. I’m sure he’ll cope,” he said dryly.

“Only during football season,” Jenny replied, which made Walker laugh.

15 June 2017, 17:41 DMT; Sanctuary City

Jirran was right in the civil management team wanting them out of the high rise.

Actually, it was a city-wide campaign to get drakes into their own burrows and out of public areas. In the three days since calling Jenny, Kell and Kammi had had more and more time to work on the burrow, while the rest of the family focused on helping the city as a whole by burrowing out new tunnels, new chambers. Kanna was still working on the waste rock team, but Keth was now working with the drilling team, using power drills to burrow out pipes directly through the solid rock, just running the water through the holes and bolting external pipes to the walls. The basalt through which they burrowed was impermeable to water, so it precluded the need to run pipes through the holes they drilled, just used the holes themselves. Jukra would have *much* preferred to use steel piping to further reinforce those drilled holes, but that was one thing in which they were in short supply. Steel was a scarce resource for them right now, so they had to make due without it. They intended to go back and pipe out the holes when they had the pipes to do it, but until then, what they were doing would work.

It wasn't as easy as just setting up a drill, though. Since they were so deep underground, *any* hole had to be carefully planned out after geological surveys of the area would ensure that even something as small as a water pipe hole wouldn't cause a collapse. Kell and Kammi's digging out of the burrow was similarly planned, using certain techniques that would keep the walls strong, and vaulting and arching the ceiling so it could bear the tremendous weight of the rock above without collapsing. While other dragons learned about magic, earth dragons learned about digging, construction, and subterranean architecture, so what they were doing in their burrow was simply common knowledge through all earth dragon society. Any adult earth dragon could dig out a stable burrow, even when they were so deeply underground.

Kell and Kammi had both moved into the burrow. They'd dug out their own rooms, each of them digging a spacious sleeping room with a small

workshop off of it. An earth dragon could dig fairly fast, and if he or she had several hours of time, it wasn't that hard to dig out a room a day...or even two rooms a day if they weren't that large. They didn't do all the work alone, though. When the family returned from their shifts, they put in some time on the digging themselves. They'd moved all their things into their rooms, and had dug out three more of the six chambers on Keth's blueprint.

What they were doing was going on everywhere. Dragons that had yet to get a burrow were digging out their own, and combined with the continued expansion of the city, it put the water dragons that had stayed to help them in a bit of a surly mood. They had to dispose of all that waste rock, and it was the water dragons that were carting it out into the deep water and dumping it in a continuous cycle that lasted during the night hours, when the sky dragons couldn't see what they were doing. Sella made sure to smack him at least once every time she saw him. But it did start moving camping dragons out of the main cavern, as they dug out enough to move into their own burrows, then continued to expand them as they were doing, making them not just roomy, but comfortable. Most dragons grumbled at not having proper earth to form a sleeping mound, sleeping on crushed-up waste rock, rendered into a nearly sand-like fine gravel, which made the sleeping mounds soft and comfortable, but it just wasn't the same. Rock sand didn't have the same smell, the same feel, as the natural earth. But, aside from those little cosmetic annoyances, the burrows were expanding, the city was nearly complete, and things were looking promising. Within maybe two weeks, they'd be done with the planned excavations, leaving only the personal burrows to be dug, and the work would shift from building the city to making it thrive.

All those earth dragons wouldn't have much to do once the digging was finished, but Anthra and Geon weren't going to let everyone just lay around and be lazy. For one, every dragon had to attend English classes, which would be taught by the department...and they'd have more than just earth dragons there. Most of the water dragons wanted to attend those classes, understanding that being able to speak at least one human language might be very useful if they encountered ships at sea. All dragons would

also have a job, rotating through the possible occupations in a two week on, two week off system that made everyone work, but also bowed to the reality that there were far more dragons than there were jobs. Drakes like Kell and Kammi already had jobs and would work every day, but others would be on gangs that would inspect every tunnel for cracks and possible damage, for example. Antha and Geon were more or less inventing busy work for drakes to undertake just so they had something to do, since earth dragons were *not* used to having nothing to do. They needed work if only to keep up morale. The builders and the tunnelers and the power drakes would have apprentices to learn the basics of their specializations, forming reserves of dragons that could be called up to respond to emergencies. Some drakes would be helping build the factories underground, and once they were finished, they'd be working in them.

Anthra had even contacted Keth about teaching other drakes their family specialty, underwater excavation. Keth wasn't sure he wanted to train other drakes in their family art, since those drakes may steal their jobs once things went back to normal, but the cistern had proved that *only* having three drakes with that kind of specialized knowledge was not a very good thing. Keth's family had always been the go-to drakes when it concerned underwater digging, and despite his concern, they still would be. For one, most dragons didn't have their conditioning. Keth and Kanna could hold their breath nearly five times longer than the average earth drake, and that meant that even if some other drake had his expertise, they simply couldn't do the work as fast as he could. Keth and Kanna had gotten back into trim in that regard, able to stay under four or five minutes at time and still do heavy work, but even they bowed to Kell's superiority in that regard. Thanks to his deep friendship with Sella and daily need to hold his breath for long periods of time when he went swimming with her, Kell had taken training himself for holding his breath to the extreme.

And Kammi was now starting it. He'd caught her holding her breath while digging a few times earlier, trying to toughen up...and at least it was safer to practice up here, where she could just exhale and not drown. It was

how he did it when he was a hatchling, after Sella, Ralla, and Kii started to tease him about not being able to stay down very long.

Kammi finished up the last part of the far corner as Kell scored an arch in the wall that would be a short tunnel leading to what would be their storage chamber, but their next project was the small sleeping chambers for the hatchlings. They were very excited about it and a little nervous at the same time, since they all currently still slept on the same sleeping mound, sleeping as a clutch, which earth dragons did. But they were old enough now to sleep alone, a sign of their maturation.

These things had very specific timing based on earth dragon culture, based on the growth of the hatchlings. Kitta had just started to bud her eighth spike, and that was the sign that it was time for the hatchlings to get their own rooms. When they budded their ninth spike, which would be in about ten years, they'd start their digging training...though the hatchlings already knew a great deal about digging, as most earth dragon hatchlings did. The parents started teaching them long before they took formal classes. The last seven spikes all budded fairly quickly after that, about one a year, until they budded their seventeenth and final spike and would be considered juveniles, which was when earth dragons entered what humans would call pubescent growth spurts, growing and becoming sexually mature. About fifteen years after that, they'd be considered adults.

He sometimes wondered if Jenny would be shocked to know that the hatchlings were around twenty years old as humans counted it. They'd be considered adults around the age of 50. Kell hadn't been officially released until he was 52, but that was more due to an overprotective mother than anything else. He'd spent six years training to be a field agent, and had been doing field missions for six years. He wasn't finished growing yet, drakes didn't actually stop growing until they were about 80, but what he'd grow until then would be negligible, just topping out. He'd grow maybe a half a foot higher, maybe a foot longer, and that would be it. Kell would be a very small drake all his life...but among earth drakes, that wasn't seen as a disadvantage or a social stigma. Earth dragons saw the value of small

dragons among them, because they were a subterranean species. Smaller drakes had an easier time of it in confined spaces.

But at least he wasn't going to be the smallest. That would probably be Kammi. She was a very petite little drake, and she was only a couple of years younger than him. She'd finished most of her growing.

Kammi. He'd found himself glancing over at her from time to time. She was an obnoxious little thing, cheeky and irritating, but she'd always been a good friend of his, a drake mature enough to discuss the intricacies of doing a Linux install but still young enough to play like a hatchling. But...she was, well, *growing* on him. He couldn't quite explain it. He'd gotten so used to her being around, it was weird when she wasn't. She'd always been a good friend, but he'd never...*missed* her before.

Kell finished scoring the wall and helped her sweep up the smaller bits of debris, some of which they'd crush to add to sleeping mounds, using their tails to gather it all up. "Where are the others, they're usually back by now," Kell fretted.

"Lazy, lazy, trying to get others in to finish up the work," she teased.

He whacked her with his tail, sending a plume of dust, which made her laugh. "Sella and Ralla are supposed to be coming to eat dinner with us. They're bringing tuna."

"Then I'm glad I've already moved in," she grinned.

"We're not giving *you* any. It's only for drakes that matter," he replied airily.

"I'll just take yours, since you're too wussy to stop it," she taunted.

"Oho, who's the little fire drake now," he replied, which made her laugh.

Kitta and Kav bounded into the room they'd just finished, looking around. Kitta's newest tail spike had grown nearly ten centimeters since that

morning, and Kav was glaring jealously at it. “Wow, you finished already,” Kitta proclaimed.

“We’ve had almost all day to work on it, little sister,” Kell answered. “How was your day?”

“I learned how to arch a ceiling today,” she said proudly. “Are you going start teaching us English today?”

“Well, I guess we could, after dinner,” Kammi answered for him.

“What about you, Kav?”

“I spent all day running around, delivering messages. But, I know my way around really well now,” he said. “And I have a message for you, big brother. Ferroth is joining us for dinner.”

“He heard about the tuna,” Kammi mused, which made Kell laugh.

“Probably,” he agreed.

Konn bounded in a moment later, just in front of Kanna. She looked a little dusty, from hauling waste rock, her monotone hide and scales duller than usual. “Mother,” Kell nodded. “We’ll start on the hatchlings’ new sleeping chambers tomorrow.”

“Good, good, they need them,” she said, patting Kitta on the head, which made her beam. “My little hatchlings are growing up so fast!”

“When will *our* spikes grow in?” Konn asked, a bit jealously.

“Well, it usually took me nearly three weeks to get my new spike after my brothers got theirs,” Kell mused, trying to sound neutral as Kanna’s eyes tightened. Even after so many years, she could hardly bear to talk about her lost children. And since his younger siblings were almost the age that Kib and Kou had been when they died, it probably made it even worse for her. “Just be patient, it’ll grow soon.”

“Good, because Kitta’s been an arrogant little jerk since she budded,” Konn declared, which made Kitta gasp.

“You take that back!” she demanded.

“Nuh-uh,” he replied, and then he was fending her off as she slammed into him, the two of them rolling around on the floor. Kanna let them scrap, since it was their business, and they weren’t really all that serious about fighting anyway.

Earth drake hatchlings were *very* rambunctious.

Sella and Ralla arrived with yoke baskets filled with tuna, both of them moving a little fast. “We had a pack of drakes following us,” Ralla laughed as he hunkered down to set the baskets down, then back out from under the yoke bar. “They could smell the tuna, I suppose.”

“We made sure to tell them that we’re simply paying back a debt we incurred before the evacuation,” Sella said lightly. “And you should be ready to be *very* popular for the next couple of days, Kanna.”

She smiled. “Most likely.”

Ferroth arrived along with Keth, the two of them talking, and he was more than happy to take a place at the serving table, a low affair that let them sit and use their forepaws that Kell had built just the day before. Kell could tell that he had something on his mind, but the age-old tradition of not discussing matters of importance while eating stayed him. When they were done, however, he put his elbows on the table and looked around at them. “What I’m about to say doesn’t leave this burrow,” he told them, which caused everyone to fall silent. “The fire dragons have made their decisions about what they’re going to do.”

“And?” Kammi asked eagerly.

“They’re splitting up,” he replied. “Most of them are returning to the island to hold their territory, which will make things *very* stressed up there. The water dragons agreed to help feed them, secretly, so there won’t be any warfare over the stockpiles of food.”

“What are the others going to do?”

“Tomorrow, fifty adult fire dragons are flying to Mount Kilauea, Hawaii, with all their younglings, hatchlings, and eggs,” he replied grimly, which caused a round of gasps.

“Kilauea? That’s right smack in the middle of most of the population of Hawaii!” Kell protested.

“They know. They want the volcano to protect their hatchlings from any sky dragon reprisals. So, a group of fifty fire dragons are herding their younglings and carrying their eggs to the volcano. It’ll take them most of tomorrow to fly up there. Needless to say, this is going to cause any number of potential disasters. A couple score hungry fire dragons in unfamiliar territory, surrounded by trigger happy humans? It’ll be a nightmare.

“Or at least it could be,” he said. “Kell, Anthra and Geon have asked me to ask you to do something equal parts important and insane.”

“They want me to go up there?” he asked, almost in disbelief. “With the entire sky dragon population after my head, they want me to go *outside*?” he demanded.

“Absolutely not!” Kanna stated adamantly. “They’ll attack him the instant he comes out of the water!”

“Which would you rather have, whelp? Your personal safety, or the fire dragons rampaging across the big island?” he asked pointedly. “You don’t think Anthra and Geon understand the danger it poses for you? They do. But the simple fact of the matter, Kell, is that you’re the *only one* that can do it. Sure, there’s some hundred and six earth dragons that speak English, but none of them can *swim* the way you can. We thought about sending Jirran, but if the sky dragons attack, you’re the only earth drake that stands any chance at all of surviving if you get separated from your water dragon guide. You’re the only earth dragon that can make the swim to Hawaii. Gaia’s toenails, whelp, you’re the only one that could *find* it. Most earth dragons don’t know how to navigate, since they don’t *need* to. The simple truth is, you’re the only one we have. We need *someone* to beat the fire

dragons there and arrange things so the humans let them have their space, barter some agreements.

“We know it’s asking a lot of you, whelp. You’re the ones the sky dragons are after. But you can save a lot of humans and a lot of fire dragons if you can be there to prevent a war.”

Kanna looked furious, Keth looked unhappy, and Sella and Ralla looked a bit shocked, but Kell ignored them all. As much as it would be dangerous, he couldn’t deny Anthra and Geon’s logic. There *was* the chance that the earth dragon that went would get separated from the water dragon guiding him, either by sky dragon attack, a storm, or just bad luck. If that happened, most earth dragons would drown long before they got back to dry land...and they were right that Kell *could* find the islands by swimming.

“Anthra wanted me to *ask* you to do this, Kell. They’re not going to order you.”

Kell was silent a long moment. “How long would I be there?”

“Just long enough to make the arrangements,” he replied. “Your human friend, Jenny, she’s *already* on Hawaii. If you show up, she’ll be in front of you in ten minutes. Just get there, translate, make an agreement between the fire dragons and the humans, then come back. We talked to Surrall, and he agreed to take you.”

“Us. He’ll take *us*,” Kammi declared, giving Ferroth a hard look. “This is *way* too dangerous for just Kell. He’ll need another earth dragon there to watch his back.”

“There’s a reason we feel Kell’s the only one that can do this, whelp,” Ferroth said bluntly, staring at her. “You wouldn’t survive the swim. Kell’s the only dragon on this island not a water dragon that can even make the swim. You’d drown somewhere out in the open ocean, Kammi, and you know it. Surrall will be there, and his defensive magic will be just as much use to Kell as you would be.”

“I can’t believe you’re considering this, young one!” Kanna protested, looking at him with her heart in her eyes. “It’s suicidal! The sky dragons will attack you, even *there*!”

“Anthra and Geon are right, mother,” he sighed. “I’m the only one that speaks English that can make the swim.”

“Sella speaks English, and the sky dragons aren’t trying to kill *her*!” Kanna declared, looking at Sella.

“And Sella doesn’t have the extensive experience dealing with humans face to face that a field agent has,” Ferroth pointed out. “She’d be just fine if she only had to deal with Jenny, but Jenny won’t be the only human she’ll have to deal with.”

“Fine, then *four* of us go,” Sella stated calmly. “Patriarch can guide Kell, and I’ll take Kammi. I can carry her all the way to Hawaii.”

“And if she somehow gets separated from you? Are you willing to accept that responsibility, Sella?” Ferroth asked pointedly. “Her *life* will be in your paws. If she gets stranded out in the open ocean, she’ll die.”

“There will be *two* water dragons with her, I’m absolutely positive she’ll make it,” Sella said simply. “And I agree with her in this matter. Kell cannot go alone. He cannot go with only Patriarch either, since he doesn’t speak complete English. And four pairs of eyes are much better than one.”

“We’ll keep Kell safe, Matron, don’t you worry,” Kammi said in a gentle voice to Kanna, who looked about ready to flip the table over and tackle Kell to the floor to keep him from leaving. “I’ll protect him.”

“As will I. He is my deepest, dearest, oldest friend,” Sella said with an eloquent nod towards Kanna. “If he needs me, I will be there for him.”

“Not just you, sister,” Ralla declared. “I’ll go too. I speak passingly decent English.”

“We can’t have an entourage. Kell will be safe enough once he’s *on* the island. It’s just getting him there and getting him back that will be

dangerous,” Ferroth declared.

“Well, it’s the five of us or no deal,” Kammi told Ferroth with surprising vehemence. “If you say no, I’ll lock Kell in the back room of the burrow and I’ll whip his tail if he tries to get out.”

“You and me both!” Kanna agreed vociferously.

“Why are you so twisted up about this, whelp?”

“Because you’ve either made Kell or asked Kell to do all your dirty work, and it’s not fair,” she retorted. “He’s the one you sent to make contact. He’s the one Anthra and Geon laid out like bait on a platter for the council, and now he’s the one you want to risk his neck when the entire sky dragon population wants to tear his head off. It’s about time *someone* stood up for him, since he’s too much of a wuss to stand up for himself.”

“Doing what has to be done isn’t being a wuss,” Kell told her, a bit surprised at how serious she was. “But, if you’re that serious, then alright. Ferroth, tell Anthra and Geon that I’ll do it. We’ll swim there, make arrangements, then swim back. The five of us,” he said, looking at his water drake friends and nodding.

“Alright then. We’ll make this up to you, Kell, I promise,” Ferroth told him. “We *do* understand that you’ve done most of the digging ever since all this started, but it’s your fault for being so damn dependable,” he grunted. “You need to leave as soon as you can. It’s going to be a very long swim since you’ll have Kammi with you, and you only have about twenty-six hours before the fire dragons arrive. That will barely give you enough time to get to the island.”

“No it won’t, but we do need to get there as early as we can,” Kell said, standing up. “Call Jenny and warn her that we’re coming and that the fire dragons are coming, and where they’re going. The humans have to be ready for when they show up in the sky. Sella, go find Patriarch and have him meet us at the lava tube in about an hour. We’ll leave then.”

“Alright,” she nodded, standing up and filing out. Ralla followed her. Ferroth gave Keth and Kanna a glance, then he too left the burrow. Kell immediately went over to Kanna and reared up on his hind legs, putting his forepaws on her shoulders. “I’ll be alright, mother,” he told her gently. “I’ll have the pod with me, and once we’re on land, Kammi will watch my back for me. We won’t be there long, and despite what chief thinks, it won’t be all that dangerous to swim there. We won’t even surface until we’re a hundred kilometers from the island. Remember, Ralla and Surrall know how to do that air bubble thing, we’ll never be where the sky dragons can see us.”

“But it’s insane, my youngling, them asking you to do something so dangerous!” she protested.

“I know, but think of the consequences if I don’t. We *need* the humans, mother. If we need more food, they’re the only ones that can bring enough of it to us to hold out. If the fire dragons destroy the relationship we’ve made with them, we may face the prospect of either returning to the surface as slaves or starving to death down in these tunnels. And I don’t want to see *either* thing happen to you or the hatchlings. I’m doing this to protect *us* as much as the fire dragons, or the humans for that matter.”

She looked stricken, then reared up on her back legs herself, putting her head over his, and nuzzled him so hard he almost fell over backwards. “I *hate* your logic!” she said, which made Kammi laugh despite herself. “If you must do this, my dear youngling, then go swiftly and be careful! Oh, please be careful!”

“I will, I promise,” he told her.

“There is such a thing as being *too* willing to be the sacrificial lamb, my youngling,” Keth said sternly as they shared a nuzzle. “But do be careful, and come back to us well and whole.”

“That’s the plan, sire,” he replied. He got gang tackled by the hatchlings, Kammi made her rounds with his parents and siblings, and then he and Kammi left the burrow. “And what possessed you to volunteer for

something this crazy?" he asked her once they were in the tunnel, heading for the department so he could gather what he'd need for the trip.

"Just what I said. You don't have to do this alone. This is way too dangerous for one drake, so here I am."

"Even though you'll never make it to Hawaii if we somehow get separated from the pod."

"Now you just made this a challenge," she told him in a surprisingly serious voice.

Anthra and Geon were at the department when they arrived, and they apologized about fifty times as Kell gathered up a shoulder satchel. "We tried to think of anyone else we could send, Kell, but the dangers just disqualified everyone else," Geon apologized. "We didn't want this to turn into a suicide mission."

"It won't be," Kammi told them. "If you'd have thought it through, you'd realize that *any* of the field drakes could have performed the mission. But you didn't."

"Whelp," Ferroth warned.

"No, she has right to rebuke us," Anthra sighed. "We *did* think that the field agents could perform the mission, Kammi, but the risk of you drowning out in the open sea should disaster befall you made it prohibitively dangerous. Kell is the only one among us that can make the swim unaided. He's the only one for whom it wouldn't be a death sentence."

"Yeah, until some sky dragon hunting for dolphins sees him surface, then he'd be a dead drake," she said harshly.

"Right now, young one, that is a danger to *any* earth dragon the sky dragons see," Geon said bluntly. "Our sole reasoning was that if any earth drake was put in that position, alone and stranded in the open ocean with sky dragons hunting him, Kell would have the best chance to escape. He

can swim for *kilometers* underwater before having to surface, something none of the rest of you can manage. We did think this through carefully, young one. And we picked the drake we felt had the best chance to survive if things went wrong.”

“Well, I don’t have to like it, so I’m going with him,” she told them. “He’ll need a pair of eyes watching the sky once he’s up on land and exposed to the air, and I’m going to be the one protecting him.”

“But think of the danger, Kammi. If you get lost—“

“It will be more dangerous for *him* if I’m not there,” she cut Anthra off. “We’ll have three water dragons with us to help us get there and back. I think they can do the job.”

“She already threatened to lock Kell in a room if we don’t say yes, so just go with it,” Ferroth told them.

“My, you’re that serious about this, Kammi?” Anthra asked.

“Yes,” she declared resolutely.

Kell and Kammi gathered up what they thought they might need and put them in the sealed, watertight shoulder bags, then received a final briefing from Ferroth. “Alright, here’s Hawaii,” he said, pointing at a map. “And here we are,” he pointed, indicating their island, which laid south-southeast of the island chain. “It’s going to be a very long and tiring swim ____“

“No it won’t. We’ll have Surrall with us, so I expect to get there in about twelve hours.”

“Twelve? That’s it?” Kammi asked.

“About that,” Kell nodded. “You don’t know what water dragons can do *in* the water, Kammi. Trust me.”

“Once you’re there, make your way immediately to the volcano,” he told them, changing to a close-up of Hawaii and tapping the volcano with a

clawtip. “Your best approach is here, along these lava flows left over from the major eruption they had last year. You’ll be in the open, but you’ll have the lowest chance of encountering any humans. Most of those lava flows are still too hot for the humans to tolerate them, but they’re more than within earth dragon tolerance.”

“Just have Jenny meet us at a beach somewhere,” Kammi countered.

“I would if I could get hold of her,” he grunted. “We have no communications right now. Shii’s checking to make sure the sky dragons didn’t find the dish. If we get Jenny before you arrive, I’ll just tell her where you intend to make landfall and she’ll meet you there. If she’s not there, then make contact with Jenny on your way to the volcano using a tablet. There are wifi points you can detour and reach here, here, here, here, and here,” he tapped, hitting villages and individual businesses not far from the lava flows. “If Jenny’s not there to meet you, go for one of those nodes and try to get in touch with her. Once you do get in touch with her, follow her instructions if they make sense, but if you feel they’ll put you in too much danger, then head for the volcano and be there for when the fire dragons start to arrive.

“First and foremost, whelps, I want you to be *safe*. Try to minimize contact with civilian humans as much as possible, there’s no telling how they’re going to react to you. When you’re on the island, you keep one eye on where you’re going and the other in the sky, and *stay alert*. Remember that it’ll be daylight when you get there, and a sky dragon cruising over the islands may take a shot at you. And don’t dawdle. You go there, you make contact with Jenny, you negotiate a treaty to let the fire dragons stay there with their eggs and young, then you come back. I don’t want you there for more than two hours after the fire dragons arrive. You’re not there to be their live-in translator, you’re there to prevent any violence, and that’s *it*. Don’t let the fire dragons hold you there, and don’t let the *humans* talk you into staying either. Understand?”

“Perfectly, chief,” Kell said as Kammi nodded.

“Good. Kammi, you do what the water dragons tell you to do when you’re in the water, no matter how silly you think it might be. That is their domain, and in their domain, you bow to their wisdom without your usual backtalk. Understand?”

She gave him a slightly hard look, but nodded.

“Kell, it’s your head they want the most, so you do everything you can to keep it on your neck. Always keep your own personal safety as your main priority at all times. If you come back with so much as a scratch, I think Kanna might spike me.”

“She will,” Kell said without humor.

“Then save us both and maintain constant vigilance,” he stated. “Stay under cover whenever possible, and when the fire dragons arrive, don’t take any crap from them. You tell them exactly why you’re there and what you’re doing on their behalf, and make it clear to them that their peaceful settlement of the volcano is *earth dragon* doing. Make it clear that they *owe* us.”

“They’re gonna love that,” Kell chuckled darkly.

“They won’t mind so much when they find out that their younglings and eggs will be safe,” he grunted. “They won’t bring them back to the island because they’re afraid that the chromatics might try to kill their young and destroy their eggs in revenge for defying them.”

“That’s not unreasonable,” Kammi agreed. “They *would* do it. They’re as cowardly as they are petty.”

“Alright, that’s everything. Remember, safety, safety, safety,” he said intensely. “In the water and on the land, surrounded by humans and dealing with the fire dragons, *always* think safety first. I don’t want to see either of you get hurt.”

“We don’t either,” Kammi noted, getting a little of her swagger back.

“Make double sure each of you are carrying at least two wireless devices, just in case,” he told them. “And good luck out there, agents. Do the department proud.”

“This isn’t for the department,” Kell said as he stood back up.

“Let’s get this sideshow going, Kell,” Kammi declared. “I want to get there and back as fast as we can without either of us having to throw a single spike.”

“Amen.”

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Surrat met them at the water’s edge along the long lava tube, looking quite serious, very much unlike him. He nuzzled Kell fondly when he got there, and patted him on the shoulder. “Alright, you know what to expect, Kell. Did you explain things to her?”

“Not yet,” he replied.

“We’re going to be using an aura current,” he told her. “It’s a form of water dragon magic that we use to travel long distances in the water. In effect, we’ll be moving the *water* around us, which will let us swim far faster than usual. This isn’t something we normally do unless there’s a great need for it, young one. It’s very demanding, and only elder water dragons have enough skill to create one or maintain it for long. When we get there, I’m going to be exhausted,” he warned. “I’ll have to rest, and that means that I’ll be little use to you. But, with the younglings along with us, they’ll be available in case you need the help of a water dragon.”

“They can’t go up on the volcano, Patriarch,” Kammi pointed out. “It’ll be far too hot.”

“True, but if there’s a need for them, they’ll be there,” he nodded. “We’ll have to swim out a good distance before I can use the aura current, and besides, we can’t surface until it gets dark anyway. Ralla, you’re responsible for Kammi,” he declared. “I’ll take care of Kell. Sella, you keep us hidden from magical scrying.” He looked at Kammi. “Young one, it is your own life at stake here, so understand this. You cannot stray more than fifty *dram* from Ralla at any time. He’ll be the one to make sure he stays close to you, but you must understand that in case something happens. If anything does happen, you grab hold of Ralla’s tail and you do not let go for any reason. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Patriarch.”

“Alright. It says much for your courage that you’re willing to do this, Kammi. Keth and Kanna were very wise to bring you into their burrow,” he declared, which made Kammi smile brightly. “Are we all ready?”

Everyone nodded.

“Remember the visors, Kell?”

“Right here,” he said, patting his second shoulder satchel.

“Alright, let’s go. Hold your breath until I get the bubble formed, Kell, then you can breathe normally,” he cautioned.

The bubble did make it a little hard to see, since its boundary distorted his thermographic vision, but when Surrall illuminated the tunnel with his bioluminescent glow, it actually made seeing underwater in the light sharper. The bubble did slightly distort the edges of his vision, but straight ahead was clear and sharp. Surrall led them down the tube, Kammi holding onto Ralla’s tail, then he had them stop just at the entrance. He ventured out into the open, the swirling, shifting sunlight filtering in from the waves above cascading over his sleek gray body as he looked up, then he motioned for Kell to follow. Surrall darted towards the cove mouth quickly, and with a broad sweep of his wings, Kell followed. Two hasty, nervous wingbeats got him to the cove mouth, and he almost sighed in relief when he reached the

downslope just past the cove, taking them deeper and deeper with ever wingbeat. The bubble contracted around his head as they descended, and a few times it got hard to breathe, but Surrall adjusted the bubble as they went down nearly a hundred meters, very deep, deep enough to plunge them into darkness before Surrall turned them northwest and ventured out into the open water, just the faintest of dim radiance above, and with the bioluminescent glow of the three water dragons their only points of reference.

Kell glanced back at Kammi and Ralla, Sella over them using her magic to hide them from scrying, and he saw the look of both trepidation and wonder on Kammi's face. There was a strange, alluring appeal to swimming in the open water, to have nothing above, nothing below, to feel like she was flying and have unlimited potential and possibility in whichever direction she chose to go. There was a great sense of freedom that came with the ocean, a feeling that Kell suspected many sailors felt when they looked out from the deck of their ship and saw nothing but ocean all the way to the horizon. The water around them was very dark but clear, in the shadowy depths to hide their silhouettes from any sky dragons above, and it was like flying through an endless twilight on a moonless night. There was just enough light coming from above to make the water over them lighter than the water below, but there was no light around them but the glow of their water dragon guides, letting their thermographic vision kick in and show them nothing but cold water.

Kell followed Surrall as he made a minor correction. All dragons could navigate by magnetic sensing, for all dragons had magnetic material in glands in their snouts, like an internal compass. Many birds also had the same thing, so it wasn't entirely unheard of in nature, but earth dragons really didn't have much use for it since they rarely went anywhere. Many earth dragons ignored that sense, or if they had to use it, didn't know how to "read" what their magnetic glands were telling them. But Kell used it often enough to be competent using it as his compass, which would allow him to navigate. By sensing the magnetic lines of force and comparing it to the direction he knew they were supposed to go, he knew that Surrall was

pointing them almost right at the big island. It was easier with a map, but Kell didn't need a map to navigate, and neither did Surrall. Surrall knew exactly where he was and where he was going, so he didn't need any help getting there.

After well over an hour in the dark of the depths, Surrall nosed up and started to ascend gradually, and Kell followed. When the darkness didn't abate, he knew that it was either dark or twilight. When he broached the surface, he saw that it was indeed dark, the stars a bright carpet of twinkling white against the black sky, and no moon to dim them. "Alright, gather in," Surrall called. "Kell, give Kammi her visor. Kammi, grab hold of Ralla's tail, and don't let go," he warned. "I'm going to form the aura current, and you can't fall out of it. These things cannot be turned, and it takes a lot of effort to start them, so don't make us have to come back for you."

"I won't," she promised, taking hold of Ralla's fluked tail.

"You know what to do, young friend," Surrall said as he closed his eyes and began.

He'd ridden in aura currents before, since Shii and Surrall both were capable of making them, and he couldn't deny that it was fun. The water got warm and then would shudder and lunge forward, but it wouldn't carry anyone. He had to actively swim to stay in the aura current, and if he didn't constantly swim forward, he'd fall out of it. It didn't matter how fast or slow he tried to swim, as long as he maintained constant forward momentum, the aura current would carry him, holding him in place relative to the others. For everyone but Surrall, it would be a very lazy, leisurely swim that would actually propel them at nearly 100 knots. But for Surrall, it would be long hours of taxing effort to maintain the aura current, and the faster he tried to make it, the more demanding it would be.

"What's the visor for?" Kammi asked, having a bit of an issue trying to get the elastic band up and over her backswept horns so it would encircle her head..

“The wind,” Sella warned to Kammi. “It will be like a howling gale in your face, friend Kammi. *Only* the water moves, not the air over it. Stay as low to the water as you can.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll remember,” she nodded, hunkering down so only the top of her head was out of the water.

“I’ll do what I can to try to mitigate that, but there’s only so much I can do,” Surrall said in a voice of intense concentration. “Alright, get ready.”

When he felt the water turn suddenly warm, he pushed off with his wings, as did the others. The aura current formed around them, a faint shimmer of magical light in a roughly oval patch centered around Ralla, and then it surged forward. The wind picked up in his face as he lowered down into the water, until it was a constant roar of wind that would be assaulting his eyes if he hadn’t brought the visor. The water dragons all submerged, leaving them to dog-paddle within the aura current, their heads and horns the only things above water so they could breathe.

Kell watched the rotation of the stars over the hours of wind rushing over his ear canals, counting the hours. Surrall was a strong water drake, and he managed to hold the aura current for nearly three hours before he had to stop and rest. Kell and Kammi treaded water as Surrall just hung in the water under them, looking all but dead as he saved all his energy. Surrall rested for nearly an hour, time Kell and Kammi spent discussing their orders, then he resurfaced and reformed the aura current. Kell could tell that they weren’t going as fast, but still at a pretty fair clip given the wind in his face, Surrall reining in a little speed so he could hold the current longer.

After two more stops to rest, Surrall got them to Hawaii just as the false dawn painted the eastern sky. The big island loomed into view against that faint light, a wavering, ominous shadow, and Surrall ended the aura current when they were about three kilometers out. “I have to rest now,” he panted. “Young ones, take over. I’ll be right here.”

“Rest well, Patriarch,” Sella replied.

“Thanks for getting us here so fast, Patriarch,” Kell added. “You must be wiped out.”

“You have no idea,” he panted. “I’m going to go down to the bottom and sleep for a while. Be careful, my young ones.”

“We will,” Kammi assured him, and Surrall slipped under the waves without a reply.

“We need to go that way,” Kell declared, pointing towards the west side of the island. “There are some lava flows that extend all the way into the ocean. That’s our landing point.”

“And let’s hope that Jenny is there waiting for us,” Kammi grunted as she turned her nose towards the west edge of the island.

The sun rose as they circled the island, searching for the black scars of the lava flows, and they found them about half an hour after sunrise, a series of twisting black paths that extended up the slope of the island, heading for the distant volcano. The lava flows had traveled dozens of kilometers on their long journey from the volcano to the sea, irregular black scars of frozen rock, frozen in mid-wave or eddy, giving the tops of them a texture like a roiling stream flash-frozen in an instant. The water around those flows was slightly but noticeably warmer than the other water, hinting that the lava still hadn’t completely cooled, and the water turned much more acidic as they neared the shore. “You two just hang back where the water isn’t toxic,” Kell told them. “You can’t go on the volcano anyway, it’d kill you. Just stay hidden and stay safe and let us handle it from here.”

“We’ll keep a watch for sky dragons,” Sella told him. “Be careful, my dear friend.”

“Like the chief said, getting here was the most dangerous part,” Kell assured her. “Just get some rest, and we’ll be back as soon as we can.”

Kell and Kammi climbed out of the acidic water onto a black, ropy lava flow, and he could feel the heat of it under his paws. There was still lava deep down inside it, enough to make the parts of it not lapped by the

waves too hot for a human to stand without heat-retardant suits. The black rock upon which they stood had to be nearly 90 degrees Celsius, hot enough to burn a human's feet right through his shoes.

"Warm," Kammi noted, patting the rock under her foot.

"The lava hasn't hardened down inside yet, so let's not get cocky. We weigh too much to stomp around on these half-cooled flows, I don't think either of us would enjoy swimming in lava very much."

"No doubt there. And no Jenny," she fretted. "I guess the chief didn't get through to her."

"That or she's at a different lava flow. There's probably more than one."

It turned out that the latter was indeed the case. As they made their way inland, up the gentle slope leading from the ocean and towards the closest known wifi point at a Starbucks in a village about two miles away, they skirted the edges of the flows in case they hadn't cooled enough for the upper crust to support their weight. They saw no humans, as the lava flow had cut through an area of heavy forest, at least until a helicopter's blades thudded the air. It got louder, and Kammi pointed it out, one of the smaller models, a two-seater, something small enough to land just about anywhere. It was a military craft, and it came to a hover about fifty feet from them and a hundred feet up. Kell could clearly see Jenny in the copilot's seat, wearing a combat camouflage uniform, waving madly at them through the large bubble canopy. Kammi laughed and reared up on her hind legs and snapped out her wings, flapping them in a display, then the helicopter very slowly started over them. They followed as best they could through the heavy forest, knocking a few trees over, until they came to a clearing holding a house, and a fairly nice one. The little chopper landed in the yard, and Jenny was climbing down almost before the skids were on the ground. She ran up to them with a big smile, then threw herself against Kell's shoulder and chest, giving him as much of a hug as she could. "It's so good to see

you!” she shouted over the noise of the chopper. “What the hell are you doing coming out here, Kell? It’s dangerous!”

“True, but it was come out or leave you holding the bag,” he replied as the chopper started to power down, the noise abating.

“What happened to your tail, Kell?” she asked, looking at his spikes.

“Oh, I grew a shanker,” he chuckled, bringing it around so she could see the clear crystal spike in the middle. “It’s just what you see, an off-color one, it happens every so often. Jenny, this is Kammi. Kammi, you know our favorite Hunter.”

“Do I,” she laughed, almost knocking Jenny down by poking her snout against her chest. “It’s nice to finally talk to you, and not sneak around you,” she grinned.

“What are you two doing here?” she demanded. “I get an email telling me to be out on these lava flows to meet a pair of earth drakes. An email of all things! Why didn’t you call my phone?”

“We’ve been having problems with our satellite system,” Kell told her. “I think the email was all the chief could manage. I’m just glad he got through to you. Did he tell you what’s going on?”

She nodded. “He said we may see fire dragons over the island as early as this afternoon. I sorta figured that they’d want the volcano here when you told me what happened. I mean, where else would they go?” she asked. “They like volcanoes, and this one is the only one around right now that’s erupting.”

“You’re pretty clever, for a human,” Kammi grinned. “But that’s not why they’re here.”

“Fire dragons can den anywhere, but they won’t keep their younglings or eggs anywhere *but* a volcano if they can help it,” Kell told her. “Especially their eggs. They have this old myth that fire dragon eggs

incubated in lava makes a stronger fire dragon. There's no proof of it, but it's what they believe, and that's good enough for them."

"I hope you've been preparing the humans for seeing the fire dragons," Kammi noted as the chopper pilot climbed out of his machine, gawking at them.

"What are the fire dragons going to do when they get here?" Jenny asked.

"From what chief told us, just take some territory right around the caldera," Kammi replied. "They'll want some rocky expanses close to the lava where they can house their hatchlings, someplace very hot so the heat is enough of a deterrent to keep anything and everything away from them, and a sheltered area of either stagnant or slow-moving lava for their eggs."

"No, what do they intend to do? They have to know this is human territory."

"We're not exactly sure," Kell answered. "That's why they sent me and Kammi. We're here to barter a reasonable outcome for both sides in this, Jenny. The fire dragons just want someplace safe for their vulnerable ones until they can go back to the island."

"Not *all* the fire dragons are coming, only fifty," Kammi added.

"That much the email told me," Jenny nodded. "But fifty is still a hell of a lot."

"I just hope nobody shoots at them as they come in."

"Nobody will. We went public two days ago," she told him, looking up at him soberly. "The President himself held the press conference. We acknowledged that that picture of you was in fact real, categorically denied most of what happened in D.C., told everyone that you can talk, and revealed that we'd been in secret negotiations with the dragons for some time. It's all a bunch of lies, but what President Walker made sure to do was to play down any scary factor from the dragons. I told him that with the

chaos on the island, going public would save *someone's* life in the very near future. If it wasn't this fire dragon migration, it would have been some rancher seeing a sky dragon snatch up one of his cattle, or some dragon raiding a supermarket looking for food. Right now, the President is telling the world that we made a deal with the dragons to let them migrate to the volcano here for a little while, and once they're done doing their dragon things, they'll fly back to their own home."

"Dragon things," Kammi laughed. "But that's actually pretty clever."

"The fact that none of them speak English makes sure nobody can debunk our bald-faced lies," she said blandly, which made Kell laugh.

"Are you handling the inevitable press blitz?" he asked. "You know, how much do you really know and when did you know it, why were you lying, conspiracy theories ad nauseum?"

She grinned. "We're dealing," she replied. "We were ready for the fire dragons without you here, thanks to that software. Olivia modified it to serve as a real-time translation program. Speak English into the computer mike, it translates it to written draconic on a monitor, and in the other direction, we managed to get the computer to speak in English. We didn't have the pronunciation syntaxes to create an artificial dragon-speaking voice," she fretted. "We were going to use that to make contact with the fire dragons, and work out a deal with them."

"You are so clever!" Kammi gushed. "That's brilliant!"

"Guess you didn't need us after all," Kell noted.

"We won't say no to your help," she replied seriously.

"We need to get up onto the volcano, Jenny, it's sufficient cover from sky dragons," Kell told her. "We'll go using the lava—"

"No, we can get you up there," Jenny said. "Colonel Gray has a truck coming, we'll drive you up."

"I'm not about to ride inside a semi trailer, Jenny," Kell told her.

“Well, didn’t you bring hider amulets?” she pressed.

He shook his head. “They were in the department, and honestly, none of us thought they’d be any use where we are now. So, no hider amulets.”

“I never thought of that, though,” Kammi mused. “Maybe we *shoulda* thought to take a couple from the department before they emptied it out.”

“And I thought earth dragons were smart,” Jenny teased lightly.

“Don’t get cocky when you’re a potential meal, human,” Kammi retorted, which made Jenny laugh brightly.

“Alright, let me think,” Jenny said. “Does being on the volcano matter that much, or just needing cover?”

“Cover,” Kell said. “If the sky dragons see us here, they’ll attack, Jenny.”

“We’ll need to go up there eventually, though, to explain things when the fire dragons arrive,” Kammi added. “So it might be best to just make the arrangements up there.”

“Hmm. Okay, let’s go ahead and do that, then. Let me call Arlen and arrange something,” she said, digging her phone from her uniform pocket. Kell looked down at her, and noticed for the first time that the oak leaves on her uniform were black, not gold. “Lieutenant Colonel, eh?” he said, poking a claw on her insignia in the top middle of her chest.

She laughed. “Being your friend has done all kinds of things for my career,” she winked as she put the phone to her ear.

Kell pondered what she said as she talked to Kent. The humans had gone public, and now the population as a whole knew about the dragons. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that. It was going to happen anyway, because the fire dragons had rather rashly decided to try to claim Kilauea, but they were fire dragons. They probably thought it was a great idea. He wondered how the humans had taken it. Was it with fear? Curiosity? Disgust and loathing? Did ancient religious or cultural sects remember the dragons, and

were either sharpening their knives or preparing a warm welcome for them? There was no way to tell, and with their satellite communications on the blink back on the island, they couldn't monitor human media to gauge reaction. They hadn't even *known* until that moment. How would the humans react to seeing fifty fire dragons herding their young across the Hawaiian sky? Would they be left alone up in the caldera? Probably...no they *would*, he'd make sure of that.

But, in a way, this was *necessary*. It was time for the dragons to at least reveal themselves to the world. They would still remain separate from the humans, but it was only a matter of time before humans and dragonkind had interacted...and it was best for it to happen on the *dragons'* terms. They had started with the government, proving to them that the dragons were intelligent and formidable, and they had forced the government to reveal the dragons to the population in a manner that made them friendly, not dangerous. And that had been what it was all about, reinforcing amicable if distant relations with humanity.

Jenny lowered her phone. "Alright, Kent's going to make some arrangements," she told them. "They're setting up a command center by a geological survey research building near the top of the volcano. They're gonna set up a camouflage cover you and Kammi can hide under while we talk. The best thing to do is for you two to do what you had in mind, climb the volcano along the lava flows here. We have MP units out clearing civilians away from the flows, what few there are since this area is still pretty hot. We'll fly over you and guide you to where Kent's setting things up."

"Sounds good," Kammi nodded.

Jenny got back in the little chopper and it took off, and Kell and Kammi started up along the edges of the lava flows. "So, they went public," Kammi noted. "I wonder how the humans reacted."

"I was wondering the same thing," Kell said, looking back at her. "It's going to complicate things. I can just see the swarms of humans along the

edges of the volcano, wanting to see the fire dragons, and how that will unsettle them.”

“We’ll have to warn Jenny about that,” Kammi nodded. “And we better make sure they have some big TVs somewhere close. Just put on some football, and that should get the fire dragons in a happy mood.”

Kell laughed. “True enough.”

It took them about an hour to traverse the miles from the shore to the slopes of the volcano, then start up. The top of the volcano was actually very high, thousands of feet up, but the slope was gentle up to the top on that side. Jenny’s chopper stayed more or less overhead as they neared the thin smoking peak, but then veered off to the right as they reached a ridgeline, where the lava flow had buried a road. The two of them climbed down to the road and padded along it, both of them keeping an eye overhead for both the chopper and for sky dragons, then came around a bend and saw a building, the sign making it clear it was a U.S.G.S. research outpost, and there were about fifty soldiers there with a dozen or so vehicles. A group were erecting a camo net lean-to of sorts in the parking lot of the small outpost building, and Kell spotted Secretary of State Arlen Kent nearby, talking to a general and pointing at a map. Most of the humans stopped what they were doing and stared as the two earth drakes padded up to the parking lot, then Kent’s barking orders got them back to work. Kent hurried over as the chopper maneuvered to land, then offered his hand. “Kell, it’s good to see you again,” he said. Kell chuckled and extended a clawtip, and Kent took it and shook like he was any human.

“You’re looking well, Mister Secretary. Nice little operation here.”

“The military is always good at doing things fast,” he replied. “And who is this?”

“This is Kammi, one of the other field agents, Mister Secretary. Kammi, this is the Secretary of State, Arlen Kent.”

“Nice to meet you, Mister Secretary,” she said, shaking his hand with her claw as well. “It’s good to see that nobody’s running screaming in panic.”

Kent laughed. “These men have been thoroughly briefed,” he assured them. “Now, let’s get you under cover, then we can talk about what’s coming. The email we received wasn’t all that informative,” he said. “What exactly’s going on?”

“Simply put, the fire dragons are bringing their hatchlings and eggs here because they feel it’s the safest place for them right now,” Kell replied as they walked towards the netted cover. “There’s fifty adults with them to protect them, and the rest of the fire dragons are back on our island, defending the volcano from any incursions by the sky dragons or chromatics. I don’t have any updated info on what’s going on up on the surface, but there’s no doubt that things are tense up there. The fire dragons won’t give up their territory without a fight, but they also don’t want their hatchlings and eggs in the middle of it. So, they’re bringing their vulnerable here, where the heat of the volcano will drive away anyone that might threaten their eggs or young.”

“Alright, that makes much more sense now,” Kent nodded as they reached the general to whom he’d been talking. Kell, Kammi, this is General Larry Steele, the officer in charge of this operation.”

The general gave them slightly nervous looks. “It’s an honor to meet you,” he said.

“Kell, we have a map of the volcano set up, so show us what’s going to happen.”

They went under the netting and to a large table, then Kell and Kammi sat on their haunches and reared up, putting their forepaws on the tabletop. On the table was a large map and several aerial pictures of the caldera. “Alright, the fire dragons will want the caldera and any lava flows or pools very close to it,” he explained, tapping the map with a clawtip. “They’ll want to put their young in a place where the heat will kill anything that tries

to get close to them. I'd say around here," he said, tapping a place right by the caldera, where two lava flows oozed out of the jagged rim. "With all that lava around, it'd have to be two or three hundred degrees right here, minimum. The fire dragons will be skittish being in human territory, so cordoning off enough area so they can't see any humans would be the wise thing to do. Jenny said you had contingency plans for feeding any fire dragons that might use the scions. Are you still planning to feed them?"

Kent nodded. "We have supplies en route. We'll take care of them while they're here, to keep them from foraging around on the island."

"You might want to include a few big TVs and set them up where it's cool enough for them to work," Kammi added. "Fire dragons love football like nothing else. You show them football, and they'll be docile as kittens."

"Dragons watch TV?" General Steele asked in surprise.

"Oh yes, and fire dragons are sports fanatics," Kell replied, glancing at the man. "Football, baseball, any *ball* sport, hockey, MMA, professional wrestling, anywhere two teams or two individuals battle over territory or a prize of some kind, fire dragons adore those kinds of sports. They resonate with basic fire dragon mentality, a test of strength, but they love football the best."

"Who'd have thunk it," Steele chuckled. "We can cordon off the caldera along this perimeter," he stated, tracing a finger along the topographical map. "That's relatively flat area, and it gives us control of the roads leading to the top. We can set up an entertainment area here, close to this USGS equipment shack, and run off the shack's power, which was where we were going to put the conference area. Standard TVs may not be the best thing, but we can set up a couple of projectors and hook them up to satellite TV. This service road can be our primary supply line, bringing food up for the, uh, dragons, and since you know it's gonna happen, we'll set up a media control point right here, about a mile from the perimeter," he said, tapping a flat, open area on the map further down that road. "There are already news choppers in the air. Somehow, word leaked out that we're

expecting dragons to appear over Hawaii today or tomorrow, and the media is looking for them.”

“You’d better warn them not to approach those dragons in flight,” Kammi said. “The fire dragons will have their eggs and young with them, they’ll blast those choppers out of the sky. They’ll see them as a threat to their young.”

“That’s a good idea. General, I think grounding everything but commercial airline flights out of the international airport is in order.”

“They won’t like it, but I can send down the order,” he grunted, rubbing his chin. “All in all, this should be an easy operation. If the dragons stay where it’s too hot, the volcano will keep any overzealous reporters away much better than we can.”

“That’s exactly why the fire dragons are coming here,” Kell said, opening his water satchel and pulling out his tablet. He set the tablet down, which was the size of a small chalkboard for a human, and checked to see if the island’s satcom system was working or not. When he got a response, he quickly started tapping on the draconic keyboard as Steele and Kent watched. “The satcom is back up, at least for the moment,” he said. “I’m sending back an email telling them I’m here, and asking for any info they have.”

Jenny ran up into the covered conference area and settled herself comfortably between Kell and Kammi. “Alright, what did I miss?” she asked.

“Not much, friend Jenny,” Kammi replied. “We were discussing where the fire dragons intend to go and what the humans can do to make them more comfortable.”

“The big thing is we keep the people as far from the fire dragons as we can,” Jenny said.

“We should be able to set up a sufficient perimeter, Colonel,” Steele assured her, then he went over his initial plans again for her benefit.

Kell got an email back. “Ferroth has news,” he said, reading the draconic. “The fire dragons returned to the island just a couple of hours ago, and the rest of them are on the way here. There’s a very tense cease fire down there right now,” he read. “The sky dragons and chromatics won’t initiate any fights, and the fire dragons are just holding the volcano and not venturing away from it.”

“How long would it take a fire dragon to fly here, Kell?” Jenny asked.

“About nine hours,” he replied. “No, more like eleven, they’ll have their hatchlings with them, and they can’t fly very fast.”

“Can they make it safely?” Kent asked. “That’s a long way for a baby to fly.”

“Easily, fire dragons are actually very strong fliers,” he replied.

“It’s a bit after nine now,” Kent said, looking at his watch. “General, can we get everything ready by eight?”

“Easily, Mister Secretary.”

“What else did the chief say?” Kammi asked, looking down that tablet.

“Only to get our tails back as fast as possible,” he replied. “We really should get Sella and Ralla up here,” he grunted. “This isn’t too close to the volcano, they should be alright.”

“They’re here?” Jenny asked.

“In the water just off the lava flows,” he replied. “Water dragons don’t tolerate heat very well, so we didn’t want them to be with us up by the lava.”

“I can go get them,” Kammi offered.

“No, we stay together,” Kell replied.

“I can go get them,” Jenny replied. “Sella knows me. Think she’ll see me from the shore?”

“She will,” he nodded. “but are you ready for people seeing two water dragons flying over the island?”

“Oh...that’s right,” she mused. “General? Are we ready?”

“I’ll have them block off the volcano access roads right now, that should hold us,” he replied.

“Alright, then, let me go track down my chopper pilot,” she said, hurrying from the table.

It took Jenny about half an hour to return with Sella and Ralla. The two water dragons landed heavily in the parking lot just beside their covered area, and Sella padded over to them. “Mister Secretary,” she said with a nod, speaking loudly over the sound of the chopper, in the act of landing.

“It’s good to see you again, Sella. Have you been well?”

“Very well, thank you. What news, friend Kell?”

“The fire dragons are on the way,” he told her. “Chief got an email out.”

“Good, good. Mister Secretary, my brother Ralla,” she introduced as he reached the table.

“Nice meeting you,” Ralla said in much poorer English.

“Who is this?” Sella asked, looking at Steele.

“Major General Larry Steele, commander of the operation to keep the civilians away from the other dragons,” he answered, in a surprisingly steady tone given he’d never seen a dragon face to face before, and now four of them were staring him in the face.

“Very good, very good. What plans did you make?”

Jenny again returned, and Steele went over everything one more time. Kell’s tablet beeped as Steele went over the map to plan out the fencing, and another email popped up on the screen. “Chief says the chromatics are

trying to parlay with the fire dragons,” he told them. “That won’t go anywhere. I wonder how he’s getting this info,” he mused.

“It’s the chief, Kell,” Kammi chuckled.

“True enough,” he agreed. “That drake knows everything going on about everything.”

After they finalized the plans, the humans rushed out to carry them out. Kell kept them under the camo netting, talking with Jenny and Kent as aides kept them constantly updated as to the progress of the preparations. After about five hours, though, Kell and Kammi left the covered area to look over the caldera, going where Sella and Ralla couldn’t safely go...or the humans for that matter, studying the lava-blasted mountaintop, walking in temperature that would kill an unprotected human. “Yeah, they’ll put their hatchlings right here,” Kammi said, looking around the little island-like area between the caldera and a lava flow that curled around and went downhill, creating a very hot area surrounded by lava on three sides and with the caldera rim backing it up. They’d had to jump an open lava flow to get there, which Kell felt over his belly. The air over the lava was hot enough to ignite flammables. “Good protection on all sides, room to do a little digging and get the hatchlings under cover in case it rains. As long as the volcano doesn’t have a major eruption, they should be just fine.”

“Yeah, this is a good area,” Kell agreed. “That’s where they’re putting the conference center,” he pointed towards the distant USGS equipment shack. “Feel like doing a little digging?”

“We’re gonna dig out a den for them? For *fire dragons*?” she scoffed.

“For their young, yes,” he replied. “Remember, the more secure they feel, the more amenable they’ll be.”

“We’ll have to be careful, this ground isn’t entirely stable,” she noted.

“We don’t have to make it deep or very big. Just a couple of shallow overhangs so the hatchlings can get out of the open.”

It took them about two hours to finish the project, digging out a shallow, wide nook in the base of the caldera with supporting pillars of rock lining the entrance to give it strength. It wouldn't be a viable den for more than a few months, the instability of the volcano would eventually either collapse the den or fill it in with lava, but for the short term, it would do well enough. As they did their work, soldiers milled around in the distance, setting up two lines of fencing with about five meters of distance between them to keep the curious well away, and Kent appeared over at the shack, overseeing the erection of a sturdy tent where he could talk to the fire dragons. They were also setting up a projector and screen so the fire dragons could watch TV. Kell and Kammi went over to the shack, Kell shaking a bit of molten lava from the spikes of his tail before it could drip down onto his hide and scorch him. An earth dragon could resist fire dragon breath, but while that breath may be thousands of degrees, it was brief, only a few seconds of exposure maximum. However, great heat applied consistently over time, like the sustained heat of clinging, sticky molten lava, could burn them, the heat working through their tough, resistant hides and getting at the vulnerable flesh beneath. Kell could survive being dunked in lava, but only so long as he got out of it before it cooked him. Kammi had stuck her forepaw in the lava and pulled a glob of it out, and carried it over to the conference area shifting it from paw to paw like a hot potato, often rearing up and waddling on her back legs, which never failed to look utterly silly and undignified. No dragon was really built to walk on two legs, and when they did, it looked clumsy and somewhat ridiculous. "Here, a present for you, Mister Secretary," she grinned, dropping the cooling glob of lava on the black stone ground. "Right out of the volcano!"

"That had to hurt," Steele mused, looking at the smoking dollop.

"Not really," Kammi winked. "Earth dragons are tough, General."

"Stop being a dork, Kammi," Kell told her, which made Kent laugh. "We dug out some dens for the hatchlings, so that should make the fire dragons happy."

“We have a visual on them now, Kell,” Kent told him. “They’re about four hundred miles from Hawaii, flying at about a hundred miles an hour. They’ll be here around seven thirty or so.”

“We should send one of those other dragons out to tell them where to land,” Steele noted. “That way we can put them inside the protected area immediately, keep them safely away from the civilians.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Kell agreed. “When they get close enough, Sella or Ralla can do it. Did you warn the soldiers about fire dragon peculiarities?”

“Jenny explained what to expect, and we briefed everyone,” Kent answered. “Basically, they’ll stay on the *other* side of the inner fence, with only two officers here at the conference center with the translation computer, in case the fire dragons need anything. That way they can ask for it.”

“Sounds good. Looks like as soon as we explain things to the fire dragons, we can head home, Kammi,” Kell noted. “I think the Secretary here has everything under control.”

“Yeah, really good job, Arlen,” Kammi nodded. “You humans know your shit.”

Steele gave her a slightly surprised look, and Kell chuckled. “We know all the English words, General, even the dirty ones,” he said lightly.

“That’s just not a word I expected to hear around this particular table,” Steele chuckled.

“Well, Kammi never really grew up, so she has control issues,” Kell teased.

“Lick my tail, Kell!” she retorted, which made him laugh. She sat down and picked up the glob of lava. “Here, tell you what, let me make you a lava dog,” she said with a toothy smile at Kent. “It’s something like a balloon animal.”

“See, she’s still just a child at heart,” Kell noted, which earned him a thump from the underside of her tail.

Kammi’s forepaws were very nimble, and she drew out the cooling lava like putty, working quickly to get it in shape before it hardened, sculpting it into the shape of a fat, rounded dog-like shape, almost like a balloon animal. She finished by shaving off the excess with her claws, then set it on the table, where it immediately blackened the tabletop and started to hiss. “And there you go,” she said grandly. “I’d let it cool down some before you pick it up,” she winked. “Just dump some water on it, that’ll take care of it.”

“Interesting. And that didn’t burn your hands?”

“Nope,” she replied, holding up her tan-scaled paw palms. “Like I said, General, we’re tough,” she smiled.

Kell did pick it up off the table and set it on the ground, however, when licks of flame appeared around the legs. “Don’t put those things on wood, goof,” he told her, smothering the little licks of flame with his paw.

Jenny joined them after they got word to Sella and Ralla, and they had little to do but wait. Kell and Kammi sat on their haunches beside the tent they’d erected, which was too small for them to get underneath. The tent was just for the computer and the large display monitor that would display draconic writing, laying it on the table after they got it set up, but Kell and Kammi did program a draconic keyboard for them. The monitor was one of those “wonder-wall” touch screen monitors, 72” wide, the kind the military put in war college planning tables so the officers could interact with computer graphics. With the draconic keyboard programmed into the computer, it would let fire dragons type out words in case the translation program had any issues...which was possible since Jenny and Petrovski had tampered with the code.

“Sella and Ralla just took off, they’re going to make contact with the fire dragons,” Kent announced, listening to a cell phone.

“Then it won’t be long before they’re here,” Kell noted. “Water dragons aren’t very good fliers, so the fire dragons have to be close for them to make the attempt.”

“Alright, let’s clear out the containment area!” Steele boomed. “All non-essential personnel withdraw behind the perimeter fence!”

“There’s also several dozen reporters demanding to be let up here,” Kent chuckled, continuing to listen. “The press knows you’re here, Kell. They know there are dragons up here.”

“Well, they’ll never see us leave,” he shrugged. “But they’ll get good footage of the fire dragons arriving,” he added, turning south and peering into the distance.

About twenty minutes later, the fire dragons appeared. They were just tiny specks in the distance at first, but as they flew in from the southeast, the individual dragons became apparent, then their wings, then he could make out their red scaled hides. They soared in over the island, no doubt paralyzing all traffic down there, and it was also clear that Sella and Ralla had reached them, because they came straight for the fenced area. Kell saw that it was Sessara leading them, the first dragon to land, with some thirty or so drakes and twenty wyrms, all females, herding about eighty hatchlings. Many females were carrying eggs in mesh slings hooked to their bellies, those females landing with exceptional care. Sessara ambled towards them as more and more fire dragons landed, folding her wings back as Kell, Kammi, Kent and Jenny moved to meet her. “I was very glad to hear that the others thought to come ahead of us,” she told Kell, nodding to him “Sella said you made a deal with the humans on our behalf?”

“The humans will keep all other humans on the other side of that fence,” Kell said, pointing. “We dug some burrows for your hatchlings near the caldera, in a protected place so hot that nothing else will survive trying to reach it. They also agreed to bring you food and water for as long as you’re here, so you won’t have to forage. They even brought a TV for you to watch, and they have a machine here they can use to speak to you, using

written language. They have software that will translate English into draconic and back, so you'll be able to negotiate further with them if it's necessary. The humans greet you as honored guests, esteemed council member," Kell told her.

"Very good, very good," she nodded, sitting on her haunches, flexing her wings a little. Kent gaped up at her a little, since she was more than twice the size of Kell and Kammi, not much smaller than Hinado. "Tell the humans we are, appreciative, they agreed to give us a place to keep our young safe. That says much of them. And it says much of your own courage that you would brave coming out where the sky dragons can get you to act as our emissary, Kell. For gallant bravery in the face of great danger, you have the respect of the fire dragons, nearly as much as you earned when you stood up to Ivaiya and battled her with honor," she declared. "Now, where is the food? We are all hungry."

"They have it stockpiled over there," he said, pointing at a series of boxes and crates. "They can get more, just tell them when you need it."

Sessara looked at the large pile of food, and grunted. "Well, that's good for *one* meal," she noted. "The food is there, everyone! Eat your fill!" she shouted, pointing at the crates. There was almost a stampede over to the crates, and more than a little hissing and pushing as the wyrms and drakes shouldered each other to eat. "Introduce us, Kell."

"Mister Secretary, Jenny, this is Sessara, the fire drake on the council," Kell said in English.

"I thought she looked familiar!" Jenny proclaimed, nodding to her. "Peace, Sessara," she said in badly accented dragon. That made Sessara's glowing red eyes widen a little, then she hissed out a chortle. Jenny took a few bold steps out towards her, no doubt remembering how scary she looked up on that council podium. "Welcome you to human lands," she continued, mangling the grammar. "Peace between us."

"She's certainly trying," Sessara noted dryly. "Tell her the fire dragons accept their offer of tribute and the agreement made by you. We will stay

here, by the caldera, and do our best not to upset the humans on the island. And I'd like to talk to this one," she said, pointing at Jenny. "I have many questions, and I know she is brave enough to answer them."

"She'll be happy to answer them," Kell replied, then he switched to English. "The fire dragons agree to the deal. They'll stay inside the fence so long as you bring them food. And she wants to have some discussions with you," he continued. "Especially you, Jenny. She seems to be rather fond of you."

"Oh joy," Jenny said in a weak voice, looking up at the burly, fierce drake.

"Sessara, this is the highest ranking diplomat from the human leader, Secretary of State Kent," Kell introduced. "He is the human in charge. If you have any problems, this is the human you see."

"I will remember," she nodded. "Greetings from the fire dragons, Secretary," she said, which Kell quietly translated. "Kell says you are in command here?"

"I am, esteemed council member," he replied, which Kammi translated back. "If you have any problems, there will be humans here at this tent that can summon me at any time. This machine here," he motioned, "will allow us to use written language to communicate back and forth. It will be a little slow, but it will allow us to speak to each other, and hopefully learn from each other. We have many questions, if you would be so kind as to spare us time to speak with us."

"I would," she nodded. "For I too have many questions." She looked to Kell. "You said they have TV?"

"Right there," he pointed. "And they'll have football."

"You just made this drake happy," she laughed. "It's offseason, but there's always the classic games, and of course preseason is coming! I must know if the L.A. Dragons managed to sign Weathers or not!"

“She’s talking about football,” Kammi chuckled to the humans.

“Tell her I’m a Giants fan, myself,” Kent said.

When Kell translated that, Sessara grinned down at him, almost making him take a step back. “Then we *will* have common ground to speak,” she chuckled. “Any human that likes football is a human we fire dragons can talk to!”

“You’ll get them right in your pocket if you put up some L.A. Dragon logo flags and pennants,” Kammi noted lightly. “That’s the official team of the entire dragon race, for obvious reasons.”

“Tell her we can bring those very things if it pleases her,” Kent chuckled.

When Kell told her that, she laughed. “Yes, yes it would! And can this computer machine display the football news from the ESPN web-site?” she asked. “Anthra and Geon would always display that place for us on the computer on the aerie. There is much news we’ve missed since the power was knocked out! Days of possible free agent signings, injury updates, coaching changes! It’s been torture not knowing what’s going on!”

“I’m sure they could set that up for you, Sessara,” Kell said without translating. “It wouldn’t be very difficult.”

“Just tune that TV to ESPN and you’ll make them happy, Arlen,” Kammi told him, pointing at the projector screen. “You have a subtitle program installed on it?”

“I can set that up in ten minutes,” Jenny assured her.

“Show me this machine, so I might know it works,” Sessara said, looking at the monitor. Jenny sat behind the keyboard and made the draconic board appear, and as she typed, a line of English appeared in a text box, with a line of draconic underneath it that translated, appearing a few seconds later. Sessara read it and nodded with a smile. “So, just touch the letters and they appear?” she asked Kell.

“Yes, esteemed council member,” he replied. “Separate the words with this key, which puts spaces between the letters. It’ll type out draconic, then the computer will translate it into English for the human soldiers that will be here to see to your needs. Or Jenny, or Secretary Kent, if they’re here. This way you won’t have much of a language barrier. It won’t be all that fast, and sometimes the translation won’t be exactly right, but at least it’s something.”

“Very good, very good,” she nodded, looking down at him. “So, I won’t take offense if the computer machine shows something insulting. It might be the machine making a mistake.”

“That would be wise,” he agreed. “The *last* thing the humans want to do is offend you, Sessara.”

“They have done much for us. I am well pleased with them and their capitulation to our strength,” she said arrogantly. “But you are not safe here, young earth drake. You should return to your hidden place, out of reach of the sky dragons and the chromatics. The council chromatic wants you in the worst way,” she warned. “He holds you personally responsible for the collapse of his scheme.”

“I’m just glad the fire dragons turned against him,” he grunted.

“We may be many things your kind don’t like, Kell, but we are *not* oathbreakers,” she said simply. “The chromatics will suffer Gaia’s wrath for their deceit, and we wanted no part of that punishment. Now, you, make sure he returns to your hiding place, right now,” she said, pointing at Kammi. “He must be back underground before sunrise.”

“I’ll see to it, esteemed council member,” Kammi assured her.

“Sessara’s kicking me out, Jenny, Arlen,” Kell told them. “She said I have to be back underground before sunrise, and she’s actually right. She understands how this works, so if you have any issues, you can talk directly to her.”

“Good, Kell, good. And yes, you get back to safety, I’d be devastated if something happened to you,” Kent told him. “We’ll take over from here. We appreciate everything you’ve done, both on behalf of your kind and for the humans, but if you’re in danger, we don’t want you here,” he said with a gentle smile. “Jenny, tell her that we’d like to know if they need anything else. We can bring anything they require.”

“Alright,” she replied, typing without looking down. “It was good to see you again, Kell. Drop me an email or give me a call when you iron out your connection problem.”

“I will, friend, I promise,” he nodded, then switched to draconic. “They’ll take over from here, Sessara. They want to make sure you have everything your dragons need. If you need *anything*, you let them know, and they’ll get it for you.”

“I see, I see it working,” she nodded, looking at the touchscreen monitor laying on the table, then rearing up, sticking her head under the tent, and tentatively tapping out her reply. She’d never typed before, so she was understandably very slow. “Get yourself to safety, young earth drake. I’ll make contact with Jussa, and he can relay any information you need to know.”

“We appreciate that, Sessara,” Kell replied. “It’ll make us sleep better knowing that your young are safe.”

She gave him a momentary look of appreciation, then her gruff fire dragon mentality returned. “I gave you an order. Why is it not carried out?” she demanded.

“We’re going,” he chuckled. “Let’s go, Kammi. It’s a long way back to the island.”

“I hope Patriarch’s rested up for the trip back,” she nodded.

“Me too, cause that’ll be a very long swim if he’s not,” Kell said absently as the two of them turned for the lava flow that would lead them back to the ocean.

“Will you need an escort down, Kell?” Kent called.

“We’ll be fine, Arlen,” Kell called back over shoulder. “It’s turning dark, and nobody’s going to see us in the dark. Not even the sky dragons,” he chuckled.

Chapter 10

17 June 2017, 09:33 DMT; The Library of Rome

This was all so...messy.

The very young female chromatic pushed several books up from the table into the bookshelf, a bookshelf that ran from floor to ceiling some 20 *dram* over her head, using one of her natural magical talents, floating magic. She was better at it than most chromatics, so one of her menial tasks was to be the librarian. But, it was work that at least wasn't so boring, for when there were no books to fetch or return for her elders, she had plenty of time to read herself. The six books all floated over her head as she rested on her haunches and the base of her tail, making gentle motions with her forepaws to guide the books back to their assigned places. Dozens more books awaited her attention to be replaced, and already three of the elder chromatics were giving her an impatient look.

It was one of the few forms of power such a young chromatic could possess, she supposed. Library rules were that *only* the librarians were permitted to remove books from the shelves, to maintain their filing system and keep track of the tomes, and right now, she was only one of six librarians on duty. She dawdled maybe a second too long to fuss with the books as they returned to their places, then she returned to all fours and turned to face the three elders. "What may I do for you, elders?" she asked in a suitably submissive tone.

"I need any tomes we have on advanced stoneshaping," the largest and oldest of them declared.

"We have five books that meet those criteria, honored elder," she said, looking up. "Umm, only two are in the shelves. The other three must be in

use. I will retrieve them for you.”

“Who has the other three?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you, honored elder,” she said. “There are five other librarians, and as you can see, things are hectic at the moment,” she said, motioning across the vast library with her feathery antenna. There were chromatics at almost every reading table, all with noses buried in books, and the other librarians were rushing around to answer any answer light, magical balls of light the elders used to summon a librarian. She again reared up on her haunches and beckoned to the books, channeling the energy of Gaia through her body, and the two black-bound tomes scooted out of the high west shelf and floated down to her. “*Advanced Earth Magic: Shaping the Unshapable*,” she read the cover. “*Lithomagical Theory of the Geomantic Arts*,” she recited as she read the other.

The elder took over from her floating spell, taking command of the books, and they trailed after him as he hurried over to the nearest empty table space. The other two followed the first rather than ask for their own tomes, which gave her a moment to tend to the return box, reading the cover of the top book and its location code, then turning and floating it all the way across the library, maybe showing off a little bit. Few chromatics could make floating spells extend to the distance she could. She deftly slid the book in its place, then paused to take a book from an elder that was leaving, bowing her head to him as he passed.

Of course things were hectic. She was still a student, in her last year of academy and barely worth notice by her elders were she not the librarian, but working in the library gave her more of a viewpoint on things than most other chromatics her age. Simply put, the chromatics were in *big trouble*. It didn’t take a grand elder and hundreds of years of experience to see that. Even the youngest hatchlings knew what happened, that the water and fire dragons had betrayed the covenant and had withdrawn from the island...but the fire dragons had come *back*, and now they were all over on the volcano, stalking around without taking to the air, making a scene and often roaring at any dragon that got too close. They were defending the volcano, one of

her classmates had postulated at breakfast. It was basic fire dragon psychology to defend what was theirs, to fight for territory, and even throwing their tails in the faces of everything the island stood for didn't prevent them from succumbing to their base natures. They had tried to roast the chromatic that tried to speak to them when they came back two days ago, making it clear that any dragon that set foot on their volcano did so at his or her own risk.

But what put them at so much risk was the fact that all the food producers had either retreated underground or fled the island. They'd been put on strict rationing since the earth dragons had been attacked by the sky dragons and retreated deep underground, and without earth dragon farms or water dragon fishing, there would be no rapid replenishment of what little stocks they had. The sky dragons were mostly gone from the island, hunting over on the continent of South America, eating their fill and then bringing back as much as they could carry for the chromatics as they worked on the other problems, but even the chromatics were resorting to basic self-preserving tasks. She herself had taken a paw at fishing the night before, and found it to be oddly challenging. Not that she had any problems getting the fish, the trick was *finding* the fish. She was so adept at floating magic that she had no problems pulling the fish right out of the water with magic, but most fish were too afraid to come close to their island. Even their tiny brains had comprehended over the centuries that the dragons on the island would eat them if they got too close. She'd been forced to fly out some distance and fish by moonlight, and it had been both a little frustrating and oddly...*fun*. And, she had come home with a full belly, the reward for her efforts. There would be no empty belly for her this day, since she had enough fish back in her den to last her until well into tomorrow.

And in typical chromatic secrecy, she wasn't about to tell *anyone* of her private stores.

She finished resetting the books in the box and stepped out onto the landing for a moment to take a break. The library was one of the largest of the nine magical libraries, and it was something of an honor to work there. She'd started in the Library of Constantinople, the smallest, but had been

promoted up through the ranks as she displayed some competence at the job. This library, the Library of Rome, was situated high on the eastern slope of the mountain, with Council Aerie visible some distance to the south, but looking down brought an entirely different, and very grim view. Where before there had been neatly tended farms, rows and rows of green all tended by earth dragons, there was now only soot-choked mud. The sky dragons had burned all the farms in retribution for the earth dragons killing their council member, and now the earth dragons were too afraid to come out of their underground villages. There were some rumors floating around academy that the earth dragons were trying to blackmail the other dragons with outrageous demands before they came back out, but lowly chromatics like her and her classmates, who had yet to even earn a name, were rarely if ever told what was going on. They had to rely on rumor, and rumor was often wrong.

It was the one flaw in their society, she pondered as she sat on her haunches and looked down at the mud-choked devastation, fields slowly eroding away as the afternoon rains steadily dumped water on soil no longer held in place by vegetation. The secrecy. It was so pervasive that the elders even kept secrets from chromatics like her, the younglings, who were told what to do but never told why they were doing it. It was left to them to puzzle out the truth of things, and while that could be in itself a lesson in persistence and problem solving, it often simply left the younglings with a sense of isolation. But, wyrms like her, well, they often learned more than their elders expected, if they were patient enough to watch, listen, and remember.

For example, she remembered the menial task they'd placed on her some days ago, to go around and inventory all available foodstocks being stored on earth dragon farms. It had seemed a silly thing to do to her at the time, since the earth dragons were very organized and didn't need them coming around and bothering them in their work, but she'd learned quite a bit about her less gifted cousins when she was forced to go among them and talk to them, something very, very few chromatic younglings ever did. Chromatics as a rule avoided the earth dragons whenever possible, ignored

them until they needed something from them. But she'd found that the earth dragons were organized, meticulous, and actually rather polite. She'd made several contacts that day, and as a result, she'd gotten an earth wyrm to come help her enlarge her den just before the sky dragons attacked the earth dragons, literally the night before it happened. Spells that tried to alter stone were among the most difficult spells a chromatic could master, since stone was highly resistant to magical forces, and the volcanic stone of the island was even more so than other forms of rock.

What she'd learned from that assignment was that what she'd been *told* about the earth dragons did not match what she'd *seen*. From the time she was a hatchling, her parents had told her that earth dragons weren't worthy of respect, because the energy of Gaia was denied to them. They couldn't do magic and they couldn't fly, and because of that, they were only good to serve the *real* dragons as beasts of burden. She was taught to stay away from the earth dragons, because they were stupid, highly aggressive, and notional, and the only reason they had even survived as long as they had was because the chromatics were there to govern them. The earth dragons certainly didn't do anything to alter that viewpoint. They were always very short with anyone that ventured down onto their farms, and it seemed that almost every other month, there were incidents where earth dragons attacked fire dragons that wandered too close to the ground. The earth dragons seemed as territorial and as short-tempered as the fire dragons to her, constantly bickering with any dragon that lived above them on the slopes, constantly rejecting chromatic offers to help them manage their farms for greater efficiency.

And then, almost overnight, everything changed...it changed the day she'd seen that strange metal bird high in the sky. That unknown, alien *thing* had ignited a firestorm of worry and debate all over the island, and she supposed to protect the real dragons from possible harm, they'd allowed the earth dragons to leave the island to find out what the steel birds were. After all, if the earth dragons died out there in the human world, it wasn't all that great of a loss. The earth dragons returned with almost outlandish tales of amazing feats of human ingenuity, human-built mechanical devices

that could fly, immense ships prowling the sea, and humans altering their natural surroundings in astounding ways to better serve them. The earth dragons continued to go out, the department was built, and they started to *learn* these human ways, learn them and bring them back to the island so the dragons too could partake in this new knowledge and the comforts it could provide.

That, she supposed, was the very first time she'd questioned the teachings of her parents. How could *stupid* dragons learn such exacting science? The sciences of the humans were nearly as complex as magic, and the earth dragons had quickly adapted to it. It seemed that almost overnight, the earth dragons were experimenting with electricity, were bringing back nonmagical means to refine metals, studying human farming techniques to increase the farm yields, and were having the water dragons scavenge steel for them from the ocean floor to use in their construction efforts.

And that was the first time she understood that the secrecy of her kin had harmed their society.

They *had* to know. They had to know what the humans had done. After all, the sky dragons left the island all the time, and they *had* to have seen the human cities, they *had* to have taken notice when the humans all fought each other in that great war that raged across the Pacific not long before the airplanes started to appear. The sky dragons had seen it, but the chromatics had silenced them, kept the island ignorant of the technological advances of the humans, kept them unaware of how the world beyond the island was changing. Why? Why keep it a secret? It made little sense to her.

But, one thing she learned very early in life was that chromatics that openly questioned were chromatics that were worked half to death, until they learned to keep their postulations to themselves. In chromatic society, age was *everything*. She wouldn't even be so much as acknowledged by chromatic society until she finished academy and chose her realm of magical study and continued her magical education as an adherant. And it would be nearly a hundred years before her voice had any weight at all in chromatic council circles. For a wyrm her age to have an opinion about

anything was just inviting harsh punishment, so like most young chromatics, she kept her mouth shut and devoted herself to her studies, getting what tiny rebellion in she could in her tasks in the library, which was the only place a dragon like her could have *any* kind of power.

She returned to the library and began to gather books left behind on tables, reading title and location codes and arranging them so she could return them to the shelves in groups, her mind more on what was going on out there, and why it made so many chromatics come to the library. The myriad problems facing the chromatics required research, study, discussion, from gathering food to bringing the fire dragons back into the fold to forcing the earth dragons back up to the surface so they could get the punishments out of the way and they could try to save their farms before the rains sent all their dirt into the sea. Some chromatics were trying to parlay with the fire dragons, some were organizing fishing expeditions, and some were working on the earth dragon problem.

Sometimes, she pondered, maybe it was better to *do* than to *think*. Chromatics often discussed a problem to the point where it would have been easier to fix it had they acted quickly, which was what she privately suspected had happened with the earth dragons. The elder chromatics must have seen a problem, but instead of acting quickly to fix it, they talked about it, and talked about it, and talked about it, and they let it get out of control before any kind of action was decided upon. The chromatics sometimes didn't understand that the lesser intelligent dragons, the earth and fire dragons, often acted quickly and rashly, and because of that, problems had a way of quickly spiralling out of control were they not corrected quickly.

But *quickly* was not a word that most chromatics favored.

It had to be a quirk of lifespan, she supposed. Chromatics lived, on average, four times longer than any other dragon, so their view of things took a much longer eye. For a creature that would live to be six hundred years old, spending two or three weeks discussing a problem didn't seem all that much time. But to an earth dragon, who might only live a hundred and

fifty years, that was too much of their short lives to waste with debate. And to the short-lived fire dragons, whose rough lifestyles often led to early deaths, even a week was too long to waste when the clock was ticking and every second mattered.

Maybe if the lesser dragons lived longer, they wouldn't be so troublesome.

The library turned even more quiet than it usually did, and as she claimed another book from the table, she saw why. The council chromatic had come to their library with two adjuncts, true elders of the race, and those three were on the Council of Seven, the ruling body of the chromatics. To her surprise, the three marched right up to her table, and she bowed her head low to them when they faced her. "What book may I retrieve for you, my Lord?" she asked humbly.

"You are the one designated fourth of the senior class?" the council chromatic asked.

"I am, my Lord," she replied, looking up at him with her scintillating eyes. That was all she had, a *designation*. When she finished her magical education and proved herself by contributing in some manner to the overall study of magic, be it with a new spell formula, theory to research, or dissertation analyzing magical knowledge for other chromatics to ponder, she would earn a name, and it would be spoken to her only *once* in her entire life.

That name would then become both her source of pride and a means of control. A name was a powerful thing in magic, and those who knew how it worked could use a name against its owner. Chromatics kept their names the most secret of all secrets...but the Council of Seven knew the names of *all* chromatics. After all, it was those chromatics that divined the aura and extracted the chromatic's true name. After receiving a true name, a chromatic was allowed to choose a daily name, and be addressed by that name by others who had similarly earned the honor of a name. But she, who was nameless, was not allowed to speak even these names.

“Come with us,” he ordered. She blinked and fell into step well behind the council chromatic’s two adjuncts, wondering just what she had done to cause the Council of Seven *themselves* to come to her. She kept her curiosity to herself as they vaulted into the air from the library entrance, and she spread her wings and followed them, followed them to Council Aerie. The Council of Seven were all there, gathered inside the ring of podiums, sitting in a loose circle with openings for the three who had left. There was a sky dragon there as well, one of their older wyrms, much larger than the chromatics and sitting just behind them, his long neck looming over the gap between two elders so he could join the conversation without craning his neck.

“Good, she is here,” one of the elders called, a chromatic she knew. He often taught classes of advanced magical theory in academy. “Fourth of the senior class, we have a special task for you.”

“I humbly serve the Council of Seven,” she replied, lowering her head. “What is the nature of this task?”

“As you know, the earth dragons have retreated underground,” her occasional instructor answered. “It turns out, student, that they have gone far deeper than just the villages. *Far* deeper. We suspect that they have built a centralized underground city of sorts, most likely underneath the southern volcano, and that they have hidden the entrances to this city within the warren maze of tunnels they’ve dug around their villages. Your task, student, is to find where the earth dragons are hiding. Once you are successful, you will return to this council.”

“*Me*, honored elder?” she asked in confusion. “But I’m just a student. I haven’t finished my schooling!”

“You have certain natural aptitudes that more than qualify you for this task, youngling,” the council chromatic said, a bit harshly. “And the fact that you are the *size* of an earth dragon will allow you to travel through their tunnels.”

“Please forgive my brashness, honored council, but would a master chromatic magician far more powerful than I using a sky dragon’s change amulet be much more effective?”

“Perhaps one would, but this is a task better suited for a dragon we currently aren’t relying upon to solve other, more important problems, student,” the council chromatic answered, giving her a hard look. “The academy assures us that you have sufficient magical training to accomplish your task, so we give this task to you.”

“I will begin immediately, honored council,” she bowed. “Might I be given all pertinent information? Maps?”

“We have no maps of the earth dragon villages,” her instructor replied. “They never seemed important enough to study, since they were always so...chaotic. The grounders just seemed to dig for the sake of digging.”

“They were digging to confuse any dragons small enough to enter their tunnels,” another of them snorted. “And they collapsed almost every tunnel in every village to further confound anyone entering their warrens now. To keep us out so they could make all their preparations. Expect the tunnels leading to their hiding place to be well hidden, and possibly trapped, student. Exercise caution as you search. As you make your way through their tunnels, *you* will map them as best you are able. Include all information you can on these maps. Tunnel heights, estimated depths, the locations of cave-ins and any anomalies.”

“I will do my best, honored council member,” she said with yet another bow of her head. Preparations? What preparations had the earth dragons made, that they would hide the entrances to this deeper series of villages, too deep for magic to find, and to both hide the entrances and trap them to keep others out? Perhaps...perhaps the rumors of them making outrageous demands before they came back out were true, then? One thing was for certain, and that was the earth dragons did *not* want to be found. It meant very little since the sky dragons were both too large to enter their tunnels and no sky dragon would willingly enter those tunnels anyway, to be cut off

from the open sky. In those small, confining tunnels, a sky dragon would be virtually helpless, and it was where the earth dragons were at their most dangerous, since they could see in those lightless realms, and their tail spikes could be brought to bear in a way that minimized danger to themselves.

No, the earth dragons had not gone so deep underground to hide from the sky dragons...they had done it to hide from the *chromatics*. And now the Council of Seven was sending her down into their tunnels to find their hidden village.

And now she recalled that many of the earth dragon farms she'd visited had all had their stores in villages rather than on their farms. Every farmer told her that they were clearing room in their storehouses for the coming crops, since they would be much larger than normal due to the increase in the tithes. All that food taken down into the villages, just before the earth dragons retreat into some deep, secret village so far down that magic couldn't locate it.....

Curious...very, very curious.

“What do you consider, student?” her teacher asked her. “I can almost hear your mind working.”

She had no real desire to share her ponderings, but another thing all chromatics learned from an early age was that you *did not* lie to an elder. They always knew if you did, and the punishments were harsh. And she had been asked a direct question.

“If the earth dragons prepared this deep village, and withdrew much of their farm food holdings into their other villages just before all this happened...then it was all *planned*,” she replied. “They intended to go underground, and stay there for some time. It is almost as if the earth dragons knew what was coming, or perhaps what was coming was also part of their plan. But it makes little sense to me,” she fretted. “Why would they do such a thing? Why would they foment discord among the dragons and then retreat deep underground and leave us to wrangle among ourselves? It

brings them no gain, no benefit. Quite the contrary, it puts them in a much more tenuous position, for now most of the island is very angry with them. There must be something else going on, something deeper, something they considered so dangerous that they were willing to face the wrath of the council for their deception.”

“They’re earth dragons, simple grounders, they’re not capable of such foresight,” another council member snorted.

“Quite the contrary, honored council member, the earth dragons are actually quite intelligent,” she blurted. “Far more intelligent than they seemed. Far more intelligent than they *wanted* us to think they were. I saw it in them as I inventoried their farms. They are educated in matters that concern only them. To us, they are simpletons, but in their own realm, dealing with their own matters, they are just as educated and intelligent as we are. And their farms were run with the same precision as the library in which I work. They are lesser than we, but it is by magic that we are more than them, not by intelligence.”

“You will keep such ridiculous opinions strictly to yourself, student,” the council chromatic snapped.

“She certainly does seem to have the intellect to perform this task,” one of the other members said with a drawl.

“Intelligence has never been her problem. Wisdom and restraint have been,” her teacher said, giving her a slightly unfriendly look. “She has always been impetuous.”

“The folly of youth, honored brother, a flaw we all shared at one time. It is easily fixed with the wisdom of age,” the first chuckled.

The rebuke stung her a little, but she didn’t let it show, just kept her head low. “May I be dismissed so I might begin my task?” she asked.

“Go, and be careful,” the council chromatic ordered.

She turned and vaulted out into the empty air off the side of the aerie, her mind already at work. To find the tunnels, she could either blunder about their village warrens like a lost hatchling, carefully mapping every tunnel, seeking to find their hidden entrance through either exhaustive searching or blind luck, or she could *think* like an earth dragon. The latter would be far easier and would take much less time.

So, instead of descending to the lowlands and the closest earth dragon village to the aerie, Dawnmist, she instead landed on Scion Aerie, close to the ruined shell of the department building, sat on her haunches, and looked down over the ruined farmlands and simply considered. If she were an earth dragon, part of a group that had decided to retreat deep underground, what would *she* do?

Firstly, and obviously, if she and her kind had gone to so much trouble to make the villages too convoluted and confusing to easily navigate, she wouldn't be silly enough to put the entrance of their secret village anywhere in one of the existing ones. After all, the chromatics *would* send in dragons to the villages to search them, just as they had ordered her to venture into their tunnels to find their secrets, and all those confusing tunnels and passages would draw an explorer like the wood bees were drawn to the mist lillies, thinking that only in such a place would there be something hidden that they didn't want to be found. And though they were excellent tunnelers, able to build a stone wall and place the stones so tightly together that the seams between them were all but invisible, they—*she*—would know that the chromatics would rely on magic to find that tunnel. They couldn't hide the tunnel from magic, because they had no magic themselves.

But the water dragons *did*. She turned her gaze to the ocean, which was empty now, all the water dragons gone. But the water dragons had been here while the earth dragons were doing their planning, and the earth dragons had had a long...relationship with the water dragons. The water dragons considered them to be as little pets, charming, loyal, and in need of their nurturing and protection. And they jealously guarded their possession of earth dragon loyalty against the other dragons. The earth dragons were *their* pets, and they would not give them up. Long had the water dragons

protected the earth dragons in matters of council. If she were an earth dragon and she wanted to build a hidden village and hide it from the chromatics, she would ask the water dragons for help.

But, the water dragons would know that not even their defensive magic would stop a determined chromatic that suspected water dragon meddling and was armed with the proper counterspells. No. The water dragons would tell her—the earth dragons that it wouldn't be safe to rely on magic. No, they would tell them, rely on your own skills. Use your tunneling skills to hide the entrance to your hidden village. Use the knowledge that you *know* the chromatics will search for your village using their magic against them.

Be clever.

Yes, they would be clever. They would be *very* clever. They would be so clever that they would confound the chromatic explorers that braved their tunnels, had a way to clear their cave-ins and gain access to the villages, a chromatic like her, who could use her natural skill with floating magic to clear out a cave-in quickly, and was small enough to enter even their narrowest, most twisting passages.

So, where would the entrance be?

For nearly four hours, she sat on the aerie and just stared down at the ruined farms and the sea, her plumaged tail swishing on the stone behind her, pondering...pondering...pondering. She was there for so long that she'd been noticed, and her occasional teacher landed beside her on the aerie and looked down at her with some irritation. "Have you not begun your task, student?" he asked.

"I am working on it as we speak, honored council member," she said in an absent voice, looking down at the waterline.

"It certainly seems strange that you would be mapping tunnels and searching for the hidden village of the earth dragons sitting up here," he noted dryly.

“I willll never find their secret by blundering around in their tunnels like a lost hatchling, honored elder,” she replied in a distant, absent voice. “That is far too obvious. The earth dragons are very clever, my revered teacher. Far too clever to place the entrance to their hidden village in a place so *obvious*. I am considering where *I* would hide the entrance to my hidden village were I an earth dragon. It is there that I will find it.”

The elder snorted out a laugh. “Really, student? You think they are that smart?”

“They were smart enough to hide from *us*, my teacher,” she said simply. “That means they are smart.”

“That...is a fair point,” he acceded, sitting beside her. “Where have you considered?”

“Several places,” she replied. “I will not find the way in inside any of the villages. The tunnels and passages and twists and turns are there only to draw us to them, make us look where we think it must be. That is the last place you put something you want to hide. No,” she said, mainly to herself, thinking it through aloud. “It will be someplace...some place we would never even *think* to look. I don’t think it will even be part of any village.”

“Then how did they all retreat to that hidden village if it’s not connected to any of the others? We never saw any of them come out, student. They retreated to their individual villages, so it means that there *must* be some way into their hidden village from the others.”

“It will not be *in* the villages,” she repeated, her eyes sliding over the little cove to the southeast, where the remains of a farm abutted a little sliver of green from kelp growing in the sheltered cove. That had been the farm of the earth dragon that had killed Ivaiya, she recalled from the rumors. “But if the earth dragons could all move without us seeing them, then their tunnels under the island must be far more extfensive than we believed. They must have joined all the villages together by tunnel.”

“That’s something already concluded, student,” he told her. “It’s the only way they could have moved without our knowledge. But again, that means that the entrance must be where we think it must be, because of simple logic. Maybe it’s not in a village as you suspect, but then it means it must be in one of those tunnels that joins the villages together. If you can find those tunnels, you will find that entrance.”

“That...has possibilities, but it’s not clever enough,” she mused absently, her eyes carefully studying the shoreline. “If they expect to stay underground for an extended period of time, then they will have hidden their entrance in a place we would never think to look...and we would think to look in those tunnels. It will be somewhere...unexpected. Somewhere...impossible,” she reasoned. “Somewhere we would never think to look because we would never believe it could possibly be there. *That* is where it will be.”

“I think you’re over-analyzing the problem, student,” he chided, but he did it gently. “I’ll grant you that the earth dragons are fairly clever, in their own way, but I assure you, you’re going to find that tunnel somewhere down in their villages, or in the tunnels joining them,” he pressed. “Yes, it will be very cleverly hidden. Yes, it may be extremely hard to access even after you find it, but it will be there. There’s nowhere else it *can* be.”

“And that is precisely why that is where it *will not* be,” she replied evenly. “But, you are correct in that I also have the task to map the tunnels, my honored teacher, so I can further consider the matter as I perform that task. Perhaps as I walk their tunnels, I might more fully understand what they were trying to do, and that will help me find their hidden village.”

The elder chromatic looked down at the youngling...barely more than a juvenile. “Then I’ll tell you what’s going on, student, so you more fully understand the situation,” he told her. “The earth dragons did in fact intentionally go underground, and intend to stay there, possibly for years.”

“For what purpose?”

“Because they resisted our attempts to restore proper dragon society,” he replied bluntly. “Their technology was starting to adversely affect the other dragons, the fire dragons particularly. The dragons were taking less and less interest in our noble traditions of magic and were more and more enamored of the human technology. Fire dragons were even missing classes in magic to watch their television,” he said darkly. “It had become a serious threat, student, and something had to be done. We tried to get them to scale back their technological pursuits, but they refused, so we had to take more direct steps. Somehow, they learned of our plans to put significant restrictions on their activities where technology was concerned, and so they retreated deep underground. They left us a message stating that they refuse to come out until we agree not to try to hinder their technological pursuits any longer.”

She looked up at him, a little surprised, and also a little curious. “So some of the rumors were true, honored teacher,” she surmised. “It also makes more sense now that the water dragons would leave us. They will not tolerate any interference with *their* earth dragon pets. But it doesn’t explain why the fire dragons would reject the council.”

“That gets somewhat complicated,” he replied. “The short of it was that the council chromatic used less than honorable tactics to bring things about.”

“The sky dragons *did* destroy the power plant,” she reasoned.

“They did,” he said with a nod. “And because the fire dragons weren’t consulted in a matter that technically affects all dragons, they believe that the covenant was broken, and they withdrew from the council. They’ll see reason eventually.” He looked down at her again. “That information does not leave this aerie, young one.”

“I understand, my teacher. I will not speak of it.”

“I’m glad you understand. I would at least *look* like I was working on your task if I were you, student. You can further ponder the cleverness of

the earth dragons as you map the tunnels. And perhaps you might find something,” he urged.

“It’s always possible, my teacher, that I might be over-analyzing things, but I think that I am not,” she replied, never taking her eyes off the land below. “The answer will be cleverly hidden, in a place they believe I will never look. I *know* it.”

“As long as you find it, then everything will work out,” he told her. “I’d suggest using—“

He stopped suddenly, and that made her glance at him. His eyes were wide, almost wild, and he stood up and whirled around so fast his tail almost knocked her off the aerie. She staggered, almost pitched over the side, one of her forepaws sliding over the edge, and she had to scramble back to keep from falling off. She gave him a slightly indignant look, but when she looked in the direction she was, her jaw dropped.

One of the nine scions...it was, was, *evaporating*.

There was no other way to explain it. The usual steady blue swirl had turned jagged, discordant, and wisps of blue magical energy was peeling away from the swirling magical disc like smoke from a candle. More and more of that blue magical energy evaporated away from the disc, and then it shuddered in a way that even *she* felt, and she was still only a student of magic, not as sensitive or attuned to it as her teacher was. That was what he felt, caused him to almost knock her off as he turned to see what the magical disturbance was. The disc shuddered again, wobbled, and then magical rotation stopped, and the rest of the magic drained away like fog before the sun.

A long clear crystal that had been hidden within the magic dropped with a chime to the floor. She recognized it as an earth dragon’s tail spike... what had it been doing inside the scion? Had it somehow caused the scion to disrupt? And why wasn’t it red?

“My teacher? What happened?”

“I...I don’t know!” he said quickly, almost fearfully. “The scions are *permanent* magic, nothing can disrupt them! It should not have failed! Student, summon the other members of the Council of Seven immediately!” he barked.

“At once, honored council member,” she replied, then turned, spread her wings, and vaulted into the air. She flew the short distance to the Council Aerie, and saw that five of them were still there, along with the sky dragon, but the council chromatic was missing. She landed and ran up to them. “I bear an urgent message for the council!” she cried, but she saw that all of them were looking in the same direction, to the north, and all of them looked very disconcerted. “Honored council members!” she shouted.

One of them blinked and looked at her. “What do you do here, student? We gave you a task!”

“You are to be summoned immediately to Scion Aerie by an honored council member,” she told them. “It is a matter most dire! One of the scions has failed!”

“*What?*” he gasped, staring at her.

“We were *there*, honored council member!” she replied quickly. “It destabilized and evaporated before our eyes! There was an earth dragon’s tail spike within it, honored council member! Did the earth dragons somehow destroy it?”

“The tail spike is the focus,” he replied shortly. “Was it intact? Did it shatter?”

“No, honored council member,” she replied, a little surprised. They used an earth dragon’s *tail spike* as the focus of the scion? How....*bizarre*! No wonder the scion failed! “It simply dropped to the floor. Unless the honored council member disturbed it, it should still be there.”

“Then attend,” he said as he and the other members rushed for the edge of the aerie. The sky dragon followed them as they all flew the short distance down to Scion Aerie, and her teacher was still there, as was the

clear crystal, something just about any dragon with any experience at all with earth dragons could easily identify by its shape, though the clear color of it would throw many dragons off. “The student said you saw it happen?” one of them addressed her teacher.

“We were right here. The magical matrix of the scion destabilized, and then it failed,” he replied. “The focus is intact, so it wasn’t any kind of deliberate attack. It just...just *failed*. What could do such a thing?”

“I don’t know,” the oldest of the council members replied, looking at the sky dragon. “Which scion is this, Genalla?”

“It’s the last one we created,” the sky dragon replied. “Scion Nine.”

“Could any sky dragon magic possibly make it fail?”

“None I know of,” he shook his head. “These scions are some of the most powerful magic you chromatics can enact, and not even a group of sky dragons working together could hope to dispel it.”

“Student, you will take the tail spike immediately to the council chambers, so we might have our most learned sages study it. Perhaps some unknown flaw in the focus itself is the reason it failed. Let’s start with that. While there, have them send at least three sages back here to further investigate the aerie. After that, you will return to the task upon which we have set you, and you will *not* speak of this, to *anyone*. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly, honored council member,” she said with a hasty nod. She scurried forward and picked up the tail spike, noticed how hot it was in her paw. “It’s hot,” she blurted.

“Hot, you say?” one of them asked.

“Yes, honored council member. It’s very hot.”

“Interesting. Make note of that to the sages when you give it to them. It may be useful to them.”

“Yes, honored council member,” she said as she turned and bounded to the edge of the aerie, then spread her wings and ascended, heading for the chambers of the Council of Seven, both worried and confused. How could a scion just *fail*? The council thought it impossible, and yet it had happened. She’d read a little about them, and the magic required to create one, it was *staggering*. It could only be done with many familiars and fetishes, even radicals, and even then only at peak magical times. It took the greater part of a year to make the preparations to create a scion, and after it was done, the chromatics involved had to rest for *months* to regain their strength. And one of the fundamental rules of magic was that a spell could only be undone by a magic *greater* than the magic that created the spell...but what was more powerful than a *scion*? Nothing should have been able to dispel it. Nothing!

And yet, it *had* been dispelled.

She reached the council chambers, which was actually the most complete library of magical lore on the island, and had a staff of chromatics known as the Sages, the most learned magicians among them all, far too important to practice politics. The sages devoted their entire lives to magical study. The sages seemed to be in some kind of a commotion, poring over a huge map of some kind laid out on the floor, and she had to be a bit of a pest to get the attention of one of them. “What?” an almost debilitated old chromatic female demanded harshly, her antenna withered, her teeth pitted. “We’re busy here!”

“A thousand apologies, most wise, but something has happened.”

She explained to the sage as the others were bent over the map, arguing among themselves. She glanced down at it, and saw that it wasn’t a map, it was an astronomical chart with all kinds of jotted notes on it. “Just evaporated, you say?” she asked.

“Yes, most wise,” she replied with a nod, looking back at her. “Before our very eyes! They bade me bring this to you, so you might study it and

see if it was some flaw with the focus that caused the scion to fail. They told me to make sure I told you that it was hot when I picked it up.”

“Hot, eh? Not a surprise,” she said, taking it in a slightly shaking paw.

“They also bade me ask you to send three sages to Scion Aerie to further study the area.”

“We’re a little busy, but I think we can manage it,” she grunted.

“Might I ask a question, most wise?”

“Certainly.”

“Why use an earth dragon’s tail spike as the focus? And why is this one not red? Did the scion change its color?”

“Because when it comes to crystals, earth dragon tail spikes are *perfect*,” she replied simply, peering at the blood red crystal intently. “Perfect lattice structure, every time, and that perfection lets them channel immense magical energies. Tail spikes are always used as the focus of the most powerful magicks, student, and some require the rarest of the tail spikes, what the earth dragons call shankers. This is a shanker, but we call it a primary focus,” she stated, holding the spike out. “Most shankers are different colors, and each color has a specific use for different kinds of magicks, but these clear ones are the rarest of all, a crystal of utter perfection and unmatched purity. A single earth dragon out of an entire generation may grow one of these. Earth dragons consider growing a shanker to be bad luck, so they get rid of them, which lets us come along and collect them without telling them just how valuable they are,” she cackled lightly. “The earth dragons may not have magic, but that doesn’t mean a thing when it comes to these,” she said, hefting it. “A crystal doesn’t have to *be* magic to *channel* magic. You should study more if you had to ask a question like that.”

Her antenna drooped, and she looked at the floor. “I will study most diligently, most wise,” she said in apology.

“Good female. I suggest you read *Gems and Crystals and their Uses in Spells and Enchantments*. Library of Atlantis, north wall, fifth shelf, third from the right. It’ll explain everything you need to know about which crystals to use with with magic. It’s the definitive work on the subject. Off with you now.”

“I will read it as soon as possible, most wise, and thank you for your advice,” she said humbly. She bowed her way out of the chamber, her mind spinning with everything she’d learned in just the last half hour or so. A scion had *failed*, and she had learned that earth dragon tail spikes had perfect crystal structures that made them useful in magic...which almost seemed a paradox. A dragon that couldn’t use magic grew a crystal from its body that was considered the most powerful crystal foci for spells and enchantments?

But, as the the sage said, a crystal didn’t have to *be* magic to *channel* magic. The vast majority of crystals used in magic were in fact non-magical. Something as simple as a pinch of salt could channel magic. So, if a pinch of salt could channel magic, why not a tail spike?

But there was also something to worry over here. The sages had all been upset, worried when she arrived, had been studying that astronomical chart and arguing among themselves. For what reason? And could it have something to do with the failure of the scion? Perhaps they’d felt it fail too, and were even then discussing the possible reasons why it failed when she arrived.

She wouldn’t be surprised it that was so. After all, the sages *were* the most learned users of magic alive.

She turned towards her den to fetch a roll of marking parchment to start her task. She would map the tunnels, but she knew that she wouldn’t find the entrance to the hidden village of the earth dragons among them. That, she was certain, would be in the last place she would ever think to look.

So she needed to think like an earth dragon to figure out just where that might be.

18 June 2017, 14:12 HDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kiluaea

They were worse than fucking *toddlers*.

Jenny blew out her breath as she inched her car through a pack of reporters near the media center. The reporters had been getting more and more desperate as the days had passed, three since the dragons had arrived, trying to get *anything* they could out of a remarkably disciplined and tight-mouthed military stone wall. Half the world was in a frenzy over the appearance of the dragons, be it wild curiosity and excitement to some religious nuts screaming that it was a sign of the apocalypse. The number of reporters at the gates of the exclusion zone had quadrupled every day, to the point where they'd had to clamp down on the number of reporters that could even come up to the media center, establish checkpoints at the base of the mountain. A strict no-fly zone had been placed over Kilauea, which had infuriated a number of commercial chopper pilots that depended on sky tourism for their weekly paychecks, and the entire volcano had been cordoned off because reporters had been trying to literally climb the slopes, and two had been hospitalized for burns after trying to climb the lava flows the volcano had laid down last year, which were still hot.

It had been *the* news story since the fire dragons arrived. People all over the island had filmed their arrival, 106 dragons of various sizes, from the massive wyrms to tiny hatchlings, and some even had footage of Sella and Ralla flying out to meet them. And there was some cell phone footage of Kell and Kammi at the initial staging area, taken by a soldier and released anonymously over the internet...and when they found out which soldier that was, his ass was *toast*. Derringer was currently tracking down just where that footage came from, and whichever basement-dwelling nerd

had been sent that video and then posted it online was going to get a very unfriendly visit from the Hunters.

Outside of that security breach, things had gone somewhat smoothly. The soldiers up at the exclusion zone were professional and they were *quiet*, keeping constant vigil against overzealous reporters that somehow managed to evade all the foot patrols and drone surveillance. The fire dragons had been at least moderately well-behaved, no issues or incidents, but they were a *fucking* pain in the ass. Kell had pegged fire dragon behavior dead center that day she went to the island and they talked, but he'd left out some of the more irritating parts of their personalities, like their brashness, their stubbornness, or their expectation that their every whim and wish would be catered to *immediately*. They didn't see the humans as their hosts, they saw them as their servants, and they expected complete and total obedience.

She blinked against multiple flashes as cameras pointed into her driver's side window, as the MPs pushed the horde out of the way so she could get through the gate. The government had promised a press conference, but hadn't set a date or time yet. For one, they had to talk to Sessara before they did that, and for another, they were fielding a surprisingly vehement series of demands from other government for access to the dragons. The older nations predominately in the middle and far east were the most vocal about it; India, Thailand, Japan, China, Iraq, and Iran, but the Chinese especially were being *amazingly* anal about it, all but accusing the United States of holding the fire dragons prisoner. Those nations all had long and rich mythologies and histories, and many of them both remembered the dragons and hadn't under Catholic control, which prevented the purge that removed them from western European history.

That development had been a surprise to her. Sure, she could see other nations being curious about the dragons, but the other governments wanted to talk to them, wanted to see what they knew, and they wanted to make deals with them...just the way America did. But America had a leg up because it they were the ones that managed to get first contact, and they were the only ones that could even *talk* to the dragons. And they were guarding that advantage *jealously*.

She managed to get through the gate and headed up to the exclusion zone. Sessara was almost infuriatingly annoying in that she absolutely refused to deal with anyone *except* her and Kent. She dealt with the duty officers at the translation computer only to ask for them to put up certain websites, get movies, ask for specific kinds of food, or to summon Jenny or Arlen. But for anything else, even something as silly as asking for a second TV projector to be set up, she would demand Jenny or Arlen to come handle it.

Well, they needed to discuss the press conference anyway.

The Hunters were in heaven, because outside of the two duty officers, Jenny, and Kent, they were the only ones allowed inside the exclusion zone. The Hunters' eggheads were the technical team handling the computers and other equipment, and the military men were the ones handling internal security, should someone manage to somehow breach all other security and get inside the fence. They were finally able to meet the dragons face to face, and Sessara had taken a curious liking to Price, perhaps sensing the inherent danger about the man. He was their sniper, a killer of men, and his confidence and aura of strength and power impressed her. She'd be bitterly disappointed when she found out Price was afraid of Jenny and her heavy right foot.

She stopped her car and saw that Arlen was up here as well, getting out and tugging a bit at her class A's; she'd never thought that they were very comfortable. The guards at the entry gate saluted and opened the gate as she stepped in, and she saw that Arlen was at the tent with Wilson, Petrovski, Michaels, and Derringer were clustered around the computer, leaning over the big touchscreen and debating something. Most of the fire dragons were way over by the caldera, but about two dozen or so were sitting by the projectors, watching TV, most of them younglings. "Hey, mookie," Wilson said with a smile, patting her shoulder.

"That's Colonel Mookie to you, Sergeant," she winked up at him, which made him laugh.

“Don’t pull that rank shit on me, mookie. In the field, you’re the one following my orders,” he teased with a smile.

“But this isn’t the field, Tom,” she grinned. “Arlen, did you call me in?”

“Sort of,” he replied as they looked down. She did as well, and saw that the computer was in the act of rebooting, with Petrovski sitting behind it as the two duty officers, both Majors watched quietly.

The shivering of the ground was usually the first warning a fire dragon was incoming; they were so heavy that their steps rumbled the ground like a tank. She sometimes found it amazing that Sessara, who was 14 feet high at the shoulder and about 38 feet long from nose to tail, weighed like three or four tons, but could move like a fucking cat when she wanted to. Sessara was the single largest drake of *any* dragon species, as large as or larger than many earth wyrms and adult chromatics. And she was the *drake* of the fire dragon race...the largest wyrm at the volcano was about 19 feet at the shoulder and was nearly 60 feet long, an absolute *monster*...and she wasn’t even the largest fire wyrm! She looked back and saw that it was indeed Sessara approaching, ambling along in a trot of sorts. She reached the edge of the tent and batted Jenny with her snout, making her lurch forward a little. “We talk,” she said in English.

That had freaked everyone out. Fire dragons were supposedly the dumbest of the dragons, but every fire dragon in the exclusion zone was learning English at a *scary* rate. The Hunters were teaching it to them. In three days, Sessara had built a vocabulary of about four hundred words, and she understood very basic English grammar. She had the language skills of an eighteen month old, but she’d picked up those skills in just *three days*.

“Patient,” she said in draconic. “Waiting,” she tried again, pointing at the computer.

She snorted, sending a searing hot blast of air down Jenny’s back, then Jenny squeaked when Sessara clamped her teeth carefully but precisely on the back of her uniform, picked her up, then turned and took a few steps

towards the TVs before putting her down. She staggered forward a little when Sessara batted her on the back again with her snout, and she grumbled a little and started walking towards the nearer projector. One of the youngest hatchlings, only coming up to Jenny's chest, ran past her without fear, causing Sessara to bark authoritatively at the youngster, admonishing it in some manner. Six fire dragons were watching ESPN at that projector, a scroll of draconic writing rolling from right to left across the bottom; draconic read from right to left rather than left to right, like Arabic or Hebrew. But, curiously enough, it could *also* be read from left to right. A marker on the writing dictated which way it was to be read, and that marker had caused their translation program a little heartburn. Kell's translation program had been set up to scroll draconic from right to left, so they didn't mess with that, but the keyboard program he'd coded into their computer displayed draconic writing from left to right. There had to be a reason why Kell made that distinction, made it different, but the reasoning for it was beyond her. A modular writing system like that was unlike anything any of the Hunters had ever encountered with the lone exception of Japanese; the Japanese had two reading systems in that they could do it the ancient way, top to bottom and right to left, but had adopted a modern horizontal reading format like English, from left to right, but those had specific uses. She'd been to Japan twice, and had seen that they used their vertical writing format in newspapers and street signs and such, but used horizontal for most everything else. But even that wasn't like this, where a marker told one which way to read the writing.

Sessara nudged her to the group of dragons, pushing her almost in the middle of them, then she sat down and looked at Jenny expectantly. "Umm..." Jenny sounded, looking up at the fierce fire drake uncertainly. What bee had gotten under her bonnet?

"You dragon speak," she said in English. "Speak bad. Look. Listen." She puffed out a small gout of flame, which seemed to freeze in midair, then pull out and twist, braiding into ropes of small shimmering flame; she was using fire dragon magic, controlling the flames. "*Krraa'zzhe*. Hello,"

she said in English, forming draconic letters from pure fire in the air between them.

She gasped. Sessara was going to *teach* her draconic! *Krraa'zzhe* was one of the words in the primer Sella had given her!

Suddenly not irritated she'd been called up, she immediately sat on the rocky ground and went for her shoulder bag, yanking out a memo pad and a pen. They could use the software to learn, but how better to learn than from a native speaker?

For six hours, she learned draconic. She learned 84 different words that had *not* been on the primer, Sessara using the fire like a pen to draw fire shapes in the air, forcing Jenny to puzzle out exactly what the new words were supposed to mean. The other five drakes there also taught her, and they were all a little short with her, almost like a pushy college professor, expecting perfect recall on demand. They only stopped when the soldiers brought in a trio of flatbeds filled with food, enough to feed nearly a thousand people, but was only good for *one* meal for fire dragons; Kell hadn't been joking when he'd said that fire dragons eat like pigs. The soldiers had learned to just park the trucks and leave quickly, because the fire dragons competed over the food like a pack of starving coyotes, displaying the basic fire dragon mindset of the strong taking what they wanted at the expense of the weak. A couple of scraps over a particularly coveted box of food, like the box of Italian sausage that had been in the shipment yesterday afternoon, never failed to materialize during meal times, but Arlen always made sure that there was food left over by the time they were done, which the fire dragons snacked on from time to time until the next meal. He didn't want a single fire dragon to go hungry, to prevent anything rash from happening. To her surprise, Sessara bulled Jenny in front of her on her way to the flatbeds, and she got nervous when one of the larger fire drakes gave a savage growl and snapped at another female. *All* the adults here were females, all of them except for Sessara and the two largest drakes and largest wyrm the mothers of the younglings or eggs. Females wouldn't let males not the fathers of the younglings anywhere near them, she'd learned over those three days, because males had a habit of

killing baby dragons they didn't father. So the host that guarded the younglings and eggs were exclusively female. "Bad idea," she said in draconic as she was pushed along in front of the fire drake. "Bad idea!" she said more forcefully when she was almost struck by a swishing tail, which would have probably broken her ribs. "Really bad idea!" she protested, jumping under Sessara's head and putting her back against her foreleg.

"Good, good," Sessara chuckled hissing, lacing her clawed fingers around Jenny's torso and picking her up, much as Hinado had done. She set Jenny lightly on the end of the last flatbed. "Eat," she ordered.

"Umm," Jenny said, then she sighed and looked at the nearest box, filled with loaves of bread from a nearby bakery, probably their day-olds. Fire dragons would eat almost anything, and they didn't particularly care if it was stale or on the verge of going bad. In fact, they seemed to like spoiling milk, which never failed to make Jenny gag little when she saw them drinking it. In one way, that did make them a little easier to feed, since Arlen could collect up near-spoilage from markets and restaurants around the island on top of the very expensive amounts of meat and vegetables they brought up three times a day. She sat on the edge of the flatbed and tore open the day-old loaf of unsliced bread, getting at the not-stale interior, and gnawing on it as Sessara staked her claim among the flatbeds and bullied her way to what she wanted to eat.

She wondered why Sessara was being so...nice. This wasn't the usual fire dragon behavior she'd seen in the last few days.

After the rather odd meal, Jenny did lure Sessara over to the translation computer and put the bluetooth over her ear. "We need to talk," she said, which caused draconic script to blink on the touchscreen. "We told you that we intend to tell the humans *something* about you. We need to know what you want us to say, and what not to say."

It took her a while to type out the reply, mainly since the eggheads had yet to successfully set up the software to translate spoken draconic into English. But Derringer and Petrovski had been dealing with that, and hoped

to have something soon. *You do not tell them where we come from, she typed. You do not tell them what we can do. Never reveal your strengths and weaknesses, even to your friend. Your friend today may be your enemy tomorrow.*

“That’s actually pretty good advice,” she said, a bit ruefully. “So, we can give them the basics about the five races, but don’t get specific?”

Yes. That’s acceptable.

“We originally told them that we made a treaty with you to allow you to migrate to this volcano for a short time to perform whatever it is you wanted to do here, then you’d go back home. We’re sticking with that, with your permission.”

It’s as good an explanation as any, she typed, giving her a slight smile. Now, I must talk to you. I’m sure you’re curious why we’re teaching you draconic.

“I think I have a good guess. You know I can do magic.”

She looked impressed as she typed. *That is EXACTLY why we’re teaching you, she typed. How did did YOU know?*

“I happened to run into Hinado a couple of weeks ago, when we took the ships down to try to find the island,” she answered, being careful. “He saw me on one of the ships and demanded to know what we were doing. He told me then, then he ordered us to turn our ships around and leave,” she chuckled.

You have contact with Hinado? Good. He is a very smart drake, and we feel we can trust him, she typed. Because you’re a magician, Jenny, it makes you, in a way, one of us. You are a part of OUR world, as much as you a part of the human world. The other dragons know this about you. Do not fear them.

“I don’t fear them like *that*,” she said. “I just worry about getting stepped on or tail-slapped.”

Sessara chuckled as she typed. *That could be a worry, she agreed. But the other dragons are impressed by your courage. Yours and the other humans within the fence. Your hunting friends?*

“It’s a title. Our group is called the Hunters,” she explained. “We’re an arm of the government that hunts down a specific kind of criminal in our society. It requires specialized skills, so they created a group with those skills to do the job. It was what I did before I got involved with the dragons.”

Yes, we could tell they were instruments of justice, strong in the human way and brave, and that gives them respect among my kind. They do much to put a good paw forward among the fire dragons where humans are concerned.

“They’ll be delighted to know that the fire dragons give them some honor,” she replied. Arlen wandered over with Wilson and Price, and she nodded to them. “Arlen.”

“Jenny. We just had a minor security breach. A reporter almost made it to the outer fence,” he told her. “They’re taking him to the hospital. The fool came up the lava flow. Sessara,” he greeted with a little bow.

Arlen, she typed. Jenny told us about your press conference. She knows where we stand.

“Very good, that’s something we needed to discuss with you, esteemed council member,” she said as Jenny rapidly typed it for translation. “I’ll schedule it as soon as we get clearance from the President.”

Do so with our blessing.

“Thank you. Is there anything you need?”

More toys for the younglings. They are getting bored.

“I’ll arrange it immediately.”

Of course, dragons had different ideas about toys than humans. The younglings had had great fun systematically tearing apart a Hum-V that had been left inside the fence, and they played with the parts for a full day before they lost most of them in the lava. They liked things they could be rough with, things that were tough and durable, and things that were fireproof. Odds were, Kent could just bring a few wrecks in from a local junkyard and let them have at it.

“I’m going to go back home, Sessara,” she said, the fire drake looking at the monitor. “I’ll study the words you taught me today, and I’d like to see my son at least once today,” she chuckled.

I will see this offspring of yours, she typed. Bring him tomorrow, him and your lifemate.

“Well, I guess I could, but everyone will have to be careful. Davie is very precious to me, and I don’t want him hurt by accident,” she fretted. “I may have to put a leash on him to keep him out from underfoot.”

Do what must be done, but I want to see him. I want to see if you passed your talent down to your son.

That had never occurred to her. “I...yes, I can bring him,” she nodded. “And if I did?”

Then it is good.

“Have you seen anyone else that might have that particular talent, esteemed council member?” Kent asked quickly.

She looked at him, then typed. *I’m not as adept in the magical arts as Hinado. It takes me time to ascertain, and I have to touch. As of yet, I’ve found no one else. But, if you want me to find out, well,* she trailed off, then she turned and wrapped her taloned fingers around Kent’s waist, then reared up on her hind legs, holding him about ten feet off the ground, looking down at him with amusement. She was *playing* with him. She peered into his eyes for a long moment as he squirmed a bit, but then her eyes

narrowed. "Arlen," she said. "Magic...maybe," she said in English. "Feel... maybe."

"Really?" he asked with surprised eyes.

"Maybe," she said again in her accented English, then she put him down. He stood by her belly, since she was in that propped-up position dragons used to employ their hands, sitting on her heels and the base of her tail, a move that showed off her light red scales on her underbelly. "Time... maybe."

"I think she means she'll have to study you for a while, Arlen," Jenny said. "But *maybe*."

"Well, I didn't exactly mean *me*, but it would be a good thing to know," he chuckled. "I think I'm a bit too old for such a big change in my life." Sessara reached down and patted him on the head with a single finger, almost like he was a dog or cat, and he laughed and got out from under her so she could drop back down to all fours.

But, that did remind her that interacting with the fire dragons had had some surprises. They were far more *civilized* than she expected, but only in certain ways. In others, they were every bit what Kell had described that day she'd gone to the island. But, they weren't as dumb as Kell thought they were. Sessara was downright intelligent. Impulsive, yes, belligerent, yes, arrogant, *God* yes, but not dumb.

She sighed and chuckled to herself as she stood up. God help her, the fire dragons were *growing* on her.

22 June 2017, 09:10 DMT; Greenside Village

It was as boring and monotonous as she feared it would be.

The young female chromatic absently cleared yet another cave-in in a small, twisting tunnel just off Greenside Village, using her floating magic to pull the stones of the cave-in aside and set them along the edges of the tunnel and clearing it, something she'd done so many times over the last four days that she'd developed quite an eye for cave-ins, and had worked out the most efficient way to clear the rubble and allow her to pass. She marked the location on her map, the 15th parchment she'd used so far as she carefully mapped out the tunnels and chambers of three different earth dragon villages before this one, barely paying the stones floating around her any mind as she checked her progress. This cave-in blocked off the entry to the main village chamber of Greenside, their common gallery, something of the entry room to an earth dragon village, she'd come to learn. The other village chambers would be reached from this one, serving as the main chokepoint protecting the rest of the village from invasion.

Earth dragon architecture had a very practical layout, she'd come to learn. Earth dragons were *big* on practicality, function over style, usefulness over aesthetics, but their architecture did have a simple elegance about it, and she'd started to appreciate it as she studied their villages. Chambers were excavated by claw, without magic, and they were amazingly exact in their dimensions. Walls were perfectly straight, floors were perfectly level, every surface was smooth, and vaulting and buttressing had flowing, gradual curves and lines. This was all done by *paw*, without guide, showing her that the earth dragons had remarkably geometric minds, able to see angles, curves, shapes, and translate that mental image into the stone they excavated. Earth dragons were instinctual builders, like bees or ants, and it showed in their excavations.

The more she studied their tunnels, the more impressed with the earth dragons she became. Their tunnels had a myriad of twisting, narrow passages, a veritable maze of dead ends and innumerable side passages that would both confuse and terrify any invading dragon, getting them lost in tight, confining spaces so stifling that many dragons wouldn't even be able to turn around in them. She herself was very petite as chromatics measured things, and *she* had issues in some of those tunnels. Earth wyrms, they'd

completely fill those tunnels, may not even be able to pass. It was a good thing she wasn't claustrophobic, or she'd have driven herself mad with terror by now.

The more she explored, the less she feared her surroundings. The tunnels were pitch black, silent, dank, a little stifling, but there was a curious sense of, well, *security* down here. Down here, they were safe. Down here, they were protected. Down here, nothing could reach them. And now that she was down here, she shared in that sense of protected isolation. It was what it meant to be in Gaia's Embrace, she reasoned, and it had a remarkably soothing effect.

She stepped into the empty common gallery, taking note that there were a few things left behind. A basket here, a tool there, forgotten in the evacuation, all clues to the disappearance of the earth dragons. They had been prepared for this, well prepared. The other three villages had no evidence of panic or chaos. Nothing overturned, nothing important left behind, some rooms and tunnels showing deep scratches on the floor, hinting that the earth dragons had carried very heavy things through them. They had evacuated to their hidden place calmly and systematically, with only little things being dropped, missed, forgotten, or deliberately left behind, and none of them were placed in a way that hinted at panic or hurry. She picked up an empty basket the earth dragons commonly used, they called them yoke baskets, which they attached to poles they slung over their shoulders. They were commonly used on farms to carry supplies or carry harvested food. The basket was old, some of its weaving frayed near the top edge, suggesting to her by its condition and its placement by the wall that it had been deliberately left behind. She made a note of it on her map, using her clawtip and a bit of magic to burn lines in the thick parchment rather than use ink, and old chromatic trick among the first spells learned by chromatic younglings. She marked the location of the basket, then jotted *intentionally abandoned* beside it. Many such notes dotted her maps, marking everything, even loose stones on the floor that had no easily discernable origin.

She moved through the gallery and to the lone tunnel that would lead deeper into the village, and naturally, it was blocked by a collapse. That was something she'd seen in *every* village so far. Every single tunnel blocked, even tunnels that went nowhere, to further confuse and delay anyone searching for them, making them clear *every single tunnel* to be sure of things. She took note of the tumbled rockfall and attacked it with her floating magic, systematically dismantling it without causing further cave-ins or rockfalls, clearing the way so she could get through. The process usually took her about ten minutes to complete, and since she was so talented with floating magic, it didn't tire her very much at all. After clearing her way, she inspected the gaping hole from where the rocks had tumbled, making sure that it would collapse on her due to weakness as she went under it, then continued on her way, brightening her magical ball of light over her head to see down the passage...and as she expected, it was caved in at the far end as well. That was a commonality she'd found in all the villages. Every passage caved in at both ends, even some chambers caved in, so heavily that not even she could clear them enough to see what was on the other side, mainly because some of the jagged boulders were too large to get out of the chambers and into the passageways.

Getting past *that* cave in, she stopped to rest a little while in the chamber, which looked like some kind of inner common room. She nibbled at some fish from her private stores, carried in her shoulder satchel, took a drink of water from a pulled glass canteen, then sat on her haunches in the middle of the room and pondered its use. Like all other chambers, all its furniture and decorations had been removed, leaving the room's function up to her speculation. This room had three passages exiting it, one on each wall, and naturally, all three were blocked by collapses.

It was probably best she was down here, for things were almost in a panic up above ground. The failure of the scion had caused a firestorm of worry among the chromatics, but what she remembered was the worry among the sages, and that chart they were studying. It had taken her a couple of days to place it, but she finally did; it was a tides chart. Such charts were often used by master magicians to chart the ebb and flow of

magic according to astronomical influences, often in preparation of using major magic. They had been studying that tides chart and arguing among themselves when she entered, and they had been *afraid*.

There was no doubt in her mind that their fear had something to do with the failure of the scion. For a scion to just *fail* like that after years of operation, it defied most of the rules and laws of magic and spellcasting which she'd been taught. Something had to disrupt the scion, or some unknown celestial or thaumaturgic event had destabilized it...but only *that* scion. Why hadn't it affected the other eight?

That was the conundrum. That was what nobody could explain. And that was what scared most of the chromatics that studied the phenomenon.

She was not accomplished in magic as the chromatics measured things, but she knew enough to understand that something *serious* was happening.

Whatever it was, it hadn't affected her floating magic, her own personal talent, however. She had little trouble clearing the collapse in the right chamber and moving into the chamber, which went a short distance, then ended in an entire chamber that had been collapsed.

But this one was different. They had tried to collapse the entire chamber, but *only* the back half had come down. The ceiling above her had a multitude of cracks in it, but it hadn't collapsed, and the mound of debris that filled the back half of the chamber didn't reach the ceiling.

It was an error by the earth dragons, she realized, the first she'd encountered. They had intended a full collapse of this chamber, but only half of it had come down...why didn't they finish the job?

Because...they *didn't know* it failed.

Yes, that made sense to her. They didn't know the front half of the chamber had collapsed because there was something in the back, another passage. Something they didn't want the chromatics to find, or at least find easily.

It was her first break since starting this task, so she bent to it. She carefully, painstakingly cleared the collapse in the back of the chamber for several hours, moving it stone by stone and doing it gingerly so as not to cause the weakened ceiling above to come down on her head, meticulously spreading the debris through the room so she could get at the passage on the far side.

But there was no passage. There was no way out of the room.

She sat down and considered. She could have been wrong, that they'd only intended a partial collapse, but...no. No, that didn't fit with earth dragon mentality that she'd come to understand in the four days of studying their hidden world. Earth dragons didn't do *anything* halfway. Had they known this chamber only partially collapsed, they would have come back and fixed it. So, they didn't *know* that the chamber didn't completely collapse.

That meant that there *had* to be another way out of this chamber, and it had been in the collapse zone.

Maybe her teacher was right. Maybe the way into their secret village was here, in this room, cleverly hidden by their skill at stonemasonry and covered over by a collapsed chamber. And perhaps the other collapsed chambers she'd encountered in other villages also held hidden entrances.

She was very proud of the fact that she knew 45 individual spells, and one of them would be useful to her here. She channeled the magic through her body to manifest in the room, which caused the walls, floor, and ceiling of the chamber to glow with a soft radiance. The stone resisted her magic, forced her to put much more of her own energy into the spell to affect it, but the stone eventually yielded to her will and her magic and gave up its secrets. The light faded from the walls, and ceiling.

And on the floor, it faded everywhere but in a large square near the far wall.

That was it. She padded over to it and found a cracked section of stone that had been covering a vertical shaft, the collapse breaking it. That spell was called a spell of Seeking, which allowed an initiate in magic to cause that which she sought to glow with magical light. It was very useful for finding a specific object on a table holding dozens of cluttered things, or a particular book on a shelf of tomes, letting the caster find that for which she was looking, as long as the caster knew *exactly* what she wanted to find.

And she had been looking for a *door*.

She carefully moved the two broken pieces of stone aside, then looked down into the shaft. It was deep enough for her to have to use floating magic on herself to get down, gingerly putting her paws on the smooth tunnel floor and feeling that they angled down the passage, descending to a T intersection.

“Hello, hello, what have we here,” she breathed quietly to herself, hearing her words echo off the walls despite her whisper, looking to and fro down the tunnel. This was *underneath* the village, and the tunnel went beyond her light, hinting that it was long and relatively straight.

Her teacher *might* have been right. This was a hidden tunnel under Greenside, and while one direction of the tunnel ascended, the other side *descended*.

But, her elation at finding one of the secrets of the earth dragons turned into something of a disappointment. After two hours, she puzzled out that the tunnel was nothing but a common tunnel that connected the villages together, and walking it showed her that it was nothing but a giant circle. She had found side tunnels, and each one led to a vertical shaft whose trapdoors were blocked from the other side...blocked by collapses.

By sunset, she'd worked it all out. This was how the earth dragons moved without them seeing. This circular tunnel connected every village, burrowing up into them from underneath, and they'd buried those entrances under collapsed chambers that would take considerable effort to clear. The vast tunnel could possibly be hiding the way down into the earth

dragon's secret village...somewhere. *Leagues* of tunnel to inspect painstakingly, hunting for the proverbial lone black grain of sand on a beach of white sand.

She returned to the council just as the sun slipped below the waves, handing over the many maps she'd made, and telling them of her discovery. "It is not the entrance to their secret village, but it *is* how they moved everything without us seeing," she reported. "It is a vast circular tunnel that connects all the earth dragon villages together."

"Then that's where we'll find the way into their hidden village," the council chromatic declared. "Focus your efforts there, on that tunnel, student. Somewhere in there, they've hidden the way in. There's no other way they could do it."

She held her tongue, but nodded in understanding. That was narrow thinking, she pondered as she left the council chambers. She'd thought that the way in would be in a place she would *never* think to look...and to look in that connecting tunnel would be the *first* place they told her to look once they discovered it.

Earth dragons were far too clever to do something that obvious.

No. The way in was *not* in that tunnel. She had no proof of it, but she *knew* it. She was certain of it. For them to put the tunnel in there was too *obvious*, and the one thing she had learned of the earth dragons over the last four days was that they were far from *obvious*. They were subtle, cunning, clever, and they wouldn't be so stupid as to put the way into their secret village in a place the chromatics would tear apart searching.

She was tired. She'd think about it more in the morning.

27 June 2017, 06:57 DMT; Scion Aerie

She'd met the sunrise on the aerie, with the eight remaining scions swirling behind her, but her eyes were down on the ruined farms.

It was down there...somewhere. She could feel it in her feathery antenna. The answer was there, if she was clever enough to look for it in the place that she would never think to look. She blinked her scillinting white eyes and felt the wind pull at the plumage on her tail, her antenna, the sensitive instruments testing the air, sensing currents of magic.

So, where would it be? Where would *she* put it if she didn't want it to be found?

Where nobody could reach it.

She spread her wings and pushed into the air, letting the morning thermals work with her floating magic to keep her soaring at altitude, looking down over the ruined, abandoned lowlands. She lazily drifted over Dawnmist, and a motion caught her eye. She focused on it, and saw a shadowy shape in the water, a fleeting glimpse, the shape vanishing into the blue of the sea.

A water dragon? But they all left the island. Maybe it was one of the ones that lived in the cove, sneaking back into its den during the night? They could certainly manage it. They could move about in the night without being seen, and their protective magic would hide them from magical detection—

That was *it*!

She dove sharply, turning towards that cove. Water dragons! They were friends to the earth dragons! What if they put the entrance to the earth dragon's secret village *underwater*? Nobody would *ever* think to look for earth dragons in the water! Earth dragons had dug tunnels all over the island, what if one of them opened up *underwater*, and allowed them to just swim to their secret village's entrance?

She landed on the edge of one of the ruined farms, a dug-out burrow on the top of a small knoll, the remains of the burrow's contents destroyed

and scattered over the moist, slightly muddy ground, still damp from last night's passing shower. The sky dragons had dug it out and destroyed it, probably searching for earth dragons to kill. She padded along the rocky shelf abutting the water, looking down into it, using what she was seeing as an example that might prove her theory. The shelf overhung the wall in several places, hiding the rocky wall from view from the top...and that condition had to exist in multiple places around the island. And an earth dragon could easily dig a tunnel that would only open to the water, but would keep the water out.

Yes, yes, that would work! That was how they did it! Somewhere along the coast, she knew she would find a tunnel that opened into the *water*, and that tunnel would be close to another underwater tunnel that would lead to their hidden village. She drifted out into the air close to the water and looked down the rocky shelf, but saw no tunnels. She did see an opening further down, but holding her breath and diving in showed that it was only the den of the water dragons, and a fairly extensive one at that.

An *excavated* den. Yes, she could see it on the walls, she could identify it in a heartbeat after spending five days studying it. This was earth dragon work!

It proved that the earth dragons could indeed dig underwater. An earth dragon had dug out this den, after all.

And no chromatic *anywhere* would ever believe that the earth dragons had dug out their secret village from the *water*. The water dragons had obviously helped them do it, using their water magic to allow them to do their digging without fear of drowning.

She surfaced and climbed out onto a short beach of white sand, pondering as the water dripped from her. The key was going to be finding a hidden tunnel down in the maze of tunnels that opened into the *water*, which most other dragons would discount as yet another trick, yet another misdirection, but *she* wouldn't. That tunnel was how they did it. Somewhere close to that tunnel, she would find another one, one that only

opened to the water, and at the end of *that* tunnel, she would find the earth dragons.

The last place she would ever think to look for earth dragons was *in the ocean*...and that was exactly where she was going to find them.

She turned and spread her wings, then launched into the sky, heading for her den to get her mapping tools. She had a lot of work to do. Her teacher was right in that there was a hidden tunnel down there, somewhere, and she had to find it. But where her teacher would have followed it to find that it ended in the ocean, she understood that that was how they evacuated the earth dragons. The water dragons helped them evacuate, probably helped them build their hidden village.

The hidden village of the earth dragons was not *connected* to their other villages, a simple fact that would have confounded the chromatics for months, maybe *years*, unable to accept the idea. It proved to her just how clever the earth dragons were, how cunning, how *intelligent*. They had built a massive system of tunnels that served no other purpose but to literally make the chromatics run around in circles.

But they'd been forced to dig a tunnel leading to the water, to get the earth dragons out without being seen, and that was their one weakness. If she could find that tunnel, then she would find the earth dragons. She'd have to, since there was so much coastline around the island that trying to search for the tunnel underwater would take far longer than trying to find the tunnel that would lead her to where it would be.

Earth dragons...they were *far* smarter than her elders ever believed.

Chapter 11

27 June 2017, 09:00 HDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kilauea

Sessara had rather rudely learned that all her strength and power and might were no match for the backassery of the United States Federal Government's planet-sized ball of red tape.

She expected obedience and immediate capitulation to her demands, but some of her demands had to go up channels, where the gears of progress turned jerkily and unoiled, grinding away until an answer finally came back down to them. It had taken that long for Sessara's demand to see Davie to go up, get approved, and come back down, and so they were in the back of the tinted-window modified Ford Expedition SUV, modified to actually be an urban tank, and hidden from the reporters by a divider glass between the front and glass as she sat in the front seat with a driver. That man was a Secret Service agent specially trained for driving the heavily armored behemoth, since its handling and weight required a man with training to operate without giving away the fact that it was built of tank armor and armored glass.

"I can't wait to see the dwagons!" Davie gushed from his car seat, looking eagerly out his window at the reporters swarming the vehicle. MPs finally got the crowd under control, pushing them back so the SUV could go through the gate leading up to the top. Once they were through, Jenny lowered the divider partition, then looked back at him.

"Do you remember what I said?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. Be careful cause I'll be like one of my army men to them. Don't get under their feet."

“Precisely, little man,” she nodded. “You stay close to me or Daddy all the time, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I have to admit, this is *really* exciting,” Greg said. “I think I’m the first civilian that gets to get this close to them.”

“Not counting Arlen, he’s technically not military, love,” Jenny chuckled.

“Well, he is government,” he pointed out.

“Remember what I told you,” she said. “Fire dragons don’t take no for an answer, and they expect you to obey them. You’re nothing but a butler to them, Greg. An interesting butler, but still a butler.”

“That goes for you too, eh? I could see you in a maid outfit,” he teased.

She flushed just a little bit, giving the Secret Service agent a furtive look. But, the man’s face was like stone, which was either a relief or an intense curiosity if it was just training keeping his expression neutral. MPs opened the inner gate, and Juarez and Hatch came up to meet the SUV as it pulled in. Hatch opened the door for her, and Juarez opened Davie’s door. “Hey *papito*,” he smiled, reaching in and ruffling his hair. “How you doing?”

“I’m okay,” he replied, accepting Juarez’s help to get down as Greg got out, then his eyes widened as he saw the fire dragons on the far side of the fenced area. None were near the TVs or tent, attending a meeting of sorts near the caldera as Sessara sat on the rim and addressed them.

“Aren’t they cool?” Juarez asked, dropping to a knee. “But you gotta be careful, *papito*. They might step on you by accident!”

“Mommy said stay close,” he nodded.

“You listen to your mama, half-size,” Hatch agreed as Greg came around the back. Price advanced towards them, his .50 caliber sniper rifle

slung over his back, always ready to be pulled down and used with his deadly accuracy. Price had never missed any target either in practice or in the field, as far as she knew. His father had been an army sniper himself, and he'd put a rifle in Price's hands when he was six.

"Hey Davie," Price greeted. "They finally let you come in, eh?"

"I'm so excited!" Davie answered, almost jumping up and down. "When can we go meet them, Mommy?"

"When they're done with their meeting, little bear," Greg replied. "We can't go over where they are."

"Why not?"

"It's too hot, *papito*," Juarez replied. "There's lava over there, and it's really, really hot. If we tried to go over there, we'd get burned."

"But it doesn't hurt them," he protested.

"They're *fire* dragons, sweetie," Jenny said patiently. "A dragon can't be hurt by its own element. Fire dragons can't get burned, water dragons can't drown, sky dragons can't be hurt by lightning, and earth dragons can't be hurt by guns, because bullets are made of metal."

"Don't I know it," Price grunted.

"I'd stay clear of Kell if I were you, Price," Jenny grinned. "He wants to do something very mean to you for all the times you've shot him."

Price chuckled. "Well, it was good practice drawing a bead on a moving target if nothing else," he smiled.

Jenny and the Hunters showed Greg and Davie around, which wasn't all that much. The only things they'd built were the fence, which they couldn't approach, the tent, and three projector screens showing different TV channels. After that, they gathered over where the other Hunters were, who were debating what they'd read in the book on magic.

It was a book they'd *all* had to read. Much to the shock of the fire dragons, and the Hunters themselves, Sessara had determined that *every single* Hunter had magical aptitude, to varying degrees. Jenny had the most potential, according to the fire drake, and surprisingly to her, Price was the next most apt, all the way down to poor Wilson, whom Sessara had determined had qualities she called tertiary. In dragon lore, she explained, a man like Wilson would only excel in a specialization of sorts based on his natural aptitudes, and have poor magical abilities outside his specialty. Wilson would only be able to do one thing, but that one thing he would do well. Maybe it would be a class of spells related to his natural strengths, maybe it would be enchantment, but whatever it was, he'd perform well in his specialty and poorly outside of it.

It made her curious. The Hunters were the best they were at what they did, and now they'd found out that all of them had magical talent. Arlen Kent too had magical talent. Maybe, she speculated privately, those who excelled had qualities related to the fact that they had magical aptitude. She had a feeling that President Walker and the First Lady would *also* have magical aptitude, if her theory panned out, for they were exceptional people, ambitious and capable.

They were arguing about the book, debating just *how* the life energy of the creatures on the world *created* magic, when they joined them. They broke off and greeted Davie warmly, Wilson and Michaels bouncing him around and making him laugh, shaking Greg's hand and renewing some friendships he had among Jenny's team. Jenny was the *only* married person on the team, which was really strange, so Greg had been adopted as the "13th man" of sorts, and Davie was the team's adopted son. Everyone else was either single or divorced, which was Derringer's, Hatch's, and Wilson's cases...but Wilson was married to the job more than he'd ever be married to a woman. He was too addicted to the life of a soldier, and would be one til he died.

But in a way, it was nice to know that she wasn't unique. There *were* other human magicians in the world, and that meant that, hopefully, the

government wouldn't focus all their attention solely on *her*. She had no doubt that all the Hunters would be right along with her when it came time to learn about magic...and in a way, she was glad. The Hunters were her team, in a way her *family*, and she was overjoyed that they wouldn't be split up by the demands of country and duty.

"Oh my," Greg breathed as Sessara vaulted over the lava flow and started towards them, getting bigger and bigger. "She's much bigger than Kell, isn't she?"

"*Much* bigger," Jenny nodded. Sessara stalked over to them and sat on her haunches, looking down at Greg and Davie with her glowing red eyes and an expectant expression. "Greg, Davie, this is Sessara, the leader of the fire dragons here," Jenny introduced. "Sessara, lifemate Greg, hatchling Davie," she said in draconic, motioning at them. Sessara hunkered down and lowered her huge head so she was nearly eye to eye with Greg, her chin nearly on the ground, giving him a penetrating stare. Greg cleared his throat and bowed a little, not sure what to do. She focused her attention on an awestruck Davie, let him put his hands on her scaly upper lip, then he flinched and giggled when she snorted a blast of hot air over him.

"She's hot," Davie declared, putting his hands on her snout again.

"They all are, munchkin," Petrovski told him. "They can breathe fire, you know."

"Really?"

"They surely can," Jenny affirmed.

"Welcome," Sessara said in improved English. In the five days since starting to teach her draconic, Sessara had quadrupled her English vocabulary and had worked on her pronunciation. "Come, youngling. Come. I show pretty, you see," she said. Jenny almost intervened when Sessara scooped her son up in her paw and turned around, then started off with him, and Greg all but had to be held back.

"What's she doing!" Greg demanded.

“I don’t know, but she won’t hurt him, Greg,” she replied, her voice quavering as her maternal instinct battled with her reason. Sessara carted Davie over to a gathering of other drakes, gently set him down, then sat down and pointed at the rocky ground. Davie looked at whatever was there and made an “*ooohhh!*” sound, sitting down and staring at whatever it was with complete fascination. The other drakes stared at it as well, a strange little circle with Davie in the middle. Juarez started over there, but after about twenty paces, he staggered back. “Ai! *Dios mio!*” he swore. “It’s way too hot!”

“They don’t want us to interfere,” Wilson grunted, his hand on the butt of his pistol.

“I think you’re right, but they won’t hurt him,” Jenny repeated, trying to bolster her own confidence about it. “They won’t hurt him.”

“If they do, they’re dead,” Price declared, gripping the strap of his sniper rifle.

The strange little conference lasted nearly a half an hour, and then Sessara gently herded Davie back over to the tent, where they were gathered watching with intense and nervous stares. Davie broke out into a run after Sessara urged him, and Greg knelt down and gave him a fierce hug when he reached them, patting him urgently to make sure he was alright. “What did they show you, baby bear?” Greg asked.

“It was so pretty!” he gushed. “They made pictures on the ground, and they were really neat! They did *magic*, Daddy! They showed me real magic!”

“Sessara,” Jenny said, almost threateningly, when she reached them.

“Very talented,” she replied unashamedly. “Teach him, soon, soon. Early good, early early early very good. Lifemate Jenny’s,” she commanded, holding out her paw.

“Oh shit,” Greg swallowed, putting Davie down.

“They won’t hurt you,” Jenny assured him, putting her hands on his shoulders. “Just remember that.”

He nodded, then Sessara curled her paw around him like herding a child as he stepped up to her, then brought him to the circle of red drakes. He sat on the ground and looked up at Sessara nervously, but she just bent her head down and motioned at the ground. Greg looked down, and he didn’t look anywhere else for long minutes.

“What did they show you, sweetie?” Jenny asked, picking him up.

“Shapes. Stars and circles, squares and other things,” he replied. “They were all different colors, and were really pretty. Then we played a game with the shapes, putting them all inside a box, like a puzzle.”

“Curious,” Petrovski noted. “They didn’t do that to *us*.”

“I know,” Wilson agreed with a nod.

“It’s a little different. Sessara has her finger on Greg’s shoulder,” Jenny noted. “She wasn’t touching Davie.”

“Maybe she’s trying to make him *think* magic while she’s touching him, maybe it helps her,” Vickers speculated.

“That actually makes sense. I’m amazed you thought of it,” Hatch teased his primary partner.

“Watch it, buddy, I’m supposedly higher up on the magic ladder than you,” he retorted.

“Even dragons make mistakes,” he said lightly, which made Jenny laugh despite herself.

Kent arrived for his daily visit while Greg was still with the drakes, and he looked curiously at them as he joined the Hunters. “What are they doing?”

“Sessara’s testing Greg,” Jenny replied. “She said that Davie’s got potential.”

“Really? That’s great to hear!” he smiled down at Davie.
“Congratulations!”

“What for?”

“For being you, *papito*,” Juarez grinned.

“Oh. What’s so special about that?”

“It’s *very* special, sweetie,” Jenny smiled, then she kissed him on the cheek and put him back down. “Tom, could you turn on one of the projector TVs for him? He can watch a little TV while we get things organized.”

“Sure thing, mookie, I’m sure we can find Nickelodeon on there somewhere.”

“Channel two hundred nine,” Petrovski said absently. “What? I like Spongebob Squarepants, sue me.”

That made the others laugh, and things calmed down a whole lot. Wilson took Davie over to one of the screens and stayed with him, babysitting as Jenny and Arlen got down to business, but Tom was very good at it. He was actually very good with children, which was something of a surprise given he was a grizzled, veteran professional soldier. “Any word on the press conference?”

“Tomorrow, two o’clock,” Arlen answered as he motioned at Michaels. He chuckled and sat at the console and brought up the translation screen on the touchscreen. “We need to let Sessara know.”

“*Please* tell me you’re giving it,” Jenny all but pleaded.

He laughed. “Yes, I’m giving it, but you’ll be there,” he replied. “They’ve seen you and me come in and out of here on a daily basis, Jenny, they know you’re involved.”

“Yeah. That house out in the middle of nowhere is going to look *really* nice once the fire dragons are gone.”

“If only we could all go there,” he chuckled. “But I’m a little too old to put all that devoted study in, I have another job that’s far more important.” He looked to Price. “Any problems since yesterday?”

“Nope,” he replied.

“Good. I really don’t want to see another fight,” he grunted.

Yesterday afternoon, they got a very close-up view of how *nasty* fire dragons could be. A fight erupted between two adult drakes, and none of the other drakes made any move to break it up. They just watched from a distance as the two females tore into each other, not even bothering to use magic, a fight that lasted nearly ten minutes and resulted in a lot of blood and scales all over the ground. The victor beat the loser senseless, and only then did Sessara intervene, pulling the winner off before she killed the loser. The loser slinked off after waking up, and had spent all night well away from the others, laying by a slow-drifting lava flow to lick her wounds and recover. And she’d have to do a lot of recovering. She had several nasty bite wounds, torn wing membrane, and had only come about a foot from losing her left eye to a claw rake. She had three jagged lacerations on her face from the other drake’s claws, her eye right between the two deeper ones, and would probably leave an ugly scar once it healed. Jenny was *very* glad Davie hadn’t seen that, or it would have traumatized him. Hell, it had almost traumatized the two duty officers.

It was a stark reminder of Kell’s warnings about the fire dragons and their savagery.

Arlen had tried to coax the wounded female out of the heat so they could give her medical attention, but she had refused to budge.

Jenny watched as several hatchlings ventured over to the TV, and Davie lost interest in the TV when the very young dragons, barely more than babies, inspected him curiously. In relative ages, Davie was in their age bracket, Jenny supposed. She watched carefully as the hatchlings sniffed at him, milled around him, but Davie showed little fear of them, and Wilson was giving the hatchling commanding stares. The hatchlings had

learned that the Hunters were *not* humans to trifle with, because the females had given them permission to whack the hatchlings if they did anything out of bounds....and several hatchlings had found out the hard way that Tom Wilson was a physically powerful man who could whack *very hard*. Fire dragons respected strength above all things, and the fact that Wilson was strong enough to make a fire dragon hatchling yelp garnered him some respect among the females. The hatchlings obeyed Tom just because he'd smack them if they didn't, which was behavior to which they were acclimated, since that was how their parents also treated them.

But, that didn't mean that Jenny didn't grip the table with a white-knuckled grip as the those hatchlings crowded around her son. A single errant lick of flame could scar Davie for life.

Eventually, the hatchlings all bounded off when an older one produced a hollow steel ball fashioned for them by a nearby foundry, and they chased each other around as they kicked and slapped the ball with their tails.

Greg came back with Sessara behind him, and he gave Jenny a kiss when he reached the tent. "Talented," she declared.

"Well, I won't be the only one hitting the books, love," Jenny grinned at him.

"I guess not," he chuckled.

"That's every single one of us," Arlen mused, scratching his chin. "Maybe Sessara should start seeing who *doesn't* have potential instead of who *does*."

"That's a fair point," Jenny agreed.

"Sessara, we must talk," Arlen told her in draconic, motioning at the screen, and he put the bluetooth over his head. "We have a time for the press conference," he told her, which she read after sticking her head into the tent between Arlen and Jenny. "Tomorrow afternoon."

Remember what you can and cannot say, she typed.

“We have everything all arranged. I’m going to download a text file to the computer that will outline what we’ll talk about. I’d like to have your approval over the talking points.”

Naturally, she typed. Show me this outline.

Arlen handed Michaels a flash drive, and he quickly accessed it and found the lone text file and opened it. It flashed onto the screen, and with a few commands, Michaels translated the entire file into draconic, the characters swapping out almost instantly. Sessara put her forepaws on either side of the touchscreen and read the file surprisingly quickly, then she nodded to him and started typing again. *I approve, she relayed. Tomorrow afternoon?*

“Yes, esteemed council member,” he nodded. “Any news from the island?”

Nothing worth relaying. Hirrag’s messages state that things are at an uneasy standoff. The other dragons won’t come close to the volcano, and the fire dragons won’t leave it except to feed. As things stand now, things are peaceful. Tense, but peaceful.

“Have you made contact with Hinado?”

She shook her head as she typed. *Jussa tried to contact him for us, but as of yet, nothing. We don’t know what happened to him. I pray to Gaia he is well. He has the respect of the fire dragons.*

“We hope he’s alright too,” Jenny agreed. Arlen put the bluetooth on the table, but Jenny picked it up. “A question, Sessara?”

Speak.

“Exactly what different did you do with Davie and Greg than with us?”

Not much with your lifemate, she replied. Assessing a hatchling requires a different approach, for the youngest are usually quite sensitive to magic. Call it an acceptance of the possibilities that things are far more than they can experience, she typed. The young mind, powerful in

imagination, is far easier to assense than an older mind, set in its ways and locked in its perception of the world.

“That is a very interesting observation,” Arlen mused as he read her typing. “So Davie was easier to judge than us?”

Much easier, she typed as Michaels typed that out for her. Magic requires belief to enact, and the young mind is more willing to believe in the impossible than the old.

“That’s entirely true,” Jenny agreed as Greg nodded. “Isn’t it odd that all of us have magical aptitude, Sessara?”

It is indeed highly curious, she agreed with a nod as she typed. Our histories say that in olden time, when we dragons interacted with humans, perhaps a single human in one hundred had any kind of magical aptitude, and yet here stand 15 adept humans in one place at one time that is not a magical school or library. Perhaps humans have developed a closer bond with Gaia in the thousand years since we withdrew from human contact, or perhaps it’s a simple convergence of luck that placed all of you here. I would like to test that theory by assessing the various army guards that patrol the fence in a purely random fashion, and see if it is indeed much more commonplace for the modern human to be magically adept than the humans of old, or if it is indeed just a matter of serendipity that placed a large number of humans who are but a small part of your population together.

“I think we can arrange that, esteemed council member,” Arlen agreed, which Michaels typed for him. “You choose which humans you wish to test, and we’ll put them at your disposal.”

It needs to be done without bias, so we can determine things rationally, she stressed. I might by some unknown instinct pick men that have aptitude to test, which will corrupt the intent of the experiment. Just gather the names of your men and pick some one-quarter of them by random draw, outside of my knowledge. Simply arrange a schedule to send them to me for assessment.

“That’s almost scientific in its approach,” Jenny mused. “A blind sample.”

I’m trained in magic, Jenny, and magic is a science, she replied with crisp movements of her clawed fingers.

“True, true,” she agreed.

“Alright, let me go get in touch with the President and get final authorization for the press conference,” Arlen declared. “His press secretary can make the announcement.”

“Where are you holding it?”

“Right down there,” he pointed, towards the media center. “May as well set the scene properly by holding it where the dragons are.”

Arlen hurried towards the gate, and it was opened by the MPs for him. He got into a golf cart-style ATV driven by an aide, and was taken back down the volcano. Sessara tapped Jenny on the rump with her tail to get her attention, then she started typing again. *Bring all your Hunters together here after lunch, and I’ll discuss magic with you. I am by no means a qualified teacher, but at the moment, I’m the best you have.*

“I’m sure we’ll do well with you teaching, esteemed council member. After all, you’ll spank us if we don’t do our best,” she smiled.

Sessara grinned. *A thump from time to time keeps the attention where it should be,* she declared, swishing her tail back and forth behind her ominously.

28 June 2017, 14:00 HDT; Media Relations Center, Mount Kilauea

Jenny *really* didn’t want to be here.

Dressed in her formal dress uniform, complete with her chrome 1911 Model .45 officer's pistol and saber hanging at her belt and her silver oak leaves gleaming in the spotlights pointed at the podium, Jenny stood just behind Arlen Kent and with Deputy Undersecretary of State Ross on his other side as he stepped up to the forest of microphones attached to the wooden podium, the seal of the office of the Secretary of State affixed to the front. Ross was Kent's main aide and handled many of his affairs, including fencing with the media in Kent's absence since they came to Hawaii, and as such she deserved a spot on the podium if only because she'd been doing the daily briefings where she basically told them "we're not saying anything, next question I'm not going to answer." Kent shuffled the papers placed on the podium for him and looked out over nearly 100 reporters from networks all over the world, then cleared his throat as camera's clicked and flashed in the background. "Welcome to the Mount Kilauea Media Relations Center, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I'm Secretary of State Arlen Kent. Deputy Undersecretary Mary Ross, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Jennifer Edwards," he motioned to the two women behind him.

"As just about the entire world now knows, dragons do in fact exist," he declared as cameras continued to click and clatter, flashes dazzled Jenny's eyes. How did Arlen stand those lights blinking? "At current, we are hosting some fifty adult dragons and fifty-six of their young here at Mount Kilauea. The reason we're here, and they are here, is strictly their own affair.

"Nearly three months ago, the dragons reached out to the Federal government," he began. "They are a very reclusive and isolationist society of intelligent sentient beings who wish as little contact as possible with human kind. However, they had certain needs and requirements that forced them to finally reach out to us. The dragons are here to observe an ancient series of ceremonies that are of critical importance to them involving their children, that required them to be at an actively erupting volcano, and right now, Mount Kilauea is the only one in the world," he declared. "In the last three months, we've been in negotiations with the dragons to permit them

both access to the volcano and strict privacy and isolation from human contact while here to observe these important ceremonies. They will be here for some undetermined time that has to do with their social ceremonies, and once those are complete, they will return to their home, which is obviously a secret location. The dragons have made it completely clear to us that their wish to involve themselves in human affairs begins and ends with their need to access the volcano,” he stated strongly. “Once their ceremonies are complete, they will leave human territory, and have asked us to honor their desire to be left alone.

“While they are here, we’ve agreed to cater to some of their needs. We’re supplying them with food and water, and in return for that, they have agreed to stay on the ground so as not to cause any widespread traffic accidents, and also agreed to relate to us some of their history and some of their social customs, which will be copied down and released to various colleges and universities across the world for study in its unedited, raw interview format.

“The dragons have authorized me to give you some basic information about them,” he said, flipping over a page and nodding to a tech offstage, who displayed a picture of Sessara that Hatch had taken that morning, “so as to be considerate neighbors. Firstly, there isn’t just one race of dragons. There are five, and while they look different from one another, they are all dragons. Each of these splinter races of dragon have their own cultures, their own history, and their own societies. All these species of dragons do live together in their homeland. The species of dragons that have visited us here in Hawaii are called fire dragons,” he related, motioning at the picture of Sessara, which caused a frenzy of flashing bulbs. “So, perhaps their interest in the volcano makes more sense,” he added in a slightly amused voice. “The other races of dragons follow the classical Greek elemental structure. There are fire, water, earth, and sky dragons, with a fifth race of dragons known as chromatics. Dragons vary greatly in size based on race, but the adult fire dragons who are here range from anywhere between seven feet to twenty feet high at the shoulder and twenty-one to fifty-eight feet long, nose to tail,” he read from the page. “Fire dragons are the largest of

the five dragon species, with the other four species being, on the average, half the size as the fire dragons. There are one hundred and six dragons visiting us, with fifty adult females escorting fifty-six juveniles and thirty-seven eggs.

“As to the multiple conspiracy theorists out there, let me make things clear. The dragons are not here as enemies. They have brought their *eggs and children* here, for Pete’s sake,” he snorted. “I don’t know about you, but I for one would not bring my children along during a hostile invasion,” he declared. “The dragons have been true to their word in their dealings with us and have been polite and respectful to the men guarding the volcano peak to assure their privacy, and in return, we have honored the agreement we made with them.

“Very well then, before I take questions, understand these simple rules. Firstly, I’m not going to answer any question involving any rumors or conspiracy theories about other dragon sightings that have popped up all over the internet since the fire dragons arrived. Secondly, I won’t answer any questions about where the dragons come from. Thirdly, I’m not here to speculate. Now, to prevent a circus, every reporter here will be permitted to ask one question and one question *only*,” he warned. “There will be no follow-up questions. We’ll pick reporters based on random draw, and I’ll give all of you a few minutes to gather your thoughts and consider the question you want to ask.” He stepped back from the podium and motioned for Jenny and Ross to follow, and they stepped just to the side of it.

“Remember, Jenny, I might call on you to answer certain questions,” he said in a low voice as the reporters all talked in quiet tones, and cameras continued to flash and click.

“I’m starting to hate you, Arlen,” she said in a low tone, which made him chuckle.

“Does Sessara still intend to crash the conference?” he asked.

“I think I talked her out of it,” she replied. “But she’s a fire dragon, Arlen. You know how they are.”

He smiled. “Yes, I’ve learned that intimately over the last week,” he agreed.

After giving the reporters a little time, they returned to the podium and Kent cleared his throat. “Alright, we’ll begin the question and answer session. Captain Mike Savage will call out reporter name and affiliation, and that reporter will have the floor. Remember, one question and one question *only*, so think very carefully what you ask and how you ask it. Captain, you may begin,” he nodded towards the man behind a computer at the edge of the gathering.

“Randall Whittaker, BBC,” the man called loudly.

“Thank you, Mister Secretary,” the man said, an older man with gray hair and an austere face. “I think the most obvious question to ask is just how the dragons managed to make contact with you, and how you communicated with them.”

“Some dragons speak English,” he replied. “And how we’ve communicated with them is classified. Next question.”

That set the tone. Kent was either evasive or just stonewalled several questions from reporters who asked various combinations of questions trying to divine just how long the dragons had been in contact with humanity, how much the government knew about them, and where they came from. It was nearly ten reporters in when one of them finally asked a different kind of question. “Exactly why would they bring eggs to a volcano?” he asked.

Kent chuckled. “The fire dragons have a legend that tells them that eggs incubated in a volcano produce exceptional dragons,” he answered. “Since they were bringing their young here to observe their ceremonies, they decided to bring their eggs along as well, since they’d have a chance to do just that.”

“Exactly what kind of ceremonies are they observing?” the next reporter asked.

“Without getting too involved, they’re here for right of passage ceremonies for their young,” he answered, using the prepared lie. “They usually conduct these ceremonies in other locations, on volcanoes much less populated where they could arrive and leave without being noticed. But, as I stated earlier, right now this is the *only* erupting volcano on the entire planet right now, and they couldn’t put these ceremonies off any longer. Next question,” he prompted.

Eventually, a reporter asked about the other dragons. “There’s been a picture circulated of a pair of dragons in this very location that look radically different than the picture you displayed,” the woman called. “These looked like dragons painted in camouflage and with spiky tails.”

“We have no comment about that particular picture,” he replied. “It delves into the area of ‘internet conspiracy theory’ questions I warned all of you about, Misses Winters. Next question.”

Jenny got more and more hopeful that Kent wouldn’t make her talk, and as they worked through the last of the reporters, she could see the light at the end of the tunnel...which turned into a train. She turned her head when she heard that unmistakable sound, the sound of leathery wings, and turned back towards the volcano just in time to see Sessara descend. She caused an almost instant frenzy among the reporters as she flapped heavily and alighted just in front of the gate leading up to the peak, the sedately folded her wings and sat on her haunches, looking huge and massive and serious. “Oh no,” Jenny breathed, hurrying off the podium as the reporters all surged towards the fire drake, every camera pointed at her, and Secretary of State was quite honestly forgotten. The MPs rushed up to hold the reporters back, but while they were all in a tizzy over Sessara making a live appearance, they weren’t exactly enthusiastic enough to get very close to her. Jenny scurried over to her foreleg and looked up at her, a bit reproachfully. “Thought we had deal,” she accused in draconic.

She just flashed Jenny a naughty little fanged smile, then fanned her wings a couple of times, a bit ostentatiously, letting the humans gape at and admire her...and also fear her.

It took the MPs almost five minutes to get control of the situation, but that was mainly because, while the fire dragon was majestic, it was also clear she wasn't going to do anything but sit there and look at them. Reporters hurled questions at Sessara, who ignored all of them almost scornfully, concealing the fact that she didn't speak English behind a seeming disregard for the questions she was being asked. Kent eventually got focus back on him, but since he was now standing in front of Sessara, it provided a powerful image with her as his backdrop, towering over him, her head barely two feet over his head as she bent it down to regard the reporters. "Alright, alright," Kent called loudly as two aides hastily moved the podium over, yanking up a knot of secured wires as they brought it to him. They set it down and Kent stepped behind it. "This wasn't entirely planned, but here we are, one of the fire dragons visiting us in person," he motioned.

"I am Sessara, member of the council of dragons, our ruling government," the fire drake boomed in fairly decent English, and that turned every camera right back to her. "I declare that the words the Secretary have given you about us are true. We are here to observe sacred ceremonies for our young, and when they are complete, we will return to our homeland. We thank the President and the American people for their generosity and understanding in giving us both access to your volcano and the privacy to perform these ancient rites without interruption. The blessing of Gaia be with you," she declared, then she turned, leapt into the air, and a single flap of her wings catapulted her over the fence. Every camera followed her as she returned to the top of the volcano, then disappeared from view as she landed.

"So, there's your confirmation," Kent chuckled lightly. "Right from the dragon's mouth, as it were."

Jenny tuned out the rest of the conference, a little aggravated with Sessara. She did *not* need to show up like that. The less kind of direct contact the dragons had with the general populace, the better, as far as both Jenny and the government were concerned. Seeing the dragons walking around and what kind of potential access they had because they could fly

would whip the nutbags and zealots into a fever pitch. She didn't need paranoid crazies out there taking a shot at any sound in the night, fearing it was a dragon landing in his yard...and they were out there. Much to her relief, the general opinion of the revelation that dragons was more curiosity than fear, but there was that minority that were screaming bloody murder, mainly on the internet, but there were a couple of prominent pastors out there insisting that the dragons were the *literal* interpretation of the beast from the book of Revelations, that the appearance of the dragons was in fact one of the signs of the apocalypse.

Jenny rather amusedly recalled a debate between the son of Billy Graham and some scientist on a talk show a few days ago, when the scientist asked Graham why he cares, since he's supposed to be raptured anyway. Graham got his feet knocked out from under him with that one.

After Kent answered the last few questions, Jenny immediately hurried through the gate and to one of the Hum-Vs they kept for anyone who needed a fast ride up to the top, and parked it outside the fences and hurried through. Sessara was by the tent, speaking with Wilson and Kantrell.

Sessara gave her an amused look as she stalked up, then quite deliberately kicked her on the forepaw. She just tapped her, showing her frustration more than anything else, and it made Sessara laugh. "Why do that?" Jenny demanded in draconic.

Sessara turned and put her head and forepaws under the tent, and Jenny read the reply. *Talking about us is one thing, but seeing one of us is another.*

Jenny growled under her breath and stalked off, almost expecting that non-answer answer. Actually, she had a feeling it was more like a fire dragon being a fire dragon. Sessara did whatever she pleased, and Jenny had a sneaking suspicion that was just to prove to Jenny and Arlen that they couldn't tell her what to do. They asked her not to come, and she did it anyway, demonstrating that *she* was the one in charge here.

The shivering of the ground told her that Sessara was following, and she stumbled forward when Sessara bumped her snout against her

shoulders. She turned and almost glared at her, which just seemed to amuse the fire drake to no end. Jenny crossed her arms and blew out her breath, but that just made Sessara hiss out a chortle. “So huffy,” she teased in English.

“You did that on purpose!” she accused.

“Humans see *true* dragon,” she replied simply. “Learn respect.”

“The idea was *not* to scare the people.”

“If I sit, speak scary, then humans fear no matter what.”

That seemed sensible enough. “Who taught you that speech?” she asked. When Sessara looked at her blankly, she rephrased. She must have gone past Sessara’s English vocabulary. “English words to people.”

“Oh. Price,” she replied lightly. “I write, he translate.”

Jenny fumed a bit, promising herself to give Price another kick.

“Come. Lessons,” Sessara ordered. “Much teach you today.”

“You pull that stunt, then pretend it never happened?” Jenny protested.

“You so cute when think have choice,” she intoned dryly, herding Jenny along with her forepaw.

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Since they were trapped underground and only had so many things to do, things had entered something of a routine for everyone.

For Kell, his routine was splitting his day between the department and his family. His work day was filled with routine inspections, turns being the roving technician, turns sitting at the monitor boards to manage the network, performing the occasional wiring job for a new den, and spending

some time with other departments to learn how they operated. Most of that time he spent with Fredda and the power team, and Fredda often hijacked him from the department to help her with the thermal plant, mainly because of his size. As one of the smallest earth drakes, he could squeeze into places others couldn't, and he had advanced technical skills that let him do the work she needed, often with a little extra training. After work, he often babysat the hatchlings as he studied advanced power generation techniques at Fredda's insistence, helped around the burrow, and after they got things ironed out a little, he again got back on the internet and kept himself abreast of what was going on up top.

The family was just as busy. Since Keth and Kanna already spoke English, they got out of those daily lessons and spent that time training. Keth and Kanna had been teaching other drakes the family specialty, underwater digging, which was just basically teaching the different approach one used when underwater compared to normal. The physical conditioning couldn't be taught, it had to be earned. When not teaching, Keth spent his days with the other farmers, endlessly making plans on how to reclaim the farms when they came back out, and Kanna was working with many other matrons and the building department on how to repair or replace the many ruined burrows.

They knew what was going on up on the island thanks to the water dragons. Shii's pod visited on a daily basis to bring them the daily news, and that news was that the island was all but deserted now. The fire dragons wouldn't leave the volcano except to eat and drink, and the sky dragons spent most of their time out hunting. The chromatics spent most of their time in their libraries, so it left the island almost eerily empty and quiet.

Quiet...and ruined. Two days ago, Kammi had gone out to remove the satellite dish, since most of the sky dragons were off the island anyway, and she took a camera with her...and the video *horrible*. The farms were all destroyed, nothing but patches of weeds and sawgrass invading, but those invaders were actually helping hold the soil. There were rain gulleys all over their farm, where bare soil was washed away by the daily rains the island experienced, and the sky dragons had dug out his burrow and

destroyed everything inside it. They'd tried to dig out the family burrow, but had only managed to open up the entry chamber before abandoning the effort. She'd gone inside it and seen that most of what they left behind, miraculously, was more or less untouched. Maybe they'd left it that way as a trap early on to try to catch Kell sneaking back into his family burrow to recover possessions. Either way, at least the family would have a burrow to return to.

The same couldn't be said for many other earth dragons. Their family burrow was very old, and because of that, it was very deep and under a very thick layer of solid rock, which had been too much for delicate sky dragon claws to tear apart. But many other burrows, like his, were shallow enough for the sky dragons to manage to get through the rock over them. Any burrow shallow enough for the sky dragons to manage to dig out, they had dug out. The factories were burned to the ground, the power plant dismantled beyond the foundation, the sky dragons had done their best to utterly eradicate anything and everything that the earth dragons had built over the years. When they finally returned to the surface, they'd have to start over, almost from scratch.

It wasn't a total loss. Kammi had taken video of some parts of the farm, and there were some buds where the potato fields had been. They were resprouting, the fires hadn't destroyed the potatoes in the ground.

It had only taken a couple of weeks for the high rise to clear out. Everyone had their own burrows now, and most of the excavation had been complete. The city was more or less finished, just a couple of little projects to complete, and now the main cavern and the high rise were purely the domain of the official government structure. The earth dragons had elected their own council made up of nine dragons, elected from the village council leaders of the villages, with Anthra and Geon leading it. That council was but one of the departments within the high rise, which was now almost exclusively used for government functions, various department activities, and storing their most important equipment or supplies. The only dragons living in the high rise were Anthra and Geon and their families, and over the weeks, the place had transformed from a series of sleeping rooms and

storerooms to organized headquarters for earth dragon government, the various organizations that operated under it, and of course, the department.

The department was running again, though at reduced drakepower. They took up almost the entire second floor of the high rise, and once again, drakes were sitting in front of computers monitoring human activity. As the construction projects started to wind down and Fredda had upgraded the waterwheel power system, more power became available...and right now, they *needed* to keep an eye on things. The fire dragons had revealed themselves to the human world, had taken over Kilauea, and the earth dragons had to keep a close eye on human public reaction.

And that reaction had been, on the whole, generally positive. The fire dragons weren't rampaging around, they weren't breaking anything, they were just staying up on the volcano using some ridiculous story about important ceremonies for PR. Most people believed that story, though, and the video of Sessara addressing the reporters during that press conference was *still* being replayed on a nearly hourly basis by most news networks. Jenny and the President had done a pretty good job taking in the fire dragons and preventing a media firestorm, and so far, there were no reports from South America of sky dragons stealing livestock. Those reports might start filtering in, odds were the sky dragons were concentrating their hunting in uninhabited or scarcely populated areas, but for now, humans had only seen the good side of the dragons.

But that didn't stop the raging debate. The discovery of a *second* sentient species on Earth challenged human religious, philosophical, and political viewpoints, some of them at the highest levels. Religious zealots either decried the dragons as animals or decided they were demons from hell, since more than one religion stated flat out that man was the ruler of earth and had lordship and dominion over all other forms of life. Sessara challenged that viewpoint on a very basic level, since she was so huge and mighty. There were debates about the responsibilities of mankind now that they *knew* they weren't the only living things on the planet that could talk, and that other species wasn't all that happy with them. From such things as pollution's impact on a species that wanted it to stop and had the ability to

say it, all the way to the basic question of whether or not a dragon might need a visa to enter a country, the dragons were turning all of human society on its ear...but in a good way, Kell believed. It was making mankind think, and for the first time, consider how their actions were impacting someone *other* than themselves.

And then there were the hate groups. They all knew they'd spring up, a mixture of religious nutbags and rabid paranoia buffs, and those disparate groups were banding together in opposition to the dragons. They wanted the dragons *gone* from Hawaii, and wanted America to pass laws banning them from entering the country, even declare war on them as enemies of mankind. Kell found that amusing, since the dragons weren't going to be moving in on every street corner and insidiously taking over human society as many of them frothed on their websites. It was those websites the dragons were monitoring most, as well as keeping track of the database of humans that visited them, searching for any sudden trips to Hawaii that they might decide to take.

Kell blew out his breath and checked the time. In two hours, they were going to start the first tests on the thermal plant. They'd been working like mad to get it going, and had gotten it built nearly 10 days ahead of schedule. They'd already tested the steam system, and today they were giving the generators themselves their first tests. They'd built two generators, one to run the city and the other dedicated to the factories, and it had taken every scrap of metal they could get, even to the point of collecting pots, jars, even toys, and the department had to give over quite a bit of their cables for their copper and aluminum. If the tests were successful, they could have full power for the city by tomorrow afternoon, as Fredda conducted stress tests to make sure their power transmission systems were ready.

It surprised him to see Sella bound into the office, but then again, the dozen or so water drakes staying near the island could come and go as they pleased if they used the water tube, or what they'd started calling the back door. It was too deep down for them to be seen entering the tube itself, though only the smaller drakes felt comfortable using it, due to its small

size. “Dear friend,” Kell greeted as she came over to him. “What brings you by?”

“News, Kell, news,” she replied seriously. “I need to speak with Anthra and Geon.”

“They’re up in their council chambers with the earth council,” he replied. “Is it important enough to interrupt?”

“Yes,” she replied immediately.

“Alright then,” he said, turning at the control console and pressing an intercom button. “Anthra.”

“Yes, Kell?” came the reply.

“Sella just arrived, and she says she has to see you and Geon immediately.”

“Send her up,” she replied.

“You know where it is, right?” he asked her.

“Yes, but walk with me, friend,” she told him.

“Alright. Girk, take over for me for a few,” he called across the room.

“Sure thing, Kell,” he replied, moving to replace him behind the three computer monitors. Two were monitoring network activity and power levels, and the third was on a website.

“Alright, what’s going on, dear friend?” he asked as they started up the ramps that would lead to the top floor of the high rise, where the council chambers were located.

“A second scion has failed,” she replied, which made Kell give her a startled look. The earth dragons knew about the first failed scion only because the chromatics had reached out to the elders among the water dragons for their opinion on the matter, despite the water dragons being at odds with the chromatics. It must have stung the chromatics’ collective egos

to ask an opinion of another dragon race, but something as momentous as the failure of a scion had been enough of a reason. Kell knew almost nothing about magic, but he did know that kind of high-order magic didn't just *fail*. And now, a second scion had failed, which changed the situation from a possible one-time aberration to a disturbing pattern.

“And they blame us?”

“How can they? Only magic could possibly disrupt a permanent magical effect, and earth dragons can't *do* that,” she told him simply. “The failed scion was the eighth they created, so it seems that if it is a pattern, they're failing in the reverse order they were created. If this is indeed a pattern, then number seven is next. The chromatics have all their best scholars on the aerie right now, studying number seven, looking for any kind of advance hint that it's failing as well.”

“What do the water dragon sages think?”

“I don't know, I was just told to bring the news,” she answered. “But I do know that Jussa has called for a council of water dragon elders at Half Mountain.” Kell knew that name, it was an undersea volcano that never managed to breach the ocean's surface, and was a well-known landmark to all water dragons. “This is a very serious thing, dear friend. The failure of one scion is an isolated incident. The failure of *two* means that something is wrong, something with magic *itself*,” she declared in a grim tone. “Whatever it is, it's enough to make scions fail, but not enough to affect dragon powers. My magic is no different from before, and neither is anyone's in the pod.”

“Huh. I would say that's very interesting, but magic doesn't really concern us very much.”

“This *does*, dear friend. What do you think hides the island from the humans?”

He almost said something, then clicked his maw shut.

“Exactly. If this magical problem isn’t discovered and solved, then the ancient spells the firstcomers laid down on the island will fail, and the island will be visible to the humans. That is a matter for everyone, even the earth dragons.”

“True, but there’s nothing *we* can do about it,” he snorted as they reached the top floor.

“That may be true, but it’s not something the earth dragons should just dismiss either. If the humans find the island and invade, *you* are the most at risk. You have no easy way to escape.”

“Well, true, but we’d kill most of them before they figured out that guns and RPGs don’t really do all that much to us but make us angry. We’re either outright immune to or highly resistant against what makes those things kill. It would take a direct hit from something like a five hundred pound bomb or anti-tank missile to kill an earth dragon. Most other explosives can’t pack enough punch to overcome our resistance to great pressure.”

“You’ve said it yourself, dear friend. Never underestimate the resourcefulness of the humans. They’ll *find* a way.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he nodded as they reached the doors to the council chamber.

Kell left her to go in alone and went back to his post, considering her news. With the failure of a second scion, maybe there *was* something going on, going on with magic itself. Scions couldn’t just fail on their own, something had to *make* it happen...and the list of things that could pull *that* off was a very short one. Magic of that kind of magnitude could only be disrupted or dispelled by a greater magical force, it was one of the basic laws of magic of which even an earth dragon like Kell was aware. And it had taken the combined efforts of nearly the entire chromatic race, with assistance from the sky, fire, and water dragons, to create those scions. What had more magical power than *that*?

But, as he told Sella, it wasn't his concern. Earth dragons didn't do magic, and drakes like him had an active scorn for it. Call it jealousy, call it a preference for technology, he really didn't care. Let the magic-using dragons worry about some problem with magic.

He was back at the board when Fredda started bringing up the generators, watching a remote readout of generator load that was on one of his monitors, and in active contact with the generator room. "I'm reading two thousand," he replied when Fredda asked him what he was getting.

"Same here. Alright, Braggi, start switching over. One grid at a time in the order I wrote out," she warned.

"Grid one A," Kell heard a distance voice, and he saw a dip in power output, which then stabilized. "Grid one B." Another dip, another stabilization.

"How's our pressure?" Fredda asked, which he overheard.

"Still nominal," came a thin reply.

Systematically, they switched over all power to the thermal plant, leaving only one grid on the waterwheel generators and that only so the generator had a load, then they ran it for nearly twenty minutes before carefully switching power back to the waterwheel. "Alright, stage one is a success," Fredda called. "Let's do an inspection and do stage two."

"I'll send down the warning," Kell said over the intercom. "When do you want to do it?"

"Two hours," she replied.

"Alright then. I'll make the announcement." He closed the intercom, then brought up the city-wide public address. "Attention all citizens, attention all citizens. The power team is performing a test on the power system at four fifteen. Expect a momentary power outage during this time. Repeat, expect a momentary power outage during the four fifteen power

plant test, so ensure that any activity that requires electricity is prepared for a momentary loss of power. That is all.”

Ferroth called on his private intercom line almost immediately. “Fredda finish the first test?” he asked.

“Yeah, chief, it went perfect,” he replied. “Didn’t you see the lights flicker?”

“I don’t have any lights on in here,” he replied. Ferroth was in his burrow. “Let me wander down to the thermal room.”

“It’s your feet she’s gonna step on,” Kell warned with a chuckle.

Sella stayed up in council chambers for quite a while, long enough for the main test to start. Kell was again riding the board as Fredda got everything ready. “Alright, let’s get this going,” she called over the intercom. “We’ll run this as a full stress test, Kell. Did the department ready its backups?”

“Yeah we have UPS on all the servers,” he answered. “So we’re ready if this blows out the power grid.”

“It shouldn’t, but you know how engineering works. What you work out on paper may not be the same number you get once you build it.”

“But it’s always close.”

“True, but sometimes close isn’t close enough,” she replied. “Alright, Kell, warn everyone. Five minutes.”

He again flipped over to PA. “Attention all citizens, attention all citizens. The power test will begin in five minutes. Five minutes,” he warned. “Prepare any work requiring electricity for a momentary power outage. That is all.”

Sella, Anthra, and Geon padded into the main room as Kell turned off the PA and switched back over to Fredda. “Alright, we’re ready on this end, Fredda,” he told her.

“We’re doing the final prep now,” she answered.

“Esteemed council members, what can we do for you?” Jirran asked.

“Just observing, Jirran,” Geon replied as Sella came up to sit beside him.

“How did they take the news?” he asked Sella.

“We didn’t take it well,” Anthra replied. “It may not concern us as much as it does the chromatics, but it *is* a cause for concern. If the spells that hide the island fail, we’ll be vulnerable. And we’re the ones who can’t fly away, Kell.”

“No, but we do have Sanctuary City,” he noted. “Not even the humans can get at us down here.”

“Yes, but they can occupy the island and prevent us from ever coming out. And starving to death isn’t the way I want to leave this world,” Geon said dryly.

“You talk like we’d stay down here like passive mice,” Kell snorted. “A few night raids would convince the humans to go somewhere else. And besides, unlike the other dragons, *they* can’t fly away either. At least not easily. Tunnel up under their base, attack in the middle of the night, and they’ll be wondering why they ever came here in the first place.”

“You missed your calling, Kell, you should have been a general,” Anthra said lightly.

He snorted. “I’ll leave that to the chief,” he replied as he checked the time.

Once they counted down the five minutes, they started. The power was shut down so they could test bringing the power up from the thermal plant, but it didn’t affect the office much because only the lights weren’t on UPS systems. Their lights whined back into operation just seconds later, since the high rise was the first grid they brought back up, and Kell watched the indicators as the thermal plant generator took more and more load as grids

were re-energized. Once they had all the grids up, Kell constantly reported his indicators to Fredda to ensure they matched what they were getting there at the plant, which were stable and within projected parameters. Fredda ran the generator for nearly an hour, then shunted over to the second generator, the one that would be handling the factories, which caused only a brief flicker of lights as the swap was executed, and they ran that generator for nearly an hour as well. “Alright, give everyone a two minute warning, Kell, and we’ll pull the generators offline and check them over. If they pass inspection, we’ll bring them up permanently tomorrow morning.”

“Got it,” he replied, then he hit the PA and warned everyone of an impending shutdown and restart.

“I must say, we should reward Fredda and the power drakes,” Geon said appreciatively. “It seems they got it all working ten days ahead of schedule. We can focus on the factories now.”

“Not without some raw materials,” Kell cautioned. “Fredda stripped us to the bare walls to build the thermal plant. We may need you to go scavenging for us, dear friend.”

“We’ve already located a few dozen wrecks,” she replied. “The water dragons leaving the island caused a bit of exploration, and the various pods are reporting in to Jussa and Essan. Since you asked us to search for salvage, they’ve been reporting back any shipwrecks they find. You might want to talk to Jenny about one of them, dear friend. They found the *Appomattox*.”

Kell would have whistled, if he could. The *Appomattox* was a U.S. Navy submarine, one of their Seawolf class boats, that sank three years ago. The reason why it went down was still a mystery. The sub simply left Pearl for a three month patrol mission and vanished. They never even found any disaster buoys, which should have automatically deployed if the sub went below what was considered its crush depth. Those systems weren’t electrical, they were induced by the pressure itself, so they *should* have worked. The loss of the *Appomattox* had led to a nearly year-long port

restriction on the other Seawolf subs to try to figure out if it was a design flaw or some kind of freak accident, but when no issues were found, the subs were put back in service, and as far as Kell knew, they hadn't had any other problems.

“Wow, where did they find it?”

“About five hundred kilometers west,” she answered. “Down on the Dead Plain.”

“Was it leaking radiation?” Geon asked.

“From what Jussa said, they said it's laying on the bottom, more or less intact,” she replied. “That says to me it flooded before it sank, else it would have been crushed. They won't approach it without permission. It *does* have a nuclear reactor in it.”

“Too bad we can't get an earth dragon down there to remove the core,” Anthra mused. Earth dragons couldn't be harmed by *anything* of the earth, and that included radiation emitted by radioactive materials like Uranium. Their hides stopped even high intensity radioactive bombardment. Kell himself had handled spent nuclear fuel rods, and while he did have to decontaminate to clean off any radioactive residue, the radiation itself could do him no harm.

Earth dragons were *very* tough.

“It's far too deep, esteemed council member,” Sella shook her head. “We'd have to raise it first, and the only earth dragon we'd be willing to take down there would be Kell. No other earth drake has his underwater experience.”

“He is our mud dragon,” Anthra smiled at him.

“It pays to have a unique skill,” Kell said dryly as the lights winked out, then came back up as they returned to the backup generator. “How goes it, Fredda?”

“We’re starting our inspection right now. And one of you had better come get the chief before I nail him to the wall,” she said shortly, which made Kell laugh

“Tell him we need to talk to him, Fredda,” Geon called. “And it’s not just to get him out from under your paws. Tell him to report to the council chambers as soon as he can.”

“You hear that, Fredda?”

“Thank Gaia I did,” she replied, which made Kell laugh again. “I’ll send him back right now.”

Geon and Anthra wandered back up to the council chambers, leaving Sella in the office. She told Jirran and Girk what had happened as Kell monitored, which made them whisper to each other as Fredda got back to him. “The initial inspections are all good, Kell,” she replied. “I’m gonna stretch my tail a bit and assume that the physical inspections and high-level diagnostics will come back clean as well. Tell Geon and Anthra that unless something happens to change it, tomorrow morning at two we switch over for good, that’s a nice off-peak time to perform the switchover. We’ll have full power.”

“I think the whole city will celebrate that,” Kell chuckled. “No more turning off one device to turn on another.”

“Nope. Generator one can handle everything not the factory all turned on at once,” she said proudly. “And generator two can handle all the power needs of all three factories.”

“Not bad for being built of scraps,” Sella noted.

“Give an earth dragon a box of scraps and you’d be amazed what she can make of it,” Fredda chuckled. “Alright, time to crack open the generator case and take a look, Kell. I’ll call back with any news.”

“I’m off in half an hour, so you’ll have to flirt with someone else, Fredda.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. Send it up to the council.”

“That you flirt with the board monitors? I’m not sure they need to know that.”

“I do know where you live, whelp.”

“And now she’s asking to come to call, too,” he noted to Sella. “I never realized you felt that way about me, Fredda.”

“Kell, I put your family burrow on its own power grid *just* for these kinds of emergencies,” she warned, which made Kell laugh.

“I can just hotwire the burrow back into the grid. You taught me how yourself,” he teased.

“Game on, whelp,” she warned in a deadpan voice, which made Sella crack up.

Trekka relieved him on monitor duty, and it freed him to go home. The burrow was completely finished, and unlike many other burrows, they had full power, and had had full power for a while. Fredda hadn’t been joking when she said that Kell’s burrow was on its own power grid, because it *was*, giving them access to power when other burrows didn’t. His parents were out working, and the hatchlings were at English lessons, leaving only Kammi in the burrow. She was laying on her side in the living chamber, half-asleep and watching TV they’d managed to get going in preparation of having full power. The TV was being piped in over their fiber optic hardline, which the water dragons had moved for them, bringing it around and up the water tube, and the room where they’d originally broken into the tube was now the main uplink switchout room, linking the fiber optic cable running to Hawaii back into their computer system. They hadn’t told Jenny they had full communications back yet, mainly because they’d only had the cable connected for three days and were still ironing out the last of the bugs that tended to pop up with a project like that. It had taken all five field agents four days to build that master switch and data traffic management system, pulling the original managing servers out of the department office

and relocating them to the hardline, and it was those computers that now handled internet traffic to and from Hawaii as well as served as the primary firewall and first line of defense against hacking and sniffing. The satellite dish had been pulled from the surface by Kammi two days ago to prevent it from being found, and would be their primary backup in case the hardline failed. But none of them wanted to leave it out there...because of *her*.

There was a chromatic out there, they'd learned, who was searching the tunnels and the villages. Just a single chromatic, one of their youngest adults, someone small enough to get into nearly any tunnel but trained enough with magic to somehow deal with the cave-ins that were all over the tunnels, and she was very smart, very thorough. She'd discovered the subway tunnel that connected all the villages together, so that meant that she was very perceptive, very clever. Jussa had warned them about her last week, after she'd done a very slow search of the coastline north of Dawnmist, searching for...they didn't know what. But her snooping around had caused them to pull the satellite dish, since it had a hard line that ran right back into the city, and they didn't want her to find it. They'd even had Kammi go out and sever the data and power lines that they'd ran into the cavern from outside, removing them from the farm all the way to a hundred meters up the lava tube, completely removing them and the incriminating trail that the chromatic might follow if she somehow stumbled over those buried lines.

Kell was almost amused by the thought of what might happen if she actually found Sanctuary City. Chromatics couldn't swim, and even if they could, what were they going to do? Invade? That was almost a joke. Even if the chromatics knew exactly where they were, there wasn't all that much they could actually do about it. Not even the chromatics were insane enough to try to take on earth dragons *underground*. Gaia's Embrace was their natural habitat, and they'd be almost impossible to beat in the tunnels, even with all the chromatics' so-called powerful magic. This was *their* home turf, and they had home field advantage in that little game, if it ever came to that.

Yet, Anthra and Geon had ordered steps be taken. The only way a chromatic might get in was through the main lava tube, and they didn't use that very much anymore, so they'd ordered a "cave-in" be placed there, placed *in* the water right at the edge, which would further deter any chromatic attempts to get past it since the chromatic on the other side would be underwater herself. Actually, it was just a pile of rocks that gave the appearance that the lava tube had collapsed, and the earth dragons could take it down in about an hour in case the water dragons needed to bring something big into the city...or in about five minutes if they were in a hurry and didn't care about being neat about it. A water dragon on the other side could take it down inside ten minutes using water magic, which was another reason why they put it there.

"Hey," Kammi yawned, then rolled over on her back, flopping her wings on the floor and stretching her feet towards the ceiling, her horns on the floor tilting her head up towards him. "What time is it?"

"Around five," he replied, sitting down beside her. "You sleep all day?"

"Almost," she answered. "You should work on your PA skills. You sounded like a bored flight attendant giving the safety briefing."

He chuckled. "I didn't take this job for public speaking. You work tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Board duty, dayshift."

"I'm pulling a rotation with Jukra to give sire a day off. Digging training down in the tank." He told her about what Sella said, which made her frown a bit as she looked up at him. "That's two scions gone, and Anthra's worried that the spells hiding the island may fail if this turns out to be some kind of sustained problem. The water dragons are getting a little worried too," he told her. "Sella said nothing's wrong with magic that she can feel, but there's something going on."

“Sella’s not an elder,” Kammi mused. “Not that it really affects us, anyway, but it might be something worth looking into. If the scions are failing in backwards order, then that means that the spells hiding the island will go last. That gives them some time to figure it out.”

“How do you know that?”

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” she grinned up at him. “The spells hiding the island are the same kind of high-level magic as the scions, and they were laid down *centuries* ago. If only the newest magic is failing, then that means that all nine scions will go first, *then* the hiding spells will go. So they have some time to figure things out before it becomes a crisis.”

“And you know that much about magic.”

“Nope. But I do know how to count,” she retorted cheekily.

“Excuse me if I don’t put all my radishes in your basket,” he drawled.

“Your loss,” she told him. “Speaking of radishes, did Sella sneak us any more food?”

He shook his head. “It’s rations and rocks for us tonight,” he told her.

“If only I could get some ketchup for my basalt,” she grunted, which made him laugh for some reason at the absurdity of it. “We should go fishing ourselves.”

“With that rockpile up, we can’t get out like we could before,” he told her.

“Pft, it’s easy to get past,” she grinned. “Just move a few stones at the top and slip through. It *does* sometimes pay to be small, Kell,” she winked. “I tried it last night, I was able to get out easy.”

“Why in Gaia’s love were you going out?”

“To see if I could make it out to the air on my own,” she replied. “And I *can*,” she said proudly. “And I’ve been practicing swimming in the tube on my off hours to get my endurance up. So, you and Matron and Patron

aren't the only ones that can get out of here unaided now, friend. I can do it too," she declared.

"Well, that's good, I suppose, but why all the work on it?"

"Because I don't like the idea of being *trapped* in here, and being reliant on the water dragons to get me out," she replied seriously. "But now I don't have to worry about that. I got out into the cove last night without any help, and got back with breath to spare. And yes, I was careful," she said before he could say anything. "I didn't surface anywhere but in Shii's den, in the air cave. The air in there's getting a little stale, but it was breathable. And I swam all the way back in underwater."

"Well, that was forward thinking," he nodded.

"So, we should go fishing some night," she prompted. "I want to learn how, and I know Sella and the pod taught you."

"Not the way they do it, but I can fish for myself," he chuckled. "The mud dragon way is a lot more work."

"It should be safe enough, with most of the sky dragons gone," she added. "The ones here can't see at night."

"And we can't see the fish," he added. "Thermo doesn't work underwater, Kammi."

"Well, go and ruin all my good ideas," she accused, swiping a clawed forepaw in his general direction. "What about a day trip to the west? The sky dragons don't go that way."

"The chromatics have been," he replied. "They've been fishing for themselves."

"Chromatics doing manual labor? It's a miracle!" she announced to the ceiling, which made him chuckle.

"Hunger can drive a dragon to extremes, you know," he said lightly.

“So can paranoia,” she added. “We field agents have relied on our own skills so long, I found the idea of being dependent on water dragons to get out of here to be almost intolerable,” she admitted. “Besides, I can’t very well fit in with *this* family if I can’t swim like a mud dragon,” she grinned.

“Oh sure, speak like you’ll still be on the farm once we rebuild the department.”

“I’ve *seen* the farms, Kell. There won’t be any *department* for maybe years after we go back up,” she said soberly. “Patron will need all the help he can get to put everything right. I’ll be on your farm for at least three years after we get back up top, because Patron will *need* me. And I’ll be there for him,” she declared. “Gaia’s eyes, my own sire might call me back. He may have owned the factory, but we *did* have a little farm not far from it, and it can’t be in much better shape than your farm. If he does, though, I’ll tell him no,” she announced. “Patron will need me *far* more than sire will. Our farm is little more than a garden, way easy for sire and mother and my brother to put right without me. Patron’s farm is one of the major food producers, and he’ll need a *dozen* drakes to put it right again.”

Her statement surprised him. A drake’s first loyalty was to family, and for Kammi to turn against her own family in favor of Keth...that wasn’t normal. Her reasoning was logical, in a sort of sense if a drake looked at the big picture, but logic usually had little to do with family loyalties. In Kell’s mind, the family always came first. For Kammi to prefer his family to hers said that her loyalty was conflicted, divided, between his family and her own.

He looked down at her curiously, and she just looked back up at him steadily, almost proudly. She looked a trifle silly laying on her back on the floor, a position many dragons found uncomfortable because of their wings and horns, but Kammi was a very limber little drake and looked perfectly comfortable with her head craned from her horns and her wings pushing her shoulders up off the floor.

They both blinked when Kanna's voice reached them. "What are you two doing, young ones?" she asked as she came into the living chamber.

"Just discussing the latest bit of news to reach us down here, Matron," Kammi answered, scraping her horns a little as she turned her head to the side. "Another scion failed this morning."

"That's not good news at all," she fretted, coming over to them. "You look silly like that, Kammi." She laughed. "Sometimes dignity must bow to comfort," she replied lightly, moving her legs like she was dog-paddling, then settling back to rest. "The chromatics are all in a tizzy over it."

"As they should be," Kanna nodded. "Such things simply do not happen, my young ones. And for it to happen *twice*, that is a very bad omen indeed."

"Can you think of what might cause it, Matron?"

She shook her head. "I know even less about magic than you do as field agents," she answered. "But I do know this. Somehow, the chromatics will blame *us* for it, since it happened after we left. You know that anything bad that happens from now until we return must somehow be our fault, even if there's no possible way we could be responsible. I'd bet my favorite scale brush that they'll find some way to place the blame at our feet, accuse us of somehow destroying the scions, even though they know we can't possibly do such a thing."

"That's Gaia's truth," Kell grunted. "We're the perfect scapegoats."

"I won't take that bet," Kammi agreed.

The PA in their burrow crackled. "Kammi," Ferroth's voice called over the speaker.

She cursed as she hit the button on the TV remote that activated the intercom. "What, chief?" she shouted.

"We need you in the office, hour maximum," he answered. "You can knock off work an hour early tomorrow."

“Alright, I’ll be right there,” she answered, squirming around and regaining her feet. “Tivo the Padres game for me, okay?”

“Just watch it at work like the rest of us do,” Kell chuckled.

Kammi hurried out of the burrow, leaving Kell to lay down in front of the TV himself and relax a little after a long day staring at monitors. But Kanna hadn’t moved, and he could tell she had something on her mind. “What is it, mother?”

“You need to decide what you’re going to do about Kammi,” she replied.

He sat back up. “Do about? What do you mean?”

“Son, you can be *so* dense sometimes,” she said with a gentle smile, sitting down beside him. “She’s getting a little impatient waiting for you to come to call.”

He blinked. Come to call? Formally ask Kammi for permission to *court*? “Seriously? Me and *Kammi*?”

“It’s not quite so surprising to anyone who watches you two,” she replied, “not even to *you*. Is it?”

He was about to say something, but he looked away from her pointedly.

“I thought so,” she replied, almost smugly. “I know you better than you think I do, young one. And Kammi is a wonderful female, intelligent and charming. And what’s best of all, Sella *adores* her,” she added.

“Sella—“

“Don’t even say it,” she warned. “What you and Sella share is very special, Kell, but don’t let it interfere with the rest of your life. Sella can never be a lifemate to you. You know it, and she knows it. She will definitely be an intimate part of your life, the best of friends and very much a part of our family, always welcome at our table, but it can never go any

further. Don't let your love for Sella as a friend close your eyes to someone like Kammi. You had *better* do something about it, before some other male swoops in and steals her from you. Kammi is a treasure, Kell, and you will find no better. Don't let her slip through your claws."

"I...I'll think about it."

"Don't think very long, Kell. Jukra's son asked me today if Kammi had an intended. *You* may be dragging your feet, but *other* males aren't. And females like Kammi don't come around very often, my son," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "Think about it. And make sure you tivo her baseball game," she added lightly as she started for the kitchen.

Well, *that* left him scattered. Court Kammi? He'd have thought the idea ridiculous...maybe a month ago. But he couldn't deny that there was *something* there, when he looked at her, when he was around her. Kammi was irritating sometimes, but she was very smart, she did the same work he did, and she was almost childlike in her playfulness and her irreverent attitude. A day around Kammi was rarely boring, and here lately, he'd been noticing it when she wasn't around. She'd been growing on him...but maybe, just maybe...it was more than that.

It certainly seemed that way for Kammi. She'd been learning the ways of *his* family, learning to dig underwater, building up her swimming skills, expanding her ability to hold her breath, and now she tells him that her loyalty was to Keth and Kanna over her own sire. Kammi was most definitely moving in to his family...was she doing it in preparation to court Kell? Earth dragon society placed the onus solely on the male to make the initial advances, to formally come to call and declare his intentions to the female and her family. It wasn't an engagement, it was more like an official request to date. During that time, what dragons called courtship, the two would see if they were right for each other, a process that could take years, and ended without a formal lifemating about 75% of the time. Some dragons would search for fifty or sixty years before finding a compatible lifemate, not all dragons were as lucky as his parents to find each other quickly. A female would only court one male at a time, at least officially, so

if Kell wanted to court her, he had better make sure he asked her *first*. Males could technically court more than one female at a time, but if the females found out...look out. And it was a *small* island to try something like that.

He flopped down, his chin under his paws, and he started to think *very* seriously about Kammi as more than just a friend, burrow-mate, and someone he could bite when he was feeling snippy.

And the curious thing was, all his thoughts were all already organized in his mind, almost as if he'd already thought this through several times without even knowing it.

14 July 2017, 15:12 DMT; Sanctuary City

He almost felt silly for being nervous.

He paced around the burrow anxiously, checking the time almost every three minutes, waiting for Kammi to come back. She'd just got off work, getting an hour free time for her work the day before, and he'd spent all morning and afternoon pondering this decision. He hadn't told Kanna yet of his decision, since he'd been training drakes in underwater excavation most of the day, so much so that his scales still felt a touch waterlogged. It was silly to be nervous. Kammi was his *friend*, and if Kanna wasn't wrong, then she'd had this on her mind herself. She wouldn't laugh in his face...Gaia, he *hoped* she wouldn't. It might make living in the burrow just a *trifle* awkward.

He sat down then stood up quickly when he heard her come in, calling out in the common room as was custom, and she gave him a curious look when she came into the living chamber. "What's got you so knotted up?" she asked without a greeting.

“Not much,” he replied, snorting a little. “I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Well?” she asked padding past him.

“Well, I—that is, I was thinking,” he stammered, which made her stop and look at him, almost amused. “We’ve been friends a long time, Kammi, and we do get along—“

“Why Kell, are you coming to call?” she asked with an almost wicked little smile.

“Well, well so what if I am?” he asked, a bit pugnaciously, a little annoyed at her attitude. “You don’t think we shouldn’t at least court a little and see? What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” she replied, then she turned and slammed into him so suddenly that it knocked the breath out of him. She bulled him to the floor and got him on his back, holding him down by his wingjoints. “But you’re gonna *say* it, Kell,” she grinned down at him. “Say it!”

“I’m coming to call,” he declared, feeling *real* stupid saying it stuck under her like a hatchling that lost at wrestling and was being forced to wing under. He *was* bigger than she was, after all...but then again, she was probably the only adult drake on the island that *was* smaller than him.

“I accept your offer,” she grinned down at him. “So, how about we go out right now? We’re both off.”

“As soon as you get off me,” he countered.

She laughed, but didn’t move a bit. “But I like seeing you where you’re supposed to be, under my tail,” she grinned impishly.

“Oh, it’s *so* on now.”

Very few formal courtships began quite the way theirs did, the two of them scrapping around the room like hatchlings, Kell almost spiking the TV in their rough-housing, but then again, if it wasn’t Kell and Kammi, it

would have probably gotten off on the wrong foot if it had started any other way.

27 July 2017, 02:46 DMT; The Library of Atlantis

The fourth of her senior class yawned, showing off all her sharp teeth, but there was nobody about to admire them.

The days were getting longer and longer for her. What had started off as the eagerness of discovery had spiraled into a long, exhausting search deep underground, checking tunnel by tunnel after walking the entire subway ring, searching the only way she could for the secret, and that was systematically. Her days underground were long and tiring, leaving her little time for her own studies, and she was starting to feel the pressure. Her assignment to this task kept her out of formal classes and seminars, and she was in danger of losing her designation as fourth of her class, threatening to slip to fifth, or maybe even sixth. The humiliation of losing her higher designation for a lower one would take her years to live down, so it left her with little option but to study when she would usually be sleeping. She was *not* losing her place as fourth of her class, not even in light of earning the thanks of the Council of Seven for completing her task.

Before her sat *Gems and Crystals and their Uses in Spells and Enchantments*, written some 1,207 years ago, yet it was still the definitive work on the subject. Within, buried between boring charts of gems and magical applications were little tidbits of hidden knowledge, almost as if the writer was rewarding the diligent with little tips here and there, such as to use an uncut topaz passed through the mouth of a goat when using it for spells that put humans to sleep, or diamond ground into dust and mixed with powdered iron was more effective than a whole gem when used for healing.

Her respect for the earth dragons was quickly getting poisoned. She couldn't *find* their tunnel. She'd searched all but one village, the subway tunnels, and even the entry tunnels leading into and out of those villages from farms, but nothing. She'd been spending upwards of sixteen hours a day walking their tunnels, to the point where she could easily navigate every village but Dawnmist without fail, bypassing the dummy tunnels and unerringly traversing the many side passages that led to the villages, but their secret remained out of her reach, extending the time she was taken from her studies, and threatening to jeopardize the smooth progression of her life thus far. If she didn't find that tunnel soon and be allowed to return to class, there was no telling how it would damage her future.

She blinked and shook her head, then turned the page, glancing at the clock. Chromatics prided themselves on the ability to unerringly tell time, a sign of a trained mind, but she'd been staying awake so long, day after day, her usual mental discipline had been failing here and there in matters of little importance. She couldn't depend on her own internal clock, and thankfully, all libraries had one clock in them as a matter of tradition, for the youngest chromatics who often lost track of time as they read. She really had to go to sleep soon, and this time in her den instead of falling asleep at the reading table and being woken up by the librarians that arrived with the dawn. She looked down at saw that it was a section devoted to earth dragons. Not a chart, a *section*. Nearly an entire chapter. What would an observation of earth dragons be doing in a book concerning gems and their uses in magic?

Reading on, she realized that it had a lot to do with it. The book did indeed describe primary focus crystals, the very rare aberrant crystal tail spikes that earth dragons grew, and how each of the six known colors of those spikes influenced different kinds of magic. Just using a primary focus as a fetish enhanced the magic, and were required for the most powerful permanent magicks and enchantments. The book wrote about the *circumstances* by which earth dragons grew these crystals. For one, the book wrote that it required an earth dragon to loose all seventeen of his spikes at once to even bring about the proper conditions to cause a primary

focus to grow, and even then it was exceptionally rare...even more rare because earth dragons were trained from a young age *not* to use all their spikes at once, further reducing the opportunities of it happening. Black ones were grown from an earth dragon that loosed the spike it replaced out of murderous rage, and the original spike had to kill to cause a black spike to grow as its replacement. Orange ones grew from a dragon who loosed the original out of fear. Pink ones grew from a dragon that loosed the original out of love. And so on and so on, until it got to the clear ones, the purest, which were grown by a dragon by different circumstances. Clear tail spikes were grown by a dragon who first loosed the original spike out of duty, but a duty against which the dragon's morals rebelled, and then found moral absolution within herself before the spikes regrew.

Under those circumstances, she could see why they were so rare.

Her interest in the subject trailed off again as her weariness took over, making the letters on the page shimmer to her eyes, and then she was struggling to stay awake, at least until she happened across a little jotted note to the side of an illustration of a tail spike, written by a paw not the author, which was actually illegal; one did not *write* in official library books. But the content of the scribble overruled her librarian's wrath. It was written to the side of a passage: *Primary focus crystals channel magic best, but require longer anchoring times compared to other focusing agents when used as a permanent focus.* The note underlined that passage, and to the side, it read *P.F. crystals linked to living donor—donor death unanchors P.F. but can reanchor. Use P.F.s for permanent high-order spells from dead donors whenever possible to prevent re-anchoring process.*

Anchoring time, the time it took a permanent spell to “settle,” to become firmly anchored into the very fabric of reality itself. Until a spell fully anchored, it was vulnerable to dispelling magicks, but after it anchored, it could only be disrupted by a raw act of magical force, like a battering ram against a castle gate, and the force of the attack had to be stronger than the spell to destroy it. Those kinds of attacks never failed to destroy the focus crystal.

So...did that mean that two earth dragons, the dragons that had given up those primary focus crystals, had died? Had their deaths unanchored the scions, and made them vulnerable to being dispelled?

But...the sage had said that maybe only one dragon in an entire generation might only grow *one* primary focus. What were the odds that there had been two, and *both* earth dragons died in such a short time window?

Were...were the earth dragons starving to death deep under the ground? Were they dying off that rapidly?

Doubtful. Highly, highly doubtful. The earth dragons had retreated with a great deal of food, they wouldn't be starving to death after only a month.

So, two earth dragons had died...how? Accidents, perhaps?

No, no, she doubted that, too. They'd *prepared* for this. They'd had that hiding place ready before they got there, so there was very little chance that two earth dragons died in separate accidents that close together, not *those two particular* earth dragons.

So, what had happened?

She yawned again, got up to get a drink of water from a fountain near the entry more to move around a little than anything else, then returned and sat on her haunches before the six books open and arrayed before her, the book on crystals being in the center. The book on the left was about the basics of stoneshaping, something of which she'd become curious since starting her task down in the earth dragon tunnels. The book was still on the introductory chapter, and her eyes passed over the stern warning that stoneshaping was only something to attempt in direct physical contact with the stone, due to stone's powerful resistance to the flow of magic—

Powerful resistance.

She blinked. If those crystals were *linked* to the living dragon that grew them, then wouldn't that link be *disrupted* by placing enough unyielding, magic-resistant stone between the dragon and the crystal?

That...that made sense. There were warnings all through magic to *never* separate a power focus from the spell it powered in such a way that it placed solid stone between them, and that was something which she could prove to herself right there on the spot. She could cast a spell of light, anchor it to a simple gem, then leave the gem in the library and take the light ball outside. As soon as the door closed and the stone completely isolated the gem from the spell effect, the spell effect would slowly begin to fade out, slowly starved to death of magic—

Starved to death! Like...like a spell *evaporating*!

That was *it*! That was the answer! The earth dragon that gave the spike was isolated from it by the hundreds of *drams* of solid volcanic rock between the dragon and the crystal, and had been separated from each other for a month! That unanchored the scion, and then the scion starved itself to death of magic!

But...the focus was *inside* the scion. How could it starve itself to death when its power source was *right there*?

No...it wasn't the answer. It was a good explanation why the scions were *capable* of being disrupted, but it didn't explain how the scions had *been* disrupted. If her theory was correct, then if the other scions didn't have a living donor, then they shouldn't become unanchored.

Her weariness shunted off by her curiosity, she picked out more books about stoneshaping, as well as some more basic tomes that dealt with stone itself and how it affected magical flow. There were quite a few geomantic studies about the subject, as magicians researched ways to bypass stone's resistance to magic, and she started taking notes in her own book, researching her theory that separating an earth dragon from his donated tail spike could unanchor a permanent spell. The more she read, the more she was certain that her theory had potential, jotting down pages of notes in her

study book, linking different lithomagical rules and theories together to support her hypothesis.

She got so involved that she barely noticed the time, and when two librarians filed in sleepily, she glanced at the clock and realized she'd been there all night. There were fifteen books opened and laid out before her, and she'd half-written a formal essay on the matter, in standard theory format, postulating a theory which other magicians might prove or disprove with experimentation. To her surprise, one of the sages also came in, the very female that had recommended the book to her. She hurried up to her and did the best she could to make herself noticed without being rude, but thankfully, the sage seemed not in so much of a hurry that she would ignore her. "Ah, I remember you, young one. Did you read that book?"

"It's the very book that leaves me in quite a quandary, most wise," she said, motioning at her table. "Might I ask a single moment to get your opinion on a theory?"

"I always have time to advance the learning of the young," she said with a pitted smile.

The sage joined her at the table, and with a breath to compose herself, she explained both her theory and the reasoning behind it. The sage sat on her haunches and listened intently, and when she gave her summation, stating her suspicion that separating an earth dragon from the focus he or she donated could cause a loss of anchoring, she nodded with a slight smile. "Very good, young one. Very, very good. That theory has never been tested, but magical law and theory combined with current conditions *do* strongly support your hypothesis."

She very nearly beamed in the face of the sage.

"What is your designation?"

"I am fourth of the senior class, most wise."

"Then you do yourself proud," she declared. "Might I borrow your research book? I'd like to present your idea before the sages."

“You honor me beyond measure, most wise,” she stammered, almost knocking her chin on the table trying to lower her head.

“Make sure to put your designation on the cover,” she grinned. “I always give credit where it’s due.”

She did so, writing with elegance despite her excitement and exhaustion, proving that her calligraphy was unparalleled among her peers. “My theory might explain *how* the scion destabilized, but not *why*,” she continued.

“And have you given any thought to that?” the sage asked, giving her a sly smile.

“Only a little, most wise, but the problem is most baffling,” she answered. “When I saw the scion disrupt, it was...was like it died out due to being choked off, almost like it was strangled of magic,” she explained. “At first I thought that perhaps it had something to do with separating the donor from the crystal, but there was no mention of the death of a donor disrupting the spell that his donated crystal was focusing. It only mentions that the spell becomes unanchored and must then re-anchor, with no ill effects. But this *was* an ill effect. Maybe no spell of the magnitude of a scion was ever unanchored before, and the power and complexity of the spell itself caused its own demise?”

“You have an open mind, young one, fluid and willing to connect separate pieces of information together. Even when a lack of all pertinent facts about the cause compel you to draw an incomplete conclusion, you propose a convincing argument,” she praised with a sly smile. “I think you should be re-evaluated in your class, young one. Fourth of the senior class seems *below* you.”

She could have walked across the ceiling in that moment, but then reality came crashing down on her when the council chromatic entered the library, took one look at her, and then stomped over. “Why are you not performing your task, student?” he asked.

“She’s been engaging me in some wonderful bit of debate,” the sage said in defense of her. “I’m going to read your work, fourth of the senior class, and it will be debated among the sages themselves,” she proclaimed loud enough for the librarians to hear. “But, it sounds like you have other work to do, so clean up your work space and get to it. I’ll make sure your journal is returned to you by tomorrow at the latest.”

“At once, most wise,” she said, bowing her head over and over.

Her work, debated by the *sages*? It was almost like a dream come true! Her classmates would be *violently* jealous when they heard about *this* at academy today! She hurriedly closed her books and returned them to their assigned places—she *was* allowed to do that as her position of a librarian, even if this wasn’t her assigned library, and then hurried from the library to return to her den to gather her materials. She’d be exhausted all day, but it had been *completely* worth it.

27 July 2017, 06:48 DMT, The Library of Atlantis

The council chromatic watched the student leave, a little curious about what someone *that* young could have talked about to get the curiosity of a sage. He waited barely a second before the student closed the door behind her before turning to the sage, his expression inquisitive. “Debate, most wise?”

“Mark well that one, esteemed council member,” the sage declared in a loud voice. “She will be among *us* one day.”

“What matter did she bring before you?”

“Insight,” she replied, lowering her voice and tapping the book on the table. “Given incomplete information, she drew conclusions and postulated a theory that come very close to the truth. She should be re-evaluated once

this task you have given her is complete. She should be *first* of the senior class.”

“What did she theorize?”

“She correctly theorized that there is a link between earth dragons and their tail spikes,” she answered, picking up the book. “But without all the information, her theory as to why the scions destabilized is incorrect. Theoretically sound and worthy of investigation at a future time, but incorrect. I think, given all the pertinent information, she would find the truth.”

That made the council chromatic glance back to the door. “And what answer do the sages have for us concerning that topic, most wise?”

“Not one you will want to hear, esteemed council member,” she relayed in a dark voice. “The next scion will destabilize in eleven days, fourteen hours,” she replied.

“The sages calculated it down to a timeline?”

“Down to the second,” she replied evenly.

“Then...what is the cause?”

“We don’t know yet. All we *do* know is that magic is draining out of the world like water from a hole in the bottom of a pot,” she replied. “The effect is predictable enough to calculate, and it’s not consistent. It’s *accelerating*. Some sages believe that it’s some unknown astronomical convergence draining magic away from the world, something so rare that it’s never been charted. Others theorize that is Gaia’s punishment for the breaking of the covenant.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Is it?” the female asked simply, giving him a steady look. “The scions will fail in reverse order they were created, one, by one. After they are gone, then the magicks cloaking the island from human eyes will fail. By that point, every dragon will *feel* what is going on, it will have accelerated

to the point where even the most simple spells will require more and more effort to cast. If this is some astronomical event, some rare convergence or alignment, there's nothing we can do but wait for it to pass. But if this *is* Gaia's wrath, then there *is* something we can do," she said, giving the council chromatic an unwavering stare.

"Ridiculous," he said again. "This is not Gaia's wrath."

"And how exactly do you know?"

"Because the very idea is utterly ludicrous. I'm positive that this is some rare convergence of events. Gaia would never rebuke us for putting filthy grounders in the place they belong. She herself dictated in the writings that we are the masters of the grounders, to rule over as we will."

"Well, it's so good that our leader is so confident putting *everyone's* lives at risk because he is *positive* about something," she said darkly. "Perhaps it's time I suggested to *you* a book to ponder."

"And what would you have me read, most wise?"

"*Henlo's Fables.*"

"A *hatchling's* book? We use that to teach our young to read!"

"That doesn't make it any less thought-provoking," she answered, reaching out with a paw. A book floated down from high on the shelves, and she took hold of it and presented it to him. "Perhaps you remember the story of the First Village?"

He snorted derisively. Of course he knew that story. Every dragon was read that story as a hatchling, learned to read by reading it and the other stories in the book. It was a book of simple grammar and rhymes, an excellent primer for a neophyte reader to grasp draconic writing.

It was an old story about the creation of the dragons, how all dragons had once been the same, but time and interests had caused them to leave their first village, their cradle. The dragons who left the village changed, became the four races of greater dragon, while those who remained behind

to tend the village, to keep it ready for the return of the others became the earth dragons. In reward for their courage and bravery to explore the unknown, to change and adapt to the world around them, the greater dragons were rewarded with magic, while those too cowardly to leave the village were denied Gaia's gift. But in the story, Gaia chided the dragons who returned against their scorn for the dragons who stayed behind and were denied Gaia's blessing. The sage caused the book to open to a certain page, a picture of the four races of greater dragon clustered around a single earth dragon, then she thrust it in his face:

*Those who ventured owe a boon;
To those that hoped they'd come home soon.*

*Remember what they gave to thee;
To give to them is to receive.*

*Tend with care the ones who stayed;
Threefold shall you be repaid.*

*But heed well this, the greatest rule;
To harm the tenders is the fool.*

*Thrice back in kind shall you repay;
The hurt you cause to those who stay.*

Dragon one, and dragon all;

To forget invites the fall.

“This? This...*fairy tale*?” the council chromatic snorted, shoving the floating book out of his eyesight.

“This book teaches morals, young one,” she told him, closing the book and folding it in her paws. “And I think that that is a lesson you *desperately* need. This story warns us of the downfall that awaits us when we let arrogance blind us to basic kindness and decency. They may be the lesser of us, young one, but Gaia warns us specifically we are to guide them with *kindness*, not with fang and claw. What kindness do *you* have for the earth dragons, esteemed council member? Or are they nothing but *filthy grounders*?” she asked pointedly, almost hawkishly. “Hatred is the *human* way, not the dragon way. A lesson that cost Ivaiya her life,” she said in a cool voice, that hit the council chromatic like a hammer.

He glared at her, then turned and stalked out of the library in a shuffle of all four feet.

The wizened old sage snorted a little and put the book back in its place. Perhaps they had erred putting that one in his position as the council chromatic. She was of a mind to bring the point up for debate at the next meeting of the Sage’s Circle...which would meet next year.

But, in her old mind, that was as good as next week.

Chapter 12

27 July 2017, 13:57 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Her eyes fluttered open, but there was nothing but impenetrable darkness.

What had happened? Her magical light had faded. She'd been so tired, she just had to stop a moment...had she fallen asleep? She couldn't see, but she could tell that she was laying down in the passage, her nose on the high side of a very gentle incline in the tunnel, one of the dead end tunnels surrounding Dawnmist's chambers, one of the myriad tunnels she had to check for that elusive hidden passage.

Yes. She'd fallen asleep. She'd been so tired, she laid down for a moment, and that moment had been all it took for her to spiral down into exhausted slumber, so tired she could even sleep on bare stone, her feathered tail pulled over her body to keep her warm. She stretched languidly, admittedly feeling much better now that she'd had a nap, then channeled magic to reignite her ball of light. It stung at her eyes a little as the light shimmered into being, anchored to hover just over and behind her eyes to keep the direct light out of them but illuminate everything in front of her, the magic of the ball tingling at her feathery antenna whenever an errant flick ghosted them over it. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, but from the feel of it, it had been at least a couple of hours.

Well, the council members didn't have to *know* that she'd fallen asleep while performing her task. Down here, they couldn't scry on her anyway. It was their fault for giving her no help.

She wouldn't accept any help now anyway. The tunnel *had* to be here...somewhere. This was the last village she had to examine, and it was

quite honestly the last place it could be. The earth dragons had never surfaced, meaning that there *had* to be a tunnel down here that linked the villages to the ocean, and from there, she would find the undersea entrance to their hidden village. She'd even studied several advanced spells that would help her when that time came.

Examining tunnels wasn't all that difficult. She just cast her spell of Seeking over them as she moved, searching for a door. Earth dragons couldn't hide that door with magic, and if there was water dragon defensive magic down here, she'd find *that* with her antenna. Not even a water dragon's ability to mask spells could hide from her antenna, which were organs that literally sensed magic. As long as she was close to the spell, within a few *dram*, her antenna would sense it. That combination would let her find the hidden tunnel, ferreting out the door or sensing the spell hiding it, one or the other.

The good part of it was that the spell of Seeking was actually simple magic to use, and she could cast it dozens of times before she had to rest, and that let her move quickly through the side tunnels in a systematic manner, using her maps to mark off tunnels as she searched them, then resting a while to recover her strength and continuing. The sustained use of magic over the weeks had actually been a boon to her, she'd come to understand, almost as if casting spells was a muscle she could strengthen with exercise. Now, casting the ball of light and the spell of Seeking were as easy, as automatic to her as using her natural talent, her floating magic.

She'd been combing through the Dawnmist tunnels for two days now. She'd started in the village itself and then moved outward in a sector format, scouring tunnels in a direction until she exhausted all possibilities, then moving on to the next. She focused on the side tunnels first, and once all of those were searched, she'd finish by searching the connecting tunnels that linked the village with the farms above. She'd developed that pattern searching the other villages, since searching the connecting tunnels brought her close to the next village once she was finished, and that was much more efficient. She'd left Dawnmist for last because it seemed the *least* likely place to find the tunnel, given that it would have received the most

scrutiny...and that joke had been on her, for here she was, searching Dawnmist because it was the final option.

Damned earth dragons. They were *too* clever.

Feeling reinvigorated after her nap, she finished sweeping the last of the side passages and dummy tunnels over three hours, getting again to the point where she no longer needed the maps to navigate, and with Dawnmist memorized she could now travel all the earth dragons' tunnels and villages unaided, as confidently as they could. She only had the tunnels connecting the villages to the farms...and then what?

Searching individual *burrows*, hunting for that secret tunnel. It had to be here *somewhere*.

She chose a connecting tunnel at random and followed it to its end, finding it to be the tunnel of...Gev, from the records. Gev the farmer and shopkeeper, whose farm was between Keth's and Grenall's farms, the two largest farms of Dawnmist. Good location for him, right between his two biggest customers. The tunnel came out within fifty *dram* of the store, which had been dug out and looted. She looked to the north, towards Grenall's farm, and then south, to Keth's farm.

Keth's farm...right on the coast. Keth's farm, with a pod of water dragons living literally right beside him.

But...she'd *been* there. Had even ventured into that water dragon pod's den. Could she have missed something, or should she save that farm for last?

Well, given what happened the *last* time she saved something for last...not this time.

Rather than spend upwards of fifteen minutes to go through the tunnels, she instead flew all of ten seconds to move from one farm to the other. Finding the connecting tunnel on that farm took a while, because it had been caved in at the entrance...which was a little unusual. But then again, the sky dragons had been after Keth's son, who had killed Ivaiya, so

they may have collapsed the tunnel behind them to keep the sky dragons from coming in after them. She attacked the collapsed tunnel with her floating magic, moving piles of earth aside until she reached rocks, then picked them up and moved them aside in an efficient system she'd mastered clearing the *hundreds* of cave-ins in the villages below, learning how to disassemble a cave-in without causing further collapse quickly. It was like a puzzle in reverse, starting from the top to the bottom with the stones least lodged, the ones she could most easily pull out and not cause any shifting. But this tunnel had collapsed very close to the surface, so she had to dig down almost as much as she had to clear stones, since there was a sinkhole over the tunnel that marked how it had come down.

It...it was deep. She cleared nearly fifteen *dram* into the where the ceiling hadn't completely collapsed. The earth dragons hadn't just collapsed one section of tunnel, they'd collapsed deep into it, well back, creating an almost impenetrable barrier to the sky dragons to try to dig it out.

Or to *hide something*.

That was one of their little tricks, she'd learned, bury something they wanted to hide under a cave-in to make it all but inaccessible. She turned her head and cast her spell of Seeking on the tunnel walls around and behind her leading up to the surface.

And she *found it*.

The door was cunning. It was so indistinguishable from the tunnel wall that it would have been impossible to locate, even with a microscope. But where they could hide the door from the eyes, they couldn't hide the door from magic. She used her magic to open the doorway and found a tunnel that descended sharply and then leveled out even as it curved, and venturing down it, the smell of salt water reached her nose. This was it!

This was *it*!

Yes! Salt water! She looked down a sharp ramp into water, clear water, and a faint glow of light from underneath told her that this tunnel opened

into the cove behind the farm. That meant that the earth dragon village had to be close to this, close enough for the earth dragons to reach it.

She felt almost the fool. She had searched *this very cove* when she realized how they'd done it...but she hadn't searched it well enough. Had she spent maybe one more hour here, she could have saved herself *weeks* of exhaustive and frustrating searching.

It was time to use the spell she'd researched. Drawing magic through her body, she created a bubble of coherent air around her, a trick of the sky dragons which a chromatic could duplicate. The spell warned that she would only have the oxygen trapped in the bubble to breathe once she submerged, and she couldn't go very deep or the pressure of the water would overcome the magic and pop the bubble. But it would give her perhaps ten minutes to submerge and search before having to surface to circulate the air in the bubble, and while chromatics couldn't really swim, she could use her floating magic on herself much like sky dragons did, letting her float around in the water. It wasn't very fast, but it was faster than what most any other chromatic might manage. She padded down the ramp and into the water, walking on the bottom with a light bounciness in her step because her weight was anchored to the air bubble in a way that made it and her slightly buoyant but still heavier than the water, at least until she came to the end of the tunnel, where it opened into the cove, which was a little bit of a drop-off. She floated out into the water and looked down each side of the steep cove side, a natural cliff that dropped into the water. The water dragon den was to the south, so she would go north.

It only took her about ten minutes to find. At first she didn't understand what she was seeing, because it was only really visible if one was on the very bottom. It was a natural lava tube, a cave, its mouth black and foreboding as it extended back beyond the light that filtered in from the surface above. The tube was angled in a way that made it almost impossible to see from any angle but straight on or on the bottom, the top overhanging the bottom, and she settled to the bottom and stood on a coral-encrusted rocky spur, a startled lobster skittering by her feet, as she looked into the natural cave and could not help but smile.

This was it.

Lava tubes were not unknown on the island. There were several on the southern volcano, extending upwards into the volcano's slopes before ending in collapses, where the shifting of the volcano and the weight of great time brought down the ceilings. But *this* tube was flooded, formed when the water level was lower, probably during the ice age, and then flooded when the levels rose, and there was no telling how deep it went. It was entirely possible the tube wasn't flooded all the way and the earth dragons had started from there, at some cave-in deeper inside, or perhaps they did in fact excavate their hidden village from the water tube itself, getting help from the water dragons.

She surfaced to circulate the air in her bubble, then descended and started up the tube. She moved slowly, carefully, for the tube was big and there was no doubt that the entrance was walled off and hidden, hidden as cleverly as the hidden tunnel down to the water had been, perhaps even covered over with water dragon magic, and there was no need to hurry *now*. Once she found the way in, she would finish her task.

Three hundred *dram* in, she had her confirmation. Secured on the ceiling, there was the shorn-off edge of a cable the earth dragons used for their technology. The end had been carefully capped, as if they might use it again. The cable was attached to the ceiling of the cave and went deeper inside. The earth dragons *had* been in here, had placed their technology in this tube.

There was no doubt now. This was the entrance to their hidden village.

After five minutes, she turned around and returned to the surface, breathing deeply as the stale air in her bubble recirculated, turned fresh again. There was no telling how deep in that tunnel went, possibly beyond her ability to venture inside it. She was no water dragon, and it was becoming clear to her that the water dragons had been a vested partner in the earth dragons' endeavors. There was no way they could get very far up that tunnel without water dragon assistance...and that was easy enough to

prove. She dove back down and floated as fast as she could up the tunnel, counting the minutes. At five minutes into the tunnel, she still had yet to find its terminus, and the cables were still running along the ceiling. That was as far as she could possibly go. She turned around and hurried back out, the air turning fouler and fouler in her bubble, and she was starting to get a little dizzy and her breathing labored as she got back to the mouth. She used the bottom to push off, her legs assisting her floating magic to get her the rest of the way out, and she exploded from the water's surface and collapsed on the bank, gulping in air in a frenzy, but almost giddy with pride and satisfaction. She'd completed her task. It had taken her far longer than she expected it to take, but that was due to the cunning of the earth dragons.

And *damn*, was it cunning. It was so brilliant that she would have only attributed such a concept to chromatics. The way they set it up, it was almost impossible to reach without water dragon assistance, putting it utterly out of reach of their main foes, the fire dragons, who would never in a million years allow themselves to submerge that deep in the ocean. The very idea of having to go that deep in the water, that far from the air, it would terrify even the most brutishly fearless fire dragon. But it also put them completely out of reach of the sky dragons and chromatics. No sky dragon would dare an *underwater tunnel* to get at the earth dragons, and the chromatics had no easy way to reach them. Some few chromatics might know magic to survive to reach the end of that tunnel, but there wouldn't be enough to make a difference, not when facing the *entire* earth dragon race, who were no doubt hiding behind cunning traps and prepared defenses. When one only had one door to guard, it made it easy to pile defense after defense in front of it.

She took out her map and drew in the coastline of the cove, then marked the location of both the earth dragon tunnel leading into the water and the lava tube on her map, then rolled it up and put it back in her shoulder satchel with a little flair. All she had to do now was report back to the Council of Seven, and she was done.

She took off from the cove and caught an afternoon thermal as a bank of rain clouds began to form some distance offshore, the afternoon rains preparing to visit them, spiraling up along the side of the extinct volcano until she was high enough to take command of her flight. Wingbeats curled her around the eastern side of the volcano, up and over the destroyed department building and Scion Aerie, past the Library of Babylon, and up to the chambers of the Council of Seven. There were no guards there, for they were unnecessary; no chromatic would come uninvited unless they were told to do so, or in her case, told to report to them upon completion of her task. The building was both seat of the rulers of the chromatics and the perennial repository of magical lore, shared by both the council and the sages. As such, there were two distinct entries into the building, one for visitors of the sages, and the other the visitors of the council. It was to the council entry that she reported, opening the door and stepping inside, using magic to close it behind her. The council was only partially in session, only three of the seven present, sitting around a huge circular table littered with books and charts, deep in discussion. Her occasional teacher was one of the three, as was the council chromatic. The third was a chromatic unknown to her. She stood by the table and waited for them to take notice of her, which took nearly ten minutes as they discussed some kind of astronomical convergence and the effect it was having on magic as a whole.

Finally, her teacher looked to her. “And what brings you before us, fourth of the senior class?”

“My task is complete, honored council members,” she said simply, using her floating magic to withdraw her map from her shoulder satchel. “I am certain that have found the earth dragons.”

That got their attention. Her teacher took the scrolled map once it reached him, and he opened it and placed it on the table. “It is most clever, how they did it, honored council members. The entrance is *under water*.”

“Truly?” the female council member asked.

“Yes, honored council member. I found a secret tunnel that leads from the villages to the water’s edge, and after searching the surrounding area, I found this natural lava tube that was in close proximity to it. The tunnel extended past my ability to travel it, but it had earth dragon technology along its roof, their cables. They must have had the water dragons assist them in building this underwater village, and then the water dragons helped them evacuate to it when they withdrew from the island.”

“So, you don’t know for *certain* that the earth dragons are there?” the council chromatic asked.

“I didn’t see them, no, honored council member,” she replied. “But the evidence is most compelling. Why would they install their technology within the tunnel if they were not there? With them building a hidden tunnel that opens only into the water, and this lava tube being the only nearby tunnel to it, why else would that tunnel be there?”

“The evidence does suggest that they might be there, but we do need a little more, student,” her instructor said in a more reasonable tone. “Did you explore the lava tube?”

“To the extent of my ability, my teacher,” she replied humbly. “I almost suffocated getting out. I can go no further.”

“Then it’s time you had some assistance,” he declared, standing up. “I’ll come with you and attempt to scry the tunnel’s depths. My magic can reach where we cannot.”

“Yes, my teacher,” she said, bowing her head again. Her teacher rolled up her map and floated it over to her, and she replaced it in her shoulder satchel, hiding her disappointment. After spending so long on this task, *by herself*, she expected a little...a little more *appreciation* for its successful completion, not a rebuke for not being thorough enough. But, if she was right, then they would have to recognize her hard work.

She led her teacher back down to the cove, landing right atop where the tube was located. “It’s right under our feet, my teacher,” she said,

pointing down into the water with a forepaw. “At the bottom of this shelf. It can’t be seen unless you’re right in front of it.”

“That would lend credence to your conclusion, student,” he nodded. “I need a direct line of sight into the tube to scry it. How did you manage going underwater?”

“I suspected where it might be, so I took some time to learn a spell that creates a bubble of air around me. With two of us inside it, it will give us about five minutes of air,” she offered.

“Then I depend upon you for that, student,” he said, patting her shoulder. “You get us down there, I’ll see if you’re right.”

She felt both honored and a little intimidated that her teacher would let *her* cast a spell for *him*, so she wrapped the bubble of air around him rather than herself, then stayed with him as he jumped in, sinking to the bottom slowly enough to land easily on the bottom. That he knew to do that told her that he knew the spell as well, and was just giving her the honor of casting it. Her teacher fell silent and closed his eyes, and her antenna shivered as she felt his magic. “It’s very deep,” he said in a distant tone. “It goes back very far. Very far. I can see the cables on the ceiling you described,” he said in a musing voice. “I can see the end. It’s blocked by a cave-in.”

“The entrance might be along the tube, my teacher. The way they hid the tunnel to the water’s edge was quite cunning.”

“No, student, the cables go *through* the cave-in,” he told her. “Whatever they did, it’s on the other side. And the cave-in isn’t solid rock, so my scrying can penetrate it.”

“Truly?”

“You’ll learn the art of scrying when you are far more advanced, my student,” he told her without opening his eyes. “The tube comes out of the water just on the other side of the collapse,” he related to her, his antenna twitching. “The cables are still there. There is a metal box attached to the wall. The tunnel...it is very deep. Amazing,” he breathed. “It goes for a

league under the island. I see an opening,” he said, then he gasped and opened his eyes. “Incredible!”

“What is it, my teacher?”

“They’re in there, alright, student,” he said with a dark chuckle. “I saw them. And they’ve built a huge complex deep under the volcano, so deep that our magic could never hope to find it. Come, let’s return to the council chambers so you may be discharged of this duty and return to your studies.”

“That is a relief beyond all words, my teacher,” she said with a sigh as she floated up over his head.

When they returned to the council chambers, her instructor did her the honor of making the announcement for her. “She was right, they *are* in there,” he declared to his cohorts. “They’ve built an underground city *leagues* under our feet, my brother and sister. And the only way in is through a flooded tunnel that only a true master of the magical arts could traverse safely without the aid of a water dragon. The way they have done this is masterful. Masterful,” he said in appreciation. “If we want to get them out of there, the *only* way that’s going to happen is if they come out willingly.” He looked to her. “Student, you have discharged your duties to this council with determination and resourcefulness. You found the earth dragons, and I dare say that very few would have managed to do the same. You are discharged to return to your academy studies, fourth of the senior class, and a commendation of your exemplary service will be read at your next class gathering, so all may know of your success. Well done, young student. Very well done indeed.”

She almost floated on air on her way out the door. A commendation... to be read at the public meeting of the senior class! Her work debated by the sages! She had never even dreamed in the most pleasant sleepy musing that such good fortune would be hers! She left the council chambers and very nearly took off the wrong way, so accustomed she’d been to descending down to the lowlands to continue her search, catching herself at the last minute and instead turning for her den. She’d need her schoolbooks. Her

class was in session right now, advanced magical theory of enchanting and dwoemerwork, where chromatics learned the art of enchantment and creating permanent magical effects.

Her classmates would be *so* jealous of her now.

27 July 2017, 17:37 DMT; The Library of Chroma

“What did you see down there, brother?” the council chromatic asked. The entire council was now assembled, having gathered in his absence, and they now listened as he reported back to them.

“Not much, we were under a time limit since I had to scry while underwater,” he replied, pulling out a sheet of clean marking parchment. His claw quickly and deftly sketched out what he’d seen. “It looked to be a massive natural cavern that the earth dragons had adapted, building floors, to expand the usable volume, with multiple exits in the floor that no doubt lead down to their tunnels. I saw several earth dragons before I ended the spell, moving either up onto the ramps or down into the openings. Including the one that killed Ivaiya,” he grunted, glancing at the council chromatic. “He was walking with Ferroth, coming down from the floors they’d built above. They had no prepared defenses I could see, but really, they don’t *need* them. Their tunnel complex is entirely too deep for *any* kind of magic to reach it in any direction but up that natural lava tube, and the tube itself is an effective barrier. They collapsed the tube within the flooded area to block it off, sealing them inside. Simply put, my honored companions, they’re untouchable.”

“Why would we want to attack them, anyway?” the eldest female on the council asked lightly. “We just want to talk to them, do we not? Make the see reason. They’re certainly no threat to us down there. They’re no threat to us up here, for that matter,” she sniffed. “This silliness has gone on far too long. We send a chromatic down there and talk them out. It

shouldn't be that difficult, they're not all that intelligent. They've already lost, for Gaia's sake. The factories are gone, the power plant destroyed, and if they don't come back soon, they won't even have any dirt to play in. It'll all wash out to sea."

"When they come back out, they'll demand to rebuild it all," the council chromatic stated. "And that absolutely cannot be allowed to come to pass. But with them where we can't touch them, it will embolden them to be unreasonably stubborn. They very well might starve themselves to death out of spite for us putting them back in their place."

"And how is that much of a loss?" the female that had been there when he left asked.

"After the sky dragons become tired of hunting for us, it *will* be a loss," the instructor warned. "Don't forget, sister, if the earth dragons die down there, the water dragons will blame *us*, and they'll *never* come back. They don't *need* us, because unlike the rest of us, they can just stay deep and far out of reach of the humans. They're the only dragons that have nothing to fear from human invasion, they're the only ones that can put themselves completely out of reach. The only reason they stayed was to honor the vows their ancestors made to the covenant and to look after the grounders. No grounders, no water dragons, no food," he said, ticking it off on his claws. "So, *we* need the earth dragons, too, sister. Or would you perhaps enjoy losing a portion of your study time every day to hunting your *own* food?"

She bristled a bit. "No thank you," she replied. "I tried my paw at fishing just out of curiosity, and I find it to be both interminably boring and degrading for someone of our status to be reduced to such...low behavior," she sniffed. "Gaia placed us above the others to guide them, and in return it is their duty to care for us in the manner in which we deserve."

"Then you'd better rethink your opinion of the grounders," the instructor declared. "There's absolutely no way we're going to *force* them out, and as long as they have food, they're not going to budge. We have no

way of knowing how long their supplies are going to last. I agree that we need to parlay with them, but we'd better be prepared to make a few concessions."

"Ridiculous," the council chromatic snorted. "We will not be held hostage by *them*! They will return under *our* terms, fully knowing their place in proper society."

"So, while we stand off against them, what's left of their farms get washed into the sea," the instructor said calmly. "What are they to do when they come back out and have nothing to work with but bare rock, brother? Not even earth dragons can make things grow out of stone. We need them out of there to save their farms, or we'll have even more mouths to feed that contribute nothing to the food supply."

"Then they starve," the female shrugged. "The water dragons can't possibly blame us for the grounders' own stupidity."

"You know, when we agreed to this plan, I didn't agree to it with the idea of us torturing the grounders into submission, or starving them to death," he said darkly. "This was supposed to be quick and efficient, overwhelming them before they could react and having them under our tails and their technology in check before they could do anything about it. But since bad luck thwarted our simple solution, I have seen more and more behavior I would attribute to the *humans* than to my own kind," he declared. "I find your lack of concern for the grounders to be not just appalling, but very disturbing," he accused the two of them. "Is this your solution to the problem, Geleste? Just let them die? Not a care in the world that killing off our lesser cousins violates Gaia's command that we rule over them?"

"To rule is to control, and there is no greater form of control than to dictate life or death," she retorted haughtily. "So, yes, if the only way to control them is to kill them, then I say we kill them."

"You know, since the grounders started bringing back human technology, I've been reading some of their literature, purely out of

curiosity to see how the humans have evolved over the centuries,” he told them, looking at his six compatriots one by one, sitting on his haunches. “And I came across a series of children’s fables that they use much like we do to teach morality. One such fable, I think, applies here. It’s called the golden goose.”

“The what?” the youngest male asked.

“It was a goose that laid eggs of pure gold,” he replied. “And you know how humans covet gold. The story goes that instead of caring for the goose and collecting the eggs it laid over time and becoming rich, the owner instead killed the goose, thinking that he could take all of its eggs at once. But once he cut it open, he found nothing inside, and realized the folly of his idea. We have here a golden goose, which is all the dragons under our control and a life of general comfort. The other dragons feed us, protect us, and care for us, leaving us to pursue magical research and study. I dare say that it’s worked out fairly well for us for the last thousand years. But what I see now is my fellow council members running around with a knife, seeking to cut the goose open,” he said simply. “Would you really kill the grounders rather than let them gain a single concession over us, brother?” he asked, looking at the council chromatic. “Knowing that it would permanently poison the water dragons against us? Would you kill the entire race of earth dragons just so you can show them who’s boss, Geleste?” he asked pointedly, staring the haughty female in the eyes. “I agreed as you did that the activities of the earth dragons was threatening the way of life of the other dragons, and it had to be stopped. But I *did not* agree to this plan thinking that it would shatter the island and put us in a position where we are seriously sitting here discussing the extermination of an entire *race* of dragons, just because we believe that we have the right to do so because we were mandated by Gaia to rule over them. Are we going to let our refusal to give even a single concession, our need to control the grounders, kill them off and destroy everything we’ve built here? Do you seriously think the other dragons would ever trust us again after we exterminate an entire *race* of dragons simply to maintain our rule? Will you cut off the head of the

golden goose, brother? Sister? You? You?” he asked, looking at each of them in turn.

“Your analogy has no bearing here,” the council chromatic retorted. “We are now dealing with a direct challenge to our rule, and to protect everything we’ve built, protect our position as rulers of this island, we have to end this on *our* terms. Or would you rather see the grounders emerge from their holes and put everything back the way it was, brother? Build even more factories? Seduce even more dragons away from our sacred traditions?”

“So, we give not a clawtip in the matter, brother?”

“Not one,” he replied adamantly. “If the grounders take a single clawtip, they’ll demand the whole island. And if they harm themselves out of their own stubbornness, then that is *their* folly, not *ours*.”

“I have to agree,” one of his brothers said. “Not that I particularly relish putting the island through this, but he is right in that the grounders are directly challenging our right to rule, and that cannot be tolerated.”

“*Especially* the grounders,” the younger female sniffed. “I could understand a conference with the water dragons, or the sky dragons, but not with...*grounders*,” she said disdainfully.

“So say you all?” the instructor asked, looking at each of them. When they all agreed with the council chromatic, the instructor sighed. “Then so be it. I resign from this body.”

“What?” the council chromatic gasped.

“I will not be party to this,” he declared. “I will not be the lone voice of dissent against this insanity, and then suffer Gaia’s wrath when she takes notice of our failure to carry out her sacred charge and exacts punishment. I will return to the academy, to my instructor’s post. And Gaia save the lot of you if you carry through with this,” he said darkly turning around and walking away. “One of the sages confided to me that she believes that the drain of magic in the world is Gaia’s warning that we are making a dreadful

mistake,” he said as he walked out the door. “What I have just seen around the council table makes me certain of it.”

And the door slammed shut behind him.

28 July 2017, 15:31 DMT; Academy Aerie

And such goes dreams of recognition.

The fourth of her class stuffed another book in her shoulder satchel and hurried after two of her classmates, silently glad she didn’t lord it over the others or announce that she had earned a council commendation. She had been content to remain silent and act surprised and gracious when the reading came, but after two different class meetings, no open reading. Either the council had forgotten its promise, or they had never intended to show her any kind of public recognition for all her hard work.

It was *humiliating*, to be lied to like that. As a young chromatic, she was used to being ignored by her elders at the best, openly scorned at the worst, but to be promised something and then have it taken away, even if nobody else knew about it, it was like being hit in the face with a rock. She very nearly cried out of frustration when she got back to her den last night, to work so hard, be promised a reward, then...nothing. She felt *used*, she felt *exploited*...she felt like an *earth dragon*.

If *this* was how her elders had been treating them, no wonder they went to their hidden city!

“Fourth! Fourth, wait up!” tenth begged, rushing after her. Tenth, the poor dear, was something of an enigma. Last of the senior class, everyone looked down on her for her shortcomings, but she had a good personality and she tried very hard, so in that respect, she did earn something of a pitying respect from others. Her failures were certainly not because she didn’t try. She just wasn’t as good at magic as the others in her class.

Because she was earnest about her shortcomings and still worked very hard to try to overcome them, it wasn't social death to be seen talking to her. Fourth wasn't the only one that had taken her aside and given her private tutoring...in a way, she was the class mascot. "What are you going to do? I was hoping we could talk about radicals in the enchanting process a little more."

"I suppose we could, but only if you come along with me," she said, latching her satchel. "I'm getting hungry."

"I've *been* hungry," she sighed, closing her own satchel as they got out of the way of one of the instructors. "But it's two hours before we can queue for our allotments."

"There's more ways to eat than to stand in line," she said with a slight smile. "I'll show you a secret."

"Really? Oh, please please please do!"

"Alright, but it's every chromatic for herself," she warned.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see," she replied with a little smile.

"Oh! Pardon us, most wise!" tenth gasped when she nearly walked into a landing elder chromatic.

"There you are, fourth of the senior class," the wizened old sage said, stopping almost all traffic on the aerie as she folded her wings. "I wanted to return your journal. Your theory was most intriguing, and the sages found it very stimulating to ponder its merits."

She almost fainted right there on the aerie. A sage addressing her so, in *public*! The sage removed her journal from her shoulder satchel and offered it to her. "Here you are."

"Thank you, most wise!" she said, almost smacking her chin on the ground dropping her head before taking the journal back.

“I put a reading list inside the cover, books related to your theory. I thought you might enjoy further study of the matter.”

“I’d be most eager to do so.”

“Alright then. I have work to do, and I was passing by anyway. Study well, young ones, you are the future,” she called loudly, then she turned and leapt from the edge of the aerie, her wings catching the air as she turned and soared in the direction of the council chambers.

Well, the council may have forgotten her commendation, but that was even better!

The other students swarmed around her in excitement and perhaps maybe a little jealousy, which she lapped up in equal measure, asking her what her theory was, asking her how she managed to get it before the sages. She enjoyed her moment in the sun, even having an instructor come over and ask her about her theory, which she more or less had to divulge at that point. “I theorized that the link between a primary focus and its living donor could be severed by separating them with stone for a sufficient period of time,” she answered her teacher.

“Interesting, I’d never considered that possibility,” the instructor nodded. “You should continue your research on the matter, student. Any new knowledge betters us all.”

“I will do so, honored teacher,” she said, lowering her head.

She and tenth remained on the aerie for about ten more minutes, and then she separated herself from her admiring classmates and flew to her den with tenth following. She allowed tenth to place her satchel in her den, then gave her a fishing basket with a smile. “You’ll need this.”

“Where did you get these?” she asked curiously, holding the basket up.

“Scavenged from the earth dragon villages,” she replied. “I feel no guilt for taking them. They left it behind, so it was free for the taking.” In fact, her den had quite a few little artifacts and trinkets she’d gleaned from

the items the earth dragons left behind, some of them for utility, some purely for aesthetics. Earth dragons liked to sculpt stone with their claws, scraping it into shapes, and some of it was quite interesting to view.

The whole school *did* know about her task, and that since she was back in class, she had completed it. “What was it like down there?” tenth asked as she buckled the basket around her wingjoint.

“Dark and confining,” she answered. “The earth dragons dug tunnels in every conceivable direction and made them confusing and hard to navigate, to scare other dragons away from trying to enter their villages. It took me quite a while to learn my way around down there.”

“And there were things like this left behind?” she asked, patting the basket.

“A few. The earth dragons took most everything,” she replied. “Now, let’s go see if we can fill our bellies.”

Tenth wasn’t very good at magic, but she was a *great* flier, having no problems following her to the northwest. It was a spot she’d found in her fishing expeditions where fish liked to gather around a shoal of sorts, an underwater mountain that *almost* broke the surface, giving the coral a place to grow. “Fish!” tenth called from behind.

“Now it’s every female for herself,” she called back with a smile. “You fish your way, I’ll fish mine.”

Of course, her way was just *slightly* more efficient. She used her floating magic to hover in the air like a sky dragon, then simply yanked the fish out of the water with her magic five and six at a time, being picky enough to only get the ones she knew tasted good to her. Some she ate even as she hovered, feeling them wriggle a bit as they went down, and others ended up in her fishing basket. Tenth at first tried to snatch the fish like a sky dragon might, but then managed a mad-flapping hover that demonstrated her flying skills, just over the water, and used her own magic. Just about any chromatic could do floating magic, but few could use it the

way fourth of her class could. Tenth pulled fish out of the water one at a time, almost losing her concentration and falling in three or four times. “Not that one, it’s poisonous,” fourth of her class warned when tenth pulled out one of those striped spiny fish with garish fins.

“Experience speaking?” Tenth asked lightly as she let the fish go.

“I threw up for hours afterward,” she admitted, which earned her a light laugh.

“This is a good place, can I come back here?”

“Just don’t take everything. If we take *all* the fish, no fish will come back.”

“That sounds a little strange.”

“The water dragons never take everything,” fourth explained. “Even when they’re after schools of fish, they always leave some behind so they reproduce. If that’s how the water dragons do it, then that’s the way we should do it. The water dragons *are* the experts.”

“Oh, when you say it like that, it makes sense,” she nodded.

They fished for nearly an hour, then landed on a spur of stone about a league from the island and ate their fill, a reaching finger of black stone barely big enough for the two young adult chromatrics to share. Fourth went over the material that tenth wanted to speak about, taking her turn tutoring their least gifted classmate, whose earnest effort earned her some modicum of respect despite her deficiencies. “You know,” tenth mused as she swallowed her last fish, “a couple of us have been considering asking you for a favor, classmate.”

“What is that?”

“We’re a little curious about what you’ve been doing down in the grounder tunnels,” she replied. “Would you take us down inside? We’ve never seen their hidden places, and you braved it. You’re the first chromatic to ever discover their secrets!”

She glowed a bit under the praise. “Well...I guess I could, but only so long as nobody bothers anything,” she replied.

“Whyever for?”

“Would you like to come to school some day and find someone gouged writing all over the walls of our building?” she asked.

“But they’re *just* grounders,” she shrugged.

“Be that as it may, even grounders deserve the dignity of their private places,” she replied. “I don’t mind taking you down into the tunnels, but you are there only to *look*. Not to steal, not to vandalize.”

“Didn’t you steal the baskets?”

“No. Some things down there, they left on purpose. Some they left because they had to. I have no guilt taking what they obviously intended to leave, those things are free for the taking as far as I’m concerned, but I will not touch *anything* that was left due to accident or necessity.”

“Well, I can live with that,” tenth replied. “How can you tell which is which?”

“Study the villages long enough, and you can tell,” she replied. “The earth dragons are very, very methodical. It only took me a couple of weeks to understand the way they do things. Study their villages long enough, and that which was left on purpose is as different as that which they had no choice but to leave as the sun and the moon.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she nodded.

“I never thought they did *anything*, you know...smart,” she said.

“They’re far smarter than we were told,” she answered evenly. “*Far* smarter. Think about what you *can* see, tenth,” she noted. “Aren’t their crops always neat and orderly?”

“Well, sure.”

“Don’t the earth dragons working down there always seem to be doing something, know what to do?”

“Well, I guess.”

“Then there you go.”

“But, I thought we did all that,” she said, looking over. “You know, planned the farms and such, and they just did what we told them.”

“Have you *ever* seen a chromatic down on a farm, tenth? *Ever*?”

She was quiet a long moment. “No, I haven’t.”

“Question answered,” she said simply.

“Wow, I never thought you loved the grounders so much.”

“Call it a newfound respect for them after having spent nearly a month crawling around in their tunnels,” she replied. “What I found down there doesn’t come anywhere *near* what we’ve been told they were like.”

“Now I’m really curious to see inside their world,” tenth mused.

“As much of it as you can see. They didn’t live in the villages, they just used them for their common areas. But still, once you see how they dug them out, how everything’s arranged and organized, you can start to understand how logically they think.”

“Can we go tonight?”

“Well...tomorrow would be a little better. I’m still trying to catch up after missing so much time,” she replied.

“That’s fine. Thank you for your help today, and showing me how to fish,” she smiled.

“We’re classmates, friend. We look out for each other, because no one else will.”

“Gaia’s truth,” she agreed.

28 July 2017, 07:04 DMT; Senior’s Building

It was something of a surprise to see the chromatic council member that occasionally taught at the academy to take the podium at their start of day announcements, the time when news and information was filtered down to them. They were usually quite boring, filled with inane announcements and rule changes, and up until the last couple of days, she usually tuned them out. But this was a change, it was different, and that got at least half her attention as she read from *Geomancy, the Magic Lurking in Stone*, one of the books that the sage had suggested she read to further explore her theory.

“There are only two announcements today,” the council member called. “First, a staffing change. I’ve returned to teaching at the academy full time, and will be replacing your advanced magical theory instructor.”

That was *really* strange. What chromatic would leave the *council* to return to a post in the academy teaching *younglings*? That was a major step down as chromatics measured social standing...and she saw that she wasn’t the only one that was giving him slightly unusual looks.

“Second, I have a major announcement concerning student rank,” he declared, which got everyone’s immediate attention. “The student rankings have changed effective today. Fourth of the senior class, you have been re-evaluated, and have been awarded the position of first of the senior class,” he declared, which made her gasp and the others stare in shock. “This is by no means a rebuke of the three who were above you,” he said gently. “Due to extraordinary efforts in extra-curricular tasks and assignments and the submission of a unique magical theory for consideration that would qualify as her adherent’s dissertation, the new first of her class has exceeded the expectations of the staff and has attracted the attention of the sages

themselves,” he explained. “The three who have lost a position due to this, remember that it was by no lack of effort or mistake on your part that you have lost one rank. Be proud and hold your heads high, students, because you have earned no shame this day, and your instructors think just as highly of you as we did the day before. Dedicate yourself as the first has and prove yourself to the school and to the chromatics, and you may regain the rank you have lost this day. As always, ranks are open to re-evaluation at any time,” he reminded them. “So, let it be officially noted for the school record that on this day, fourth of her class has been promoted to first of her class, with those she supplants stepped down by one rank respectively, but those so reduced are done so with due prejudice and consideration,” he added, which was a condition that meant that they hadn’t lost their rank due to errors, but were instead demoted under exceptional circumstances by the one whose promotion caused their demotion, and as such they retained a few of the privileges of their former ranks. That, at least, would soothe a few bruised egos.

There was polite applause and a few heated looks as the class paid her a moment of grudging respect, seats were rearranged to let her take the seat of honor and the three she jumped over each had to move a table back, and then she went from highest-ranking member of the class to just another student, preparing to take notes as class began.

At the first break, though, she got to hold court as first in class, with the other nine students gathered around her, accepting slightly sulky private congratulations from the three males she’d jumped over and proper supplication and a little tail-licking from those under them. The first in class had a great deal of power within the class, able to discipline the other students in the absence of a teacher, given privileges greater than other students, and allowed to ignore certain rules. Luckily for her, the new second in class didn’t lose some of his privileges because he was demoted with due prejudice, so there wouldn’t be any overt hatred and backstabbing going on in inter-class social politics. The new second still had his special access to restricted areas and rank privileges, but he could no longer

discipline other class members. That was the exclusive purview of the first in class.

After class, they again stored their school satchels in her den, picked up utility satchels, and they descended down into the ruined lowlands. The village of Forest Edge was closest to her den, on what had once been the grassy plain just south of the forest, where earth dragons had tended herds of livestock rather than farmed. But the sky dragons had burned the pastures as well as the farms, leaving muddy, pitted ruin in their wake. Tenth paused at the opening to the tunnels, gawking down its black mouth, ignoring the pile of stones around the entrance that first had moved aside to gain entry. “It’s a little frightening.”

“There’s nothing inside,” first told her as she created a ball of light and set it over her head. “Just don’t get separated from me. You can wander down in those tunnels for days and never find your way out if you don’t know where you’re going.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“I was down here so long I don’t need maps anymore,” she said, a little darkly, as she entered the tunnel.

She guided them unerringly through the twisting passages, checking often to make sure tenth didn’t get lost behind her, but that was a moot point. Tenth was all but climbing up her back, fearful of the dark, confining spaces; tenth was larger than she was, since she’d entered academy older than most. She brought them to the entry chamber of Forest Edge, a larger chamber than most other villages, possibly because they herded livestock down here. One of the village chambers wasn’t a storage silo as in other villages, but a large barn-like stable underground meant to hold living animals.

“This is the entry chamber,” she announced. “All villages have one. The other chambers can be reached from here.”

“It’s...big,” tenth mused, brightening her light to illuminate the entire chamber.

“It’s more than just big, classmate,” she replied. “The earth dragons dug this out with nothing but their claws, and yet the floor is perfectly level, and the walls are perfectly straight. There’s an exactness to their work you can appreciate.”

“Well, wood bees and ants build things too, and they’re not very smart.”

“Wood bees and ants don’t create perfect right angles,” she challenged.

“This room doesn’t have anything in it.”

“No, they must have had more time to evacuate this village than others,” she nodded. “But there’s something I want to show you. It’s in one of the inner chambers.”

“Oh.”

She led tenth through two buffering chambers, and into what first was fairly certain was the village council chamber, where the earth dragon village leaders gathered to discuss matters. The room had been emptied out, but it was what was on the walls that she wanted to see.

Etched into the walls was an elaborate and breathtakingly beautiful work of art, the stone gouged and polished by whoever had made it in such a way that some stone swallowed light and some reflected it, creating dazzling light-induced illusions of depth and texture. It spanned all four walls, and each wall demonstrated a different aspect of life for an earth dragon. One wall showed a herd of cattle with two earth dragons walking beside them, the volcano rising in the background. One wall showed row after row of neat crops, a single earth dragon reaching down to pluck a tiny leaf from between the rows. One wall showed earth dragons working, and the mastery of the relief made it almost seem as if the dragons etched into the stone were digging at the very wall itself with their claws. And across from the entry wall was the most detailed of all, showing a mated pair of

earth dragons and three hatchlings, the hatchlings tended to with love and care.

“Unbelievable,” tenth breathed, turning slowly to take in the sculpture.

“Can someone as stupid as we were told create something like *this*?” first asked simply, looking at her favorite part, the earth dragon mother nuzzling one of her hatchlings with exquisite tenderness.

“It had to have been made by magic,” tenth protested.

“Look carefully at the walls and you can see where earth dragon claws made the marks,” she challenged simply. “I thought so at first as well, but the claw marks are unmistakable. They even used them to induce texture into some of the reliefs to give the illusion of depth. It is the most intricate work of art I’ve ever seen, far beyond the art hanging in the libraries. I don’t think even a chromatic artist using magic to assist could create something like *this*.”

“And it’s been hidden under the ground, all this time,” tenth breathed, staring at the wall showing the cattle.

“It was made by the earth dragons, for no one *other* than the earth dragons,” first replied. “We may be the first non-earth dragons to ever see it.”

“I see why you don’t want anyone disturbing the villages. If a chromatic came along and marred this, I’d bite him myself. But why keep this underground? Why hide it?”

“That is the question,” she answered, looking into the eyes of the earth dragon mother and seeing the *emotion* within them, emotion captured in cold, dark volcanic stone. “This is but one of the many works of art I discovered within the villages, but it is one of the largest, and in my opinion, one of the most beautiful.”

“I almost wish I could take it back to my den.”

“Not literally, but I’ve been studying the basics of stoneshaping magic. If I could learn how, I’d copy this onto the walls of my den.”

“You said there’s more art? Can you show me?”

“Certainly. There’s a beautiful rendition of Gaia on the wall of a chamber in Blackstone, and it’s just the next village over. We’ll have to go out, we can’t get to the tunnel that links Forest Edge and Blackstone together. It’s buried under a cave-in I can’t clear.”

“Tunnels connect the villages?”

“Only one tunnel, a circular tunnel they dug under the villages, like a grand boulevard underground,” she replied. “The work on the walls show that it was dug out with great haste, though, the walls down there lack the usual exactness and precision as the tunnels up here. I believe they only made it to evacuate the earth dragons to their hidden places without anyone knowing about it.”

It took them nearly an hour to reach Blackstone and the work of art she described, because Blackstone was one of the largest of the earth dragon villages, and it was also one of the deepest and most heavily protected by deceiving side tunnels. Blackstone also had things left behind in the common chamber, and first let tenth pick up a few trinkets, things they felt were too trivial to take up vital space, as well as a discarded shoulder satchel that first buckled to her other wing. The sculpture wasn’t in the council chambers of Blackstone, that chamber was actually very plain and utilitarian, and marks on the floor hinted that earth dragons had kept important things in the room holding the relief, perhaps works of art, perhaps artifacts important to them. Blackstone was a very important village among the earth dragons.

“Amazing,” tenth gawked at the image of Gaia, the World Dragon, an image taken right out of one of their most ancient books and etched into the stone. Gaia was coiled around herself, and just along the edges of her body was the circle that represented the earth. All dragons revered Gaia as the living soul of the planet and the mother of the dragon race.

“I know, this is probably my second most favorite,” first agreed.

“I’m almost surprised the elders haven’t come down to remove these to a safe place,” tenth breathed as she looked into the eyes of Gaia.

“I didn’t tell them about it,” first admitted. “I was afraid they’d do just that. If you made these beautiful sculptures, how would you feel if you came back and found them torn off the walls?”

“I, I guess I’d be very mad,” she answered.

“I didn’t tell them *anything* about what’s down here,” she added. “I was tasked to find where the earth dragons were hiding, and that was *all* I told them. No more, no less.”

“Why?”

“I intended to at first,” she mused, looking up at Gaia, sitting on her haunches. “I had a detailed report of everything I found ready. The art, the architecture, everything. I did give them maps of the tunnels, they told me to map them, but after a while, I realized that they didn’t...*need* to know everything. I went back and redacted my maps, removed everything but the tunnels and rooms. But then I found this very room, and I stared into Gaia’s eyes,” she breathed. “And I realized that our elders *lied* to us, classmate. I’ve always been told that the earth dragons were stupid, were little more than beasts, and existed only to serve the greater dragons as providers and beasts of burden. But could a stupid beast make *this*?” she asked, looking up into the eyes of Gaia.

Tenth of her class sat down, giving the first a long look. “But, why lie about it?”

“I don’t know. I also don’t know why the earth dragons hide things like this from us. It certainly doesn’t help. They *act* like what our elders think of them above ground, but down here, it’s like they’re entirely different. What they show the world isn’t who they really are. In some ways, they’re as secretive as the chromatics.”

“Who knows. They’re as different from us as they can be,” tenth mused absently. “Maybe they’ve been jealous of the fact that they can’t do magic, so they just shut themselves away from the other dragons. I mean, we don’t have anything in common with them.”

“They love art as much as we do,” first said, turning to look at her classmate. “That’s at least something.”

“Actually, they *did* show us who they were,” tenth mused, looking up at the sculpture. “They built the department and brought human technology to the island. They showed us they were clever about human technology.”

“And then the sky dragons destroyed it all,” first said quietly. “If you look at it that way, the earth dragons were smart to keep their secrets.”

“That doesn’t make much sense.”

“They’re defenseless, classmate,” she reasoned. “Without magic, they have no protection. Not from the humans, but from *us*,” she declared. “Look at what the sky dragons did. How long did it take them to completely destroy *everything* of the earth dragons? Two days? How long did it take them to build it all, and then it was gone, just like that,” she said, slapping her feathered tail on the floor to accent her statement.

“The earth dragons *did* kill their council member right on the aerie, in front of the entire council.”

“And we did nothing to stop the sky dragons from punishing *all* of them, not just the killer?” she countered. “Did *any* dragon other than the water dragons do *anything* to stop them? Did the entire earth dragon race deserve to suffer for the acts of one? And if not, then why does nobody *care* about such an injustice?”

Tenth was silent a long moment.

“It must be why they’re so secretive. They don’t *trust* us, and I don’t think they ever did. And after everything that’s happened, perhaps they were smart to be so suspicious. The fact that they have no magic makes

them vulnerable, and because of that, they only show their true selves here, deep under the earth, where none of us can reach them, where none of us can *see* them. Only here, where they feel they are *safe*, will they let down their guard.”

“That’s a broad generality, honored classmate,” tenth speculated. “Don’t we *all* feel safe and more at ease when surrounded only by our own? After all, do the other greater dragons truly understand us as much as we do ourselves?”

“A point worth debate, classmate,” the first of her class mused. “But time is marching without us. It’s nearly time for dinner, and we both have much studying to do.”

“Allotments or fish?”

“Fish, of course,” she replied with a smile. “It just tastes *better* eating them right out of the sea.”

“You know, honored first? I agree with you,” tenth of her class smiled in reply.

4 August 2017, 11:37 DMT; Academy Aerie

She felt quite comfortable now in her position as first of the senior class.

The former first, now second, had been popular among the ten of them as intelligent, skilled, and actually sociable, and in a way, his gracefulness at being supplanted had helped her become accepted. Over the last week, she’d demonstrated that she could be as gracious as he, maintaining discipline in the class with a gentle paw rather than harsh commands, spending time with the lower three in the class to help them, helping the second in his prior schedule of tutoring them, establishing positive relationships with their four instructors much as the second had done during

his tenure as class leader. She had turned the class into *her* class, and at least so far, things were going smoothly.

She was in such a tutoring session, with the eighth, ninth, and tenth of the class, going over the material presented to them that day by their teacher, who had once been on the council...and that had been *the* topic in the rumor mill since he'd returned. Nobody knew the exact circumstances of it, if he resigned or if he was removed, but there had been no word at all from the Council of Seven over it, not even an announcement of a new council member. They were a council of *six* as far as they knew, unless they installed a new council member in secret. Rumor, naturally, had run away with itself over the matter. Some said that their teacher had lost in a power struggle of sorts within the council, some said that he had been voted out of the council by the others, and a few rumors hinted that he'd come an antenna's flutter from being formally brought up on charges of treason against the council. Whatever had happened, their teacher had remained closed-maw about it, simply doing his job teaching them advanced applications of magic, the theories behind classes of spells and then training them in the spells themselves.

"I'm never gonna get this," ninth of the class fretted, his antenna drooping a little. Ninth had been both a great source of pride and frustration for his parents. He was the youngest in the class, *well* younger than the others, and had been touted as a prodigy when he was a hatchling. He'd managed his first spells years earlier than usual, and had earned his place in academy some twenty years younger than the usual chromatic. But since he had come to academy, he had struggled, and struggled mightily. First of her class quietly suspected that he had simply been pushed too far, had burned out, for while he seemed highly intelligent and had a natural talent and aptitude for magic, he had no focus, no discipline to apply it. They had placed so many expectations upon him that it had crushed him beneath its weight.

"Like any fire spell, you have to keep tight control over it," she said as she spread blue fire between her paws, licks of flame drifting away in

tendrils like oil spreading over the surface of water. “Why is this more useful than standard fire?”

“It sets fire to stone,” eighth in his class replied.

“Not quite. It will continue to burn when it hits stone, unlike any other fire spell. That’s why it’s called Clinging Fire,” she answered. “The magic anchors to the stone and spreads from the impact point, which is why it’s so much more demanding to use. If you must use it to defend yourself, this is the fire spell you use against a foe hiding behind stone.”

“Why are the flames blue?”

“It’s simply an element of the spell,” she answered. “Since it’s different from all other fire spells, and it burns hotter, it has a different colored flame.”

After the tutoring session, first of her class pulled her own study guide out, the one given to her by the sage, and looked at the last book on the list. She’d read all the others, books dealing with both dragon magic and basic science as chromatics knew it, to complete the task that the sage had written on the back of the paper; *Geomancy will expand your theory and lead you to the truth.*

Geomancy, also called Lithomagic, the study of the earth, stone, and its unique magical properties...or anti-magical properties, which was more precise. The sage’s reading list was mostly books on geomancy, scientific journals on the study of stone from a geological perspective, different ones exploring the effect of stone on magic, and the effect of magic on stone, and the difficult arts of lithomancy, or stoneshaping, one of the most difficult magical fields of study a chromatic could pursue. She had indeed been studying geomancy, read all the books on the list but the last, and was refining her theory that stone could disrupt the link between an earth dragon donor and his tail spike. When the earth dragons returned to the surface, they’d be easy enough to test; she just had to ask an earth dragon for a tail spike and experiment. There were plenty of tail spikes laying around, but

since she didn't know if the dragons that shed them were alive or dead, she couldn't very well use them in her experiments.

The final book on her reading list was a book she'd never heard of; *The Magic Stone*. She had to ask around with several librarians before she finally found the book, in the one library no academy chromatic would ever bother to visit. It was in the Library of Thebes, which was a *hatchling's* library, filled with books that were both instructive and purely for entertainment. The book, she finally found out, wasn't a book about geomancy, it was an ancient hatchling's storybook, so old that it was almost falling apart, kept in a shelf of forgotten tomes in the basement of the library. She repaired the book with magic and brought it out, getting all kinds of curious looks from parents who had brought their younglings to the library, but she paid them no mind as she set the book down on a table entirely too small for her and opened it, finding a writing system she'd never seen before...which explained why it was in the basement. It wasn't written in draconic. She checked the book out—one of her privileges as first of her class, since only a first could remove a book from a library without teacher permission—and took it back to the academy and showed it to her history teacher.

“That's Greek,” he told her with the most cursory of glances. “Athenian dialect, circa fifteen thousand.”

“Is there a way I can translate this, honored teacher?”

“Surely,” he shrugged. “Library of Alexandria. Ask the librarian there for the translation text for Athenian Greek. But why translate it? There should have been a translated version of the book right beside it in the library it was from.”

“I didn't see one,” she mused. “I'll go ask.”

Asking only deepened the mystery. The librarians at Thebes had to refer to their records, since most books in a non-draconic language did indeed have a translated version in the shelves. The very young male, just starting academy, gave her a curious look. “It's in the restricted room in the

Library of Atlantis,” he relayed. “Why would a hatchling’s book be *there*? It must be some kind of filing error.”

“No doubt,” the first of her class agreed.

The restricted room in the Library of Atlantis was in the cellar, for it held both dangerous tomes on advanced magic as well as ancient texts that were brittle and required great care. The room was magically enchanted so it was always cool and dry, to protect the books from mildew and rot, and as first of her class, she could enter the restricted room without teacher permission.

The book was indeed there, but strangely enough, it wasn’t in the main restricted area. It was in a sub-basement, where a single shelf of forgotten books stood in a room holding old furniture, the shelf carrying an identity placquard reading *Refurbished; To Be Filed*. She took it down and noticed that it had no title, and neither did any other book on the shelf, just a location code burned into the cover, the location code of the original Greek book she had in her shoulder satchel.

So, they’d translated the book, but had forgotten to file the new copy. That seemed a bit odd. She *worked* in the libraries, she knew that once a book was magically refurbished or a new book was made to replace an old, it was immediately shipped to its respective library and filed.

And it was odd that they’d refurbish a hatchling book *here*.

She dropped the small book in her satchel and left, not really wanting to sit down in that dark basement to read the book. She returned to her den, which still smelled of cut rock, now nice and roomy with plenty of space for her books and her reading table, her Egyptian lamp that was enchanted to glow with a soft light whenever she was within 10 *dram* of it, one of her very first permanent spells. She laid down near enough to her lamp for it to activate and put the book on her woven carpet, held between her forepaws as she started to read, curious as to why the sage would suggest this book, and why it had been so hard to track down.

Four hours later, she found out why. The book was not a youngling's adventure book. It was a very serious journal of a human magician who had lived in Greece during the height of Greek civilization, a name she vaguely recognized from somewhere, somewhere she couldn't entirely recall...

Athena. Athena had made it her mission in life to study the dragons, as much as the dragons studied the humans, and among the pages of her notes were many rather disturbing observations, such as the fact that a human bathed in dragon blood gained the racial protections of the dragon. She read that Greek warriors would often smear fire dragon blood on themselves to protect against fire used in battle, but the most coveted of all was earth dragon blood, for it protected a warrior against any kind of mortal weapon and made them nigh invulnerable. Athena's journal noted just how exceptionally rare it was for any human to *get* earth dragon blood, because the earth dragons were very shy and reclusive, fearful of humans, and the other dragon races defended them with immediate and merciless violence. Just *knowing* where an earth dragon village might be located was reason enough for the other dragons to hunt down and kill the human that had stumbled across that information.

But Athena had somehow managed to escape that fate. She had searched for and found an earth dragon village and had engaged the dragons there in conversation, approached them as a friend rather than try to attack them for their blood, and spent some twenty years among them, because it took her that long to gain their trust and get them to answer the questions she had for them. She studied the earth dragons as a scientist might, and her observations were within the journal...which violated almost everything she had ever seen or been told earth dragons were like. She wrote that they were shy, gentle creatures, utterly devoted to farm and family and content with a simple life of honest work, but highly intelligent and self-educated in matters that were of interest to them. Violence and aggression were things alien to earth dragons, so peaceful and respectful of the sanctity of life that they didn't even kill animals to eat them.

That was *nothing* like the earth dragons *she* knew. The earth dragons of today were hostile, highly aggressive little creatures, extremely territorial

and apt to attack first and ask questions later.

But it was Athena's dealings with *other* dragons while studying the earth dragons that was most curious. On eight separate occasions, she wrote, she was attacked within the earth dragon village by other dragons, mainly fire dragons, who did so with no warning and no mercy. This was *highly* aberrant dragon behavior. The final attack was by an entire group of chromatics, who had learned of the invading human who had fended off single attacks by seven other dragons. But the earth dragons spoke on her behalf, and that alone was enough to dissuade the chromatics from their murderous intent.

I find it almost irrationally curious that the chromatics, the teachers of men and the most kindly and helpful towards us, are so unreasonably violent the instant earth dragons are even mentioned, she wrote in her personal musings. The chromatics that gathered to kill me wouldn't answer my questions, and the earth dragons themselves were vague about it. They would only say that they believed it was Gaia's command to protect the earth dragons, who could not use magic. They were typically dragonlike in their words, speaking in riddles and metaphor. Krun, the village elder, was the only one that gave me an answer I could even partially understand. He told me that the dragons were following Gaia's Threefold Rule. This, of course, is a rule of which I am aware, as is anyone who has studied dragon theology. The Threefold Rule states that any action one undertakes has the potential to return to him threefold, be it positive or negative. An act of kindness may reap thrice its benefit, an act of violence cause three times the grief inflicted on the victim.

First of her class nodded almost to herself, for she knew that rule. She read on, glossing over the many customs and social intricacies of earth dragons, until she reached the end, when Athena left the village. The last part of the book was her writings about when an earth dragon sought her out, and the commotion the creature caused in her city, which would eventually be known by her own name, Athens. *It was quite a sight to behold, the young earth drake wandering about the town with childlike curiosity and kind regard for the humans he was inadvertently upsetting,*

she wrote. He had come to see me in particular, to deliver to me some writings from Krun the elder, who had passed away and wished me to have them for my studies. Within half a day, an entire group of chromatics had arrived with the intent to take the young drake in charge, but when they learned why he was there, they instead hovered around him, almost maternal in their care and highly protective of him. They acted so much differently around the drake than I am used to seeing. They treated him like their own offspring, gentle and loving, but what I could not help notice was that it was abundantly clear that the drake was the one that was in charge. They tried repeatedly to convince him to leave human lands, almost irrationally fearful for his safety, but when he spoke, they bowed to his authority. When his business with me was complete, they escorted him back home, and sufficiently terrorized the entire town with the most graphic warnings of untold agony for any who dared try to follow.

It took me nearly five years to finally understand this behavior. After much research and study on the subject, including a perhaps not entirely honorable moment where I drugged a fire dragon with an herb that makes them giddy and talkative, I learned one of the great secrets of the dragons. The four flying races of dragons consider the earth dragons to be blessed by Gaia in ways that make them almost holy to their kind, and will fight to the death to protect them. The fire dragon told me that they were earthbound and without magic by choice. She related that in the beginning, only the earth dragons had those gifts, but they had given them up willingly, sacrificed those gifts to the other dragons so that they might fly and do magic themselves. In return for this ultimate act of generosity, Gaia dictated that the other dragons protect and nurture those who had given so much of themselves to their kin. The earth dragons themselves, however, don't believe this legend, and are quite tolerant of the perhaps overprotective natures of the other dragons concerning them. The earth dragons believe that they never had those gifts, had never had need of them, and that Gaia told the other dragons to remember humility by caring for their less powerful kin.

Whether or not either legend is true, the one thing that is certain is that earth dragons are so revered by the flying dragon races that to threaten an earth dragon is to invite immediate and merciless wrath. That is more than enough for most humans to lose all curiosity over the earth dragons and leave them well alone. Rarely if ever do we see the noble dragons act so aggressively...and when we do, it is a sight that inspires naught but raw terror.

First of her class closed the book, lost in thought. She didn't believe the legend either, but it was entirely possible that back then, some three thousand years ago, the dragons could have had much different attitudes concerning the earth dragons. If she accepted that idea as truth for the sake of argument, what could have caused such a change? The sky dragons *hated* the earth dragons, barely considered them at all until one of their own was killed by an earth dragon, and then they went utterly berserk. The fire dragons fought endlessly with them, and her own kind saw them as stupid little creatures whom Gaia had commanded they rule over. Only the water dragons cared for the earth dragons, whom they saw as loyal little pets in need of guidance and protection...but water dragons were protective by their very nature, their magic aligned thus. The water dragons cared about all dragons, not just the earth dragons, for they had abandoned the open seas to come to the island to nurture their kin, when the water dragons were the only dragons that truly had no need for their island sanctuary.

Perhaps, she pondered, *all* the dragons could learn something from the water dragons.

But the question ghosted again through her mind. Why did the sage want her to read this? What could it mean to her theory? It was the musings of a human magician, which could not be independently verified. What meaning did it have for her theory, which was a simple theory that the link between earth dragons and their tail spikes could be disrupted without the earth dragon dying. What use did this information serve for her theory?

None.

So why did the sage want her to read this book?

That...escaped her.

But, she could admit that it was somewhat curious, reading this book about what could possibly be ancient history, at least if the book could be believed. What could have caused such change? What could turn the pacifistic earth dragons into the degenerate, bloodthirsty little savages they were now? Was that what caused the change of attitude of the other dragons towards them? Had the descent of the earth dragons from nobility to barbarism caused the other dragons to stop protecting them?

And yet, the sculptures within the villages...that was not the work of a barbarian.

She blinked and turned the book back over so it was face up, rapping her claws on the floor beside the carpet, lost in thought. It wasn't what she was intending to study, but perhaps a little investigation through the history books they kept in the Library of Camelot might answer a few of her questions. She could research the matter in her spare time, if only to satisfy her curiosity. After all, there was no real hurry, and she had plenty of time.

The history she'd been taught didn't entirely match up with what was in this book, and she was the kind of dragon that couldn't resist the mystery of it. Who was correct, Athena or her parents?

She'd find out. It may take a few years, but it wasn't all that important, and it would give her something to do when she was looking for something to do.

Chapter 13

5 August 2017, 14:26 HDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kilauea

Sessara was a much better teacher than she thought she was.

Kell had said that the fire dragons weren't very smart, *we think all that fire in them cooks their brains* he'd joked to her, but after many days among the fire dragons, Jenny had drawn an entirely different conclusion. Fire dragons were smart. They were *very* smart. In fact, Sessara was downright intelligent. She was learning English at a nearly supernatural rate, having mastered a vocabulary of nearly 1,000 words and grasping the tricky metaphors strewn through the language that made it so hard for people to learn. English was a language of relatively simple rules grammatically speaking, but it was a minefield of idioms, words with multiple meanings whose only means of reasoning out which meaning applied was context, and a truly vast vocabulary of words that had multiple meanings on top of that. Sessara had the grammatical skills of a four year old, capable of smooth sentence structure, and was now able to follow English conversation more or less, puzzling out the meaning of words she didn't know by the context of how they were used with words whose meanings she did.

Four years of learning in a little over a month. That demonstrated just how smart Sessara was.

What made them *seem* not quite so smart was that, like many humans, they were ruled by their emotions. They were impulsive and short-tempered, very aggressive, and often acted before thinking things entirely through. They also had a somewhat simplistic world view that dealt with their social custom of being a race of gang members...literally. Fire dragon

society was a hierarchy where the strong ruled the weak, where bullying wasn't just commonplace, it was *expected*, a society of "king of the mountain" where the top dragon enjoyed all the spoils of his station, but only so long as he or she could hold it. Sessara maintained her position mainly through the threat of violence against the other dragons. And they were *all* afraid of Sessara, even the wyrms.

Not because she was a powerful dragon or a nasty fighter, but because she was the *best* magician among the fire dragons. Her magic made up for her lack of size when she squared off against the wyrms, capable of many spells outside of the usual fire dragon sphere of destructive magicks, and with a sound education in magic and magical application.

Hatch, the Hunter's resident nerd, likened the fire dragons to Klingons. That made Jenny laugh, at least until Hatch explained Klingons to her. In the *Star Trek* shows, they were seen as warmongering savages, but in reality, they had a rich culture that included opera, literature, and science. It was just that their love of the glory of battle and their willingness to die for their cause poisoned the view of others against them. In that sense, Jenny could agree, sort of. It wasn't that the fire dragons weren't intelligent, it was just that their social customs made them look brutish.

If one wanted to prove just how smart a fire dragon could be, one just had to say the word *football*. Sessara knew *everything* about football, players, stats, rules, its history...she could even name the winner of every single Superbowl since they began, and could name the winners of the championship games they played before it became known as the Superbowl all the way back to the beginning. She knew as much about legendary players like Jim Brown and Bart Starr as she did about current players, like Andrew Luck or Jacob Weathers. She followed college football as well, but mainly as a means of assessing players that would enter the NFL, where other dragons were more inclined towards the NCAA than they were the NFL. Her knowledge of football was vast and complete, always at the tip of her tongue to unleash her encyclopedic knowledge in the many debates that raged among the fire dragons about their favorite sport, debates that,

surprisingly enough, never erupted into violence no matter how vociferously the dragons were arguing about some obscure statistic.

Watching the first preseason game with Sessara and several other dragons was an experience. Sessara would be an *amazing* coach, analyzing what she saw on the field like a general and picking it apart, and half the game turned into a running debate among the fire dragons about which defensive schemes the Colts should use as the Redskins let their different quarterbacks take turns leading the offense, and vice versa, then rating the play of virtually every player that had played the game to determine who would get cut and who would make the roster. After the game, Jenny watched the ESPN postgame and heard almost everything she'd heard from the fire dragons coming out of the analyst's mouths.

The other thing that had gotten weird to her was how...*normal* it felt now, coming to the exclusion zone and interacting with dragons. All the Hunters had agreed to that, how it just felt like coming to work, joking with their friends among the fire dragons, learning about magic from Sessara, even playing with the hatchlings. Greg and Davie arrived every day just after lunch to learn about magic, and in the ultimate example of how comfortable she was now, she never worried about Davie as he wandered around the place. The fire dragons kept an eye on him, herded him in the opposite direction if he got too close to the lava flows, taught him draconic, and the fire dragon hatchlings didn't bully Davie the way they bullied each other. Actually, at first they tried to stay away from him, mainly because their mothers had warned them not to hurt the human hatchling, and fire dragons were very rough when they played. But Davie could be very determined. He'd decided he wanted to make friends with the "dragon babies," as he called them, and he worked his way into their social circles with an affable personality. Because of that, they sort of adopted Davie as a mascot, and they always welcomed him among them as they played their games, where he most often served as the scorekeeper since he was too small to really play with them.

Davie wasn't playing right now, he was sitting in front of Sessara, listening to her with rapt attention as the Hunters clustered around her,

along with Private Kevin Winters, U.S. Army, only 18 and on his first duty assignment after finishing initial MOS training as an MP. He was the *only* one that Sessara tested in her blind study experiment that had magical aptitude, just one out of 23. That fact caused Sessara to conclude that it was blind luck that put all these magicians in one place. Jenny, however, wanted to look more into the subject, mainly to try to figure out *how* twelve magicians somehow all ended up on the same elite government law enforcement agency, when no human had any inkling of magic. Was there some kind of outside force at work? Or was Yancy himself a magician, who had picked his team based on hunches that were in fact grounded in his latent magical abilities?

It was something to consider, at least when she had the time.

Arlen and Jenny had excused themselves from the lesson about sensing the power of magic for a brief time, giving the daily briefing to President Walker. One of the other fire dragon females, Gressa, sat on her haunches behind them, looking at the monitor that showed Walker's face. Sessara had been learning English quickly, but Gressa was the best English speaker among the dragons, having a natural aptitude for the language and spending more time than the others pestering the Hunters for lessons. Gressa was also one of the fire drakes that almost always sat in on the magic training, for she was probably the third best magician among the adult females. Where Sessara sounded like a four year old, Gressa had the English language skills of a second grader. She wasn't *entirely* fluent, but she could easily hold a conversation as long as the human didn't use exotic words.

All that, in a *month and a half*. If that didn't demonstrate that the fire dragons were far more intelligent than even their dragon cousins believed, nothing did.

The fire dragons had been remarkably forthcoming about some things that Jenny would have thought they'd keep a secret. They'd told them about the failure of the scions, with three of them having failed, and the discontent it was causing to ripple through *all* the dragon societies, not just the fire dragons. This had turned into something serious, a definite pattern of failing

magic, and since it concerned Jenny and the Hunters due to their magical aptitude, they'd been told about it.

It was that subject Gressa addressed to President Walker, speaking *amazingly* good English for someone who had only started learning it a month and a half ago. "The chromatics have been sending out messages for the last week, honored President," she explained. "They're trying to arrange a, how do you say...*summit*? Summit, yes. Bring the sages among the magic-using dragon races together to discuss the problem, chromatic, fire, water, and sky."

"Any word on if it's going to happen?" Walker asked.

"It will," she replied. "We will keep our young here, but Sessara and a few others of us will return to the island to discuss the matter. It is this she wished you to know. We will be gone some number of days, but we will leave competent rulership in our place. Frazza."

"I don't like Frazza," Jenny said darkly. "She's a bitch."

"She is the only one that will keep the others in check without Sessara here," Gressa told her evenly. "Only Sessara doesn't fear her."

"This might be the opportunity to bring in that sociologist we promised to interview the dragons," Walker mused. "Since things will settle down some with the fire dragon sages off island."

"We were thinking the same thing, mister President," Arlen nodded.

"Did you choose one?"

He nodded. "Professor Martin Mickelson, U.C. Berkeley," he replied.

"Well, since preseason started, the fire dragons certainly won't be bored," Jenny chuckled.

"Yes! The Hall of Fame game was most fun to watch," Gressa nodded with a smile. "But the real game is this weekend!"

“Oh, right, the Dragons play their first preseason game against the Seahawks,” Walker chuckled. “Did you get all those banners and flags up?”

“Oh yes,” Gressa grinned. “We wanted to ask for special food for the game. Snacking food?”

“Snack food,” Jenny corrected. “But I’m not sure I want to pump all that sugar into the hatchlings and let them loose. It could be a disaster.”

Walker laughed. “Anything else you needed to pass along, Gressa?”

“No, honored President,” she answered. “Your tribute has been generous, and because of that, we have no demands.”

“Very well, then, thank you for your time, Gressa. I need to speak with Jenny and Arlen a moment.”

“Of course. Make it quick, you two, Sessara gets impatient when you shirk her lessons.”

After Gressa returned to the magic lesson, sitting beside Davie and leaning down to look at what Sessara was drawing on the ground, Jenny turned back to the monitor. “So, things are still stalemated on their island outside of that?” Walker asked.

“As far as we know, Mister President,” Arlen replied. “Sessara gets messages from Hirrag, the other fire dragon council member, and nothing indicates there’s any changes.”

“Hmm. Any new security breaches?”

“Not since yesterday,” Arlen replied. “Just another reporter trying to sneak up here. What about the Chinese? Anything new that hasn’t reached my desk yet?”

“Screaming louder and louder,” he replied with a grunt. “Publicly, they’re all but accusing us of holding the fire dragons prisoner. Privately, their diplomats are all but threatening economic sanctions if we don’t give them access. I’ve never seen them this bull-headed about anything. I almost

believe they're willing to cause a global recession just to bully us into getting their way."

"Well, didn't you want to start that initiative to lessen our dependence on Chinese trade?" Arlen asked.

Walker chuckled. "I certainly did, so I'm inclined tell them to stick their demands up their asses," he remarked. "I could even turn around and hit them over the head with that currency policy."

They finished up with some minor points, then Arlen left to go to his field office. He was still the Secretary of State, and while this was *slightly* important, he still had all his other work to do. Jenny wandered over to the lesson, which was mainly for Davie, listening to her explain the currents of magic in ways Davie would understand.

But both Sessara and Gressa stopped and looked up, concern on their faces. "What is it?" she asked in draconic.

"A sky dragon, and not hiding itself," Gressa replied.

Jenny looked up, and she saw it. The huge wings made it unmistakable; it was indeed a sky dragon. Long and whip-like, with that slender body and spindly limbs designed to snatch prey in their talons rather than carry its weight on the ground, the sky dragon descended slowly, almost lazily, from almost directly over them. When the dragon got closer, she recognized him; it was Hinado!

"Hinado!" Jenny called, waving to him. Where had he been? Sessara had been looking for him, Hirrag had been looking for him, they said that the water dragons had been looking for him...*everyone* had been looking for him! And now he finally shows up?

He landed lightly just in front of Sessara, who was giving him a curious look. They chattered at each other in draconic, far too fast for her to make out more than a word here and there, then Hinado's glowing blue eyes looked down at her. "Jenny," he nodded.

“Where have you been?” she demanded in draconic.

“Busy,” he replied, giving her a slight smile. “Your draconic is much better.”

“She makes me practice,” she replied, pointing at Sessara. “Busy with what?”

“Watching,” he replied. He started chattering with Sessara, and Gressa brought her head low to translate, her English losing some of its polish as she was forced to translate quickly. “Sky dragons getting mad at chromatics,” she relayed. “Soon Hinado try to take control back, when they get very mad, when they listen again. Sessara tell him of summit, say three scions fail. Hinado say he go too. Banish or no, if scions fail, serious problem. Must talk.”

“Do you think the chromatics would let him?” Jenny asked quietly.

“Not their concern. Between Hinado and sky elders,” she replied. “Sky elders maybe beg him come back, Hinado very smart, good leader. This no time for dragons to fight each other.” She listened. “Sessara tell him of all humans here with magic. Hinado very surprised so many in one place.” Hinado looked to Jenny, and she understood what he said. “Can I stay here until Sessara leaves?”

“Of course!” she replied in draconic. “All dragons welcome here, Hinado! Want to talk to you!”

“And I want to talk to you,” he agreed. “Much to discuss. Much to teach,” he noted, glancing over at the other Hunters, and the deer-in-the-headlight look of Private Kevin Winters. “All of them?”

“All of them,” Sessara nodded.

“Curious. Very curious,” he said. “Come, Sessara. Tell me what they’ve learned, so I know where to start.”

“I’m glad of it, I’m not a good teacher,” she admitted. “You’re *much* better suited.”

14 August 2017, 17:39 DMT; The Library of Camelot

The word had already spread through every library like wildfire. The fifth scion had failed.

That was a shock. A real shock. Only two days ago, they'd heard about the fourth scion failing, and it had only been 5 days from that that the third had failed. The fifth scion had failed just *two days* after the fourth. And after writing down the dates they had failed, she saw that they were failing faster and faster. Nearly a month after the first, fourteen days after the second, five days after the third, and only two days after the fourth. Each failure was *less than half* the time of the previous. If they continued to fail in that pattern, then the sixth would fail *tomorrow*, and the last three would fail on the very next day within hours of one another.

That was five of the nine scions, gone. And the island was now in full-blown panic.

Panic enough to bring the sages of the dragon races back to the island. Despite the discord between the races, the failure of the scions was so important, so grave, that four water dragons and three fire dragons had arrived the day before, as well as all the members of the dragon council, including the banished sky drake, Hinado. They were here to pool their knowledge with the chromatics and try to understand what was happening, and once they determined the cause, try to correct it.

It left the Library of Camelot virtually deserted. This library was the repository of most of the non-magical books the chromatics kept, books on history, science, even fiction and other entertainment books, as well as many human tomes the earth dragons had brought from human lands that the chromatics filed, because a book was a book, though earth dragons weren't *allowed* in the library. Earth dragons kept their own libraries in their villages. Almost every chromatic was in the other libraries, reading

anything and everything they could get their claws on, studying and researching like crazy to see if *anyone* could find *anything* that might lead them to the truth behind the crisis. Even the academy was engaged in the effort, though they were needed more for their manual labor than their magical knowledge. Those libraries needed librarians, after all.

She was already a librarian, but instead of working in her own library, they had sent her here to run the Library of Camelot by herself...which was very easy when she had no patrons to cater. So, since she only had to fetch books for herself, well, she had plenty of spare time. She had been assigned to Camelot just yesterday, replacing the entire library staff so they could serve in the much busier libraries. It let her research the historical journals she'd been curious to read, reading a little about pre-modern draconic history. Humans considered it ancient history, but since recorded dragon history went back some 18,000 years, 3,000 years ago wasn't all that far in the past.

What she learned was...disjointed. Incomplete. Further research did tend to support Athena's observations about draconic behavior in that time period. The earth dragons were very shy and reclusive, and the other dragons defended them with nearly unreasoning violence, even chromatics. The texts didn't go very deeply into this behavior, obviously written at the time and done so with a basic frame of historical reference that modern dragons lacked. The dragons back then knew why they did it, and considered it such basic common knowledge that the idea of recording it for posterity had seemed ridiculous to them.

Her research had pinpointed the only real changes in historical reference she could find, and that coincided with the dragons withdrawing from human lands and human civilization. One historian, a chromatic named Veldela, had a private journal in the library that conveyed her sense of betrayal and outrage over the humans turning against them. *We, who gave them so much, who taught them, nurtured them, considered them as our very friends, have been betrayed on every level by the humans*, she wrote. *The Pope has declared us to be demonspawn, the agents of Satan and enemy to all mankind, and even worse, he has ordered the complete*

excisement of dragons from their records, from their very history, to hide the contributions the chromatics have provided mankind, even the very church. Do they forget so quickly that it was the chromatics that helped build their basilica? That magic placed the works of art on their walls, their ceiling, that shaped the statues of their virgin Mary and Christ the Holy Redeemer they so revere within the nave? Magic infuses all of Rome, will they burn Rome to the ground now?

That was curious to read, but it was the story of Camelot itself that got her attention as the point where the earth dragons began to change. It had several versions in multiple history books, but they all agreed on certain points. The earth dragons had built Camelot out of respect for Arthur, some kind of deep friendship the earth dragons of Britain had for the monarch, but had also declared that Camelot would only stand so long as Arthur's line sat upon the throne. After Arthur was assassinated by a female assassin hired by his half-sister, and one of his trusted knights betrayed him and killed both Arthur's wife and children to assume the throne for himself, the earth dragons attacked Camelot, slaughtered the legendary Knights of the Round Table, impaled Lancelot the Betrayer on one of their tail spikes and left him in the courtyard, then they tore the entire city of Camelot down. That displaced thousands of civilians and townsfolk, who spread the story of how the earth dragons, the shy, reclusive, gentle earth dragons, had gone berserk and tore Camelot down to such a degree that they even pulled up the foundations of the buildings and carried away the stones so as to deny humanity *anything* that had ever been part of Camelot. The only thing they left was a hideous scene of dead knights, their heads all taken off and laid in a great circle around what had once been the courtyard, a grim mockery of the Round Table. The bodies of Arthur and his family had been spirited away by the earth dragons, and then the earth dragons abandoned Britain completely, moving into what was now Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

Only one knight survived the slaughter, because he was off on a quest. Sir George of the Gray vowed revenge on the dragons for their destruction of Camelot, and became known in both human and dragon history as Saint George, the Dragonslayer. George had managed to kill five dragons before

being killed himself, using cunning and steel weapons to slay five fire dragons, the first three of which were attacked by ambush, thinking that humans were still their friends, which the dragons considered to be the paramount of cowardice.

What had caused the earth dragons to do something so *violent*, she pondered. It seemed much unlike what the histories said of them. What could have driven a race of pacifists to act in such a barbaric fashion?

But that was the turning point. There were no mention of attitudes towards the earth dragons among their cousin changing in the histories, but it was when the humans started to turn against the dragons. News of the destruction of Camelot spread across Europe, and from what she'd read, it started a series of events that eventually led to the church declaring that dragons were the enemies of mankind, and that led to the ultimate self-imposed exile of the dragons to the island.

Like most chromatic libraries, the master list of books wasn't easy to find. The librarians were the ones that kept the books in order, were expected to know *every* book in their library and where it was, and it was a measure of control the librarians exercised to not let others know as much as they did. Such secrecy was commonplace in chromatic society, where chromatics kept secrets from each other. So, for a librarian not assigned to this library, she knew how to find books due to the filing system, but she didn't know what books they had. It required her to dig around quite a bit, peruse the titles in a section to find the book most aligned with what she wanted to learn. So, she was a bit surprised when she came across a book about magic in the historical section. The title on the spine was almost always an abridged version of the actual title, for chromatics tended to be very literal about naming their books. The spine read *Magical History of Atlantis*, but the full title read *The Rise and Fall of Atlantis: A Comprehensive History of Magical City of Atlantis From Birth to Death*.

Intrigued, she took the book out and found that it probably hadn't been read in a thousand years. The librarians kept it in decent condition, but a librarian could tell when a book wasn't read regularly due to the stiffness of

the spine and pages. The filing code told her that there was another copy of this book in the Library of Atlantis, which probably explained why this particular book wasn't used as much. She took it over to the reading table and opened it, finding an illustration of an earth dragon on the first page, the title and author just under it. That meant that an *earth dragon* had written this book. The dragon's name had been Kem, and from the preface, had been the only earth dragon in Atlantis when the disaster destroyed it, there to study history. Several other books written by Kem were listed on the inner page, mainly dealing with more detailed studies of both human and draconic history that were before Kem's time. Kem's foreword told her that he had thought it would be a good rounding out of the historical record to tell the story of the magical city from a frame of reference of those who had built it...and then *unbuilt* it. Atlantis had fallen while Kem was there researching other historical subjects, and he had been one of the earth dragons that had disassembled the city to deny it to the barbarians that roamed what is now southern coastal Spain, south of Portugal.

She started to read the book, more out of honest curiosity than a need to research her own subject, learning more about Atlantis in a few hours than she'd learned in years in lectures in history in academy. She learned how the great magicians of the era had decided that creating a single place to pool their knowledge would benefit magic as a whole, but such a place had to be built the right way, magical in design and complementing magical forces...and that meant earth dragons. The chromatics had secured the cooperation of five different villages of earth dragons, and they came together and raised the city using only the best materials; the most pristine marbles, the richest granites, the city built in three concentric circles that would help influence magical forces used within the city. The earth dragons built at its center a grand library that rivaled such wonders as the Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens, even the great palaces of the Egyptian pharaohs, a true architectural marvel of sweeping towers and towering walls. After it was built, it became the greatest repository of magical lore ever brought together, the fabled Library of Eternity; the chromatic council chambers had taken on that name for its sages to honor that lost library.

Kem described a day in the life of an average citizen, which he told with an attention to detail that almost made her seem to be transported back to that legendary place and become Tevak the Merchant, one of the many non-magical humans that dwelled in Atlantis due to the fact that it was probably the best place for a merchant to ply his trade. Tevak was a modestly successful businessman, a Moor by ancestry but much more cultured than his barbarian cousins, who dealt in textiles; cloth, dyes, raw wool, carpets, and tapestries. He wasn't a citizen of the city, so he couldn't call himself an Atlantean, but he had lived there for most of his life. In fact, most of the residents of the city weren't citizens, for only a magician could be a citizen. Kem described an average day in Tevak's life, from spending his early morning at the baths, where much business was conducted, to visiting his two shops to make sure things were running smoothly, then a day visiting other merchants to maintain friendships, do business, and make new contacts. Evenings were spent with the family, his two wives and five children, playing his *citaran*, occasionally entertaining guests, and from time to time they would go to parties thrown by other merchants. Once a month, however, there was a festival of sorts in the center of the city, a night celebrating the full moon where the inhabitants of the city would bring food to share with their neighbors and eat under the moonlight, creating a strong sense of community that didn't exist in most cities of the era.

Then, Kem described the disaster. He'd been there when it happened, so his writing was very detailed. He wrote that first there was an earthquake, a powerful earthquake that shook down anything in the city that the earth dragons didn't build, and just as the city was in a full-blown panic some ten minutes after the temblor eased, a wall of water some 50 *kaddams* high—that was about 42 *dram*—slammed into the city. The tidal wave was created by the earthquake, and it washed virtually anything that couldn't fly either inland at the vanguard of the wave or out to sea as the waves washed in and out, each one building on the last, until the entire coast was underwater and the only parts of the city above the roaring, building waves were the towers and the library. Kem himself had ridden out the tidal waves clinging to the side of the library, climbing up the side just as the first wave

roared down the river and into the shallow lakebed upon which the city had been built, then sitting on the top with several other dragons, watching in horror until a sky dragon happened to come to the area and pick Kem up and lift him into the safety of the air...because there was nowhere else to take him and he wanted to stay near the city so he could help once the water receded.

That took almost the full day, and when the water finally drained back down the river and back to the sea, there was nothing but mud-choked devastation left behind. Most of the smaller buildings had been scoured away, leaving only the dragon-built walls and major buildings. The tidal waves had killed nearly the entire population of the city, the only survivors those few that managed to reach the Library of Eternity, but the magical protections of the library held, keeping the tidal wave out and saving the books and scrolls.

Then there was the aftermath. The city had been decimated, and to the east, tens of thousands of Moorish barbarians were gathering, eager to plunder the remains of the city. What was worse was that the city's geography and geology had been ravaged by the earthquake and tidal waves, making the entire city unstable and unsafe. The entire area had *sunk* during the earthquake, enough for water to start to collect in the ancient lakebed in which the city had been built, which would place the entire city under 10 *kaddams* of water once the water levels stabilized. The dragons decided that the city was beyond salvaging, and it would take too much repair to restore the city...and after what had happened, with the ghastly loss of life, it was decided that Atlantis was best left in their memories. Earth dragons were brought to the ruins of the city, and they bent to the task of taking the city apart just as their ancestors had built it a thousand years before, as the flying dragons gathered up the books, scrolls, and magical treasures in the Library of Eternity and spiriting them away to the east, taking them to what would eventually be known as Alexandria, and those tomes would be part of the Great Library that had once stood there. The earth dragons took the city apart all the way down to the foundations, stacking the stone along the edges of the lakebed, and once they were done,

they returned to their homes to leave the stone for the barbarians to use as they saw fit...for the stone was the only thing they would get.

Referring to maps of the area the earth dragons had gleaned in their ventures into human lands, she saw that the area that had once been Atlantis was now a wetland, uninhabited by humans. Atlantis, the greatest city in the history of both human and dragon kind...reduced to a *swamp*. Such a pity.

And it answered her question as to why they simply didn't repel the barbarians and rebuild the city, which would have been easy for dragons. If the entire area had been sunk, turned into a swamp, that would make it a very bad place to put a city, especially in those ancient times. Swamps bred diseases, and those would have decimated the human population.

She closed the book, thoughtful and even a little entertained. She hadn't been studying the subject, but it had been a good book to read, and she had learned a great deal even as Kem's easy, personable writing style had kept her entertained.

But, it wasn't what she was here to study. She dug back into the stacks, searching for books that would explain when and how things changed for the dragons in the 15th millennium, how earth dragons had turned from gentle to savage and the other dragons' opinions of them mirrored their descent into barbarism. However, she learned after digging for a while that books on *earth dragons* were very rare, so rare that it seemed...*wrong*. Certainly *someone* had decided to study earth dragons, as Athena had done. Someone *had* to have documented the fall of earth dragon society from their fateful actions at Camelot up until the creation of their island, of Draconia. And yet, nothing. No books on earth dragons, not even from *before* Camelot, no books on what happened to them, no books on what happened to everyone else. Just dusty history books documenting the increasing hostility of humanity to the dragons up until the Pope declared them the enemies of men and eradicated all mention of dragons and their contributions from human history, as thoroughly as the ancient Egyptians had eradicated the memory of convicted criminals and tyrants.

She slowed to a stop, and realized something. That was just *impossible*. There *had* to be books like that. For dragons not to document something was unusual, but to not document something so momentous as a fundamental shift in the entire culture and society of the earth dragons?

Impossible. Absolutely impossible.

There were, however, little bits and pieces in the books that were there. One book about the early Catholic church had a single paragraph about earth dragons, mainly the church's condemnation of the earth dragons after they destroyed Camelot, then the ascension of a Pope that had *been* in Camelot when the earth dragons attacked it. That Pope, the book read, had secretly tried to kill off the earth dragons, but had found that all the earth dragon villages the church knew about had been abandoned, and the earth dragons had retreated into inaccessible places. Another book mentioned the earth dragons only briefly, just before the dragons retreated to their island, mentioning the Vikings finding earth dragon villages deep in what was now Scandinavia and opening relations with them...until the Catholic Church made headways into Viking territory.

Again, it was strange. The only books here that mentioned *anything* about the earth dragons or that time were only ones that told her how evil the church was. No books about what was going on over in Asia or down in Africa, no books about the Eastern Roman Empire, just book after book denouncing the church and what they did to the dragons.

She may be a young dragon, but she knew *propaganda* when she saw it. Every book in the historical section supported what she'd been taught, and there was not a single book in the library that offered any alternate viewpoints...not even books about anything else happening. If the library was to be believed, the rest of the world didn't exist outside of Europe between the time of the fall of Camelot and the retreat of the dragons to their isolated Pacific island. Perhaps nobody else bothered to document outside of Europe because that was where everything was happening concerning the dragons, but she rather doubted it. *Some* dragon would have visited Constantinople, or Damascus, or Persia, or perhaps India and China,

with whom the sky dragons especially had contact because they could fly that kind of distance much faster than any other dragon.

So, someone was hiding something...and given the chromatic bent for secrecy, it had to be her elders. What exactly were they trying to hide? And for what purpose?

She replaced the book in the shelf after making some notes in her journal, pausing a moment to wonder at what was going on up on Council Aerie at that moment. The banished sky drake was back, as were all the original council members save the earth dragons and the sky wyrm that was killed. There was only one subject, of course...the magic crisis. Part of her wished she could be up there, to be *that* important...but another part of her rather liked being alone in a library full of books, to have almost the leisure to peruse at her whim, to read books that were almost frivolous. To relax, just a tiny bit, if only for an afternoon of light reading.

Something she suspected would be in *very* short supply on the island, for some time to come.

14 August 2017, 20:01 DMT; Sanctuary City

Kell had never courted a female before, but he found courting one that lived in his burrow with him...*weird*.

It wasn't entirely unheard of. Often, the hired worker in a family had lots of contact with the family, and as such courtships often blossomed from friendships. But on another level, Kell felt a certain sense of *expectation* surrounding his courtship of Kammi. For one, everyone in the family adored her, from his siblings all the way to Keth. She fit well in the burrow, babysitting the hatchlings and capable of both being someone they could wrestle with and someone that could make them obey her at the same time, providing companionship for Kanna, able to hold her own in debate with the wise Keth, and of course, she and Kell had the same job, so they had a

great deal in common. Kammi almost seemed like she'd lived in the burrow with them for years sometimes, and she was completely comfortable with them as much as they were with her.

Courtship did have some requirements. First and foremost, the two dragons had to spend every possible moment they could together, because that was one way they could figure out if they were compatible enough to spend the rest of their lives together. But one of the parts that made it weird for him, and probably for her too, were the talks. Kell had to more or less bare his soul to Kammi and her to him, sharing secrets and shames, victories and defeats, strengths and weaknesses. Both dragons were expected to keep what they learned about their intended in the strictest confidence—it was actually illegal to divulge information learned in courtship—but again, what made it weird was that he was sharing secrets with someone he worked with in the department. If their courtship failed, and the strong majority of them did, he'd have to deal with Kammi on a daily basis. That put a little strain on things, because they had to make sure they stayed friends even if they found that they weren't compatible lifemates, but since it was something that both of them understood, it did make it a little easier. He was fairly sure they'd be even better friends even if their courtship failed, but the disappointment that would be prevalent in the burrow would make it a little hard on them, as well as the fact that they'd be living together in the same burrow after the courtship failed.

Well, for a little while. If things fell through, Kell would dig out his own burrow. He'd lived by himself before all this started, he'd go back to it.

But, so far, their courtship had gone very well. Kell and Kammi *were* good friends, and their talks were engaging, occasionally silly, but always entertaining. Kell had Kammi pegged in that she was a young drake with a mischievous streak and maybe just a little hatchling in her, but that also made her a lot of fun. She was a drake that found a good mock fight as much fun as sitting around talking perl or java. Kell was much more sober and mature than she, but she never let him put on airs, teasing and baiting him into acting as immature as his hatchling siblings from time to time.

Kanna, of course, was already completely convinced that Kammi was going to be Kell's lifemate, completely ignoring the fact that few courtships ended in a lifemating, and even fewer *first* courtships did. Kell sometimes felt that Kammi was getting far more information about him than he was getting about her, because Kanna was spilling all the secrets of his youth, even braving her powerful emotions to tell Kammi about the day Kell's brothers had died, killed in a fall from the side of the volcano. The two of them had snuck off during chores to climb what they called Hanging Rock, which was a boulder jutting out of the slope of the volcano. But the boulder was a piece of stone that had rolled down the slope when the volcano formed and settled in ash that compressed into brittle rock, and the two juvenile earth dragons had weighed too much. Their weight pulled the boulder free, and they'd been killed in the fall off the cliff as the boulder took them with it, literally rolled over them as they climbed up the side, which never gave them even a chance to jump free and try to glide to safety. That had happened at the extreme north corner of the farm, and Kanna would not come within eyesight of where his brothers' bodies had been found, not even now. Keth had to do all the work on the north slope tract, because Kanna would not set paw on it. The boulder had been torn up and removed, both to get it out of the tract and because Kanna could see it from the burrow, and just seeing it made her fall to pieces. They'd even gone to the length of patching the gaping hole in the side of the volcano so the empty socket of the boulder wouldn't remind her of her lost children.

Earth dragons were *very* attached to their hatchlings, because of their very slow reproduction cycle. But, when a female did lay eggs, she always laid either two or three, and she laid three 90% of the time. Only once in Kell's memory had a female laid any number other than two or three, and that was when Jedra laid four eggs...and only one of them hatched. Kammi was actually rather rare in that she was from a clutch of two, her and her brother, and her parents had not had any luck since producing another clutch.

The whole city knew that Kell and Kammi were intended, and they'd been plotting in secret along with Kanna to make sure it happened, it

seemed. Ferroth suddenly couldn't schedule them any other way but on the same shift, often in the same room, maximizing their time together. Jukra had decided that Kammi needed to be there whenever Kell trained drakes in underwater digging, and Fredda made sure that any time Kell was over at the thermal plant learning more about industrial power, Kammi was right there with him.

But, he didn't mind all that much. He *did* like Kammi, and they had fun together, even when they were working.

What he did mind, or more to the point, what was starting to worry him, was just how alike she was getting to him.

Yesterday, one of her spikes fell out. This wasn't uncommon, sometimes spikes just fell out on their own, especially if they were very old. But the half-grown crystal that replaced it was clear, just like the spike in his tail. She was growing a shanker, and she *didn't* throw all of her spikes to incite it. She was quite surprised about it, surprised enough for them to visit the apothecary, a healer among earth dragons who used herbal remedies and natural cures rather than healing magic...because earth dragons couldn't use magic. The job of apothecary was actually fairly easy, because of earth dragon physiology. They were very hard to injure, and if they were injured, they healed *very* fast. They could even regrow lost limbs and teeth, their bodies regenerating back to health if they had enough time, at least when they were young. An earth dragon's regenerative powers faded as they aged. Kell was young enough to regrow a lost limb, but Keth was not. So what apothecaries did was just ensure that conditions were optimal for an earth dragon to heal himself, deal with pain and any possible infections, and treat the occasional illness.

Kell was sitting beside her as the apothecary, Foll, studied Kammi's tail with a glass. "Interesting, but nothing so dire to bring to me over," he declared.

"Well, it's unusual because I didn't throw all my spikes before it grew in," she told him, looking back behind herself.

“That’s not *necessary* to grow the occasional aberrant spike,” he chided. “Fairly rare, of course, but not necessary. Does the socket tingle any?”

“Nope. Feels just like growing any other spike,” she replied, shifting her tail slightly.

“Then you’ll be just fine. You can either loose it once it’s grown enough to come off its anchor, or you can keep it like your friend here has with his.”

Kell glanced at his own tail and chuckled. “I’m kinda used to it,” he said. “If anything, it makes me easy to identify from a distance,” he chuckled.

“It looks grown enough to loose, if you want to get rid of it.”

“Oh, I know it is,” he replied, extending and spreading his spikes, and the clear one did as well. When a drake could extend a spike, it meant it had come off its anchor and it could be thrown. “But like I said, I’m sorta used to it now. My younger siblings think that it looks neat.”

“Well, they can gawk at mine when it grows in,” Kammi grinned, flourishing the tip of her tail a bit. Where Kell’s odd spike was square in the center, Kammi’s clear spike was growing at the very tip of her tail, the last one in the middle row.

“Such a copycat,” Kell teased.

“Oh, as *if* I could make this happen!” she shot back.

“You two can fight somewhere outside of my shop,” Foll said lightly. “If you have any strange tingling or pain in your socket, come back. But if you don’t, don’t worry about it,” he told her.

They left the apothecary’s shop and burrow, which were down on the lower levels not far from the water tube’s entrance, chatting idly as they headed back for the department. They were aware that the council had come back, as well as some other dragons, and they were all up on Council Aerie

at that very moment, discussing the failure of the scions and pooling their knowledge as to why it happened. It was a serious concern of theirs, because if all the scions failed, the earth dragons would have no viable means to get off the island in an emergency. They'd either have to swim or rely on sky dragons to carry them, and *that* wasn't going to happen anytime soon. If there was some kind of major disaster so extreme it would force a mass evacuation, the only way the earth dragons might survive it would be if the water dragons helped them swim to one of the two nearby uninhabited islands...or in Kell's family's case, swim there on their own, or maybe even swim to Hawaii. Kell could easily make it, and he was fairly sure that Keth and Kanna could, so it would come down to the hatchlings and Kammi.

Damn it all, now *he* was doing it, just automatically grouping Kammi in with his family.

They climbed the ramp up to the department, and it was fairly busy despite the late hour. The department ran at all times, and while the evening and night shifts didn't have as many drakes on duty. Ferroth was there, along with Anthra and Geon, which was why Kell decided to drop by before going back home. "Any word on what's going on up there?" he asked as they entered the main office.

"None yet, Sella and Ralla haven't reported in," Geon replied. "What we've learned so far is that they expect the next scion to fail tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow?*" Kammi gasped.

"If the pattern holds, the next scion will fail a little past nine tomorrow morning," Anthra replied. "And the last two will both fail by noon the day after tomorrow."

"I can't believe they'd fail so *fast*," Kammi breathed.

"And nobody knows why," Kell grunted.

"Nobody," Anthra nodded. "One of the things I asked Sella to find out is when they believe the cloaking magic that hides the island will fail. If we lose that, then we're going to be very vulnerable. They'll spot the island

with the first satellite pass, and we might have ships anchored off our shore within days.”

“That’ll be a disaster waiting to happen,” Ferroth grunted. “I don’t much like the idea of any fishing boat that can get out here running down to either gawk at the dragons or take pot shots at us with high powered rifles.”

“Well, not *us*, but it still wouldn’t be a very good thing,” Kammi said. “We may need the water dragons to take steps.”

“Yeah, and sinking a bunch of invading ships might be seen as an act of war. Or an excuse to invade,” Kell reasoned.

“They’re the ones invading our territorial waters. We have as much right to defend our three miles as anyone else.”

“But that depends on if we’re recognized as a sovereign state,” Ferroth pointed out. “If some country just decides we’re an island there for the taking, what are we going to do, complain to the U.N.?”

“That’s a point,” Kammi admitted. “But we’re not gonna just let them anchor offshore either. Well, except maybe American ships.”

“At this point, I wouldn’t trust the Americans any more than anyone else,” Anthra said darkly. “The only reason they’re being relatively conciliatory is because they don’t know where we are, and it’s in their best interest to keep the fire dragons mollified. If the island becomes visible, I get the feeling that the first ships that we’ll see sitting offshore will be American naval warships.”

“Yeah, but that could be a good thing,” Kammi replied.

“We’ve flat-out told them we don’t want contact,” Ferroth said gratingly. “And they’ve *already* tried to find the island despite that. I have to agree with Anthra, I wouldn’t entirely trust *any* ship sitting offshore. They have no reason to be here unless they think they can get something from us.”

“We don’t need anyone’s protection. We can take care of ourselves,” Geon declared.

“So, the big question is, do we go up to join the talk?” Kell asked.

“No,” Anthra replied. “We will not budge a claw, Kell. We made our demands, and we will stay down here until they either give in or starve. Yes, the failure of the scions is a grave concern, and the failure of the cloaking magic would be a disaster, but right now, *we* are far safer than the other dragons. The humans either don’t know we’re down here or don’t know how to reach us if they do. We have enough food to last us another fourteen months if we ration properly, and unless our relationship with the humans change, we can get more. When our food starts to dwindle, *then* we’ll start to worry about what we’re going to do. For now, Essan and Jussa are part of the conference, and they’ll keep us abreast of what they’re doing, what they find out.”

“I figured, but I *hate* just sitting down here and not knowing what’s going on,” Kell growled.

Geon glanced back, and chuckled. “You two are becoming quite the pair,” he noted.

“I know, isn’t it handsome?” Kammi asked lightly, bringing her tail around to show off the half-grown clear crystal spike. “Kell’s stamping his ownership visibly,” she teased, giving him a look.

“Oh really,” he snorted. “It’s just coincidence and you know it.”

“I’ll think whatever I want to think,” she replied airily. “It’s *my* tail spike.”

They stayed and talked over the matter until Ralla arrived. He looked a little sleepy, yawning as he came in. “I know you’ve been waiting for me, but they just broke up,” he told them.

“Any news?” Geon asked.

“None of note,” he replied. “They discussed the matter all day, but reached no conclusions. They’re going to keep vigil over the scion and study it. If it fails when predicted, they want to be there to analyze the process, hoping it will tell them what’s wrong.”

“But that’ll just leave two scions, and both are supposed to fail the day after tomorrow.”

“I know, but there’s not much else they can do,” he replied. “Jussa told me to stress that this is a completely unknown phenomenon. They haven’t the slightest clue as to what’s causing it, and like anything dealing with magic, it may take extensive study and experimentation to find the cause. Very few things concerning magic are *simple*.”

“Nothing else to pass on?”

“Not right now. Sister Sella will bring a report to you in the morning, so you can read over what they discussed. Until then, I’m going to go to sleep,” he said, yawning again.

“Thank you for getting word here quickly, Ralla,” Anthra told him. “We appreciate your time.”

Ralla filed out, leaving silence in his wake. Finally, Ferroth gave an audible grunt. “I think we can start making plans assuming that there won’t be any scions,” he declared.

“I think you’re right, old friend,” Geon agreed with a nod. “Those plans we made to burrow up to Scion Aerie in case of a need for emergency evacuation are moot now.”

“Or they will be the day after tomorrow,” Kell grunted. “But we should start considering another kind of tunnel.”

“What kind?”

“Under the sea floor,” he replied. “Over to that island to the west.”

“Kell, friend, do you know how hard that would be?” Geon asked. “Go ask Jukra about that idea tomorrow, and see if he doesn’t give you a look like you’re a cow. We’d have to dig all the way down to the sea floor, somehow burrow a tunnel underneath it without the weight of the water crushing it and killing the burrowers, then burrow *up* to the island. I think you’re not considering that this island rises up off the sea floor, *four kilometers down*,” he stressed. “We live more or less at the top of one of the highest mountains on the planet. We’d have to burrow down, over, then up, and do it all while dealing with pressures and stresses no earth dragon has ever tried to work under before.”

“Gaia’s teeth, the sea floor tunnel would have to be *kilometers* under the sea floor, just so there’s enough rock overhead to support the weight of the entire ocean,” Anthra noted. “So far down that we’d come close to the mantle.”

“Alright, alright, so it’s not a very good idea. But at least it *was* an idea,” he said defensively.

“That’s what you get for thinking, my silly intended,” Kammi teased, thumping him with the underside of her tail.

“You *do* live with me,” he warned, which made Anthra and Geon chuckle.

“Take her home and show her the error of her ways, Kell, we’ll pick this up in the morning,” Geon said.

“I’d say it’ll be the other way around,” Anthra declared.

“That smells like a wager, my esteemed compatriot,” Geon said lightly. “I’ll put a day’s rations on Kell.”

“It’s the smallest ones you have to watch, my friend. I’d put that allotment on Kammi.”

“Let’s go before this turns into pay-per-view,” Kell noted to Kammi, which made the older dragons laugh richly.

They spread the news to his parents when they got home, sitting in the living room as the hatchlings watched TV, but Keth and Kanna couldn't come up with anything either. "There's really just nothing we can do," Keth grunted. "Even if we went up to try to contribute, we don't know anything about magic. All we'd do is appear to give in to the demands of the other dragons."

"I know, but I *hate* feeling like there's nothing we can do," Kell growled.

"In this case, my young one, there *is* nothing we can do," Kanna affirmed. "In fact, we'll cause less problems if we just stay out of it and let the dragons that know about magic do what they need to do. I just wish Ralla would have come to visit."

"He looked exhausted, I have no doubt he's already asleep by now," Kell noted.

"Sleep sounds like a good idea to me, we have early shift tomorrow," Kammi said, giving him a look.

"Just let me eat something first."

After a snack, they retired to *their* room, which was both common and unusual. It was common for an intended pair to move into the same sleeping chamber for a couple of months to see how they handled living in intimate circumstances, but it was uncommon for them to try it so early into their courtship. It had been Kanna's idea, pushing them together by sticking them in the same room, and since they already lived in the same burrow anyway, Kanna didn't see it as much of a stretch. And Kell had to admit, it hadn't been that bad. Kammi wasn't a pushy roommate, and sleeping on the same mound with her was almost a nostalgic memory of his childhood, sleeping with his brothers. Kammi climbed up onto the mound and started digging out a hollow as Kell checked their messages on the computer, then joined her just as she finished. "You always do that," she accused lightly, "let me dig it out."

“It just shows you’re good for *something*,” he retorted playfully, then gave a little wheeze when her tail smacked into his ribs. He laid down in the hollow she’d made for them, surrounded by somewhat sterile-smelling earth, more sand than dirt, but the soft feel of yielding earth around him, and Kammi curled up beside him, her wing thrown over his back, was more than enough to relax him to the point where he fell asleep rather quickly.

15 August 2017, 09:19 DMT; Sanctuary City

Continuing the sinister plot to keep Kell and Kammi all but nose to nose as much as possible, Ferroth had scheduled them to work in the main office. Kammi was on the board, and Kell was doing Kintel’s job as the office supervisor, through which Trekka, Kell, and Kintel rotated. Trekka hadn’t been far from retirement from field service, being groomed to return to the department as a supervisor, and Kell had enough seniority and understanding of the various operations of the office to the job. It gave Kintel time off, and since there were too many drakes and not enough jobs as it was, it also rotated drakes through available positions so they had something to do and didn’t get bored. Just like everyone else, Kintel had to share his job with others, but unlike many dragons, not many were qualified to take Kintel’s place.

What it also did was put them in the office on this, a very important day. If they were right, then the seventh scion had failed just moments ago, and all the council members and sages were on Scion Aerie, no doubt talking about what they’d just witnessed. If they were also right, then the last two scions would *both* fail by this time tomorrow. The eight scion would fail in the middle of the night, and the last scion would fail before dawn tomorrow.

And from there...nobody knew what would happen next. The big fear was that the cloaking magic that hid the island would fail, and if it did, when it would happen. That was the main thing they needed to talk to Jussa

and Essan about, and they were supposed to come down to the city after they finished what they were doing to brief Anthra and Geon.

Ferroth was stomping through the cramped office in his usual bright and sunny demeanor, and Anthra and Geon sat on their haunches near Kammi's board, waiting. Sella was supposed to bring them a report any minute, and everyone, even the other field agents, were hovering in the office waiting for her. Jirran and Girk were over at terminals. Jirran was reading up on State department cables, using what Kell had slipped into their system on that fateful mission where he was outed, and Girk was currently doing the same with the Chinese...which was always an adventure. The Americans thought they had the best cyber security, and they did have the best programs and the best programmers, but they couldn't compete with the sheer labyrinthine *mess* that was the Chinese computer network system. They were good hackers, but not the best at security, so their tactic was to hide what was sensitive within a virtual *sea* of other computers, other systems. It took a great deal of patience to sort through their "white noise saturation" defensive tactic, even more so because they changed the whole thing about every three months to make any hackers have to start over at the beginning of the maze, and pulling China duty was the worst lot in the draw...which meant that Kell usually had to do it. Kell had learned Mandarin Chinese and had more experience penetrating the maze of decoy networks to get where the real data was, but since the Chinese systems actually didn't have very good security, even Girk was competent hacking a network once Kell tracked it down. The rest of the office was humming as drakes searched internet websites to gather information about what was going on up there.

Kammi punched the intercom. "I'm getting a spike reading on my board, Fredda," she called. "Grid nine B."

"Same here. I've already sent a team out," she replied over the intercom.

"Where is Sella?" Ferroth snapped, turning and pacing back across the office, his tail almost swiping a couple of computer desks. "We need to

know what's going on up there!"

"Just be patient, chief," Anthra said. "I have no doubt she'll get here as soon as she can."

"I'm surprised you're not at the tube entrance."

"I have a drake there who'll call in when she shows up," he replied.

It was nearly an hour later when they got word that Sella was on her way up from the water tube. She was still a little damp when she came up the ramp and into the office, and she was almost mugged by Ferroth. "I've been waiting for you, Sella," he said quickly. "You have a report?"

She nodded. "The scion failed exactly when predicted, to the second," she told them. "From what the gathered elders and sages have determined, the effect isn't linear, it's almost logarithmic. The next scion will fail in ten hours, and the last will fail five hours after that."

"Any word on the cloaking magic?"

She nodded. "They predict those spells will fail in four days, two hours."

"Four *days*? That's it?" Anthra gasped.

"Unless something changes, esteemed council member, yes. That's it. The drain on magic is now so prevalent that the chromatics are feeling its effects. No other race is feeling it quite yet, but then again, most other races aren't so connected to magic as they are," she reasoned. "The scions aren't the only things that have failed, chief. All the hider amulets and other magical devices that were in the department are non-functional, but unlike the scions, the spells are still *there*. They've gone dormant, as if there's not enough magic to make them run, but not so starved of magic that the effects unravel. The magical light globes the chromatics use in their libraries are starting to fail as well."

"Damn it all, what's going on?" Ferroth said darkly, turning to look at the council members.

“Your guess is as good as ours, chief. I’ve never studied magic extensively,” Geon replied. “You probably know more about magic than we do.”

“Do we have any magical assets down here? We might want to send them up with Sella so Jussa can inspect them.”

“Only one,” he replied. “I have an old device that finds warded areas, a crystal with enchantments on it. It’s fairly rare, so I keep it close at paw. It’s on my desk in my office. Hmm,” he said, looking at Sella. “It’s still working. It glows as long as it’s not in a warded area, then the glow fades. It was still glowing the last time I was in my office.”

“Then it must be truly ancient, chief,” Sella noted. “Jussa said that the most recent magicks are failing first. The older the spells, the longer they last. If it’s still working when most enchanted objects are starting to fail, then it must be *really* old.”

“It is, made back before we came to the island,” he noted absently. “And I’m not about to send it up top with *anyone*. If the fluffies knew I had that thing, they’d steal it.”

“It wouldn’t do us much good anyway, chief,” Sella told him. “We have plenty of magical objects up there to study.”

“What are the sages and elders saying, Sella?” Anthra asked.

“Right now, a whole lot of cursing,” she replied, which made Geon chuckle despite himself. “What’s causing this phenomenon is still a complete mystery, and you know that old dragons don’t like to be rushed into *anything*, yet they’re staring at a very dire deadline that’s only days away. That’s barely time enough for half of them to even fully consider the problem, yet we need answers *now*. There’s only one real theory put forth, but it was called down so fast that it made it clear there’s a little division among the chromatics.”

“Oh? How so?”

“One of their oldest sages believes that the drain on magic is Gaia’s wrath for what they did to you,” she replied simply. “She believes that the poor treatment of the earth dragons has made Gaia angry, and she’s showing her displeasure with the rest of us by sapping our magic. The council chromatic almost bit her trying to rebuke her theory.”

“Well, it can’t really be proved either way,” Anthra mused. “But I certainly wouldn’t be putting my tail up at the idea that Gaia is on our side,” she chuckled.

“Me either,” Geon nodded. “As much as we appreciate the help of the water dragons, dear Sella, we could use someone on our side with that much weight to throw around,” he chuckled.

“You don’t get much heavier than Gaia herself,” Kammi agreed with a slight smile.

“This sage quoted some ancient chromatic writings about earth dragons and their duty to watch over you,” Sella added. “It’s nothing with which we water dragons are familiar, but she’s convinced that the chromatics have somehow failed this ancient charge. When Jussa asked to read this commandment, the council chromatic almost bit *him*.”

“Damn fluffies and their secrets,” Trekka grunted.

“Not many agree with this sage, but a few do feel that her theory is worth at least some investigation. Hinado mainly.”

“Well, the sky dragons actually do keep very detailed records, second only to the chromatics,” Anthra noted, glancing at Geon. “But like I said, they can’t really prove it or disprove it. Gaia doesn’t speak to us that way.”

“Why not?” Girk asked curiously.

“Gaia exists in a different way than we do, young one,” Geon answered. “She represents the living life force of the planet, she *is* the planet, and the planet has born life for *billions* of years. What’s a blink of her eyes to her is a thousand years for us. She sees time in a completely

different way. Our days and months and years are her epochs and eons and eras. The last time she directly spoke to the dragons was six thousand years ago.”

“That we know of,” Anthra added. “And for her, that would be barely a heartbeat of time. No doubt to her, the dragons have only lived for barely a few seconds.”

“Gaia can speak to us, but I guess it means she has to pull herself completely out of time to do it, slow herself down to our level,” Geon continued. “And as soon as she speaks, she returns to her own time, which makes something like a conversation just a bit difficult.”

“But, that doesn’t make much sense, if you don’t mind my opinion,” he pressed. “If this is Gaia’s wrath, but she doesn’t fathom what’s going on because it happens too fast, then why can’t they confirm it if it is? I mean, if she took enough notice to take away their magic, and if she’s *keeping* the magic away, doesn’t that mean she’d still be watching? You know, she’d be aware enough of us to confirm it?”

“The young one does have a point,” Geon said after a second. “If this *is* Gaia’s wrath, then perhaps they *might* be able to confirm it. Sella, could you pass Girk’s observation on to Jussa? Maybe one of the chromatic elders can manage an augury. If Gaia *is* watching, then she might answer.”

“I can do that, chief,” she nodded.

“Well reasoned, young drake,” Anthra said, which made Girk beam.

“I do have one other thing to warn you about, esteemed council members,” Sella said. “The chromatics know where you are.”

“So, they found the cavern?”

“That female chromatic that’s been snooping around did, yes,” she nodded. “That was what they tasked her to do. Find where you went. It took her over a month, but she did it. From what I was told, she found

everything. The subway ring, the tunnel under friend Kell's farm to the water, the lava tube, everything."

"Well, she must be fairly clever to figure it out," Anthra mused. "I think we'd better watch that one, chief. She might be dangerous to us later on."

"I have pictures of her. She'll be watched from now on," Ferroth nodded.

"You should get back up there, my friend, and thank you for the news."

"It is nothing, Anthra," she said calmly. "The earth dragons have ever been our friends. Especially to our pod," she said, smiling at Kell.

"Send down a report of what happened today when you can, Sella. We'll be waiting for news."

"Impatiently," Geon agreed. "And please try to tell us as quickly as you can if or when the next scion fails."

"I will," she nodded. "Walk me back to the water, dear friend?" she asked Kell.

"Of course. We'll be back soon," he said, ignoring Kammi's look at him. But everyone turned towards him when there was a chiming sound, and he looked back to see that one of his spikes had fallen out. Odd...his spikes were relatively new, he shouldn't have lost one to age quite yet. It was common enough of an occurrence for the earth dragons not to pay it much attention, outside of Girk scooping it up to get it out of the middle of the floor when he passed by.

As they entered the tunnels leading down to the server room and the entrance to the lower water tube, Sella glanced over at him with a light look. "The news even reached us, dear friend. I'm happy for you. Kammi is a good female, and you two are well matched. I think your courtship might end in success."

"So, you're not jealous?"

“A little,” she admitted. “It’s hard to give away my best friend in all the world, you know,” she added lightly, nudging him with her shoulder.

“It’s not that bad.”

“I know, but for a long time, I more or less had you all to myself, dear friend. We grew up together, Kell. I can’t remember a time when you weren’t there, and the entire pod sees you as almost one of our own, far beyond how we feel for the rest of your family. You are the mud dragon,” she noted lightly. “And you became the mud dragon just for me, my dear friend, to make me happy, to be close to me...and now there’s someone else there, demanding to be as much a part of your life as you have been in mine. Even a friend can feel jealous over losing something like that. But, it’s what’s best, Kell. Kammi is well liked by the pod. We approve of her.”

“No regrets?”

“Only small ones,” she replied. “But it would have eventually happened anyway. As long as you’re happy, I’ll be happy for you.”

“Mother told me not to let our friendship interfere with...reality,” he said.

“She’s right. Much as I love you, dear friend, and would turn the entire island on its tail if we were more than friends, just exactly how would we handle the living arrangements? You can’t live in the water, and I can’t live out of it. And so on, and so on, and so on.”

“I know. And to be honest, I never really *seriously* thought about us like that. Jenny actually asked if we were more than friends, and I told her the truth I’ve always known, even if I didn’t admit it until that moment. I’ve always known it would be impossible. But like you said, we’re best friends, Sella. It’s hard to look somewhere else when I had someone that’s just perfect already here.”

“Such a sweet thing to say,” she smiled, nudging him again. “But Kammi can be just as much a friend as I am, Kell, if you let her. And unlike me, she *can* be much more to you. More than I could ever be.”

“She’s an annoying little punk...but there *is* something there,” he told her. “I’ve started to *miss* her when she’s not nearby.”

“Then Matriarch proves she’s right yet again,” Sella chuckled. “She said the first day she met Kammi that you two would court, and odds were good it would turn formal.” That was a term that meant that they’d end up lifemates. Were their courtship to fail, dragons would say that their courtship *concluded*. “Matriarch is a very good judge of character. Present company excluded,” she smiled. “She has no idea how much of a scoundrel you are, Kell.”

“Surrall’s fault, not mine,” he retorted, which made her laugh. “He’s the one that used to drag me out on fishing trips, and that’s where he taught me how to be a scoundrel.”

“Yes, Patriarch would do that,” she said lightly, glancing at him. “He’s very much the rebel among water drakes.”

“Why do you think I like him so much? He was my idol when I was a hatchling,” he chuckled as they turned into the room holding both the servers for managing the fiber connection and the entrance to the water tube, the sound of rushing water filling the room. The entrance had a hatch now, installed by Jukra, but it was still open because Sella was in the city, and it was policy to leave it open when a water drake was inside.

“So, don’t worry, dear friend. Court Kammi with my blessing, and court her hard. She’s one of the few female earth drakes I’d *allow* into our family,” she said with totally insincere arrogance.

Kell chuckled. “Thank you, Sella. And when you start to court some lucky male water drake, I promise not to kill him.”

She looked at him, then burst out laughing. “I *would* appreciate that,” she told him cheekily.

“I am a savage,” Kell said dryly, which made her laugh again. “I really need to go out with the pod soon.”

“Patriarch could probably get you out this way, he’s been working on that bubble magic,” Sella noted. “But speaking of entering, you should get back up there and discuss the main entry. The chromatics know how to get in now, dear friend.”

“I know. We’d better do more than just pile rocks in the tunnel. We might need to build a door.”

“I can get you the steel for it,” Sella assured him.

“These are chromatics...we’d need solid rock more than steel. But the steel will help, and for more than just a door. We’re in critical need of steel right now.”

“Think of more than just a door, my friend. The chromatics attacked you once before, and they were very dirty about it. Don’t trust them.”

“I agree. A few more...elaborate defenses might be in order. After all, chromatics don’t mix well with bullets.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Sella winked, then she turned and dove into the opening, slid down the rushing water, and splashed down into the saltwater.

He watched her go, then sighed and closed the hatch. He knew that talk was coming, and while he was glad that Sella approved of Kammi—he’d have nothing to do with Kammi if she didn’t approve—it still stung a little to hear her say what they both had known all their lives.

She was a water drake, and he was an earth drake. No matter how they felt about each other, that one immutable fact would forever put both social and physical boundaries on their friendship, to ensure that it remained just that.

A friendship.

16 August 2017, 02:19 DMT; Scion Aerie

The white band of the Milky Way was the only light cast down on Scion Aerie. The moon was in its new phase, giving no light to the island, and as the crystal chimed to the stone floor of the platform, the light that had once been radiated by the scion was no more.

The last scion had failed.

There was a moment of long, grim silence among the two dozen or so dragons that had been there to witness it, an eerie gathering of sober faces that were tense with underlying fear. There were three distinct groups there, the council members, the dragon elders, and the chromatic sages, each more or less to itself as the clear crystal focus clattered to a stop on the cold stone, the last glimmers of light that had been within it fading into darkness. The ringing echoed one last time off the side of the volcano, and left nothing but the sound of the dragons breathing for a long moment.

Jussa was much more worried than he looked. They all knew what was next. In just over three days, the spells hiding the island from the humans would falter, and they would be vulnerable. And still they had no idea what was happening or how to stop it. Jussa himself hadn't slept since early yesterday morning, spending every moment either in debate with the chromatic sages, debate with the elders, or discussing potential contingency plans for what they would do if—or when—the cloaking spells failed and the humans could find the island. Those things had to be considered now, and for that reason, despite the discord between the races, the council had met just hours ago to prepare an emergency plan...and prepare a battle strategy.

Jussa did not doubt that it would come to a fight. When the humans knew where to find them, they would come. It was their nature. They would come because humans were racially incapable of not exerting their perceived right to control and rule over others. The impulse to conquer was too deeply seated into them, and one of the major reasons why the dragons had left them a thousand years ago. And they had to be ready for them.

There were only two ways the humans could reach the island, by air or by sea, and that was where the defenses would be concentrated. Sky dragons could knock any plane out of the sky, but it was by ship that the humans were most likely to invade, and that was water dragon territory. Jussa had a plan for protecting the island he would spread among the pods, but that was the extent to which the water dragons would cooperate. They would protect the island from ships, but he'd made it clear that they weren't coming back to the island, and they weren't feeding the chromatics. The chromatics had to repent before the earth dragons before they would return to the island for true, which was probably something that would never happen, to hear the council chromatic talk.

That one was getting unhinged, he'd noticed, glancing over at him. He was getting short-tempered, snippy—well, far more than usual—and highly defensive over the actions of the chromatics that had led them to this predicament, if that chromatic sage was to be believed. Jussa himself was of a mind that it was probably some other cause, since Gaia so rarely directly involved herself in mortal affairs, but he was open to the idea that it was *possible* that it was Gaia's wrath. After they eliminated other possibilities, then that theory would be there to test. The council chromatic was under a great deal of stress, facing a hostile council, pressure from his sages, increased hostility from the sky dragons as the chromatics worked them beyond their patience, and added to that was the weight of just feeding his dragons. The sky dragons were getting a taste of what chromatics thought about other dragons when they didn't have earth dragons to lord over, and the other dragons were seeing the chromatics for what they truly were.

Arrogant, petty, and possessed of a sense of entitlement that they were the rulers over all other dragons.

This was something that the water dragons had seen in them long ago, as had the earth dragons, and one of the reasons why the water dragons stayed as aloof as possible when it came to island affairs. To fight the chromatics over their self-perceived manifest destiny was a pointless exercise, a waste of energy, and water dragons didn't waste energy. They demonstrated how wrong the chromatics were by more or less ignoring

them...and that really infuriated the chromatics. To be ignored was only slightly less intolerable than being disrespected, and unlike other dragons, the chromatics couldn't act towards them the way they wanted to.

The chromatics knew that the water dragons didn't *need* the island, so they had to bite their own tongues being nice.

Honestly, most water dragons had little love for the island and its silly politics, but they couldn't just *leave*. Gaia had told them to provide for their cousins when they couldn't provide for themselves, and besides, the earth dragons needed them. The earth dragons were vulnerable, defenseless against the other dragons, and since they could not protect themselves, the water dragons had stepped in to do it for them.

At first, it had been out of both duty and pity, but as the water dragons came to understand the earth dragons, they saw that their earthbound cousins were far more than they appeared. They were cunning, clever, highly intelligent in things that mattered to them, and while their personalities and society were radically different from other dragons, they were dragon enough to relate to them. Jussa had secretly admired Anthra and Geon, showing amazing political savvy in maneuvering around the other dragons, doing as much as they could in their weak position for their earth dragons. They could be ruthless as well, when it was needful. Jussa more than suspected that Kell's killing of Ivaiya was entirely deliberate, but he doubted that the earth dragons had intended for what happened afterwards to come to pass.

Though, they *were* more than ready for it....

Well, they had reason enough to be ruthless, he supposed. They'd been battling prejudice from the other dragons since the day they set foot on the island.

"Well...that's that," Hirrag grunted as they all looked at the clear crystal, laying dark on the platform. Being the largest single living dragon on the island, he dwarfed the others, especially the chromatics. "How long do we have, sage?"

“Three days, fifteen hours,” one of the chromatics replied.

“We will return to our study of the problem after a short rest,” the council chromatic declared. “Though time is short, we do poor work when exhausted. Let us all adjourn until dawn and let a few hours of rest refocus our concentration and allow us to ponder what we have learned. Is there objection?”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Hinado stated. “Everyone could use a few hours of sleep. Maybe the rest will bring with it a revelation.”

“Then let it be so. Everyone, please be careful flying home in the dark,” the council chromatic called to the sages. Instead of flying off, he instead came over to Jussa as he and Essan turned towards the side of the platform. For them, it would be much easier to get back to their dens, since the water glistened in the starlight far below. And once they were surrounded by Gaia’s blessed oceans, they would no longer need light. “A word with you, Jussa.”

“Speak on, cousin,” he said as the other dragons began to scatter into the air, globes of light saving them from crashing into the side of the volcano.

“I would demand the truth of you, cousin. Did you help the earth dragons build their underground city?”

“We got them down there, they did the rest,” he replied honestly.

“Why do such a thing?”

“Look over the edge once the sun comes up, chromatic, and ask that question again,” he said bluntly. “The earth dragons had every good reason to prepare for the worst, for that is *exactly* what you showed them you can be.”

“Don’t put this disaster on *us*,” the council chromatic flared. “We did what had to be done, no less!”

“Really. Devastating the island and driving the earth dragons underground was the least you could do?”

“You saw how the human technology was threatening our traditions, Jussa!” he said, almost pleadingly. “We tried to talk the grounders into scaling back, but they would not hear of it!”

“See, that’s where you made your first mistake, cousin,” he drawled. “I take it your idea of talking to them was to issue commands they would see as unreasonable and humiliating?”

The chromatic’s eyes flared brighter for a second.

“That was a very bad idea. The earth dragons have their pride, cousin. Knowing *how* to talk to them is far more important than what you say when you do.”

“Pride,” the chromatic snorted. “For what could they be proud?”

“A great deal,” Jussa answered dryly. “The first thing you learn once you learn about them is that they can be intractable and tenacious, especially when they feel wronged. But I think you’re starting to see that,” he added blandly. “I will tell you this now, cousin. They will not move from their sanctuary until you give them what they demand.”

“Then they will never leave it,” the chromatic said arrogantly. “We will not be held hostage by *them*.”

“Then this island will fail, and the dragons will scatter to the four winds,” Jussa replied simply. “You forget, cousin, that this island was built on the backs of the earth dragons, literally and figuratively. All they have ever wished is to be left in peace, and even that was too much for the chromatics to tolerate. You had to go and interfere in their simple lives, and now you pay for it with empty bellies and angry dragons. Remember, you need *them* far more than they need *you*. The beggar does not make demands, cousin.”

And with that, Jussa vaulted off the edge and into the starry night, leaving a fuming chromatic in his wake.

17 August 2017, 13:46 DMT; The Library of Camelot

First of her class set a note on the door that she was going to go eat and left the landing, soaring down the slope of the volcano and leaving the library empty. Nobody had been in there except for her since she took over, and while she had all the time in the world to ready and study, academy being suspended so everyone could work on the crisis, it did get a little boring being in the same place from sunrise to sunset, and necessitated the occasional departure to get something to eat. Nobody would particularly care, since nobody was going to use her library anyway. There were no books in her library that would solve the crisis befalling them.

Magic was *fading*. Even she could feel it now, feel the extra effort it required to use her magic, use anything but her floating magic anyway. Her natural talent was floating magic, and while that was as strong as ever, practicing her spells in her morning ritual took more effort than it did just days ago. Magic took effort to use, and while her spells were as strong as they had been, it required more exertion on her part to get them to that power level. It was now the singular driving force behind the actions of *every* dragon on the island, even the younglings, the youngers doing what they could to support the elders as they labored to discover the reason behind the failure of magic, and then try to formulate some kind of remedy.

Stopping by her den to get her fishing basket, she flew out over the western sea, heading for her shoal, her mind troubled. Word had even reached her that the scions were all gone, and now they were counting down the hours until the island's cloaking magic would fail as well. When that happened...she didn't want to think about it. The island would be visible to the humans, vulnerable, and the dragons may be called upon to defend the island from human invaders.

Days. They only had days before that happened.

She reached her shoal, spread her wings and fanned the plumage on her tail out so the breeze could steady her as she floated her tail's length over the water, then started studying the coral reef below, preparing to fish up her lunch and dinner both. Personally, she found fishing...*relaxing*. Perhaps it wouldn't be quite so relaxing if she had to work at it, but there was a simplicity about it that was intriguingly peaceful. There was nothing but the sound of the breeze, the occasional lap of a wave that broke over the highest rock, which just her foreleg's length under the water, and the warm sun shining down on her iridescent scales and white feathers. The quiet of it gave her time to think, and it was mildly challenging to identify the fish she wanted and then yank them out of the water, just challenging enough to make it...fun.

And she'd gotten very good at it. She had no idea what the names of those fish species were, but she knew them by sight, and after taking the altered angle of sight into account due to light refraction, she started filling her basket with the fish that tasted best, the narrow-tailed gray ones, the ones with the red bellies and silver backs. She was careful not to take *too* many, afraid that she'd fish the spot out or make the fish too afraid to return, eating enough to satisfy her before starting to fill her basket.

But today, something different happened. A solitary water dragon's head popped out of the water not far from her, a rather young female water drake from the look of her, and her head slipped back under and her silhouette approached under the waves. She poked her head out again and looked up at first of her class, her eyes a deep emerald green glow. "I didn't know that chromatrics fished," she remarked.

"We do now," she replied evenly, her scillinting eyes looking past the water drake and at the fish.

"I know you. You're the chromatic that they sent to find the earth dragons."

First of her class looked back to the water drake. "I am," she replied. "How do you know me?"

"Because *I* have been watching *you*," she answered, climbing out of the water and sitting sedately on its surface, using her water dragon magic to make the surface solid. "Jussa of the council bade me to come find you, for he's too busy to do it himself." The water under first of her class shuddered and then flattened out, a clear invitation for her to land.

"Me? Why me?" she asked, floating down and setting her feet on solid water.

"Jussa hears many things. He heard that the sages of the chromatics have an interest in you."

"Well, not quite an interest," she said modestly. "I proposed a magical theory that one of them found somewhat curious, that's all."

"That is more than many chromatics achieve," Sella replied. "He also knows that you have been in the earth dragon villages. You have seen what few outside of the earth dragons have seen."

Sella...she remembered that name now. She had been the only water dragon to work in the department, and was one of the pod in that family of water dragons that lived in the cove where the lava tube was, and they had to have been instrumental in helping the earth dragons build their hidden village. "Things you've seen as well?" she asked pointedly.

"I am far more connected to the earth dragons than most," she replied simply. "I have seen the truth of them."

"What truth?"

"That they are not what even my own kind think that they are," she answered, reaching into her shoulder satchel and producing a roll of water dragon parchment. It was actually made of some kind of fish skin, something they could use underwater. "Did you see this?"

Blinking, first of her class unrolled the smooth-textured, pliant material and found an illustration of the Gaia sculpture hidden in Blackstone village. “Yes,” she replied. “It’s only one of many sculptures they made on the walls in their villages. Have you been there?”

“I used to work in the department. I am welcome among the earth dragons,” she said simply. “They let me see things they show no one else. Jussa believes that your sage is correct, that the problems with magic are because Gaia is angry,” she continued. “He thinks that with your help, he can confirm those suspicions.”

“How so?”

“You are a chromatic, and you are a librarian. You also have a relationship with a sage. That means you can get into the Library of Eternity, and you can find a certain book that Jussa knows is there. He thinks that that book may confirm the sage’s theory.”

“What’s the title of the book?”

“It’s on the scroll I gave you, but you can only see it when you look at it a certain way,” she replied.

“What way?”

“I don’t know. But Jussa said that you would figure it out.” Sella gave her a steady look. “Jussa made sure to warn me to tell you that doing this might cause you to run afoul of the council chromatic and the chromatic elders,” she warned. “Jussa thinks they are hiding the truth, and Jussa would know the truth. To gain access to that truth, he needs your help.”

“Me.”

“The one chromatic that understands the earth dragons better than any other,” she said simply. “The one chromatic that might believe that what was done to them was wrong. The one chromatic that can get into that library and find that book that the chromatic elders do not control.”

First of her class narrowed her glowing eyes, but said nothing.

“I leave it up to you if you help Jussa or not,” she said simply, her body sinking back into the water, but holding her magic so first of her class could remain standing. “And I was never here. Fare well, chromatic. Oh, and know that the earth dragons are aware of you now,” she added with a light expression. “They know you found them. Expect them to respect you now for that accomplishment. You, they would treat with more than scorn.”

Her head slipped back under the waves, and first of her class floated up off the surface as her silhouette darted away, the water under her claws shimmering and returning to wavy undulation.

Curious...very curious. The water dragons wanted her to break into the Library of Eternity and steal a book for them? What possible secrets could such a book contain?

Learning the name of the book was fairly simple. This was a *water dragon* scroll, meant to be read underwater, but given to a chromatic, who couldn't even swim. So, the scroll had to be in the water while she was not. She lowered down to the water's surface and plunged her forepaws under the waves, and the title of the book shimmered into view within the image of Gaia: *The Origins and History of the Species Draconis*. It wasn't even a function of magic, it was an aspect of the fish-skin parchment and the inks they used that caused the name to be visible only when the scroll was in the water.

Very clever.

She wasn't sure if she was ready to betray the secrets of her elders, but that was *exactly* the kind of book that *she* had been looking for, something that might explain what happened to change things. If the history within the book was modern enough to include the creation of the island, then it would have what she needed in it. If it didn't, well, she might get more clarification on ancient dragon society.

She *would* find this book. After she read it, then she'd decide if she wanted to betray the secrets of her elders and give it to the water dragons.

Chapter 14

18 August 2017, 14:37 DMT; Sanctuary City

Now *everyone* knew that something was going on, and it wasn't just going on above ground.

It had started with Kell, but it hadn't been isolated to him. In the two days since they'd heard about the last scion failing, six more of his spikes had fallen out on their own. It wasn't uncommon for earth dragons to lose spikes, but usually ones that were old. The crystals themselves weren't alive, but the very living flesh that anchored them got...well, *tired* after a while, and the spike fell out when those flesh moorings needed to renew themselves. After a year or so, a socket expelled its spike to grow a new one.

Kell only had ten spikes in his tail now, and two of those seven empty sockets were growing *clear* spikes. The other five sockets had yet to bud, but Kell had no reason to think that he'd grow normal red spikes, not when his tail seemed to be, well, *replacing* all the red spikes with clear ones.

And he wasn't the only one. Dragons all over the city were losing their spikes, but the majority of them that were losing their spikes the fastest were dragons close to Kell's age, around sixty or so, the young adults. Kell, Kammi, the other field agents, the apprentice dragons around the city, they were all losing their spikes at accelerated rates, and clear ones were taking their places. And while it seemed to focus on dragons Kell's age, Keth had lost a spike the night before, and now a glittering clear crystal had appeared in the socket, and Kav and Konn's new spikes were growing in clear, which made Kitta *insanely* jealous...so that was a bit of revenge for the boys

against their sister for her budding her new spike so much earlier than they did.

As the dragons above talked about magic, the only thing anyone could talk about under the volcano was this rash of spike alterations. The elders among the earth dragons were speculating that it was the fact that they were underground that was causing it, that a different environment was inciting this change in dragon tail spikes. Others speculated that it was their diet. Earth dragons were supplementing their usual diet of predominately grains and vegetables with rock, and that intake of pure rock, while not giving them any sustenance, could be affecting their biology.

That was what Kell thought was happening, because of the curious anomalies surrounding basic earth drake biology lately. For one, the *mass* of what they were eating was *not* matching either what they were expelling as waste nor a gain in weight among the earth drakes. That stone was just... *vanishing* when they ate it. It certainly wasn't coming out the other end, volume figures from the sewer and treatment systems proved that, and Kell weighed almost exactly what he did before he came down. So, if he was eating kilograms of stone that wasn't staying in his body, yet he didn't weigh more now than before, then where was that stone going? Was he somehow *metabolizing* the stone, and that metabolizing was altering his tail spikes?

But still, even if he was somehow metabolizing the stone, then where was the mass going? Mass didn't just *disappear*. If he ate it, and he didn't expel it, then it had to still be inside him...yet he only weighed 5.6 kilograms more now than he had before all this started, and that was normal weight gain because he *was* still growing a little. He'd taken in *far* more than 5.6 kilograms of stone, but he couldn't account for that stone anywhere.

And he proved it in an experiment. He weighed himself over the course of 20 hours, weighed what he ate, and even weighed what he excreted as waste, and there was a definite mass imbalance. According to

his calculations, 5.82 kilograms of food or stone he'd eaten over that time period just disappeared.

Kell wasn't the only drake that was doing experiments like that, trying to figure it out. It wasn't anything critical, but for the majority of dragons who weren't all that worried about what was going on up on the surface, it was something immediate, something tangible, and something mysterious.

But Kell didn't really have the time to focus on the mystery of it, because unlike most dragons, he *did* have a vested interest in what was going on up there. If the math was right, then the spells that cloaked the island would fail tomorrow at a little past 5:07pm local time...just a little more than 24 hours. The dragons up there were now splitting their time between trying to find out what was wrong with magic itself, and planning the defense of the island against what they knew was coming.

Kell couldn't disagree with them. If the humans knew where the island was, they would come. Anyone that thought they might get something out of it would come, and he wouldn't even put it past the Americans to host the fire dragons, smile and be their friends, then turn around and send a task force down here with the excuse of just being nearby in case they were needed...but the simple fact of the matter was, they'd try to annex the island. Kell liked Jenny, even liked President Walker, but no matter how much he liked and admired humans, he was fully aware of their baser nature. It was why the dragons separated themselves from the humans in the first place. The other dragons had to be ready in case the humans tried to conquer the island.

That had been part of a five hour debate that morning. Anthra and Geon spent most of their time in the department anymore, and they, Ferroth, Kintel, and Kell had debated whether or not they should pledge their support if it came down to a fight. After all, most human weaponry was completely useless against an earth dragon, and they *did* want to have an island to return to after the other dragons gave in to their demands. But, on the other paw, the other dragons would see them breaking their self-imposed exile as capitulation, and the other dragons had brought it upon

themselves, if the theory that the draining of magic was Gaia's vengeance was true. The debate gave Kell something to do as he monitored the board, since things more or less ran smoothly now. The factories coming on line later that month would give him more to do, but that had slowed down because the water dragons were too busy now to scavenge steel for them, and they needed that steel to build their assembly lines. Kammi was out doing a repair, since it was her day to be the roving technician, and the other field agents were working in the tunnel.

They were building defenses down there. They'd already constructed a huge steel-bound door of stone and mounted it in the tunnel, sealing it off, but they were also installing some weapons to use against any invading dragon. The water dragons used the deep tube to get in and out now, mainly because it didn't require a four mile walk up the lava tube like the main tunnel did. The water tube came up right in the city itself. The huge door they'd built closed off the tunnel 300 meters from the main cavern, and they were installing barricades and hedgehogs to slow down any dragon trying to get in, as well as hanging hooks off the ceiling of the tube to foul up the wings of any dragon small enough to try to fly in the tunnel...like that young chromatic. In the open space in front of the tunnel they had built two 20 millimeter cannon bunkers, guns they built right there in the city using paw-crafted parts built from old Korean war-era design blueprints, cannons that had no electronics in them. Those guns would kill any dragon not an earth dragon that tried to get in, and being hit by a 20 millimeter cannon round would give an earth dragon one hell of a nasty bruise. Kell doubted that any attacking dragon would survive the 300 meter run up that tunnel while dodging both obstacles and cannon rounds, not with two cannons firing on them in that enclosed space. That tunnel was more of a kill zone than a tunnel when they used its confining dimensions as a weapon against their enemies.

The fun part had been scraping up the cordite and explosives to use in the cannon shell rounds.

Building the guns was hatchling play. Any number of factory workers and builders had the skill to shape the pieces out of stock metal, and do it

with the same precision as if they'd been machined. The only tricky part had been the barrel, since earth dragon paws were too big and not long enough to manually bore and rifle the barrels. For that, they'd had to fall back on tools.

Their debate about what they should do had taken up much of the morning, gave them something to talk about more than anything else, but now they were waiting for a report from the surface. Geon had his tail wrapped around in front of him, and he was running his paw over his flattened spikes, stroking them like a human might pet an animal...which included an empty socket. Everyone was almost expecting the spike that grew in that socket to be clear, like every other earth dragon's had been in the last week or so. Anthra was laying down with her head up, her tail swishing behind her nervously, and Kintel was in the other room, looking over a website that one of their monitors had flagged. The monitors were busier than ever now that the humans knew about dragonkind.

"Chief, if it comes down to fighting, what *can* we do from here?" Anthra asked.

"Plenty," he replied. "We have our hardline back, Anthra. Kell can hack a system anywhere in the world from where he's sitting, and most national military networks aren't *that* well defended. We may not be up there fighting them off, but we can play hell with them from right here."

"I already have about fifty back doors laced through the Chinese network," Kell said absently as he watched four drakes from a remote camera.

"And what does that do for you?"

"I could pretty much well paralyze their entire communication systems," he replied. "Send fake orders, remotely break their equipment by commanding it to do things like deploy while still in boxes, disable weapon systems, turn the lights off and on in the Chinese President's office, even make every TV in China show nothing but *Blacklist* reruns dubbed in

Portuguese. I think even the Americans have forgotten that while the other dragons may have magic, *we* have *computers*. And we can use them.”

“So, if they send ships down here?”

“Those ships have uplinks, and I can attack them through those uplinks,” he nodded, looking back at her. “But that’s actually Jirran’s area of expertise. Nobody breaks things like Jirran.”

“That’s Gaia’s truth,” Ferroth chuckled.

“And you can do this against any nation that could send ships here?”

“More or less,” Kell answered. “American military crypto is a bit more formidable and they don’t run their ships with their uplinks always on to prevent exactly what we’re talking about doing, but we’ve gotten our clawtips in their systems. The Japanese are the hardest ones to crack, but they wouldn’t be that much of a threat. The Chinese have a big navy, but we’ve got complete penetration into their systems. I can shut them down with just a few commands from right here. Keeping them shut down is the trick, though. The Chinese are good at fixing the holes once our attacks expose them. After the initial attack, it’ll be a game of chase to keep up the pressure.”

“Well, we can send that information up with Ralla when he gets here. They tell us who’s approaching, we do what we can from where we are.”

And almost as if that summoned him, Kell got a message from the entry room via intercom. “Ralla just arrived, he’s on his way up,” Fendel, one of the department drakes, relayed.

“Alright, thanks,” Kell answered.

Ralla got up to the department after a few minutes, and he was almost mugged by Geon and Anthra. “It’s crazy up there,” he finally relayed. “The cloaking spells will fail tomorrow, and they’re in a frenzy to try to solve the problem before that happens...but there is little hope. They are no closer to a solution now than they were days ago. Everyone expects the spells to fail.

While the elders and sages work on the problem, the council has been making plans for dealing with the island being visible. All of them are positive that the humans will come. I happen to agree with that,” he grunted. “The humans won’t be able to resist. They’ll speak on their TV about how much they want to be our friends, but there are no TV cameras down here.”

“We’ve been talking about that,” Geon said. “We refuse to come back to the surface, Ralla, but we *can* put a paw in and help with the defense of the island, if it comes to it. The chief assures us that we can attack them using computers.”

“Easily,” Ferroth snorted. “We can tie their computer networks in a knot if we have to.”

“All we need is information,” Anthra continued. “The water dragons tell us who is approaching, the department goes after that nation through their computers.”

“We can do that,” Ralla smiled. “And Jussa will be very glad to hear that. He’s drawing up plans to disable any ships that come within one hundred fifty kilometers of the island.” Like Sella, Ralla had enough exposure to the department to know to use metric measurements, which were department standard. Unlike most dragons, though, he knew what those measurements meant.

“Disable how?”

“Their ships can’t go anywhere if they have no propellers,” Ralla answered. “We’ll attack their propellers then drag the ships out of our defended waters. They can get repairs or get towed from there.”

“That’s pretty clever,” Anthra chuckled. “They do no harm to the men, but it does more or less cripple their ships.”

“We don’t have to kill their men to stop them,” Ralla nodded. “Jussa did want me to ask one more thing. When the spells fail, the main way

they'll find the island is with satellite imagery. Is there something you can do about that?"

Anthra and Geon looked at Ferroth, who looked to Kell, who rapped his claws on the desk. "Maybe," he grunted. "It's going to depend on the system. The civilian imaging satellites, yeah, easily. I can hack the Google imagers in my sleep. But when you start moving into the government systems, you're talking about three different systems and each with its own layers. The milsats, yeah, we could hack those, but it'll be tricky. The NSA system...most likely, but doing it without getting caught will be the trick. They have the most formidable defenses. But the problem is, the top tier, the CIA ISET system, that would be impossible to hack, because they designed them to be unhackable to prevent anyone from taking them over."

"You once told me that nothing is unhackable, whelp," Ferroth said.

"You can't hack something you can't communicate with," he replied. "The ISETs aren't manually controlled. They don't tell them where to go. They're locked in set orbits and they *only* accept commands based on camera direction and resolution when using their high-sensitivity cameras. There's absolutely no way to control the other three wide angle cameras, and you can't hack the satellite itself because the comm system that handles the camera commands isn't physically connected to the rest of the satellite. The only conceivable way I could hack those would be to make them point their three high-resolution cameras away from the island when they pass, but there's nothing I can do about the three wide-range observation cameras, and those *will* pick up the island."

"Can you kill the satellites from the one way you can get in?" Ferroth asked.

Kell was quiet a long moment. "I don't think so," he replied. "I could break the high-res cameras by jacking them or force a reboot of the high-res system with a crash, but there's no way I can think of to stop those satellites from seeing the island, and no way to stop them from transmitting those images. Those birds were designed to prevent hacking, chief. A hacker

can't get access to the main system because it's completely automated and doesn't accept external commands, and without that access, you just can't stop the birds from transmitting their images. The best I could do would be to prevent them from getting higher resolution images of the island."

"Can you scramble or jam the transmissions?"

"Not when the transmitter's in orbit," he shook his head. "It would require us to jam every receiver on the *planet*. The only way we could do it would be to have another satellite system transmit on the same frequency with more power, and that satellite system would have to have instantaneous global coverage. There are thirty-one ISET satellites, and they have more or less global coverage at all times."

"All the satellites transmit on the same frequency?" Anthra asked.

"Yes, and each bird transmits *everything* all the other birds collect," he answered. "Each ISET transmits its own images, but it *also* transmits the images belonging to the satellite in front of it and behind it in the system. The birds send their data to two other birds in case their ground-pointing array gets damaged, and those birds send to the next one in the chain, and so on and so on. The transmitter pares out any redundant data when the bird gets back its own transmission from the one behind it, the data going all the way through the ring, then it transmits all that data in a block. It does that every fifteen seconds. The systems aren't real-time imagery like the new Google Watcher system, they're just a series of pictures taken at set intervals that the CIA calculated to provide maximum visibility."

"And all thirty-one satellites transmitting at the same frequency doesn't cause problems?" Geon asked.

"No, it's very easy to set that up," Ferroth answered for Kell. "It's just a matter of filtering out the phased signal."

"Just so," Kell nodded. "The receiver receives a series of signals in different phases but on the same frequency, chooses the strongest one, and rejects the rest. It's a commonplace system used mostly by cell phone

networks, since different towers are receiving the same signal from a cell phone in use.”

“Can you attack the *receivers* then?” Ralla asked.

“Not those receivers I can’t,” Kell replied. “They’re cold.”

“Cold?”

“They’re not connected to the internet in any way,” he answered. “The CIA is justifiably paranoid, Ralla. They don’t put their most critical systems or data on computers connected to the internet, to prevent hacking. The ISET system isn’t on the internet, it’s on an independent *intranet* that has no connectivity to the internet whatsoever. The only way in to mess with the ISET system would be a field agent breaking into a CIA ISET facility and attacking it on site. And the CIA wasn’t the only one we had to do that with from time to time.”

“So, we could fool everyone but the CIA,” Anthra surmised. “And that would mean that anyone would know where we are eventually anyway.”

“Eventually,” Kell nodded. “The other nations would just watch where the American naval task force is going when they sail them down here, and that would be that.”

“Well, we could be soft about it, or be hard,” Ferroth grunted. “If it comes down to it, Anthra, the department could put the entire world on its back. We have our claws into most every computer network on the planet, and we could either take them over or crash them from right here. We could demand to be left alone and use the threat of bringing the entire global computer network’s nose and wings to the floor as our bargaining chip.”

“We should save the threats for when we have no choice but to use them,” Anthra answered. “They don’t see us as threatening, chief, and while that has disadvantages, it also does have a few advantages.” “If they don’t see us as a threat, they won’t think twice about landing an invasion force on this island,” Kell said bluntly. “Much as I admire what the humans have built, they still only respond to naked force when it comes to *stopping* them

from doing something. If we want to be left alone, we may have to prove to them that invading the island is far too costly.”

“Well, if we can isolate it down to one nation, maybe we could bargain with the Americans,” Geon noted.

“That would still require me to basically attack both national and international satellite systems, Geon, and that’s an act of war in many countries,” Kell reminded him. “I’d have to disable satellites and put entire civilian companies out of business, attack military satellites from about ten different nations, and the spy satellites from six different nations. That’s a whole lot of attacking, and we’re bound to piss just about all of them off like you’ve never seen before. You asked me if I could do it, and yes, I can do it. But if I do it, you’re gonna piss of a whole lot of people. To hide the island from satellites, we’d have to basically hack the entire satellite system, and that would cause an uproar of apocalyptic proportions.”

“If you use brute force,” Geon noted. “You once inserted a program that makes internet server switches and traffic managers *overlook* the island’s connection unless they’re actively transmitting data to or from the island, turning the island into a ghost in the system. Is there some way you could insert some virus into the satellite system that would make them replace an image of the island with an image of empty ocean when they look down on us?”

Kell almost said something, then clicked his maw shut and put his paws on the table. “That...that *might* be possible,” he said. “I couldn’t get *all* of them, but I could do that to the civilian and lesser protected various government systems. The only ones I wouldn’t be able to get are the Americans and the British. It would take more than just me to do it.”

“I’ll call in the others,” Ferroth said immediately. “Kintel, get in here!” Ferroth boomed.

“It’ll take just about every good coder we have to design something like that. There would be so many variables, making one virus work across

multiple OS platforms, making the image look believable...and we don't have much time. It'd have to be ready before the cloaking spells fail."

"Then I think you should get to work," Anthra said lightly.

"I'll report that to Jussa, he can pass it on to the others," Ralla said.

Ferroth almost pushed Kell off the board and hit the city-wide intercom. "All department personnel report to the office *immediately!*" he called. "Unless what you're doing will explode and collapse the entire city if you don't finish, just leave it! Jukra, Fredda, we need you here too. Why do I not hear running feet coming up the ramp, drakes? Immediately means *right now!*"

"Well, that's gonna cause a stir," Anthra chuckled.

"I'll get out of your way and report to Jussa," Ralla said dryly.

"While you're out there, have Sella come in," Ferroth told him, moving away from the board. "She's a department member, after all, and we're going to need her."

"What can she do?"

"What the other drakes are doing now, so it frees them up to work on this," he answered. "Sella can do about anything in the office except write code, and we'll need every set of paws we can get that knows what they're doing. That's why I'm calling in Jukra and Fredda, we're about to steal some of their drakes to fill in while we work on this."

"Oh, alright. I'll tell her as soon as I get out there."

"We should move out of the way too, it's about to get very crowded in here," Anthra noted. "And I take up a little more space than your workers," she added with a chuckle.

"We'll keep you up to speed on our progress, but if we're gonna do this, it has to be done *now*," Ferroth said. "We don't have much time." He

looked at Kell. “Get off the board, you goofy whelp, and go clear out the terminal room so you can get started.”

Kintel hurried in. “What’s up, chief?”

“We have about twenty hours to write a virus to infect the satellite imaging system to hide the island when the cloak fails,” Ferroth told him. “Get with Kell and organize it.”

“Got it. C’mon, Kell,” he said, and the two of them hurried out of the inner office.

“We’ll narrow it down to the Americans,” Anthra noted as she stood up. “Ralla, tell Jussa we’ll be discussing how to manage that. They’ll know where we are, we can’t stop that, so we’ll have to negotiate a little.”

“This virus won’t hide us forever, it just buys us time,” Geon noted, to which Ferroth nodded. “Hopefully enough time to get the cloaking spells back in effect.”

“I’ll tell him,” Ralla nodded. “I think that might go well, since they’re hosting the fire dragons right now, and they’ve been very kind to us on top of that.”

“We’ll see, young one,” Anthra frowned. “How they act when they think they have much more to gain by treating us differently will reveal who they truly are.”

19 August, 2017, 17:24 DMT; Council Aerie

It was almost a wave of palpable fear sweeping across the aerie.

The cloaking spells were gone. The air over the island shimmered as the ancient sky dragon magic failed, causing a rain of crystals from the sky, the anchors and focuses of those spells losing their magic and falling to the island like a rainbow-glinting rain. The spells had been held together with

17 focus crystals, crystals which would have shattered had the sky dragons not been ready to catch them. They could re-use the crystals to create the new spells, at least once they corrected the problem with magic.

But it meant that the island was no visible to the humans, and now it was vulnerable.

Jussa shook his head as Hinado landed back on the aerie holding one of the crystals in his paws, an earth dragon's tail spike. Sometimes Jussa felt wrong for keeping that secret from his earth dragon friends, that their tail spikes were so critical to some of the most powerful magic, but it was one thing that all dragons agreed had to remain. Much as he admired Anthra and Geon, he understood earth dragons enough to know that they could be almost bull-headedly stubborn, and since they were so resentful at how they were treated, they may very well refuse to give over their spikes to be used in spells, even if the spells were being used for their benefit. Earth dragons were well known to be so contrary that they would hurt themselves just to hurt others, willing to do harm to their own cause just to spite another. Jussa, like the water dragons before him on the council, knew that to protect the earth dragons from themselves, that secret had to be kept.

Their self-imposed exile from the island was a perfect example of that mentality. They were willing to spread misery across the island and starve themselves in the process, just to get their way. Jussa happened to agree with what they were doing, that these particular circumstances allowed for it, but it showed the earth dragon mentality. An earth dragon would cut off his own tail if it somehow caused injury to those he felt were doing him wrong. Sometimes, working around that very large burr in basic earth dragon personality was a challenge, sometimes it was a chore, but it had to be done. The earth dragons were Gaia's children just like the other dragons, and the water dragons had sworn to help the other dragons when they couldn't help themselves, which placed the earth dragons almost permanently under the watchful care of the water dragons.

They were stubborn, defiant, angry children, but they were still children in need of nurturing and protection.

Hinado clutched tightly onto the crystal in his paw, reared up on his back feet as best he could, his long body almost curled over them to give him balance. “And I was hoping that they were wrong,” he sighed. “They were off by nearly twenty minutes.”

“And that fact is worth investigation,” the council chromatic said soberly. “Some variable had to be introduced to cause the time delay. If we can find it, it might tell us what’s wrong.”

“The big question is, what now,” Sessara said darkly, shivering her wings.

“Now, we implement our protection plans,” the council chromatic replied. “Sky dragon patrols out to two hundred *draman*, water dragon pods in position to intercept any ship within our territorial waters. Remember, Jussa, no injuries. Just disable their...whatever you called them. Minimal risk to both sides. We don’t want an escalation caused by a great loss of life if we sink a ship.”

“It’s a very easy thing to do, esteemed council member,” he said calmly.

:”The same thing with the sky dragons, Hinado,” he added. “Do what you can to make the planes turn around without killing the humans making them work. If you have to bring the planes down, try not to kill the humans.”

“Even easier to do,” Hinado answered. “I’ve put our best sky dragons out that can use magic to convince the humans to turn their planes around by confusing their senses.”

“Excellent,” the council chromatic nodded. “And what of...them?” he asked Jussa.

Jussa had to chuckle. He couldn’t even say *earth dragon*. “I don’t have the most recent status report, but if things are on schedule, the earth dragons have released their computer program to confuse the satellites. They can’t blind *all* of them, but they can get *most* of them. It will just leave us with

the Americans knowing where we are, and that might be enough to hide us until we can get the cloaking spells back up.”

“Speaking of that, Hinado, have the elders researched the process?”

“We have, and we can replace them once magic is stable again,” he answered. “It will take about ten days to accomplish, but it can be done.”

“Sessara, I would ask you to return to the dragons in the human lands,” the council chromatic said. “If we must negotiate, I’d like you there to arrange things.”

“But, you may need me here,” she protested.

“Your input is valuable, but right now we have to worry about more than just magic. We have to be in position to protect the island, and you can serve in that role much better than you can here.”

“Because I’m a fire dragon?” she flared.

“Because you have a personal rapport with the humans at the site where the hatchlings are, humans you said have very high rank in their government,” he countered. “You might get them to *give* you information. If the humans are planning to come to the island, you might hear about it before we see them coming. We need you there for your eyes and ears much more than we need you here.”

Sessara gave the council chromatic a long look, then finally nodded. “I’ll see what I can do, but I’ll need to take Gressa with me. She’s the most fluent in English. She can even read it, where I haven’t learned that yet. She might read something they leave out.”

“Then do so,” the council chromatic declared.

“I’ll visit daily, Sessara,” Hinado told her. “I want to take more of a measure of the human magicians.”

“Are they truly worth the effort?” the council chromatic asked.

“Five or six of them, yes,” he replied. “Jenny especially. With proper training, she’ll be a *powerful* magician. Worthy of personal training from the chromatics.”

“Never again,” the council chromatic snapped. “If you want her to learn magic, Hinado, *you* teach her. The chromatics will never share that knowledge with the humans again.”

“Then I’ll teach her,” he said simply. “I happen to believe that if the humans learn magic, they’ll be more amenable to us. We’ll have common ground to use to broaden negotiations.”

“We believed that once, and see what it got us,” the council chromatic almost sneered. “It got us this island after the humans betrayed us on every level possible.”

“That was a thousand years ago.”

“And yet we still live on this island,” he retorted. “Remember *why* we still stay apart from the humans, Hinado.” He turned to Jussa. “Perhaps you could use your influence with *them* to get them out of their hole, Jussa? This is *far* more important than their petty demands.”

“Their demands are far from petty, and to abandon their position will put them in a far worse position once this crisis is over,” he replied bluntly. “I have no doubt that the chromatics have all kinds of punishments all prepared and waiting for them. They’re doing what they can from where they are. And to be honest, they’re more effective *there*, since I believe that you destroyed their department building and talked Ivaiya into destroying the power plant,” he said dryly, which made the chromatic scowl. “The earth dragons know human technology, and they’re in a position to use that knowledge for our benefit...which was the *entire* reason we created the department in the first place. Or have you forgotten?”

“We need them up here, supporting us while we work on this crisis!”

“Doing what? There are no more farms. You destroyed them all,” he replied bluntly. “All they could do is rebuild, which would prevent them

from *helping* in the ways that they can. For now, chromatic, just leave them be. We need them where they are until we get the cloaking magic back over the island.”

“I’d have to agree with Jussa,” Hirrag nodded. “If the earth dragons can use their gadgets to confuse the humans, then let them do it. After all, if the humans come, they have no escape. They’re doing what they can for their *own* self-interest far more than helping *us*. They can’t fly away, and after everything that happened, I’d venture a guess to say that we’d just leave them here and abandon them to their fate.”

“We wouldn’t, but there’s not much we can do,” Essan added. “The only ones that could evacuate the earth dragons off the island without any of them dying would be the sky dragons, and right now, no earth dragon would come into the line of sight of a sky dragon. They wouldn’t trust any of them, not after what they did.”

“They brought that on themselves,” one of the sky dragons elders snapped. “They killed our most revered elder!”

“Really? One earth dragon kills one sky dragon, the sky dragon that *destroyed their power plant* I might add, and they bring the entire destruction of every farm and village on themselves? Really? Did earth dragons that had nothing to do with it bring it on themselves when your sky dragons burned their farms, killed their animals, even dug out their burrows and destroyed everything inside?” Essan snapped right back. “You have a *lot* to answer for, elder. Your behavior was absolutely inexcusable. Ivaiya deserved punishment for her crimes, and for one, I think she got what she deserved.”

The sky dragon elder glared unholy death at Essan, but said nothing.

“Cease this inane bickering!” the council chromatic almost screamed. “It does us no good to fight among ourselves in this time of crisis! There will be time to sort everything else out once we’ve repaired the damage and recast the cloaking magic to protect the island!”

“It might be moot if they already know where we are,” Hirrag noted.

“There are other things we can do, spells to repel their planes and ships so they can’t land,” Hinado answered. “But even if they know exactly where the island is, it still benefits us if they can’t *see* it. After all, how can they land here if they can’t find the beach? They might ram their landing boat right into a cliff. A helicopter may land in the water because they can’t see the ground, even if they’re directly over the island.”

“A fair point,” Hirrag nodded. “I didn’t know the magic worked exactly that way.”

“The human has to be standing on the ground to cancel the effect,” Hinado explained. “If they’re not, they only see empty ocean, even if they’re hovering just a tail’s length above the ground. But once a human cancels the effect, it can never work on them again. The human we brought here, *she* can see the island, even if we restore the cloaking magic. She won’t be able to see it on a picture, but if she’s in a plane looking down or on a boat offshore, she’ll see it.”

“Then she might be a liability,” the council chromatic said.

“Jenny? No,” Sessara said in defense. “She’s trustworthy. Even if the humans demanded she help them find the island, she wouldn’t do it.”

“Are you willing to risk every life on the island over your feeling, Sessara?”

“Where Jenny is concerned, yes,” she replied flatly. “If there’s one human I trust, it’s her. You don’t *know* her, chromatic. Every dragon over on Hawaii respects her greatly. We even let her mind the hatchlings.”

The council chromatic wisely let that drop. “Sessara, find Gressa and start for Hawaii when you can. Fly at night if you feel it’s safe. I need you there as soon as you can safely get there.”

“It’s safe enough,” she answered. “There’s nothing out there for us to run into, and the top of the volcano is well lit.” She looked at Jussa. “Can

you get word down to the earth dragons to warn Jenny we're coming?"

"Easily. There aren't any ships nearby, so don't worry about being picked up by radar until you're close to Hawaii."

"So you know how to get in to their hole?" the council chromatic asked.

"Not anymore," he replied dryly. "They blocked off the tunnel. There's a second way in, but only a pawful of water drakes know where it is. From what I understand, it's almost on the bottom of the ocean," he drawled. "So far down that it would kill any chromatic that used magic to try. So, I wouldn't suggest trying to find your way in, cousin. You'd be in for a very rude shock if you do."

The council chromatic gave him a dark look, but said nothing.

Ralla landed on the aerie and immediately hurried over to Jussa and Essan. "What word, young one?" Essan asked.

"The earth dragons report success," he replied. "They have blinded the vast majority of satellites to the island. When they look at the images from the satellites, they'll see only empty ocean, the computer virus causes the rendering software that governs how computers translate the images the satellites transmit to pixel out the island and replace it with water. There are some satellites that *can* see the island, but they're all owned by the Americans. That narrows things down greatly. But the results aren't perfect. The virus will pixel out every island in the region based on the satellite's global position, which will betray their meddling to humans who are paying attention and notice that the small uninhabited islands around ours disappear off the images. It was the best they could come up with on such short notice, and even now they're working on an updated virus that will hide only our island. With luck, they can update their virus before anyone notices."

"I don't understand half of that explanation, young one, but I did hear that it was a success," Jussa chuckled. "How long until one of the satellites

that can see passes over the island?”

“Two hours,” he replied. “By tomorrow morning, the Americans will know the island’s location.”

“Then we should wait and see how they react.”

“And I’d better get to Hawaii as fast as I can,” Sessara noted, then she turned and raced off the edge, spread her wings, and flapped up and out of sight around the curve of the volcano’s slope.

“Report back to the earth dragons that they have done well, and to continue their other preparations to attack the humans by computer if they threaten the island.”

“I’ll take it back to them,” Ralla nodded, then he turned and bounded off the edge, disappearing.

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Yawning, Jenny watched as Sessara and Gressa flapped their wings heavily in preparation to land, and if she wasn’t so tired, she’d be jumping for joy that Sessara was back.

Frazza was...*difficult*. That was actually rather kind. The honest truth was, Frazza was an overbearing, insufferably demanding, sadistic *bitch*. She was the largest dragon there, the biggest wyrm, and she threw her weight around both figuratively and literally. She was much more physical with the other dragons than Sessara, using raw force to make them do what she wanted, and she was of a habit to smack anyone around her for no apparent reason, as if to simply remind them that she was there, she was bigger than them, and she’d do a hell of a lot more if they dared defy her in any way. Even something as simple as a roll of the eyes could land a fire dragon over by the lava flows, recovering from injuries. She tolerated absolutely no real or perceived challenge to her authority, and got into at least one fight every

day just to *demonstrate* to the others that she was the top dog. Sessara didn't hurt the other dragons just to remind them of her authority, but Frazza did, and she *relished* it. She liked to hurt the other dragons, and that demonstrated the worst aspects of fire dragon behavior to Jenny and the Hunters, showing them the other end of the spectrum from Sessara, who when compared to Frazza was a very mild-natured and agreeable fire dragon. Sessara was probably the most affable fire dragon on the volcano, but Frazza was the most hated. *Nobody* liked Frazza, not even Sessara, but she didn't care. Frazza didn't want friendship from others, she wanted only fear, and the respect she believed that that fear induced.

Dealing with *that* on a daily basis had given both Jenny and Arlen headaches, stomach aches...*everything*-aches. Jenny had the feeling that Frazza probably would have killed a couple of the other drakes, and a few of the Hunters, if not for the stern warning that if everyone wasn't alive and whole when she returned, Sessara would kill Frazza. And Sessara was the *only* dragon that Frazza feared.

Jenny almost had to restrain herself from running up and hugging Sessara when she landed, walking up to her with Arlen beside her, but she did almost hug the huge finger Sessara put on her shoulder. "God, am I *glad* you're back," Jenny said explosively, looping her arm around Sessara's paw.

"Did Frazza cause you any trouble?"

"Me, no. Everyone else, *god* yes," she sighed. "Now, why are you flying back in the dark?"

"I'm needed here," she replied simply. "I'll explain things after I eat. You have food around?"

"We're *starving*," Gressa nodded. "There's not much to eat back on the island."

"We haven't had a proper meal since we left," Sessara grunted.

“Major, have them bring in some food,” Arlen called to the officer standing by the tent, one of the contact officers for the dragons. “Actually, just have them bring in the full breakfast. It won’t hurt it to sit here until the dragons wake up.”

“I’ll call it down, Mister Secretary,” the man said, then picked up the hot phone.

“How was it on the island?” Jenny asked.

“Tense,” Gressa replied as Sessara sat on her haunches and started staring at the vehicle gate, where the flatbeds would bring in the food. “We can feel the drain on magic now, and most of our magical devices and permanent spells have failed. The elders and sages still have no explanation.”

“Shouldn’t you be there?” Jenny asked, looking up at Sessara.

“They felt I would serve better here,” she replied. “I’ll explain after I eat.”

Other dragons were stirred awake when the flatbeds rolled in, and they hurried over at the prospect of an early breakfast. They greeted Sessara and Gressa when they realized they were back, and Jenny and Arlen followed them over to the trucks. Jenny climbed up onto the cab of one of the flatbeds and sat on the back to stay out from underfoot as Sessara tore into a large crate of watermelons, eating them rind and all. Jenny hoped that Sessara would explain, but from how fast she was eating, she had to truly be famished...and that was a pretty big indicator to her that the earth dragon strategy was *working*. If food was that scarce, that even a council member wasn’t eating well, then the chromatic and sky dragons remaining on the island had to be on the brink of starvation.

After Sessara and Gressa ate far more than they usually do, Jenny and Arlen walked with them back towards the tent. “The council chromatic sent us back to be the first point of negotiation,” Gressa said, translating for Sessara when what she wanted to say went beyond her English skills.

“It’s already tomorrow, so the word should reach you soon,” Sessara added.

“What word?”

“The magic hiding the island has failed,” Gressa told her, giving her a sober look. “The earth dragons have used their computers to hide that fact from most of the humans, but they said they can’t hide it from the Americans.”

“The sat...sata...the high birds that look down,” Sessara groped. “The earth dragons did things to them so they can’t see the island, but they couldn’t do it to *all* of them.”

“The earth dragons attacked the satellite network?” Arlen gasped.

“They used an illness,” Gressa said.

“They used a *virus*,” Jenny said, thinking furiously. “Actually, a worm if we want to be technical, but...shit. That would be seriously hard to do.”

“It isn’t perfect, what they did,” Gressa relayed as they reached the tent. “The water dragons that talk to them brought word that they’re working on a different virus to do a better job.”

“Arlen, if the earth dragons are moving like that, things must be more serious than we thought,” Jenny said. “I need to see what they did.”

“From what Ralla said, they used their virus to make the satellites only see water instead of the island...some word Ralla used. Rendering? The virus works against the computers that receive the pictures from the satellites, Ralla said. The only thing it does is make the machines that create the pictures paint over the island with the color of water to hide it.”

Jenny almost said something, then she laughed. “Brilliant!” she said brightly. “Satellites are incredibly hard to hack, but if they attacked the site receivers...that’s brilliant!”

“That might be going a bit too far,” Arlen fretted. “That’s an act of war to most countries.”

“They have to catch the earth dragons first, Arlen, and trust me, that is *not easy*,” Jenny said. “They’re more or less the reason the government created the Hunters, and you saw how effective we were against them,” she frowned. “But why tell us this, Sessara?”

“Because the American sat-uh-lites can’t be fooled,” she replied. “Your people should already have seen the island by now.”

“We haven’t heard anything yet,” Arlen noted. “But then again, they know it’s not even dawn here. I’d better call my office in Washington and see what’s going on.”

“They sent me here to make certain that you leave the island alone,” Sessara told them bluntly. “We don’t want your ships close to the island.”

“I’m certain we can work that out, Sessara,” Arlen told her with a nod. “We won’t send ships if you don’t want them there, but I’m fairly certain that the Navy will prepare a task force for deployment in case you *ask* for us,” he said. “Just because only we can see the island doesn’t mean it’s going to stay like that. If you ask for our help discouraging *others* from approaching the island, we’d be happy to arrange it.”

“The water dragons will protect the island,” Gressa warned. “One thing we were told to tell you is to keep all ships one hundred of your miles away from our island. The water dragons will cripple any ship that comes any closer.”

“Like I said, my dear friend, we can work that out,” Arlen told her smoothly. “These kinds of talks are the only reason I’m still here, you know. Let me talk to the President and see where he stands on things, then we can sit down and discuss the matter formally.”

Jenny sat at the computer and brought up a couple of remote programs on the Hunters’ private cloud server, then checked several real-time satellite images from commercial satellite imaging companies. Their servers were

up, their websites operating normally, so the earth dragons hadn't attacked the sites...so they must have penetrated security and planted their worm behind the firewalls. Holy shit...if they'd hacked *every* company, even some government systems, military...just how deep into the internet did the earth dragons have their hands? To plant a worm like that over so many different networks, so many different platforms with varying levels of internet security, to get it into *military* systems...shit. Just...shit.

She knew the earth dragons were good, but this, this was fucking *nuts*.

So, which satellites America controlled could they not get at? CIA? NSA? Possibly Air Force? Or maybe all three? If their worm attacked the site computers that received the images and rendered them into picture files, then they didn't have to go after the satellites themselves. So, which American agency had security so formidable that the earth dragons couldn't crack it?

CIA. It had to be the CIA. Like the Hunters, they used cold protocols. The Hunters didn't put anything critical on a computer that had internet access, and the CIA had entire intranets that were isolated from the internet. The NSA had a few, but not as many as the CIA...though the Hunters had been advocating for moving to intranets, and the Hunters were a division of the NSA, not the CIA. The CIA's satellite system had to be on an intranet, and because of that, the earth dragons couldn't hack it unless they were on site...and the earth dragons couldn't do that anymore with all the scions gone.

One thing was for sure, though. If the earth dragons could plant a worm that affected various companies and networks across the entire *internet*, then they were every bit as dangerous as Jenny had warned. If they could do that, then there was no telling what else they could do.

Magic, shmagic. Right now, the *earth dragons* were by far the greatest threat to humanity the dragons represented, if only because they seemed capable of feats of hacking that even Jenny would find implausible. What would happen if the earth dragons decided to shut down the power grids of

every major city all over the world? Those power companies were all connected to the internet, and that meant *they could do it*. If they had that kind of penetration into internet-connected computer networks, then literally, nothing connected to the internet was safe from them. And that made them *fucking scary*.

“Jenny?” Sessara called.

“Sorry, I was checking to see what the earth dragons were up to,” she said, looking up from the monitor.

“You look worried,” Arlen said.

“I *am* worried,” she replied. “If the earth dragons could hack *every single* satellite data receiver site, Arlen, think about it. What *other* global system could they hack and take over?”

Arlen frowned.

“Exactly. I warned the President that they were good, but *shit*,” she breathed. “We’d better make sure we don’t get on their bad sides.” At least until she could think up some way to stop them, she added silently. As much as she liked the dragons, and especially Kell and the earth dragons, she had to think about the basic protection of the United States. If the earth dragons turned on them, then the Hunters had to be ready to stop them.

“What they did was that big?” Gressa asked.

“Oh yes,” Jenny grunted. “It’s not something I’d think even Anonymous or the Chinese could pull off.”

“Who is anonymous?”

“Sorry, it’s a group of computer hackers,” she replied. “I’ll have to talk to Yancy about it,” she said, putting it aside. “So, you two are back for good?”

“Until we return to the island for good, yes,” Sessara answered. “Have you been practicing your draconic in my absence?”

Jenny laughed. “And get smacked if I didn’t?” she replied.

“Arlen, we need to speak to the President about these matters,” Sessara said, turning to him.

“I’ll call it up and arrange a conference,” he replied.

It took Arlen about two hours to get everything set up, time Jenny spent with the other eggheads on the team, discussing just what the earth dragons had done, how they did it, and what it meant. Michaels had some friends at a satellite company, and they let him in to search for the hack job without Michaels telling them exactly what he was looking for, and it took him almost an hour to find it. “Holy shit, this is the most brilliant worm I’ve ever seen,” he said as they brought up the code. “It’s designed to attach to the rendering software and recolor all pixels not blue or white as blue in a GPS grid block that includes where we think the island is. That would paint the island blue without altering any clouds over it, which would give away the alteration.”

“How did they get it in?”

“That’s the brilliant part. They didn’t have to hack anything, because they sent the worm out to every major internet traffic hub and had them insert the worm in data packets in route to the target systems. They piggybacked the worm right into the IP-two protocols, something I’ve never seen before. Since the worm was in the encapsulation frame itself rather than the data, it let the worm bypass the initial defenses. The worm was fragmented into the encapsulation, then it was reassembled by the victim system itself when the encapsulation was stripped out, which triggered the first stage of the worm’s program. Once the victim server reassembled the worm from the packets, bam, it was in and behind the firewalls.”

“That’s impossible!” Petrovski protested. “Encapsulation frames can’t be altered like that without the computer throwing them out as corrupted!”

“I thought so too until about three minutes ago,” Michaels grunted. “This is the most brilliant bit of hacking I’ve ever seen. They found a hole

in the IP-two protocol *itself*, and designed an exploit to take advantage of it. Using this trick, they could get a worm or virus almost anywhere, into any machine that's IP-two compatible. And that's almost every box that's not running something old, from before the IP-two protocols were designed and started to be implemented into OS's."

"Can we patch it?" Derringer asked.

"Not without patching every single server, hub, and switch on the internet," he replied. "But I can come up with something that'll make NSA firewalls recognize this trick and block it."

"Well, we just learned something new," Jenny grunted. "The earth dragons just showed us a fundamental flaw with the IP-two protocols."

"It can be patched," Michaels repeated. "But it's damn smart."

"We already knew they were smart," Petrovski said, scratching her shapely chin. "Now that we know what it's doing, can we get around it?"

"You mean get an unaltered image?" Michaels asked, and she nodded. "I think so. Let me find a satellite about to pass over the area and see where it sends its data. The worm doesn't affect the data coming in, just how the software processes it."

"Which is pretty clever," Derringer nodded. "Much easier than trying to hack every satellite in orbit."

"Sessara said this was something they came up with on short notice," Jenny said as Michaels typed at the computer.

Ten minutes later, Michaels had an image up on the tabletop monitor. It was an island, and even seeing it from above like that, Jenny recognized it from its topography. "That's it," she said. "That's their island."

"Which satellite got that image?" Derringer asked.

"One of the google satellites," he answered. "They have so freakin' many of 'em up there, it's never more than twenty minutes before one

passes over someplace.” Michaels zoomed it in, and kept zooming, and to Jenny’s surprise, individual dragons became discernable on what she knew was Council Aerie. They were barely little dots on the image, but since dragons were so big, they were showing up the same way small houses showed up on the images.

“Council Aerie,” Jenny told them. “Sky dragon, chromatic, fire dragon, chromatic, sky dragon, water dragon,” she said, tapping the tiny figures on the inset touch-screen monitor that formed the tabletop.

“Alright, so, we can see the island now,” Petrovski noted. “You think they’re looking at a similar image over at CIA headquarters?”

“No doubt,” Jenny agreed. “My god,” she breathed as they zoomed back out, and she could see the farms...or what used to be farms. She moved the image over and saw that the department building had been destroyed, nothing but rubble, and moving more showed her dug out burrows, rutted farmland that was growing over with grass and weeds, a field of splintered bones where the earth dragons had herded their livestock, and the shattered remnants of the factories on the north side of the island. It was every bit as bad as Sessara said it was. “They destroyed *everything* of the earth dragons’,” she said, finding the cove. “This was Keth’s farm. It’s ruined. Totally ruined,” she said wistfully. “He’ll be devastated when he sees this for himself. His farm was everything to him.”

“It does look bad,” Derringer grunted. “But they should be able to fix things when all this is over.”

“That doesn’t mean that they won’t be righteously pissed off,” Petrovski noted. “But, we better think about how we’re going to stop them if they go crazy.”

“There’s only one real way to do it,” Michaels said, looking up at them. “I doubt we’d be able to keep them out, but we can slow them way the fuck down if we can find where they’ve spliced into the fiber optics and cut their cable. If we restrict them to using hacked satcom uplinks, it’ll severely hamper what they can do.”

“That’s like finding a needle in a field of haystacks,” Derringer protested. “They probably spliced in underwater.”

“And they have control of most of the Hawaiian internet servers,” Jenny said absently. “Kell let that slip when I was on the island. It’s how they hide where all the extra traffic is coming from, and they have to have control of those servers so they can access the internet but still be invisible on the system, the proverbial ghost in the machine.”

“So we root through all the switches and boxes that route traffic here on the island and try to find how they messed with them,” Petrovski said. “And since we’re *here*, at least it won’t be all that hard.”

“They might be using a major traffic source on the island as a gateway,” Michaels proposed. “A couple of Hawaiian ISPs might just be fronts for earth dragon internet traffic.”

“That’s a viable option, we should check that out too,” Jenny nodded. “We need Yancy over here.”

“Yeah, we should call him and get him here, we need him for this.”

“That’ll keep him from replacing all of us,” Michaels laughed. “They have him building a new Hunter team.”

They discussed the options for curtailing earth dragon hacking, but they also got Yancy on the next plane to Hawaii. After that, Jenny dismissed the others so Arlen could conference in President Walker. Sessara and Gressa explained things to him, and they relayed the stern warning they were told to bring from the island. “Any ship that comes inside that line will be crippled and any airplane will be turned back, honored President,” Sessara told him in stern English. “With the island vulnerable, the water dragons and sky dragons will protect it.”

“We’ll honor your territorial claim, Sessara,” Walker assured her. “But I will have a task force ready for deployment and operating in the waters south of Hawaii. They’ll stay out of your territory, but be close by in case they’re needed. Is that acceptable?”

“I’ll have to pass it on to the council and let them decide,” she said after Gressa translated for her. Walker went beyond Sessara’s four-year-old equivalent English skills. “You have been very good friends to us, honored President, but in this matter, we trust no humans.”

“I understand completely,” he replied.

“We would also ask you to keep this to yourself,” Gressa added. “The only ones that can see the island are you Americans. The rest of the humans can’t see it.”

“Why is that?”

“The earth dragons,” she answered. “They’re using their computer devices to hide the island from other satellites, but they can’t hide it from *yours*. Don’t ask me why, my understanding of human technology begins and ends with turning on and off a TV.”

Walker looked a bit surprised they’d admit that, but Jenny wasn’t. Fire dragons didn’t lie as a matter of course. They considered it dishonorable when dealing with one worthy of respect, and they respected President Walker. Fire dragons were bad diplomats, but in honesty, they were the only diplomats the dragons really had at the moment. They were the only dragons they had outside the earth dragons that knew any English at all.

“They’re doing it, Mister President,” Jenny said when Walker looked at her. “It’s a pretty brilliant bit of computer hacking they pulled off. They’re hiding the island using a computer worm affecting the vast majority of the computers that receive satellite video imaging data and translate it into video images. Their worm causes the video rendering software to paint the island over and make it look like ocean.”

“But not ours.”

“Not *all* of ours,” she corrected. “I’m just guessing, but I’d say that the CIA spy satellites are immune from the earth dragon hack. I’m surprised the CIA hasn’t run to you with pictures of the island yet.”

“I do have a four o’clock with the director,” he noted, looking down. “How did they do it?”

“Like I said, it’s pretty damn clever. We’ll send you a detailed report, sir.”

“I’m looking forward to reading it. Uh, Sessara, you *do* understand that what the earth dragons are doing would be considered an act of war by some countries?”

“Perhaps, but do those countries know it was the earth dragons that did it?” she replied simply.

Walker laughed. “A fair point,” he nodded. “And I think we can overlook that little fact for the moment.” He glanced offscreen a moment. “It’s about time for me to ask a favor of you, Sessara. With your permission, I’d like to come to Hawaii and visit you in person. It would be part a state visit, and part media opportunity. The human media is almost up in arms over the severe restrictions we’ve put on them over contact with you. We’d like to arrange an open meeting between you and me, with the media there, including allowing a couple of media teams the opportunity to visit the exclusion zone and see what’s up there.”

Gressa translated that, and Sessara considered it for a moment. “I have no objection,” she replied. “But they’ll be disappointed.”

“No, they won’t be,” he laughed. “The chance to see dragons doing what dragons do will make them very happy.”

“We watch TV and argue about football.”

Walker grinned. “And they’ll be quite interested in that fact. Might you allow me to bring my wife? She’s very interested in the dragons.”

“She is welcome if you wish it,” Sessara nodded. “I think we might have to invent a couple of fake ceremonies to make your media happy, and explain what we’re doing here.”

“You’re a savvy politician, Sessara,” Walker smiled. “Since it’s about the young dragons there, just organize some kinds of formal competitions. Races, wrestling, whatever, and say that they’re part of what you’re doing.”

“The hatchlings would probably enjoy something like that,” she nodded after Gressa translated for her.

“I’ll get things moving here. We’re aiming on visiting in about five days. I’ve been wanting to do this, so we already have an itinerary drawn up. We just needed your permission.”

“Itener...what?” Gressa asked, looking at Jenny.

“They have everything all planned out,” she elaborated. “And now that they have your permission, it’s just a matter of setting it in motion. An itinerary is a plan, a planned series of events, like a schedule.”

“Oh. Alright,” she said, then translated that. “I learned a new word today,” Gressa chuckled.

“You learn about a thousand new words every day,” Jenny accused lightly.

“The advance teams of the Secret Service will be on a plane inside two hours, Colonel,” Walker told her. “Be sure to warn General Steele as soon as you can, you’ll get it to him before the official orders reach him.”

“I’ll pass it along, Mister President. You realize the service will want some extravagant precautions?”

“Oh yes, they’re terrified of the idea of me being face to face with a dragon,” he chuckled. “But the dragons have shown trust in us, and I’d be a poor President if I didn’t show some trust in them.”

“Why would they be afraid?” Gressa asked.

“Because it’ll be the first time the President will be meeting with someone that can kill him before his bodyguards can move to stop it,” she

answered honestly. “One bite, one blast of fire, and it’s over too fast for them to protect him.”

“We would never do such a thing!” Sessara said, a bit indignantly.

“*We* know that, but humans who don’t know you very well don’t,” Jenny told her.

“At least you show courage to come see us in person,” Sessara told him. “Fire dragons respect courage.”

23 August 2017, 02:54 DMT; The Library of Camelot

It was the dead of night, but it was really her only chance.

First of her class looked up at the clock to make sure her internal sense of time was correct, then buckled the flap of her shoulder bag. It had taken a while to get to this point, because of the crisis. The council library had been in use around the clock for the last couple of weeks, but now, finally, she’d heard that the sages were taking a break, getting some rest. She’d heard it from one of the sages herself, whom she had sought out under the pretense of asking her questions related to crystal focuses, but in reality she’d been fishing for just this kind of information.

She’d learned quite a bit from that conversation. She knew, for example, that the magical protections over the Library of Eternity had failed, like just about every other spell that had been placed since they arrived on the island. Even the driftlights illuminating the library had failed, forcing them to use their own magical lights. The sages were all taking the night off after several very long days, exhausted to the point where they needed sleep, so the sage’s library would be empty. There might be chromatics over in the council chamber and its attached private library, but there would be none in the main library.

It would be her first chance to search for that book.

She'd done some of her own research in that time. The only dragon or human that had ever really gone out of her way to study the earth dragons was Athena, so she'd been reading some of Athena's other works. She'd documented more than just earth dragons in her life, had been quite a proficient magician who had forwarded quite a few magical theories in her day, and had also brought the city that bore her name in the modern time into prominence in Greece. Reading about Athena made it very easy to see where the myth of Athena originated, for she was vastly intelligent and had formidable magical powers. Over the years, history yielded to legend, and legend to myth, turning Athena into one of the Greek gods of their pantheon.

She wasn't the only real figure to make it into mythology. Hermes, Aphrodite, Poseiden, Heracles, Achilles, Perseus, Tantalus, Sisiphus, Prometheus, they had all been real people. Most had been magicians of the pre-classical Greek era, and their fame had turned into myth over the centuries, as the Greeks entered their classical age.

It took a lot of reading and research to compile what Athena knew about the earth dragons, because it was scattered through her other works. And her view of them was much like what else she'd read, that the earth dragons were gentle, shy, reclusive, highly intelligent, and complete pacifists. She was one of the few humans that had an actual relationship with the earth dragons, so her observations had a great deal of weight. She wrote in one of her historical journals of her time ruling the city that would become Athens about when the village she knew moved at the request of the other dragons, since Athena knew where it was, humoring the magical dragons who were so worried that Athena would turn on the earth dragons and lead an army against them that they persistently badgered the earth dragons into moving their entire village.

The amusing part was that the earth dragons gave Athena directions to their new village after they moved.

This behavior intrigued her. The earth dragons were quite tolerant of the protectiveness of the other dragons, but didn't take them all that

seriously. It was almost like a chromatic mother enduring the hatchling hanging from her wingjoint, humoring the infant and tolerating his actions without doing anything about it. The earth dragons were almost... patronizing to the other dragons.

Again, showing her just who was actually in charge back then. The magical dragons liked to think that they were, but the earth dragons were the ones that actually was, because the other dragons wouldn't dare tell an earth dragon what he could or couldn't do.

That was the extent of what she'd managed to gather for herself over the days of waiting for her opportunity, and it was now upon her. She left her library and spread her wings in the relative darkness, then jumped out into the open air. She'd flown this route dozens of times in practice for this, the unlighted, stealth flight to the Library of Eternity, navigating by her internal sense of time and what few landmarks she could see in the moonless night. She knew how fast she was going and at what angle she was, and that told her when to increase her altitude, when to turn, when to descend. She'd practiced it so many times that she landed almost exactly where she meant to land on the platform holding the library and council chambers, just a few steps away from the entrance the sages used. As she expected, there were no guards standing outside the door. If there were any guards, they'd be inside.

The library was dark and deserted. The starlight coming in through the windows just barely illuminated the interior as she crept inside, moving carefully and quietly in case they had guards *inside* the library, and once she was certain that there wasn't a sky dragon or young chromatic napping in some corner, she created a very dim light for herself, just enough to not bump into things. Odd, she expected someone to be here, a napping dragon set to guard the library. There was definitely someone over in the council chambers, however, she could hear their faint voices through the wall separating the library from the council chamber. There was a door between them, and she knew she needed to avoid that door with her light.

Now that she was here, she got as close to the center of the library as she could determine, then extinguished her light and prepared herself. With magic drained so much, it made any spell more difficult to cast, but at least this was a spell she'd had so much practice using that she'd be able to put a great deal behind it, even with the drain. The title hidden on the scroll was all she needed to use her spell of Seeking to find the book, since that title would give her something exact to use in searching for it. She centered her mind on that title, on finding the one book in the library with that name, then she put all her effort into channeling the magic through her body to shape the spell and make it reality.

She just prayed that the chromatics in the council chamber were so intent on their debate that they didn't sense her spellcasting. There was a stone wall between them, but the feathery antenna on a chromatic's forehead were quite sensitive to such things.

Her spell triggered, and she opened her eyes and turned in the direction the book lay...which was through the door and into the council side of the building.

She should have expected that.

She blew out her breath and crept up to the door, listening intently. From what little she remembered of this place, that door didn't open directly into the council chambers, it instead opened into an anteroom off the council chamber. She pushed it open as slowly as she could, wincing a bit as the door squeaked on its hinges, but the sound didn't alter the conversation going on in the next room, conversation that became loud enough to be audible as she crept into a simple room with no furniture, just shelves on the walls holding books.

"—some kind of nexus," one chromatic was saying as she crept into the anteroom.

"Possibly, but we'd be able to determine that," another replied, a voice she recognized as one of the females on the Council of Seven. "The drain

has no focal point, it's like a blanket thrown across the entire astral plane that's suppressing magic uniformly."

That was a term she rarely heard. It was theorized that magic moved through a slightly different phase of existence that theorists deemed the astral plane, a single piece of the full reality, like one side of a coin. It was why magic wasn't visible unless channeled into a spell, they speculated, channeled through the dragon's body from the astral plane to the material plane. The theory had yet to be proven, and it had both supporters and critics. The council female sounded like a supporter of that theory.

Luck was with her in that they had the door to the council chambers closed. She peeked out of the anteroom and found herself in a hallway holding the offices of the council members and their private library, and her seeking spell was locked on the book, telling her that it was down the hallway away from the council chambers. She crept down the hallway as quietly as she could, walking with care so her claws didn't click on the stone, even holding her tail up and centered so her plumage didn't swish against anything. She knew she had to look quite silly, high-stepping along with her tail held up and straight behind her, her wings folded tightly against her upper flanks and lower back, but dragons weren't exactly built for stealth. Her spell of seeking sent her all the way down the hallway and to a door that warned her that the personal office of the council chromatic lay beyond...but without magical alarms or protections, there was nothing keeping her out.

She did pause, though. If they caught her in the council chromatic's private office, there would be hell to pay. But, her curiosity drove her to ignore good sense, and she pushed the door open slowly and carefully. Beyond was a large room holding shelves on the walls, three separate reading tables, and a large, ornate table that served as a desk. Magical instruments that were now powerless set on those tables, on the desk, which might have alarmed the council chromatic to her intrusion, or kept her from entering, but like all other magical devices, they were now dormant.

She moved in and looked right where the book was. It was on one of the shelves, very high up on one of the shelves, almost to the ceiling. She used her floating magic *very* carefully, keeping it tightly controlled, pulling the book down and into her paws. It was a very old book, bound in black leather and with carved script on the front cover that didn't match the title she'd been given. But her spell had singled this book out, and when she opened the cover, she found the title she expected on the inside page. They'd rebound the book under a false name.

The problem was the hole it left behind. She knew the council chromatic would notice that hole in his stacks, chromatics were very sensitive to changes in their personal domains. She'd notice a single thing out of place in her den, and she was certain that the council chromatic would notice that missing book with the most fleeting glance. Fretting a bit, she pondered the problem, then reached the only solution she could think up on short notice. Setting the book on the floor, she used her clawtip to very carefully cut the book out of its leather binding, then she took that empty black leather outer cover and put it back in the hole, being very careful to place it exactly as she'd seen it. Luckily for her, the books to either side of it weren't leaning against it, so when she replaced it, it fit in the hole perfectly. She put the now unbound book in her shoulder satchel, then turned and hurried out as quietly as she could, her heart in her throat and feeling both anxiety over being caught and elation at having found what she was after.

Answers.

She used a bit of magic she knew that wiped out the lingering traces of her presence in the room, an anti-tracking spell, then carefully used it as she backed up the hallway, eradicating any trace of her presence, and so high-strung that the council chromatics would sense her use of magic that she might hear them charging into the hallway at any second that she might jump out of her skin at any loud noise. She swept her tracks clear all the way back into the sage's library, then once she closed the door, was a bit more confident about using it once the stone wall was directly between her and the council members. She removed the evidence of her presence in the

library all the way to the landing, floated up off the stone ledge, then finished her work, then turned and flapped her wings, heading back to her own library, both excited and terrified at the same time. Did they see her fly away? Had they noticed her when she was in the library and said nothing, just seeing what she was going to do? Would there be a contingent of angry elders waiting for her at her library?

She worked herself into a fever pitch flying back, so much so she almost crashed into the volcano when she lost her bearings, but she managed to get back to the Library of Camelot without killing herself. She shut the door and bounded in like an excited kitten, then pulled her shoulder satchel off and very carefully pulled the unbound book out of it. The book's page bindings were intact, holding it together, but without its outer cover, the whole thing might fall apart if she was too rough with it. She charged downstairs to where every library kept its supplies, found a blank book about the same size as the book she'd stolen, then ripped out the pages and carried the outer cover back upstairs. She placed the book in the cover carefully, placed new binding page flaps on each side, and to her elation, she found that it fit perfectly.

Thank Gaia for standardized book sizing!

It took a lot of effort channeling the spell to attach the new binding flaps and repair the book, to bind the book into the new outer cover, a spell every librarian knew so they could maintain their books, but it also concealed her theft in a nameless brown leather cover, a book she could easily hide by putting it in one of the earth dragon villages, someplace that only she could easily go. All that stone between it and any chromatic searching for it with magic would hide the book from seeking spells.

And that was *exactly* what she was going to do with it.

She collected up some food and water into a second shoulder satchel, put the repaired book back in the first one, then buckled both on and evacuated her library before someone came looking for her. She soared down to the ground and almost plowed into the grass by misjudging her

altitude, but she'd come down right where she wanted to be, within ten steps of one of the entrances to Blackstone Village. She created her light the instant she had her nose in the tunnel, then raced down the passages unerringly, rushing to get into the village and deep under the ground, just in case they were looking for her. She'd read the book down there and leave it, leave it where no chromatic could find it, then, after reading it, decide if she wanted to give it to Essan or not. If she decided to give it to him, she'd tell him where it was so as not to have any more contact with it. Essan was small enough to navigate the tunnels, he could come down here himself and get it...or send Sella for it. She had no doubt that Sella knew the tunnels as well as she did, since the earth dragons allowed her to go among them freely.

Running into the room with the sculptures, she used floating magic to lay stones over the entry, further putting stone between her and anyone seeking her or the book, then pulled it out of her satchel with trembling fingers, set it on the floor, and sat on her haunches over it.

It was time to find out the truth.

The first chapter of the book, surprisingly, was nothing but the myths of creation of the dragons, but it included the myths of all five races, each with its own specific point of view where it believed that it was the original species, and all other species deviated from it. She read all five of them, curious to see what the other races believed, and once she read them all, she turned the page and felt a shiver run through her.

They are all wrong.

Well...that wasn't entirely unexpected. Myths were rarely entirely correct, and while some myths were based in fact, most actually weren't.

The origins of the species draconis are actually twofold, the book read. Dragons did not evolve from a single race, though it is theorized that the two originating races of dragons did in fact evolve from a single parent race. However, this is a theory as yet unproven, and while it deserves mention, as such it has no basis in this factual history.

The original races of dragons were, to use the classical Latin designations, the draconis astra, or the chromatics as they are known today, and the draconis terra, the earth dragons. The chromatics lived above ground, and the earth dragons below, though a chromatic colony was never far from an earth dragon warren. The other races of dragons, sky, fire, and water, descended from the chromatic dragons, while the earth dragons have changed only slightly since the earliest draconic fossils and ancient warrens unearthed by historians and archaeologists. The earth dragon of today looks much as the earth dragon of a million years ago appeared, where the chromatics and their splinter races have changed considerably, have evolved over time.

That was definitely interesting. So, in a way, the chromatic view of the origins of the dragon species was correct. The chromatics believed that they were the first dragon race and that all other dragons evolved from them, specializing in certain forms of magic, which altered them into what they were...except for the earth dragons. The chromatics believed that the earth dragons evolved from the weakest of the magical dragons, unable to find proper mates, which degenerated them to the point where they could no longer use magic. And from there, they evolved into the modern earth dragon. But, according to the book, the earth dragons had always been a separate species...which did make a kind of sense. If all the other races of dragons were magical except the earth dragons, that disparate origin was a very logical explanation for it.

She read on as the book got into the science of how the other species of dragons evolved, then it went back to the original relationships between the chromatics and earth dragons, got to one of the main points she'd been pondering since she got involved in all this. *Chromatic colonies remained close to the earth dragons in prehistoric times, according to historical studies, the book related. This is because as the source, dragons of that era depended on the earth dragons for their ability to fly. Magic had yet to permeate the world to the degree where dragon magic worked on a global scale.*

Source? Source of what? And why wouldn't magic work everywhere, only in chromatic colonies? And how in Gaia were the chromatics dependent on the earth dragons for flight? Earth dragons *couldn't fly*. Could they fly back then, and somehow lost the ability?

She read on about this strange relationship between the chromatics and the earth dragons, how the chromatics fed and protected the earth dragons, and got nothing in return. The earth dragons, shy and timid, were afraid to come out of their warrens, and the chromatics literally supported them, hunted all their food, protected them from danger. It was more like a parasitic relationship to her, not symbiotic. The earth dragons were like leeches.

She read on with more interest when the book mentioned change. *Eventually, evidence suggests, the chromatics managed to entice the earth dragons into abandoning a completely subterranean lifestyle. The earth dragons established shallow dens and warrens closer to the surface and ventured out for limited amounts of time, where they discovered an affinity for agriculture. Once earth dragons began to farm, to spend extended amounts of time above ground, magic began to permeate the land and spread beyond the limited areas in which the chromatics clustered, for earth dragons are in fact the source of all magic.*

She gasped and stood up over the book, staring at it like it suddenly came alive and tried to bite her. Earth dragons were the *source* of all magic? That was...impossible! They couldn't even *do* magic, not back then, not now!

But the book explained it to her, in a way that no other book had. *The two dragon races existed in a state of symbiotic harmony. The earth dragons were the familiar, the source of magic, the chosen of Gaia, where the chromatics were the users of the magic they radiated. In this symbiotic relationship, the chromatics supported, nurtured, and protected the earth dragons in return for being granted the magic that allowed them to fly and perform ever-expanding magical feats as they explored the boundaries and limits of magical power. The earth dragons were the living focus of magic,*

the outlet of the energy generated by all life, and once they abandoned their underground existence, their magical auras were no longer absorbed by the stone and began to permeate the air and plants and water of above. But, as the earth dragons learned the arts of agriculture and could support and feed themselves, and their magic expanded through the land, it freed the chromatics to expand their ranges, explore, spread out. This led to the eventual evolution of the sky, fire, and water dragons, as chromatic colonies were established and adapted to local conditions, until such time that they evolved into completely separate races, as magic adapted them to disparate environments. Dragons that came to dwell on the high mountain peaks became the sky dragons. Dragons that came to dwell in the depths of the great desert became fire dragons. And dragons that took up fishing as a means of sustenance, living by the sea, became the water dragons..

By Gaia's grace...that *made sense*. Given what was going on right now, that made sense! If the book was to be believed, magic was fading because the source of magic, the earth dragons, were so deep underground that the magic they radiated was being absorbed by the stone around them rather than enriching the world above. The earth dragons were truly of the earth, for Gaia was the living soul of the earth, of *life*, and it was said that through Gaia, all magic flowed. If the book was right, then magic flowed into the world from Gaia, but through the *earth dragons*. They were living magical energy sources...the ultimate familiar!

But...why had she never *sensed* it? She was sensitive to the currents of magic, like most chromatics were, but she never sensed *any* kind of magical emanation coming from the earth dragons.

The book even explained the seeming contradictions of the fact that earth dragons couldn't use magic. *Many sages discount this historical fact based on earth dragon peculiarities, such as their nonmagical natures, the book read. But simple magical law proves these theories correct. Since earth dragons are magic, it renders them incapable of using magic. The magic within prevents the proper channeling of magical energies to cast spells, since they have absolutely no control over the magic they radiate. The magic within overwhelms any conscious attempt to use magical spells*

or abilities. Their bodies have adapted to demonstrate quasi-magical capabilities unique to their kind, a trait common through dragonkind, such as the fact that they grow inorganic crystals from their tails and the nature of their breath weapons, which like water dragons, they must fuel outside the boundaries of magic.

Breath weapons? Earth dragons don't *have* breath weapons. But she could agree, the tail spikes could indeed be a function of magic...or as the book called it, *bio-thaumatology*, biological processes born of and fueled by magical energy, something all dragons had. All dragon breath weapons fell under that category, a biological process fueled by magical energy. It would take magic to cause a living thing to grow crystals like *that* out of their bodies, crystals that were highly prized in magical uses. Since they were a creation of magic, it made them eminently suitable for use *in* magic. If earth dragons couldn't use magic because the magic within interfered with any attempt to channel it properly, then it seemed feasible that they developed organs capable of using their internal magical energy on a biological scale. It also explained the earth dragons' immunity to their own element, which was a quasi-magical aspect. Earth dragons couldn't be harmed by stone... though the sheer weight of a massive rockfall could kill one, and had in the past. It also explained the old legend in Athena's books about earth dragon blood and its ability to render anyone doused in it utterly immune to mortal weapons...which were made of wood, stone, or metal, which were all of the earth.

But again, it fit. If the book was right, the earth dragons couldn't use magic themselves because it was interfered with by the very magic they radiated. No magician could cast more than one spell at a time, because the magic channeled to perform both functions interfered with each other and canceled out. Following that theory, earth dragons couldn't channel magic because their internal magic canceled out active attempts to channel it. So, instead of relying on magic for protection, they had evolved their tail spikes, which were pretty formidable weaponry in their own right.

She turned the page, and found a drawing of the original races, the original chromatics and earth dragons, and they did look much different.

The chromatics of the past were much larger than the earth dragons and were fully feathered, almost looking like birds with long tails, where the earth dragons looked almost exactly as they did today. The drawings were done in full color, showing a chromatic with rainbow-like plumage, all the colors of the spectrum in bands, where the earth dragon looked quite like the modern earth dragon, except for the tail spikes and horns. In the drawing, the tail spikes were clear crystal, like the coveted power focuses, and their horns were glittering crystal, like shimmering diamond, the drawing even catching the prismatic refractions off of them.

She read on, as the book delved into the ancient history, the first instances of recorded dragon history some 17,000 or so years ago, how the dragons spread across Europe and northern Africa, coexisting somewhat warily with prehistoric man, and the book answered another of her questions. *As the population of the earth dragons grew, the power of the magic each individual earth dragon radiated decreased. Some sages theorize this curious effect is a matter of zero sum; that the amount of magic radiated as a whole is a constant, so the more earth dragons there are, the less each dragon has to generate to fulfill that overall quota. The proflogation of the earth dragons also spread their influence across most of the known world, and hastened the global saturation threshold of magic that allowed all magic to be used anywhere, even when far away from the earth dragons that supplied it. And that too made sense. If each earth dragon was only radiating a little magic, it wouldn't be that easy to sense, not with the general permeation of background magic in the air itself. And it was why this drain on magic was totally unknown to other dragons, since never before had all of the earth dragons gone underground the way they had here.*

So, theoretically, as long as there was only *one* earth dragon alive, then magic would function, that one dragon radiating *all* the magical energy in that constant the book described. Curious.

She skimmed over some of the details of the dragons interacting with humans more and more as the humans came out of the Stone Age, eventually leading up to the discovery that humans could use magic, and the

renaissance of advancement that incited in humankind, when the dragons started to teach them how to use that power.

She decided to jump ahead, to see where everything went wrong, and thank Gaia, the book included the events of Camelot in the very last chapter. It gave a pretty detailed description of how it started, how Arthur had saved an earth dragon village from raiders armed with weapons made of *unearthly* metal, which could do earth dragons harm. The raiders wanted the earth dragons for their blood and the invulnerability it imparted onto anyone who bathed in it. In gratitude, the earth dragons formed an alliance with Arthur and built Camelot for him, had forged the sword Excalibur, and gave him a scabbard made of earth dragon bone, which protected him from mortal weaponry. But it didn't protect him from poison, and it was by poison that he was murdered at the order of his half sister, the wicked magician Morrigan Le Fae. The earth dragons were furious at the death of Arthur, and they descended upon Camelot, killed Morrigan and her lackeys, killed the betrayer Lancelot, who took the throne after slaying Arthur's oldest son and heir, then took Camelot apart right down to its foundations and carried off the stones. The book had a map, and after cross-referencing Camelot to more modern maps, she saw that the city of Leeds had been built where Camelot had once stood.

It all went wrong after that, she read. The chromatics were angry with the earth dragons for destroying Camelot, for the trouble it caused between the dragons and the Catholic Church, who condemned the destruction of Camelot on the strongest possible terms. The chromatics traced most of the ensuing problems with the Church back to that incident, including their eventual banishment from human lands and being declared enemies of humanity. That act had caused great anguish and outrage among the chromatics, who had been deeply intertwined with humanity. The betrayal of the humans had wounded the chromatics, wounded them deeply....

And that was it. That was the end of the book.

She closed it and put her paw under her chin, rapping her claws on the stone, pondering what she read. If it was indeed true, it explained

everything that was going on. With the earth dragons underground, the magic they radiated that replenished the existing magic in the world was cut off, and it was draining away that permeation of magical energy the book described. When that was gone, then magic would only work within direct proximity of an earth dragon. The book's theories about magic did fit the current conditions, and it would be very easy to prove one way or the other.

But the other part, it didn't answer all of her questions. If the destruction of Camelot had started the rift between the earth dragons and chromatics...well, what were the details? Exactly *how* did it come to the way things were now? And how could it be so severe that the chromatics would even go so far as to deny the shocking truth at the beginning of the book, that earth dragons were the actual source of all magic, and as such, the chromatics and all other dragons were utterly dependent on them?

And how did the *earth dragons* forget such a critical fact?

Utterly dependent on them...that was almost a dark joke. These last few weeks had showed her that even without magic, the chromatics *had* been utterly dependent on the earth dragons, at least in the frame of reference of depending on them for their lifestyle.

She glanced up and realized that it was light outside, past dawn...well, if the book was right, it would be easy to prove. And it also explained the time discrepancy when the cloaking magic failed.

Sella. Sella had been around earth dragons, and had been on the aerie, in close proximity to the main crystal focus that maintained the cloaking spells. She had...*recharged* the magical matrix just with her presence, because she had been in close proximity to earth dragons, bathed in their magical aura. That residual magical charge surrounding her had slightly extended the duration of the cloaking magic, if only for a matter of minutes.

She got up and put the book on the table at the far end of the room, then padded along the confining tunnels of Blackstone, lost in thought. She couldn't see how things got to where they were now, with nobody knowing the truth and the chromatics thinking so *lowly* of the earth dragons, when

the stark truth was, the chromatics were dependent upon the earth dragons for everything that made a chromatic a chromatic. If the sky dragons knew the truth, they'd have never attacked the earth dragons when one of them killed Ivaia...but perhaps...perhaps *that* was what caused the change in attitudes. Maybe the earth dragons grew drunk with their power over the other dragons, became utterly insufferable, incited deep resentments that showed today. The unilateral action they undertook razing Camelot showed a change in behavior in the earth dragons, for the gentle pacifists she'd read about in Athena's books would have been appalled at what the British earth dragons had done. Athena's earth dragons wouldn't even kill animals to eat them, but the Camelot earth dragons had attacked one of the greatest cities at that time, killed hundreds of knights, slaughtered the children of Lancelot and Morrigan Le Fae, then evicted the entire population of Camelot without mercy, no doubt sending many of the humans to their deaths by exposure or starvation. Those were not the acts of the earth dragons from Athena's writings.

Well, one thing was for certain. The modern earth dragons were more like the earth dragons of Camelot than the earth dragons of ancient Greece.

She pondered exactly what to do. She had an idea of how to prove the book's veracity, but the question would be, could she prove it to others. The simplest way to prove it would be to go down to the earth dragons and seeing if her magic returned to normal, but to do that, she was going to need help. She couldn't get down there on her own, she'd drown or suffocate long before she got the rocks blocking the tunnel out of the way and reached air. But if she discovered the book was right and that earth dragons were indeed the reason why magic was failing, how could she prove it?

Essan. Essan had wanted that book, he probably suspected what the book told her. The water dragons were primitive by chromatic standards, but they did have a long history and had been isolated from the other dragons, which might have preserved the legends of the earth dragons in their histories. If she could prove it to Essan, a council member, he could convince the others. But before she went to him, she had to know. She had to prove it, if only to herself, to know that the earth dragons were in reality

the heart of all draconic society, that the sky dragons had caused the disaster that had befallen the island...and behind them, her own kind.

There were still questions to answer, but the big one seemed solved. Despite that, she wanted to *know*, she wanted to know what had happened in the past, what had caused the changes in the earth dragons, what had turned them from gentle pacifists to ruthless killers.

And she intended to find out, but that would have to wait. For now, she had to find out if she was indeed right, and if she was, to get that information to Essan, then let him spread that revelation to the council. They'd never believed it if *she* told them.

She didn't think it would be wise to go to Council Aerie. Essan had gotten word to her in secret, so she would keep that secret in turn by returning the information to him through their go-between, Sella. And that meant that she had to find Sella, for more than one reason. But first, she needed an experiment to prove her hypothesis, so she returned to her library and picked up a tiny crystal from a basket that she'd had to go around and collect, the dormant crystal focus of a driftlight, the hovering magical lights that illuminated the interiors of chromatic libraries and dens. Once she had it, she flew down to the coast and out over the water, flying so slowly she had to rely on floating magic to keep from falling in, her antenna flicking as she used magic to locate her quarry, a water dragon...*any* water dragon. She eventually found one, and to get its attention since it was fairly deep, she lowered down and slapped her tail on the rippling surface of the water. Water dragons could hear extreme distances in water, and the sound of her tail slaps would reach the water dragon even that deep. She kept at it incessantly until she felt in her antenna the water dragon ascend, then rose up and got enough distance to let the dragon surface under her. "What?" the wyrm demanded. "We're not going to fish for you!"

"I don't need you to fish for me, honored wyrm," she said respectfully. "I would beg to ask a favor of you."

"What?"

“I need to speak with a water drake named Sella,” she answered. “But I don’t know where she is. I know that water dragons can send messages great distances within the water. If you would be so kind, honored wyrm, would you send the call out that I wish to speak to her?”

“And who are you?”

“Tell her, I’m the chromatic that has seen what only she has seen,” she replied cryptically. “Please pardon the secrecy, but she’ll know who I am.”

The young adult male wyrm gave her a look. “Very well, where will you meet her?”

“At her den,” she replied. “Or at least on the bluff overlooking it.”

“Alright. I can’t guarantee she’s going to come meet you, but I can send the message.”

“Thank you, honored wyrm,” she said, dipping her head, her antenna bobbing over her eyes.

The wyrm sank back under the water without another word, and she turned and flew back to the island, to the cove, and landed on the little bluff just off the cove that overlooked the water. A half-dug out burrow was behind her, a few pieces of destroyed equipment scattered around it, the ground rutted a little due to flowing water over scorched ground, but since then the rapidly growing sawgrass that ringed the island had taken root, and was now holding what soil was left. As she waited, she worked out exactly what she wanted to say, how to ask for what she wanted without sounding either crazy or demanding.

But she didn’t have to wait long. A sleek shape slipped into the cove, then a water drake burst from the water in a glittering spray. It was Sella, landing easily on the rocky ledge just beside her, then she shook her wings to dislodge the water and folded them. “You wished to see me?” she asked.

She nodded. “Your friend asked me for a favor. I have done it for him,” she answered.

“And where is what he asked you to find?”

“In the place where Gaia smiles down upon us,” she replied simply.

Sella nodded, her glowing green eyes unblinking. Only Sella would understand what that meant. “Then I’ll see to it finds its way to him,” she said.

“I have something else to ask,” she said before Sella could turn and dive into the water. “I have...a very strange thing to ask you, Sella. But understand, I am dead serious about this.”

“Go ahead.”

“I need to speak to the earth dragons, face to face,” she said, staring steadily at her. “I know you can speak to them. Tell them that I am in no way a representative of the chromatics or the council. This, I do on my own, for my own reasons, and it is absolutely critical to me to do this. I’ll go wherever they demand I go, and I’ll do anything they demand I do.”

Sella gave her a long, assessing look. “And why do you want to see them so badly?”

“Because I believe that the key to solving this crisis of magic hinges on the earth dragons,” she replied. “I wish only to speak to an earth dragon, face to face, to see if my theory is true. But before we even do that, Sella, you can do something for me, something very important, that will validate the hypothesis of my theory and make a meeting with the earth dragons imperative to me to prove or disprove it utterly.”

“What?”

She opened her paw and offered the tiny crystal. “Do you know what this is?”

“It feels like a driftlight,” she replied.

“That’s exactly what it is. Please, if you would, take it.”

Sella stepped up and opened her paw, and the chromatic dropped it into the palm of her padded paw. Almost immediately, the driftlight flickered, sputtered a dim yellow light, then ignited into a soft white radiance, like sunlight, and hovered up and over Sella's paw.

Sella gave the driftlight a startled look, but the first of her class just gave a dark smile filled with both relief and dread. "The book was right," first of her class said in a bare whisper. "I need to speak with the earth dragons, Sella," she said with an intensely serious expression. "Please. Speak to them. I'll accede to any demand or condition they set concerning the meeting. I'll wait right here while you go negotiate the terms. And remember, tell them that I will do *anything* they demand, and that I do this for *myself*, not for my kin, not for the council."

Sella gave her another long, speculative look, then she nodded. "You shouldn't wait out in the open. There's an air chamber in my pod's old den. The air may be a little stale, but you can wait there out of sight."

"Then lead on, honored water drake," she said immediately. "I will do anything you ask, so long as you do me this one favor."

"If I didn't believe you with all my heart, I wouldn't be doing this now," she replied, turning back towards the water. "Can you swim?"

"I can float," she replied.

"Then take a deep breath and follow me," she replied, then she dove off the bluff and into the water.

Chapter 15

23 August 2017, 09:54 DMT; Sanctuary City

“Are you serious?” Ferroth demanded of Sella, as she talked to the chief in the main terminal room where the earth drakes were writing their software. “With everything else going on, there’s a single chromatic that wants to come down here and, what? Do a magical *experiment*?”

“It’s more than that, chief,” Sella replied, rearing up on her hind legs and sitting on the base of her tail, just so she could gesture with her forepaws. “I think this particular chromatic is on to something. She thinks she’s found the reason why magic is fading, and she needs to come down here to prove it.”

“Seriously? Sella, you’re a good girl and a smart young drake, but can you say *trap*?”

“If that’s so, why is she willing to accede to any demands you make?” she replied. “I trust my instincts, chief, and they tell me she’s sincere. I can get her down into the main tunnel, and whoever you send to talk to her can talk to her there, by the water’s edge, in a place where she can’t even get out alive without my help.”

“We could always cart one of the twenty mils down there and point it at her,” Kammi offered without looking away from her terminal screen.

“Tail spikes would work better,” Jirran offered. “I don’t see the harm in it, chief, as long as we take proper precautions. After all, if Sella never comes out of the water, it makes it abundantly clear to this fluffy that she either talks fast, gets spiked, or drowns trying to get out.”

“I happen to agree,” Geon called from where he was looking over Kell’s shoulder, learning the basics of computer programming as the field agents refined their program to hide the island from satellites. “It could very well be a trap, chief, but it really doesn’t cost us anything to listen. There’s no such thing as magic that can make the chromatic influence our minds, and if we have four or five dragons there with their spikes out, it sets the tone.”

“I don’t know, Geon, it just doesn’t feel right,” Ferroth grunted. “There’s no reason I can think of that any fluffy would want to come down here.”

“Well, as I said, this one thinks she’s found the reason magic is failing, but it requires her to come down here and talk to you,” Sella answered. “I can only guess that some earth dragon lore or history is what she’s seeking, something the chromatics wouldn’t keep in their records. She did have access to the earth dragon villages, so I assume she couldn’t find the answer in what you left behind.”

“It’s *her*, is it?” Girk asked.

“Yes, it’s *her*,” Sella nodded. “This one is a very unusual chromatic. She’s not like any other chromatic I’ve ever talked to.”

“How so?” Geon asked.

“Well, all very young chromatics are deferential and polite as a matter of custom, so I’m used to the flowery speech, but this one is far more intelligent than other chromatics her age,” Sella answered. “It’s why they set her on the task to find this city, because she’s very smart and small enough to fit in most any earth dragon tunnel. But it’s her personality that’s different. She’s...well, it’s hard to explain. She’s just not like other chromatics. She’s...well...she’s more *independent*. What she’s doing, she’s doing on her own. She made sure to stress that. She’s doing this for herself, not the chromatics. And for that much, I believe her. I think she found something while searching for this city, and she’s pursuing it to see where it goes.”

Ferroth looked at Geon. “Well, it’s your call, friend,” he grunted.

“Like I said, there’s little harm in talking to her, and if Sella trusts her, then that’s enough for me,” he said simply. “I’ll go speak with her.”

“No,” Ferroth said bluntly. “You’re far too valuable to risk if this turns out to be an elaborate trap. Kintel, call Jukra and ask him to send a team to go clear the rocks at the waterline in the main tunnel. Kell, fish up a couple of headcam earsets so we can see and listen from here. All we’ll need is five volunteers to go out and meet her, five drakes with full tails of spikes. Which rules out everyone in this room,” he said dryly.

“That might be hard to find right now, chief,” Geon noted, thumping his tail lightly on the floor. The empty socket was indeed budding a clear crystal spike.

“I know, but if the fluffies know that most of us don’t have a full set of spikes, it might give them ideas,” he replied flatly. “So find five drakes with full tails and see if they’re willing to go out to meet this rogue fluffy.”

That took nearly an hour. Eventually, five adult dragons were found, four drakes and a wyrm, and among them was Kanna, who was given command of the team due to her age. Kell was a bit worried that his mother was going to go out there and confront that chromatic, since she wasn’t really much of a fighter, but she’d have four young, strapping males to protect her, including one of the rare earth wyrms, and a fairly burly one at that. Kell fitted his mother with the headset, which included a camera, fussing with it a little as Kammi buckled on the shoulder satchel holding the battery and transceiver. “Remember, if you think for *any* reason that that fluffy is a threat, mother, you spike her,” Kell said intensely as he wriggled the camera a bit to get the straps to sit right in front of her horns.

“I think you’re being a bit melodramatic, my youngling,” she replied calmly.

“No he’s not,” Kammi agreed. “You know what the fluffies think of us. I’m not sure what this fluffy is about, but she’s still a threat.”

“Sella trusts her, and I trust Sella,” Kanna declared simply. “I’ll listen to what she has to say.”

“Start out, Sella. Give us twenty minutes, then bring the fluffy in,” Geon ordered. “Don’t leave the water for any reason once you get her to the water’s edge. Make it clear to her that at the first hint of any kind of trickery, you’ll leave her there to die.”

“I’ll make sure she understands,” Sella nodded, then she turned and hurried out of the office.

“Let’s check the headcam,” Ferroth said. “Set it for channel two, whelp.”

“Channel two, got it,” Kammi replied, reaching into the satchel.

They sent Kanna out, Geon went to Ferroth’s office to watch through the headcam, and while they were supposed to be writing the code for their updated worm, Kell just couldn’t stand not knowing what was going on. He stopped working and hacked into the feed for the headcam, and Kammi reared up and hung over his back, looking over his shoulder as they watched and listened. “What, I’m worried about her too,” Kammi protested, patting his shoulders when he glanced back at her. “And besides, they’ll see it was *your* terminal that hacked the feed, not mine,” she added lightly.

“There’s no honor among thieves once they’re caught, you know,” he said dryly, which made her laugh.

The video window covered his coding window, so they got a good view of Sella surfacing, with the chromatic right behind her. The chromatic looked a bit silly wet, with her feathery antenna matted and droopy, and she looked a bit frightened, gripping the end of Sella’s fluked tail in a grip that seemed reluctant to loosen even when they were back in air. But she did eventually let go and climb out onto the dry part of the tunnel, in a narrow passage formed by the stacked rocks that Jukra’s team had moved to give Sella access to the tube. “Here she is,” Sella called, staying back near the back edge of the water, her head near the ceiling of the tunnel.

“Step up please, dear,” Kanna said, stepping out a little. The chromatic was indeed the one they’d tagged, a very, very young adult, about Kell’s age from the looks of her, which meant that she was still in chromatic school and had about as much power in chromatic society as an earth dragon did. She was slightly smaller than average for a chromatic her age, just a shade larger than the average earth drake, but she was smaller than Kanna. “Now, what’s so important that you’d go to all this trouble?”

“Nothing less than trying to save magic, honored earth drake,” she replied simply. “Did they explain why I wished to come down here?”

“To conduct some sort of experiment concerning magic, and to talk to us.”

“Both,” she nodded. “The experiment is in my shoulder satchel. May I take it out?”

The other four males weren’t visible on the camera’s feed, but the shuffle of feet and the slight recoil of the chromatic as she reached for her satchel told Kell that they’d brought their spikes to bear. The chromatic looked at them in fear, then she gasped and stared to Kanna’s left, quite intensely. “You’re...*reverting*,” she blurted.

“We’re what?”

“Part of the history I read said that originally, earth dragons didn’t have red tail spikes, that they were transparent. Clear,” she said, still looking to Kanna’s left. “That drake has *two* clear spikes in his tail. Have they been growing in clear since you moved down here?”

“Well, yes,” Kanna replied, which Kell found a bit unwise. Kanna wasn’t a politician or trained as a field agent, so she didn’t know about things like never revealing information unless it was necessary.

“Has any earth dragon started growing crystalline horns?”

“No, nothing quite that dramatic,” Kanna answered.

“Well, your race originally had them, not the black ones you have now,” she told them as she reached into her satchel. “So if it starts to happen, well, now you know.”

That made Kell almost involuntarily reach up and touch one of his horns. It didn’t feel loose, and felt just like it always did, harder than the hardest steel and ridged from how they grew. Earth dragons commonly used them as files or grinders, since they were far harder than rock and metal, and the ridges on them made them perfect for such use. He felt Kammi tug on his other horn. “Still there,” she said lightly near his earhole.

“Thank Gaia, I’d look utterly ridiculous without my horns,” he agreed.

“I’d certainly have nothing to do with you,” she teased, thumping the top of his tail with her own.

They focused on the feed again. The chromatic took out a pawful of tiny floating magical lights, the ones they used in their dens and libraries, which hovered in midair and could be influenced by a simple magic spell to move around. She held them up and let them go, and they floated up over her, twelve of them. “That’s all the experimenting I need,” she said, looking up at them. “The driftlights function down here. Up above, they’re dormant.”

“And why is that?” Kanna asked.

The chromatic looked right at her. “Because *you* are here, honored Matron,” she replied simply. “The lights won’t work above because magic is too weak. But here, close to the earth dragons, they function once again.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, young one,” Kanna told her, advancing from the jar and aspect shift of the video feed. Kanna walked right up to her and stopped.

“To the contrary, honored Matron, it’s entirely what I expected, and it proves my theory,” she replied, looking up at the lights. “And this close to you, I can *feel* it. Down here, magic is just as strong as ever.” She sat on her haunches, her wet antenna drooping over her face. “My theory is a simple

one, honored Matron. Earth dragons are the *source* of magic, you radiate it like an aura, and this experiment and my own observation proves it. The reason magic is failing above is because you have buried yourself so deeply within the earth that there's too much stone between you and everything else. The only thing that you have contact with is the sea, and the point of contact is so narrow and constricted that the magic you radiate can't replenish what's drained away."

"You honestly believe that *we* do magic?" one of the males called scornfully.

"I didn't say you *do* magic, I said you *are* magic, the very fountain from which all magic radiates into our world," she replied simply. "The very fact that you *are* magic is the reason you can't *do* magic."

"My, that's a very...extreme viewpoint, young one," Kanna said with obvious skepticism. "And how did you come to this conclusion?"

"Extensive research and study of some of the oldest books of history," she answered.

"And if we are the source of magic as you infer, then why didn't *we* know about it?"

"That...I don't know," she replied with a fret. "The histories I've read have obviously been edited. Maybe purged. I could tell from how the books were laid out that things had been redacted, perhaps even entire books removed from the stacks. My only guess is that somehow, for some reason, it was decided that such a fact must be a secret, even from *you*. And your ancestors must have agreed to it, for they stopped teaching their new generations that secret. They *did* know that secret, and then...somewhere, they just *did not*. It's hard to pin down exactly when, but it's right there in the histories if one simply takes the time and patience to research." She reached up and flicked her antenna with her paws, shaking the water off of them. "The history I researched revealed that the balance between the dragons pinions on that fact. The earth dragons *grant* the magic, the other dragons *use* it. Somewhere in history, that fact was suppressed, turned into a

secret, and it was forgotten over the years. I would gamble to say that it was done to protect magic itself,” she postulated. “If humans learned that magic could be permanently removed from the world by exterminating the earth dragons,” she said, then trailed off deliberately. “It must have been done to protect your species, and all of magic, as the humans proliferated and they started distrusting dragon kind and magic itself. Possibly around the rise of the Catholic Church,” she mused to herself.

“Do you believe that?” Kammi asked, putting her chin on his shoulder.

“No,” he snorted.

“But the driftlights *are* working.”

“And she’s a chromatic,” he retorted. “She’s probably using magic to make them work.”

Kanna was of a different mind, however. “And exactly how are we the source of magic?”

“Biology,” she answered. “You are a unique race, unrelated to any other dragon. The four magical races of dragons all evolved from the proto-chromatic race. You are different from us. The histories call you the chosen of Gaia. At first I could make little sense of that title, until I came across the truth. Gaia blessed you, honored Matron, by making you the wellspring of all magic. This fact prevents you from using the very magic you generate, but in olden times, the magical races of dragons nurtured and protected your kind, for they knew that their magic depended on your well being. But, like us, you have biological aspects that are magical in nature. Your ability to grow your tail spikes, your immunity to metal weapons, those are magical aspects of a supposedly nonmagical dragon race. They are manners in which your bodies have adapted to *metabolize* the magical aura you generate and use the magic on a biological level. It is the *only* way you could do so, for the very nature of what you are prevents you from using magic in the way the rest of us do. *We* do not radiate a magical aura that interferes with the ability to channel magic. And with magic so depleted in the world, I can even sense it now,” she said, flicking her antenna towards

Kanna. “I can feel the magic coming from you, honored Matron, and it empowers me.”

“Now I *know* she’s full of it,” Kell snorted. “The other dragons *protected* us? They *hate* us.”

“Yeah,” Kammi agreed.

“The histories made mention of the fact that in olden times, earth dragons had breath weapons. And since your race has not changed since prehistoric times, for millions of years, then it only stands to reason that you still can,” she continued. “The book made mention of an odd fact, that your breath weapons rely on an outside source of fuel to function in addition to the magic required. I theorize that some change in behavior among the earth dragons separated them from this outside fuel source, and they were unable to use them anymore. But if I am correct, then if we can find what this source was and restore it to you, you should have breath weapons once again.”

“Well, that might be theoretically possible,” Kanna noted.

“It’s how our breath weapons work,” Sella supplied from the water. “We have to absorb water to make them function, since both forms of our weapon *are* water. One is steam, the other is a jet of water used to apply great force to a target, like a battering ram. Either way we use it, if we don’t have enough water stored inside ourselves, they don’t work.”

“You don’t just make the water by magic?”

“Magic can’t create organic matter, nor can it create permanent mass from magical energy, unless the spell itself is sealed by a crystal focus to become permanent,” the chromatic said immediately, as if reciting from a book. “Mass created by magic lasts only so long as the magic that empowers it, and I know for a fact that the water in a water dragon’s breath weapon doesn’t just vanish when it’s used. It remains behind and must evaporate by purely physical means. It *is* water. And it would be absolutely impossible to seal something like a breath weapon to a crystal.”

“That much is true,” Sella agreed. “And I can affirm that the water we breathe is real water, not magical water.”

“Since you are *earth* dragons, I would venture to guess that your breath weapon is somehow related to the earth,” she said, looking at Kanna. “Perhaps you must ingest large amounts of rock or stone to fuel your breath weapons, which you would then unleash in some manner...perhaps a shower of small stones expelled with great force, much akin to the water dragons’ ability to unleash a powerful jet of boiling water. Much akin to the water dragons, I suspect that the magical aspect of what empowers your breath weapons carries that mass around with you without weighing you down. Magic *can* negate mass. It’s the fundamental aspect that gives us the power to fly. Perhaps your own version of this basic dragon ability is restricted solely to countering the mass you must carry to fuel your breath weapons.”

Kell pondered that for a moment...now *that* seemed feasible. And it fit in with his own exploration of what was going on with the mass they were eating, which was then just *vanishing*. If magic was at work, some long-forgotten bio-magical ability that was making something inside them absorb the stone, *store* it in a way that didn’t weigh them down, filling up the gas tank as it were, then it was theoretically possible that they might be able to use some form of breath weapon. Now *that* was the only thing she’d said he even came close to believing, and it was something worth a little investigation.

“A very interesting theory, young chromatic,” Kanna told her. “And even more curious that you would tell us this.”

“I came here to at least try to start healing the division between our races. Not for my kin, not for the other dragons, but for *myself*,” she said simply. “The simple fact of the matter, honored Matron, is that we need you far more than you need us. Not just for the food you provide, but for the very magic that makes us who and what we are,” she replied with candor. “The simple fact of the matter is that when my elders learn this truth, and cannot possibly deny it any longer, they will give you anything you

demand. I am entirely self-serving in that I am here *first*, being honest with you, in hope that the wrath you visit upon the others is not placed on *me*.”

Now *that* was a chromatic, Kell mused darkly. She was all about *herself*.

Geon’s voice came in over the feed. “Bring her into the city, Kanna. We want to talk to her face to face.”

“Very well, esteemed council member,” Kanna answered. “Come along, young one. It’s a fairly long walk. We’ll discuss things as we move. Coming, Sella?”

“She should, we might need the opinion of a water dragon,” Geon called over the radio.

“Not *me*,” Sella said in protest. “I’ll summon Matriarch and Patriarch. You need elders with great training and experience in magic for this, not a youngling.”

“Good call, Sella. Bring in your parents,” Anthra’s voice chimed in.

The feed cut out, and that was that. Kell and Kammi looked at each other, then she went back to her own terminal without comment. He didn’t believe most of what she said, but that last bit, now that seemed possible. And Kell felt like a suitable test subject, because he knew about the mechanics of a breath weapon better than any other earth dragon thanks to his long conversations with Sella. She had described how she did it to him as best she could, even describing how it *felt* when she used her breath weapon, and he could at least experiment using those impressions. It really cost him nothing to try, and besides, they had to *look* for things to do down here to stay busy.

When Shii and Surrall arrived, they came in from the water tube entrance and headed straight up to the council members’ offices, and they were up there all day. Even when Ferroth called down from that conference to let the field agents off for the day, they were still up there in debate with

the young chromatic, and Kell couldn't possibly fathom why they would be up there for so long. What could they talk about for ten hours?

But, it freed Kell up to go do his own experiment. Kammi grinned and bounded after him when instead of heading for the tunnel that went to the burrow, he instead went to one of the deep ramps that went down to the belly of the city, where they had their industrial sectors. He knew where he was going, to one of the large chambers they'd excavated for a theoretical fourth factory, just in case it was needed. That chamber was perfect, a large volume of empty space where they couldn't possibly hurt anything if it turned out that the chromatic was telling the truth. "Gonna see if she was lying?" Kammi asked as they started down the ramp.

"What else is there to do?" he shrugged. "Sire's with the hatchlings, so it's not like we're shirking hatchling-sitting duties."

"I was thinking about it, and it does kinda fit," she said as they descended. "I mean, both of us were trying to figure out where the mass is going. It's just vanishing."

"And here I thought you were just getting fat," he teased, which earned him a whack.

Once they got down there, Kell sat down and told Kammi everything Sella had ever told him about breath weapons. He related her descriptions in how she went about it, how she chose between a blast of steam and a jet of scalding water, how it felt when she *staged* the water inside herself, like priming a cannon, then unleashed it with great force, and he made sure to tell her how Sella described how she had to brace herself when she used the water jet. "I guess magic doesn't overcome Newton's third law," Kell mused. "If Sella doesn't brace herself, she goes flying in the other direction. She used to do it on purpose in the cove just to make me laugh, launching herself into the air."

"Well, that is an awful lot of mass flying in one direction," Kammi noted. "Maybe magic does reduce the backlash, but not enough. Does she brace when she breathes steam?"

“Not as much, but she does. It’s why water dragons never use their breath weapons while flying, only in the water or on the ground.”

“Yeah, a blast of steam, that does meet the definition of jet propulsion.”

“In the wrong direction,” he noted, which made Kammi grin.

“Well, that does kinda explain why other dragons *do* use their breath weapons when flying.”

“They’re nothing but energy, but Sella breathes *mass*,” Kell nodded. “Fire, lightning, pure magic, they don’t have real mass, so the dragon’s own weight absorbs the reverse momentum induced by the breath weapon. Equal and opposite isn’t enough to move all that weight in a significant manner.”

After talking about it a little longer, they started trying. Kell tried to mimic what Sella had described, trying for that sensation deep inside, bringing it up and out. It didn’t work very well for the first hour or two, but after those two hours, he did start to feel, well...*something*. A tingling in his chest and belly when he tried to breathe something, a strange tightening in his diaphragm that had nothing to do with breathing. It got more pronounced as he practiced, and he could hear that same, well, *hitch* in Kammi’s explosive releases of breath, like she was feeling it too. They stopped and compared mental notes on what they were feeling, any unusual sensation, then they tried again.

After about a half an hour, something finally happened, and it was with Kammi. Kell had just come back from fetching water for them, and she was smacking her tail on the floor rhythmically, a look of intense concentration on her face, then she set her back feet, arched her back down like a stalking cat, then exploded forward with her maw open wide...and *something* came out of her mouth. It was just a little puff of very fine particles, like a bit of dust, quickly diffusing into the air. Kammi’s eyes snapped open in surprise along with his, for that little puff of dust was a blazing, incandescent white to their thermographic vision, meaning that it was *very* hot.

“How did you do that?” Kell asked quickly.

“I...I don’t know!” she said in surprise, then she laughed. “So, we breathe hot dust. Wow, what a breath weapon!” she grinned, then laughed even harder.

“But, it proves that the chromatic wasn’t lying, at least about *this*,” Kell said. “That was *definitely* something.”

“Yeah. It tastes like basalt,” she said, licking her teeth. “And it didn’t burn at all.”

“Alright, we got a result. Let’s see if that’s it, or there’s more to it.”

After a lengthy conference about how she felt when she did it, Kell tried to mimic her instead of Sella, even mimicking her movements, that little set-up thing she did, hoping that it might trigger something. But Kell took it a step further by sinking his claws into the stone under him, completely bracing himself against...whatever.

And thank *Gaia* he did that. After about twenty more minutes, as he sucked in his breath and concentrated very hard on making *something* happen, and something sure as Gaia’s embrace *did* happen. He felt a sudden intense sensation deep in his belly, like a sudden tremendous pressure deep inside him seeking release, and at that sensation, he almost instinctively tightened his chest and throat, snapped his neck out straight, and his diaphragm snapped like a rubber band, like a bowstring. He felt *something* boil out of him in an angry torrent, and then there was nothing but blazing white in front of him, a blazing heat that seemed to sear right through his brain, along his bones, even resonate in his horns and tail spikes. He kept at it for nearly three seconds as he dimly heard Kammi scream in surprise, then the pressure inside him alleviated almost instantly, like turning off a water faucet. He tasted something intensely hot in his mouth, sticking to his fangs a little bit, but it didn’t sear his gums or tongue.

“Holy *shit*!” Kammi squealed in English, for polite draconic just didn’t have any swearwords strong enough for her consternation.

In front of him was as cooling mass of liquid rock, laying on the floor, spread out in a pushed pile at the far end but a trail of lava leading back to him, a very narrow cone in front of him, maybe two meters across at its terminus not counting how it had piled up, some thirty meters away. Deep gouges in the floor showed that Kell had been pushed *backwards* nearly half a meter, his claws digging furrows out of the stone.

“Holy shit, Kell, you breathed *lava*!” Kammi squealed, jumping up and down, then she raced over to the result of his effort. It was glowing hot on the floor, emitting dull red light, but to their thermographic vision it was an incandescent blaze of intense heat, white-hot, but quickly cooling. “That sure as fuckin’ hell wasn’t dust!” she laughed delightedly, literally jumping up and down on all fours like an excited poodle. “Show me how you did it! Show me show me show me show me!”

“Alright, give me a second,” he said, panting. He was completely out of breath, both from the effort and from almost collapsing his lungs. He scratched at the side of his face when something tickled it, then scratched again, then felt something brush against his cheek. He got hold of it and pulled, and it yanked his head to the side, but then came free. He looked at it in confusion, a splinter of something the same temperature as him, but he held it out over the lava so it would show him how it appeared in the world of light.

It was a meter-long ragged piece of his *horn*.

Gasping, he put his paws up behind his head and felt around. His horns were still there, thank Gaia, but, but the piece of it came from the lower outside edge of his left horn, down near where they grew out of his head, and he could feel the crevice there where it had fallen out. Fallen out...how was that possible? Earth dragon horns were the hardest, strongest material *in existence*, that was a proven documented fact! Nothing could make their horns break, chip, or splinter! But something had definitely done it, and from the feel of it, his horn was *coming loose* under that split.

Using his breath weapon had somehow split his horn!

“What’s wrong?” Kammi asked, and he almost reflexively turned away from her so she couldn’t see. “Kell!” she said sternly, then she took hold of him and turned his head back towards her. “What’s wrong?”

“My horn,” he said in fear. “A piece of it fell out!”

“*What?*” she gasped, then she took hold of his horn and yanked on it. It was still firmly anchored, and she moved his paw and looked where he pointed. She inspected it a long moment, then pulled his head down close to the lava he’d expelled, using the light to see visibly, then he felt her claws probe in the split in his horn. “Holy Gaia!” she exclaimed.

“What? What, Kammi?”

“The fluffy wasn’t lying!” she declared. “Kell, the inside of your horn is *crystal*! The outside is splitting away from it, like the rind on an orange!”

“Really?” he gasped. “But, but I’ve seen dragon horns taken off dead earth dragons, their roots weren’t crystal!”

“I know, me either, but it’s *there*,” she told him intensely. “I can see it!” He felt her tug on his horn, and he almost flinched when he heard a tearing sound, like ripping leather. “Look, see?” she said, holding out a large curved section of black horn. “The outer layer is just coming off!”

“I’d better go see the apothecary—“ he said, but she bulled him to the floor by the lava and literally sat on him, her claws gouging and pulling on his horns. “What are you doing?”

“Peeling off the rind and seeing what’s inside,” she told him.

“Those are *my* horns!” he protested.

“And that’s why I’m doing it, because they’re not *my* horns,” she replied lightly.

“Kammi! Kammi, this isn’t funny!” he yelled, struggling under her, but she had him pretty effectively pinned to the floor. She scrabbled at his horns, both of them, for a long moment, then she laughed lightly and patted

his neck. “There, it’s all off, and the fluffy wasn’t lying, intended! Your horns are pure crystal!”

“Seriously? I, I gotta see!” he gasped.

“I like it,” she declared, still holding him down. “It looks exactly like they did before to thermo, but to visible light, your horns are shiny and refractive, a kinda opaque clearness with white streaks running through them, with a core barely visible inside the centers.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup,” she affirmed. “Now, I wonder.”

“What?”

“If my horns’ outer cover will shed like the velvet off an antlered buck if *I* figure out how to use my breath weapon. I’ll bet my tail that has something to do with it. Maybe using your breath weapon for the first time causes some kind of reaction that crystallizes the inside of our horns, then turns the outside brittle, like the velvet dying off the antlers and letting the bucks rub it off.” She rapped on his horn, then he hissed in pain when his head jerked to the side. “And they’re just as strong as they were before.”

“If you break my neck, I’m gonna break yours!”

“Welp, one way to find out,” she said, getting off of him. He scrambled to his feet and reared up and put his paws on his horns, and they felt a little different. The ridges were still there, but they felt both smoother and rougher now. The ridges had edges to them, not sharp bumps, and the crystal felt like it had no curves, just angular planes, narrowing down to a very sharp point. He tapped one with a claw and heard it give a dull *thunk*, very much unlike the crystal of which it was made, feeling it vibrate in the root, but they were solidly anchored and felt quite strong. As Kammi breathed deeply in preparation for another try, he went over to the wall, gritted his teeth, then butted his horns against it.

They didn't even flinch. They were crystal, but clearly they were just as hard as his horns had been before, meaning they were still the hardest material known to man or dragon. Rubbing them up and down resulted in a fine sifting of rock dust as the ridges gouged into the wall, far more effectively than his old horns had ground into stone, he noted, leaving behind some pretty deep ruts.

Well, he couldn't see them, but just knowing they were like that would take a *lot* of getting used to.

He walked back over to Kammi just as she smacked her tail on the floor and tried again, but nothing but a rush of air came out. She looked at him, glanced at his horns, then started panting to try again. "See if you can do it again," she said. He nodded and set his feet, remembering everything he felt...and that made it much easier. He tried five times before he felt that same sensation again, but when he felt it, he wasted no time clamping down on it, bringing it forward, and again, a jet of blazing lava blasted from his mouth, launching nearly 30 meters before splattering to the floor. Again he was pushed back from the force of it, then he spat out a little glob of lava before it burned his tongue. "Alright, so we can repeat once we figure it out the first time," Kammi noted.

"Just not immediately."

"I figure it'll be just like throwing our tail spikes. It takes practice to loose them on command, you know."

"True," he nodded. "It took me almost a month to figure it out after they came off their anchors."

"And way longer for me to learn how to aim them," she chuckled, then she took on a very serious expression.

It took Kammi nearly fifteen minutes, but she finally got something... something Kell didn't expect. She exhaled sharply, but this time it was followed up by a roaring *SHWAAAAASH*, and a torrent of blazing heat flashed out of her mouth. When it was over, he could see the particles,

superheated pieces of sand and dust, falling to the floor. Whatever that was went nearly 20 meters before it diffused out into a cone so wide that it lost its momentum.

But he saw what she hadn't. He looked instantly back to her, to her horns, and saw that they were white hot from a sudden eruption of heat but then cooled almost unnaturally fast...her horns had crystallized, he was sure of it! She yowled before she could even celebrate, as Kell took hold of her horn and pulled it over and down. "Ow! Kell!"

"Hush," he said, looking at her horn carefully...and he saw a split! He quickly wedged his claws into it and pulled, and a piece of the outer layer came free with a tearing sound. "You were right, Kammi! Your horns changed!"

"Cool! Pull off the covering, I wanna know what it looks like!"

"How did you do, whatever that was?"

"I dunno, the same way you did yours. Maybe males and females have different breath weapons," she speculated.

"Or maybe we have *both*, and we each just figured out the other one first," he offered. "I mean, Sella has two breath weapons."

"Possible," Kammi agreed as Kell tore the now-leathery outer cover off her horns, leaving nothing but glittering, prismatic crystal in their wake. Much like she described, he could see in the fading red light that her horns were both clear and opaque at the same time, like the horns had a multitude of crystalline facets in them that made them opaque, but the crystal between them was clear as glass. There was definitely a cylindrical core at the center of them that tapered along the horn's length, gently curved in the form of earth dragon horns, backswept but with the upper half curved back towards the neck and the tips curved upwards in a very slight angle. Earth dragons used the section of horn near the skull to do their grinding, that gently curved arc that was the furthest out when they put their heads down. The

horn looked exactly the same as it had to thermo, but in the light, it was *startlingly* different.

“Okay, you try to do, whatever that was I did, and I’ll try to do what you did,” Kammi proposed. “If we can, then it’s not a matter of gender, or age, or size.”

“Nope, we’re pretty much well the same age and size,” Kell mused. “That just leaves gender.”

“It pays to be small when you’re an earth drake,” she grinned at him.

It turned out that Kell was the one that was right. Trying to ignore the horn thing, Kell managed to produce the jet of lava three more times while trying for that, whatever it was, spray of tiny pieces of sand, but Kammi managed to release a powerful blast of lava, fired in a stream, almost like a flamethrower. She jumped up and down in victory afterwards, then grinned at him. “I figured it out first!” she lorded.

“Fine, you go to the nearest intercom and get the chief and the others down here while I figure this out,” he replied.

“Too bad there’s no light anywhere, I *so* want them to stare at my horns!”

“Stop preening, you vain little thing, and go get the chief! And have them bring down some floodlights!”

“Yes, intended,” she grinned, then she turned and bounded out of the huge chamber like a happy puppy.

He managed it while she was gone. There was a different sensation to it, it was hard to describe, but once he felt that *difference*, he locked on it and brought it forth. The result was a powerful blast of hot sand, dust, and even sand-sized pieces of volcanic glass released with great velocity, like a sandblaster, hot enough to kill most living things instantly that were enveloped by the cone, and powerful enough to scour the flesh off the bones of anything that somehow survived that heat. He felt that torrent of sand and

dust on his fangs as he unleashed it, but they didn't break them or wear them down. It did leave a gritty taste in his mouth, however. Kammi pranced back into the huge chamber just as he reared back up from it, laughing. "Couldn't perform for an audience, hmm?" she said lightly. "I feel slighted! I'm your *intended*, you're supposed to be able to do *anything* in front of me!"

"Yeah yeah, you get hold of the chief?"

"He didn't believe a word I said, so I told him I'd come up *there* and show him right in the terminal room," she grinned. "So they're coming down," she added as Kell laughed.

"Let's wait until they get here. If we have to eat rocks to do this, then we could run out of stored rock practicing and make them think we're liars," he said.

"Good idea. Do you feel, I dunno...empty?"

"Not really, but I don't think I'd know what it felt like even if I was," he answered. "Then again, I've been eating a lot of rock lately, for that experiment."

"Yeah, me too. Well, now we know where it was going," she grinned.

"Thank Gaia, that was driving me crazy trying to figure it out," he said with an explosive sigh.

Nearly half an hour later, Ferroth, Anthra, Geon, Shii and Surrall, and to Kell's surprise, the chromatic entered the empty factory chamber, the dozen or so driftlights the chromatic had brought hovering over her and lighting the way. Ferroth was also carrying a portable light. "Just come over here and get us into the light, chief, we don't have to say a word," Kammi grinned.

When they got over to them, they all gasped—well, except for the chromatic. Anthra even went so far as to grab hold of Kammi's horn and pull on it. "Amazing!" she breathed. "And how did this happen?"

“Near as we can figure, the first time you figure out how to use your breath weapon, it like *ignites* your horns and they turn into this,” Kell said, tapping his own. “I saw it happen to Kammi. Her horns flashed with heat the first time she managed to pull it off, and it left them like this. Well, after we pulled off the outer layer, that turns into something like leather.”

“Like velvet on antlers,” Kammi held to her metaphor. “If mine look half as awesome as Kell’s, I’m gonna be strutting all over the city,” she said, turning her head to and fro in the light.

“And you’re completely serious about using breath weapons?” Geon asked.

“Just look,” Kammi said, turning slightly and motioning with a paw. “And feel. Can’t you feel the heat?”

“I can,” Shii said. “It’s much hotter in this room than anywhere else.”

“That’s why,” Kell said, pointing at the lava. It had cooled enough to lose its reddish glow, but it was still spread all over the far end of the chamber, where they’d been practicing. “That’s our breath weapon.”

“Rocks?” Geon asked.

“Lava,” Kammi corrected. “It’s just cooled off enough to harden. It’s one of them, anyway. We can also breathe a pressurized blast of hot sand, like the sandblaster from hell,” she grinned.

“Alright, whelps, show us,” Ferroth said seriously, pointing down the chamber.

“I’ll do the sand, you do lava,” Kammi said, obviously enjoying being the center of attention.

“Fine by me,” he replied.

He managed it on the first try. He knew how it felt now, and more to the point, how to start it. He built that pressure up inside him in the way to make it lava, and when it reached its pinnacle, he snapped his head forward

and unleashed it. A torrent of glowing red liquid fired from his open maw, arced nearly 25 meters across the chamber, then splattered with some force to the floor, spreading forward as it was pushed forward by the lava behind. Again, Kell was pushed backwards by the force of it, his claws digging half-meter long furrows in the rocky floor. Kammi sucked her breath in, then she too unleashed, pointing her weapon more towards the floor. A grayish-tan cone of rushing particles roared away from her and hit the lava he'd left on the floor, blasting it backwards like a pressure washer, and she moved her head slightly upwards as she sustained it for nearly three seconds, scouring the lava all the way across the floor. "See?" she grinned after she finished.

"Amazing!" Anthra repeated, gawking down the chamber.

"Just as the book indicated," the chromatic said calmly, quietly. "Earth dragons *do* have breath weapons. And you now appear almost exactly as the book described your kind from ancient times," she said, studying Kell. "Your tail spikes are half clear and half red, and your horns are crystal. Have your spikes been changing colors, or have you been losing the red ones and growing replacements?"

"Now you know where to look in one respect, young chromatic," Shii noted. "Find where earth dragon horns were described as black instead of crystal, and you find one of those points of historical alteration you described."

"Not quite, honored Matriarch," she answered. "The only reference I ever found to the crystal horns is in the book that described the origins. I only speculate, but perhaps when the chromatics enticed the earth dragons to live above ground, they stopped eating rocks once they turned to farming, and thus lost their breath weapons, even forgot about them over the long centuries of not using them. But all these thousands of years, the ability has always been there. And since earth dragons do not seem to change, the ability did not fade from your being from lack of use."

“That does sound logical,” Surrat agreed. “But I never knew you had it in you, youngling,” he smiled rakishly at Kell. “You’ve always been full of surprises, our little mud dragon.”

“So, you must be Kell,” the chromatic noted.

“He is,” Shii affirmed. “As much a part of our pod as our own children.”

“Whelps, you just found yourself a new occupation for the next couple of days,” Ferroth said dryly. “The others will finish the virus. You two are going to teach *all* of us how you do that.”

“After I refuel,” Kell said ruefully, patting his stomach. “I can *feel* it now, I used up all my reserves. Now I’m hungry, and for more than just rocks. I’m *famished*. It seems like that takes a lot more effort than it feels.”

“Then go find some of those blocks they’ve been storing for building projects and chow down,” Ferroth told them. “And get back here quick as you can!”

“Well, we’re important now,” Kammi grinned at him as they hurried out.

“I just hope the others don’t kill us for being pulled off the project,” Kell chuckled.

“Oh, and I *love* your horns like that,” she said, glancing up over his eyes. “They make you look incredibly attractive.”

“My, such praise,” he noted. “But they do look rather striking on you.”

“Such a schmoozer,” she grinned as they hurried off.

23 August 2017, 21:09 DMT; Sanctuary City

Word had somehow spread all over the city that something momentous was going on down in the deepest levels, and pretty soon afterward, the rumors hit the city. And if earth dragons were good at one thing, it was spreading a rumor.

They didn't have to deal with curious spectators for a while, though. It was hard to train the others in something that was nothing but sensations, feelings, but they tried as best they could. Ferroth, Geon, and Anthra were the first ones they tried to teach, and they were good test subjects for figuring out what worked and what didn't...and they must have done *something* right, because Ferroth managed it after about an hour of trying. Like Kammi, his first success had resulted in the torrent of superheated sand and dust, and like them, it cauterized his horns and left them crystalline once the outer layer was peeled off of them. Anthra and Geon looked a bit annoyed that Ferroth had figured it out first, but only ten minutes later, Anthra succeeded, launching a jet of lava across the room, and further than Kell or Kammi had managed. But then again, Anthra was nearly twice their size, and the strength of Anthra's lungs and diaphragm might have an effect on her range. Geon managed it as they tried to use the alternate versions, breathing out the cone of sand, and like the other two, his horns crystallized immediately upon his success.

It was with Anthra's horns that they figured out why the outer covering split. The horns inside expanded to the same size as the original horns had been, and the outer cover wasn't exactly suited to deal with the expansion of the interior, so it split apart. That did rather conveniently give them a means to pull off the outer layer, however.

They had their first spectator as the others practiced...if spectator was the right word. Keth wandered in and hurried over to them, and nobody even thought to make him leave. "I've been looking for you two," he told them, then he stopped dead and gaped at them. "What happened to your horns!"

"The same thing that'll happen to yours, Patron," Kammi grinned at him. "Come in, come in! We may as well start teaching the ones we care

about the most!”

“Teach me what?”

“We found out that earth dragons have breath weapons, Keth,” Anthra told him, scratching a bit at the root of her right horn. “We’ve been learning how to use them.”

“It does this to your horns when you manage it the first time,” Ferroth said, touching his own now-crystal horn.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not at all,” Kell told him. “But you should go get Mother, Sire, and track down Kammi’s parents and brother. They told us to teach everyone, and Kammi’s right. May as well start with our families.”

“My brother will go nuts when he finds out,” Kammi laughed.

“How did you figure something like that out?” Keth asked.

“She researched it in some ancient history, and it proved true,” Kell replied, pointing at the chromatic. “It explains where all the mass we’ve been eating is going. You know how I’ve been going on and on about that.”

“Ah. Ahhhh, alright,” he nodded. “So we have to eat stone to use a breath weapon?”

Kell nodded. “And a lot of it. But, since we never really ate any stone in quantity til we came down here...” he trailed off.

“I see. I’ll go find Kanna, and your parents and brother, Kammi,” he nodded.

“I just hope the earth dragons don’t eat the entire island practicing this,” Surrat noted, which made Kell burst into laughter.

“It does give them limited ammunition, of a sort,” Shii nodded lightly.

“Well, there’s a lot of rock right over there,” Kammi said lightly, pointing. “And I’ll bet that the mass of all that ejected lava and sand exactly

matches the mass we've consumed. Minus what's still in here," she added lightly, rearing up and patting her slender belly.

"I wouldn't take that bet," Kell nodded. "And I don't think I like the idea that much of eating something I just vomited not long ago."

That made Shii and Surreal crack up.

"We do need to do some examinations, find out why spitting lava isn't char-broiling our gullets," Geon noted clinically. "Our resistance to heat is *external*, not *internal*. It starts and stops with our hides."

"Maybe we can't be burned by our own breath weapon," Kell mused. "I never felt any burning at all until after it was over, and had some lava left in my mouth. Not *that* got hot, and I had to spit it out."

"We have the same problem," Shii agreed. "When we use our breath weapon as a jet of water, any water left in our mouths will burn us if we don't get rid of it quickly. But so long as we're *breathing* it, it does us no harm."

"A function of the bio-magic, perhaps, protecting the user from her own magic until the magic wanes, which leaves whatever's left over behind to do possible harm," the chromatic forwarded.

"A curious theory, and worth exploring," Shii agreed.

"It sounds feasible," Anthra agreed.

"We should head back as soon as we feel we're competent at this, since we just wasted a couple of hours with this distraction," Geon chuckled. "After you teach your families, pack it up for tonight, young ones. Be back here tomorrow at seven, and we'll have a class for you to train. Those dragons will train everyone else, you two are a bit too important to waste all your time teaching."

"And we'll have Jukra's builders stack some stone in here overnight, so they can keep up their supply," Ferroth noted. "I'm feeling stupid for having the water dragons cart off all that waste rock now."

“I’m sure we can bring some back in,” Surrall chuckled. “We didn’t dump it *that* far off.”

“More than just rock, chief, it makes us hungry to do this,” Kammi reminded.

“We’ll triple their food allotments,” Anthra agreed. “They need their energy.”

After the council members and Ferroth learned how to use both forms of breath weapon and practiced enough to be able to use it on the first try, they took the others back up to the council offices and left Kell and Kammi to train more students. Keth returned with Kanna, Kammi’s father and mother Keel and Karri, and her brother Kyre. Kanna made quite a fuss over Kell’s horns, almost dragging him up to the apothecary before he could explain, but looking quite skeptical after they explained things. “Oh, it’s completely true, Matron,” Kammi told her. “We have lots of evidence right over there,” she chuckled, pointing to the hardened lava marring the floor.

“Is it very hard to do?” Karri asked.

“Not very, Mother, but it does take a while to get the hang of it,” Kammi replied. “But once you manage it the first time, it gets *way* easier.”

24 August 2017, 11:12 DMT; Sanctuary City

They were a very small minority, but they were growing.

Kell and Kammi represented a tiny sliver of only ten earth dragons that had crystal horns when they woke up that morning, but their numbers increased by ten within three hours of holding their first and only class. Eight dragons were waiting for them down in the factory chamber, and Kell wasn’t surprised at all to see Jukra, Fredda, Javan, and five other Earth Council drakes. The upper crust wanted to learn first, and then pass that knowledge down. But, for every dragon that managed to use each breath

weapon the first time, they were pulled out of the training and were replaced by the *real* trainers, earth dragon elders who were well known in the villages for teaching others...be it draconic, how to throw spikes, mathematics, or academics. It was those dragons that would be doing the formal training, dragons who more or less made a living training young dragons, so they'd be more adept at communicating the process and hopefully train the others faster.

By 14:50, Kell and Kammi had trained 17 drakes in how to get in touch with their inner breath weapon, and they were officially yanked from the duty and put back in the department. Trekka, Jirran, and Girk were *extremely* jealous of Kell and Kammi, though they tried to be nice about it, and Kammi was the kind of drake to rub it in their faces a little bit, preening her crystalline horns every time they looked in her direction. They couldn't go learn how to use their breath weapons until their work was done, but in the two days that Kell and Kammi had been pulled off the project, they'd actually almost finished. Ferroth, however, didn't act a whit different now that his horns were different, stomping around and barking out orders when he was in the office, and spending most of his day up in the council offices in conference with the council members, that female chromatic, Shii, and Surrall. She was still in the city, had been kept overnight, still deep in discussion...and it expanded as Kell and Kammi got back into the project. Word spread quickly through the office that Essan and Jussa had entered the city, Essan through the water tube and Jussa from the main entrance, which required drakes to go out and clear some of the obstacles so he could get in without hurting himself. Kell was debugging code for Jirran and Kammi was writing the last block of code they needed for their updated program, which would much more selectively filter out the island from satellite imagery. Getting it into the computers doing the image rendering would be easy, since their prior worm had installed ghost back doors that not even a master hacker would be able to find. Kell had a suspicion that the Hunters knew how they got it in there, but they *didn't* know everything that the worm did, nor did they know just how many holes there were in basic IP-2 protocols that hadn't been found yet. They still had six other ways to spread a virus or worm on a global scale, not counting the technique they used for

their first move, and that ignored the fact that the earth dragons had installed back doors in just about every major system connected to the internet. Satellite imagery servers weren't *major* systems, requiring a global insert approach. That had been a rush job, and it had required them to reveal the most glaring exploit in IP-2 protocols, one that would have been found by human hackers and exploited within a matter of months, or perhaps a year or two. If anything, the earth dragons did the world a favor by revealing that flaw.

"I wonder what they're talking about up there," Trekka grunted as he tapped at his keyboard.

"Nothing good, I imagine," Girk replied. "I mean, do you believe it, Trekka? That *we* are the source of magic?"

"I don't know what to believe," he answered. "I mean, two days ago I'd have laughed in your face if you told me you could breathe lava."

"True," Kammi agreed. "She *was* right about that. There's a chance she might be right about everything else."

"And when did you switch sides, my intended?" Kell asked with a edged smile.

"When I sandblasted my name into the floor of that factory chamber," she answered.

"I'm not sure what to think, but it'll be easy to prove," Jirran mused. "We just send an earth dragon up there. If that fluffy's right, his presence will restart their magical objects."

"What about the permanent spells?"

"They'll have to redo those," Jirran answered. "The cloaking spells they can do at any time, but they'll have fun redoing the scions. They have to wait for the right conditions, that's much bigger magic than the cloaking spells."

“Yeah, it took them almost twenty years to create the nine we had,” Kammi agreed, nodding. “Providing they *do* remake them.”

“They will. We can’t move back up top without having a way off this island. We can’t let them hold us prisoner here,” Kell grunted. “We’ll demand all nine scions be restored, maybe even add four or five more, and this time they put them where *we* want them to. Down on the lowlands, where we’ll build our new department building...where *we* want it. Chief never wanted it built on the side of the volcano, they made him build it there.”

“Yeah,” Trekka nodded. “If the fluffy’s right, we’ll have them by their feathery tails. They’ll have to do anything we demand if they ever want their magic back.”

“But the question I’ve been asking myself is, do we go back to the way things were,” Girk sighed. “I mean, feed the other dragons.”

“We probably will. Even though we field agents are mutants in earth dragon society, we’re still a race of farmers, Girk,” Jirran replied. “It does us no good to grow food nobody will eat. And we still need the island. The dragons still need to stay separate from the humans, so we have to learn to coexist again. The initial reception of humanity to knowing we exist went better than I expected, but I don’t expect it to stay that way. The humans turned against us once before, when we thought they were our friends. There’s a good chance it will happen again.”

“Probably. That’s probably some of the things they’re talking about up there,” Girk said, looking at the ceiling. “We know we have them by their antennae now, if that fluffy’s right. So it’s just a matter of beating them over the head with our tails until they give in.”

“I do think that no matter what, we’ll keep this city going,” Kell speculated. “It’s far too useful. We can dig some tunnels up to connect it to the villages or something. In my opinion, we should keep the department and our factories down *here*, where they can never destroy them again. We can rebuild the power plant up there, build a satellite department

headquarters to manage up top operations, and keep the main guts of the operation down here in the high rise.”

“That’s such a good idea that it’s what we decided to do,” Ferroth grunted as he came into the terminal room. “Sanctuary City will always be populated, even after we go back up. There will always fifty drakes here living here on a rotating schedule maintaining the place on top of the different departments that’ll establish headquarters down here. And the department *will* stay here,” he declared. “It’s where I wanted it form the start.”

“Down here?” Kammi asked.

“Underground,” he replied. “I wanted it built in Tidewater village, where the cable comes in, but they refused. They wanted it not just above ground, but on the volcano, in *their* territory,” he snorted. “So get used to this place, whelps. If you don’t live down here, you’ll be commuting down here every day. We’ll connect Sanctuary City to the surface with a couple of tunnels we can defend, and this will be our new main center, the way Blackstone used to be.”

“Wow, you guys really planned up there,” Jirran noted.

“We made lots of plans,” Ferroth nodded. “Jukra’s already planning on digging four tunnels to the surface. Two will be for us, travel tunnels to go up and down, two will be major connection arteries for power and data cables. We’re not moving the cable again, we’re leaving it the way it is now. We’ll have our main cable servers down here and run lines up to the surface, then rebuild.”

“So we rebuild,” Girk said.

“We rebuild,” Ferroth stated. “We rebuild everything. The computer factory will stay down here, but the TV and appliance factories will return to the surface. We’ll rebuild the power plant up there, establish a foundry and steel mill so we can make our own steel rather than scavenge it, and attach a foundry and machining factory for producing parts rather than have

every department make their own. And,” he said with a grunt, “we’re building an enclave.”

“A what?”

“An enclave, for humans,” he replied. “Given how tangled up we are with the humans now, Anthra and Geon think it’s a good idea we have an ambassador from the humans here on the island.”

“Jenny,” Kell blurted.

“Jenny,” Ferroth agreed. “And most of the Hunters on top of it. Essan said that Hinado wants to move the Hunters and Jenny’s husband and hatchling to the island to teach them magic, so it’ll be more like a compound for the humans in training than just a single house.”

“What a world, taking in the humans that chased us all over the globe,” Trekka chuckled.

“And they’ll be right where I can keep an eye on them,” Ferroth grunted. “Those humans are *dangerous*.”

“I’m sure they say the same thing about us,” Jirran said lightly.

“Enough about that. Where are you on the project?”

“Writing the last of it now,” Kammi answered. “We should have it ready in four hours or so.”

“About that, provided the debug goes well,” Trekka agreed.

“Get it done and push it out as soon as it’s viable,” he ordered. “I’m going back up to the council office. I just came down to see where things stand.”

“Chief, you could have used the intercom,” Kammi laughed.

“I can’t see you jump when I bark when I use that thing,” he retorted, which made all five of them laugh.

After he left, Kell pondered what he said. “They’re going to open channels,” he realized.

“How so?” Kammi asked.

“If we’re building a mill and foundry, we’ll need raw materials. Iron ore, coke, coal, and so on and so on. I think they mean to start *trading* with the humans,” he realized. “Trekka, you still have that back door in Jukra’s terminal?”

“Of course I do,” he replied.

“Dig through it tonight and see if there’s not plans to build a wharf and cargo unloading equipment somewhere in his plans,” he said.

“Seriously? Trade with the humans? What would we trade?” Jirran asked. “We don’t *have* anything.”

“We have *magic*, and what we know,” Trekka answered, nodding. “We teach them magic, we earth dragons train their engineering students in our methods, we trade them silly little harmless things like driftlights that the magic dragons can virtually mass produce, other magical trinkets that are harmless to us but humans might find quite exciting, they supply us with resources we don’t have on the island.”

“Oh. Ohhhh, that would work,” Kammi nodded. “We give them the equivalent of cheap Chinese-made toys, they give us things that matter. But if we do something like that, we’d better be careful. It would mean showing some humans exactly where the island is.”

“So we do it carefully, but think of the advantages,” Trekka said. “No more steel and aluminum shortages. No more sorting through plastic the water dragons net and bring back. No more shaking crabs out of aluminum drink cans so we can recycle them,” he drawled. “We’d have everything we need.”

“If we can get the others to agree to it,” Girk said.

“They won’t have any choice,” Trekka replied. “If they want their magic, they do what *we* want. And really, is setting up trade that benefits *them* as well as *us* so much to ask? It’s not like we don’t understand what the island means, and how important it is. We’re *staying* here, after all. But this is our chance to make things much better, for both us *and* the magic dragons.”

“Whether they like it or not,” Kammi chuckled.

“Sometimes you have to drag the naysayers kicking and screaming into the new era,” Trekka said blandly. “As much as forcing the other dragons to be more accepting of technology and tolerate twenty or so humans living on the island will change things.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Girk said. “Trading useless magic trinkets for steel. And everything else.”

“It does create some opportunities we’ve never had before,” Kammi agreed. “As long as we can set up a supply line that doesn’t endanger the island.”

“I’m sure we could work something out with the Americans. Hawaii *is* the closest major port and industrialized center to the island.”

“They wouldn’t exactly need a wharf, if you think about it. They pull up close to the island, chuck the cargo overboard, the water dragons recover it,” Jirran mused.

“That would be too much work for the water dragons, and they’d probably get pissed off at us,” Kell chuckled. “If there’s one tail out there we don’t want to grab, it’s theirs.”

Kitta and Kav bounded into the office in front of Kanna, Konn right behind her, and Kell almost gawked when he saw that Kitta’s horns were crystallized...was that a good thing? Her horns hadn’t fully grown yet... would they continue to grow even after changing? It was a moot point, though, since it was already done. “Well, look at you, little miss!” Kammi laughed as Kitta jumped up on her. “Who taught you that!”

“Mother did,” she replied smugly, grinning down at Kav and Konn. “The boys haven’t figured it out yet,” she taunted.

“Which just proves girls are better than boys,” Kammi grinned in Kell’s direction.

“Says you,” Kell snorted, which made the other agents chuckle.

“I’m surprised such a young drake can do that,” Jirran said clinically.

“She’s the youngest so far,” Kanna said, a bit proudly.

“From a biological standpoint, it makes sense,” Trekka said. “She’s too young to throw her spikes, so having a breath weapon gives her a defense mechanism.”

“I just hope it doesn’t mess with growing her horns,” Kell said, reaching over and touching one of her crystalline horns. “They’re not full size yet.”

“Well, we grow crystals out of our tails, it’s no stretch we can do it on the other end,” Kammi said, bouncing Kitta on her back a little.

“As long as my horns don’t come off like my tail spikes will someday,” Kitta said with a frown. “I’d look really stupid without horns.”

“A sentiment shared by quite a few of us,” Kammi laughed. “Imagine how heavy your head would feel without your horns counterbalancing your muzzle! Why, your nose would be dragging the ground all the time!”

“Ewww!” Kitta sounded, which made Kanna smile.

“That or we’d have some serious upper neck muscles from holding our noses up,” Trekka chuckled.

“Are you about done, youngling?” Kanna asked, looking at Kell.

“We’ll be here for a while, Mother,” he replied. “Four or five more hours. This is *slightly* important.”

“Then I’ll bring all of you something to eat,” she decided. “I managed to get enough flour to make some fresh bread.”

“Oh, bring some please!” Jirran said with enthusiasm. “I’d love some fresh bread!”

“I’d be happy to. Come along, hatchlings, let them get back to work. You can help me bring the bread back.”

24 August 2017, 11:32 DMT; Council Aerie

It was almost intolerable.

The council chromatic paced back and forth on the aerie as Hirrag and Hinado discussed aerial patrols of their territorial airspace, and the sages were clustered to the side, near the former earth dragon podiums, debating the newest theory about the drain on magic and how they could reverse it. The council chromatic desperately needed to talk to the water dragons, but not only were Jussa and Essan not there, the water dragon elders as well hadn’t shown up that morning.

Things were getting very serious. With sky dragons now required to patrol their airspace to turn back planes and also watch for ships at sea, it cut down on the number of hunters, which in turn cut back further on the daily food allotments. The council and the sages were still eating well, but the younger chromatics were starting to get almost dangerously angry because they were on the brink of starvation...those who refused to fish for themselves, anyway. The fire dragons holding the volcano wouldn’t leave it except to eat, and they had already attacked several desperate chromatics and a few sky dragons that tried to get in on the food that the water dragons were bringing to the fire dragons. It burned his feathers that the water dragons were feeding the *fire* dragons, but wouldn’t feed anyone else. The fire dragons were holding the tiny spit of rock that the water dragons were

using to bring their fish with savage tenacity, and it was a dragon's life to try to steal food brought there.

This was no time to worry about...*logistics*. This was one of the greatest crises the dragons had ever faced, the potential loss of magic, and he had to worry about hungry chromatics getting themselves hurt trying to steal food that the fire dragons were selfishly hoarding. The water dragons were enabling that kind of counterproductive behavior. This was a time when all dragons should be coming together and working towards averting this most dire of catastrophes, not squabbling among themselves over a pawful of fish!

He needed to speak to the water dragons, to convince them that at this time, they needed to put their declarations aside and see reason. He couldn't afford to lose a chromatic because he got too close to a fire dragon, and the rest of the fire dragons had to stop sitting on the volcano like angry children and get involved with the problem. The younger, less educated fire dragons could help, even if it was just helping the water dragons bring fish onto the island for the others to eat. A fire dragon could pull a cart just as effectively as an earth dragon could.

Those Gaia-cursed *earth dragons*. They needed them up here, where they could do all this...*busy work*. It was all they were really good for, that and supplying them the food the island needed. When they finally crawled out of their dirty holes in defeat, oh, how he would make them pay!

He turned and paced back, almost stepped on Hinado's long tail, then glanced at the newest member of the council, the sky wyrm elder Faralla. He was one of their younger elders, just having recently earned the title, but he was respected for both his mind and his flying skills. He wasn't very good at magic, but he had a very analytical mind...and the council chromatic didn't like that. The fire dragons were easy to manipulate, the water dragons usually didn't involve themselves, and he'd always had Ivaiya to keep Hinado in check, whom he had *never* wanted on the council. He would have preferred to have Beyori back on the council, some simpleton he could easily control, but Beyori had resigned the day after

Ivaiya was killed, and word was he was now so terrified of the earth dragons that he wouldn't come within a thousand *dram* of the ground, not after seeing that damned little earth drake slaughter Ivaiya in cold blood. Faralla was a threat, as much as Hinado was...and the two of them together formed a very dangerous alliance that jeopardized the council chromatic's control of the council itself. The only good thing to him was that he had participated in the attacks on the grounder farms, so he possibly had certain sympathies that the council chromatic could exploit. If he could get Faralla on his side concerning punishing those filthy grounders for everything they'd done, he could use that as a starting point to sway Faralla over to his side, and retain control of the council.

Finally, thank Gaia, Jussa appeared, coming up over the level of the aerie and landing clumsily on the edge. Essan was right behind him, and behind the water drake was a young female chromatic...the one they'd put to finding the earth dragons, first of the senior class. She'd been assigned to an unimportant library to maintain it while the elders worked on this problem...why was she with the water dragons? The young female landed beside Essan, far more gracefully, and folded back her wings with a steady look at him...almost *challenging*. That little—she knew better than to look *him* in the eye that way!

He was going to teach that female about proper respect when he got his claws on her.

“Jussa, we need to talk,” he said, hurrying over.

“No. You will not talk. You will *listen*,” Jussa declared, staring down at the smaller chromatic with narrowed eyes, glowing a dark green rather than their usual lighter green or turquoise, depending on his mood. “If I might have everyone's attention!” he called loudly, which caused all discussion to cease and the council chromatic to fume, glaring at Jussa with sparks and flecks of color flickering across his glowing white eyes. “We bring critical news!”

Essan jumped up on the podium that had once belonged to the earth drake seat. “We’ve discovered the reason for the drain on magic,” the drake shouted, which caused everyone to rush over.

“Really? What is it?”

“Can we reverse it?”

“Speak, Essan, speak!”

Jussa reared up, sitting on his tail and raising his forepaws. “Calm down,” he called, taking clear control of the aerie. The council chromatic looked for some opportunity to reassert his authority, but at that moment, no one was going to listen to him. “We have this young chromatic to thank for this revelation,” he said, motioning to first of her class. “Her research into the problem, searching books none of the rest of us bothered to study, revealed the truth.”

Essan reached into his shoulder satchel, and withdrew a very plain, untitled book bound in tan leather. “The answer lies within this book,” he declared. “A book of our most ancient history, laying forgotten within the Library of Camelot.”

“Simply put, our current crisis is a problem of our own making,” Jussa stated. “We brought this on ourselves. In a way, this *is* Gaia’s fury brought upon us,” he said, nodding at the elderly female chromatic sage who had been advocating that theory from the first day. “She is not punishing us directly, but rather she has let our own arrogance and foolishness punish us in her stead.”

“Well, what is the cause?” someone demanded.

Jussa looked to Essan, and he nodded. “The earth dragons.”

“They caused this?” someone said angrily.

“*We* caused this,” Jussa retorted. “When we drove the earth dragons underground, we set into motion a chain of events that brought us to where

we are now. The failure of magic is directly tied to their retreat underground.”

“So they *did* cause this,” the council chromatic stated haughtily.

“Only in that they are depriving us of magic by separating themselves from us,” Essan replied. “Earth dragons are the *source* of magic, esteemed council member,” he said dryly, which produced shocked gasps.

“That’s impossible!” Faralla declared.

“We proved it,” Jussa said simply in reply. “We conducted multiple tests and experiments and proved the theory. Magic *works* in the underground city of the earth dragons, because *they* are there.”

“They have put so much stone between us and them that the magic they grant to the world is being absorbed before it reaches us,” Jussa continued. “Had they not dug down so deeply, magic would not be in crisis. But they are simply too deep. Stone is unyielding to magic, and blocks it from us.”

“That’s an utter and complete fantasy!” the council chromatic snapped, trying to regain control.

“We have *proved* it,” Jussa repeated. “And the earth dragons have agreed to prove it to *you*, beyond any shadow of a doubt. They have agreed to allow three dragons into their city. Three and three only,” he called. “A member of the chromatic sages, Hirrag of the council, and Hinado of the council, which allows a member of each race to witness this proof. The chromatic sage will prove the theory beyond any doubt, which Hirrag and Hinado will witness and affirm to everyone else when they return. Sages of the chromatics, decide among you which will be the one to go to the earth dragon city.”

“I will go,” the elderly female declared, looking at the others.

“Then go with our blessing, sister,” one of the others nodded.

“This is completely ridiculous!” the council chromatic shouted. “It is absolutely impossible that the earth dragons are the *source* of magic that infuses our world!”

“When the honored sage comes back, she’ll look you in the eyes and tell you we speak the truth, chromatic,” Jussa told him, a bit darkly. “As I said, we’ve already proved it to our satisfaction. This further test will be solely for the rest of you.”

“I too seriously doubt this, but if you say you can prove it, then I’m willing to see your evidence,” Hirrag said.

“Give me ten minutes,” the old sage said. “There are some things I must gather to test the theory. Ten minutes.”

“We will wait, honored sage,” Jussa nodded. The old chromatic charged off the edge and into the air, moving like she was half her age. The council chromatic tried to wrap his mind around their outrageous claim, that the earth dragons were the *source* of magic. He would believe they had somehow sabotaged magic before he believed they were the source of magic. He squared off against Jussa, his eyes narrow. “How could you possibly prove such an insane idea?” he demanded.

“Simple. I went to see Anthra and Geon, and my magic was just as strong as it was before this began,” he replied. “First of her class here brought magical objects with her that had gone dormant, but down there, they function normally. In fact, I believe she brought a few back. Did you, young one?”

“Yes, esteemed council member,” she replied, reaching into her shoulder satchel. She withdrew something and gently lobbed it into the air, and three driftlights floated up and over her. “If our calculations are correct, they’ll operate for twenty-six minutes before they fail,” she added. “Give or take thirty-one seconds.”

“That’s it? Your evidence is *driftlights*?” the council chromatic demanded angrily.

“Are there any other driftlights currently functioning anywhere on the island, chromatic?” Essan replied simply. “Are there any other magical objects *anywhere* currently functioning, or are they all dormant? They may be simple driftlights, but the glaring fact that they’re *working* is powerful evidence.”

“It would take far more than driftlights to prove something so outlandish!”

“And if it *is* proven true, chromatic? If we return and declare that Jussa is right, what will you do?” Hinado asked simply. “Because at that point, the earth dragons will have us by our tails. We either give in to their demands, or they strangle us of magic until we can’t even fly anymore. It won’t matter who has more food at that point, for if we can’t even fly, we’ll be completely helpless.”

The chromatic was almost defiantly silent, unable to even *admit* that such a thing might be possible...because it couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be! How could filthy grounders, who can’t fly, can’t use magic, be the *source* of magic? It would be the most cruel of jokes, for the weakest, most *useless* splinter of the dragon races, not even *true* dragons, be so important.

And if, through some twisted joke, they were, then *why didn’t they know before now?*

The council chromatic gathered up the Council of Seven to the side and fell into furious, whispered debate far on the edge of the aerie, discussing possible courses of action if Jussa was proven wrong, and the opportunities that presented, and almost against their will, discussing the outside chance that Jussa was right, and what that would mean. But not one of them even wanted to *think* about that, for it would mean that the earth dragons could demand virtually *anything* of the other dragons, and if they did not get it, they would just stay underground until magic was so weak that the other dragons couldn’t even fly anymore, as Hinado had said.

The sage returned with two large shoulder satchels weighed down with items, and she hurried over to Jussa. “I’m ready to go,” she replied. “I’m

taking various magical objects of differing magical strengths to test this theory, items more powerful than simple driftlights.”

“A wise thing,” Jussa said. “I want there to be no doubt in your mind, honored sage. I want you to be able to say with complete confidence yes or no.”

“Then lead on. Time is a precious thing right now.”

The council chromatic was preparing to storm across the aerie and grab that young upstart by her antenna, but she left with the water dragons, Hinado, Hirrag, and the sage, and the water dragons welcomed her among them. She was clearly with *them* now, and that meant that they’d have to punish her severely when her theory was debunked and she was forced to crawl back to them on her belly.

They continued their plans while the others were gone, but their plotting was disrupted almost exactly 26 minutes later, when the three driftlights that the young chromatic—*traitor!*—sputtered, their lights turned unsteady, then they slowly descended to the floor and their magical light winked out. They went dormant, only 14 seconds off the chromatic’s predicted time.

That was not a good omen.

Barely an hour later, the dragons returned. Jussa and Essan landed behind Hinado and Hirrag, and the two chromatic females landed behind them with two water drakes flanking them. Hinado looked grim, and Hirrag almost astounded. The elderly sage came around them, her face almost amused. “The theory is proven,” she declared to the aerie. “Magic is at full strength and functions normally within the earth dragon city, and tests conducted prove that magic is *radiating* from the earth dragons. They are truly a source of magic. Maybe not the *sole* source, but they are so much of a source that without them, magic itself becomes unstable. Further research and experimentation is required to determine the specifics of the theory, but it is true. Earth dragons are the source of the magic we use.”

That caused an uproar on the aerie. Dragons were shouting, a few were almost babbling, but it didn't move Hirrag or Hinado. They both backed up the sage, declaring that they had no doubt that the sage was right. Jussa jumped up on his podium and spread his wings to get everyone's attention. "The earth dragons have agreed to a meeting to discuss terms. They agreed to one and only one representative from each dragon race to be brought to their city. I will represent the water dragons in this conference. The other races must select who will go within the next two hours. The meeting is scheduled for four o'clock."

"I will represent the fire dragons," Hirrag boomed.

"We must discuss the matter and decide who will go for us," Hinado said, and he hurried over to Faralla and the sky dragons around him.

Jussa looked at the clustered chromatics, almost amused at the shocked looks on their faces. "The earth dragons have stated outright that you will *not* be permitted to represent the chromatics, esteemed council member," Jussa told them, almost lightly. "Given that *you* are the main reason they went underground in the first place, they do not believe that you will bargain in good faith. They do not want you anywhere near their city. So you must choose another among yourselves. One, I suggest, that will listen and be reasonable," he warned.

"*What?* They can't deny me what is my right!" the council chromatic raged. "I am the council member of the chromatics! I *lead* this council!"

"It is *their* city, and to be honest about it, they can demand anything they damn well please at this point," Hirrag snorted, smoke billowing from his nostrils. "If we want to *survive*, chromatic, we will give them what they want."

"And what *do* they want?" a sky dragon called.

"Far less than you would expect given their advantage," Jussa noted. "We meet back here in two hours' time. Chromatics, choose your representative and have him or her present here at that time." The young

chromatic left with the four water dragons, flying down towards the lowlands, staying safely out of his reach...and he sorely wanted to lash out and punish *someone*. The earth dragons were the core of their crisis, for it was their retreat underground that had weakened magic. No matter what the others thought, as far as he was concerned, it was *their fault*. Everything was their fault! And they refused to allow him to be there to negotiate! It was...intolerable!

But while he was furious inside, outside he was still calm and collected enough to exert his authority within the Council of Seven to make sure that the chromatic that went would be one he could trust, one that would not let the other dragons browbeat them into making ridiculous concessions. No matter what the others thought, they did still have leverage, they had pieces on the board to move.

“Remember,” he told the second in command of the council, a female whom he had groomed to be his lieutenant. “If this insanity is correct, you will have your magic when you go down there. Use it to locate their food stores, learn how they are getting their water, and find where and how they’re circulating the air. They *must* have air vents, else they would have all suffocated by now. If we can find them, we can block their vents and force them to either come out or suffocate, or perhaps send down smoke and force them to evacuate. We can’t let them come back to the surface on their own terms. They must only come back under *our* terms, or our very way of life will be destroyed, everything that we are will be undermined by their...*technology*. It would be better to *die* than allow them to destroy magic.”

“I understand.”

“And when it comes to the negotiations, do anything and everything you can to either stall or deadlock the proceedings,” he continued. “Agree to *nothing*, no matter how simple or practical it might be. The earth dragons won’t return to the surface so long as we refuse to agree to their demands, and that gives us more time to learn the secrets of how their city works and come up with a way to cripple them, or in some way force them to

evacuate. Force them out of their hole without an agreement, and once they're back on the surface, they will be *ours*."

"And if the other dragons object my seeming unreasonable position?"

"Let them," he snorted. "Dissent only works in our favor."

She nodded to him and hurried out of the council chambers. He had confidence in her. She understood what was at stake here. If they were right and earth dragons were responsible for magic, then it would be the darkest of ironies that the dragons that *created* magic would be the ones to destroy it, destroy it with their technology and their subversion of the other dragons to their sinister ways.

But he was dead serious. He would rather see the dragons die than watch them slowly degenerate into something less than what they were, to turn their backs on their proud traditions and the ways of Gaia's magic...to become no better than *earth dragons*.

24 August 2017, 14:42 DMT; Sanctuary City

Kell absolutely could not *believe* that they were making him do this.

He sat on his haunches by the main tunnel entrance with Sella beside him, waiting. Sella had brought them the warning that the others were on their way, being brought in by Jussa, Essan, Ralla, Shii, and Surral, and Anthra had sent *him* to walk them up the tunnel and to the main chamber. Hirrag and Hinado were in the group, and Anthra seemed to have forgotten that Hirrag and Kell did *not* get along...or perhaps she was hoping that Kell spiked him before they got where they were going. Two driftlights that the chromatic hadn't taken back were hovering over their heads, anchored to them now so they'd follow along, providing the light that the other dragons would need to navigate the tunnel. The two driftlights would let them see where they were putting their feet, but wouldn't illuminate very far up the

tunnel. But, then again, they'd walked the tube once already, so they had an idea of how long it was, and what kind of defenses were sitting at the top.

Jussa's head slid out of the water, and right beside him, Hirrag almost jumped out. Fire dragons weren't hurt by water, but they *hated* water. If not that they'd die, they probably wouldn't even drink it. Hirrag shook the water off of himself hastily, sending droplets flying in every direction, and just behind him, Essan appeared with a rather large chromatic—well, large *for* a chromatic. She was slightly larger than Essan, who was a very large drake. This had to be the new representative for the chromatics, and she did *not* look friendly. Hinado came up behind them, brought by Surrall, and Shii brought out the young female, who immediately passed by the elder dragons and joined Kell and Sella at the front. "I'm going on ahead, if you don't mind," she told him. "Esteemed council member Geon wished to speak to me before the conference begins." He nodded to her, and she created a little light for herself, bounded a few short hops, then spread her wings and disappeared into the darkness, her little light quickly vanishing in the distance. She was just small enough to fly in the tube, and she knew to land and walk when she reached the door.

"Where does that youngling go?" the chromatic female demanded.

"She's reporting back to Geon."

"She submits herself to *you*?"

"She sees the truth of things," Sella said lightly.

"She should, she discovered it," Kell said absently. "Follow me."

Kell started them out with Sella walking beside him, listening as Hirrag and Hinado discussed how they felt the conference was going to go. He wasn't holding much hope for it, given that that chromatic they sent didn't look like the agreeable type, but at least he got the satisfaction of hearing her gasp as they started walking. "Well, they were right about one thing," she said. "Magic *is* stronger down here."

“It’s trapped in here by the stone,” Jussa told them. “And of course, Kell is here.”

“I’m still trying to get used to those horns,” Sella noted, glancing at him.

“Well, I can’t see them, so it doesn’t hit me until I see someone else.”

“What happened to them?”

“I’ll let Anthra and Geon explain that,” Kell answered, glancing back around his wing at her.

“Will you be at the council, Kell?” Hinado asked.

“Gaia, I hope not,” he snorted, which made Sella chuckle. “I’m not a council member anymore, Hinado. I’m back in the department. I think I set a record for the shortest-serving council member in dragon history. I’m not even sure why they sent me down here to escort you back. I have very important work to do.”

“Their reasoning was simple, young drake. *You*, we know beyond any doubt, will kill. Anthra and Geon wisely display their power by sending one that will kill if we step out of line. A worthy tactic. I find myself admiring Anthra and Geon more and more,” he said sagely.

“Oh joy,” Kell said blandly.

“And you, we know, will be honest. Should we expect the earth dragons to be unreasonable?” Hinado asked.

“If you consider us just wanting to be left alone to be unreasonable, then yes,” Kell replied evenly. “I don’t know what Anthra and Geon plan to tell you, but I doubt they’ll demand more than what we’ve already demanded. Just let us rebuild, stay up on your mountains and we’ll stay down on our farms, and everyone will be happy.”

“And the food?” Hirrag asked.

“Provided we can ever get our farms back to normal, we’ll grow food again. It may be a little tight for a few years, given how much damage the sky dragons did,” he said with a tilt to his voice. “And provided you survive the explosion of outrage when the earth dragons see the damage,” he added darkly. “We haven’t told them just how bad it is yet. We’ve been trying to find a way to break it to them gently.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s what *I* think they’ll talk about, but I told you, I’m not on the council anymore. I honestly have no idea what they’ll want to talk about, I’m just making guesses.”

Kell more or less ignored them as they talked among themselves, at least until they reached the door. He noticed that the chromatic was looking *very* carefully at that door, and took note of the fortifications behind it, as well as the cannon emplacements in the main cavern, pointing down the tunnel, pointing right at them. Hirrag, being the largest dragon alive, had a lot of trouble picking his way through the hedgehogs and hooks, which gave the chromatic plenty of time to study the layout. She regarded the huge cavern floor and the many ramp entrances leading down in the floor, and the artificial ceiling overhead that formed the second floor of the high rise. Kell had no doubt, she was studying the city and looking for weaknesses.

The chromatics weren’t willing to surrender just yet.

Kell wasn’t the only one that noticed the chromatic’s quiet interest in the layout of the main cavern. “Need I remind you, chromatic, that you won’t get out of here alive unless both the earth dragons and I permit it,” Jussa said flatly.

“What are you about, threatening me in such a manner?” she retorted hotly.

“A promise, not a threat,” he replied.

“I’ll just spike you here and now if you prefer to bypass all the verbal fencing over the fact that you’re studying things *way* too hard to have good

intentions,” Kell declared. “I think you’ll be leaving in a blindfold. And I don’t think you’ll be coming back.”

The chromatic gave him a savage glare, but said nothing.

Kell led them up the series of ramps to the top two levels, where Anthra and Geon had their offices, bringing them into the large open area between them that served as the main office and meeting area for their staff and meetings of the Earth Council, the council of the village council leaders, with the private offices of the council members bisected the top level of the high rise, two half-circle rooms with the top of the dome chamber serving as the ceiling. Dralt and the rest of the staff worked at desks and tables to one side of the large room, leaving an open space for the meetings. Anthra and Geon were there speaking with the young female chromatic as Dralt was sitting on the base of his tail nearby, taking notes using a computer, tapping away at the keyboard. “Here they are, esteemed council members,” Kell called as the others came in behind him. The chromatic wasn’t the only one looking around, for none of them had been in this room before.

“No, Kell, stay,” Geon called when Kell turned to leave. “We may need your input.”

“What possible help could I be?”

“You’re a field agent,” Anthra replied. “If we have any questions, better to have the field agents here to answer them than have Ferroth dig one of you up to come in.”

Three more drakes came in behind him. Ferroth, Jukra, and Fredda filed in, and Ferroth pushed Kell along with a dark smile. Behind them, Kammi, Trekka, and Jirran stepped in, and Kell immediately went over to them. Anthra wasn’t kidding about wanting the field agents here, for she’d summoned all four that had off-island experience.

Poor Girk, excluded again.

Anthra nodded to Dralt, and she reared up to sit on her tail, which made her tower over all of them except Hirrag. “Alright, let’s get down to business,” she declared. “The earth dragons have a series of demands that must be met before we relent and return to the surface.”

“I’m not here to—“ the elder female chromatic started, but she ended with a pained yelp when Hirrag slammed his tail into her side, almost knocking her over.

“You are here to *listen*, and nothing else,” Hirrag snapped. “When Anthra is done speaking, *then* you may talk, and you will address the esteemed council member with the respect that title grants her. If you speak again without being granted permission, I will rip your antenna off your head with my bare paws. Do you understand?”

The female had the sense not to even *think* that Hirrag was bluffing. She drew herself up, her white eyes blazing with indignant light, but she said nothing.

“Well, my thanks, Hirrag,” Anthra said dryly. “Now, we have six main conditions that must be agreed to before we return to the surface.

“First. The dragon’s council will recognize our equality,” she began. “No law will be passed that affects us without that same law being binding against *all* other dragons, and in extension, the dragon’s council will no longer have any right or power to pass any law controlling, restricting, or appropriating earth dragon property, which *includes* our technology and our harvests. The earth dragons will still provide allotments for all non-producing dragons and will offer technological services to any dragon who wishes it, such as power and TV, but the sizes of food allotments and the resulting tithes against the farms will be determined by the Earth Council, the council of earth dragon village council leaders, *not* the dragon’s council. The Earth Council will also be directly responsible for managing the emergency food stockpile, storing the required one year’s worth of food to protect against famine or disaster. Simply put, cousins, you may not simply decide to take what is ours anymore, and the food we produce is *ours*. We

will not let you go hungry, but you will never have the power to take what is ours without due cause or proper compensation again, because it is abundantly clear to us now that it will be abused. You have lost our trust that you will be fair and impartial in the exercise of the power we once gave you over us.

“Second. The use and development of technology will be determined and controlled by *us*, not the dragon’s council, within certain reasonable limits,” she continued. “All matters of technological research and deployment will be controlled by the Intelligence Department, and under Ferroth’s direct supervision as the department chief, with one exception. The dragon’s council will have a liaison in the department to speak in matters concerning sending field agents out into human lands, which gives the dragon’s council a voice in the operations of the field agents. After all, what they do out in human lands potentially impacts all dragons, not just earth dragons, so the dragon’s council must have complete knowledge of what they’re doing and be able to pull the department back if they feel that they’re doing something that jeopardizes the island as a whole, such as bring highly radioactive nuclear material onto the island, for example. For all other matters, if you don’t like the technology we deploy, you come to us and explain why you object to it, and we’ll consider the matter.”

“What would a reasonable limit be, Anthra?” Hinado asked politely.

“Well, say we decide to experiment with windmill style electrical turbines. Those are large, ugly, and pose a threat to flying dragons, so that would violate what is reasonable, as it poses a danger to any dragon not paying attention. We would also not violate the territories of the fire dragons without permission first. It would be unreasonable to simply march onto fire dragon land and run a cable through it without permission to do so, and also bartering fair compensation for the use of that land.”

“Ah, I understand. Please pardon my interruption.”

“Third. The coastal plains and lowlands will be off limits to all other dragons except the water dragons, who may travel through earth dragon

territory and mingle freely at their will and desire. No other dragon may land in our territory and remain without permission, and in return, no earth dragon will be permitted up on either volcano without prior permission or in the pursuit of previously scheduled and approved work, except in the use of a single ramp that will run from the base of the volcano to Council Aerie. We have no *need* to come up on the volcanoes with the sole exception of coming to Council Aerie, and if we restrict you from our territory, then we will restrict ourselves from yours.

“Fourth. The dragon’s council relinquishes all authority to prosecute and punish earth dragons except in the most egregious circumstances. If an earth dragon is suspected of wrongdoing on a scale that it would usually come before the dragon’s council, then the dragon’s council refers the matter to the Earth Council, who will then pursue the issue until proper justice is done. If it is one of the three crimes listed in our laws as the most severe, then the dragon’s council may prosecute and pass sentence. However, if the dragon’s council passes sentence in such a matter, then the punishment levied against the earth dragon in question *must* be levied against any other dragon that commits a similar offense. There will be no arbitrarily decided punishments based simply on what race of dragon committed the crime. There will never again be an attempt to give an earth dragon the death penalty when you grant simple interdiction to another for a similar offense. We simply cannot trust you anymore to be fair,” she said simply.

“Fifth. The earth dragons demand a change in dragon council procedure that gives any race of dragon the power to *veto* any matter brought before council. The mechanics of this veto is that the drake and wyrm must both agree to the veto, and a matter vetoed is considered retired with prejudice and follows the same rules as other matters retired in that fashion. Since the chromatics only have one council member, the chromatic seat has the power of veto without requiring a second confirmation. This gives *every* dragon race the power to block matters they see as harmful or unfair to *their* dragons, and something that should have been a part of our system since its inception. This change of rules will prevent what the

humans call a tyranny by majority, where a ruling majority can pass highly prejudicial and unfair law and the victims of said law have no recourse. What happened to us will *never* happen again, to *any* dragon race.

“And sixth. There will be no punishments, no public humiliations, and no penances handed out upon our return, in *either* direction,” she declared. “The chromatics will put their scheme to punish us for our defiance back in the dark hole from which they pulled it, and the earth dragons will simply repair the damage to our lands and move on. It’s best for all concerned to simply leave this in the past and move on, at least once the changes we demand are made to protect us from future attempts to control, demean, abuse, or enslave us.”

“No demands of public penance? No making us put our noses to the floor?” Hinado asked.

“You’ve been punished enough,” Geon said simply. “And now that we know what we know, we know how sorry you are. But the dragon’s council *will* take up the matter of punishing the sky dragons for destroying earth dragon farms. That was totally uncalled for. We’ll need help restoring the farms, and a little manual labor will be good for the sky dragons’ spiritual well being,” he drawled. “Besides, we’ll have to bring in soil to replace what eroded away, and without scions, that means sky dragons will have to carry it.”

“We’ll also bring up to the council several proposals concerning the humans,” Anthra added. “Since they already know about us, we believe that some formal ties should be established, and there’s a potential for trade. We could trade children’s toys for items of value and worth, such as steel. Field agents, how much would a human pay for a driftlight?” Anthra called.

The four of them looked at each other. “Quite a bit, if only for the novelty of it,” Trekka finally replied. “But the light bulb manufacturers would scream bloody murder, since driftlights never go out,” he chuckled.

“And how easy is it to make a driftlight?” Anthra asked.

“I can make two dozen over the course of a day, esteemed council member, and I’m still in school,” the young female answered. “It is a very simple thing to do. I could even make them to respond to spoken English commands rather than magical direction, tailor them specifically for human use.”

“Then we have some potential here to enrich ourselves without giving anything of value away,” Geon said. “We give them frivolous toys, they give us items of real worth.”

“I would be interested in discussing such a thing,” Hirrag said. “Or, more to the point, my successor will. I will be stepping down from the council after this crisis passes. This was partially our fault for allowing the council chromatic to run wild, and for that failure, both Sessara and myself will resign our seats.”

“I’d rather you not do that, Hirrag,” Anthra told him. “Now that you’ve seen what the chromatic’s up to, and what lengths he’ll go to do get it, it puts you in a position to keep him in line. We can’t force him off the council, but we can ensure that the other eight dragons looking at him know him for what he really is. As a personal favor to me, I would ask that you and Sessara remain on the council. And you too, Hinado,” she said, looking at him. “We don’t need the upheaval of the council reforming itself right now.”

“I had no intentions of surrendering my seat, now that I have it back,” he replied with a smile.

“I’ll discuss it with Sessara,” Hirrag nodded.

“That’s all we can ask,” Geon told him.

“Well, your demands aren’t unreasonable,” Hinado said.

“That’s *your* opinion,” the elder chromatic female said scathingly. “The earth dragons seek to put themselves above the law, and I for one will not have it! I reject outright all of your demands! They are completely beyond all reason and tolerance!”

“They are not points of negotiation, they are *demands*,” Anthra told her flatly. “We didn’t bring you here to haggle. We brought you here to tell you our demands, and now it is your responsibility to take those demands back to your dragons. When the dragon’s council meets and formally accepts our demands by vote, then we will begin the process of returning to the surface. The council *can* vote on such a thing without our presence,” she said lightly.

“Outrageous!” the female snapped.

“You are in no position to bargain, fluffy,” Geon growled. “Give it perhaps two more months, and you won’t even be able to fly anymore. And all the other dragons will *know* that the only reason it got that far is because the chromatics are being jackasses. Do you really want *all* the dragons that angry with you?” he asked intensely. “If you can’t use magic and you can’t fly away, you won’t get very far from the pack of incensed fire dragons out to *make* you give in, even if they have to break your bones to do it.”

“Geon speaks a truth, chromatic,” Hirrag warned. “This is not them against us. This is all of us against *you*. If the chromatics stand against us, if the chromatics are the sole reason that magic continues to fade from the world, then the fire dragons will simply wait until your magic is so weak that you cannot protect yourself, *then* we will move. Tooth to claw, you are no match for us, and you know it.”

She looked honestly frightened, probably realizing for the first time that she was in no position to make any kind of demand. Every other dragon in the room could kill her, and no one above would ever know what happened. She could not even get *out* without a water dragon taking her.

“Once the council accedes to our demands, *then* we’ll come up and discuss the finer points of it, negotiate the areas of gray within the six demands to formalize things and establish a seated set of laws and rules governing how the other dragons treat us. But we will not move until we have *law* protecting us. We will not leave this sanctuary until we know beyond any doubt that we will be safe and free from retribution or petty

vengeance,” Anthra stated, looking right at the chromatic. “What you may do for us, my friends, is spread the word among your dragons of the truth, a truth *not* tainted by the chromatics’ plotting. Let the common dragon know that without us, there *is* no magic. Let them know the truth, and then let things fall where they may.”

“Most of my kin already know the truth,” Jussa said. “We spread that revelation yesterday when this young chromatic’s experiments proved her claim,” he added, motioning to the young female.

“Hirrag, obviously, you can’t tell Sessara until she comes back, nor any of the other dragons,” Essan told him. “The humans can *never* know this secret, that the very existence of magic depends on the earth dragons.”

“Which could be why it was turned into a secret in the first place,” the young female chromatic noted. “During the spread of the Catholic church and the threat it posed to magic itself, it might have been a conscious decision by our ancestors to hide the truth. To protect both magic *and* the earth dragons from those trying to destroy it.”

“That does seem logical,” Jussa agreed.

“You know, I just don’t like calling you first of your class,” Geon told her. “I think we need to give you a name.”

“A name is a very personal and private thing, esteemed council member, and I have yet to earn the right to take one.”

“Bull,” Kell snorted. “You solved a millenia-old mystery and about brought this standoff to a conclusion by yourself. If that doesn’t rate a name, nothing does.”

“Amen,” Anthra agreed. “What do you think, young ones?”

“Well, she saved our butts, so let’s call her Jesus,” Kammi grinned, which earned her an elbow from Jirran.

“In a way, she was a field agent entering hostile territory to seek out a truth, braving unknown dangers, so in honor of her having the heart of a

field agent, we will bestow upon her the title of Prism, honorary chromatic field agent and part of our very exclusive little group,” Trekka said lightly.

“Too science-y,” Kammi challenged. “Pris-*ma* is much better.”

“Then Prisma it is,” Anthra smiled. “And feel lucky, young one. If *that* lot thinks you’re one of them, you’re either in august company, or you’re doomed.”

“Hey!” Kammi protested as Geon laughed. “Now come over here and join the most exclusive clique on the island. Without us, the whole place would fall apart!” she declared, then she physically dragged the startled young chromatic right into the middle of the four and hung off her shoulder.

“Jussa, I think we should let the others go back up and report back,” Geon said. “Tell everyone the truth, and tell them what we demand in order to return.”

“Yes, this would be a good time,” he agreed, looking at the female elder chromatic, who was glaring unholy death at the now-titled Prisma. But the younger chromatic just looked her right in the eye, almost defiantly, telling her without words just where she stood in the matter, that she felt her elders were on the wrong side. “Agents, take Prisma here down to the department so she can continue what she was doing for us.”

“And what is that?” the elder chromatic asked flintily.

“Not your concern,” Trekka replied bluntly, which made the elder’s feathery antenna snap like little whips. “Come on, newest field agent, we have work to do,” he grinned at her.

“Ferroth’s gonna love having someone new to boss around,” Jirran laughed as the four young earth drakes herded the chromatic towards the door.

“Then we’re done,” Anthra declared. “Hirrag, Hinado, thank you for coming, and I hope we can get this behind us quickly.”

“We will if I have any say about it,” Hirrag stated, looking the elder chromatic right in the eye, smoke billowing out of his nostrils.

Chapter 16

24 August 2017, 19:58 DMT; The Library of Chroma

“What do you *mean*, you couldn’t find out anything?” the council chromatic flared at his lieutenant. The Council of Seven was meeting in their private council chambers, the library with a library, the Library of Chroma. That a chromatic council chamber would be anything other than a library would be unthinkable.

“They knew what I intended to do, before we even got there,” she replied, almost defiantly. “If I tried to cast any scrying, Hinado would have known, and he’d have had Hirrag *kill* me! He directly threatened me, esteemed council member! And I don’t know about you, but I’m not going to give a fire dragon that kind of chance, he’d have killed me just for the, the *pleasure* of it! Fire dragons are barbarians!”

The council chromatic was inwardly furious. That conference did *not* go the way he’d expected, not one little bit. Not only had there not been any negotiating, just a presentation of demands, now he finds out that his most trusted lieutenant Geleste came back with virtually no intelligence on the earth dragon cave outside of the fact that it was highly organized, extensive in scope, and very large. That it was extensive wasn’t a surprise, because grounders were like bees or ants, possessed of some kind of instinctive ability to build things, especially underground...but it certainly wasn’t a measure of intelligence. But the organization and sheer scope of it, that was a surprise. If she was right, they’d built more than some small cavern with a few rooms, but had built an entire city down there, with multiple levels and massive rooms like the one in which they’d taken her. If it had that kind of size to it, then finding the air vents was *not* going to be easy. They could be *anywhere*, not just immediately on or surrounding the extinct volcano. And

they didn't have to be very large, either. A single paw-wide vent, with proper air circulation, could provide air to a large section of their city.

What concerned him more was that they had *power* down there. That was a far greater indication that they'd been getting more than just help from the water dragons moving in. The water dragons were bringing them supplies, possibly even feeding them where it couldn't be seen, and where the chromatics had no way to stop it. If that was the case, then forcing them out was going to be even more difficult.

"It was truly that large, sister?" one of the Council of Seven asked.

"Immense," she replied, looking to him. "The natural cavern we knew was there is far larger than we believed, because before we could only see its lateral dimensions. The ceiling we saw before was only the second floor, and it had nine floors. And I saw at least sixteen *new* tunnels and ramps leading to other areas than the last time it was scried. The only thing I did manage to find out is that they are deeply entrenched and ready to stay down there for *years*. They have their human electricity going down there, they have automated ventilation, they even had ice cubes in the water I saw in a pitcher on the way up. They are down too deep and too heavily dug in to move a claw unless they feel that they get everything they want."

"Then our only recourse is to *force* them out," the council chromatic stated zealously. "We cannot lose this battle, my brothers and sisters. Our very *existence* as magic-wielding dragons is at stake here. If they win, they'll subvert our proud traditions to *technology*, and that can never be allowed! *Never!* We must find their air vents, as quickly as we can. Time is now our enemy," he bristled. "The other dragons are weak. They'll succumb to fear or to hunger, not understanding that submitting to the grounders will destroy everything that they are. But *we* will not be terrorized! Dandrella, I want you to round up every chromatic youngling and schoolgoer and have them search the earth dragon villages and surrounding tunnels. Make sure all of them have maps and devise a means of keeping them from getting lost. I suspect that they would have made their air vents open into the villages, keeping them out of sight. Golventis, you

lead the search of the volcanoes and lowlands, but take care around the north volcano to prevent the fire dragons from getting violent. Emvrek, you and the rest of the council try to discern just how dependent the grounders are on water dragon support. If we can somehow split them apart, we could force the grounders out without the water dragons aiding them. If anything, make them *dig* their way out if the water dragons won't help them escape. They are as trapped down there as we are unable to reach them if the water dragons abandon them. We should pursue that angle of attack. But our most promising action is to find and block their air vents, and as I said, I suspect that we'll find them down in the abandoned villages."

"But first of her class never found any air vents down there," one of them noted.

"She wasn't *looking* for them either," he replied with a snap. "And about that traitorous youngling, I want her *here*, in front of us, as soon as possible," he declared, slamming his paws down on the table. "She will answer for this treachery, siding with *them*!"

"If only she were old enough for us to have divined her true name, then we could use it to force her obedience," Geleste grunted. "Perhaps we should change our policy to divine the true name before they enter academy, so that *any* chromatic with formal training be firmly under council control."

"A reasonable change we will discuss later, Geleste," the council chromatic agreed.

"But we can't get around one fact, esteemed council member, and that's that it seems that her theory was correct," Golventis said darkly. "If earth dragons are in fact the fountain of magic, then what are we going to do about *that*? They *know* this fact, they know just how important they are to us. Even if we force them out of their hole, what are we going to do when they're up here? If we try to bring them to heel, all they have to do is cry to the other dragons, and they will turn against us. We can't fight *all* of them."

“They can grant us our magic while still chained to their farms,” he replied stiffly, his eyes narrow and burning. “They are *not* that important, Golventis. They are nothing but filthy *grounders*.”

“I think you are losing sight of the important points here, esteemed council member,” a voice called from the door. They all turned to look, and saw that it was their estranged former council member, who had quit the council and returned to the academy. He stormed in as if he’d never left, his antenna twitching. “I think your personal hatred of the grounders is clouding your judgment. And I, for one, am not going to let your bigotry threaten the entire chromatic race.”

“What are *you* doing here?” the council chromatic challenged hotly. “You surrendered any right to stand in this room when you quit yourself of us!”

“I resigned out of protest to bring to your attention the dreadful mistake you were about to make. And it seems that you are still hell-bent to carry through with it,” he replied in a steely tone. “I just had a very enlightening conversation with Jussa of the water dragons. He told me the truth.”

“*What?*”

He nodded. “They’re telling every dragon what they discovered down in the earth dragon city,” he told them. “Even the youngest chromatic hatchling now knows that the earth dragons are absolutely vital to the very essence of who and what we are. And I come in here to discuss this with you and hear you still scheming to enslave them to their farms, totally oblivious to how trying such a thing would permanently destroy everything we chromatics have built here.”

“They had no right to do such a thing without my approval!”

“It seems that the other dragons don’t *care* about your authority anymore, esteemed council chromatic,” the former member said in a blunt tone. “The water dragons especially seem to be moving swiftly to

undermine you. I think they fear that you will try to sabotage any attempt to bargain with the earth dragons and negotiate their peaceful return to the surface. A reasonable suspicion, I see now.”

“How dare you!”

“When my council member teeters on the border of madness, I dare,” he replied in a powerful voice. “Can you not see the truth?” he called to the other members of the council. “If you force the earth dragons out of their city, what will you do when they get up here? They’ll be furious, and I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t feel *safe* anywhere on this island if the earth dragons are on a rampage and the other dragons won’t dare try to stop them for fear of somehow damaging magic!” he declared. “They proved pretty damn effectively with the food stores that *anything* that rests upon the ground is within their reach, and that means that the lot of us would be spending the rest of our lives hovering out of spike range! This is *not* a situation we can approach with a strong paw! We must negotiate, try to minimize the damage the earth dragons may inflict with their technology with agreements and treaties. From the sound of the demands they made, they aren’t unreasonable. They could have demanded a whole lot more, but they did not. We might reach a bargain with them.”

“We will *never* capitulate to *them*!” the council chromatic screamed.

“Why? Because we are chromatics, or because they’re earth dragons?” he retorted.

“Both!” Geleste snapped.

“You once remarked that we should let the earth dragons die rather than bargain with them, Geleste. I wonder, do you have that same opinion *now*, knowing that to do so would mean you never fly again?” he asked darkly.

“And you, what of you, brother, who turned your back on us and everything we stood for rather than have the courage to do what had to be done?” one of them called.

“I never knew that we stood for torture and *murder*,” he shot back in a hiss, his eyes narrowing and flaring with white light. “Gaia dictated to us to watch over and guide the other dragons, *not* kill them off to maintain our own rule. Gaia didn’t have to punish us for our folly, for we have done that on our own far more effectively than anything she could have devised!” he declared. “If we are to maintain our position of rule so that we might carry out Gaia’s wishes, we will *not* accomplish that by taking the stance of the stubborn fool! Sometimes, a wise ruler knows when to allow things to bend, to prevent them from breaking!”

“Remove yourself from this august library, *professor*,” the council chromatic said icily. “You have no right to be here!”

“A point of debate we will hold at a later time, Vindrox,” he said darkly. He turned to the side and marched towards the passageway separating the Library of Chroma from the Library of Eternity.

“How dare you address me as an *equal*!” the council chromatic shrieked, almost jumping up on the table. “And I told you to leave this place! You are no longer welcome here!”

“You are not my equal, and not even you can deny me my right to consult with the most wise. It is a right afforded to all Academy professors,” he said tersely without turning around, then he passed through the open doorway and into the passage without another word.

“Then you will not *be* an Academy professor by the end of this day,” the council chromatic said in an evil hiss as he settled back down. “Jenvem, I want you to put a muzzle on Jussa and the stories he’s spreading, and spread a different story that directly counters Jussa’s claims,” he said angrily. “We cannot let the water dragons undermine the authority of the chromatics, and keeping those things from being believed are of the utmost priority. If nobody believes the grounders when they cry to the other dragons over the rightful penance we force upon them, then we have nothing to fear. Let our own version of the truth be the only truth spread across this island,” he declared, then he slapped his paws on the table. “We

have our things to do, my brothers and sisters. Let's carry them out," he declared, passing a steely stare around the table.

Jenvem, youngest of them and the chromatic that had replaced the traitorous professor, nodded soberly.

As the others filed out to do their work, the council chromatic padded down the passage leading into the offices, turned, then went down a ramp to the lower level. That level only held one thing, the Vault of Names. That hidden chamber held the books of dissertation of all chromatics, and appended to each of them was the written true name of the chromatic. Had that treacherous youngling had her true name divined, they could bring her to heel *instantly* by using her true name to force her obedience, but their oversight that a chromatic so young could not possibly be any sort of challenging problem had cause them to not have that powerful hold over her now, which allowed her to run wild...an oversight they certainly needed to rectify. But he wasn't down there to seek the true name of a youngling, he was there to retrieve the book of dissertation of his former council member and friend, Trejem. He was a threat to the council chromatic's authority, and at this time, he could not afford someone with as much social and political power as *him* running around unchecked. Not only would using the true name against him squelch any attempt by their former brother to dissuade the council from its rightful action, it would punish him for defying the will of the Council of Seven, and far more importantly, the council chromatic himself. He wanted that traitor to suffer for his defiance!

The council chromatic filed through the hallway and down the ramp to the lower chamber of their library, to the ornate door known as the vault, or the Vault of Names. The magic that had once sealed the vault door against all intrusion had failed along with all other magical objects on the island, so it only took a pull on the door to open it—

And he gasped in shock.

There was nothing but row after row of empty shelves.

The books were *gone*.

“Were you looking for something, brother? Perhaps my book of dissertation?” Trejem called lightly from the hallway. He whirled around and gaped at him, where he and a single sage were by the ramp, him sitting on his haunches and her standing just behind him.

“The books of dissertation have been placed with the sages for safe keeping, since the magic that protected them from theft has gone dormant,” the wizened female sage said dryly. “Be assured that they are hidden most cleverly and well, and are completely safe,” she told them, then she turned around. “The use of a true name against its owner is the most dire of last resorts. For shame,” she said as she went up the ramp.

“It’s quite fortunate that the sages considered the vulnerability of those dangerous books and took steps to protect them,” the professor said with an acidic smile. “The sages are now watching you, Vendrox,” he added in a ominous tone. “If you continue this path of insanity and act against the interests of all dragonkind just to pursue your own personal vendetta of hatred and prejudice, they will know. And no matter what you think, *you* are not the ultimate authority on this island. The sages can take you right off the podium they put you on. You hold your position by *their* blessing. Don’t *ever* forget that,” he said in a flat voice, then he turned and hurried up the ramp after the sage.

The council chromatic watched him go, livid fury popping bright lights behind his eyes. It was even more infuriating in that he was *right*. If the sages turned against him, then they could remove him as the council chromatic.

Well...he might have to do something about that, he supposed as he closed the vault door with an aggressive shove.

25 August 2017, 10:27 DMT; Sanctuary City

Prisma was almost *obnoxiously* persistent.

Because she was in personal danger of retribution from the chromatic elders, they'd allowed her to stay in the city, placing her in the department and under Ferroth's direct supervision. Ferroth had arranged that, to keep an eye on her the way he kept an eye on everything; Ferroth was a big fan of that human adage *keep your friends close and your enemies closer*. Ferroth still didn't *entirely* trust the very young chromatic, but Kell could tell that she was growing on him.

For one, they could understand her desire to be there. Down here, in the city, she was *respected*. Chromatics considered dragons her age to be little more than bugs, the lesser educated, lesser important physical offspring that wouldn't matter until they were old enough to be taken seriously. But earth dragons were a bit more accepting of the young, a change of culture mainly caused by the field agent program which *required* that its operatives be very young, and their success had changed some earth dragon concepts about the capability of youth. In the city, the earth dragons respected her for her discoveries, and took her seriously despite the fact that she was, like the field agents, barely an adult. Down here, council members sought her advice and she moved in the highest circles of social and political power, and she was chromatic enough to relish that position of importance. Down here, she *mattered*. Up there, she was just a librarian and a student, and no matter how admirably she performed, she would never be given the respect she was due.

Since the field agents had more or less adopted her as a mascot, she'd spent much of her time in their office the day before as they waited for word from above. She showed curiosity about the internet and computers, how the earth dragons could keep eyes out over so much of the human world, and had seemed mystified at the concept of a computer network with global connectivity, where a drake sitting at a terminal in the office could watch humans walking down the streets via street cameras in Tokyo, or play a game of chess with someone in Romania, or access virtually any book ever written and read the opinions of politicians and the news from the smallest village in Holland. The chromatics actively segregated themselves from technology and kept their youngers intentionally ignorant of its

applications, so the power and potential of the internet was something new and exciting to her, and something that seemed almost magical in its possibilities. That Kell could press buttons on his keyboard on the island and make a traffic light change in Poughkeepsie as a result was truly amazing to her.

But, while she was mystified by technology, she had her own agenda, which was the further seeking of the truth. She had discovered a portion of that truth, that the earth dragons were the source of magic, but there was a second part to the mysteries she sought to uncover, and that was a matter of history. She described the earth dragons of old to them, that they were radically different from modern earth dragons in culture and society, and she sought to understand when that change occurred, how it happened, and most importantly, why it happened. She had this idea that earth dragon history might answer her questions, so she'd been running around interviewing earth dragons, looking for a sage or historian that might have information the chromatics lacked, which would tie all the strings together and let her view the tapestry as a whole.

And that was where she was irritatingly persistent. After learning that Jengo was the oldest earth dragon, she dragged Kammi off to talk to him, since they wouldn't let her go anywhere alone quite yet. It left Kell with a few moments of peace to monitor their updated program, which really could be called a program rather than a virus or worm, since they now had access to all the receiver sites. They just pushed out the program to update to their servers, it updated the rendering software, and that was that. The new program only hid their island, but it was also programmed to take notice of any dragon shape, like a sky dragon cruising in the stratosphere on the lookout for ships or planes, and hide the dragon as well. It was a much more focused and reliable fix, and now that it was up and running, they only had to worry about the CIA and their untouchable satellite system.

And they knew about the island. Jenny had admitted as much last night when he called her. They had detailed images of their island, as in zooming all the way down to where they could see the scales on a dragon's back, and

Jenny had told him that the CIA had told President Walker and showed him the pictures.

But they knew that was coming, so there was no help for it.

However, their action did give him something of an idea. Now *he* was watching the island, currently using a Google Space civilian imaging satellite, watching a meeting on Council Aerie and several other activities. He'd set every satellite imaging site receiver to mirror all raw data to the department, and *their* rendering software wasn't programmed to hide things. The chromatics probably had no clue that Kell could watch everything going on up there via satellite surveillance...and from the looks of things, the chromatics were not taking the revelation well. They were flying all over up there, even the younglings and hatchlings, swarming around the island...almost as if they were looking for something. There were some six chromatics on Council Aerie along with a gathering of other dragons, no doubt discussing the earth dragon demands.

Or, more to the point, delaying the inevitable. The earth dragons had them by their tails, and no matter how much they couldn't stand that idea, there was no denying it. Prisma had calculated that if the earth dragons stayed underground, then the sky dragons would start losing their ability to fly in 67 days. Sky dragons had the most powerful flying magic, and as such, theirs would start to fail first. Some 12 days after that, chromatics would be grounded, then fire dragons four days later, then finally water dragons two days after that. By that point, all magic would cease, which would leave the magical dragons with no magic, no flight, and no breath weapons. They would be more or less defenseless, unable to gather food, and those stuck on the high slopes would be facing a nervous glide down.

So, they had 67 days to accede to the inevitable and give the earth dragons what they wanted. 31 November was their day of reckoning, to use a human idiom, when the first of the dragons would lose their ability to fly. That would no doubt cause untold panic up top, and a swift end to the standoff would ensue. It was one thing to stubbornly deny the truth, but it

was another to see sky dragons falling out of the sky, their flying magic stripped from them.

It was the damned fluffies, he knew it. They were rejecting the demands, knowing that the earth dragons wouldn't come out until *all* the dragon races agreed to them. They were stalling, delaying the inevitable... for what? What purpose did it serve them? And just what were they scrambling around like mad searching for? The chromatics had already explored the villages...Gaia's claws, they even knew where the city was. So what could they possibly be searching for?

That they *were* stalling wasn't entirely a surprise to him. For the arrogant fluffies, arrogant to the point of narcissistic, to be forced to accede to earth dragon demands would be akin to them having to give humans rides on their backs for the rest of eternity. Not two months ago, they'd tried to *enslave* the entire earth dragon race, and now the race they thought was so far beneath them that they should be serfs, thralls to their chromatic overlords, held every advantage. The tables had been turned, and now it was the earth dragons that had control of the game. Chromatics would see that as the ultimate insult, and many of them would fight to the bitter end before finally giving in, unable in their blind arrogance to give an inch until someone came along and clubbed them in the side of the head.

And the club was being readied. Hirrag had called Sessara and the fire dragons on Hawaii back. Sessara had delayed the return for seven days, to give them time to have a pre-arranged meeting with President Walker. But, when Walker left Hawaii, the fire dragons would return to the island. Hirrag wanted *all* the fire dragons here, he wanted their numbers at his disposal if it came down to them having to beat the chromatics into submission. The chromatics were stalling out of sheer contrariness, and Hirrag intended to smack it out of them if he had to.

Good old Hirrag. Kell was starting to admire that monster of a fire dragon.

But, he had other work to do than watch the chromatics. He focused his attention back on the other window on his display, the window holding a unix prompt, then tapped out a series of commands in modified mandarin, a phonetic base they used in computers mainly to make it a little easier to type. This particular computer was a server of a Hong Kong investment bank which was a well-known front for a government-sponsored hacking ring. They had issues with this particular group from time to time, lurking around their shadowed gateway into the internet, trying to crack earth dragon security and get access to the island. Their hackers didn't know what was behind the ghost network's front door, but they'd discovered that the door was there. And hackers being hackers, they wanted to see what was behind it. No doubt they thought they'd stumbled across the mythical Skunkworks system, a legend of sorts among hackers as a system that did not exist except for those who already knew where it was. It was believed that it was the gateway into the servers holding the data of the Skunkworks, also known as Area 51, where the United States tested their most top-secret experimental vehicles and systems. That was the ultimate prize for the Chinese, who used their hacking ring to steal any technology they could get their hands on. And to get into the servers holding the data on America's experimental next-generation technology, it was worth the millions of dollars they spent on their hackers and equipment.

Kell almost didn't have the heart to tell them that Area 51 was a cold system. They'd isolated it from the internet way back in 2007, when the Chinese managed to hack a Navy high-security computer network. From that point on, America kept its most sensitive information on computers in no way connected to the internet.

What they'd found was the earth dragons' gateway into the internet, and since they'd been much more active than usual trying to crack the first line of defense, enough to put up the warning flag...that meant that it was time for the usual counterstroke, and the reason the Chinese government had to spend millions on training and equipment. The Chinese were very good when it came to computers. They were well trained, had good gear, and were usually on the cutting edge of the hacking bell curve. They were

so good that the earth dragons just let *them* do some of the hacking, then plundered the data from their own servers once they got it, letting the Hunters and the Americans come down on the Chinese instead of them. But, when they got a little too full of themselves and tried to break into the island, the earth dragons took steps.

Before, that usually meant a personal visit from Kell. Kell was the drake that usually went to China because he spoke Mandarin, and on more than one occasion, he'd been sent there to eliminate a hacker that was just *too* good. He'd been dispatched to China to kill a hacker four separate times, and while he'd found it very distasteful, the protection of the island trumped his personal feelings. He'd also invaded Chinese systems from on site, allowing him to bypass a great deal of computer security, installing many of his back doors through the Chinese computer networks. It was those back doors that were useful to him now, letting him jump right into the main cluster of servers holding most of the data and instructions given to the hackers. The Chinese government was too paranoid of American intelligence to have any kind of physical contact with their hacking ring, maintaining "plausible deniability," but their internet messages couched in what seemed were innocuous social emails had been cracked long ago by the department. It was a rather ingenious code they used, instructions spread through a series of emails sent to different accounts at different times, sent from all over the world to accounts all over the world, in multiple languages.

It was quite devious, how they did it.

But, they were snooping around again, so it was time for one of those messy object lessons the department occasionally had to dish out. Before this chaos started, this kind of object lesson would have been delivered personally, in the form of a "catastrophic electrical failure leading to fire," but since he couldn't torch their server rooms like he used to, he had to do it this way, logging in as root and all the powers and shenanigans such a position entailed.

In a swift series of commands, Kell dumped a copy of their server cluster to a floating cloud server for future analysis, then he nuked every computer in their *building* through access to that server cluster. That building happened to be a medium-sized investment bank that specialized in stock transactions, Hang Seng Securities, named after their stock market, but that's what a company got when it fronted a secret government hacking ring. Using a specialized program, Kell jacked the physical hard drives that provided storage for the servers. Digital storage provided by flash and other forms of rewritable chip-based memory was burned out by electrical surge, while the older magnetic wafer drives were physically broken after Kell zeroed them out, breaking the data reading armatures then burning out the motors. As a last act, they burned out the CPUs. This was common procedure, not just stealing their data, but ruining the computers that had been storing it and forcing them to replace their hardware before they restored what Kell stole and destroyed using cold storage backups, backups Kell could do nothing about. The time it took them to replace their hardware and then restore from backups and try to figure out what was lost between the last backup and the failure, then realizing that they'd been attacked, and the majority of the time the attacker was someone who invaded the server room and torched it, usually made them lay low for a few months.

Kell had no doubt that the Chinese cyber espionage people just *hated* him.

And Hang Seng Securities was blasted back into the stone age, just like that.

He mopped up, covering his tracks, then updated the task log to mark that bit of business off the queue. He sat fully erect and sighed, thumping his tail on the floor a couple of times...and he had to resist looking back. All his red spikes had fallen out, and now clear spikes were budding in their places. Give it a week or so, and he'd have a full tail of clear spikes. Them, and his crystalline horns which were becoming more and more common as earth dragons took their turns down in the practice gym, as it was being called, were becoming less obvious when he walked out in the common

areas. More than half of the earth dragons now had crystal horns, and like him, they were shedding their red spikes for clear ones. One couldn't walk a passageway without seeing a few red spikes laying in the corners, waiting for the custodians to come along and sweep them up. A glance over at Jirran showed his brand new shiny crystal horns, and Trekka had the same, having just got them that morning, with a couple of tiny pieces of black horn covering still sticking to the bases. He'd been scheduled for training today, but Trekka being Trekka, he figured it out within two hours and was sent back to his job.

Kammi and Prisma filed back into the office, deep in discussion. Kammi had taken an instant liking to the chromatic, and Prisma seemed content to let Kammi hang around her. Prisma was describing chromatic outlook to Kammi, how the entire life of a chromatic revolved around magic, in every aspect and regard. All chromatrics were what one might call professional magicians, where the entire focus of a chromatic's life was the study and advancement of magic. "That was why the chromatic elders felt so threatened by your technology," she told Kammi as they went to Kammi's desk, which was beside his. "Fire dragons especially seem enthralled by technological toys you provide, and were actively shirking magical training. That caused so much alarm that they must have devised their plot to destroy your technology and return the island to nothing but magic."

"Well, I could see that, I guess," Kammi said as she reared up to a vertical base at her terminal, and Prisma sat on her haunches between Kammi and Kell, her back mostly to him. "We certainly knew they had it all planned out. From the day Kell was discovered, they moved quickly and surely. But it's nice to know what set it all off."

"That must be why the chromatrics are stalling now," Jirran mused, looking over to them. "They fear what will happen if the earth dragons can just set up any technology they please without council oversight."

"They're definitely stalling," Kell nodded. "And they're all out there looking for something. I mean, come take a look. Prisma, maybe you can

figure out what they're doing," he noted. "You're a chromatic."

She turned and looked at his monitor, and he switched windows. She studied them for a moment, then shook her head. "I'm not sure. But they *are* searching for something. And they have the entire chromatic race out doing it, even the hatchlings," she said, pointing at a cluster of five very young juveniles, what a human would consider a seven year old. "This is one of the Council of Seven here, watching over them," she added, tapping the screen over a fairly sleek female. "How are you getting this picture?"

"Satellite," he replied with a chuckle. "There's one directly over the island right now."

"Ah, those cameras all the way up in space."

"Yep," Kammi said, nudging her. "I think you need to watch them for a bit, Prisma, see if you can figure out what they're looking for."

"I can do that. Can you put this picture up on another, uh, monitor?"

"Easily," Kell replied, pointing at Girk's terminal; Girk was down learning how to use his breath weapon. "I'll put it up over on that one."

She nodded and ambled over, sat on her haunches, and Kell accessed Girk's terminal and mirrored it over to it. "You can move the camera using the arrow keys on the keyboard," he told her.

"Which?"

"These right here," Kammi said after she came over and pointed.

"Ah. Yes, the ones with arrows on them, however could I have missed it," she said dryly, which made Kammi laugh.

"We'll train you up on basic computer literacy yet," she grinned.

"I was pondering such a thing," she told them, her eyes on the monitor. "If the internetwork has on it every book ever written waiting my command to bring them forth, how hard would it be to put our magical tomes inside

the computer? To be able to peruse any book at any library from one place, it is almost a dream for a chromatic,” she mused.

“Ridiculously easy,” Trekka replied. “But the chromatics won’t even let us *in* their libraries, and we’d need to scan in the books.”

“How long would it take?”

“Given how many books the chromatics have, maybe a year or so,” Trekka replied.

“Would we still have the books afterward? Does this *scan in* require your computer to consume them in some fashion?”

Kammi laughed brightly. “No, it just makes a copy,” she replied. “What we’d do is take a picture of the page, and the computer would read the writing and transcribe it into a text file. Just leaf through the book page by page, let the computer compile the book as a file, then save it and start over with a new one. We could scan maybe one book every four or five minutes.”

“And with the average library holding some twenty thousand tomes, yes, it would take a year or two,” she agreed. “Would you do such a thing for us?”

“Well, I guess so,” Kammi shrugged. “I mean, once all this is over, the idea will be to bury the grudges and move on. So I think they’d let us, as long as the chromatics let us.”

“Well, I speak for myself,” she replied. “I would like one of these computers in my den, and my private library put inside it so I might read them.”

“You want it? You got it,” Kammi told her grandly. “We can come up and deck you out no problem. We’ll even set you up with internet access so you can read human books and play chess with the humans on the gaming sites.”

“They’re very bad at it,” Trekka chuckled.

“And could I take a camera into a public library and take pictures of its pages, then take it home and put it into my own computer?”

“Sure,” Kell said. “We could set something like that up for you. A tablet with a built-in camera could do that easy.”

“Hmm. I find it odd that my elders would fear something that seems... *useful*,” she pondered. “I could see this aiding in our study of magic. It would streamline the libraries, give chromatics better and more effective access to the tomes they must study, even allow us to read and review theories and participate in debates we often miss because we are not there when they occur. I can easily see how this will advance my own studies.”

“It’s *not* magic, that’s why they fear it,” Kell replied.

She looked at him, then nodded sagely.

Ferroth stumped out after about an hour of Prisma studying the chromatic activity and went right over to her. Prisma was a petite chromatic as they measured things, which made her noticeably bigger than all the field agents and just *slightly* smaller than Ferroth, who was a fairly large earth drake. “Chief,” she said with a nod as he approached her.

“What are you up to?”

“They tasked me to watch the chromatics and endeavor to determine what they search for,” she replied, her feathery antenna flicking towards the monitor.

“Smart,” he grunted. “Anthra wanted me to remind you that they want to speak with you at one,” he told her.

“I remember, and I will be there,” she replied. “Will the water dragons be there?”

“Most likely,” he replied. “They’ll probably be asking you about that,” he added, pointing at the monitor.

“Any word from up there about our demands?” Kammi asked.

“Just what we already know, that the chromatics are resisting. The excuses they give in councils are utterly ludicrous. And they’re about to get the others very angry with them. Hirrag has all but threatened to declare war on them once the other fire dragons come back. If even the fire dragons can see that the chromatics are stalling, they’re being blatant about it.”

“It just works in our favor,” Kammi shrugged.

“No, it doesn’t,” Ferroth replied with a grunt, to which Prisma nodded. “If the other dragons are at each other’s throats, it’ll make it that much harder for *us*. If Hirrag loses his temper and goes after the chromatics, they’ll be too busy fighting with each other to vote on the demands. I’m almost ready to think that the chromatics are inciting it just so they can prevent the other dragons from accepting our demands.”

“But that’s kinda dumb, if you don’t mind my pointing it out, chief,” Trekka noted.

“Not from the mindset of the Council of Seven,” Prisma said darkly. “If their ultimate objective is to prevent technology from being returned to the island, then engaging in a war with the fire dragons accomplishes that goal. It is somewhat extreme, but at this point they have few options. They very well may be willing to shatter the island in order to prevent what they see as the destruction of the core of draconic society. Better the dragons be at war with themselves than to allow technology to supplant magic, for it at least preserves magical traditions.”

“That would be the last resort, because in about two months, there won’t *be* any magic up there,” Ferroth grunted. “And the fire dragons will run roughshod all over them.”

“At that point, the Council of Seven will no doubt face their own reckoning,” Prisma mused. “They are *not* the final voice in our society, chief, the sages are. If the sages are angry with them, they’ll dismiss the entire council and place new chromatics in their stead, ones that are not quite so intractable. The sages care only about magic, and if there *is* no

magic and the Council of Seven is the cause, they will move swiftly to correct the problem.”

“Why don’t they do it now?” Jirran asked.

“Because tradition and custom places the sages outside the structure of politics,” she replied. “And they probably do not even pay attention to what the council does. They free themselves of such concerns to focus purely on the studies of magic. Most of the time, they barely even take note of anything outside of the Library of Eternity.”

“But, if something really big happens, they set that neutrality aside and take steps.”

She nodded. “They now know that earth dragons are critical to magic. And if they know that the council is the sole reason things get so dire, that it is their refusal to accept your demands that drains magic out of the world, they will most definitely take steps.”

“And the council knows this?” Ferroth asked.

“Of course they do.”

“Yet they’re going right ahead with it.”

Prisma looked steadily at Ferroth. “You believe they think they can prevent the sages from interfering?”

“I think they very well may,” he replied. “And that means we’d better warn them. Do you think that the council would take it that far?”

“I would like to believe they would not, but after what they did to *you*, and what they do *now*, I cannot say that with complete confidence,” she said with a frown. “But what they do now, it is not rational. They should be discussing the terms of your demands, not rejecting them outright and moving so quickly with whatever it is they do. They must believe they can somehow thwart your plans, and part of that means that they must have a contingency in case the sages take action in the matter. Chromatics do not do *anything* without a plan.”

“We’ll agree on that one,” Ferroth said. “I think we’d better to have a chat with Anthra and Geon, Prisma.”

“I am at your service, chief,” she replied, turning as she dropped back down to all fours.

The two of them filed out, leaving the four drakes to look at each other. “Wow,” Kammi finally said. “Now I’ve heard everything. The fluffies will turn on each other to get their own way.”

“How is that a surprise?” Jirran asked. “But if the sages see it coming, there’s little the council can do about it.”

Sella came with Jussa and Essan when they arrived for their conference, and she stayed with them in the office, chatting amiably with them. Sella knew all the field agents very well, having worked in the department for several years, discussing what was going on up top while the agents went about the work on the queue, mostly checking intelligence networks for information as Girk went over State Department communications. They were keeping abreast of what was going on over on Hawaii, and that had been promising. The Americans were going out of their way to accommodate the fire dragons, even to the point of running resistance against the Chinese. The Chinese were *majorly* hot to get contact with the fire dragons on the island, to the point of threatening sanctions against American trade, which seemed a bit strange to the other field agents, but not to Kell. Kell understood the Chinese a bit better due to his exposure to them. Dragons were from their oldest legend, mainly the sky dragons, and to have one of their most ancient legends come to life, it motivated them to find out just how much of the legend was true, and how much was just myth. Chinese mythology was kindly to the dragons, considering them messengers of the Celestial Bureaucracy, who aided mankind.

It was a bit strange, though, when Anthra and Geon came into the office after their meeting, and they came over to where Kell, Kammi, and Sella were talking while the two earth drakes did their work. “Kell,” Anthra called.

“What is it, esteemed council member?”

“The dragon’s council has been considering a few things, and we believe that it’s time for at least *one* of us to go outside,” she began. “Hinado asked that a fluent English speaker be present at the meeting between the fire dragons and the President, but more than that, he thought it might be prudent for all five races to represent themselves and hold council with President Walker. They asked if you would be interested in the job as translator, escorting Geon. Geon has decided to go.”

“Swim to Hawaii?” he asked, and Anthra nodded. “Is that entirely safe?”

“It should be safe enough,” Geon replied. “Hirrag and Hinado both are going, and both have made it clear through Jussa that they’ll protect us. Hirrag sent the order to Sessara right in front of Jussa that the earth dragons that come are to be defended by the fire dragons on the volcano as if we were their own hatchlings. Hirrag *personally* vowed to keep us safe, and that’s no dragon any other sane dragon wants to cross.”

“And thus the cycle comes full circle,” Prisma mused. “You were protected by us that way before, and now, you will be again.”

“The chromatics don’t even know about this venture, and neither do the sky dragons,” Anthra added. “The only sky dragon that knows of this is Hinado, and him, we can invest with at least some trust. He was against what they did to us, and wasn’t here when the sky dragons attacked our holdings.”

“Who else is going to be there?”

“Hinado, Jussa, and Prisma,” she replied, glancing back to where the chromatic was entering with Ferroth. “Not that Prisma can speak for the chromatics, but it was decided that she’s the only chromatic we can really trust to stand before the humans. She speaks no English, so she can just stand there. She’ll just be, what is that term you use...window dressed?”

“Window dressing, human slang,” Kell chuckled.

“Hinado was exiled when the other sky dragons attacked, so I trust him enough to carry me to Hawaii,” Geon spoke up. “He’s agreed to do it, but he can only carry one of us. Since you’re such a strong swimmer, we thought you could swim to Hawaii...because we’re sure as Gaia’s grace not going to trust *any* other sky dragon,” he said, to which Kammi nodded vigorously.

“Surrall is also going to go, to help you get to the island. Surrall’s experience taking you out on his fishing trips makes him proficient.”

“Not without me, he’s not,” Kammi said immediately. “My intended isn’t going *anywhere* without *me*, not when half the sky dragons up there still want to tear his head off. He needs someone along with him whose sole job is to watch out for him, and I have a vested interest in keeping him alive,” she said dryly, which made the council members chuckle. “And Jussa and Surrall should have another water dragon with them, one that *does* speak English,” she added, glancing at Sella.

“So, what do you say, Kell? Do you feel up to the task?” Geon asked. “It’ll be you, me, and Kammi here representing the honor of the earth dragons among the humans.”

“I’ll agree on one condition,” he replied, turning on his back legs, staying on a vertical base. “Geon does *not* go with Hinado. Just because he didn’t participate doesn’t mean that he *wouldn’t* have. Geon can swim it with us. Surrall knows how to carry along weaker swimmers, and he’ll have two water dragons there to herd him along.”

“Well...alright,” Geon nodded. “I do know how to swim, and I’m in fairly good shape. If you can put up with me dog-paddling all the way to Hawaii, I’ll swim it.”

“It’s pretty cool how he does it,” Kammi chuckled. “You *can* just dog paddle along, but you’re going so fast you have to wear eye shields against the wind.”

“An aura current,” Sella supplied. “A trick we water dragons use to swim long distances quickly. And I can carry you, esteemed council member, so you don’t have to swim at all,” she offered to Geon. “Kammi we *know* can swim the distance, but we don’t know how much swimming you do.”

“Actually, Sella, it might be best to ask your Matriarch along, that way Geon’s not such a burden to you,” Anthra said lightly.

“Your confidence in me is inspiring, Anthra,” Geon said blandly.

“So it is agreed?” Anthra asked.

“Sure, I’ll do it,” Kell replied. “It’ll be nice to get out and about, and I’d like to meet President Walker face to face, and it sounds safe enough.”

“Then you leave tomorrow,” Anthra declared. “That will give you two days to confer with Sessara and prepare. You should contact Jenny and warn her, so she can make arrangements. I don’t think you’ll want to sleep close to the fire dragons, no matter how much they say they’ll protect you,” she said lightly.

“We’ll have time to dig out a one room burrow, the three of us can just sleep there,” Kammi noted.

“Prisma is going with *you*, so she’ll need somewhere to sleep,” Anthra warned. “She’ll fly along above you, part of her task is to watch out for sky dragons that disobey Hinado’s warning not to harass any dragon in the water.”

“We’ll go tonight. Sky dragons can’t see at night, and Prisma can follow us if she stays low enough to see Sella’s glow.”

“That’s a good idea, Kell,” Geon agreed. “Sella, could you find your parents and ask them if they wouldn’t mind going tonight, well, on top of asking Shii if she’d help us?”

“I’ll call them in so you might discuss it with them,” she replied, then she turned and bounded quickly out the door.

“Consider yourselves off the rest of the day, whelps,” Ferroth grunted. “No doubt Geon wants to go over what he expects of you for this expedition, and you’d damn well better protect him. You’ll be Geon’s bodyguards as much as you’ll be translators. We have to look out for each other, especially right now, when half the dragons up there want to flay us.”

“If that’s the case, then *all* of us should be going,” Trekka declared. “We’re *field agents*, chief. And if Geon has five of us with him, he’ll be well protected, on top of us protecting each other.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Geon said. “But it’ll depend on how many of us Surrall and Shii feel comfortable taking. And if any of you can swim,” Geon noted. “I know I can swim.”

“I’m no mud dragon, but I can hold my own,” Girk declared.

“I’m actually a pretty good swimmer,” Jirran answered.

After Shii and Surrall arrived, they decided that only one of the other field agents would go, to minimize the exertion it would put on the water dragons; the larger the aura current, the more energy it took to maintain it. Shii decided to take the three of them down to the tank and test their swimming skills, wanting the strongest swimmer of the three along to further minimize the risk. Jirran won that little competition, proving that he really was a good swimmer, so he was added to the conference Geon held. Geon went over his plans for the conference, to confer with the President along with the other dragons, but Geon wanted to try to arrange some potential trade avenues so the earth dragons could get the claws on some steel they didn’t have to ask the water dragons to salvage off the ocean floor. And in trade for that steel, Geon fully intended to hire the department out as a consulting firm. After all, few knew computers the way the department did. There were also some other possible trade options outside of hiring out their services, like earth dragon sculpture. Earth dragons could carve precise shapes out of rock or metal using nothing but their claws, and it was something of a universal skill. Some were better than others, but any earth dragon could pick up a rock and whittle it down to a perfect cube. If

anything, earth dragons could open up a machining corporation, crafting metal tools and parts to spec. Geon had multiple ideas for trade, offering them up to the three field agents, who had experience with humans, looking for options that would let them bring in raw materials in adequate supply for their plans. They had to rebuild the power plant and two factories, and that was going to take some steel and other hard to get materials, like aluminum, copper, nickel, and tungsten.

Shii and Surrall had to cluck a little bit at Kell over his horns, Shii scraping her claws over them with a chuckle as she held him still with her paw on his shoulders. "You look a bit silly with these, young one," she teased.

"Get used to them, Shii, we all have them now, even the hatchlings," Kell told her as the larger water drake fussed with them.

"Oh, I know, I've seen them. Kav is strutting around like the deepest diver," she replied lightly. "But they still look silly."

"I like them like this," Kammi declared, reaching up and touching her own horn at the base.

"Now that all the boring lectures and talking is over, get some sleep, young ones," Surrall warned. "It's several hours to Hawaii, and we'll be swimming it in the dark. Even dark for you earth dragons, since the water blinds your thermo."

"There's a full moon tonight, that should help some," Jirran noted.

"That's more than enough light for me to see you," Prisma stated. "Chromatic eyes are much more sensitive to light than sky dragons."

"We need to warn Jenny, we haven't done that yet," Kell said. "I'll go take care of that."

He went back down to his terminal and used his emulator program to call Jenny's cell. She answered on the first ring. "I think I know who this is," she answered lightly.

“That ‘number not found’ on the caller ID does give me away,” Kell replied lightly, which made her laugh. “How are you doing?”

“Busy right now,” she replied. “Everyone’s running around like crazy getting ready for the President.”

“Well, it just got more complicated,” he told her. “The dragons here decided we can’t let an opportunity like this pass by, so members of the other races are coming to the volcano,” he told her. “And some of us will be there in the morning.”

“Really? Who? How many?”

“Um, well, Hinado’s going to attend the conference, but he’s not coming with the rest of us. Outside of him, one chromatic, Jussa, Shii, Surral, and Sella, and four earth dragons,” he answered. “Geon, our council member, me, Kammi, and Jirran, one of the other field agents.”

“Hinado comes every day to teach us magic,” Jenny told him. “So I don’t think we have to make any preparations for him. But what about everyone else?”

“Just the chromatic,” he answered. “The water dragons will stay in the ocean, and we’ll just dig a burrow for ourselves somewhere close to the peak. The chromatic will need a covered place to sleep. It doesn’t have to be underground, but it does need to be enclosed.”

“We can put up one of those temporary steel buildings,” she offered. “The Air Force has these portable hangars they can erect in about six hours, they use them to cover fighter planes at forward airstrips.”

“That’ll work,” he replied. “We’ll just need some food and water while we’re there, and that’s the most we’ll burden you.”

“We can manage that. I’m surprised they’re letting you earth dragons out,” she told him. “Isn’t it still dangerous?”

“Yeah, but this is too good of an opportunity to pass up. And that’s also why there’s four of us coming, so we can watch out for each other,” he

noted dryly.

“And you’re okay staying for a few days that close to the fire dragons?”

“After we spike a few of them, the rest of them will learn to leave us alone,” he said blandly, which made her chuckle despite herself.

“Don’t you come up here and cause any trouble, Kell, we have things running pretty smoothly,” she said in a teasing voice. “For as long as it lasts. Sessara told us yesterday that the fire dragons are going to leave.”

“Right after the conference,” Kell affirmed. “Things are settling down on the island, friend. Within two months, everything should be worked out and the earth dragons back on the surface. Hirrag’s recalling Sessara and the females watching the young because he wants them back here.”

“Things are safe?”

“No, it’s more of a show of force,” he replied dryly. “The chromatics aren’t taking their defeat very graciously...which is the mother of all understatements. The truth is, they’re kicking and screaming and throwing a tantrum on the surface while they scheme and plot like crazy to try to find some way to derail things behind the scenes. Hirrag’s going to bully them into accepting our demands, and he wants the females over there to add to his numbers. That many fire dragons in one place and with one thing on their minds can make any dragon religious.”

Jenny laughed. “They are a bit intimidating.”

“Too bad their brains are half-cooked,” Kell grunted.

She chuckled. “Oh, stop it. I *like* Sessara. She’s not half as bad as you made fire dragons out to be, and way smarter than I ever expected.”

“She’s a council member. Go talk to the other fire dragons there,” he retorted. “Sessara has years of training to keep her temper, and she *has* to be nice to you, you’re feeding her. The average fire dragon is impulsive, aggressive, and volatile.”

“Well, I can’t dispute that,” she admitted. “But they haven’t been bad at all. Just a few spats among the fire dragons is all, outside of that they’ve been very well behaved. And I trust them enough to let Davie play with them,” she told him. “They wouldn’t hurt a hair on his head.”

“You’re braver than I am,” Kell noted. “We should be arriving sometime early tomorrow morning, from the ocean. We’ll come up the lava flows just like last time.”

“I’ll make sure they’re cordoned off for you,” she replied. “I’ll mark off a place you can dig a burrow, out in a corner of the exclusion zone, and we’ll get that hangar up for the chromatic. Oh, and just how did you get a chromatic to agree to this?” she asked lightly.

“This chromatic is on our side,” he answered. “She’s a teenager as humans would mark age, but she’s actually much smarter than chromatics twice her age. She’s the one that found our city for the other chromatics, and while she was hunting for us, she realized that her own race was in the wrong. So she defected.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah. She lives down here with us now, because the other chromatics know that she’s against them, and they want her head like nothing they’ve ever wanted before. Chromatics don’t brook any defiance within their ranks, and she’s defying the hell out of them right now. Even after all this is over, she might be stuck with us just for basic protection. We even gave her a name, Prisma. She doesn’t speak a word of English, and really the only reason she’s going is to make it look like all the races of dragons are participating in the conference, so things don’t look out of sorts because the humans know there are five races. She’s just for show.”

“Well, I think I’d like to meet this rogue chromatic,” Jenny said.

“She’s curious about the human magicians, so I’m sure she’ll want to talk to you.”

“Alright then, let me get this done, Kell. I’m looking forward to seeing you!”

“Oh, I’m fairly sure you’ll be impressed,” he said dryly, touching one of his horns. The horns were still a secret. “I’ll see you tomorrow around sunrise or so.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she replied, and she cut the connection on her end.

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“This is going to be weird, but I’m looking forward to it,” Geon said as they padded down the long main lava tube, heading for the water. “I’ve never seen high order water dragon magic before.”

“You won’t really see this, but you’ll feel it, esteemed council member,” Shii answered.

“I think we can dispense with the titles, Shii,” Geon chuckled. “This is too intimate a happy little group to bother.”

“As you say, Geon,” she replied. “Did daughter Sella explain how it works?”

“She did, Matriarch,” Jirran answered as he padded along just behind Prisma, who looked just a little sleepy. Chromatics actually slept a great deal more than other dragon races. “I’m just not sure what the goggles are for.”

“To protect your eyes from the wind, since you have to breathe,” Surrall answered from the lead position, Kell almost frisking along beside him, happy to be going out with his water dragon neighbors again. He’d honestly missed his swims with Sella and the fishing expeditions with Surrall, the water drake taking him halfway out to the middle of nowhere, hundreds of miles from the nearest spit of rock, and the two of them fishing the open-

ocean schools of fish, like tuna and silverbacks. Though Surrall could use water magic to just net them, he liked to keep in trim doing it the old fashioned way, where Kell and Surrall worked together to keep them balled up the school into a tight bunch, then lanced right through the school, eating anything that couldn't get out of the way. Surrall had taught Kell almost as much about fishing as he'd taught his own hatchlings, and he could tend the kelp beds and herd lobsters just as effectively as Shii could.

He *was* the mud dragon.

"The magic only affects the water, not the air over it," Shii added. "Every time you lift your head up to breathe, you'll do it in the face of a howling gale."

"Alright, I'll remember that," Geon chuckled. "Are you sure you'll have no problems keeping up, Prisma?"

"I'll be fine, honored Geon," she replied calmly. "I can fly much faster than you can swim. I'll be slowing down so I don't leave you behind."

"You'll be fine, young chromatic," Shii told her. "Just keep your magic locked on Sella and let her guide you."

"Oh yeah, magic will work for you," Jirran mused.

"And it will temporarily refresh magic outside as well, since four of you will be going out," she told them. "If my calculations are correct, the four of you being outside for some four or five days will extend the sky dragon's ability to fly by sixty-four days. But we don't have to tell them that," she murmured.

Kammi laughed. "What they don't know benefits us," she grinned. "This is why you fit in with the department so well, Prisma. We think alike."

"In some ways," she admitted. "Secrecy does seem to be the standard for the department."

"It's how we keep everything running," Jirran told her.

“Expect the chief to offer you a position, once he feels you out,” Kell noted. “But that’ll take a while. The chief doesn’t give out his trust easily.”

“What would I do in the department?”

“Thinking up ways we can use both magic and technology together for maximum benefit,” he answered. “They’re *not* mutually exclusive. Magic can boost technology, technology can boost magic, if you do it right.”

“That’s an intriguing idea,” Shii mused. “How so?”

“Well, if Prisma could research some kind of way to use magic to develop an electrical battery that never depletes, just think about it. Magic *can* provide perpetual self-sustaining energy, and we can find ways to harness something that non-magical forms of energy can’t do.”

“You don’t ask me for much, do you Kell?” Prisma laughed.

“Here’s an easier one, Prisma. Do you think you could research a way that magic would turn a crankshaft at a set speed and make it permanent? That crankshaft could be the armature of a generator, and we’d have a magic-driven generator that provides power with no pollution and no mechanical work requirements like steam or running water.”

“That...yes. I could do *that*,” she said, her eyes widening a bit. “A simple motion spell locked to a focus crystal to make it permanent. And I’m still just a student.”

“Then you have an idea of what the chief will be after,” Kell told her, glancing back. “You study magic, then help us figure out ways to use it for our technology, because we trust *you*. You’re right in this with the rest of us.”

“No doubt,” Kammi agreed. “We’ve never had a chromatic around we could trust before. It’s opening up some possibilities.”

“You never came to ask *us* for magic,” Surrall noted lightly.

“To be honest, we avoided magic like claw rot up until now,” Jirran chuckled. “Chief tried to make the department as magic-independent as possible, so we wouldn’t get hamstrung if the magical dragons backed out. But now that we know what we know, well, all of us are starting to think that maybe we shouldn’t be so against magic. I mean, we can’t use it, but it’s *part* of us.”

“A healthy outlook,” Prisma noted. “And perhaps my own race should not be so against technology. In just the short days I have been among you, I have seen how your technology could potentially advance magical study and knowledge. We should harness it as a tool, not fear it as a curse. Magic is also a tool, after all. We are dragons who use different tools separately when those tools could have been used together this whole time.”

“Well, getting an earth dragon and a chromatic in the same place and having them talk civilly to one another doesn’t happen more than once or twice a millennium,” Surrall chuckled. “You two are worse than the earth and fire dragons.”

“At least we understand the fire dragons,” Kammi said, giving Prisma a light look. “But you fluffies are just so *weird*.”

“Fluffy? I find that term somewhat offensive,” Prisma replied.

“Only somewhat? I’m not trying hard enough,” Kammi grinned.

“Oho, so you seek to irk me, do you? Be warned, Kammi, I can be even more irksome.”

“Bring it on, *fluffy*,” Kammi taunted, which made Geon chuckle.

“Let’s not start a new race war here and now,” he said.

“Besides, we’re here,” Surrall stated as the water came into view to the light bobbing over Prisma’s head, high up, almost near the ceiling. “Now comes the fun part. Sella, you carry Prisma. Geon, Jirran, I’ll carry you two. Lifemate, could you get Kammi?”

“I can get out on my own,” Kammi said proudly. “I’ve been practicing.”

“Alright then, we leave it to you, young one,” Surrall said with an approving look. “Are you sure you don’t need a breathing bubble?”

“Nope. Save your magic, Surrall, you’re gonna need it.”

“I’ll take you, Jirran,” Shii declared. “Just grab hold of my tail and I’ll pull you through.”

They let Kell and Kammi go first, since they were going on their own breath and wouldn’t appreciate someone blocking the tunnel when they were desperate for air. Kell had Kammi go first, so he could drag her the rest of the way if her boasting was more than her lungs could handle, but it turned out to be a baseless fear. Kammi had *really* learned how to swim, her wings carrying her up the tunnel with speed and power, using the trick Kell taught her about how the water felt along her wingtips to know if she was drifting off the center. She showed no signs of distress when they came out of the tunnel, even swam out to the cove mouth before surfacing, but when she did, she blasted out the air in her lungs and greedily sucked in fresh air to replace it. “Pretty good,” Kell told her. “But still nowhere near as long as I can hold my breath,” he teased.

“Lick my tail, Kell,” she said sourly, which made him laugh. “Which way?”

“Follow me, the others will catch up,” he replied, angling away from the island and out to sea.

It felt *wonderful* to be outside again. Despite being a subterranean species, knowing that he was outside, that nothing contained him, that the entire world was open to him again, it almost made him a little giddy. He raced away from Kammi with shocking speed, showing her just who the faster swimmer was, easily hitting 55 to 60 knots as he used his wings like water dragons did, letting them push him through the water, almost as if he were flying...the closest he would ever get to flying. He got them a good 10

kilometers out from the island and stopped, treading water as Kammi caught up, a little annoyed. “They’ll meet us here,” he told her.

“Do they even know where we are?”

“They know *exactly* where we are,” he told her calmly.

About ten minutes later, the others caught up, Prisma hovering in the air directly over Sella without using her wings, showing off her powerful floating magic, so powerful that it was almost like sky dragon magic. All three water drakes were using their bioluminescent glow to let the other dragons see them, and Surrall swam up to the front. “Alright, remember, do not stop swimming,” he said, looking back at them. “The aura current will only carry you as long as you make even a feeble attempt to swim forward. That’s how the magic works. If you stop swimming you fall out of it, and it’s a great deal of time and energy for us to turn around to come get you. It doesn’t matter how fast you swim, so don’t exert yourself. As long as you’re just dog-paddling along, you’ll stay within the aura current. Now put on your goggles.” After they did so, Surrall arranged them so Kammi was in the back among the earth dragons and Kell was in front, just beside Surrall. “Alright, here we go. Start swimming, and the aura current will pick you up.”

It worked very well. Prisma flew along right over them, barely exerting herself, flying almost lazily and not overtaking them, low enough to join the conversation as Geon told them all about what he hoped to accomplish, and Prisma discussed some of Kell’s ideas with the group as Kell and Surrall basically caught up; Kell had always admired the rakish water drake, and Surrall and Shii saw Kell as an adopted son.

After about five hours, Kell was a bit startled when a *much* bigger water dragon surfaced almost right beside him, and Kell recognized it as Jussa. Jussa entered Surrall’s aura current without any trouble, the water wyrm almost crowding them a little bit, then he felt the current shudder. “I have it, Surrall, rest now,” he announced; Jussa had taken control of the aura

current. Essan broached the water hard enough to get airborne, and landed within the aura current right beside Geon.

“You’re further along than we expected,” Essan said.

“Surrall is very good at these,” Kell said almost defensively in reply. “Are you going with us?”

“Just taking you, I’ll return home after we see you safely to Hawaii. And yes, it seems that Surrall is much better at magic than we thought.”

“It seems that he is,” Jussa agreed with a nod as Surrall gave Kell a toothy smile.

“How many other water dragons are with us?” Geon asked.

“Ten,” Jussa replied. “And Hinado flies higher above with Hirrag, staying higher so Hirrag doesn’t need to come close to the water. You know how fire dragons feel about the ocean,” he chuckled. “They’ve been tracking you by your glow since you left the island.”

“A sky and fire dragon flying at night? Wow,” Kammi breathed.

“There’s nothing out here for them to run into,” Prisma noted. “I can’t see very well either, but this is open ocean. The moon lets me see the water’s surface. I don’t need to see anything else.”

“Exactly,” Essan agreed, looking up at Prisma. “They are safe enough up there until we reach Hawaii.”

“Which should be just before dawn,” Jussa noted. “We’ll have to guide Hinado down and have him carry Hirrag so they don’t crash into the mountainside.”

Jussa’s estimation was precise. About an hour before dawn, the dark, indistinct shape of the island cut a hole out of the blanket of stars in front of them as they approached it, and Jussa went ahead to guide Hinado and Hirrag down safely. Surrall guided them right to the beach, where Hinado was barely visible floating down with both paws on Hirrag’s back, the

massive fire wyrm staying still so as not to disrupt Hinado's concentration; Hirrag was an awful lot of dragon for Hinado to float. But Hinado got him down safely, Hirrag's taloned paws lightly alighting on a black crust of rock that went right down into the water, rock that cracked a bit under the huge dragon's weight. At a shade over twenty meters long, Hirrag was the largest living dragon, and with that came tons of weight. Kell always felt like a hatchling when standing beside the huge wyrm, who stood at the shoulder as high as a two story building. At a little over two meters high at the shoulder, Kell could almost walk under Hirrag without his wings scraping the fire wyrm's belly. Essan and the other water dragons that had joined them didn't come out, they submerged again after a farewell and headed back for the island.

"Dark," Hirrag noted.

"There's very little population along this stretch of coast, due to the lava flows," Kell answered him. "Do we wait here for sunrise, or start up now?"

"I can make enough light for us all to see by, quite easily," Prisma offered, floating up into the air.

"We don't want to attract too much attention," Jussa warned. "This isn't the island, Prisma, this is human territory."

"Well, there's a bunch of humans out there now," Kammi declared, looking around. "I see about two dozen of them."

"What are they doing?" Hinado asked as he floated just over Hirrag.

"Just standing around."

"Yeah, just standing," Geon agreed.

"That one's talking in a phone, it looks like," Jirran pointed. "They're standing in groups of two or three at regular intervals. I think they're soldiers."

“They are,” Kammi agreed. “I can make out a gun barrel on that one over there. He’s had it shouldered long enough for his body heat to bleed into the metal.”

“Jenny said she’d have the way cleared for us, they may be picket sentries on the lookout for us,” Kell speculated. “Go ahead and light up the area, Prisma, let them know we’re here.”

“Go ahead,” Geon nodded. “The field agents know much more about things like this.”

Prisma wasn’t kidding when she said she could light the way. She was a sudden beacon of bright white light in the air, pure light radiating from her body so strongly that it almost looked like daytime...but then again, she was a chromatic. They were always good at using light magic. That kind of light was certain to attract attention, since she was like a low-hanging white sun in the sky. They only had to wait for about three minutes before a pair of men in BDUs hurried up to the lava flow clearing, waving both arms in their direction. “Come on ahead,” Kell called in English, and they almost jogged up.

“Colonel Williams gave orders to watch for you,” the young man replied. “The way all the way up the lava flows to the top is cordoned off for you.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Kell nodded, then he repeated that to the others. “Just don’t walk *on* the flows, there’s lava under some of them, and they can get very hot,” he warned.

“We’ve been up this way before, just follow us,” Kammi added. “I can see well enough, thanks to our living floodlamp up there,” she chuckled, pointing.

“I knew chromatics could be useful,” Surrall said lightly.

“Are you coming with us this time, Patriarch?” Kell asked.

“We’ve been trading off the burden of the aura current, so none of us is tired enough to need rest,” Jussa told him.

It took them nearly an hour to walk along the gentle slope of the island to the volcano, and then up its rather steep slope. Soldiers were stationed all along the lava flow to keep back any civilians, and there were some out there, since the flashes of cameras blinked in the distance as they padded up. They came up to the fenceline, patrols of soldiers walking along it, but instead of walking around to the gate, Kell and Kammi simply vaulted over it, and the others followed suit, either flying up and over or jumping it. Prisma landed beside Kell as two fire dragons and a small ATV rushed towards them, with Jenny riding on it. Kell laughed as she skidded to a stop in front of them, looking up at them with some surprise. “You’re early! And you could have used the gate, you know, I was waiting there for you!” She gaped at him. “And what happened to your horns?”

“I’ll explain later, and since when does a field agent do what you expect?” Kell replied lightly, reaching out and putting his paw on Jenny’s shoulder. She laughed and threw herself against his shoulder and chest, hugging him as best she could. “It’s good to see you, Jenny,” Kell told her with honest affection.

“Sessara, Gressa, is all well?” Hirrag asked.

“All is well,” Sessara replied with a nod. “Jenny, this Hirrag, this Jussa, this Essan, all council,” she said in accented English. “Earth dragons, Geon and Kell only I know.”

“This is Kammi here,” Jenny chuckled, patting the little earth drake’s shoulder. “How are you, Kammi?”

“Doing fine, Jenny, doing fine. This is Jirran, one of the field agents. You know him as Onyx,”

“So *you’re* Onyx?” she said, grinning at him. “Boy, would a few of us love to rip your scales out one by one!”

Jirran laughed. "I was just doing my job. I was enjoying it, but just doing my job," he replied.

"Welcome to Hawaii, esteemed council member," she said to Geon.

"I speak *some* English," Geon replied in English. "Just not good."

"We'll work around it," she said with a bright smile.

"That's what these troublemakers are for," Geon said in draconic, pointing at Kell, which made Jenny laugh before they could translate for her. She must have *really* improved her draconic...but then again, she had some fifty fire dragons around to teach her.

"Oh my gosh, Sella!" Jenny barked in glee when the three water drakes moved out from around Hirrag. Jenny rushed over and hugged the slightly surprised water drake, who patted her on the shoulder, then she gasped and laughed louder. "Matriarch, Patriarch! I'm surprised to see you here!"

"We helped them get here," Shii said as Surrall patted Jenny on the shoulder. "But we won't be staying for the conference. That is council member duty, not ours."

"We come to see you, Jenny," Surrall said with a smile. "But Sella stay. Translate for Jussa."

"Yeah, I see more than a couple of fluent English speakers in this lot," Jenny noted, looking over her shoulder and smiling at the earth dragons. She looked at Prisma, then walked over to the slightly antsy chromatic, who wasn't quite sure what to do about the overly friendly human. "Prisma, right?" she asked in draconic.

Prisma gave her a surprised look. "You speak draconic?"

"Poorly," she replied with a smile. "We make den for you, for sleeping."

"Thank you," she replied, her feathery antenna bobbing over her eyes, which caught Jenny's attention.

“Please, come, come! Food is waiting, rest and talk. Others want to meet!” Jenny announced, beckoning with her hands as he backed up towards her ATV.

“She’s getting much better,” Kammi noted.

“Sessara must be giving her lessons,” Kell nodded.

“I have,” Sessara affirmed, falling in step beside Hirrag. “How goes things back home? Hirrag has been deliberately vague about many things.”

“We’ll explain it later, Sessara,” Geon answered. “In more intimate surroundings,” he added, nudging his muzzle in Jenny’s direction, which made the fire drake nod.

Jenny had had the humans set up a huge pavilion style tent on the far side of the fenced-in area, which was obviously meant for the dragons to use. It was open-sided, only a roof, but it was the size of a circus tent, so even Hirrag had little trouble getting under it and having room to move around. There were several very sturdy steel tables holding food, almost a banquet, and once she got them in there, she took hold of Kell’s horn and yanked on it. “And how did you get *these*, Kell?” she asked. “I didn’t see *any* earth dragon back on the island with horns like this! And now all four of you show up with them!”

“It’s a long story,” he answered. “I’ll explain it some other time.”

“So, if it’s all four of you, then I take it it’s not *just* the four of you?”

“Astute,” Kammi replied with a smile. “It’s more like *all* of us.”

“I guess living underground agrees with you,” she said lightly.

“You have no idea,” Kammi grinned.

“Now please, get something to eat, I know it had to be a long journey,” Jenny offered. “Kent’s on his way up, and I’m pretty sure the Secret Service advance commander will want to talk to you, get an idea of how this will change his plans.”

“Probably not by much,” Kell replied. “The council members are just here to talk.”

“Well, there’ll be more than dignitaries in here,” she warned. “The President agreed to allow two teams of reporters in here with him, pool reporters, and they might want to interview you. They don’t know that the other dragons are here, it’ll be a surprise for them.”

Jirran translated that for the others as Kell chuckled. “Break earth dragon secrecy? That’s almost sacrilege,” he said lightly.

“We should organize things, now that we’re all here,” Jussa said. “We have four English speakers not counting the fire dragons, each of them should be assigned to a council member for translation. Sella will be my translator.”

“Kell was sent to be mine,” Geon replied.

“I speak fairly decent English, I can translate for my esteemed council members,” Gressa spoke up.

“She has been since we got here, she’s the best English speaker among the fire dragons,” Sessara agreed.

“Be that as it may, a *fluent* speaker might be necessary here. Jirran, you translate for Prisma, but stay close to assist Gressa in translating if she needs it. Gressa will translate as needed, but if she runs into them using very exotic English, help her out a little,” he said delicately, proving he was every bit a politician. He understood that Gressa would be insulted if she was removed from the job she’d been doing, and fire dragons were very touchy when they got insulted. The way Jussa proposed the idea, it let Gressa save face but still put a fluent English speaker with her to help her out.

Gressa nodded. “That’s workable,” she replied.

“I guess you’re stuck with me by default, Hinado,” Kammi said, looking up at the sky drake.

“You’re a field agent, I have no doubt you speak better English than the humans do,” he replied easily.

“While we’re all together, only one translator is needed. Field agents, you were specifically trained to speak English, which among you is the best English speaker?” he asked.

The three field agents looked at each other. “I’d have to say Jirran,” Kammi said.

“I’d agree with that,” Kell nodded.

“Alright, Jirran, congratulations, you are the official group translator,” Jussa noted. “Now that we have that arranged, let’s not leave Jenny in the dark about our intentions,” Jussa said, rearing up and sitting on the base of his tail to take a vertical base. “Sella, if you would please,” he nodded towards her.

“If we already get into the business of council, then we will take our leave,” Surrall called. “We’ll be down in the water close to the shore, esteemed council member. Call us if you need us.”

“I will,” he replied. Surrall and Shii both patted Jenny on the shoulder, then they filed out.

“They’re leaving?” Jenny protested.

“For now,” Sella replied. “They’ll come back and you can talk with them, but for now there is business to discuss, and water dragons do not involve themselves in business that is not theirs,” she said simply.

“Oh, okay,” she answered, taking a seat behind a table. “We should wait for Arlen before we talk business, at the very least.”

Sella translated that, and Jussa nodded. “We can always eat while we wait.”

Arlen arrived some fifteen minutes later, as they were eating, and he wasn’t alone. The general from their first visit, Steele, was with him, as

well as three men in suits, who had to be Secret Service. Arlen immediately came over to Kell and shook hands with him, as it were, staring up at his head. “That’s new,” he noted.

“Yes, that’s new,” Kell chuckled. “How have you been, Mister Secretary?”

“Busy,” he replied. “Quite an august assembly,” he noted, looking around. “Care to introduce us?”

After everyone was introduced, including three members of the advance team for the Secret Service, agents Walderson, Daniels, and Robinson, Jussa outlined what the dragons hoped to accomplish with their conference. “We seek to establish official ties with the humans, mainly through the Americans, though this is by no means an endorsement of your nation or people,” he warned as Jirran translated. “It is simply because Hawaii is the closest populated area to us, and we have certain vested interests in several of your citizens,” he added, looking to Jenny. “As before, and as always, our primary desire and goal is to be left alone. But, since the humans know of us now, we’re willing to open at least distant channels of communication with you. This is one of the things we will discuss with your President. We would also discuss the possibility of very light trade,” he added, glancing at Geon. “We have needs for certain materials that are simply not available on our island. We would reach an agreement for a barter for those goods. Though we have very little to offer, we hope to find a fair trade.”

“What kind of materials?” Arlen asked.

“The earth dragons will need to rebuild when they return, so it is their needs that we must meet,” Jussa answered through Jirran, then looked to Geon.

“Mainly steel,” Geon continued. “But also copper, aluminum, tungsten, heavy industrial piping, some industrial electrical wire, computer fiber optic cable, and some other metals and building materials. Those are our short-term needs.”

“Going optical on the island?” Jenny asked lightly.

“We never had the fiber cabling to go fully optical, may as well if we can barter for it,” Kell shrugged in reply. “Fiber cable wasn’t high on the list of priorities.”

“Why not?”

“It only has one use,” Kammi replied. “At least cat five and six wiring can be recycled for the copper or aluminum, which are always in short supply. A fiber cable’s only good for one thing, and if it goes bad, it’s trash. Remember, we’ve never had any resources, so we’ve always planned everything out to get the most use out of everything we have.”

“Ah, yeah, that makes sense,” she nodded.

“So, that’s basically what we’re here for,” Jussa continued. “Outside of that, this meeting will simply be to meet, meet President Walker and establish those tentative initial relationships that are vital to diplomatic negotiations.”

“You’ll be meeting more than the President,” Arlen warned. “He’s allowing two teams of reporters into the exclusion zone to see inside, and let them observe the dragons. Since they know some of you speak English, they might ask for interviews.”

“I’ve already given orders about these nosy humans,” Sessara injected. “They will not be harmed, and any fire dragon that gets annoyed by them is to retreat to the lava pools. They can’t follow us *there*,” she chuckled.

“Speaking of lava, Kammi, I would adore it if you made me another of those lava sculptures,” Arlen told her lightly. “My wife stole the one you made for me, and I’d like another to put in my office.”

Kammi laughed. “Easy enough,” she answered. “Maybe this time I’ll make it pretty for you.”

“Maybe we should make a gift for the President,” Geon mused. “You’ve seen him several times, Kell. Think you could carve his likeness

into a piece of stone?”

“Easily,” he shrugged. “Would a full life-size sculpture be too garish?”

“Not at all, he can put it in his front yard,” Geon chuckled. “When we dig out our burrow, we’ll just save a big enough block to do it.”

“I’m sure he’d love that,” Jenny said lightly after she heard the translation. “Politicians can never get enough of themselves.”

“You’re surrounded by politicians, Jenny,” Jussa warned lightly after Jirran rather cheekily translated.

“So, am I wrong?” she challenged, which made Jussa laugh.

“The Secret Service would like an interview with all of you at your convenience,” Agent Robinson announced. “Since you’ll be in direct contact with the President.”

“We were warned that the agency was a bit wary of allowing him among us,” Jussa said dryly. “And we will attend these meetings, if only to calm your fears. We have no intent to bring harm to your leader.”

“Alright then, I think we can adjourn for now,” Arlen noted. “I’ll send this up to the President, and you need time to settle in. We have a building ready for our chromatic friend, and we’ve been told that Jussa and Sella will be staying in the ocean?”

Sella nodded. “We don’t feel comfortable sleeping out of the water.”

They finished eating, and they split up. Jussa and Sella remained to speak with the Secret Service, Hinado vaulted off into the dawn sky and headed back to the island, and the four earth drakes found a stable area of solid rock at the corner of the exclusion zone. They worked in pairs, and to Jenny’s amazement, they excavated out a huge single chamber about ten meters under the surface, going deep because heavy dragons would be walking over it. She and her husband Greg came down the ramp as they dug out the back end, working around the single piece of volcanic basalt Kell

would sculpt as Geon and Jirran cleared the waste rock. “I’m surprised to see you doing busy work, esteemed council member,” Jenny noted lightly.

“No task is above or below any earth dragon,” he replied simply in English, accented but understandable.

“You speak much better English than I thought.”

“I’ve been practicing,” he told her.

“We’ve been teaching all the earth dragons English,” Jirran told her, sitting on his haunches beside them and looking down at them. “You must be her lifemate. Greg, right?”

“Yes, I’m Greg. And you are?”

“Jirran of the field agents,” he replied easily. “I’m glad to see they let you walk freely.”

“I’ve been walking freely in here since I got the news.”

“Ah, yes, you’re a magician. What do you think of it?”

“Excited, nervous, curious, and scared as hell.”

“A healthy attitude,” Jirran nodded.

“Where’s Davie?”

“Sessara has him. She’s quite fond of him,” Jenny chuckled.

“You’re brave, letting a fire dragon watch after your hatchling.”

“I trust Sessara with Davie,” she answered. “And Davie gets along with *all* the fire dragons. They think he’s cute.”

“Alright, let’s cut this out and take it up,” Kell said as they finished digging around the squared pillar of very dark gray rock, streaked through with black.

“So, that’ll be the sculpture?”

“When I get around to it,” Kell replied.

“I never took you for an artist.”

“An artist? Me?” Kell said, then he laughed. “*Any* earth dragon can carve a likeness out of stone. I’m just a doodler as earth dragons reckon such things. You should see *real* earth dragon art.”

“Well, you mind if we tape you doing it? I think it would be interesting.”

“I don’t mind,” he replied. “What do you think, Geon, is this big enough?”

“It looks it,” he answered, looking around. “Let’s finish the walls and sweep up after we cart that out of here.”

Kammi hounded Greg with questions as they carried the block out, and after they set it down, she gasped, hunkered down like a stalking cat, then bounded across the exclusion zone. Two Hunters were in the area, and neither of them saw her coming, but they felt the shivering of the rocky ground under them from Kammi’s weight. They turned around, then one of them screamed in alarm when Kammi pounced on him, driving him to the ground and pinning him down. “Price!” she barked. “I owe you *so* many spikes!”

“Gettoffame!” he gasped, but then he spluttered into laughter when Kammi raked her somewhat rough tongue over his upper chest and face.

“You’re gonna pay for shooting me in El Paso!” she declared, holding him down and tormenting him.

“That’s *Price*?” Jirran gasped.

“The one and only,” Kell replied dryly.

“Don’t kill him yet, I get a turn!” Jirran shouted, dashing over. “I owe him big time for Seattle and Carson City!”

“He’s just *so* popular,” Jenny drawled, which made Greg laugh.

“That’s what he gets for shooting us so many times with that sniper rifle of his. That thing *stings*,” Kell snorted, which made Jenny laugh.

“Who...are...you?” Price gasped and wheezed as Kammi resorted to tickling after the human managed to squirm around so he was face down, Kammi all but sitting on him.

“I’m Jasper, and you’re *so* gonna suffer!” she retorted, which made the other Hunter burst out laughing.

“And Onyx is coming for his own vengeance,” Jenny called loudly, which made the other Hunter look over and see Jirran charging towards them. The Hunter wisely retreated, abandoning his teammate to the tender mercy of Kammi. She tortured him for a moment more, then grabbed the straps of his harness in her teeth and picked him up, then jaunted along quite spryly towards the burrow with her prize.

“What are you doing?” Jirran demanded.

“Taking him where he can’t get away,” she replied through her clenched teeth. “We have *all day* for this.”

“Let’s hang him off the ceiling by his ankles,” Jirran offered.

“Kammi, stop that, you might hurt him,” Geon barked. “Drop him right now!”

Kammi stopped, sat on her haunches, then rather unwillingly opened her jaws, which made Price flop to the ground. Instead of squirming out from under her and bolting, he instead laughed helplessly, rolled over, and lightly kicked her in the chest, not hitting hard enough to do any harm whatsoever. “I was just doing my job, you know,” he protested.

“You didn’t have to do it so well!” she shot back, looking down at him.

Price just gave her that quirky smile of his, then sat up and kissed her on the bottom of her chin.

“Don’t think you’re safe, Price,” she said playfully. “I’m gonna getcha, and you’re gonna remember it.”

“Then let the games begin,” he chuckled.

26 August 2017, 23:09 HDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kilauea

Kell yawned and looked down at the fenced-in area, tired but not sleepy, from his perch near the erupting caldera of the volcano. The heat radiating from the lava that bubbled and oozed from underground would have killed a human, and he could feel the warmth against his hide more as a basking in the sun and enjoying the dry heat rather than breathing in air hot enough to sear the lungs of the unadapted. Earth dragons were utterly immune to heat and fire the way fire dragons were, but of the other dragon races, they were the most adapted to heat, capable of withstanding temperatures lethal to about any other form of life. Their immunity began and ended with their hides, though the 300 degree Centigrade air wasn’t burning his lungs. Earth dragons weren’t fire dragons, but the earth deep within was an intensely hot place, and it was from that dark fire from which the earth dragons had been born. Earth dragons could tolerate heat that would kill anything but a fire dragon as a result. Fire dragons were born of just that, fire, where earth dragons were born of the heat induced from crushing pressure deep, deep under the surface. The coal of his horns had transformed into diamond, of a sorts, when he unleashed his breath weapons, returning him and the other earth dragons to their roots.

How things were changing. The other earth drakes were asleep, but he’d been restless and left Kammi to nap on their mound on her own, and he sat on that perch precariously close to the bubbling lava to consider the events of the day, which were mostly conferences and meetings where he translated for Geon when the English went beyond Geon’s skills. It had been...strange, seeing dragons from all five races sitting at the same table without arguments or snide comments, and that had struck him to the core,

had hit him deeply that at least those around the table understood things. Hirrag was an entirely different dragon now than he'd been in the two days Kell had been on the council, almost shockingly so. It was as if the revelation of just what the earth dragons were had slapped the bigotry right out of him, and while Hirrag wasn't exactly friendly to the earth drakes, he was *polite*. But then again, fire dragons admired strength above all things, and now they knew that all *their* magical strength was directly dependent on the earth dragons. That gave the earth dragons power in a fire dragon's mind, *real* power, and that power had to be respected. And Hirrag had *hovered* around Kell and the other earth dragons most of the day, almost protectively. But then again, he'd given his personal word that the earth dragons would be safe, and Hirrag was, in his own way, honorable. He'd given his word, and he would honor that promise. And nowhere did the disparity between dragons become so clear as it did when Hirrag sat on his haunches beside Kell, almost like a parent and a child, the largest adult dragon alive side by side with one of the smallest.

Hirrag wasn't the only one. Jussa and Hinado also hovered near to the earth drakes, at least when Hinado was there, the three huge dragons all but surrounding the four small earth drakes; though Hinado was a drake, sky drakes were *big* compared to the wyrms of their kind, a trait similar to the fire dragons. Sessara was smaller than Hirrag, but Sessara was larger than most wyrms of other races because she was a fire drake. Fire drakes bred themselves big, even as the earth drakes bred themselves small. It was much as Prisma had described in ancient history, it seemed to him, the other dragons protecting the earth dragons because of what they meant to magic itself.

So...what *had* changed? Why did the earth dragons abandon their reclusive, pacifistic culture and take a more aggressive stance? When did the dragons stop protecting them? And when did the secret of the earth dragons get buried? Were they all somehow related, a series of events that brought it all about? Or did things change slowly over time?

They were things to ponder when he didn't have anything else to worry about.

He saw someone he knew and stood up, then scampered among hissing, steaming half-liquid rock, over a lava flow, and slowed to a walk beside Petrovski and Price, two of the Hunters. Price flinched a bit when Kell slowed down to simply walk beside them, looking up at him in the lights of the exclusion zone, then he chuckled. “Not going to try to drag me off somewhere?” Price asked.

“That’s not my style. But I wouldn’t try using your credit card anytime soon,” Kell replied dryly, which made the two of them laugh.

“That worm of yours was some brilliant bit of coding, Kell,” Petrovski told him. She was the newest member, a bit green with the guns but a damn good codeslinger. “So was how you got it in there.”

“It was just a matter of time before you found that hole yourselves,” he shrugged even as he walked. “We didn’t give away much when we used it. We knew you’d figure out how we did it. Did you warn the CIA and everyone else?”

“A universal patch is in the works to fix it, coming from the big guns themselves,” she answered.

“So, I hear you guys are all magicians,” Kell noted.

“It was a shock to us, that’s for sure,” Price replied. “Every single Hunter, including Yancy.”

“Even the old curmudgeon, eh?”

Petrovski grinned. “He wasn’t very happy about it. But the NSA created a new division and put him in charge of it, the Division of Magical Affairs. He’s now a deputy undersecretary. He answers only to the big man at the NSA.”

“And what does this new division entail?”

“Learn about magic, and learn how magic can make life better in the United States,” Price answered. “However we can use it.”

“And of course, how you can use it in the auspices of the NSA,” Kell added.

“Of course,” Price replied. “This is the dawn of a new era, Kell. Magic won’t be restricted to America, no matter how hard we try to clamp down on it. It *will* get out. And when it does, we want to make sure we’re one step ahead of everyone else. We don’t want some Al Qaida magician using his magic to commit terrorist acts on our soil, not if we have no way to find him and stop him.”

“That’s fairly wise. That’s more or less our stance right now. The dragons know humans can use magic, and some of them, like Hinado, want to teach it to you. He believes that if you understand magic the way the dragons do, it will foster much better relations between our races. After all, the fact that our race’s entire culture is based on magic and yours isn’t is a major gap.”

“Well, *yours* isn’t.”

“It’s not based on magic, but the very existence of magic has shaped earth dragon culture over the years,” he replied dryly. “We’re the only *nonmagical* dragons in a *magical* race. Magic can’t help but make us who we are, even if we can’t use it.”

“Yeah, that’s true enough,” Petrovski agreed. “But you can do more than magic. That statue is *amazing!*”

“That thing? That’s almost laughable,” Kell snorted, glancing at the sculpture he’d whittled out of the rock, which was an exact likeness of President Walker sitting behind his desk. Kell had even shaped out the things that had been on the desk when he’d seen him, like his phone and the picture frame. “I’m not very good at shaping, but I’m the best of the four of us, so there you go.”

“If *that’s* not very good, I’d love to see what you think good is,” Petrovski chuckled.

“Someday you might see it,” he noted as they reached the tent holding the computer, where two officers sat...and to his surprise, Yancy. The bald, grizzled old man was typing away at the desk on the far side, the inset monitor in the table turned off.

“Kell. You’re not trying to kill Price like the others?” Yancy asked, which made Price burst out laughing.

“I’d stay in company if I were you, Price. Kammi’s hot to get you alone so she can do things to you you’ll never forget.”

“That almost sounds scandalous,” Petrovski said slyly.

“Kammi’s version of scandalous leaves scars,” Kell added, which made her laugh brightly. “She was in heavy debate with Jirran over just *how* close they could drag you to the lava before it would burn you. They were almost at the point of drawing up a diagram.”

“That doesn’t sound very good,” Price chuckled.

“All of us have lulled ourselves to sleep over fantasies of ramming that rifle of yours down your throat,” he said dryly, which made Price laugh.

“Just doing my job.”

“My, that sounds familiar,” Kell drawled.

“Speaking of your job, since you’re here, Kell, I think you need to see something,” Yancy noted, turning on the table monitor. “The CIA has intercepted something that concerns you.”

“Really? And you’d let me see this,” Kell mused.

“I was ordered to show it to you. We think it’s something you need to know. Besides, we figure your department already has a copy of it, so you’ll see it when you get home anyway,” he shrugged.

What showed up on the monitor, however, made Kell stop smiling. It was written in Mandarin, and he immediately realized that this wasn’t very encouraging: *Operatives report failure retrieving Dragon, and Americans*

refuse to allow access to dragons. Full trade sanctions against U.S. are hereby authorized, and will be announced by 28 August. All field offices and bureaus recall all personnel, all military resources are to be brought to Stage Two Readiness immediately. Prepare plans to have all American citizens within Chinese borders detained or expelled, as per security classification..

“It seems the Chinese tried to kidnap one of you,” Yancy noted as Kell read.

“You don’t speak Mandarin, do you Yancy?” Kell asked. “They failed retrieving not *a* dragon, but *the* dragon. It’s a context thing. The context is that they were after an inanimate object, a *thing*. The dragon reference has to be a code word. I’d assume that their spies tried an operation to steal something, but they failed. And because of that, now they’re going to face off against America.”

“They must be insane,” Price breathed. “Trade sanctions? Military buildup? What could be worth risking World War three?”

“Us,” Kell said darkly. “The Chinese have been howling for access to the fire dragons, and they made all kinds of threats. Well, they’re going to carry them out.” Kell put his paws on the table. “I wonder what they were after,” he grunted. “And why it would be worth risking that kind of a confrontation.”

“That, is a damn good fucking question,” Yancy growled. “Kell, I think you’d better warn your island that the Chinese might be coming to pay you a call soon. And they won’t be friendly.”

“If they find where we are...maybe,” Kell nodded.

“The dragon...isn’t the translation software based on the Dragon text to speech program?” Petrovski asked. “Could they have tried to steal a copy of that?”

“Possible,” Kell said, as Yancy nodded. “How many copies did you make?”

“It’s installed on only six computers not including this one, and all are in heavy security buildings and installed on cold boxes,” Yancy answered. “There’s only one installer, and it’s on a flash drive in a vault buried deep under NSA headquarters, on the ass side of men that will shoot you if they even *think* you’re not supposed to be there. And the program itself is installed on a kill switch.” A *kill switch* was a password protection that gave absolutely no leeway. It was based on typing a 24 character password in real time, where just one mistake caused whatever the kill switch protected to be purged off the computer. “We keep that program under *tight* security.”

“And that might be why they failed,” Price murmured. “But why would they need an English to draconic translation program? It wouldn’t do them any good, the only ones who speak draconic are right here.”

“Because they want to *read something*,” Kell said, lurching up on his hind legs, almost standing erect. “Prisma!” he shouted. “Prisma, wake up!”

The petite chromatic stepped out of the steel building with a yawn and padded over to them. “What is it, Kell?”

“You know more about history than we do,” he said, all of them looking at her. “When you studied the history, did it make any mention of China?”

“Of course. The sky dragons were heavily involved with China,” she answered. “They taught the monks of Shao Lin and Shao Kai the art of magic as part of an ancient treaty between the sky dragons and the Emperor, but did not train the lay populace in magic the way that the chromatics did with the Europeans. The Shao Lin became part of a monastic order and distanced themselves from worldly affairs, but the Shao Kai went on to become a secret society of personal bodyguards to the Emperor during the entire dynasty...which I cannot recall. The Shao Kai were eliminated when the Emperor’s family lost power. The new ruling house did not trust them.”

“Could the sky dragons have left behind books?”

“They had libraries all over the world,” she shrugged. “It’s entirely possible.”

“Books on *magic*?”

“What else would be in a library?” she asked.

“You think the Chinese are sitting on an ancient sky dragon library?” Yancy asked after Kell explained what he was asking, then he activated the translator program so Prisma could read what they were saying in English.

“And all they need is someone that can teach them how to read it,” Kell nodded. “I’ll bet my horns that that is why they’re so hot to get access to us. They’re sitting on a treasure trove of forgotten sky dragon books, and they want to know what’s in them, that they’re betting that they can learn magic from what’s in those books. And they’re willing to risk a war to find out.”

“That’s feasible,” Prisma agreed after she read the dialogue. “The Catholic church had no reach into China, so the purge of dragons and their books from humanity could not reach there. Dragons fell into myth after they left human civilization, even where they were not purged, but now we are back, and the Chinese must realize that some of their old myths are true, that those ancient books Kell theorizes they have are indeed what their myth says they are. When the dragons retreated from the world, the Chinese might have found a sky dragon library that they abandoned, either having forgotten about it or not believing any humans could possibly get up there.”

“Or they were the original books used to train the Shao Kai,” Petrovski ventured. “But why not write them in Chinese?”

“Because all magic is written in draconic,” Prisma replied after reading the translation. “To truly understand magic, you must speak draconic fluently. The very essence of magic depends on understanding the root language which forms the basis of thought which shapes its power. Why do you think that the fire dragons have been teaching you draconic?” she asked pointedly. “It’s not *only* so you can speak to us. After all, we can learn your

languages much faster than you can learn ours. To be effective magicians, you must speak fluent draconic, so we can teach you the *soul* of magical power. To try to teach you magic in any other language would...would... you would lose much in translation,” she said finally. “Even if humans were writing books on magic for other humans, they would be written in *draconic*. When the new ruling house eliminated the Shao Kai, they killed the only humans capable of reading the books. Only their books of non-magical subjects would be written in Chinese, like history.”

“So they have books that explain what the books they can’t read have in them,” Price surmised after reading Prisma’s analysis.

“I think that makes enough sense to have it checked out,” Yancy grunted. “If the Chinese think they’re sitting on a stash of books on magic, they might be willing to risk war to keep us from getting that kind of an advantage over them. Most of the other nations have already learned that the dragons have identified human magicians, thanks to *their* intelligence agencies.”

“If that’s the case, damn, they must have those books so deeply buried that not even *we* heard a peep about them,” Kell mused. “There can’t be more than handful of Chinese politicians that know they exist.”

“That’s how you keep a secret,” Yancy nodded.

“The more who know a secret, the less of a secret it is,” Prisma agreed.

“Could you find those books, Prisma?”

“If I’m close enough,” she answered. “But you know the limitations.”

“Yeah, true,” Kell grunted as Yancy pushed at Kell enough to make him move, and the gnarled old man started typing. “So, we need to find out if they’ve got some sky dragon books.”

“That’s a moot point in what’s coming,” Yancy growled. “If the Chinese are going to slam us with trade sanctions, President Walker’s gonna have a *hell* of a lot more to worry about in just a couple of days. It might

cause a global stock market crash. Global recession. The Chinese have to know what they plan could cause, they'll piss off half the world."

"But what would they lose if the Americans gain access to whatever they believe magic can do and they don't?" Petrovski asked. "What if they think that a wave of dragon-trained American magicians can descend on China and every other nation on earth and take them over with magic?"

"That's laughable," Prisma snorted after reading.

"But it's not what we know, it's what *they think*," Kell pointed out to her. "And the Chinese are *paranoid* when it comes to perceived threats to their emerging dominance. Give them twenty more years, and they'll be either on the same level with America or just over them, and they know it. It's what they've worked for for the last fifty years, to be a world superpower, to be a global power player like America or the Soviet Union of old. They're not about to let what they see as their biggest rival in the world gain an unknown and potentially overwhelming advantage, not right now, not when they have the better poker hand and they're about to raise. If they think that it's worth the risk to plunge the world into global depression to prevent the Americans from conquering China without ever firing a shot, there's not another nation on this planet that would do it faster."

"Listen to the dragon, kids, he knows his shit," Yancy grunted.

"Shoot them in the knee," Kell said, looking at Price with amusement. "They haven't announced that the fire dragons are leaving yet, have they?"

"No."

"Then do it. Tell everyone *exactly* when they're leaving, which will castrate the Chinese reasoning behind trade sanctions and make every other nation on earth point the finger right at them when things start going to hell. If they're sanctioning you over not giving them permission to speak to the dragons, well, if we're not here...."

Yancy laughed. "You're a devious son of a bitch, Kell. I knew I liked you," Yancy grinned savagely. "But I can't make that kind of a call. I can

suggest it, though,” he chuckled.

“Then I’ll leave you to it. I need to talk to Geon and the others, we have to discuss this,” Kell said. “We could use your opinion, Prisma,” he added in draconic.

“Of course. Shall we?”

Chapter 17

27 August 2017, 20:13 PDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kilauea

Everything was ready.

They were meeting for the final conference before President Walker arrived, which would be at precisely 9:00 tomorrow morning, and he would spend ten hours at the various sites on the mountain dealing with the dragons. He would tour the food preparation area, the security command post down the mountain a little bit, the press area just beside it where some 79 different networks or news organizations from all over the globe had more or less set up permanent shop. He would have a brief press conference down there at 10:00, and then he and the two pool journalism teams would be escorted up and into the exclusion zone. The only outsider so far that had been allowed inside was a sociologist from UC Berkeley, who had spent some three days interviewing the dragons and learning about their culture, but they'd also sworn him to partial secrecy in that he could only release his report based on fire dragon society, and nothing about anything he saw on the volcano, and that included not being allowed to take any pictures. It would be the first real chance for the public at large to see more than just Sessara up close via the cameras, and what was more, now they knew that they'd be seeing more than just the "red dragons." They'd let it be known that all five dragon races had arrived to confer with the President.

The conference would be the important part for the dragons. Jussa, who had quietly assumed command of their impromptu council, had several proposals he wanted to put on the table to try to bargain both assurances that their autonomy and sovereignty would be honored, and bartered agreements to procure raw materials unavailable on the island...and not *just* for the earth dragons. True, Jussa mainly was interested in what they'd need

to rebuild both their factories and their farms, from steel to wiring to pipes all the way to seed and livestock and farm-grade topsoil and good old fashioned dirt to fill in the erosion that had taken place after the fires. First, though, they had to arrange to get food from the humans. Inventories showed that if the earth dragons came out, their stored food wouldn't be enough to feed everyone before they got the farms producing again. The department had quite a bit of gold and silver stockpiled, and it was with that that the dragon would *buy* food from America, to cover the shortfall and keep anyone from starving.

One thing Jussa wanted to arrange that had nothing to do with food or barter was the *Appomattox*, mainly so the water dragons could get it and its nuclear material out of their ocean. They would raise the *Appomattox*, the earth dragons would go in and make sure the fuel rods were safe, then they'd drag it somewhere and let the Navy take it over.

Jussa had other ideas as well. He wanted a region of ocean proclaimed sovereign water dragon territory, since the ocean was where they lived, and the island would be smack dab in the middle of that sovereign sea. He wanted some territory set aside for hunting for all the flying dragons, a game preserve of sorts somewhere in South America, but wanted America to help them organize it. He also wanted America to use their power in the U.N. to have the dragons declared a sentient species, and their island and the ocean surrounding it a sovereign state, the nation of Draconia. That official U.N. recognition would give them at least some protection against nations that might try to plunder their island, using the fact that it was legally unowned territory as justification.

And for the chromatics, he wanted the U.N. to declare magic to be a legal and lawful practice, where a magician couldn't be arrested and prosecuted for simply being a magician. The U.N. certainly couldn't back up a declaration like that, each nation could ignore a resolution like that if it pleased, but it would set the stage to prevent persecution based on magical grounds.

Kell was somewhat amused when Jenny told them which reporters had won the lottery draw and were coming in as pool reporters...Gaia had a dark sense of humor. The somewhat notorious Gloria Brenner from Fox News had won the first slot. She was a right-wing zealot who had not-so-secret ambitions of replacing Bill O'Reilly when he retired from his TV show at the end of the year. She had a bad habit of making up facts for her reports and being both combative and downright snarky during interviews, grooming herself for the role of talk show host, but since she was blond, pretty, and had large breasts, Fox News suspended their journalistic integrity where she was concerned. Besides, her antics made for good ratings, and Fox News was about ratings over little things like professional integrity or factual and unbiased reporting. The second reporter was Ahmad Al-Benja Raouf from Al Jazeera, whom Jirran told them was a moderate as Al Jazeera rated their reporters, more of a journalist than a propagandist who had done war correspondence on top of a damning investigative report on Afghanistan's governmental corruption that got him nominated for a Pulitzer. Putting a conservative firebreather side by side with an Al Jazeera correspondent...that was going to give the Secret Service some gray hair.

Walker would arrive in the exclusion zone after the press conference, get a tour, have a few photo ops, eat lunch in the big tent, then they'd sit down and talk business. No matter if they made any agreements or not, the President would be leaving at exactly 7:00pm, conduct another press conference down at the media center, then go home...and Gaia, would he have serious business back there. The Chinese were going to carry through their threat, so Walker was going to be just one of a bunch of world leaders howling in protest as the stock markets took a nosedive. Of course, Walker was going to announce the departure of the dragons at the evening press conference, making it sound like the dragons had declared their intent to leave during their conference. Walker would be leaving tomorrow, but the rest of the dragons would be gone two days after him, time Sessara needed to get everything organized.

What to do about Jenny, her family, and the Hunters was still a matter of debate. When he was there, Hinado had forwarded the idea of taking

them back to the island and sticking them in Sanctuary City for the time being, but he was disabused of that notion fairly quickly by about everyone else. But Hinado wasn't the only dragon fully intent on teaching them magic. Sessara and Gressa were quite serious about it as well, mainly because several of the humans had considerable potential. Jenny, her son Davie and husband Greg, Hutch, Price, and Michaels all had the potential to be *powerful* magicians, and most of the rest of them would be respectable. Only Wilson demonstrated minimal potential. Jussa was of a mind to keep the Hunters on Hawaii to continue their education with Hinado, and when Jenny told them about the original idea of the private island with the CIA safe house, that had Jussa's interest. He rather liked the idea of an island well away from cameras where Hinado and any other dragon could come and go as they pleased.

But that also opened the other debate, which had taken place over by the lava pools not long ago. The Americans were starting to get comfortable with the idea that the dragons were dealing almost exclusively with *them*. Geon had said it best when he told Hinado that the dragons had to engage the *entire world*, not *just* the Americans. The simple fact of the matter was, they couldn't let the American hospitality shade or flavor their overall stance on certain issues, and one of them was that they couldn't *only* trade with the Americans. Yes, they would have to work through the Americans in that they would be receiving those supplies through Hawaii, the closest major port to the island, and also a means by which the dragons could restrict movement through their territorial waters as much as possible. The Americans might be the broker, the cargo shipping company through which the dragons dealt, but they couldn't limit themselves to *just* the Americans. That was going to create a delicate dance as the Americans sought to limit the dragons to only the Americans, but Geon was confident that they could manage it.

Price was right that magic would get out...because the dragons would be the ones spreading it. Hinado had a grand vision of teaching magic all over the world, getting humanity not just acclimated to magic, but so comfortable with it that it became part of human daily life, and that would

give the dragons a very secure place within it as the teachers. Hinado believed that the reason the relationship with humanity failed the last time was that magic became compartmentalized and transformed into a class of social standing against which other social classes rebelled. The human magicians of old were the elites of human society, and over time, Hinado believed from sky dragon history, the teaching of magic was restricted more and more to only the upper classes of human society. The average peasant was denied magical training unless he or she was truly gifted. It was a flaw Hinado admitted that the sky dragons had repeated in China, teaching *only* a very select few about magic, and then seeing that very select few transform into an elite segment of society. Hinado's vision was to train *anyone* capable of using magic in the art, to all but open an academy of magic on the island and allow anyone with magical aptitude to come and study.

Needless to say, Hinado's idea wasn't all that enthusiastically embraced by the others. Everyone agreed that it was in the interest of magic itself to train humans in its use, that Gaia had decreed that the knowledge of magic be shared with all who could use it, that it was the solemn duty and responsibility of any magically adept being to learn about magic and know how to use it in ways pleasing to Gaia. It was that edict that had led the chromatics to start training humans in magic in the first place, spreading magical knowledge across the world. But Geon and Jussa saw a more limited interpretation of that decree that gave the dragons selectivity and control, so as not to train people in magic who would then turn around and use that magic against the *dragons*...after all, that would not be pleasing to Gaia. Jussa wanted to be very careful about who they trained in magic, but even Jussa agreed that training Jenny and the Hunters was necessary. He didn't like that they were agents of the American government, but they were a good start, and they would be good students. All of them were intelligent and disciplined, and using magic required both traits.

But, the Chinese were a serious problem, one that Kell pondered after the meeting, as the sun set and he laid on a ridge of rock with the bubbling lava behind him, a place where the humans couldn't come...a place where he was surrounded by somewhat curious fire dragons. Jussa and Hirrag had

spread the truth among the females, and many of them just sat or stood and stared at him, almost not believing it, but none of them could deny that their magic had returned to full strength since the earth dragons came among them. The Chinese had always been something of an amusing annoyance to the department. There wasn't much in China for them, since they too stole most of their technology from others, but the Chinese were very good at computers, very good at hacking, and had patience and determination. Since they'd found the ghost system that was the earth dragon gateway into the internet, they'd been implacable in their resolve to crack that system and see what was inside it, a fact that forced the earth dragons to go to China over and over to break it up. And that included four separate occasions where a Chinese hacker had learned too much and had to be killed. Kell was the one mainly responsible for China since he spoke the best Mandarin, and that unpleasant duty had fallen upon him. Teaching the Chinese magic didn't seem like a bad idea, but the way they wanted to go about it...well, that wasn't going to work. If the Chinese wanted to learn magic, they had to do it on *dragon* terms, not their own. If they were sitting on a long-lost sky dragon library, or perhaps the original library of the Shao Kai, then they'd have to be dispossessed of those books before any agreements could be made to train Chinese magicians, if only to save the magicians from themselves. Trying to use magic beyond one's ability could be fatal to humans, they didn't have the raw power or constitution that dragons did.

In this, the dragons did have an advantage. Prisma had explained the fundamentals of magic from a human perspective, and that was that human magicians were dependent on an external fetish of sorts. She called it a talisman, and without one, a human was barely half as powerful as they could be. A human magician without a talisman could still do magic, but it would be absolutely nowhere near the kind of magic they could do with one. The talisman focused their magical powers in ways that made them only slightly less powerful than dragons, but the key to the talismans was that they could only be crafted by a magician...and right now, the only magicians around were the dragons, well, and the earth dragons, and it would be earth dragons that would be required to make the talismans for the humans. The art of talisman making had been more or less discontinued by

the dragons in the thousand years they'd been separate from humanity, and Prisma told him that right now, an earth dragon would really be the only one with the skill to craft such a device. Using the fact that only the dragons could supply the talismans human magicians would need, it would allow the dragons to control just who got access to magic, and how much access they had.

But, the Chinese had gone *way way way* beyond being an annoyance, they'd found out just hours ago. Ferroth had sicced the department on China, and their sifting through the intelligence networks and using their back doors, they were getting back some rather disturbing news. Much as they'd once feared, China had made the connection that because the dragons weren't recognized by any national or international law, and their island was not officially the territory of any recognized nation, then the dragons were ripe for conquering, and conquering them with no real legal repercussions. The U.N. couldn't do a damn thing about it if the Chinese steamed an invasion force towards the island. The Chinese more than any other nation had immediately understood the way magic could change things, thanks to their legends and the books they had that they *could* read, and they wanted complete and absolute control over that magic.

And that meant that they had to have complete and absolute control of the dragons.

Their plan was a two pronged attack to intentionally rile up the Americans and cause internal turmoil and dissent by causing economic upheaval, let it spread to other nations and cause them to blame American for their problems, and while everyone was trying to get their financial houses in order, invade the island before anyone could do anything about it. They wanted the dragons and the magic they represented under Chinese control, and they were willing to risk a war over it. The communiqués they'd intercepted made it clear that they didn't want to get into a war with America, but they *would* if they had to. They considered the island and the dragons a prize so valuable it was worth the risk...and besides, the Americans were in no real position to engage in a protracted war, not after over 15 years of fighting terrorism all over the globe, fighting in

Afghanistan, fighting in Iraq, fighting in Yemen. The Chinese were willing to gamble that the Americans would shy away from the threat of war due to the war weariness of its population and the weakened forces of its military. And they weren't worried about their post-confrontation reputation, either. The rest of the world could just go right ahead and hate them as long as the Chinese had *magic* and the rest of the world *didn't*.

Clearly, something had to be done. And what had to be done wasn't going to make anyone very happy.

Sessara landed beside him on the ridge, folding back her wings. Being a fire drake meant that she was more than three times Kell's size, larger than Anthra, who was the largest earth dragon alive. She looked down at him curiously as she sat on her haunches, her tail drifting down until the tip of it submerged into the lava below. "It seems that the earth dragons have changed more than just cosmetically," she noted. "I've never seen an earth dragon lounge this long in temperatures like this. I thought you weren't immune to fire."

"We're not, but we tolerate it better than the others," he shrugged. "What do you want, Sessara?"

She looked slightly amused. "I would know what you're thinking," she replied. "You've been sitting here since the conference ended."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because I've come to learn in this time on this island, among the humans, that *experience* can be more important than *age* in some respects," she replied simply. "And you have a great deal of experience, Kell. I would value your opinion because it has much weight behind it."

"Really," he drawled, looking up at her. "And what you learned today doesn't have *anything* to do with it?"

She gave a raspy chuckle. "I am a little curious. How do the earth dragons see it? Was it much of a surprise?"

“Sort of, but it doesn’t really change anything for us,” he shrugged. “I mean, it’s *passive*. It’s nothing we can change or control.”

“I disagree, you’ve demonstrated quite a bit of *control* over it the last few months, even without knowing what you were controlling,” she noted. “And you are wrong, young one. It will change *everything*. The other dragons must change how they see you. It has already changed how I see you. Much as the ancient times that young chromatic described, I find in myself an almost compulsive need to stay close to you. Were you to come to harm, magic *itself* might be damaged. The times you risked your life out there in the human world—“ she said with a shudder. “And to think that my kind used to go down to your lowlands to harass you for *sport*. What were we thinking?”

“Puts an entirely different spin on things, doesn’t it?” Kell said with a dark chuckle. “I guess the earth dragons will get what they wanted all along, to just be left alone. But I do see some arguments coming.”

“How so?”

“I’m a *field agent*, Sessara. What we know now doesn’t change that or any of us who do this job. We’ll still be out there risking our lives, because that’s what we do. The department and the island as a whole will need us more than ever now that the humans know about us.”

“Yes, that will incite an argument,” she said with a light look. “You are far too valuable, too *precious*, to risk yourselves that way. I read an old fire dragon book once, written before we came to the island, that described the dragon races as being a single entity. The fire dragons, the book explained, were the muscles and bones of the body, the strength and the resilience, the anchor of all. The chromatics were the mind, the thinkers. The water dragons were the conscious, the will of restraint. The sky dragons were the joy, the free spirits. And the book described the earth dragons as the *soul* of the body. I never understood that reference, until now. You are the soul of our kind, young Kell, and you are far, far too valuable to us and to the world to risk your lives. It doesn’t mean that you have to stop working in the

department, it doesn't mean that we fire dragons want to run your lives now, but it does mean that you cannot risk your life needlessly. I will leave you be until I feel that you are in danger, then I will put my paw in as I see fit."

"Well, I guess that's a starting point," Kell mused.

"You will find that we fire dragons can be determined, young one, to the point of madness," she warned lightly, patting him on the back with her large forepaw.

Kammi flickered into view among the lights of the zone and the ruddy red of the lava, vaulting over a lava flow and coming up to the base of the ridge. "Enough brooding, intended," she told him.

"I'm not *brooding*," he protested. "I'm just thinking."

"Well, come back to the burrow, we're doing the same thing, we're just not brooding," she replied, which made Sessara chuckle.

"Go ahead, young one," Sessara urged, swishing her lava-covered tail up and batting him lightly on the hindquarters. "I'm sure you'll be in much better company with your intended than with me."

28 August 2017, 09:02 PDT; Exclusion Zone, Mount Kilauea

Kell could only wonder how he got roped into *this* one.

As the stairs on Marine One lowered in the open area just off the media center, Kell found himself to be the focus of most of the cameras as he sat sedately on his haunches beside Jenny. It could be because he spoke English, or it could be that he was small enough to move around among humans without posing too much of a risk or threat...or it could be that President Walker knew him, but for whatever reason, the dragons had decided they needed someone to observe the parts of the President's visit

outside the exclusion zone, and Geon had put Kell to the task not an hour ago.

Actually, it made much more sense. Kell, being a field agent, knew exactly what he should or should not say while surrounded by cameras, part of his extensive field agent training, and he wouldn't get camera shy or freeze under the pressure. Geon could depend on Kell to discuss things like magic or dragon customs without giving away what the humans didn't need to know. And Kell knew exactly what the dragons were willing to reveal about magic and about themselves, thanks to all the conferences they'd held the day before. Every dragon knew those limits, but Geon could depend on the field agents to not vary from those boundaries one step.

But Gaia, did the fire dragons disapprove of *that*. Sessara almost took Kell by the scruff of the neck and carried him off when she found out that the earth dragons were sending one of their own *by himself* right into the middle of all the humans. Kell found it almost shocking and maddening that the fire dragons would change their attitude so quickly, but Jirran felt that it was a simple over-reaction to finding out the truth so soon. Once the idea of it sank in, Sessara wouldn't be quite so overprotective.

"You're supposed to at least stand up, you know," Jenny said in a hushed tone to him.

"When I see him on the stairs, I will," he replied lightly, nudging her with an elbow.

He stood when Walker and his wife, Julia, appeared in the chopper's doorway and waved, and Jenny saluted sharply along with most of the uniformed service members as he started down. Secretary of State Arlen Kent, Jenny, and General Steele stepped out once he started away from the chopper, whose engines were powering down and both Marines and Secret Service surrounded Marine One to protect it. Jenny saluted again when face to face with Walker and his wife, and Kent shook his hand. "Glad to see you finally made it, Mister President," Arlen said as Walker shook Steele's hand.

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world, Arlen,” he replied with a smile as Jenny shook hands with Julia Walker. After they shook hands for the cameras, Walker and his wife came right over to Kell. “It’s good to see you face to face, Kell,” he said as Kell offered a single clawed finger to him, then chuckled and took it, shaking it.

“You too, Mister President,” he replied. “Welcome to Hawaii.”

“I’m supposed to say that to you, you know.”

“You just got here, we’ve been here,” Kell shrugged. “Misses Walker,” he said as Julia almost elbowed her husband out of the way and shook his extended finger.

“I have quite a few things to discuss with you, Kell,” she told him sincerely.

“We’ll do our best to answer your questions,” he told her as the cameras flashed from the news gallery. “The other dragons are waiting up in the exclusion zone. I was sent down here because I won’t trample anyone.”

“Sometimes being small is an advantage,” Jenny noted lightly.

“Small in relative terms,” he said dryly, which made her chuckle.

There were a few issues with his size, however. Though he was only a foot taller than the humans on the average at the shoulder, the fact that he was very close to 24 feet long from nose to tail, a little over seven meters, made him entering the command building that had once been a USGS research center prohibitive. He would barely fit in the hallways, but the first corner he reached would be his undoing. Just getting in the front door might either cost him a few scales or the building its doorframe. So, when Kent and Steele ushered the President into the building, Kell sat on his haunches outside with several camera crews deciding to keep their cameras on *him* rather than the President. Two Secret Service agents stood with Kell, flanking him almost protectively, and they passed the time in sedate silence as the President toured the nerve center of the operation for the humans.

Steele and Kent had completely taken over the building, but the building wasn't very big, so they weren't in there long. After about twenty minutes, the procession came back out with the cameras following, and Kell rejoined them as they toured the food staging area. "Food from all over the islands as well as the mainland is gathered up here and prepared for our dragon guests," Steele declared, motioning at the tented area.

"And what do dragons like to eat, General?" Walker asked.

"Just about anything," he replied. "They have a preference for meat, raw vegetables, cheese, and bread, but they'll eat about anything we will. Each adult dragon eats about fifteen times as much as the average person, but given how large some of them are, that's not really much of a surprise. Meals are gathered here on flatbeds, and then driven up to the exclusion zone three times a day."

"I was curious, Kell, do different dragons have different tastes?" Julia asked.

"If you mean by species, yes," he answered. "Earth dragons favor vegetables over meat, but eat meat occasionally. Fire and sky dragons prefer meat over vegetables, and water dragons prefer fish over anything. Chromatics aren't picky."

"And what do you like best?"

"Potatoes, radishes, pumpkins, and onions," he answered. "Earth dragons prefer hearty vegetables that most humans find bland. Most earth dragons favor potatoes and onions over most other foods."

"Who grows the vegetables in your home?"

"We do," he answered easily. "Earth dragons are farmers, Misses Walker. We are of the earth, and to work the earth to produce food is a basic part of who and what we are."

"So, there's a deeper meaning to calling you an earth dragon."

"That holds true for any of us," he told her.

After that, Steele took them over to the press area and showed both the President and the press a map of the exclusion zone. He described the various areas and, to Kell's surprise, even showed the layout of the various small dens that Kell and Kammi had dug for the hatchlings, then described the average day of a fire dragon to the press for the first time. "After breakfast, most of the fire dragons enjoy watching television," he said. "They've become quite the fans of American football while here," he chuckled. "We have three projection TVs set up near the main command tent for the dragons, where they watch both sports and instructional shows to help them learn English."

"How many dragons up there speak English?" Walker asked curiously.

"Seven," Kell answered for Steele. "At least enough to follow a conversation."

"A couple of the fire dragons have shown amazing aptitude for English, and have learned at a truly phenomenal rate," Steele disclosed. "After lunch, the females organize sports and challenges for their young, where the young dragons compete against one another in events such as wrestling, racing, tests of intelligence and skill, those kinds of things. The whole reason they're here is for these challenges, which they can only do at an active volcano. After all, events such as lava swimming don't work if there's no lava."

"That's almost laughable, General," Walker chuckled. "Lava swimming."

"I've seen them do it, Mister President. Fire and heat don't hurt them at all. I guess that's why they're called fire dragons. After the afternoon challenges, they eat dinner and spend the rest of the afternoon in leisure. They watch TV, practice English with the guards, debate among themselves, whatever they want to do. At sunset, they gather together for a council of sorts to discuss the events of the day, then afterwards they go to sleep."

"Do they actually breathe fire, General?" Julia asked.

“The fire dragons do, ma’am,” he replied with a nod. “They’ve demonstrated for us. It’s quite impressive.”

“And what do the other dragons do?”

“Sky dragons breathe lightning,” Kell answered as both he and Jenny looked to him. “They can also breathe out a cloud of chilled air that induces condensation, and that takes on the proportion and appearance of a cloud once it spreads out, or fog if they’re on the ground. Water dragons can breathe either a blast of pressurized steam or a jet of scalding water. Chromatics project out a cone of pure heat radiance, coherent light that burns like a laser.”

“And what do earth dragons do?”

“Earth dragons have no magic,” he replied stonily. “But we do have these,” he added, raising a paw and showing her his long, curved, wicked-looking black claws.

“And the tail,” Jenny chuckled.

“And the tail,” he agreed, bringing his spike-studded tail around to present to the First Lady. “This is all we’ve ever needed.”

“Well, it certainly looks intimidating,” Walker chuckled. “Those things look sharp.”

“You’ll feel it if I hit you with it,” Kell said mildly as he swished his tail back carefully, since he was surrounded by humans.

“Like a stegosaurus,” Julia mused. “A spiked tail used for defense.”

“Defense being the critical word,” Kell noted. “Earth dragon morals teach us to never attack first, that the instigation of violence without justified cause is the lowest form of cowardice and dishonor. So long as you treat us with a non-violent paw, you never need fear us.”

“And that’s *earth dragon* morality,” she noted.

“The other dragons feel differently than we do,” Kell nodded. “Each race of dragon has its own code of ethics and mores. Some are more aggressive than others, but all dragons believe in the simple tenets of honor and courtesy. Even the fire dragons, the most aggressive of all, are easy to get along with if you understand them. Treat them with respect, honor their strength without kowtowing to them, and they are very approachable.”

“They’ve been nothing but excellent guests,” Steele nodded.

“Though all dragons are dragons, there are differences beyond our looks,” Kell told them. “The five races each have their own societies, their own cultures, even their own histories. Just because you may understand the earth dragons, that doesn’t mean that you’ll understand the water dragons. They are very different from us, just as the fire dragons are different from the chromatics, who are different from the sky dragons.”

“That almost sounds like humanity,” Walker noted. “Each country has its own culture, its own history, its own identity.”

“It’s a good parallel,” Kell nodded. “Before we came together on the island, we lived separately. Living together can be challenging at times, since the dragons don’t see things the same way, but we work out our differences over time.”

Jenny couldn’t help but give him a sidelong smile.

“I must ask, Kell, where did you learn English?”

“From your radio and TV,” he answered, fully expecting a question like that, and ready with an explanation. “Sesame Street is far more useful than you might believe.”

“Seriously? You learned from *television*?”

He nodded. “It started when we first started seeing your airplanes in the sky,” he told her, looking at her evenly. “We had no idea what they were, and they terrified quite a few of us. That was when it was decided that we should find out what was going on, what had caused things to change so

drastically that birds made of iron were flying in the sky.” He glanced at Walker, then at Jenny. “They sent a few of us out into your world to see how it had changed. Sky dragons flew over your lands and were amazed at how you had grown and expanded. Water dragons started bringing back ships that had sunk, on the bottom of the sea, and we studied them, studied how things changed from wooden galleons all the way up to battleships sunk during that terrible war that raged through the Pacific some eighty years ago. And from time to time, they would send out an earth dragon like me, someone very small and easy to hide, to study humans from much closer, close enough to hear them speak. Well, we learned about television on those excursions, stole a few of them, then learned how to make them run. And that’s why I’m here with you now instead of a council member. I know more about humans and your customs than the other dragons. In a way, I’ve been trained for this day, when the dragons might have to speak to the humans.”

“Fascinating,” Julia breathed. Of course, she knew the *real* truth, given she was the First Lady, but Kell’s explanation of how dragons learned English and weren’t mystified by human technology were at least plausible. “So, it’s possible that you might be the Loch Ness Monster?” she asked lightly.

“Actually, yes,” he replied evenly. “But I’ve never been to Loch Ness. I was once spotted by humans swimming in a lake in Canada, and a legend grew over a monster in the lake. That particular legend, I hate to say, was *me*.”

“Well spun,” Jenny whispered in draconic as Steele talked again.

“Thank you,” he replied close to her ear. “And where did you learn that word?”

She flashed him a grin. “TV,” she replied.

Kell chuckled helplessly.

Walker toured the rest of the command and media area, though most of the cameras were following Kell around rather than the President. Kell did take a back seat to the President when he held his first press conference after the tour, as he stood at a podium with his seal on it and answered questions about what he hoped to talk about, and Kell was a bit surprised to hear that the reporters had already got wind of the looming showdown. “Do you have any comment about the rumors that the Chinese are preparing to levy sanctions against the United States?” a British reporter asked.

“Oh, yes, I certainly have a comment about that,” Walker said, gripping the podium. “The Chinese have accused us of intentionally blocking access to the fire dragons to all other governments. Well, I’m here to state right here, right now, that *we* didn’t make that decision. It was the fire dragons that asked us to make sure they were completely sequestered. Outside of four officials and the assigned guards of the perimeter fence, *nobody* has had any access to the dragons up on that peak. Not me, not the British, not the Russians, not the Indians, nobody. The dragons made it very clear to us when they asked us to use the volcano that their primary goal in all things is to be *left alone*, and let me tell you, it has been the exercise of ultimate discipline on my part to honor their wishes. Just like everyone else, I have so many questions that I’d like to ask that it’s not funny. Well, the dragons have given us this one day to let us in to see a little piece of their world, and I’ll have only slightly more access than the pool reporters that will be going with us.”

“President Walker speaks the truth,” Kell interrupted from the side. “The dragons asked for complete isolation, and the Americans were gracious enough to grant that request. Don’t blame them for them blocking access to us. They only do what we’ve asked them to do.”

That laid the foundation of what Kell knew was coming, at least from the Americans. He sat back down and lowered his head close to Jenny, whispering with her as President Walker continued to answer questions, and then Walker and the two pool reporters and their cameramen entered an SUV with the President’s Secret Service escort. Arlen Kent, General Steele, and Jenny climbed into a Hum-V behind it, and Kell bounded up to walk

beside the SUV holding Walker, ambling along and easily keeping up with the slow-moving vehicle. “Kell, might I introduce Gloria Brenner from Fox News and Ahmad Al-Benja Raouf from Al-Jazeera,” Walker said from the open window, something a President almost never got to enjoy. But, since the entire area was heavily secured, the SUV in which he was riding was one of the military trucks that Jenny and Kent had been using to drive back and forth to the peak.

“I should remind both of you of a few rules,” Kell told them as he walked with the SUV. “First, *don’t* pester the fire dragons. If they don’t want to talk to you, let them walk away. Second, there are only seven dragons up there that speak English with enough capacity to talk to you. Third, you’d better watch yourself around the fire dragon younglings. They can be very enthusiastic, they’re very playful, and the average youngling up there is the size of a Clydesdale horse. Some are much bigger. They won’t *mean* to hurt you, but you know how kids can be.” He glanced at Walker. “Understand that in dragon society, the home is a hallowed place whose sanctity is never violated. Since our dens don’t have doors, every dragon species has deeply ingrained customs about not entering the private den of another dragon. You won’t be able to get to the fire dragon dens without dying of heat stroke, but there are two dens in the area that you can reach. One is a small metal building set up near the main meeting tent, which is where the chromatic is sleeping, and the other is a burrow dug in a corner of the grounds, which is where the earth dragons are sleeping. Do *not* enter either of them without permission. If you want to look inside, we’ll let you, but it is the highest of affronts to enter the private den of a dragon uninvited. Outside of that, just be polite, and you’ll be treated with respect.”

“So, you’ll let us look inside the burrow?” Raouf asked.

Kell nodded. “Not that there’s anything in there, but if you want to see what a temporary earth dragon burrow looks like, we’ll let you look around. And I doubt that Prisma will care if you look in her building. There’s nothing in it either. The only reason they even set it up is because most dragons don’t feel comfortable sleeping outside in the open. It’s just a roof over her head to give her the feel that she’s in a den.”

“Easy enough to remember,” Raouf nodded.

The council members were waiting for them just inside the gates. They stood in a line near where the food trucks were parked, looking quite odd to Kell to see them lined up like that, the massive Hirrag and large Hinado, Jussa, and Sessara dwarfing Geon...to see them like that reinforced again just how small the earth drakes were compared to the rest of the dragons. Prisma stood to the side with the field agents, reminding him that she was quite petite as chromatics measured things; but then again, she hadn't even finished growing yet. Sella was also there, having come up while Kell was down at the command center, standing between Kammi and Prisma. The fire dragons were watching from a discreet distance, gathered up together in a throng, with Gressa walking over to the council dragons. The Secret Service, Hunters, and screened members of the Army guards roamed the fence with assault weapons prominently displayed. An agent opened the door for Walker and his wife, helping them out, and the reporters exited the SUV on the other side, the cameramen already shouldering their cameras and panning around.

“On behalf of the five races of dragons, we welcome the leader of the nation of America, his lifemate, and the two chosen historians into our company,” Sessara proclaimed in fairly decent English, nodding her head regally. No doubt she'd practiced that line. The earth dragons, Prisma, and Gressa then closed in with the council members as Walker approached, then stood in front of Geon.

“I'm honored to be given this chance to tour the peak and speak to you,” he answered, offering his hand to Geon. The earth drake gave him an amused look and reached out a single claw, which Walker grasped and shook like it was a hand. “You are Geon of the earth dragons, yes?”

“I am,” he nodded in accented English.

Walker went down the line, being introduced to the members of the council one by one, getting more and more towered over with every dragon he met, until he stood in front of Hirrag and had to crane his neck to look up

at the huge fire wyrm. Hirrag was the size of a small house, so his glowing red eyes were some five meters over Walker's head. Walker was a fairly tall man, but he only came up to halfway up Hirrag's upper foreleg. After the introductions, Walker and Julia were put in an ATV to ride beside the dragons as Sessara led them in a short tour of the exclusion zone, with the reporters in a second ATV and the cameras swinging in every direction, from the tents to the projector screens to the fire dragons padding at a distance to the ATVs, curious but keeping their distance. After the half hour tour, Walker and the reporters were brought into the conference tent they'd raised, where Walker, Kent, Steele, and Jenny would sit at a table facing the large open area where the dragons would sit. A large lunch was on the table waiting for them and the reporters, who would be allowed to observe part of the conference, but then would be given leave to wander the peak while Walker talked about the important things. Brenner and Raouf peppered them with questions as they ate, but the cameramen were getting footage of the dragons eating.

After lunch, the conference began. Kell listened in only half-heartedly as Walker talked about general goodwill and things like that, and the dragons professed a guarded interest in opening discreet communications with the human world. It was with the reporters in attendance that Jussa put on the table the request for the Americans to use their access to the U.N. to have the dragons declared a sentient species and their territory officially recognized as a sovereign nation under international law...but instead of claiming a landmass or island as home territory, Jussa instead claimed *ocean* as sovereign territory. "We are *water* dragons, that area of ocean *is* our home," he explained when Walker gave him a surprised look. "As much as the land of America is your home, where you live, work, play, and where you harvest your food, the ocean is *our* home. We don't require a large territory to support us, but like any sovereign nation, we would require that our borders be respected," Sella said as Jussa spoke in draconic beside her.

"Well, you do have something of a point," Walker said with a sober nod. "And I don't think it would be too difficult to introduce the proper

resolutions before the assembly. Just how much territory do you intend to claim?"

"Not much, an area roughly circular that is approximately two hundred kilometers in diameter," she replied for Jussa. "It is an area that is rarely used by humans as it is. There are no major shipping lanes through that area, so it would cause minimal problems for your people."

"Well, that's something we can work out," he promised.

Clever, clever Jussa.

They debated that for nearly two hours, working out the specifics of the resolution, then Jussa brought up the ideas of a game preserve somewhere in South America where a nation like Chile or Peru or Brazil would grant sky dragons the right to hunt. After discussing that idea for a while, they took a break. The reporters were more or less kicked out to be allowed to roam freely, and much to their annoyance, Jirran and Kammi were sent out to translate for them, and Gressa, Kell, and Sella were set to translate for all the council members. Walker took a drink of water, then fixed Jussa with a dry look. "That was pretty damn sneaky, dropping that on me in front of the reporters," he declared.

Jussa chuckled after Sella translated. "You should have expected it," Sella replied for him. "Now, on to important matters," she said, looking right at Jenny. "We would have all the magicians moved to that island that Jenny once told us about, the private one," Sella relayed. "That way we can come and go without attracting attention. We'll train them in magic, and they can also serve as the primary point of contact between us."

"I was going to suggest that very thing," Walker nodded as Julia scribbled on a pad beside him, taking notes for herself. "As soon as we close down shop here, the Hunters will be moving to Imakaii, and we'll set up both their training and a little diplomatic outpost where you can communicate with us. Now, Arlen mentioned that you had interest in opening trade?"

“There are some things that we need,” Geon said in English. “And there’s no other way to get them. Instead of getting them the way we usually do, we thought instead to barter for those things.”

“Well, what do you have to offer?” Walker asked.

“Gold,” Geon answered. “Gold salvaged from shipwrecks, as well as silver. At first, we’ll buy what we need with those things, which have value to your people. Once we’ve used up what gold and silver we have, we’ll discuss what we can trade in exchange for the materials we need. We have little, but I think we can find something of interest to you.”

“So, you’re opening the vaults,” Jenny mused to Kell.

“It does no good just sitting there,” Kell shrugged. “It’s why the water dragons scavenged it in the first place.”

“What do you need?”

“Kell,” Geon said, then he looked to Kell.

“We have a list, things we need to repair or replace what was destroyed during the riots,” Kell supplied. “But one thing we’re going to need immediately is food. There’s almost nothing left for the dragons on the island, and what we have stored underground won’t be enough to hold all of us over until we get the farms repaired and producing again. The farms are totally destroyed, and it’s going to take months just to get them to where we can plant crops.”

“That is our greatest need right now,” Hinado said, and Sella translated for him. “We will buy food from you, and once that need is met, we’ll barter for what the earth dragons need to rebuild what was lost.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that,” Walker nodded after hearing the translation. “You can get together with Arlen after I leave and work out exactly how much you think you need, and he can negotiate a fair price. You can also give us that list of what else you want to get, and we can hammer out an agreement for it.”

“Now, on to a matter that is of importance to both of us,” Jussa said. “There is one of your submarines laying on the bottom of the ocean near some of our fishing grounds.”

“It’s the *Appomattox*,” Kell supplied. “The water dragons found it a couple of months ago.”

“You found it? Where is it?” Walker asked quickly.

“It’s inside our claimed territory,” Sella said. “The ship is more or less intact, laying on an abyssal plain. We would wish to raise it so that you can reclaim it, and also to get that nuclear reactor out of the sea. The reactor is intact, but it is only a matter of time before the water causes it to breach.”

“I’ll need to talk to the Joint Chiefs about it, and naval specialists, to find out the easiest and *safest* way for you to move it and us to remove the nuclear material,” Walker answered. “But we can get it all arranged, Jussa. Give us a few days, and we’ll have a place and time for you.”

“That’s acceptable,” Jussa nodded.

They went back to the trade, as Walker felt out exactly how far the dragons were willing to go, as well as getting that detailed list of what the earth dragons needed to rebuild their farms and their factories. They then discussed Jussa’s proposals to have the U.N. recognize the dragons and also accede to their claim of territory in more detail. Then, they started to discuss China.

“They’re dead set on this,” Walker told them as he related a very heated exchange he’d had with Chinese President Deng Fao Xu. “The sanctions go into effect in four days unless we literally open up the exclusion zone to Chinese diplomats. There’s an entire platoon of them at the base of the volcano, and they try to argue their way past the first checkpoint at least twice a day.”

“Well, they’ll get their wings pinned back when you announce that we’re leaving,” Hinado said.

“It’s gone far beyond that, Hinado,” Kell supplied. “Chief’s had the department rifling through the Chinese intelligence network since Yancy shared what he had with me. The intelligence we’ve gathered on them makes it clear that they’re in this to the end. They’re marshalling their military forces, and they’re planning an attack.”

“We’ve gotten the same intel,” Walker nodded. “But an attack on who?”

“Us,” Kell replied. “Why do you think Jussa was so intent on having the U.N. recognize us? The Chinese Politbureau realized what we already knew, and that’s that there’s no *legal* ramification for invading our island. It’s not owned by any nation, and we have no real status in your law. They believe they can simply annex the island and forcibly make us Chinese citizens. The real thing they’re after, though, is magic. They believe that if they control the dragons, they’ll control magic. And they’d have us to teach them magic...and if we refuse, then they have the books on magic we think they possess, part of either an abandoned sky dragon library or books on magic the Chinese magicians left behind. They’d only need to learn draconic, learn magic on their own, and use their control over us to prevent the dragons from teaching anyone else.”

“That seems a somewhat hard thing to do, since dragons can fly,” Julia noted. “How could China hold you on the island when you can just fly away?”

“Not all of us can fly, and we will not abandon the earth dragons,” Jussa declared. “The island must be defended, because the earth dragons have no way to escape.”

“Well, one option is to move the earth dragons somewhere not quite so vulnerable,” Jenny offered, giving Kell a slight look.

“Good luck with that, Jenny,” Kell snorted. “We won’t run from the Chinese right into your arms, so you can do the same thing they intend to do.”

She flushed slightly. “We wouldn’t make you do anything!”

“Right,” Kell drawled. “You just worry about the Chinese turning the global economy on its ear and you let us worry about the rest of it.”

“What do you intend to do?” Walker asked.

“The Chinese will learn quickly that their boats are at our mercy, and the skies are the domain of the sky dragons,” Jussa replied after hearing the question from Sella. “They will never get a single soldier on our island, and we can do such a thing without harming a single human if we so wish. And once we restore the magic that cloaks the island from sight, they will have no idea where to send what ships they have left that still work.”

“Since you’ve kept just what we can do quiet, the Chinese have no idea what they’re about to get into,” Kell said with dark amusement. “Even if they did manage to land an invading force, they’d find themselves up against a whole lot of very angry earth dragons. Nothing that stands on the ground is safe from us.”

“We could support—“

“No,” Geon interrupted the President. “If you get in war with China, it could ruin the entire world.”

“Geon’s right,” Steele said delicately. “If we got into a war with China, it would be World War Three, Mister President. It would drag almost every nation on earth into the war on one side or the other. It might even turn nuclear.”

“You let us worry about protecting our territory,” Hinado said calmly. “You worry about the human side of it.”

“The Chinese are trying to intimidate you into doing nothing about their plans,” Kell said. “They’re willing to threaten war if you get in their way, and they think you’ll blink. If you *don’t* blink, they feel that there’s too much ocean between you and them, and your citizens and your military are too exhausted from fighting three wars against terrorism to be a major

threat. They don't want a war, but they'll start one to get what they want, take as much as they can, like Taiwan, and then sue for peace the instant it looks like the American people are turning against the war and keep everything they've taken. They see it as a reasonable risk."

"We wish to be recognized as a sovereign state," Hirrag finally spoke, which Gressa translated. "Allow us to prove that we need no help to enforce our borders."

"Well...alright. I don't like it, but if that's the way you want to do it, then that's the way we'll do it. But, I am going to put all Pacific forces on high alert, just in case you need our assistance," he told them. "That, and we have treaties with Taiwan, Japan, and Korea that we have to honor."

"Just have a fleet of tugboats kept ready, Mister President," Sella said on her own. "Water dragon tactics against ships are to break their propellers and their rudders. When they cannot move themselves and cannot steer even if they can, they are no longer any threat to us."

Walker laughed, and Steele nodded professionally as he mulled that over. "So we might have to go get them. And we'll have a bunch of Chinese ships to inspect before they get their own tugs over here to tow them home."

"What you do with them isn't our concern," Hinado said. "The sky dragons will deal with any Chinese planes that violate our airspace. We can't be as gentle as the water dragons can be, but we will turn back or bring down any plane that tries to enter the area we've claimed as sovereign territory. We can protect what is ours, Mister President, and that leaves you to worry about the financial moves."

"And we can help you there," Geon spoke up. "The department has its claws into quite a few Chinese computer networks. The department will share information with Yancy and the Hunters, who can pass it along so you have an advantage. In this, our interests will coincide, so cooperation is in order."

“How much penetration?” Jenny asked, looking at Kell.

“Enough to scare the crap out of them when we start to move,” Kell answered, which made all five humans laugh. “The Chinese have been hacking and plundering any computer they could crack for nearly thirty years. It’s about time for them to get a taste of their own medicine.”

“Well, I’m not going to stop you,” Walker chuckled. “I just ask that you restrain unleashing the overt chaos unless war is officially declared. That kind of thing *is* an act of war, and they’ll blame us when it starts to happen. Nobody outside this little slice of volcano and the White House know exactly what the department is and what it can do.”

“You’d better be ready for it on your side as well,” Kell warned. “They *already* have hackers trying to break into things like your power grid. If you enter war with China, half of it will be fought over the internet.”

“That’s her department,” Walker said, pointing at Jenny.

“It used to be, Mister President. You have me doing something else now,” she chuckled. “But we can help when we’re not busy with our other project. The four eggheads on the team *will* have internet access on the island, won’t we?”

“Of course,” Walker replied with a light look. “The island is actually quite luxurious, I’m told. It was built to hide people who had certain... expectations.”

“Well, at least I’ll be in a pampered prison.”

“You’re too important not to pamper, Colonel,” Walker chuckled. “And I think this is a good time to stop for a break. The reporters are probably getting antsy out there, I’d like a coffee and a run to the nearest bathroom, and I hear you have a gift for me?”

“We’ll have to go get it,” Geon said, glancing at Kell.

The President went to the portable bathroom the military had set up by the front gate, but Julia Walker followed Kell and Geon as they headed

towards the lava pools, her guards hurrying behind her. “I have a few questions I wanted to ask you, Kell,” she said in a gentle but insistent voice.

“Well, ask before you have to turn back, Misses Walker,” he answered.

“Why are the earth dragons so *different* from all the other dragons?” she asked. “And it’s not just the fact that you don’t use magic. There’s something *fundamentally* different about you. The other dragons all have similarities, but not you.”

Geon and Kell looked at her and her determined expression, and both of them chuckled. “You are a very clever human, Misses Walker,” Geon told her. “Yes, the earth dragons, *very* different from other dragons. I think we’ll leave it there.”

“Well, we can be a *little* more forthcoming, Geon,” Kell said. “The earth dragons are descended from a different ancestor than the other dragons,” he told her. “They’re all related because the four other races descended from a common origin. Well, before the other dragons came to be, there was their ancestor dragon race, and *us*. They changed over time. We didn’t. We’re like the sharks in your ocean. Nature found something that worked, and here we are, still the same after all this time.”

“Ohhhh, alright,” she said. “That does answer many of my questions. But I do have other questions. Like this,” she said, reaching up and touching the base of Kell’s horn. “What caused this change?”

“It turned out this was how our elders looked before, before,” Geon answered, reaching the limits of his English.

“We’ve all been living underground long enough for us to revert, to use a term,” Kell added.

“What could cause a change this dramatic?”

“An increase in minerals in our diet,” Kell said lightly.

“You can *eat* rock?”

They both nodded. “It doesn’t feed us like food, but it does fill an empty belly,” Geon told her easily.

“Hmmm,” she pondered, running her hand along his horn as they walked. “And that caused your horns to ossify?”

“What does that word mean?”

“Turn to stone, in a way,” Kell answered. “You have quite a vocabulary, Misses Walker.”

“I’d hope my doctorate would have taught me *something*,” she said with a light smile.

Kell chuckled. “English?”

“Education,” she answered. “And I read a lot of mystery novels.”

“Uh oh, we’d better run, Geon,” Kell noted slyly. “I feel an interrogation coming.”

“Just answer a couple more questions,” she said, grasping his horn and stopping. Kell turned his head to the side and stopped rather than drag the First Lady around on her low heels, which wouldn’t look very friendly. She walked down the length of his body and reached down, then tugged on one of the clear crystal spikes in his tail, one of the half-grown ones near the tip. “I take it these changed colors for the same reason?”

“More or less,” Kell answered, lifting the tip of his tail so she wasn’t leaning over.

“But it comes back to the original question I had, Kell. You’re the only species on this entire planet I’ve ever heard of that can grow mineral crystals like these out of their bodies. Most advanced life can produce certain mineral compounds, but not in a purely crystalline form to this degree. “My question is, how can a *nonmagical* race of dragon grow something so *unnatural*?”

“Unnatural for *you*, not for *us*,” Kell said simply.

Luckily for him, a distraction flitted down and landed beside them. Julia looked at Prisma with open curiosity as she folded her wings and looked down at Kell with a slightly amused expression. “Misses Walker, you remember Prisma,” Kell said as the chromatic craned her neck down to get her head closer to Julia’s face. She gave a slight gasp and recoiled, however, when her hand shifted on Kell’s spike and its sharp edge cut into her hand. She looked at her hand, which had a neat, nearly incision-like cut across the palm, and a handkerchief was being wrapped around it by one of her agent guards before it could even really start to bleed.

Prisma’s attention, however, wasn’t on her hand, it was on Kell’s tail. Julia’s blood oozed down the edge of his spike, then it was *absorbed* into the crystal. The spike seemed to flush pink, then it turned blood red with unnatural speed, shuddered, then his tail released its anchors on the spike of its own volition. It chimed to the ground, leaving the First Lady to gawk at it.

“Curious,” Prisma mused, picking up the spike and regarding it with her glowing eyes. “A most curious reaction.”

“That’s a new one for us, too,” Geon said in draconic.

“Not entirely shocking, since your spikes are composed of elements of your blood. It seems that your spikes are, well, *compatible* with human blood,” the chromatic noted, then she presented the spike to Julia. “For you.”

“What happened to it? Why did it turn red?” she asked, taking the spike, which was about half a meter long, ending in a nasty point on one end but with a more rounded base.

“We’re discussing that at the moment,” Kell answered in English.

“I would think to have Hinado inspect this human, Kell,” Prisma told him. “I suspect she has magical aptitude.”

“He can do that, but he’ll have to touch her,” Kell answered, then switched to English. “We’d like you to meet Hinado, Misses Walker. Maybe

he can shed some light on it.”

“The sky dragon? Certainly,” she replied as the agent tied the kerchief around her hand.

“This might need stitches, ma’am,” he noted.

“Prisma, can you do anything about that cut?” Geon asked.

“I know a little healing magic, but not much,” she replied, rearing up to sit on the base of her tail. The move made her suddenly as tall as a one story house, and she scrunched her lithe body down so her forepaws were within reach of the First Lady. “Healing magic is usually taught after academy, but my father has a natural talent for it,” she explained as she gestured with a single finger, and the kerchief untied itself. “My own talents lie in other directions, but he taught me how to heal minor cuts and hurts before I entered academy.” She brought a forepaw up and licked one finger, then she leaned down and touched it to Julia’s hand. The bloody cut seemed to shudder under her finger, and when she lifted it, the cut was gone. The First Lady cleaned the blood off her palm, then regarded her healed hand with surprise and excitement. “I had no idea you could do *that*,” she gasped.

“Healing is highly advanced magic,” Prisma said after Geon translated for her.

“What are dragons capable of healing?” she asked quickly.

“You’d be better served discussing it with the water dragons, Misses Walker,” Kell told her. “Only water dragons and chromatics can heal, and at least you have one water dragon around that speaks English.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“Certain dragons have talents in certain magicks,” Prisma explained after hearing the translation, and Kell translated back. “Water dragons have natural talents in magic that protects and defends, and healing magic is by its very nature *protective*. Chromatics have no singular focus on their

magic, so only water dragons and chromatics have enough magical connection to the magic required to heal to bring it about.”

“So, sky dragons and fire dragons can’t heal?”

“No. But water dragons can’t do things that sky dragons can do, who can’t do things that fire dragons can do, who can’t do things that water dragons can do. Chromatics can do *anything*, but chromatics have individual talents in differing fields of magic. My own talent is with floating magic, and my father’s talent was in healing magic. But, when it comes to specific magic tied to a dragon’s natural aptitude, even we chromatics cannot match the power and expertise of other dragons in their natural field. When you need the strongest magic in an area of aptitude for another dragon, that dragon is best for the task.”

“That answers *many* questions I had,” Julia said with a smile. “Thank you,” she added, flexing her fingers.

Prisma nodded with a gentle expression and dropped back down to all fours.

“Can I keep this?” she asked Kell, holding out the half-grown tail spike, now blood red.

“Only so long as *you* keep it,” he answered. “If I find out it’s in some CIA lab somewhere, you and me are going to have words.”

“Heaven forbid,” she chuckled softly.

“We should wrap it so it doesn’t cut you again, ma’am,” one of her guards proposed.

Julia followed the three of them to the lava pools, getting as close as she could without burning herself, then she laughed richly when Kell and Geon brought the statue of President Walker out, him sitting at his desk. “He’ll be thrilled,” she told them. “It’s very good. Who made it?”

“I did,” Kell answered. “It’s not the best, but it’s good enough.”

“I know just where Jack will put it,” she smiled.

They presented the statue to President Walker by the conference tent, as he spoke with the other dragons and the reporters were there to cover it. He laughed delightedly as Geon and Kell carried the statue over and set it down gently, and then went over and leaned on the desk and looked at his basalt self with bright eyes. “Amazing! You made this?”

“We thought you might like it, Mister President,” Jirran said lightly. “Kell made it yesterday.”

“*You* made this, Kell? It’s amazing!”

“It’s passable,” he said modestly.

“You could make quite a lot of money as an artist, Kell,” Julia told him as she joined her husband by the stone sculpture. “Some art collectors would pay millions for something they could say was made by a dragon.”

“That’s an interesting concept,” Geon noted.

Prisma went over and reared up, then whispered close to Hinado’s ear. He gave her a surprised look and glanced at Julia Walker, then nodded and stepped closer and brought his long neck into play to bring his head close to the President and First Lady. He let her brush up against the side of his head, flinched a little when she realized he was that close, then smiled and patted him on the side of his long muzzle. “It does look lifelike,” he noted, which Gressa translated. He looked at Prisma and gave a single slight nod.

Julia Walker was a magician.

They continued the conference, but now they had the reporters watching on, so they discussed far less important matters. It was there that the fire dragons announced that they’d be leaving, doing it for the benefit of the reporters, and they trotted several young fire dragons in to meet the President who had “won” the various competitions. Walker discussed means by which the dragons could keep in contact with humanity, but the dragons were quite firm about such things. “We understand that humans are

curious about us, but we feel that the human world simply isn't *ready* for us yet," Jussa said through Sella. "Yes, we feel that there must be communication, but we also feel that things must be taken slowly and carefully. This is new and unexplored territory for both our species, and it must be done the right way."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be sure about things, esteemed council member," Walker answered.

"We also do not wish to interact with the human world until your United Nations confers upon us the protections and legal rights they afford other sentient beings on this world," Jussa continued. "For there to be any expansion of communications between you and us, we must be sure that your laws grant us the same protections it grants humans, and your nations respect and honor the boundaries of our territory, as they would any other nation."

"Again, not unreasonable," Walker stated with a nod. "I'll have our people in the United Nations introduce the resolutions as quickly as possible."

Then, something happened that Kell thought would *never* happen. Over the vociferous objections of the Secret Service, Hinado took both Jack and Julia Walker up into the air, a single touch conferring into them his floating magic, and he zoomed around the peak with the two humans stuck on the ends of his fingers by magical adhesion, which prevented a banking move from sending them hurtling to a grisly death. He flew them around for about five minutes, then set them down gently as they both panted a little. "I'm *so* glad I didn't wear a dress," Julia remarked, which made Jack burst out into laughter.

They had nearly an hour before the second press conference, which was spent with the President and First Lady more or less mingling with the dragons, meeting the fire dragon females, learning just how much fire dragons loved football as Kell translated a heated debate over the 53 man roster that the L.A. Dragons had finally reached, discussing which cuts were

wise and which players *should have* been cut. Sessara demonstrated fire dragon breath to them, unleashing a hellish inferno, a tightly compact cone of pure fire that rotated about itself, then expanded as it moved away from her, until it was nearly ten meters wide at its end terminus, some forty meters away. The humans were highly impressed by that, but all of them, even the reporters, quieted down and watched when Jussa had Prisma demonstrate magic to them, showing them what the dragons felt were harmless tricks. She floated the statue of President Walker across the zone, putting it on a flatbed truck. She created shimmering lights, she produced fire from her forepaws, then she froze a thrown bucket of water in midair, the ice crumbling into irregular shapes when it hit the ground. As she did so, Sella explained the basic rules of magic to President Walker, Julia, and the reporters, explaining what could and could not be done.

“So, there won’t be a sudden glut of gold on the international markets to coincide with a shortage of lead?” Walker asked lightly.

“No, Mister President, that is simply an old legend,” Sella answered.

“I’m more interested in the concept of life,” Julia said, looking up at Sella. “Magic can’t kill?”

“Not directly. That is not allowed,” she answered. “There is no spell or magic that causes the instant death of a living thing, nor can it transform what is alive into something that is dead. There is no turning a living thing to stone, nor is there an *avada kedavra*,” she said whimsically, which made Julia laugh. “Magic can kill *indirectly*, however. What the magic creates may itself be lethal, such as fire. Magic cannot take life, nor can it bestow it. There is no turning rocks into birds, just as there is no turning birds into rocks.”

“But you could change one living thing into another?”

“Within boundaries,” she replied. “If you changed me into a human, I would still weigh what I do now. The magic can’t alter mass.”

“Interesting,” Walker noted, looking up at her. “That magic can’t just ignore physics.”

“Quite the contrary, most forms of magical energy are subject to physical law,” she replied as Kell and Kammi padded over with Hirrag hovering close to them. “Magic is *part* of nature, therefore it is bound by the same laws that nature is, at least mostly. There are exceptions. Part of being a magician is knowing when your magic is subject to physics, and when it is not.”

“Very interesting,” Walker said, tapping his chin. “But why can’t you turn someone into stone? Wouldn’t it go back to being alive after the spell wears off?”

Sella smiled slightly. “It delves into things that your Christian religion would find heretical, Mister President.”

“Well, you have my permission to attempt to rock my theological foundation, Sella.”

“Very well,” she said, sitting on her haunches. “All living things have a soul. From a bacteria, to a fly, to a snake, to a dog, to a human, to a dragon, even to the planet itself. A living thing has a soul, the spark of life, which is tied to its *living* body. Separate the body from the soul, and the body ceases to live, which would happen if you changed a living thing into stone,” she said evenly, looking at the President. “If you theoretically *could* change a living thing to stone, you have rendered the body incapable of housing its soul, and thus, its life instantly ends. But magic will not permit such a thing,” she said. “Magic is the energy of life, and as such, the direct taking of life is forbidden.”

“Yes, that’s going to cause something of a row among religious circles,” Walker said blandly. “That dragons believe that everything has a soul.”

“I warned you, Mister President,” she said with a slight smile. “We dragons believe in what you could call evolutionary reincarnation,

somewhat similar to Buddhist beliefs, that souls return to life over and over, learning from each life, gaining wisdom, evolving. A soul moves up through the ranks of life as it grows, until it reaches its pinnacle, human or dragon. A soul may regress back to a prior form of life if it so wishes to experience something it feels it didn't the first time around, but the vast majority of souls return as either equivalent life, or the next rung on the ladder if they have gained enough wisdom to move up."

"So dragons believe that even things like trees have souls?" Julia asked.

"*Anything* that lives has a soul," Sella answered. "The soul is the life force itself. Without the soul, there is no life. Simple forms of life have very simple souls, unaware, unevolved. They are more a collection of instincts and impulses than rational beings. But over time, they may gain those things, and when they do, they return as higher forms of life."

"That's a very strange concept, if you don't mind my saying," Julia noted.

"It is the simplest of things, Misses Walker," Sella said calmly, giving her a kindly look.

"Simple as it may be, it's still going to cause quite a bit of debate, in more than one religion," Walker noted dryly. "And it makes me wonder why there are still microbes after billions of years."

"Because of two things, Mister President. For one, there are not just a set number of souls on this world. Life demands procreation, and souls are born from the life energy of Gaia just as your children are born of your females, which begin their journey at the bottom of the ladder, as a single cell organism. For another, not *every* soul evolves. Some are just not capable of it. There are microbes in this world that have souls that have existed as such for *billions* of years, because they are simply not capable of higher awareness, no matter how much time they are given to grow. Just as humans have varying degrees of intelligence and wisdom, so do the souls of all things as well. Humans and dragons represent the most elite of all souls,

those who have evolved to such a degree that they have achieved self awareness and sentience, souls that can *reason*, can *think*. We are also among the oldest souls on this world,” she added, looking at Prisma. “We have had far more time to evolve than other souls.”

“Can magic affect a soul?” Julia asked.

Sella shook her head. “Souls are immune to such things, because they are not real.”

“But—“

“It is one of the contradictions of magic,” she explained patiently. “Magic can only affect what is *real*. It cannot affect emotions or thoughts or feelings, because those are not tangible things. A soul is itself intangible in scope. Though it exists, it exists in an altered state that physical forces cannot affect. Though it is a real thing, to magic, it is not real, therefore it cannot be affected. That is why magic that would instantly kill won’t work. The magic can’t evict the soul to render the body dead, or change it into something non-living. The magic can’t affect the soul, and the anchors the soul has to the body causes the spell to fail.”

“That is a very *curious* thing,” Julia mused, looking at her husband. “So, magic can’t make me fall in love with someone?”

Sella shook her head. “Nor can it hear your thoughts, nor make you sad or angry or happy. Those are thoughts and emotions, which are not *real* in the respect that they are *tangible*. But, magic can make you see and hear that which is not there, or send a chill up your spine, or show you an image that might induce fear indirectly. Magic can affect the *senses*, but it cannot affect the *mind*.”

“That’s a very narrow distinction,” Gloria Brenner injected.

“It is, and there is some leeway in both directions, in a limited manner,” Sella agreed, looking over at her and her cameraman. “For example, the image magic might show to someone could make them angry, or frightened, because it is an emotional response to what their senses are

telling them is there. It's an indirect use of magic to accomplish that which is impossible with a direct use of magic. The rules of magic are strict, but a practiced magician knows where those rules can be bent."

Prisma performed several other minor tricks, the most amusing of which was turning Julia's hair green, as Kell caught up a little with Kammi. "What did the reporters do while we were in conference?"

"Run around mostly," she replied in a low tone. "Take some footage, and a few dragons gave them interviews. Then they filmed a bunch of hatchlings playing tail soccer."

"What is that?"

"A game they made up while they were here. Smacking around a steel ball with their tails. They have rules and everything," she chuckled. "The Syrian's pretty sharp, he asked a bunch of questions I didn't want to answer."

"Like?"

"Like how every adult fire dragon around would take a lurching step forward every time Raouf touched me," she replied with a grunt. "He asked why they're so defensive. I told him it's because we're tiny compared to other dragons, as small as their hatchlings, and it brings out their maternal instincts."

"Clever," Kell chuckled. "So, he knows the earth dragons are the runts?"

"We live underground, being as big as Hirrag would make that a bit tricky," she replied easily. "And I told him that too. It's not protected information."

"Nope."

"Then he grilled me about things I really didn't think anyone would ever ask, like why we're camouflaged."

“What?”

“Seriously. He said we wouldn’t have natural camouflage markings unless we had a reason to hide from something, then he tried to find out just why we have camouflage markings. Like I’d know? We’ve *always* been like this...well, most of us,” she chuckled. “Trekka and your mother certainly don’t have camouflage markings.”

“Weird that he’d ask about that.”

“He’s sharp. He asked what kind of light sourcing we use in our underground burrows, since he saw no lamps in there when we let them look around.”

“Well, he was a war correspondent, I guess he’s trained himself to be observant. That’s something of a requirement to live in a warzone. Did the fire dragons get a similar grilling?”

“As much as he could, since I was translating,” she chuckled.

Eventually, however, they finally reached the end of the visit. At exactly 7:00pm, Walker said goodbye to the dragons, got back in the SUV with the other humans, and they filed out. He would conduct another press conference down at the press center, answering questions about his visit, but their part of the official visit was complete. Almost as soon as the gates were closed, Hirrag turned around and started telling everyone to get ready to leave the morning after next...except for the earth dragons. They were returning as soon as it got dark, and Sella had already left to get her parents to come up to the exclusion zone.

“Well, that was nervous and enlightening,” Geon noted as he came up to Kell and Kammi, Jirran just behind him. “The humans let a few things slip.”

“And I’m sure we did too,” Jirran replied. “Are we going back now?”

“As soon as it gets dark,” Geon nodded. “Hirrag doesn’t want us out in the open any longer than necessary. The fluffies know we’re here.”

“How?”

“Magic, I’d wager,” he shrugged. “But Jussa got a very nasty magical message from the council chromatic about two hours ago. If not for Hinado, this place would probably be crawling with sky dragons, but he told them any sky dragon that dared overfly the island wouldn’t be going back in one piece.”

“Wow. Glad the humans didn’t see *that*,” Kammi mused.

“You and me both,” Geon agreed. “So, as soon as it gets dark, Surrall and Shii will be taking the four of us back. Prisma’s going with us, she’s in just as much danger as we are if the chromatics catch up to her. From what I heard, they don’t just want her dragged in front of their elders, the council chromatic wants her *dead*.”

“Woah,” Kell breathed.

“No chromatic has ever defied the elders, and they don’t want her setting any precedents,” Geon grunted.

“Will she be safe going back by herself?” Kammi asked. “I mean, last time we had a bunch of water dragons and Hinado with us.”

“The water dragons will be there,” Kell told her. “I seriously doubt that they’ll send us back with *only* Surrall and Shii. We should be alright.”

“Well, let’s get ready to go, if only so we can be out from underfoot while the fire dragons get ready,” Geon said.

The Hunters took notice of the earth dragons moving off as a group, and the tall female Petrovski and Michaels hurried over to them. “Well, it’s all over. Are you guys staying tonight?” she asked.

Geon shook his head. “We have much to do,” he replied in accented English. “We need to get home.”

“Yancy already told us what happened in the conference,” Michaels told them as they approached the burrow. “We’re going to be moved to that

island as soon as the fire dragons go back. From there, while we wait for things to get set up so we can be trained, we'll be playing defense against the Chinese. They promised us trunk access," he said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"Work, pft, you should see the pool," Petrovski scoffed.

"They showed us pictures of the island, and wow," Michaels laughed. "Big swanky mansion, huge pool, private beach, servants, even a full eighteen hole golf course that takes up the rest of the island."

"Sounds nice," Kammi said. "Guess you'll get to see Petrovski in a bikini."

"They've seen more than what a bikini shows," she snorted, which made Michaels grin and chuckle. "I'm not afraid to show off what God gave me."

"We have only one locker room, and Olivia wasn't afraid to come out from the partition separating her and Jenny's showers," he chuckled.

"Why Petrovski, you bad girl," Kammi noted.

"I have six brothers and I grew up in a small house," she laughed. "Modesty wasn't always possible, for them or me and my mother."

"Now, if only I knew what it was like to wear clothes."

"You're already wearing a full suit of body armor," Michaels quipped, patting her scaled shoulder, just in front of her wingjoint.

"And don't you forget it," she said slyly. "Any news on the Chinese while we were busy?"

"Nothing really," Petrovski replied. "Derringer is already en route to the island to start setting it up for us, along with Price. Keeping him away from you," she chuckled. "The two of us leave in the morning to help, and the rest of the Hunters will follow after the fire dragons leave."

“Damn, I had so many plans for him,” Kammi growled, which made them laugh.

“And that’s why he’s been redeployed, to save him from your tender mercy, Kammi,” Michaels drawled.

“Her mercy has way too many sharp pointy ends to be tender,” Jirran drawled, which made her grin impishly at him. “We’ll have to set up some contacts with you when you settle in. If the Chinese make any moves, we’ll need to be able to share information.”

“We’ll work something out while we try to hack each other’s networks,” Petrovski grinned, which made Kell chuckle.

Shii and Surrall landed somewhat awkwardly about twenty meters in front of them, stretching their wings out a little before folding them back, and Kell nuzzled each of them fondly when he reached them. “Matriarch, Patriarch, is everything ready?” he asked in English.

“We’ll be leaving as soon as it’s fully dark,” Shii replied. “Are the earth dragons prepared?”

“We ready to go, Shii,” Geon answered.

“Petrovski, Michaels, might I present Matriarch Shii and Patriarch Surrall, leaders of the pod of water dragons that live beside my farm,” Kell introduced, nudging his muzzle to them in turn. “They’re very old friends of my family.”

“He is our mud dragon,” Shii said affectionately, nudging Kell with her shoulder, then putting a paw up and over his shoulders. Since she was well over a meter higher at the shoulder than him, it wasn’t hard for her to do. “Did the conference go well?”

“It seemed to,” Kell answered as Surrall seemed to stare at Petrovski a little bit. “Jussa represented our cause very well.”

“As he should, since he’s on the council,” Shii sniffed.

“Not much time,” Surrall noted, looking at the sky. “We need Prisma.”

“I’ll go get her,” Kammi said, then she turned and bounded towards where the other dragons were clustered around Hirrag.

About half an hour later, the earth dragons, Prisma, and their water dragon escorts were gathered by the western fence, with the members of the council and two fire dragons. Hirrag was giving the fire dragons orders, for they would be flying higher overhead with Hinado on the way back, using Prisma and the gibbous moon to navigate, flying a slow patrol to protect the earth and water dragons from aerial attack. Hirrag had been quite serious about protecting the earth dragons, and just because they were returning to safety didn’t mean he wouldn’t make sure they got there even when they were supposedly in a safe place. Jenny rode up to them on an ATV and climbed off, then gave Kell a last fond hug. “Well, he announced it to the world, guys. Everyone knows that the dragons are leaving the morning after next.”

“Good, that should give the Chinese some pause,” Kell said.

“And our U.N. resolutions?”

“Will be introduced to the General Assembly as soon as they’re written and you approve them,” she answered.

“That will be the department’s burden,” Shii noted, looking at Kell, Kammi, and Jirran.

“We already have channels open,” Jirran answered. “The President and Secretary Kent have an email account they can use to get the files to us.”

“That’s usually all we need, you know,” Jenny said with a slight smile.

“Maybe against idiots,” Jirran retorted, which made Kammi snicker.

“It was good to see you guys again,” Jenny told them, patting Kammi on the shoulder. “Will you come visit at Imakaii?”

“I think I can manage it, at least once we get things settled back home,” Kell answered. “If they let me, anyway,” he chuckled, looking at the two fire dragons.

“Yes, I noticed that,” Jenny said, glancing at the fire dragons. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not something we can explain here and now,” Jirran answered. “Let’s just say that the chromatics aren’t going quietly.”

“Yes, that’s what waits for us at home,” Geon grunted. “The chromatics are only thing standing in the way of a treaty.”

“I’m not entirely surprised,” Jenny said, glancing impulsively at Prisma, who didn’t understand a word of what was being said. “But they may change their mind when Sessara and the females return.”

“Good luck with that,” Kell snorted. “They see capitulating to our demands to be akin to surrendering their rulership on top of being the ultimate humiliation, and they’ll fight to the bitter end. You know how they are.”

“All too well,” Jenny nodded. “At least all but one, anyway,” she said, smiling in Prisma’s direction.

“Yes, we rather like our pet chromatic,” Kammi chuckled. “Who’d’ve thought that a fluffy could be cool?”

“It’s dark enough,” Surrall said in draconic. “We need to be on our way.”

“Alright, Patriarch,” Jenny said in accented draconic. “It was good to see you again.”

“And you, Jenny,” he replied with a kind smile. “You must come to the island soon.”

“I would love to very much,” she answered immediately.

“The winds are favorable for the earth drakes to glide down,” Hinado said, his head high and looking up. “It should save us all time.”

“I love being a living hang glider,” Kammi quipped, stretching out her wings. “We can take off from that knob to the south.”

“Alright, I’ll let you guys get out of here,” Jenny said, patting Jirran. “Be careful on the way home.”

“We will. Gaia embrace you, Jenny,” Jirran replied, patting her on the shoulder with a single finger.

Jenny said farewell to each of them in turn, and then the five earth drakes jumped the fence, got a running start, and vaulted out over a steep drop-off on the south side of the fenced compound. Kell’s wings caught the upward thermals blowing in from the ocean, then he banked gently to the west with Hinado hovering protectively over them. The other drakes followed him down, where instead of landing on the shore, he glided directly out over the ocean, over a sailboat heading for port, and then saw a cluster of water dragons looking up at him. He flared his wings out to stall a little, then folded them and dove smoothly into the water, then surfaced in the middle of the ten water dragons, eight drakes and two wyrms. One of the drakes was Ralla, to whom he swam over. “How did it go?” Ralla asked.

“Fairly well,” he answered. “What’s going on back home?”

“Nothing good,” he replied. “I just arrived to bring word, there was too much to send by magical message. The chromatics found one of the air vents down into your city.”

“So *that’s* what they were looking for!” Kell said, slapping his wings on the water a little. “What happened after that?”

“The earth dragons blocked it off from their side to keep the chromatics from sending anything down. But they won’t find any other air vents. Most of them are diffused fissures all through the caldera, according to Jukra, and the main air vent is actually the water tube, a lot of air comes

in with the stream that pours down the tube. There are only two real vents that the chromatics can find and exploit, and Jukra blocked them both.”

“Well, that’s good. What else is going on?”

“There’s chaos among the chromatics right now,” he answered.

“You mean more than usual?”

“I mean they’re on the verge of fighting *each other*,” Ralla answered, and Kammi surfaced beside them. “There’s a rift in the upper levels of chromatic society right now. The council is dealing with a renegade chromatic elder that is openly defying them. He was once on their council of ruling dragons, but resigned. Well, he’s back, and he’s rallying the chromatics to sack the council chromatic and the rest of the ruling council, claiming that they’re acting against the best interests of all dragon kind... which is true. The sages won’t take sides in either direction, so there’s no real guidance.”

“Holy Gaia,” Kell breathed, as Kammi gaped and Prisma hovered just over the water’s surface.

“Why won’t the sages intervene?” she asked. “They wouldn’t permit that kind of infighting!”

“We don’t know, but they won’t support either side,” Ralla answered. “The council chromatic has most of the older chromatics on his side, but this rebel has virtually all the younger chromatics backing him. It seems that he teaches in their academy, and used his position to sway the youngers to his side.”

“It’s *him*?” Prisma gasped. “Our professor?”

“I would guess so,” Ralla answered as Geon and Jirran joined them. “He’s calling for the council chromatic and the council to step down, and in return, they’re trying to silence him. Word is that the chromatics loyal to the council have orders to kill him on sight.”

“That doesn’t seem like it’s much of a match, if it’s the older chromatics against the younger ones,” Kammi noted. “I mean, the older chromatics know a lot more magic, and since the four of us came out, didn’t it recharge them?”

“Not *that* much,” Prisma replied. “You four coming out really only extended the time before magic fades. The only ones who benefit from your being outside are dragons who are physically close to you.”

“Like us,” Shii said as she landed lightly in the water.

“Magic won’t restore to full strength until some nine days *after* all earth dragons come out from underground,” Prisma relayed. “I had leisure to calculate the time before the conference, after conferring with Elder Hinado.”

“Well, I guess that gives the youngers more of a chance to overthrow their elders,” Kammi noted lightly. “If the magic of the elders is weakened, it puts them on a more level playing field.”

“It’s not a good thing, Kammi,” Geon said grimly. “If the chromatics are engaged in an internal power struggle, there’s no guarantee that they’ll accept our demands, and we *will not* come out until *all* dragons agree to them. In reality, this dispute only helps the chromatics against accepting the agreement.”

“Just so,” Hinado agreed as he floated down near the water. “With the chromatics divided, it stalls the peace process. And we can’t afford that right now, not with the threat of the Chinese trying to invade the island.”

“We’ll have to move on without the chromatics for now,” Prisma sighed. “Honored Jussa seemed quite competent in role of leader. We should simply name him the new leader of the council of dragons and eject the chromatics until such time that they are united in common leadership, be whoever that is. If anything, that will further infuriate the council chromatic, being removed from his own council, and give my revered teacher more of a chance to wrest power away from him.”

“I know that couldn’t be easy for you to say,” Kammi said compassionately, looking at Prisma’s grim expression.

“They are my people,” she said with stoicism.

“We can discuss this while we move,” Surrall declared. “We have to get the earth dragons back underground before sunrise.”

“True. Farann, Dorrage, stay about a thousand *dram* up. I’ll be higher up keeping watch. Remember, the chromatics know the earth dragons are outside, so keep a high vigil, they may have scouts out looking for us to return,” he told the two circling fire dragons, then he shot high up into the sky with a single beat of his wings.

“Gather in so I can form the aura current,” Surrall declared.

“I’ll assist, Patriarch. This current needs be very fast,” one of the wyrms offered. “We have to get back quickly if the chromatics know they are out.”

“I welcome your help, Vessall,” he replied immediately.

“On *any* hint of attack or trouble, I want all four of you to dive as deep as you can, do not worry about staying in the aura current at that point,” Shii ordered of the earth drakes. “The water dragons will come to you quickly to grant you a breathing bubble.”

“We are in your care, Matriarch,” Geon told her. “You heard her, younglings. If you even *think* something is out of place, you dive.”

“No problem, esteemed council member,” Jirran replied. “Matriarch chose us because she knows we can swim.”

“She chose *you* for that purpose, not me,” Geon chuckled.

“Let us finish forming our shielding so they can’t be scried,” the other water wyrm called.

“Alright. As soon as we feel the scrying shields set, we’ll enact the current,” Vessall answered.

Chapter 18

29 August 2017, 03:52 DMT; Sanctuary City

With enough velocity to send water spraying in every direction, Kell broached the surface of the water tube's watery border and landed some two meters from the edge. His spread wings cascading water, he advanced into the tunnel and shook them to urge it along, then folded them back as Kammi's head parted the roiling water he left behind. She didn't vault out of the water as he did, instead climbing out as she sucked in air greedily, her body brightening to his thermographic vision as the water that absorbed her heat either dripped off or warmed up.

The trip back had been very fast, but otherwise uneventful. They spent most of the time discussing Ralla's information, and how it was going to complicate things. Kell was almost of a mind that the chromatics had engineered this rebellion and power struggle on purpose, just so they had a viable reason to not come to the bargaining table. Prisma seemed utterly convinced that such a thing just shouldn't happen, mainly because the sages wouldn't allow the chromatics to fight among themselves. But it seemed that the sages were truly staying out of it, letting the younger chromatics settle the matter themselves, which backed up Kell's theory that the whole thing was just a ploy. There was so much to do, and the earth dragons would need to come out soon, if only because summer was coming and with it the change in the weather patterns that caused it to rain much more. Not that seasons meant that much on a sub-tropical island in the south Pacific, but there were changes in weather that came with the seasons. Winters on the island were warm and delightful, the seasonal winds discouraging all rain except the afternoon showers caused by the island itself. The spring and summer brought weather systems over the island that caused

significantly more rain, which caused the earth dragons to change their crops; potatoes and other root vegetables didn't like excessively wet conditions. They grew rain-tolerant crops on the lower tracts during the summer, pumpkins, eggplants, squash, tomatoes, and saved their root crops such as potatoes, radishes, and carrots for upper fields that drained quickly, fields that they designed to let them grow root crops without the excessive water rotting them in the ground. Every farm had crop rotation plans like that. But, the coming of the rainy season made it even more critical for the earth dragons to get back outside and get to work saving their farms, before the daily thunderstorms and heavy downpours scoured the entire lowlands of their fertile soil. Every day they stayed in their city was another day that they lost vital topsoil to erosion.

The other dragons intended to put their paws into it, however. All three of the other races were firmly convinced of Prisma's revelation, and as such, were willing to accept the earth dragon demands...and indeed, attitudes among the other dragons were already changing. The fire dragons had gotten very protective in a hurry, afraid that an earth dragon coming to harm might damage magic, and while the sky dragons were still very angry over the death of Ivaiya, the fact that venting their anger on the very dragons that gave them the ability to fly put them in something of a moral quandary. Despite what the earth dragons meant to magic, there were a few sky dragons that, like the chromatics, were still spiteful enough to threaten the earth dragons. But the problem they had was that it was mostly the younger sky dragons that refused to let go of their prejudiced hate, and the *other* sky dragons wouldn't tolerate them trying to avenge Ivaiya. About the only thing that could stop a sky dragon in the air was another sky dragon, and a younger sky dragon was no match for a seasoned, mature sky dragon, long in age and far more experienced in both flight and magic.

Sky dragons didn't slow down as they aged, they only got faster.

The water dragons didn't have to move much from their original position. They had always been the allies of the earth dragons, the two races having more in common with each other than any of the other races, and the relationship between Keth's and Shii's families were a perfect example of

that. Only in the lowlands did dragons of different races live so close together, literally side by side, where on the volcanoes they segregated themselves by race along the two mountaintops. The revelation really just proved that the water dragons had been right all along to care for their earth dragon cousins.

Prisma floated out of the water, looking a bit silly with her antenna and tail feathers soaked and drooping, and behind her was Geon, the breathing bubble around his head vanishing once it lost contact with the water. Jirran was the last one out that wasn't a water dragon, with Essan, who had joined them just at the edge of the island, climbing out behind him. Hinado had stayed outside to spread the word to the other dragons, and prepare them for Hirrag's return later that day. Hirrag would be flying back on his own, was probably already on his way back, and Sessara would be bringing the females and hatchlings back tomorrow.

Kammi hit the intercom box on the wall near the water. "We're back," she declared. "Is anyone up?"

"Of course there is," came a reply. "The chief and Anthra will meet you in the office as soon as you get up here."

"Sheesh, I guess they think little things like maybe wanting something to eat or getting some sleep don't mean anything," she grunted.

"I doubt they'll hold us there long," Kell said back to her as he started up the tunnel.

He was right. Ferroth and Anthra only kept them long enough to get their impressions of the summit, listening to Geon mainly, then Ferroth asked the four field agents for their observations. All four agreed that the Americans were being a little *too* accommodating to be entirely trustworthy, and agreed that the Americans would resist when the dragons started branching out to other nations. They discussed China's moves, and Ferroth brought them up to speed. "They're in full war mode," he told the field agents as the council members listened. "They're mobilizing their military assets and they have entire buildings full of war hackers warming up their

boxes. The dragons leaving isn't changing their plans, they still intend to levy sanctions on the Americans in two days."

"Which will send the entire global economy into a tailspin," Trekka grunted.

"We're digging up their military plans now," Ferroth continued, looking at Trekka. "The first thing they're sending are surveillance aircraft, to try to find the island. Once they find the island, they'll send a task force, including two of their four aircraft carriers and enough troop transports to scare the piss out of any other country that might want to try to take the island from them. Some hundred thousand men, tanks, armor, engineers, everything they need to dig in and turn this place into a fortress," Ferroth growled. "If they can land *that* on the island, even we might have a very hard time trying to beat them back. That's a hell of a lot of soldiers."

"Yeah, so we can't let them land," Kammi said. "The water dragons can deal with the task force."

"Carefully," Essan noted. "Water dragons don't show up on sonar, but that's no reason to be reckless."

"Right, we can't let them figure out how it's happening. But, we also can't be quite so merciful as we first planned to be," Kell grunted.

"What are you saying, Kell?"

"I'm saying that sinking some of those ships might be necessary," he answered. "Not the troop transports, but the cargo freighters, and maybe a couple of the larger warships. Maybe even one of the aircraft carriers."

"Sinking a modern ship isn't quite that easy," Essan said with a frown. "They can stay afloat with big holes in them."

"I know, that's why you'll need me there," Kell said with an expression that made it clear that he didn't like what he was suggesting. "Earth dragon claws can tear right through the hull. I can dig a gash from bow to stern and make it impossible for them to keep it afloat."

“Send an *earth dragon* out into harm’s way?” Essan protested.

“I’m not an earth dragon, Essan, I’m a *field agent*,” Kell shot right back. “That wouldn’t be the first time I’ve risked my life doing my job, and it won’t be the last. I don’t like the idea that I might kill men who can’t get off the ship in time, but we have to look at our own safety...and our own needs. They’re sending those ships down here to conquer us. Well, once we sink them, those ships and everything on them become ours as soon as the water dragons drag them back to the island. We sink them, the water dragons salvage them, and that’s materials and equipment we don’t have to buy.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Kammi said despite herself. “That’s a whole lot of steel, as well as some other raw materials we need, like wires, pipes, and cables. Even some machinery.”

“And it’s material we don’t have to barter for, just as Kell said,” Trecka agreed. “That will let what gold we have go further.”

“How fast could you sink one of their ships?” Ferroth asked.

“Pretty fast,” Kell replied. “Modern damage control is very effective, most ships can survive hitting a mine or taking a torpedo and not sinking, but they’re not designed to deal with widespread damage, like, say, a gash that runs all the way down the ship below the waterline. The key to sinking a modern ship is to get around its compartmentalized construction.”

“We could bring a few icebergs up from the antarctic,” Essan offered. “Just ram them, that should sink the ships.”

“And damage things we might salvage,” Girk piped in. “Actually, Kell has the best idea. Sink them while doing as little damage as possible. As long as the equipment survives hitting the bottom, it’s equipment we can salvage. The electric power generators on a ship the size of an aircraft carrier could power the entire island, we wouldn’t have to build our own. And they’re built to tolerate getting flooded, so we could probably get them back in working order after getting them dried out.”

“Are Chinese ships nuclear?” Essan asked.

“They have ten nuclear powered ships, and two of them are their aircraft carriers,” Kell answered. “They’ve started building a fleet of nuclear submarines, but I’m not counting those, just surface ships.”

“So, if we sink an aircraft carrier, we have a reactor to deal with.”

“We can manage that,” Kammi assured him. “Earth dragons aren’t hurt by uranium, and we can store the fuel rods down here. This is a whole lot of solid rock separating the material from the island. It should be safe enough.”

“Actually, I’d have Jukra dig out a storage bunker even deeper if we take on something like nuclear fuel rods,” Anthra said. “Putting them almost into the mantle should be deep enough.”

“We could sink the ships without an earth dragon,” Essan said. “But if the point is to capture the ships, then we don’t need to *sink* them. We can capture them without sinking them.”

“The point of sinking the ship is to force the crew off,” Kell told him. “If we tried to capture a ship, there would always be crew members who barricade themselves inside the ships, seal off the watertight doors, and we’d have to fight them...and you’d still need earth dragons if you try that. You can be killed by bullets, Essan. I can’t. Also, when we sink the ship, the Chinese don’t *know* we captured it. If they knew we captured the ship, it would lead to all kinds of political problems later on, like them demanding we give it back. If we sink it, then the international law of salvage comes into play. Anyone can *salvage* a ship, and it’s legal. The Chinese couldn’t say jack about it.”

“Ah. Alright,” Essan nodded. “But we could still sink the ship without needing an earth dragon. We could froth the water, make it too aerated to support the ship, or simply ram it with a water spear. That would easily go through the hull.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t want an earth dragon along to help?”

“I will not risk you that way,” he replied immediately. “You are too *precious*.”

“And here I thought being so important would be a good thing,” Kammi said sourly. “I didn’t expect them to want to chain me to the pedestal they put me on.”

“I had a similar discussion with Sessara,” Kell grunted. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told her, Essan. We may be earth dragons, but our job *requires* us to put ourselves in danger from time to time. You’re just going to have to live with it. When you sally out to sink those ships, I *will* be going with you, and I’ll be there to help you sink the ones I decide we need to sink, because it’s my *job* to know which ships to sink and which to spare, it’s my *job* to use what I know to protect the water dragons from possible harm when they attack. And if it requires tooth to claw battle with the humans, that’s my job too, because nothing short of an eight inch gun I’d be facing attacking a naval ship is going to hurt me, marines don’t usually carry explosives or anti-tank weaponry while defending a ship, it tends to sink your own ship. I won’t like to do it, but I will. The department and the field agents were created for exactly this, to know humans and know how to protect ourselves from them, and that’s going to include me being along when the water dragons attack those ships so you have my expertise available to you, which may save water dragon lives. I work well with Patriarch Surral out in the open water, and he’ll make sure I don’t drown.”

“You believe we’ll let you do such a thing?”

“Stop me,” he said bluntly, which made Ferroth give a dark chuckle.

“Kell gets to the point, Essan,” Ferroth said. “What we are doesn’t change what we do. The five young drakes you see in this room were risking their lives long before the other dragons cared about the lives they were risking. Just because you think we’re too *valuable* to risk now, that doesn’t change *our* point of view. We are *the department*.”

Girk almost beamed at being included with the other field agents, though he’d never been sent on a field mission. Essan, on the other hand,

looked quite irritated at Ferroth's declaration.

"So, you'd better get things organized with Patriarch Surrall so he can take Kell out when you attack the ships. We'll tell you when and where they'll be, then you deal with them."

"And if I refuse?"

"They're so cute when they think they have a choice," Kammi said impishly, which earned her a glare from Essan.

"That's what the department does, Essan, and we're not going to stop just because you don't like it," Ferroth declared. "Now, I'm sure the others are pretty damn tired and very hungry, and we're not going to hold them here with more debate."

"Yes," Anthra agreed, looking at Geon. "All of you get some food, get some rest. And good work out there," she finished.

"While you guys are resting, we'll dig up the engineering plans on Chinese naval ships so you can get around their damage control," Ferroth told them. "It'll be a good project for our earth drake computer jockeys that aren't field agents."

"Sounds good," Kammi said, then she yawned. "I'm not sure which I want more, food or sleep."

"You can always dream that you're eating," Trekka quipped with a light look.

"Lick my tail, Trekka," she retorted.

30 August 2017, 19:27 DMT; Sanctuary City

Things up top were definitely as chaotic as Ralla suggested.

The chromatics were all stirred up. It was almost a state of open civil war. The libraries had always been the nexus of chromatic society, and those libraries were now the staging grounds of the two factions. One faction was led by the council chromatic and the council of chromatic elders, the chromatic ruling body, and in their corner they had many of the older chromatics. The other faction was led by a renegade elder chromatic and numbered most of the younger adult chromatics, which showed a split within chromatic society. The older dragons were siding with the council chromatic because they were fully indoctrinated in the chromatic society, which told them to obey those above them and demand obedience from those below them. The council and the council chromatic were their superiors, so they were doing what they were told almost out of reflex. The younger dragons, who still had some fire in them that had yet to be put out by the strangling nature of chromatic society when it came to free thinking, had the gall to actually think that the council chromatic was making a mistake. One *did not* question the actions of a superior in chromatic society.

And it was all Jussa's fault, they learned. Jussa had had the clever foresight to spread the truth across the island before the chromatics had a response organized, and their attempt to quash Jussa's information actually did more harm than good. The fact that they tried to actively suppress the revelation and replace it with a truly outlandish theory that basically boiled down to *the water dragons are lying* rather than try to explain things in a rational manner the way the water dragons did got quite a few chromatics thinking, mainly the younger ones. Had the chromatics countered with an alternate theory that could debate the issue, they may not have caused the reaction they did. But, since they had no real retort for the powerful evidence the other dragons presented, they instead resorted to simply calling them liars without offering their own side of the story. That made the younger chromatics even more suspicious, and allowed the rogue elder to sway them to his side.

So, it actually came down to two sides; those who believed the water dragons, and those who didn't. The older chromatics were more educated, but in some ways, they were less *smart* than the youngers, because they

were so conditioned to blindly follow their ruling council that they were willing to believe even the most ridiculous of claims they made.

It had even less of an effect on the other dragons. The fire dragons were, in their way, even worse than the chromatics in that regard. Hirrag said he believed something different, and since he was the biggest bully on the block, everyone else either believed what he believed or kept the fact that they didn't *very* quiet. Hirrag had the power to command every other fire dragon to do his bidding, it was his privilege as the fire wyrm council member, so if he told them the water dragons were telling the truth, that was that. Whether they believed it or not didn't matter, it was that *Hirrag* believed it, and Hirrag was the boss. The sky dragons, on the other hand, were a bit more esoteric about it. Some of them believed the water dragons, and some didn't, and there was active discourse over the matter...*polite* discourse. They debated the issue with the reason that the chromatics should have been using, but the fact that Hinado believed Jussa's claims, and Faralla by proxy since he defaulted to Hinado's personal experience in the matter, was a very convincing argument in those debates. Hinado was highly respected in sky dragon society, and he had been personally present when it was proven that earth dragons were the source of magic. If he said that it had proved it to his satisfaction, that was a strong weight tipping the scales in Hinado's favor. Some sky dragons believed Jussa, some sky dragons believed the chromatics, but unlike the chromatics, the ones that believed the chromatics were willing to give Hinado the benefit of the doubt. If he was right, he was right. If he was wrong, he'd admit he was wrong, and it did no real further damage to the situation.

The only real point where the sky dragons were angry with Hinado was over the demands. Hinado was fully on board with them, and when he told the sky dragons they had to help rebuild the farms they destroyed, they were more than a little miffed. Quite a few sky dragons shared Ivaiya's contempt for earth dragons, and they were mainly the ones that didn't believe Jussa's claims that the earth dragons were the source of magic. But, unlike the chromatics, those sky dragons ceded to their council members and the majority with voiced objection, but without violent retaliation. They

weren't happy about it, but they weren't going to attack their own and cause a civil war over it. They were being far more civilized about their internal difference of opinion than the chromatics were. They could voice their dissent in a civilized manner, and Hinado acknowledged that dissent, also in a civilized manner.

Down below, the earth dragons were involved in two different but no less important activities. Anthra oversaw one, and Geon the other. Anthra was coordinating their imminent return to the surface, holding many conferences with Fredda and Jukra over what they'd need to rebuild, what the farms would need, tools, help, everything. Anthra then started telling the lay earth dragon just how bad the damage was about that then, but doing so with an emphasis on the fact that since the earth dragons had *won*, they could have their moment of anger as long as they let it go. After all, once everything was put back together, then they'd never have to worry about it again. Keth had gotten pictures of his farm from Sella, and while the damage was extensive and it caused him to nearly break into tears, he got over it and his mind started working on how to not just rebuild, but make it *better*. The earth dragon need to constantly tinker was starting to approach the problem as a chance to remodel, as it were, to make improvements that would have been either very hard to accomplish or downright impossible on a farm that was actively producing.

But there was some realignment. Gev, at seeing the state of his farm, shocked everyone in Dawnmist when he sold half of his land to Keth, holding back just enough to feed his family comfortably and make a little extra on the side. "I've wanted to expand the store anyway, this gives me an excuse," he explained when Gev and Keth finalized the deal. "My lifemate rather likes the idea of being a shopkeeper. She says it's much less work focusing on one rather than trying to do both."

And so, Keth and their family farm became not just the largest farm in Dawnmist, but one of the largest farms on the island...and that meant that he'd have even more work to do, since Gev's tracts had been the most extensively damaged tracts in Dawnmist, due to the topography that channeled much of the free-flowing rainwater across his land in corrosive

sheets. That had been a boon when he had crops in the ground, but when there was nothing holding the earth in place, it ravaged his topsoil.

Keth, however, was smart enough to deal with it. After finalizing the deal, he and Kanna spent all day in the burrow, drawing up recovery plans that now included their four new tracts.

Geon oversaw the war effort, and that was centered in the department offices. They had three teams going in preparation for the Chinese, each with its own objectives and mission. The first team was spearheaded by the field agents with the senior agent Trekka in command, leading all the computer specialists in the department in their preparations to take it to the Chinese in the way they loved to take it to everyone else, over the internet. The team was further broken down into two units, one of which would intercept orders and communications, and the other would actively attack Chinese computer assets. Military systems, financial systems infrastructure, nothing was being left out in their preparations. From causing chaos in the military chain of command to disrupting power and other services to such things as misdirecting shipments of needed goods, the hackers would all but force China to unplug from the internet to protect themselves, which would serve the double purpose of robbing *their* hackers of the connections they needed to do the same thing. The Chinese actually had plans to prevent cyberwarfare, tight throttles and controls and firewalls at their main internet access hubs that gave the Chinese censorship power over what came in, but the weakness in their design was that whoever had control of those main nodes had control of China's entire national computer network. And once they had control, the only way to shut them down would be to literally pull the plugs that physically connected China to the rest of the internet. And once they did that, there was always satellite.

The second team, led by Kintel, was undertaking observation, intelligence, and intercepting communications. Drakes sat at computers monitoring computer traffic, observed both military and civilian communications like Chinese radio and TV, looking for anything unusual, and other drakes were studying satellite imagery to ensure that where the intelligence the computer teams were gleaning matched the physical

location of military and civilian assets. They coordinated those assets on large maps that kept track of everything, from naval ships to individual army units, and finding out as much as they could, even to the point where they were studying food and water consumption figures of army units that were slated for the invasion force. They were even trying to find out the names of the greenest privates in those units, where they already knew the names of the senior enlisted personnel and officers. The department always found out everything they could about anything that interested them, and that curiosity was unleashed.

The third section of the department focused on the dissemination of the information the intelligence team provided, and coordination of various agencies. That was headed by Ferroth himself, and it was his job to provide information to President Walker and his agencies, walking that delicate line between giving them what they needed but not revealing too much, something that only Ferroth could do to his own satisfaction. He and Jussa organized water dragon patrols, and he helped Hinado streamline sky dragon aerial patrols, on top of getting some sky dragon overflights of Chinese military bases to make sure the satellite images matched what was really going on. Those, Hinado or Faralla did themselves, since the earth dragons really didn't trust any other sky dragon.

With typical organization, these new divisions within the department had quickly smoothed themselves out into well-oiled machines, so well oiled that the earth dragons were monitoring Sessara and the females' journey back to the island via satellite in real time. They were only a few kilometers out, preparing to land back on their volcano, and their arrival was going to push things. With all the fire dragons back, Hirrag intended to push the issue with the chromatics despite the fact that there was really nobody in control of the chromatics at the moment. They were divided into two factions, and both factions claimed support from the sages...who remained completely and utterly silent. In fact, they weren't even appearing in public, something that had both Prisma and Kell both curious and worried. Kell suspected that the council chromatic had literally locked them up in their library to prevent them from removing him from his position of power,

executing his own private coup, but not expecting a second coup to rise up from the younger chromatics to challenge his authority. Prisma, however, had a different theory, one she was discussing with him as he tweaked code meant to attack the power grid that ran the city of Beijing.

“You really think they’re doing it on purpose?” Kell asked.

She nodded. “It made no sense to me until I approached the problem from their side. The sages could stop it all with a single word, but they are not. They are letting it happen.”

“And the council chromatic couldn’t imprison them in the library? Or even kill them?”

“Not the sages,” she replied. “They are our most expert users of magic, Kell. The entire Council of Seven could not hope to defeat them in magical combat. They are silent because they *wish* to be silent. And once I understood this, their motives are more clear.”

“You think they’re letting the Council of Seven hang themselves.”

“Yes and no,” she answered. “I believe that the sages are not unanimous in their intent, and the sages never do anything until unanimous consent is achieved. And while they debate the matter, they allow the council chromatic to run amok...deliberately. His actions will poison the platform of those who hold his position, and when the sages finally do move, those that believe as he does will have no foundation upon which to stand. They will be neutralized.”

“So, they *are* letting him hang himself, but hang everyone who doesn’t want to agree to our demands along with him.”

She nodded again. “The sages may hold themselves above politics, but there is not a sage that did not rise up to that title through political expertise. They are all formidable players in the game.”

“Cute,” Kell noted, looking back at his monitor. “And I’m sure the council chromatic figured out the same thing.”

“As I am sure the sages took into account.”

Ralla, however, brought more light to the subject when he stopped in after bringing a report. “It’s completely broken down,” he told them. “The sages have come out, but they didn’t do a single thing to stop it. They declared that what was going on was a test from Gaia, and the chromatics had to prove their worthiness by doing her will. But, they didn’t say what they should do. They all but told the chromatics to fight it out in a trial by combat.”

“That’s not good,” Kell growled. “We need them to accept the demands so we can come out.”

“Actually, even if they did, we’d still be right here,” Girk noted from his terminal. “We have everything set up down here, where up there, it’s all destroyed.”

“That’s true,” Trekka nodded from his terminal. “But not everyone’s in the department, Girk. The farmers need to get out there and start recovering the farms before all our topsoil ends up in the ocean. The summer rains are coming.”

“The sages are wise,” Prisma murmured. “They *are* setting up the council to fall.”

“That or allowing them to claim Gaia’s favor if they win,” Kammi said sourly.

“How can they win? In a few short months, no dragons save the water dragons will be able to even fly,” she replied. “And that does not assume that the other dragons allow it get that far. The fire dragons very well may beat the chromatics into submission. With magic weakened, it gives the fires more and more power every day.”

“How so?” Girk asked.

“Because they don’t rely solely on magic,” she replied, looking at him with a blink of her glowing white eyes, then she shivered her rainbow-

colored wings a little. Kell found chromatic wings to be strangely attractive, since the multicolored hue was an effect of tiny scales that covered the membranes of their wings, scales so fine that made her wing membranes as supple and flexible as any other dragon's, but those tiny scales did give chromatic wing membranes more resiliency. They didn't tear their membranes half as often as other dragons, but like all other dragons, those membranes healed quickly when they did tear. "For every day that passes, it takes more and more effort for the chromatics to cast spells. The fires may use magic, but their sheer size and brute power don't require magic."

"When Hirrag moves, all he has to do is tire out the chromatics with his superior numbers, then it comes down to fangs and claws," Kammi finished giving Prisma a playful look. "The fluffies can't possibly stand up to *that*. Hirrag will just beat them down."

"I will make you stop calling me that," Prisma warned with a slight smile.

"Bring it, fluffball, I'm not afraid of you," she replied swaggeringly.

"There is one way we could stop it," Girk said, mainly to himself.

"How so?" Prisma asked him.

"Well, if they're fighting over the truth of us, if one of us went out there and proved it beyond any shadow of a doubt, then even the chromatic elders would have to admit it."

"If they're rational," Kell told him. "But they're not *being* rational. The council chromatic and his lackeys are fighting to maintain their power, and little things like truth are very inconvenient at times like that."

"But, you do have something of an idea, Girk," Prisma noted, clicking her teeth. "Kell."

"Yeah?"

"Among all the field agents, among all earth dragons, you are renowned for being the most courageous."

“What?” he asked in surprise.

“You do things no other earth dragon will do,” she replied. “If I asked it of you, would you do something very dangerous?”

“What?”

“Go outside,” she replied. “If my honored teacher is battling the elders, he will need every advantage he can get. Well, what advantage would he hold if *his* chromatics are fully charged with magical power, where the elders are not?”

“You mean send me up there to be a battery?” Kell asked, which made Kammi laugh.

“A what?”

“Nevermind. Yes, I’d do something like that, as long as I don’t take more than ten steps from the water. Not even a sky dragon will come after me if I’m underwater.”

“Easily arranged. We can use your farm. You know the submarine topography of the cove like the back of your paw, and if you’re standing on the edge of the bluff, you’re just a dive away from the water.”

“Can you get your old teacher there?”

“I can, but it requires *me* to go outside as well,” she replied, frowning a little. “And they want to kill *me* as much as *him*. I know him well enough to send him a magical message, to arrange things.”

“Just go out at night with a couple of water dragons shielding you from scrying,” Trekka suggested. “The sky dragons can’t see you, the chromatics can’t sniff you out.”

“I’m sure Shii and Surral would help,” Kell offered.

“That might be useful for more than just the chromatics,” Kammi said. “I’m sure Hirrag would appreciate an earth dragon on the volcano to charge up his troops. We power them up, they protect us. Not even the most rabid

chromatic is going to try to get into that caldera right now, and we'd be safe enough in a fire dragon den, under Hirrag's personal protection. We can juice up his troops, and then they can really take it to the council fluffy."

"That's actually not a bad idea," Ferroth grunted as he stomped into the agent office. "In fact, it's such a good idea that Hirrag has asked for an earth dragon to come to the caldera, so one of us can power up his fire dragons. Anthra sent me down here to see which of you is crazy enough to go outside and *stay* outside for a couple of days in the company of the fire dragons."

"I'll do it," Girk volunteered almost immediately. "As long as Hirrag provides protection."

"They've also asked for some food," Ferroth grunted. "The water dragons will have to suspend fishing for a few days to raise the *Appomattox* and get it back to the Americans. As big as that thing is, it'll take most of them to raise it."

"Shame we don't take it for ourselves and see what kind of toys they have in that thing," Kammi chuckled.

"You know how the council feels about us playing with nuclear fuel," Ferroth replied. "If that was a diesel sub, it'd probably already be in the north cove being taken apart."

"Well, it's not *our* fault the radiation hurts them but not us," Kammi protested, throwing her paws up. "And like we were reckless with the fuel rods we did extract from that sunken Russian sub! Not a single radiation leak!"

"True, but it scared the hell out of them when we salvaged that thing," Ferroth said with a dark smile. "Too bad they forbade us from keeping those fuel rods. I had ideas for those things."

"You and us both," Jirran said lightly. "But they'll have to look the other way when we go after those Chinese ships. The carriers are nuclear, and we can't just let one of those carriers steam into our waters, not when it

can launch planes to bomb the island. Besides, you know how much steel we can get out of a carrier?”

“I’m already working on that. Anyway, I heard what Prisma suggested, and I’ll pass it up to Anthra and Geon. They have to authorize something like that. Prisma, you get the meeting arranged, you don’t need council approval to take a quick trip outside to send that message, just make sure Matriarch Shii and Patriarch Surrall are with you to shield you from the chromatics. Girk, come with me. If you’re willing to do this, the Earth Council wants to talk to you about it.”

“Sure thing, chief,” he answered, twisting away from his terminal and dropping back down to all fours.

“Kell, could you summon the Matriarch and Patriarch?” Prisma asked.

“Anyone can do it, goof,” Kell chuckled, going over to the intercom, then hitting the button that activated an underwater speaker they’d installed. It sent out a simple beeping tone that told the water dragons that the earth dragons needed to talk to one of them. “There, someone will be along in a bit,” he said easily.

Sella was the water dragon that answered the call, and she and Prisma scurried off to organize their mission. The other agents ended up staying even later as they finished up Girk’s part of the day’s task list while he was up talking with the Earth Council, since they couldn’t call it a day until the task list was finished. After wrapping things up, they managed to make it back to the burrow in time to sit down and eat with the family, though the family had put off eating until they arrived. Kell again mused at how *completely* Kammi fit in with his family, playing with the hatchlings but yet able to hold her own in conversation with his parents. She was young enough to be playful but educated enough to be taken seriously in council, and he was starting to consider the possibility that he and Kammi just might be compatible. They certainly got along, smashingly, with common interests and genuine affection for each other based on more than their shared career...and Kanna was already considering who to invite to their

lifebonding ceremony. *She* had certainly made up her mind. They were sitting side by side at the table, as they almost always did, when a call from the entry room interrupted their meal. Anthra ambled in after Keth beckoned her to enter, squeezing through the entry passage and taking up most of the free space in the dining room after getting most of her bulk through the entryway. “Welcome, Anthra,” Keth said with a nod. “Care to join us?”

“I’ve just finished dinner, but thank you for the offer,” she replied. “Kell, Prisma made the arrangements. Would you mind going out tonight?”

“I don’t mind. Is Girk already out?”

She nodded. “As soon as the sun went down,” she answered. “He’s entrenched in Hirrag’s personal den with ten fire dragons guarding the entrance, already digging his own little private burrow in Hirrag’s den. Prisma made sure to stress to him to stay *inside* the den at all times, so the stone absorbs his aura and doesn’t empower anyone not literally right in the den with him. That will let him empower the fire dragons, but not anyone else.”

“Cute,” Kell noted. “I guess I’ll do the same?”

She shook her head. “You’re not *staying* out there, Kell. You’ll go out, meet the rebel chromatics, then after a couple of hours, you’ll come back. Prisma said that with magic so drained, only dragons in close physical proximity to you will get any benefit from you being outside. But since Girk *is* staying out, he’s staying underground even though he’s outside, so the majority of his aura is absorbed by stone. Prisma’s already recalculated the deadline times to take Girk being mostly outside into account. She even told him how deep to dig his personal burrow so he doesn’t enrich magic over time while outside. When not actively empowering the fire dragons, he’ll stay in his burrow, which Hirrag approves. In that burrow, he’s *much* harder to get at, and even if they do, they’ll have Girk himself to contend with in a burrow so small that he can’t possibly miss.”

“That’s one very smart young female,” Keth noted.

“She is,” Anthra nodded in agreement. “Prisma will meet you by the water tube entrance at ten, Kell. Shii and Surrall will be going with you.”

“Good, I’ll have them to talk to at least,” he said.

“I don’t like you going out there alone. I should be going with you!” Kammi protested.

“We already have one earth dragon out there in harm’s way, Kammi. We won’t risk any more than necessary,” Anthra told her gently, but resolutely. “But we know that if we needed you out there, young one, you’d do us proud.”

Kammi almost beamed at Anthra.

Ten wasn’t all that far off, and with them dawdling over dinner, he left Kammi to help his parents put the hatchlings down for the night and ambled out to the huge doors they’d built in front of the water tube entrance. He padded between the two 20 millimeter cannons, loaded and ready, and saw Prisma sitting on her haunches sedately with Shii and Surrall standing behind her, talking with each other. “Shii, Surrall,” he said fondly, accepting nuzzles from both of them, feeling quite content close to his other, adopted parents. “Did Prisma explain things?”

Surrall nodded. “We’ll be shielding you and her as long as you’re out,” he answered. “Essan and a few other water dragons will be there as well for additional protection, lurking in the cove. Essan is conferring with the elder chromatic right now as they await your arrival, Kell. From what I was told, this chromatic goes by Trejem.”

“He actually gave his *name*?” Kell gasped.

“What passes for one,” Shii replied. “It’s not his real name, just how he allows others to address him. But still, that is quite a change among the chromatics. The only chromatic I knew that went by a name sits right here.”

“Well, local customs and all,” Prisma said demurely. “Besides, I rather fancy the name the field agents bestowed upon me.”

“It’s a name you *earned*, young one, so of course it suits you,” Surrall told her with a nod. “Come along, Kell, they’re waiting for us to appear.”

“You talked to them?” Kell asked as he and Prisma started down the tube, carefully picking their way through the obstacles piled up on the far side of the open door.

“Yes. They’re waiting inside the tunnels leading to Dawnmist. The youngers are somewhat smaller than the older chromatics, so they can fit within the passages fairly easily. In fact, they’re using Dawnmist as their base of operations,” he noted lightly. “Prisma’s maps let them navigate the tunnels, and while Trejem can’t fit in the tunnels near the village, he *can* fit in our den,” he chuckled. “He’s using the air chamber to hide right now. The chamber hides him from scrying magic, and while the air is a bit stale, he’s been using what magic he has left replenishing the oxygen. He’s an accomplished magician,” Surrall added with an approving nod.

“He’s one of our elders, Patriarch, he should be,” Prisma said in defense of her teacher. “And that’s quite clever. The earth dragon villages are among the last places the elders would look for those against them.”

“They can’t *fit* in most of those tunnels, Prisma,” Shii chuckled. “They were built so Anthra can just barely squeeze through, but only through *one* route along the passages. And you know how those tunnels are down there.”

She nodded. “Unless you know exactly where you’re going, a dragon of any size would quickly get hopelessly stuck,” she noted.

“Exactly. The youngers are all but untouchable in Dawnmist because only hatchlings, water drakes, and young chromatics can *fit* in those tunnels, and it gives them a direct pathway right to where we’re going to be without ever being seen.”

“Very clever.”

“They *were* using Cliffside village, but when you made contact, Trejem moved them to Dawnmist to take advantage of things,” Shii noted.

“Ah, Cliffside. Actually a fairly wise choice,” Prisma nodded. “The labyrinth tunnels are somewhat easier to negotiate, and the entry tunnels are well hidden from sky dragon observers and the most distant from chromatic dens along the south peak. I do hope that the chromatics aren’t disturbing the villages,” she fretted.

“There’s little down there left,” Kell said.

“No, I don’t mean that. The art. I don’t want them to damage the art, or try to remove it off the walls to take home with them.”

“They’d *better* not,” Kell said with a dark glance at her. “Some of the reliefs in Dawnmist have been there since the village was excavated.”

“Exactly my worry,” she told him. “I’ll make it quite clear to them that they do *not* alter or damage anything in the villages.” She then chuckled. “But what they are doing is clever, very clever. The earth dragon villages continue to serve our cause, friend Kell, even with the earth dragons being down here. They are the one place a young, *small* dragon can go and be assured that their elders will not follow.”

“We can arrange some supplies for them,” Surrall said absently. “With the water entrance, we can ferry in food without any sky dragon seeing it.”

“And now you know why earth dragons are small, Prisma,” Kell chuckled. “Being small is an advantage when one lives underground.”

“In addition to requiring far less food than larger dragons,” she nodded. “A species adapted to underground existence would need be able to stretch sparse food supplies to the utmost. And earth dragons do not change,” she added, glancing at him. “You are now as you were before the humans evolved from their primitive ancestors. Before there were even water dragons and chromatics.”

“When nature finds something that works, she stays with it,” he shrugged.

When they reached the water, Shii turned and stopped Kell with a swish of her tail. “Wait here, dear friend,” she told him. “We’ll take Prisma out and ensure it’s safe, then Surrall will come back and fetch you.”

“Alright,” he said, sitting on his haunches and shivering his wings, warming them up in preparation to swim.

He only had to wait about ten minutes before Surrall’s head poked out of the water. He said nothing, but Kell stood up and waded into the water as he slipped back under, took a deep breath, then dove in. The water was a tiny bit warmer than usual, the summer currents bringing warmer water, and he quickly centered himself in the tube and used his wings to all but fly, moving with speed and grace, his wingtips coming close to the edges without touching. He’d swam up and down the tunnel so many times he could literally do it blind now, knew exactly where he was all the time, to the point where he turned upwards in blackness and didn’t slam his head on a ceiling, instead flaring his wings to slow down just so his head came up out of the water. He took in a breath as his vision adjusted to the moonless night, his thermographic vision clearing after being muted by the water, and he could see some fifty or sixty chromatics sitting in a loose throng on the bluff just off from the remains of his burrow. They were remaining quiet, using no magical lights, which meant that they could barely see more than five meters in any direction. Shii was up there, and Surrall broached the water and landed on the edge of the bluff; he couldn’t tell, but he was almost positive they were actively shielding the group from scrying. Kell copied Surrall’s move, diving down, lancing forward, then angling up and letting his momentum carry him all the way to the top of the bluff. He landed on the edge and stopped right where he was, with his hindquarters nearly hanging off the edge, then sat down with his tail drooping along the bluff’s edge, the spiked tip almost in the water. He was dead serious about not taking more than ten steps from the water.

“Kell,” Prisma called in a low tone, then a single magical light appeared between the paws of the largest of the chromatics, nearly three times Prisma’s petite size. This was definitely an elder, somewhat larger than Shii and Surrall, bigger than Anthra by a distinct margin, and someone

who would never hope to make it to Dawnmist. He'd get stuck in the tunnels long before he got there.

"I can *feel* it," the chromatic elder said reverently. "I can *feel it*!"

"Did you think I was mistaken, revered teacher?" Prisma asked, a bit archly.

"No, no, of course not, it's just—seeing it for myself is a bit of a surprise," he replied, approaching Kell on one foreleg, the dim ball of light over his unused paw as he held it up and out. "Thank you for coming out, Kell," he said, nodding in his direction. "I am Trejem, professor of the Academy and former member of the Council of Seven."

Kell narrowed his eyes, the amber glow of them flickering in and out due to the dimness of the light. "I'm not here to be cozy," Kell replied bluntly. "The only reason we even agreed to this is because you accept our demands."

"They are quite reasonable," Trejem said with an answering nod. "We would have need to negotiate some of the finer points, mainly the importation of technology, but all in all, I find them quite fair. Even generous to us, whom you hold at your utter mercy."

"The Earth Council wants this put behind us, and harsh punitive measures would only foster more antipathy," he answered. "All we want is to be left alone and left in peace. The demands ensure that."

"Gather in close to the earth dragon, my young friends," he said in a low voice of command. "Let his aura regenerate your magical powers. But do not crowd him, nor block him from the water. He must have need to make quick escape if any threat endangers him, and if such threat appears, defend him as he makes his retreat. His safety is paramount."

"I'm glad you understand that, my revered teacher," Prisma said as she came over and sat down beside Kell. "The earth dragons must be protected. They are the very lifeblood of our magic."

“Hirrag has made contact with me, and tells me that the young earth drake who deigned come help him is protected by the entire fire dragon race,” he said with a chuckle. “Hirrag won’t even let *me* come anywhere near him.”

“Trust me, we earth dragons find it a bit disconcerting to be suddenly so popular,” Kell grunted.

“How do the earth dragons react to the revelation?” Trejem asked curiously.

Kell shrugged his wings. “It just is,” he replied noncommittally. “It’s not something we can control, and it directly impacts our own lives in no way. We’re the same today as we were yesterday, and will be tomorrow.”

“Truly?” he asked in surprise.

“You don’t know us, professor,” Kell said steadily, staring at him. “And you never did.”

The elder sighed. “I can’t deny that,” he agreed. “I have my own share of personal responsibility in this. I was one of those who made the decisions that brought us to this state, and for that, Kell, I apologize to you and the other earth dragons,” he said in a serious and sincere tone. “I never believed it would come to *this*, and I was very, very wrong. Perhaps if I and my former colleagues on the Council of Seven had taken the time to know you, none of this would have happened. But I guess even we can be seduced by a combination of fear and arrogance,” he said with surprising candor. “Do the earth dragons fare well in their deep sanctuary?”

“Much better than the rest of you,” he snorted, which made Prisma chuckle. “Has there been any violence up here?”

“Some, but we strive to avoid it,” Trejem answered. “We simply wait for the other dragons to make their move, and we’ll support them. The other races are against the council chromatic, especially the fire dragons. Hirrag intends to move in a matter of days. When he does, we will support him with our magic.”

“What’s he waiting for? He has Sessara back, and the fire dragons outnumber the chromatics and the sky dragons put together,” he snorted. “He can throw sheer numbers at the chromatics, especially with you against him.”

“I think he seeks not to simply beat them in the head until they do what he says, but make them *see* that they are wrong,” Trejem speculated, his expression thoughtful. “After all, if they don’t *understand*, then what’s to stop them from trying again when things settle down? Hirrag never came across to me as an especially intelligent fire dragon, but I find myself revising that impression. He may not be smart, but he is *cunning*.”

“If I may be so bold, honored teacher, the proof sits before us,” one of the young chromatics spoke up. “To stand before this earth dragon is proof beyond dispute. I can *feel* the aura of magic around him, and I can *feel* my magic strengthen.”

“But the problem, student, is that if brave Kell here marched up to the council, they would kill him without hesitation,” Trejem replied. “But, if we were to subdue them in such a way that they could do no harm, then Kell were to come before them, that might make them understand how wong they are, they might understand that what they do now threatens *all* dragons.”

“They would *try* to kill me,” Kell corrected with a narrow-eyed glance at Trejem.

Trejem looked at him, and nodded. “What of this external threat student Prisma mentioned? The Chinese?”

Kell glanced at Prisma, then nodded himself. “They’re marshalling their forces to invade the island,” he said. “The other dragon races are preparing to beat them back. They’re just leaving the chromatics out of it for now, they won’t be needed to attack the ships the Chinese plan to send down here.”

“That explains Hirrag’s reluctance to strike in force,” Trejem noted. “He can’t risk debilitating the fangs and claws of the island if the threat exists that humans will try to attack us. He would need his fire dragons healthy and battle ready for repelling human invaders. I see,” he mused. “It costs him no injured fire dragons to wait and let things develop, then strike at the proper moment when the elder chromatics have their attention fixed firmly on *us*. Yes, that is most clever.”

“Both of us have had to give Hirrag more due,” Kell admitted. “And all this time, I just thought he was a baked-brain brute that thought with his fangs.”

“He does act like that sometimes,” Trejem chuckled. “But it seems that there was a mind under all that aggression, one we never noticed before. Now describe this threat, if you would, honored earth drake. I would know what threatens our home so I’ll be ready to help when it is time to move.”

Kell nodded, then he brushed the earth in front of him smooth and drew very crude maps. He explained what the Chinese were after, and how they intended to go about it. He then explained the dragon alliance with the Americans to thwart them, and the earth dragons’ early actions to prepare.

“You should see what the earth dragons can do with their computer devices,” Prisma told him. “I have studied them, and have found them *amazingly* useful. And not just for the earth dragons. Honored teacher, *we* can benefit from the computers,” Prisma almost pleaded. “They would help advance the study of magic by making our studies more efficient. Just using the small computer they gave me, my own studies are now faster and more comprehensive. I’m able to make notes quicker, I can recall all my notes at any time, and once I transcribe my books into the computer, I will have access to *all* of my books from a single device that I can take anywhere, with just the press of a button. I will be able to recall on computer in seconds what may take me an hour of searching my books when done manually.”

“Truly?”

She nodded emphatically, then she reared up to sit on her tail and took the tablet they’d given her out of her shoulder satchel, which was encased in a waterproof clear plastic carrier. “This device could revolutionize the process of magical study,” she declared, holding it out for him to see. “All this time, honored teacher, *we* could have benefitted from the technology the earth dragons brought from human lands. And *this* chromatic will do so,” she declared. “When all of this is over, the earth dragons have already agreed to install technology in my den so that I might use my computer to advance my magical education.”

“We won’t mind, it’s a service the department has always offered. Besides, we like Prisma,” Kell said lightly, thumping her lightly on the hindquarters with the underside of his tail.

“And I enjoy working in the department,” she replied with a slight smile. “I have learned a great deal, and learn more every day. Perhaps when I finish my schooling, I might come work there.”

“Chief’s already more or less started planning for that,” Kell chuckled.

“We’ll explore the possibilities of that later, my young student,” Trejem told her. “But for now, let us focus on the danger of the Chinese. Explain what the other dragons intend to do in more detail, if you would please.”

Kell spent the two hours they wanted him topside getting into detail with Trejem over the upcoming operation against the Chinese, from department drakes attacking their computer networks all the way to the plans to sink and cripple the ships they intended to send, to minimize possible loss of life but to still turn the ships they didn’t sink back by simple matter of rendering them dead in the water. He explained Hinado’s current patrol operation to hunt for Chinese surveillance planes that were hunting for the island, more or less everything that they’d done so far and what they planned to do next. Trejem asked very few questions, but they were always insightful and to the point. They drew rough maps in the dirt and debated

possible invasion routes from China to the island, from northerly to southerly, and water dragon tactics to attack the ships without overly endangering themselves. Kell was impressed by Trejem's intellect, and his grasp on military tactics that the chromatics never really needed to use. Field agents studied human battle tactics as a part of their jobs, from the small arms tactics that might be used against them to full-scale battle. Kell had studied all the major battles of every war since the American Civil War, the birthplace of the modern combat tactical mindset, on land, sea, and then air starting in World War I.

"As long as we don't get stupid, this won't be that hard," Kell surmised. "We have an overwhelming advantage as the defenders, and we have dragons that can do things that human technology can't copy and can't stop. Water dragons can't be seen by sonar if they don't want to be seen, and they can attack those ships from underwater, where they can hit the ships and be gone before they know what happened."

"I agree," Trejem nodded. "And it is time for you to return, Kell. Our time is up, but it was good time. Just two hours close to you has regenerated my magic."

"Are you ready to return?" Shii asked them.

Prisma nodded. "I am in your charge, Matriarch," she replied, turning and diving into the water. Much like Kammi, Prisma had been availing herself of both the water tube and the tank, and had actually taken a few swimming lessons from Ralla and Sella. As a result, she was a competent swimmer, at least as chromatics would rate things. To Kell and the water dragons, she was *barely* adequate. But, since Shii could put an air bubble around her to let her breathe, it gave her a little more maneuverability. She still required a water dragon to get her down the tube, but if it was just swimming around, she wouldn't drown. Shii dove in after her, and they vanished under the water.

"Should you not have let Kell go first?" Trejem asked Surrall. "He is the more vulnerable one."

“Not in the water he’s not,” Surrall replied lightly. “Come, dear friend. Let’s go.”

Kell smiled wolfishly at Surrall, and the two of them dove off the cove and, instead of heading for the tube mouth, Surrall instead streaked out of the cove and into deeper water. Kell followed him eagerly, understanding the invitation in that statement, and then the two of them turned south and raced off far faster than most human boats could hope to manage. “So, what are we going to do?” he asked as they surfaced, still swimming.

“Oh, there’s got to be *something* out here we can hunt,” Surrall replied with a grin. “I should have snuck you out of there months ago!”

“I’d have gone with you,” Kell laughed. “So, you know, the orcas might be gathering for the penguins coming off the shelves,” he offered.

“We can’t be out for days,” Surrall laughed. “But we might catch a couple of schools of bluefins starting their summer migration a bit early.”

“Tuna? I’m all for that,” Kell replied.

“That’s good to hear,” Shii said from behind him, and Kell laughed when Sella and Ralla surfaced just behind her. He almost felt sorry for the hatchlings, missing out on a fishing expedition like *this*.

“It’s been too long since we did this,” Sella said, nuzzling Kell as she reached him.

“Alright then, dear friend, let’s go fishing,” Surrall said with unbridled eagerness and passion.

There was almost something...*religious* about something so simple as fishing with a pod that was as close to him as his own family. Shii and Surrall had all but been second parents to him as he grew up, and Sella and Ralla were as much clutchmates to him as his departed brothers were. They ranged out nearly 100 kilometers southeast of the island, in the route of the schools of bluefins as they migrated towards Antarctic waters to partake in the explosion of available food that would be coming into bloom in just a

week or two, and they spent literally all night hunting. They did it the old fashioned way, working as a team to trap the fast-moving tuna and then cull their numbers, but never killing an entire school, eating their fill then catching tunat to take back with them. Though it was dark and the water impaired his thermographic vision, there was *just enough* ambient light for his light-sensitive eyes to see by. It made him the most inept member of the fishing group since he didn't have sonar, but he was quick and agile in the water, and once he locked in on a tuna, he caught it most of the time. He'd learned long ago how to use his tail and even his tail spikes as fins in the water, letting him turn quickly and turn very tightly, letting him stay on an agile tuna as it tried to evade him. They stayed out until the false dawn started to paint the eastern sky, then Surrall sent the others ahead with their catch in Shii's aura current, then he and Surrall spent some quality time together swimming back the old fashioned way.

"Thanks, dear friend," Kell said with sincere warmth in his voice. "I think I needed this."

"I knew you needed some time to feel normal again, Kell," Surrall told him easily. "But expect to face a very angry intended when you get home."

Kell laughed. "Yeah, Kammi won't be too happy I ran off and fished without her. So, I'll dump my take of the tuna in front of her as a peace offering, and we'll bring her next time," he grinned. "No lifemate of mine can go without knowing how to fish. It would be a scandal!"

"If she can't be a mud dragon, we'll chase her away," Surrall replied lightly. "Because she's obviously not worthy of you."

"So, how about tomorrow night?" he asked.

Surrall laughed delightedly. "Why not? She can get out on her own. Let's see what she's made of!"

"Midnight?"

"We'll be there," Surrall nodded. "There should be more moon tomorrow, that should help you two see better," he said, looking up at the

waxing crescent of the moon just coming out of new moon phase. But for Kell, that sliver of soft white light combined with the bioluminescent glow of his water dragon partners that were acting as the decoys to push the tuna towards the non-glowing ambushers were enough to see the darting, dark shapes in the water...as long as they didn't go too deep. With a bit more light tomorrow night, he'd have much more visual acuity, and that would increase his personal kill count.

Surrall was right that Kammi was not very happy with him when he got back. She confronted him in the common room, sitting on her haunches with her tail swishing aggressively on the floor behind her...and she had her spikes extended. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "All we get was some cryptic messages from Prisma that Shii said they were keeping you out from a special task! No warning, no information, no telling me when you'd get back! I was worried about you!"

Without saying a word, Kell snapped his tail to the side, dragging a sled filled with tuna into the room with him, the lead rope tied to the middle of his nested rows of tail spikes. Her eyes widened when she saw the tuna, the smell reached her, then she laughed unexpectedly. "Alright, alright, so *that's* what you were up to," she said. "Now why didn't you take *me*?"

"Tonight," was all he said, giving her a slight smile.

She all but cuddled up to him at that point, nuzzling him as she pushed herself against his side. "Well, you know how to deflect my wrath, that scores a few points for you," she said lightly. "Now, if you want a complete flash wipe of this—"

"Yes, half of them are yours," he told her.

She almost jumped up and down. "What girl can say no to fresh tuna for breakfast!" she exclaimed, then literally jumped over him and attacked the sled.

Kammi almost made a pig out of herself gorging on tuna, and the smell of it roused the rest of his family. He handed over his half of the take to

Kanna, and she happily portioned them out for everyone. “So, this was the urgent errand Shii said you had to run,” Keth said lightly just before he grabbed a small tuna in his teeth, turned his head up, and swallowed it whole.

“Yes, it was very urgent. And there will be another urgent errand to run tonight,” he replied easily. “So don’t expect much out of me after work. I’ll be sleeping.”

“I get to go!” Kammi declared in glee. “My first ever—uh, errand!”

“I suspected that Shii and Surrall wouldn’t let you go long before taking you under their wing,” Kanna said with a smile.

“Aww, when can we go!” Kav complained.

“After all this is over and we’re back on the farm, they’ll take you out again. But right now, it’s just not going to work,” Keth told his young son in a gentle voice. “So be patient, my hatchling. Time will bring what you desire.”

“I can’t wait to go home, even if there’s going to be so much to do,” Kitta sighed. “Are the pictures as bad as reality, brother?”

Kell nodded grimly. “It’s actually worse than the pictures,” he answered. “And now that we have four tracts from Gev, it’s even worse. His land was damaged more than ours.”

“Which is why I suspect he sold some of it,” Kanna noted clinically. “But, I won’t complain, since he intends to double the size of his store and increase his inventory of offered wares. Having a larger store with more variety right beside our farm will be very convenient. No more walking up to Long Grass Village for Vedra’s larger store.”

“Vedra probably won’t be very happy when he hears about Gev’s plans,” Keth chuckled. “He might expand his own store to compete for our barter.”

“He’d be a fool not to,” Kanna nodded. “But he has more options, since the ranchers come to his store too. Gev doesn’t have to stock for ranching goods.”

“Ranching. Hmm,” Keth mused, rapping his claws on the table. “Kell.”

“Yes, sire?”

“Gev’s two upper tracts are fairly flat, on that natural bluff of sorts that steps down from the volcano and steps down again into the lower tracts. I wonder, instead of repairing that land for farming, we instead seeded it with switchgrass and sawgrass and put a few cows on it, how do you think that would go?”

“Start ranching?”

“Not ranching. Just a few cows, for milk, and their manure would cut down on our fertilizer costs. The grass would help us repair the tracts over time, and they were always vulnerable to erosion anyway. They’re actually not worth that much due to their location.”

“In that case, I suggest a couple of milk cows, a stud bull, and a breeding pair of buffalo,” Kell replied, scratching a very light etching on the tabletop; the table was temporary anyway, and the hatchlings had been doodling on it since they made it. “The tracts are about this shape. We build a fence right here to keep them out of the lower tracts, let the volcano pen them in on the upland side, and they’d do fairly well. The stream on the south border will give them all the water they need, and I don’t think five animals could denude out the grass. And even if they can, we can just barter some hay from the ranches. They don’t charge much for it.”

“Yes, and we can sell off the offspring for extra revenue,” Keth nodded, looking at his etching. “We can dig out the stone rails for the fence underwater so we don’t have to lease quarrying rights from the northern villages. I rather like that idea, young one.”

“I might be able to talk Jenny into getting us the animals,” Kell mused. “We’ll buy them from *Jenny* instead of trying to wait for the breeding stock

we brought down here to reproduce. Hell, for that matter, we could barter with Jenny for wheat seed to replace what we lost, and maybe some seedlings or seed for other popular harvests.”

“Really? How would we get them down here?” Kanna asked.

“We’re going to get shipments from them anyway, mother,” he answered. “Even with our own stores added in, there’s not enough food left on the island for everyone for us to make it until we repair the farms and can get in a harvest. So, I’ll just ask her to add what *I* barter from her personally to the shipments of food they’re selling us for the gold the water dragons have scavenged.”

“That might be a good idea, young one, and *not* just for us. I think we should gather all the farmers together and see what kind of materials we’re going to need to recover quickly, and then barter with the humans for at least a portion of them. Seeds, replacement topsoil, that sort of thing. If we have plant seed waiting for us once we repair the tracts, it will speed up the first harvest.”

“One step ahead of you, Patron, we already did that,” Kammi smiled. “The department has a list, and we gave it to the humans during the summit. We even added a few things to it.”

“Like?”

“Like short-range two way radios so farmhands can communicate without having to leave the tracts,” she replied. “Cheaper than the cell phones we were using, and it’ll take us a some time to get the cell towers rebuilt anyway. We also added iron stock for forging tools, old-fashioned plows we can adapt so one of us can pull them, fertilizer, livestock, livestock feed, portable gas-powered generators so burrows can have power until we repair the power grid and rebuild the power plant, those kinds of things. Just general tools and supplies to hold us over up top while we rebuild.”

“See, we weren’t told that,” Keth frowned. “The Earth Council needs to work on its dissemination of information.”

“Things are pretty hectic right now,” Kammi said with a shrug. “With the summit and the demands and now the Chinese, there’s a crisis a day going on up in council chambers.”

The night out made for a slightly long day. Kell still had a lot to do at work, the task list was merciless, but earth dragons could go long periods of time without sleep. He knocked out a good half of the task list by himself, then took a moment to call Jenny and see how things went, as well as try to do a little private bartering. Jenny was slated to move to Imakaii, the name of the private CIA safe house and private resort of sorts where they hid the most important people who also expected some luxury, and he wasn’t sure when she was going to go there. Kell also wasn’t sure if that was the name of the island, but he’d find the place without Jenny’s directions. Jenny picked up on the first ring, and sounded rather chipper. “And what do you want, Kell?” she asked lightly.

He chuckled. “Just seeing how it’s going. You still on Kilauea?”

“Yup,” she replied. “Most of the Hunters are already on their way to the next assignment, and I’ll be leaving in the morning. Just going through the debriefings now, which you are *interrupting*,” she said pointedly.

“Like your personal problems matter to me in any way,” he replied blandly, which made her laugh. “But, if you’re busy, we’ll cut it short. I’ll call sometime tomorrow, once you’re at your new gilded cage,” he said lightly.

“Sure thing, friend. Talk to you tomorrow.”

It took him about an hour to track down Imakaii, because it was surprisingly well hidden. Much as Jenny described, it was a private island just west of halfway through the thousand-mile long chain, which was listed as government property and marked on public maps as a wildlife sanctuary island, one of many through the chain. It was nearly 90 kilometers to the

closest village of any size, but there was a tiny fishing village on the closest island to it, which was 32 kilometers east. It took some doing to get some images of the place, but he was impressed once he found them. The island itself was a bit of an oddity where small volcanic islands was concerned, since it was nowhere near round or oval. It was roughly rectangular in shape, some four kilometers long and about 1.5 kilometers wide at its widest point near the center, the interior dominated by a long lateral hill that was the extinct volcano and with lush green carpeting the whole island, broken only by the man-made construction on the island. Imakaii literally was a playground. It had a *huge* main house, fairly large boat dock set in deep water, which would allow good-sized boats to tie up, several outbuildings, a large pool, chopper pad, private landing strip, and even its own private golf course, some nine holes arrayed in a ring around the island's eroded central hilltop, which was an extinct volcano eaten away to the point where it was now just a fairly rounded if large hill that dominated the center of the island. The landing strip was on top of that long ridged hilltop, literally cut from the top of the hill, and long enough to accommodate a twin engine turboprop or small private jet. The island was surrounded on three sides by coral reefs, making a seaborne approach impossible from any direction but the south, into the very shallow lagoon near which the house and compound were built.

And recent satellite imagery showed two Naval vessels, a destroyer and a light cruiser, picketed near that southern approach. It also showed a formation of six larger ships only about 170 nautical miles east and steaming in that direction, four Naval vessels and two transports, one of them an industrial engineering transport with heavy construction vehicles chained to the top and a crane mounted on the stern.

They were bringing construction equipment to the island...clever. If Imakaii was going to become America's secret magical academy, they were going to need to renovate a little bit. The island's location also would require some fortifications to be dug, for it had some unique advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were complete isolation and control of the island. Unlike a military base on the mainland, there would be *no one*

creeping around the perimeter here, no press, no nothing, and its complete isolation from populated areas would allow the dragons to fly back and forth without being seen. The disadvantage was also the advantage, and that was isolation. A hostile naval force could blockade the island, and it was vulnerable to both aerial attack and amphibious invasion. But, those disadvantages were outweighed by the complete privacy and isolation the island and its inhabitants would enjoy.

He called her back just before leaving the office, and she was still just as chipper, putting him on speakerphone and Davie's voice bubbling in the background as she answered. "*Now* what?" she demanded lightly.

Kell laughed. "Don't make me hack your toaster, woman," he warned, which made her laugh brightly.

"You burn Greg's toast, and he'll take it out of your hide," she replied. "Now, what's so important that you'd do the closest thing to pestering me an earth dragon manages?"

"Actually, I do have something I want to talk to you about, and it's something rather personal," he answered, ticking off the second to last item on the day's task sheet. Kammi and Jirran were both working on the last bit, securing their back doors into the Hang Seng to intentionally crash it should China declare war on the United States...not that it wouldn't crash all by itself in just two days, when the sanctions were set to go into effect. "Or, more to the point, something you can do for Keth."

"Well, then let's talk about that," she said, putting Davie down from the sound of it. "What does Keth want?"

"Nothing earth-shattering," he replied. "He was of a mind to barter some livestock and plant seed from the humans on top of the relief supplies we'll buy with gold. We don't have that much to offer right now, but you said at the summit that humans would pay a fortune for earth dragon art, so perhaps I could make something for you in barter for what we need."

"What does he want exactly?"

“Two dairy cows and a stud-worthy bull cow, none of which have been shot up with hormones. He also needs a breeding pair of buffalo. Also, sec, lemme get the list,” he said, digging up a small piece of slate earth dragons often used as paper. “fifty kilograms of wheat seed, ten kilograms of carrot seed, ten kilograms of pumpkin seed, and ten kilograms of tomato seed. Those are the plants we don’t think we can recover after the farms burned. The potato crops actually sort of made it through, at least to where we can recover partial yields and get some seed back, and after checking the farm, we found that the rioters missed some of our seed stores in a deep cellar in the main storage room. That gives us enough to replant everything but what I just told you.”

“Tomatoes, hmm? He’s going to try his hand with them?”

“We’ve raised them before,” he replied. “But while they take a lot of work, they start producing faster than many other crops and also have yields beyond a single harvest. We’ll have consistent tomatoes coming off the vines during the entire planting cycle, and that’s going to be important.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Well, you can go up and talk to Anthra and Geon, Kell, and tell them that Arlen will need to talk to them tomorrow. We’re almost done gathering the materials you asked for, so it’ll just come down to bargaining a price for them, then setting up a delivery.”

“I’ll have them call Arlen in the morning,” he nodded, sending that note up to the council floor’s computers as an urgent message. “So, can you get what sire wants?”

“I should be able to,” she replied. “But you won’t be getting it from *me*, you’ll be getting it from the government. I wouldn’t know the first thing about buying cows,” she laughed. “But, I think I can convince them to accept something you can manage to give as barter.”

“Such as?”

“Such as you and a couple of other earth dragons coming to Imakaii and helping me with something,” she replied.

“What kind of something?”

“The kind that requires builders,” she replied lightly. “I want a playground for Davie. He’ll need as many things to do as possible given he’ll be the only child on the island. I could have the construction teams build something, but I’d rather have the earth dragons do it. I don’t want something, well, *sterile*. I want something Davie knows was built just for him, and by the dragons themselves. He’s already having some separation issues since the fire dragons left. He *really* got attached to Sessara,” she noted.

“I think we could do that,” he mused. “We’re too big to make tunnels and such for him, but I could build a playground for a human child easily, and maybe a few other things.” He glanced over at his task list, which was completed for the day...but would be just as long tomorrow. “Tell you what. Let me go talk to the chief and Geon about it. I know things are gonna go to hell in two days, but if we can manage a short visit over there, that’s good. We’ll be coming there anyway, and earth dragons will need to dig some dens for the visiting fire and sky dragons, as well as burrows for ourselves. We can do it *way* faster than the other dragons can.”

“Sounds good. Now, while you’re here, you’re going to sit down with the four computer geeks on the team and talk about computers a little bit,” she added. “Mainly about what you’re doing to China, and how we can help.”

“So, the true motive is revealed,” Kell chuckled.

“Think we’re not going to learn some of your tricks when you want something from us?” she retorted lightly. “I’ll talk to Arlen about what Keth wants, and arrange it. We’ll consider your visit to build Davie his playground and a little chat session with the four of us fair barter for the farm supplies. I’ll have directions—“

“Directions? Really? *Directions*?” he cut her off, which made her burst out laughing.

“I shoulda known,” she replied with a trailing chuckle. “Already know where it is, don’t ya?”

“I’m looking at it right now,” he replied, a bit flippantly.

She laughed helplessly. “Curse you, evil dragon,” she teased. “They showed me pictures of it. It’s really nice.”

“It does look to be,” he agreed. “Beach, nine hole golf course, pool, huge main house, however will you survive living in a luxury resort on a private tropical island.”

“We’ll find a way,” she replied lightly. “Though it won’t be quite so pristine for long. They’re sending in a construction crew to expand it. They’re building an instruction center and a series of bungalows around the main compound for students. They’re planning it so it can hold a hundred and fifty comfortably. They’re talking about sacrificing the golf course if they have to expand, so we’d better learn how to play golf *now*.” She was quiet a moment. “Not that all our students will be there. Hinado told me that both the President and First Lady are magicians.”

“We knew about the First Lady, but he didn’t tell us about the President,” Kell noted.

“Well, it’s not like he can quit his job and take lessons,” she chuckled wryly. “But we’ll teach him and Misses Walker what Hinado teaches us as best we can, when we can.”

Ferroth stumped in and headed right to him as Jenny was talking, and since Kell had it on speaker, it wasn’t like he didn’t know what Kell was doing. “Jenny, we were about to call you,” he called, looking at Kell’s monitor.

“Who’s that?”

“Jenny, that’s the chief, Ferroth,” Kell introduced.

“Oh. Hi chief,” she replied with a light tone.

“Anthra and Geon wanted an update on things, and were about to call the Secretary of State. Is he available?”

“He is anytime *you* call,” she replied immediately. “Just use the number he gave Geon, it rings him personally. And he was going to contact you, since he has news for you. Since I have you here, chief, let me tell you what I told Kell. We’d like a few earth dragons to come to Imakaii and do what you do best. Kell bartered some goods from me in return for him building a playground for Davie, and he said that the fire and sky dragons that come visit will need dens. We’d like them to dig them out so our visitors have places that they feel are *theirs*. We want them to feel comfortable.”

“Making private deals, are ya whelp?” Ferroth accused in draconic, which made Kell laugh.

“On behalf of my sire I am,” he answered. “Sire wants some wheat seed and a few livestock animals, and, well, I’m in a position to get them.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” Ferroth said in English. “We’d need a field agent to go to the island and make sure it’s safe anyway. Kell can conduct a security inspection after he builds that playground for your son, and we could dig out some dens and burrows for the dragons that come to the island. I’ll take it up to the Earth Council and they’ll make the decision.”

“So that means yes,” Jenny said lightly.

“When I tell them it’s a department affair, it turns into a yes,” Ferroth snorted, which made Jenny chuckle.

“Yeah, I figured I knew who really ran things down there,” she replied. “Alright, I’ll let you get to that, friends. I need to cook dinner for the boys, before they get all whiny.”

“I do not get *whiny*!” Greg protested in the background.

“See? Whiny already,” she said teasingly, which made both Kell and Ferroth chuckle.

“Why do you think they want earth dragons there?” Kell asked after they said their goodbyes.

“Not sure, but we can figure out what they’re up to when we’re up there. This kind of intelligence gathering will take some face to face discussion,” he noted, sitting on his haunches. “While you’re up there, you can hack their on-site network,” he added absently.

Kell chuckled. “They’ll be watching us way too carefully for us to do that,” he said slyly. “But since they want to go over what we’re doing to China, I will have access to their computer network,” he mused.

“Then that’s part of what they’re after. We have our claws on China’s neck, and they want to see how we did it so they can do the same thing. But, if they’re inviting us, I’d be an idiot not to take them up on it. Getting a couple of field agents on the island just benefits *us*.”

“Well, chief, I’m done for the day, so I’m going to go back to my burrow and get some sleep,” he said.

“Yeah, I heard you stayed out last night. How was the fishing?”

Kell laughed. “Productive,” he replied. “Tuna for breakfast makes for a happy earth drake. Don’t tell anyone, but I’m going out again tonight.”

“Nobody made any rule saying you *couldn’t* go,” Ferroth said with a shrug of his wings. “Just be careful out there, whelp.”

“We will be,” he nodded.

Chapter 19

1 September 2017, 04:23 DMT: 17 miles south-southeast of Draconia

Kammi was going to work out.

She'd never fished before, not the way the water dragons did it, but she showed her field agent training in that she learned fast and wasn't afraid to either try or fail. After learning the basics behind water dragon fishing, which in the old ways meant actually *fishing* and not using their water magic to collect the fish like an earth dragon might pull radishes out of the ground, she went from hindrance to at least not a hindrance after her first experience. She couldn't swim as fast as Kell, turn as quickly, or stay submerged even as third as long as he could, but she was good at making a lot of noise and driving the tuna towards the water drakes. She didn't catch a single thing, unable to keep up with or turn with the tuna, but in her own way she did help the pod have a successful expedition, the *entire* pod. Jerral, Hura, and Kii had come with them, the three water drake hatchlings both getting some exercise and honing their skills fishing in the old traditions. Surrall was quite adamant about any offspring of his being able to fish *without* magic, even though Surrall himself was even better at fishing with magic than he was doing it the hard way. But, fishing without magic was something Surrall enjoyed as a sport, and Kell had to agree, it *was* a great deal of fun. Surrall was renowned as one of the most skilled fishers among the earth dragons, and he kept that reputation because he insisted that knowing how to fish *without* magic made a water dragon a better fisher *with* magic.

So, after four hours of hunting tuna, the pod had netted quite a haul, half of which was Kell and Kammi's, and they were on their way back to the island.

They stayed in constant contact with the island, however. Water dragons were singing the news across the oceans on the hour, and even over the night, there was news. Trejem of the chromatics had asked for an earth dragon to come out, and since Kell and Kammi were busy, Jirran had answered the call to come out for an hour and "top off" the younger chromatics, because today would be the day. Jirran had sent that news out as soon as he got back underground, and word of it reached the pod as they swam back. Hirrag intended to move *today*, before the water dragons were called away to raise the submarine and the day after every fire dragon cycled through Hirrag's den and received magical power from Girk, and also before word somehow got back to the council chromatics that an earth dragon was on the surface, charging up the dragons that intended to oppose them. Hirrag showed quite a bit of tactical savvy in planning his strike, giving his side time to arm themselves and prepare, but not so long that he gave his opposition time to think a way out of the bad situation they were in. And it *was* a bad situation. The chromatics would tire out after just a half-dozen major spells, the kinds of spells a dragon might throw around in combat, and then they'd have to fall back on fangs and claws. And chromatics were absolutely no match for a fire dragon in the realm of physical combat. No dragon really was. When it came to facing a fire dragon tooth to talon, every dragon except earth dragons fled from them. Only earth dragons had the physical power and sheer contrariness to fight a fire dragon in his own realm of advantage, because though earth dragons were small, they were physically powerful and the most agile and light-footed of all dragons, since they had far less weight to move around, at least on land. Sky dragons were more agile in the air and water dragons more agile in the water, but standing on the earth was the sole means of getting around an earth dragon had, so they were the most fleet of all dragons.

And there were the tail spikes. Those tail spikes gave more fire dragons nightmares than anything else on the island.

The exact plan Hirrag had wasn't sent out, but they didn't really need to know it. Kell and Kammi also knew that unless they received direct orders from the Earth Council, they wouldn't be going back inside. Trejem and Hirrag might *need* a couple of earth dragons close by, but not so close by that their presence empowered the council chromatic and his lackeys. Girk was a brave young drake, but he had no practical field experience, and there was no telling how he might react to his first taste of field work being a pitched battle between fire dragons and chromatics. Kell and Kammi already made plans to stay in the family burrow, for their burrow was deep enough underground to prevent their magic from empowering their enemies, but close by in case they were needed, and monitor things from there. They also had a generator in there, and they could get some power going and keep the city below apprised of what was happening. The sky dragons had tried and failed to dig out their family burrow, because it was very deep and under the bedrock. They'd only managed to dig in to the entry chamber, but gave up when they saw all that solid rock surrounding the lone passage out of that chamber, a passage far too small for even the youngest of the adult sky drakes.

Of course, the magical wards that Surrall had placed over the burrow had also discouraged them. From what Kell had heard, a sky dragon tried to send a lightning bolt into the burrow to set fire to anything that might be in the next room, but Surrall's defensive magic had sent it right back at him. Lightning couldn't hurt a sky dragon, but it most likely scared the hell out of him and made him and the others abandon the attempt, fearful of what *other* magical protections might be placed over the innocent-looking burrow.

"I'm not sure if the fire dragons will need us, but we'll be staying close to the island if they do," Surrall was saying as the island came into hazy view in the first vestiges of dawn. "They may need us for our healing magic if anything."

"Younglings, I want you to stay with Kell and Kammi at all times," Shii ordered. "The wards we have over the burrow will prevent any dragon from detecting them, but they still need protection. *You* will be that

protection when we are not there,” she told them, which made Kii, the oldest of the clutch of three, beam in pride at being given *real* responsibility. “Don’t get under their feet, but don’t let anyone into the burrow except those you know to belong there.”

“I’ve been practicing my shield spells, Matriarch,” Jerral said animatedly. “And with Kell and Kammi on *our* side of the shield, it gives us magic and anyone trying to get in none.”

“Wise thinking, young one,” Surrall said professionally. “Lay both a shield and a ward at every critical juncture of the burrow, but mind that your Matriarch and myself already have some protections laid down. Assense every area before you start casting. Kell, Kammi, stay down on the lower levels. Deep.”

“We will, Patriarch,” Kammi answered. “That’s where the generator is anyway.”

“So is the ELF transmitter. It’s still down in our mushroom cellar,” Kell added. “We can use that to send messages down into the city, but we need one of you to go in there and tell them to turn on the receiver.”

“I can do it, I have to go in anyway and bring the news,” Ralla answered, then he dove underwater with a slap of his fluked tail on the surface.

“We’ll have any messages that need be sent to the earth dragons brought to your burrow, it’s faster if you do it,” Surrall told them. “Younglings, that’s your other job. Accept messages at the entry and take them down to the mushroom cellar.”

“We’ll do you proud, Patriarch,” Hura said with quiet dignity. She was like that.

“Let me go to Jussa and see what he intends to do,” Surrall said with quiet intensity. He was definitely preparing himself for possible fighting. “I leave the younglings to you, my lifemate.”

“I will care for them most carefully, lifemate,” she answered with a nod, and Surrall submerged.

“Kammi, we’re going to need a door,” Kell said as he saw the cove emerge from the darkness and gloom. Since they were swimming around 30 knots, Kammi’s top speed, they’d be there within a half an hour. “Nothing fancy. We’ll just use the debris in the entry chamber to block off the passage as best we can.”

“It’s gonna take cement to fix that,” Kammi growled.

“After this is over, yeah,” he nodded. “But sire’s been thinking of enlarging the entry room anyway. Anthra’s too big to really fit in it very well.”

“Sella, go ahead and warn the chromatics of our approach, if they’re on the farm,” Shii ordered. “Even the twenty paces from the beach to the burrow should not be taken in this light without protection. It’s almost light enough for sky dragons to see. If they’re not on the farm, return to us so that we might shield our friends from sight as they leave the safety of the water.”

“I’ll see to it, Matriarch,” Sella replied, then she too dove under the water and streaked ahead.

“We will submerge now,” Shii declared. “Kammi, come to me.”

“Yes, Matriarch.”

Once they went underwater, they went *much* faster. Kell was right behind Shii as she carried Kammi along with her, a breathing bubble around both of their heads, with the younglings to each side and behind them, a defensive formation. Sella didn’t return as they approached, the water dark and Shii the only thing Kell could really see in the gloom, but she brought them to a halt when they reached the opening of the cove in the growing light, rocky contours Kell knew as well as his own burrow. Shii used magic to write glowing writing in the water; *the chromatics are ready. Straight to the beach, straight to the burrow.* Kell and Kammi both nodded, and Shii

gestured for Kell to hold his breath, a pre-arranged signal if a water dragon had to end a breathing bubble. Kell took in his breath and nodded to her, and the bubble popped, letting the warm water crash into his face and head with surprising force. He shook his head and saw her motion, so he snapped his wings and lanced into the cove, turning to the left to follow the long sheltered miniature bay, his wings propelling him through the water so fast that he would easily be mistaken for a water dragon in the gloom. He snapped to the right when he reached the beach and angled up, and literally exploded from the water five meters from the surf, where the ledge dropped off into the cove and allowed the beach to form. He landed in the sand and was bounding straight for the burrow as several young chromatics watched, their eyes glowing with blazing incandescence as they used their magic to hide him from sky dragon eyes. Kammi vaulted out of the water just as he reached the ruined entry ramp of the family burrow, and he stopped and waited for her as she galloped across the sawgrass between the entry and the beach. He lunged down into the torn-out ramp, open to the air all the way down to the entry chamber, then picked their way through the tumbled stones to the entry room. Kell quickly started gathering up some of the larger boulders as the three hatchlings appeared, diving right into the entry room and into the burrow, then he and Kammi piled them up in front of the entryway to the main burrow just enough to slow anyone down trying to get in. The elder chromatic Trejem appeared at the top of the chasm-like opening, looking down at them with glowing white eyes.

“Two young ones will remain in the Dawnmist tunnel to assist you if needed,” he told them. “Stay safe, young earth drakes.”

“Nothing’s getting at us down here,” Kammi grinned up at him. “You have no idea how *big* this burrow really is.”

“Then stay deep and stay safe,” he replied, gesturing with a paw. A big boulder lifted up from the ruined floor of the entry chamber, and both of them stepped back as he placed it on top of the stones they’d already piled. There was enough room for a dragon to reach in, but not enough for them to fit through the entry or unleash a breath weapon into the passage without

moving the boulder...which would be a bad idea with a defender behind it to make it a full contact sport.

“Let’s get to work!” Kammi barked as all three water drake younglings used magic to create small lights so they could see. They knew enough to make them just bright enough to see, but not so bright that they interfered with the thermographic vision of the earth drakes.. “Hura, Jerral, do those magic things. Kii, come with us, we might need your help with the generator.”

“Go ahead,” Kell said lightly when all three looked to him. “Hura, see if the emergency water tank is in good condition too, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure thing, Kell,” she answered, and she bounded down the entry passage and into the main common room.

“You get the generator, intended, I’ll go to the ELF transmitter.”

The generator was down on the lowest level, in a large room with an air vent for exhaust, with a higher ceiling than the passageway to help trap exhaust fumes inside the room. The room also had negative air pressure thanks to that air vent, causing air on the lowest level to flow *into* the generator room and out the air vent, which further trapped any possible exhaust inside the room. Kell checked the fuel and oil, and finding them good, he primed it and yanked on the cord. The generator sputtered a little, coughed a couple of times, then it caught and started to rev up. He let it get up to speed and stabilize, then he hit the switch that started the generator side of it. The lights in the burrow flickered, then came up as the generator handled the initial surge that came from being activated on active lines, something that they really weren’t supposed to do. But after so long, Kell had honestly forgotten that the lights down here had been left on. “Go through the burrow and turn off anything electrical we don’t need, Kii,” he told the eldest of the clutch. “I don’t want to stress this thing out.”

“I will,” she answered with a nod. “I’ll see what the clutchmates are doing while I’m up there.”

After checking the fuel tank they had in the room to see how much reserve gas they had, he hurried down to the deepest chamber in the burrow, the mushroom cellar. The ELF transmitter was there, still bolted to the floor, and Kammi was cleaning some mold and moss off of it, as well as a couple of mushrooms. "I hope it still works," Kell chuckled.

"They're built for dank conditions," she replied immediately, popping a tiny mushroom into her mouth rather than toss it aside. "What'll matter is if they have the receiver turned on."

"Well, let's find out."

Kammi put the earset on in front of her horns and turned on the unit. It came up with just a little protest from a couple of fans, then the fans spun up and settled down. She hit a few keys on the control pad, then pressed the transmit button. "Sanctuary, this is the cellar. Sanctuary, this is the cellar, come in," she called into the microphone. "You reading this?"

"We read you, cellar," came a reply over the external speaker. "A little weak, but readable. Try boosting your output gain a little."

"That you, Trekka?" Kammi asked as she did as he asked.

"Yup," he answered. "Hold on, I'm being kicked off."

Another voice replaced his. "Are you safe up there?" Kintel asked.

"Safe as can be," she replied. "We're in position and ready. The water dragons said they'll relay messages through us rather than send a drake to deliver them, so keep this thing open and manned at all times."

"Got it. I'll have someone put on the unit right now," he replied.

"Things busy down there?"

"You know it. The whole department is in, every dragon on the Earth Council is crowding up the main office, and we have ten drakes set and ready to come out if they're needed. Any idea when this dance starts?"

“Nope, but knowing fire dragons, they won’t wait long once the sun comes up.”

“True enough,” Kintel agreed. “Alright, I’ve got an operator.”

“Who’s on the other side of this?” came a curious voice.

Kammi laughed. “Hrada, you have to learn to move faster when Kintel’s putting the eye out!”

“This is better than web surfing,” he replied in a tone that made Kammi laugh again. “They want to know if there’s anyone up there to relay messages.”

“Yes,” she answered. “We can get messages out.”

“Good, then get it out that we’re ready to move if we’re needed.”

“Will do.” Hura half-slid down the ramp into the cellar, causing Kammi to glance over at her. “We’ll call in every thirty minutes if there’s nothing to report.”

“The emergency tank is about half full, Kell,” she replied. “That should be enough water to last a whole week. But there’s no food.”

“Shii still has the catch,” Kammi grunted. “Well, I think we’ll survive a day without eating. Besides, there’s always the hatchlings if we *really* get hungry,” she added lightly, giving Hura a playfully predatory look.

“We can always get the chromatics to bring us food if it comes down to it. When you and Jerral finish putting up your shield, arrange it so there’s a drake at the entry and a drake in here at all times, in case they pass a message.”

“We’ll work it out,” she nodded, then she turned and went back up the ramp.

“You ride jockey on the ELF, intended, I’ll go lurk near the entrance.”

“Sounds like a plan. Don’t sandblast anyone by accident,” she grinned at him.

Kell climbed the ramp himself, both grim and a little relieved. Not that he relished the idea of the dragons fighting each other, but this had to be get solved, and *fast*. The chromatics were threatening the entire island with their childish behavior, so intent on holding onto power that they would rather destroy what they couldn’t hold rather than let it go.

But, in this, they would be observers at the very most. Trapped in the burrow, there was little they could do except be close by in case they were needed.

Unless....

He blinked. Then his eyes narrowed, and he took on a calculating expression.

“Kammi,” he called down the ramp.

“Yeah?”

“I’m going out.”

“*What?* They told us to stay in here!”

“There’s something we forgot. I’ll be alright, I’m just going into the village. Just hold down the fort til I get back.”

“Well, alright. But be careful!”

“I will, I promise.”

He stopped and looked behind himself, at his tail. With steely eyes, he relaxed his spikes from their anchors, then with a gentle shake, dislodged them. Chiming tinkles shimmered in the passage as his seventeen clear spikes clattered to the stone floor, then rustled to a stop as he stalked away.

For what he had in mind, not only would he not need them, but he wouldn’t be able to do what he had to do if he had them.

1 September 2017, 06:37 DMT; Council Aerie

They stood upon a precipice of change, and were but one step from flinging themselves into the void of uncertainty.

Jussa sat on his haunches on top of his podium, a place he had not been very often in the last couple of months. Six of the nine podiums were occupied, the six council members settling in as they began this most momentous of council sessions. Jussa couldn't help but glance to his left, where the two empty earth dragons podiums stood, and to his right, where the lone chromatic podium rested, and feel the great weight of uncertainty press in on him from both of those sides. The earth dragons were still deep underground save for three, three field agents who had come up to be close by in case they were needed, and the chromatrics were divided and one tiny step from open civil war. The council was not complete, but there were enough of them there to convene...not that the rules really mattered at this point.

There was nothing in the covenant about what they were about to do. But, Jussa believed they were operating in the spirit of the covenant, which had been formed to ensure the protection and prosperity of all dragons on this island. They were moving to heal the wounds that the chromatrics had caused and bring the island to at least a sense of closure.

"If we are all ready, then I would suggest that we begin," he declared as more and more dragons landed on the aerie, water dragons, fire dragons, and sky dragons. "Hirrag, it is you who has called this session of the dragon's council. Therefore, it is to you that the floor is yielded."

Hirrag lifted his head higher, towering over every other dragon on the aerie. "I thank you, Jussa," he replied. "I put forth to this council and to Draconia as a whole that the council chromatic and the Council of Seven

have violated both the rule and the spirit of the covenant. They have brought harm to every dragon on the island, even themselves, and have used deception and cowardly sabotage to bring about harm to the earth dragons, whom they sought to strip of their rightful place upon this very council. I put forth before this council the resolution that for these acts, the current council chromatic be ejected from this body, and the Council of Seven be reprimanded most harshly by this council for their craven deeds.”

“I believe that we should approach each proposal independently,” Hinado said, shivering his huge wings. “I agree that the council chromatic has to go, but I think we should allow the chromatics to handle the disciplining of their leaders. If we don’t let them straighten that part of it out on their own, it might cause us more problems on the other side of the storm front.”

“I know little of what happened before I was selected for this post, but one thing I do know is that no matter what dragons believe about the earth dragons, what the chromatics have done is inexcusable,” Faralla added. “But, it is not the chromatics by themselves that have shown a darkness inside them,” he said with a sober expression. “The sky dragons as well have shown a blackness of heart. We looked down upon the earth dragons and saw only pitiable creatures denied the gifts of the rest of us, but instead of nurturing those we felt were below us, we instead believed ourselves to be their betters, and let arrogance and cruelty taint us. After all, it wasn’t the chromatics that destroyed the earth dragon farms and dug out their burrows. We have our own blame in this, and we will put things right.”

“We too share the responsibility for this mess,” Sessara said with stoic pride. “We allowed the chromatics to do our thinking for us, and allowed them to use us to bring harm to not just the earth dragons, but the entire island. We very nearly brought irreparable harm to magic itself. But Gaia teaches us that the only mistake is the one that is not rectified, and we are here to rectify our error.”

“The time for recriminations is past,” Essan stated. “The earth dragons themselves wish only to get this past us, so that we might heal and rebuild,

and I agree. We need them back on the surface, and the only thing holding them underground now is the chromatics. So, let us solve this problem, here and now. I believe that the time has come to vote.”

“Then let us settle this,” Jussa nodded. “The matter before the council is thus: a vote to remove the chromatic from this body, and allow the chromatics to appoint a successor. What say you, esteemed council members?”

The vote took only seconds, and went exactly as Jussa expected. He slapped his tail on the floor behind his podium. “Very well, in a vote of six for, none against, and three abstentions, the matter is passed. Effective immediately, the chromatic representative of the dragon’s council is forcibly removed from his post. Since he was the current chair of council, we must immediately elect a new chair to serve the remainder of his term. Who places their name into consideration?”

“There is only one choice. I place into consideration Jussa of the water wyrms,” Hirrag declared.

After a rumble of assent, Jussa sighed a little. “By acclimation, the matter is passed. I would have preferred another, but if you wish me to chair, then I will do my best.” He rose up a little on his forelegs. “As our first order of business, I set forth before this body that we are in a time of crisis, and as such, the rules of crisis must be invoked. Is there objection?” When he saw nods and heard silence, he slapped his tail again. “Very well, by general acclimation, I declare that we may proceed under the rules of crisis. I therefore place into consideration for immediate vote this matter,” he said, nodding to his aide. The water drake carried several stone tablets out into the middle and set them down. “These are the six written demands of the earth dragons, transcribed into stone as per draconic law. I attest before this council that they are faithful and complete copies of the original documents,” he declared. “Clerk of the seat, read the documents.”

The dozens and dozens of dragons, council members, workers, and spectators, listened as Jussa’s aide read the list of demands of the earth

dragons, the six demands for changes in rule and policy. The aide read them quickly and in a strong voice, and for many of the spectators, it was the first time they'd actually heard the demands read as the earth dragons wrote them. When the aide was done, he placed the three stone tablets on the gold circle in the middle, then returned behind Jussa's podium.

"I place before this council the resolution that these demands be immediately accepted and adopted, complete with the changes of rules for this very body. Hirrag?" he asked, looking across the aerie.

"Aye."

"Sessara?"

"Aye."

He turned his head. "Faralla?"

He hesitated only a second. "Aye."

"Hinado?"

"Aye."

He turned to look at the water drake. "Essan?"

"I vote aye."

"As for the water wrym seat, I vote aye as well," Jussa said. "In a vote of six for, zero against, and two abstentions, the matter is passed. The council adopts the changes of law and council rules proposed by the earth dragons. From this moment forth, the Earth Council accepts responsibility for the portioning of allotments for all non-producing dragons. The lowlands are considered out of bounds for all but earth and water dragons, and the upper peaks with the exception of Council Aerie and a route to it to be constructed later to be out of bounds for earth dragons. The earth dragons take responsibility for the department and its operations, and from this moment forth, any matter brought before council may be rejected by a vote of veto by both seats of a dragon race. The finer points of these issues

will be settled in future discussion and debate, but only when the council is fully attended by *all* dragons elected to this council, not only the six currently present. It is also set forth by these demands that there will be no punitive measures or recriminations by *either* side in this matter. The conditions of the agreement give leave for this council to debate the extent to which the earth dragons may import human technology onto the island, give this council jurisdiction over matters of diplomacy with the humans, and there is still the matter of the sky dragons destroying the earth dragon farms, which by this agreement will be handled separately. But, since the earth dragons have shown integrity, I am confident that they will be fair.”

He looked around the aerie. “Now then, on to the final bit of business this council will handle before it adjourns. As this body operates under the rules of crisis, that includes giving this council the authorization to vote on matters of grave import. And there is a matter of grave import before us now. The chromatics have not agreed to the demands of the earth dragons, and even now threaten the very existence of Draconia with their resistance to blunt, inescapable truth. As the chromatics have rejected all reasonable attempts to negotiate, it is my sad and heavy duty to put before this council that the chromatics are threatening the very existence of the island. Their utter refusal to accept reality jeopardizes our entire society. And as such, it gives this ruling body the legal authorization to bring them to heel. As acting chair in a matter of crisis, I set forth a warrant of arrest for the council chromatic and the chromatics known as the Council of Seven. Hirrag, as the fire wyrm seat and overseer of the fangs and claws of the island, I charge you the task of locating the renegade council chromatic and the chromatics known as the Council of Seven and bringing them before this body to answer the charges, by force if necessary. You also have authorization to exercise force against any that would seek to hinder or impair you in your pursuit of council justice. Is there objection to this declaration?”

“Not from me, there’s not,” Hirrag said with an almost ominously eager smile, all fangs.

“Then, without dissent, the warrant of arrest is so foresworn. Hirrag, the matter is now in your paws. And with that, I move that this body stand in adjournment until such time as the charged dragons are captured and brought before us. Is there objection?”

There was silence.

“Then we stand in recess.”

The council dragons stepped down, and Hirrag immediately took to the air with Sessara right behind him. Essan fell into step beside Jussa as they approached the edge of the aerie. “You know they can re-appoint the council chromatic right back to the council. If they even recognize that we were capable of impeaching him in the first place.”

“I know, but for now, it gives us the legal right to move without him,” Jussa nodded. “I’m going to be with Hirrag, my friend, he might need me. Do the others have everything prepared?”

“All is ready, my friend.”

“Then let’s get this overwith,” he said with a sigh of dread.

1 September 2017, 08:19 DMT; The Library of Chroma

He couldn’t *believe* that it had come to this.

Chromatics swarmed all over the library as they prepared to evacuate. If the sky dragons that were with them were right, the *entire* fire dragon race was gathering in the caldera of the north peak, and they had orders to come after him and the Council of Seven, to *arrest* them. Arrest *them*! According to their sky dragon allies, the council had met without him, kicked him off the council, voted to accept the demands, and then declared the council chromatic and the Council of Seven to be outlaws and set Hirrag on them...and that massive *oaf* actually believed he had the right to arrest

them! They couldn't persuade the dim fire dragons that they had absolutely no legal right to do so, the fire dragons were far too savage. The prospect of going to war was like the most intoxicating drug to the barbaric brutes, and now they were working themselves into a bloodlust. When they came, they wouldn't *care* that they had no right to do what they were doing. All they would care about was that someone told them they could fight, and that was all they wanted to hear. And there were far too many fire dragons. They were the second most populous of the dragon races, only outnumbered by the treacherous earth dragons, and there were so many of them that they nearly outnumbered the entire chromatic race twice over. His loyal chromatics would be overrun by the fire dragons' overwhelming numbers.

But to run was the coward's folly. The chromatics were the rulers of this island, the rulers of the fire dragons, the rulers of *all* of them, and they would prove that they were worthy of the sacred charge Gaia placed upon them. Gaia had decreed that the chromatics would rule over all other dragons, and today, they would be forced to carry out Gaia's will directly by subjugating the fire dragons in combat. That they were outnumbered almost three to one was a liability, but Gaia would be with them, for it was Gaia's will that they were upholding. But trying to hold up in the library was not wise. The building was never constructed to fend off a siege, and there were too many irreplaceable treasures inside. Besides, the sages were in the same building, and though they were not aiding them in this, the chromatics would *not* put their sages in mortal jeopardy.

The council chromatic snarled a little at that thought. Just what did the sages think they were proving? Wasn't it clear to them that the elder chromatics were the ones in Gaia's favor? It didn't *matter* what the earth dragons were, they could be put back in their place without doing magic any possible harm; in fact, it would only protect magic by putting the magic-givers in firm and complete control of the chromatics, there to supply them with unlimited magical power whenever they so willed it. Trejem was wrong about them. They were not blessed by Gaia, they were *cursed* by Gaia. They carried the curse of granting magic to everyone except themselves, denied the one thing that made the dragons better than every

other form of life on the planet. Gaia had cursed them, played the cruelest of jokes on them, forcing them to be the granters of magic they could never use. If anything, that fact only further bolstered his position and his plans. He would see the *cursed* earth dragons put on their farms and forever under chromatic control, he would carry out Gaia's will and put the *cursed* earth dragons in the place Gaia had made for them.

They were *born* to be what they were. Inferior. *Slaves*.

"Get the supplies in your shoulder satchels and get ready to move," he barked.

"Where shall we go, esteemed council member?" one of them asked.

He returned a wicked smile. "To the earth dragon village of Darkwood," he replied with a dark smile "We've widened a passageway so that the largest of us will just fit. That will restrict the number of fire dragons that can come in after us. Most of them will be too big. And they will be restricted in the use of their breath weapons outside for fear of burning down the forest."

"Wise, esteemed council member," the chromatic nodded, then hurried off.

Of *course* it was wise, he'd thought of it.

But he certainly didn't feel all that wise. It was almost *intolerable*, the idea that they were being forced to abandon the Library of Chroma, that it had come to this, come to a battle with the other dragons for the supremacy of the island. But Gaia was with them, he *knew* it. He would retreat from the library for a more defensible position, and from there, he would lead the chromatics to victory against the fire dragons, and prove to *everyone* that the chromatics were both destined and fit to rule.

He oversaw the last of the preparations, as food was gathered, magical tomes readied for moving. The village had its own small river running through it that would supply unlimited water, so they only had to worry about food. And with access to the other earth dragon villages, his smallest

chromatics could use the underground tunnel to slip out from other villages to forage or conduct missions. Things would be on a purely defensive standing for some few weeks, until the fire dragons gave up trying to root them out, and the earth dragons would stay like the cowards they were in their deep hole so long as the chromatics refused to accept their demands. Besides, knowing what the earth dragons were, the other dragons wouldn't *allow* them to try to take back their village. They would keep them out of harm's way, treat them like the slaves that they were by dictating to them what they could and could not do. That was the lot of the earth dragon, to be under the dominion of others.

Just as the council chromatic finished organizing his dragons, there was a shuddering blow placed on the door. Its magical wardings held, prevented it from being opened, but the sudden impact on the door caused immediate and tense silence within the room. The sky dragons hadn't warned them that the fire dragons had started to move! There was another impact on the door, then half the chromatics in the room flinched when black claws ripped through the door and tore down to the floor, then again, then again. The clawmarks were low on the door, barely halfway up its height, but those claws ripped through the stone quickly. The bottom half of the door collapsed into rubble, and on the other side of it wasn't a pack of angry fire dragons, there was only an earth dragon.

A single earth dragon.

It glared into the main chamber as it dropped back to all fours and sat on the far side of the hole it tore into the doorway, almost laughable in its arrogant swagger. It was a tiny thing, barely a third the size of the average chromatic, but it sat there with arrogant haughtiness as if it were the size of the island itself. The crystalline horns gave the creature a different appearance, but the council chromatic almost cackled in glee when he recognized the small creature.

Kell.

“It’s over, fluffy,” the earth drake declared as it stared at them through the hole in the door, then he stepped through the hole, a hole far too small for anyone else to use. Every chromatic almost automatically looked at the earth drake’s tail, and the council chromatic noted, with some relief, that he had not a single spike in his tail. He had somehow lost them all, and without those spikes, he was completely defenseless. He was a lamb sauntering into the slaughterhouse. But there was more. As he came through the door, removed the stone separating them, he could *feel* the magical aura of the little earth drake, a radiance of golden warmth that immediately started to refresh and recharge the dwindling stores of magical energy inside him. The earth dragon *was* giving off an aura of pure magic, just as Jussa described... but that was no matter. This particular earth dragon had been a thorn in his paw for far too long, and he would never leave the library alive. “The fire dragons are on their way right now to tear this place down to the foundations. But I can see that you know that,” he noted, looking around.

The council chromatic laughed lightly. “Gaia truly favors me if she sets you before me like a dawning day present,” he said with eagerness, stepping out in front of the others. “I’ll get to kill you before we leave.”

“Good luck with that, fluffy,” he replied, coming to a stop and sitting on his haunches, and the council chromatic padded right up to him, until they were almost nose to nose, looking down at him with dreadful anticipation. Without his spikes, he was defenseless, and he was too small for his claws or bite to threaten a dragon *his* size. And his aura of magic reinvigorated him by the second, strengthening his magical powers. “Even if you could manage it, the instant Hirrag sees my dead body, he’ll go into a psychotic rage that none of you will survive,” he said with a dark, fanged smile. “You see, the other dragons already won’t so much as let us walk across a room without protection. They don’t want to see magic harmed, so they’re almost annoying protective. But I’m a field agent, I can take care of myself,” he added with a barbed smile in his eyes.

“Clearly, the field agents are suicidal,” the council chromatic said, rearing up and sitting on his tail, as magical light sprang into existence around one of his forepaws.

“Don’t kill him, esteemed council member, he will grant *us* magic in the time to come!” one of the chromatics behind him called.

“Oh, you’re not going to kill me that easily,” the little earth drake said with a nasty smile.

“You have no spikes. You can do nothing,” the council chromatic said with a malevolent smile.

“Oh really,” the little earth drake replied in a drawl, then he flexed his toes, driving his claws into the stone floor. “The earth dragons will forgive the other chromatics, fluffy, but you, we will *never* forgive. You are the one that brought about the destruction of our farms, the disruption of our lives, and you have risked the very island itself and jeopardized the lives of every dragon that dwells upon it. Your hatred of us has put our society at risk and even now jeopardizes the well being and security of all dragons. For that, fluffy, you must be punished.”

“And what will you do without your spikes, little drake?” he mused lightly.

“I’m going to kill you,” he replied with cold eyes, then he sucked in his breath. The chromatics watched him with almost amused interest as he seemed to hunch down over his feet, but there was no surge of magic he could sense with his feathery antenna, no using some latent spell placed over him by some other dragon. Without his spikes he was *nothing*. He snapped his head forward and opened his maw—

—And pure *hell* blasted out of his mouth!

A white-hot cascading jet of liquid streamed out of the tiny drake’s mouth. It arced the very short distance between them, and it hit the council chromatic squarely in the chest. The liquid was lava, liquid rock, but so hot that even lava would be the cool surf lapping the shores compared to *this*. The chromatic didn’t even have time to register what was happening to him before the white-hot liquid rock enveloped his chest and the splatter from the impact sprayed lethal liquid over his neck, legs, even his head, over the

entire front of his body, charring flesh, splitting bone, vaporizing blood. In an instant, less than a split second, the council chromatic's spirit was ripped from his body as instantaneous death severed the link between flesh and soul.

The council chromatic tumbled into darkness, but tumbled towards glowing eyes deep within, deep down, eyes that looked upon him with baleful anger and bitter disappointment.

In that instant, his soul knew. It knew *everything*...and it knew how terribly wrong it had been.

The gasps through the room were almost simultaneous as the charred body of the council chromatic was driven back, the dragons behind him scattering and several crying out as spatters of lava hit them. The body crashed to the stone floor, flames licking over exposed, blackened bone, sudden heat filling the room as the white-hot liquid surrendered its heat to the air. The chromatics had no idea what had just happened, until one of them puzzled out the only explanation they could find. "He has a *breath weapon*! Kill him before he can use it again!"

Overcome with sudden chagrin and fury, several chromatics sucked in their breath, which caused the little earth drake to turn and bolt through the small hole he made in the door.

Twisting away just as the door exploded from the intense heat, Kell snapped out his wings and dove off the platform, diving into the caldera of the extinct volcano with its deep crater lake at the center. His angle was steep, more a controlled fall down the slope of the volcano than a glide, but it had done what it was meant to do, and that was send the chromatics into total blind panic and make them lose control...and there was nothing more effective in panicking a chromatic than to take out the one giving them orders. Besides, for everything that bastard dragon had done, he *deserved* to get his face burned off. His clawed feet bounced off the volcano as his

wings guided his half-fall, half-glide along the rocky face, bits of smoking stone drifting by lazily as their descent overtook him.

He figured he had less than twenty seconds to get to cover before a sky dragon got him. They hadn't seen him come up the volcano because he'd used the secret passage up to the ruins of the food storage chambers the earth dragons had raided, clearing out the cave-ins in a frenzy of digging to get to the mountaintop from underground, and had managed to climb up the rest of the way; it wasn't very far from the storage chambers to the chromatic headquarters. Kell's camouflage had served him well, letting him blend in with the rock and making it hard for the sky dragons to see him in the short time he was exposed. A glance up and behind showed that the chromatics were pouring out of the building and diving at him, looks of pure fury on their faces. A lightning bolt slammed into the rock not two meters to his left, loosed by a sky dragon, but the ridge of rock that was his objective loomed just under him. He hooked his claws into the stone and tore deep rents in the rock as he slowed just enough, then went over the ridge, snagged the lip, and swung into the passage holding one of the storage chambers. He tumbled to the floor in a heap of kicking feet and wings and thrashing tail, but quickly got his feet under him and raced down into the unlit passage. The passage was large, wide, more than large enough for any dragon but Hirrag to fit comfortably, but the darkness worked in his favor, forcing the other dragons to pause if only for a second to conjure magical light. The tunnels below the earth were the domain of the earth dragons, and the liabilities they caused others were advantages for them. He dove into a side passage with a sudden blinding blaze of light behind him, just got his tail into the passage when another chromatic breath weapon blasted by, filling the tunnel with blinding light and searing heat. The heat was no problem, but the blaze of light left him a little dazed, crashing into his eyes when they were in thermographic mode, leaving him to shake his head a few times before taking off again. Several chromatics turned into the passage behind him, but Kell passed into the charred, ash-choked storage chamber that the earth dragons had firebombed. The breach into the passage was on the far side, the slab of stone that had hidden it shattered from the

heat to leave a visible hole, and it was a long run across a large, empty chamber with some hundred or so furious chromatics hot on his tail.

But that's what field agents did...the dirty jobs.

Kell was much smaller than the chromatics chasing him, but he was an earth drake, and that meant that when it came to moving around on the ground, he was far superior to other dragons. Earth dragons could run *very* fast, Kell eating up the distance in a graceful lope as his wings and tail guided him to his objective, his panther-like body stretching out and his claws digging furrows in the stone under him with every stride.

But he knew he wasn't going to make it, not when his opponents had a ranged attack at their disposal. He skidded to a halt about twenty meters from the hole and snapped his wings over his face and head as one of the chromatics sucked his breath in, then intense, searing heat rampaged over Kell's body, shimmering along his scales. The heat wasn't the the problem, the problem was the blazing light, closing his eyes and using his wings to further shield them from the light so he wouldn't be dazed. Chromatics knew that earth dragons were resistant to fire dragon breath, but chromatics had never really tried to use them against earth dragons before, so they really didn't know until it was too late that they were largely ineffective.

And it was his turn. Sucking in his breath, finding that pressure within him and bringing it forth, he turned and unleashed a concentrated jet of nearly white-hot liquid rock. Not at the chromatics, but at the wall over the tunnel. The liquid rock impacted the wall and splattered in every direction, but most of it dropped straight down into the tunnel. Kell used that split second as the chromatics behind him flinched, slowed, having seen him do that once before and already learned to fear it, using the fleeting moment of fear to dash forward and literally dive into the tunnel, his belly sliding over the lava he had expelled seconds before as he squirmed into the constricting tunnel, made just big enough for an earth drake to get in. The liquid rock actually lubricated his squirm into the tunnel, his spikeless tail vanishing into the hole just as the chromatics tried again with magic. Several magical missiles and bolts of lightning pounded into the liquid rock oozing on the

wall over the tunnel, sending spatters and globs down onto Kell's hindquarters and tail as he made the turn into the horizontal portion of the tunnel, a tunnel just barely wide enough for him to turn around. He looked up through the hole and saw one chromatic slide to a halt just over the tunnel mouth, squealing in pain as his paws came down in the lava. Chromatics were *not* immune to heat the way fire dragons were, and that was the entire reason he did what he did. The entire area around the tunnel mouth and the bottom of the vertical part was awash in red-hot liquid rock, and it was a lethal obstacle to anyone that might follow him except another earth dragon or a fire dragon. Their only recourse would be to use magic to cool the lava, but that would take time, and it also put more volume in the tunnel mouth, further constricting it and making it impossible for *any* of them to follow him.

“You made that too easy, thinking that just because I don't have spikes, that I'm harmless!” Kell barked in condescending laughter from inside his hole. “Now your council fluffy is dead and the rest of you are disorganized so Hirrag can stomp you into the ground! Enjoy your beating, idiots!”

The screams of outrage and chagrin up there was the sweetest music. Kell's scornful laughter trailed away to them as he scampered down the forgotten tunnel, before they got the idea to send some spell in after him.

But, the confrontation did prove something to him, something very, very important. He reached a cave-in he hadn't cleared, since he'd come out through one of the other storerooms, and set to work digging through it. He had to get back to the burrow, this was something that Kammi needed to know.

And he left chaos in his wake.

Hirrag felt his blood sing in his ears as he and his fire dragons dove on a pack of disorganized chromatics swarming around the Library of Chroma and the interior slope of the caldera behind it. Something had happened that had gotten them completely out of sorts, chromatics flying in every

direction, and Hirrag was never one to pass up a gift from Gaia. The first chromatics didn't see them until it was too late, as huge, powerful fire dragons slammed into smaller chromatics, favoring pure physical power over magic when it came to diving on unsuspecting prey. Hirrag literally swatted a chromatic out of the air, the dragon slamming into the caldera wall with stunning force, then the chromatic slid down the slope in a boneless heap. He'd given orders to not kill unless absolutely necessary, but that didn't mean that they couldn't leave some chromatics with some good, lasting scars to remind them of what happened when they dared oppose the might of the fire dragons. His fire dragons outnumbered the chromatics by nearly four to one, and in seconds, the entire air surrounding the library was filled with lancing, turning dragons, sizzling bolts of pure magic flying in every direction, and cones of intense light that the chromatics used not to injure fire dragons, but to try to blind them. Hirrag banked and loosed a lance of pure magical energy at a chromatic turning in the other direction, hitting a mystical shield the enemy had managed to raise, but he simply did so again, and again, and again, knowing that the effort it would take his enemy to hold his defense was far more than Hirrag's effort in conjuring his power bolts. Hirrag and his fire dragons were fully charged with magical energy thanks to the cooperation of the earth drake Girk, and while every cast drained those reserves, they had far more reserves than their opponents.

That this would be a victory was never in doubt. The only doubt was in how long it would take them to subdue the chromatics and capture their quarry.

Though they were disorganized, leaderless, they were still valiant, and they continued to fight. Magical spells sizzled back and forth through the air as the chromatics battled to get clear of the library, trying to protect the building by giving the fire dragons no reason to attack it...and Hirrag would honor that. They were not at war with a building, they were at war with renegade chromatics. "Do your best not to damage the library," he called as his sixth bolt tore through the shielding of his opponent and struck him in the shoulder, drawing a cry of pain as shocked wing muscles refused to function. The left wing of the chromatic cramped up, and without it, he

immediately fell into a spin that gave him a stunning impact with the caldera slope once the air under him suddenly turned to stone. He turned just in time to avoid a lightning bolt from a young sky dragon, then flicked his tail and sent a dozen tiny missiles of magical force back along that arc of lightning. The missiles forced the sky dragon to dart away, but the missiles followed, and would follow for quite a while. The missiles were a special spell the fire dragons had devised to deal with sky dragons, for the missiles were even faster than they were but couldn't turn as fast, which forced sky dragons to constantly twist and turn to avoid being hit, and a sky dragon unable to concentrate on anything but himself was no threat to anyone else.

Sessara streaked by, raking her claws over the back of a chromatic, tearing at her wing membranes and ripping a squeal of pain from her, tearing big enough gashes through them to steal her lift. She turned her head and unleashed a very tightly controlled blast of fire at another, the fire curling around a mystical shield, then she quickly banked out of the way of a retaliatory beam of pale blue light from the chromatic's paw, a spell of cold that would affect fire dragons far more than others. But other dragons weren't as nimble in the air, and the walls of the caldera had more than chromatics laying upon them. But this Hirrag knew was unavoidable, that the chromatics would cause casualties, casualties that water dragons were awkwardly landing to tend...both fire dragons and chromatics. But, they were making their allegiance clear by launching blasts of water upwards at the chromatics. One such chromatic was struck by the jet of scalding hot water and knocked from the air, crashing into the volcano, and he ended up being tended by the very water drake that had brought him down. Jussa and Essan were landing on the library ledge, by a door with a hole torn in it, and then things got even more chaotic when the other chromatics arrived. Their wings shaded black by a magic spell to tell them apart, the younger chromatics attacked their elders with the large elder Trejem leading them, barking out commands and using his powerful magic against those he once called brother. Trejem was the only chromatic elder with his magical powers at full strength, and it showed almost immediately as he used a powerful spell to drive a cluster of a dozen chromatics out of the air, slashing his forepaw in their direction and causing them all to get driven

aside as if swatted by a gigantic hand. Had those chromatics had their full power, they might have had the magic to defend against that attack, but Trejem was just too overwhelming.

Hirrag landed on the ledge at Jussa's beckoning, annoyed to be taken away from the fighting. "What is it?"

"It seems we didn't get here first, esteemed council member," Jussa said dryly, looking into the open doorway. Hirrag craned his neck over the water wyrm and looked in, even as the smell of charred flesh reached his nose. There was a body in there, a chromatic whose head, neck, and chest had been reduced to charcoal and ash, laying in a pool of cooling lava with licks of flame eating at unburned flesh. "One of the earth drakes is about."

"Find him and protect him," Hirrag declared. "But I have no doubt as to who that is that lays dead."

"The council chromatic," Essan surmised, looking at the corpse. The lava had been sprayed right in the dragon's face, from point blank range. There wasn't that much left from the shoulders up, just blackened bone and charred skull...and it made his shudder. That had to be a horrific way to die. But, there was a sense of justice about it. The council chromatic had sought to ruin the lives of the earth dragons, and one of the earth dragons had exacted the ultimate revenge. From the look of it, he had just walked in here and burned the chromatic down, and odds were the fire dragons had struck just moments after the attack, when the chromatics were disorganized and infuriated. And probably shocked. Only the council and the rogue chromatic Prisma knew that earth dragons had breath weapons. And the earth drake had used that to get close to the chromatic, so he could kill him.

"Press the advantage!" Hirrag boomed in a magically augmented voice. "The chromatic leader lays dead! Do not let them organize a chain of command!" He vaulted from the landing and rejoined the battle, slamming his tail into a banking chromatic that was trying to get altitude, smashing it through the roof of the library in a cloud of dust. "Battle on, my fire dragons! Victory is within our jaws!"

1 September 2017, 11:48 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It could have been a hurried sprint across the yard from the tunnel to the burrow, but nobody was paying any attention.

He looked up and saw them, circling and dancing and darting above the south peak. Dragons at war. Blasts of magical light, gouts of fire, incandescent beams of light, the occasional bolt of lightning, the fire dragons were pressing the attack against the elder chromatics and their small number of sky dragon supporters. Though it looked like chaos from the ground, Kell knew that the fire dragons knew exactly what they were doing, and they had the chromatics off balance. Chromatics did not respond well when there was no clear leader, and Hirrag wasn't giving the Council of Seven the chance to establish any sort of command. The chaos of battle was an organized symphony of martial beauty to a fire dragon, where every bank, every spell, every blast of flame was a brush of paint on the canvas of glory.

It was over for the chromatics. They weren't going to admit it for a while, until the fire dragons beat them down, however. Chromatic arrogance and pride would not allow them to surrender, not to dragons they saw as inferior to them. That arrogance had at times past been their advantage, but this day it was their greatest weakness. Kell had used the arrogance of the council chromatic to get close enough to kill him, letting him think he had the advantage, and in typical chromatic fashion, his need to *gloat* had been his downfall. Having his supposed victim dead to rights, he could not resist taunting Kell, rubbing it in, rather than strike and be done with it. Had the chromatic attacked the instant Kell tore through the door, he might have had a chance. But to see a spikeless earth drake, it was too much for his arrogant pride to just let go so easily. The feeling of superiority had to be extended as long as possible, savored, *experienced*, then he could finish.

And it cost him in the form of a very quick, very painful death.

Now Kell faced another kind of adversary as he dove down into the torn-out entry chamber, between the two young chromatics who had moved from the Dawnmist tunnel to flank the entry, serving as guards for the two precious earth dragons hiding within. They urged him forward quickly when he appeared over them, then he darted between them and into the burrow, where the chromatics floated rocks into the tunnel to make it very hard for anything not the size of an earth drake to get through. He turned and looked back. "Get a message to Hirrag," he called. "Tell him that the council chromatic is dead."

The two young chromatics looked at him with surprise, then one of them nodded. "I will send the message immediately," she assured. "Now retreat to the deep burrow, earth drake. Retreat to safety!"

"I can take care of myself," Kell growled as he turned and bounded down into the tunnels of his family burrow, tunnels he knew so well he could navigate them with his eyes closed. However, that kind of bravado wouldn't hold up long. Kammi was going to be *furious* when she found out what he did, and he wasn't exactly looking forward to telling her. But he'd better; if she found out from someone else, well, that human adage *hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* would be applicable in this situation.

He wasn't *afraid* of Kammi. Not one bit. He just had common sense.

She was still in the mushroom cellar, Jerral and Kii sitting with her, but Hura was nowhere around, probably prowling the burrow. He came down the ramp as she turned and looked at him. "What took you so long?"

"Well, it's a long climb up the volcano," he said dryly.

She turned and gave him an ugly look. "What were you doing up there? You said you were going to Dawnmist!"

"I had to go *through* Dawnmist to reach the tunnels the builders dug up into the storage rooms," he told her. "I had to pay a little visit to the council chromatic."

"Did you kill him?" Jerral asked breathlessly.

“He looked exceptionally dead when I tore out of there,” he replied blandly. “Unless chromatrics can live with all the flesh burned off the upper half of their bodies, anyway.”

“Eww!” Kii shuddered.

“You did *what?*” Kammi gasped. “You ran out there and took matters into your own paws without *taking me?*” she boomed, whirling on him.

Uh oh.

The water drakes had the sense to get out of the way. Kammi crashed into him, drove him up on his back feet, then over onto his back as the smaller earth drake upended him, then pounced on top of him. Her claws raked and scrabbled over his hide, and her teeth found purchase on his neck and face several times, but she didn’t bite down very hard, and her claws didn’t tear through his scales or skin...though they left some gouges. Kell squirmed under her, surprised that a smaller, lighter drake could hold him down, but she proved that when she put her paws on his wings and slammed them down, forcing the rest of his body to go along or risk broken wings. She gave him an almost adoringly furious look, huffing, dust and sand filtering out from between the teeth in her lower jaw, sifting and drizzling down onto his chest and base of his neck. “I can’t believe you!” she raged. “I’m a *field agent*, same as you! I should have been there to bite that arrogant fluffy ass in the neck!”

“I know, I’m sorry,” he answered, looking up at her. “But I figured if nobody knew I was going, not even you, I’d have a better chance of getting to him. Sky dragons key on movement, the less movement, the better chance I’d get there undetected.”

She narrowed her eyes, giving him a withering glare, dust and smoke still coming out of her mouth in grayish puffs. “Kammi?”

Her eyes blazed with sudden yellow radiance. She sucked in her breath sharply, her claws digging into his wings. “Kammi!” he gasped. He had no

idea if his immunity to his own element would protect him against her breath weapon!

She lunged her head down, and just as Kell flinched, she blew a mouthful of hot sand in his face. It wasn't unleashed with the incredible force that she *could have* put behind it, but it was enough to get in his nose and make him sneeze.

Jerral and Kii laughed as Kammi grinned down at him, then she licked the tip of his nose playfully. "You bitch, you scared me half to death!" Kell accused in English, since draconic lacked sufficient cursewords.

"I'll do a lot worse if you *ever* run off like that without either telling me or taking me ever again," she retorted. "You are my *intended*, Kell! I don't like being left behind!" He wheezed when she flopped down on top of him, then licked his muzzle and cheek fondly. "But good work, intended, taking out that fluffy!" she finally said, using the fact that his horns more or less pinned his head in a curled upward position to nuzzle him when he couldn't get away.

"Eww, don't do that in front of us!" Jerral protested.

"You won't be saying eww in about fifteen years, sea slug," Kammi shot back slyly, glancing at him. "Now let me send that info downstairs, I'm sure Anthra and Geon will be thrilled." She got off of him and returned to the ELF, and Kell twisted over and got back on his feet, pushing off with a wing to quickly get his feet under him. Kii was giggling as he shivered, getting at least a shred of dignity back, and she laughed when he gave her a short look.

"Go find your sister, you traitor," he told her.

She laughed again and bounded up onto the ramp.

"Big news from up top," Kammi said at the machine. "The council chromatic is dead. Repeat, the council chromatic is dead," she said, adjusting the microphone. "Kell got him!" she declared.

“What was he doing out of the burrow?” came a response.

“Just Kell being a field agent, he took initiative,” she said, giving him a fanged smile. “Doesn’t have a spike left on his tail, so it must have been extra-holey!”

“Actually, I hit him with lava,” Kell said modestly. “From point blank range.”

“Ouch,” Kammi noted, then she chuckled. “Barbecued fluffy.”

“He’s probably still roasting,” Kell noted dryly.

Geon’s voice came over the speaker. “If you’ve used up your spikes, stay out of it, Kell,” he warned. “Your breath weapons don’t have the same range.”

“I’ll make sure that he doesn’t leave,” Kammi said. “He ran off without telling me. And he didn’t take me with him!”

“No fighting you two,” Geon chuckled. “Get a message out if you can, me and Anthra are coming out,” he said. “We need to be there to take our places on the council. Shii and Surrall are bringing us up to your burrow.”

“Anthra won’t fit in our burrow.”

“Yes, but she’ll fit in the storage chamber. And nothing will get down the ramp alive with two of us in there.”

“We have two fluffies standing guard at the burrow mouth, we’ll have them stay with you instead,” Kammi answered. “Me and Kell are far safer down here in Patron’s burrow than you will be in the storage room.”

“Arrange it, young one,” he answered. “Also, get word to Hirrag that if it is in any way possible, get Girk to the burrow. We want all the earth dragons up top to be in one place. Safety in numbers, you know.”

“They can probably do it,” Kammi noted, glancing at Kell.

“I’ll have the fluffies send it,” he said, then he turned and bounded up the ramp.

It took all of twenty minutes. Kell told the chromatics, they sent the message, and fifteen minutes later, Hinado flashed out of nowhere and landed at the top of the opened entry chamber, and he had Girk with him. The banded drake dropped down into the opened entry chamber and grinned at Kell impishly as he rushed inside, and Hinado nodded to him and spread his wings, then vanished with a single wingbeat. Kii and Hura ventured outside to see if Geon and Anthra were there, and when Hura came back, she nodded. “They’re in the storage chamber, Kell,” she informed him. “The two chromatics are standing guard there, and I’ll be running any messages out. Kii is staying with them to help shield them from scrying.”

“I’m glad your parents taught you how to do that so early,” Kell chuckled.

“With everything that’s gone on in the last couple of months, they felt it might be needful,” she replied gravely. “They were right.”

“They’re very wise drakes, youngling,” Kell nodded. “You alright, Girk?”

“Glad to be back with earth dragons,” he laughed. “Fire dragons are terrible conversation after about an hour.”

“Tell me about it,” he agreed as they ventured into the burrow. “How did things go?”

“Easily,” he answered. “Hirrag had like twenty fire dragons guarding the entrance to his burrow at all times, and he’d have them come into his den in groups to just be close to me without the stone getting in the way. Guess that’s all it really takes.”

“Important to remember,” he said pointedly.

Girk chuckled. "We're keeping Sanctuary City, so the option is always there," he noted, then glanced back. "All I did was sit around and learn way more about football than I ever cared to know. Hirrag was almost as bad as my mother," he grunted. "Did you get attacked?"

"No," he said, glancing back at his tail, which was completely spikeless. "I dropped them on purpose so I could get close to the council chromatic. He thought that since I had no spikes, I was no threat."

Girk laughed brightly. "Clever! He dead?"

"Very," Kell drawled.

"Good going!" he grinned. "Now, have you told Kammi yet?"

"Yes, and I still have all my toes, thank you very much," he said blandly, which made Kii burst out laughing.

"She scared him silly," she relayed with a treachrously amused expression.

"She wouldn't be Kammi if she didn't," Girk grinned. "Now tell me what's going on. I didn't get much info under Hirrag's wing...sometimes literally," he snorted.

"Welcome to the new world, Girk. We're important now," Kell grated.

"I'm starting to understand how you feel about it," he nodded.

"Geon and Anthra are up here now, in the storage chamber," he relayed as they went down to the next level. "They want to be at paw when this is all over, so they can rejoin the council. They brought you here so we're all in one place, and I have no doubt that there's a few fire and sky dragons hovering over the farm to make sure nobody tries anything. They're still fighting it out up there."

"I saw some of it when Hinado carried me out," he nodded. "The chromatics didn't look to be doing very well."

“They’re outnumbered and outgunned. This isn’t much more than a beatdown,” Kell answered with a grunt. “The other dragons are smacking some sense into them, no more, no less.”

“That’s a good description of it,” Girk agreed. “So, we just hang out here until it’s over?”

“Kammi’s sending messages down to the city using the ELF, so we’re more like a communications post right now,” he answered.

“Clever, I didn’t know it was still here.”

“Yeah, we sorta forgot about it in all the chaos,” Kell noted. “But it’s coming in very handy now.”

“Girk! Nice seeing you!” Kammi said brightly as the two of them came down the ramp into the cellar.

“Nice to be back with my own,” he chuckled. “So, I heard you scared the scales off Kell.”

Kii burst out into laughter again.

“Revenge is coming, little drakeling,” Kell told her in an ugly tone, which made her laugh harder.

“He deserved it, running off like that without taking *me*,” she growled, giving Kell a warning look. “But I’m not arguing with the results.”

“So, now we play messenger and just wait,” Girk reasoned.

“Yeah. But it shouldn’t take long,” Kell said, sitting on his haunches. “The chromatics really don’t stand a chance.”

1 September 2017, 14:38 DMT; Council Aerie

It was over.

The dragon's council mounted their podiums as six chromatics were herded before them. All six showed signs of battle, lacerations, burns, one of them had all the feathers burned off of his tail, and all of them were almost stumbling from exhaustion. They had fought fairly well, as Jussa would estimate such things, but they had honestly had no chance. The dragons they faced all had full command of their magical powers, and once the chromatics expended their breath weapons and cast what few spells they could, they were defenseless. The larger, stronger fire dragons had overwhelmed them with sheer numbers, had exhausted them, and then had defeated them.

They looked defeated. They looked lethargic, dazed, one of them looking around with vacant eyes as if he had palsy in his neck. One stumbled and fell, then was helped up by her companions, until they were herded into the center of the aerie, standing on the golden stones of the center circle. "Sit," Jussa called in a strong voice, and they all did so, some of them with relief. "Well done, esteemed council member," he said, looking to Hirrag. "The valor of the fire dragons has been proved this day."

"We are the fangs and claws of the island, esteemed council member," he replied with a simple nod.

"Chromatics of the Council of Seven, a warrant of arrest has been forsworn against you, and the fire dragons have executed that warrant with swift and dutiful action," he addressed the six chromatics.

"Arrest? By what authority do you arrest us?" the oldest female asked, outrage giving her strength.

"That would be *ours*," came a voice from behind them. The six chromatics gasped as the earth wyrm Anthra climbed up over the edge of the aerie, the earth drake Geon just behind her. "The chromatics turned their backs on the authority of this council, and so we have brought you to heel."

"Esteemed council member," Jussa said with a nod. "I'm glad you could make it."

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss *this*,” she replied with a dark smile at the six weary chromatics. She climbed up onto her podium, and when she sat on her haunches, Jussa could feel the aura of magic around her, bathing him in its invigorating warmth. It was an aura that had been concealed behind the ambient magic in the world before the earth dragons retreated to their sanctuary, but now that that magic had faded, the true power of the earth dragons was a blaring trumpet to the sky that none on the aerie could ignore. She fanned her wings a few times, almost majestically, then folded them back against and over her flanks. “You used deceit and treachery to destroy our homes and disrupt the harmony of this island. Now you stand before this council to answer for your actions.”

“We did no such thing!” one of them protested. “We were protecting the ancient traditions of dragonkind, which *your* dragons were threatening!”

“And what part of your plan of protecting draconic culture involved stripping us of our right to sit on this council?” Geon asked flintily, giving them a narrow-eyed stare.

The six of them fell silent.

“Exactly,” Anthra snorted, then she turned to look at Jussa. “You know where we stand, esteemed council member. The punishment need not be harsh. Harshness will only fester old wounds. But the council chromatic—“

“Is beyond our justice,” Jussa said dryly. “It seems that someone exacted the ultimate punishment against him.”

“Someone killed him?”

“Yes, someone killed him,” a voice called from the side. Kell the earth drake climbed over the edge with the female intended of his, Kammi, and a slightly larger earth drake with thick black bands on his neck, the earth drake Girk. “I did,” he declared, which made Kammi give him a short look.

“Your attack was quite timely, Kell,” Hirrag told him. “It left the chromatics without leadership.”

“That was the idea, esteemed council member,” he said as the three earth drakes approached to the edge of the ring of podiums, then stopped between the earth and water seats. “But it had to be done. It was clear to everyone that the council chromatic would never see reason. He was too consumed by his hatred to ever accept defeat.”

“A truth, but I’m not sure it required the vigilante action of execution, Kell,” Jussa said mildly.

“After everything he did, you think he *didn’t* deserve it?” Kell flared, rising up on his haunches and pointing. “Go look over the edge, Jussa! That mess down there, those destroyed farms, gaping holes, the empty bellies, the fact we just fought *each other* when there’s going to be a fleet of human ships coming our way in a matter of weeks, they’re all *his* fault! He deserved far more than me melting his face off!”

A few of the chromatics shuddered. They had probably seen it, and it must not have been pretty.

“I did not say you were *wrong*, Kell, I simply said that something less, gruesome, could have been done.”

“Well, I for one approve,” Geon said calmly, looking down at the three earth drakes. “And it removes the only real problem we had.”

“Truly,” Sessara agreed.

“We digress,” Hinado called. “We are here to dispense the justice of the council upon the Council of Seven for the crimes of lying to this council, destroying earth dragon property, causing a disruption of the production of food that has brought hunger and harm to every dragon on this island, and engaging in a conspiracy to deprive the earth dragons of their rights, their property, and strip them of their seats upon this very council.”

Jussa drew himself up. “As was agreed by this council, your punishment is thus. A public rebuke will be read at every council and pod session when next they meet, and you are hereby stripped of your positions

on the ruling council of the chromatics. You will spend your time aiding the earth dragons in the reclamation of their farms, but will not suffer magical interdiction. You will instead use your magic at the behest of the earth dragons to help them restore their farms and rebuild their lives. When every farm and ranch on the island are fully repaired and in working order, your punishment will be complete. In that time, it is our hope that you will understand how terribly wrong you were about them.”

“You can’t do that!” one of them declared indignantly.

“*We* can,” came a new voice. Ten aged, wizened chromatics flitted down from the air and landed just before the empty podium of the chromatic seat. “We told you that this was your test, that the will of Gaia would prevail. And you have failed,” the female told them. “We gave you one final chance to reverse yourself from this self-destructive course, because true wisdom teaches us that all dragons, no matter how wrong, must be given the chance to do what is right on his own before they are set right by others. You ignored your chance to set things right, and so now they will be set right *for* you. You allowed the hatred the council chromatic held in his heart to poison you, and that has made you unfit to stand in positions of authority among the chromatics. Only with time and contemplation over what you have done will restore our trust in you. You have failed the chromatics, you have failed all of Draconia, and we are very disappointed in you.”

The six chromatics looked at the ten wizened old chromatics in something approaching horror.

“You will stand forth and accept the punishment pronounced upon you with dignity,” one of the other sages told them, a bit harshly. “The destruction and ruination that lies on those lowlands is *your* responsibility, and you will help set things right.”

“Well spoken, most wise,” Jussa said with a nod. “Since you are here, it comes to you, sages of the chromatics, to choose a new council chromatic

to take your race's rightful place among us. It is unseemly that all races of dragons are not represented in this council, especially right now."

"We have already agreed to a replacement," one of the sages declared. "Let he who had the courage to stand against his peers and do what was right stand forth now and represent the chromatics in all matters of importance."

Another chromatic landed seconds later, whom they all identified as the professor, Trejem. He climbed up onto his podium with a grave expression, shivered his wings, then folded them back. "I am not worthy of this position," he said. "I was one of those who agreed to the course of action that brought us to this point, and for that, I most humbly apologize," he said, lowering his head in Anthra and Geon's direction. "I believed that I was acting in the best interest of all dragon kind, at least until I saw the extent of the hatred that the former holder of this seat had inside him. He would have shattered the island and driven us to the brink of ruin to satisfy his lust to subjugate the earth dragons under his paws, and it was all completely unnecessary. Had we simply approached the earth dragons and explained our concerns, I'm positive now we could have reached an agreement. Now I see that this wasn't about the earth dragons and their technology, it was about nothing more than my prior colleague's need to place himself above others, to prove his superiority by bringing misery to those he felt were lesser than him."

"At least you understand, and for that much, we can accept you," Anthra told him. "And it is time to move on. We must clean up this mess, rebuild, and then we move on and put this behind us. There will be no recriminations, no punishments outside of the just punishment handed out to these six," she said, sweeping her glowing amber eyes over the six exhausted, frightened chromatics. "For the other chromatics and the sky dragons that opposed us, there will be amnesty. They were simply misled, and we will not punish them for that."

"However," she added in a grating voice. "The actions *prior* to this do need to be addressed. The sky dragons destroyed our power plant, our

factories, and our farms, and we demand that they assist us in rebuilding what they destroyed.”

“And you will get their assistance,” Hinado answered evenly. “The sky dragons not involved in protecting the island will be at your service, Anthra. We will help in any way we can. After all, *we* eat the food that comes from those farms as well, so all of us must help repair them as quickly as possible, before the summer rains come.”

“Well said, Hinado,” Sessara nodded. “If not for the threat of the humans encroaching on our territory, we would be right there with you. But I’m afraid that at this time, the need to defend the island trumps the need to repair the farms. If we do not meet the threat of the invading humans with every fire dragon we can muster, there may be no farms to repair.”

“And we understand that need,” Anthra nodded. “The fire dragons are needed to perform their role as the fangs and claws of the island. We can handle rebuilding, and we will let you do what you do best, my fire dragon cousins. Protect the island.”

Sessara and Hirrag nodded silently.

“Take them to be healed and allow them to rest,” Trejem said, looking at his former colleagues. “They will begin their penance at sunrise tomorrow.”

Fire dragons herded the six exhausted chromatics from the central circle.

Trejem rose up to sit in an erect posture. “On behalf of the chromatics, esteemed council, we hereby accept the demands levied by the earth dragons. Though some of my chromatics may be forced to accept those demands at clawpoint, nevertheless, the demands are acceded to by this council seat. We absolutely *must* bring the earth dragons back to the surface. Not only does magic depend on it, but the summer rains are but weeks away, and there is much work to do.”

“You should go explain things to your dragons, esteemed colleague,” Jussa ventured.

“It won’t be that hard, honored council leader, since the fire dragons are holding all the insurgents by the crater lake while the water dragons tend their wounds,” he said dryly.

“We have just come from there, where certain truths were laid upon them,” one of the sages growled. “They will cause this council no trouble, I assure you. We have made our displeasure very plain.”

“And for that, you have our gratitude, most wise,” Jussa said mildly.

“However, we would ask a boon of you, earth drakes,” the sage said, turning to the field agents. “There is absolutely no argument about the source of magic when one of you stands before them. I would ask one of you, or all of you, to go to the lake and show the chromatics just *what* they were doing.”

“I believe we can arrange that,” Geon said, looking at the three of them. “It’s what field agents do, after all.”

“So, you want us to go down there and smack some fluffies in the face with our tails? I’m in,” Kammi said, which made Jussa give her a light, amused look.

He then he slapped his tail on the floor. “At this time, I think we should adjourn for a short time. There are some things that need to be done, orders to be relayed, injuries to tend, and of course, some faces to tail-smack,” he added dryly, which made Kammi grin wickedly in his direction. “We will reconvene in two hours.”

“Plenty of time,” Kammi said, prancing a bit as she advanced into the circle.

Kell sighed and shook his head, which made Girk snort from a suppressed laugh and give him a highly amused look.

Chapter 20

2 September 2017, 07:27 DMT; Sanctuary City

It certainly didn't feel much like a victory.

A victory it certainly was, because the other dragons had capitulated to the earth dragon demands, things were settling down up there as wounds were healed and prides were soothed, and even now the earth dragons were furiously preparing to return to the surface. No earth dragon had slept all night as they instituted their plan for a return to the surface, getting supplies ready, going through briefings, studying satellite imagery of the farms above and the damage that had been done to them. Every farm owner was very, *very* angry about the damage done to their farms or ranches, but Geon and Anthra had made it clear that they were to keep it to themselves. Right now, everyone needed to just put on a polite face and get down to the business of getting things fixed.

A victory was supposed to come with a sense of accomplishment, and that was really what was missing from this one. There was really nothing but shifting from one chaotic, hastily assembled plan to a more thought-out, organized plan. Kell and the other field agents, and many of the critical department workers, were left out of the shift in the city as earth dragons collected supplies, inventoried food stores, prepared equipment, and drew up plans of action that everyone else was doing. The department couldn't drop everything to help return the earth dragons to the surface, because the Chinese were starting to consolidate.

Ferroth determined that they'd start moving within ten days, whether or not they found the island...and they were *looking*. Five different reconnaissance planes had come close enough to force a response, had

come within 260 kilometers of the island, which was the line of reaction that the department had drawn for sky dragon response. Chinese aerial-based radar of the type used in their recon planes could detect the island at a range of 145 kilometers, so a 260 kilometer line had been drawn to give the sky dragons time to respond to incursions. Those five planes been turned back by the sky dragons just yesterday, the sky dragons using their magic that confused the senses into tricking the pilots into turning away from the island, or using their weather magic to create very small yet concentrated squalls in front of the planes, forming a defensive wall of bad weather to discourage the recon planes. The department knew that the Chinese didn't want to launch their naval operations until they knew *exactly* where the island was, so at the moment, everything for the Chinese was stalled as their recon planes tried to get an exact location, and the sky dragons thwarted them.

But when they did find the island...*Gaia*. Kell looked at just one of the fleets they'd assembled on his monitor fed by a satellite, this one at the port of Hong Kong, 157 ships ready to go. Only 38 of them were naval warships, however. The rest of them were troop transports and freighters, both military and commandeered civilian freighters. They had even hijacked one of the civilian ferries that operated in Hong Kong, a ferry that went from Hong Kong to different ports in the southern stretches, from Vietnam to Indonesia, one of their large ferries capable of open sea operation. The Chinese fully intended to land 100,000 troops on the island, and that many humans was going to take a *lot* of ships to get down here. They didn't just need pure troop transports to haul people, but they also needed food, supplies, equipment, everything those men would need for an extended operation well away from bases of supply, and with the outside possibility that they might be blockaded. What China was planning was almost as extensive in scope as the great Allied invasion of France in World War II in some ways, but even more extensive in others. There wasn't the same plans for moving heavy equipment and moving inland, but the vast distance the invasion force had to travel to reach the island made it possibly even more difficult to plan and prepare than Operation Overlord had been. China was displaying some quite sophisticated logistical organization

getting their invasion ready, probably far more than other nations would have attributed to them. China had a highly trained, well commanded, and efficiently run army, and they were proving it.

And that was just the Hong Kong fleet. They had another one at Shanghai, and ships were en route to Shanghai and Hong Kong at that moment from the northern ports. From their hacked insights into Chinese military orders, the water dragons would be looking at a massive fleet of some 400 ships once they got them all together and headed them out, with oilers racing back and forth from the armada to the mainland to keep the fleet fueled and moving. Chinese planners had determined that once the armada was launched, it would reach the island from anywhere between 13 and 19 days, depending on its exact location, since many of the civilian ships in the fleet would be heavily loaded and weren't very fast to begin with. Some of those ships would struggle to make 10 knots, and Gaia help them if they got caught in a storm.

Armada...that was a good word for it.

It wouldn't matter, though. In fact, the sheer size of the Chinese fleet would work against it when the water dragons started snapping propellers and rudders off the ships, as men and equipment were stranded in the open ocean, thousands of kilometers from a friendly port. It would be Kell's job to pick which ships to cripple, and part of what he was doing at that moment was identifying the cargo transports. *Those* would be the critical ships to take out. Those 100,000 men wouldn't be landing *anywhere* if they had no food to eat, no tents to sleep in, and no ammunition for their rifles. Some of the freighters would be crippled, but the ones carrying heavy equipment would be sunk, so the dragons could salvage them for the steel in the ships and for that equipment. Most of it was made of high-grade steel, and the dragons were in desperate need of steel. Four naval vessels had also been targeted for sinking, and despite their heavy lobbying, they had been forbidden from sinking anything nuclear. Taking out one of their aircraft carriers would be like winning every lottery on the planet on the same day, a bounty of steel and equipment they could adapt for their own use. But the carriers were nuclear, and despite even Ferroth all but putting his wings and

nose on the floor, Anthra and Geon had forbidden them from sinking them. No nuclear material on the island.

So, after that bitter disappointment, Kell went through the other ships and picked the four largest that were diesel. All four were heavy cruisers; like many naval powers, the Chinese had drifted away from the classic battleship. The modern navy was comprised mainly of carriers, cruisers, and support ships, since battleships were particularly vulnerable to being sunk by fighter-bombers. They were too big and too slow, and the need for them to use their heavy guns to blow up other ships was largely obsolete in the era of cruise missiles and smart bombs.

Now, the Americans, *they* had found a use for their battleships. They'd already refitted one with a next-generation weapon called a *rail gun*, which fired a projectile at speeds that were almost downright ludicrous, imparting unbelievable energy into the projectile which then was used to eradicate it. No amount of armor could protect against it, and like most impact projectile weapons, they transferred all that kinetic energy into the target, which tended to make them tear themselves apart. Like an assault rifle's bullet would make a watermelon literally explode, rail gun slugs did the same thing to ships. Kell had seen some of the top-secret Navy videos of the last stages of the weapon tests, before the first of the rail guns were brought into active service, where a rail gun had literally blown a destroyer in half with one shot. They had smaller sized versions of the weapon they could mount onto a cruiser or destroyer, but the battleship-mounted rail gun had proven to be absolutely devastating. It was truly a one shot, one kill weapon in naval warfare, and the thing had a range of literally line of sight. If the battleship could see it, it could sink it.

After the rail gun was adopted for active service, the Navy had pulled two battleships out of mothballs, recommissioned them, and were even now refitting them to carry rail guns. American Naval tactics had returned the battleship to service, doing what it did best. The modern battleship's main job was to sink aircraft carriers and take out ground-based sites and installations with pinpoint accuracy, and the rail gun gave it the power and range to pull that off.

He almost wished he was down in the main cavern. Earth drakes were scrambling in every direction, carrying crates, hauling equipment, as council aides ticked everything off on checklists. They were waiting for Jukra's team to do their job, and that was to open a tunnel from the lava tube, near the water, up into Dawnmist Village. The water dragons would help them move some dragons and supplies out through the tube, but the tunnel had been planned since they made the city, which would give the earth dragons a means to come and go from Sanctuary City without relying on the water dragons. The tunnel would be cleverly hidden and built so it could be blocked off by a single drake, but everyone agreed that once the earth dragons returned to the surface, they needed a tunnel joining the city to the villages. Jukra's team had been digging that tunnel since late last night, being very careful to avoid several other void tubes, lava tubes that were either collapsed or didn't open anywhere, and a few geological hazards, mainly microfaults that would weaken if the earth dragons tunneled through them. The Dawnmist tunnel would only be around 450 meters but had to be dug very carefully to keep it stable and viable, curving gently upward in an S, and coming up to join to the emergency storeroom in the village if the digging team did it right. The last report put them 80 meters or so from the village, and as soon as they opened into Dawnmist, the return to the surface would officially begin.

He slapped his tail on the floor a few times to get the angry buzzing out of it. All 17 of his spikes had budded, and that was making his tail itch. In a curious reversal to what he would have considered normal four months ago, 16 of his spikes were clear, and one was red like they used to be. He was growing a shanker, just a shanker sort of in the opposite direction.

He wasn't the only one that wondered if their tail spikes would revert back to red once they were back on the surface. Odds were, they would. Their diets would go back to more or less what they had been, though all earth dragons would keep a full reservoir of internal rock for breath weapons. Kell had gotten used to the ability enough to know when he needed to eat some stone to refill the proverbial tank, which he'd had to do after getting back down into the city after all that mess yesterday.

That had been almost comical. Kell and Girk had simply sat nearby as the chromatic sages dressed down the elders, but Kammi had strutted back and forth in front of them like a conquering general, letting them feel her magical aura up close and personal as the sage raged at them for threatening the earth dragons, and therefore all of magic, even after they'd been told the truth. Kammi's ostentatious presence drove the glaring truth home, that the earth dragons were the power source of *their* magic, so they'd better at least pretend to be nice to the earth dragons from then on. The chromatics didn't have to *like* the earth dragons, but they had better respect their territory.

And that territory was now officially marked. The lowlands were now the official domain of the earth dragons, and only the water dragons could move about on their land as they wished. Every other dragon could land on the lowlands, but they had to announce their presence and ask permission to remain to whichever earth dragon family either owned the land or owned land closest to it, if the dragon landed in public areas like the forest, the grassy plain where the ranchers grazed their livestock, or the northern lava fields.

There were some changes to their plans, however. Kell's use of the tunnels up into the storerooms had given Anthra an idea, and she got together with the Earth Council to flesh it out. Rather than store the communal food on the lowlands and force the other dragons to land down there to get their daily allotments, the tunnels they'd dug up into the south volcano were the perfect means by which the earth dragons could feed the other dragons without crossing any dragon's volcanic territory, but still keep the dragons off their land. The south peak was primarily the domain of the chromatics and sky dragons, the slopes riddled with entrances to dens, and trying to build ramps up to the top would potentially interfere with a den entrance. They would instead build a cargo elevator of sorts inside the volcano utilizing the tunnels dug to destroy the foodstocks, and the dragons would receive their allotments by the crater lake. That way they didn't have to carry it far to take it back to their dens, the lake was right there in case anyone needed some water, and the earth dragons didn't violate any territory bringing the food up. The required year's worth of food would be

stored on the lowlands, in the villages and in planned storehouses that would be dug under the base of the volcano, and the Earth Council had already appointed a council of nine earth dragons who would oversee the storage of the year's reserves, farm production, and allotment amounts. Farms would still surrender tithes to feed the other dragons, but those tithes would be set by the food management council. Anthra envisioned something of a cafeteria area by the lake, which had always been considered open, public area, where dragons could land, get their allotments, mingle a little with other dragons doing the same, then fly home. Water dragons would bring their portion of the tithe to the individual villages, each village with a food manager that would make sure that all tithed amounts were fair and the water dragons got everything they needed. As before, individual pods would barter with individual earth dragon families for what they wanted off the farms, but if a water dragon pod wanted something they couldn't usually get, the food manager would arrange the barter for it.

It was something of a sidestepping of the new territorial agreements, Kell mused. The earth dragons promised to stay off the peaks...but they never promised not to dig tunnels inside the volcano. The surface was the domain of the other dragons. Underground was the domain of the earth dragons, even if that "underground" was 900 meters above sea level.

Kell finished up, then compiled some additional data into a file they were sending to Jenny and the humans. Jenny was on the small island holding Imakaii now, or she should have been if she was staying to her schedule, and they would be settling into their new digs on what was supposed to be a CIA-sponsored combo resort/safe house. Kell had to admit, if someone *really* wanted to hide someone, Imakaii was a good place to do it. It was 75 kilometers to the closest village, which was a small fishing village, almost exactly in the center of the roughly 1500-kilometer long Hawaiian island chain. The vast majority of the population of Hawaii lived on the three biggest islands on the eastern side of the chain, but the chain extended far to the west, where the only real inhabitants were smaller towns, fishing villages, and the occasional ultra-exclusive hideaway for the

obscenely rich. Kell knew of one little place just like that called Kamaii, which was so exclusive that it didn't even appear on maps, and one would find no mention of it on the internet except on the small, dark little alleys of cyberspace. You either knew about it or you didn't, and if you did know about it, odds are you *might* have enough money to buy a vacation house there. It was literally a playground for the filthy rich, a place where the law was owned by the residents, and the village constable's office only followed the laws that the residents deemed important enough to enforce. Kamaii and Imakaii were the dirty little secrets in the Hawaiian islands, and that was there were places on American soil that one could go to avoid the vast majority of those pesky little laws that the common rabble followed.

A few keystrokes made him chuckle. Jenny's phone was indeed now located on Imakaii. That wasn't the island's real name, it was the name of the resort, but that had been enough to find it. He called her phone, and it picked up on the first ring. "It's about time!" she barked immediately. "Two days, we've gotten no calls from you guys!"

"We've been a bit busy," he drawled. "I see you're on Imakaii."

"I had them take the GPS out of my phone!"

"So?" Kell retorted, which made her laugh ruefully. "When did you get there?"

"About an hour ago," she answered. "Greg's settling in our new room, and Davie's exploring the house. This place is the size of a hotel!"

"Didn't you look up the pictures of it?"

"Well, yeah, but they didn't put the right perspective on this place, Kell, seriously," she told him. "The main house has *fifteen* bedrooms. And there's a staff of like forty people that work here. Cooks, maids, groundskeepers for the golf course and grounds, and five maintenance men to keep everything up. The place runs on its own private little power plant, a trio of industrial generators a tanker comes and refuels every other day, and thank god, it has internet access. So, I take it you have something for us?"

“Some data on recent Chinese activity,” he replied. “I’ll just email it to that address you gave us, since I don’t think you’re in that loop anymore. You know I’d rather deal with you,” he chuckled.

“Nope, it’s now in the CIA and Pentagon’s lap,” she replied. “I am now officially on my next assignment, and that’s learn magic. But, it’s a good thing you called me first,” she noted. “Away from the pool, Davie!” she barked away from the phone. “We have something of a minor problem.”

“Well, I doubt Hinado missing a couple of days—“

“That’s not the problem,” she replied, then he heard a sliding glass door open. “Actually, I’m glad you’re back in contact with us, because we need to ask you about it.”

“About what?”

“The First Lady’s in seclusion. They have her at Camp David right now, and they’re not sure what to do.”

“Well? What’s wrong with her?”

“Wrong, technically nothing. But *damn*,” she grunted. “I’m not sure how to explain it, Kell, so I’ll just tell you the way we found out. Yesterday morning, when the First Lady woke up, she looked like she was eighteen.”

“She what?”

“I saw her myself, Kell, she looks like she’s eighteen years old,” she replied. “They ran her through a full battery of physicals, but from what the President’s told me, she’s perfectly healthy. Her body is the body of an eighteen year old, but that eighteen year old body is in perfect health. She just lost some thirty or so odd years. She looks like she could be President Walker’s *daughter*,” she said in a bit of wonder.

“She cut herself on my spike—“

“And that’s why I’m telling you. Is there anything in dragon, you know, magic history about this? About dragons reversing aging in a human?”

Near as we can guess, somehow she got magicked when she cut herself on your spike, but we don't have any idea how it happened. This is *definitely* magic, and since she was in the exclusion zone, it had to happen there. The only thing we can think of that happened to her and nobody else was her cutting herself on your spike."

"We don't do magic, Jenny, so I don't see how I could have done something like that," he replied, rapping his claws on the desk. "Does she still have my spike?"

"Oh yes, and she has it in a padded box and locked in a vault. She's afraid that if she breaks your spike, that she'll return to her original age... and she doesn't *want* to," she said. "I can't blame her myself. If some magic could make me eighteen again, I'd be all over it in a heartbeat."

"What? You're only thirty-two, woman! Don't talk like you've got one foot in the grave!"

"Women always want to be younger, even when they're young," she replied flippantly. "But anyway, since this is rather important, could you ask the dragons that do magic about it? Julia doesn't want it reversed, but everyone *does* want to know how it happened. She's looking into make-up to hide it," she said. "Make herself look older. Because seriously, Kell, it's *amazing*."

"Well, I don't think you're going to be surprised if I ask you to keep this quiet," he said darkly. "If humans think that dragons are the new fountain of youth, you can kiss the peace plans goodbye. Some humans would go to any length to be in Julia's shoes right now."

"I can believe that," she grunted in reply. "Only a handful of people know, Kell. Me, her, the President, their staff, and the doctors they sent to Camp David," she answered.

"Well, I'll ask Prisma about it. She knows a lot of draconic history," Kell noted. "Since it involves the First Lady, I'm sure she'd try to find an answer for you, but there may not be one. Earth dragons have never really

interacted with humans until the modern era, Jenny. The other dragons kept the humans away from us back before we came to the island.”

“Why?”

“Because they felt we were vulnerable, since we can’t fly,” he replied delicately.

“But you can’t be hurt by metal weapons, and all they had back then were swords and spears. What would a human attacker use, harsh language?”

“Don’t ask me why they did it, woman, I wasn’t alive back then,” he told her. “But I’ll ask Prisma to research it. We’re all pretty busy, but this involves the First Lady, so it’s important.”

“We’d appreciate it, Kell, if only to give the President some peace of mind,” she replied. “And if it turns out that dragons can repeat it...” she trailed off.

Kell laughed. “The first one was a freebie. It’s gonna cost *you*.”

“You bastard!” she laughed. “I want to be carded when I buy wine again!”

“What? Good Gaia, woman, you still look young! Well, I guess you do, you humans all look the same to me, all soft and squishy,” he teased.

“It’s gonna cause a few problems, but the First Lady told me when I called that if a girl’s gonna have issues, that’s the ultimate issue to have,” she laughed. “She’s almost giddy, and I can’t really blame her. She’s fifty-three, and now she looks eighteen again, she *is* eighteen again, and she has a second chance.”

“So, she won’t mind being married to a man thirty years older than she is?”

She was quiet a moment. “That’s a good point,” she noted. “I wonder how it’s going to affect their marriage after the President leave office. Hell,

how it'll affect the marriage out of the public eye. I think she really loves him, so I don't think she'll divorce him, even with this sudden age gap," she chuckled. "She'd never divorce him while he's President, anyway. Julia's as political as he is, she understands the kind of damage that could do to his administration. She'd never do that to him."

"Well, that's good, I suppose," he replied. "Anyway, on to the big news I was going to give you."

"Shoot."

"Well, the reason nobody contacted anyone on your side yesterday was because we were all rather busy," he said dryly. "The council decided to move against the chromatics."

"*What?*" she gasped.

"Oh yeah, there was even a fight," he replied. "The council unleashed the fire dragons, and they smacked the chromatics right into place. The council chromatic got himself fried in the brouhaha, so the council is reformed with a new chromatic on the podium."

"There was a fight?"

"Yeah, the chromatics were in chaos," he replied. "Half of them sided with the council, on our side, and half sided with the council chromatic, who was opposing the wishes of the council. Well, that split was causing the dragons up there to not be able to accept our demands, which was the only thing keeping us underground. Well, they got sick of it. Yesterday, they called council without the council chromatic, declared him an outlaw, and swore out arrest warrants for him and the Council of Seven, the governing body of the chromatics for chromatic affairs. The council sent the fire dragons after them, and when they arrived, the chromatics decided to fight...or what amounted to one," he grunted. "*All* the dragons were against them, Jenny. They were beat down inside two hours."

"I hope nobody I know was hurt."

“Plenty of bites and claws and scorchmarks, but only two fatalities in the whole mess, both of them chromatics,” he told her. “The fire dragons were only trying to *subdue* them, not *kill* them. Had they been there to kill them, it would have been a massacre. Without their magic, the chromatics are *no match* for the fire dragons. Anyway, that’s about where we stand now. The dragons are all unified again, the chromatics got the riot act read to them by their sages, and things are starting to settle down. As I speak, we’re digging a tunnel up from our hidden city to Dawnmist village, and once it’s open, we’ll be returning to the surface.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” she replied. “You think the chromatics will accept the demands? You know how arrogant they are. Some of them may hate you for eternity because they were beaten.”

“Not this time,” Kell grunted. “The chromatic sages are the *real* power behind the chromatics, Jenny, but they completely distance themselves from the day to day workings. They appoint other chromatics to handle the politics, while they devote themselves to study. They spend all their time shut up in their library, debating magic and shit like that,” he said indelicately. “Well, this got so out of control that it even got *their* attention, and they stormed out and put the other chromatics in their place in short order. They told them flat out, to their faces, that they will abide by the demands, and if they don’t like it, that’s *tough*,” he chuckled. “I’ve never seen chromatics act like that. It was almost funny.”

“You were there?”

“For some of it,” he answered. “I’m a field agent, Jenny, I was up there putting my paw in,” he said lightly. “So, we’re all one big happy family again,” he quipped, changing windows on his monitor and typing out some lines of code. “The earth dragons are going back to the surface to rebuild, and the other dragons are going to help as much as they can without disrupting our preparations for dealing with the Chinese.”

“Well, that’s really good to hear, Kell,” she said honestly. “I saw the satellite images of the island. Keth’s farm is just *ruined*. I almost cried when

I saw it.”

“He’s not too happy, and neither are the other farmers,” he grunted. “We finally showed them pictures of the surface, and we almost had to put down a riot.”

“I’m not surprised,” she agreed. “Speaking of that, since we’ve been out of contact, tell the Earth Council that we should have everything you asked for ready for shipment in three days,” she said. “We have the stuff, we’re just waiting on a couple of freighters to get to Honolulu so we can get it down there. They’re supposed to get there the day after tomorrow, and leave as soon as they’re loaded.”

“I’ll warn the sky and water dragons so they don’t attack them,” he chuckled.

“Yes, I’m sure the crews would appreciate that,” she replied lightly. “And tell Anthra that Arlen is almost in a frenzy that she’s missed the last couple of appointed conference calls. He’s really worried.”

“Well, we’re sorry about that, but it was something of an emergency. Call him once we get off the phone and explain, and I’ll get hold of Anthra and tell her to call Arlen, if only to let him know everything’s alright.”

“Good. So, we want the gold and silver delivered to the Naval ships escorting the freighters, they’ll bring it back.”

“You bartered a price?”

“Just before you guys went quiet,” she affirmed. “And speaking of barterers, when will you come here to build Davie’s playground?”

“Well, maybe a couple of days, I’m not sure,” he replied. “We’re just a *little* busy here, Jenny. But, I made a fair barter, and I’m not backing out. As soon as I can find the time, me and Patriarch will swim out to Imakaii and visit.” He paused a second. “And you might want ask them to get plans together to bring the First Lady there, just in case a chromatic might want to examine her.”

“That’s a reasonable precaution,” she agreed. “I’ll talk to the President about it...and I’ll probably have to promise Julia that they won’t change her back,” she laughed.

“As long as doesn’t put on a nineteen sixties bikini and pretend that she’d Gidget,” Kell drawled, which made her laugh harder.

“She’s not *that* old, Kell. But you were.”

“Yup. I saw my share of girls pretending that their bikinis were scandalous, which are old lady bikinis compared to the modern era,” he said dryly. “And I expect to see *you* in a bikini.”

“Why on earth would you want that? We’re not even the same species!”

“Because I know you’ll blush the instant you take the wrap off,” he replied, which made her burst out laughing.

“I will *not*! I have quite a few man-catching bikinis in my closet, thank you very much! How do you think I got Greg?”

“I thought he married you just to find out where you work,” he replied.

“That was *after* I got his attention with my bikini,” she replied lightly. “We met at a communal friend’s house during a pool party.”

“Rowr,” Kell sounded, which made her laugh.

“Yeah, he didn’t have much for his imagination to fill in,” she replied teasingly. “My bikini caught his eye, but my mind reeled him in.”

“That or a heavy club,” he noted. “No wait, you’re a Hunter. You just hacked his life so he was married to you, then made him seal the deal at gunpoint.”

“I did not!” she protested. “Edwards is *his* name, if I’d have done that, I’d have made him take mine.”

“And what was it?”

“Vickers,” she replied.

“Jenny Vickers?,” he asked, then he laughed suddenly.

“What’s wrong with Vickers?” she demanded. “It’s a nice name!”

“How much draconic do you know?”

“Not all *that* much.”

“Then next time you’re talking to someone, ask them what *grihka* means.”

“Well, you’re right here.”

“I don’t want to ruin the surprise,” he said dryly.

“Kell!”

“Think of it as a vocabulary building exercise,” he said teasingly.

“Damned dragon,” she retorted, which made him laugh. “Speaking of that, should we expect a visit from Hinado today?”

“I’m honestly not sure, probably not,” he answered. “Things are a mess right now. But Sella has a couple of books she wanted to give to you, so I’ll arrange for a sky dragon to fly them out to you today, along with whatever other news they want to send along. The chance of a long-distance flight will make them jump at the chance.”

“Sounds good. We’ll settle in, I’ll call Arlen and the President, and we’ll be waiting for the courier.”

“Alright, let me go track down Prisma, she’s running around here somewhere. We’ve fully adopted her.”

“Oh?”

“She works for the department now, officially,” he told her. “She’ll still attend her academy classes, but she’ll work for us, as our magical liaison. Finding ways to use magic to help us do our jobs, and finding ways for us

to help the magicians use technology to help them in their studies,” he explained.

“The way it should have been to start with,” she noted.

“We’re dragons, change is a bad word,” he said dryly. “Well, for the *other* dragons. Earth dragons adapt.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said seriously.

“Alright, let me get off of here. I’ll get things moving.”

“I’ll make some calls. So, hope to see you soon, Kell. Call me when you have a schedule.”

“Will do. And you’re on a private Hawaiian resort, *use* one of those bikinis, woman!”

She laughed. “I’m going to do just that,” she promised.

After hanging up, he turned to the intercom. “Council Member Anthra, Prisma, could you come to the department as soon as possible, please? I have urgent news from the humans.”

A second later, a speaker buzzed. “What is it, Kell? We’re busy.”

“It’s important, Anthra. Could you please find the time to come to the office?”

“Alright, be right there.”

Prisma didn’t bother with the intercom, she simply showed up about two minutes later. “What is it, Kell?” she asked, her feathery antenna bobbing a bit as she ambled in.

“We have something of a mysterious complication with the President and the First Lady,” he told her. “I think we’re going to have to ask the chromatics for help to figure it out.”

“Oh? This sounds interesting,” she said as she reached him, sitting on her haunches. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, from what Jenny told me, yesterday morning the First Lady woke up about thirty years younger than normal,” he explained. “The way she explained it was she went to bed normal, and woke up physically younger. She said that all their science says that she’s eighteen years old, when she’s actually forty-six.” Kell had looked up her actual age while waiting for Prisma and Anthra. “She’s mentally the same, just her body changed. As you know, she cut herself on my spike, and unless you cast some kind of spell on her when we didn’t see it, that’s the only thing that happened to her that was unusual. Some kind of strange magic. She *is* a magician, could have cutting herself on my spike triggered something?”

“Hmmm,” she sounded, tapping her chin with her clawed finger. “That does sound very unusual, and definitely magical. Magic *can* influence the physical age of a body. But I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“Neither have I, and you’re our resident expert on magic, Prisma.”

“This is beyond me. But since I’m no longer killed on sight, and in fact have some access to the most wise, I will take this to them and see if any of them know anything about it.”

“Oh really?” he asked in surprise.

She gave him a wolfish smile. “As I am the only chromatic working in the department, they feel that from time to time, I might need their wisdom, and they also wish to be kept abreast of the work I do here. So I am welcome in the Library of Eternity,” she said, trying to at least act a *little* modest. “A problem like this, which deals with humans, is best brought to them. They have access to books we do not.”

“Well, the humans are in a bit of a tizzy over it, so a little haste would be appreciated.”

“I will tell them so, just nicely,” she said with a grin.

“We’ll let you be the diplomat,” he chuckled. “When do you return to your school?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied. “Since I have other duties, I have abdicated my position as first of my class to the former first. I will be second in class,” she told him. “He will lead the class, and give me time to do my other work.”

“Sounds like a win-win,” he nodded. “Keeping your name?”

“You know I am,” she replied. “I am quite proud of my name. And I think it’s very pretty.”

“It does suit you,” he agreed with a smile. “And how jealous will it make your classmates?”

“Unbelievably,” she grinned, which made him laugh.

Anthra squeezed through the entry and filled the room with her bulk. “What is it, Kell?”

“A few things for you, esteemed council member,” he replied, turning and rearing up to sit on his tail. “First, Arlen Kent is a bit frantic to hear from you.”

“I know, we didn’t make our conference calls,” she replied. “They have news of the goods we bartered?”

“Three days and they’ll start out for Draconia,” he replied. “We’ll bring the gold to the Navy ships, so they can take it back. So, Kent really wants to talk to you. Secondly, we have something of a magical mystery that’s befallen the First Lady.” He related to her what he told Prisma. “Prisma here said she’ll ask the chromatic sages about it.”

“Did you tell whoever you talked to not to release that to the public?”

“And tell humans that dragons can somehow restore youth? Yes, I told them to keep it quiet,” he replied, which made her nod. “Near as we can figure, both them and me, it somehow happened when she cut herself on my spike. Julia Walker *is* a magician, Anthra. Maybe cutting herself on my spike caused some kind of magical reaction.”

“Possible,” Anthra mused. “But I would very much like the most wise to look into this problem, Prisma. This is potentially dangerous to us, and very important.”

“I will take it to them as soon as the tunnel is opened and I can get out, esteemed council member,” she promised.

“Jenny said that the First Lady is perfectly healthy, she’s just eighteen again. And she doesn’t want to change back,” he added with a wry chuckle. “I guess one way to test it would be to let one of the other magicians cut himself on an earth dragon’s spikes, and see what happens.”

“Let’s save the experimenting for after we learn what the chromatic sages can dig up,” Anthra told him. “And I want *you* there with her,” she added.

“What? Why?”

“Because she cut herself on *your* spike,” she said. “I want the sages to examine you and make sure that you won’t suffer any kind of problems. I want to make sure *you’re* healthy.”

“Oh. Well, when you say it like that, I guess I’d better. I hadn’t thought of that,” he noted.

Because he now had an appointment, Kell gave over on his work and foisted it off on the other field agents, then he went out with Anthra and Prisma as she returned to overseeing the preparations. In typical earth dragon style, everything was highly organized, with drakes and wyrms checking and double-checking and triple-checking lists, and the nearly half of the 2300 or so earth dragons were trying to cram into the main gallery with their initial carries. Everything in Sanctuary City would be brought back to the surface in waves, arranged by priority, with food and critical tools being at the top of the list. Seeing that many earth dragons at once reminded Kell that the earth dragons were actually the most populous of the dragon races, with the fire dragons being second most populous. Anthra checked her way down the long tube leading to the water, and when they

reached where the water flooded it, Kell got his first look at the new connecting tunnel. It was in the right wall just by the intercom box, a very wide oval to accommodate the equipment they'd have to take out, and the digging team was carrying out waste rock in a continuous chain. Anthra stopped one of them with a paw. "How much longer?"

"We've broken through into Dawnmist, esteemed council member," he replied. "They're just finishing the tunnel mouth now. We'll have the tunnel open for traffic in about an hour."

"Amazing that you dug a tunnel that long in just two days," Prisma murmured.

"Not even human machines can tunnel faster or better than we can," the earth drake said, a bit preeningly.

"Kell, Prisma, go on up. As soon as the opening is wide enough, get it done."

"Yes, esteemed council member," Prisma replied.

"You can go that way, I'll meet you on my farm, Prisma," Kell said, then he turned and dove into the water.

Six minutes later, Kell vaulted out of the water and onto the knoll just off his own den, and he sat on his haunches with his tail drooping over the edge and sighed as he surveyed the damage. The sky dragons had managed to dig out the first two chambers of his burrow, and they'd scattered what he'd left in the burrow all over the ground over what was now a wide, gaping, water-filled pit. They had somehow collapsed or clogged the drainage pipes that kept the water out of the burrow, and it had flooded. His burrow was all but ruined, but it wasn't a total loss. But, instead of seeing it as a negative, he instead started to consider the possibilities. He could ask his water drake friends to drain the water and then take the opportunity to expand his burrow, add more rooms, maybe a second level. After all, he and Kammi had a lot of stuff, and it was never too soon to start considering a brood chamber. He liked his burrow right where it was, on its little knoll

overlooking the cove where he could lay in the sun by the entrance, and he had a nice open area where he used to play as a hatchling with his brothers, and would be a great place for his own hatchlings to play.

He blinked...Gaia, that female was *really* getting inside his head.

Prisma was always full of surprises. Instead of coming out of the Dawnmist tunnel, she instead erupted from the water behind him, and set herself to hovering just behind him. He looked back at her and saw her slightly challenging smile, which made him chuckle. "I didn't know you could get out on your own."

"I can *now*, when it's too late to matter," she replied easily. "Do you want me to carry you, or would you rather climb?"

"I'll climb. It won't take me all that long to get there."

"I won't just leave you behind, friend. I'll just float along with you."

"You do that," he said with a chuckle as he stood up.

Climbing the slope of the volcano was hatchling play for an adult earth drake. Kell's ebon claws gripped the rocky slopes with ease as he scampered up, almost bounding up the mountainside with his claws leaving gouged holes in the rock behind him. Prisma hovered just beside him and used her magic to carry her up, exploiting the fact that her constant exposure to earth dragons left her fully charged a little bit. It was almost effortless for her, since floating magic was her area of expertise, so she had plenty of time and wherewithal to talk. They discussed the timetable for the earth dragons to reclaim the farms and the incoming shipment of relief supplies from the humans, at least until a fire drake landed on a flat area just above them and spread her wings. "Hold, earth drake," she called, but not in an unfriendly voice. "The new rules are in effect. Being on the mountainside without cause is out of bounds. What reason do you come up here?"

Prisma floated forward and spoke before Kell could. "We're going to the Library of Eternity, fire drake. We must seek their counsel on a fairly

important matter. The earth drake has proper reason, the sages will need to see him.”

“Then you may pass. Climb carefully,” she said, gesturing with a wing, then she took off and soared off to the east.

“I forgot about that part,” Kell chuckled darkly. “But it’s good that the fire dragons aren’t being jackwagons about enforcing it.”

“You are with me, Kell, that gives you justification to be up here,” Prisma said, a bit lightly.

“I’ll go wherever I damn well please, Prisma,” Kell replied with a sly smile.

“And such goes the word of the earth dragons,” she retorted.

“I’m a field agent, Prisma. Rules for us are nothing but a minor inconvenience,” he said flippantly, which made her chuckle.

Only a few sages were in the library when they arrived, but as Prisma and Kell explained why they were there, it so intrigued them that they called in all the other sages. Kell felt a little odd being surrounded by venerable chromatics, by far the smallest dragon in the room, and felt even more odd when they had him sit on a podium in the center of the open area so they could examine his tail with a magnifying glass. “So, this human has regained her youth, but demonstrates no other unusual aspects or features?” a male asked.

“Not that I was told, most wise,” Kell answered. “We were of a mind to ask them to bring the human to where the other humans are going to train in magic, so the chromatics might check her out the same way you are me.”

“That’s actually a prudent thing to do,” one of the others said, her forepaws glowing with magical light as she fed off of Kell’s magical aura and used a spell of some kind on him. “Inspecting this human in person would give us a better chance to determine the cause.”

“Now hold still, young earth drake,” one of the others said. “Anything, sister?”

“There’s definitely something magical at work,” she replied. “It’s a little hard to read through his aura, but I can definitely sense a magical tether.”

“Forgive my ignorance, most wise, but what is that?” Kell asked.

“A magical tether is the astral representation of the linking of two objects by a magical spell,” she replied. “Think of it as a cord of magic that ties you to something. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll track this tether back to its source.”

“This red spike in your tail, young earth drake, is it the same slot that the human cut her hand on?” the one examining his tail asked.

“Now that you mention it, yes,” he replied, looking back at his tail. “That *was* the spike socket. But it had a clear crystal in it before, it grew back after it fell out. I dislodged all my spikes at once, and that sometimes causes us to grow back a shanker.”

“Ah yes, I recall now,” he noted. “You were the one that killed the council chromatic.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Fear not retribution from us, young one,” one of the others said. “In our minds, your action was justified.”

“So, either it is simple random chance the one spike socket in question grew back different from the others, or it might be a clue,” the male noted, touching the red crystal bud growing out of the socket.

“Our reference appendix has no exact match to this phenomenon,” one of the others announced. “It will take more detailed research, and that will take time.”

“Have you considered my proposal, most wise?” Prisma asked. “Imagine if the earth drakes brought one of their computers here and copied all your tomes into it. You could find exactly what you seek in mere seconds.”

“True, but there is much to be said for actually holding a book in your paws and reading it,” one of them declared. “But, far be it for me to stand in the way of progress.”

“We are debating your proposal at this time, young Prisma. We will let you know when we reach a decision.”

“Just let us know,” Kell said. “We can get you up and running fairly quickly.”

After a moment, the female with the glowing paws looked towards the wall. “The tether’s terminus is very distant from here,” she told them. “Very, very distant. Evidence certainly suggests that there’s a link between Kell and this human female, but I should know for sure in a few moments.”

“Strange. Earth dragons can’t do the required magic to form a tether,” one of them mused.

“To be honest, our understanding of the exact capabilities of the earth dragons is limited,” the oldest of them said, a truly ancient male. “There is no example in our tomes of chromatics actually *studying* the earth dragons. A curious oversight.”

“Or those studies were purged at the same time the attitudes of the dragons changed towards the earth dragons,” Prisma offered. “To protect the secret of the earth dragons.”

“That is a possibility,” he affirmed with a nod.

“So, you’re sticking by your theory that the other dragons stopped treating the earth dragons like glass to hide the secret?” Kell asked. They’d had many discussions about that subject.

“It seems a logical thing to do,” she replied. “To keep the humans from discovering the source of magic, the dragons hid that secret, even from *themselves*. And once that vital information was concealed, the attitudes of the dragons changed concerning your kin, my friend.”

“When magic is fully empowered in the world, you can’t detect an earth dragon’s aura,” one of the chromatics noted. “It’s lost in the background magic. That *would* keep that knowledge safe.”

“Well, it is something that we should undertake,” one of the sages declared. “A more detailed understanding of the exact capabilities of the earth dragons would further the advance of all magical studies.”

“You are a wonderful example of biothaumaturgy, at a level far exceeding the other dragon races,” the male looking at his tail told him. “But then again, given your auras prevent active spellcasting, it makes a great deal of sense that earth dragons have found other ways to use the magic they generate.”

“At a biological level,” Prisma nodded. “The one manner in which their auras cannot interfere.”

“Actually, my young student, the ultimate example of it is their magical auras themselves,” he continued. “That is a biothaumaturlogical reaction at its core. Earth dragon biology *generates* magic, which they then access with other biological processes, and from which the rest of us benefit.”

“As I suspected,” the female declared. “I can sense a human female at the other end of this tether.”

“Can it be severed?” one of them asked.

“Possible, but we should not explore that idea until more study is undertaken. As of right now, this tether is passive, and will do him no harm. It might have harmful effects for both of them if we break the spell. Kell, you said you can bring this female to us for examination?”

“I can get her close enough for us to go see her,” he answered. “It will require a journey to Imakaii, the training complex for the human magicians. That’s a journey of some ten or so hours by wing.”

“We may be old, young earth drake, but we can manage,” the female said with a slight smile. “We will dispatch two sages to journey to Imakaii and undertake examination of this Julia Walker as soon as she is made available to us.”

“I have to go there as well, so we can just make a group trip out of it,” Kell noted. “After all, it might be best if I’m there too when you examine her.”

“Yes, that would be best,” she nodded.

“Well, there is nothing unusual about this spike,” the male behind him declared. “It may be a different color, but it has no magical tethers tied to it. “Can you dislodge the spike so I might examine the socket?”

“Can’t,” he replied. “It’s not grown enough yet to come off its anchor. It should be by tomorrow, though.”

“Then you’ll need to return, young earth drake. I really want to examine that socket.”

“I can manage that.”

“We will research this issue for the day, young earth drake. Return to us at sunrise tomorrow so we might further examine you, and we might plan this trip to Imakaii.”

“I’ll set it up today,” he nodded. “Could you keep Anthra informed?”

“I dare say this is a matter which must be brought before the full council,” the male behind him declared. “We will discuss the matter with them later today.”

“Just for my curiosity, the earth dragons intend to return to the surface today, correct?” one of the sages asked.

Kell nodded. “They might be starting to come back out right now, given how long we were in here.”

“Thank Gaia, it means things will return to normal soon.”

“The new normal,” Kell noted.

“New is not always bad, young earth drake,” the sage smiled.

Kell had to climb over to the south side of the volcano before he could vault off the side and open his wings, gliding down with Prisma following. Kell almost felt a surge of elation when he saw earth dragons coming out of the Dawnmist tunnels carrying yoke baskets and pulling carts. His parents were already out with his siblings, Keth surveying the fields closest to the burrow as Kanna seemed to pace around the dug-out entry of the burrow. Kii and Surrall were approaching from the cove with their hatchling. Kell landed some distance from them with a few hops to slow down, then folded back his wings and hurried up to them. “Mother,” he called.

“I am quite upset, my youngling,” she said with emotion in her voice, her tail slashing back and forth as she looked at the hole that had once been their entry ramp.

“Well, once you get inside the burrow, it’s just fine,” Kell assured her. “A little musty and a little mold, but they couldn’t dig through the bedrock. We only have to repair the entry chamber, and sire said he wanted to enlarge it anyway.”

“What did the sages have to say?” Kitta asked.

“Who told you I went to see them?”

“Anthra.”

“Well, that figures,” he noted, sitting on his haunches as Prisma landed beside him. “They want to see me again tomorrow. They said there’s definitely some kind of magic linking me and the First Lady, and they want me to have the humans bring her to Imakaii so they can examine her.”

“Is it dangerous?” Kanna asked immediately.

“The sages said that the tether is passive and not harmful,” Prisma answered. “They need time to research the matter, so they need to see us again tomorrow.”

“Us?”

“Us. I am involved now, and if you think I will hear from you second paw what the most wise have to say, you’re crazy.”

Kell laughed. “Typical chromatic, butting your snout into everything.”

“I have a position of importance now, friend, I’m going to abuse it,” she replied with a sly look. “Do you have any idea how jealous the other chromatics my age are that I may walk into the Library of Eternity?”

“Shame on you, rubbing their noses in it,” Kanna accused with an amused look.

“It’s the chromatic way, Matron,” she murmured shamelessly. “Having power is no fun unless you can show it off.”

“Well, it seems that a certain young chromatic needs her feet grounded,” Kanna declared. “You’re here, Prisma, so you can lend your magic to help us clear this rubble.”

“Until I am called to other duties, Matron, I would be happy to help,” she said magnanimously.

“I’ll be back up as soon as I can, Mother,” Kell said. “I’m not exactly done down in the department quite yet.”

“That’s fine, my youngling,” she told him with a wave of her tail. “Just get here when you can. We’ll need your help.”

“If help is what you need, then help is here,” Surrall called as the water drakes reached the burrow. “Our kelp beds can wait for a while, Kanna, they’re actually in fairly decent shape outside of the top halves of the stalks being eaten off. The farms are what need the most attention right now.”

“Truly,” Shii nodded. “Tell us how we can help.”

“Such good friends,” Kanna said with a warm look. “Keth is forming a plan for repairing the tracts, so until he finishes, we can concentrate on the burrow.”

“The interior is intact, mother, so *this* is the only real problem,” Kell noted, waving a paw at the gaping hole before them.

Rather than try to walk against the flow of traffic in the newly dug tunnel, Kell decided to swim back into the city. He’d done it so often lately that it nearly seemed *easy*, nearly six minutes of steady swimming with little need to prepare before. And besides, it was far more fun to swim than it was to walk. He broached the surface and startled a few earth dragons standing at the entrance of the new tunnel, waiting to move up into it with their yoke baskets and carts. Kell nodded to them as he shook the water off, then folded his wings and trotted up the lava tube, moving against a line of drakes and wyrms. It was *so* much a relief to see that, to see the earth dragons returning to their farms, returning *home*. Their underground city had been comfortable and comforting, a place of peace and security deep in Gaia’s embrace, but every earth dragon, even Kell, was tied to the living land above as much as the dark tunnels below. Though he spent his time sitting in front of a computer and roaming the human lands, even Kell found simple joy in tending the fields and satisfaction in the harvest. Even the field agents were farmers at heart.

He returned to a nearly empty department. Most of the workers were in that line to go up, since they had a lot of work to do up there as well. They were keeping the heart of the operation down in Sanctuary City, and some drakes intended to live down in the city rather than go back up so they didn’t have to commute, but they had a *lot* of infrastructure they had to repair. They had to rebuild the power plant and the water and sewer plants, which were Fredda and Jukra’s realms of responsibility. But the department had their own work to do repairing their own infrastructure, from laying new datalines to run from Sanctuary City up to the surface—they weren’t moving the fiber optic cable again—to repairing the current network. They

wanted everything ready to turn on as soon as they had power back, wanted the island's intranet completely functional, and foremost of those were the wireless services for the cell phones, tablets, and laptops that would be critical to the builders and power drakes. Getting the wifi back up and running was their primary task, and Ferroth had almost half of the department's technicians in that line to go up not with personal effects, but with equipment and tools for getting the wireless nodes back up and running, both above and below ground. Jukra had drakes digging tight vertical tunnels up into Dawnmist to run cables so they didn't clutter the tunnels, so tight only one drake could fit in it at a time. They were going to run all their data cables up that trunk tunnel as well as some power lines to get power to at least Dawnmist, and then work out from there to power critical need applications on a temporary power grid. They could use the existing grid cabling for that, since Fredda had buried the power cables, but they'd have to replace transformers that were trashed by the rioting sky dragons. The transformers could have been buried as well, but when Fredda designed the power grid, she wanted her workers to have relatively easy access to the transformers. A good idea at the time, but since they were exposed to the open air, it left them vulnerable to attack by sky dragons.

An oversight Fredda meant to rectify. She already had plans to move the transformers underground with good ventilation and heat sinks to prevent overheating when they rebuilt the power grid.

The only drakes in the office were Kammi and Trekka, and of course, Ferroth. Kammi immediately rushed over and nuzzled him fondly. "What did they say?"

"That it's nothing to worry about from a health standpoint, but it's also something they've never come across before, so they want to examine it more closely," he replied as Ferroth stumped over. "They want to examine Julia Walker at Imakaii as soon as the humans can get her there."

"Well, you were going there anyway," Ferroth grunted. "I'll send that up to Anthra, and she'll arrange it with Kent."

“I can—“

“You have your own work to do,” Ferroth cut him off. “Let the dragons that handle that kind of thing do their jobs, Kell. Now, you and Kammi get up there and do *your* jobs. I want the wifi network for Dawnmist ready to go the instant they get the trunk tunnel dug and the cables run.”

“Yes, chief,” Kell said.

“I have our tools ready, and the equipment’s on its way up in the convoy,” Kammi told him. “And I put the tools in the waterproof satchels,” she added with a sly smile.

“Good, no way was I waiting in that line,” Kell chuckled in reply. “I’ll be staying up top after we finish, chief, to help out on the farm.”

“That’s fine, but get that network up first. That’s the priority here.”

After both of them slung a shoulder satchel off each wing, they padded down the lava tube, passing drakes slowly moving forward as they waited their turn to go up the new tunnel. A few of them gave Kell and Kammi dirty looks, but they ignored them as Kell told Kammi in more detail about the examination and what they said. She was quiet a long moment after he finished, then looked over at him. “I don’t know all that much about magic, but if you somehow made Julia young again, it stands to reason that any of us could do it. So, we’d better keep it a secret.”

“I already made that point abundantly clear to Jenny,” he replied. “Imagine if some old billionaire got word that a dragon could make him young again. We’d never be safe,” he grunted.

“And the sages said there was nothing harmful about it for you? You didn’t like give up some of your own youth to Julia, did you?”

He shook his head. “They said it didn’t harm me in any way, that it was *passive*,” he replied. “But there’s what they called a magical tether between me and Julia. Since we can’t *do* magic, it had to come from *her*.”

“An unconscious use of magic? Isn’t that supposed to be impossible?” Kammi asked.

“It is, but since the chromatic sages had never heard of this before, I guess we’re in uncharted territory here,” he said as the new tunnel came into view to their thermographic vision, with the water about 10 meters beyond it. They’d dug the connecting tunnel far back enough that a freakish high tide couldn’t possibly flood it, while still getting it as far to the end of the lava tube as possible to cut down on the required digging. “I guess we’ll find out more when we go to Imakaii, and the sages can give Julia an exam.”

“And put both of you in the same room and see what happens,” Kammi ventured.

“That too,” he agreed. “But, we have other things to do there,” he noted.

Kammi grinned wickedly. “Just get me close to one of their terminals, and we’ll have a back door hacked from the inside before they can blink.”

“Which is why they won’t let us anywhere near a computer on the island,” Kell chuckled. “But, I did get the plans done for Davie’s playground. I think he’s going to like it.”

“We’re digging a visitor’s den too, right?”

He nodded. “A few of them, for Hinado and whoever else visits,” he replied. “I was thinking of digging out a burrow for visiting earth dragons as well.”

“Good, we can start taking over the island from underground,” Kammi grinned, then she stopped at the edge of the water and started to breathe deeply, preparing for the swim.

“I’ll wait for you,” Kell said lightly.

“You’d *better*,” she replied with a look that made him chuckle before diving into the water.

4 September 2017, 10:23 DMT; 19 nautical miles southeast of Imakaii

Even after nearly ten hours, he wasn't sure about this.

Kell had never allowed himself to be carried before, and while it was an unusual sensation, he wasn't all that sure he *liked* it very much. Back on the island, it had been a matter of strange pride that he went nowhere that his paws could not take him, as if he were embracing his earth dragon-ness, and part and parcel of being an earth dragon was earth dragons did not fly... yet at the same time, he was playing with the back-mounted jet engine to see if an earth dragon could figure out a way to do it with technology rather than magic. But in the interests of staying together and making things as easy on the two elderly sages as possible, Kell and Kammi had consented to allow themselves to be carried by sky dragons rather than swim with the water dragons. It was much slower to swim in an aura current than fly. Kell was carried by Hinado, and Kammi was being carried by a younger sky drake. Anthra, who was along with them, was being carried by Faralla, mainly because only a sky wyrm would be able to haul Anthra around any long distance, and the other members of the council were arrayed behind them, the water dragons being helped along by a pair of sky drakes to help them fly faster. Ten fire drakes, Gressa among them, were flying in a diamond formation around them as protection, and four fire wyrms were flying in the point and rear guard positions, two ahead and two behind, a maximum protection formation to defend the Dragon's Council from possible attack.

Kell wasn't exactly sure how this had evolved into a full-out conference. Yesterday morning the rumor had gone around that the council was going to meet the humans, this time in *their* territory, and Ferroth had confirmed the rumors when Kell and Kammi came back down after spending the night on the farm to get their day's task sheet. For some reason, the entire council had decided to go to Imakaii rather than just Kell,

Kammi, and Prisma, and listening to them talk as they flew confirmed his suspicions that it was about the human magicians. The council wanted to meet the Hunters and discuss what they would learn while Kell and Kammi built Davie's playground and dug out a few dens. The President was going to be there to discuss matters with the council, and also probably to be on hand while the sages examined Julia.

He had to admit, though, that flying like that was fairly fast. They were flying at the speed of the sages, about 180 kilometers an hour, and while the sages weren't going all that fast, they looked quite spry despite a ten hour flight and capable of going longer. A sky dragon could cover that same distance in about 90 minutes if they cruised, or about 50 minutes if they were *really* serious about it. Sky dragons were fully capable of supersonic flight, and the fastest of them could achieve speeds approaching Mach 3 for short bursts, and go even faster than that if they were extremely high up where the air was very thin; that was how the sky dragons conducted reconnaissance for the department, by overflying a target at around 80,000 feet moving around Mach 1.5, then looking down with their raptor vision that was so keen that even at that altitude, they could make out individual people walking on a sidewalk even if they couldn't recognize faces. However, with them carrying the earth and water dragons, they couldn't go that fast, forced to fly "low and slow" as they called it. Sky dragons were both physically and magically built for supersonic flight, where trying to carry a passenger while going that speed would kill the passenger dragon. Sky dragons could breathe at speeds where the air turned into a semi-liquid to the moving object, known as *laminar behavior*, and were capable of going to altitudes that only spy planes could achieve. It was why sky dragons had no fear of fighter planes. They could outrun most missiles, could out-turn the jets at high speed, and if things weren't favorable, they could simply turn their noses up and outclimb them, then go so high that most fighters couldn't follow.

Hinado's paw on Kell's back, just between his wings, was magically glued to him by the sky drake's innate power, and Kell wondered several times during the flight if it didn't make Hinado's paw numb to carry all of

Kell's weight like that for so long...and it was a *lot* of weight. Because of Hinado's magic, Kell weighed more than he did, despite Hinado being nearly three times Kell's size. Hinado's weight-canceling floating magic was that powerful, even powerful enough to negate Kell's weight in addition to his own. And with that magic infused through him, Kell found that he didn't feel like he was being held by that paw on his back. Instead, it was almost as if he could fly himself, as if he weighed nothing. He found it curiously similar to being in the water, and spreading his wings and testing the play of air over them felt something like gliding, just without him falling a meter for every three meters he went forward. Turning the air, he found, was just like turning in the water, almost as if the same principles were at work, and it also annoyed Hinado a little. Hinado's control over the flight canceled his attempts to turn, which had been what was miffing the sky drake, pulling them off course, but he found that trying to turn while flying was much like turning while gliding. Since most dragons didn't have a tail rudder, they did their turns almost completely with their wings, using their tails only as the crudest of rudders. Only sky dragons had a developed fin on their tail for aerial maneuverability, a long fin that ran from near the tip of their tails all the way up to their back legs. But, even a fire dragon's unadorned tail helped guide them in the air, because of the simple laws of aerodynamics. It didn't do much, but it did just enough to help the wings execute turns.

At least things back on the island were going smoothly. Earth dragons being who they were, everyone was already hard at work to recover the farms before the rains started, and the technical drakes were laboring to restore infrastructure. To Kell's surprise, there were more than just earth dragons on those farms. Quite a few water dragons were there, laying off of fishing as the dragons used up the emergency stores the earth dragons brought up—which had caused a row when the other dragons found out that the earth dragons had been, in their eyes, building up a stockpile of human food and hoarding it—and there were sky dragons as well, serving the council-imposed penance due to the fact that it was the sky dragons that destroyed everything. Even a few fire dragons and chromatics not the former Council of Seven were down on the farms as well, the fire dragons

pitching strong backs and paws to the heavy moving and the chromatics using the farm situation as a chance to practice geomancy, practicing some spells dealing with earth and rock that they usually couldn't cast without causing damage to the lowlands. Actually, those spells were quite handy for the earth dragons, like magical bulldozers that evened out the rutted farmland, and the chromatics knew other spells that encouraged the rapid growth of plants. That was a *critical* help, since just the night before, Kell saw budding sawgrass over evened farmland, grass that would hold the soil against the monsoonal rains that would hit in mid-October and last until late January, where it would rain virtually every day for far longer and with more precipitation than the afternoon heat-effect showers common on most tropical islands most any time of year. From the look of things after just the first day, the farmland would be grassed over and protected, and the tracts that would be immediately planted with crops that could handle the daily heavy rains with the temporary berms and barriers in place to protect the cultivated farmland from excessive runoff..

Everything yesterday went fairly well. Kell, Prisma, and Kammi had returned to the sages at sunrise that morning, and it had only taken an hour for them to inspect his socket. He'd shed the red shanker just before going in, and they found nothing unusual about the socket...in fact, it was now growing in a clear spike like the rest in his tail, going back to the new normal for earth dragons, clear spikes. That in itself was now being studied by one of the sages and a few earth dragon scholars, trying to determine what about moving underground for a while had caused all the earth dragons to change from growing red spikes to growing clear ones. It could have been diet, lack of exposure to sunlight, change in daily activity, almost anything.

The horns, well, they knew what caused that change.

It had been a long flight through most of the night, to help prevent them from being seen by any boats, and while Kell had done nothing but hang there and talk, he did feel a little tired. Much like humans felt tired after a long car trip where they did nothing but sit, Kell found traveling without *doing* anything to be strangely tiring as well. But, he had the others

to talk with about matters on the island, as well as his phone to talk to Jenny and make sure everything was ready. They'd set up some pavilion style tents to serve as temporary dens, just putting a roof over the heads of the visiting dragons since they didn't feel comfortable sleeping in the open, and the President and First Lady were already on Imakaii and waiting for them. That, Jenny told him, had taken quite a bit of subterfuge. The movements of the President were always a matter of public record—indeed, reporters followed him everywhere he went—but this time, he'd boarded Air Force One with no word whatsoever that he was even planning a trip and flew off, leaving his chief of staff to stonewall the press over where he was going and what he was doing.

“We're almost there,” Hinado said as Kell fidgeted a little. “Just a few more minutes.”

“Those are always the worst,” Kell grunted. “I'd have you just drop me so I can swim, but I'm not wearing my waterproof shoulder satchels.”

“What you're carrying can't get wet?”

“Not even damp,” he replied.

“What's going to be our first move?” Kammi asked.

“We should get everyone settled in first,” Jussa answered. “Then Kell can do as he promised while we speak with the President. Afterwards, the most wise can conduct their examinations. Are you sure you can get everything built in a day, Kell?”

“Easily,” he replied. “Digging out the dens will take the most time, then I'll use the rock from the excavation to build Davie his playground. We know we have to be done by tomorrow evening.”

“Then we go straight to the human ships to oversee the relief shipment,” Anthra said. “I hope they brought an aircraft carrier.”

“They did, and remember that we can't gouge out the deck, esteemed council member,” Kammi replied. “So we have to walk around gingerly.”

“I’ll be careful, youngling,” she chuckled in reply.

The resort of Imakaii came into view in the brightening day. It looked luxurious alright, red tiled roof capping a three story mansion with two wings, a massive artistically sculpted swimming pool and deck between the house and a white sand beach, and outbuildings to each side, mainly residences of the 21 CIA workers that maintained the facility and the attached nine hole golf course and served as physical security in event that some rich, powerful enemy tried to assassinate whoever was being held in the safehouse. The huge mansion, built with government dollars, was the size of a hotel, but it was meant to hold only one or two people at a time even though it could hold fifty people if they didn’t mind doubling up. The place had ten bedrooms and plenty of other rooms that could be—had been—converted into bedrooms, and from what he heard, plans were in the works to build another building on the estate, a dedicated teaching facility with warehouse-style rooms big enough for a dragon to enter. As it was, the Hunters and their lone Army addition would be taking their lessons from Hinado outside on the pool deck. The safe house had almost everything to keep a critical government witness both alive and entertained, many outdoor recreational activities, direct optical cable linking the island to the internet through the CIA’s offices in Hawaii, even two sailboats, a speedboat, and a large motorboat rigged for supporting scuba divers in a pair of dockhouses a few hundred meters to the side of the beach. It was truly a gilded cage for a CIA guest, but it was exclusively the CIA’s no longer, now it belonged both to the CIA and the NSA. They were the ones that had authority over the magic project.

Several humans were standing on a grassy lawn to the side of the main house, and among them were Jenny, Arlen Kent, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Yates with the Marine and Navy representatives of the Joint Chiefs and several aides, and President Walker and the First Lady with their Secret Service detachment. Even from that distance, Kell could see that Julia did look different. She looked like the President’s daughter instead of his wife standing beside him, radiant and beautiful. Hinado slowed them down, and when he set Kell gently down on the grass, he finally let go and

landed beside him. The other dragons landed behind them, the sky dragons relieving themselves of their earth and water dragon passengers as the other dragons landed a small distance away and then walked up, then Jussa bowed his head respectfully to the ten humans. “Mister President, you looking well,” he said in broken English.

“You seem to improve your English on a daily basis, esteemed council member,” Walker replied.

“We’ve been studying,” he replied, then looked to Sessara, who spoke the best English among the council members.

“We thank you for accepting this invitation, Mister President,” she said, as Kell, Kammi, and Gressa quietly translated for the others. “As promised, we brought our most learned sages to examine Misses Walker to ensure she’s healthy,” she added, motioning to the two elderly chromatrics. “If we find that what happened to her has no ill effects, we will leave it to her to decide if she wants to stay that way.”

“That’s a silly thing to say, if you don’t mind my honesty,” Julia laughed. “What woman wouldn’t want *this*?” she added, motioning at her youthful body.

“Honesty is always best, even when it might not be what one wants to hear,” Sessara said sagely. “Especially with us fire dragons. We are not ones to mince words.”

“Don’t I know that,” Jenny chuckled. “How are you doing, Gressa?”

“I am well, Jenny. It is good to see you again,” she replied.

“We have little time, so we have a schedule prepared,” Sessara said, advancing up a bit, then sitting on her haunches in front of President Walker. “We will confer today while the earth dragons build what is needful. Tomorrow, the sages will examine the First Lady, and then we will leave that night to travel to the ships holding our bartered goods, so we might oversee the transfer. Is this acceptable?”

“Quite,” Walker replied, glancing at Kent and nodding. “We’ve prepared a conference area behind the house that you should find comfortable, as well as food and places to rest. It had to have been a long journey, so we can begin the conference as soon as you feel ready.”

“We’re ready now,” Hinado stated in English, and Jussa and Hirrag nodded when they heard Gressa’s translation. “Flying long distance isn’t as tiring as you believe.”

Kell pulled his tablet out, then set it on the grass. “Me and Kammi drew up some plans,” he said, turning it on.

“A dragon-made computer?” Walker asked, looking at it. To a human, the paw-held tablet was the size of a TV.

“One of our products, yeah,” he replied with a nod, bringing up his plans as a diagram of the island. “We’re going to build three dens up here on this ridge to the west,” he began. “We’ll do our best not to dump rocks on the golf course,” he added with a chuckle. “Prisma and the fire dragon escorts agreed to help us with this, so we can dig them out cleanly. Afterwards, I’m going to build Davie’s playground right over there,” he said, rising up on his hind legs and pointing back towards a flat area directly beside the pool, on a terrace over the beach. “It should have everything a human child needs to keep himself occupied.”

“It will be all stone?” Jenny asked.

“Mostly,” he replied. “I’m going to need to borrow a few metal pipes and some sheet metal, but I’m sure they’re here. This place is set up to be self-sufficient, and that includes a repair shop with lots of building materials.”

“You are a clever one,” Kent chuckled. “How did you know?”

“Simple common sense, Arlen,” Kammi grinned. “A place like this? You don’t just run down to the hardware store when something breaks.”

“After that, if there’s anything else you guys need that earth dragons can do quickly, just tell us.”

“I can’t think of anything, but if I do, I’ll let you know,” Kent replied. “It sounds like a lot of work.”

“We can dig out the three dens in about eight hours,” Kell answered. “That kind of digging isn’t that hard, it’ll be harder on our waste rock carters,” he chuckled, glancing back at the ten fire drakes. “We don’t just dig everything,” he added when Walker gave him a curious look. “That’s inefficient. We dig holes to each side of a slab of rock, break it off, then drag it out. That’s fairly fast, and I’m going to need those slabs of rock for Davie’s playground. It’ll take me today and tomorrow to build Davie’s playground. That’s actually going to take longer because I have to shape the stones.”

“So, if your maintenance guys want any big slabs of basalt, tell us now,” Kammi added. “We can quarry it for them while we’re digging the dens.”

“Will you need anything from us?” Walker asked.

Kell shook his head.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but could you have them dump some of that waste rock somewhere we might be able to use it?” one of the men Kell didn’t know offered. “It can be used for landscaping and some other things.”

“You’re the facility manager?” Kell asked.

The rather handsome middle aged black man nodded, adjusting the tie of his brown suit. “John Mercer, sir, site supervisor,” he introduced. “And if you don’t mind, I think I would like a few of those slabs of stone you described. They could be used to build a very nice-looking decorative wall.”

“No problem, Mister Mercer,” Kammi answered. “Just show us where you want it, it’ll get there.”

“That’s basically it,” Kell said. “I should be done with this by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Well then, let’s get something to eat, then we can get started after breakfast,” Walker offered.

“A good plan,” Sessara agreed after Jussa nodded.

They’d made sure to have enough food on hand to feed some 27 hungry dragons. Mercer’s men carted out ATVs pulling flatbeds holding all the foods dragons liked, the humans learning about dragon diets from the fire dragons, and rest of the Hunters, Greg, and Davie joined them after they woke up. Davie immediately ran over and hugged Sessara’s ankle, which made her smile in a nearly motherly way and pat the human child on the back with a finger. The Hunters talked a while with Gressa and two of their escorting fire drakes, who were females who had been at the volcano sanctuary, renewing some relationships as Kell and Kammi held court with Jenny, Petrovski, Michaels, and Derringer, the four computer experts on the Hunter team. They talked computers as Walker talked politics informally with the council through Sessara’s translation, and the two chromatic sages sat slightly separate from everyone else and observed all this interaction with intent eyes.

After breakfast, they got to work. The council retired to a circus-sized tent behind the house with the chromatic sages and Gressa to help translate, and the rest of them got to work. Mercer decided to go with them, riding one of those little ATVs between Kell and Kammi as they headed for the exposed rock ridge on the west side of the island. Mercer was a civil engineer by profession, and he was highly curious to see earth dragon builders in action, see how they’d excavate three roughly elliptical 25 meter wide, 15 meter tall caverns in eight hours. “Believe it, Mercer,” one of the fire drakes said in decent English as he walked behind them. “Earth dragons are born diggers. If they say they can do it, they can do it.”

“We’re a subterranean species, John,” Kammi grinned at him, showing her fangs. “We know how to dig.”

“You live underground?”

Kell nodded.

Mercer gawked a little when they reached the first site, a roughly vertical rock face of dark stone with a terrace in front of it to serve as a nice landing spot, and Kell and Kammi started digging. Within three minutes, their entire bodies were inside the holes they dug out, some 9 meters inside, as their claws ripped apart the tough volcanic stone like it was paper. “Holy crap, they’re faster than a drilling machine,” Mercer said, then he laughed ruefully and picked up a jagged rock and tossed it into one of the canvas slings they’d brought with them to move waste rock.

“The earth dragons dig out all our dens,” the same fire drake male told him as he swept waste rock onto his sling with his tail. “They’re best suited for the work.”

“No freakin’ doubt,” Mercer laughed, rolling up his sleeves. “I’m gonna ruin my suit, but I don’t care. I shoulda brought a shovel,” he grunted as he picked up another rock.

“You don’t have to do that,” Prisma told him.

“I don’t have to, but my momma taught me to never stand around and watch others work when you can pitch in,” he replied.

“My, that’s almost earth dragon,” Prisma smiled, then she made a gesture. Mercer gasped when a huge swath of the rocky debris on the terrace lifted into the air. “I’m sure they warned you we do magic, Mister Mercer,” she said with a light expression.

“Yeah, but seeing it is somethin’,” he said with open appreciation, which made Prisma preen a bit. She was chromatic enough to enjoy that kind of attention.

Kell said eight hours, and that was almost exactly what it took. Kell and Kammi rested after each excavation, and then they moved to the next site. Digging like that was actually fast and easy because it didn't take any kind of real precision. They had to stay within the boundaries of the den's volume, but outside of that, they could dig fast and a little sloppy. The only precision came when they dug out the rock slabs Kell needed for his playground and Mercer wanted for his wall, making them a uniform thickness, which they did as three rows down the middle. After most of the rest of it was dug out, they came back and scored the walls, broke them off, and the fire drakes carried them down to where the playground would be and where Mercer wanted them stacked. Kell was impressed at how willing the fire drakes were to help out in work they felt was below them, hauling waste rock both to where Mercer wanted some and out to see using the big slings and carrying rock slabs so Kell and Kammi didn't have to stop digging to do it themselves. Mercer replaced his suit with work overalls, a pick, and a shovel halfway through the first den, and he tried to help out as best he could as he talked with Prisma, learning more about dragons *from* a dragon, rather than the intelligence the humans had on the dragons. After they finished the last den, Kell and Kammi sat by the opening, just big enough for Hirrag should he use one, panting a little from the exertion of it.

"I haven't worked out like that for a while, at least where I could breathe," Kammi said, giving Kell a grin.

"We'll get you trained up," he replied easily, stretching his wings, shivering them, then folding them back. "Good work, though. Three dens, eight hours."

"Easy enough digging," she shrugged. "Now let's get some dinner, then we can start on the playground."

"Thanks for all the help," Kell told Prisma and the fire drakes. "We won't need any help with the playground, so I guess that's it for you guys unless the council has something for you."

“I take it we’re done?” Mercer asked as the fire drakes turned and vaulted off the terrace, then banked for the estate.

“With this,” he replied. “Come on down with us, John, I’ll show you my plans for the playground. You coming with us, Prisma?” he asked her in English.

“As long as we’re going to eat,” she replied, which made Kammi grin.

After a meal, Kell got started on the playground. Kammi and Mercer helped, Kammi with the stones and Mercer with the plans, helping them lay everything out. Kell shaped chunks and slabs of stone into one-piece playground equipment, sculpting it out of rock, and Mercer was amazed when Kell even managed to sculpt chains of rock in an unbroken line to form swings, carefully and efficiently carving out the majority of a link with the top arc of the next link attached to the bottom, score it out with hit needle-sharp claws, break the links apart, then smooth them out to where they were so smooth that they felt like polished metal. Everything was all one piece, from the swings to the slide to the half-dome exercise lattice to the adventure tower, Kell using every part of his body to drill out tunnels and holes and hidey-spaces in the tower, from smoothing it with his horns to using the spikes on his tail dipped deeply down into a hole to continue drilling it past the reach of his foreleg. Some of the major pieces were joined together, though, to form a U-shaped adventure area surrounding swings, monkey bars, the half-dome, and a six meter high curly slide. Kammi cut out the grass and about half a meter of topsoil, rolled it up like a carpet and stored it so the groundskeepers could use it for sodding before it died, dug out the two very small underground rooms and the tunnel that connected them to let Davie feel a little like an earth dragon and then capped them with reinforced rock slabs with holes cut into them for the equipment that would go over them. She then placed the pieces to Mercer’s layout and joined them together, filled the piling holes with concrete from Mercer’s stores to anchor it down, filled the entire play area after they placed everything with sand dredged from an unused beach, then bordered it with stone squared lengths that almost looked like timbers to keep the sand in and the grass out. After they finished, they installed lighting so

Davie could use it after dark with help from Mercer and his rather overwhelmed electricians, mounting large lights on utility poles they had stored on the island and then wiring everything up. It took him and Kammi nearly nine hours to build and install the playground, working as fast as an entire crew of humans working with pre-fabricated parts.

With the help of Mercer and his maintenance men, Kell and Kammi finished the playground that day rather than the next, because around 7:00pm, they realized they only had a couple more hours of work to do to get everything done. Kammi's help with the installation let Kell focus on carving out the pieces, and Mercer and his men helped secure the erected pieces and ensure they were safe for a four year old with extensive inspections. Some parts of it they blocked off until Davie was older—Kell made it knowing Davie would grow—and they helped beautify it with paint, benches they pulled in from their small warehouse and other aesthetics.

The entire thing vaguely resembled a medieval castle, albeit one filled with holes and slides and stairs and ladders like some gigantic hamster playpen gone out of control. The two corners of the U had nearly seven meter tall towers with flagpoles waiting to have flags installed, upon which were anchored all the other play equipment not sitting in the “bailey” of the construction.

At sunset, Jenny and Greg brought Davie out to see his new playground, and the look on the boy's face made all the work worth it. He gaped at it in wondrous awe, the high towers of polished stone, so smooth that it wouldn't hurt him, slides polished to such a degree that the stone was as slick as glass and then waxed with some supplies out of Mercer's repair shop to make them even slippier, terraces, balconies, honeycombed towers to climb through and explore, slides, swings, ropes, ladders, poles, crawlspaces, tunnels, hidden rooms and secret passages, a merry-go-round that was so balanced that it would rotate what seemed like endlessly on its axis, even a treehouse without a tree, a large clubhouse built on a stone sculpture that looked like a tree without leaves that Mercer could cover with

fake foliage, everything a little human boy would ever want in a playground. And all of it was built out of dark volcanic stone.

“What do you think, Davie?” Kell asked. “I built all of this for you.”

“For me?”

“All for you, so you’re happy here,” Kell replied with a gentle smile. The little boy surged out of Jenny’s arms and wrapped himself around Kell’s foreleg, which made him chuckle and pat him on the back. “There’s lots of secrets and surprises in there for you, Davie,” Kell told him. “It’s up to you go find them.”

“Oooh, can I pway, Mommy, pwееееase?” he begged.

Jenny laughed. “Half an hour, then it’s suppertime and bedtime, little man,” she replied. Davie gave an excited squeal and ran out onto the sand as Kell and Kammi lowered their heads just a little, putting them in line with Greg and Jenny’s head. “It’s everything I hoped for and more, Kell, Kammi. Thank you both so much.”

“It was my pleasure, Jenny,” he replied.

“Actually, it was kinda fun,” Kammi replied. “I’ve never built a playground before.”

“Is there anything you *can’t* do?” Greg laughed.

“Digging and building are genetic for us, Greg,” Kammi told him with a grin. “We’re just oversized, intelligent bees, or ants.” Greg laughed raucously at that image. “Seriously. Any earth dragon could have built this, even desk jockeys like us,” she added lightly. “We’re the worker bees of the dragon races, and we’re proud of it,” she stated confidently.

“I dunno, Kammi, I don’t think *any* earth dragon could have built this,” Jenny said, looking around. “Most earth dragons wouldn’t know what a playground *is*.”

“Well, yeah, but if you showed it to them, they could build it,” she replied.

“You two must really be tired after all that,” Greg reasoned.

“Moderately tired, yes, but not exhausted,” Kell replied. “Dragons in my family have stamina, Greg.”

Kammi laughed. “You should see them,” she replied. “They specialize in the hardest kind of digging there is.”

“What kind?”

“Underwater digging,” she replied. “Imagine digging out one of those dens up there *underwater*. That’s what Kell’s family does,” she said, pointing to the three new holes just barely visible on the western ridge. “You have to do all that work one breath at a time.”

Greg whistled. “Wow,” he said, looking at Kell.

“We’re teaching Kammi,” Kell said lightly. “If she can’t cut the mustard, she won’t find a place in *our* burrow.”

“I’m getting better!” she protested.

“*Slightly*,” he corrected, then the two humans laughed when Kammi smacked him with the bottom side of the end of her tail, showing off her one little trick that set her apart from most other earth dragons, an amazingly flexible tail. Kell didn’t know any other earth dragon that could curl up her tail and touch her spikes to the top of her head the way she could. She was almost like a scorpion.

“Any time a water dragon needs something dug, they come to Kell’s family,” Kammi told him.

“It’s our niche,” Kell said modestly. “I’m starving, Kammi, let’s get some dinner, and leave Greg and Jenny alone so they can play on the playground without anyone seeing them act like kids,” he said slyly, which made Greg and Jenny laugh brightly.

“You got us,” Greg said, looking at the six meter high spiral slide, complete with a safety ladder so Davie could climb it without falling off, given it went so high up. “I have *got* to try out that slide.”

“I made it big enough for an adult human, and the top is curled in so Davie won’t fly out of it.”

“That’s good to know,” Jenny grinned. “Some of this Davie won’t be trying out til he’s older, though,” she said, looking around. “I didn’t expect you to build twenty foot tall towers, Kell.”

“This is his castle, and no castle is a castle without towers,” Kell replied airily, which made Greg laugh.

“I’m just glad you didn’t build a moat,” Jenny grinned.

“We can do that,” Kammi offered, which made her laugh.

“No! Now go eat so you stop causing trouble!” Jenny barked, pointing towards the back of the estate house. “And thanks again guys!” she said as Davie climbed up a short ramp and into the most enclosed part of the construction, which was in the middle.

“Where are you two sleeping tonight?” Greg asked.

“Up there with Anthra and Geon,” Kammi answered, pointing to the ridge. “We dug it out, we get to sleep in it. The sages will sleep in one of the other dens, and the last one will go to Hirrag, since he’s too big to really fit well under one of those tents. It’ll be a bit cramped for him, but he’ll fit in it.”

“Weren’t you digging a proper burrow?” Jenny asked as Davie got going on his swing.

“Not yet, but we will eventually,” Kell answered. “When Anthra decides she wants one here, we’ll dig it out. Now stop holding us up and let us go eat!”

She laughed. “Go, go!” she said, shooing them with a hand.

5 September 2017, 09:27 Western Island Time (HDT -1); Imakaii Training Facility

After a very long and very refreshing sleep, Kell, Kammi, and Prisma followed the two chromatic sages down to the main house, where Julia and Jack Walker were waiting on a patio on the side of the house. Julia looked a tiny bit nervous, because she knew the chromatics were coming to examine her condition, and she didn't really know what was going to happen. Like any person sitting in the exam room of a doctor's office, waiting for the doctor to show up, she had time to think about what was coming.

The two chromatic sages surprised Kell with their, well, *good attitude* towards being around humans. Most chromatics despised humanity, a lingering racial prejudice harkening all the way back to when the humans betrayed the chromatics, but the two sages seemed honestly enthusiastic to meet two human magicians and examine one up close. Though Walker would be too busy being President to learn about magic, Julia had already indicated she was going to learn, and unlike her husband, she had time to do it. Explaining her absence to the public for long periods of time would be tricky for the White House, but the fact that she looked 18 again already made it imperative to keep her out of the public eye as much as possible.

Jack and Julia Walker stood up when the five dragons approached, and Julia stepped out and offered her hand to Kell. "Well, our first chance to really talk since this happened," she smiled, patting her youthful cheek. "We're going to find out what happened?"

"That's why we're here, Misses First Lady," Prisma replied as Kammi translated. "Please forgive our most wise, but they have very little practice with your language."

"Fully understandable," Jack Walker replied. "Should we go somewhere more private?"

“Here is just fine,” Prisma replied as she looked to the speaking sage, hissing and growling in the draconic language. “The most wise asks that you find a comfortable chair and make yourself at ease, and we will begin as soon as you feel ready.”

Kammi translated for the two sages for nearly four hours, as the two of them poked and prodded at Julia, almost caused a scene when they asked her to disrobe in front of the Secret Service agents—*outside* for that matter—which she surprised Kell by actually doing, standing there naked as a jaybird for nearly half an hour as the two Secret Service agents tried to look anywhere but at the First Lady and anyone inside the house could get far more of a look than they bargained for if they happened to look out the window. Kell got a chance to see Julia unclothed, and saw that the infusion of youth into her had affected her entire body, leaving her with the body of an 18 year old as well as the face of an 18 year old. She was slender, well proportioned, and most any human male would find her highly attractive. After that, when the agents brought a robe for her to wear, the two sages examined Kell and Julia literally side by side, using magic to probe their strange condition.

Eventually, one of them felt they knew enough to start talking. “The most wise says that this unusual condition is a product of a kind of magic unknown to us,” Kammi explained after nearly four hours, as they took a short break so Julia and the humans could get some refreshments. “It is entirely harmless to you, Julia. The most wise dare speculates that it is actually beneficial, since it regenerated you two a younger age.”

“Well, that’s one major relief,” Jack Walker said with an explosive sigh.

“This condition is permanent and lingering,” Kammi said for the other sage, her glowing yellow eyes widening. “You should prepare yourself for the possibility of living to an age of nearly two hundred, Julia. The magic lingers inside you, actively slowing the normal aging process, but this lingering effect is slowly fading. The most wise speculates that you’ll remain almost exactly as you are until this magic fades completely, which

should take approximately one hundred years. After that, you'll age normally, and with proper care and diet, you should easily live to be one hundred. Subjectively," Kammi added, glancing at the sage.

"What? Oh my dear lord," Julia gasped, putting her hands to her mouth. "That's unbelievable!"

"Two hundred?" Jack Walker gaped. "What caused this?"

"As of yet, we are unsure," Kammi replied after translating, looking at the talking sage. "But it is most definitely an active magical effect. The fact that Julia Walker initiated this magic without any kind of formal training is highly irregular."

"I did this?"

"I certainly didn't," Kell replied. "Earth dragons can't *do* magic, Julia. This had to come from you. You're the magician."

The sage nodded after hearing the translation. "Kell is correct," Kammi translated. "The initiator of the magical spell had to be you, Julia, though the how of it is quite a mystery that we must study. This is almost unheard of, for an untrained magician to not only manifest magical ability, but magical ability of this magnitude. You are truly gifted, Julia."

The other sage spoke. "There is one other option we must consider," Kammi translated. "Earth dragons are what you would call a free radical in magical applications. Though they cannot do magic themselves, they are like all dragons in that they have certain magical capabilities, and these capabilities might have interacted with Julia's body at a direct level when she cut herself on his spike. It is possible that this event occurred because of a, well, a magical *happenstance*," Kammi fretted. "He's using words that don't translate easily into English, hold on. Some kind of event that was triggered by the presence of an earth dragon," she continued as the sage rephrased. "And that it might not be exclusive to Julia."

"You mean this might be repeatable?" Walker asked, looking hard at the sage.

“Possible. If it is so, then that information must never leave this island,” Kammi replied after translating back and forth.

“Amen,” Jack Walker said fervently. “Imagine if some rich maniac found out that an earth dragon could make him young again. They’d hunt you to the ends of the earth,” he said, looking at Kell and Kammi intensely.

“I’m glad you agree with us about that, Mister President,” Kell replied with a nod.

“If it is so, then this fortunate discovery would only apply to *magicians*,” Kammi said for the male sage, who was speaking with some animation. “The magic that created this tether between Kell and Julia came from *Julia*, even if Kell’s presence somehow *initiated* the tether’s formation. That much is very clear to our magical inspection. Only a magician could repeat this event.”

“Are you saying that if any magician came along and grabbed one of your tail spikes, it might do *this*?” Jack Walker asked intently, motioning at his wife.

“That is a possibility,” Kammi answered for the female sage. “It is something we must research extensively.”

“So, to sum it up, earth dragons had better stay well the hell away from all of us,” Julia said, looking directly at Kell. “To both protect this secret and prevent it from happening again.”

“Yes, in the short term, that would be the wisest course of action,” Kammi said as the sage nodded.

“Well, there’s one sure-fire way to test it,” Walker said, looking speculatively at Kell.

“Not until we fully understand this tether that exists between Julia and Kell. It is not harmful to either of them *now*. There is no telling what might happen to both of them if another magician attempted to duplicate the effect.”

“If you don’t mind, could you explain this tether in greater detail?” Julia asked.

Kammi listened for a moment after translating, then began to speak. “A magical tether is a connection between two objects,” she began. “It can exist between two living things or a living thing and an object. It cannot exist between two objects. Tethers link the two together in a mystical manner, and what a tether can do depends entirely on the magic that created it. This tether between you and Kell seems to be completely passive,” Prisma said, then she paused to let the sage speak a few seconds. “It doesn’t seem to do anything at all, and it is our initial theory that the latent magic inside you that retards your aging is tied up in the tether between you and Kell. We are not sure yet, but we think that if the tether was dissolved, that you would age normally from your current physical age. You would not return to your original age, but would instead age like any other human.”

“How can it be passive if it’s doing something?”

“A tether can be passive in that nothing happens *between* the linked objects, but still have effects on the objects themselves,” Prisma explained as the sage spoke. “We theorize that the tether retards your aging. For Kell, it seems to do nothing at all. In a way, you are leeching magic off Kell directly through this tether to empower this magical youthfulness, draining his innate, natural dragon magic for your own ends. Like a parasite.”

Julia flushed. “Well, it certainly wasn’t intentional,” she said with a cough. “And if it is possible, friends, I would *like* to have this thing that keeps from aging removed. I don’t want to still be eighteen and young when my husband is in the last days of his life, then face a century or more without him. I couldn’t stand it,” she said, giving Jack Walker a look of pure love and devotion. Walker took her hand and patted it with a warm look in return.

“This we can do for you, Julia, if you give us time to research and study this magic so we might undo it without harm to either you or Kell,”

Kammi said for the male sage. “Give us some few weeks to fully understand this magic, and we can remove it for you.”

“Please, I would very much like that,” she reaffirmed. “I’m enjoying being young again, but I don’t want to still be young when those I love most grow old.”

“You are truly a very wise human, Julia Walker,” Prisma said for the female sage. “Let us retire for an hour or so for a meal, and we will continue the examination.”

“That’s fine with me, I’m a little hungry,” Julia replied. She and Jack Walker stood up, then the agents escorted them inside. The female sage gave Kell and Kammi a serious look, then nudged her head as she turned to walk away. They fell in with her, and after a moment to get some distance from the house, she spoke.

“There’s much more to it than what we said,” she told them.

“I figured. I don’t know much about magic, but I know what you told her wasn’t exactly right,” Kell replied. “What did you discover, most wise?”

“The tether between you and the human is passive, and *does* do what we said it does, but it actually works both ways,” she replied, looking at Kell. “Simply put, Kell, something else has to be at work here that we must examine,” she explained. “At this moment all that is happening is you are giving, but there exists within the tether the *potential* for Julia to give *back*. Before, we thought that the magic was generated by the planet itself, which we then used. Now we know the exact process of it,” she said delicately, being warned that Jenny was adept at draconic. “A tether like the one binding you and Julia Walker together is *mutual*. For Julia, it grants her youth and vigor. The laws of magic states that in a mutual tether like yours, as you have given unto her, *she* must give something unto *you*. That means that there is the potential within this tether for Julia to grant you some kind of gift or boon in a magical manner. If so, the laws of magic will be in effect. The boon Julia grants unto you cannot exceed the energy you invest into her, and it cannot be beyond her natural magical capability.”

“If she is granting me some kind of magical effect, it’s nothing I’ve even noticed,” Kell replied. “I feel no different, and I’m not doing anything unusual.”

“At this moment, Kell, that’s not unusual, for she is not granting you any magic. Right now, the tether is nothing but you giving unto her. We must further study and examine this tether in more detail to determine exactly *what* this tether will grant to you,” the male sage said. “We must also understand the full extent of it before we permit it to be severed, to make absolutely sure it has no unforeseen effect on you *or* her.”

“Exactly what kind of gift would be passed on?” Kammi asked curiously.

“If you’re asking for speculation, Kammi, that is as boundless as your imagination, at least up to a point,” the male replied. “What Kell has given to Julia cannot exceed what Julia gives to Kell. That means that the amount of magic it takes to maintain Julia’s youth is the same magical amplitude passed to Kell, and just like Julia’s age retarding magic, that magic will fade over time. It also cannot be something beyond Julia’s natural magical aptitude, nor outside the bounds of magical law. That means the usual strictures are in effect.”

“So, Kell powers Julia’s youth, but Julia powers something for Kell, and she gets the energy for that from us in the first place,” Kammi grunted.

The female chromatic’s eyes widened. “Kammi, my youngling, that is an *intriguing* observation,” she said with sudden animation.

Kell glanced at Prisma, and saw that she was deep in thought. “What is it, Prisma?”

“I...I may not be correct about this, but there is a small chance that this is not the first time this has happened,” she said uncertainly. “Mind that this is pure speculation, honored sages, but in my studies, I read about a human magician of the old times named Athena. It just occurred to me that she lived for nearly two hundred years. The day of her birth isn’t in the histories

I researched, but it was documented that she ruled her city for over one hundred years, and had fifty years of journals and researched tomes she'd penned before ruling the modern city of Athens. I first attributed this to the fact that she was one of the most learned magicians of her day and had found some way to use magic to extend her lifespan. But she was also the *only* human magician to have known ties to the earth dragons. Mayhaps, she did as Julia has done, and we might find some information about this tether by studying Athena's later life?"

"A subject worth study," the female sage told her. "It very well may be so, youngling. We will pass that to our experts in history for their research."

"And to think that they initially placed you *fourth* in your class. Clearly some favoritism was involved in your placements," the male snorted, which made Prisma beam.

"Yeah, we think Prisma rocks too," Kammi said lightly, bumping against the young chromatic.

"We must return to the examinations very soon," the female declared. "Young Kammi's observation is something I wish to test."

"See, what would you do without me, intended?" Kammi grinned at him.

"Have a much more peaceful life," he replied blandly. All three chromatics chuckled when Kammi bounded up even with him and whacked him with her tail.

After a snack, they returned to the examination. The two sages cast spell after spell on both of them, even had them sit at various distances, from touching to 50 meters away from each other, for nearly two more hours. After that, one of the sages tested Julia's innate magical ability with a series of simple tests, both physical and mental, for it required a strong body and a sharp mind to handle the demands of magic. After that, the female sage cast a spell that lasted nearly twenty minutes, her eyes closed as her forepaws glowed with magical light, then she dropped down on all fours

and conferred with her counterpart in low tones while Kell and Julia both got something to drink, her from a glass and Kell from a large bucket. Eventually, they came back, both of them looking quite serious. “The tether can be safely severed,” Kammi translated for the male sage. “And it would behoove us to do so immediately. This tether is, sec, another strange word...*settling in*. The longer we wait to sever it, the more difficult it will be.”

“There won’t be any side effects?” Jack Walker asked, putting his hand on Julia’s arm.

“None whatsoever,” the female said, which Kammi translated. “However, we would like to examine Misses Walker once a week for the next two months to both ensure she is well and also study this fascinating magical condition. Is that permissible?”

“We can arrange it,” he replied with a nod.

“Then we will begin immediately. Misses Walker, please sit still and relax. You should feel nothing, but if you remain stationary, it will be easier for us,” Kammi said for the male, then both sages reared up onto their hind legs and sat on their tails, taking a vertical base.

Kell didn’t feel anything. The process lasted nearly two minutes, as the two sages stayed almost perfectly still, their forepaws glowing, then they opened their eyes and looked at them. “It is done,” the male declared, which Kammi relayed. “You might feel tired within the next ten to twenty minutes, Misses Walker.”

“I’m feeling it a bit now,” she said, putting her hand on her upper chest. “Like I just got out of the pool after a workout swim.”

“A brief rest and a hearty meal will rectify that sensation,” the female said, which Kammi translated. “Your aging process is again entirely normal, outside of the fact that you have regained your youth.”

“Thank you so much,” she said, taking her husband’s hand. “I think I need to go lay down a bit, honey.”

“Is that alright?” he asked. When Kammi nodded for the sage, he helped her up and the agents opened the door to the house. “How long should she rest?”

“A short nap will do it,” Kammi said as the male sage spoke. “And she’ll need a healthy meal with lots of calories after she wakes up.”

“Alright then, let’s get you a nap, sweetheart,” he said, and he led her into the house.

“Well, that was abrupt,” Kammi noted slyly, looking at the male sage. “And just what didn’t you want them to know?”

“You are a very clever young earth drake, youngling,” the male noted as he turned towards the tents set out for the dragons. “Kell. I would ask you a serious question.”

“Go ahead.”

“How much do you like these human magicians?”

“Fairly well,” he replied.

“Do you trust them?”

“The ones I know, yes, I trust them, at least after a fashion,” he replied. “The Hunters are honorable people.”

“Very well,” the female said.

“What did you discover, most wise?” Prisma asked.

“Something of great importance,” she replied. “The tether does indeed work both ways, younglings.”

“It had to be severed *now*, before its activation,” the male added.

“Why? Was it dangerous?”

“No, Kammi, it is because after the tether fully formed and anchored itself, Kell would have refused to surrender it,” the female replied. “Kell. Is

there one magician among them that you trust enough to grant extended life?”

“Several,” he replied. “Why?”

“Kammi. Is there one among the humans you would trust in such a manner?”

“Well, sure, I kinda like Greg, but why? What’s going on?”

The two sages looked right at them. “The tether grants unto the humans the lifespan of an earth dragon and one hundred years of youth and vigor,” the female said. “To *you*, it amplifies the natural innate magic within you that helps negate the tremendous weight you bear, that weight of stone that powers your breath weapons that is there but is not there.”

“How did you know about that?” Kell asked, then he gave Prisma an accusing look.

She looked a trifle sheepish.

“What does that mean?” Kammi asked

“It means that for each bond you form, it further allows you to negate your own weight. Bind enough humans to you, and it would create an effect similar to the natural floating magic that enables other dragons to fly.”

Kell gaped at her. “You mean—“

“Yes, Kell. When tethered, *bonded*, to a human magician, it will further negate your weight and allow you to glide longer distances. And as speculated, you can form tethers to more than one magician. Each tethered magician further amplifies this boon, for each bond you form, that power amplifies even more. Eventually, it would become so strong that it would allow you to generate enough lift to get off the ground, similar to the water dragons.”

“Are you serious?” Kammi gasped, stopping dead in her tracks. “You mean we could *fly*?”

“Very,” the male replied. “Where other dragons can increase or decrease this natural floating magic to fly, earth dragons seem to have no innate control over this ability. It is *biological* for you, *autonomic*, like the beating of your heart or breathing. The bonds the humans form amplify this bio-magic, and when it becomes strong enough,” he said, then he opened his wings, gave a single flap, and rose nearly four meters off the ground before settling back down. “The earth dragons also have this innate magic, but as I said, you cannot control it, and it is very weak compared to other dragons. In you, it is designed solely to negate the phantom weight of the stone you carry that fuels your breath weapons. Well, the binding of a human to you amplifies that power, it is the human’s gift to you even as youth and vigor are your gifts to them. Since Julia has no wish to maintain the bond, we felt that immediate severing was required before Kell became too fond of the gift it gave him.”

“Holy *shit*, Kell, we could *fly*. We could *fly*!” Kammi said in wonder, then she laughed delightedly.

“How many humans would it take?” Kell asked quickly.

“That, we do not know. But there is a way to find out,” the female said, giving him a direct look. “But it would take consent on both sides. The Hunters must know just what it would mean, that they would outlive their friends, their families. Their life spans would separate them from the rest of their kind, even more than the knowledge that Hinado wishes to impart to them.”

“Most of the Hunters are solitary types anyway. I think Jenny’s the only one that’s married,” Kammi mused. “And since both Greg and Davie are magicians too, it’s not like she’s losing her husband to time.”

Kell, however, wasn’t grinning the way that Kammi was, because she wasn’t thinking it through. If the sages were right, binding enough human magicians to him would allow him to fly. There wasn’t a single earth dragon alive that didn’t dream about that most coveted and also most unreachable of things, to be able to fly like all the other dragons. But, there

were only 18 known human magicians, the Hunters, the army Sergeant, Greg, Davie, Kent, and the Walkers.. In the best case scenario, requiring two humans to form enough of this magic to let him fly, then only nine earth dragons would be blessed with that kind of ability. Nine, and only nine, out of over two thousand. That kind of gross inequality went against just about every tenet of earth dragon society there was, and in addition, it had the potential to cause intense discord within earth dragon ranks. Just as there were humans out there who would do anything to live longer, there were some earth dragons that would do anything to be able to fly. It would either create two classes of earth dragons that would invoke extreme divisiveness, or earth dragons wanting to fly more than anything would demand the opportunity to find human magicians to help them achieve their dream, which would put everything at risk.

The longer he thought about it, the less of a gift this revelation seemed to be.

“Kell? Intended?” Kammi asked, looking back at him after he stopped to ponder that bit of news.

“We have to talk to the council,” he said grimly. “And we say *nothing* about this to any other dragon, intended.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re thinking with your wings, not your head,” he replied, turning and heading for the back yard, where the huge pavilion tent holding the council was erected.

“What do you consider, youngling?” the female sage asked.

“You don’t understand earth dragon society, most wise,” he replied seriously. “This information isn’t a boon.”

“Intended, I think you’re selling the others short. Think about it, we might be able to *fly*!”

“And *how many* of us will be given that gift, Kammi?” he retorted as they turned the corner. “Five? Six? Maybe nine if things work out perfectly? Can you imagine how we’d be received by the others if they found out we used our political positions to make ourselves something *more* than the other earth dragons? And how would knowing that a slim pawful of earth dragons were given this incredible gift impact the villages?”

Kammi slowed down, frowning. “You think it would create jealousy?”

“Just *slightly*,” he replied with a snort. “Earth dragon society hinges completely on community and equality. We are one big family,” he told the sages and Prisma. “All earth dragons see all other earth dragons as brothers and sisters, cousins, and we look out for each other, do for each other, and we all have equal say because we’re all equal in each other’s eyes. Even a young drake like me can have his say in village council meetings, because earth dragons believe that all earth dragons are of equal worth. Giving just a tiny pawful of earth dragons something so *magical* could not help but sow the seeds of jealousy into the earth dragons, and that would create discord by making us *unequal*. By setting some earth dragons apart, it breaks the sense of community.”

“I think you’re being pessimistic about this, intended,” Kammi replied. “I don’t think giving some earth dragons the ability to fly would rip earth dragon society apart at the seams.”

“Maybe not, but if this becomes common knowledge, it has to be handled with extreme care,” he replied. “I know for a fact that Gev would all but sell his shop and farm in exchange for the ability to fly. He’s dreamed about it since he was a hatchling. Just as we’d have to guard against rich humans doing anything to get an earth dragon to make them young, we’d have to guard against some earth dragons doing something crazy to get the ability to fly.” He looked back at Kammi. “How would *you* feel knowing what you know, and *not* being chosen to be given this gift?”

She gave him a look, then grunted and nodded her head. “Alright, I can see what you’re saying when you put it that way. But I’m a *field agent*, if

anyone should get this, it should be *us*.”

“And the fact that you gain from that decision doesn’t influence your opinion at all?” Kell asked.

“Well,” she hedged.

“Just my point,” he replied. “I’m biting my own tail for saying this, but if I had my way, *none* of us would be flying. If we *all* can’t fly, then *none* of us can.”

“That is a very narrow point of view, youngling,” the male sage said.

“Oh really? Didn’t the fact that we *can’t* fly flavor how *you* see *us*? You wouldn’t be walking with us right now if it wasn’t about magic,” he said pointedly. “Before you knew what you know now, a chromatic sage wouldn’t come within a hundred *dram* of an earth dragon, yet here you are. In fact, right about now we’d all be enslaved on our farms and Anthra and Geon wouldn’t even be on the council anymore, all because your chromatics believed that us not being able to fly made us less than you. Do you honestly believe that giving a tiny minority of earth dragons the ability to fly won’t change *us* the way it changed *you*? Do you honestly believe that knowing that there are, say, six lucky earth dragons out there granted the power of flight wouldn’t alter how earth dragons see those lucky six, or themselves?”

The sage said nothing.

“So you keep it a secret?” Prisma asked.

“It would be best,” he replied immediately. “And it should never be used. Even giving *one* earth dragon the ability to fly would put our entire society at risk. We are all equals in earth dragon society. To make a few earth dragons *more* than the other earth dragons violates that equality.”

“Well, we shall see what the council has to say about it,” the female sage intoned.

They reached the council, and the two sages explained their discovery. Kell watched the council members, and saw that their reactions were more or less what he expected. The other dragons were favorably inclined to the idea that earth dragons might be able to fly, but Anthra and Geon looked less than enthusiastic about it. “Serendipity,” Faralla noted, shivering his tail a little. “At first I hoped that this tether might give the earth dragons some kind of direct control over the human magicians, but if that is what it does, it seems a good thing.”

“No, it’s *not* a good thing,” Anthra replied.

“I disagree,” Jussa said. “The earth dragons may not see flight as something they need, but the fact that we live on an island about to be besieged by enemies puts the earth dragons in a very dangerous position. As you told us yourself, Anthra, the earth dragons have no means of escape. If disaster befalls us and the Chinese invade the island, the earth dragons can do naught but return to Sanctuary City and hope that the Chinese can be driven off the island. If earth dragons were to be given the gift of flight, they would have a means to escape harm.”

“That is a reasonable argument,” Trejem agreed. “If we could somehow empower the earth dragons with flight, their safety would be much more certain. And that is the paramount issue before us. The earth dragons are the very lifeblood of all dragon societies, and they must be protected at any and all costs.”

“If a way could be found to do this for *all* earth dragons, I wouldn’t be against it,” Anthra told them. “But the simple fact of the matter is, something this huge, this momentous, cannot be given only to *some*. It must be all of us, or none of us. To empower only some violates the core tenets of earth dragon morality and society.”

Kell breathed a sigh. He knew Anthra was wise.

“But in this case, the needs of all dragons must supersede the potential harm it might cause *only* to earth dragons,” Trejem said. “I’m sure the earth

dragons will understand that it's being done to ensure the survival of *all* of us. You can survive without us. *We* cannot survive without *you*."

"You don't understand us, Trejem," Geon spoke up. "If *all* of us can't escape, then *none* of us will leave. We'd never abandon our own like that. That's what Anthra is trying to say to you. Just giving a dozen or so earth dragons the ability to fly won't change anything. Those dozen or so would be right back in Sanctuary City with the rest of us in your scenario."

"Well, then, the simple solution is to locate enough human magicians to do just that," Sessara declared. "If the earth dragons won't leave their own behind, then we simply fix it so *all* of them can escape." She looked to the sages. "How many magicians will it require to empower an earth dragon to fly?"

"We are as yet uncertain, esteemed council member," the male replied. "We require further research and study, and perhaps direct experimentation."

"We have some dozen or so humans here for you to conduct your experiments," Trejem said simply.

"Without telling them what they're about to get into?" Kell cut in. "You can't do that!"

"I never meant it that way, youngling," he answered. "Of course we explain what the bond means for them, but what human would say no to an extended lifespan?"

"One did just that," Kammi reminded him.

"The point is, this kind of information impacts way more than just a few earth dragons. It affects the entire island," Geon stated. "For one, I have to agree with Anthra. You're risking a new round of potential social upheaval here, and we don't need that right now. For the moment, this information can't leave this group. We let the sages study and research and get more information before we do *anything*, and in the meantime, we focus

our attention on the invasion coming. Once the sages have more detailed information, *then* we should talk about it.”

“In other words, Geon, we put this on the shelf and wait?” Trejem asked.

“Exactly that,” he replied. “Even if the Chinese do somehow manage to invade the island, they won’t have any more luck digging us out of Sanctuary City than you did,” he said, almost with a smirk. “We’ll be safe enough.”

“Given that the earth dragons would know best about this, I say we should listen to our earth dragon cousins in this subject,” Hirrag declared. “After all, they know their own dragons far better than we do. I dare say that we barely knew them at all.”

“Hirrag speaks a truth,” Essan nodded. “If Anthra and Geon think we should hold this information for now and have the most wise study it further before we take any action, than that is exactly what we should do. After all, this impacts *them* far more than the rest of us.”

“We should be safe enough,” Anthra said. “I have no doubt that the sky, water, and fire dragons can repel the ships the Chinese are sending.”

“Then let us give the most wise a week to further study and research, then after they report back, we can continue to discuss the matter,” Jussa proposed. “Is that acceptable to all?”

“If the most wise feel a week is sufficient time to prepare a preliminary report?” Trejem asked, looking to the sages.

“We can come up with some generalities within a week,” the female replied. “But to do so, one of us must stay here to study the humans. They are the other half of the equation.”

“They’ll need protection,” Hirrag stated. “I will leave five fire drakes here under Gressa’s command. She knows the Hunters fairly well, and speaks their language.”

“That will be just fine,” the female replied. “I will stay here and study the human magicians to further understand their role, and also to further examine Julia Walker to ensure severing the bond she formed with Kell has no unforeseen side effects.”

“Then a week,” Jussa nodded. “Is there general acclimation?” When the nine members of the council rumbled in assent, he slapped his tail on the ground. “Very well. Let us arrange one final conference with the President, and then we will return home.”

Kammi went to go get something to eat, but Kell went out to the sand-filled playground he’d built for Davie, surrounded by his construction, and laid down on the warm, soft sand and pondered. To *fly*...it was the youthful dream of many an earth dragon, as was also the crushing revelation when those hatchlings found out that it would be denied to them. He remembered that day very well, when he and his brothers were playing on the beach. A sky dragon juvenile swooped down close to the cove, clearly playing, and when he innocently asked Kanna why the earth dragons never seemed to be in the air, they were given *the talk*. It was that day, when he was only nine, that he understood that he was fundamentally different from the other dragons, that they had something *more* than him, and like many earth dragons, he underwent his period of intense jealousy and anger at being denied the gift others were given. Some earth dragons got over it fairly quickly, but it had carried over in Kell for many years, and in some ways had shaped his career path. If he couldn’t fly, then he’d be a field agent, he’d do what *no* other dragon was allowed to do, go into human lands.

But, those were also the foundations of earth dragon society in that it brought them all together as a powerful community, where every earth dragon looked out for every other earth dragon, forming a unified front that had brought the earth dragons through when the chromatic council member had lost his mind and tried to poison the other dragons against them. And that itself was one of the dangers of giving *some* earth dragons the ability to fly. It could potentially foment discord within earth dragon ranks. He wasn’t absolutely sure that it *would*, but going on his own feelings and history, he knew the potential was there.

But still, the hatchling in him wondered what it would be like to be able to fly, now that it seemed that it might actually be possible. They would probably be like the water dragons, very clumsy in the air. After all, earth dragons weren't exactly aerodynamic to begin with, and if the magic worked the way the sage said it would, it would just *barely* nullify enough weight to give their wings enough lift to get them off the ground. They'd probably require a running start to get in the air, like certain very large birds, and flying would be a tremendous amount of hard work. But, Kell at least would probably be in shape for that. He was one of the most physically fit earth dragons because of his family's specialty of underwater excavation, and his wings were far stronger than nearly any other earth dragon alive, because he used them to swim, and he swam a *lot*. Kell had the muscle power and endurance to flap them constantly, pushing against the water, which would then let him push them against the air. He also glided more than many other earth dragons because the department building had been at altitude, so he already knew how to guide himself in the air, how to shift his head and tail and alter the tilt and angle of his wings to turn, descend faster, and arrest descent. Kell actually was one of the more likely subjects to be given the initial gift, since he was so close to the required attributes, and he could admit that objectively, even as he admitted that it should be the *last* thing they should do until they both studied it and got input from the other earth dragons.

This was no decision that *only* Geon and Anthra could make. If the earth dragons agreed to allow it, it had to be done by a vote of all earth dragons. This had to be decided as a *community*.

He rose back up and spread his wings and closed his eyes. Earth dragons had the smallest wings in proportion to the body of all the dragons, but that was just proportional. His wings had an eight meter wingspan when fully extended wingtip to wingtip, almost the same length as his body from nose to tailtip, where the wings were much larger on other dragons. He flapped them very slowly, felt them brush against the sand, felt the air rush over them, ripple across the sand, then he sighed and slowly, deliberately

folded them back. He couldn't let his own feelings and desires cloud his judgment.

He heard human footsteps behind him, and turned his head enough to see Jenny out of the corner of his eye. She came up to his shoulder and patted it, and he curled his neck around to look at her. "What are you up to out here, Kell?" she asked.

"Just thinking," he replied. "This is a nice quiet place."

"Not for long," Jenny chuckled. "I guarantee you, as soon as Davie wakes up in the morning, he'll be back out here. He loves your playground. Thank you, Kell," she said warmly, patting his shoulder again.

"It's no biggie," he replied, laying back down. Jenny sat down in front of him, so they could look at each other, then she laughed when he shimmied forward enough to grab her foot with his teeth and pull her around. She let him settle her against his flank, under his upraised wing and just behind his foreleg, and he curled his body around a little.

"We were on a beach the last time we did this," Jenny mused, leaning back against him. "So, what's got the dragons so wound up?"

"How do you mean?"

"They looked a bit tense when they came out of the tent a while ago."

"Just the usual. They spent most of the morning discussing Julia and what possible ramifications it might have," he answered.

"The only ramification is that we'd better keep it quiet, and the earth dragons shouldn't be interacting with the common population to prevent another *incident*," she replied.

"That's about what they decided," he agreed. "Not that earth dragons would really be running around anyway."

"Such a liar."

He laughed. "Alright, non field-agent earth dragons," he corrected. "What did your own conference decide?"

"That if anyone *accidentally* grabs one of your tail spikes, there would be hell to pay," she replied. "And I mean Yancy cocked his Glock when making that declaration. We may love the old coot, but he's hardcore retired CIA, Kell, and if he was given the order to kill somebody, he'd do it. Hell, the only thing saving Julia from a date with some dissection table in the basement of a lab building somewhere is the fact that she's the First Lady."

"You think so?"

"I suspect so," she replied. "Wouldn't *you* want to know how it happened?"

"That's a fair point," he acceded.

"Is she going to be alright? She said that the chromatics, uh, severed the connection."

"She'll be fine," he replied. "She's eighteen again, but other than that, she's perfectly normal and healthy," he replied.

"What a lucky girl," Jenny sighed.

"Oh, listen to you," he chided. "You're still young and beautiful, Jenny, at least as humans reckon such things."

"Anything older than eighteen isn't eighteen," she replied lightly. "Humans, especially women, do lots of things to either stay young or look young. And now Julia *is* young. Of course I'm a tiny bit jealous."

"You'll live," he told her, shifting to nudge her.

"So, how are things on the island? Like really."

"Really? More or less what we already said," he replied. "The earth dragons are back on the surface rebuilding, and everyone else is getting ready for the Chinese. When they get close enough, we'll be ready for them."

“I almost feel sorry for the Chinese,” she noted. “I don’t see how any ship’s going to protect itself against the water dragons. I mean, they *control water*. And since I know for a fact that they don’t show up on sonar, they’ll never see them coming.”

“That’s the idea. The water dragons are going to take out the rudders and propellers of the invading ships and leave them dead in the water, which neutralizes their threat to us without slaughtering them.”

“That’s pretty clever.”

“It’s the easiest way to disable the ships without causing mass casualties,” he replied. “They could easily sink the ships, but we figured that losing that many men would enrage the Chinese. Besides, it’s against Gaia to kill when there are other options.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Maybe we should have the President make you an offer,” she mused. “If we could get our hands on one of their next-generation cruisers—“

“No,” he told her, though he was chuckling. “If you want it, steal it yourself.”

Kammi padded up, then looked down at them and grinned. “What are you two up to?”

“Oh, the usual, Kammi, telling each other everything the higher-ups don’t want each other to know,” Jenny replied lightly. “How goes the courtship?”

“It’s progressing along in a thoroughly satisfactory manner,” she replied a bit smugly, giving Kell a smirk. “Though it’s only been a couple of months, it seems that me and Kell are very compatible.”

“Gaia help me, but she’s not lying,” Kell grunted, which made Jenny laugh and Kammi give him a short glare.

“I’ve never really asked how that works. Who moves into whose burrow?”

“If we were farmers, that depends on who has the bigger farm,” Kammi replied, sitting down. “Kell’s family farm is *way* bigger than mine, so I’d be moving there and changing my name—well, I don’t *have* to.”

“How do you mean?”

“Mother’s name was originally Vanna,” Kell supplied. “Much as human females change their last name on marriage, the earth drake moving into the new family changes their name to conform to the new family. In a way, earth dragon surnames deal with the first letter of the name. Every member of my family’s name has the same starting sound.”

“I noticed that. I didn’t realize it was part of a social convention,” Jenny mused.

“Well, our family name has the same starting sound, so I won’t have to change my name, or Kell change his,” Kammi added.

“Male dragons change their names if they move?”

“Yup,” Kammi replied.

“Gev was originally Hrev,” Kell supplied. “He moved to his mate’s farm when they became lifemates. Anyway, since we’re not farmers, if we end up becoming lifemates, Kammi will move into my burrow on the farm because that’s what we decided to do.”

“It’s way bigger than mine, I won’t mind,” she nodded. “It’s also much closer to our new department headquarters, so it’s a shorter commute.”

“Well, you learn something new every day,” Jenny chuckled. “And other dragons have different customs?”

“Very different,” Kammi agreed with a nod. “So, *when* he finally gives in and agrees that we’re compatible, I’ll move into his burrow, and we’ll raise our own family,” she said with a strange smile.

“Someone’s made her mind up,” Jenny laughed.

“We’re just *too* compatible, Jenny,” Kammi grinned. “I mean seriously. We have the same job, the same interests, many of the same friends, our families really like each other, and what’s most important, the last few months of living together have shown me just how compatible we really are. It’s not that I’m being a bitch about it, it’s just that I don’t see how we *won’t* end up lifemates.”

“Kanna’s already planning the ceremony, and counting down the days until our courtship officially ends,” Kell said dryly, which made Jenny laugh harder.

“She sees what I see,” Kammi replied lightly. “We’re just too compatible, Kell, and it’s that obvious. *Everyone* is saying it looks like we’ll be lifemates, not just Kanna. Face it, you’re stuck with me for *the rest of your life*,” she said in a voice that made Jenny burst out into gales of helpless laughter, literally falling over on the sand.

Kell gave Kammi an amused look, then got up and started lightly scratching his forepaw in the sand, digging a shallow trench. He grabbed Jenny by her belt, showing some delicate coordination by pinching *only* her belt between his teeth, then dropped her in the trench. Kammi burst out laughing when he kicked several paws of sand over Jenny, who was too gone to climb out on her own, the sidled away as if he’d won an argument, leaving Jenny buried from the waist down in the playground.

After a short meal, Kell, Kammi, and Gressa were again serving as translators back and forth between the council and the President, Arlen Kent, Jenny, and Yancy. The sages gave the President more information about Julia, then Jussa told the President at least part of the truth, that it looked conceivable that others could do what Julia did, and that the sages were researching it. He didn’t pay much attention as he pondered what he’d learned, translating back and forth without really listening all that much. He went through the motions until Jenny looked around, then gave a sudden

laugh. “You know, it just occurred to me,” she said. “Why can’t any of you speak English *now*? You spoke perfect English when I went to the island!”

“We weren’t speaking English,” Sessara told her. “You *heard* English. The Council Aerie is enchanted. When you arrived, Hinado cast the second part of the spell upon you so you would hear a language you understand. In your case, your native language, English.”

“But I thought that magic wouldn’t affect thought.”

“It doesn’t. That doesn’t stop magic from altering the sound vibrations and rearranging them from draconic to English. We had to set it before you arrived, we called one of the field agents up to provide us with the English, so the magic would know *how* to alter the sounds,” Sessara replied.

“That’s very clever,” Walker said. “Can you create that here?”

“It takes a long time. It’s actually extremely delicate and powerful magic,” Kammi replied for Hinado. “That spell is one of the more abstract applications of sky dragon magic,” he said, a bit proudly. “It’s been laced into our aerie since it was built. When we built it, it was considered that we might *someday* again speak to the humans, so we built and enchanted the aerie to give us that ability.”

“The magic of change,” Jenny said, almost automatically as she looked up at the large sky drake. “Changing the vibrations of soundwaves. That really *is* clever,” she chuckled.

“Magic is versatile and powerful, Jenny,” Sessara said simply. “Soon, you will learn just *how* powerful it can be.”

“That brings up a point. Kell,” Hinado said, looking at him. “It will fall to you, youngling.”

“Me? For what?”

“I know it’s very early in the process, but they will need talismans, and an earth dragon will have to craft them,” he said. “You’ve shown a great deal of skill at sculpture. Do you think you could fashion a talisman?”

“Easily,” he replied immediately. “I’ve done even more delicate work dealing with electronics. Just bring me the materials and a sketch of what it’s supposed to look like.”

“I can make them as well,” Kammi injected. “Kell’s not the only one that can work with metal.”

“They will have to be assensed,” Trejem said speculatively, looking at Jenny and Yancy. “So the proper material formulae may be determined.”

“I’m doing so today,” Hinado replied. “It doesn’t take long.”

“I would like to help you with that, esteemed council member. I find myself growing more and more curious about the humans,” the male sage declared. “Assensing their auras will give me an insight into how magical power has fared in the human world since we left.”

“I would be honored by your assistance and expertise, most wise,” Hinado replied with a nod.

“Excuse us, but what exactly are you talking about?” Walker asked.

“They’re going to make us *talismans*,” Jenny said in a surprised voice.

“Those amulet necklace things that human magicians need to do magic?” he asked, and Jenny nodded in reply.

“It’s very early yet,” Hinado said, which Kammi translated, “but I have a suspicion that with a talisman, we might get a few of you to cast the simplest cantrips by the end of next year. We can get the formulas needed while we’re here, and Kell and Kammi can craft them at their leisure for you.”

“Then by all means, you have all our resources at your disposal,” Walker declared. “Just tell us when and where we have to be.”

“We?” Kell asked lightly. “I thought you said you weren’t going to take magical training.”

“The Secret Service changed my mind,” he said dryly. “They said that if the Chinese somehow unravel the secrets in those books you think they have, that if I can use magic *myself*, it was an additional layer of protection. Even a *bad* magician has a leg up on the competition.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Kammi mused after a second’s thought. “So, Air Force One is going to be making a lot of round trips?”

“At least once every other week, with a hell of a lot of homework in between,” he replied. “Besides, Julia has decided to stay here and train formally since she’ll have to stay out of sight for a while, and I *do* love my wife, Kammi,” he replied with a smile.

“Ah, yes, those books. We need to make some plans about that, my friends,” Jussa said. “We will need to send in the field agents.”

“Ferroth’s already ahead of you there,” Kammi replied. “When the time comes, we’ll go in and find them.”

“Very well then,” Jussa declared, sitting up more fully. “I think we will give Hinado and the most wise a chance to get the information they need, then it will about time for us to go.”

They spoke for about another half an hour about the Chinese, then they broke up. Hinado gathered up all the magicians to assense them, the sage with him with a book, writing down the materials they’d need, while Kell and Kammi widened one of the dens after Hirrag had had trouble getting out of it that morning. They talked mostly about the Chinese as they dug, preparing for the upcoming operations, speaking of potentially invading China to find those books, then Jussa appeared in the entryway. “Are you two about done?” he asked.

“Ten minutes,” Kammi replied from the ceiling, her rear legs anchored to the stone by her claws as she dug a gentle protrusion out of the ceiling. Hirrag nearly lost some scales to the night before.

“Alright. We’ll be leaving within the hour, young ones,” he warned. “It will be a long day for us, since we will be arriving back at home in the

middle of the night, but we need to return to prepare, and speak more about what we've learned."

"Alright, esteemed council member," Kell said.

"We'd better go get our hanging out with the Hunters done," Kammi chuckled.

They did just that. They hung out with the entire Hunter team and Greg out at the playground, Kammi reminiscing about the many brushes she'd had with them and teasing them about it as she played with Davie, getting to know the human child and maybe torturing him a little bit. But to Davie's credit, he never once showed any fear of the dragon that was almost ludicrously larger than he was, even when Kammi pinned him down under her paw and tickled him, then she let him sit on her back, just over her wingjoints as Price and Hatch leaned against her shoulders, looking quite sedate and content being not just surrounded by humans, but literally having them crawl all over her. Kell sat facing Kammi and with Jenny and Petrovski hanging off of him in a similar fashion, Jenny sitting on his back like she'd done when he'd carried her months ago and Petrovski leaning against his shoulder in a similar fashion, her ankles crossed under her. Kell was drawing a diagram in the sand of a logic chart as he explained the encapsulation exploit in greater detail, which had all the eggheads watching attentively, Jenny looking around his neck.

"That's so darn clever," Derringer grunted. "Too bad you can't use it against the Chinese."

"We already did," Kammi grinned as Davie climbed up her neck, Greg hovering close by in case he slid off. The human child managed to get all the way to her head, sliding up between her horns and sitting down, holding onto them as she bounced her head up and down like a horse, which made the boy giggle. Kammi seemed to have a way with most any hatchling, even human ones. "We already absolutely *own* their entire computer network," she said grandly. "We have spiders roaming their systems and programs

intercepting almost all communications. Why do you think you get back so much from the chief every day?" she winked.

"I just hope things go well when you engage their ships," Hatch said.

"The water dragons will be fine," Kell said. "The Chinese will have no idea that they're there."

"So, how is it living in this resort?" Kammi asked.

"Weird," Petrovski replied. "I still do Hunter work on the side, since all I need is a computer and internet access, but right now, we're just spinning our wheels waiting."

"It's been a bit boring," Price grunted.

"Poor baby, nobody to shoot in weeks," Kammi grinned.

"Well, you're here," he noted, which made Kammi laugh.

"Yeah, you shoot me again, buster, and you'll get a very up close and personal look at all my teeth," she warned, then she peeled back her chops and showed him her sharp, dagger-like teeth.

"I've been learning how to play golf," Wilson supplied. "It's harder than I thought it'd be."

"No doubt there," Michaels chuckled. "There's not much to do until Hinado comes back to teach us."

"Soon as we spank the Chinese, he'll be back," Kammi assured them. "He's just a *little* busy at the moment."

"Well, I've ordered some scuba gear. I have my certification, I'm gonna dive off the island and maybe teach anyone who wants to learn," Juarez said.

"I might go for that," Petrovski said. "I've always wanted to try it."

"I can teach you, it's not that hard. I grew up carrying scuba tanks," he chuckled. "My papi was an underwater welder in Puerto Rico."

“That’s some money there,” Wilson noted.

“Yeah, he made enough to send me and all my brothers and sisters to a fancy school, and what do I do? Join the Marines, and end up here,” he laughed. “He retired two years ago, now he runs a boat out of San Juan doing scuba dives and charter fishing, catering to the tourists.”

“Mmm, Olivia in a bikini,” Kammi noted, looking over at her. “You shouldn’t tease the males like that.”

She laughed. “They’ve seen plenty more in the locker room,” she winked.

“She used to come out from the women’s side of the showers naked,” Hatch grunted, which made Kammi laugh.

“I was the only girl in a house full of men, and my father had European sensibilities,” she replied easily. “Europeans aren’t half as hung up about nudity as Americans are.”

“I’ve never understood this thing about clothes in the first place,” Kammi mused. “I mean, really, it’s not like they *do* anything.”

“They make me look *faaaabulous*,” Juarez said grandly, which made them all laugh.

“Sometimes a social custom holds for so long that it almost becomes ingrained,” Jenny told her. “Besides, when it’s January in Washington, damn right I’m wearing clothes,” she added, which made them laugh.

“Humans are so, so, so *sensitive*,” Kammi shot back. “It’s either too hot or too cold, never just right.”

“I don’t have a hide like this,” Jenny said, patting Kell on the neck. “If I did, I wouldn’t get hot or cold either.”

“Just another reason why dragons are superior,” Kammi said with insincere haughtiness in her voice. “Well, outside the whole I outweigh all of you put together thing.”

“That just means we can call you a fat cow, Kammi,” Jenny teased back.

“Cow? *Cow*? How dare you compare me to something so small!” she retorted, which made Jenny laugh brightly.

“Alright, a big fat hippo,” she grinned.

“That’s better,” she replied, sticking her nose up and making them all laugh.

“Well, being a fat hippo certainly doesn’t go to *her* head,” Price said lightly.

“You’re looking awful tasty, Price,” she warned, which made him chuckle.

“Kammi, stop threatening to eat the humans. You know they taste terrible,” Geon said lightly as he padded up on surprisingly light feet, barely making any shudder in the ground. “I came to get you, young ones. It’s time to go back.”

“Well, nuts,” Kammi said. “Alright Davie, you gotta get down, hatchling,” she said, looking up...almost as if she could see Davie sitting between her horns. She twisted her tail up and over her, that trick of hers, touching one of her spikes to her crystal horn and making a sweet chiming sound. Price took Davie and set him down as Jenny climbed off Kell’s shoulders.

“Call when you get back, Kell,” Jenny said, patting him on the side of his muzzle.

“I’ll do that. You guys don’t get too bored,” he called to them.

They traded farewells, then the earth dragons headed towards the back of the manor house, where the others awaited them. They had a lot to do back on the island, and there wasn’t much time.

It was time to go.

Chapter 21

6 September, 2017, 16:16 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Prisma was an alright dragon...for a chromatic.

She had pulled some serious strings in chromatic society to get a veritable *pack* of chromatics onto the family farm, and they did their magic. Literally. After water dragons brought mud up from the sea floor and dumped it onto the ground to fill the gullies caused by the rains, they used those geomancy spells to bulldoze out all the eroded ruts in the tracts, smoothed them over, even mixed the sea mud in with the topsoil so the mud-dominated ground had the same fertility as the rich volcanic soil, then after sky dragons spread grass seed over the churned-up ground, they enacted that growing magic. It took them nearly two days, but the result was that every tract on the farm, even the tracts bought from Gev, were showing chutes of green grass that was growing at an unnaturally fast rate. The magic used would cause that grass to die quickly, the magic accelerating their life cycles, but they'd germinate and release seed that would take root and grow itself before it died, the magically affected grass replaced by natural grass within four months.

The main burrow was also completely repaired, thanks to Keth's connections. Four earth drakes from the builder team had come out and cleared the rubble, enlarged the entry room as he wanted, then they repaired the dug-out entry with rocks mortared together with cement and reinforced with some rebar they had from the farm's stores of supplies. After it was dry, they buried it with dirt and mud and evened it out, spread grass seed around the burrow entry, and that was that. The burrow was repaired and the farm tracts were safe. Kell's family farm was fully restored, and in just a matter of days.

But that was just *their* farm. The instant Keth's farm was repaired, the entire family except for Kell and Kammi, who had other duties, rushed straight to Gev's farm to help him recover his tracts. And when they finished with Gev's farm, they'd go to Hrada's farm, and so on and so on. Every earth drake was going to be chasing-his-tail busy until every single farm was repaired.

Food...well, that wasn't going to be an issue. At that moment, a group of water dragons, led by Surrall, was on the way to the rendezvous point with the American cargo ships to pick up the food and supplies they'd bought from them with the gold and silver scavenged from the sea floor.

There was a much larger contingent of water dragons to the west, raising the *Appomattox*, along with a single earth dragon and a sky dragon to carry him. The humans had gotten back to them to tell them that just picking it up and bringing it to Hawaii would be alright, and it was going to take nearly *all* of the water dragons to move something that huge and carry it that far. The water dragons wanted that thing out of their ocean, dreading that its reactor would melt down; they did a lot of bottom fishing in that area, and all that radiation would kill off the abyssal crabs and other deep sea creatures they hunted, many of which the humans had no idea existed. The water dragons almost never brought those things back to the island, since the pressure change tended to make them explode, so they used that area as a feeding ground instead.

The Navy had a simple plan for it. They were going to have the water dragons beach the wreck on a government-owned beach, then after the reactor fuel was removed, they'd bring in tugs to take it to a repair facility. Once they got it there, they'd have investigators find out why it sank, and then dismantle it.

The water dragons would make sure it was safe first, however. Trekka had been taken with the water dragons, and once they raised it off the sea floor, they'd get him down there so he could make sure the reactor was intact. The hider amulets were working again, so he'd put one on to shrink down and then enter the sub and ensure the reactor wasn't leaking in a way

the water dragons couldn't detect. If it was safe, they'd take the sub on to Hawaii. If it wasn't, Trekka would do what he could to seal the radiation leak before the water dragons took it back.

With the vast majority of the water dragons away from the island, Shii's pod could almost be called lonely. The only water drakes left on the island were Shii and her hatchlings Jerral, Kii, and Hura, and of course Jussa and Essan. Every single other water dragon was either collecting the supplies the dragons bought, patrolling the perimeter of the ocean that the dragons had claimed as sovereign territory, or raising that submarine.

Where Kell and Kammi weren't repairing the farms—at least not *other* farms—they had plenty to do. The two of them were installing new cell transceiver nodes on the side of the volcano overlooking Dawnmist. Since cell towers posed a flying hazard to dragons, they instead utilized the volcano itself to get their cell and wifi nodes high enough up to get line of sight to large swaths of the lowlands, installing the nodes on protrusions and ridges on the sides of the volcano that gave them some field of vision. The nodes would ring the volcano at strategic points to provide complete coverage for the lowlands below, but wouldn't provide any coverage to the top of the volcano. They'd never really installed any tech up there anyway, stopping it at the site of the old Department building.

But that was going to change. They were running hard lines up to where they intended to distribute allotments by the crater lakes, so the earth drakes could use computers to keep track of inventories, and they were also going to lay both power and data lines to Prisma's den so she could use the computer they were giving her at home. Fredda would have to install a transformer to get the power lines out that far from the grid, but that wouldn't be very difficult.

The sky dragons had destroyed all the old nodes, but they'd done it by ripping the transceivers off the mountainside and throwing down the steep slope. The mounting plate the earth dragons had installed for those nodes were intact on all the nodes they'd repaired so far, just requiring them to install new bolts into the anchor plate, something any field agent had the

training to do. They'd stockpiled transceiver nodes in plans to expand the island's wifi network, but now they were using them just to restore basic service. Kell held the transceiver still while Kammi bolted it in place, then he made sure it had the proper facing and alignment, the two earth drakes clinging to the very steep side of the volcano by their ebony claws.

"Okay, that's the last one," Kammi called. "I need the splicer, they ripped the cables out."

"You have it," he called as he tugged a bit on the unit, making sure it was secure. "What about the cables for the microwave relay?"

"Ummm, lemme look," she said, and he saw her shift a little. "The jacks are ripped off, but that's about it. We can fix that no problem. You go get the microwave unit while I fix the wires."

"Don't order me around, female," he protested teasingly.

She gave him an adorably dirty look. "I'll order you around all I please, *intended*," she shot back, waggling the tip of her tail threateningly in his direction.

"I don't think you two want to start fighting while clinging to the side of a cliff," Prisma warned dryly as she floated down to their level, her rainbow-colored wings fluttering a bit to work with her floating magic to position her where she wanted to be.

"Hey fluffy, what's up?" Kammi asked, giving her a sly smile.

"I *will* make you stop calling me that," she retorted primly.

"Good luck," she grinned, showing her dagger-like teeth.

"The chief wanted to know how things were going. I told him I would check on you before I go home," she replied. "He's a bit annoyed that you haven't sent him a status report."

"We were going to when we got this thing up and running," Kell answered. "This is the last thing on our task list. Guess we'll go help Gev

get his tracts fixed after this.”

“How was school?” Kammi asked.

“A little boring today, the professors are still a little out of sorts,” she replied. “Chromatic society is in upheaval at the moment, so nobody was concentrating much on school. Not even us,” she admitted.

“I can imagine,” Kammi noted, shifting a little on the rock wall, the claws on her toes spread out and gripping the rock face like some gigantic squirrel. “I’m surprised chief didn’t hold you in the department.”

“There’s little for me to do right now,” she answered. “Right now, they need me up here more than down in the department. Did you hear about the plans?”

“You mean where the department takes over half the high rise? Yup,” Kell answered. “We’re claiming the five lower floors for the department. Chief is already walking around planning out how he’s going to arrange things, since we’ll be able to put *everything* we do in the high rise. He’s even having some walls knocked out on the fifth floor to enlarge his personal office, since we’ll have the space to spare.”

“A bit ostentatious. That’s almost chromatic,” Prisma smiled.

They both laughed. “He’ll be offended when we tell him that,” Kammi grinned.

“The chief has never had an office big enough for all his stuff, space was always at a premium in the old building,” Kell chuckled. “Well, now he has that entire huge room for all his stuff. He can move it out of his burrow and into his office.”

“We’re getting bigger offices too,” Kammi said eagerly. “Both of us can really clear out our burrow by moving our stuff down there.”

“*Our* burrow?” Prisma asked lightly, giving Kell a sly look.

“Just bowing to reality, fluffy,” Kammi winked. “Me and Kell are moving back into his burrow as soon as we have the time. We’re gonna expand it a little before we start moving our stuff in there, though. Add a few rooms, dig out a brood chamber, you know. Make it more a *family* burrow instead of a *bachelor* burrow,” she grinned at Kell.

He slapped his tail on the cliff in irritation.

“I’ll tell chief that you two are almost finished with your day’s tasks, then I’m going home to study,” she told them, letting that one pass. Prisma was wise for such a young dragon. “See you tomorrow.” She then turned and descended towards the tunnel on their farm, which right now was the fastest way to get back into Sanctuary City from the outside. The builders were building a new tunnel that intersected their farm tunnel to the village so earth dragons wouldn’t be trampling all over their farm to get down to the city. They were also building a second spur tunnel from the connecting tunnel linking the village with the surface and running it directly into the main entry chamber of Dawnmist, so the earth dragons could get to the city from the network of subterranean tunnels they had under the island. Now that all the villages were connected by a beltway tunnel, the various village councils were absolutely aflutter with anticipation over how that would make things easier. Overland traffic of earth dragons on the island would drop significantly now that they could move from village to village underground.

Going in there and making the beltway tunnel a little more polished was also on the list of things to do for the builders. They’d excavated it in a frenzied rush, and it *looked* like it was rushed...Jukra wouldn’t stand for that. Earth dragons took great pride in the *appearance* of their constructions. They were going to go in there and widen the tunnel and dig new connecting tunnels with ramps up into the villages so they could move carts back and forth between the villages, make it look far more planned and far less dug out by the scales on their tails. They wanted that connecting subway to be what it had the potential to be, an alternate way of moving dragons and goods around without going through the farms on the surface.

That would have to wait, though. Right now, the major project for the builders was excavating a central food repository just off Blackstone Village, a large complex of storage chambers and staging rooms to take in, organize, store, and then distribute food. That would become their new central food reserve, where the Earth Council's food management dragons would do their work, utilizing computers and technology to keep track of everything. They were going to build large tunnels directly down into the water so the water dragons could bring their catches directly to the food management center, and large cargo elevators to take the allotments up to the crater lake for the other dragons. They were digging it out to make the passages large enough for any dragon except possibly Hirrag to easily enter and leave the complex. That particular underground system of chambers and tunnels was *meant* to have other dragons in them. The council would have need to visit the complex fairly often to inspect the operation. The earth dragons were taking over managing the food, but the council still had the power of oversight of the operation.

The lucky part was that they'd managed to repair all the refrigeration units after the earth dragons firebombed the freezer chambers, and they'd already moved them down to Blackstone to install in the new cold storage chambers being dug out.

A very young sky dragon flitted down and watched them for a moment, then zipped away. According to Prisma, magic was returning to the world at the predicted rate. The entire area around the island was back to normal, and the earth dragons' magical aura was once again hidden in the background radiation of magical energy. That area of empowered magic would now expand from the island at a non-linear rate, expanding quickly and then slowing down as the magic the earth dragons radiated entered space already saturated by magical energy, "pushing out" the volume of magical charge until the aura of magic encompassed the entire globe once again. Prisma calculated that it would take 71 days for that to come to pass, but it would take 206 days for magic to reach its full "saturation" and be at full power anywhere on the globe. But, it would only take the magical front

three days to reach Imakaii, which would allow Hinado to teach magic to the Hunters.

The return of magic to the island also meant that the chromatics and the sky dragons were already making preparations to restore the magical cloak that hid the island from the humans. It was going to take them 12 days to finish the preparations, gather whatever it was they needed to do the magic, then it would take them two days to complete the magical spells. That was going to wipe out most of the sky dragons and the chromatic elders, it was *very* demanding magic, but Hirrag and the council considered the restoration of the cloaking spells to be far more important than sky dragons turning planes away. After all, once the spells were restored, those spy planes wouldn't be able to find the island anyway.

So, in two weeks, the island would be concealed behind its magical shroud of invisibility to the humans once again. But until then, the Chinese were a threat, and a bigger one every day. According to their taps on the Chinese network, they were sending the invasion force in three days whether they found the island or not, gambling that the planes launching from the aircraft carriers could search out and find the island before supplies became an issue. Sky dragon overflights of the staging areas showed the massive scope of the Chinese operation. Hundreds of thousands of troops, vehicles, equipment, and supplies, all gathered, organized in a very short time and then loaded onto ships, and those ships were now amassing at Hong Kong for the trip down. Most of the troops were in Hong Kong now, in tent cities set up in most every clear area, staying in the stadiums, officers staying in hotels, anywhere they could find a place under a roof or shelter to set up a cot for a soldier. The sheer logistics of it was staggering, and it showed the capability of the Chinese army to set that up so quickly and make it happen without any major glitches. The Chinese timetable would get them to the area around the island in 16 days after launching, and they were carrying enough supplies to feed their 102,000 soldiers for 35 days, with a very long supply chain being organized to continue to supply those troops when they arrived. They were bringing heavy equipment with them to build runways, and planned to add aerial

resupply to their logistics after they had the island secured and the airfield built.

Tomorrow, Kell would study the ship manifest lists stolen from Chinese computers, surveillance photos, and some magical images produced by sky dragons that overflowed Hong Kong and figure out which ships had to be sunk to inflict maximum damage. Needless to say, it was the cargo ships they wanted the most, and in a bit of an ironic twist, the *food* on those ships had high priority. The dragons were facing a food shortage, and all the food they were bringing for their soldiers would feed the dragons as well. Sinking the supply ships created the double effect of starving the soldiers being sent down here. They wouldn't be here long if they had nothing to eat, or tents to sleep in, or replacement boots to wear.

Kammi's nimble paws repaired the wiring to the cell node, and once they had it hooked up, Kell tested it with a small gas-powered portable generator they'd carried up. They wouldn't have power for it until they tied its power cables into the power shunts they had running from Sanctuary City. Those two thermal generators would eventually be powering the entire island, as Fredda's power drakes repaired the transformers the sky dragons trashed and extended the active power grid more and more every hour, repairing them by cannibalizing the unsalvageable transformers for parts to repair the ones that they could. Fredda calculated that the two heavy generators in Sanctuary City could power the entire island, as long as they didn't run any factories or heavy industry at the same time. She was going to rebuild the thermal plant on the surface, however, so they'd eventually have more electricity than they needed. Getting the power restored to Blackstone, the "capitol" village of the earth dragons, was now Fredda's main task. That would restore power to Grass Edge village and Darkwood village purely because they had to run the power right by both villages to get it to Blackstone, and the transformers for the villages were underground and had been undamaged.

"Okay, all we have to do is upload the patches and we're set," Kammi declared as she hooked up the microwave unit, then carefully sighted it on its sister transceiver down at Dawnmist, on one of the few towers that the

earth dragons built. It was only about 5 meters high and erected on Hrada's farm at a spot where it wouldn't be a nuisance, no danger to any flying dragon, and it was built purely to get the microwave transceiver some altitude. Before, that dish would be aimed at the department, but now the high dishes would be aimed at that tower, since it was the main node linking Sanctuary City to the surface for their wireless applications. Dawnmist would be the main node connecting above with below, since all the trunk cables came up from Sanctuary City into Dawnmist...and that meant that Kell's job would get a *lot* harder, since he was the earth drake responsible for maintaining all the island intranet resources in Dawnmist. Ferroth would probably dispatch a staff to handle the increased workload, though. Kammi shifted and adjusted the dish of the microwave, covered by a white piece of sturdy plastic polymer to protect it but also wouldn't hinder the microwaves, until she got a good "bounce" off the other dish. Kell got the cell transceiver booted as she did that, having it access the network and download the patches to its core OS that the earth dragons utilized from the servers down in the city.

Almost immediately after the cell transceiver came online, the cell phone in his shoulder satchel rang. Kell chuckled as he fished it out, then set his bluetooth on his head. "Yes, chief," he said lightly.

"Have Kammi finish that and get down here. We have some new data in from the Chinese, and you read Mandarin better than any of us."

"You tell her," he retorted. "You keep pulling me from work we're both doing and making her finish it. Well, *I'm* the one that has to live with her," he pointed out, which made Kammi laugh and waggle the tip of her spiked tail

"Then put me on speaker." When he did so, Ferroth repeated what he said.

"Okay, I *guess* I'll give you a pass, intended," Kammi grinned. "We're almost finished here anyway, so I get to go home."

“You’re carrying down all the tools,” Kell warned as he unhooked his tool satchel.

“No sweat, I can handle it. Go ahead, the sooner you finish the sooner you can come home.”

Kell divested himself of everything he didn’t need and glided down, and instead of landing, he dove right into the water over the lava tube and let that momentum carry him into the tunnel. Kell still refused to use the ramp unless he was carrying something that couldn’t get wet, and he *always* carried his waterproof satchel anymore, since there was never any telling when he’d have to go to the city. He burst from the water at the end of the tube about five minutes later, shaking the water off his wings as two earth drakes that had just come from the tunnel started a little. All the earth dragons knew that Keth’s family could swim the tube, but few had actually *seen* it. He trotted up the long tunnel as he went over what he remembered from tomorrow’s task list, both terminal work where he sat on his butt analyzing intel stolen from the Chinese and paws-on work where he’d be out repairing or installing equipment to get the island’s intranet and wireless networks back up and running.

He came out into the main dome chamber and noticed how *empty* it felt now. Before, earth dragons would be filling the chamber, either socializing or moving from one part of the city to the other, since the dome chamber was the center of the city both symbolically and literally. The spur tunnels that formed the other parts of the city all opened to the dome chamber, forcing drakes moving from one part to the other to go through this area. The 20 millimeter cannons they’d built were still flanking the doors, mainly because they really didn’t have anywhere else to put them... and because the Earth Council had decided that it might be a good idea to keep the fortifications in place, maybe build a few more. If the Chinese did manage to invade the island and somehow found the entrance to the city, they might need to fight them off. And those cannons would kill Chinese just as easily as they’d kill invading dragons.

He got up to the floor holding the field agent work areas and many of the computer terminals, and Ferroth stumped up to him as soon as he came up the ramp. “Good, you’re here,” he said. “We just got in some high-level cables from our sniffers, and I want some actual confirmation from a fluent Chinese speaker before we pass it down to the humans.”

“Uh oh,” Kell grunted.

“It could very possibly be *uh oh* level intel,” Ferroth grunted. “It’s already on your terminal, whelp.”

Kell sat on his haunches and reared up with Ferroth sitting behind him, then used his paws to wake up his terminal and access the missives and reports that Ferroth had sent to his terminal. They were a series of high-level military memos, to use a term, between the command-level staff of the Chinese Navy, Air Force, and Army, discussing deployment of their forces when they landed on the island. The Air Force general had sent a message telling his Naval counterpart that they could suspend the recon flights, that they were certain they had the location of the island. In another cable, the Naval command staff that was organizing the logistics of the supply lines told all their lower level officers to plan for a supply line that stretched 9,000 kilometers of travel distance from supply ports in southern China to the island.

Kell did the math. Given that the Chinese would have to skirt Indonesian territory as well as avoid island chains held by other nations on their planned southerly supply routes, he saw that they had the distance more or less correct. It was about 8,100 kilometers to Hong Kong from the island, but that was by sky dragon and ignoring territorial airspace. A ship would have to take an indirect route, and that would be about 9,000 kilometers.

Kell finished the last cable, then rapped his claws on the desk. “They have the location of the island,” he declared.

“That’s what I thought, but I wanted you to confirm,” Ferroth grunted. “I don’t see *how*. The sky dragons haven’t let a single Chinese plane within

500 kilometers of the island.”

“They must have eyes inside the CIA. *They* know where the island is,” Kell reasoned. “And I mean they have the exact GPS coordinates of the island. They’ve *seen* it. Have the analysts look for any stolen pictures of the island, chief,” he said, looking at him. “Have them focus on the Army, they’re the ones that will need the most detailed intel of the island’s topography so they can plan landing sites and set up bases of operation.”

“I will,” he growled. “Or I’ll have Kintel do it. This has to be reported to the Earth Council and *the* council, immediately. Kell, you call Kent and warn him. The Americans need to know.”

“Why?”

“Because this means there’s a Chinese mole deep inside the CIA, and they’d damn well better find it quick,” he replied bluntly. “Now do as you’re told.”

“Yes, chief,” he said. Ferroth turned and stumped away, shouting for Kintel, and Kell sighed and looked at the various emails and messages scattered across his screen. If the Chinese knew *exactly* where the island was, it was going to cause them far more problems, as well as make the Chinese much more determined. They didn’t have to wander around, they didn’t have to *guess*. And if they had images of the island, they’d know exactly where they could land; the island’s coast wasn’t very hospitable to boats except in certain places, like the beaches on the southeast and southwest sides of the island, and that territory included his own family farm. There was a very real possibility that the Chinese would specifically focus on his family farm because of the cove and the ease with which a boat could land there, using the cove as a natural breakwater. That, in a way, made this incoming invasion far more *personal* to Kell, that all the hard work they’d done over the last few days to repair the tracts, admittedly with the help of a small army of water dragons and a large pack of chromatics marshaled by Prisma, might be for nothing as the Chinese invaded and

churned up the ground building forward operation buildings and setting up tent cities.

Kell put off calling Arlen by doing some personal digging, using some of the personal back doors he had set up in critical areas of the Chinese network. He could get almost anywhere in their network he pleased, even read the personal emails of the Chinese President, and like any good hacker, he didn't exactly tell others about his private little back doors. He wasn't holding out on them, they could get access to that information as well, but Kell could access it directly from the source.

After about an hour of combing through the highest level communications, he found it, buried *deep* in a Chinese Army archive. Both the GPS location coordinates and the longitudinal coordinates of the island. They *did* know exactly where it was. There was only one accompanying image, a picture of a computer monitor displaying a satellite image of the island, an image taken with a cell phone most likely. That told him that the leak was a mole, not a hack, and whoever took it was someone smart enough not to try to make a copy of that image and smuggle it out. The CIA's network was actually pretty secure, so much so that one couldn't make a copy of a file in their system without the proper clearance and access to the file. And on top of that, any time a file was copied on a CIA computer, it created a log that the one making the copy could not in anyway prevent or alter, and it operated in real time. Certain highly sensitive files had flags on them so that trying to copy them raised an alert within the CIA, even when someone had authorization to copy the file. And it had to be someone with some rank, who could take a recording device into the CIA facility. The CIA had very hard rules about those kinds of things. This told him that the mole had high rank and knew the way the CIA's system worked, knew that the only way he was getting that image out of the building was by bringing it up and taking a picture of it, and that it was someone that had *clearance and access to the file*. It could be an analyst, it could be a supervisor, but whoever did it had access to the file.

This...perhaps it was best if he went over Arlen's head.

He dialed the direct contact number for President Walker, emulating Jenny's crypto ID that would allow the White House system to recognize the call, something he'd stolen from Jenny's cell phone, which bypassed the switchboard and connected him directly with the President's secretary. She answered immediately. "Yes, Colonel Edwards?"

"It's not Jenny," Kell replied in English. "This is Kell, and I need to speak to the President immediately."

If the secretary was surprised, she didn't sound it. "One moment," she said in a calm voice.

Barely ten seconds later, the line picked up. "This is Walker," his voice came over the computer speakers, the sound making it clear Walker was using a speaker phone on his side.

"Sorry to bother you, Mister President, but I just found something that I felt had to be brought straight to you, even to the point where I'd reveal this little trick I've been saving," he said dryly.

Walker chuckled. "You hacked her phone again, didn't you?"

"I *own* her phone, Mister President, as well as her computers, her Ipod, her TVs, even her curling iron and her toaster," he said dryly, which made Walker laugh. "But we can discuss that another time. Are you more or less alone?"

"At the moment? Admiral Yates is here, that's it."

"That's good, I trust him, and he should hear this anyway. You have a mole in the CIA, and he's very high rank," he declared.

"How do you know?"

"Because the Chinese know *exactly* where the island is, Mister President, and they have an image of the island off the CIA's satellite network, which the mole displayed on a monitor and then took a picture of it with a cell phone or some other imaging device. I won't go into the specifics, but this means that it has to be someone *inside* the CIA giving it

to them, and it's someone that has to have access to the information, someone with enough rank to take a recording device into the building without raising any alarms, as well as knowing enough about how the CIA's computer system works to know not to try to copy the image into a computer file, and get their picture out of there without getting caught. That means that it's someone high up on the ladder. It might be a senior analyst or one of their main supervisors, it could possibly be a computer expert or one of the people that operate the ISET system, but this mole has access to the intel the CIA keeps about the island and has experience with CIA internal security. This is someone that the CIA's internal physical security would allow to bring a cell phone into the building."

"You're sure?"

"I'm looking at the image I stole off the Chinese network as we speak, Mister President. It even has the ISET ID stamp on it."

"Kell's got a point," he heard Admiral Yates say. "If that's an ISET image, there's no doubt where it came from. We'd better get Barker in here and tell him so he can find this guy. But more importantly, this means that the Chinese have hard intel on the island, and it's going to make their attempt to invade much more effective. They'll know exactly where it is and where to go to land fast and establish a beachhead. The dragons had better stop them before they can *get* to the island, or they'll have a war on their hands."

"Exactly," Kell agreed. "Chief is warning the council as we speak, but since you have a mole in the CIA, you'd better be *very* careful what you do. I'll send you a copy of this image bundled in with some intelligence I pulled out of the Chinese system related to it so you can get some confirmation, Mister President. Maybe the ISET stamp on the image itself will help you find who gave it to the Chinese. I'll send it directly to the email inbox we set up for Arlen," Kell told them as he compiled all the data into a file. "I'm encrypting this using a public domain encryption protocol that's actually pretty damn secure, and the keyset to decrypt it is a numerical code. That code is the first ten digits of the square root of the combined age of you and

Misses Walker, Mister President. Mind that if you use the wrong keyset code, it will corrupt the file and make it impossible to decrypt with the right keyset, so make a copy of it before you try to decrypt just in case. I'm also going to delete the email off every mail server that it passes through on the way to Arlen's inbox, so don't worry about any copies floating around. That's as secure as I can make it right now given I'm pressed for time, but I'm fairly sure that you'll get it right. I know for a fact that you can access State's email server from the White House, so you can download the email. Any of your computer guys there in the White House will be able to decrypt it for you, just make sure you tell them which keyset to use."

"Alright. My and Julia's ages?"

"Your *real* ages," Kell said pointedly.

"I—ah, okay. I have the number."

"That was fast."

"I keep a calculator in my desk, Kell," Walker chuckled lightly. "We'll be waiting for your email."

"I'm compiling it right now," he said as his clawtips deftly did just that. "By the way, how is Julia?"

"She's settling in and she's doing fine, Kell, thank you for asking."

"And how's everyone reacting to the sanctions the Chinese levied yesterday? I've been a little too busy to pay much attention."

"Oh, just a 900 point drop in the stock market," he said dryly, which made Kell chuckle. "But we expected that. I've already hit them back with that currency policy change, so the financial war has begun."

"I was hoping they'd see reason, but I guess not," Kell grunted. "But it does mean that they're absolutely committed to this. If they're willing to bring economic ruin to half the world, they're committed."

“That’s what we predict as well,” Yates agreed. “They must believe that what they can gain in taking your island can match what they lose by angering half the planet.”

“They have to reach it first, Admiral,” Kell said darkly. “And when the water dragons are done with them, they’ll wonder what the hell they were thinking. Oh yeah, speaking of water dragons, they’re raising the *Appomattox* as we speak,” he told them. “They should have it in Hawaii by the day after tomorrow. An earth drake is going to enter the sub to make sure it’s not irradiated, and once he’s sure it’s safe for the water dragons to transport, they’ll bring it to you.”

“How? Subs aren’t built with dragons in mind.”

“A hider amulet, one of those devices that let us move around among you,” he answered. “It won’t do anything about his weight, but it will make him small enough to get far enough inside with a geiger counter and make sure the sub’s not radioactive. The earth drake is supposed to send a written report with the water dragons to give to your people, some numbers about the radiation levels inside the sub, so your recovery people know what they’re getting into.”

“Sounds like a field agent.” Yates noted.

“Trekka,” Kell said honestly. “We had to send a drake that can write in English, and besides, only a field agent would know what to do. It’s what we’re trained for, after all,” he said easily as he sent the email. “Alright, the email’s sent. You should be able to pull them out of Arlen’s box now.”

“I’ll have my IT people get on it, Kell, thank you for sending it. And thanks for the warning. I’ll have Barker start hunting down this mole.” He was silent a moment. “Before you go, I have a question.”

“Sure.”

“How averse would the dragons be to making a public appearance?”

“That’s going to depend on what it is and what it’s for,” he replied. “We *are* kinda busy at the moment, Mister President.”

“I understand that, but I think that if the dragons were to present their case before the United Nations in *person*, it might have a significant impact,” he explained. “It’s one thing for us to introduce these sovereignty resolutions on your behalf, but it puts an entirely different spin on it if there’s a dragon standing in front of the General Assembly making a speech about it. If you want to be recognized as citizens of the world and a sovereign state, you’re going to have to *prove* it to some of the people that are going to vote on the resolution. You know that the Chinese are going to fight tooth and nail to prevent the dragons from being officially recognized as a sovereign state, and they can throw a lot of weight around in the U.N. If there’s a dragon stating your people’s case right in front of them, it’s going to make it very hard for them to vote against you. Take it from me, Kell, standing face to face with a dragon is a *memorable* experience.”

“Well, that does make some sense, Mister President, but I’m not the drake you need to talk to about that. You should have Secretary Kent arrange a conference call between you and the council. They’d have to authorize that kind of an expedition, and you’ll have to convince them it’s in our best interest to do it.”

“I know that, but I’ve learned over these last few weeks that you’re probably the one drake on the island we can trust to give us an honest opinion, Kell, so that’s what I’m asking for.”

“Do I think it’s a good idea? It has definite possibilities. Will the council go for it? Not without a whole lot of persuading,” he answered. “Whoever gives the speech would have to go to New York, which is on the other side of the planet from our island, almost literally. It would have to be Geon to give the speech, he’s the only one on the council that both speaks English and is small enough to make it feasible, and the amount of security the dragons would demand for his safety would make you choke on your coffee.”

“Yes, I noticed that when I was at Imakaii,” Walker said. “Any time I even approached Anthra and Geon, the others almost took a step forward.”

“Now that we’re all friends again, the other dragons have it in their heads that we earth dragons need *protecting*,” Kell snorted. “They see us as weak and defenseless because we can’t fly or use magic. That made them prejudiced against us before we went underground, but now that they understand how much they need us, they see it as us needing their protection. We grow most of the food, and they don’t want to starve again,” he said with dark humor.

“And to a field agent, that must be cloying,” Walker said sagely.

“Oh, just *slightly*,” he replied. “We almost had to spike a few dragons to let the water dragons take Trekka out to make sure it was safe to move the sub.”

“Oh, I’m sure things will calm down a little once things get back to normal,” Walker mused. “Oh, by the way, I should pass on to you that you’ve been invited to almost every government and public function in most of the civilized world,” he added dryly. “Other governments, sports teams, even the Boy Scouts, they’ve all asked to pass along official invitations for the dragons to visit. And a few are cashing in on the sudden eruption of dragon fever that’s gripped the civilized world since you let the cameras up onto the volcano in Hawaii. The L.A. Dragons are selling tee shirts with their logo overlaid over a picture of Sessara, from when she came down and crashed the press conference. I know her enough to recognize her.”

“We should sue them for that,” Kell chuckled lightly. “But Sessara would probably be thrilled that they’re using her image on Dragon merchandise.” He laughed. “You’d better tell the football team that they’d better do good this year, or else they’ll disappoint very passionate fans that happen to outweigh them by a few tons. The honor of the dragons is at stake here.”

“So, the Cowboys may be America’s team, but the L.A. Dragons are the *dragons*’ team,” Walker chuckled.

“Damn straight they are,” he replied. “You’d make every fire dragon on the island your best friend forever if you got them a perch on the stadium to watch the games live.”

Walker was quiet maybe a second too long, then he laughed brightly. “That’s a *great* idea!” he blurted. “I’ll talk to Dan Childers, he owns the team, and tell him that if he built a reinforced scaffold perch high up on the stadium, that fire dragons might come to watch the game.”

“As far as it is to Los Angeles, maybe only once a year, and only with extensive preparations,” Kell chuckled. “That’s a *long* way for a fire dragon, and they’d need to eat, have a place to sleep overnight before going back.”

“Well, it would be good for both of us. Both sides could do with a little exposure to each other, preparing for the day when the dragons feel comfortable leaving the island for extended periods of time. You know that day will come.”

“It probably will,” Kell agreed. “Maybe not for a few decades, but it eventually will. Anyway, I have things to do, so I’ll let you go call in your CIA director and have him have at it.”

“Alright. I’ll be waiting for a report on the *Appomattox*.”

“As long as Trekka says its safe to move, they’ll have it where you want it when you want it there. They’ll be glad to get it out of their ocean,” he chuckled. “Gaia embrace you, Mister President, Admiral Yates.”

Walker hesitated just a split second. “Gaia embrace you, Kell.”

Kell disconnected, a little amused that he’d actually say that. It *did* sort of infringe a little on his Christian religion, to invoke the name of Gaia in that fashion.

Kell never saw what the flap was about. The Bible stated *thou shalt put no god before me*. It *didn't* say that there weren't other gods, it simply said that God deserved his due as God. According to their own holy book, Kell didn't see why Christians had issues with the idea that there were *other* gods out there.

But, he didn't have time to ponder the call. He sent Ferroth and Geon an email telling them about what they'd discussed in the call, so they'd know he contacted the President and they talked about a few things outside the mole, mainly about Walker's idea to have a dragon address the General Assembly. That idea did have some potential, so the council needed to know about it. Then he put it aside and decided to get an early jump on analyzing the incoming Chinese fleet. Now that he knew they knew the island's exact location, that altered his plans about which ships to sink, and how many to sink. They couldn't just disable enough ships and sink enough tonnage to make them *seriously consider* turning around, they had to make absolutely sure of it. The water dragons had to sink so much tonnage in supplies and equipment that they had no choice but to turn around, if only because their soldiers would starve if they didn't, then disable so many ships that it would take every ship left to get those crippled ships back to a safe port, else tens of thousands of soldiers would die.

And it might take more than just attacking their fleet to do it. A little direct action on China might be in order, coordinated with the attack on the ships. They should make it *abundantly* clear to the Chinese government that the dragons were not defenseless, and could attack them in ways they had never *dreamed*.

The Chinese were starting to demonstrate an all-in mentality with this operation. They were dedicated to the idea of taking the island and gaining control over the dragons...and though they didn't know it, they *could*. The earth dragons were trapped on the island, and if the Chinese managed to gain control of it, they'd have the earth dragons, and that would give them control over the other dragons. If they got control of the island and forced the earth dragons underground, it would again starve the world of magic that the other dragons needed just to survive, and force them to either go to

war against the Chinese on the island to free the earth dragons or submit to Chinese rule to protect the earth dragons from harm.

Kell frowned a little. He was confident that they could repel the Chinese, but this did expose a weakness in the dragons' position, and that was the island. The earth dragons were vital to the other dragons, and they were on a small island a thousand miles away from any appreciable land. That was their strength, a fortress of open ocean and clear sky controlled by the water and sky dragons, but if a hostile force could somehow get past them and get onto the island, somehow fight off the fire dragons and chromatics that would protect the island from the invaders, they could get within striking distance of the earth dragons. Not that earth dragons couldn't defend themselves, but in the realm of *possible*, it was *possible* that a hostile outside force could gain control of the island, and thereby gain control of the only dragons that couldn't escape from it. The other dragons could just fly away, but the earth dragons could not. They were the most vulnerable because the land they called theirs was an isolated island far from everything else. That had been an advantage up until the Chinese got their hands on an ISET image of the island and got its exact GPS coordinates. Now, it was a liability.

A serious liability.

One thing was for sure, and that was that the chromatics and the sky dragons had to get a scion back in operation *quickly*. Without a scion, the earth dragons were trapped on the island with no means of escape. A scion was absolutely necessary to give the earth dragons a last-ditch way to get off the island in case of emergency. In the interests of magic itself, they had to get a scion back in operation to protect the earth dragons by giving them a last resort means of escaping the island.

He decided he could do his research from home, since he had power and connectivity to the city's network. He swam down the lava tube and vaulted out of the water and onto the beach, shaking water off his wings before folding them back. Keth and Kanna were doing a little work out in the nearest tract, where they'd had the wheat planted, Keth making motions

with his forepaws at the budded sawgrass on the field, no doubt planning out how he was going to plant when the seed he'd ordered from the humans arrived with the relief shipment. Keth would have his farm replanted as soon as the summer monsoon season ended, but would have a new crop of radishes and potatoes in the ground as soon as he could get the time to do it. Keth had kept his giant radish seeds, had gotten them down to the city safely, and on top of that, he had managed to get some giant sweet onion seed from Hett's farm in trade for some of the giant radish seed Keth's family had developed and some wheat seed he had incoming, allowing Keth to start growing the onions himself. They'd decided to trade the seeds because the burning of the farms made them realize that if either Keth or Hett lost their farms again and somehow lost all their stored seed, that their unique strains of giant onions and giant radishes would be *gone*. So, to protect their work, they had finally given seed to another farmer so the giant vegetables they'd carefully bred over the centuries wouldn't be wiped out by a calamity on a single farm.

So, Keth would be planting some of his giant radishes, giant onions, potatoes, tomatoes, corn (which did very well in the heavy rains of summer) and wheat when he finally had time to replant. Repairing all the other farms was the highest priority, but Keth would no doubt find time to get his crops in, probably by lantern light at night.

Kammi was in the common room, laying on her belly watching TV and looking very tired as the hatchlings literally crawled all over her, but she wasn't all that interested in playing. Kav and Konn were certainly trying to get her interested, Kav on her back, biting her wingjoint as Konn hung off her neck. Kitta was trying to at least *pretend* to be a little dignified, laying half on the other side of Kammi's neck, her head up between Kammi's horns as she scraped her claws lightly over the top of Kammi's head, a form of grooming which earth dragons rather liked. "Boys, leave her be," Kell ordered as he came down in from the receiving room. "She's tired."

"I am *so* tired," she agreed without moving. "I was digging drainage trenches after I finished the cell node."

“I can relate, I just spent the last hour hunting down something that changed the game,” he said. He told her about what he found, and his conversation with President Walker as the boys finally gave over on making her play and instead started wrestling with each other, making sure to stay *well* away from the TV as they did so. They didn’t have the cable back on, but that didn’t stop her from pulling a TV show in off Hulu on the internet and sending it to the TV. Instead of watching something entertaining, she had BBC News on, her favorite. She stayed on the floor as she listened, shifted to laying on her side as Kitta continued to groom her.

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “I found the ISET image in one of their intelligence servers, pretty deeply buried,” he told her. “Now that they know exactly where the island is and they have a picture of it, they’ll know exactly what to do.”

“What does that mean, Kell?” Kitta asked.

“That the Chinese will be very hard to discourage,” he told his younger sibling. “Since they know where the island is and where they can land, they might try even after they put the cloaking magic back over the island that prevents the humans from seeing it. The water and sky dragons are going to have to spend the next few years minimum patrolling the water around the island to turn back ships and planes. Even after we turn back this invasion, they’ll try to sneak down here and try to get on the island.”

“Sounds like we need the United Nations to get on the ball,” Kammi said. “When it becomes an act of war punishable by sanctions to invade our territory, they might not be so willing to do it.”

“Yeah, but the Chinese won’t be quite so willing to let the resolutions pass until after we kick their butts,” Kell chuckled darkly. “Speaking of which, let me go over the latest intel the analysts put together. I need to have everything ready before the Chinese launch their armada.”

He retreated to the room he and Kammi had been using and got to work. There was a whole lot of new intel to go over, organized by the analysts that worked in the field agent office to help them do their work. Since they had to completely shut down the invasion, Kell pored over the manifests of the ships that they'd stolen off the Chinese systems, cross-referenced them with pictures of the ships, then located them in the Navy's planned deployment schedule. He used a piece of slate to map out how the Chinese intended to sail their ships down, the formations they intended to use and their deployment schedule, to locate the ships the water dragons had to disable, and the ones they had to sink. Estimating the towing capacity of the remaining ships, Kell's aim was to force them to dump supplies and gear to lighten their working ships enough so they could tow the disabled ships back to port with *just enough* food and water to keep the soldiers alive. Hungry and a little surly, but alive.

The key would be a two-pronged attack. The first and more important prong was to disable the largest ships, which would force the smaller ships to tow the crippled vessels, and to disable the carriers. Given how expensive a carrier was, the Chinese *would not* leave those ships adrift, and it would take upwards of a dozen smaller freighters to tow it back to a safe port. Kell worked out a spreadsheet of ships to cripple or sink listed by priority, based on its size and its cargo, to give the dragons some much-needed supplies and also tie up as many ships as possible in the towing effort. The second prong was to attack the oiler fleet that would be carrying the fuel the fleet needed to get to the island. Most freighters carried enough fuel to get where they were going, but most diesel-powered Naval vessels did not. They relied on external fuel supplies, what the Navy called oilers, who brought the fuel they needed to get where they were going. That was because a Naval vessel couldn't sacrifice critical internal space to massive fuel tanks to get them around, and besides, those huge fuel tanks would be nothing but a large internal bomb that would blow up the ship if it was hit by an enemy bomb or missile. Chinese ships carried enough fuel to get them about 2,700 kilometers before they needed to be refueled, so the Chinese had to deploy oilers to refuel their ships a minimum of three times along the way. Sinking those oilers would stop that fleet dead in the water.

Once he knew *how* it was going to be done, he had to work out *where*. He studied the projected route the Chinese intended to take and took into account how much fuel they'd need to get back to a safe port. They had to be attacked in a place where their only option was to turn around, but make it take so long for them to get back that it would totally screw up any attempt to just turn right back around once the ships were repaired. And the damage had to be so severe and scare them so badly that they wouldn't try it again. By arranging it so the very last of the rations were gone two days before they got back to port and they had some 100,000 hungry, tired soldiers on their hands that wouldn't be all that easy to manage, it would seriously discourage them from making another invasion attempt until they thought they had some way to evade water dragon attacks on their ships. He calculated what he felt were average food consumption rates for soldiers and Naval crewmen on reduced rations and compared it to how much tonnage of food supplies they had in the fleet and used that to identify the point of attack, where they'd *just* have enough food to get them back to Hong Kong, the closest friendly port where they could take their damaged Naval vessels. Some ships could conceivably break away from the fleet to pick up emergency supplies from Indonesia and bring them back to the fleet, but that would just keep the soldiers from half rations. They'd have too many damaged ships to try to tow them all the way to the island.

And there would be a *public relations* aspect to this attack as well. The Chinese weren't just going to steam an invasion force to try to take Draconia without anyone knowing about it. Jirran was going to put together a press release package showing exactly what the Chinese were doing, and when that invasion fleet set sail, the entire world was going to know about it. And when they limped back to port with half their fleet towing the other half and the soldiers all but jumping off the ships when they reached the dock in search of food, the entire world was going to know about *that* as well. The disastrous attempt to invade Draconia before it received recognition from the U.N. was going to be a matter of public embarrassment for the Chinese, and when the rest of the world found out what they'd tried to do, their current round of economic sanctions against America would make perfect sense to the common citizen.

Kammi wandered in and looked over his shoulder as he finished up, putting her forepaws on his shoulder. “All done?” she asked.

“More or less,” he replied. “Which farm were you on digging drainage ditches?”

“Hett’s farm,” she replied. “But that’s not what wore me out.”

“Well, what was?”

“I was doing some digging in our burrow,” she told him, bringing her head close to his, so close their horns tapped together with a chiming ring. “I was enlarging the main room the way we talked about.”

He glanced over at her. “Really. Just invited yourself right in, did you?”

She grinned back. “Yup,” she replied. “I also laid out the entrances for the other rooms we talked about. I drew up a plan for it from what we discussed, so don’t worry that I’m digging in the wrong place. I want us moved in over there in a couple of weeks.”

“Why?”

“Because Patron is going to need a couple of farmhands that can work full time for him, and we’re taking up space in his burrow,” she replied. “There is one thing we need to talk to Jukra about, though.”

“What?”

“The tunnel that goes down into the water is directly under the burrow,” she told him.

“I know. I told him to dig it that way because I know the topography of the cove. It was the best place.”

“Well, if we want to expand down, we have to either work around it or take it over. Since we don’t need it anymore, I thought we could ask Jukra if he could wall it off from the tunnel to the village for us. It’d give you a

direct back door right into the cove, so Sella and Ralla could come right into the burrow.”

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” he agreed, clicking his teeth together. “But it’s gonna make the burrow a little musty.”

“Dehumidifiers,” she said easily. “That and we can build a door leading from the passage to block it off when we’re not using it.”

“That could work too,” he agreed as she nuzzled the side of his head. “My, we’re kittenish all of the sudden.”

“What, I can’t be affectionate to my intended?” she challenged.

“Given it’s *you*, I’m certain there’s an ulterior motive somewhere.”

She whacked him on the hip with the underside of her tail, which made him laugh. “When do you expect to head out to attack the Chinese?”

“They won’t launch for another three days. When they do, I plan to hit them right here,” he said, pointing at a point east of Indonesia’s main island on the map, which displayed the Chinese Navy’s projected route. They would swing to a more southerly route after clearing the Indonesian archipelago and skirt the southern island chains to their north, then head directly for the island once they were in the open ocean of the South Pacific. “It’ll take Surrall about two days to get me out there, a little time to set up and get everyone ready, then we hit them.”

“I wish I could go.”

“This is *too* dangerous,” he told her bluntly. “You’re turning into a pretty good swimmer, intended, but this is an entirely different row of spikes we’re dealing with here. I’m going to be operating in open ocean in a war footing, and you just don’t have the open water experience for me to feel comfortable taking you. Until you spend three full days with the only land a few thousand meters under your tail, we’ll talk about me taking you on a war party. But until then, you’re keeping your feet on dry ground.”

“I won’t argue *this* time,” she acceded, which honestly surprised him. “You’ve done that? Spent three whole days out on the water?”

He nodded.

“How did you sleep? Earth dragons don’t exactly float, you know.”

“It took the pod keeping me up, but I don’t sleep that much.”

“Don’t I know it,” she grunted. “You’re always up before dawn.”

“I’m not lazy like you are.” She pushed up against him, which made him chuckle. “Anyway, odds are we’ll be heading out in six days, and attacking in nine. I picked the spot I felt would be the furthest away they could be and still be too far away from the island to try to just head for it after the attack. They’ll have too many disabled ships, and all their supply ships will be on the bottom, so they’ll have to put their soldiers on tight rations to get them back to port.”

“What if they just leave the damaged ships behind and rely on air drops for food?”

“I thought of that, and that’s where the sky dragons come in,” he answered. “They’ll locate those cargo planes and either bring them down or misdirect the pilots into dropping their supplies in the wrong place. And if the Chinese don’t take the hint and keep coming, then we just keep disabling ships until they either turn around or their entire fleet is adrift.”

“Which ships are we sinking?”

“The supply freighters mainly, but also a couple of the largest equipment transports and their oilers,” he answered, pointing to pictures of his targets on another window of his monitor. “*We* can use that food too, so it only strips them of the food they need to make it to the island, it feeds us for another few weeks. Taking out the oilers severely restricts the range of their Navy ships, since they don’t carry much fuel on their own.”

“No Naval vessels?”

“I was told to leave those alone,” he answered.

“Not all of them are nuclear. Only two of them are,” she protested. “And we could learn a lot if we could tear one of their next-gen cruisers apart.”

“I know, but the council doesn’t want us to sink any of their military ships. They think it will send the wrong message. They don’t want an all-out war with China, and I think they’re afraid that’ll happen if we sink their Navy ships. So, I’m sinking their oilers instead, so their Navy ships won’t be able to reach the island,” he chuckled. “That’s another reason why I picked that spot. It’s more than twice the maximum range of the average Chinese Navy ship at full fuel, which puts us completely out of reach. If we sink all their oilers and most of their food freighters, they’ll be forced to steam for the closest friendly port on the fuel they have before they run out of food.”

Kammi laughed. “That’s damn clever!”

“The fun part is, the water dragons can drag those oilers back to the island without them rupturing if they’re careful, and that’ll give us all the diesel fuel we’ll ever need. We can moor them on the north side of the island, strip them of anything that identifies them, and just use them as gigantic gas tanks. We could even barter the diesel with the Americans for supplies we need.”

She laughed and nuzzled him. “I knew there was a reason I kept you around, intended,” she said lightly.

“You’d better, this is *my* family burrow,” he replied.

7 September, 2017, 08:01 DMT; Council Aerie

Kell hadn’t expected to be back up *here* in a long time.

The aerie was exactly as he remembered it, though it felt a little weird to be back up here. He'd sat on Geon's podium for all of two days before killing Ivaiya and triggering the earth dragons' holdout. But he wasn't up there to take Geon's place—he didn't *want* it—he was there to give a report on the upcoming attack on the Chinese fleet. It was Kell's mission, being relegated to the department as it qualified as a field mission, and he had complete control over it because he was the one that knew what to do better than anyone else. He would direct the water dragons in the attack. He would be the one to tell them which ships to sink and which to cripple. He would be responsible for the safety of the water dragons that he would direct in the attack, making sure they attacked in a way that minimized the danger to themselves. This was *his* mission, much as all his other field missions had been his, but this was the first time that he'd had any other dragon along on one of his missions. It was the first time he wouldn't be doing it alone. It would be the first time that he'd have other dragons under his command.

He wasn't the only department worker up on the aerie. Ferroth was there, sitting behind and between Anthra and Geon's raised platforms, and Prisma was also there, pulled out of school and sitting beside Trejem, the council chromatic. Why Prisma was there was beyond him, but Trejem had to have a reason to call her out of school...most likely much to her annoyance. There was a very young sky dragon flitting behind the sky dragon platforms, and a large water wyrm was standing to the side of Jussa, nearly as large as Jussa was herself. The staffs of the council members worked behind their podiums, organizing slates, which served as paper for dragons, and doing all the busy work the council members needed to do their jobs.

"Earth Drake Kell, we're ready to hear your preliminary plan," Jussa called.

Padding out as Dralt and Viro from Anthra's staff carried out a large slate, he got into the center of the circle and nodded to Jussa. "I've used the intelligence we gathered last night to draw up this plan, esteemed council members," he began. "This plan has three main objectives, and is designed to force the Chinese fleet to turn around long before it has a chance to get

close to the island. We're going to venture out some 4,000 *draman* and meet the Chinese off the east side of the Indonesian archipelago and attack them there instead of allowing them to get close to the island. The reason for this is twofold," he said, sitting up on his haunches and gesturing as Dralt and Viro set down the slate. "First, as you were told yesterday, the Chinese have managed to get the exact location of the island from the American intelligence network, using a spy. This gives them detailed intelligence that will make them much harder to dissuade if we attack them just a couple hundred *draman* from the island. Secondly, we'll be using the weaknesses of the Chinese Navy's range limitation against them, which is the fact that the Chinese Navy keeps the fuel for its ships on external tankers they call oilers, not on the Navy ships themselves, and those hundred thousand human soldiers need to eat. By attacking them east of Indonesia and sinking their refueling ships and supply freighters, it limits the fuel supply for their ships. And also, by attacking and sinking the vast majority of their food reserves, it drastically cuts down on how long that human army can operate without resupply. We're going to force them to turn around and head for a friendly port where they can get more fuel, and before their soldiers starve. And they'll do it with many of their ships disabled and requiring other ships to tow them, which cuts down on their operational capability to the point where not even the most rabid officer or politician would try to continue on to the island."

"That sounds logical," Jussa nodded. "Continue."

With the help of Dralt and Viro, using slates that Kell had already sketched out, he went over his entire plan. The two earth drake aides rotated the slates as he explained the objectives behind his plan, from crippling ships and forcing them to use their own ships to tow them back to identifying and sinking ships carrying food, supplies, and equipment that the dragons themselves could use. He continued on with detailed descriptions of the current military weaponry that the Chinese were using, from their machine guns to their torpedoes to their depth charges, then outlined the main dangers to the water dragons. "The Chinese will realize they're under attack after the second ship is crippled or the first ship is

sunk,” he explained. “Since they won’t be able to see the water dragons on their sonar, they’re going to more or less shoot blindly. They’ll launch torpedoes and fire depth charges from their destroyers, moving to protect the ships that they think will be next. That’s going to be the key of it,” he explained. “The first thing the water dragons will do is attack the cruisers and destroyers. They need to both snap off their propellers *and* rip off their rudders, and it has to be done as close to simultaneously as they can possibly do it, before they realize they’re under attack,” he explained. “Those ships will be the main threat against the water dragons, and if they’re dead in the water, it severely restricts the Chinese’s ability to threaten the water dragons as they continue the operation. The Chinese fleet will stop where it is and retreat to the disabled military ships for basic protection, since those ships won’t be able to move themselves, but that just makes them sitting ducks, as the humans say. With the enemy fleet stalled because their defensive escort is crippled, it will give us the time to move on to phase two of the operation and do it carefully.

“Phase two is the most critical, which is the initial attack on the transports and oilers. They’re going to have main supply freighters with the fleet, which are carrying the vast majority of the food for their soldiers. The key to the attack will be to sink all twelve of those freighters, it does the most damage to them and gives us the most benefit in return. The average troop transport only carries enough food on board to feed its complement of soldiers for about ten days. Some carry more, like the military troop transports, some carry less, like the commandeered deep sea ferries, and if they’re sharing the food between the ships to extend their rations, it comes down to about ten days’ worth. They just don’t have the room to store large stockpiles of food on the ships, since every ship will be nearly overloaded with the soldiers and their personal gear, what they’ll carry with them when they hit the beach. Without those freighters, that gives them, on average, just enough food to reach the island, but nothing to eat once they get here. If we sink every ship carrying their extra food, they’ll be looking at a scenario where their soldiers are starving by the time they reach the island. If we’re somehow thwarted in the attack after sinking those freighters, taking out those ships will most severely cripple their offensive. And on the other side

of it, we need that food as well, so every ship we sink takes food away from them and gives it to us. Even if everything else fails, if we can sink those freighters, it jeopardizes the Chinese plan while it extends out own food supplies.”

“Well reasoned, Kell,” Hirrag rumbled with a nod.

“But we’re not *counting* on the Chinese being particularly kind and gentle with their men,” he continued. “The intelligence we have suggests they’d throw away half those men just to get them to the island. So, making them turn around will require a combination of starving the soldiers, sinking their tankers so they can’t refuel their ships, and crippling enough Navy ships and troop transports so the vast bulk of their combat-ready manpower is stranded in the middle of the Pacific. It’s going to take all three of these tactics to force them to turn around, but we should be able to do it. After the initial sinking of the freighters, the water dragons will go after the oilers, tanker ships that carry the extra fuel the Navy ships need to get here. The Chinese Naval vessels are almost all diesel powered, and they don’t carry enough fuel to get all the way to the island and back on their own. Sinking their oilers is another one of those *they lose we win* scenarios, because it hamstring any Navy ship we don’t cripple by vastly reducing its operational range. We’re going to keep those oilers, mainly so they *don’t* get sunk and threaten to cause a diesel oil spill,” he told them. “The water dragons wouldn’t like us fouling up their ocean like that, and besides, that diesel fuel has a material worth to the Americans. We can trade them that diesel fuel for extra food and supplies. The water dragons will sink those oilers *carefully* and then cart them back to the island.

“After the oilers are sunk, the water dragons will go after the troop transports. Their job with the transports is to snap off rudders and propellers, disable the ships rather than sink them, which they have to do very carefully. By then, they’ll have pulled their fleet in close to the crippled Navy ships, primarily their destroyers, and that will let them more or less shoot back using depth charges and explosives. I’ll brief the water dragons on how to approach the ships to disable them, and also how to deal

with the explosives the Chinese are going to drop into the water to try to stop them.”

“I see a couple of ways we could refine this plan, Earth Drake Kell,” Hinado said, ruffling his wings a little. “Might I make a couple of suggestion?”

“Please, esteemed council member,” he answered.

“If the Naval ships are the most dangerous to the water dragons, can the water dragons separate the warships from the other ships using water magic?”

“I thought of that, and while it’s possible, the other ships will try to stay with them. I thought it would be best to keep them in one place, so we know exactly where they are and the water dragons have a safe means of retreat in any direction if they surprise us with something I didn’t take into account.”

“Yes, but *trying* to stay together will not be easy if, say, there’s a storm raging over the area,” he said lightly. “That’s my second suggestion. I can dispatch a group of sky drakes to the location to whip up a very nasty squall that will reduce visibility and toss those ships around like a feather in a dust devil. They’ll have a very hard time countering the water dragon attacks if they can’t see what’s going on.”

Kell reared up and sat on the base of his tail, scratching the side of his muzzle. “They can’t overdo it,” he said. “The storm has to be strong enough to make it hard for them to respond, but not so bad that the disabled ships capsize and sink. Without their rudders or propellers, they’ll be in very real danger of sinking if the sky drakes make the storm too strong. Our goal isn’t to wipe out their soldiers and destroy their convoy, it’s to make them turn around with as *few* deaths among the humans as possible. That was what I was told to do when I made this plan.”

“But the storm would be of use?”

“Actually, yes, esteemed council member, it would be *very* useful. It won’t hamper the water dragons in any way, and I’ve swum through worse storms than the one we’ll need. I’ll have to revise my plans a little to take the storm into account, but I think it’s a very good idea, and I would ask for the help of the sky dragons in the matter. Just make sure you send drakes who know the magic to evade radar detection or they won’t be there for very long.”

“Why didn’t you ask for the sky dragons earlier if it’s such a good idea?” Trejem asked.

“Well, I guess because I’m not *used* to having anything but earth dragon resources at my disposal when I draw up an operational plan,” he replied honestly. “I’m a field agent, esteemed council member, I’m sort of used to only using what resources I can get out of the department.”

“An understandable oversight, I suppose,” Trejem chuckled. “But that’s why I’m glad Jussa asked for this briefing. With us here, we can get *all* dragons involved in this plan to stop the humans from invading our island, and bring the wisdom of the council to bear on the matter. So, we will add a group of sky drakes to the plan to whip up a storm to make the water dragon attack safer and easier for them,” he said, rearing up himself. “Does anyone else have any suggestions? Since we have Kell here, we can have his input to debate the matter.”

“As long as everyone here remembers that it is *Kell* that has final say in this plan,” Essan warned. “He has the education and training to know what to do, where we do not. Not a single dragon here knows *anything* about these humans and their ships and their technology, where the department knows *everything*. Kell is our specialist, and we must respect that training despite his young age. That is why we put this operation to the department. That is what they were created to do, and we should let them do their jobs.”

“You will hear no objection from us,” Hirrag rumbled. “Kell has proven his worth to this council despite his young age. It is his right to lead

the attack. I would feel comfortable with no other department dragon handling this matter.”

“Aye. We may suggest, but we leave the specifics of it up to the department,” Geon agreed. “This is their realm of expertise.”

Kell was a little surprised by that, but he didn’t dwell on it. The fire dragons with their education in warfare made several very good suggestions about how and when to attack, maximizing the surprise factor, but it was Kell that weighed each suggestion and either approved it or discounted it. They spent nearly two hours discussing the matter as Kell refined the battle plan with input from the council. He also found out why that very young sky drake was present at the council. The drake’s name was Irago, and Hinado had intended to add him to the attack as a means of getting Kell out of there in a hurry if things went bad. The council, naturally, saw nothing wrong at all with that, and even Kell could admit that it would just be foolish arrogance not to have Irago’s services in case things went very, very wrong. Irago would be outfitted with a very rare item in the chromatics’ inventory of magical devices, something that would let him see in the darkness as clearly as a sunny day. Sky dragons had exceptional vision, able to read a book from 300 meters in the air, but they, and all other dragons but earth dragons for that matter, had the same problems seeing at night that humans did. The water dragons could operate in a night attack because they’d be underwater, and they were used to functioning in the lightless expanses of the deep water.

Well after he expected to be back down on the lowlands helping repair Hett’s farm, the council meeting ended. Kell’s initial plan was significantly altered from his original, but they were improvements, involving the sky dragons and their weather magic and a plan to drag the damaged Naval ships out of the convoys after they were disabled, pulling them different directions to make it impossible for the civilian ships to gather around them for protection. With the Naval ships spread out, they couldn’t concentrate their underwater weapons, and the heavy squall would make it virtually impossible for the carrier to launch fighters to support the fleet while it was under attack.

If everything worked the way Kell expected, they'd sink 21 Chinese vessels filled with food, equipment, and diesel fuel, disable 121 other ships, and leave the Chinese stranded in the Pacific after the rain let up with no idea who attacked them or how it was done. They would then be forced to use what ships they had that weren't crippled to tow the crippled ships to the closest ports before their soldiers ran out of food.

Prisma and Trejem advanced up to him as the meeting ended, the earth drake aides carrying away the slates for archiving in the council historical vaults, and Hinado and Faralla joined them with Irago, all of them hovering in the air. "An excellent plan, Kell," Trejem said with an approving nod. "I almost wonder why Geon took your place back on the council."

"Because I'm a department drake, esteemed council member, and it's where I belong," he replied simply. "I had my taste of council politics, and Geon can *have* it."

"You are indeed wiser than your years, young earth drake," Hinado chuckled. "Chief," he called.

Ferroth stumped over. "Yes, esteemed council member?"

"After consideration and consultation among the sky dragons, we feel that the water dragons and the chromatics have the right idea. They've placed drakes within the department, both to learn how it works, and to know the earth dragons better. We would like to contribute as well. Irago here has volunteered to take a position in the department. We would like you to teach him about human computers and department operations, so he might bring *us* the expertise that the water dragons enjoy through Sella, and the chromatics have at their disposal with Prisma. In return, his magic and his skills as a gifted young sky drake will be at your command. But what's far more, he will learn about earth dragons by being *among* the earth dragons, as Sella and Prisma have learned, and we hope that his understanding will prevent anything like what happened after the death of Ivaiya from ever happening again," he said strongly. "We must seek to understand the earth dragons better, so as the human once told us on this

very aerie, the mystery isn't quite so mysterious. We feel that it's a good first wingbeat towards an amicable relationship between our two species."

Faralla nodded vigorously. "We want to move forward after the recent events with a better understanding of our earth dragon cousins, so that this understanding foments better relations."

Ferroth looked up at the sky drake, and so did Kell. He was *very* small for a sky drake, probably barely a year out of being released by his parents, and only a little larger than Prisma, who was a very petite chromatic. He looked like most any sky drake, whip-thin with slender backswept horns, huge wings for his size, and those small diamond scales whose coloration he could change at will, and the long sail-like fin that ran down his long tail, all the way to the tip. His expression was calm, almost resolute, and there was no trace of indignance or annoyance on his face. He did indeed look like he volunteered for the position.

"Well, while that's a good idea, esteemed council member, the sky drake has to prove he's capable of working in the department," Ferroth warned. "It takes not just intelligence, but the right mental attitude, discipline, and dedication. We take only exceptional dragons to work in the department, Hinado. Earth dragons that work in the department have to pass a lot of tests to win a position there, and the competition can be fierce. But I'll take him in under a probationary period and we'll see how he does. If he performs up to department expectations, I'll make the position permanent. If not, you're free to send another drake to the department until we find one capable of the rigors of the job."

"Excellent," Hinado nodded. Irago's expression became almost insulted at Ferroth's blunt declaration, but it then turned quite determined. Kell could see already that if Irago didn't make it in the department, it certainly wouldn't be because he didn't try.

"I will make you proud, esteemed council members," Irago said with quiet dignity as he looked at his council members.

“I can ask for no less than your best, Irago, nor should I expect any less,” Hinado told him. “I release him to you, chief.”

“Your first job will be old fashioned work,” Ferroth told him. “Kell and Kammi are finished with their task lists, but they’re helping out on the farms in their off time. You will go with them and help out.”

“I understand,” he said, then he looked to Kell. “Would you like me to carry you down?”

Ferroth winced, and Prisma laughed. “Kell *never* takes rides, Irago,” Prisma said with a sly look. “He is almost stubbornly independent.”

“That’s a good trait among my field agents, Prisma,” Ferroth grunted. “And where’s that report I asked for?”

“I will bring it to you as soon as I retrieve it from my den, chief. I still don’t have a connection to the internet from my den.”

“I thought we did that,” he protested, and Prisma shook her head.

He looked to Kell, who chuckled. “It’s on the task list, chief, but it hasn’t come up yet. It wasn’t given high priority because Fredda has to run power lines up there.”

“We’ll fix that tomorrow,” Ferroth said. “You take care of it, whelp. I doubt Fredda’s gonna get up there anytime soon, so install a generator and set up wireless with a transceiver strong enough to get her a signal.”

“I’ll take care of it first thing in the morning, chief,” Kell nodded. “I might have to install a bouncer down at Cliffside, her den’s on the southeast side of the island..”

“I might have a way to help with that, chief. With assistance from the most wise, I’ve been experimenting with a motion spell. I might be able to enchant the generator so it spins to give me power, without use of fuel.”

Ferroth grinned widely. “That’s *exactly* why I brought you into the department, Prisma. Don’t experiment on your own generator, though. I’ll

send you up a couple of broken ones you can experiment on, ones with broken engines. They won't interfere with what you're trying to do."

"I would be happy to continue my experiments," she nodded.

"Report to Kell's farm at sunrise tomorrow, and he'll bring you down into the city," Ferroth said, looking at Irago. "Then we'll get you started. Just be warned, whelp, you have a *lot* to learn, and you won't have much time. Be ready."

"I will be there at sunrise, chief," he promised.

Kell ended up with Irago flitting along beside him as he glided down from the aerie, landing with a few bounding jumps near the burrow of his farm. Keth's farm was almost deserted, just ankle-high grass the chromatics had urged to grow, while most of the earth dragons were on the other farms of Dawnmist, moving in a wave that would eventually circle both sides of the island and meet at the northern lava flows. Hrada's huge farm was to the east, towards Three Hills Village, while Hett and Gev's farms were to the west, towards the grassy pastures the ranching drakes had for their flocks, and towards Greengrass Village. The ranchers had no herds to tend, so they were planning on plowing up some of their prime grassland for farming tracts for the next two rotations, and once they had more and more stock in from the humans, they'd let their fields go back to grass and return to ranching. The Darkwood was north of Greengrass Village, the forest riding the edge of the volcanoes with farming tracts along the coast, holding both Darkwood village and Blackstone Village. Beyond that were the old lava flows that dominated the north side of the island, pouring down from the active volcano which was dominated by the fire dragons. Most of the earth dragon villages were on the east side of the island, which had far more arable land. There was a much broader plain out there from the base of the volcano out to the coast, where on the west side of the island, the volcanoes were looming over the coastline. Of the 21 villages on the eastern side of the island, only 12 of them were along the coast. The rest were inland, which had caused the beltway tunnel they'd dug to zigzag a little once they got to the east side of the island.

“This is my family farm, Irigo. This is where you come to tomorrow morning,” he instructed, pointing the thumbclaw of his wing at the burrow opening.

“I knew this was your farm, Kell,” he replied in that calm voice of his. “Hinado’s had me watch you from time to time to make sure you were safe, since all the adults were busy. I was just released yesterday, and when word passed among us that Hinado was searching for a sky drake willing to go underground to learn the department ways, I volunteered.”

“He must think highly of you to let you do that,” Kell said with a nod of approval. “And congratulations on your adulthood.”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod, flitting just beside him.

“And Hinado is clever. He’s sending a sky drake that had nothing to do with the attacks on the farms,” Kell chuckled.

Irigo nodded again. “My mother and father didn’t either,” he said. “They were against it.”

“That’s a surprise.”

“Not *every* sky dragon feels the same way, Kell,” he said calmly. “Esteemed council member Hinado didn’t approve of the attacks either. He was *very* angry about them.”

“That’s true,” Kell nodded as he started towards Hett’s farm, and Irigo hovered nearby, keeping pace with him without using his wings. “Why did your parents object?”

“Because they’ve been on the wrong side of Ivaiya’s wrath before, and they were not sad in the slightest that you killed her,” he replied bluntly. “Besides, it was a stupid thing to do. *We* eat the food off those farms, and yet we go out and destroy them all. That’s ridiculously stupid.”

“I think we’re going to get along, Irigo,” Kell said grandly, which made Irigo smile.

Kell went over the basics of what the department did and how it worked as they hiked over to Hett's farm, using the cart path so they didn't trample on any repaired farmland, coming over a rise and being greeted with quite a sight, *hundreds* of earth dragons, chromatics, fire dragons, and sky dragons laboring to repair Hett's tracts. Earth and fire dragons were digging drainage trenches or setting up waterbreaks to prevent water from forming torrents as it came down off the rocky slopes of the volcano or moving earth by paw while chromatics were using magic, and sky dragons were flitting to and fro with sling pouches filled with grass seed, getting the repaired tracts seeded so they'd have grass covering them before the summer rains started. "The two main things you'll have to learn, and learn fast, are the basics of how computers work, and English," Kell continued as they approached a group of earth drakes with a single earth wyrm, Hren from the department. That he was over here working on Hett's farm rather than his own Matron's farm was saying something about how well he took orders. "Hren, why aren't you on your Matron's farm?" he asked as they reached them.

"They're done, they've moved on to Tringa's farm," he answered. "They needed me more over here. I have to say, the magic the chromatics are using makes this *much* faster. They bulldoze out entire tracts in a matter of minutes, then we come up behind and set up the water drainage while the sky dragons seed the tract. It's working pretty well."

"I saw how they did it on our farm, they did all seven tracts in just a few days, and our farm is *way* bigger than Hett's," Kell nodded. "Alright, tell us where we can pitch in a paw."

"We can use another set of claws," Hota told them as he set stones pulled from the volcano in the trench to form a waterbreak, to prevent the water from raging down the trench and eroding it into a deep gully. "We're digging this down to the coastline. You can get into the rotation."

"I don't think you're equipped to dig very much, sky drake, so get yourself a sling pouch and carry the waste dirt they dig out over to the tracts the chromatics are working on. They'll need that dirt for the tracts."

“I’ll do what I can,” he nodded.

8 September 2017, 05:15 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Irago was certainly punctual.

He was hovering just over the burrow entrance when Kell and Kammi came out at sunrise the next morning, which wasn’t easy to see because of a light rain that was drizzling down on them. The clouds to the east were a faint murky gray where the rest of the sky was dark. Irago had flown down in the dark, probably using a magically-conjured light, and was amusing himself by changing the coloration of his scales, trying to match them perfectly to the faint, ruddy light coming from the east. It wasn’t light enough for them to lose their thermographic vision, so he was a brilliant heat source hovering in the sky above the entrance. He ghosted down to them and actually landed, looking a little uncomfortable with his paws on the ground. Sky dragons usually only landed when they were resting. “Good morning,” he said in a quiet voice.

“Ready to delve the deeps, Irago?” Kell asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” he replied, looking at tad nervous.

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad. Just a few thousand *indrim* of solid rock over your head,” Kammi said with a slightly malicious expression.

“Behave, intended,” Kell chided her. “Well, if you’re ready, let’s go.”

Though Irago was a very, very small sky drake, he was still a good four meters longer than Kell and Kammi, though most of that was his extremely long tail. He was long and thin, so he had little problems getting into the Dawnmist tunnel that led from their farm to the village, which had been cleared out of the cave-in debris and repaired due to the fact that it was the fastest way to get outside from the connecting tunnel, and had been about the only way out when they’d initially dug the connecting tunnel. They had

dug a new spur tunnel that opened off the farm, which kept earth dragons from trampling their tracts, but they got to benefit from the repaired tunnel left behind to get all the earth dragons out. Irigo looked a little skittish as they entered the tunnel, his eyes going up to look at the roof overhead, which Kell could understand. Sky dragons were not comfortable in confined spaces, closed away from the sky. Their dens usually had very large openings that reduced the closed-in feeling of their underground dens. He walked along with them, almost staying *too* close as they advanced up the tunnel, which caused Kammi to give Kell a sly, almost mischievous look.

Kell had to give it to him, he didn't hesitate as they went down the connecting tunnel, which spiraled gently to the left as it descended. The curve and slope formed a wide circle that would bring it down and connect it to the lava tube when the two tunnels were actually very close to each other in a vertical sense. But they couldn't make the slope too steep because of all the heavy equipment they had to bring out, so they'd reduced the grade by turning the tunnel into a near-roundabout. The builders were kicking around the idea of opening a second tunnel much closer to the city and opening it to Blackstone, something of the capitol village of the earth dragons, but they had many other much more important projects on their boards to worry about that right now. The lava tube was large enough for him to rise up into the air, but he did not, walking with them as they started up the very gentle slope to the city, which was some seven kilometers away. As they walked, Kell told Irigo about the city and the high-rise, and how they were about to start rearranging it so the department dominated the lower floors. "So, the earth dragons will stay in the underground city?" he asked.

"Some are," Kell nodded, looking behind him. "Since we built the place, we may as well use it. So we're moving a lot of our central administration down here. The esteemed council members will have offices down here, the department is moving in, the builders and the power drakes are moving down here, and I think they're keeping one of the factories down here."

“The computer factory,” Kammi nodded. “They’re going to take over the industrial space we dug in the lower north gallery. Last I heard, the electronics and refrigerator factories are moving back outside.”

“Since some earth dragons work in those departments, they’re just going to stay in the city,” Kell told him. “It makes sense, if you think about it. That’s a long way to go to get to work.”

“That won’t hurt magic, will it?”

“The chromatics said it won’t,” Kammi answered. “Besides, if you’re going to work in the department, you’re gonna be surrounded by earth dragons,” she said with a look back. “And you’d better be polite. Some of them are still torqued off about what the sky dragons did to the farms, so don’t give them a reason to spike you.”

“I can handle it,” he said calmly.

“I just hope you can manage the walking,” Kammi noted lightly. “There’s no room in the high rise for you to fly. The ceilings are lower than they were in the old building.”

“I’ll manage.”

Kell and Kammi handed Irago off to Ferroth when they reached the high rise and got to work. They gathered up everything they’d need and slung it off their wings and headed back out, to get wireless up to Prisma’s burrow and install a bouncer so she could get a signal, as well as do the other things on their task list. Ferroth had been keeping them together since they were courting, maximizing their time together, which sometimes made Kell feel like the entire island was conspiring to stick him with Kammi.

Prisma had already given them prior permission to enter her den while she was at school, so after hiking over to the southeast side of the island and climbing up the side of the volcano, they got to work. Kell installed the wireless system and generator while Kammi built the bouncer down at Cliffside, and installing a general wireless receiver node for the ground around the bouncer while he was at it to give some parts of Cliffside some

wireless connectivity. Kell also installed some electric lights on the ceiling, sleek fluorescent models that would illuminate her entire single-room den without drawing too much power. He installed the generator outside her den so she didn't have to listen to its gas engine drone, as well as it needing proper ventilation, and set down the two broken generators she was going to use for her experiments in the storage area of her den, which was orderly and kept immaculately clean.

He was hanging from the ceiling by his back feet when Prisma and Kammi came in, both of them looking up at him. "Whatever are you doing, Kell?"

"Installing some lighting for you," he replied as he bolted the light fixture to the back part of her elliptically excavated den. He flapped his wings a couple of times to push his upper body back up and securing himself with another forepaw.

"Don't claw up my ceiling, now," she protested lightly.

"Think of it as decorative texturing," he replied flippantly as he tightened the bolt on the last mount. "Can you get those bulbs up here?" he asked, pointing at the cardboard box holding the lights. "Just be careful, they're glass."

"I take it you will come fix them if they go out? I know nothing of these things," she said as she floated the box up to him.

"Of course we will. Why aren't you in school?"

"We're between classes right now. I have ten minutes to return to the academy, and wanted to see how things were going."

"We have the generator and your wireless installed, and I'll be done when I get this light in. Did you finish installing the bouncer?"

"Yup, and Fredda's got drakes repairing the last transformer going out to Cliffside right now, so the whole village should have power by the end of

the day. I got it on a generator right now so you can test connectivity from the den.”

“I’m finished, so you can do that while I finish this,” he prompted.

“And if I don’t want to?” Kammi asked swaggeringly.

“Never say that to someone directly over you,” he replied, holding his wrench out directly over her head.

Kammi laughed and danced back, but she did do as he asked. Prisma only stayed a moment as Kell and Kammi finished up, then she went back to class just as Kammi began testing the connectivity to the bouncer down at Cliffside while Kell installed the lights, dropped down to the floor, and tested them the old fashioned way, turning on the switch. They flickered to life as Kammi disconnected her tablet from the network cable leading from the wireless modem. “Working perfectly,” she announced. “I think we’re about done here. What’s next?”

“The bouncer for Greengrass Village,” he replied, referring to the task list. “Then we do Darkwood village, then Blackstone. The power drakes were supposed to get power back to Blackstone village by this morning.”

“We did the bouncers for Greengrass.”

“Well, they’re on the list, so I guess we’ll go check them out and make sure they’re working before we move on to Darkwood.

About noon, as they installed the wireless equipment for Darkwood Village, a familiar face bounded up to them. Jirran was weighed down with tools and equipment, ambling up as they installed a directional transceiver, pointing it back towards Greengrass village. “Hey Jirran, what are you doing up here?” Kell asked.

“Chief sent me out here to take over. Chief wants both of you back in the office after you get some lunch.”

“What for? We’re not done with our task sheet yet,” Kammi protested.

“You can ask him, I’m just relaying the message,” he chuckled. “By the way, Trekka’s back from his mission.”

“Cool, how did the mission go?” Kammi asked.

“Pretty smoothly,” he replied as he came up and sat on his haunches. “They’re moving it to Hawaii now, and one of them brought him back. The sub’s clean and the reactor’s intact, so they shouldn’t have any problems. Chief sent him home to get some rest, so he’ll be back at work tomorrow.”

“I’m still surprised they didn’t send Kell to do it,” Kammi grinned at him.

“I was busy, and there were more than enough water dragons to make it safe for him,” he replied.

After they ate, they went down to the office to see what was going on. Ferroth was sitting in the soon-to-be low security room, training Irago in his usual gruff voice by giving him a detailed explanation of what the room was for and what the drakes in it did. Kammi bounded up to them and patted the very tip of Ferroth’s tail to get his attention. “You two eat?” he asked as Kell padded up behind Kammi.

“Sure did, what’s up, chief?” she replied.

“The council wants to talk to you in about an hour, Kell,” Ferroth told him. “Anthra sent word down through me, since she knows I know where you are. “She said make sure to bring that updated presentation you were going to make about the changes to the plan. They want to discuss it some more.”

“Well, what about me?” Kammi asked.

“Since you always bitch when you get stuck finishing Kell’s work, you can work in the office getting it ready for the switch,” he replied with a slight smile. “Irago, since you’re part of the plan, you go attend the council session, they may need you there,” he ordered. “You can go with Kell.”

“Yes, chief,” Irago nodded.

“I’m not ready yet, let me get what I need,” Kell said. “I’ll come find you when I’m ready.”

“Alright.”

After gathering his things, he walked with Irago back up the passage, and he could see that the sky drake was showing the effect of spending half a day on his paws, walking around. He walked a little gingerly as they went up the connecting tunnel, and looked pretty tired by the time they got out into open air. He breathed a sigh of relief and lifted up off his weary feet, opening his wings a little as he just hovered over and beside Kell. “Are you sure you don’t want me to carry you up?” he asked politely. “They haven’t rebuilt the ramps.”

Kell held up his wickedly taloned forepaw. “That’s what these are for, Irago,” he replied calmly as he turned towards the volcano.

Kell climbed up the side of the volcano with Irago hovering close by, almost protectively, and got up to the aerie just as the council members were returning from their own meal. He went over to Anthra and Geon’s podiums and looked up at them as Dralt set slates on the front edge for them; they council never worked in paper, as per draconic law. Everything official was inscribed in stone and stored in the archives. “Ready, Kell?” Geon asked.

“I’m ready, esteemed council member,” he answered.

Once again, he took his spot on the gold disc in the center of the aerie, then they went over the plan once again. He covered everything from the beginning as if it were the first time they’d heard the plan, from its objectives to its proposed execution. He again went over the list of Chinese vessels, updated as of an hour ago, this time having images of them to show the council, showing them one of the new Chinese aircraft carriers, their cruisers, their destroyers, their missile cruisers, their defensive picket frigates, and their military troop transports. He had illustrations ready of exactly *how* the water dragons would disable the ships, and even had a slate ready to demonstrate how the water dragons would sink the oilers without

damaging them. It was all mixed in with a step by step rundown of how the operation was supposed to go, and this time, Kell had included the emergency abort procedures in case things went very wrong. He finished with the follow-up plan, which included the water dragons salvaging the ships that were sunk for their cargo and their steel, after Kell went through them and disabled all automated beacons and positioning systems. Just sinking them wouldn't destroy some of those systems unless they went to the bottom, and that would destroy much of what was on those ships that the dragons could use.

He finished with the evacuation plan in case things went wrong and he called for an abort, which was fairly simple. "Given our advantages, retreating from the Chinese fleet will be easy and fairly safe," he explained as Dralt and the other aides removed his slates for archiving. "If I call for an abort, the water dragons will dive straight for the bottom, and they won't stop until they reach it. *Nothing* the Chinese have can follow them to the bottom. The sky dragons will do the opposite, they'll go straight up and go as high as they safely can, then they'll head for the planned rendezvous point. The storm will give them cover as they pull out. As for myself, what I do depends on what we're facing that forces me to abort the mission. One plan is to have Irago evacuate me, but if I deem that too dangerous to Irago, my alternate plan is to swim away."

"There is no situation where you should be abandoned in the ocean to fend for yourself," Sessara told him sternly.

"With all due respect, esteemed council member, I have certain advantages that Irago lacks. They're not going to hurt me with anything short of a torpedo, and the day I get hit by a torpedo is the day I *deserve* to get hit by a torpedo," he said with a touch of indignity. "If I decide that it's safer for Irago for me to evacuate on my own, that's exactly what's going to happen. I'm not going to risk *any* other dragon to protect me when I don't need that protection," he ended, a bit pugnaciously. "The safety and welfare of the water and sky dragons taking part in this attack are *my* responsibility, and I'm not putting my own safety over theirs. If anything, I'll be the *safest* dragon out there, because the Chinese can't kill me with the vast majority of

their weapons.” He turned and stared Sessara in the eyes. “I don’t need to be protected because I’m an earth dragon,” he declared. “I can take care of myself, probably better than any other dragon that’ll be in or above that ocean.”

“I suggest you leave it, Sessara,” Geon said with a little amusement. “Kell is very independent.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said, giving him a look of grudging respect. A fire dragon would respect his courage.

A water drake landed heavily on the platform and advanced up to Jussa and Essan, the young female whispering to them. Jussa nodded to her, and she turned and bounded off the edge of the aerie behind the water dragons. “I just received word that the water dragons have made contact with the human relief convoy, and they’re beginning to offload the supplies we bartered,” Jussa announced. “Anthra, Geon, are your drakes ready to receive the goods?”

“They’re prepared,” Anthra said calmly. “They should have enough of the food management center excavated by the time the shipment arrives to store it.”

“Very good. Now, does anyone have anything to add with Kell’s report?”

“It was comprehensive, I see nothing that needs to be changed with his plan,” Faralla stated.

The others were quiet, so Jussa slapped his tail on the floor behind him. “Very well. Kell, you will begin training the water dragons participating in the attack when they return from their current tasks. Tomorrow morning at dawn on the old Scion Aerie, you will meet the sky dragons assigned to the mission and begin training them as to what they must do. I want you to remember, Kell, and I want everyone to understand completely, that Kell is the drake in command of this mission. He is the

field agent, he is the one with experience with human ships. If you have any issues with disobedience, Kell, you let us know.”

“I won’t have any problems, esteemed council member,” he said, swishing his tail in an exaggerated manner, then he extended and spread his spikes, which made Anthra and Geon chuckle.

After he was done, he brought Irago back to the department, and found that Jenny had tried to call him a couple of times. He reared up in front of his terminal and called her back as he checked a few things with his Chinese spiders, making sure that the Chinese hadn’t changed their plans enough to make him change his. It wasn’t Jenny that answered the phone, it was Greg. “Hello,” he called.

“Afternoon, Greg,” Kell called pleasantly as he started checking his reports. “How are you?”

“Oh, hey Kell! We’re doing fine, fine,” he replied. “Davie’s still completely in love with his playground.”

“Well, I hope so, since we worked so hard to build it. And how many of the Hunters sneak out and play on it when they think nobody is looking?”

He laughed brightly. “More than they’ll admit,” he replied. “Were you looking for Jenny?”

“She tried to call me, just playing phone tag,” he replied.

“Well, she’s out at the pool, so hold on a second.” He read some reports while he waited, and Jenny’s voice came over his bluetooth.

“Hey Kell! What’s up?”

“Not much, just calling you back,” he answered.

“Well, I wanted to let you know that they started offloading the supplies you bought earlier today,” she told him, her voice turning distant a second as she probably leaned away from the phone. “Everything Keth wanted is in the shipment, and it’s marked with his name. All the seeds he

wanted, as well as the livestock. It's pretty clever how they're moving those," she chuckled. "The water dragons asked for old rafts and barges with guardrails. They're lowering them into the water and putting the livestock on them, then they just pull them away."

"That's good, we're going to need those animals," Kell said. "So, you got our cows and buffalo?"

"I didn't, but we had someone from the USDA pick out good ones. We wanted you to have quality cows and buffalo," she told him. "We got all the other ones too. Ummm, cows, buffalo, sheep, pigs, water buffalo, emus, and some ostriches."

"Sounds about right," he said. "How's things on the island?"

"Hurry up and wait right now. We're still studying the stuff Hinado sent us, and practicing our draconic. Until Hinado starts coming back regularly, we can't do very much. The eggheads have been doing work for the NSA and for the CIA concerning the Chinese, and the other guys are just loafing around. How about down there?"

"Going faster than we anticipated," he answered. "We've got the other dragons helping us repair the farms, and instead of working on all of them at once, we've assembled into work gangs that are moving around the island. The chromatics have been pretty helpful with their magic," he admitted. "They're bulldozing entire tracts to even them out and fill the ruts, then they're using magic to accelerate the growth of the sawgrass we're planting to hold the soil through the rainy season. They're projecting that the last farm will be repaired in nine days, which just barely squeaks us in before the daily monsoons start."

"That's a relief," she said. "So, how is *your* farm?"

"It was the first one repaired," he said with a chuckle. "It was our farm where we experimented with the reclamation techniques the others are using now, because Prisma managed to pull some strings and get some chromatics down there to practice a kind of magic they can't usually do."

Patron would be preparing to plant some crops that can handle the rainy season on our tracts that can deal with it, but right now, getting every farm and ranch pasture fixed is more important than getting crops in the ground. They're almost to Greengrass village to the west, and to the east they're working their way towards Cliffside. They've already gone through Three Hills."

"They *are* moving pretty fast," she mused.

"We haven't built the fences yet, so I guess I'll be doing that when I get home," he mused. "They should have the supplies we bought back here by sunset. Well, I guess we can mark our stock and let them wander until we have the fence built. Nobody will bother them."

"How about China? Anything new we need to know about?"

"Not too much," he replied. "We're finalizing our plan to attack their fleet."

"They leave yet?"

"Not for a couple of days," he replied. "We're still consolidating our holds on their computer network. If they try to escalate, we'll tail-slap them back into place."

"I thought you agreed not to do that unless the President was alright with it."

"We agreed to give him advance warning when we were doing it," he corrected lightly. "A couple of sky dragon elders have overflowed the large cities of China searching for any lost books, but so far nothing. They're either buried deep underground or being kept somewhere very remote, and that's way too much real estate for them to search quickly or easily. And speaking of sky dragons, they've put one in the department."

"Oh, they did, did they? And Ferroth let them?"

"They *asked*, and he agreed," he told her. "His name is Irago, and he's about as young as an adult sky drake can possibly be."

“What’s he like?”

“Quiet and determined,” he answered. “He’s going to be trained as a full department drake, so he has to learn computers and learn English, and do it quickly.”

“You should just send him here, we could use someone to teach us draconic, and we’ll teach him English.”

Kell chuckled. “That’s a good idea, but chief will have to make that decision,” he told her. “I can pass that along.”

“Any word on our talismans?”

“Nothing yet. I think the sages are still formulating them, that or they’re waiting for us to have the time to make them. Sorry, Jenny, but right now, our farms are more important than your amulets.”

“True, and earth dragons are the ones that have to make them,” she agreed. “We don’t need them anytime soon, but since they assented us, we were kinda curious, that’s all. Oh yeah, we sent you some jeweler’s quality gold, silver, and platinum with the shipment to use for the talismans. They sent a bunch of uncut gemstones too. They didn’t want you to have to use your own resources to make them for us.”

“That’ll help,” Kell told her. “We’ll send back what we don’t use.”

“That works. When are you coming back to Imakaii?”

He chuckled. “Not til we get some of this important crap dealt with. There’s more we need to do over there, some more digging and building. What we did the first time was the bare essentials.”

“Good, I’d like to see you again. Maybe you can stay more than just a day or two, and you can bring Sella. Maybe even Patron and Matron.”

“Good luck getting Sire off his farm, Jenny,” he retorted, which made her laugh.

“Yeah, that would take a miracle,” she agreed. “Too bad I can’t come there.”

“*You* might, but I doubt they’d allow anyone else,” he told her. “If there’s any human they’d allow on the island, Jenny, it’s you.”

“Well, if I can’t bring Greg and Davie, that’s a no-deal,” she told him immediately.

“They were kicking around the idea of bringing you here to be an ambassador, you might want to ask Arlen to see where they stand on that,” he said. “But odds are that’d be another promotion. You wouldn’t be here *only* representing the United States, but all of humanity. Even though we have a good relationship with you Americans, we’re not tying our tails to you.”

“Well, I’d have an entire island of tutors,” Jenny chuckled.

“Yes, but could you handle the isolation?” he asked. “Just you and Greg and Davie on an island surrounded by dragons.”

“That would be an adventure, not a prison sentence,” she told him immediately and earnestly.

“Can Davie?”

She was quiet a long moment. “Well, I’m not so sure how Davie would handle that,” she said. “He seems to be doing alright here, but we consulted a few child psychologists to know how to deal with him having no children his own age around. The one thing I do know is that he gets along very well with the dragons. He asks every day when Sessara and Gressa are coming back,” she chuckled ruefully.

“They did seem fond of him,” Kell mused. “Anyway, that’s above both out pay grades.”

“Not mine,” she teased.

“Then you handle it, Lieutenant Colonel bossy pants,” he said dryly, which made her burst out laughing. “I bet you pull rank on Greg in the house.”

“He’s not impressed by my oak leaves,” she replied with a residual giggle. “Now if I had birds,” she added.

“Give it a week,” he predicted. “I’m surprised they haven’t made all of you officers.”

“They did,” she answered. “The ones still in the military, anyway. The other eggheads are all from the private sector, I’m the only military computer expert. We had to teach them the basics of small arms tactics.”

“Petrovski’s still learning,” he noted lightly.

“She’s learning fast, though, or she was,” Jenny chuckled. “But I outrank everybody. They’re all Majors, or Lieutenant Commanders in Hutch and Juarez’s cases. They’re from the SEALs. Price came from the Army Rangers, from their elite sniper unit, and Tom was an E-5 in a mechanized infantry division when he took this job. They gave him oak leaves, and he wasn’t very happy about it,” she told him with a laugh. “It takes Congressional approval for any of us to make Colonel, so it’s not quite so easy to field promote us. Lieutenant Colonel or Commander is about as high as the President can promote us without Congress getting involved.”

Kammi crashed into him from behind, making him almost butt the base of his horns against the monitor, and she laughed and pushed her head over his shoulder. “Hey Jenny! I shoulda known this was what was keeping him busy!” she said near his microphone. She reached down and put Jenny on speaker, hearing her laugh cut in halfway through.

“Hey Kammi! How’s the courtship going?”

“Oh, he’s mine, he just hasn’t admitted it to himself yet,” she grinned, patting his shoulders with his paws, then gasping and staggering back when

he snapped his wings up into her chest. They jostled a little as Jenny laughed, then Kammi returned to looking over his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Not much, just catching up. We haven’t talked for a few days.”

“Well, you’ll have to wrap it up, cause we have some work to do,” she said, giving him a commanding little look out of the corner of her glowing amber eye.

“What work?”

“Well, we need to go up and help out reclaiming the farms, and after we’re done with that for the day, we’re working on our burrow,” she replied. “We’re expanding it before we move back in. Oh, by the way, intended, I talked to Jukra and he said we could seal off the water tunnel. So we can dig down into it and connect it to the burrow. I was of a mind to dig out an entire second level down there, mainly for our gear. We could build a killer workshop down there with all the equipment we have, and we could always use our own mushroom cellar.”

“She’s certainly running your life now, Kell,” Jenny teased.

“She thinks she is,” he replied dryly.

“We haven’t even talked about the brood chamber yet,” she said slyly.

“Brood chamber?”

“Where we’ll keep our eggs,” she said pointedly, which made Jenny grin.

“So, what makes a brood chamber a brood chamber?”

“Temperature, humidity, complete darkness,” she ticked off on her four fingers on her forepaw, three fingers and an opposable digit that was almost a thumb. “A brood chamber’s floor is dug down past the entry hall and filled with earth up to the hall level. We incubate the eggs in fertile earth, only the best earth, and keeping the conditions perfect in the chamber takes

some vigilance. After about ten months, the eggs hatch, and our hatchlings will stay in the room until they're ambulatory."

"What do hatchlings eat?" she asked curiously.

"The same things we do, but usually one of us will either tear it up until it's in bites they can handle," she replied easily, leaning more against Kell's back, and their horns rapped against each other, producing a crystal chiming sound. "Hatchlings don't leave the brood chamber until they're about six months old, and they won't leave the burrow until they're about two."

"Sounds interesting. I'd love to know all about how dragons raise their young."

"That's something you'd probably have to be here to learn," Kell noted.

"Anyway, I gotta take Kell now, Jenny, sorry," she smiled.

"No problem. I guess I'll go back out to the pool and work on my tan."

"Work that bikini, Jenny," Kell called, which made her laugh.

"I am," she affirmed mischievously. "I'll try to call back tomorrow afternoon. That work for you?"

"You can always try. No guarantees," he said.

"Alright then. Talk to you later."

"Later, Jenny," Kammi called.

"Bye Jenny," Kell said. He disconnected the call, and Kammi wheezed when he jammed his elbow into her lower chest. "I'm gonna put you on valium," he threatened, which made her laugh brightly.

"Admit it, you love me just the way I am," she teased, patting him on the shoulders, then she reared up and moved off his back. "But I was serious. They need us up there for our claws and strong backs right now,

intended. The sooner we get the farms repaired, the sooner we can work on our burrow.”

“Alright, let me wrap this up,” he said, checking his spiders. His eyes widened when he saw one of his spiders’ report, then he quickly pulled up the message the spider had tagged. “Gaia’s horns,” he growled, quickly saving it to a thumb drive.

“What? What is it, Kell?”

“The Chinese just threw another spike, and a Gaia-cursed *big* one,” he said quickly. “Kammi, get hold of chief, we need him. And tell everyone in the department to track down the esteemed council members immediately and convince them in the strongest possible terms that the council has to meet *right now*,” he said. “And tell chief we need a sky dragon overflight of China.”

“What? What’s going on?”

“They’re sending a nuclear-equipped Celestial Arrow missile system with the convoy,” he told her, which made her gasp. “They just made the decision, umm, an hour ago. They’re getting ready to move the system right now, so we need a sky dragon to overfly and get visual confirmation.”

“Are those those short-ranged missiles they developed to blow up aircraft carriers?”

“Yeah, that’s them, but they’re sending the nuclear variant for taking out an entire task force with a single missile,” he said as he read the orders. “If they have nukes on the island, they’re certain nobody will dare try to kick them off with force. And the mission commander has authorization to *use them* if they’re faced with an overwhelming opposing force.”

“Why those bastards!” Kammi spat.

“This tears it, that force absolutely *cannot* be allowed to land here,” Kell said as he quickly began to type, sending an emergency message to

Ferroth's tablet. If he was in wifi range, he'd be alerted, but Kell had the feeling that he wasn't. "Go, intended, go!"

She nodded, turned, and bolted out of the field agent office, screaming at the top of her lungs. Ferroth did answer the emergency message, his voice coming over his speakers. "What is it, whelp?"

"We need to get the council in session *right now*, chief," he said quickly. "I just intercepted an order for the invasion force to bring a Celestial Arrow system with them. A *nuclear* Celestial Arrow system."

Ferroth swore in English sulfurously. "You have confirmation?"

"I have the orders, but we need a sky dragon to overfly the installation to get a visual."

"Which?"

"Umm, installation 13-122," he said, referring to the department's code number for the Chinese base.

"I'll have a sky dragon on the way in five minutes, Irigo is here and he can get one here so I can brief him on what he's looking for," he replied. "Get your tail to Council Aerie and wait for the council to get there, I've got a couple of chromatics here that can send a magical message."

"Right away, chief, see you up there," he said, then he cut the call.

By the time he climbed up to Council Aerie, they were just starting to arrive. Faralla and Hinado arrived first, landing on their podiums, and they didn't wait for the others. "What's the reason you called this council, Kell?" Hinado asked curiously as he folded his wings.

"The Chinese are sending nuclear weapons with their invasion force," he replied strongly, which made both of them gape at him a little. "We just intercepted the order an hour ago. Chief has a sky dragon overflying China to get visual confirmation, but I have no doubt about it. I have the orders the Chinese President sent down to his commander of the Army."

“A nuclear bomb?” Faralla said in dismay.

“Actually a system of eight short range missiles, each equipped with a tactical nuclear warhead,” he replied. “The system has a range of about a hundred *draman*. The Chinese developed the system to wipe out a Naval task force that threatened their coastline. But just *one* of those tactical nukes could irradiate the entire island and make it unfit to support life if it was set off on the island,” he said intensely. “This is something the council needs to know *immediately*.”

“I dare say we do,” Faralla agreed with a fervent nod.

The other flying dragons all arrived within a minute, and Kell remained in the center of the aerie. When Jussa climbed up onto his podium and shivered water off his wings before folding them, he looked down at Kell curiously. “What is so important that you would have us conduct an emergency session, young earth drake?” he asked calmly.

“The Chinese are bringing nuclear weapons to the island,” he stated quickly, which made the newly arrived council members gasp. “We just intercepted the order about an hour ago, and Chief Ferroth has a sky dragon on the way to get a visual. We felt that we had to get this information to the council immediately.”

“You certainly did,” Jussa agreed. “What kind of nuclear weapon?”

“It’s called the Celestial Arrow,” he replied, looking around. He bounded over and picked up a blank slate and dragged it into the center, then laid it down and started scratching on it. “It’s a system of eight short-ranged missiles, each one equipped with a small nuclear warhead. The missiles have a range of about a hundred *draman*, and the Chinese developed them to attack enemy Naval task forces that threatened their coastline. The nuclear warheads on these missiles aren’t as powerful as the ones that destroyed the cities in Japan, but just one detonated on the island would irradiate the entire landmass and make it unlivable,” he warned. He finished his quick sketch of a launcher holding eight fairly large missiles, mounted on a universal track mount, then lifted it up and showed it to Jussa

and Essan. He rotated around slowly to show the other council members in attendance. “This changes things a great deal, esteemed council members,” he warned. “Under absolutely no circumstances can we allow them to get this weapon system onto the island. Not only could it irradiate our island, but even if we asked for help from the Americans or the United Nations, they would be *very* reluctant to attack the island if it’s got nuclear weapons on it. A single one of these missiles could wipe out an entire Naval task force, that’s what they’re designed to do.

“What this means, esteemed council members, is that the ship this system is put on has to be sunk, and it has to be sunk *first*,” he said strongly. “Even if the rest of the attack fails, we absolutely can *not* allow the ship carrying this weapon to reach the island. Since this is so critical, once we have a visual on the system, we need to make sure a sky dragon *sees* which ship it’s loaded on. It’s the only way to be absolutely sure. We let them steam out as we originally planned and attack them east of Indonesia, but we single that ship out and sink it first.”

“Why such adamance?” Trejem asked.

“Because the Chinese government has given the general in charge of the invasion the authority to *use* this weapon, esteemed council member, at his own discretion,” Kell said, turning to face him. “The one thing about the Chinese that you have to understand is that when they are given authority to do something, they *will do it*,” he stressed. “If this commander thinks that using these nuclear weapons will somehow aid in their mission to invade our island and secure it for China, he will not hesitate one second. If they get these missiles onto the island, esteemed council member, the commander will *use* them before he surrenders the island back to us. He will either use them against the other humans if we ask for their aid, or he will use them against *us* as scorched earth to deny us the island if his invasion force is about to get pushed back off the beach. Never doubt for one second that the general in command of this invasion will use these missiles, esteemed council member. Because of that, the absolute most important thing we must do is sink the ship carrying these missiles. Better

the entire invading force reaches the island and we fight them here than allow these weapons to get within firing range of our island.”

“Can these weapons be launched from the ship carrying them?” Jussa asked as Geon appeared, climbing up onto the aerie.

“Yes, esteemed council member. The system is intended to be a ground-based system, but they can assemble the launch system right on the deck of the ship and fire them.”

“It must be important if you started without us,” Geon noted as he climbed onto his podium.

“Quite, Geon,” Jussa answered. “Young Kell reports that the Chinese are sending nuclear weapons with their invasion fleet.”

Geon gaped at Kell, then frowned. “What kind?”

“Tactical warheads on short-range missiles, esteemed council member,” he said, picking up the drawing and holding it out for him. “We intercepted the order about an hour ago. Chief has a sky dragon en route to get visual confirmation that they’re loading this weapon system for transport.”

“This changes everything,” he said immediately. “You have to sink that ship, Kell, before it can get within range.”

“He has made that very clear to us,” Jussa said with a nod. “Kell, I would like everything you know about these weapons in a report you will give us at sunrise. Everything. What they do, how much damage they can do, even how they work. If we learn how they work, we might be able to devise a magical defense in case your mission fails and the ship survives the attack. In this, we take *no* chances.”

Faralla looked back to one of the sky wyrms that had arrived with him. “Find Anthra and bring her here, Hioya,” he ordered. “Carry her to the aerie.”

“At once, esteemed council member,” the small wyrm said, then he dashed away in a gust of wind. He returned barely twenty seconds later carrying Anthra, who must have been halfway up the volcano. Since the ramps hadn’t yet been rebuilt, the earth dragons were climbing up the side.

Kell repeated what he’d learned to Anthra, who looked almost furious. “Is this one of the systems they can fire from the deck of a ship, Kell?”

He nodded. “It’s small enough for them to assemble on the deck.”

“Then that ship cannot get within the missiles’ range of the island,” she declared.

“A point Kell has stressed most strenuously, Anthra,” Jussa told her. “I told him I want a full report on this weapon at sunrise containing the tiniest detail, so we might better understand the nature of this weapon, and search for some means we can use magic to defend ourselves against it if the attack somehow fails.”

“A prudent course of action, Jussa,” she agreed as Ferroth climbed up onto the aerie. “Ferroth, thank Gaia. Have you been briefed?”

“Yes, esteemed council member. I have the department working on it as we speak, and I dispatched a sky dragon to get a visual on the weapon.”

“Which dragon? We have updated orders,” Hinado called.

“Jileva, esteemed council member,” he answered.

“I’ll send the orders immediately,” Hinado said, then he rose up and drifted away from the aerie so he could speak clearly without disturbing the others.

“What new orders?” Ferroth asked curiously.

“To watch the conveyance they load that weapon on at all times. We don’t want it out of our sight,” Trejem answered.

“She’s already going to do that, esteemed council members. Jileva was ordered to find the weapon and watch the truck or train they load it on, stay

with it until another sky dragon arrived to relieve her, then return and report her findings directly to the council.”

“Always one step ahead of us, Chief Ferroth,” Essan chuckled.

“I begin to think that we might need a flight of fire dragons on paw when the attack commences, with orders to destroy that ship,” Hirrag grunted. “If sinking it is so critical, then a backup plan may be in order.”

“That would be suicidal, Hirrag,” Kell said quickly. “The fire dragons have no defense against the weapons the Chinese Navy can bring to bear.”

“Better the valiant loss of a brave fire dragon than allow such a terrible weapon to reach the island,” he said simply. “I would volunteer for the mission myself were I not needed on this council.”

“Let’s not start scribing names in Gaia’s Obelisk just yet, Hirrag,” Geon said. “I’m sure we can work out a way to make sure this weapon doesn’t get anywhere near the island.”

“Indeed. Kell, you are dismissed to begin gathering the information we require. Be here at sunrise and ready to teach us everything the department knows about this weapon.”

“As you command, esteemed council member,” Kell said with a bob of his head.

“Chief, stay while we discuss the matter further. We may need your expertise.”

“Of course, esteemed council member,” he replied, padding over and sitting on his haunches by Anthra’s podium. Kell bounded to the edge and jumped off, spreading his wings and gliding down, his mind already organizing the information to prepare the report that Jussa wanted.

Which was only wise. If the Chinese were upping the stakes of the game by bringing nuclear weapons, then the dragons had to be thoroughly prepared to face them.

But one thing was for damn sure now...no dragon that ventured out to attack that armada would think it was some kind of milk run, as the humans said. The price for failure just went *way* up.

Chapter 22

15 September 2017, 06:12 DMT; South Hill Village

It was quite a sight.

Kell stood on the low cliff overlooking the ocean along the relatively straight and even west coast of South Hill Village, looking down at nearly the entirety of the water dragon race. There were some 1,892 water dragons down there, staged and ready to depart for the mission, all of them looking up at Kell, the council, Ferroth, Irigo, Kammi, Keth and Kanna, Prisma, two of the chromatic sages, and twenty sky drakes and four sky wyrms. Kell was executing final checks on the gear he was taking, mainly a satcom system for communicating with the island that could handle getting wet, a tablet in a waterproof case, GPS equipment, a transceiver he'd set up to pick up Chinese ship to ship communications, and some odds and ends he thought might be useful. The council was addressing the assembled dragons, Jussa giving a speech about how important this mission was, how safety was paramount, and he stressed more than five times that Kell was the dragon in charge of the mission, despite his young age, despite the fact that he was an earth dragon. Kell was the department drake that was mainly responsible for China, and that gave him more experience with their enemy than any dragon on the island. He spoke their language, he had conducted multiple missions in their country, he knew their ships and their tactics, he knew them better than anyone else.

It was a full day later than they expected to depart, but that was because of the Chinese. They had delayed their departure for a day because one of their carriers had a mechanical problem, but they were under way the next day. They were currently north of Indonesia's westernmost islands in the archipelago, and they were steaming eastward at about 14 knots. That

was very slow, but they had some very slow ships in their armada. And they were not going to make this attack easy, because they'd placed the Celestial Arrow missile system they were bringing on their newest aircraft carrier, which was *nuclear*. They'd put the system that they had to sink on the one ship that the council didn't want him to sink. The council had debated the issue for nearly five days, and then decided that the safety of the island was far more critical than starting a complete war with the Chinese.

Kell had very specific orders about that carrier. It would be sunk, and it would be attacked first, allowing it to sink while they continued the attack. They would so heavily damage the ship that it had no chance of staying afloat, and Kell and Surral would be among those attending to that *personally*. Surral would drag Kell down the length of the ship as Kell's claws ripped gashes from bow to stern, and with seven other water wyrms slicing the hull along with him with their own magic, then do it again on the other side. That kind of damage would make it absolutely impossible for the sailors to keep the ship afloat, even a ship with as advanced a damage control system as a carrier...not with every compartment of its interior breached on multiple decks. With damage that extensive, Kell estimated that the carrier would sink within 30 minutes, and for those entire 30 minutes, a small group of sky dragons would be hammering the ship with high winds to make it rock violently, making it impossible for anyone to offload those nuclear weapons. The sky dragons would also strike their antenna mast with lightning generated out of the thunderclouds, which was *far* more powerful than their breath weapon, to fry their antennas and most of the components and equipment connected to it, such as their primary radios, to make it extremely hard for them to communicate. After it sunk, the water dragons deep below would ensure the ship didn't shatter on impact with the bottom, bringing it down gently, to prevent its nuclear reactor from rupturing.

Kell had rallied very hard with the council for the right to salvage that ship. It had *so much* usable steel and equipment on it, and they couldn't just leave those nuclear weapons in the water. They weren't designed to withstand prolonged exposure to saltwater the way the reactors were, and

they might contaminate the entire area with radiation. So, after nearly three hours of explaining, persuading, cajoling, nearly begging, Kell had managed to convince the council to let the water dragons pull that ship back to the island. When they did so, since it would be far too big to beach and thus wouldn't be part of the magical protections of the island, it would stay submerged to hide it from possible satellite imagery and be chopped up into manageable pieces while laying off the north coast. The department would extract the reactor's fuel rods with the help of the water dragons and dispose of them the only way it would be safe to do so, and the nuclear weapons would be disarmed and disposed of along with the fuel rods.

Jukra already had a team digging a shaft on the tiny island to the west past the Scarred Rock, which was barely more than a small extinct volcano, and it would go so far down into the earth that it would nearly put the nuclear material in the mantle. They'd bury the fuel rods and disabled nuclear weapons in that shaft, and fill it in and seal it with their own breath weapons at set intervals to form hard barriers, which would bury the disabled nuclear weapons and fuel rods under nearly two kilometers of rock. That deep, even if they suffered some kind of meltdown, it would cause no problem. The heat would make the superheated material melt through the rock and sink into the mantle, and the molten rock the heat formed would cap the shaft once it cooled. They just had to make sure not a single drop of water ended up in that shaft, to prevent pressure buildup, something Jukra could easily do.

Sinking that ship, that...was going to make the aftermath very messy. That carrier was considered the flagship of the Chinese Navy, named the *Mao Tse Tung* in honor of China's first communist leader, and it was only four months old, almost fresh off the docks. It wasn't as large as an American supercarrier, but it was pretty damned big, it was nuclear, and it primarily carried Russian-built SU-27 fighters, which were admittedly very impressive machines. Intelligence told them that they had 38 fighters on board along with surveillance planes. But the problem Kell could see was that by sinking that carrier, the pride of the Chinese fleet, it might provoke an all-out war if the Chinese figured out that the dragons had attacked

them...and they wouldn't be *that* dense, not with all the damage done and the fact that they'd been outed. The Chinese might even launch a few nukes at the island in retaliation, carrying out the ultimate orders the admirals and generals had been given before departing: *if we do not control the dragons, then no one controls the dragons.*

Needless to say, the department had its claws *deep* in the Chinese nuclear missile system, but not even they could prevent a launch. The Chinese were actually smart in that it required manual controls to launch the missiles, and the actual launch systems themselves and programmed guidance were cold systems, in no way connected to the internet, and thus were unhackable. They couldn't stop a launch, but what they *could* do is be ready for the eventuality. It would only take one missile to obliterate the island, so there was a sky dragon lurking over every nuclear missile site in China, and there was a sky dragon following every one of their mobile ICBM missile systems. If they launched any missiles, the sky dragon in the area would intercept it and destroy it. Kell had already trained them how to do it, for Chinese missile guidance systems were vulnerable to an EMP pulse once they were airborne, and a sky dragon could produce an EMP pulse just by modulating their lightning the right way. A sky dragon could fry the missile's guidance and blow out its onboard computer, which would make it crash.

The whole world knew what the Chinese were doing, however. Yesterday, the department released an exceptionally detailed list of what the Chinese were sending towards the island, what their mission was, the fact they were sending nuclear weapons with them, and revealing their orders to take the island or destroy it to deny it to anyone else to every nation on the planet and every major media institution. The world was reacting with outrage, but the Chinese did not care. Them being outed only made them much more determined, and they doubled down by announcing a new round of punishing sanctions against the United States. Walker hadn't made an official statement about what he was going to do yet, but Jenny told him that Walker was going to have the Senate revoke China's most-favored trade status and hammer them with a complete ban of all Chinese imports—

something he could do without Congressional authority via executive order—and to lobby Congress for a resolution for every American company to close all of their facilities in China or face crippling fines and sanctions. The Chinese economy was large, but it was vulnerable to something like that because it was almost completely dependent on exports for its well being. If they lost the lucrative export business with America and other large markets, their economy would crash in a matter of weeks.

China did have a lot to lose if they decided to push it to the limit, but on the other paw, their leaders hadn't shown much rationality in this situation. There was something on the island they wanted so badly they were willing to risk war to get it.

The hope was, however, that after the dragons took out their invading armada, they'd realize that they had *too much* to lose, not just in economic matters, but also in military assets. They would surely realize that trying to invade the island was just too costly.

And those water dragons down there *were* a Navy unto themselves. Only 90 would be engaging in the actual attack on the Chinese, while the rest would stay very deep, far deeper than any depth charge or torpedo could reach, and would be there to capture the sunken ships as they came down and magically seal them so they wouldn't break apart or rupture, protect the food and equipment inside from the seawater, put them on the bottom—which was 520 meters down where Kell intended to attack, far too deep for the Chinese to easily salvage any of the ships quickly—and then haul them back to the island. It had taken hundreds of water dragons to raise the *Appomattox*, but that was out of an abundance of caution due to the grave risk the sunken and damaged sub posed should something go wrong. It would take about 100 water dragons working together to move an oiler, mainly because the diesel fuel inside was more buoyant than water and thus easier for the water dragons to move, and about 200 to move one of the large supply ships. It would take some 600 water dragons to move the *Mao Tse Tung*, and that was what they had to move first due to the nuclear weapons. They'd simply park them on a narrow plateau on the edge of the Indonesian shelf, a wide relatively flat area about halfway up the gigantic

cliff where the Indonesian plateau dove down into the abyssal plain, then haul them back to the island in groups.

. The method the water dragons would use to sink the ships was quite simple, and would vary depending on the ship. For the oilers, since they could do no major damage to the ships or risk a diesel spill, the water dragons would drag them under. The surface conditions would be windy, rainy, and with high waves, so the water dragons would drag the ship under the waterline by affecting the water around the ships and inside the ballast tanks, forming exaggerated depressions in the surface into which the ships would fall, then ram out every door and porthole above the hull to flood the interiors. It was almost akin to some animal falling into a pit. They assured him that 60 water dragons working in unison could scuttle an oiler, because once the entire ship was under the waterline, the water would collapse in on the ship and blow out almost every window and door, which would then doom the ship. They only had to keep it under until enough water got into the ship to rob it of its buoyancy, which would *not* take long. Once the ship was pulled under the waterline, it was doomed. They would drag under the oilers one at a time, then let them sink on their own. The water dragons deeper down would catch them using their combined magic, set them on the bottom so they didn't break up or rupture, and magically seal them. The freighters, well, that was much easier. A single water dragon could sink one of those, using the same tactic Kell was going to use, by slicing a series of gashes below the waterline of the hull from bow to stern on at least two decks. They'd have four water dragons do that, slicing a set of gashes down each side so the ships wouldn't capsize and destroy or ruin what was in them, and also would let them sink faster.

And while they were doing that, the 20 water dragons trained to disable ships would be doing their job. Their first and primary target was the other carrier, the *Cheng Lao Xu*, and once it was dead in the water, the water dragons would then split up in a pre-determined pattern and snap the rudders and propellers off every other Navy ship. The 14 submarines with the fleet would be ignored unless they moved to threaten the operation, since there was absolutely nothing they could do; they relied utterly on

sonar, and water dragons didn't show up on sonar when they didn't want to, thanks to a simple spell that both hid them from sonar and masked their own sonar so human sonar couldn't lock in on their position. After disabling the Navy ships, they'd drag them away from the transports and freighters in a wide circle, making it impossible for any disabled ship to protect the ships inside the ring. Once that was done, they'd disable the troop transports Kell had marked, then they'd pull out and leave the Chinese to stew over it. Kell had calculated it so the ships that weren't damaged would have *just enough* towing ability to tow the other ships back to the nearest port, which would be in Indonesia. They could anchor there until Chinese tugs arrived to haul them back to Chinese ports for repair.

When they left, the Chinese would have no refueling oilers, no freighters carrying their food and equipment, a sunken carrier holding their nuclear weapons, a crippled aircraft carrier, and 121 disabled ships carrying some 55,000 troops. At that point, the Chinese would have virtually no choice but to turn around...that or forge onward with transports carrying 45,000 or so troops that would have no food or equipment.

And if they did that, Kell had orders to sink any ship that did not turn around, no matter how many human lives it cost.

Kell packed the last of his gear in his two waterproof shoulder satchels, making sure they were sealed properly, then he tuned back in just as Jussa finished his speech to the water and sky dragons. Chromatics, sky dragons, earth dragons, and fire dragons were in the air and on the ground around the council, watching on in quiet attendance. They had their own jobs to do while the water dragons were off to war. The sky dragons and chromatics were preparing to cast the cloaking spells to hide the island again, this time with a few water wyrms adding a few protective wards to help enhance the island's invisibility against modern forms of detection and surveillance, and the fire dragons were both helping repair the farms and also preparing for the eventuality that the attack on the armada failed. If the Chinese threatened the island, the fire dragons would attack them, and they had to prepare for it. The earth dragons were hurrying to finish repairing the farms, having repaired some 85% of them thanks to the magic of the chromatics

and the manual labor provided by sky and fire dragons. And that was a good thing, since the sky dragon sages predicted that the rains would begin in just a couple of days.

Jussa finished his speech, then turned to Kell. “Are you ready, Kell?” he asked simply.

“I have everything I need and it’s all working, so I’m ready,” he replied, then he wheezed a bit when Kammi slammed into his side, nuzzling him *hard*.

“Be careful out there, intended,” she said with quiet intensity, which was not like her at all...she sounded worried.

“I’ll probably be the safest dragon in the host,” he replied as he shared a nuzzle with his parents.

“Don’t take any unnecessary risks, youngling,” Keth warned. “Stay close to Surral and keep your safety always in the forefront.”

“You had better come back unhurt, my youngling,” Kanna said with almost desperation in her voice, clinging a little to him. Since she was bigger than he was, that made it easy for her. “No crazy stunts!”

“I’ll be too busy making sure the others are executing the plan to do anything crazy, mother,” he protested mildly.

Prisma advanced and held out a small brass ring. “This was made by the sages last night,” she said, then she advanced on him. She slid it down his horn, almost down to the base, where it seemed to clamp down on his crystal horn. “With this, you can hear magical messages sent to the device, and also send them. Simply tap the ring with a claw and speak the name of the dragon you need to speak with, and it will send a magical message.”

“Cleverly made,” Jussa said with honest respect in his voice. “It works the same as the standard spell of sending?”

She nodded. “It is simply a modified version of the spell locked to the ring,” she answered. “It should last nearly a week until the spell fails, Kell.

This is not a permanent device. But that should be more than long enough.”

“I think it will be. I take it like most temporary items, the more I use it, the faster it depletes?” Kell asked.

She nodded. “So use it wisely,” she affirmed. “There is some debate among the sages about how long it will last, however. This is as much an experiment as it is a useful device.”

“Earth dragon aura?” Essan asked.

Prisma nodded again. “Yes, esteemed council member. Several sages speculate that Kell’s aura will extend the life of the device when it’s directly touching him, drawing power directly from him. I am to bring it back to them upon his return for them to study.”

“I will be most interested in their findings,” Essan said.

“Time grows short,” Hirrag boomed. “The water dragons must be away.”

Kell nodded. “If the attack fails, I’ll get it back to you as fast as possible, esteemed council member. The department can give you all the information about the Chinese we have.”

“They already are,” Hirrag said, looking to Ferroth. “The fangs and claws of the island will understand the nature of the enemy, should they make it to our shores. We will be ready.”

“As will we,” Faralla agreed. “We have plans in place to make trying to land on the island as hard as possible, when their ships face the full wrath of the weather that only the sky dragons can create,” he declared.

“I have no doubt,” Kell said, then he turned and looked back. “Ready, Irigo?”

He moved over from his council members and hovered directly beside him. “Ready.”

“Then let’s do this.”

“Gaia watch over you, Kell of the Earth Drakes,” Jussa intoned sonorously.

“Gaia watch over us all, esteemed council member,” Kell returned, then he started bounding towards the edge. The fire dragons gave an ear-shattering roar just as Kell jumped off the edge and opened his wings with Irago flitting beside him, gliding down towards the water. He tucked his wings and dove in, the water dragons making room for him, then they allowed him to swim out to the edge of their gathered host before they turned to follow, giving him the right to lead the dragons away from the island. Shii and Surrall took up positions on his flanks, and Ralla was directly behind them. Sella, unfortunately for her, was one of the water dragons chosen to remain behind to care for the hatchlings and young, one of some 70 young females tasked to babysit the young of all the pods. Sella was *not* happy about it, but a water dragon had to be the one looking after the young of the other water dragons. They’d gathered all the young in the somewhat large bay that formed the eastern coast of South Hill Village, forming the peninsula upon which it stood.

“It’s almost like a fishing expedition,” Surrall said lightly as they swam to the west-northwest, along the planned route that would bring the dragons to the Chinese armada in about 41 hours,

“We’ve never fished for this kind of prey before,” Ralla noted. Kell had made sure that Ralla was not on the strike team. He and Shii would be among those on the bottom setting the sunken ships down without them tearing apart.

“I’ll let you navigate, Patriarch,” Kell told him.

“Alright,” he said, nudging slightly into the lead as the flight of sky dragons hung lazily overhead, and a group of 10 of them lanced far ahead, vanishing in the distance. Some would be flying recon around the host, which would submerge so they wouldn’t be visible on any satellite images, and the rest were going ahead of them to prepare the host’s planned rest point. The first leg was to a tiny uninhabited rock about halfway to the

attack point, where Kell and the sky dragons would have a chance to get some sleep, then they would lay up on another tiny island not far from where they intended to ambush the Chinese. The attack itself would be at 2:30am, striking after the moon set. Food and water weren't a problem, because the water dragons could drink saltwater, the sky dragons could wring water out of the air, and the tail end of the formation of water dragons were carrying along enough fish to at least settle empty bellies for the host. Nobody would be gorging, but dragons were capable of operating for long periods of time on reduced food. "We're on the line and past the first shelf, let's submerge," Surrall called.

Kell nodded, took in a deep breath, then he dove down. The hundreds and hundreds of water dragons followed suit in a wave of exposed tails. He moved deeper and deeper, coming into view of the shelf of rock right around the edge of the island, an old plateau that had been drowned by the melting of the glaciers of the ice age, then it plunged out of sight when he went past its edge. Surrall created a breathing bubble around his head and he exhaled, then tested the newest refinements to the spell that Shii and Surrall had created and taught to many other water dragons. "Can you hear me?" he called.

Surrall nodded—he wasn't able to speak in return—but a glowing series of draconic letters appeared on the interior of the bubble, yet another Surrall creation. *Your voice sounds a little strange, but I can understand*, he wrote on the bubble with magic.

"Okay, that trick works too," Kell told him. "You have contact with the sky dragons?"

Yes, the sending spell doesn't require speech the way we do it. The sky dragons use a similar version, since it's very hard for them to speak high up and flying fast. Kassa is the wyrm responsible for keeping the sky dragons informed. They can't see us this deep, so they're tracking us with magic. He pointed past Kell, where one of the largest of the water wyrms was swimming just beside him, a huge male nearly the size of Sessara.

“Okay. Let’s get the aura current going. Kassa, let the sky dragons know we’re about to speed way up.”

Kassa nodded.

We’re forming it now, Surrall told him.

Kell felt the aura current form, and once it had firm hold of him, he eased his swimming to conserve energy. Since they’d formed the current deeper underwater and they didn’t have to worry about allowing Kell to breathe, and since they had so many water dragons to maintain it, they’d be traveling some 120 knots the entire way to their first stop. It would be easy swimming, but Kell certainly wasn’t going to be bored. He had a whole lot on his mind.

18 September 2017, 00:48 DMT-2; 156 nautical miles northeast of Jayapura, Indonesia

The island was barely more than a speck just barely poking out of the sea.

It was a coral atoll, barely 400 square meters in area and so low that it swamped at high tide, but it was just big enough for Kell and the 23 sky dragons with him that needed someplace solid to rest. The tiny island was more or less by itself north and east of Jayapura, Indonesia, on the large island of New Guinea, part of which was the extreme eastern edge of Indonesia. Kell sat near the crashing waves of the atoll studying a satellite image of the Chinese fleet as of 2100 local time, just before sunset with Kassa and Surrall sitting beside him and Irigo hovering just above them. The fleet was in a defensive formation, the Navy ships forming a protective ring around the hundreds of both military and civilian ships with them. Kell had kept track of them as they came south from Hong Kong on the west side of the Philippines, then turned east in the Sulu Sea. They’d passed between the Philippines and Indonesia due east, and had turned more

southerly after clearing the islands of Indonesia forming the eastern border of the Molucca Sea.

The sky dragons were quiet as they prepared for their part of this. Creating a storm big enough to cover the entire fleet and make it violent enough to severely hamper the Chinese, but not so strong that it sank disabled ships, was going to be challenging for them. Creating a powerful and highly violent storm was actually *easier* for them than creating a moderately powerful storm, one that they had to carefully control in both size and power.

He was waiting for a report. Two sky drakes were watching the fleet, able to see it via its lights on this crystal clear early summer night, and keeping track of their air cover. Like any smart fleet on its way to war, they had fighters up over the fleet flying CAP and two surveillance planes keeping an eye on the commercial freighters that were using the same shipping lane. Underwater, they had 12 attack submarines banging away with active sonar in search of any possible lurking American subs. He was far more concerned about those fighters. The sky dragons would be too involved in making the storm to concentrate on those fighters, but the tradeoff there was that the sky dragons would be very, very hard to see in the darkness. Standard heat-seeking missiles wouldn't lock onto them, and sky dragons could use magic to reflect laser light to foil laser-guided missiles, not allowing the laser light to scatter and provide the missile with a means to find its target. The sky dragons could blind those fighters using magic, using their sense-altering magic on the pilots to make them not see anything amiss, but that kind of magic didn't last very long. They'd have to attack all 10 planes in the air just before they created the storm.

A young water drake popped his head out of the water and climbed onto the rocky coral. "The submarines have not broken their formation, Earth Drake Kell," he reported.

"Did you cast those spells on them?"

He nodded. “We can disable their sonar completely with a thought. It will absorb all sounds trying to pass through the barrier. It will blind their active sonar and prevent any sounds made from outside from getting through.”

“Good. ELF radio?”

“It will block that as well. The spell will also destroy the electronics of any torpedo they try to fire through it.”

“Excellent. They’ll know they’re being attacked somehow, but with them blinded and unable to talk, it won’t do them any good,” he grunted. “Did they survey the ship bottoms?”

He nodded. “We know which are which. They’ve been marked.”

“Are they still in the same formation?”

He shook his head. “Two ships have changed places,” he said, coming over and looking at the image. “This one and this one, they’ve swapped positions,” he relayed as he pointed at two freighters, both of which were targeted for sinking.

“Alright.”

One of the sky drakes returned, zooming down by homing in on the ghostly bioluminescence emanated by a few water dragons. Like humans, as long as they had lighted landing areas and operated in an area where they couldn’t crash into anything lurking in the darkness, they could fly effectively at night. The large female pulled into a hover just beside Irago, who had his night-sight device resting just in front of his horns, ready to be pulled down. “The fleet continues at the same speed and direction, Earth Drake Kell,” she reported. “It stays in the same formation, except for two ships.”

“The water dragons just told me,” he nodded. “What about the planes?”

“The two surveillance planes circle at a distance of 39 *draman* from the fleet, at an altitude of 3,200 *dram*. The fighters are in two flights of four, flying a diamond pattern at a distance of 49 *draman* at 8,100 *dram* and 61 *draman* at 10,012 *dram* opposite sides of the flight path. They are patrolling to protect from a threat from without, not within.”

“At that distance, they won’t be able to get a visual on you,” Kell noted absently, also noting that the higher flight of fighters was almost into the commercial flight altitude layer. “But those surveillance planes are really close.”

“That won’t be an issue, Earth Drake Kell,” one of the sky wyrms called. “The first act of the flight will be to conceal us in a cloud. They won’t see us anyway.”

“Radar?”

“The spell that hides us from radar doesn’t have to be actively maintained,” he answered.

“How high up will you be when you start making the storm?”

“We have to be around 2,000 *dram*, but we’ll increase our altitude as we form the storm.”

That was about 2100 meters, which was fairly low—draconic *dram* were only slightly longer than human meters, which made it easy to convert—but if they’d be covered by clouds, they’d evade visual contact. “Alright. If you think you can do it safely, flight leader Foyadi, I’ll leave it in your paws. Just keep your dragons safe.”

He nodded solemnly.

Kell dug into his satchel and pulled out his special bluetooth for his Chinese military radio, then set it over his earhole and turned it on. A sky dragon would be carrying that radio for him in the air so it could pick up all their ship to ship transmissions, and send it to his remote bluetooth via a form of site to site that would penetrate about 20 meters into the water. The

armada was too far away for him to hear their ship-to-ship transmissions yet, but they were close enough now for him to barely receive their air traffic control radios. Chinese ships communicated with the mainland and their command via satellite...which the department had already hacked and was standing by to disable on his command to prevent the fleet from telling anyone what was going on.

“Alright, Kassa, Foyadi, bring in your lieutenants and we’ll have our last briefing before we engage,” he called.

About ten minutes later, Kell was addressing the assembled water and sky dragons as the rest of the water dragons looked on from the sea just beside them. Foyadi produced magical images in the air that Kell had on his tablet for everyone to see that gave the dragons a graphical representation of the plan, from the initial strike on the aircraft carrier to their retreat lanes when the mission was complete. He also went over the abort plan to make sure everyone knew what they had to do. They’d all heard this plan dozens of times, but this final briefing was to make absolutely sure everyone knew what to do, and also to make any last-minute changes. The only change he made was to reverse the sink order of the freighters since two of them had swapped position in the formation. “The scout team has marked the hulls of the ships for us,” he instructed the water dragons offshore. “So we sink them in order once we’ve disabled the Naval ships. I want all of you to keep alert,” he said sternly. “The Chinese are going to start shooting once they realize that it’s not just a bad storm, but an attack. Expect small arms fire and explosives such as grenades tossed over the sides from the freighters, and heavier caliber weaponry, depth charges, and torpedoes from the Naval vessels, including the smaller Hu Sang torpedoes that will pose the most threat to you. Pay close attention when you get near the destroyers, they’re the ones that will have the most anti-submarine weaponry, and thus pose the greatest threat. Never approach a destroyer any way but from directly underneath, stay right under the hull while you’re there, and for Gaia’s sake, stay inside its flanks. Remember that the Chinese still use the older style depth charges that don’t rely on proximity sonar or induction to explode, and they’ll start launching them over the sides as soon as the destroyer’s

disabled. All of you have been trained how to prevent them from exploding, but that doesn't mean that you don't treat them with extreme care."

"What are we to do with overboard humans?" someone called.

"If they're far from you, nothing," he replied. "And I hate to say this, but if you think one was close enough to see you, then you drown him," he added. "The Chinese cannot have concrete proof that we attacked them, and eyewitnesses can provide that."

"How far would that be?" another called.

"Given it'll be night and storming, don't get within five *dram* of any overboard sailor, and use *no* bioluminescence or lighting during the attack, human eyes are very sensitive to light. If you get closer than that, then you can't let him get back on a ship. He has to be drowned. I know you find that highly distasteful, but the security of our island is far more important. We can leave *no* evidence of who attacked the Chinese. None. That means that if you have to, you must drown any overboard sailor that may see you. So save yourself the need for it and keep your distance from them."

"That should be fairly easy, since we'll be well under the surface," Kassa called. "Any human that goes that deep will most likely be doomed without our interference."

"Any other questions?" Kell shouted. When no dragon responded, he nodded. "Very good. Get ready, we leave in ten minutes. Ten minutes," he repeated.

"Organize into your teams," Kassa boomed. "Deep divers, go ahead and get into position. Sing of your readiness when you're there."

"Sky dragons, we depart in ten minutes, make your final preparations," Foyadi shouted as the vast majority of the water dragons submerged, rising up over Irago. "Irago, remember your role in this attack most keenly. The safety of the earth drake is in your paws. If he needs you, you cannot fail. Be ready at any time to extract him."

“I will protect him, flight leader,” Irago said with a nod up at the much larger wyrm.

Kell reached up and tapped the bronze band around his horn.
“Esteemed council member Jussa.”

“I hear you, Kell. Are you ready?”

“We’re preparing to leave from the island we used to rest to intercept the Chinese now. We should make contact in about an hour, and begin our attack a half hour after that. The attack itself should take about an hour to execute. Is the department ready?”

“Prisma is there now. Send her the message when it is time for them to strike.”

“It will be done, esteemed council member. I’ll contact you again at the completion of the mission.”

“Gaia watch over you, Kell. Be careful.”

“I will. Until we speak again, Gaia embrace you.” He removed his claw from the band and looked at Surrall. “The department is ready and waiting. Everyone check your spells one final time and make sure you’ll be invisible to sonar and radar!” Kell shouted. “Could you check me, patriarch?”

“Your protective wards are in place, Kell,” he replied after looking at him closely.

“Remember, no external lights of any kind, either in the air or in the water! Sky dragons, make sure you’re cloaked from thermo and keep yourself blended into the night, the Chinese have infrared cameras! Keep a controlled air layer around you to hide your heat! No unnecessary sounds when we get under way!” He packed up his gear except for his tablet, which he strapped to his foreleg in its waterproof case, and used it to tune the radio Tiyano was carrying to Chinese ship to ship frequencies.

By the time he was done, it was time for them to get moving. The sky dragons streaked into the night, quickly vanishing in the darkness as they shifted their scales to take on the exact color of the starlit sky. Kell waded into the water and submerged, and Surrall formed a breathing bubble around his head. Kell tested his ability to reach into it to touch the magical messaging device without popping it, and nodded in satisfaction when he could do so. He touched it once again and spoke. "All lieutenants, report in," he called.

"Carrier team ready."

"Naval team ready."

"Oiler team ready."

"Freighter team ready."

"Ship catchers en route."

"Sky dragons en route."

"I'm in position and ready," Irigo finished.

"Very good. Let's do this. Ship attackers, move out," he ordered, then he turned his body and snapped his wings, leaving the tiny island behind as he swam swiftly and steadily towards the location where they would intercept the Chinese fleet.

18 September 2017, 09:25 EDT; The White House

In his situation room, President Jack Walker sat at the head of his table and watched the monitors arrayed on the wall facing him. Graphs and maps of the Pacific overlaid with American military assets shared space with a real time satellite image from their Air Force birds that had been parked over the area, six different satellite images being streamed to his situation room in real time.

The attack would begin anytime now. The dragons hadn't told them when or where they were going to do it, but they'd been keeping a very close eye on things since they told them what they were going to do. They'd seen a *huge* number of water dragons leave the island three days ago, led by a small earth drake that Walker was positive was Kell, and they spotted them four more times over the three days. The water dragons weren't changing course to hide their destination, so his people were able to plot their course, to the point where they identified the two islands that the dragons used as rest stops, and now they'd left the island and headed northwest, which a graph showed would have them intercept the Chinese fleet. They couldn't see them now, they were all underwater, but Walker had no doubt that they were sitting underwater and they were waiting.

What they were most interested in was the crescent of clouds that had formed almost of their own volition, forming a U into which the Chinese ships were sailing. The clouds were thickening, constricting, and once the Chinese fleet was inside its border, it began to close behind them like silent hunters encircling their prey. This was weather magic, the magic of the sky dragons, and they wanted to see just how strong it could be. They hadn't known for sure that the sky dragons would do it, but Admiral Yates predicted that they would. A storm would reduce visibility and provide cover for the attacking dragons, but it was also going to conceal the ships from the satellites and prevent them from seeing what the dragons did.

"You were right, Tom," Walker said as he watched the clouds thicken and expand on an enhanced image. There was no moon in the area, but the satellite had cameras so sensitive to light that they could see the ships far below using their own running lights. The image couldn't make out all the details on every ship, but they could see them well enough to make out their general shapes. "What's about to happen?"

"A whole lot of chaos for the Chinese," Yates said, standing up and walking to the large monitor. "This is the weather magic the sky dragons can do, it has to be. This storm is forming far too fast to be natural. They'll use it as cover to attack the ships. Jenny's report said that they intend to disable the Naval vessels and sink the oilers and food freighters, forcing the

remaining ships to turn around and tow the damaged ships back. It's damn clever."

"Which ship has those nukes on it?" he asked. Three days ago, they received that shocking message from the dragons, that the Chinese were sending short-range tactical nukes along with the invasion force. That had very nearly made Walker dispatch every ship they had in the Pacific to intercept that fleet and destroy it, but the dragons had assured them that they could deal with it, so they were allowing them to do so. But he did have just about the entire Pacific fleet that could steam to the rally point in three days about 500 miles south of Pearl, and ready to steam into battle should the dragons fail. They also had four subs shadowing the Chinese fleet just outside of sonar range. They were *not* allowing the Chinese to put nuclear weapons on an island that put Hawaii within range of their medium-range missiles. If necessary, the U.S. Navy would engage that fleet. It would be war, but this was a line in the sand they could not allow the Chinese to cross, not when it came down to *nuclear weapons*. It had nothing to do with protecting the dragons. It had everything to do with protecting Hawaii.

"This one," he said, pointing at the largest. "The Chinese flagship, the *Mao Tse Tung*. If I were them, this is the ship I'd sink first."

"I hope they know that."

"From what I've learned about the dragons, Jack, I'd say that they know exactly what they're doing," Yates said calmly. "Their department will allow them to send in the other dragons knowing everything they need to know about those ships. How they work, what kind of arms they have, what threat they pose, their radar and sonar systems, how to attack them, how to sink them, they probably even know the names of the captains of the ships," he chuckled.

"Kell is with them," Walker said. Jack Walker had something of an affection for Kell. He was by far the most *approachable* of all the dragons he'd met, with a personality that he could easily understand and admire, including a rather quirky sense of humor. He'd grown fond of the earth

dragon long before he met him, when he continually hacked Jenny's electronics and played little jokes on her, and as he learned more about him, how *competent* he was, that fondness became respect and admiration. It only grew when Julia cut herself on his spike and turned 18 again, for he'd been very, very concerned about her well being, showing that he had sincere compassion for humans. If Kell was the norm of the earth dragons in the department, then that was one fearsome and highly effective organization. Walker had no doubt that they'd sent Kell to lead the attack, since he knew so much about their enemy, there to provide his expertise...maybe even there to do something about those nukes. If they gave him one of those, those hider amulets, he could get onto the carrier and inside, find the nukes, and disable or destroy them. That was what field agents did, the dangerous work, and Kell was a field agent.

"He's the one that knows about modern Naval ships, they need him," Yates nodded. "Someone like him would be a tremendous asset," he added.

"How so, Tom?"

"Remember Jenny's report, Jack. Earth dragons can't be harmed by their own element. That means that Kell is completely bulletproof. He could climb onto any ship and wreak total havoc, and there's little the Chinese could do about it, not unless they start launching explosives at him that'll do damage to their own ships. God, what I'd give to have something like that on my side," he breathed. "Earth dragons are like goddamn tanks, and on a ship, the only way to stop him is to sink the ship he's on."

"That might just be why he's there," Walker nodded. "I figure he has a hider amulet with him, and he's there to get onto that carrier and deal with those nukes."

"That's entirely possible," Yates agreed as they watched the U of clouds close into a ring, then it thickened, the cloud cover moving quickly towards the ships in the middle. "I'd say they'll be starting as soon as that storm is fully developed," he said. "We do have the boys over at NOAA a feed of this?"

Walker nodded. “They have a weather satellite over the area, they’re watching the storm form,” he answered. “If we can get enough info on it, we’ll be able to identify other storms they create.”

“Then there’s little we can do until the clouds clear,” Yates noted, coming back over and sitting down. “We’ll at least get a good view of the aftermath.”

18 September, 02:28 DMT-2, 126 Nautical miles northeast of Jayapura, Indonesia

430 meters down, well below the operational range of the Chinese subs, Kell and 92 water dragons waited for the signal to go.

Kell had been down that far before, but he’d never stayed more than maybe 20 seconds, and it was an entirely different world. The water was pitch black, cold, and it pressed on him in ways that he almost found uncomfortable. Earth dragons were immune to the effects of great pressure applied to their bodies as long as it wasn’t applied with explosive force, they didn’t suffer from the bends or other pressure-induced maladies, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t feel the weight of the water above him pressing on his scales. They were so deep that the water was still and calm, unlike the roiling that had to be going on up on the surface as the sky dragons developed their squall, and there was faint luminance from the three water dragons by Kell using their bio-luminescent glow to give him at least a little light to see, which the dark water swallowed up barely two meters from their bodies. His thermographic vision was useless in water that was one uniform temperature, unable to even see the heating of the water around them as they stayed stationary, blinding him as surely as the lightlessness of this deep world did. Surrat, Kassa, and Ralla were surrounding him closely, giving him that faint light so he had *something* to go by.

Time? Surrall wrote on his breathing bubble, which surely had to be taxing Surrall's strength to maintain it that deep. There was probably a couple of tons of pressure per square centimeter being applied to the magical bubble.

"Two minutes, but Tiitano is supposed to message me when the fleet is in position," he replied, hearing his own voice echo back a little off the bubble.

Everyone is in position and ready, Surrall wrote on his bubble

He nodded as he looked up, though he couldn't see anything. He reached up and touched the band on his horn. "Prisma."

"I hear you, Kell. What orders?"

"Tell the department it's a go. They should have the Chinese sat system hacked by the time we begin."

"I will relay the order. Gaia protect you, friend."

He looked to Kassa. "Get everyone in position. Have the wyrms start staging the water."

That was the most recent addition to the battle plan, added barely two hours ago. The water wyrms participating in the attack were actually going to strike first, and they were doing it with their innate power over water. All of them would be pulling water up with them as they ascended rapidly, getting a large volume of water moving at high speed, then they'd form the water into spears and impale the bottom of the aircraft carrier in multiple places. Those holes would probably penetrate at least three decks into the carrier due to the sheer force the water would apply once it got past the hull, and then they'd veer off and shear through the hull with scythes of magically-backed water as per the original plan.

"One minute," he said as he felt water start to move around him, as the water wyrms got control of the water directly below them. "Remember, strike in the determined order. The hulls are marked."

He felt more than saw the 91 water drakes participating in the attack gather around him, and Ralla sank a little. He nodded to Surrall, then he turned and dove for the first wave of ship-capturing water dragons some 200 meters under them, that would use their magic to prevent the ships from imploding as they dropped to the flat abyssal plain deep below. They'd leech out air pockets and magically seal the oilers so their diesel tanks wouldn't rupture, then the hundreds of dragons at the bottom would allow them to land gently to prevent the ships from tearing themselves apart from the impact.

"Earth Drake Kell, the fleet is in position," the sky drake charged with surveillance up there, Tiyano, reported. He was also carrying Kell's radio and a camera to get some hard photos.

He tapped the band. "Tell the sky dragons that we're beginning the attack. Begin hitting the carrier's antenna mast with lightning."

"I will tell them immediately."

Kell raised his foreleg and waved it, and Surrall and Kassa sang out the attack order. They all waited for Kell to move first, and he didn't make them wait more than five seconds. His wings opened and snapped down and back, sending him rocketing directly upwards, and the 91 water dragons that would attack the fleet surged just behind him. The faint glow around Surrall and Kassa faded as they ascended, as Kell felt the air expand in his lungs as the pressure lessened. Kell proved to the water dragons what he was made of in that rapid ascent, as he kept pace with the water dragons, rising higher and higher and hitting speeds of 60 knots. The magical marks on the hulls appeared in the darkness ahead, the magical glyphs that *only* a dragon could see marking which ships were to be attacked and in what order, and he adjusted to bring himself up right at the rolling bow of the carrier *Mao Tse Tung*. The other water dragons fanned out as they adjusted to intercept their assigned Navy ship, aiming at their sterns so they could use a water scythe to slice off the rudder and shear off the propellers, or screws in nautical terms, where it was bolted to the engine shaft. The water dragons attacking the destroyers would also have to destroy the four small

movable engine pods under their ships that augmented the main screw, a newer innovation that gave the small ships more maneuverability. The hulls of the ships above flickered in and out of visibility as intense lighting raked across the sky above, illuminating the silhouettes of the hulls to the dragons below. The radio signals from the ships started to sound in his ear as he got close to the surface, close enough for the relay radio that Tiyyano was carrying that was picking up their ship to ship transmissions to penetrate into the water and reach his crypto headset, telling him they were within 30 meters of the surface.

Kell *heard* the initial strike hit home. The sound of tearing steel was loud in the water as the water spears rose up from the depths and penetrated the hull, but Kell didn't have the time to look back. He reached the bow and drove all eight of his claws on his forelegs into the steel, penetrating through, then Surrall grabbed hold of him with water and yanked him backwards towards the stern with tremendous force. Slivers of steel curled away as his claws rended through the eight inches of steel hull, ripping through the hardened metal like paper. Kell didn't just drag his claws through the hull to breach it, he scissored his paws, bringing them together and opening them as Surrall dragged him down the base of the carrier's starboard side, which caused large elliptical segments of the hull to tear away from the side and get sucked into the ship, and ribbons of steel from between his claws to fall into the darkness below. Above him, two water wyrms were doing the same thing, slicing through the slightly thinner hull higher up, and using two scythe blades oscillating to not just cut through the hull, but cut long eye-shaped holes in it to make the ship absolutely impossible to keep afloat. Kell felt the tremendous stress on the roots of his claws, almost threatening to tear them out of his fingers, but his claws proved to be far harder than the steel they were shredding. He felt the jolts every time they raked over a bulkhead...but that was why he was the one tearing through the bottom, because his claws could go through the hull much easier than the water dragons could cut through it.

Surrall pulled him out all the way to the very end of the carrier, which had already had its screws sliced off and its rudder torn away. He heard a

muffled explosion inside as the crankshafts lost the resistance the propellers placed on them and allowed them to spin free, which they were *not* designed to do. Ships that size didn't use transmission systems to alter the speed of the propellers, they instead adjusted the RPMs directly from the engines...and that sound told him that either a driveshaft just shattered or the engine itself ruptured, blasting steam all through the engine compartment. Surrall carried him around to the port side while going under the ship, as several pieces of steel sank by them. Water wyrms had already slashed out the port side and were moving to their next task, leaving Kell and Surrall to tear through the lower section of the port side. The ship began to list in a way that had nothing to do with the storm, and it settled in the water by a good two meters in the time it took Kell and Surrall to get back to the bow.

It's working.

"Just as planned. Let's open this side and then move to the oilers. What word on the subs?"

They're turning back towards the fleet. I think someone on the carrier managed to get out a distress signal.

"How many ships are disabled?"

Nine and counting.

"Then we're right on schedule," he said as he reared back, then drove his claws into the hull. His head snapped to the side, however, when he heard a dulled *THWOOM* behind them, an explosion of something that was designed to blow up...a depth charge. "Already? Is everyone alright?"

Just a couple of dazed drakes, Surrall answered. You were right about the depth charges.

"I didn't expect them to start that so quickly," he fretted. "I'm not hearing any orders on their radios for the ships to open fire, just a lot of confused chatter as ships report that they've lost helm control. Let's get this done so I can see what's going on."

Again, Kell almost felt like his claws were being yanked out of their sockets as Surrall dragged him down the length of the carrier. He scissored through the hull, opening gaping holes in the base of the ship and hearing the water rush in, but his attention was on the radio. The carrier was transmitting, probably using a backup and a secondary antenna since the sky dragons fried their main array, warning the others that they were taking on water and that they *hit* something, for them to sound off to find out which ship they'd hit in the storm. Other ships began to sound off as they lost their propellers and rudders, some of the comm officers almost screaming over the radios as they warned the others that they'd been damaged. He heard another explosion from a depth charge, then Surrall pulled him free of the stern of the doomed carrier, which had settled another three meters just in the time that it took Surrall to pull him down the length of the ship. He tuned into the carrier's intercom and heard the frenzied reports from all over the ship, that they had multiple hull breaches on both sides, then he almost breathed a sigh of relief when the carrier's captain put everything together and gave the order to abandon ship. Not everyone would survive, but that quick decision would save the Chinese Navy many sailors.

It was one destroyer firing off depth charges, which had already been crippled. The ship was drifting in the 12 meter waves and 80 kilometer winds the sky dragons were whipping up above the surface, unable to resist the movement of the waves and water without its engines and rudder. He saw it roll dangerously to the side as it was swamped by a wave that hit it broadside, and that effectively ended its firing of depth charges. Those sailors could probably do nothing but hold on for dear life as the rolling waves tossed the ship about like flotsam.

All Navy ships crippled. Water wyrms are pulling them away from the center of the formation.

"Begin phase two!" he called, and Surrall nodded, then he sang out the order.

The *Mao Tse Tung*, fatally wounded, listed hard to starboard as the water dragons moved to the second phase. The oilers and transports were turning towards the Naval ships, who were drifting in the storm but also being slowly pulled away from the transports by water wyrms, and the entire time every ship was rolling and rocking in the high waves and high winds. Kell swam towards the nearest oiler as 30 water dragons surrounded it, then they worked together to enact their magic. First, they sheared off its propeller so it couldn't try to escape, then the oiler's hull suddenly sank drastically as the water dragons pulled it down, affecting the water inside the ballast tanks as other dragons pulled the water surrounding the oiler down itself, forming a depression in the ocean surface that made the waves crash in on the oiler with exaggerated force. Kell swam past as the dragons did exactly what they'd practiced, what they said they could do, dragging the oiler's bow down to the point where the crashing waves swamped over it. Water dragons used rams of water to blow out closed hatches and windows, flooding the bridge, flooding companionways, but doing no damage to the diesel tanks as the crashing waves filled the bowl and drained into the oiler, robbing it of its buoyancy. Kell circled the oiler, saw several sailors jump into the water wearing life jackets as floodlights were turned on the surface, and then the dragons all dove in unison. The oiler surged down about four meters from the drag, but when it bobbed back up, it didn't bob up nearly as far as it had come down. Massive streams of air bubbles roared from the top of the swamped oiler, and Kell saw that the oiler was doomed. It sank deeper and deeper as Kell swam past it to check on the next oiler. The water dragons could only sink two oilers at a time due to the number of dragons it took and the need for other dragons to do other tasks. While 60 water dragons sank the oilers, others were attacking the ships they weren't sinking to snap off rudders and screws while others pulled the Navy ships further and further away to prevent them from protecting the other ships.

The subs are moving in, Surrall warned, pointing down and to the east.

"They're blinded, right?"

Surrall nodded. *They can't even make sonar contact with their own ships. We have them completely blinded.*

“Just warn the others to keep track of them and stay away from them. They might be coming in to help pick up overboard men.”

Men. A dead Chinese sailor's body drifted past Kell as he turned more to the north on its way to the bottom, a man with no life jacket...but they knew that it was going to happen. They couldn't sink that many ships without casualties.

Two by two, the water dragons sank the oilers, while Kell kept a very close eye on the doomed carrier. It was no longer rolling in the waves because it was so low in the water that the waves were crashing over the deck. They'd swept the deck clear of everything, and Kell poked his head out of the water to see the port edge of the carrier's bow go under the base of a wave, and not come back up.

That was what he was waiting for.

He dove under and saw the horrific damage the dragons had inflicted on it. There were gaping eye-shaped holes at regular intervals along the side of the carrier, exposed superstructure visible within in the emergency lights of the interior bleeding through the water. Kell made his way to the port elevator and set the claws of his hind feet into the steel, puncturing it, then he tore through it quickly and easily. He ripped a square hole through the elevator door and entered the carrier's main hangar deck with Surrall just behind him. Water roared in behind them, swamping planes that were tied down to the deck and sloshing around equipment and gear that wasn't lashed down, but Kell knew exactly what he was in there to find, and now that he was out of the water, he could see perfectly in the dim lighting of the hangar. The Celestial Arrow system was fairly large, and if they wanted to keep it in a place where they could get it out quickly and easily, able to assemble and deploy it in a hurry if necessary, they'd keep it in the main hangar. The sky dragon watching had reported that it was brought into the

hangar through that door, and he was going to make sure that nobody was trying to evacuate it...or set off one of the warheads.

“Where is it? What would it look like?” Surrall asked as he and Kell bounded across the hangar.

“That’s it, right there,” Kell replied, sliding to a stop and pointing at a very large series of steel containers, holding the missiles and its modular launch platform. “It’s still lashed to the deck. They didn’t try to move it. We need to flood this hangar fast, Patriarch, so they never get the chance.”

“You made sure of that when you tore open the hangar door,” he replied, looking back. Water was racing around his tail and ankles, quickly rising in the hangar now that it was below the waterline. “This ship won’t stay afloat more than five more minutes. I’d better get you out of here.”

“Not until this hangar is flooded,” Kell retorted.

A scream to the side got both their attention. A lone Chinese sailor was clinging to a work table bolted to the deck, and Kell saw that he was reaching for an intercom phone.

He couldn’t take the chance that the intercom was operational. Kell turned to the side and slashed his tail just over the rising water. A single spike sizzled across the space between them, almost skipping off the top of the roiling water, and impaled the man through the upper chest. Two of his fingers spun away as the force of the impact ripped him away from the bench and drove him into the bulkhead wall about ten meters behind him, pinning him to the metal. He gave a single convulsive shudder, then went limp, hanging from a clear crystal spike that was the size of a large javelin impaled through the sailor’s body.

“You did say no human could live if they saw us,” Surrall said in a grim tone.

“Better I do it than you, Patriarch. Killing in such a way is not for you, or any water dragon,” Kell said simply. “I need to get that spike, I can’t

leave it here just in case the Chinese manage to get a submersible down to the carrier before we can move it.”

Surrall nodded and turned to look back at the water pouring into the hangar deck. “Hurry, we have maybe three minutes before this hangar floods.”

Kell started wading towards the body, but ended up swimming as the water level rose quickly. He tore the spike free and shook the body off of it, then he carried it with him as he and Surrall went under and waited for the hangar to completely flood. When it did, Kell heard the carrier make ominous groaning noises, as its largest open compartment filled with water. *We have to go, it will go under any second*, Surrall wrote on the surface of his breathing bubble once it was restored. *A ship this big will drag you under if you're caught in its wake.*

Kell nodded, and once the water gushing into the hangar slowed, Surrall pulled him out, Kell holding him by the tail as Surrall swam against the powerful current and got them back through the breached hangar. Once they were well clear of the carrier, Kell turned and saw the flight deck sink under the water, then the conn tower followed it. It spiraled slowly down out of sight, falling into the cold darkness below, taking everyone that had failed to get off with it into death's embrace.

Kell let go of his spike to let it sink to the ocean bottom and touched the bronze band on his horn, as he was ordered to do so when the carrier went down. “Esteemed council member Jussa, the carrier is sunk. I have visual confirmation the nuclear weapons went down with it.”

“Very good, Kell. We are all breathing a sigh of relief. Does the rest of the attack go smoothly?”

“Just as planned, esteemed council member. We're sinking the oilers and freighters now. No major injuries to report at this time.”

“Very well. Contact us again when the mission is complete.”

Kell let go and tapped it again. “Alright, what do they sing, Patriarch?”

All oilers are under, and they're working on the freighters. The Navy ships are pulled out to the distance you set and those dragons are moving in to help sink the freighters. All ships marked for disabling have been so, and a few dragons are keeping the less seaworthy ships from sinking in the storm by steadying them. The ship catchers have caught the first oiler and they're taking it down gently.

“Warn them the carrier is on the way down.”

They already know. All they have to do for it is to make sure it lands gently, so they'll intercept it close to the bottom.

“Any resistance?”

No. The storm is preventing the Chinese sailors from managing much more than hanging on for dear life, he wrote on the surface of the bubble. That storm was an excellent idea. No ship can see any other ship, and the Navy humans can't throw bombs at us.

“Alright. Let's get the rest of the freighters down, then we pull out.”

Surrall nodded.

But the Chinese weren't going to go *that* quietly. Kell heard over their ship to ship that they were certain it was an attack, and they responded. They used every weapon system they could that was automated, didn't require sailors to go out on deck. Destroyers dropped depth charges, but they did so with empty ocean around them, so they did no harm to any dragon. The submarines moved directly under the fleet to try to get sonar on whatever was going on, which required the water dragons to move a few sinking ships around the blinded subs, which were 40 meters down to make sure they were deep enough to not scrape the bottoms of the ships above. Hu Sang torpedoes were fired from every Navy ship, which were equipped with smart guidance that allowed them to ignore friendly ships...but since they were unable to lock on to any dragon with sonar, they simply veered around in the choppy waters searching for a target to chase down, and often locked in on and destroyed sinking debris off the ships above, which

required the water dragons to give any piece of debris a very wide berth. The destroyers were firing their 9 inch guns into the water, timing the roll of the waves so the barrels fired into the sea, and there were virtual carpets of small caliber rounds fired from the Chinese Navy's own version of the Phalanx system, gatling guns that sprayed large volumes of rounds in a short time, which were mounted in a way to allow them to fire down into the water. Troop transports that weren't disabled were making their way to the second carrier, and the fighters flying CAP were trying to get close enough to see what was going on, but the storm was making flying that close to their fleet very dangerous. The constant lighting rolling across the sky above, flashes of light on the choppy surface, was all the sky dragons needed to keep those fighters out. No fighter pilot would willingly fly through a thunderstorm that intense, since the aircraft's metal frame would attract lightning.

But that was all they could do...flail helplessly. Since the only weapons that could pose a threat to the water dragons relied on sonar, which the water dragons could defeat, they were virtually helpless. Torpedoes circled aimlessly searching for targets, nine inch shells and gatling rounds pounded into the water vainly, trying to hit something...anything. It was all they could do, and Kell had to give them credit for at least trying. But the simple fact was, they were completely helpless against the way the water dragons had attacked.

Kell put a finger near his ear as he listened to the captain of the *Cheng Lau Xu*, the surviving carrier, scream for confirmation that the *Mao Tse Tung* was sunk. None of the sailors above could see more than 100 meters past their own windows thanks to the pounding rain and high winds, the moonless night making only a ship's running lights visible even if they had a clear sky. "Progress?" Kell asked.

All oilers are sunk. Four freighters yet to be breached, the rest sinking right now. Six have already gone down, he replied. Opening them up like clams is working. They sink within minutes when their hulls are opened from bow to stern. Hessu reports that one freighter has broken apart amidships, they must have done too much damage.

“What about the other ships?”

Wallowing through the storm.

“Have them breach the last four then dive,” he ordered. “We’ll keep an eye on things from two hundred *dram* down, too deep for most of their weapons.”

Kell shuddered when an explosion sent a shockwave through the water. He turned in time to see it, see the bright flash that was quickly muted. “What was that?”

One of those torpedoes locked onto the freighter that broke apart and hit the bow section. Hessu’s sorting it out. Kell waited in tense anticipation. Hessu reports two concussion injuries and a few broken bones, but nothing severe.

“That’s it, evacuate everyone to two hundred *dram* except the dragons breaching the last four ships, and tell them to be *damn* careful when they do. Avoid any and all debris, the torpedoes are locking onto it. Things are getting too messy up here.” Kell followed his own order, turning his nose down and diving, his wings carrying him deeper and deeper, the flashes of light from the lightning above getting dimmer and dimmer. Surrall joined him a moment later, both of them looking up into the darkness. Several more water dragons joined them, and more, and even more, until almost all of the strike team was hovering in the water around Kell, all of them looking up. They saw an occasional explosion above as torpedoes detonated against debris, making him feel very justified getting the water dragons out of there. *The last ship has been breached*, Surrall wrote on his bubble. They waited about 20 more minutes, then Surrall nudged him. *That’s it, the last ship just went under. All oilers and freighters sunk, all marked ships disabled.*

“That’s it, we’re done,” Kell called loudly. “Everyone go deep and help catch the ships as they fall. Patriarch, get me up to the surface past the storm’s border, then you can come back and help. I’ll swim to the extraction point and meet Irigo and have him carry me back to the island. I’ll meet

you there with the water dragons going back to Draconia once you have the ships safely on the bottom. Remember, we have to be off the island and underwater before sunrise to avoid aerial recon from Chinese planes.”

Surrall nodded.

Kell put a finger to the band on his horn. “Flight Leader Foyadi, the mission is complete. Evacuate your sky dragons to the rendezvous point.”

“Is it a success?”

“A complete success,” he replied. “Only minor injuries among the water dragons, and nothing they can’t heal. Have Irago meet me at extraction point one, he’ll carry me back to the island.”

“I will be there in two minutes, Kell,” Irago replied.

“Let’s go,” Kell said, then he and Surrall turned and started out as the other water dragons began to dive, relief washing through him...but also justification. Kell had planned that attack to maximize the safety of the dragons while also stripping away every single defense the Chinese could mount against them. Simply put, no Navy on earth, not the Chinese, not the British, not the Americans, had any hope of defending itself against the water dragons, not unless they simply dropped explosives and depth charges into the water at all times as they moved. Sonar couldn’t detect them, radar couldn’t penetrate the water, and laser beams had a range of only about half a meter in seawater due to diffusion, and 95% of Naval water-based defenses relied on radar, sonar, or lasers. Some next-gen American naval weapons used underwater cameras for visual detection, and those were the only weapons that could hope to find and stop a water dragon...but only if the water dragon was lazy or inattentive. Some others used induction to detect the metal of submarines, but that would never find a water dragon. Modern human weaponry simply could neither detect nor stop a water dragon bent on attacking, forcing the ships to do exactly what the Chinese did; fire wildly and blindly and pray they hit something. That was all they *could* do, and Kell had been expecting it. It was no bad mark against the Chinese Naval officers that they couldn’t stop anything, and

they did everything they could. They simply had no idea what kind of enemy they were facing, nor what they were capable of doing.

The battle was won in the initial strike, when the water dragons disabled all the Chinese Naval line vessels in a simultaneous attack.

Kell breached the water about a kilometer from the edge of the rapidly unwinding storm, running on what power the sky dragons had invested into it before it fell apart. Little pieces of it would remain as showers and thunderstorms due to the sky dragons getting things started, but the near-cyclone conditions they'd whipped up couldn't be sustained without sky dragons to fuel it. He didn't feel the paw set itself between his wings, so he was a little startled when he was pulled up out of the water. Surrall looked up at him as Irago pulled him free of the ocean, the waves rather high due to the storm behind them. "I'll have the water dragons escorting you back to the island at the rendezvous point in half an hour," Surrall called.

"It'll probably take me that long to finish my report to the council," he called back. "Remind the dragons on the bottom to collect up all the loose steel, every bit of it. We're going to need it."

"There are still fighters in the air, Kell, staying in one place is not wise," Irago warned.

Kell looked up and nodded. "See you in a bit, Patriarch."

"Well done, my young one. Well done," Surrall said proudly, then his head pulled back under the waves.

They weren't the first to return to the island. Five sky wyrms were already there, using their magic to cover the top of the island in an image that there was nothing underneath, a clever bit of camouflage that allowed Kell to set his feet down without fear that Chinese fighters or recon planes would see him. He sat on his haunches as Irago landed beside him and reared up to sit on the base of his tail, touching the band on his horn. "Esteemed council member Jussa."

"I hear you, Earth Drake Kell. Report."

“The mission is a success. The nuclear weapons are on the bottom, and all oilers and freighters are either on the bottom or on the way to the bottom. Only a few minor injuries among the water dragons from explosive concussion when the Chinese dropped a whole lot of torpedoes that locked onto sinking debris and exploded. We were not seen by the humans. Tiyano of the sky drakes is supposed to be sending you a message to report on the condition and situation of the enemy fleet. He’s still watching. The water dragons are setting the ships on the bottom right now and preparing them for transport back to the island.”

“Excellent,” Jussa said with relief. “You have performed admirably, Kell, as has the entire department.”

“It certainly wasn’t just me that put this together, esteemed council member,” he said. “Tiyano will return to the island as quickly as he can once the sun comes up and he can get some pictures of the fleet to bring back to the department for study and release to the world.”

“We will be expecting him. Will you be back on schedule?”

“I should be. The water dragons should also be on schedule. Expect the first of the food freighters to arrive at the island in two days. The water dragons will be dragging the ships back two or three at a time, with the food having priority. They’re also pulling the nuclear weapons out of the carrier and bringing them back immediately, since they’re not designed for extended exposure to saltwater.”

“Very good. Keep us updated as things happen, Earth Drake Kell, and well done. You can give us a full report on your return, I won’t keep your attention when there is much left to do.”

“Thank you, esteemed council member. I have a few things to tie up, and then we’ll be on our way back. I’m sending the sky dragons back as soon as they get back, and Patriarch Surrall and some water drakes will be bringing me back to the island as quickly as we can while the rest of the water dragons get the ships ready to move.”

“Gaia go with you, Kell.”

That done, he then moved to report to his other boss. He set up a small satcom dish, part of the Navy SEAL equipment the Americans gave them, and hacked himself an uplink to get in touch with the department. Kintel’s face appeared on his chat program almost immediately. “Chief’s at the aerie?” he asked.

“You know it, they wanted him right there. We already heard that your mission was a success, it’s all over the island.”

“That was fast,” Kell grunted as the rest of the sky dragons arrived, swooping in and landing to rest a moment after their efforts. “Everything went according to plan. Have Jirran and Trekka get everything ready to accept the nuclear warheads, they’ll be en route as soon as the water dragons pull them out of the carrier.”

“They should have everything ready by the time they get here, even the disposal shaft,” he answered with a nod. “Was it smooth?”

“They had absolutely no idea what was going on until it was too late, just as we predicted,” he replied. “By the time they realized they were under attack, there was nothing they *could* do. A few water dragons got concussed by exploding torpedoes, but nothing more serious than a few broken bones. Those Hu Sang torpedoes were as dangerous as we figured. We really need to get out paws on a few of them and check them out.”

“We’ll have enough to play with. An entire carrier, and even a few of its fighters,” Kintel smiled. “Enough steel to hold us for *years*,” he added eagerly.

“I told the water dragons to pick up every scrap of steel they could find,” Kell assured him. “We should be able to salvage a lot of fiber out of that carrier too.”

“Good. Are you on schedule to get back?”

“I should be. The sky dragons will be heading back as soon as we’re done here, except those *escorting* me,” he said with a snort.

“You *would* like to stay hidden when we stop in on that other island to rest, wouldn’t you?” Irago asked from the side.

“Well, they’re needed to raise the cloaking magic back at the island. Is that still on schedule?”

Kintel nodded. “They have everything ready. They’ll be doing the magic in two days, when the magical forces are aligned or something. It should be back up by the time you get back.”

“It won’t mean as much as before now that the Americans and Chinese have images of the island, but it’ll stop most everyone else,” Kell noted. “The sky dragons should be back a couple of hours after sunrise, so they should have time to rest before they have to enact the magic.”

“We’ll need it. Most every sky dragon and chromatic on the island will need a few days to recover after they cast that spell,” one of the sky wyrms hovering over him said. “The only ones that will have the strength to fly will be the youngest sky dragons, Kell, those too young to know the basic magic required to assist us. We’ll be depending on them to keep the island safe until we recover.”

“I’m sure they’ll do just fine, Jimari,” Kell told her. “Call me jaded, but I happen to believe that young dragons *are* capable of real responsibility.”

“You do make a good point,” she murmured with a slight smile.

Kintel got jostled out of the way, and Kammi’s face replaced him. “Thank Gaia!” she said with an explosive sigh. “Intended, are you well? Did things go alright?”

“Not a scratch, just as Surral promised, intended,” he chuckled. “And it went *exactly* as planned. The Chinese never knew what hit them. All their

oilers and freighters are on the bottom, and the rest of the fleet will have to tow a whole lot of ships to the nearest friendly port.”

“Awesome!” she beamed. “Now get your tail home safely, and we’ll have a big feast on the beach to celebrate!”

“We’re gonna be too busy to party, goof,” Kell told her. “Sire’s gonna need us to help get his crops in, now that he has time to work on the farm. So be ready to do a lot of planting for the next couple of weeks.”

“Stop avoiding fun, intended,” she chided, which made a couple of the sky dragons chuckle.

“Put Kintel back on,” he ordered, which made her laugh. Kintel replaced her, looking over and no doubt swatting Kammi with the underside of his tail. “I should be back in two or three days, depending on how fast we move,” he said. “The first ships should be there in about three days, but the nuclear weapons should be there as fast as the water dragons can carry them. Maybe a day and a half, given the distance.”

“I’ll make sure everything’s ready. We’re about to lose the uplink, so safe journey, Kell. Message Prisma if you need to tell us anything.”

“I will. Gaia embrace you, Kintel.”

“You as well, Kell.”

Kell shut down the program and started packing his gear back up. Surrall’s head poked out of the water, along with about 15 other water dragons, and he climbed onto the tiny atoll, shaking the water off his wings, as the others remained just offshore. “Everything goes as planned,” he replied. “The injured have been healed, and they’re dragging the ships some ten *draman* to the north and setting them until we can come back for them, to make them harder for the humans to find. The nuclear weapons are already on their way back to the island. I have our fastest water wyrms carrying them back. The drakes here will be taking you back home, Kell.”

“Outstanding, Patriarch,” Kell said with a nod. “Then it’s time to get out of here. Foyadi, get the sky dragons organized and on the way back to the island, as fast as you can get there. If you have to stop to rest, don’t do it *here*, this is not a safe place. Make sure you give the council the pictures that Tiyno took,” he ordered. “Irago, go with the sky dragons, I won’t need your help from here. But thank you for being right where you needed to be any time I needed you,” he said with an approving nod. “I want all of us out of here before the Chinese start sending out scout planes, so don’t linger here. We won’t be so much as poking our heads out of the water until we get back, so you won’t be able to stay with us.”

“Where will you sleep, Kell?” Irago asked.

“I’ll sleep underwater on the way back, Patriarch Surrall will take care of me. We’ve done this before when he’s taken me out on extended fishing expeditions. We have practice,” he said, glancing at Surrall. “That’s why he’s been right here with me the whole time. We work well together, and he knows exactly what I can and cannot do.” He gave a short grunt of amusement. “The island rest stops were mainly for the sky dragons to rest and so I could set up my equipment to keep track of the Chinese, not necessarily so I could sleep.”

“Earth dragons don’t sleep much anyway,” Surrall chuckled.

“Nope,” he said as he made sure his satchel was sealed. “I’m ready, Patriarch, let’s start back.”

“I have our route planned out, including a couple of places we can stop and rest that aren’t on the bottom,” he nodded as they both turned towards the waves.

“Message me when you return to the island, Foyadi, I want to make sure every singly sky dragon gets home safely,” Kell said, looking back at him, then he waded into the surf. “We’ll report in to the council twice daily until we get back.”

“I’ll relay that to them, Kell. Outstanding work, young earth drake. You have proved beyond any doubt the critical importance of the department this day.”

“Thank you,” he said with a simple nod, then he and Surrall slipped under the waves.

18 September 2017, 15:19 EDT; The White House

“Holy *shit*,” Admiral Yates breathed as they got their first daytime images back from the attack site.

It was a complete mess. There were quite a few ships missing from the fleet—that much they knew from their night images once the clouds cleared—but now that they could get a very good look at things, they saw just how devastating the attack had been. Ships were drifting in the current north of New Guinea as other ships tried to lasso them with towing lines, and there was a lot of debris still in the water. One of the ships must have broken apart, spreading floating flotsam all over the area, from packs to crates to broken and twisted wreckage, and there were quite a few bodies bobbing in the light waves. All their subs were on the surface as sailors and soldiers filled the decks of the ships, repairing damage from the storm or trying to fish items out of the water.

It was a *mess*, and it was everything that Yates thought it would be. Walker leaned back in his chair and watched a series of images taken 20 seconds apart, as sailors and soldiers tried to get things cleaned up. The ease with which the water dragons had crippled a highly capable fleet like the Chinese, who had *formidable* equipment and training, it was quite sobering. The water dragons had struck hard and struck with surgical precision, sinking one military ship but leaving the others afloat, if crippled, and all the oilers and freighters in the formation were gone. Sunk. The water dragons had sunk the fuel supply and the food and equipment for the

invasion force, leaving them with no choice but to turn back for the nearest friendly port so they could get their crippled ships tied up to something solid, or at the very least, anchored in shallow water. The estimate on his screen was approximately 12,000 Chinese casualties, which made it very *merciful* considering that the dragons demonstrated that they could have sunk the entire armada with relative ease...a very forceful point that not only the Chinese would take to heart. That chaos out there was a message to anyone and everyone that entertained thoughts of invading their island: *do so at your own peril, for we can fight back in ways you can neither comprehend nor prevent.*

The damage was crippling not just to that armada, but to the Chinese Navy as a whole. Some 30% of its operational fleet was now crippled, leaving them heavily undermanned, and they'd be facing *billions* of dollars to repair those ships, not to mention the hefty price tag that represented the loss of their carrier. They had a second carrier there to recover their airborne planes, and they were close enough to New Guinea for them to find a place to land anyway, but the price of the ship, the fighters and planes that had still been on board, equipment, supplies, men...that was about \$4 billion dollars total laying on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, and it was sunk by an enemy that the Chinese could not see, could not hear, and could not stop.

Walker tapped his fingertips together as he watched the images. "Tell me we can't be manhandled like this," he said grimly. "They're our friends *now*, but history has proved over and over that your friends don't stay your friends forever. We'd better be able to stop them from doing that to *us*."

"At this moment, I can't do that, Jack," Yates replied. "The Chinese have equipment almost as good as ours, and it's clear they never saw it coming. Neither will we."

"Ideas?"

"A few. Give me a few months, and I'm sure we can come up with some way to see them coming. I'm not sure how effective we'll be stopping them, but if we can prove they did it, it might help us on other fronts. But as

one Navy man to another, *damn* I'm impressed," he said with a nod. "Whoever planned that knew exactly what to do and how to hit them. In just over an hour, they completely eliminated any threat the Chinese posed to their island, and did it in a way that will scare the piss out of anyone else with similar ideas. It was *perfect*."

"Mister President, there are pictures of the Chinese fleet appearing on media sites," an aide said. "I'm getting reports that they were sent to every major media organization in the world as part of a mass email."

"They said they'd do that," Yates said. "They told everyone they were coming, and now they're showing the world what happens to anyone that tries, without ever admitting that they were the ones that did it. It's a show of force, and a damn effective one. No doubt the admirals over in China are standing in front of some *extremely* pissed off politicians right about now," he grunted. "There might even be a few executions. The Chinese don't take military incompetence very lightly."

"They're everything Jenny warned us they could be," Walker said quietly. "Their magic backed up by the department's technological savvy... it makes them *dangerous*."

"But reasonable," Yates said quickly. "And they had every right to defend their island. It's the right of any sovereign state to defend itself from aggression."

"Of course, but to see how they did it, and how defenseless it makes *us*...I'd almost be happier not knowing," he said. "Have the boys over in the Navy lab start working on some way we can protect our ships, Tom," he ordered. "If they ever turn on us, we'd better be ready."

20 September, 2017, 10:31 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It was a tired Kell that climbed up onto the beach of his family farm, between the family burrow and the cove.

It had taken the 16 water drakes with him two days to get him back to the island, time spent almost constantly on the move. The water drakes took turns sleeping in the aura current while others carried them, and Kell had done so himself, sleeping about two or three hours at a time, which was more than enough for an earth drake. The rest of the time was spent swimming so he didn't tire any water drake out carrying him, and after two days, he was feeling it a *tiny* bit in his muscles...after all, he hadn't exerted himself like that in a while. He'd spent nearly six days on a war footing, constantly on the move, and it had finally caught up with him a little bit.

He was most likely energetic compared to the sky dragons and chromatics. He'd been receiving reports almost on an hourly basis since starting back, and he'd been told that at midnight last night, they'd recast the enchantments that hid the island from the humans. It had taken them nearly four hours to complete and had required quite a few materials to enact, and now about 99% of the sky dragon and chromatic population was virtually comatose in their dens. Even chromatics like Prisma had worked on the spell, chromatics still in school, there to literally be nothing but magical batteries, to feed power to their elders. Only the youngest of the chromatics and sky dragons weren't wiped out by the magic, and now those sky dragon juveniles were the ones flying patrols around the island, searching for human ships. And they'd probably be doing so for two or three days.

The fact that *tomorrow* was supposed to be the most conducive to using their magic was an indication of how serious they were about getting those spells back up as fast as dragonly possible. The autumn equinox would have been a high point in magical energy that would have made casting the spells much easier, but the council had decided to do it as soon as the conditions were *conducive enough* to cast the spell without killing any dragons. But at the end of the clawtips, the spells were back up and the island was once again hidden from visual and satellite surveillance.

There was more magic coming, however. Jussa had been giving him status reports as he swam back, and the water dragons were going to research a permanent spell that would act like a physical barrier, turning away anything made of steel from the island that didn't come in with a dragon physically touching it to get it past that spell. Jussa was talking about placing the spell about half a kilometer away from shore on average, since the spell had to be spherical in shape to work right. That would prevent any large ships from being able to get close enough to anchor by shore and prevent most forms of landing craft from reaching the shore. It would also stop virtually any human weapon from getting onto the island, at least ones not being carried by a dragon. They needed to keep a way to get steel into the effect of the abjuration because the dragons needed that steel themselves, so they had to have a way to get it onto the island. Setting a spell so only steel that was brought past the boundary of the spell in contact with a dragon was a very clever means of going about it. The conditions Jussa described would let a dragon carry steel items back and forth across the boundary of the spell without any problems, but would stop just about everything else. It was simple, but it was elegantly effective in its design. But that was how water dragons tended to think, simple solutions that solved the problem. Water dragons were highly underestimated in how smart they were, since they were very modest and unassuming by basic personality.

The first freighter was about five hours behind them, and the nuclear weapons were already here. They'd already disarmed the weapons and extracted their plutonium cores, and those were now safely stored behind plenty of steel and lead casing in Sanctuary City, waiting for the reactor fuel rods from the carrier to arrive so they could bury them. The shaft was dug and waiting, capped so it couldn't fill with water. The department was studying the rest of the missile system to get a very close look at it, looking for any design flaws they could exploit if they had to ever deal with those missiles again.

His family and Kammi boiled out of the den and bounded towards him, and Kammi being Kammi, she slammed into him and drove him to the

ground. He was too tired to do much more than lay there as she nuzzled him fiercely, all but laying on top of him. “I’m *so* glad you’re home,” she told him in a strong, emotional voice.

“I’m glad to be home too,” he replied. “See, mother? Not a scratch, outside of Kammi just giving me some bruises. Surrat kept his promise.”

“I’m so glad,” she said with a relieved smile.

“We’ve heard that it went well,” Keth said as they reached him.

“Just as planned, but I wasn’t too surprised. The Chinese had absolutely no defense against the water dragons, so it made it relatively easy,” he said as Kammi let him up, and he endured a little rough hugging and nuzzling from the hatchlings. “Sheesh, I’m just fine, you worriers,” he chided Kitta as she pulled on his horn to bring his head down. “Just a little tired. We’ve been moving nonstop since we left Jayapura. The water drakes are so tired they just went straight to their dens.” He looked at the coastal tract behind the burrow. “I see you planted already.”

“Wheat, and I have a crop of Hett’s onions and my radishes on the south coastal,” Keth said professionally. “Those crops can handle the rain, and those tracts have good drainage.”

“The tomatoes?”

“We’re going to plant those on the lower north slope tomorrow,” he answered. “And the corn on the north tract.”

“What about our livestock? They might eat the seedlings when they sprout.”

“That’s what you and Kammi will be doing after work, youngling. We need you to build the fence so we can keep them from roaming while the rest of us get our crops planted.”

“We can do that, Patron, no problem,” Kammi told him.

Two sky dragons whizzed down from the volcano well behind his parents. One was Irago, and the other was an extremely small female juvenile. “Kell,” Hinado called.

“Irago,” he replied with a nod. “Didn’t you help with the spell?”

“No, I’m the drake in charge of the youngling sky dragons,” he said modestly. “Until our elders recover, I’m directing the younglings in patrolling the skies around the island in search of planes and boats. I was given a message for you. Rest for now. The council will meet to hear your report when the council members feel strong enough. Right now, the chromatic and our council members are too exhausted to attend council.”

“I can understand that. Just have them send me a message when they need me.”

He nodded. “I was tasked to collect that message band to take to the chromatic sages for examination,” he added.

“Oh, right.” Kell pulled it off his horn and offered it up, rearing up on the base of his tail and handing it up to him. “Is the council still in session while the others are recovering?”

Irago nodded. “They gave permission for the council to meet with six until such time that they can rejoin. They trust Jussa’s wisdom. He was a good choice as the leader of the council.”

“No argument from me there,” Kell agreed. “You’re moving up in the world, Irago,” he said lightly.

He nodded his head slightly. “Since I was placed in the department, they felt I was mature enough to handle the responsibility to oversee the youngers and keep watch over the island,” he explained. “So far, they’ve done very well, because they understand how important our task is. Nothing is sneaking up on the island while our elders regain their strength,” he declared, a bit forcefully.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, Irago,” Kammi told him, then she took hold of Kell’s paw. “Now, if you don’t mind, Kell needs to get some rest.”

“Of course,” he said with a slight smile. He and his very young female companion flitted up and raced back towards the top of the volcano, and Kell found himself being dragged towards the burrow.

“Now let’s get you on a sleeping mound so you can rest, then we’ll have a big feast tonight to celebrate you coming back safe,” Kammi declared.

“Well, thank you so much for planning my entire day, Kammi,” he protested.

“Get used to it, intended,” she said teasingly. “You belong to me now.”

Kell cut off the inevitable giggle from his younger siblings with a hard stare, which naturally made them all burst out laughing as he was dragged bodily towards the den.

Chapter 23

21 September 2017, 19:56 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It was a *disaster*...at least for the Chinese.

Kell dumped the last of the black stone rails and posts from his cart onto the pasture overlooking the northern edge of their farm and Gev's tracts, a stretch of sloped ground right up against the volcano that had a small stream on its north edge and a natural steep terrace-like dropoff along the western border, to check the latest reports from his own internet snoopers and spiders and the latest reports from the department's slightly more extensive spy network inside the Chinese computer system. The damage to their invasion fleet had been absolutely ghastly, in their terms, and just as Kell had planned and hoped, they had no absolute proof that the dragons did it. They highly *suspected* that the dragons had something to do with it, because of the unnatural storm and the fact that they never saw anything, in addition to the subs reporting that every single sonar on all 14 subs had malfunctioned at exactly the same time. They'd lost 9,102 men in the attack, the most of which had been on the freighters and oilers, for they'd gone down so quickly that, on average, half the crew of the ship died before they could even get on deck. They'd been trapped in flooding interior compartments by automatic safety doors, and drowned. They'd lost 37 ships, and as of the last report, the seaworthy ships were towing the 121 disabled vessels to Jayapura, Indonesia, with a large fleet of tugs and support ships en route from China to start sorting things out.

But it was the loss of the carrier that had them most furious. They'd lost *billions* of dollars when that ship was sunk, and they were most infuriated over the fact that they had no idea *how* it sunk. The department had their sat systems hacked, and the sky dragons had fried its antenna

mast, so they received no telemetry or data from the ship as it went down, and the Chinese had not designed her with a disaster buoy to provide critical information about where, how, and why a ship sank. Those buoys were standard issue equipment on most Naval ships from most any nation, but for some reason the Chinese never added it to their flagship supercarrier...probably never believing that it could possibly sink. All they had were reports from other captains in the fleet, who had heard the *Mao Tse Tung's* captain report that he'd collided with something and was taking on water, and then nothing else. The captain had died, he went down with his ship.

Everyone was more or less waiting to see what the Chinese did next, but as far as the council was concerned, the threat of the Chinese had been neutralized. What happened afterwards was the realm of the department, the council believed, and they'd already turned their attention to the next major issue for the island not counting the food shortage, which was the scions. Jussa had listened to Kell's concerns about that in a meeting that morning, and agreed that getting at least one scion back in operation was absolutely critical for the earth dragons, for the island, and for magic in general. The earth dragons absolutely had to have a means to escape the island in the event of some kind of calamitous natural disaster—like the volcano deciding it wanted to explode rather than erupt—or another invasion that managed to make it to the island. The chromatics and sky dragons were still recovering from recasting the cloaking spells, but Jussa would make that the top priority when council returned to session.

The department wasn't done with the Chinese, however. They were hiding a secret, the secret of why they were so hot to get control of the dragons, even to the point of risking global war, and Ferroth wanted to know why. When a scion was restored, Kell had the feeling that he'd be spending a *lot* of time in China. They also had to keep an eye on how the Chinese reacted, and Ferroth had already authorized the department to take steps if the Chinese started trying to destabilize the world's political or financial foundations. Chaos in the human world might cause them

problems, so Ferroth was going to make sure the Chinese got smacked back into line in a hurry.

Kell was certainly hoping that that was the last time he'd have to go before the council for quite a while. Kell had taken on almost a bit of celebrity since the completion of the mission, surprising quite a few dragons that an earth dragon *that young* had successfully led the mission against the Chinese invasion, and truth be told, he didn't like it that much. But what he did like was that almost overnight, quite a few dragons suddenly had a hell of a lot more respect for the department. They were finally starting to understand that the department didn't just bring them cable TV and install lights, they were the dragons that dealt with the outside world...and when the outside world had tried to intrude on their sanctuary, it was the department drakes that had led the counterattack to beat them back and protect the island. It was also giving the earth dragons as a whole a lot more respect as well. Right now, the other dragons were treating them like glass because of what they were and what they meant to magic. But every dragon knew that the department was an earth dragon operation, and the success of the department in protecting Draconia was showing the other dragons that while earth dragons didn't have magic, it didn't make them helpless, nor did it make them weak.

There are many different kinds of power, and the dragons were starting to see that the earth dragons had a *lot* of power...just not in the way most dragons reckoned such things.

"Very good, youngling. You think you can get another load before dark?" Keth asked as he and Kanna dug post holes for the fence they were about to raise.

"We should," Kell replied as Kammi herded the hatchlings up the hill. They'd all been helping him dig stone rails and posts from the stone shelf not far from the entrance of the cove, a place that Shii's pod allowed them to quarry rock without them having to barter quarry rights from the above-water quarries on the north side of the island. It was another chance for the hatchlings and his intended to learn the family skill. "One more load should

be it,” he said, glancing at the pile. Keth and Kanna had been digging rails all day, and in the morning, they’d be building the fence. Keth was just getting as much done as he could to speed things up tomorrow.

“It should,” Keth nodded as Kanna moved even further away, then she dug a post hole in about two seconds by driving her forepaw into the ground about a meter and pulling out the soil. They’d been cutting out the rails in a uniform length, so she knew *exactly* how far apart to make the posts.

“Come on, hatchlings, one more load before dark,” Kell called as he got back under the yoke bar of the cart, putting it just in front of his wingjoints, then he turned the cart around and started back towards the burrow. The three young earth dragons jumped up into the cart rather than walk, talking excitedly as Kammi fell into step beside him, but Kell didn’t mind that much. They barely weighed enough for him to notice them in the cart. “Holding up, intended?”

“Of course I’m holding up,” she replied in a frosty tone that made Kitta burst into a fit of giggling. “And you’d better watch it, little girl, I happen to live in the same burrow as you,” she threatened, looking back into the cart.

“Not for much longer,” Kitta teased.

“You think I can’t come in there and show you who’s bigger and meaner, little whelp?” she retorted.

“Stop making empty threats,” Kell told her, which earned him a whack on the hip from the underside of her tail. “And save your energy. Did you see tomorrow’s task list?”

“Ugh,” Kammi grunted. “It’s gonna take us all day to do all that work. I wanted to help Patron finish the fence tomorrow afternoon, but I’m not sure it’s gonna happen.”

“I’m just glad I get to actually work,” Kell grunted. “After almost three weeks of preparing, it’s nice to get back to good old boring work.”

“I can understand that,” Kammi nodded, glancing at him. “By the way, Jukra told me that they’ve sealed off the water tunnel back where it connects to the village tunnel, so it’s ours now.”

“Good. We’ll have to get some dehumidifiers for the lower levels.”

A shadow passed over them, and all five of them looked up just in time to see a *big* fire drake flap its wings heavily in preparation to land. Kell recognized her as Gressa as her back feet touched the youthful sawgrass, then she folded her wings and advanced up to them quickly. The three hatchlings gawked a tiny bit at the huge fire drake—they didn’t see other dragons from so close up very often—but Kell and Kammi just nodded to her. “Gressa, what are you doing down here?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” she replied. She fell into step with them, dwarfing all five of them. She was longer than Kell was even with the cart hitched to himself “May I remain?”

“Of course,” he told her. The other dragons had done *very* well respecting earth dragon territory since the rules were changed.

“With the threat of the Chinese eliminated, at least for now, we aren’t preparing for an attack. I have free time again,” she said. “I was wondering if perhaps I could take lessons in English from someone in the department? I’d like to complete my education, and the fire dragons need at least one English speaker. I learned more in the week I remained on the island after the council left, but I still have much more to learn.”

“You’re not far from fluent now,” he told her, then he looked back, appraising her carefully. “I think you *might* fit down the tunnel to Sanctuary City, but you won’t fit in the department office very well. It wasn’t built to handle someone your size.”

“I don’t have to go down there to get lessons,” she said dismissively.

“Actually, you probably will, we’re all really busy right now,” Kammi told her. “We’re still trying to restore all department services to the island.

We're teaching Irago English, we could probably convince them to give the lessons out in the main gallery where you'll fit."

"I know you're busy. Thank you for getting power back to my den, by the way. When will the TV be back on?"

Kell laughed. "For you, in time for the next football game," he told her. "The cable's not on a high priority, but since you were so helpful to us dealing with the humans, well, I think we can set something up for you," he said lightly.

"Sure can," Kammi replied easily. "If you hadn't been there, it woulda been much harder on us."

"Really? What?"

"We can get you wifi access and install a computer in your den," Kammi told her. "We can set it so it makes your TV work, and you'll also have the computer there to surf the sports websites. It probably won't be tomorrow, but I'm pretty sure we can get there before Sunday."

"That would be fine!" she said eagerly. "I grew quite fond of the sports webbing pages when we were with the humans. They taught me how the computer page viewer worked, so I could do it myself."

"Web pages," Kell corrected, "and we'd be happy to. You helped us, we help you. That's a fair barter."

"We can filch one of the surplus computers in the storeroom," Kammi said with a sly smile. "It won't need much just to stream TV from our intranet and surf the web. We'll just set it so her TV is her monitor."

"We could also install some programs to help you continue to learn English," Kell mused.

"That would also be quite fine," she said with a nod.

"Whereabouts is your den? On what side of the island?"

"It overlooks Blackstone Village," she answered.

“That’ll make it *easy*,” Kammi said with a dismissive gesture of her forepaw. “We already have a wireless node up and running that covers that part of the island. All we’ll need is the site antenna for her den, some cabling, and the box itself,” she told Kell. “It would only take a couple of hours tops.”

“Yup, but finding that couple of hours is gonna be the trick,” Kell said.

“As long as you can have it done before the football game, I’ll be happy,” Gressa supplied.

“We’ll make sure. Come to the farm tomorrow at sunrise and we’ll try to get you down into the city, see if you fit,” he said, glancing at her again. “I’m almost positive you will, we dug the connecting tunnel so it would be big enough for us to get our equipment back out. You’re not much bigger than the generator they pulled out of the city yesterday, and they got that out with no problems.”

“Just be ready to be a little bored, Irigo’s starting at the beginning,” Kammi said. “And I doubt that they’ll have an earth drake to spare to give you dedicated lessons.”

“I’m sure I’ll learn *something* listening to the lessons,” she assured them, then she looked at them. “Pray tell, would the computer you install allow me to speak with the Hunters? I grew rather fond of several of them, and would like to talk to them.”

“Actually, yeah, we could set that up, and they can speak English to you,” Kell said. “In fact, we could set it up as a conference. You teach them draconic until Hinado can get back to it, they teach you English.”

“I think we’re getting into the realm of getting approval here, intended, but it does sound like a really good idea,” Kammi said. “Jenny and the others need to learn draconic, and well, here’s a dragon that can teach them,” she said, pointing the thumbclaw of her wing at Gressa. “And they can teach her English. We’ll just have to teach her how to use the conference program.”

“Shouldn’t be that hard, Gressa’s a very intelligent drake,” Kell said, which made Gressa smile. “Tell you what, Gressa. Let us talk to chief in the morning and convince him that it’s a good idea. If we can talk him into it, we’ll have your computer set up a whole lot faster, because then it becomes department business. He’ll put it on our task list.”

“What about the council?”

“This is *department* business,” Kell said simply. “Teaching English is our responsibility, and that’s mainly what you’re asking us for. If you happen to teach Jenny and the others draconic at the same time, that’s *your* business. Chief Ferroth is the drake to see to get approval for something like this.”

“If you say so, I’ll leave the politics to dragons that know about it,” Gressa shrugged. “I will return to your farm tomorrow evening to get your answer, is that alright?”

“Just fine,” Kell told her.

“Very well, I’ll be off then. It’s nearly time to get our evening allotments,” she said, then she frowned. “I’m starting to wish that I knew how to fish. Many dragons are still fishing on their own for extra food.”

“You wouldn’t enjoy the way *we* do it,” Kammi laughed. “We do it underwater.”

Gressa shuddered. “Absolutely not,” she agreed.

“Why is that?” Kav asked, one of the hatchlings finally getting brave enough to talk to a *much* bigger dragon.

“Because fire dragons will not dive into the ocean, little hatchling,” she replied, looking back at him. “All that *water*, it makes my scales crawl just thinking about it.”

“Fire dragons don’t like water, Kav,” Kell told him. “For obvious reasons.”

“Call it a racial prejudice,” Gressa nodded. “We know it won’t do us harm, but still, no fire dragon would ever willingly dive into water like that.”

“I never knew that.”

“There is still much for you to learn, small one,” Gressa told him with a very gentle voice, looking back the three of them. “The courage to ask questions will bring you the answers you seek. That is the fire dragon way.”

“Timidity has never been Kav’s problem,” Kell said dryly, which made Kammi laugh.

“I will see you tomorrow evening, Kell, Kammi,” she said to them. “Until then. Fare well, my brave hatchlings,” she added, looking back at them, then she veered off enough to open her wings and climb into the air, causing a large blast of wind to rush over the earth drakes.

“Woah!” Konn breathed. “I’ve never been that close to a fire dragon before!”

“They’re certainly big, aren’t they?” Kammi asked lightly.

“She seemed nice,” Kitta noted.

“Gressa’s okay for a fire dragon,” Kell told them. “She’s one of the smart ones. I can handle the smart ones.”

“Gaia’s truth,” Kammi grinned.

That work would be later, because they had something to do. Kell left the cart at a rocky point by the beach, so they didn’t ruin their sandy beach, and all five of them dove into the water. Kell led them out of the cove and a little to the north, then he surfaced with his siblings and Kammi following him. “Alright, let’s try to get this done before sunset. We’ll do it the same as before,” he said to them. “And don’t drown, Kammi.”

“Lick my tail, Kell,” she retorted, which made Kitta giggle again.

After all that insanity with the Chinese, it felt *good* to be doing something simple and meaningful. Kell and Kammi dug out long sections of rock in quick succession, Kammi able to stay under longer and longer with every breath. The three hatchlings were digging out their own sections, working together and practicing the family skill of both managing their oxygen and doing it properly. They were digging the sections they'd split into posts as Kell and Kammi dug out the sections they'd split into rails. Kell paused to observe the younglings, and he nodded at their technique, doing it exactly as they were taught, displaying the nearly genetic digging ability that all earth dragons possessed. They *instinctively* knew how to dig, how to excavate, and even to a lesser extent how to build, it was stamped directly into earth dragon DNA. They would cut out the edges of the block, score it at the bottom, then the three of them would snap it off and carry it up to the shore, and they were digging out a post block every four or five minutes. Kell did a lot more digging than Kammi, but that was because he could still hold his breath more than twice as long as she could. But with some work and training, she'd catch up to him fairly quickly. Kell wouldn't be able to extend the time he could hold his breath much, since he was already close to the limit, where Kammi had a lot of improvement to go before she reached her maximum.

In the 90 minutes they had before it got too dark to do anything, they'd managed to dig up the last of the post and rail blocks they'd need for the fence. They'd have to split them up and shape them, but that could wait until tomorrow. The hard part was quarrying them, and that was done. Kell herded the hatchlings out of the water and followed them up onto the rocks, shaking the water off his wings in much the same way the water dragons did before folding them. Kammi looked a little tired—digging underwater was *far* harder than the standard way—but she wasn't so tired that she pinned Kitta to the ground and tormented her, his sister giggling and squirming. "Be sassy to me, will ya? You had this coming, earthworm!" Kammi declared. Kav and Konn looked a jump from defending their sister from Kammi's torture, but Kell stopped them with an outstretched wing.

“Let them sort it out,” he said. “We need to get the cart loaded and up to the pasture.”

Kammi tormented Kitta for only a moment or two more before she relented, then they loaded the cart. Kell sent the hatchlings to the burrow to get dinner out of the pantry as he and Kammi went back to the pasture, his vision shifting into thermographic as they started up the slope. It was the point where the other dragons all stayed in their dens, or at the very least didn't fly without precautions, but for the earth dragons, it was the time to socialize and visit. Earth dragons would probably be nocturnal if not for the need to be awake during the daylight hours to tend their crops and herds, since they saw perfectly well in the darkness when virtually no other creatures could.

Most of the time. Kell and Kammi both looked up when they heard the leathery flap of wings and saw a white light, and they both smiled brightly when Prisma landed just before them, a little heavily, using her magic to light her way. Scillinting refractions from the magical light over her head shimmered off her rainbow-colored wings, the result of tiny, shiny colored scales that covered the membranes of her wings. The effect was actually quite pretty. “Fluffy!” Kammi called, bounding forward and rearing up to sit on her tail, offering her paws. Prisma did the same, taking her forepaws in greeting. “Feeling better?”

“Enough to get down here,” she replied in a weary voice. “The youngest of us will recover the fastest, as we didn't do as much work as our elders, but I am still very tired. I hope to return to the department tomorrow. Classes are cancelled for another four days,” she said with obvious disappointment.

“Why are you flying at night, Prisma?”

“Because I am *starving*, Kell,” she replied honestly, looking at him. “I came to hope to beg a meal from your stores. It's too late to get an allotment and too dark to fish. They don't move around after dark, I've come to discover. You are my only hope to avoid a very unpleasant night.”

“We have enough to share,” Kell told her. “The hatchlings are in the burrow. Go announce yourself and tell them that I said you could eat.”

“Thank you, *thank you*, Kell,” she said with gratitude, daring to come over and put a fond paw on his shoulder, then she crossed in front of him, heading for the burrow entrance.

“I’ll go with her, you don’t need me to help you pull the cart,” Kammi said with a sly smile, turning and following.

“Someone just ended up with the entire task list tomorrow,” he warned.

“You wouldn’t do that to your intended,” she said haughtily as she padded away with Prisma.

“Watch me,” he called, which made both females laugh.

Kell hauled the stone blocks up to where the others were set out, and he started unloading them as his parents ambled back to him. “Where are the others? There’s still work to be done,” Keth said with a slight edge to his voice.

“I sent the hatchlings to the burrow to start gathering dinner, and Prisma asked to join us. She’s finally strong enough to move, and she has no food in her den, so she came to us hoping for a meal. Kammi went with her.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I’m glad she’s up and about. Such a dear little thing,” Kanna said. “I’m quite fond of her.”

“Almost everyone in the department is too,” Kell chuckled as his parents started helping him unload the cart. “Half of them can’t believe they’re friends with a *fluffy*.”

“She doesn’t act like most chromatics,” Keth noted as he reached for another post.

“I know, that’s probably why she gets along with us so well,” Kell nodded as he and Kanna set down one of the long blocks.

“How is that sky drake managing?”

“Surprisingly well,” he replied. “He’s very quiet most of the time, but he seems to be very smart, and he endeared many in the department to him when he did so well out on the mission. He seems a dependable drake, and chief likes that in his workers. Our work is too important for it to be done by dragons we can’t depend on to do it right. He might actually make it, but we’ll have to see.”

Keth was quiet a moment. “I had something of a question, youngling.”

“Go on, Sire.”

“Since everything seems to be calming down a bit, I was wondering if the rules about interacting with the humans over the computer might be changed. I find myself growing more and more curious about how Jenny is doing, and I would like to use the facebook page she keeps to leave her messages.”

“You could always call her, Sire. I have her number.”

“It’s a little more than that,” he said. “The humans know about us now, and it was my thought that if some few of us start interacting with the human world over the internet, it might be beneficial. You know, use the twitter and the facebook. I find myself curious about the farming techniques the humans use, and I’d like to communicate, not read articles, to actually have conversations with others. I don’t have to identify myself as an earth dragon, but the rules as they are now don’t even permit me to use the social networking under an assumed identity. Only the department drakes have that permission.”

Kell paused as he reached for a block, then leaned back on his tail a little more. “That’s actually a very good point, Sire,” he said in a musing voice. “Things have changed. I’m not sure if the council would permit it, but we should at the very least bring it up. Maybe a little communication back and forth over the internet would be good for both us and them. And maybe it *is* time for us to start establishing an official internet presence,” he

pondered aloud. “An official website, a facebook page, and so on. I know that the internet division already has a webpage coded and we have the facebook page and domain name reserved, we’ve kept them just in case. But letting dragons outside the department start to delve into social media is something I should bring up with the chief,” he said with a nod. “And probably the council, too. We’ll see what they think about it.”

“If it would be no bother,” Keth said.

“A good idea is never a bother, Sire.”

They unloaded the rest of the cart, and Kell pulled it back to the burrow with his parents. He put it away in one of the external storage rooms and then joined his family and Prisma in the kitchen, where they ate all their meals, the six dragons sitting around their low table. Seeing Prisma sit beside Keth reminded him that she was larger than all of them, if not by very much, but she would grow larger as she aged. Chromatics continued to grow well after they reached adulthood, which was unique among the five races. Kell may grow maybe 20 or more centimeters at the shoulder and might put on an extra half meter of length, but that would be it. He was the smallest adult male drake on the island his age or older, and it was almost fitting that he was courting the smallest adult female drake on the island. Prisma was telling his family and Kammi about casting the spell, which was done at the geographic center of the island, in the valley of sorts between the extinct peak and the active peak of the volcano, a grueling spell that took over four hours to cast and left them all so exhausted that they all but crawled back to their dens, and the dragons actively controlling the magic had to be carried there by the fire dragons that were attending. Kell joined them as she finished, and Kanna pushed a bowl of huge radishes at him. “When will they start on the scion?”

“If I remember correctly, they can’t create one until the end of November, when the magical forces will align to make the spell possible,” she answered. “But if what you said about the council is right, then they’ll begin the preparations very soon. I know little about the magic that creates a

scion, that's highly advanced magic, but I have no doubt it's going to require a large number of familiars and fetishes to enact."

"Sounds like the sky dragons are going to be doing a lot of plant hunting," Kammi noted.

"I'm sure they'll enjoy it, they love getting missions that allow them to venture into areas usually denied to them," Prisma said as she ate another of Hett's sweet onions. Like most other dragons, she wasn't too fond of radishes, and Kanna was too much the hostess to make her eat something she didn't like. "How goes the planting, Keth?"

"We've got most of it done," he answered. "We're going to plant some corn and tomatoes, they do well in the rainy season, but we've got all of our other crops sowed."

"I do love tomatoes," Prisma said. "What about the food on the human ships, Kell?"

"They haven't gotten it all here yet, but it's being added to the allotments, at least after they sort it out," he replied. "I doubt that all of it will stay good with the freighters being underwater, some of it had to have gotten flooded when they sank. Right now, they're bringing the carrier, and that takes a whole lot of water dragons to move. We needed to get the carrier back here before the Chinese try to get submersibles down to inspect it."

"That's gonna be a lot of work for us," Kammi said. "Me and Kell I mean. We're the only ones that can really hold our breath, and no doubt chief will want us to go through the carrier before the water dragons start chopping it up."

"Surrall and Shii's bubble spell doesn't guarantee you those kinds of jobs anymore, Kammi," Prisma told her. "Quite a few water dragons have learned it, and Surrall and Shii have received notice from the sages, Surrall especially. Few even among the water dragons realized they had such skill in magic."

“Like most water dragons, Prisma, they’re quiet and modest. And since Surrall spends most of his time out fishing, few get to see his magical skills. He rarely uses them outside view of the pod.”

“Speaking of the ships, what news from China?”

“Right now, we’re just waiting to see what they do,” Kammi replied. “We’re watching their high-level communications. So far, there’s a whole lot of blaming going on, and they’re still trying to figure out just what in Gaia *happened*. That’s why we had the water dragons move the carrier, so they can’t get a look at it.”

“Given how bad they were beaten, I’m not sure if they’ll try something like that again. But, the fact that they resorted to force *first* means that whatever it is we have that they want, they want it so bad that they were willing to risk a global war among the humans to get it. When they get the scion back up, I foresee a whole lot of visits to China in my future.”

“Not just you, odds are chief’ll send all of us,” Kammi added. “You’ll just do the missions where you have to speak to the Chinese.”

“I still feel certain that they have ancient sky dragon tomes, and are trying to kindle their own magical training by getting the means to read those books,” Prisma said.

“That’s possible,” Kell nodded. “But it’s pretty clear that the Chinese knew a lot more about us than anyone else, part of their histories that weren’t purged, so it’s also possible they were coming down here for no other reason than to conquer us, so they could have magic all to themselves. The orders their military commanders have seem to suggest it.”

“Well, they learned real quick just what magic can do,” Kammi grinned. “When we attacked their fleet.”

“They didn’t see anything, which was the entire point,” Kell said. “They can’t *prove* we did it. They *suspect* it, but they can’t *prove* it.”

After dinner, Kell called Keth into the chamber where he kept his home computer. Keth was a typical earth dragon in that he was computer literate—was actually pretty savvy behind a keyboard for that matter—and he used his computer to help manage his farm. It held records of all his inventories, land management plans, planting schedules, and future planting projections. He even ran statistical programs to monitor the yields of the tracts, to adjust his land usage to keep the land at maximum productivity without impacting crop yields. He also had a long and detailed file on his computer that documented his breeding program for the giant radishes for which the farm was famous, carefully maintained so Keth knew exactly what was working and what wasn't to make his radishes the largest and most robust on the island.

And there was a new file on his desktop labeled *Sweet Onions*. He was going to try to out-do Hett with his own onions.

“What is it, youngling?” Keth asked as he padded into the room.

“I’m removing the filters and getting your computer access through the firewall that keeps you from leaving messages on most internet websites,” he replied. “And I’m starting you a facebook page and twitter account.”

“Without Ferroth’s approval?”

“I know how he’s going to answer, so why wait?” he shrugged. “I’m also going to install a phone emulation program that will allow you to call cell phones off the island. And I put Jenny’s phone number, facebook page, and twitter handle in your book,” he added, pointing to the address book icon on his desktop, which held the on-island numbers for the cell phones the earth dragons used to talk to each other. “Just be warned, Sire. If you call Jenny, she’ll be able to call you back. So make sure you don’t mind her calling you before you take that step.”

“I’m rather fond of her, youngling,” he replied calmly. “What do I need to know about using the facebook and twitter?”

“Keep your computer in English when you do, computers off the island don’t recognize the draconic language packs we use here,” he said. “And it won’t be as fast as using the island’s intranet. We have some very strong firewalls up between us and the internet when it comes to leaving messages and similar activities, so don’t worry if it takes a few seconds to load or update. When it comes to trading messages with the humans, don’t reveal that you’re a dragon, at least not until we have official permission to start interacting with humans over the internet, and don’t reveal where we are. As far as the outside world’s concerned, you’re a farmer. That’s it. If someone asks about you, just tell them that you never give out that information because it makes you feel uncomfortable.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

Keth watched as Kell set up his facebook page and then customized it to make it look rather impressive, then he learned how it worked. Keth was internet literate since he surfed many websites in search of new information about farming and agricultural science, so he picked up the art of facebook quickly. He then got a ten minute course on the proper use of twitter, then he learned about instagram and a few of the other lesser known social networking sites.

Kell’s phone rang while he was explaining the “language” of the internet, educating Keth on the abbreviations commonly used in most communications. Kell still had his tablet strapped to his forearm, so he activated his speaker. “Kell,” he said.

“Are you the one putting a new box through the firewall?” Kintel asked.

“Yes, that’s me,” he replied. “I’m going to talk to chief about it in the morning.”

“Alright. I was about to shut you down,” he chuckled.

“Like you could keep me out,” Kell teased lightly.

“You’re not *that* good, Kell,” Kintel replied tauntingly, then he cut the call.

Kell laughed. “Sounds like the spikes are out and the tail is cocked,” he mused to himself.

“Don’t get into a war with your supervisor, Kell, it can only end badly.”

Kell laughed again. “Wise advice, Sire, wise advice.”

22 September 2017, 09:41 DMT; Sanctuary City

Kell got his revenge on Kammi, because she was out there doing their task sheet alone.

Kell and Ferroth were in his new office, spacious and open, Kell explaining what he did for Keth and then broaching the subject of allowing the dragons to start limited interaction with humanity over the internet. They’d already gone over Gressa’s needs, and Ferroth had checked off on getting a computer up to her den, but he was adamant that they’d need council approval for her to teach draconic to the Hunters. But, he was also fairly sure they’d allow it, so Kell would go up and do the installation himself as soon as they were done with their meeting. Gressa they would trust with a computer, since she’d proved that she was one of the smart fire dragons, and she could actually get a lot of use out of it since she could speak and read English fairly well. Their computers translated webpages into draconic, but it lost a lot in the translation since dragons didn’t have words for many of the innovations the humans thought up since they moved to the island. The earth dragons had imported those words into the draconic language, but since they were the only ones that used them, few other dragons would have any idea what they were talking about.

And also no doubt she'd become *very* popular in fire dragon circles for her access to ESPN and other sports websites, getting news before the fire dragons saw it on TV.

"I should spike you for doing that without council approval, but I won't," Ferroth told him as he put his forepaws on his new desk, newly carved out of volcanic rock. "Keth at least won't do anything stupid. But, as far as the idea goes, I think it might be a good idea, on a *very* limited basis. Only dragons fluent in English should get that kind of access. And I've been pondering the idea of putting up something official for a while now, but we've always had more to worry about than a web page," he grunted, rapping his claws on the desk. "It'll have to wait a bit. We'll need the full council to approve going semi-public, but I think the six there now can approve Gressa teaching the Hunters draconic. They were going to do that anyway as soon as Hinado could go back to teaching." He looked at his monitor, which was infragraphic. "I have an appointment to speak to the council around noon. You get what you need and go install that computer in Gressa's den, but take your time. If you dawdle long enough, I can get you an answer."

"But I should go ahead and take a webcam with me, and install the conferencing program."

"May as well, you'll have to do it anyway," he said with a slight smile. "Make sure you throttle her firewall permissions so she can *only* use it to talk to Imakaii. Gressa's pretty damn smart for a fire dragon, she might start playing with it. Gaia knows, we don't need her learning Portuguese from some human in Brazil she randomly rings up while clicking buttons."

Kell laughed. "She'd probably do just that," he agreed. "I'll take care of it. Anything new from China?"

"Nothing yet, they're still in punishment mode for their military," he answered. "The carrier should be here late tonight, maybe tomorrow morning. Trekka's going to lead a survey team into the carrier using hider amulets to remove the reactor core. I want you to pick some department

drakes to empty out the carrier's armory. Bring it down here. We might have use for all those bombs and missiles," he said in a grim kind of tone.

"I can do that," he nodded. "Let me go get everything I need, and I'll go track down Gressa's den and get started."

"Alright."

Kell gathered up all the equipment he'd need to do the job and walked up to Blackstone Village. It was just inside the Darkwood and close to the edge of the volcano, not far from the lava flows on the north side of the island. It had tunnels down into the village from several points that were actually rather far from the village, since it was considered the capitol village of the earth dragons and thus had the most dummy tunnels and side passages to confuse invaders. He started up the side of the volcano, his onyx claws carrying him up as easily as walking across flat ground, until a fire wyrm finally took notice of him and landed heavily in front of him. She was huge, one of the largest of the fire dragons, so big that she made Kell look like one of her hatchlings. "Hold, earth drake," she said, clinging to the side of the volcano with surprisingly agility. "You are out of bounds. Explain yourself."

"I need to talk to Gressa, a fire drake. I'm bringing equipment she asked for up to her den," he said, opening his wing and showing her a large shoulder satchel.

"I can take them."

"I'm *installing* them," he elaborated. "She's asked for the use of a computer from the department, and I'm up here to install it for her."

"Does this mean that the TV will be back on soon?" she asked with sudden enthusiasm.

Kell had the sense not to roll his eyes. "Not yet, they're still trying to repair the damage to the cables," he told her. "It's going to be a week or two, just be patient."

“But football season is happening! We are *missing games!*” she protested.

“Tell you what. We can’t get the cable back on yet, but we can set up some public projection-style TVs near the crater lake until we get the cable back on. It might be crowded, but that’s about the best we can do for now.”

“Yes! You must do that!” she declared. “You must do so right now!”

“I have this to do first, but I’ll bring earth drakes up this afternoon and set it up,” he told her. “Now, can you find Gressa and ask her to come find me? I need her permission to enter her den.”

“I know the magic to send messages. I will contact her immediately. The faster you finish that, the faster you can put up that TV!”

Kell sighed. *Fire dragons.*

The huge wyrm launched from the side of the volcano and spread her wings, banking to the south as Kell tapped speed dial for Ferroth on the tablet strapped to his forearm and started back up the steep slope. “Chief,” he called.

“What is it, whelp?”

“We’re going to need three or four large projection units linked to the satellite and a team of drakes that can set them up. I just had a nervous encounter with a fire wyrm that is *very* unhappy we don’t have her TV back on,” he replied. “We can set them up on the east side of the caldera, that large flat space past the crater lake. They all can’t fit there, but it’s *something*. And for Gaia’s sake, we’d better get the cable back on soon or they’re gonna riot. They’re missing football games.”

Ferroth actually laughed. “That’s not a bad idea. I guess with the attack successful they missed out on getting to fight, so the fire dragons need football to keep them busy. I’ll get Kintel to get everything set up, and dispatch an installation team. We can get something relatively decent up there to keep them happy until the cable’s back.”

Gressa landed on the side of the volcano just above him, her claws gripping the rock as she clung to it sideways, and she turned her head back towards him. “I received a message from Frazza that you’re bringing the computer?”

Kell nodded. “Just lead me to your den and we’ll get started.”

“And she said that you’re going to set up TVs like the ones back in Hawaii by the crater lake?”

“It was agree to it or have her bite my head off,” he replied, which made Gressa laugh.

“Frazza isn’t one known for being indirect about what she wants,” she said lightly. “My den is very close, just up there,” she said, pointing up the slope and to the north. “Come.” She scrambled up the rock nearly as deftly as an earth dragon, and Kell followed her.

Fire dragon dens were nothing like earth dragon dens. He’d been in quite a few of them over the years, installing electricity, one of the things field agents did when they had spare time between missions. Fire dragons preferred a single large cavern that was roughly elliptical, with a sleeping mound in the center made of rocks and loose sand and earth and all their possessions lined up along the walls. The den was excavated, and from the exacting dimensions, it was clearly done by earth dragons. Fire dragons could dig out a den, but they didn’t have the precision that earth dragons did. Fire dragons were pack rats, collectors, so the edges of the chamber were filled with all manner of objects and items that she’d either found, bartered, or taken as trophies or tribute from other fire dragons. Some of the items were dragon-made, some were natural objects like oddly shaped or colored rocks, some were works of art, and some of them antiques, human items from before the fire dragons came to the island. Her TV was at the very back of the den, mounted on the wall well off the floor, with the power lines attached to the ceiling running across the den. Gressa followed him into the very large and spacious den, a symbol of her status as a fire dragon to be reckoned with, but not so formidable that she could wrest one of the choice

dens inside the active caldera away from its current occupants. Kell went around her sleeping mound and set down the heavy pack he'd brought up holding his equipment. The size of the sleeping mound told him that Gressa had a mate, and given her formidable reputation, there was little doubt in Kell's mind she was the one that ruled the den. "I'll put your computer here. You'll have a wireless keyboard with an integrated trackball mouse, and you can also use the voice function of the TV to direct your computer. I'll install an antenna above your den entrance that will get you connection to our network, it's important that you don't damage it."

"I'll make sure of that," she replied as she climbed up onto her mound and laid down.

Kell had the computer installed and was connecting it to the TV when another fire dragon entered the den. It was a male drake, slightly smaller than Gressa, as well as two very young hatchlings, about the size of his own siblings. Kell hadn't known that Gressa had hatchlings. The male stopped and looked at him as the two small fire drakes bounded into the den, one chasing the other, but they slid to a halt when they came around the sleeping mound and saw him. "Kell, my mate Hazzath, and our hatchlings Zava and Kissar. Mate, younglings, this is Kell of the Earth Drakes, the warrior drake among them. He is to be treated with respect," she declared.

"Welcome to our den, earth drake," Hazzath said with a simple nod. "You bring the computer machine mate spoke of?"

"I'm installing it right now," he replied as he reared up and connected the video cables to the back of the TV. "Since you're both here, I can teach you how it works at the same time."

"I learned some of it from the Hunters," Gressa told him. "They taught me the workings of the web while I was there, enough to find the web sites, especially the youtube and football games to watch, and how to search for things I want to see. But I'm sure this one works better, since it is dragon made."

Kell couldn't help but agree with that, nodding as he came back down to all fours. The TV was almost too high for him to reach. Kell turned the computer on and set the keyboard down on the floor. "Access TV turn on, access input two," he called, and the TV screen blinked on. The computer's boot came up, and after just a few seconds, the GUI desktop settled in. The computer automatically resized the screen for the TV and set optimum resolution.

"That looks very different from what the Hunters had," Gressa said.

"We use a different program than they do, but it's just as easy to use," he replied, tapping on the keyboard. The two fire drakes watched the screen in curiosity as the hatchlings wrestled in a clear area well away from anything they could break. Kell configured the computer, then he set up a tutorial program they used with new earth drakes in the department that explained the basics of the graphical Linux OS they used. "You two can watch this instructional show that explains how it works while I install the network antenna. Remember, you can't break this or you can't watch TV."

"Did you hear that, younglings? You leave that object *alone*," Gressa declared in a strong voice, which made the two stop.

"Yes, Matron," the young male said.

"We'll be careful, Matron," the female agreed.

Kell had the antenna installed inside half an hour, since it was as easy as bolting it to the rock above the den entrance, pointing the directional antenna down to the bouncer they had at the edge of the forest, then running the cables across the ceiling. The two hatchlings watched him curiosity as he seemingly walked across the ceiling, tying the network cable in with the power cables, going directly over the two fire dragons on the sleeping mound. He went down the far wall like a giant squirrel, then dropped the cable to the floor behind the TV, dropped down, and installed a connector after he cut the cable. He had to wait a couple of minutes for the tutorial to end, then he configured the networking connections and got Gressa's box access through the firewall for conferencing Imakaii, and *only* Imakaii. He

let the conference program they used install off their cloud server as he went over how to bring up the web and how to get TV on her computer with Gressa and Hazzath. “So, we just press this button on the keyboard and it turns on the TV?” Hazzath asked in surprised, pointing at it with a claw.

“That’s it, that button is programmed to do all the work for you, it streams the TV off our own system. It works just like the TV you’re used to once you have it turned on. Press it again if you want to watch TV on one window while you look at web pages on another, and press this button to turn the TV window off completely.” He hit the shortcut button on the keyboard, and the GUI was replaced with a full screen TV window set on the default channel. “You change channels either with voice command or by typing the channel number on the keyboard. Access TV, ESPN,” he called. He had the TV sending those commands to the computer, and the computer recognized it and changed channels. “Access TV, set default channel, NFL Network. There, the TV will automatically go to NFL network when you turn it on,” he told them. The computer will make the TV work exactly the same way it worked before, so you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“That will be fine,” Hazzath said, looking down at the keyboard.

“The web browser will work exactly like the one the Hunters used, Gressa,” he continued. “I can show you some of its functions if you want.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out. That’s half the fun,” she said with a light smile. “Now, you do need to show me how I can talk to the Hunters.”

“I can show you from your side, but since they don’t know who you are, I’ll have to talk to Jenny so they can set it up from their side. Here, I’ll show you how to start the program and bring up the Hunters.” He explained the program to her, how to select which person she wanted to talk to, which was easy since Kell had already programmed her address book. He then showed her the email program, since the firewall would let her send and receive email with the Hunters.

“Most clever,” Hazzath said in surprise. “I can send a typed message to anyone in the world with this device?”

“Not *anyone*, right now it will only let you do so with the Hunters,” Kell told him. “But if the council lifts the restrictions, you just might. Right now, only the department drakes have that kind of access.”

“I suppose that is a wise thing, since I have no idea how this works. I might through my inexperience do something that brings harm to the island,” he noted.

Kell was impressed; Hazzath was far smarter than the average fire dragon, just like Gressa. “That’s exactly why we have it set up that way,” Kell nodded. “If you need any help with it, Gressa, just send me an email, I put myself in your address book. The computer will allow you to use the conference program and email with any dragon on the island. It’s just off the island that it’s restricted.”

“Most, most clever,” Hazzath mused. “It’s almost as effective as magic.”

“That’s why we use it, Hazzath,” Kell told him as he started packing his tools. “If you don’t need anything else, I’m going to go install those projection systems in the caldera so the fire dragons can watch at least a little TV before we get the cable back on.”

“Not us, we have our own TV right here,” Gressa said with a beatific smile, patting the keyboard. “There will be no fighting for seats for us, mate.”

“If they start shedding blood up there, we’ll take the TVs down,” Kell said firmly. “So they’d better behave themselves.”

“You had best make the rules plain to noble Hirrag and Sessara so they might lay down the law,” Hazzath suggested. “If those rules come from our council members, no fire dragon would dare break them.”

“That is a good idea, Hazzath,” Kell nodded as he buckled on his shoulder satchel.

“Access TV, NFL Network,” Gressa called, and then he lost both the adults to the evils of the digital succubus known as TV.

He had no doubt that neither of them would leave their den for at least a day...or until hunger drove them out.

There was nearly a *mob* of fire dragons at the caldera by the time he got back to the department and joined the contingent that was building the projection system. They put it all on the food elevators and came out where the earth dragons distributed allotments, and there were fire dragons sitting along the edge of the caldera, looking down with growing eagerness and excitement. Nevra looked around nervously as Kell led the ten earth drakes out, then she scurried forward when Hota pushed her from behind. “Okay, this is gonna be a little scary,” Nevra observed.

“Only if we take too long,” Kell replied, then he raised his head and shouted. “We need one of the esteemed council members Hirrag or Sessara to come here. Can someone summon one of them for us?” he boomed. He almost laughed when Sessara made herself noticed by taking off from the edge of the caldera, then she landed beside them. “Esteemed council member,” he said with a nod to her as they started again.

“What do you need, Kell?” she asked as she started walking with them, dwarfing all ten earth drakes.

“To set some ground rules about etiquette around the TVs,” he replied. “Mainly that there won’t be any fighting. If just one fight breaks out over seating, we pull the projectors and you wait until we get the cable fixed before you can watch football.”

She actually laughed. “That will keep them in line all by itself,” she said lightly. “I’ll make it clear to them that they will act with decorum, and that they won’t overflow and block the allotment area.”

“Yeah, that would also be a good idea,” he agreed. “It should take us a couple of hours to get them up. Just keep them up there and off the caldera

floor until we're done. We'll be nervous enough doing this with all those vultures lurking," he noted, which made Lakra laugh.

"If there is anything we can do to help, you will have a few thousand volunteers," Sessara said lightly.

Kell looked at her. "Actually, you might be able to help us, esteemed council member. I was told you're one of the most skilled fire drakes when it comes to magic."

"I am," she nodded proudly.

"Then you may be just what we need to make a couple of screens large enough so dragons sitting up there can see clearly," he said, pointing. "We can install a big enough sound system so they can hear, but we don't have portable projection screens large enough to make them visible from that far away."

"I know just the spell that will help you," she said confidently. "I can enlarge your screens by magic, and it will be permanent."

"Then please join us, esteemed council member," Kell said grandly, making an urging motion with his wing.

Sessara was *very* helpful. The eleven earth drakes erected four different portable projection screens, and she enlarged all four of them using her magic, to the size of a drive-in theater's screen. Half his team had to go back to the city for anchors, support cables to stabilize the projectors against wind, and a sound system they could set up about in the center of the caldera, right by the lake, and then they had to waterproof everything... which was again done by magic. Kell had them set up the projector screens in the center and face the four directions so the dragons could either sit over in the open area by the east side or along the caldera rim, and he placed the main control computer on the west side, closest to the lake. Kell got Sella up to the caldera, and she warded their water-sensitive equipment with a spell that would repel all water from the spell's border, promising to come up once daily to refresh it since it wasn't permanent. "Because of the sound

issue, only one screen will have sound, that one,” Kell told Sessara. “The other screens can be set to different channels, but they won’t have audio. But, you can turn on captioning so dragons can read what’s going on. On game day, someone can come up here and change them to the channels showing the games, but you’ll have to pick which one you want to be running sound. I can give you that responsibility, if you want it, esteemed council member.”

“Do they work like regular TVs?”

Kell nodded. “But since all four controllers are right there, we’ve assigned them numbers. That screen is TV one, it’s the one that controls the sound. That one is TV two, that one is TV three, and that one is TV four. To change channels, address the TV you want, like this. Access TV one, turn on,” he called, and the earth drakes flinched almost in unison when the fire dragons that could see that screen roared as the projector displayed a TV screen. “Access TV one, ESPN.” The image shimmered to display *Sportcenter*, and the fire dragons roared their approval once again. “If you want to control all four at once, use TV all. Access TV all, turn on.” The other three screens shimmered to life, causing even more roaring.

“Easy enough. Is that all you have to do?”

“That’s it. It’s up and running. Access TV one, audio on.” The reports on *Sportcenter* were suddenly audible, their voices echoing off the sides of the caldera. “You can control the volume just like a regular TV.”

“Excellent, Kell. You have made a great many friends today,” she said with a light smile. “Access TV all, ESPN.”

Kell got something to eat at the farm, then he went back to the department to find out what Ferroth wanted him to do. Instead of sending him out to join Kammi, he ended up poring through the latest communiqués that were intercepted from the Chinese. The politicians had about worked through their temper tantrum of sacking generals and admirals, and were now debating their official response to the attack. Some of them wanted to declare war on the United States, thinking them behind the attack with some

new weapon, but others had correctly deduced that it was the dragons themselves that had done it, and that gave them pause. Kell marked the ones that urged caution and restraint, for they might have knowledge of the sky dragon tomes the dragons suspected the Chinese had. As Kell went through the data, he read that the Chinese weren't going to give up on the idea. Where brute force had failed, and the ghastly cost of the lost ships made them very wary to try again, they were now discussing political, diplomatic, and clandestine ways by which they could get control of the island, and some of the hawks among them were rallying for a smaller military force to sneak down to the island and try to take it, that their huge armada had telegraphed the attack. A smaller force striking by surprise, they argued, had just as much chance as the massive invasion.

But thankfully, none of them were considering launching nuclear weapons against the island in retaliation for the attack.

They weren't giving up. They were sending recon ships and planes down to try to study the dragons from a distance, and they were accelerating the schedule for getting one of their new spy satellites up that could keep watch over the island. They had four satellites up, but they were in locked orbits that didn't let them see into that area of the south Pacific with any detail...when they designed them and put them orbit, they'd never thought they'd need to look at an empty stretch of ocean, so they hadn't built them with the ability to easily change their orbital tracks. Chinese satellites weren't as sophisticated as American or French or British ones, which could change their orbits rather easily. Chinese spy satellites were designed to overfly important areas, and had limited fuel aboard that was reserved for keeping them in their designed orbits.

Rather amusingly, the Chinese made up for this deficiency by hacking Google satellites and getting real-time images from them, before Google could censor and redact the imagery to comply with international law.

But they were going to continue their standoff with the rest of the world over the island, to make everyone think that the Chinese had the right to claim or annex the island, and that meant they'd continue their

diplomatic confrontation with the United States. They would also do everything in their power to prevent the United Nations from granting the dragons the rights of a sentient species, including using their veto power on the Security Council, intimidating the nations they could bully to vote against it.

Well, two could play that game.

Ferroth looked into Kell's new, larger office, already cluttered with much of his junk. "The council agreed to let Gressa teach the Hunters," he relayed. "Call Jenny and let her know."

"Can do, chief," he replied as the earth drake stumped past his door. He put on his earset and dialed Jenny's number, and she answered before it finished the first ring.

"Hey Kell, what's up?" she asked.

"We have some news for you," he replied. "First, the council has set up some draconic tutoring for you and the other Hunters."

"Really? Who?"

"Gressa," he replied. "She's not coming there, she's going to use a teleconferencing program. I've already installed it for her, and I have her contact address you can use to get in touch with her...though, you probably won't have much luck," he chuckled. "We set her up with internet access, and since the cable's still down, she's using it to stream TV. She's pretty computer literate for a fire dragon."

"Thank us for that, we taught her when she was on the volcano," she replied. "What's her address?"

Kell gave it to her. "You might want to give her a new address for a computer in a conference room. Oh, and she can use that computer to call your phone, so be ready for it."

"I happen to *like* Gressa, thank you very much, Kell," she replied primly, which made him chuckle. "And speaking of dragons I like, did you

know that Keth called me this morning?”

“I know, I set up the den computer so he can use the phone emulator,” he replied. “I also removed the firewall blocks preventing him from sending messages through the web, so he can post on twitter and facebook and other sites.”

“That’s new, I’ve snooped through your firewall. It’s pretty tight.”

“Oh, you have, have you?”

“You hack my phone, I hack your firewall, Kell,” she replied tauntingly.

“Sounds like it’s time for an island-wide power outage at Imakaii,” he mused.

She laughed. “Good luck, they keep most of the important controls on cold systems,” she shot back. “So, I take it Keth has a facebook page?”

“And a twitter account,” he replied lightly.

“So, what’s his facebook page? I wanna go look at it.”

“Just don’t give away who he is, Jenny,” he warned after telling her.

“I won’t do that,” she assured him. “Nice! I can see you made it for him.”

“That’s my Sire, Jenny. I’d be embarrassed if it looked stupid,” he replied indignantly, which made her laugh.

“You did let him use his real name.”

“The human world only knows *my* name, Jenny,” he said easily. “Everything else is nice and vague.”

“Yeah, I see,” she replied. “Anyway, let me get on this. I’ll call you back in a bit with an address you can give Gressa that will connect her to the computer in the conference room. That has a projection screen, so we can all see her. Oh, any word yet on the talismans?”

“None yet. Keep your shirt on, woman, you’ll get them when you get them.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll call you back in a little bit.”

“Alright.” They said their goodbyes, and Kell went back to studying what they’d pulled from the Chinese. Somehow, he had the feeling that they might have to do more to make the Chinese back off. They’d taken the hint, but it hadn’t sunk in quite yet.

24 September, 21:45 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Carting out the last load of waste rock was almost like a little ceremony.

The expansion of Kell’s den was complete.

After Kell took it over to the pile and dumped it—Keth had plans for that waste rock—he turned and looked back as Kammi swept the dust and crumbs up the ramp and ejected them with enough force to send the small stones peppering into the cove. They’d excavated an entire lower level and added two rooms to the upper level, then added a mushroom cellar below the second, a job that would have been too much for just two drakes to finish in a few days. But Kammi had already dug out the entire first level expansion before Kell had time to do any work, done it all on her own, and his family had helped them dig out the second level over the last two days, once all the seeds were planted and the fence was built. They’d just finished the mushroom cellar, the last room of the expanded burrow, and now the burrow was ready to be occupied. The ground around the entrance was different, since they’d had to repair it where the sky dragons had dug it out, and Kammi had pulled in favors to repair the entry chamber with concrete.

The entry chamber had been enlarged to fit Anthra in it, then it opened to the main living chamber, which contained the pantry and dining table,

and his old sleeping chamber was now a storeroom and pantry for food and stuff that wasn't that important. Their sleeping chamber was one of the new ones, a much larger chamber with a large sleeping mound, and the other two rooms were for work. One was a home office that would hold their computers and gear, and the other a workshop where they could build or repair computers or other equipment.

The second level had five rooms as well, and it was devoted to family. Four of the rooms down there were designed to be sleeping chambers but would serve as storerooms, and the fifth was built to be a brood chamber. They'd had to dig out a bathroom as well, boring a pipeline down to the sewage drain that served the upper floor, but they'd also connected the lower level with the tunnel connecting to the cove, and placed a door there to keep the dank air out of the burrow. But it did serve as a direct tunnel from the burrow to the cove, allowing the water drakes to come in or him to go out without being seen. The mushroom cellar was dug down from the main hallway of the second floor, and Kammi had made it fairly big; Kammi loved mushrooms, so having a nice big cellar for growing them meant she'd have plenty of them to eat without having to barter for them.

Kammi gave him a bright smile when he came back over, and the two of them sat on their haunches at the entry, looking down into the entry chamber. "Well, intended, we're all done," she replied with relief. "Let's start moving in. I want to sleep here tonight."

"With as much junk as we have? That's going to take all night," he protested.

"Alright, let's at least get what we need over here, but we *are* staying here tonight. We'll move as much out as we can, then get the rest tomorrow, then we can do the wiring and install the lights later, when we have time. We have power on the first level, that's all we really need right now."

"Why the rush?"

"Didn't Patron tell you? He's hired two families as farmhands, so we need to clear out to give them space," she replied. "They're from the

northeast side of the island. Two mated pairs, and one of them has hatchlings just old enough to leave the burrow. I guess the whelps will have some other whelps to play with now,” Kammi chuckled.

“Sire does need the help. With the new tracts from Gev and the rush to get crops grown, he’ll probably need four adult drakes just to take the strain off of him. Especially with us more or less going back to work,” he noted. “When are they supposed to move in?”

“The ones without hatchlings are supposed to move tomorrow. They’ve just mated, from what Patron told me, so they’re striking out on their own after working on their family farms. The other pair are longtime farmhands.” That was common enough. All the land on the island was already owned, so the earth dragons that *didn’t* inherit the family farm either worked the family farm as extra paws or moved to another dragon’s farm. Keth’s two brothers had moved to other farms when their sire had awarded the farm to Keth, both of them a tiny bit bitter about not inheriting. When it came to inheriting something as important as a farm, only the most capable offspring, the best farmer, was given that honor. Keth was a farmer to the tips of his horns and tail spikes. Only a small portion of the earth dragon population were actual farm owners, the rest were either extended family or farmhands, who received a share in the farm’s bounty as payment for their help. When they moved into Keth’s burrow, they would become like extended family themselves, living with Keth, eating with him, sharing in the work and in the rewards. And since Keth’s farm was so large and prosperous, it let him be a little picky choosing his farmhands. Keth had no doubt that Keth had thoroughly checked out those two mated pairs to make sure they could handle the responsibility of working the largest farm in Dawnmist, and one of the most productive farms on the island. Keth was *highly* respected for his farming skill, to the point where other farmers constantly came over to ask his advice. Which he was always glad to give, Keth was not arrogant over his success, willing to help others achieve the same success he had.

And those two families would see their reputation on the island increase after landing jobs working for Keth. Keth would teach them

everything he knew about farming, and when they left his employment, they'd be all but fought over by other farmers to hire them on and bring that expertise to their own farms...if they ever left. Their former farmhands had worked for Keth for some 30 years, and their clutch of three had been born in the same brood chamber that hatched Kell and his deceased brothers and his younger siblings. Ten years ago, they managed to buy their own farm with Keth's help, so they moved off the farm, and Keth had managed to keep it running smoothly once the hatchlings were old enough to work. The old farmhands bartered some of the land at the edge of the lava flows and converted it back to farmland, a process that took nearly a year, stripping the hardened lava off the soil beneath and revitalizing it after years of being baked under cooling lava. Keth and Kanna had helped them prepare the land, and they were now prospering. It was a tiny farm as Kell would reckon things, but for a mated pair with hatchlings of their own who had worked as farmhands their whole lives, having that little farm was a dream come true.

In earth dragon society, one could be no higher than a farm owner, even if that farm was barely an acre in size. And they weren't the only ones that had gone in after the lava flowing from the volcano shifted to the west on a permanent basis and reclaimed the farmland the volcano had covered over.

Kell and Kammi represented the new order in earth dragon society, the *technical workers*. Kell knew how to run the farm, he couldn't help but know how, but he'd never own it. That would go to one of his younger siblings. Kell, and others like him, they were an entirely new class of earth dragon, non-producing dragons that worked almost exclusively in another kind of job. They'd always had a group like that, the builders, but with the bringing of human technology to the island, new classes of workers had appeared. Department drakes, factory workers, industrial builders like Fredda, drakes that worked in non-farm jobs, but who were all like Kell and Kammi, born and raised on a farm and knowing the farming business.

But Kell could foresee an interesting scenario take shape in about 80 years, when the young drakes and wyrms working non-farm jobs raised

clutches of their own that would have very little or no farming experience. That was almost unthinkable in earth dragon society, earth dragons that couldn't farm, but he could see it coming. Kell still lived on his family farm, so his hatchlings would learn the art of it, but drakes living permanently down in Sanctuary City, drakes living in burrows along the edges of the volcano so they didn't take up valuable farmland, their hatchlings wouldn't grow up learning about the most important aspect of earth dragon life, the farm. Unless those younglings were put on a farm and trained in their species' primary focus, they'd be near-anathemas once they grew up. If they couldn't get jobs in a factory or something, they'd have no farming skills, and that would severely hamper them. If they couldn't earn food, they'd have to grow it...and if they didn't know how to grow it, they were in *big trouble*.

"We should have all our junk out by then. I think you need to go through all your stuff and pare down. Seriously, girl, how did you even *sleep* in your burrow with that much junk?"

"I had walkways," she replied with a grin. "And I'm not getting rid of anything. All of it can be useful. Maybe not immediately, but it will be."

Ralla rose up and landed on the edge of the bluff. "Kell, Kammi," he said.

"Ralla! When did you get back?"

"Just now. They have the carrier here," he replied. "It's on the north shelf, not far from the hook spur. Patriarch wants you there, they have a problem."

"What?"

"The water inside the carrier is noticeably warmer than the water outside," he replied. "He thinks there might be something very wrong."

He looked at Kammi. "Call chief and tell him then get there as fast as you can, have him get Jirran and Trekka down here to help us," he replied. "I'll go ahead and take a look. Ralla, tell the water dragons to get the hell

away from that carrier *now*,” he told him. “It’s possible that the reactor wasn’t shut down before it sank.”

“I’ll have Trekka bring the control box and four hider amulets,” Kammi said, then she turned and ran for the main burrow.

Kell and Ralla dove into the water, and Ralla paused to sing Kell’s warning as he raced out of the cove and turned north. He could run faster than he could swim, but the north shelf wasn’t right up against the island, it was actually about 200 meters offshore and about 100 meters down, deep enough so that no satellite would see the carrier, since it was laying angled on its keel. The conn tower would have been sticking up out of the water if it was level. Kell had to be guided by Ralla’s bioluminescence in the darkness, but it didn’t take long for him to reach a ring of water dragons. Shii approached and placed a breathing bubble around his head, and he nodded to her. “Kammi called it into the department. They’re bringing equipment. I’ll go ahead and at least take a first look,” he said. “Don’t come within 100 *dram* of the carrier until I give you an all clear,” he told them, looking at several dozen water dragon faces. “How long will this bubble last, Matriarch?”

She used magic to write ghostly letters of light in the water in front of him; Surrall must not have taught her his trick of writing on the surface of the bubble yet. *Fifteen minutes*, she wrote.

“More than enough time. Remember, at least a hundred *dram* away from the carrier. And send a water dragon to the shore to guide the other field agents to the ship.”

Shii pointed at a young male, and he turned and darted into the gloom.

“I’m going to need some light,” Kell said. “I can’t see a thing.”

Shii created a ball of magical light and affixed it over Kell’s head, behind his eyes so it didn’t blind him, and he nodded and swam on. He moved slowly, until the carrier’s bulk appeared in the gloom before him, and he started by checking the hull. The light interfered with his thermo, but

a paw on the hull told him that it was cool, as cool as the water outside. He found the hangar he'd ripped open and entered it, and saw where they'd removed the nuclear missiles. Kell advanced across the hangar and put a paw on one of the closed hatches, and found it cool to the touch. He drove his claws into the bulkhead around the door and tore a hole in it, pulling the steel aside like paper, and he looked down the passageway. The water inside felt a little warmer than the water outside, but not by much. There was a body within the companionway beyond the door, and it was *not* pretty. The body had compressed from the sinking from the water but hadn't gone so deep that the pressure squashed it to jelly and bone fragments, and had bloated a little from decomposition while on the bottom, then when it came up, the suspended gases inside the corpse expanded. The body had several ugly gashes and tears on it from the pressure of the gases inside, including a missing arm and several exposed ribs from the bursting of something inside it. A rap of claws on metal made him look back. All three field agents were swimming into the hangar, each of them carrying gear and their heads enclosed in breathing bubbles. "That was fast," Kell noted.

"I've been keeping the gear at Blackstone," Trekka replied. "I had someone run it out to us as we got here. They told us we have fifteen minutes," he said, holding up a hider amulet. Kell let them put it on him.

"We all can't go," he said. "If the breathing bubbles expire deep in the ship, you two won't get out," he warned. "Let me and Kammi do this, we can hold our breaths long enough to get back out. You two keep time. At eight minutes, bang on something so we know it's time to pull out. You bring a Geiger counter?"

"Right here," Jirran said, offering it to him.

Kell and Kammi touched the crystal of the hider amulets at the same time, and they both underwent the not entirely pleasant sensation of being magically transformed into something *human-like*, not entirely human but humanoid in shape. It took some getting used to when he first became a field agent, walking on two legs, feeling all scrunched up and compressed, like he was in a trash compactor. His dragon body was replaced with

something that Hollywood would love to see in a horror movie, a scaly bipedal reptile-man with a humanized face—so he didn't attract too much attention—with the same basic coloration as his dragon body on the humanoid one. Kammi shivered a little once the hider amulet changed her, then Kell took the Geiger counter and turned it on. "Seven minutes," he said.

"Got it. Be careful in there," Jirran replied.

The two of them walked down the passageway—they still weighed the same despite being smaller, so they had little trouble walking underwater, it was just slower than in the air. The Geiger counter didn't show anything abnormal as they advanced into the ship, Kell relying on his study of the ship's technical specs to know his way around. "It is warmer in here," Kammi noted as they went down a narrow stairway, heading for engineering.

"It's not radiation. Maybe the steam system ruptured in the attack, and its heat has bled into the interior of the ship," Kell reasoned as he pushed another dead body out of the way, his claws puncturing the bloated flesh and making it stick to his hand. He shook the corpse off. "We only have four minutes until we have to turn around."

"I think you're right, intended," she said. "But let's get as close as we can."

They used all four minutes to get as close to the reactor chamber as they could, and the Geiger counter read nothing but normal background radiation. They heard faint banging of metal on metal, the signal to return, so they turned around. "We'd better cut our way into the reactor chamber from the hull," Kammi said. "We're going to need the water dragons to be close by to recharge the magic of this spell."

"Surrall knows a way to make them last a long time, we'll need him here to show the others," Kell told her as they went back up the narrow stairs.

When they got back to the other two field agents, he saw that Shii was in the hangar with them. “I checked the radiation levels before I gave you the counter, it’s safe here,” Jirran told him.

“Good. Matriarch, we need Patriarch here, he knows a way to make the bubble spell last for hours,” Kell told her. “Guys, we’re going to cut our way into the reactor chamber from outside, so the water dragons can at least get line of sight on us. I’ll need to get the ship’s blueprint before we do that. I need to go back to my den and get my waterproof tablet.”

Shii pointed at herself, then turned and lanced out of the hangar.

“Shii’s going to get it,” Kammi supplied for Trekka and Jirran. “She’ll get it way faster than we will. I just hope Patron knows where you keep it.”

“He does,” Kell replied. “Let’s go out and get the water dragons back over here,” he said, then he touched the crystal of his amulet and transformed back to normal, shaking himself afterwards. That was never pleasant.

Ten minutes later, it wasn’t just Shii that returned. Surrall arrived with her, as did Essan, Jussa, Geon, Anthra, and Ferroth, the three earth dragons carried by water dragons and with breathing bubbles around their heads. “What have you learned so far, whelps?” Ferroth asked.

“The exterior has normal radiation but the interior is warmer than the exterior, chief,” Kammi replied. “Kell thinks it might be the steam system that heated the internal water when it ruptured after the ship sank.”

“I think we should cut our way into the ship and get close to the reactor, chief,” Kell offered. “That way the water dragons have line of sight on us if they need to use magic, and it’ll be easier to extract the fuel rods if we can cart them out of a big hole.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Ferroth said as Kell accepted his tablet from Shii, in its waterproof case. He strapped it to his foreleg and turned it on, then brought up the carrier’s blueprints, which were still in its memory.

So the ship is safe? Jussa wrote in the water using magic.

“The outside is, esteemed council member,” Trekka replied. “We’re about to find out if the interior is as well. I suggest you keep only two or three water dragons at the entrance of the hole we’re about to cut, and have them shield themselves using magic. We’re going to cut our way into the ship as close to the reactor room as we can and get readings.”

“Patriarch, we need breathing bubbles that’ll last longer than fifteen minutes,” Kell said, looking at Surrall. “The one you did for me for the attack lasted for over an hour.”

Surrall nodded, then he held up his forepaw. *Exhale*, he wrote on the surface of his bubble. He did so, and flinched a bit when the original bubble popped, but was replaced almost immediately by a new one. *That will last well over an hour*, he wrote, and Kell nodded. Surrall repeated it for all four field agents, then they gathered around him as he looked over the blueprints. He looked at the ship, back at his tablet, then pointed. “We need to go to the other side,” he told them. “Me and Kammi will do the cutting. Jirran, you keep an eye on the Geiger counter. Trekka, Jirran, you’re the lucky drakes that’ll be doing the core extraction, so Trekka, you carry the control box. We’ll get you there, you take care of it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Trekka nodded.

Surrall and Shii followed them to the other side, everyone else retreating to a safe distance, and after Kell found the spot he was looking for, they began. They cut through a series of bulkheads with their claws as Jirran kept constant watch on the Geiger counter. The interior got warmer and warmer as they cut through several bulkheads, but the radiation remained the same. They encountered floating debris and a few dozen bloated and torn bodies, up against the ceilings in the compartments they opened to the sea. They stopped as Kell consulted his tablet again, then tapped on the wall. “The reactor is down a companionway that opens on the other side of this bulkhead,” he told the others. “How is it, Jirran?”

“Still within normal range, but a tiny bit higher.”

“Let’s cut a test hole and see what it’s like on the other side,” Kammi suggested.

“Sounds good.”

Kammi did the honors, cutting a hole big enough for Jirran to push the counter’s probe into it. “A little hotter, but still within normal range. I don’t think the reactor’s breached.”

“Then maybe this heat *is* from the steam system, bleeding heat into the interior water,” Kammi mused, then she cut a hole big enough for Trekka and Jirran to get in. “Want us to wait here or go with you?” she asked.

“I think we can handle it. Bang on something when we’re getting close to losing our air bubbles,” Jirran said as he touched the crystal on his hider amulet. His body shimmered, and a rush of water heralded his transformation into the scaly near-human the amulets gave to them. He took the counter back from Kammi, now much larger in his hands as Trekka also changed. The two of them climbed into the hole and started down the companionway towards the reactor room.

Kell turned back to look down the hole they’d cut to get in. “No radiation!” he shouted, certain the sound would reach Shii and Surreal. He was right, for not seconds later, the two larger water drakes advanced towards them. They were too big to fit easily into the holes they’d cut, but they managed to wriggle in to where they were only two bulkheads away. *What word?* Surreal wrote on his bubble.

“Jirran and Trekka are about to start extracting the fuel rods,” he replied. “It’s probably going to take them about an hour. We’ll wait out here for them until they’re done.”

How hard will it be for them? Shii wrote in the water before them.

“Chinese reactors are actually fairly easy to access. They only have to open two hatches to get at the fuel rods. These reactors are built so the rods can be changed with a minimum of work, due to the dangers involved to the humans. What the humans do is install a unit that already holds the fuel

rods into the reactor, then swap out the entire unit when the fuel rods have to be replaced. That box Trekka was carrying was a box we built that the control rod assembly will fit inside, a box that's made of steel and lead lined to protect against radiation. Trekka will simply open the reactor and take out the box holding the fuel rods, then place it in that carrying box for extra protection, at least if the reactor's safety protocols kicked in and the reactor executed an emergency shutdown. If it didn't, they'll have to open the reactor chamber and remove the fuel rods themselves and put them in the control assembly, which they'll have to do very fast or the rods will overheat. After that, they'll make sure the reactor room isn't dangerous to you and then pull out. They'll have to take the fuel rods over to the hole we dug immediately, because the control box isn't designed to contain the rods for very long. Even in their control box, they'll overheat and melt down if they're not kept cool, it just takes longer than if they're not in the control box."

Sounds fairly simple, if the reactor turned itself off correctly, Surral wrote on his bubble.

"It should have. That system is self contained, automatic, and mainly mechanical," Kell told them. "All it has to do is retract the fuel rods back into the control unit, where they're isolated from each other. It's the proximity of the rods to each other without control rods between them that causes the fast heating," he explained. "When they're isolated by control rods, the heating is much slower, slow enough for them to be kept contained with a cooling system. The reactor is designed to automatically retract the rods into the control assembly, putting control rods between the fuel rods, if any major aberration appears in the system. Well, the carrier sinking qualifies as a major aberration."

So after you finish, one of you will have to take the rods to Clawbreak Island immediately.

"That or have those fuel rods melt down within an hour," he replied.

The four dragons waited about 50 minutes, and Jirran appeared at the hole. “The control unit’s intact, Trekka’s putting it in the carry box right now,” he replied. “He needs to get them over to the shaft as fast as he can.”

We can help with that, Shii wrote. I’ll take him. I will use magic to keep the box he carries very cold.

“That might help, if the spell leeches the heat from inside as well as outside,” Kell noted.

It is an area of effect. Everything within the boundary of the spell will be magically chilled, both inside and out.

“That’s perfect,” Kell nodded. “The spell will act like a cooling system.”

How big are these rods? Surrall wrote, a curious look on his face.

“About this long,” Kammi said, holding her paws about a meter and a half apart. “The reactor raises them up into the chamber when it’s in use, and retracts them back down into the control assembly when it’s not. That’s why the emergency system should have worked, all it has to do is unlock the rods, then gravity assists a simple spring system that drops them back down into the control assembly.”

Trekka’s human-like face appeared, and he pushed the large steel box out of the hole. Kell took it as the two of them climbed out. “Everything went smoothly, the rods were already retracted and the automated cooling system was still working,” he reported. “Now I have to get these things to the disposal shaft. I just hope they have the earth dragons there to bury them.”

“Chief was here, I’m sure they’re already there,” Kell said as Jirran and Trekka both touched the amulets around their chests, and returned to their draconic forms. That caused two pulses of displaced water to wash over them. “Shii is going to get you to the island, Trekka, and she’s going to use magic to keep the control box cool,” he reported.

“Outstanding. We need to start out, Matriarch. Every minute matters right now,” he said as he took the box back from Kammi.

Trekka followed Shii back towards the exterior of the ship, and Kell looked to Jirran. “What were the radiation levels?”

“A tiny bit hot, but nothing life-threatening. Just the usual inside a reactor room,” he answered. “The ship is safe for us to chop up.”

“Good,” Kell said. “Let’s get out of here and report back to the council.”

The four dragons on the council were where they’d been, so the field agents reported everything they’d done. *So the ship is not radioactive?* Jussa wrote.

Kell shook his head. “The reactor room has slightly elevated radiation levels, but that’s somewhat normal. I heavily suggest that you let earth dragons remove the reactor itself when the time comes, for maximum safety, but it’s completely safe where it is. The reactor core is out and the ship’s safe to approach. We can start salvaging the ship for its steel and equipment at any time.”

“Outstanding,” Anthra said proudly. “The department once again demonstrates why it is so important to all dragons.”

“Well done, young ones,” Geon agreed, as Essan and Jussa nodded.

“We have more to do. Chief tasked us to start emptying the armory before the saltwater does so much damage to the weapons that they become unstable,” Kell said, looking to Ferroth.

The water dragons will assist. If these weapons might become dangerous, then we must get them out of the water, Jussa wrote.

“We’re going to store them in Sanctuary City for now, where they pose no threat to any dragon,” Ferroth related. “We need to get the aircraft munitions mainly, the bombs and missiles. The gun ammunition will be safe underwater for a while longer.”

Patriarch Surral, gather a group of water dragons and have them place the weapons at the end of the lava tube, so the earth dragons don't have to carry them very far, he wrote, mainly for the benefit of the earth dragons. *The field agents will coordinate, tell us what must be taken and where it is.* Surral nodded, then turned and vanished into the dark water.

“Kell, you handle it. Jirran, get down to the city and manage the intake and storage, have them store them in the lower industrial gallery where the TV factory was set up. Kammi, you get to the end of the lava tube and make sure the water dragons completely dry out the munitions once they get there, inside and out. When they're dry, inspect the munitions for any sign of saltwater corrosion. Kintel will meet you there so he can inventory everything.”

“You got it, chief,” Jirran said.

“On the way, chief,” Kammi mirrored, then the two of them turned and swam away. Jirran headed for the coast, but Kammi swam to the south; she'd get to the lava tube faster swimming. Two water dragons peeled off and followed them, to make sure they got there safely.”

“I'll inventory everything we take out and make sure it matches what Kintel gets in,” Kell added.

“Get it done, whelp.”

Moving into the new burrow was put on hold. With Ralla staying by his side to maintain his breathing bubble, Kell spent nearly nine hours through the night systematically emptying out the carrier's armory, removing bombs, missiles, plane-dropped torpedoes, and crate after crate of the ammunition the carrier's Phalanx guns used. He also cut into the ship's small arms armory and cleaned out all their Chinese-made AK-15 rifles, the newest incarnation of the venerable AK-47, small arms ammunition, and their rifles, pistols, and grenades. Kell ensured that they got everything, all the way down to carrying out one of the newest Chinese Wong Du pistols, one of China's newest arms makers with their newest handgun, commissioned by the Chinese military to supply their officers with

sidearms. They were basically just copies of the Beretta 9mm the American military used, but they were very *good* copies, rugged and dependable. The carrier was the flagship, so everything about it was cutting edge, even down to the rifles and pistols that were issued to its complement of sailors and marines. The AK-15s and Du Wong pistols were issued to the personnel of the *Mao Tse Tung* before they went out to any other military unit. After that was done, Kell had the water dragons pull out one of the SU-27 fighters that had been in the hangar, the least damaged one, with just some damage to one of its wings from the fall and gentle landing on the bottom of the sea. After measuring it, he found that it would fit down the lava tube if the wings and tailfins were folded. The department would love tearing it apart and learning about its advanced avionics and other systems, and since the sky dragons might be facing them in combat, knowing everything about them would make that much safer for them. He also had them cut the wings off one of the Chinese surveillance planes, but he cut off its radar dish himself to make sure it wasn't damaged, then sent those on to the city as well for inspection. Getting a good look at Chinese radar systems would also be useful.

It was sunrise by the time Kell finally surfaced off the north coast of the island, the Darkwood just to the south and the lava flows to the north. He was a little tired, as were the water dragons, but everything was either in the city or in the lava tube waiting to be carried in and stored, the reactor fuel rods and plutonium cores were at that moment only about an hour from being buried under nearly two kilometers of solid rock, and tons and tons of usable resources for the dragons were waiting to be harvested from the carrier. Steel, wiring, fiber optic cable, preformed pipes, fiberglass, generators, boilers, copper, aluminum, everything in that carrier either had a use for the dragons or could be scrapped for its construction materials. He was sure that Fredda would definitely want to get her paws on the ten electric generators the carrier held, huge ones capable of powering the entire carrier. The carrier usually only had three running at any one time, but in the spirit of true redundancy, they had ten in their power system... which was good planning, actually. On a ship that was designed to see

combat, having triple redundancy in their power generation system was only smart.

Kell climbed up onto the shore of the island, and was honestly surprised when Hinado, Faralla, and Trejem landed—at least Trejem did—followed immediately by Hirrag and Sessara. The water and earth dragon members of the council waded out behind Kell, leaving him surrounded by much larger and much more august dragons than himself. “Esteemed council members,” Kell said, nodding his head. “It’s good to see you up and about again.”

“Thank you. I still feel very tired, but there is work that must be done. What is the status of the operation?” Trejem asked.

“We’re finished,” he replied. “The carrier’s nuclear reactor fuel rods were extracted, and I was told that the earth dragons are almost done burying them. The carrier’s bombs and other weapons have been removed and placed in storage in Sanctuary City, and the ship is ready to be salvaged for its materials.”

“Anything else of note to report?”

“Not at this time, esteemed council member,” Kell replied. “The Chinese haven’t decided on what their next move will be after we defeated their fleet. So the outside world is waiting to see what happens next.”

“As are we, it seems,” Essan noted as he shook the water off his wings before folding them. “The department has arranged for a fire dragon to continue teaching the human magicians draconic over the computer machine,” he told the sky dragons and chromatic. “Gressa of the fire drakes has agreed to teach them from her den here until Hinado can organize their education.”

“That was forward thinking,” Hinado answered with a nod. “They must learn draconic before we can teach them anything of substance.”

“Speaking of the human magicians, the sages have completed the formulae for their talismans for Hinado, and the fire dragons have finished

resmelting the metals to make them acceptable,” Trejem told them. “They had to be properly prepared for them to be suitable for use in the talismans. Anthra, we need your best earth dragon crafters available to make them. Kell, we were told that you are to make one of them, Jenny’s talisman.”

“Yes, I was going to make hers, hers and Greg’s and Davie’s. Jenny and her family are very good friends of mine, I promised her I’d make the talismans for her family myself. All the field agents were going to be making talismans.”

“Then we must borrow them from Ferroth for a short time, Anthra,” Hinado said. “This project is very important.”

“I’m sure we can make the arrangements, Hinado,” she replied. “Now that the carrier’s reactor core has been removed and buried, I don’t think they have anything else so important left to do that Ferroth would say no.”

“How long will it take to fashion the talismans?” Sessara asked.

“It might take a couple of days for each talisman, esteemed council member,” Kell replied. “They’re very small and rather delicate, and we have to make everything from scratch, including the links in the chains of the necklace. And given what they are and how important they are, we’re going to take our time and make sure we do it exactly right.”

“Very good,” Trejem nodded. “Anything else to report while we’re here, Kell?”

“Only one thing,” he said. “It’s more of advance warning than anything else. Ferroth will probably be coming to you to ask for a change in the rules about dragons communicating with the outside world with the humans, over the internet,” he replied.

“What is this internet? The computers talking to each other?”

“Just that, Trejem,” Geon nodded.

“With us setting things up so Gressa can talk to the Hunters over the internet to teach them draconic, it got us to thinking that perhaps we should

relax the rules a little. There are quite a few dragons on the island that the department would trust to allow them to communicate discreetly with the humans, such as my own Patron, Keth. He speaks English and knows what to say and what not to say, and he's been using the internet to improve his knowledge of farming by reading human research on the matter. He also has a personal relationship with Jenny, and wants to communicate with her."

"We'll discuss it with Ferroth," Jussa told him. "But if we allow such a thing, only those the department deems competent to do so would be given that privilege."

"We've also been discussing making our presence in the human world a bit more official," Kell told them. "Increase our internet presence, start slowly introducing ourselves to the common human civilian instead of only the diplomats among their governments."

"Is this a wise thing to do?" Trejem asked Geon and Anthra.

"It has some potential, Trejem," Geon replied. "If done correctly. The humans are still wildly curious about us, and there's an opportunity there to gain some popularity with countries beyond America. We'll need global support to get the resolutions we need through the United Nations, especially if the Chinese are going to oppose them."

"We'll discuss the matter at length with Ferroth, Kell," Jussa told him. "We'll need to debate the issue among ourselves."

"I understand, esteemed council member. Oh yes, I forgot. Jenny has made some inquiries about us making another visit to the island," he added. "The earth dragons do have some more work to do there, and we'll have to deliver the talismans, so we could do both at the same time. A few earth dragons could go back to the island and finish the work we need to do there, probably a couple of builders this time with more expertise than we have. Jukra and one or two of his best builders there to direct us would be ideal."

"Only with suitable protection," Hirrag injected. "Earth dragons should not go *anywhere* off this island without escort, at least no earth dragon but

the field agents. They have proven themselves in the eyes of the fire dragons.”

Kell was about to make a tart response, but he nodded respectfully when Hirrag remembered that field agents didn’t *need* protection.

“Perhaps another meeting with the President is in order, to discuss the coming United Nations resolutions in more detail,” Jussa offered. “And I’m sure the sages would like to examine Julia Walker again, to check on her progress.”

“They would, actually,” Trejem agreed with a nod. “I think that is a good idea, Jussa. We can organize a more comprehensive visit to Imakaii with the dragons we need to get everything done, and discuss the resolutions with President Walker and further examine Julia Walker as they do their work.”

“We’ll take it up later, once those of us who have been awake all night have the opportunity to rest,” Jussa said, stifling a yawn. “We all need some rest, both us and the sky dragons and Trejem, only just recovered from their efforts. We shall meet at four hours before sunset at the aerie. Anthra, could you inform Ferroth? We have matters to discuss with him.”

“By your leave, esteemed council members, I’ll be going home,” Kell said.

“Yes, get some rest, young one, and good work,” Geon told him.

Chapter 24

26 September 2017, 04:58 DMT; Dawnmist Village

He was honestly surprised that he woke up so early.

Kell opened his eyes and had to remember for a moment that he wasn't in his old sleeping chamber. He was back in his old burrow, albeit in a new, larger sleeping chamber that still smelled of fresh earth and newly hewn rock, and he and Kammi had moved everything in and had slept for their first night in his burrow.

Their burrow.

Even he was getting to the point where he couldn't deny Kammi's confidence in the matter. They were simply too alike, had too many common interests, and they also happened to be very good friends. And he was *thinking* about her now, almost all the time, ever since she showed so much worry and concern when he went with the water dragons to attack the Chinese. He had woken up and felt *right* hearing Kammi's breathing beside him, her wing thrown partially over his back, her tail curled up and over his own and along his opposite back leg. He had to face the prospect that they were forming a pair bond, that their courtship would end in a successful mating.

And he was just fine with that.

Kammi was immature at times, a little saucy, irreverent, but she was *never* boring. She was highly intelligent, exceptionally skilled when it came to their job—though she wouldn't be his first choice to send on certain missions—made good decisions when in pressure situations, was very good with his hatchling siblings, educated in farmcraft and basic building as all

earth drakes were, and seemed much more devoted to their courtship than he was. She would be a good mate, at least after she matured a little bit more, and would be a good partner with which Kell could share the rest of his life.

His mother had been right. Kammi was his match.

But it would be a while until it was official. They had to court for two years before draconic society would recognize their mating, and even that was shockingly fast. Courtships as long as fifteen years had happened, though most lasted between three or four years on the average. For those two years, they'd still "officially" court, even if they'd already made up their minds about it. And Kell had little doubt that Kammi would want to try for hatchlings as soon as things were official.

That was where earth dragons were very different from humans, as well as from other dragons. Humans and the other dragon species derived physical pleasure from the act of mating, but earth dragons did not. Among the dragons, earth and water dragons didn't mate just for the sake of mating—though it was a social custom among the water dragons, not physiological—but the fire, sky, and chromatics could and did, particularly the fire dragons. When that time came, the act of mating would simply be a step in the process for Kell and Kammi, driven by instinct and want for offspring rather than physical pleasure, and while it would not be painful for either of them, neither would they find the same pleasure in it that other dragons and humans did. In one way, that was why earth dragons were so completely and utterly devoted to their mates, because there was little incentive or impulse to stray. Mating was about sharing his life with his chosen mate, a bond of love and companionship, not the seeking of physical pleasure. But that didn't mean that earth dragons couldn't be romantic, however. Keth and Kanna were devoted to one another, very much in love as humans would reckon such things, and Kell couldn't deny that he'd been having some romantic feelings about his intended in the last couple of weeks.

Prisma's book said that earth dragons were unique among all forms of life, and that was just one of the many ways that the book was right. Earth

dragons were as different from the other dragons as the dragons were from the humans.

He needed to get up, but he didn't want to disturb Kammi. They'd been up late getting their computers set up and the workshop organized, merging both of their workshops into one large one that was almost cluttered with Kell's experiments and Kammi's large amount of equipment and gear. The two of them had a lot of stuff, which had really emptied out the family burrow and cleared the way for him to his farmhands to settle in. The first mated pair had moved in yesterday and would start their first day on the farm today, and the pair with hatchlings was slated to move in today.

The younger pair seemed decent drakes. They were Jarr and Jenri, just mated after a three year courtship and looking to move off Jarr's small family farm up in Red Valley Village, the most northeastern village, so named for the shallow, wide, but steep-walled valley that cut through the fairly flat plain that had reddish stone walls. The pair wanted to own their own farm, and since Jenri was from a farmhand family and Jarr was from a family where he wouldn't inherit his family's small farm, their only option was to master farming and find a way to get some land of their own. Getting hired by Keth was a good step; odds were, Sire hired them because he saw some potential in them. Jarr was very young, only three years older than Kell, but he was dedicated and determined, and those traits would serve him well on Keth's farm. If he wanted to learn, Keth would teach him. Jenri seemed less single-minded than Jarr, less driven, but she was clearly very intelligent and was a competent farmhand.

The older pair, Kell had met yesterday when they brought their hatchlings over to introduce them to his siblings. They were Feno and Fia, both from journeyman farmhand families and respected through most of the island as very good workers. They had three hatchlings that were about five years younger than his siblings, all three females, Fai, Fila, and Fori, who had seemed a trifle nervous and uncomfortable. That was understandable, though, since they'd never moved to another burrow before, so everything was new, and a little scary. The hatchlings had to get to know an entirely new village of drakes, both on the farm and around it, and they seemed a

trifle intimidated by Kell because he was once on the council...for all of two days.

That gave Keth seven new workers on the farm, since Feno and Fia's three hatchlings would also be pitching in, and that was more than enough for him to work the increased land, given they had to produce a whole lot of food in a hurry to get them back to self-sufficiency. And the extra workers would give him a little time to himself, which he rightfully deserved.

Boredom overcoming consideration, Kell carefully extricated himself from Kammi without waking her and went into the common room. One of the perks of being a department drake was that he could get his paws on things before anyone else, so some of the vacuum packed bread and crackers from the first Chinese food rations they'd recovered had found their way into Kell's pantry yesterday. The water dragons were still tied up in dragging the freighters back to the island, but they'd managed to get the carrier and all the oilers there already. The carrier...well, that was the latest project of the department. The department was crawling all over that ship, removing its useful equipment that could be salvaged, inspecting some Chinese military technology up close and personal, and Jukra had been called in to start salvaging the ship for its steel, wiring, and pipes. They were going to take the ship apart and maintain some of its interior for other uses, since it was pre-fabricated, like the tanks and reservoirs within. The water tanks, waste tanks, jet fuel tanks, steam boilers, they were all useful to the dragons, as were those units on other ships. It was easier to just pull the tanks out of the ships and convert them than it was to build their own, and they were going to need some. Everything else would be salvaged for its materials, which they desperately needed. But, the sheer amount of steel in the carrier had solved their steel problems. Between it and the freighters, they had all the steel they needed.

The oilers were going to come in handy in that manner. Since they wanted to keep some of the diesel fuel for their own, they were simply going to take two oilers and take them apart as much as possible without breaching the holding tanks, harvest the steel from the hull and crew compartments, convert them from floating fuel cans to stationary ones.

Jukra was going to take one oiler and literally bury it on the north side of the island not far from Blackstone Village, run some pipes to its tanks, repair the pumps damaged by being sunk, and they'd use it as a gigantic underground diesel fuel reserve tank. Then he would excavate a large diesel fuel reserve tank in Sanctuary City, easy to do since the basalt of the island was impermeable to any liquid, to give the city access to diesel fuel reserves for its emergency backup generators. Jukra was also planning on building a series of pipelines to allow the converted oiler to provide fuel for every backup generator on the island, allowing them to draw fuel into their own tanks directly from the main tank. Most of those generators were in the villages and at strategic points around the island to provide electricity when the main geothermal plant was down, and thanks to all the generators they were going to salvage off the ships, Fredda would be able to put a backup generator everywhere one was needed to give the island a complete emergency backup power grid once the new geothermal plant was online. One oiler would supply the dragons with all the diesel fuel they'd need for a good fifty years, giving them so much diesel that the fuel would probably degrade before they could use all of it.

The rest of the oilers were going to be sold to the Americans, at least after the dragons scoured every vestige of China's ownership of those ships from them, even to the point where they'd remove some of the superstructure to alter their appearance and make them hard to identify via satellite or reconnaissance photos. They wouldn't look like Chinese oilers when the dragons were done with them, and the Americans could simply take them somewhere the Chinese wouldn't really be able to see them. The oilers were small enough to be taken well up the Mississippi river, and the Chinese wouldn't be looking for their oilers in the heart of the American midland, Saint Louis, Missouri.

Today was going to be a little different. The fire dragons and chromatics had finished all the other work, and it was time for the earth dragons to fashion the talismans for the human magicians. They'd been delayed a couple of days because the chromatics were the ones to cut the gems that would go into the talismans, and the fire dragons had had to re-

smelt a couple of the metal ingots to pass the chromatics' inspection. Today, Kell and the others making the talismans would pick up the materials and the formulas that would tell them how to fashion them. Each of them would have a chromatic helper for the job, to use magic to do some of the work that an earth dragon might have trouble doing, such as inlaying one metal into another. Kell *could* do it, but it would only take a couple of minutes with magic, where it would take him a good couple of hours of meticulous work under a magnifying glass. Kell would be making three talismans, the ones for Jenny, Greg, and Davie, mainly because he *wanted* to make them. Jenny was a very close friend, and if anyone was going to make her talisman and those for her family, it was going to be Kell. Kammi had also been slated for talisman duty due to her experience working with extremely small components, having the kind of practice the chromatics felt was necessary for doing such intricate and exacting work. Jukra, Fredda, and a few of the most experienced builders in their departments were the others slated for the task, for they too commonly worked with small items that required a great deal of precision. Jukra and Fredda could carve gears that were absolutely perfect free-paw, craft wire out of scrap metal, so they certainly had the skill to make a piece of jewelry.

They'd need to finish them in a week, because they'd set the date for the next visit to Imakaii. The council was going to meet the President, and they were planning on being there almost three days. They'd arrive late in the afternoon of 3 October, get some rest, have a day-long conference with President Walker over a variety of political subjects, but mainly about the United Nations and how to get the resolutions granting legal protections for the dragons through as fast as possible. They would then leave on the morning of 5 October. Outside of the council and a detachment of fire dragons to protect them, all five field agents including Girk would go, Ferroth would go, and three earth dragons from the builders would be going, who would be doing some of the work that was needed. It had taken some arguing to get the council to allow three non-field agents off the island.

And that worried Kell more than a little bit. Much as Prisma predicted, the other dragons had swung *wildly* from one side of the spectrum to the other, in a shockingly short time. Many of the dragons still didn't entirely like the earth dragons, but knowing that their magic depended on the earth dragons being safe and healthy had turned them ultra-protective. Hirrag and Sessara had nearly demanded the entire fire dragon race to accompany the three builders that would go to Imakaii to protect them...and at least they afforded the field agents a degree of respect in that they were trained to protect themselves. The island that had trapped them under chromatic dominion now trapped them with the dragons that didn't want them to so much as get a scratch for fear that magic might somehow be damaged. In a way, the earth dragons were *still* prisoners to the other dragons, but now it was the prison of good intentions, not the prison of perceived inferiority. The other dragons would never allow the earth dragons off the island, for it was a fortress that kept their magical batteries safe.

Kell could see a reckoning coming over that, but not anytime soon. Maybe when the humans accepted the dragons, or when the island could no longer support the earth dragons living there, there would come a time when the earth dragons would demand to be allowed to leave. And when they did so, the other dragons would do everything in their power to keep them in their gilded cage, where they were kept safe from harm, but also kept against their will.

After eating, Kell went into the workshop, where they had their serious computers. He combed through all the emails and other communications their spiders had gathered over the night, as well as some of his own personal data collection programs. The Chinese were still debating what to do next, working up a plan about exactly how they were going to gain diplomatic control of the dragons, since a military attempt had failed so utterly. The first stage of it was to block the United Nations from recognizing the dragons, giving them legal status, but they were still debating the specifics of what to do after that. It was something of a sticky problem for them, especially since they were taking a whole lot of heat for their diplomatic standoff against America. The Chinese couldn't back

down, not now, so they were carrying through on their latest threat to sell off much of the American debt they held, primarily in the form of bonds, which would devalue the bond market and put pressure on America's borrowing power. They were doing it in retaliation for Walker having Congress revoke China's most favored nation status.

He glanced up when Kammi padded into the workshop, yawning a bit. "Why didn't you wake me up?" she asked.

"Because it's not even sunrise yet," he replied as he skimmed over another report, this one from the Chinese President's office. "Just remember that we're making the talismans today, so don't get sidetracked."

"I know," she told him as she turned and went back to the common room, which she'd had to pass through to get to the workshop.

Kell worked through more reports, at least until he came across one that mentioned the Shao Kai. It was a message from the leader of Chinese intelligence to their Politburo, the leaders of the Communist party in China. *Decryption of the Shao Kai texts continues slowly, it read, due to the surprising complexity of the cypher the ancient order used in its writings. Were it not for modern computers, this code very well might be unbreakable. As was noted to your august eminences in the security briefing, this data cannot be put on any computer connected to the internet. As the report of 13 September indicated, an unknown foreign organization or organizations has managed penetration into our national intranet, to a degree which we cannot easily combat without cutting us off from the internet. Since this would cripple our own cyber intelligence operations, this is our act of last resort. As my deputy undersecretary briefed you, we can track this penetration back to the instigator, if you only give us the time and resources to do so, so we have left the intrusions in place and untampered in hopes of using them to identify the attacker.*

Good luck with that.

The part of the text holding the second formula of interest remains undecrypted at this point in time, due to the complexity of the cypher the

Shao Kai used. This office projects a complete decryption of the texts within ten days, which will contain the information your august personages require. Once fully decrypted and the data is acquired, it will be hand delivered by courier to the office of the President, whom will assume the responsibility of disseminating it out to the rest of the ruling members of the party.

Preparing the first of our People's Expeditionary Brigade immediately would be advisable. Once we have the formula, we need only collect the materials. The administration of the formula to our forces will be quick and efficient, and then Operation Glorious Dawn can commence. The last step, while admittedly the most difficult, will be gaining access to the dragons. But getting what is needed from them will be quick and relatively easy.

Kell leaned more up on his haunches and pondered the message. Clearly, there was a second plan in place for them, since the first failed, and from the sound of it, it was also militaristic in nature, but *not* aimed at the dragons. After all, they'd activate this Operation Glorious Dawn *after* getting what they needed from the dragons. The dragons were an intermediate step in their master plan, he realized; they'd attacked the island to get *something* that they needed for this overall plan, a plan they'd been keeping *extremely* close to their chests. This was the first mention of it Kell had seen anywhere in their internet traffic, meaning it had to be one of their most top secret plans.

Or, it could be bait, since the security secretary knew that someone had penetrated Chinese security.

Either way, it was something that Ferroth needed to chew over. He emailed a copy of it to him to make him take notice of it, then joined Kammi in the common room as she ate breakfast.

They met three of the ancient chromatic sages and three younger, larger chromatics down in Sanctuary City, along with Fredda and Jukra and two other earth drakes, Herrik from the power department and Pult from the builders. They met in a workshop that had been set up on the first floor of

the high rise, with workbenches for each of them holding a few basic tools and large magnifying glasses. The sage passed out stone slates holding a graven image of the talismans, three to each of them except for Herrik, who would only be making two talismans. Kammi would be making Julia Walker's talisman and two others for the Hunters, and Jukra would be making President Walker's talisman and two others. Fredda would be making three talismans, Pult three, and Herrik two. Kell looked at Jenny's talisman, which had been etched into the slate as an illustration of how it was supposed to look, as well as extremely precise material weights and placements. Her talisman would be oval in shape, primarily be gold, but it would be inlaid both in the front and the back with silver and platinum, the platinum in the back forming a cap of sorts, and would have a large emerald for its focusing crystal. Six other gemstones would surround it in a circular pattern; two rubies, two sapphires, and two diamonds, and there would be a very small copper inlay connecting the six surrounding gemstones together in a vague hexagon. Draconic runes would be etched into the talisman, both front and back. When he was done, the talisman had to weigh *exactly* what it said on the slate, and the weight and mass of the materials had to be precise, almost down to the milligram.

And that was why earth dragons had to craft them. The other dragons wouldn't be able to manage that kind of precision without using magic.

Greg's amulet wasn't as fancy as Jenny's, but it was more valuable. It was circular, would consist almost entirely of platinum with gold and silver inlays, and it would only have one crystal in it, a very large diamond cut in an oval shape. The inlays were straight lines radiating out from the central diamond in a sunburst pattern, with draconic runes etched along the inlays. There was a gold inlay surrounding the gem setting that further made it almost look like the sun, with the inlay metals light emanating from the center.

Davie's amulet was the most interesting. It was octagonal in shape but with rounded edges, and would be made mainly of gold but with quite a few inlays of platinum, silver, and copper in some swirling, artistic shapes, almost a spiral pattern. It would have a large central crystal, a black

sapphire, with three other gems arrayed in an inverted triangle. The top left gem was a small ruby, the top right gem was a small garnet, and the bottom gem was a blue diamond, all three cut in a diamond shape and set thusly into the talisman. Davie's talisman would take the most work, because it was far more intricate than the other two. For that reason, Kell would do it last.

"Woah, this is not going to be easy," Jukra said as he held up a slate.

"It can't be much more complicated than this one," Kell chuckled, holding up Davie's slate. "Who is that for?"

"President Walker."

"An important man needs an important piece of jewelry," Kell mused.

"We can begin as soon as you feel ready," one of the old sages said. "The tools we've placed on your benches have been specially prepared to make them conducive to working on these talismans, in case you need them. These three young chromatics will be here to assist with magic if you need it," he continued, motioning at the three chromatics. "The gems in the formulae have been cut already and are in bins marked with the name of the human over on that table, as are all the other raw materials you'll need. You'll note that the talisman formulae don't mention the necklace chains. Those aren't part of the talisman, but you'll need to craft the chains out of the primary metal making up the body of the talisman. Gold talismans require gold chains, and so on. We'll magically treat the talismans once they're complete to make them very hard to damage, as many of the metals that make them are soft. Are there any questions?" When silence greeted him, he nodded, his feathery antenna bouncing. "Very well. Please take no offense, but we'll need to carefully inspect each talisman upon its completion. These devices must be very, very accurate for them to work properly."

"Quality control is a part of the process, most wise," Fredda told him dismissively.

Since Greg's talisman was the least complicated, Kell started with that one. The six earth dragons picked up the bins holding the materials in a line, and then the shop went silent as they got to work. Kell pulled out the gem and three small metal ingots, platinum, gold, and silver, made careful note of the size and weight of the main amulet, then he set to work. He carefully whittled down the platinum bar into the proper shape, a perfect circle, cut out the center for the setting, then spent nearly half an hour carefully weighing and then shaving platinum off the amulet until it was the proper weight. Once he finished that, he fashioned the setting for the diamond and carefully cut the inlays for the amulet, again having to weigh repeatedly to make sure that each delicate piece of metal was the exact size and weight required in the formula. Once he finished that, he pulled out the magnifying glass and used one of the tools, a tiny chisel looked to have been magically forged out of pure iron and hardened, and he very carefully, very slowly etched out the inlays into the amulet, into which the inlay metals would fit. He had to use a micrometer to make sure he had the depth exactly right, that the inlays perfectly matched the sockets into which they would fit. Then, with one of the chromatics looking over his shoulder, he gently and carefully set the inlays into the amulet, each one fitting perfectly. He affixed the center inlay last, the gold circle, then set the diamond into the amulet from the back and placed the cap in the hole he'd crafted.

That was the majority of the work on Greg's amulet. After taking a short break, Kell finished it, carefully etching the runes into the talisman using a sharpened etching tool and the strongest magnifying glass they had. Kell would usually use his clawtip for something like that, but the runes were too small and delicate for him to do so. The amount of metal he scraped out to make the runes *mattered*, since the finished talisman had to be absolutely precise in its weight and metal composition. Just a few milligrams off and the chromatics would have to use magic to meld some metal back into the talisman to make it correct...and Kell wasn't about to have to resort to that. Earth dragon pride was at stake here, so he was for damn sure going to do it right the first time.

Five hours after he began, Kell gave the talisman a final weighing, nodded, and had one of the three attending chromatics give it a magical inspection to make sure it was correct. Kell sat on the base of his tail as the chromatic held the tiny device in his paw, then he opened his eyes and gave Kell a respectful look. “Perfect,” he declared. “I will take this opportunity to harden the talisman, and meld the hole cut in the back to inset the crystal. We need only make a chain for it now, and it will be complete.”

“That won’t take too long,” Kell replied.

Kell was done with the chain only a few minutes after the chromatic was finished with his magic, magically hardening the metal of the talisman so the usually soft gold and platinum could handle the rigors of being worn without damage...and probably more than that. Given how precious they were, making them all but indestructible was almost necessary. Making a chain like that was fairly easy, just cutting platinum fashioned into wire into equal lengths and bending them into shape. The chain didn’t have to be as exacting as the talisman, so Kell didn’t have to obsess over it. He did make it look nice, though, each link in the chain of equal size, fashioning a fairly large chain with sturdy links, a man’s chain for a man’s amulet. Greg’s neck size was included in the formula, so he made the chain long enough so Greg could put it on over his head, but not so long that it would easily fall off if he turned upside-down for some reason. The chain would have no clasp.

Kammi finished her first talisman as Kell got to work on the second one, Jenny’s. Hers was much more complicated than Greg’s, with seven gems and more inlays in much more intricate patterns. It was so complicated that by the time they stopped for the day, Kell was barely a third of the way done with it, having carved the main amulet out of a bar of gold and etched out about half the inlay channels in its face. When they stopped at sunset, each of the earth dragons had produced at least one talisman, with Jukra and Fredda managing two. The others were all at various stages of the second talisman.

The next morning, they went right back to work. Kell finished carving the inlay channels and then fashioned the inlays and the gem settings, and

after lunch, he put it all together with painstaking caution and care. Each inlay fit perfectly, and each gem was set into the amulet from the front using the copper inlay to hold it in place, the socket cut to lock the gem and its setting in place and the copper inlay set over it. It took him nearly three hours to carve the runes into the amulet, affix the platinum back inlay to the back of the amulet, then he passed it off to the chromatics for inspection as he fashioned the chain for it. He made Jenny's chain much more "lady-like," a delicate chain with a multitude of small links, each one paw-crafted and joined into the chain one by one. The chain took him nearly three hours to fashion since he wanted it to look nice.

Fredda and the other two earth dragons finished their talismans and then went back to their normal duties, leaving Kell, Kammi, and Jukra to fashion their third amulets, which were the most complicated for each of them. Fredda had crafted three amulets in the time it took the others to make only two, but the three talismans she made weren't quite as intricate as the ones that Kell, Kammi, and Jukra had to fashion. Kell spent the rest of that day just planning out how he was going to make Davie's amulet, something Kammi also had to do to fashion Julia Walker's talisman and Jukra did for President Walker's talisman.

It took Kell almost the entire third day to make Davie's talisman. It required a lot of prep work, since inlays crossed inlays on the surface of the amulet, requiring him to make nearly three dozen tiny pieces that he'd fit into the face of the amulet like a jigsaw puzzle, and to make it work right, he'd have to set them into the talisman in a specific order. He spent nearly five hours doing so, putting the complicated design together piece by tiny piece, setting the inlays and gems into it with careful, delicate skill, until he set the last inlay, a silver octagonal ring around the border of the talisman that he had to very carefully carve out so it locked into place without needing anything extra to hold it. He took a break after that, as Kammi took Julia's talisman to the chromatic for inspection, then he got to work on the multitude of tiny runes that needed to be etched into the surface. Jukra finished Walker's talisman as he finished the last of the runes around the central black sapphire, then after weighing it and finding it right where it

needed to be, he allowed the chromatics to inspect it. That took nearly two hours since it was so complicated, time Kell spent making the chain for it and talking with Kammi, who had stayed behind to wait with him. Finally, the chromatic came back to his table and set it on the surface. “Almost perfect,” he replied. “It’s heavy by gold by two *varamila* and light in silver by the same amount. We can fix that easily.”

“That explains why it weighed properly,” Kell grunted. “Alright, let me get some silver scraps you can use to meld back into the talisman.”

It took the chromatic about fifteen minutes to get the metal balances correct, by magically infusing a tiny sliver of silver into the ring around the center, after Kell shaved off a similar tiny little slice off the back of the amulet, which the chromatic then used magic to smooth over to create a smooth surface. He then reassessed the amulet to ensure the weights were correct, which only took about twenty minutes. He nodded and set it back on the table. “Perfect,” he declared. “I’ll harden the talisman as you finish the chain, then we can put them in the box and await delivering them to the humans. You are keeping them in here, correct?”

“Chief is keeping them in his office,” Kell answered.

“That’s fine. They need only be kept in a safe place away from stray magical emanations for a time. Putting them anywhere within this city will do just that.”

That done, Kell and Kammi went back home after taking the small chest to Ferroth, holding the 17 amulets they’d crafted. One for each hunter, one for the President and his wife, one for Greg and Davie, and one for Kevin Winters. It was nearly sunset when they joined his family and the two farmhand families in the common room, around a much larger table that Jarr had carved for them. The farmhands were working out so far, both pairs working hard and knowing what they were doing, and the three female hatchlings got along well with Kell’s siblings. Jarr had made the table so everyone would just fit when Kell and Kammi were included, the table laden with potatoes, radishes, and a large platter of fish they’d probably

bartered from Shii and Surrall. “You have good timing, youngling,” Keth said as Kell and Kammi padded into the common room, both of them still a little damp from the short walk in the rain. “Did you finish your task?”

“Just a little bit ago,” Kell replied.

“Thank Gaia chief didn’t feel talkative,” Kammi chuckled as she came in behind him, and they took their places at the table.

“You are going to see the humans, right?” Jarr asked.

Kell nodded. “In four days,” he elaborated.

“What are humans like, Kell?” Fia asked.

“Erratic, but entertaining,” Kammi replied with a toothy smile at her. “They’re not all that bad, at least if you talk to the right ones, anyway.”

“They’re not like what you’ve seen on TV,” Kell chuckled. “That’s entertainment. Most humans are basically decent people, working to make a living for themselves. Some are nice, some aren’t. Some are smart, some aren’t. They’re very different from us and from each other, based mainly on cultural upbringing, but at their core, most of humanity is decent.”

“Yeah. You get to know the good ones from the bad ones after a while,” Kammi added, taking several fish from the platter. “We’ll be going to see the good ones, the ones on Imakaii.”

“I remember when that human was here, it set the whole island afire with gossip,” Jenri mused. “I wonder, will another one visit?”

“I’d say that eventually, yes,” Kell replied. “I know that Jenny will if I can help it, her and her family. She’s exactly the kind of human that we *want* to associate with.”

“How so?” Feno asked.

“Jenny’s fairly awesome,” Kammi replied. “She’s extremely smart, she’s friendly, she’s kind, and she’s highly skilled at what she does. But what makes her so awesome is that she’s extremely open-minded,” she said,

then she swallowed a smaller fish. “She reacted like a champion when she found out about the dragons, then she found out that she can do magic. She’s very steady, and that’s a trait we dragons admire in someone.”

“She’s predictable?”

“In a few ways, yes, but what Kammi means is that she’s very hard to unsettle or surprise,” Kell added. “She didn’t freak out the first time we met face to face, at least the *real* me,” Kell chuckled. “She reacts well to unusual situations and makes good decisions when faced with the unknown, decisions based on reason instead of fear. That makes her a very good human to deal with us, since we’re very exotic to the humans.”

“We’re not exotic to Jenny anymore,” Kammi chuckled.

“Hopefully, we won’t be exotic to most humans after a while,” Kell said. “Now that they know about us, we don’t want them to think we’re dangerous. Not when there’s so many of them,” he grunted.

“How did the day go, Patron?” Kammi asked.

“Very well,” he replied. “We’re showing some sprouts on the corn and wheat tracts, and the tomatoes are almost ready to be staked. We’ll be taking care of that tomorrow.”

“Those should do very well in the rainy season, as well as the corn,” Feno mused. “I’ve only raised tomatoes once before. They seem an easy crop to manage.”

“Once you stake them, you just let them grow on their own,” Keth nodded. “I’ll be planting the first of Hett’s onions tomorrow in the tract right by the burrow.”

“And you’ll have to watch them else one of the water dragons will sneak over and steal a few,” Kammi laughed.

“We’ve already had a discussion about those onions,” Kanna said dryly, which made Kammi laugh harder. “Mainly Shii offering some very nice barter for a portion of the harvest.”

“The entire pod absolutely loves those onions,” Kell explained to Jarr, who was to his immediate left.

“I’m still getting used to them,” Jenri said honestly. “The water dragons didn’t often come to us so often at our old farm.”

“We’ve lived side by side with the pod for generations, Jenri, so our friendship dates back to the founding of the island,” Keth smiled.

“They’re a little different, but not much,” Fia observed. “I rather like them.”

“Most earth dragons are nearly as isolated from the other dragons as we are from the humans,” Kell noted.

“I can’t deny that,” Jarr said. “We almost never had other dragons come to our farm before.”

“That was their fault, not ours,” Keth said. “They only had to come down and talk to us, but they would not.”

“Well, those days are past,” Kanna predicted.

“For better or worse,” Kell agreed, then he looked at Kitta. “You three are awfully quiet tonight,” he noted.

“Just tired, brother,” she answered. “Sire ran us all over the farm today.”

“There’s more to do here than at our old farm,” Fai noted, then she looked down abruptly when Kell looked at her. All three of Feno and Fia’s hatchlings were a little intimidated by him.

“This is a much larger farm, youngling,” Kell chuckled. “Sometimes I’m amazed that Sire managed to run it with just mother and the hatchlings.”

“That won’t happen again for a long time, with the extra tracts and the livestock we’ve taken on,” Keth said. “I’m glad Jarr and Jenri are here, they

have experience with animals.” And that partially explained why Keth had hired such young drakes...they had something they could teach *him*.

“You don’t have enough cows and buffalo for them to be a bother, Patron,” Jarr called. “But whoever selected them for you chose well. They are prime stock.”

“Glad to get some corroboration,” Kell said lightly. “The humans picked those animals out. We bartered them as part of the relief supplies they traded to us for gold and silver.”

“I hope they bring more bread next time,” Fila piped up.

“When our wheat comes in, we’ll have our own bread, youngling,” Kanna told her with a motherly smile. “Fresh made right here in the kitchen.”

“You know how to make bread, Matron?” Jenri asked.

She nodded. “Kell often brought flour and yeast back from his missions,” she said looking at Kell.

“When I could sneak them home,” he replied with a chuckle.

“What’s it like out there among the humans?” Fila asked, looking at him.

“That depends on where in the world they sent me,” he answered. “Some places it was fun, but in some places, I had to be very careful. Human society isn’t contiguous like ours is. The different races of dragons do act differently, but when you’re dealing with a different race of dragon, you more or less know what to expect. Humans are nothing like us that way. Different groups of humans have different customs, and some of them are very strange. Some of them are even self-destructive, but they don’t see them that way.”

“I think I’d like to meet a human,” Fila declared.

“Unless they come here, I doubt you’ll get the chance, youngling,” Kell said evenly.

“They *should* be bringing humans we can trust here, so the other dragons can get exposure to them,” Kammi said.

“I’m sure they’re thinking about it,” Kell answered. “I know for a fact that Jenny will be coming back, if I get my way.”

After dinner, Kell received a call from Jenny just after he got back to his burrow. Kammi had stayed behind to get to know the new farmhands a little better, so she didn’t bother him as he took Jenny’s call on his computer as he worked more on the data his snoopers, spiders, and bots were filtering in from the Chinese. “Hey Jenny,” he called as an image of her popped up on a window.

“Kell,” she said, her voice serious. “I’m about to send you something using Liberty Six. I want you to take a look at it and call me back when you’re done,” she told him. “Just don’t bandy this about. The CIA doesn’t exactly know that we have this information,” she added.

“Spying on the CIA now, Jenny?”

“Sometimes you *have* to with those secretive bastards,” she said with a frown.

“Is this about the mole?”

“No, but I can tell you that they found him this morning, so he’s neutralized. This is about something else. I’m emailing you a Liberty Six keyset and an encrypted file. Make sure you copy them and purge the message from your mailbox, I have Olivia ready to scour it off every mail server it goes through.”

“Got it. I’m ready.”

“I’m sending it right now.”

Barely three seconds later, two files appeared in his inbox. One was a huge data file—gotta love insane bandwidth—and the other was a long series of numbers, the decryption keyset for Liberty Six. The data file was both encrypted and compressed. Kell copied both to a new file, deleted the originals, and then nodded to Jenny, and she looked to her right and nodded. “I can’t stay on and chat, Kell. Read that and send it up, it’s important,” she said, then her image winked off.

It took Kell nearly ten minutes to decrypt and decompress the file, which turned out to be a directory of files, text and video, gleaned from the CIA’s own internal intranet. How Jenny had managed to get her hands on these was a mystery, but it just proved how good she was. Kell started in the same order the files were in, and his glowing yellow eyes were widening with the first paragraph.

The CIA knew what the Chinese were after.

They had a mole deep in the Chinese security service, much like the Chinese had had a mole deep in the CIA, who had managed to get access to one of the Chinese government’s most top secret internal intranets, something that Kell couldn’t easily do. He’d managed to copy a large number of files and smuggle them out of the country, and the CIA had been sitting on it for nearly three months. The mole was actually a long-time employee loyal to his country, but what he found out made him so concerned that he stole the data and gave it to the Americans, out of love for the well-being of his *own* country.

The Chinese weren’t sitting on ancient Shao Kai texts they couldn’t translate—well, they probably were, but that wasn’t their primary motivation. What they were acting on was Shao Kai texts that were written in Mandarin, one of which gave a formula for a magical substance that was derived from earth dragon blood, which made human soldiers virtually invulnerable. *That* was what they wanted the dragons for. Not their magic, but their blood, to make this magical substance to use on their soldiers. And when they had enough of it manufactured, they were going to launch an invasion of the rest of Asia.

The mole had managed to copy the original text, written in Mandarin, which Kell could read. He perused it, translating it into draconic as he read, which gave a formula for producing an oil with magical properties from the blood of an earth dragon and several other materials. Done properly, it conferred onto anyone who rubbed it into their skin the invulnerabilities of an earth dragon. Such a protected human wouldn't be harmed by stone, earth, or metal, would have an earth dragon's resistance to heat, and were immune to pressure and low to medium pressure changes, such as those created by small explosive devices.

After translating it, he called the only magical expert he knew that he could trust. He rang Prisma's computer, and she picked up his call almost immediately. "This is Prisma," her voice came over his speakers.

"I need you to come to my burrow, right now," he said without greeting. "It's extremely important."

"Certainly, Kell. I will be there as soon as I fly down."

"Thanks," he said, then dropped the call. He read some summaries for the top brass about Operation Glorious Dawn as he waited, which was their master invasion plan of the rest of Asia. They intended to overrun Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran in order to get access to the Middle East, and from Iran, conquer the entire Arabian peninsula to the south and west and Turkey and the oil-producing nations south of Russia and into Russia to the north. The plan called for a fast-moving blitzkrieg to take their opponents and the world by surprise, then consolidate their hold on their territory and dig in to resist the inevitable Western counterattack. The primary objective of the operation would be to gain control of the oil resources in central Russia, the smaller nations between Russia and the Middle East, and the Middle East, as well as all the natural resources of the other nations they conquered along the way. The plan was fairly cunning in that it used the mountains of central Asia as shields to prevent counterattack, cut western Russia off from eastern Russia once they took the oil-producing regions west of the Urals, took the entirety of Iran to use it as a chokepoint if they were driven out of the

Arabian peninsula, and conquered all the easier avenues of invasion when the west launched a counterattack to drive them back.

Prisma called out from his entry chamber, and he called her into the workshop. She looked around as she padded in, her glowing white eyes curious. “It’s very nice,” she told him with a nod, her feathery antenna bobbing gracefully.

“You can praise Kammi over the burrow later,” he said, pointing at another monitor. “Read that and tell me if it’s possible.”

He continued to read about Glorious Dawn as Prisma read the Shao Kai text, then he heard her gasp. Then gasp again. She looked at him with surprise after she finished. “Is it possible, Kell? I believe so. We already knew about the use of dragon’s blood on humans, but the Shao Kai look to have taken it to another level, allowing but a few drops of earth dragon blood to be manufactured into an oil that would protect two or three humans. I cannot say with complete veracity if it actually works, but I would say that it is *possible*.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” Kell said grimly.

“This is what the Chinese were after, is it not?” she asked, pointing at the monitor.

“I think it is,” Kell replied. “Jenny just got this information to me a few minutes ago. If we’re right, they weren’t here to control us, they were here to *harvest* us for our blood, use this magical concoction to make their soldiers invulnerable, then start a war.”

“Or more likely both,” she amended. “Both control our magic *and* take our blood. After all, killing you would grant them only a limited supply, where if they kept us in thrall, they would have an unlimited supply. And with them having a stranglehold on magic, it would rob their enemies of the only force with which they could fight back against their magically protected soldiers. This formula would not protect the soldiers against magic not related to the specific protections the formula provides. It would

be primarily focused towards protecting humans against the weapons they use on each other.”

“You might be right,” he grunted as he opened another file. “Prisma, do me a favor and go get Kammi. She’s over in my family burrow.”

“Yes, we need to study this information thoroughly. We need Chief Ferroth here as well.”

“I’m going to call him and the other field agents right now,” he nodded.

By the time Kammi came back with Prisma, Kell had Ferroth, the other field agents, and Kintel on the way to his burrow. “The fluffy said you got something big from Jenny,” Kammi said, then she yelped a tiny bit when Prisma smacked her on the hindquarters with her feathered tail. Kammi laughed and flashed Prisma a playful grin, but the grim look on Kell’s face made her smile dissolve. “Uh oh, it must be *really* big.”

“Jenny somehow managed to get her hands on the real reason the Chinese are so hot to take over the island,” Kell nodded.

“The ancient Shao Kai created a magical formula to impart the protections earth dragons enjoy to human subjects,” Prisma told her. “Your immunity to metal weapons, your resistance to heat, and your immunity to pressure and changes of pressure. They need earth dragon blood for this formula to work, which can only be found here, on our island.”

“Then they were going to conquer most of the Middle East and south central Russia, as well as a path from China to Saudi Arabia to get their hands on the oil in the Middle East and the oil-producing areas east of the Urals,” Kell finished, pointing at a map on his monitor. “Imagine an army of soldiers that you can’t kill with bullets, fire, or blast waves.”

“The three main weapons of most any human army,” Kammi grunted in a low tone. “They’d have to resort to biochem, or even nuclear.”

“And that would make the entire world go to hell in a hurry,” Kell nodded. “I have to admit, it’s pretty damn clever,” he added with a growl. “Use us to make their troops invulnerable, then take over the majority of the human world’s oil supplies.”

Kell read the next file, which was their plan for getting the blood. They were going to use coercion, and their target was the earth dragons. The Chinese knew far more about the dragons than most others, probably thanks to the Shao Kai, and knew that the other dragons would not abandon the earth dragons if the Chinese managed to take the island, that the other dragons were highly protective over the earth dragons and would move mountains if needs be to keep them safe. They knew about the near-war that had taken place between the earth dragons and the others thanks to their CIA mole, but had attributed the behavior to the earth dragons rebelling against what they felt were undue restrictions placed on them by the other dragons to assure their safety...which, in a weird sort of way, was *almost* true. The Chinese analysts believed that if the Chinese could take the island and gain control of the earth dragons, that the other dragons would capitulate to their demands. They would harvest earth dragon blood, and force the other dragons to teach them magic.

Amusingly enough, the Chinese didn’t take the fact that the earth dragons would fight into account, and they’d be ten times worse than the other dragons because very little the Chinese could do could harm them.

They’d certainly be prepared for it, Kell noted as he read the next file. They’d devised weapons made of *plastic* to use against the earth dragons to threaten them to get the other dragons to capitulate. They had both pure plastic weapons and bullets coated in a teflon-like plastic polymer. Plastic... that actually wasn’t a bad idea. Plastic was derived from oil, a natural substance from the earth, but it was so *unnatural* that earth dragons didn’t have any intrinsic defense against it. A hardened plastic epoxy might be strong enough to penetrate an earth dragon’s scales and hide and do real injury, but a plastic-coated round *would* have enough kinetic energy to penetrate an earth dragon’s defenses, and thus do real harm. Like a teflon-

coated armor piercing round could go through an armored vest, such a bullet would hurt an earth dragon.

Those damn Chinese, sometimes they were *too* clever.

And if they'd thought of it, the Americans probably had as well. Kell made a note to warn the others to be *very* careful during field missions from now on.

They did have their minds on magic, however. With control of the island and the dragons, they would force the dragons to teach their soldiers magic to make their army even more formidable. The Shao Kai texts they had about magic did make it clear that only people with the gift could learn it, but didn't go into much detail about how much work it took for humans to use it. The Chinese had a misguided idea that they could train a large number of magicians to add to their army within five years, because they didn't know enough about magic to know any better. Odds were, most of the texts on magic in any detail were written in draconic, and thus were unreadable to them.

Ferroth called out from the entry chamber, and then he and Kintel came into the workshop. The two of them looked around a tiny bit as they stepped up, then Ferroth reared up and sat on the base of his tail beside Kell's workbench. "Well, whelp? What did you get?"

"A whole lot," he replied, pointing at his monitor. "Jenny managed to get her hands on the *real* reason the Chinese tried to invade the island."

"Summarize it," he said.

"It was an attempt to get control of us not for magic, but for our *blood*," Kell answered, then he went over the formula and China's plans to use it to take over the richest oil fields in the world.

Ferroth gave a growling sound, then nodded. "It does make sense," he said. "The one thing the Chinese need is oil. They're stressing the global markets trying to keep up with demand, and it seems they've come up with a way not to pay for it. How involved is this plan?"

“Fairly well thought out from a military perspective,” Kell replied. “It would probably work if they had this magical oil that the formula talks about making their soldiers invulnerable to bullets and fire and low-grade explosions. They certainly have a big enough army to conquer all the way out to the Arabian peninsula and the logistical skill to keep it supplied, and then hold it against a NATO counterattack. The only slapdash part of the plan was them rushing their fleet down here to try to get control of us.”

“They’ve always been far more intelligent than they let on,” Kintel offered, reading from one of the other monitors in the workshop. “And this explains a lot. Given how much they’re spending on oil, it’s no surprise they’ve come up with a military solution to their problem.”

Kell went over everything in more detail when Jirran, Trekka, and Girk arrived, and the seven earth drakes and petite young chromatic crowded the workshop as he went over everything he’d read thus far; he still have a few files to go. Once he was done, Ferroth had them all read everything. When everyone was done, they gathered in a rough semicircle in the common room, each of them with a tablet, and Ferroth reared up again. “Alright, the first thing is we’d better assume that the CIA and the Americans know everything in those files, so that means that they might get the idea of starting to use teflon-coated rounds when dealing with us. That means that until we come up with a solution, no field missions.”

“I believe we might be able to offer a magical solution,” Prisma spoke up. “A magical spell or device that protects against the plastics and teflon they will coat over the bullets to do you harm. I will speak to the sages about it tomorrow.”

“It’s low priority for now, Prisma, since we’re not going to be doing any field missions for a while,” he said. “But do talk to them about it.”

“Keeping the earth dragons safe is of the highest priority for us, chief,” she replied with a quirky smile. “Our lives literally depend upon your well being.”

“Alright, we know what they’re after. The question is, what do we do about it,” Trekka ventured, looking at the others.

“Right now, not much we *can* do,” Kammi said, scratching her shoulder absently. “We’re too busy dealing with our own problems, and right now, the Chinese aren’t much of a threat. But this intel makes it abundantly clear they’re not gonna give up. They want that oil, and *we* are their golden ticket to get it, so we’d better be ready when they come up with a new plan.”

“And we can’t overlook the idea that someone else that gets that intel might get the same idea,” Jirran said. “It’s actually a bad thing that the intel contains the actual formula, so now anyone who gets their hands on that data will know exactly what they need for it. We’d better be *very* careful. Even the Americans might turn on us if they see invulnerable soldiers mowing down their enemies in their future.”

“That’s a fair point,” Ferroth agreed with a nod.

“Prisma, could just *anyone* make that oil, or only a magician?” Girk blurted.

She looked at the young drake, her glowing white eyes narrowed slightly. “That is a good question,” she replied. “I cannot be absolutely certain. This formula is completely unknown to me. I have never seen its like before, so my knowledge of its processes is virtually nil. My educated opinion is that it would take a magical hand to craft this formula and manufacture the oil, but that is only my opinion. I will have to take it to the sages and have them study it to get confirmation. There is some chance that the Shao Kai might have found a way around the need to have a magical hand prepare the formula, and if so, the sages will be able to discern it by studying the formula.”

“Your opinion turns out right more often than not, Prisma,” Ferroth grunted. “I’m going to assume that only a magician can make it until you prove me wrong.”

“What I *can* say with confidence is that the magician need not be *trained* to make the oil for it to work, if it does require a magician to make it,” she elaborated. “He would only have to follow the steps of the formula. If the Chinese found a magically adept human and had him manufacture the oil, it would have potency. He need not have any training at all in magic, it would only require a *magical hand*.”

“Which is why we could make the talismans, because even though we can’t *do* magic, we *are* magic. The Chinese maker would be the same way,” Kell said, to which Prisma nodded knowingly.

“Then this might put us at odds with the Hunters,” Trekka said grimly. “If the American military demands that they make this, whatever it is, using their relationship with us to get what they’re after...well, it’s something we’d better keep in the back of our minds from now on.”

“We’ve always operated on the idea that we can’t entirely trust the Americans,” Ferroth said in a gravelly voice. “This just makes that policy make much more sense.”

“It *was* Jenny that got it to us,” Kammi said. “I don’t think she’d do something like that willingly.”

“She might not, but Price is a good little soldier that will do as he’s told. So is Yancy,” Kell countered.

“We’ll come back to that in a bit,” Ferroth said. “Prisma, given what you do know, would it be possible for this formula to work if they only had a *different* dragon race’s blood for it?”

“I cannot answer that with any confidence, chief,” she replied. “I will have to take it to the sages. They could discern if it could be used to make an oil that conveyed the immunities of the dragon who supplied the blood.”

“That’s a question I want answered,” he said. “We need to make sure there’s no threat to the other dragon races over this formula. The first thing tomorrow, you take that to the sages and have them find out absolutely everything they can about it. I want answers to questions I haven’t even

thought of yet, whelp,” he ordered, which made the field agents chuckle a bit. That was typical for Ferroth.

“I could take it now.”

“No, it’s almost sunset, no reason to keep them awake all night. It’s not so important that it can’t wait for morning,” he said with a shake of his head. “Kell, how did Jenny get this to you?”

“Using crypto and with Olivia purging it off every mail server after I got it,” he replied.

“Good crypto?”

“Liberty Six, chief.”

He gave a little sigh and nodded. “Alright, so we won’t have to make sure no wannabe hacker yahoo with a mail server sniffer program got his hands on it,” he said with relief.

“The Hunters are definitely good, I have no doubt Olivia got it all,” Jirran nodded.

“Alright, we’ll have to find out who else knows about this. Definitely the Americans, and most likely their allies,” Ferroth postulated. “And anyone with spies inside the CIA high enough up to get their hands on it. And odds are the Chinese know they’ve been compromised.”

“Jenny told me before sending this that they found the mole and removed it,” Kell told him. “Unless they have *another* mole, that’s not a given.”

“We’ll have to keep an eye out and make sure. If the Chinese know they’ve been compromised, it might make them do something crazy, say like nuke us to prevent someone else from getting their hands on the ingredients for this formula,” he said, pointing at his tablet.

“Where is the council at on discussing magical defense against nuclear weapons?” Kintel asked. “I know they were debating the issue.”

“Right now, still debating, but it might be a good idea for them to debate faster,” Ferroth replied. “But we’d better find out who else knows about this, so we can keep an extra-close eye on them.”

“Hate to say it, but the council might use this as another reason to keep us earth dragons way the hell away from everyone else,” Kammi grunted. “As in suspend field missions. They wouldn’t want to risk any agency out there getting their hands on our blood.”

“They’d be smart to do so,” Ferroth said soberly. “And we’d better face the idea that they won’t let the earth dragons go to Imakaii. It just presents too much of an opportunity.”

“That’s true,” Kintel agreed.

“Huh,” Girk sounded, then he looked up at the others. “Prisma, here’s a dumb question. Can this oil or whatever it is work on *us*? On other dragons, I mean?”

Prisma’s eyes widened just a little. “I don’t see why it would not,” she replied with sudden enthusiasm. “Going on my general education in magic, I see no reason why it would not work for us the same as it would for the humans. I’ll bring that up with the most wise when I present this to them in the morning. If we can adapt this formula for our *own* use, it would give the fire dragons an earth dragon’s defenses if we enter battle with the humans.”

“Well, that might be handy,” Ferroth nodded. “And given that the dragons know what it means to magic if they try to drain us of all our blood for the formula, we don’t have to worry about them going crazy with the idea.”

“Certainly not, chief,” Prisma nodded. “Some might object to the idea of taking blood from an earth dragon to make the oil, for fear that it would weaken magic in some manner.”

“Alright then. I want everyone to spend the rest of tonight studying this intel, and write up reports for the morning,” Ferroth said. “Think of every angle, ask any question you can, no matter how stupid it might sound.

Everyone be in the office an hour before sunrise so we can have a meeting and discuss the reports. Kintel will combine them and our meeting into a master report I'll give to the council later in the morning. Prisma, I want you to give that formula to the sages first thing tomorrow, and give them *your* report, since you'll be approaching it from a magical angle. Any question you think up, you write down and pose to the sages. We need to know everything we can about this formula, including how *we* might be able to use it," he said, and she nodded soberly. "Kell, copy all the data to the high security cloud server."

"Sure thing, chief," Kell said, looking down and tapping at his tablet to do just that.

"Since Jenny got that to you, call her back and talk to her, find out what the Hunters know about it," he continued. "I need to take what we have to Geon and Anthra right away, so they have some advance warning."

"So that's why we're breaking before we go through everything," Kintel mused.

Ferroth nodded. "Prisma, with me, so you're there to answer any questions the council members might have. The rest of you, get it done," he ordered, and he turned towards the doorway.

They all filed out to either go down to the city or back home, but Kell and Kammi went straight to the workshop. "I'll start reading through this, you call Jenny," she offered.

"Sounds like a plan," Kell replied as he sat on the base of his tail in front of his computer.

Jenny picked up the voice chat almost immediately. The background was that of the apartment she lived in over at Imakaii, with Greg moving behind her with Davie in his arms. "You called back sooner than I expected," she said seriously. "You go through that?"

"Me and the field agents," he answered. "How did you get it?"

“They have rules about taking wifi-enabled tablets into CIA headquarters for a reason,” she replied with a grim kind of smile.

“Clever girl. I take it they know what’s in those files?”

She nodded. “So does the President. He’s already made it clear that anyone that lays a hand on an earth dragon will get shot for treason on the spot,” she relayed. “And he said if he finds a single armor-piercing round anywhere on Imakaii, heads will roll.”

“Well, that’s something of a relief,” Kell grunted.

“His wife is tied up with us, with *you*, so he’s far more worried about Julia than what the government might get out of that data,” she told him. “Anything we do to you might end up getting Julia killed. I don’t think he’s willing to risk that.”

Kell hadn’t considered that angle, but it did make some sense. Julia was intimately involved in the magic program, and she was in a place where the dragons could get at her quickly and easily if it came down to it. Hinado could be at Imakaii inside an hour, and strike with complete surprise. To protect his wife, Walker was making it very plain very quickly that the dragons weren’t to be harassed.

“I know you read Mandarin, Kell. Was there anything more in the originals than what we got out of the translation?”

He shook his head. “Whoever translated it for you did a very good job,” he replied. “They even managed to accurately translate the original text, which looks at least a thousand years old. Mandarin hasn’t changed much over the millennia, but it did change a *little*, enough to need special training to read old Mandarin. Mainly with the shape of the pictoforms, some of them have changed a little over the centuries.”

“Like Latin,” Jenny mused.

“Pretty much, yes,” he agreed. “Mandarin *needed* to be unchanging over the years because of what they used it for. They needed that continuity

with so many languages within the Chinese empire and its sheer size. If it changed too much in one region, they wouldn't be able to use it to talk to others. So the bureaucracy took great pains to make sure that Mandarin changed as little as possible."

"Well, there's my history lesson for today," Jenny chuckled. "What's the initial reaction?"

"Not much of one yet, but not all that good," he replied honestly. "Mainly paranoia. We haven't taken it to the council yet, so the initial reaction is from the department. Chief thinks they won't allow us to come to Imakaii for the conference. They may not even allow Anthra and Geon to go, and they're on the council."

"I wouldn't entirely blame them if they did," she agreed. "I can almost imagine the guys over in the Pentagon drooling over the idea of having an entire regiment of Captain Americas."

"That's what the Chinese were planning. Did the Pentagon get the plans?"

"Oh yeah, and from what I heard, they're going to devise a counter-strategy in case it happens, *including* them somehow getting the formula. I think they're even going to warn Iran about the plan, so they can fortify their eastern borders. I wouldn't be surprised if they pull the chemical weapons out of storage."

"We were discussing that very possibility earlier," Kell nodded.

"So it's *real*?"

"We're not sure. Prisma's going to take it to the sages tomorrow and find out, but we're going to assume it's real until it's proved that it's not. Excuse us if we don't tell you if it's real or not."

"Amen. Don't say a word," she agreed vehemently. "I have to say, it's fairly clever, what they were trying to do."

“The Chinese are many things Jenny, but they’re not stupid,” he said soberly. “And it makes a lot of sense. They’ve been almost strapped for oil for the last twenty years, since their domestic production capacity can’t meet the demand, their demand drove up global oil prices, and it’s a hell of a lot cheaper to conquer oil-producing areas than it is to buy it, at least in the long run.”

“It’s the World War three scenario,” Jenny sighed. “What the boys over in the war games department say will eventually happen when the world reaches a critical point in oil consumption. When supply can no longer meet demand, eventually some nation is going to try to take it by force. It looks like the Chinese weren’t going to wait for the tipping point, and were going to move first and take the entire world by surprise. I think they’d have managed to get to Turkey if they tried it, but I’m not sure if they could hold it.”

“And that’s what the formula would be for, to make sure they hold it,” Kell surmised. “They wouldn’t have been slowed down very much by Pakistan and Afghanistan, that’s for sure. It would have hinged on how well the Iranians prepared to meet them.”

“You’d think they’d avoid Pakistan.”

“The Chinese have a lot of agents in Pakistan, Jenny. They know exactly where every Pakistani nuke is, and they’d have been taken out in the first day of the surprise attack. That would let them simply march in and overwhelm the Pakistani army with superior numbers, and you know India would take advantage of it and invade the Kashmir region. The Chinese wouldn’t be interested in conquering the entire country, they’d just need to hold enough territory through the southern half of the country to move their troops and maintain their supply lines. And since that would cut off Kashmir from the rest of Pakistan, the Indians would just move in and take it.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “So, the conference is still on, but you may not be here?”

“Right now, I have no idea,” he replied. “Like I said, we haven’t taken this to the council yet, and they’ll have to make the decision. But I’m sure the conference will go on. Oh, and so you know, we’ve finished your talismans. We were going to bring them to you.”

“Well, that’s good news. What does mine look like?”

“You’ll find out when you open the box.”

She gave him an annoyed smile. “Bastard.”

“I have to keep you honest, Jenny, and you know how hard that is.”

“It’s how women keep men under control,” she said lightly.

“Oh, is that so?” Greg’s voice called faintly from the background, which made Jenny laugh.

“I think this is a good time to let Greg beat you into submission,” Kell said dryly, which made both Jenny and Kammi burst out laughing. “We have a lot of work to do tonight.”

“I’m the one with the gun around here, Kell,” Jenny winked. “Call me back tomorrow when you know more. I do love knowing what’s going on an hour before anyone else,” she grinned.

“Sure thing. Later, friend.”

“Be well,” she said in draconic, then she cut the connection.

Well, that was at least one small favor. Walker wasn’t going to act on what they’d found out, at least not openly and not yet, because he was personally involved. After all, both he and his wife were going to be taking magical training from the dragons, who would take a very dim view of them trying to abduct an earth dragon to take his blood for that formula. At least for now, it looked like they could trust the Americans...or they would after the department did some digging to make sure they weren’t feeding Jenny false info, since they knew she passed it on to Kell.

The bigger question was how the council was going to react. Kell wasn't sure what they were going to do, especially since this ancient Shao Kai formula involved using earth dragon blood...and the council was *way* too protective at the moment. Ever since they found out that earth dragons were the source of their magic, they'd done much what Prisma predicted, completely flipped over from their prior position. There was a very good chance that the council wouldn't allow *any* earth dragon off the island, not anytime soon, to protect them from possible human governments trying to capture them for their blood.

Prisma had told him about the old legends, and how they were based in fact. Achilles was the best known old legend about earth dragon blood, which had changed over the centuries to become him being dunked in the river Styx. In reality, there *was* an Achilles, who *had* used earth dragon blood to make him invulnerable to metal weaponry. Exactly *how* he got earth dragon blood wasn't known, not even to Prisma's histories, but the history did say that he had somehow procured a large amount of earth dragon blood, which back then was probably the rarest substance in the world. But he wasn't killed by a poisoned blade hitting him in the heel as in the story, he had actually been killed by a common footsoldier wielding a broken spear whose broken end formed a sharp point. Earth dragons could be harmed by wood, at least theoretically, but the reality was that their scales and hides were too thick for wood to penetrate unless it was shot out of a cannon. Human skin wasn't nearly as tough as earth dragon hide, so Achilles had been killed by a man using the crudest of weapons, a broken spear.

And now, he knew that military leaders in both China and America were dreaming of an army of Achilles, men that couldn't be hurt by bullets, who would have a very strong resistance to fire, able to survive the shockwaves generated by about anything smaller than a 500 pound bomb. Men like that could storm through almost any defense like living tanks, and only the most extreme measures would stop them.

This was certainly going to complicate things.

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Kell and Kammi waited with the other field agents in the common office holding the field agent support team as the council had first met out in the large open gallery on the ground floor area, underneath the high rise, then they'd moved to the aerie about three hours ago after receiving Ferroth's report. The support team was a group of ten earth drakes that did some of the research and other work for the field agents, helped them prepare for their missions, and so forth, who was led by Kintel. The entire department was a beehive of activity, because most everyone knew about the Chinese data. It was all about anyone in the department could talk about.

The council had been in session for about six hours, and Kell figured that Ferroth had told them everything and they were now discussing the matter up on the aerie. All of them had produced detailed reports, their impression of the data they analyzed, then they read each others' reports and discussed the conclusions that each of them had reached about what they learned. All of them agreed that they had to take this information very, very seriously, and that it put the earth dragons in danger from the humans for an entirely new reason. Before, it was the fear of some old billionaire finding out an earth dragon might make them young again, but now it was because their blood could be used to make a topical oil that would give the humans that used it their quasi-magical defenses. They all agreed that they had to be *very* careful around the Americans, and they all reluctantly agreed that until they got everything sorted out and made sure that what they'd learned didn't go any further than the Americans, not a single earth dragon should leave the island. It meant no trip to see Jenny, no trip to Imakaii, not even for Geon and Anthra. They all more or less agreed to that because they knew that the council would make that decision anyway, so may as well accept it early.

They were all still working on the problem. The department was now in containment mode, making sure that that Shao Kai formula didn't go any further. They'd made sure that it didn't exist anywhere on the internet, and they set up a series of sniffers and spiders that would detect it and move to squash it if it did show up. It was *highly* unlikely that would come to pass, given how paranoid the CIA was, but the Pentagon also had their hands on it, and sometimes they weren't as careful. They didn't want that information going anywhere else...it was bad enough that two major nations had their hands on it, nations with tons of resources, they didn't need every nation with dreams of conquest finding out that earth dragon blood could make their soldiers almost impossible to kill with conventional weaponry.

On the magical side, they still had no word from Prisma. She was up on the aerie with six chromatic sages, so they didn't know what she'd managed to find out so far.

Everyone stopped and turned when Ferroth came into the room. He didn't look more unhappy than usual, which was a good sign. "Gaia's grace, finally!" Kammi blurted. "What news, chief?"

"Interesting news," he replied. "The council did what we figured. They won't even let Geon and Anthra off the island for now. But, since they're on the council and they need to be there for the conference, they've decided to move the conference *here*," he declared, which elicited a few gasps from the room. "The Hunters, Walker and his wife, and Kent will be invited to the island. We're not sure that the President will accept. If he doesn't, we'll set up a video conference system for him."

"That's really surprising, since any human they bring here can't be affected by the cloaking magic," Kell noted.

"That's why the guest list is seventeen people. No Secret Service, no guards. *Only* the magicians that intend to train. The council feels that we can afford them a little trust, and that's the reason why we doubt the Walker will accept. So I want a secure portable conference package set up," he ordered. "We're also going to build them some shelter. Basic housing, a

series of rooms up on the platform where the old department building stood, where the sky dragons can easily keep an eye on them. Since there's no ramp anymore, they're not even getting off that platform without help," Ferroth chuckled. "They've already sent the orders down to Jukra, and I'm having Pikan draw up the plans. She knows what humans will need in the rooms. It's going to be fairly basic, but they'll only be here for three days."

"How are they getting down here?" Trekka asked.

"They'll allow an aircraft carrier to come within twenty kilometers of the island, and sky dragons will carry them the rest of the way," he answered. "The Navy has passenger planes capable of making carrier landings, so they shouldn't have any problems getting down here. Since we'll have the Hunters here, I want you whelps to help the admins go over the network. I don't want any of them finding a way to hack in, so we're going over our security with a hunter's eye," he declared. "Kintel, put the team on it."

"Yes, chief."

Prisma came into the chamber, almost trotting, and came up to Ferroth. "The sages have news, chief," she told him. "The formula is viable. It actually impresses them mightily," she said absently. "It will require a magical hand to craft, as I suspected. As to your query, they are not absolutely sure if it would work on another dragon, but they suspect that it will. They will know more upon further study."

"Put everything they told you in a report and send it to me as soon as you can," he ordered.

"As you might expect, they wish to test the formula and it's potential use on other dragons by making it. They have all the other ingredients, but they will require a small amount of earth dragon blood. No more than a few drops," she added. "They ask for a volunteer to provide the sample, whom I will take back to the Library of Eternity."

"I'll do it," Girk declared.

Prisma nodded to him. “Then by your leave, chief, Girk and I shall attend the matter and return quickly.”

“Go ahead,” he ordered. “But don’t dawdle, Girk. We have a lot of work to do.”

“I’ll be back as soon as they’re done, chief,” he assured them, then the two of them hurried out.

“Alright, let’s get it done, whelps,” Ferroth barked. “Kintel, you draw up an inspection plan and hand out the assignments. I want every aspect of the intranet checked over and reinforced. Wireless, hardware, fiber, software, computers. I want plans drawn up for physical security at external sites where the humans might gain access to the network. These are the *Hunters*, whelps, they know nearly as many tricks as we do when it comes to hacking into networks.”

“I’ll take care of it, chief.”

“Good. I have to get back to the aerie, they want me there in case they have questions,” he told them. “Work hard, work well,” he declared, then he turned and scurried out of the room.

“You heard the chief,” Kintel called. “I want the support team in my office while the field agents finish what they’re doing. Someone find Irago and get him in here, we’ll need him to get in touch with the fire dragons about securing the remote sites,” he added, then he turned and padded towards his office with the ten support drakes following.

“I’ll go get Irago,” Jirran volunteered, then he bounded from the room.

“You think Walker will go for it, intended?” Kammi asked curiously, looking over at him as they returned to the terminals they were using.

“I’m not sure. He’d probably love to come here, but his security may not let him. Guess it’ll come down to how much they control him,” he chuckled. “I’m just surprised they’re bringing the humans here.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Kammi said. “They’re on *our* turf if they come here, where we have control of everything. That lets Anthra and Geon be there for the conference and still protect them from the vampires,” she said with sarcasm dripping from her voice. “Besides, letting *all* the dragons see more humans might be a good thing.”

“That’s true enough,” Kell mused. “And Jenny will get to visit my parents and the pod.”

“Yeah, they’ll love that,” Kammi nodded. “I wonder if she’s bringing Davie.”

“He’s part of the invite list, so most likely,” Kell replied. “It’ll be interesting to see how Greg handles it,” he laughed.

“How all of them handle it,” Trekka piped in. “This will be the first time they’ve come to *us*, all of them but Jenny. It will be way out of their comfort zone.”

“I’m fairly sure they’ll handle it,” Kell said easily.

Jirran returned with Irigo, who nodded in silent greeting as he passed through the main office and into Kintel’s office. So far, Irigo had impressed almost everyone in the department, and Kell was fairly sure he was going to make it. He was quiet, but he was smart, he was motivated, and he was steady. “You know, I just thought of something,” Jirran said with a sly look as he returned to his terminal.

“What?” Kammi asked.

“We’ll have Price here, where we can easily separate him from the others,” he said in a lilting voice.

All three of them burst out laughing. “We could make his visit here memorable,” Kammi agreed with an eager grin.

“We’ll be too busy to play with Price,” Kell chuckled. “No doubt chief will have us all riding jockey over the intranet making sure none of them manage to find a way in.”

“Let a girl dream, will ya?” Kammi protested.

Chapter 25

29 September 2017, 21:12 DMT; Dawnmist Village

They'd managed to get a whole lot done in just a little over two days.

There were multiple tasks to accomplish, but if earth dragons were good at anything, it was organization. The department was dealing with the revelation of the Chinese, and after two days, they'd had the time to thoroughly investigate the matter, which brought the chromatics and Prisma into it. Prisma proved her invaluable nature to both Ferroth and the chromatic sages as acting as the intermediary, both taking the magical aspects of the problem to them and digging for all the information she could get, being her politely pushy self even to the sages, but it had produced results. Thanks to the sages, they knew that the Shao Kai formula in the data Jenny got them worked on other dragons, because they'd produced some using Girk's blood and tested it on a fire drake. The fire drake gained all of an earth dragon's immunities, and it had yet to wear off. The sages speculated that it would remain potent for a good week before the magic faded, and they were also testing that duration by exposing the fire drake directly to earth dragon auras to see if their presence extended that duration.

They were doing that because of the little magical band they'd sent with Kell on his mission. Being in direct physical contact with him had drastically increased its lifespan. When they got it back and inspected it, it had only used a fraction of the stored magical energy into which it had been imparted, and had more or less fed off of Kell's aura for most of its power. That put the chromatic sages into a bit of a tizzy, since it hinted that temporary items would last an earth dragon nearly ten times longer than any other dragon, and maybe even longer if the item was specifically designed to draw magic from an earth dragon's aura, almost like a magical leech.

Earth dragons more or less shunned magic because they couldn't use it, so there was almost no research on how temporary magical items worked with or around earth dragons. The department was the only group of earth dragons that used magical objects, but they only used hidden amulets, which were all permanent devices.

While Kell and the department was working on the China problem, and the sages were working on the magical side of that problem, Jukra and Pikan were busy with the conference problem. The temporary barracks for their incoming visitors were about halfway built, with them at a bit of a pause as they waited for some human furniture to be brought by the sky dragons. Beds, chairs, that sort of thing, things that they couldn't just carve out of stone and place in the rooms like desks and tables. They didn't want the humans to have to sit on stone chairs or sleep on stone slabs, so they'd arranged some beds and comfortable chairs to be brought in, as well as human foodstuffs and some portable cooking stoves to cook it. The sky dragons were supposed to pick them up from the exclusion zone up at Kilauea in about an hour, which hadn't been disassembled yet, then bring them back. Once the furniture was put into the rooms, the builders would put the roofs on the buildings and finish them. The buildings would have power, water, and sewer lines, giving their human guests all the amenities they required. And since the old Department Aerie was so far from the lowlands and the wifi nodes, they felt that the risk of hacking would be minimal...with some precautions. Precautions such as lights illuminating the entire aerie so they'd see any humans trying to use a directional antenna.

They'd also be given some magical comforts. The power run to the buildings wasn't for lighting, it was for laptops and other devices so they could recharge them. Lighting would be provided with driftlights, created to respond to English commands, and each room in the barracks would be provided with a spell locked to a crystal that would keep the room at a comfortable temperature, like a magical air conditioner, also designed to respond to English commands. Those kinds of spells were limited by how large the room was they were controlling, which was why they used conventional electric freezers instead of magic to preserve the island's food

stores, but they were more than enough for the rooms they'd built. And they'd already decided that the humans could take those magical trinkets back with them as gifts.

Prisma had made those objects with the help of Sella, since Sella spoke English, part of her job in the department to learn how to meld magic with technology. This wasn't melding magic with technology, but it was also part of her job to research how they might be able to sell magical trinkets to the humans for the supplies they needed, and that very much came under Prisma's job description.

For Kell, the last two days had been busy. He along with the other field agents had been working on the China data. Kell had had to burn more than a few of his back doors into the Chinese network to dig up a few pieces of information, and they'd just finished all of it and presented the final report to the council that morning. What the Chinese were after, their plans both before and after they got what they wanted from the dragons, and their overall plan to basically conquer most of the Middle East.

While they'd been doing that, several of the technicians in the department had been running around securing the network against the inevitable hack attempt from the Hunters. They'd gotten most of it done, including arranging physical security at their most sensitive site locations in the form of fire dragons, and had even planted a few nasty surprises in case they tried anything.

And there were some preparations going on over in Kell and Kanna's burrow. They were very excited at the idea of Jenny coming back to visit, so Kanna had bartered some "human food" from the stores and was currently sitting in front of a freshly made firepit on the back edge of the beach, learning the intricacies of roasting meat over a fire. Humans didn't eat their meat raw the way earth dragons did, so Kanna wanted to be able to present a more proper meal for Jenny and her family...and she wasn't doing all that good a job. Granted, it was her first time ever trying to roast meat, so she deserved a little slack in that regard, but her attempts thus far had ended up with charred outsides and nearly raw insides. Kell was watching her from

the entrance of his burrow with some amusement, sitting up on her haunches and hunched over a fire, turning a large chunk of spitted pig over the fire as she read from the tablet strapped to her forearm that explained how open-fire roasting was done. Kanna had spent a lot of barter to get those pigs, given how scarce meat was on the island right now, which just went to show how serious she was about being a proper host for Jenny.

“I’m almost expecting to hear her start cursing in English,” Kammi said from beside him, which made him laugh. They were laying by the entrance of their burrow, so they were too far away from the fire for Kanna to easily hear them. Kanna had dug the firepit on the edge of the beach about halfway between their two burrow entrances. “Maybe we should go give her a paw.”

“That’s one trap you don’t want to step into, intended,” he warned. “When it comes to her duties as Matron, we don’t step on Mother’s tail. Especially when she has company.”

At least Kanna had a taste tester that wasn’t afraid of a little ash on her food. Gressa sat sedately beside the firepit watching Kanna, her expression serious and her tail swishing slightly behind her. Gressa had become quite the regular visitor to the farm over the last couple of days, first coming to ask some questions about the computer and the conference program of Kell, but she’d met Kanna, and the two of them had struck up the most bizarre friendship. Kanna and Gressa were almost nothing alike, but something about Kanna just intrigued Gressa. Perhaps it was her nurturing personality, perhaps it was her open and accepting demeanor, perhaps it was their shared affection for Jenny, but Gressa *liked* Kanna, and Kanna seemed to be fond of her in return. It was a bit amusing to see them together, however, since Gressa was nearly three times Kanna’s size. Kanna looked like a hatchling sitting near her.

Kell didn’t mind. Gressa, he could handle. She was smarter than most fire dragons and much more even-tempered, probably a byproduct of all her magical training, one of the few that thought with her brain instead of her fangs.

What Keth had minded was having Gressa's two hatchlings tear up one of the corn tracts this morning. She had brought her hatchlings to meet Kell's siblings and Feno and Fia's hatchlings, and the eight of them had gotten a little mischievous.

It was almost funny. Two months ago, no fire dragon would have ever dreamed of bringing their hatchlings to an earth dragon farm. Gressa wanted her hatchlings to *understand* earth dragons, to respect them beyond what they meant to magic the way Gressa had since the conference on Imakaii, so she had brought them down to the farm to see what earth dragons did and meet them face to face, including having the chance to play with some hatchlings about their own size...but not their age. Zava and Kissar, her two hatchlings, were nearly fifteen years younger than his siblings, though they were nearly the same size. It wasn't all that surprising when one thought about it, since fire dragons were so much bigger than earth dragons. They were back in their den under the care of Gressa's mate, Hazzath, which had given Keth quite a bit of relief. It took him, Feno, and Fia nearly an hour to repair the damage they did to the corn field.

The only thing more rambunctious than earth dragon hatchlings were fire dragon hatchlings.

In a way, Gressa's interest in earth dragons was an example of the wholesale change in attitude among the dragons since learning the truth. Now that the shock and disbelief was starting to wear off, the other dragons were getting *curious* about earth dragons, and Gressa wasn't the only dragon that was starting to politely come visit farms and see what was going on. It was almost like the revelation that earth dragons were indeed magical, just in a very different way from other dragons, had caused the others to see them with new eyes. Fire dragons, sky dragons, and even a few chromatics—mainly the sages themselves—had started poking around earth dragon farms, learning about both farming and earth dragons without getting in the way. The water dragons already understood earth dragons well enough to not feel the need to come learn about them, but a few of their elders were discreetly studying earth dragon auras to more fully understand how they worked.

At least now they knew what to look for. Their auras were again completely hidden by the background magic permeating the island, undetectable except by skilled magicians that knew *exactly* what they were looking for.

Kell was fairly sure that earth dragons on other farms were taking all this newfound interest in stride, because that was how earth dragons rolled. As long as their guests didn't trample any fields, and maybe even made themselves useful, most farmers wouldn't mind them hanging around asking questions. If anything, earth dragons loved to gossip, so they certainly wouldn't mind someone to talk to while they were tending the daily chores. The farmer's rumormill could move information around the island as efficiently and nearly as quickly as magic could, and that rumormill was never unhappy to get more into it.

Kell almost had to stifle a laugh when Kanna did in fact curse in English, and Gressa looked down at her with an amused expression. "I just do not understand this," she complained, motioning with her forearm. "I'm following the instructions, but the meat is burning."

"If you don't mind a bit of advice from a dragon that intimately understands fire," Gressa offered, trailing off.

"I'm not that proud, Gressa," she admitted. "What am I doing wrong?"

"If you want it to cook evenly inside and out, let the wood burn down, only add wood to keep the coals red hot and the flame low and steady, then let it cook for a while, turning it every so often. Steady heat applied evenly over time is how you cook something from the inside out."

"Ohhh, so that's what this means. I'm afraid I don't read English as well as Keth does. He spends so much time researching farming websites, he's quite good at it."

Kammi gave him a grin, and he pushed a bit at her shoulder, which made her laugh.

It was too nice a night to sit in the burrow and work. The rainy season was in full swing, so this clear, dry late evening was a rare treat. Usually they'd be dealing with intermittent storms and showers rolling across the island day and night, far more rain than the usual afternoon rains they got the rest of the year. The rainy season would last for about two months or so, slowly tapering off to return to the usual weather pattern. The rainy season was about the only climatic variation the island got, one of the reasons why it was chosen as their refuge over a thousand years ago. When a small island had to support the population of an entire race, they had to make sure that it could produce food year round. So, after a long day slaving over a computer terminal, both Kell and Kammi were relaxing on what a human would call their front porch, the flat area just outside the entrance to the burrow, and Kell was musing over how life was changing on the island, both for the earth dragons and for the others.

And their view of Kanna and Gressa was a big part of it.

Another big part of it was the bright light approaching the farm. It was the unmistakable light of a chromatic, and sure enough, Prisma landed beside them near their burrow, ending the magical light allowing her to fly safely the twilight dimness. "What are you up to, fluffy?" Kammi asked cheekily, and laughed when Prisma threatened her with her plumaged tail.

"Matron Kanna invited me to sample cooked food," she replied, looking down at them, her eyes shifting between glowing white and visible irises and pupils in the dimness. "But I had much work to do. I hope I am not late."

"Nah, she's still trying to figure out how to cook it without burning it," she replied.

"I heard that, youngling!" Kanna barked from the firepit, which made Kammi laugh again.

"And what brought on this sudden desire to do so? I was under the impression that earth dragons ate food as it was."

“It’s for Jenny,” Kell answered. “Humans don’t eat raw meat, so she’s learning how to roast meat so Jenny won’t feel weirded out when she comes to visit.”

“Ah. I did not know that Jenny knew your parents so well,” she noted.

“She met them in person once, and Sire and Mother took an immediate liking to her,” Kell chuckled. “She has that effect on dragons, I’ve noticed. *Everyone* likes Jenny.”

“She’s the humans’ dragon whisperer,” Kammi laughed in agreement.

“What is this whisperer?”

“Sorry, human inside joke,” Kammi told her. “Matron knows that chromatics like to cook their food, so no doubt why she invited you.”

“Some,” she replied easily. “I find I prefer fish raw, but I like my other meat cooked And I enjoy the stew of many different vegetables with beef added.”

“Beef stew,” Kammi supplied. “How do you eat that without making a mess?”

“Practice,” she replied easily.

“Fluffies always were prissy,” Kammi noted to Kell, then yelped a tiny bit when the end of Prisma’s tail snapped like a whip and struck her across the top of the base of her own tail.

“That’s the only way you can keep her in line, Prisma,” Kell said approvingly.

“I’ve come to learn that over the last few days,” she agreed, which made Kammi burst out laughing.

They talked about the upcoming summit as Kanna continued to learn how to roast meat, and when Shii and the pod arrived from their fishing trip and hauled some of their catch up onto the beach, it nearly turned into a party. The farmhands and their hatchlings joined them, giving the pod a

chance to get to know the new hires, Prisma, and Gressa better, and Kanna tried her paw at cooking fish over the fire after she ran out of pig. Her attempt with the last of the pig worked out fairly well, cooked on the inside and with only a slight burn on the outside.

It was a large enough gathering that they attracted outside attention, and they got crashed by a fairly important uninvited guest. A bright ball of light heralded the arrival of Hinado, and he drifted down over the scene in curiosity. “What are you doing flying at night, esteemed council member?” Kell asked, looking up at him.

“I just got back from Imakaii,” he answered. “And that smells very intriguing.”

“Please, join us, esteemed council member,” Kanna offered, making a motion towards the food laid out on a tarp near the firepit.

“I would be rude to decline, Matron,” he said grandly, drifting down and putting his feet on the sand, folding back his sail-sized wings.

Since it was considered rude in dragon society to discuss anything important during a meal, Kell waited until Hinado finished eating before asking him about his trip. “Are the humans on schedule?” he asked.

Hinado shook his head. “That’s what I need to discuss with the council in the morning. They want to come as soon as we’re ready to receive them, so I’ll need to talk with Ferroth to see if the department is ready. The human President is ready to leave as soon as we tell him to come.”

“We’ll be done with our part of it tomorrow afternoon,” Kammi answered. “Did the sky dragons bring that furniture?”

“They’ll be bringing it tomorrow,” Hinado answered. “How long will it take the builders to finish once they have the furniture?”

“Maybe a day,” Kell speculated. “All they have to do it put on the roofs. They left them off because the doors they made are too small for us

to use, so we have to put the furniture in through the open tops and then put the roofs on.”

“Ah, that explains that mystery,” Hinado noted. “So, we could be finished in two days.”

“About that, as long as nothing goes wrong.”

“So we could receive the humans in three,” he noted. “That works for me. The sooner we get this conference done, the quicker we can get back to getting everything put back to normal.”

“At least the island won’t look like a disaster, with the last of the farms repaired,” Kammi chuckled. “Is the council ready for the conference?”

Hinado nodded. “We have our agenda ready to discuss with the humans, from the next shipment of supplies to our status in their United Nations. We have a few other things to discuss, though, mainly dealing with the humans while they’re on the island. What parts of it will be restricted, how much freedom we give them, and whatnot. We’ve already decided to keep them well away from the northwest side of the island. We can’t risk that they see the carrier.”

“That would be a good idea,” Kell agreed. “So you’ll have their ship approach from the northeast?”

Hinado nodded. “It’s more or less in line with Hawaii from that direction anyway,” he added.

“I do hope that you’ll be letting Jenny come visit us, esteemed council member?” Kanna asked in concern.

He smiled in her direction. “Of course, Matron,” he assured her. “We see your relationship with her as a good thing, so we won’t stand in the way of it. The better the humans understand us, the less reason they have to fear us. We’ve also been discussing allowing Jenny to move here as an emissary, her and her family. It seems that she’s the one human that most dragons

seem to favor, so if we're going to have any human here to act as our contact with the human world, it would be her."

"I think we should start planning to build a cottage for her family over on the knob," Kanna declared, pointing past Kell's burrow. "The knob" was a flat-topped ridge over by the north coastal tract that had just enough space to put a human house, connected to the lawn around Kell's burrow by a 20 meter wide strip of buffer grass between the cove and the south coastal tract. There was a small, shallow valley between the bluff holding Kell and Kammi's burrow and the knob, into which Keth had installed a concrete-lined drainage ditch with soil filters so excess water could run off the coastal tract and into the cove, and drain into it as clean water, not muddy water. Keth didn't farm the knob because its sides were just steep enough to cause water erosion when the land was tilled as the water rolled down the hillsides, so he kept it as a grassy bit of lawn that acted as a buffer of sorts between the rocky cliff behind the tor dropping into the cove and the tilled farmland of the tract on the inside of it, curving around the knob and ending about 20 meters from Kell's burrow. He'd long considered razing the knob to make it flat so he could farm the half hectare of land, but he'd never gotten around to it, mainly because the hatchlings liked to play there. There was just enough room on that flat-topped knob for a fairly good-sized human house, and it would be very easy for them to outfit it with running water, power, and a septic tank. Kell and Kammi could *easily* build such a thing. For that matter, so could Keth and Kanna.

"They would need a host here, and a chaperone," Hinado said easily. "And who better than the earth dragons that she knows the best?"

"I'm in agreement with my lifemate," Keth smiled. "I would be happy to host Jenny and her family if they move here."

"Then I'll make sure the council knows that that's all arranged, should we decide to do it," Hinado declared.

"I doubt chief would object," Kell mused. "If a Hunter moves to the island, he'd want her under the direct supervision of someone in the

department.”

“And we don’t mind babysitting her,” Kammi agreed.

“I would enjoy having Jenny here,” Gressa said. “I came to like her very much when we were at Hawaii. She is an exceptional human.”

“She is at that, Gressa,” Kell agreed.

“I think that the most wise would also find her presence here beneficial,” Prisma added. “They have spoken to me about the humans, and show some curiosity about their abilities. Having one here, within easy reach of them, would give them the opportunity to study her and her family’s magical capabilities.”

“Trejem said the same thing in council this morning,” Hinado nodded. “No dragon on the council inherently objects to Jenny. We were all most impressed by her when we met on Imakaii. And with the news that there are dragons willing to host her, we very well may offer her a place here.”

And *that*, Kell reasoned, was the real reason Hinado had stopped by to talk to them...though he had certainly enjoyed the food.

After their impromptu beach picnic, Kell was almost amused by Keth and Kanna’s sudden animation. After cleaning up, they all but ran up onto the knob and started looking around, no doubt planning out how they could build a human house up on the flat spot.

“Didn’t they hear that they haven’t decided on that yet?” Kammi asked lightly.

“They will,” Kell predicted, to which Sella and Prisma nodded in agreement. “They’ve been kicking around the idea of bringing Jenny to the island for a while, and the humans have been pushing for it, so they have someone here that can keep them apprised of what we’re up to. And now is a good time, since we’ll have to coordinate with the Americans to get our resolutions through the U.N. You know China and Russia are going to do everything in their power to block them.”

“Amen to that,” Kammi agreed. “China because of what they want, Russia because the Americans are the ones backing the resolutions.”

“So, Jenny will be equal parts diplomat and spy,” Gressa mused.

“All diplomats are spies, Gressa,” Kell told her with a chuckle.

“I was *not*,” Gressa declared, a bit indignantly.

“Of course you were, Gressa,” Kammi grinned up at her. “You may not have known it, but you were.”

“Hmph,” she snorted, a bit of flame flaring out of her nostrils.

30 September 2017, 16:16 DMT; Dawnmist Village

Kell almost had to laugh when he came home, bursting from the water of the cove and landing on the bluff near his burrow entrance in a steady, warm rain.

Keth and Kanna had been very busy while he was down in Sanctuary City. They’d flattened the top of the knob and laid the foundation for a building, a human house, and from the look of it, a *big* one. A large slate was left by the foundation showing the plans Keth had drawn up for the house, and Kell was quite surprised at both how complete they were, and how *logical* the plan was. His plan was for a two story, four bedroom, four bathroom house situated firmly in the center of the flat area at the top of the knob, giving Davie quite a bit of flat, open lawn to play on...and on the plans, Keth had marked the flat area at the bottom of the tor on the north side, right at the edge of the north beach at the very end of the cove near the oyster beds, for Davie’s playground, which Kell supposed Keth intended to have removed from Imakaii and brought down here. Or, Kell could just build him another one, leaving the one at Imakaii for him to use when he visited there. The plans showed a patio behind the house that overlooked the cove, large enough to accommodate Gressa, and balconies on the

second floor coming out of the master bedroom and what Kell supposed was Davie's room, which both overlooked the cove as well. Keth had clearly consulted with a builder about human houses, or he'd looked up floorplans on the internet, because his plans included hollow walls for running wiring and pipes, and also included ducting for airflow through the house and windows that would open and close. He'd clearly done his homework, which showed his enthusiasm for the idea of hosting Jenny if—no, *when*—she moved to the island.

Keth was making sure that she would have a house sitting here waiting for her.

But the earth dragon in him had added to the plans. There were plans for two basement levels under the house, the house below to mirror the house above, that would give Jenny and her family a nearly obscene amount of room. It included a tunnel that would run from the second sub-level out to the north beach, giving them direct access to what would be their own private beach. The two sublevels were built like an earth dragon burrow, with large, open rooms, wide passages large enough to accommodate any earth drake, and an entry chamber big enough to hold Anthra. A staircase connected the living room upstairs with the entry chamber underneath it, which gave Jenny access to the entry chamber that was too small for any dragon to use to get into the house. There would be an entry ramp for dragons on the southeast side of the tor, allowing Jenny and Greg to welcome and entertain dragon guests in surroundings more normal for them. Keth was building a human house above and an earth dragon burrow below.

Of course, a dragon made house would be quite different from a human one. There would be no wood in the house at all, the walls wouldn't be wallboard, they'd be flat planes of rock whittled down to the size and shape required to mimic wallboard and bolted to the stone frame of the house using stone pegs and anchors. The stone to build the house would be quarried from the burrow they'd build under it, which meant they'd have to dig out the burrow carefully, preserve the stone in large enough blocks and slabs to carve out the house sections and the pieces for Davie's new

playground. Putting it all together would be an interesting challenge, and Kell found himself a bit eager to see what they could do with these plans, without any help from the builders.

Keth ambled up the tor and joined him as he studied the slate, his forepaws muddy from doing some farmwork. “I see you couldn’t even wait for formal council approval,” Kell accused.

Keth gave him a gentle smile. “It will take us some time to build, and I’d like it to be ready before Jenny gets here, so she can stay in her own house while here,” he answered. “Besides, if there’s a house sitting here waiting for Jenny, it might persuade the council to let her stay.”

“I have to say, Sire, this is a good plan,” he complemented, holding up the slate. “It would take us a couple of days to build, at least if we do it ourselves. The builders—“

“No. We build it ourselves,” Keth insisted. “I want this house to be made for Jenny and her family, by *us*.”

“I fully understand that sentiment, Sire,” Kell smiled as he nodded. “Me and Kammi can pitch in after work, and I guess you and Mother will be working on it while the farmhands tend the tracts.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Kanna’s out with the pod quarrying some of that black rock from the shelf, which we want to use in the kitchen to give them nice counter tops. I’m sure we can polish it to make it as smooth and shiny as granite. And I was of a mind to put some art on the rock sheets we install on the inside, to give the walls some character. Jenny did mention that she’s curious about earth dragon art.”

“I like that idea, Sire,” Kell nodded. “We’ll have to arrange it with the humans to get them some appliances. Stove, refrigerator, washer and dryer, dishwasher, you know, the basics. Nice ones,” he mused. “I’ll get online and order some.”

“How are we going to buy them? We don’t have human money,” Keth protested.

“You leave that to me, Sire,” he said with a slightly malicious smile. “They didn’t train me in hacking without teaching me how to get stuff for free over the internet.”

“I’d best not ask too many questions,” Keth said mildly, which made Kell laugh.

“There is one thing I’ll want to do, but I’ll need Prisma,” Kell mused.

“What is that?”

“We’ll need driftlights and comfort stones for Jenny’s family, and I’ll have her enchant a strong enough generator to run every appliance we’ll put in the house at the same time, which is one of the reasons she’s in the department,” he answered. “That’ll handle the power problem. I’ll have to give her access to the island’s internet, which means I’ll have to put her switch somewhere she can’t reach it and put some pretty strong firewalls on it to keep her from hacking the island. Water...we can handle that without much trouble. We can run a new pipe from the well over here. Wiring and fiber...that shouldn’t be a problem. We have tons of it now that they’re harvesting it off the carrier, on top of what the humans sold us. But we’ll have to use a septic system for sewage, this tor is too far from the sewer line to make it feasible. But, I see you saw that,” he said, tapping the slate.

Keth nodded. “We’ll need some human toilets and pipes that fit them,” Keth supplied.

“We can manage that,” he assured him. “Tell you what, Sire. I’ll start on the burrow part of it while you finish up the chores. I’ll put the stone over there so we can start shaping the pieces. We’ll have to shape out the rest of the foundation stones and frame of the house first, then shape the wall slabs, furniture, decorations, and roof pieces. I’m sure you already know how you’re going to do that, so we’ll let you handle the interior pieces while we handle the stuff behind the walls.”

“Sounds like a plan, youngling. I do have a few things to finish up, then me and your mother can get to work on this.”

By sunset, the house was halfway built and the burrow beneath was fully excavated. When Kell told Kammi what they were doing, she called in the other field agents, and the five of them managed to excavate the entire burrow in about five hours. Even Kintel and Ferroth got in on the act, coming up to the farm to oversee things, but ending up digging their own passes and carrying stone slabs themselves. They took the stone they carted out of the burrow and used it to shape stone posts, beams, and other equivalent pieces to a wooden frame house, then they started fitting them together, demonstrating the earth dragon genetic ability to build. None of them had formal training in human carpentry—which the house would mimic in its design and appearance—but all of them had no problems shaping the frame pieces of the house and then fitting them together. Jirran and Girk plundered enough fiber and electrical wiring from the department stores to wire up the house, and Kell pulled a few favors from Jukra to get enough piping to handle the water requirements for the house. And while Kell didn't steal the appliances and amenities they couldn't duplicate he needed, like kitchen cabinets, windows, and the like, he did order them and went around Jenny, calling Arlen Kent and arranging to have them delivered to the exclusion zone so the sky dragons could bring them to the island. Kent promised him they'd be there by morning, and it just took talking to Irago to arrange to have a flight of sky dragons to go get them.

By sunset, they were ready for the next step, which was starting to flesh out the inside.

Ferroth decided that the house was pretty important, and the field agents were mostly done with the important work anyway, so he had the field agents and Kintel back on the farm that morning. Once the sky dragons arrived with the appliances and equipment Kell ordered, they helped Keth with the inside. Keth was the one that shaped the wall slabs and interior stone pieces, the parts that would be seen, duplicating the architectural style of a southern plantation house. Keth made the pieces, then the others put them in place. And with eight earth dragons working on it, the house started taking shape very quickly. They did have to call in one of Jukra's builders to help with the plumbing, just making sure that what

they built was correct and would last, and Fredda came over herself to check out the magic-infused generator that Prisma delivered to them a couple of hours before noon, a heavy duty generator enchanted by magic to spin the armature to produce electricity without need of gas, one with an English trigger word to turn off and on. Prisma also delivered enough driftlights and comfort crystals to fill the house, also designed to respond to English commands, and also delivered the heating crystal for the hot water tank. She hadn't made that, Gressa had. Keth had Gedra, one of Gev's adult offspring, come over and put some art on the wall slabs, and Kell also did some doodling on a few pieces...though his pieces were nowhere near as good as Gedra's. She was a *real* earth dragon artist, where Kell was just an amateur. They didn't put art on every slab, but every room had one wall slab with some art on it, leaving the other three walls to be decorated however Jenny and Greg pleased.

The hardest part was the passage from the house to the burrow beneath. The stairwell and passage were human-sized, and that meant that they couldn't dig it out as they were. It took two of them with hider amulets to dig out that passage, using the claws on their near-human forms to do the work, which took a whole lot longer for them to do. It took Girk and Trekka nearly three hours to carve out that passage, which was basically just a staircase down from the kitchen to the main living chamber, with a door on each side. They could have dug a that passage in about five minutes in their dragon forms.

At sunset, they carefully set the roof on top of the house and bolted it down, then the nine of them took a step back and admired the result. The house was complete, inside and out and above and below, and everything worked. The appliances were hooked up and operational, the generator was running, the house had water, and the house's connection to the internet was up and running...and also heavily firewalled to keep Jenny out of the island intranet. They even had the house connected to the island's cable TV system. And since it was dragon made and made of stone, it would be able to handle about anything, even a cyclone. The only thing it lacked was the

personal touches, but Jenny could bring her own with her when she moved in.

“It looks pretty snazzy, Patron,” Kammi complemented as they looked at the front. It had large windows and a columned front door, in the tradition of a southern plantation house, and the back had the balconies and patio he had put on the plans.

“It was fairly fun to build. I’ve never done anything like that before,” Keth said mildly as they admired it. “So many small pieces that we had to fit together like a puzzle. And all the little cosmetic things we did were very challenging as well, like the molding, and the lines on the floor slabs to make them appear to be hardwood floors, and carving out the likeness of shingles on the roof slabs.”

“We do need to paint the outside,” Kell mused. “Humans like to paint things.”

“I hope Jenny likes gray walls,” Kammi added. “Because I don’t think she’ll paint the inside. Having only three walls painted would look weird.”

“If she wants to paint over the art we put on the inside, that’s her prerogative,” Keth declared. “It’s *her* house. She can do with it what she wills.”

“We’ll just have to warn her to bring a drill capable of boring volcanic rock if she wants to hang anything on the walls,” Jirran chuckled. “And if she wants carpeting, she’ll have to bring her own.”

“Probably, that floor is very hard for human feet,” Kell chuckled.

“All we have left is Davie’s playground,” Kanna declared, holding a slate with the plans Kell drew up. “And it’s nearly as intricate as the house.”

Kell laughed. “Hey, I can’t skimp on it. If it’s not as nice as the one we built for him on Imakaii, he’ll be disappointed,” he protested.

“What is this diamond on the plan?” Kanna asked.

“That’s something Prisma and Irago’s going to make for Davie. It’s a zero-gravity zone where Davie can float around. Since it’s here, we can put some magic in the playground, give him something no other human has,” Kell grinned. “Prisma and Irago are going to come down tomorrow morning before Prisma has to go to school and discuss a few other ideas. Prisma wants to surround Davie with magic so it sparks his curiosity about it. She says it’ll make his magical education easier.”

“Don’t get too involved, whelp. Remember, they’ll be here in three days, and we’ll have a full task sheet tomorrow,” Ferroth warned. “I put off today’s tasks so we could get this finished.”

“So, it’s official?” Keth asked.

Ferroth nodded. “That’s what that messenger was bringing. The council has everything set up,” he answered. “We’ll be receiving the humans around noon in three days. No doubt, Walker’s on his way to Hawaii right now.”

“Well, this is gonna be fun,” Kammi said eagerly. “I think we can finish the playground in three days.”

“It’s not the playground we need to finish, whelp,” Ferroth warned.

3 October 2017, 11:37 DMT; 27 nautical miles north-northeast of Draconia

With a shuddering of the deck, Kell of the Earth Drakes landed on the deck of the carrier *Gerald R. Ford*, water streaming from his body and wings after being catapulted up onto the deck by Surrat. The water drake landed beside him a moment later. The deck was cleared of all aircraft, with another carrier just behind it in the task force formation to provide the air cover, along with 33 other ships in the formation to serve as protection and support for the two carriers. Two more water dragons landed on the carrier

deck as seven other dragons descended from above, with a large cluster of visible sky dragons circling the fleet. The two water dragons that landed behind Kell were Jussa and Essan, and the other dragons were the other members of the council and Prisma. As the dragons settled themselves, they saw President Walker, his wife Julia, Arlen Kent, his assistant Ross, and Jenny come out of the conn tower and start towards them. Behind them, the rest of the Hunters and Winters—now Major Winters—were exiting the conn tower as well, carrying three days' worth of clothing and whatever personal effects they were bringing.

Everything was ready for the visit. Their quarters were all done, the itinerary set, and what mattered to Kell and Kammi, the playground was also finished, which meant that Jenny's house was ready and waiting for her. And she'd be staying in it. They'd had that fight with the council yesterday, requiring Kell and Kammi to go before the council themselves and give multiple assurances that the three humans being off the aerie and being able to move around wasn't going to cause any problems.

An aircraft elevator rose to the side of the deck, and a fleet of ten electric-powered ATVs, basically oversized golf carts with all-terrain tires and more powerful engines, came into view. Those were for the visitors to get around on their tour, since humans couldn't keep up with dragons on the ground. Sky dragons would carry them from point to point with the humans seated in them, set them down, and then they'd be able to keep up. They were going to take them to several places on the island, including taking them down into Sanctuary City and on a diving expedition with the water dragons. Surrall's breathing bubble spell would allow them to go under, but they'd have to be careful not to give them diving sickness. Humans weren't immune to pressure the way earth and water dragons were.

Kell leaned down a little when the first group reached them, and put a paw around Jenny when she hugged his neck and shoulders. "Hello, Jenny," he said in a warm voice. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Kell," she replied brightly.

“Where are Greg and Davie?”

“Back with them,” she smiled, pulling back enough to look him in the eye, then pointing back to the other group. “So, you have everything ready?”

“Of course we do,” he replied, looking down at her. “You’re looking a bit excited, Mister President.”

“I have good reason to be,” he laughed, his arm around Julia. “You have no idea how excited I am to be here, Kell. There’s a lot of work to do, but the chance to do it here, in the most exotic place on earth from our point of view, it’s a real treat.”

“We’ll try not to disappoint you too much,” Kell told him, then he remembered his manners and did what he was there to do, translate everything they just said to the others. That included the rather formal greeting from the council, voiced by Jussa, once all twenty that were going arrived. The twelve Hunters, Yancy, Winters, President and Misses Walker, Arlen, Ross, and Greg and Davie. And that was it. No Secret Service, no entourage. Ross would be acting as President Walker’s main assistant, including carrying the “nuclear football” while they were there. Ross was only going because Hinado had tested her two days ago on his visit and found she was a magician.

No non-magical human was going to set foot on the island. That decision had already been made.

“The sky dragons are going to carry you and your things to the island,” Kell translated as Jussa continued. “We’ve built you suitable quarters on the old department aerie, where you should have everything you need to be comfortable. We’ve built you quarters that use both technology and magic, and Prisma of the chromatics will explain to you how that magic works,” Kell said, motioning towards the petite chromatic. “One of the field agents awaits you on the aerie to provide translation, since Prisma doesn’t speak English. After you settle in, you will be offered a tour of the island, including a visit to the underground city built by the earth dragons and a

chance to go on an undersea expedition with the water dragons. Tomorrow morning, we'll begin our conference, focusing on the needs of the island and a discussion about your magical education. After lunch, we will present to you your talismans and provide the chromatic sages the chance to talk to you and study your abilities a little. The day after we'll discuss the United Nations and other worldly affairs. The day after, you will be given a chance to rest and relax. You will be returned to this ship just before sunset. Is that satisfactory?"

"Quite," Walker replied, looking up at Jussa.

"There's just one thing that's changed from what you talked about yesterday with Hinado," Kell said. "Jenny, Greg, you're going to be staying on the farm instead of up on the aerie," he said, looking at them. That made Jenny give him a huge, eager smile. "Sire and mother arranged it. We'll be hosting you while you're here, and we've organized something appropriate for you two and Davie. It even has furniture," he said lightly.

"I'm not complaining at all, Kell. I'd much rather stay with you," Jenny said enthusiastically. "I get to see your family and the pod again!"

"Sire and Mother are looking forward to seeing you," he answered. "You're going to meet our new farmhands and their hatchlings, too. Sire needed way more help than what me and Kammi could give him."

"I'd say we're ready to go, then," Walker declared.

A flight of sky dragons landed, and they bent to that task. Some of them picked up the luggage carts and golf carts and soared off, then one by one, sky dragons picked up the humans and lifted them up into the air, hovering over the carrier until all of them were collected. Hinado carried President Walker, and Faralla carried Julia, which was their honor as the sky dragons on the council to carry the most important of the guests. Kell was a tiny bit irked when Irago put a paw on his back and picked him up, pulling him up with the humans, and the expression on his face made Jenny laugh. "Still don't like to be carried, do you Kell?" she said teasingly.

“No,” he replied in a voice that made her laugh harder. “By the way. Jenny, Irigo, the sky dragon in the department. Irigo, Jenny,” he introduced.

“Nice to meet you, Irigo,” Jenny said, speaking fairly decent draconic. “How goes work?”

“I’m learning, Jenny,” he answered in his sober, mild voice. “I hope to be off probation soon.”

She gave him a blank look, then nodded when Kell translated. That went beyond Jenny’s draconic skills.

Juarez gave a bit of a whoop when the sky dragons started back for the island, flying very slow so as not to upset their human charges, Walker chatting with Jussa, who was flying along with them since the sky dragons were going slow enough for him to keep up.

When they got close to the island, Yancy voiced what more than a few of them were thinking. “The spells must be up. I don’t see anything, and we have to be close,” he declared.

“You won’t see the island until you set foot on it, that’s how the magic works,” Kell affirmed. “So all of you don’t panic when the sky dragons set you down on nothing. And don’t move when they set you down, you’ll be on an aerie. You might run off the edge before you get your bearings.”

“I seem to recall that I could see the island my first time here, and I wasn’t standing on it,” Jenny realized.

“That’s because I was,” he answered. “I’m an *earth dragon*, Jenny. I literally am of the island, because I am of the earth. Being on my back when my feet were on the aerie was the same as if you were standing on it yourself.”

“That’s an intriguing condition,” Julia called. “It screams of magic.”

“Just because we don’t *do* magic, it doesn’t mean that we aren’t *magical* creatures, Julia,” Kell answered. “The fact that we can’t be hurt by

weapons forged from the earth makes that obvious.”

Geon gave him a slightly warning look, fearful he was drifting too close to the truth.

It was quickly forgotten as they approached the aerie. The sky dragons did a good job very slowly and gently setting the humans down on the platform, well away from the edge, and they all blinked owlshly once their feet touched the stone and looked around in wonder. The extinct volcano behind them came into their view, as did the barracks the earth dragons had built, and they suddenly found themselves surrounded by *hundreds* of dragons of all races, who were hovering around the aerie watching, or on the slope behind the aerie. Jenny rushed over to the side and looked down, and she was looking right towards Dawnmist. “You repaired all the damage!” she declared. Davie ambled up to the edge, and Jenny took hold of his hand and knelt down, pointing. “That’s where Kell lives, baby bear,” she said, pointing towards Dawnmist. “Down there, at the edge of the water.”

“We finished just a couple of weeks ago,” Geon told her as he stepped up to the edge along with her and her son. “And have crops in. Now we tend them and wait for the harvest. And we could never have done it without the help of the other dragons, particularly the chromatics. Their magic did in weeks what would have taken us months, maybe even years.”

Kell reared up and sat on his haunches and base of his tail, gaining a vertical base, then opened his wings to get their attention. “There are six buildings, and five of them have four bedrooms and a common room,” he called. “That’s more bedrooms than guests, so everyone’s getting a private room. President Walker, Misses Walker, that building right there is yours and yours alone, something befitting your station. Jenny, Greg, you’ll be coming down with me,” he called as Trekka and Jirran stepped up to take over translating. He dropped down onto his paws and walked over to the edge along with Greg. “Just show the sky dragons which luggage cart is yours, and they’ll bring it and you down. I’m going to go ahead and warn them you’re coming. I’ll meet you down there.”

“Alright.”

He vaulted off the aerie and opened his wings, arresting his fall, then turned towards the family farm. It was a fairly easy glide down to the farm from the old department aerie, landing near the main burrow on the border grass between the burrow and the tracts, and his arrival caused his parents, the hatchlings, Shii’s entire pod, and Kammi to boil out of the burrow in anticipation. Feno, Fia, Jarr, and Jenri came out behind them with the other hatchlings, arranging themselves to meet the humans—and looking decidedly nervous about it at that—and when Kell reached them, he turned and looked back up the mountainside. It was quite a collection of dragons waiting to greet Jenny and her family, most of the dragons with which she’d interacted on a personal level since her first visit to the island. And it said a great deal about her that she’d garnered so much affection from dragons like Kell’s parents, who had only met her once, as well as the respect of Shii and Surral.

“Are they coming?” Keth asked.

“In a moment, Sire,” he replied. “The sky dragons have to collect up their stuff and bring down a golf cart for them.” He reared up on his hind legs and pointed. “And there they are.” Five sky dragons came down from the aerie, and as they got closer, Kell could see Jenny and Greg being carried, Greg holding onto Davie very tightly. A chromatic sage was following them, which surprised Kell a little bit. The sky dragons set them down very carefully along with their things, and Jenny gave a laugh and ran right up to them and threw her arms around Keth and Kanna in turn.

“I’m so happy to see you two!” she declared.

“We’re happy to see you too, dear,” Kanna answered, patting her back and nearly making her fall over. They regarded Greg as he approached them, and when he set down Davie, the child fearlessly came right up to the assembled dragons. “And this must be Davie!” she said, leaning her head down close enough for the boy to touch her snout. He did so with a bright smile and a lot of curiosity.

“You’re not red,” he declared.

“Fire dragons are red, little one,” Kanna told him in a gentle, soft voice. “We’re earth dragons.”

“It’s good to meet you in person, Greg,” Keth said, offering a claw towards Jenny’s husband.

“You sound much different over voice chat, Patron,” Greg laughed, shaking his claw.

Jenny greeted all the dragons she knew, including Kell’s younger siblings, then she was introduced to the farmhands and Shii and Surral’s younglings, with whom she’d never interacted. Feno and Fia’s three females absolutely gawked at her, Fila looking about ready to run away, but she calmed down when Jenny leaned over and gave her a gentle, reassuring smile. “You’re Fila, right?” she asked in draconic. When the hatchling just nodded mutely, she knelt down and put her hand on her horn. “It’s alright,” she soothed. “How is working on a farm this big, Feno?” she asked him, and that *impressed* Kell. She’d been working hard on her draconic.

“Challenging,” he replied, which Kell translated. “But also rewarding. Patron and Matron are as skilled and kind as everyone says, and I’ve already learned much in the short time I’ve been here.”

“Not fair!” Kitta complained, nearly knocking Jenny over. “We worked so hard to learn English, and now you’re speaking our language!”

Jenny laughed, putting her hand on Kitta’s neck. “I’m a long way from being fluent in draconic, silly,” she told her in English. “And look at this!” she added, taking hold of Kitta’s crystal horn. “You look so different now!”

“Do you like it?”

“Actually, I do,” she replied. “What happened to make them change like this?”

Kitta looked to Kell, who gave her an approving nod. It was already decided that they could trust the humans with that knowledge. “It turns out

we have breath weapons,” Kitta answered, showing off her skills with English. She really had worked very hard to learn the language while they were down in the city. “When we first learn to use them, it makes our horns change.”

“How did you *not* know you had them?” Jenny asked in surprise.

“That’ll take a bit of explaining, which can wait til later,” Kammi injected.

“Well, what do they do?” Jenny asked.

“We’re *earth* dragons, duh, think about it,” Kammi grinned.

“Stop being a dork, Kammi,” Kell said, which caused some laughter. “We found out that we can breathe a cone of superheated sand and glass particles with extreme pressure, like a supercharged sandblaster from hell. If the heat doesn’t kill, then the scouring of the sand will. We can also project out a stream of lava, which is even *more* destructive. I don’t like saying we *breathe* that,” he said primly. “We can’t really show either of them to you, not with you this close. The heat would kill you, and Patron would kill us for scorching the front yard.”

“Wow, and I thought your spikes were impressive,” she grinned, putting an arm over Kitta’s neck and shoulders.

“Our spikes don’t cause collateral damage,” Kell answered.

Jenny walked past the gathered earth and water dragons, and deliberately approached the wizened old chromatic sage, who had stayed behind, staying at the edge of the group. The aged female looked down at her soberly. “No need to stay away,” she said in draconic. “It’s an honor to meet you, most wise.”

The old female gave her a bit of a guarded smile, showing aged, worn teeth. “We are most curious about you, Jenny Edwards,” she said, which Kell translated. “I will be staying nearby while you are here to observe and study your magical abilities passively, but not to interfere.”

“I don’t mind,” she said with a nod, then she switched to English. “And I’d like to have a long talk with you about magic. Kell can only tell me so much.”

“That goes without saying.”

“Anyway, let us show you where you’ll be staying,” Kell called.

“We’re not staying in the burrow?” she asked in surprise.

“We made something for you guys,” Kammi grinned. “I’m surprised you didn’t see it coming down off the aerie.”

“I wasn’t really paying much attention,” Jenny laughed.

“I was too busy keeping Davie from squirming out of my arms,” Greg added.

Davie squealed in laughter when Kammi swooped him up into her paws, then set him boldly on Keth’s back. “Now you can keep up with us, Davie!” she declared.

“Now that’s something I’m definitely gonna do again,” Jenny declared, standing up. Kell had to laugh when she came up to him and started climbing up his shoulder. He leaned down and let her get in place at the base of his neck, and Kammi rather cheekily more or less forced Greg up onto her shoulders, mainly by dipping her snout under and between his feet from behind and bodily tossing him up and over her head. Greg managed to land on her shoulders without falling off, and lucky for him, he didn’t land straddling her neck, which for a human male would have been a very painful experience.

Kell didn’t have to go more than five steps before he heard Jenny gasp. “You built a *house*?” she blurted, since there weren’t a bunch of dragons blocking her view once Kell started moving.

“A fully functional house,” Kammi said grandly. “It even has human toilets!”

“We’re pretty sure we got everything right,” Kell nodded, glancing back at Jenny out of the corner of his eye. “Power, water, appliances, furniture, cabinets, that sort of thing. Prisma threw in some magic too, to make it more interesting for you. There are driftlights in every room that respond to English commands, that work on keywords. You can turn them on and off, make them brighter or dimmer, and have them follow you around to provide light for you. Just say ‘driftlight,’ then what you want it to do. The blue crystals embedded in the floor of each room act like air conditioners. They respond to English too, just tell it you want it warmer or colder and it’ll change the temperature in the room. They have a keyword, just say ‘room temperature,’ then what you want it to do. Both of them won’t respond to you until you touch them, though,” he warned. “And they’ll seal to the first two humans that touch them so they only accept commands from those two people, so don’t let Davie touch them first or he’ll be one of the ones that can give them commands. And I don’t think you want a five year old with that kind of power,” he said dryly, which made Jenny laugh.

“The whole family worked on it,” Kanna told her. “We wanted you to feel comfortable while you’re here.”

“The house has a few secrets and a few surprises,” Kell continued. “You’ll have fun exploring it.”

The group followed Kell and Kammi along the coastline, past his burrow, then up the small tor. He heard Jenny gasp as they approached the house. “I thought you made it out of wood at first. It’s made of stone!”

“The only wood in that house are the cabinets and furniture we had brought in,” Kell told her. “The entire house is built of stone, shaped to resemble the way humans build wooden houses. So don’t worry about damaging any wallboard,” he chuckled. “Wood’s too valuable a commodity for us to build anything out of it. There are only so many trees on the island, after all.”

“My lord, there’s a playground down there!” he heard Greg blurt. “It’s even larger than the one at Imakaii!”

“Hey, Davie’s gotta have his own space,” Kell said lightly, looking down towards the impressively large playground built at the bottom of the tor on the far side of the burrows, occupying the grassy strip between the north beach and the north coastal tract. Kell had built Davie another “castle,” this one even larger, and with more activities and equipment in its bailey. All made out of stone, with a sand-filled “bailey” filled with sand dredged from an undersea bar not far from the cove, where the current that ended at the island collided with it. There were large pockets of sand all along the southwestern side of the island, and there was a huge mass of it on an undersea shelf about 40 meters down and 60 meters off the coast of the cove. “This one’s got a few extra surprises in it. Prisma made a few magical modifications to the playground, like an area where Davie will float around, a zero-G area. There’s another place where gravity is reversed, so he’ll be walking around on the ceiling. And a few more magical surprises, but I’ll let you guys discover those yourself. That makes it more fun,” he chuckled.

“Aww, that was so thoughtful of you, guys,” Jenny said gratefully as she and Greg got down..

“We enjoyed building it, Jenny,” Kanna answered her. “It was actually fun. I’ve never built anything like that before.”

“Ohhh, ohhh, can I go play, Mommy? Please?” Davie said with unbridled glee, looking at the playground.

“Sure thing, sweetie, just stay on the playground while we put our things in the house,” Jenny answered.

“Younglings, take Davie down to the playground and keep him from wandering,” Keth ordered, looking at Kell’s younger siblings as Sella carefully set the young human on the ground..

“Oh no, if anyone’s gonna play on the castle, it’s gonna be me,” Kammi declared, picking a laughing Davie up and ambling down the hill on

three legs, much to the amusement of quite a few dragons. Kav, Kitta, and Konn all decided that playing on the playground was the better option, and followed after her. And after an approving look from their parents, Kii, Jerral, Hura, and the three farmhand hatchlings chased after them.

“She really is just a big kid, isn’t she?” Jenny asked Kell with a light look.

“Gaia help me, I think we’re gonna end up lifemates,” he sighed forlornly, which made Jenny burst out laughing.

The dragons all sat down and allowed Greg and Jenny to look around inside the house, and that turned into nearly half an hour...which made it a good thing that the hatchlings were all down on the playground enjoying themselves, keeping them entertained and out of trouble. Kammi kept Davie very entertained down on the playground, proving that she was as good with human hatchlings as she was with dragon hatchlings. More than once, they heard Jenny or Greg give exclamations of surprise or delight, and after a while, Jenny came out with an astonished look on her face. “Kell, how did you *build* this?” she said in amazement. “It’s astounding!”

“It took us a few days, and we had to have your government deliver us some of the stuff inside,” he replied mildly. “We didn’t really have time to build everything ourselves, so we built most of it and had the appliances and cabinets and such brought in by sky dragons.”

“This isn’t as, well, as *temporary* as the buildings up on the aerie.”

“No, we built this to last, dear,” Kanna told her. “When you move to the island to be the humans’ emissary to us, you’ll live here. We already agreed to host you.”

“When?”

“It’s just a matter of time,” Kell shrugged. “And we wanted you to have something here waiting for you when they finally make that decision. Something *yours*.”

“So, do you like it, Jenny?” Keth asked.

“Like it? I *love* it, Keth!” she gushed. “Who did the art on the walls?”

“I did some of it, the simpler pieces, but the really good ones were done by Gedra. She’s Gev’s daughter,” Kell answered. “Gedra’s one of the better artists on the island. She did some good work.”

“It’s incredible!” Jenny agreed.

Greg rushed out of the house, his expression amazed. “There’s a gigantic basement under the house!”

“Not a basement, a burrow,” Kell corrected. “We built you your own earth dragon-style burrow under the house, where you can receive earth dragon and smaller dragon visitors in surroundings we’re more used to. It has two levels, and there’s a passage down there that leads to that beach, which Matriarch and Patriarch said you can use as you please,” he finished, pointing at the north beach. “And we built the patio behind the house for dragons too big to fit in the entry chamber, like Gressa and Sessara. You’ll be seeing a lot of both of them when you move here,” Kell chuckled.

“Good, I like them,” Jenny declared.

Jenny and Greg took about fifteen more minutes to move the rest of their stuff into the house, Kell distracting himself by carrying over the golf cart and setting it on a sheltered carport beside the house, complete with a covered outlet to charge it, and they collected up Davie and returned to the aerie to rejoin the others. Kammi joined Kell as they were carried back up to the aerie by sky dragons, and they listened as Jenny and Greg gushed about the house they’d been given to the others...who looked a *trifle* jealous. Even President Walker looked a little envious as they described the inside of it.

Once the humans were back together, the tour began. They were loaded into their carts which were then picked up by sky dragons, and they were taken around the island. They were first taken to a chromatic library, the Library of Rome, and Prisma explained how chromatics used it to

advance their magical education as mystified chromatic library goers watched on from a respectful distance. Prisma even explained the filing system, which amused Kell. The librarian in Prisma showed itself as she got a bit too technical, but she acquitted herself by presenting all of them with copies of books meant to help them learn to read draconic, books sized for chromatics, which meant that Jenny had trouble carrying the gift she was given. Luckily they didn't have to carry them more than a moment, because sky dragons collected them up and flew them back to the aerie for them.

And Jenny certainly couldn't let that opportunity pass. "I notice that you don't have any power here, or computers," Jenny observed.

"Chromatics don't respond well to sweeping changes to our traditions, Jenny," Prisma admitted, which made quite a few of the observing chromatics bristle a tiny bit. "Computers are not magic, so we chromatics have a certain amount of distrust of them. They are not how we do things... or at least *most* of us," she said, offering her forearm, with the tablet strapped to it the way earth dragons used them. "I have learned the use and value of the computer machines in my time working in the department, and I think that once my kin come to understand their usefulness, they will accept them. I use the computers the earth dragons gave me to study magic, and it makes my studies much more comprehensive and organized. The ability to call up on the computer screen any book in my private library and read it at my leisure is almost indescribably useful. The thought of having every book we have all accessible from one device, able to be called forth with but a single command, that is almost a dream come true."

When Prisma described it *that* way, Kell noticed, a few of the chromatics in the library looked more intrigued than offended at the insult to what they saw as ancient and sacred chromatic traditions and custom.

The next stop after the library was the active volcano, and they were given a tour of a fire dragon den. It was Gressa's den, and she showed a lot of trust to let the humans in to look around. They met Hazzath and her hatchlings, and they were told a few stories about the ancient human artifacts in their den, brought to the island and held by Gressa and Hazzath's

families for generations. She even proudly showed off an ancient sword that she proclaimed belonged to Saint George the Dragonslayer, and told quite the tale of her ancestor, who had been the one that had killed the renegade knight after Saint George invaded his den and tried to kill him.

Kell was a bit surprised. He had no idea that Gressa descended from such a notable fire dragon family.

Their next stop was to the north side of the island—away from where the carrier was sitting—to let the humans see the lava flows that dominated that side of the island. It was there that they were given a few more demonstrations in both dragon magic and breath weapons, and Kell was the one that showed off what the earth dragons could do. They were impressed by the lava, but they were almost blown away when he used the sand attack to erode a small boulder to almost nothing in just a few seconds, showing just how damaging and destructive that attack really was. All four field agents also showed off their spike throwing skills, demonstrating the range and deadly accuracy for which earth dragons were most well known among the other dragon races. Girk was the most skilled spiker among them, and he proved it by hitting a moving target from nearly 150 meters away.

After finishing up there, they rode their carts about half a kilometer to the east, and they visited a small earth dragon farm...the farm owned by Keth's former farmhands, Har and Hikka. The two of them were happy to show them around, show them how earth dragons organized their land and produced food, and allowed them to enter their burrow and look around.

Once they were done there, the humans got their first real taste of the truly exotic, when they were brought to Sungrass Village on the northeast corner of the island, and were met by a group of water dragons. The group changed into swim suits in tents erected for them, and then they were taken out into the water to go on an undersea expedition. It was there that the dragons escorting them got whittled down. The council members were brought along—except the fire dragons, no way would they *ever* agree to an underwater jaunt—and Kell and Kammi came along with them to translate. Kammi was no mud dragon, but she'd showed a lot of improvement since

courting Kell, and naturally, Kell was almost as at home in the water as he was on land due to his family's long relationship with Shii's pod. The humans were completely encapsulated in air bubbles by Surrall, who had been called in to lead the expedition, and they were all given small crystals on pendants that would serve as magical radios, allowing anyone wearing them to speak to everyone else wearing them, as long as they stayed within 20 meters of each other. They would be able to hear Kell and Kammi's voices without them, but the water would distort it and make them hard to understand. They were carried along by the escorting water dragons as they started down the undersea slope of the island, heading for a shelf known as the Crystal Forest.

"This is amazing!" Julia breathed as they started to descend. "We're not going to get the bends when we come back up, are we?"

"Patriarch Surrall already took that into account, Misses Walker, you'll be perfectly safe," Kell assured her. "He can't take you too deep, but we'll be going deep enough for you to see some things." The water dragons illuminated the water with bioluminescence as they went deeper and deeper, and the Crystal Forest ghosted into view in the murky dimness. It was a flat, very shallow "bowl" in the side of the undersea mountain which formed the island that was filled with mud, but it had several large spires of pure quartz crystal jutting up through it. "This is called the Crystal Forest," Kell supplied, staying close enough so his pendant was within receiving range of them. "We think those big crystals were expelled by the volcano, long enough ago for them to end up down here. We're not entirely sure."

"They're huge," Walker mused, looking at the largest of them. "What are they?"

"Quartz," Kell answered.

They continued down the slope, going down to the very edge of Kell's diving range without magical assistance, visiting something he'd always found really, really cool. They reached another shelf much deeper down, so deep that the water was dark and chilly, which was much narrower than the

one above, a narrow flat spot on the side of the slope. But this one didn't mud in it, it had an active vent from the volcano surrounded by giant tubeworms, their mud tubes rising some 30 meters from the shelf. Large pale white crabs scuttled along the bases of the tubes. "This is something that water dragons say usually they only see at the ocean bottom," Kell explained. "There's an active volcanic vent here, and these tubes are from large worms that feed off the chemicals that come out the vent. They say they're fairly common around most deep undersea volcanic vents."

"The water here is hot," Julia remarked, putting a hand on the inside of her air bubble.

"It's much hotter at the vent opening," Kell said. "The pressure prevents the water from boiling, so it's around three hundred degrees Fahrenheit. This is as close as they can bring you to the vent without hurting you."

They ascended and went nearly a quarter of the way around the island, reaching what was known as the Waterfall. It was a frozen cascade of obsidian, magma that was shock-cooled by water that caused it to turn to glass, and the obsidian was frozen in a waterfall shape that tumbled down an undersea cliff. "Amazing," Jenny breathed, looking at the formation. "What is it?"

"Near as we can figure, this was a lava flow going down the cliff that was hit by a tsunami, which produced this large amount of obsidian," Kell explained. "During the Ice Age, this area was above water due to the lower sea level, so it formed here and then the seas rose and covered it. Obsidian forms when fluid lava is cooled really, really fast, and here was a large amount of fluid lava that was cooled really fast," he chuckled, motioning at the frozen waterfall of volcanic glass. "I've always loved this thing. I used to dive down here just to look at it."

They were taken to one more sight to see deep underwater, and this one was nearly halfway down the slope, taking them over a kilometer down. They entered an area of the ocean that Kell couldn't reach without

assistance, a place of dark, still cold. “*Dios mio*, how far down are we?” Juarez asked as they continued to descend.

“Over a kilometer, maybe a kilometer and a half,” Kell answered. “We can’t go much deeper, or the magic forming your bubbles will be overwhelmed by the pressure.”

“I can almost feel it,” Price said, looking up. “The air in here is thicker.”

“The bubble’s being pressed in by the water,” Kell chuckled. “I really shouldn’t mention that right now, if those bubbles failed, you would never know what happened.”

“Instant death,” Jenny breathed.

“More or less, yeah,” Kell nodded. “But we’re here anyway, so it’s a moot point.”

Something came up out of the darkness below, and it was something that Kell had never seen before either, though he’d heard all about it from the water dragons. The humans gasped when the shape of a skull emerged from the gloom, a skull the size of a two story house, the base of it embedded in the rock, causing it to extend out at an upward angle with its jaws frozen open. It was long and narrow with a gigantic set of jaws, jaws so big that Kammi quite cheekily swam inside them and turned around to wave at them from the inside. “Holy God, what is that thing? A dragon?” Greg asked.

“It’s a fossil,” Kell answered. “I’ve never seen it before, but Sella’s described it to me, and I *think* it’s from the plesiosaur family, a group of water-dwelling, air-breathing dinosaurs from the Mesozoic era. I did a little research after Sella first told me about this, and near as I can tell, this skull is nearly twice as large as the largest known plesiosaur fossil.”

“This is an active volcano, the rock is much too young to hold a fossil like this. How did it end up *here*?” Julia asked. “It shouldn’t be here.”

“Well reasoned, Misses Walker,” Kell nodded. “The honest answer is, we have no idea how it got here, or if there’s more of it in the rock behind the skull. It might just be the skull, or the whole thing might be in there. Either way, we honestly have no idea how something that should be buried deep underground in a Mesozoic-era sea bottom ended up *here*. And it’s long been a point of argument between me and Sella,” he said lightly, looking over at her. She narrowed her eyes in cool challenge. “She thinks that some titanic disaster ejected the fossil from wherever it was and deposited it here. My theory is that the fossil isn’t tens of millions of years old, and that it died here and settled on the slope while the island was forming, then got buried. I think this thing died maybe a couple of million years ago, which means that some of the plesiosaurs survived all the way up to the Ice Age,” he proclaimed, which caused Sella to shake her head in disagreement.

“I’m not sure you have the evidence to back that up, Kell,” Walker chuckled.

“On the contrary, Mister President, the evidence supports my theory much more than Sella’s,” he countered. “In this case, you have to go full Sherlock Holmes. It’s not necessarily what you see that tells you, it’s the fact that you can eliminate nearly every other theory or explanation. To paraphrase the old saying, once you eliminate all that is not possible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth. There’s simply no other explanation for how it got here, other than it died here and got buried as the island formed. I have no evidence that I’m right, but I can refute every other theory.”

“Now I can understand why Sella always looks so tired, arguing with you all the time, Kell,” Jenny said lightly, which made him laugh and Sella nod vigorously.

They came back up into the warmth and the light, and the water dragons took them to more “tourist” places to see. They were taken to the reef just off the Scarred Rock and allowed to explore it, spending nearly two hours sightseeing among the coral and tropical fish that lived on the

reef. The water dragons showed off a tiny bit of their magic with Davie, making solid water slides and ramps for him to keep him entertained while the others explored the reef. Sella also demonstrated water dragon breath weapons for them, at a safe distance, releasing a blast of steam, then making them all laugh when she did the same trick she'd often done for Kell, using her breath weapon like jet propulsion, sending her flying up and out of the water going backwards. She arced through the air and dove smoothly back into the water some 30 meters away, then her head popped back up near the humans, which made them laugh and applaud.

“And *that's* why water dragons never use that in the air,” Kell noted lightly.

“It must hit with the force of speeding semi,” Price reasoned.

“Trust me, it does,” Kell chuckled.

“She's used it on you?” Wilson asked.

“Once, as an experiment,” he answered. “I spent nearly a week recovering. She damn near broke my neck,” he accused.

“You were the one who badgered me for *days* before I finally agreed,” Sella retorted calmly. “How many times did I warn you, Kell?”

“Not enough,” he replied with a sly smile.

“Why on earth would you ask her to do something like that?” Jenny asked.

“Because earth dragon juveniles are too full of energy and not nearly full enough of common sense,” Kell answered honestly, which made all of them erupt in laughter.

After they were done at the reef, Surrall led them back to the island, and took them up the main lava tube leading to Sanctuary City. They emerged from it near the connecting tunnel, where their carts were waiting for them so they could ride up, as well as the council fire dragons and Gressa. Hirrag had to wait in the side tunnel leading up to the surface, since he took up the

entire passage and his tail was very much a danger to anyone behind him, human or dragon, so he would be behind them. Their clothes were also waiting for them, along with some tents set up near the water's edge so they could change out of their swim suits. "Why the carts?" Petrovski asked after she came out of the tent, back in her street clothes.

"Because it's about seven kilometers from here to the city, and it would exhaust you to walk that far," he replied. "That's how long this lava tube is. Amazingly enough, it's almost perfectly straight the entire way up."

Anthra and Geon took over the group, and they gave Walker and the other humans a fairly comprehensive tour of Sanctuary City. They showed them all the major features of the city, from the high rise to the industrial sections to the main room where the fiber came in, and everything in between...though not all of the council members could go with them. The city was built so Anthra could just barely fit down the passages leading to public areas, which meant that the fire dragons, Jussa, Trejem, and Faralla had no hope of fitting in them. Even for Essan and Hinado, it was a tight fit. They showed them some of the abandoned burrows, showing how they did them differently when burrowing them out of rock, the power plant, the storage silos where some of the food was still being held.

"Amazing that it's so elegant, given how fast it was made," Jenny mused as they walked down a long passage leading back to the main gallery. "There's even some art on some of the walls."

"Trust me, it didn't look half this pretty when we first dug it out," Geon said dryly. "We came back after it was first done and cleaned it up, mainly to give everyone something to do. Nothing is more dangerous than a bored earth dragon," Geon noted, which made Kell and Kammi laugh. "Besides, seeing something done only halfway is something that drives us earth dragons absolutely insane. We can't stand shoddy work, even if it's not our own. You have no idea how hard it was to keep the diggers from completing things as they dug them out. The concept of *just dig the tunnel, we'll do the finishing touches later* is alien to them."

“The art is the result of said boredom,” Kammi supplied. “You gotta understand, this whole city is like a blank canvas, none of the public passages have any rules about what you can do to them. Earth dragons were doodling on the walls just for something to do, at least until Anthra and Geon got everything organized and kept everyone busy.”

“I’ve noticed that English was one of those things,” Jenny said.

“English classes were part of the busy work,” Kammi nodded. “A few of them got pretty far in the time they had.”

“I noticed. Kitta sounded almost conversational,” she agreed.

“She had a whole burrow full of fluent speakers to practice with,” Kell chuckled.

“So, living down here is what made your horns change?” Jenny asked.

“Sort of,” Kell replied. “I’ll explain all that later, Jenny.”

“I’d prefer you explain it now, Kell,” Julia said with great interest. “I get the feeling that Jenny hears more than we do, because she’s down there with your family.”

Kell gave Julia a slightly amused look. “It gets a little involved,” he said as all the council members gave him fleeting warning looks. They already knew what they could say and not say, but the explanation tread rather closely to the secret of the earth dragons. “The first thing you have to know is that while we were down here, we found out we have breath weapons.”

“Ah yes, that. And how did you *not* know you had them before?” Jenny pressed.

“Easy. Because to use them, we have to eat a *lot* of rock and stone. You saw us use them, Jenny, the lava and sand we breathe out has to come from *somewhere*. It’s mass, not energy. Well, we haven’t eaten rock in that quantity for thousands of years,” he explained. “No rock, no breath weapon. Near as we can guess, we forgot we had them because for generation after

generation after generation, we never used them. We *couldn't*. So, parents stopped telling children about them, and eventually we forgot about them.”

“When we came down here,” Kammi continued, “we started eating rock again to stretch out our food reserves. And when we ate enough rock to fuel them...boom.”

“Our horns change the first time we use our breath weapons,” Kell continued. “We’re still not quite sure why. We’ve worked out that we have to be a certain age before we can use them, which is why the younglings all have crystal horns, but hatchlings don’t. So, if you see an earth dragon with crystal horns, you know that he or she has learned how to use their breath weapon.”

“A visible warning,” Julia mused. “Like the warning markings on some dangerous animals that warn predators not to mess with them.”

“Thank you so much for comparing us to poisonous bugs,” Kammi said gratingly, which made Kell laugh.

“Hey, you’re the one that once told me that earth dragons are nothing but really big bees, Kammi,” Jenny replied lightly.

“Bees are cool,” Kammi defended airily.

And that more or less ended the tour. The humans were taken back up to the aerie after getting back to the surface, except for Jenny, Greg, and Davie, who only had to walk maybe 400 meters from the Dawnmist entry tunnel on the farm to their new house. They didn’t stay there long, however. As the rest of the humans handled the food delivered to them however they pleased, Jenny’s family was invited out to the beach for a large dinner and social gathering. It was the chance for those that knew Jenny to meet Greg, and also a chance for Davie to run around in almost constant excitement, while Kanna showed off her brand new cooking skills by roasting a large side of beef over the fire. The meal was attended by more than just the family and the pod, however. Gressa and her mate were in attendance with their hatchlings, the farmhands were invited—they were family while they

worked for Keth—and Prisma and Irago were also invited to the party, Prisma because everyone liked her and Irago so he could get some direct interaction with humans in a more relaxed environment. As the sun lowered below the horizon, they roasted beef and tuna from Surrall's catch, then just enjoyed a nice and rare rain-free evening, watching a thunderstorm drift by just south.

And everyone had a pretty good time. Greg seemed completely at ease among dragons he barely knew, but it was Jenny that was making the rounds. She spent quite a while talking with every single dragon there, even the farmhands, and spent quite a while practicing her draconic with the hatchlings, who didn't speak very good English...except for Kitta. Davie remembered Gressa's hatchlings from Hawaii, and the three of them banded around near the water before the other hatchlings started getting involved, turning into quite a little game involving the young of three dragon species. Irago found himself a little under siege, first from Jenny, and then from Keth and Kanna, who were quite interested in the young sky dragon that had come to work in the department.

And what was normal for Kell and Jenny, they were a lot more honest with each other than their respective governments might like. Kell got a bit more indepth in the recent turmoil on the island after the meal, as the full moon added to the magical light that Prisma made over the beach to illuminate the party, but also the very fast and radical change in outlook the other dragons had towards the earth dragons. Kell couldn't reveal the truth, but his explanation vaguely touched upon it while still sounding quite plausible. "It was the breath weapons that changed everything," he told Jenny as he laid near the fire with Jenny sitting with her back against his side, right behind his left foreleg and directly under his wingjoint. Because of where she was, Kell had his wing slightly open and raised to both give her room and shelter her in case it started raining. "When the others found out we had breath weapons, they started thinking about us differently. That made them realize that even though we can't cast spells, we *do* have our own magic. It just works differently than theirs does."

“Everything about earth dragons works differently than the others,” Jenny supplied as Greg surfaced in the cove, laughing as Ralla swam in tight circles around him. Greg and Ralla had really hit it off.

“Well, yeah, but this was something they could *see*,” he continued. “The fact that we can’t be hurt by the earth should have tipped them off that we have magic. But there’s more, like what happened with Julia. That’s what the sages are studying now, what else we can do that’s not active spellcasting, that’s a magically-charged biological or autonomic process. I’m not sure, but I think they’re going to talk to your group about that tomorrow.”

“What are they going to say?”

“I have no idea. The sages are very secretive,” he answered. “And not even the department can find out what they’re planning. Hell, we don’t even know what they’ve discovered so far,” he grunted. “Prisma’s supposed to keep us up to date on that kind of thing, acting as our liaison between the chromatics and the department, but if the sages tell her not to say anything, she won’t. So, that’s the main reason the other dragons are so protective over us now. Since they’ve discovered that yes, we do indeed have our own form of magic, it made them realize that we’re *real* dragons. Real dragons that they still see as disadvantaged and helpless, and thus we have the overprotective mother hens,” he grunted, nudging his snout in Gressa’s direction. “Though, to be fair to Gressa, she’s here because of you. She really likes you.”

“I’m glad, because I really like her. And she seems to really like Kanna,” Jenny noted.

“I know, it’s the weirdest thing,” Kell agreed. “I’d never have thought Mother would have anything to do with a fire dragon, but she seems genuinely fond of Gressa.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve met her, Jenny. Think about it.”

Jenny was silent a moment. “She’s sheltered,” she realized. “She’d have trouble relating to other dragons, at least those not a water dragon. She’d treat them like an earth dragon, and that would rub the other dragons the wrong way, as well as put her off when the other dragon doesn’t act the way she expects them to.”

“Bingo. She understands water dragons because of the pod, she’s known them all her life. She’s the daughter of a farmhand that used to work for my grandsire. Mother was actually born on this farm, in the same brood chamber that hatched Sire and his brothers, and she and Sire mated when they were both very young. So, when the farmhand earned enough barter to buy her own farm, Mother remained behind. It’s all she’s ever known, and part of that life experience has been Shii and the pod,” he explained. “So she’s known the water dragons all her life. But she doesn’t know the other dragons very well. In a way, we earth dragons are even more sheltered than the others, because they interact with each other, but my own family excluded, earth dragons almost never interact with other dragons. But even my own family didn’t, not really, outside of the water dragons. But I have to admit, this whole thing has really put some edges on Mother’s spikes. When we were forced underground, she was nearly as fearful as a human, her entire life had just been put on its back and everything was uncertain. But at the end of it, right before we came back out, she was nearly as tough as a department drake. And that courage is what I think started her friendship with Gressa. Mother was willing to go outside her comfort zone, and, well, Gressa is Gressa. If there’s any fire dragon that I think could be Mother’s friend, it’s her. She’s very even-tempered for a fire dragon, on top of being pretty damn smart.”

“Brilliant. Just calling her smart is an insult,” Jenny corrected.

“I’ll give you that,” he agreed. “And in a way, Gressa is an example of how attitudes on the island are changing concerning you humans. I can’t stress enough how good of an impression you’ve left on the island, Jenny. I don’t know a single dragon that’s interacted with you that doesn’t like you. You’re the perfect liaison between our world and the human world. That’s why we built your house,” he chuckled. “Even chief can’t deny that you’re

gonna end up living here, so we went ahead and bowed to the inevitable. Chief even had a paw in building it, him and the other field agents.”

“I *love* that house, Kell,” she said emphatically. “If I do move here, when I leave, you’re finding some way of pulling it up and shipping it back to the states.”

Kell had to laugh. “It is your house, you can do what you want with it,” he told her.

Jenny was quiet a moment. “You know, that explains a whole lot,” she mused. “About your mother, I mean. She’s never lived anywhere else?”

“Outside of us being down in the city, no. This farm is her entire world, Jenny, both hers and Sire’s. They were born here, and they’ll die here. This farm is their home, their passion, and in many ways, their entire world. So, it’s a bit of a surprise to see them stepping out of the boundaries of the world they made for themselves and seeing what’s on the other side.”

“Even earth dragons can change,” Jenny noted lightly.

“When you drag us kicking and screaming, yes,” he agreed dryly, which made her laugh. “And speaking of change, you’re getting your talisman tomorrow. Ready for it?”

“Eager,” she replied. “And not just because it means I can cast spells. That talisman is very special to me, Kell, because it represents my new life. Not as a magician, but my life with *you*. With the dragons. I feel...like this is where I was meant to be,” she told him. “I can’t explain it, but it just feels so *right* to me to be with you, around you, to learn from you and learn about you. I know it sounds a bit arrogant, but I want to be standing there the day that the world welcomes the dragons back into it, to know that I helped bring it about. This island may be your home, Kell, but I feel that the world has been *less* without the dragons being in it. We humans drove you away, and I want to help heal that old wound and make you feel entirely *comfortable* coming back into the world. This world belongs to you as much as it does us, Kell, and you have the right to be a part of it.”

“Too late, we’ve stolen you. You belong to us now,” Kell told her, which made her laugh again.

“So that house is my gilded cage?” she teased.

“Yup. The trap so Mother can talk you to death,” he agreed, and Jenny laughed even harder when Kanna immediately turned her cool gaze in their direction.

“I get the feeling that most of the rest of my life is going to be spent more with dragons than with humans,” she agreed wryly. “But you know what? I’m entirely alright with that idea. In fact, it appeals to me. Now I just hope that Greg and Davie don’t feel constrained by that decision.”

“Greg? Probably not, he seems honestly interested in magic. Davie... I’m not sure,” Kell said. “His fascination with us now may turn into angsty rejection when he hits his teen years. Human teens are temperamental,” he noted.

“Not my son. He’ll go straight from ten to twenty,” Jenny declared, which made Kell laugh.

“I don’t think it works that way.”

“I’m sure the chromatics will find a spell that makes it work that way,” she predicted in reply.

Sella padded up to them and sat on her haunches. “Are you about done hogging her, Kell?” she asked.

“I’m doing no such thing. She’s welcome to get up and leave any time she wants,” he protested. Sella laughed when Kell dipped his wing and pressed the leading edge gently against Jenny’s torso, which kept her from getting up. “See? She’s here completely of her own free will.”

“Ribs, Kell, ribs!” Jenny wheezed.

“Well, let her up. Me and Ralla are going to take them out on a moonlight fishing trip,” Sella told him. “Patriarch’s beacon sang of tuna just

north of the Endless Deep. That's close enough to take them, let them see a pod in action. And we have to get there before some other pod hears of it."

"I'd love to go!" Jenny said eagerly, pushing against Kell's wing.

"Not just you, I want a piece of that catch," Kell declared, standing up right after her. "Kammi! Kammi, we're going out! Tuna near the Endless Deep!" he shouted.

"Awesome! Be there in a few!" she shouted in reply from where she and the hatchlings were playing with Davie.

"And this is the advantage of being the only earth dragon that can fish," Jenny chuckled.

"Damn right it is," Kell agreed. "I can catch my own tuna. Besides, Kammi needs more experience open sea fishing. If she can't hold her own, the pod will chase her off."

"Yes we will," Sella agreed, which made Jenny laugh.

"Irago, you mind doing a little babysitting?" Kell called. "Jenny and Greg are going with the water dragons, but Davie may not be ready for a trip like that. Mind carrying him along over us?"

"I don't mind, Kell," Irago answered from where he was sitting by the firepit, talking with Gressa and Prisma.

Surrall stormed the beach, already in fishing mode. "Hatchlings, we're going out!" he boomed. "Let's move, there are tuna close to the island, and we have to reach them first! There were other beacons set!"

"Beacon?" Jenny asked, after Kell translated his words

"A spell Patriarch places in strategic places, it warns him when a sizable number of desired fish pass close to it," Sella explained. "It's an old trick used by most pods. Patriarch isn't the only one that had a beacon set there, so we have to move quickly if we want to get a good catch."

Under Surrall's commanding presence, they were organized and on their way out of the cove in five minutes. The entire pod swam along with Kell and Kammi as they turned southwest, and Greg, Jenny, and Davie were in a large bubble being carried along with them. Irago and Prisma were flying overhead, guided by the bioluminescence of the water dragons. And unlike the humans, neither Kell nor Kammi had a breathing bubble. They didn't need them, and he wasn't about to let Kammi learn any way but the natural way. Davie seemed much less enthusiastic about being in the bubble with it being dark, since they couldn't see very much but the ghostly light of the water dragons, but he didn't get overly fidgety or fussy, content to be held in Jenny's arms as she and Greg sat sedately on the bottom of the bubble holding them.

They didn't have to wait long to see much more. It only took them about half an hour to get to the tuna, and as luck would have it, they got there first. And it was a *huge* school, hundreds of them. Prisma and Irago helped them out at that point by pulling the humans out of the water and giving them an aerial vantage point, Prisma cast a spell that allowed them to see in the darkness as if it were bright as day—the same spell permanently enchanted into the goggles Irago had worn during the attack on the Chinese—and from that aerial vantage point, they got to see a water dragon pod fish. And Surrall made sure to do it the hard way, teaching his hatchlings how to fish without using magic, where the entire pod worked as a unit to gather the fish into a tight ball near the surface, and then kept them there long enough to show Jenny and Greg how it was done. Kammi didn't do that badly at all, demonstrating that she'd gained competency in the basics of fish herding, playing her part in the unit by preventing the fish from getting past her. Had they all not just had a big meal, they would have taken turns attacking the ball to eat what couldn't get out of their way. But, since they were all more than content, Surrall then showed the humans how the water dragons used their magic, by turning the water surrounding the tuna into a net, a solid barrier the fish couldn't cross, and then they started hauling them back towards the island.

Kell explained everything they'd just done when he surfaced, when they started back, as Prisma held Jenny, Greg, and Davie aloft using her floating magic and carried them just over the snared tuna. "They never take an entire school, only half," Kell told them. "The water dragons herd the fish into a ball to make them easier to manage, and then use magic to net them, turning the water solid around the edges to keep the fish from swimming through. That's why they get them as compact as possible, to make it as easy as they can when it comes time to net them. The more water they have to affect, the more tiring it is. They can use magic to help ball the fish, but Surrall doesn't believe in that. If any hatchling of his didn't know how to fish without using magic at all, Patriarch would disown them."

"So, the fish are in an invisible net of water," Greg surmised.

"Yup," Kell nodded, then submerged a quick second to go under a small rogue wave. "Patriarch already declared that the school has been fished, so the other pods won't go after what's left. They never take more than half of any school, so the fish left behind can reproduce."

"That's just smart management," Jenny nodded. "So, you get a portion of the catch?"

"Yeah, we'll get maybe twenty, ten for each of us, if I counted right," Kell chuckled. "Just about every earth dragon I know loves tuna, so it's always worth it to go along when they're tuna fishing. It's really good barter. Plus, we don't have to pay Patriarch's outrageous demands for his catch when we barter with him," he added slyly, which made Surrall laugh.

"It's how I get you out here, Kell," Surrall replied easily. "If it's too expensive to barter, you'll come fish it yourself."

"True enough," Kell agreed as Kammi translated that for Jenny and Greg.

"So, this is what it means to be the mud dragon," Jenny noted with a smile.

“The only thing I can’t do is go deep for giant squid,” Kell said confidently. “Patriarch trained me well. And now we have to train up Kammi,” he added, glancing back at her.

“I’ll be better than you, Kell,” she declared.

“Good luck with that,” he snorted in reply.

After getting the catch back to the island, Greg and Jenny dried off and relaxed on the beach while Surrall divvied up the spoils, giving Kell and Kammi their cut and penning the rest in at the south end of the cove, keeping them alive until they could separate out the tithe. They spent the rest of the night just sitting and talking, letting Greg and Jenny get to know Irago and Prisma, at least until the demands of tomorrow broke up their party. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

After walking Greg, Jenny, and Davie up to the house, Kell and Kammi started back for their burrow. “I enjoyed that,” she told him as they went the short distance back to their burrow. “I think I’m really gonna like having Jenny around all the time.”

“Me too,” Kell agreed. “I get the feeling that she won’t be going back with the others.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “The sages seem really interested in the humans, and having a couple here will make it easy for them to study them.”

“Lab rats,” Kammi chuckled.

“More or less. Given she’s got two strong voices on the council for her, Sessara and Hinado, there’s a good chance the council lets her stay.”

“Works for me,” Kammi said spryly as they reached the burrow entrance. “Something tells me that tomorrow’s gonna be eventful.”

“How so?”

“Dunno. Just have that feeling,” she answered.

3 October 2017, 06:12 DMT; the former Department Aerie

Everything was prepared.

Kell and Ferroth looked over the tent where the council would be holding talks with the humans and nodded in approval. Several department drakes had set everything up, using a large circus-style pavilion tent big enough to hold all the members of the council along with a long table carved out of basalt for the humans, which was elevated to make it easier for the larger dragons on the council like Hirrag and Jussa. The platform was set up so the smallest council dragons, Geon and Essan, were more or less eye to eye with the humans when they sat on small podiums brought in for them. With the human table on a raised platform, they wouldn't have to crane their necks quite so much. Another platform was to the side that would hold the official translator, which would be Jirran, who was the best English speaker in the department. A platform behind Jirran's podium would hold the other field agents, Sella, Irago, and Prisma, so each race of dragon would have an English speaker present—or at least the dragon among them that knew the most English. Gressa was too big to fit on that platform, so she and one sage from each of the dragon races would be sitting opposing the translator's platform, forming a square of sorts under the tent. The earth dragons had sent Jengo to be their sage, which really wasn't much of a stretch. He was the oldest and wisest of all the earth dragons.

The tent was necessary. A steady rain was pattering on the roof of the tent. While dragons didn't much care about rain, or being wet in general, humans would find sitting around all day being rained on to be very uncomfortable, so the tent was mainly for their benefit. Department drakes had run power lines out for the humans' laptops and tablet chargers, and several powerful driftlights hovered near the roof of the tent to provide plenty of lighting.

“It looks good, chief,” Kell surmised as Kintel scurried past them.

“Yeah,” he agreed, looking over at the platform holding the table and chairs. “They have the wifi scramblers set up, Kintel?”

“Just finished, chief. The humans’ laptops won’t get any signals, but it won’t interfere with the President’s satellite phone.”

“I hate that he brought it,” Ferroth growled. “But, if something happens, Walker needs to have a comm line back to his office.”

“At least he abided by the rules and only brought the one,” Kell noted, glancing to the side when motion caught his attention. Several chromatic sages landed just outside the tent, then one of them scurried in. It was that female sage that Kell had seen several times.

“There you are,” she said, advancing up to them, dwarfing both Kell and Ferroth.

“Who are you looking for, most wise?” Ferroth asked.

“Kell. We must talk,” she prompted, motioning towards the other sages with her wing.

“Uh, sure,” he said, glancing at Ferroth, who gave a slight nod. He followed her out, and was a bit surprised when the members of the council landed around the edge of the tent, the sky dragons carrying the earth dragons. They all but surrounded him, and aside from Geon, Kell looked like a hatchling among the much larger dragons. “This must be a serious talk,” he noted, looking towards Anthra.

“We’ve made a decision, Kell, and it involves you,” she answered, then she looked to Jussa.

“We’ve discussed what happened with the human, Julia Walker,” Jussa said. “And it’s been decided that we’re going to proceed with the experiment that the chromatic sages proposed.”

“What’s that?”

“We want to find out how many humans it takes to allow an earth dragon to fly,” the female sage answered. “Naturally, we need the humans, but it also means that we need an earth dragon. You.”

“*Me?*” Kell protested.

“You, Kell,” Anthra answered.

“Why me, esteemed council member?” he called.

“Three reasons. One, you know how to keep a secret, and this will be a *secret*,” she stressed. “Until we know more about how this works, we keep this experiment secret. Only the council, the sages, and Chief Ferroth will know about this. Second, simply put, Kell, if the experiment works, you’re the *only* earth dragon that could actually do it. Think about it. We earth dragons don’t *use* our wings, so they’re not very strong. But you do. You probably have the most developed wing muscles of all the earth dragons, because of how strong a *swimmer* you are. The sages are already certain that if this works, it’ll be similar to the water dragons, that your wings will have to provide a large amount of the lift to get you into the air. So, young one, you’re the only one of us that *could* fly if you were given the ability to do so.

“Third, because you *deserve* this honor, Kell,” she continued. “You’ve been out in front of every other dragon since all of this began. You’ve been an integral and key reason why we’ve gotten where we are, and I for one think that your dedication and service to the earth dragons, the council, and to the dragons as a whole should be rewarded. You have done much for us, young one, and so it is our turn to do for you. So, Kell, you will be the one to find out if earth dragons can fly,” she declared with a proud smile.

He was absolutely *scattered*. It was every earth dragon’s dream to be able to fly, but to actually get the chance to do it? He was speechless, and the expression on his face made both Anthra and Geon chuckle.

“There’s no guarantee it will work, Kell of the Earth Drakes,” the female sage warned. “There are only so many humans here, and they may

not be enough. The President and the other older human, Kent, they appear in public to the humans, so they *can't* do it. The child, we won't allow him to do it. We have no idea if it will cause him to suddenly grow the way it causes the older humans to revert to a younger state, so we won't risk it. And they also have to agree to it. Each of them must allow themselves to bond to you, and as you pointed out with the first one, the human Julia, they may not want what that process entails. But we are going to try with the humans we have and see if they're enough. And whether they are or they aren't, we'll study both you and the humans to see how bonding humans to you affects both you and them. We suspect that the extended lifespan may not be the only effect for them, and there may be other effects for you. This is something completely unknown to us, so there is no telling what might happen."

Kell thought furiously, but his thoughts were disjointed. They were actually going to do it, see if an earth dragon could fly...and he had to admit, part of their reasoning for selecting him was sound. Most earth dragons never used their wings, not even for gliding all that much, but Kell did. His wings were exceptionally strong from all the swimming he did, using them in the water the way water dragons did. He and the dragons in his family, and maybe Kammi, they were the only ones that had the wing strength to actually fly if the experiment worked.

But still...how was this going to change things? If it worked, how was he going to manage being the only earth dragon that could fly, of being so drastically and completely separated from the others by this secret, by this ability? How would he feel walking among the others, talking to them, knowing a secret like *this*? This wasn't department secrets. This was something that could change the entirety of earth dragon society...a secret that could tear them apart.

Such a heavy burden...that alone may put too much weight on him to allow him to fly.

In the end, though, there wasn't much of a choice. The council wanted this done, and they chose him to do it. If he said no, they'd choose someone

else...and given he fully understood just what this meant, the incredible danger it posed to basic earth dragon society, he wasn't going to take the chance that that other dragon may reveal that secret. Until they knew more, until the sages had time to figure this out, this had to stay *secret*. As in so secret that not even *Kammi* would know about this.

"I'll do it," he finally said, his voice heavy and without emotion. "But on one condition."

"What is that, Kell?"

"That if this doesn't work, then the sages destroy their notes, and not a single word of this is ever spoken again," he said, his voice powerful and determined. "The humans aren't the only ones that have the potential to let obsession drive them to madness. For the good of all earth dragons, we destroy all documents and swear all who participated in it to secrecy if the experiment fails."

"I'll agree to that," Anthra nodded.

"So will I," Geon added.

"Then it will be as you say, Anthra, Geon," Jussa said, looking down at Kell. "This is a matter of vital importance to all dragons, to protect magic itself, but you know your dragons. If the experiment fails, then all traces of it will be purged from our histories."

He wasn't sure how they expected him to do much of anything after *that*. He barely remembered what they talked about in the morning conference, sitting behind Jirran and trying to wrap his mind around what was coming, all but ignoring the conference. If it worked...he wasn't sure if he *wanted* it to work. How would the earth dragons react? Would there be celebration? Condescension? Would dragons like Gev, who had dreamed of flying his entire life, go to extremes in order to fulfill that long desire? And if it did work, how exactly would it? How many humans would it take to get an earth dragon off the ground? Two? Five? Ten? Maybe seventeen? Maybe even more? What if there weren't enough human magicians in the

entire world to give all earth dragons flight...then what? Anthra and Geon weren't stupid, but they also weren't the ultimate authority in earth dragon society. They couldn't just declare that since all earth dragons couldn't fly, then none would. In that respect, earth dragons really had no central authority. Earth dragons more or less governed themselves, relying on tradition, custom, and common sense to guide them. Well, none of those applied to *this*. Tradition and custom wouldn't know what to do with this, and common sense would go right out the window when it came to something like flight.

He wasn't joking when he said that this could destroy earth dragon society. It had that potential.

And here he was, right in the middle of it. He was going to be the one they used as a test subject, and he would be looking at days and days of being examined under a magnifying glass by the sages. On a personal level, though, it was almost a dream come true. There wasn't an earth dragon alive that didn't dream of being able to fly, and some never let that youngling dream go, dragons like Gev. He himself had suffered flight envy fairly strongly as a youngling, which had probably fueled his prejudice against magic as he grew.

Yet...if it worked, then what? He'd be able to fly, but he'd never be able to *do* it. They had to keep it a secret, and him flying around, even out in the middle of nowhere, wouldn't go unnoticed, not when the sky dragons could see everything and the water dragons took notice of what went on over their ocean. He'd be given this incredible gift, then told to put it in a box and stick it on a shelf in his storeroom, never to take it out again. It would be the ultimate in discipline and restraint to sit on something like that, even for him.

He'd *better* keep it a secret. The stability of earth dragon society could very well hinge on it.

After lunch, a lunch he barely remembered, he tuned back in to witness something of a ceremony. The sages brought out the boxes holding the

talismans after they reconvened, and one by one, the humans were presented with them. President Walker was the first to receive his talisman, and his eyes just lit up when he saw it. The talismans were supposedly based on the human, so at a fundamental level, the talisman represented who they were, the very essence of what they were. The shape, the gems, the arrangement, the metals that made it up, they all described the very soul of the magician, so it was, in a way, allowing the President to see his true self as he gazed upon that talisman. “The talismans are magically hardened to prevent them from being damaged,” the sage explained through Jirran’s translation as Walker put it over his head, his hands trembling a little bit. “Guard well these talismans, magicians,” she warned in a powerful voice, and Jirran was careful to mirror the warning in her voice. “Without it, you cannot use your full magical potential, and they are not easy to make. I would suggest in the strongest possible terms that you never take them off.”

“Couldn’t you cast a spell on it so we can’t lose it?” Walker asked.

“*We* cannot. *You* can,” she answered. “Only the owner of a talisman may lock permanent spells into it, such as spells that would allow only its owner to take it off. So until you have the ability to cast those spells, President, you must protect your talisman most vigilantly.”

“I understand,” he said, holding it up and looking at it. “It’s gorgeous. Who made it?”

“The leader of the builders did, Mister President. An earth drake named Jukra,” Kell answered.

Walker smiled in his direction. “His workmanship is exquisite,” he complemented. “I’ve never seen a piece of jewelry so perfect, and perfect for *me*.”

Kammi had to speak up as Julia was called forth. “I made yours, Julia,” she declared. “Hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will, Kammi,” she replied graciously. When the sage took it out of the box, Julia’s eyes widened, and she took in her breath. “It’s...it’s

absolutely amazing,” she said, taking it from the sage that towered over her with trembling hands. “I’ve never seen anything so lovely.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Kammi said casually.

And so it went, one by one, as each human received their talismans, and each one had a similar reaction to Walker and Julia, though some were more subdued than others, like Wilson and Price. When it was Jenny’s turn, she looked over at the field agents. “I’d better be impressed, Kell,” she warned with a smile.

“You will be once I arm the bomb inside it,” he answered, which made her laugh. But her laugh turned into a gasp when she saw it for the first time, and there were actual tears in her eyes as she put it on over her head. “Oh, Kell...I, I just can’t even,” she told him, holding it up and looking at it.

Davie’s reaction was the most curious. When the sage took the talisman out of the box, the child almost froze. He stood unmoving and stared at the talisman, transfixed, until Jenny snapped him out of it with a gentle nudge. They’d been warned that the owner had to be the first one to touch it outside of a dragon, so the sage had to hook the chain on a clawtip and present it to the boy. “Take it, baby bear,” Jenny had to prompt, because he was again all but hypnotized by the talisman. Once he reached out and snatched it away from the sage, almost greedily, Jenny knelt down and helped him put it on.

“Okay, that’s just weird,” Kammi voiced what all the field agents were thinking. “What, did the sages put a spell on them or something?”

“You don’t understand, youngling,” the sage told her. “These talismans represent the true self of who these magicians are, and that holds power. It’s as if they got a look at their own souls,” she explained. “What writings we have on the matter state that the presentation of a talisman is nearly a religious experience for humans.”

“That’s a pretty good description of how it felt to me,” Jenny said before Jirran translated, showing off her skills with the draconic language as she gazed at her talisman, running her finger along the inlays on the face of it. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I just got it, but it...it’s like it’s a *part* of me.”

“In a way, it is,” the sage confirmed after Jirran translated. “It represents who you are, and knowing who you are will help you focus your ability to channel magic.”

“Speaking of magic, this means that we’ll be able to cast spells, right?” Price asked, holding up his talisman.

“With study and dedication, yes,” the sage affirmed once she heard the translation. “Eventually.”

“I’m never taking this off,” Petrovski breathed, clutching her talisman in her hand.

After giving the humans a little bit to adjust to the talismans, the council made the field agents and other dragons in attendance a bit sulky by effectively evicting them. Kell remained behind under the auspices of acting as a translator for this ultra-secret meeting, one attended by the humans, the council, four of the chromatic sages, Ferroth, and Kell. When the others were gone and the sages outside the tent confirmed it, Jussa looked down at the humans with a grave expression. “I apologize for the theatrics,” he said, and Kell began to translate. “But what we’re about to discuss must be held in the strictest confidence. I would ask that you never discuss this outside of this group,” he told them.

“I’ll make sure of that, esteemed council member,” Walker answered confidently.

“Very good,” Jussa nodded, then he glanced at Kell before continuing. “What happened to Julia Walker has piqued the curiosity of the sages,” he began. “And they wish to further study the effect, both on you and on the earth dragon involved. For that reason, it has been decided to offer the same

gift Julia Walker received to all of you, under the condition that you do not ask to break the bond it forms with the earth dragon until after the sages complete their research on the matter. That could take a few years,” he warned. “So you must each ask yourself if you are willing to accept an extended lifespan and a change in your appearance, and to accept the fact that this change will require you to maintain secrecy about how it happened.. I’m sure that each of you have families, and that means that you must lie to them,” he noted as they all looked suddenly quite excited. “Secretary Kent, Mister President, we fully understand that your role as politicians, who stay in the public eye, would make accepting this gift impossible, but the offer will stand. Once you leave your roles as public servants, the gift will still be here if you so wish it. It is our gift to you for all you have done for us so far, and in the future.”

“The chance to be young again? YES!” Petrovski literally shouted, which made more than a few of them laugh.

“If anything, the extended lifespan the gift imparts upon you will give you the time required to master magic,” one of the sages told them. “And in the case of that one, it will give him a new lease on life,” she added, pointing in Yancy’s direction.

“The chance to be a young man again? I’d jump on that,” Yancy said, grinning a little. “Maybe if my wife Lorraine was still alive, I’d have said no, but there’s nothing holding me back now.”

“Is there any here that doesn’t want this gift?” Jussa asked. After a few moments of silence, he nodded. “Alright, then. We have selected Kell to be the earth dragon. We will have you grab one of his spikes, one by one, over the course of several hours,” Jussa explained. “After each one, the sages will examine both the human and Kell to look for any new changes beyond what we already know. So, this process will take a little time. There are sixteen of you not counting Julia Walker, after all.”

Kell stepped up to the gathered humans, his expression sober, even a little fatalistic. He brought his tail around his body and held it up at about

their chest height. “Jenny,” he said in a soft voice, and she stepped up to him with a huge smile. “I guess you get to take your pick,” he added, looking down at the spikes on his tail.

“Thank you, Kell,” she said, patting the tip of his tail. “Both for this, and for being the dragon that gives it to me. I wouldn’t want anyone else.”

“We’re friends, Jenny,” he smiled down at her as she boldly reached through the spikes and grabbed his center spike, the middle one in the center row. She winced a bit as she took a firm grip on it and slid her hand down, which caused its sharp edges to bite deeply into her hand. And just as it had with Julia, the spike flushed pink, turned blood red, and then released off its anchor of its own volition. Jenny pulled it out and kept hold of it, almost cradling it against her torso.

“I’m keeping this,” she declared.

“We let Julia keep hers,” Kell shrugged.

“Remember that the effect will take some time to sink in,” one of the sages called.

“I remember that,” Julia said, touching her face absently. “It happened to me while I was sleeping.”

“Go with the sage, Jenny, she’ll look you over and heal your hand,” Kell said as one of the four sages in the tent stepped up and gave Jenny an expectant look.

Kell and Jenny were pulled to opposite sides of the tent and checked by the sages, which for Kell had a lot more import. “I can sense the tether,” one of the sages said in a low tone. “The process has begun.”

“The magic of the bond is already settling into him,” the other told the gathered council members, speaking quietly because Jenny had shown quite an aptitude for draconic. “It’s about the same strength as it was when he was bonded to Julia.”

“That might mean that the increase in his weight-nullifying magic is a constant,” the first sage speculated. “If so, we may be able to mathematically calculate how many humans it will take.”

“We’ll need more data before we can make that prediction,” the second warned.

After about fifteen more minutes of inspection, the sages had Kell pick another human. Naturally, he picked Greg. And after another inspection, he was sent back again, and selected Yancy.

And again, and again, and again, the sages kept sending Kell back to bind the magicians to him, until he had bonded all sixteen of the humans to him. As the sages inspected him, Jussa, Hinado, and Faralla hovered near them. “Almost,” the sage said. “As it stands now, he could *almost* fly. I think it will take one more. That would mean that he would have to bind a human for each of the spikes in his tail. Seventeen,” the sage declared.

“Well, we have a problem. We’re out of humans we can use,” Kell observed. “Kent and the President can’t, and Davie is off limits because he’s a child.”

“Julia,” Hinado said. “We have Julia.”

“She’d have to agree to it,” Kell reminded him.

“The main reason she broke the bond the first time was because of her lifemate,” Jussa noted. “Since we’re offering the gift to him once he leaves his post, she may not object to it. Besides, it will give the sages a chance to see if re-bonding a human operates any differently.”

“True,” one of the sages nodded. “We can do naught but ask.”

Kell and the sage stepped away from the others and up to the humans. “The sages want one more,” Kell said. “Julia, you’re the last possible choice. Are you willing to do it again? They promised that you can break the bond once they finish their research, but it may take a few years.”

“It’s not an issue now, Kell,” she said with a radiant smile. “As long as you give me your solemn vow that you’ll give this to Jack once he leaves office, I’ll do it. I can’t think of any better gift than the chance to spend the next two hundred years with the man I love.”

“Julia,” Walker said thickly, and Kent patted him on the shoulder.

When Kell translated that, Jussa too looked a bit misty-eyed. Love, devotion, and loyalty were very much parts of water dragon culture, nearly as much as they were part of earth dragon culture. “That vow is given, Julia,” Jussa declared. “As leader of the council, I give you this promise. This gift awaits President Walker whenever he wishes to receive it. It is his for the asking.”

Without a word, Julia offered her hand. Kell brought his tail around, now only holding one spike, and she took hold of it and pushed her hand down. Her expression didn’t change at all when the spike cut into her, and the spike flushed red and then released.

Kell was a bit surprised at all the attention everyone was suddenly giving him. “What?” he asked.

“Kell, your horns are *glowing*,” Jussa told him. “The cores of them are radiating light, and it’s bleeding through the crystal.”

“That’s definitely a visible indication that something changed,” a sage said, rushing over to him and nearly bowling Julia out of the way.

“Kell’s getting something out of this, isn’t he?” Julia asked.

“Yes,” the sage answered when Kell translated. “The nature of this magic is give and take, Julia Walker. As Kell gives to you, so you give back to Kell, each gift equal to the other. This is part of what we wished to study. We know what humans get out of the bond, we wanted to learn what an earth dragon gains from it. And it seems that for an earth dragon, nothing is gained until he has bonded multiple humans to himself. The combined gifts of all seventeen of you are having a visible effect on him.” The sage

touched his horn, running a clawed finger down its ridged length. “Do you feel any differently, young earth drake?”

“Not at all,” Kell replied as the sage bent down and peered at his crystal horns. “I don’t feel anything, different or otherwise. I feel just like I did before we started the experiment.”

The two sages continued to inspect him, growing to four after they finished with Julia and found nothing different about her, that her re-bonding to him had been no different, and everyone in the tent watched the four sages all but hold Kell down and inspect every centimeter of him, focusing most of their attention on his horns and spikeless tail. About half an hour into it, they told him that the faint magical light glowing from his horns faded out, and then disappeared entirely, leaving him exactly as he was before they began...well, almost. He still had no spikes in his tail, but if what happened with Julia was any indication, those would grow back naturally.

After nearly an hour, the sages finally finished their initial examinations, and they called for a break from the discussions. The humans were taken back to the aerie for a meal and to rest—except Jenny, Greg, and Davie, they took their cart back to the house—and once they were gone, the sages had Hinado carry Kell to the Library of Eternity. He was put on the same table they’d had him on the first time as the entire complement of chromatic sages gave him an indepth and exhaustive examination, as the council sat back against the far wall...and for Hirrag, that was quite a tight squeeze. He’d barely managed to get in through the door.

“It seems that seventeen is the magic number,” the wizened female sage that seemed to have a fondness for Prisma declared, her voice bright and excited. “Kell should have the ability to fly now. The magic nullifying the great weight he carries for his breath weapon has become empowered, to the point where it should offset most of his natural weight. It will still take quite a lot of strength of wing for him to get off the ground, but he has the *theoretical* ability to do so.”

“Then why don’t I feel any, well, any lighter?” Kell asked.

“That’s not how it works, Kell,” Faralla told him. “I feel my full weight even when I hover over the ground, I still feel the pull of gravity. I don’t feel *weightless* at all.”

“In a way, that’s a very good thing, else we’d lose our sense of direction when flying when our visibility is restricted,” Hinado added. “If we couldn’t feel which way is down, we’d have no way of knowing if we were ascending, descending, or flying level.”

“That’s a fair point,” Kell nodded.

“There’s one easy way to find out if you’re right, honored sages,” Essan called. “Kell, flap your wings, and don’t hold back. If the sages are right, that should be enough to get you into the air.”

“It could before, at least a little,” Kell answered. “A good wingbeat just as we jump can add a good ten *dram* to our distance.”

“Well, in this case, it should just keep sending you up,” Essan said. “Go ahead and try.”

Kell looked to the sages, and they nodded and backed up to give him room. He took in a deep breath, not sure what was about to happen, and opened his wings and raised them. He almost reflexively jumped up when his wings snapped down, an old earth dragon habit, then he pulled them up and beat them down again, then again, then once again. He was concentrating so hard on that, that he didn’t realize that he wasn’t descending, that each wingbeat sent him higher and higher into the air, until the reality of his situation struck him very pointedly when his wingtips struck the ceiling, disrupting their rhythm and shattering his concentration. He crashed back to the table, and his weight broke the legs, dumping him unceremoniously to the floor.

“What just happened?” he asked as he sorted himself out, standing on the crumbled ruins of the stone table. “I felt something hit my wings.”

“That was the *ceiling*, young one,” Anthra said, giving him the biggest grin he’d ever seen on a dragon. “The sages were right, Kell. You were *flying*! The experiment worked!”

“Then seventeen is the number,” the female sage declared. “It takes seventeen humans to empower an earth dragon to fly. One for each spike in their tails. That is quite...logical,” she mused.

He just gave them a dumb look. He was...flying? As in actually defying gravity flying?

“Now, the question is, where do we dig up nearly fifty thousand human magicians,” Essan said seriously. “That’s how many it would take to empower all of us.”

“We *will* find them,” Jussa declared. “For the protection of all dragons everywhere, to protect magic itself, we will find them.”

Kell barely registered that, for the simple declaration of the sage had rocked his life to its foundations. He could *fly*. He was an earth dragon that could *fly*. It was the fulfillment of a dream held by earth dragons for centuries, for *millennia*, and in him, that dream was realized. He...he didn’t know how he was supposed to feel. There was a youngling joy in the prospect of it, of dreams of soaring through the sky that were now within his grasp, but then, when he looked at Geon and Anthra, the *reality* of it hit him. He was now *different* from every other earth dragon...and that feeling did not sit well with him, not one bit. The earth dragons had always been united by their perceived disability compared to the other dragons, but now there was a threat to the unity, a threat embodied in Kell himself.

He tuned back in when he heard Jussa speak. “It seems that Gaia is clever beyond words,” he said dryly. “By making the humans vital to the earth dragons, she makes them vital to *us*. No doubt to prevent our two races from killing each other as we grew and developed, making us symbiotically dependent on each other. But if Prisma’s histories are correct, we were so protective over the earth dragons that we never gave them the chance to discover Gaia’s gift. We kept the humans away from them, and by

result never allowed our ancestors to discover this. All this time, the earth dragons had within their grasp the ability to fly, and in our fear, our cowardice, we kept it away from them,” he sighed. “Even in the past, we were taking much more from those that give so much of themselves to us. Who knows how history might have gone had we discovered this millennia ago. We may very well have not ended up on this island.”

“Recriminations of the actions of our ancestors is a futile exercise, Jussa,” Trejem declared. “We simply did not know then. But we know now, and I agree with you. We must find enough human magicians to empower *every single earth dragon*, both for their protection and the protection of magic itself. And to grant them what is their right as dragons, the ability to fly.”

“The humans aren’t going to like our decision,” Geon blurted. “The Americans don’t want magic getting out until they have a chance to learn how to counter it, in case their enemies get access to it. And given everything they’ve done for us, we do owe them some consideration.”

“We are the ones that control which humans gain access to magic,” Trejem stated. “We simply ensure that no one that would misuse Gaia’s gift gets access to it, either against us or against the humans. Given how many humans there are, I’m sure we can find fifty thousand of them that we can trust. And they don’t all have to be from America. In fact, they *should not* be. Gaia decreed long ago that it is the duty of chromatics to spread the use of magic through the world, to both dragons and the humans that are blessed with Gaia’s gift, and this newest revelation only makes that decree make that much more sense. It is our duty to find the humans the earth dragons need. We didn’t recognize borders between human kingdoms then, and we should not now. However, we will exercise judgment in our task this time, choosing only those humans that we know to be loyal to our cause.”

“It seems that Prisma’s historical research is proving to be more and more important with each passing day,” one of the sages said. “Truly a remarkable young female, and more than worthy of her name.”

“We should set her to continuing that research,” another sage agreed.

“We’ll have a plan ready to present to the council for the search for human magicians as soon as the sages have it ready, Jussa,” Trejem declared, to which most of the sages nodded. “We can set it into motion once we know we have the cooperation of the humans in the matter.”

“That won’t come until we have assurances from them,” Anthra told them. “At the very least, recognition of our sovereignty from the human United Nations and the guarantee of the same basic rights humans afford to one another. Without them, any dragon out searching for human magicians would be at great risk.”

“They will be anyway, but at least with recognition from human law, the risk is reduced,” Kell injected, his life-changing revelation momentarily forgotten as they got into matters in which he was well educated. “There will always be crazies out there, but the important part is to have legal protection from crazy governments. We’ll need the cooperation of a nation’s government to search for magicians inside their territory. And having a good supply of that salve the Chinese were after may be a good idea. No dragon should go out there that at least isn’t as bulletproof as an earth dragon.”

“The exact process of it will be fleshed out later,” Trejem said with a nod towards Kell. “But the sages can draw up a basic plan that we can adapt to whatever conditions are presented.”

“Easily,” one of the sages agreed.

“I think we should take a break to consider these new developments,” Jussa said. “And give Kell some time to process everything that’s happened. No doubt, this is bordering on traumatizing for him.”

“Just a little bit,” Kell agreed without humor. “Just the philosophical ramifications alone already have my brain spinning.”

“In what way?” Sessara asked curiously.

“Mainly the fact that I’m now *different* from all the other earth dragons, and that difference has to be kept a secret,” he replied. “Oh, and that difference is also the culmination of a dream that just about every earth dragon has had in his life, which also happens to be a dream that I can’t actually *use*, else the secrecy of this is gone. So, I’ve been given something every earth dragon dreams about that I can’t *use*, not for a long time.”

“I’m surprised he’s not bouncing off the walls even more than Kammi usually does. He’s not joking that it’s the dream of many earth dragons to receive the gift Kell has,” Geon said. “It’s most of the reason we chose him. We knew he could keep his head about this, and treat it with the gravity it deserves.”

“That department training serves us well, in more than one way,” Anthra smiled down at him. “Kell has the discipline to handle this burden.”

“We should take him out to one of the western islands and teach him to fly,” Faralla noted to Hinado.

“No,” Kell said forcefully. “If you teach me, I’ll just want to do it. It’s best for all of us if I have no idea how to do it. It’ll remove a lot of the temptation. Perhaps the threat of me plowing my face three *dram* deep into the ground will keep me from getting any bright ideas.”

Anthra had to chuckle at that. “I think Kell’s right,” she agreed.

“I’m almost at the point of asking the sages to come up some way to stop me from flying at all, some device they can put on me that un-empowers me except when they’re actively studying it,” he said.

“I can think of no such spell we could use, but if you give us some time to do some research, we may come up with something,” one of the sages answered.

“I think it would be a good idea, most wise,” Kell answered. “If I’m prevented from doing it at all, it prevents any sort of accidental revelation.”

“We’ll look into the matter, young earth drake,” the sage assured him, a lot of respect in his voice.

They ended the meeting, and Hinado carried Kell back to the farm. When he arrived, he laid down on the knoll and looked out into the cove, past it, his mind working in unsettling spurts, like the gears of a broken machine trying to turn. There was so much to think about, his mind couldn’t process it all. There was how this would change his life, his relationship with his family, with Kammi, his friends...then there was how this would change the entirety of earth dragon society once they revealed this to the general populace.

And the biggest sticking point, he could see, was the magnitude of the problem. It was going to take seventeen humans *per earth dragon* to empower them, and with a population of nearly three thousand, that was about *fifty thousand* humans. How were they going to manage that? Who would get to go first? How would the decision of the order by which earth dragons received that gift affect earth dragon society? And the most basic question of all...would the earth dragons even *stay on the island* if they had the means to leave it?

He saw Feno come out of the family burrow, and that farmhand represented all of his fears. There was no higher aspiration of any earth dragon than to own his own farm, but there was only so much land on the island. What would the farmhands do when they were empowered with the ability to fly, and could theoretically go search for their *own* farm? Would they rebel if the council decreed that they weren’t allowed to do it? It could fracture what was now a very delicate political situation on the island. The dragons were just now starting to come back together after the events that sent the earth dragons underground, and this could wreck that, completely wreck it. Farmhands trapped into a life of working for another may not want to continue that when they had the means to achieve their dream by simply flying to another island.

But, there were no other islands close to theirs that could support farming. A few of the larger ones west of the island might be able to

support a single earth dragon with a modest farm of maybe a hectare, but it would have no stable source of fresh water. There were no streams on those islands for irrigation, the islands weren't large enough to have fresh water aquifers underground, leaving the dragon at the mercy of the rains. There were a few islands south of theirs, but those were windswept rocks or coral atolls, not suitable for farming. There wasn't enough land nearby for everyone who wanted their own farm. Would fights break out over that land? Would it cause irreparable harm to earth dragon relations with one another?

So many questions. So many ways things could go wrong in a hurry. It was all going to depend on how careful the council was in revealing this, then keeping control once that secret was out.

He...he had a bad feeling about this. He should be overjoyed that he'd been given something incredible, something precious to an earth dragon, but all he felt was...dread. And the more he thought about it, the stronger that feeling became. He felt like he was carrying around an armed nuclear bomb, a bomb that might go off at any second. And much like what had happened with him being revealed by the humans and then going underground, he had this terrible feeling that, if things did go south, it would be *his fault*. He was the one given this gift, and in a way, it would make him the object of the anger and jealousy of earth dragons that would either be very unhappy about this, or unhappy they weren't the ones selected. Here he was, right in the middle of everything going wrong once again.

Sometimes he felt like he was jinxed.

Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe he was underestimating the strength and resilience of his kin. Maybe he was overestimating the impact that this would have on earth dragon society. He prayed to Gaia that that was exactly what he was doing.

But it didn't make him feel any less like things were about to go to hell in a handbasket, and *quickly*.

And that scared him to death.

Chapter 26

1 October 2017, 04:39 DMT; Dawnmist Village

He had never felt so isolated in all his life.

It was all he could think about almost all night, which ended up being a night without sleep, without rest, and all of his feelings were embodied in the earth dragon sleeping beside him. The joining of two earth dragons as lifemates was, at its core, taking two lives and making them one. There were no secrets between lifemates. The fears and desires and shames of one were carried by both, and Kammi knew the deepest, darkest parts of him, as he knew them about her. There was no doubt in his mind that their courtship was going to become formal, but this...this put tremendous stress on the bond forged between them. He now had to keep a secret from *Kammi*. He knew he would have to do it when he agreed to this, but it hadn't impacted him just what that meant, what that *really* meant, until he was laying beside her on their sleeping mound. To keep a part of himself from the female that would be the other half of himself—more or less already was, to be honest about it—it was the hardest thing he'd ever faced.

And Kammi certainly noticed. She kept dogging him most of the evening, trying to find out what was upsetting him, and not content to accept that he was told by the council not to talk about it. Kell had certainly never bothered to keep the other things the council told him to himself. The only thing she'd bought about the entire thing was his excuse for losing all his spikes, that he'd been asked to give them to the humans as gifts. And much to his relief, the buds that had formed on his tail by the time they went to bed were all clear.

He spent almost the entire night laying there thinking, his mind too much a jumbled, chaotic mess to quiet enough to allow him to sleep, and the quiet time didn't help much. Instead of wondering how things may change, his mind instead latched onto everything that could possibly go wrong, and in true neurotic fashion, the consequences he imagined just got worse and worse with every passing hour. Right before Kammi woke up, he finally got a grip on himself, made himself calm down, and tried to think more rationally about things. And the biggest thing he told himself was that to not underestimate his kin.

Yes, there was going to be some upheaval. Yes, it could potentially get ugly. But, at their core, the earth dragons were about *community*. They were very much like a hive of bees, they thought *we* before they thought *I*, they were about the welfare of the whole, which in turn ensured the welfare of the individuals that made up that whole. There were going to be earth dragons that went against the group, dragons like Gev whose obsessions would override their common sense, but the key for Anthra and Geon was going to be minimizing the impact those outliers were going to have on everyone else.

After he got a grip on himself, he felt at least functional enough to be able to face the day. He untangled himself from Kammi and went outside to sit at the entrance, and he saw that Jenny and Greg were up, that a driftlight was lit and moving around on the patio behind the house. Curious, he ambled across the shallow valley separating his burrow from their house and advanced onto the patio. Jenny and Greg were indeed there, sitting at one of the outdoor tables Kell had carved for them, drinking coffee from the smell of it. Both of them still looked the same, the magic that would reverse their aging hadn't sunk in yet...which Kell was silently happy about. He advanced out of the pre-dawn gloom and surprised them a little bit, then sat beside Jenny's chair. "Davie must still be asleep," he said quietly.

"Yeah," she replied. "You're up early."

"I didn't sleep well last night," he admitted.

“Because of us? I mean—“

“No,” he cut her off. “Remember, we asked you not to talk about it.”

“But it’s just us here.”

“On this island, Jenny, don’t *ever* assume that anything you say is only being heard by the people you intend to hear it,” he warned. “Most chromatic elders know the magic to eavesdrop, and they can do it from a long way away. And I have no doubt that by now, more than one of them knows nearly as much English as Prisma does, more than enough to get the general idea of what you’re talking about.”

“Scrying magic,” she said, her voice slightly distant, as if recalling what she’d read about it. “How did Kammi handle you showing up with a bald tail?”

“She bought my explanation,” he grunted. “I told her the council gave all of you tail spikes as gifts. And since I was there, most of them came off my tail, since we didn’t want the council members to empty their tails.”

“A kernel of truth,” Jenny mused. “The best way to do it.”

“Earth dragons are very good at sniffing out the truth, especially when you get them curious,” he told her. “The key to lying to an earth dragon is to *not* let them get curious.”

“That sounds about right,” Jenny smiled up at him.

“And did you run to the mirror every ten minutes all night?” Kell asked, which made Greg laugh brightly. Jenny reached over and swatted him on the arm.

“It took it a couple of days for Julia, so that’s what we’re expecting,” Jenny answered. “But yes, Kell, I’m *very* curious about it. I’m wondering if I’ll look like my old pictures, or if I’ll look different.”

Kell was about to say something, but a light in the sky heralded the arrival of Hinado, who descended and hovered just above the ground, in the

usual sky dragon manner. “I saw the light from your driftlight,” he said. “I was going to send Irago, but I was passing by. They’ll be along to collect you up to take to see the sages at sunrise,” he relayed, which Kell translated. “They want to give all of you another examination before we convene for talks.”

“That’s not a problem, esteemed council member. That should give us enough time to get Davie up and eat breakfast.”

“They’re there now, Kell, and they want to see you as soon as you wake up,” he added, looking at Kell.

“Looks my day just started,” Kell noted.

“I’ll carry you up,” Hinado offered, drifting up and over and putting his paw on Kell’s back. The size of Hinado’s paw compared to Kell almost let him wrap his fingers around Kell’s body.

“I’ll see you at the conference, Jenny,” Kell offered as Hinado lifted him off the ground.

“Good luck up there,” she smiled up at him, then Hinado ascended quickly, causing the ground to trail away.

Hinado had him at the Library of Eternity in just a brief moment, and he was again put on a table—a new table—and inspected by all of the chromatic sages. They had tools this time, instruments and other magical trinkets that they passed over him, touched to him, prodded against him, and they asked a series of questions to see if he’d noticed anything different, anything new. They didn’t seem convinced that the bonds he’d formed would do anything else but empower him to fly, but they said over and over that they knew nothing at all about this, so they were just being thorough.

They did mention one thing that was different. “As expected, the tethers are settling,” one of the sages said. “But they also seem to be *entangling*.”

“What does that mean, most wise?” Kell asked.

“The bonds are anchoring to you, young earth drake, as we expected, and is only logical. Given what these bonds do for you, it only makes sense that they are anchoring, making them much harder to sever. But the seventeen bonds are entwining, as if they were braiding into a rope,” he explained. “If it continues like this, no one bond will be able to be severed without severing *all* of them.”

“Are their tethers interacting with one another?” A sage asked.

“No. They are simply entwining, making all seventeen of them harder to sever by presenting a unified tether. Cutting ten strings one at a time is easy, but cutting a rope twined together from those strings is not.”

“Most curious,” another sage breathed. “This tickles my memory, brothers and sisters. Something I read in passing not long ago. Now I must remember which book mentioned it.”

That was the only revelation the examination revealed. After the sun was well risen, they finally let him off the table. “Any word about that device that will keep me on the ground, most wise?” he asked as he turned to look back at them.

“We’re still researching the matter, Kell,” the wizened female told him. “Have you felt any differently in that regard?”

“Physically? No,” he answered.

“Inform us immediately if you feel any change,” she said. “We’ve summoned a sky drake to carry you to the aerie. The council is already in session, and they asked that you be taken there as soon as we were done. One of us will accompany you to provide a report.”

“Alright. Thank you, most wise,” he answered.

Kell was carried to Council Aerie, where the nine members were discussing the upcoming talks with the humans. Today they’d talk about the U.N. resolutions and recognizing dragon sovereignty, as well as further aid

shipments and other non-magical topics. Kammi was present on the aerie, sitting with Ferroth beside Anthra's podium, and she looked a bit excited. "Kell," Anthra said. "We should let you know that we've included Kammi into our circle. She already knew most of this information, given she was there translating when the sages initially discovered the truth behind the bonds. This also gives us an additional translator when speaking to the humans about this matter. And I'm sure it takes a great strain off of you. I can imagine that not being honest with your intended was hard on you."

"You have no idea," he agreed emphatically, quite relieved, and also feeling a tremendous amount of gratitude to the council for their compassion.

"This *so* explains why you were acting so weird last night," Kammi grinned at him as he came over and sat beside her. "And I forgive you for lying to me. You were just doing what the council told you to do."

He leaned over and gave her a heartfelt nuzzle under her chin, then they listened as the sage that came with him told the about the examination. That intrigued Trejem, who reared up to sit on the base of his tail so he could use his forepaws, tapping his muzzle in thought. "What do you consider, esteemed council member?" the sage asked.

"This sounds familiar," he mused. "I've been researching our history concerning the humans, and what you're describing, it sounds similar to something I read."

"One of us made the same observation," the sage replied. "You must have both studied the same tome."

"What makes it familiar?" Jussa asked.

"The human magicians would gather into groups, which they called *covens*," he answered. "It referred to a group of magicians that had come together to form a society, an organized group with a purpose, objective, or goal. It could be a group of humans that were friends and formed a coven for mutual support and assistance, or an organized society devoted to an

ideal or goal, like a king or some esoteric objective like studying history or protecting some ancient relic. The book defined the difference between a group and a coven by the fact that covens tether themselves together, where an informal group of magicians do not. The humans would form specialized tethers that would allow them to protect each other. As you know, human society back then was very warlike, and the peasants often feared magicians.”

“The closest English translation to that word isn’t a very good one,” Kell warned. “It has an evil meaning, referring to magicians as witches, as servants of the human’s devil.”

“Most likely, the meaning of the word was perverted by the Catholic church,” one of the sages offered.

“Well, we should borrow another English word when talking about them and call them *societies*, not *covens*,” Kammi said.

“Good idea,” Kell nodded.

“It sounds as if our experiment has produced a coven,” Trejem continued. “Seventeen humans bound together through their tethers with Kell, which Kell leads. He is the focus, and that makes him the leader of the coven. But, since Kell isn’t a magician, he can exert no real control over the members of his coven. Quite intriguing,” he mused.

“We will be keeping very close eye on the earth drake over the next few weeks,” the sage told them. “With daily examinations at sunrise every morning. And once the humans return to their island, a sage will be accompanying the dragons that visit them to give them their lessons daily to continue observing them. We must document everything, as this is something new to us. But we must keep most vigilant watch over our young earth drake volunteer for any further changes.”

“What do you suspect, most wise?” Hinado asked.

“I *suspect* that being able to fly won’t be the only boon Kell receives from this,” the sage replied. “Remember, the type of bond he’s formed is

equal. What he gives is equal to what he receives, no more, but also no less. And I suspect that what the humans are granting to Kell is *more* than what we've seen so far. The amount of magic the seventeen humans are granting to him is too much to empower his ability to fly, and that magic has to be going *somewhere*. I theorize that while he will be unable to use magic the way we do, due to his aura, the bonding of the humans to him will empower the racial abilities enjoyed by *all* dragons. Before, he had no way to fuel them due to the interference of his aura. If I'm right, the tethers will bypass that, granting him that magic without his aura getting in the way."

"Control over the earth!" Trejem said in sudden excitement.

"The ability to control their element is a fundamental aspect of dragon magic," the sage nodded. "Earth, air, fire, water, and in our case, magic, which is why we are the most powerful spellcasters compared to other dragon races. We can control magic at an innate level. I suspect that, in the coming days, the earth drake will begin to demonstrate the magical capability to control and manipulate earth, rock, and stone."

"Wouldn't his aura interfere with that ability, most wise?" Jussa asked.

"Normally, yes," he nodded. "But the tethers are connected to him *through* his aura. It is hard to explain," he said, looking around, then gesturing at a blank slate laying over on the side of the aerie. It floated over to him and laid on the floor, and one of his clawtips began to glow. He began drawing on the slate. "Think of an earth dragon's aura as a curtain," he said, continuing to draw. "What the tethers are doing are reaching *through* that curtain and anchoring directly to the earth dragon's core. I would almost say his soul, but no magic can affect the soul. By reaching through his aura, I theorize that it will give him a connection to the fundamental powers of all dragons, allowing him to access and use them without interference from his aura. The tethers are...are giving him an alternate route to connect with the core of his magic, one that his aura cannot block," he explained. "But, since the tethers bypass his aura, this connection won't give him the ability to use magic the way we do. However, it could theoretically give him the magic based on his core, and

his core is that of an earth dragon. And in this case, he would draw the power he needs to use his ability to control the earth from the *humans*, not from his own aura.” He finished drawing and held up the slate, turning so they could all see it, depicting his idea as an image of a rope or pipeline of sorts penetrating a barrier to reach the object behind it. “It is their tethers that are connecting to the core of him and amplifying the magic that counters his mass and gives him the ability to fly. I theorize that those tethers will also empower his racial ability to control the earth, a fundamental part of all dragons. Even earth dragons.”

“A sound theory, most wise,” Trejem nodded in agreement.

“But only a theory,” the sage said modestly. “Only time, observation, and experimentation will determine if the theory is valid or invalid.”

Kammi looked curiously at Kell, and the expression on her face was doubtful...and he agreed with that. What the sage was forgetting was that earth dragons were not like the other dragon races. They were greatly different, a species unrelated to the chromatics and their descendents. It was more likely that they’d never had that ability in the first place.

The others continued to discuss what the sage described, but Kell basically tuned out, much to Kammi’s delight. He sat quietly beside her, leaning against her, his tail wrapped around hers, and she was quite happy to receive his attention. He had never before felt so *right* about Kammi than at that moment. That she would understand what he was going through, support him, *forgive* him, it told him beyond any doubt that she was his match. This was the female he would spend his life with, and in that moment, he knew beyond doubt that he would never regret that decision. She may drive him crazy sometimes, but that just made her perfect for him. Kell needed a female in his life that would drive him a little crazy. A field agent needed someone in his life to keep it interesting...exciting.

After more discussion, the meeting broke up to attend the other meeting. Instead of being carried, Kell and Kammi walked from Council Aerie to the former Department Aerie, which weren’t very far away from

each other. The lack of ramps required them to walk along the southern ridge of the volcano, near multiple holes in the ridgeline that were fire, sky, and chromatic den openings, and the walk gave them a chance to talk...or more to the point, for Kammi to interrogate him.

“Did you really?” she asked, opening her wings deliberately just enough to get her point across.

“For about a second, long enough to prove it was possible,” he answered. “I’ve been afraid to take more than two feet off the ground since.”

“You have way more discipline than me, intended,” she admitted with a laugh. “But still, that we *can*...I don’t know what to think of it!”

“What did they tell you about it?”

“Most everything,” she answered. “Including the fact that no other dragon’s gonna get the chance. There aren’t enough...or at least enough *humans*. I wonder if dragons can substitute for them.”

“They already checked into that. No,” he answered. “We can’t bond a dragon. Only a human. And seriously, it’s no surprise. How many fire dragons have been punctured by an earth dragon tail and survived it over the years? It would have happened long before now, if we could.”

“I never thought of that,” she admitted. “Do you feel any different?”

He shook his head. “Not physically. Mentally and emotionally, that’s a different story.”

“I can imagine. Does it scare you?”

“Not the fact itself. The potential for disaster it represents is what scares me,” he answered. “I just don’t know what’s going to happen when the others find out. Last night, I just sat at the entry and thought of everything that could go wrong, even things like the farmhands leaving the island to start their own farms where there’s available land. What’s stopping

them now is the fact that they can't leave the island. When they *can*, will they stay? Will the council alienate them by forbidding it?"

"Huh. I never thought of that," she breathed. "If I was in a farmhand's pawprints...I don't know what I'd do. To own my own farm, to finally achieve that dream...it might make it worth it. I might even go against the council. I mean, what are they going to do, send fire dragons to drag me back? I'd be just *slightly* pissed off when I get back, if the fire dragons even push it to that point in the first place. They know what we mean, they wouldn't dare lay a paw on us."

"Now you're starting to see why I'm so worried, intended," he nodded. "It's all going to hinge on Anthra and Geon," he predicted. "They have to break it to the earth dragons the right way, and make sure we don't fracture. They'll have to convince the earth dragons to stay with wise words, in addition to keeping things orderly. I think if he could, Gev would literally *kill* me to take my place," he said seriously. "Anthra and Geon are going to have to work around that, too. The potential for upheaval within our society is something we can't ignore."

"Gev won't get the chance, not when you sleep right beside me in the burrow," Kammi said with an outrageously melodramatic, sinister voice that made him break out laughing. "This is my chance to both take your place *and* get a promotion at work. It's win-win!"

"You," he accused, nudging her with his shoulder. But that turned into another nuzzle as they walked. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being my *lifemate* instead of my *intended*," he answered, which made her eyes soften as she looked at him.

"So, let's hear you say it," she smiled at him.

He laughed. "I love you, Kammi," he declared, which made her literally tackle him to the stone beneath them.

They arrived at the aerie just moments before the conference began, and Kell noticed that none of the humans were showing signs of de-aging yet, and that all of them were wearing their talismans prominently outside of their shirts and blouses. Their attire wasn't formal, Walker was the only one wearing a dress shirt, but he wore no tie or jacket and had his sleeves rolled up. Everyone else was in very casual attire, from tee shirts and shorts to the breezy, aesthetically pleasing sun dress that Julia Walker had on, complete with a wide-brimmed floppy hat to protect her from the sun. But, while the dress wasn't formal, the talks very much were. They had some serious business to discuss, and they got right to it once Jussa convened them into session. They first talked about the next aid shipment, primarily food and equipment to build an even larger geothermal plant, then they discussed the United Nations for nearly six hours, both the exact wording of the resolutions the Americans would introduce and the possibility of sending a dragon to address the assembly.

They were discussing possible reactions to the resolutions when the conversation drifted to the Chinese. "They're going to resist the resolutions with everything they have," Walker predicted. "Direct opposition, leveraging other nations in the assembly to voting against it, even threatening global depression if the vote passes. And right with them will be the Russians," he grunted. "Not because the Russians have a dog in this fight, but because of the fact that we're the ones sponsoring it. They'll oppose us just to oppose us, and that gives the Chinese their most powerful ally."

"These Russians, what can be done to remove their resistance?" Jussa asked, which Jirran translated.

"Maybe killing a few of their leaders," Walker said half-heartedly. "This isn't about *you*, Jussa. It's about *us*. They'll oppose the resolution purely because we want it to pass."

"Ah, so they are contrary."

“To the point of self-destruction,” Walker agreed with a nod. “The old human saying *he will cut off his nose to spite his face* perfectly describes how the Russians behave towards America. If it will hurt us, they’ll do it, even if it hurts them even more. That’s why we have to keep this out of the Security Council, keep it in the general assembly. The Russians will veto it immediately if it goes to the Security Council.”

“We can handle the Russians, esteemed council member,” Ferroth said confidently. “If you give us a little leeway, we can *convince* them to leave this one alone.”

“When the time comes, you will have our permission to do so, chief,” Jussa answered him with a nod. “That will only leave the Chinese, who won’t be so easily dissuaded.”

“Afraid not,” Ferroth agreed. “They’re in this to the base of their tails, esteemed council member. They see this as their chance to become the greatest power in the world, and they’re not about to back down. For one, I seriously doubt that their plan would have ended with taking the oil-producing areas of the Middle East. They would have gotten there, realized what they had, and just kept going. They would have tried to conquer all of Europe and northern Africa.”

“I wouldn’t disagree with that assessment,” Kent agreed, looking over at Ferroth.

“My joint chiefs said pretty much the same thing,” Walker added. “That if the Chinese pulled off their plan, they would have invaded Europe both to prevent a counterattack and because the lust for conquest would have taken them over. That’s why we have to keep the earth dragons as far away as possible from the Chinese. From anyone that finds out about that formula, including my own military,” he grunted. “More than one general has quietly been trying to find out if we can use our contacts with you to secure blood for the formula. And every single one of them has been sacked,” he announced. “Even *speculating* about it can get you fired and

retired, as the first ten or so object lessons have demonstrated to the rest of them.”

“And that is one of the reasons why we allow you on our island, Mister President,” Jussa told him with calm temperance.

“This gives me a very different point of view from my generals, Jussa,” he answered, holding up his talisman. “And I don’t want my own military to start drawing up the same plans the Chinese did. America stands for something much better than to conquer and rule,” he said with dedication vibrating in his voice. “We do not stand as the beacon of freedom in this world by taking it from others.”

“Well said, Mister President,” Kent nodded.

“That being said, Jussa, I really have to suggest in very strong terms that you send a dragon to the U.N. to plead your case,” Walker told him. “You have no idea what kind of impact that can have. Seeing one of you on television in no way compares to meeting you face to face. And it will drive home the point beyond any shadow of a doubt to the rest of the world that you *deserve* recognition from the world, both as a people and as a nation. It’s hard to argue that dragons aren’t sentient beings deserving of the same rights as humanity when you’re face to face with one.”

“What you ask might be a problem, Mister President,” Jussa said. “For several reasons, it would be an earth dragon that would have to go, if only because only Geon could fit within the building,” he said, glancing at Geon. “And even he might be too large. But that delves into a simple matter of protection. Many dragons will object to sending an earth dragon out in the world with very little protection. A member of this council is entitled to protection. Yet, even with his study with the department in the matters of humans, even Geon would admit that he’s not ready for such a thing.”

“The simplest solution, Jussa,” Jenny spoke up, “is to send a dragon that’s already trained to deal with the outside world, has the temperament and discipline to handle himself in a high-pressure political situation, and has the training to deal with any crisis that may pop up. Send a high ranking

member of the department,” she suggested. “Chief Ferroth would be the best choice, but if not him, then a field agent. A dragon that not only intimately understand human culture, but one that is trained to know what to do if things go wrong. That dragon could take care of himself if it comes down to it. And I can think of one dragon here that would be perfectly suited for the task, if Chief Ferroth declines,” she said, giving Kell a meaningful glance. “There’s only one council member on this island that has formal department training...even if he’s not on the council anymore.”

“That’s my *intended* you’re talking about, Jenny,” Kammi said with protective heat, partially opening her wings and interposing herself between Kell and Jenny. “He’s not going to do something that dangerous...not without *me* he’s not.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Geon mused. “Kell has certainly proved that he can handle himself in a high-stakes political situation, and he has the training to be able to handle such a mission safely. This kind of thing *is* what the field agents were trained to do. And I, for one, have to agree with Jenny. Kell once stood on my podium. He may not do so any longer, but it *does* give him the weight of authority.”

“Sending just one dragon may not be prudent, but it goes without saying that a field agent will be dispatched with whoever we may send to speak to the humans, if we make that decision,” Essan said. “The council member would need a field agent’s expertise and protection out in the human world. That being said, Jenny does raise a valid point. Kell has the *political* skills to handle the mission, and if we decide that sending Geon is too dangerous, Kell would be a viable replacement.”

Kell gave Jenny a flat look, and she just smiled and winked back at him.

They moved on to the next important topic after a little more discussion, one that was important to the earth dragons most of all, the aid shipments. Anthra and Geon produced quite a list of additional equipment and supplies that they’d need to get everything *completely* back to normal,

mainly replacing what the sky dragons destroyed when they dug out the earth dragon burrows. Quite a few earth dragons had lost just about everything, and now that the crisis had passed, the needs of those individual dragons had to be addressed to bring the matter to a close.

It had taught the earth dragons one important lesson...all the new burrows were now deep enough to be well into the bedrock, to where the other dragons would have to invest a hell of a lot of effort to dig them out. Even a fire dragon would have trouble trying to dig through solid basalt, which was the primary bedrock from which the island was formed. Fire dragons were powerful, but their claws weren't hard enough to tear through that kind of rock for very long before their claws were worn down. Earth dragon claws were the *second* hardest material known to dragon kind, capable of tearing through hardened steel like it was paper.

"We can have most of this palleted up and ready for shipment in a week," Kent speculated as he read through the list. "We kept the freighters at Hawaii, so we have all that in position already."

"I think as far as payment goes, we'd like to discuss something other than money, or goods," Walker said, looking at Jussa. "Jussa, Essan, Faralla, Hinado, a few agencies in my government like to have a few very long talks with the water dragons and the sky dragons, concerning the ocean and the weather. You know far more than we do, and we'd like you to teach us. The NOAA and NASA in particular would benefit greatly from learning what you know."

"What is this NOAA?" Jussa asked. "Jirran didn't offer a translation of that word."

"The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration," Kell supplied. "It's an American government agency devoted to the study of the ocean, atmosphere, and weather."

"Ah, so they are scientists?" Jussa asked, to which both Kell and Walker nodded, Kell before Walker since he had to wait for the translation. "I think we could see fit to pass on what we know, Mister President. I can

have our sages come with Hinado to Imakaii, and you bring your science people. They can discuss such things while Hinado trains the magicians.”

“A few of them want in the worst way to find some way to let you take them down into the deep water,” Walker chuckled. “We know almost nothing about the ocean floor.”

“That might be possible,” Jussa mused. “I’ll have to discuss the possibility with the water dragon that knows more about using magic on air-breathers for water operations than any other.”

“Surrall,” Kell realized.

“He has impressed many of us greatly, Kell,” Jussa nodded in reply. “He might be one of the most skilled magicians among us, and at his age, that is truly a marvel. And in typical water dragon fashion, he kept that to himself. Sometimes our modesty can be a liability instead of an asset,” he said ruefully. “We’re keeping track of his experiments now. Currently he’s working on a magical spell that would replace the breathing bubble, that would allow you to breathe water instead of air. If he can perfect that spell, it would allow you to go much deeper, since the breathing bubble can’t be used when under great pressure. A few other simple spells to protect from the cold and the pressure to prevent pressure-based maladies would be needed, and we just may be able to take your ocean scientists down into the deep water.”

“The pressure spell is something we could research, it falls within the realm of sky dragon magic,” Hinado speculated. “That’s a relatively simple spell of change, altering the amount of pressure being placed on the body. We already have one that works in the other direction, that protects sky dragons from the *lack* of pressure when flying at the edge of space. I’m sure we could modify that spell to provide protection against the crushing pressure of the deep water.”

“A spell to protect against the cold is basic magic. Any dragon could cast it,” Sessara supplied. “I can think of four different versions of it off the top of my head.”

“So, we could very well take your scientists down into the deep water,” Jussa finished. “Once we solve the breathing problem.”

“I can see why Surrall’s been working on that spell,” Jenny noted, giving Kell a sly look.

“I guess I’m not water dragon enough for him as it is,” Kell said in reply, which made her laugh.

“It’s the only thing keeping them from taking you deep,” Jenny answered. “You don’t need protection from the cold or the pressure as it is.”

“It may seem a small thing, but that earth dragon immunity to great pressure and changes in pressure is deceptively powerful,” Hinado mused.

“Now I’m getting curious,” Walker said. “Maybe you could take me down there once you get it solved.”

“I’d be happy to, Mister President,” Jussa offered. “I’d love to show you the Dark Lake. It’s a fairly large lake of heavy water at the bottom of the Vast Deep, that looks like a lake on the surface.”

“Heavy water? What’s that?” Jenny asked.

“A form of water built from isotopes of hydrogen or oxygen instead of regular atoms,” Kell explained. “It makes it heavier than normal water, so it sinks when mixed with regular water. I’d bet there are layers in that lake made up of the different isotopes, with the heaviest being at the bottom, at least as long as there’s no current down there to stir up the water.”

“It would be so, Kell, if it lake was still,” Jussa nodded. “But the Dark Lake isn’t completely still. It has just enough movement in it to prevent the layers from forming.”

“We might discuss you harvesting some of that water for us, Jussa,” Walker said quickly. “It has some uses in our science.”

“Not *that* lake, but there are other pools of heavy water on the bottom we’d be willing to harvest. There are creatures living in the Dark Lake that

can't survive outside of it. We're not going to kill them by taking their water."

"Living things in a lake of heavier water at the bottom of the ocean that can't live outside it? I've never heard of that," Jenny mused.

"There are mysteries in the ocean that even we seek to solve, Jenny," Jussa told her after hearing the translation. "That's the beauty of the ocean. She is a mysterious creature, fickle and capricious, who hides her secrets well."

The meeting ended about an hour before sunset, which was the end of the conference. They'd left tomorrow more or less open in case things ran long, but they'd gone through the entire agenda, and they had agreements in place for everything. And he was pleasantly surprised that Walker had demanded knowledge in payment for the supplies they needed, which, in a way, resonated with the dragons. Even the fire dragons had a nearly genetic love of *teaching*, of spreading knowledge, and were quite happy to share what they knew, even with other fire dragons. That seemed a bit of a paradox given the fire dragons saw everyone as a potential enemy, but it was on full display when the fire dragon females were in Hawaii. They'd taught Jenny and the other humans, taught them a great deal, and purely because the humans wanted to learn.

It all came back to what Prisma said was the guiding principle of the chromatics; to guide, to teach, to fulfill Gaia's command that they spread the knowledge of magic through the world, which also caused them to spread other knowledge as well...after all, to be good at magic, Prisma told them, a dragon or human had to be quite knowledgeable about a variety of other topics, from physics to chemistry to botany to biology to metallurgy. The elders perverted that belief into thinking that it required them to control the other dragons, to lead them, but at the core of it, it was all about teaching. He remembered that passage that Prisma had read to them out of Athena's journal, her calling the chromatics *the teachers of man*.

And Kell could see that cycle beginning again in Walker's request that the dragons pay for their supplies with knowledge instead of money or barter.

Kell was too afraid to glide down, that he wouldn't glide so much as fly and make dragons suspicious, so he had Irago carry him back down to the farm. Kammi landed beside him, bounding a few times to slow down once she hit the ground, then gave him a huge grin as Kell waved his thanks to the young sky drake. "You are *so* showing me once we get in the burrow," she demanded as Irago rocketed back towards the top of the extinct volcano in a single wingbeat.

"There's not much space in there," he noted.

"I just want to see it," she told him. "Just see you get your feet up and stay there."

"Well, that's about all I can do," he told her as they started down the entry ramp. "And we're going down to the brood chamber. It has a high ceiling and it's deep in the burrow. Not even Sire and mother will come that deep into the burrow without permission."

"Whatever makes you feel comfortable, intended."

Deep down in the burrow, in the brood chamber, Kell gave Kammi what she wanted. He again flapped his wings hard enough to get off the ground, and instead of falling right back to the earth, he instead went higher, then higher, then higher, then his wingtips hit the ceiling and he dropped back down to the recessed floor, dug out below the hallway level so they could fill it with proper earth to incubate eggs. Kammi raised her head to watch him ascend, her eyes wide and gleeful, and she nearly tackled him when he landed. "It's true! It's so true!" she squealed. "Kell, that's incredible! How does it feel to be able to do it? Is it hard? Have you tried moving forward or anything? How long can you stay up?"

"Whoa there, eager hatchling," he chided, which made her laugh. "I told you, I've only done it once before that, for like two seconds. And I

think that was about a second. And I'm not doing it again until the esteemed council members have a plan about what to do about it."

"But still, how does it *feel*, Kell? How does it feel to defy gravity?"

"I haven't let myself feel anything about it," he answered honestly, as they left the brood chamber and went down the passage leading to the ramp leading back to the first level of the burrow. "I don't want to be tempted, Kammi, not in any way. There's too much potential for disaster. I'm not as doom and gloom about it as I was when we first found out, but I still feel that if the council doesn't do this the right way, it could make the entire island explode in chaos. So I'm not going to do *anything* that might mess that up," he said emphatically.

"Alright. What about the humans? Can you feel them through the bonds? Do you feel any different than before?"

"No and no," he answered. "I don't feel even slightly different than before. I can't even tell that it was done."

"I wonder why. I'd have thought you'd feel, well, different."

"Nope," he answered as they went up the ramp back to the top level. "I'm kinda glad of it, to be honest. I'm connected to the humans through the bonds, but I don't want them invading my privacy any more than they'd want me invading theirs. And as far as me feeling different, I don't want that either. I'm happy with who and what I am, I don't want to feel any different than I do now."

She gave him an understanding glance, then proceeded to grill him for nearly two hours about everything he hadn't told her. And he was honest with her, because she was his intended, she was as good as his lifemate already, and there were no secrets between lifemates. What surprised him most about their long talk was how adamant she was that he not ignore the gift he was given, not be afraid of it, summed up in her nearly stubborn insistence that he actually learn how to fly. "I know you think that our entire society will collapse if you take your paws off the ground," she told him, a

bit teasingly, “but you shouldn’t be so against this, intended. For one, when others get this gift, we’re going to need *you* to teach *us*. I’m sure that how you do it is going to be different than the other dragons, just because of how you got there. You need to figure things out so, when more and more of us get it, we have someone that can show us what to do. And along the same lines, you need to show the others that it’s not something to be afraid of,” she stressed. “You know there will be some of us afraid of a change that big, and maybe even quite a few afraid of heights. You need to be competent so you don’t take someone’s fears and make them worse when they see you crash into the ground. I know you’re thinking about right now, but you need to start thinking of *afterwards* too.”

She wasn’t being silly about earth dragons maybe being afraid of heights. Most earth dragons didn’t glide from altitude the way the field agents did. For that matter, quite a few earth dragons hadn’t glided once since they were taught the skill as a hatchling. There was little use for gliding for a dragon like Keth, whose entire life revolved around his farm, which was very much at ground level...though, Keth was actually a highly skilled glider.

“Listen to you, sounding like you’re next in line,” Kell teased.

“Nah, the council members are, but I’ll be high up on the list,” she said confidently.

“Really? And why is that?”

“Because my wings are stronger than most, thanks to all the swimming,” she replied easily. “By the time we find seventeen more humans, I’ll have the wing strength to get off the ground. How many other dragons can say that? You *did* say that that was one of the reasons why you were chosen.”

“That’s true enough,” he admitted. “And I’m surprised you’re not out in the cove right now.”

She laughed. “I will be tomorrow,” she grinned.

“Much as I understand your point of view, Kammi, I don’t want to do that. I told you, I don’t want to be tempted. And if I don’t know how, then I can’t do it.”

“Kell, that hatchling is already out of the egg,” she told him seriously. “The simple fact that you *can* do it renders your point moot. You won’t think to do it on purpose, sure, but it *can* happen, and you know it.”

“That’s why I want the sages to make something to keep me on the ground until we can reveal it.”

“And that’s the worst thing you could do, Kell,” she told him seriously. “You said that you’re happy with who and what you are...well, this is a *part* of you now. Don’t try to lock it in a cage and bury it in the sleeping mound. You were given something incredible, something *precious*, and acting like it’s a bomb chained around your neck is going to have some bad repercussions when the council finally reveals it. Your fear is going to transmit down to the other dragons. If they see you afraid of it, they will be too. Believe it or not, intended, you are actually highly respected by most earth dragons. They see you as young, yes, but competent and confident, with the trust of our council dragons. You *were* on the council, Kell, and many earth dragons will always see you as a *former* council member. That garners respect, you know it does. Ridiculous and silly, I know,” she grinned at him. “If they knew you the way I did, they’d feel foolish having any confidence in you.”

“Oh, ha, ha, ha,” he drawled, which made her laugh.

“You have to look at this not as a field agent, but as a council member,” she continued. “And a council member would want the dragons to see the first of us to receive this gift to not be so afraid of it he’s wearing an anchor around his neck.”

That was a surprisingly logical argument, and he barely had time to think through it before she continued.

“Appearances matter, Kell. When that time comes, you’ll want to look like you know what you’re doing. There’s a big difference between looking like you know what you’re doing and you looking like a complete joke, flailing around like an angry hatchling that lost in wrestling then crashing into the ground.”

He felt a tiny bit offended at that comparison.

“So, intended, tomorrow I want you to talk to Hinado and see if there’s somewhere completely private he can take you to give you some basic instruction.”

“That’s like nowhere, Kammi,” he answered as they reached the main living chamber. “The sky dragons are keeping an eye on everything around the island, and what they won’t see, the water dragons will. And that’s just us. We can’t go out beyond the sphere of influence that hides the island from satellites, or they’ll pick up images of me, and those *will* get back to the island. You know they will.”

“Well, duh, intended, stop thinking like a fluffy and think like an earth dragon. What’s stopping you from going out at *night*? Irago has those night vision goggles, just give them to Hinado, have him take you out away from the island, and boom. No dragon sees you, the satellites can’t see you as long as Hinado doesn’t use light magic, and you have all the time and space you need.”

“The water dragons—“

“Won’t come near you if Jussa declares a patch of ocean off limits, and what do ya know, he’d do it,” she told him lightly. “All he has to say is *don’t go there, council business* and no water dragon will. They’re funny like that, you know.”

“Well, that’s not as perfect as you think it is, but it does have some potential,” he admitted. “The sky dragons *are* patrolling at night, but if the moon’s not up, they won’t be able to see us. Besides, Hinado and Faralla can clear them away from where we go the same way Jussa can.”

“So, there you go, intended,” she declared. “You master your new skill, it stays a secret, and you’re ready when your secret’s not a secret anymore.”

“I’m not sure...but I’ll think about it,” he answered. “And that’s enough about that. There’s something much more important for us to discuss.”

“And what is that?” she asked, then she gave a bit of a surprised sound when he pulled her over to where the TV was and then sat both of them down. He put his wing over her back and pulled her against his side, then nuzzled the side of her head to the announcement of a sweet chiming sound when his horn rapped up against hers.

“I think I’m going to like this discussion,” she purred, nuzzling him in return.

2 October 2017, 13:38 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It was quite crowded.

With quite a few dragons roaming around the tor, Jenny and Greg were hosting the other humans that had come to the island out on the patio behind the house built for them. The final day of their visit had no scheduled meetings, so the Hunters, the President, and the others were supposed to have a day of relaxation before they were returned to the aircraft carrier at sunset. The most prominent dragon by far was Gressa, taking up the entire back of the patio as the much smaller dragons crowded in around the edges, making sure to give the humans enough space to not feel enclosed. Kell’s family shared space with the other field agents and the pod around the pool, and the humans sat at the tables and benches they’d carved out of stone for them while Greg watched over Davie as he played down on the playground. They were mainly in swimwear from their swim on the beach earlier, some in less than others, given the super-skimpy black bikini that Petrovski had on that showed off that potential supermodel body. So far, none of them was

showing any signs yet of reverting to their youth, but Yancy, the oldest of them, was moving much more spryly than before. That hinted to Kell that the magic was starting to affect them.

But while they weren't in an official meeting, business was being discussed...China. They had intercepted a series of orders sent down to the military that morning, and they were discussing it with Walker and Kent. Simply put, the Chinese weren't just going to let things lie. The intel showed that the government was now highly uncertain it could get what it wanted from the dragons, and that, combined with the water dragon attack on their fleet, had them talking *revenge*. The government had ordered the military to draw up battle plans for another attack on the island, this one designed to *destroy* it rather than *capture* it. There was even talk of using nuclear weapons to obliterate the island, but thankfully, the saner people in their government were throttling those suggestions. They knew that to use a nuclear weapon would incite the *entire world* to declare war on them, and without the formula, they'd be in no position to win that war. They were quite willing to use nuclear weapons when they felt they could *win* that war, but not when they could *lose* it.

The military was ordered to draw up a battle plan to basically carpet bomb the island with their most powerful explosives (a war crime), exterminate every dragon they could find, including the hatchlings and the eggs (another war crime) and poison the island with "dirty bombs," explosives filled with radioactive material to leave behind a radiation zone that would be lethal to all known forms of life (also a war crime). Simply put, they had decided that if they couldn't get what they wanted from the dragons, they would make sure that nobody else could either. If they couldn't control magic in the world, then they would destroy magic completely to deny it to everyone else. One communication Kell read was from a high-ranking member of their politburo that was very serious when he wrote about bulletproof Russian or Indian or American soldiers boiling over the borders or landing on the coast. The Chinese knew the formula was out, and now they were afraid that some other nation would succeed where they failed, and then use that formula against them. The fact that the

dragons seemed quite cozy with the Americans was a matter of particular worry for them, that it would allow the Americans to secure the formula, and then subsequently invade China.

Needless to say, the council was deep in discussion about the matter at that moment, and they had Ferroth up there to advise them, since it was a matter that dealt with the outside. While they talked, Kell and the field agents revealed their info to Walker and the others, and they'd been talking about it ever since.

"This was why we didn't want to be seen as allied to any specific human nation," Prisma stated as they continued to hash through it. "Just because of this, one nation seeing such an appearance as threatening."

"Well, to be fair, fluffy, the Chinese already did sorta attack us," Kammi grinned at her, she endured the inevitable tail whack. "So they're gonna see anything we do as against them...cause it sorta is."

"The bigger question is, are they going to go through with it?" Yancy asked musingly. "Even if they don't use nukes, them attacking the dragons is going to put them on the bad side of lots of people."

"They don't really care, Yancy. They see us as a threat to their government," Kell told him. "They'll take a decade or so of diplomatic problems with everyone else if it means that they stay in power. In their minds, this is about the survival of their nation, of them keeping their positions of power and luxury. That can drive men to extremes."

"Then why not use nukes?" Petrovski asked.

"Because that would destroy China once the rest of the world came after them," Kell answered, to which Kent and Walker both nodded.

"If they used a nuke against the island, I'd have a declaration of war in front of Congress ten minutes later," Walker declared emphatically. "And we wouldn't be the only nation to do it. There's no place on this earth for any nation willing to actually *use* nuclear weapons. That was why I was one

step from declaring war on them when I found out about those tactical nukes they were bringing to the island.”

“The big question is, what are we going to do about it?” Price asked calmly.

“Most likely, plenty,” Kell chuckled without humor. “I’m sure the council is going to order retaliation...or more to the point pre-emption. We can’t let that attack get started.”

“We might be able to help with that, Kell,” Yancy said. “We have several back doors into the Chinese computer system.”

“They would be better served using magic,” Prisma said after hearing Kammi translate for her. “Something impressive enough to dissuade the Chinese from ever *thinking* about attacking us again. After all, if there is no punishment, they will simply try again and again.”

“This time, they have to know we did it,” Kammi stated, to which Kell nodded in agreement. “They have to know that we’ll tear them a new one if they threaten us, and I don’t think the rest of the world will bitch about it.”

“And now I’m glad Davie’s down at the playground,” Jenny drawled, which made Kammi grin at her.

“Either way, it’s the council that will decide what to do, not us,” Jirran said. “We just get to pull the trigger...and it’s gonna be *fun*,” he added with an eager grin.

“It’ll come down to just how big a response the council wants, I suppose,” Kell mused. “We could send China back into the stone age with an EMP attack, but I doubt they’d order that. The death toll among the civilians would be ghastly,” he grunted.

“How so?” Juarez asked.

“Simple, no electricity, no vehicles with electrical systems, no communications, and no refrigeration,” Kell answered. “I don’t think you understand how utterly dependent modern society is on electricity, Juarez.

Not for lighting or air conditioning, but transportation and *refrigeration*,” he stressed. “A population like China or America or Europe doesn’t maintain enough non-perishable food to feed its entire population. And even if it did, the loss of communications means you don’t know where to send the food to where people need it, because you can’t talk to them and they can’t talk to you. That sudden inability to move what food you do have to where it’s needed, and you have a recipe where tens of millions starve to death in the high population density areas while the rural Chinese farmers, who don’t rely as much on electricity, would fare much better. While we have a plan to do that, it’s always been a last resort, because of the death toll,” he admitted. “I’d never want to press that button knowing what kind of death and misery I’d be inflicting on someone.”

“Yikes,” Juarez sounded. “I’ve read some of the government docs on EMP, but I’d never put it together like that.”

“EMP is our nuclear bomb,” Kell told them. “The sky dragons can produce powerful EMP attacks, and it’s not even that hard for them, they just modulate their breath weapon the right way. A mature sky drake could knock out half a city with a single EMP attack. A wyrm could knock out the entire city. Sky wyrms have stronger breath weapons than the drakes, they’re the only dragons where the breath weapons between wyrms and drakes aren’t the same strength. I think it has something to do with their size, maybe the wyrms have more batteries in them or something,” he mused, which made Kammi laugh.

“I think that’s something you’re not supposed to talk about, Kell,” Jenny grinned at him.

“To the contrary, as far as you guys go, the council *wants* you to know we can do it,” Kell countered.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Girk warned, looking up. Kell did the same, and he saw Hinado descending towards them, carrying Ferroth. He set the chief down gently and remained hovering in the air over the group. “Are we about to move, chief?” Girk asked.

“Yup,” he answered. “All field agents report to the department.”

“What’s the plan?” Kell asked as he stood up.

“We’re going after China,” he replied. “We have three hours to prepare our counter. It’ll take the flight of sky wyrms that long to get into position.”

“What are they going to do?” Jenny asked, again showing off her draconic skills.

“They’re going to park a typhoon over Beijing,” he answered with a malicious smile. “And they’re going to *keep* it there until the Chinese sign a confession that they tried to invade the island and a treaty promising they never do it again, or the city drowns.”

“Holy Gaia, it’ll take half the sky dragons to pull that off!” Kell blurted.

“Not quite that many, but a few hundred are going,” Hinado answered. “Faralla is leading them. He’s quite skilled at large-scale weather magic.”

“What we’re going to do is prepare to take down the entire Chinese military network,” Ferroth announced. “And set it so every computer on their network dumps their memory into public domain cloud servers and then blows up when someone types a single command. Whelp, you’re the Mandarin expert in the field agent office, so you’re handling the official announcement drafts and warnings,” he said, looking at Kell. “Trekka, Jirran, you’re on the bomb team. Kammi, Girk, you two are going to help the coders build a program to put into the Chinese civilian internet that allows us to take complete control of their system. I want it to be self-replicating, whelps, piggybacking through the Chinese government snoopers programs they have installed on most civilian computers and devices. Fix it so that so long as there’s one infected system on their intranet, it infects all the others through the snoopers system. That’ll keep them busy for *weeks*.”

“I can do something like that, chief, no problem,” Kammi said confidently. “Bypassing their censorship?”

“Exactly,” he answered. “The council wants the Chinese civilians to know what their government is doing.”

“That might actually work,” Kell mused. “The weakness in their system is the sheer size of their population. piss enough average citizens off, and they’ll force change through sheer force of numbers.”

Jenny stood up. “It may not be our fight, chief, or even our place, but for one, I’m volunteering to help,” she declared. “I’m not about to sit here and do nothing while some of my best friends are threatened.”

Ferroth looked to Jenny, his face unreadable for a long moment. “I’d be an idiot for not using your skills. I *know* how good you are.”

“I’ll get in on that,” Michaels added, jumping to his feet.

“The chance to stick it to China? I’m in,” Petrovski agreed.

“Hell, the chance to blow stuff up and not get Yancy pissed at me? I’m in just for that,” Derringer said.

“I’m sure we can find a way you can contribute,” Ferroth said. “Yancy, feel like riding cowboy over your herd?”

Yancy laughed, his voice gravelly. “Someone’s gotta keep the young punks in line, chief,” he said, climbing to his feet. “I wanted to get a second look at your operation anyway. It’s well organized. I might use some of your ideas in my new department.”

“Mister President, mind if we go do our old jobs for a few hours?” Jenny asked winsomely.

“You have my permission, Colonel,” he replied with a smile. “Give ‘em hell.”

“I need to go get my pack,” Derringer called. “I have a flash drive holding most of my programs in it.”

“We can get everything sorted out down in the department,” Ferroth declared. “Which of you wants to work where?”

“I’ll join the bomb team, I love blowing stuff up,” Michaels grinned.

“I’ll take the bomb team, I have some back doors in the Chinese network we can use,” Derringer added.

“I’ve done work similar to what the other team’s doing, so I’ll jump on that,” Petrovski said.

“I’ll give you a hand, Olivia,” Jenny added.

“Sounds like we have a plan, so let’s go get our stuff and get down there and get to work,” Michaels called.

While the others sorted themselves out, Kell and Kammi swam down the lava tube to give them a head start on everyone else, then all but ran down the long tunnel to the city. They’d yet to build a tunnel closer to the city because they hadn’t finished their impact studies to ensure a tunnel like that so deep under the mountain would be stable. “It looks like the council’s done hiding,” Kammi observed as they bounded up the gentle slope. “No way can they hide what the sky dragons are gonna do.”

“I’d have voted for it,” Kell answered. “The only way the Chinese are going to back off is if we prove to them that we can make their lives hell if they don’t. There’s too much greed involved in what they want, and no consequences to stop them, at least none that they can see. They have to be shown those consequences.”

“You really think they woulda used nukes?”

“I think they *will* if the conventional attack fails,” he answered. “Remember, they sent those tactical nukes with the invasion fleet, and they had orders to *use* them if necessary. What stopped them is that they don’t want to use any ICBM-delivered high-yield nukes in a way that the Russians or Americans can track the nuke back to them, it might trigger a full nuclear exchange at the worst, or the entire world putting sanctions on them and crashing their economy at the best. I hope Ferroth told the sky dragons to keep an eye out for heavy Chinese bombers. Loading a warhead on a cruise missile and launching it from a bomber flying at low altitude

would be almost impossible for the American and Russian systems to detect. They see some other nation being able to produce the formula as a threat to China itself, and I'm honestly surprised they didn't order a nuclear strike in the first place."

"So, we'd better smack that idea out of them quick," Kammi grinned.

"Exactly."

Barely half an hour after Kell and Kammi arrived, the entire department was organized and working. The others had arrived, and after just putting the humans on top of the desks and letting them sit there, both human and dragon got down to business. Kintel was leading the bomb team, which was going to bring down the Chinese military computer network after dumping its contents into the public domain, while the supervisor of the computer programmers, Lakka, was heading the team that was going to hack the entire Chinese civilian internet, which was actually an *intranet* with access to the internet. There were a bunch of sniffer and spyware programs the Chinese government used to spy on their own citizens using their civilian intranet, programs that had to be installed on all computers and other smart devices by law, and that was how they were going to take control over it. They would get in using the Chinese government's own spyware, which would allow them to effectively take control of every computer, smart phone, and tablet in China. But that spyware went both ways, and it would allow them to invade and take over the *government* systems that spied on the citizenry. When Kell wasn't drafting statements, he worked with the takeover team, and found himself working side by side with Jenny. She was sitting cross-legged on the desk he had out in the main area, her laptop in her lap and quite the serious look on her face as she worked with Kammi, Girk, Kell, and several of the programmers in the department to write the code that would let them take over China.

It wouldn't take them long. They had several programs already written to do what Ferroth wanted, but they weren't designed to attack and take over the *entire* Chinese civilian intranet. They were targeted programs, designed to go after specific systems on the intranet. What they were doing

was tweaking them so they would allow penetration of every computer on the Chinese intranet.

“For this to work, we’re gonna have to insert it into multiple points of their system,” Jenny mused as her fingers danced confidently over her keyboard. Jenny was a *very* fast typer.

“And that’s probably why chief let you guys in, so we could get access to the back doors you have in the Chinese network,” Kell answered. “We’ll have to hit all fifteen main data hubs at once, or their failsafe system will kick in. We have ways in to those, but every single additional entry point spreads it that much faster.”

“Still, that’s a pretty clever counter, Kell, using their own government spyware system against them,” she smiled at him.

“They already did most of our work for us,” he chuckled ominously. “The fatal flaw in their system is they don’t believe it can possibly be hijacked from the outside, thanks to their firewalls that isolate their intranet from the internet. And I guess they *would*, if some scoundrel hadn’t gotten into them from on site and patched them to allow traffic from a ghost domain through.”

“And were you that scoundrel, Kell?”

“I do speak Mandarin better than anyone else in the department,” he said easily, which made her laugh.

“And how many languages do you speak? I’ve never asked you that.”

“Thirteen,” he answered absently. “Korean, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Hindi, Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian, Portuguese, English, Arabic, and draconic. I’m more or less the department’s far East specialist.” He glanced at her startled expression. “What?”

“I had no idea you could speak so many.”

“Languages are easy for dragons to learn,” he shrugged. “Ferroth speaks about twenty human languages. I’m not sure how many. I do know

that he speaks every major language used on the internet, so he can read what he sees without translation so he can understand it on a deeper level than translation software can provide.”

“Smart.”

“Chief’s the smartest dragon in this room, Jenny. He might be the smartest dragon on this island,” he said seriously.

They had a fix for the software and were rebuilding it when the sky dragons reached China. All of them paused in their work to watch a real-time weather radar, which showed them forming the storm off the coast within the massive bay that was the closest to the city, forming with a speed that made it abundantly clear that it was in no way a natural phenomenon. In three hours, hours they spent rewriting the program, the storm took definite cyclonic shape, expanded kilometers every minute to start hammering at the northern and southern tips of the two peninsula that formed the bay, whipping their destructive winds through the cities of Dailan and Yantai. It grew until it was a category three storm with typhoon force winds nearly thirty kilometers out from the eye...large enough to park over Beijing.

When they had it formed, they started it moving. Kell took a break in finalizing their ultimatum to China as the storm made landfall, lashing the city of Tianjin, which was on the coast and in a direct line between the bay and Beijing. The storm moved fully inland, moving at an unnatural sixty kilometers an hour, which would put it directly over Beijing about two hours after it made landfall.

“Where are you on that program, whelps?” Ferroth demanded.

“We’re debugging it right now, chief,” Jenny answered for them, still sitting on Kell’s desk with her computer in her lap.

“Functionality?”

“Total,” Kell answered. “It does everything you want it to do. You can control the whole thing from your desktop in your office. Type one

command, and you can make every computer in China all go to the same website.”

“Good. The final draft’s approved, whelp,” he said to Kell. “They want you to read it, then we’ll release the audio after the sky dragons have the typhoon fully over Beijing. That’s the go time, whelps,” he called through the room. “When the sky dragons have the typhoon in place, we strike with both attacks. So get them debugged and ready.”

“Give us another half hour, chief,” Kintel called. “We’re almost done.”

“If this debug passes, ours will be ready, chief,” Lakka added.

“Good, I have to report that to the council,” he called in reply, then stumped towards his office.

“Good thing you had most of the program already written,” Jenny chuckled. “Or this woulda taken days.”

“We like to be ready for these little eventualities,” Kammi grinned from the next desk, which she was sharing with Petrovski.

“Lemme go record the ultimatum,” Kell said, scooting back away from the desk and dropping back to his paws.

An hour later, the department was ready to go. The recordings were done and the programs were ready, and all of them were sitting around the office watching the weather radar feed from China and waiting. They watched as the small yet powerful typhoon raced inland at sixty kilometers and hour, the storm’s border crossing over into the city of Beijing. They watched as the storm moved deeper and deeper into the huge city, and then began to slow down. In a pretty impressive display of control, the sky dragons parked the eye of the storm directly over Tiananmen Square, which put the Chinese government headquarters buildings right in the eyewall, lashing them with winds approaching two hundred kilometers and hour.

Kell mused that, to the humans, it was a terrifying display of just what magic could *really* do. He could see it on Jenny and Petrovski’s faces,

seeing the sky dragons park a powerful, destructive storm directly over a city and keeping it there, letting the storm do all the damage for them. They watched impatiently as the storm held its position, as the sky dragons *anchored* it, which would keep it from drifting. Ferroth was just behind Kell's workstation, reared up on his hind legs with Yancy standing beside him, both of them watching the large TV monitor mounted on the wall. "That's it," Ferroth declared. "They have it set. Kell, release the audio. Kintel, Lakka, execute the programs."

"Releasing the audio, chief," Kell replied, typing a series of commands on his workstation.

"Bomb program is active, chief. We have penetration into the Chinese military network," Kintel followed up.

"Sending out the hijack program," Lakka finished.

It wouldn't take long. The bomb program was able to come right in through most of China's cyber-security thanks to the back doors they had in their systems, while the hijack program was released into all 15 major hubs in the Chinese civilian intranet, as well as nearly 300 addition insertion points, other back doors either the department or the Hunters had in the Chinese system. With that many infection points, it caused he hijack program to spread like wildfire through their system, attaching to the government spyware and causing it to infect every program it could detect. It caused a sudden lag spike on the Chinese intranet as the spyware searched for uninfected computers and infected them, coming in through all defenses by virtue of using the government's own spyware system.

It only took about half an hour for both programs to do their jobs, during which both Geon and Anthra came down to the city to observe, standing with Ferroth and Yancy off to the side. Trekka, who was monitoring the bomb program, called out loudly. "The bomb program worked!" he announced in glee. "The cloud storage sites we flagged are starting to receive data dumps from the infected computers! They're dumping the entire Chinese military network into the public domain!"

“What kind of response?” Ferroth asked.

“So far none,” he answered. “But eventually the Chinese will get wise and shut down their military computers to stop them. It’s the only way they can.”

“Where’s the hijack program at, Lakka?” Ferroth asked.

“It’s doing its work, chief,” she answered. “We have nearly half a billion units under our control. That’s computers, tablets, laptops, and smart phones. The infection rate is starting to slow, which means we have control of over half of their network.”

“That’s enough. Whelp, send out the second ultimatum,” Ferroth said, looking at Kell. “Make sure every infected computer receives it. Oh, and broadcast those public domain cloud site addresses over the internet so *anyone* can snoop through China’s secrets.”

“Will do, chief,” Kell answered with a chuckle.

“Mind if I send those addresses to the CIA and NSA, chief?” Jenny asked.

“Do it,” he answered. “And mirror it out to MI6, Mossad, the DGSE, Bundeskanzleramt, FSB, and every other intelligence agency you can contact.”

“Can do, chief,” Jenny said confidently, turning back around.

Over a speaker, Kell’s recorded message played. “In response to your silence, we have launched our second attack,” his voice said in Mandarin, and Kell translated his own voice for the room. “Chinese military computers and networks have been taken over, and are dumping their contents into public domain cloud archive systems. The Chinese government has one hour to publicly admit by globally broadcast press conference to their plan to exterminate the entire dragon race, and agree to sign a formal binding treaty to never do such a thing again. If this demand is not met, the typhoon currently over Beijing will intensify to category four

status, and China's civilian intranet will be attacked and all censorship filters will be removed, so the Chinese people can finally hear the truth of what their government is doing. You have one hour to comply."

"We've been outed, chief," one of the programmers called, Harka. "A story just went out over Fox News that connects the voice of the ultimatums to Kell, playing audio they have of him from the President's visit to the volcano. They know it's him reading them. They have proof we're behind it."

"It was never a secret, whelp," Ferroth answered.

"We *wanted* them to know it was us," Geon agreed. "But not us coming out and admitting it openly."

"That's the dragon way," Kell said lightly to Jenny.

"I've come to learn that over the last few months," she winked in reply.

An hour later, with no response, Ferroth did exactly what was threatened. From his office, he issued a series of commands to the hijacked Chinese intranet that removed all censorship blocks, allowing any Chinese citizen to access any website...and he helped them along by causing every web browser in China to open a web page they'd prepared that explained why China was being attacked, and what the Chinese government was doing, and that for now, anyone using their intranet did so without the government being able to track them and surveil their communications. Kell had coded that webpage, mainly because he was fluent in Mandarin. They also got a status report from Kintel and Lakka.

"To use a human term, their IT pros are freaking out," Lakka reported, which caused some chuckling. "They haven't figured out how we did it, and they're about to take the entire intranet down until they can fix it. But they can't do that unless we allow it short of them physically pulling the plugs."

"That's what they'll eventually do," Kell predicted. "Their system is set up so sixty men can completely disconnect China from the internet by physically disconnecting the main router hub farms from the fiber optic

trunks. They only have sixty external connections between the internet and their intranet.”

“Which explains the lag you get any time you connect to a Chinese website,” Derringer chuckled.

“The bomb part of our attack was a success,” Kintel added. “We estimate that we destroyed nearly two thirds of infected units by burning out their CPUs and solid state memory systems, which effectively cripples their networks for a couple of weeks. They don’t have enough uninfected and backup units to handle the load. As to them dumping their storage, we didn’t get everything, the Chinese started disconnecting their systems once they realized what was going on. Add into that the fact that the transfer speed was throttled down to the sixty access points in and out of their system. I think we got about five petabytes of data into the various cloud servers before the Chinese pulled the plug. I’m sure we’ll find some pretty interesting things in that data when we go through it..”

“Good work. Any word of them launching an immediate attack? Or even worse, ordering a missile launch?”

“None yet, chief,” Kell answered. “Right now they couldn’t order a single fighter to scramble, even if they wanted to.”

“Can they attack the sky dragons holding the storm?” Girk asked.

“Theoretically, but that would just be blind luck,” Kell answered. “Their fighters can’t pick them up on radar and can’t see them, and they’d have to go into the eye wall to reach them.”

They got in some video from Beijing, and Kell saw that the magic side of the attack was dealing just as much damage as the computer attack. Some insanely brave humans were taking video of the storm, and it showed a whole lot of wind damage to the smaller buildings around the center of the city, downed trees, and a lot of flying debris that was shattering windows. The storm lacked a storm surge, so all of the damage was from the howling wind...though the intense rain was starting to flood streets, the water

frothed and wind-whipped. And in the center of it all, Tiananmen Square, the sky was clear and the wind was still and calm. There were quite a few people clustered in the square, more or less trapped there by the raging typhoon. The eye wall was so compact and defined that it was clear and calm in the square, but just ten meters outside of it, one was in the most intense part of the storm.

They did see one Chinese attempt to stop the storm, and the sky dragons answer it. One video feed showed a group of soldiers in trucks manage to get to the square, and they unpacked and started assembling an anti-aircraft gun. They'd worked out that there were sky dragons in the storm, and they were going to just blindly shoot up into it and hope they hit something. The sky dragons spotted it, because not two minutes later, an incandescent bolt of lightning sizzled down from the clear sky and struck the gun, the bolt so intense that it blew the gun to pieces. It also electrocuted the squad of soldiers that was setting it up. The human taking the video fell backwards when the bolt struck, then got up and put the camera back on the scene, which showed a smoking crater in the concrete of the square where the gun had been and a dozen or so smoldering bodies laying amid the debris of the destroyed gun.

That wasn't sky dragon breath, they couldn't produce a bolt of lightning that powerful. That was them using weather magic to produce a bolt from the storm, which they directed to the gun.

Their next attempt was fairly clever, Kell could admit. They had long-range artillery set up at the fringes of the storm, the pieces with ranges of upwards of ninety kilometers, and they loaded them with high explosive shells and started firing. They were effectively *shelling their own city*, setting the shells to explode at high altitude along their downward trajectory arc and hoping the explosion or the flak would kill the sky dragons. They were even seemingly firing them off target so the winds would push the shells to the desired location when they exploded.

It was a good idea, Kell could admit, but the Chinese didn't understand that the sky dragons were some 15,000 meters up, which put them well

above the trajectory arc of those shells when they came back down. Some of the sky dragons were even higher, some as high as 22,000 meters, the ones at the very top of the storm.

The attempt failed, and several people on the ground got shots of the shells hitting the far side of the city, blowing up houses and setting fires that the intense rain quickly smothered.

The next attempt was ground to air missiles, then bringing them in and setting them up near the artillery. They must have set them to fire at a fixed GPS location and explode once they reached those coordinates, where they thought the sky dragons were...and those were a viable threat, so much so that the department had someone warn the sky dragons that they were coming. They fired hundreds of missiles up and into the typhoon. The people recording on the ground got images of multiple explosions high in the air around the eye, but it did nothing to stop the storm.

But there was more going on, and it showed the subtlety of the council's master plan. In other Chinese cities, demonstrations erupted after the lay citizens got a good look at exactly what their government was doing, and the censorship filters and other blocks keeping them from communicating with each other over their intranet were removed. The demonstrations grew by the moment, until there were hundreds of thousands of Chinese out on the streets, shouting slogans and waving hastily made signs. And with the military network in shambles and the government bureaucrats under siege by the storm raging over Beijing, it made the government, police, and military extremely slow to respond to the uprisings. By the time riot police organized to end the rallies, they were too large for anything but the military to disband...and the military had no organization thanks to the bomb that had been set off in their computer network.

Just after sunset, after the roof was torn off the building holding the Chinese President's office, the Chinese finally admitted defeat. In a publicly televised address, the President confessed to his government's plot to exterminate the dragons, citing them as a threat to all humanity and using

the typhoon as a very example of why China moved against them, that their magic made them far too dangerous to exist in the world of men. And while they considered the attack on them an act of war, the President was trying to save the people of Beijing before the storm flattened the city by acceding to what he called a terrorist demand. So, while it was an admission of guilt, it wasn't a very contrite one...and probably only given so the President and the Politburo could escape from Beijing before they ordered their next attack.

But they had more to worry about than the dragons, given the massive protests snarling every major city in China.

All eyes in the department turned to Anthra and Geon after the press conference aired, and both of them looked a bit thoughtful. They'd been given authority to manage the operation, since they knew more about what the department was doing than the rest of the council. "Recommendations?" Geon asked, looking at the field agents. He spoke English for the benefit of the five humans in the room.

"They won't retaliate, at least anytime soon," Kell answered, also speaking English. "They'll be working too hard to keep power to worry about us. Whipping the citizens up like that was pretty devious. We may see a new Chinese President by the end of next month, and they'll go through the upper ranks of their military with a scythe. The Politburo doesn't tolerate failure in their military, for the exact reason you're seeing now," he said with a dark smile, pointing at his monitor. It had a video feed of a massive protest in the Chinese city of Zhengzhou..

"They really *can't* retaliate anytime soon, we pretty much shredded their entirely military communications network," Jirran added. "As well as exposed just about every secret they have to the entire world. They'll need to assess the damage before they can make their next move."

"It's going to take them months to repair the damage we caused," Jenny dared speak up. "The spyware hijack is going to cause chaos in their attempts to restore the censor filters. And if they take down their entire

intranet, it'll cause even more civil unrest, not to mention all but crash their economy."

"So, we've tied them in such a knot that they'll be too busy trying to repair the damage to come after us?" Geon asked, and got several nods in reply. "Well then, I think they've had enough," Geon finally declared.

"I agree," Anthra nodded, turning her head. "Irago, send word to the sky dragons for them to stop fueling the storm and let it die out," she ordered in draconic.

"Yes, esteemed council member," he replied.

"Kell, air the stand down message."

"But they didn't agree to the treaty," Kell noted.

"They *will*," Yancy growled with a chuckle. "And you all just put the whole world on its ear," he added. "People had no idea you could do something like whip up a hurricane. That's gonna cause you some problems with some governments, they'll see something like that as the equivalent of a nuclear weapon, but it does warn everyone that the dragons are a force to be reckoned with. And that you'll play hardball when you're threatened. Overall, I see that as a good thing. China attacked you because they didn't *respect* you, they saw you as weak and easy to conquer. Well, they'll respect you now. And so will everyone else, out of fear that you'll park a hurricane over *their* capitol cities."

"Hopefully, it'll be enough to prevent another attack," Anthra sighed. "That was why we agreed to do this openly, so we might dissuade someone else from getting the same idea."

"Your English has really improved, esteemed council member," Trekka said with an approving nod.

"I've been practicing, youngling," she smiled lightly, then she looked to the humans. "I'm afraid we ruined your last day here, friends. We won't force you to pack up and return to your ship now. We'll return you to your

quarters and let you get some rest, and you can leave in the morning. And *thank you*. Chief Ferroth said that without your help, we may not have met our deadlines. We are in your debt.”

“We’re magicians, esteemed council member,” Jenny told her. “Sessara once told me that because we’re magicians, we are part of your world. And by God, we will *protect* that world, because we belong to it.”

“Well said,” Petrovski agreed with a nod.

“The Chinese tried to take magic out of the world by killing the only ones that still know how to use it, like *hell* we’d allow that,” Michaels agreed, taking hold of his talisman and gripping it meaningfully. “Not when we’re so close to learning how to use it.”

“It comforts me greatly to hear you say that, my friends,” Anthra told them warmly, shifting her massive form. “Chief, arrange for their carts to be readied so they can get back out. Irago will arrange to have sky dragons waiting to return them to their quarters.”

“Where the President will no doubt want a long briefing,” Jenny chuckled.

“The President and Kent are up on Council Aerie discussing the situation, so he received all the information that the council did,” Anthra replied. “He already knows everything, Jenny.”

“Everyone be back early tomorrow so we can start going through the data,” Ferroth called. “But for now, go home and get some rest. Good work, whelps.”

Kammi stayed behind to talk to Ferroth as Kell walked with Jenny and the other Hunters back down the lava tube. They discussed the operation and how well things went, as well as how well the humans and field agents worked together to build the two different programs and then unleash them on the Chinese. Kammi bounded up behind them when they got close to the flooded part of the lava tube, pushing her way past the other field agents and getting beside Kell at the front of the procession, where the five humans

were riding in three of their carts. “So, I miss anything important, or you guys just patting each other on the back?” she asked.

Jenny laughed. “Just us talking about how fun it was to work together,” she smiled, looking up at them. “It’s way better than working against you, that’s for sure.”

“Amen to that, Michaels mirrored, which made Kammi laugh.

“I’m gonna miss that. I loved trolling you guys,” she said impishly.

“Oh yeah, and just which of you jokers was responsible for that box of dead scorpions?” Derringer demanded.

“Guilty,” Trekka called, then all four of the field agents laughed. “It took me almost six hours to gather them up. And they were alive when I put them in the box. I shoulda poked holes in it,” he grinned at the human.

“I’d never heard Jenny scream like a little girl til she opened that box,” Derringer teased.

“And who gave me that box, huh?” she demanded, looking back at him.

“Hey, I couldn’t let a gift like that go to waste,” he grinned in reply.

“I think I’m glad I wasn’t on the team for that one,” Petrovski mused.

“Oh yeah, that was before your time. Where was that, Mexico City?” Kell asked.

“Yeah,” Trekka replied. “Me and Kammi were down there to do some snooping through some records at the Exxon Mobil facility there, and the Hunters showed up.”

“Why would you need to look through something like that?” Michaels asked.

“Their geological surveys,” Kammi replied. “They were using experimental survey equipment at the time, and we wanted to see if the

designs were worth stealing.”

“I think my favorite prank of all time was the hookers in Amsterdam,” Derringer said with a laugh, and that made Jenny blush furiously.

“I was so furious, I woulda killed you with my bare hands if I could get them on you, Kell,” she fumed at him, which made him laugh brightly.

“Don’t blame *me* for that one, that was Jirran’s idea,” he replied. “I just wish I’d thought of it.”

Jenny reached out and slapped his foreleg, which made everyone else laugh.

Sky dragons were waiting at the exit of the tunnel not far from the farm to take the others back up to the aerie. Hinado drifted down after they were collected up and carried off, hovering over them. “A word, Kell,” he called.

“The esteemed council member wants to talk to me, so I’ll see you tomorrow morning to see you back to the carrier, Jenny,” he said.

“Sure. See you soon.”

Hinado clearly decided that they weren’t alone enough on the ground, so he put his paw on Kell’s back and picked him up off the ground, then carried him all the way up to Council Aerie. “Irago sent word that you wanted to talk to me about something.”

“Me? Not really. I didn’t even talk to him about it.”

“He said Kammi relayed the message.”

“Kammi? What—ohhh. She’s meddling,” he grunted. “She has it in her head that I should learn how to fly.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” he answered. “How are the others going to learn if there’s nobody to teach them, Kell?”

“That was one of her arguments, and I can’t really refute it. I’m not sure I like the idea. I shouldn’t be taking my paws off the ground until we

tell the other earth dragons and we have a plan that all of us agree to.”

Hinado gave him a long look. “Are you afraid of who may see? Or are you afraid that you’ll like the experience?”

“Both,” he admitted. “I don’t want to learn how to fly, discover I love it, then somehow have it taken away from me. Or even worse, be told I can never fly again. That *could* happen, if it turns out that we can’t empower the rest of the earth dragons. There can’t be even one of us with the ability to fly if it’s denied to the rest of us. If they didn’t seal it away so I couldn’t use it, I’d feel ashamed, as if I’m betraying the other earth dragons, every time I spread my wings. Even if I never take my feet off the ground..”

“I don’t blame you for being afraid of it on that level. If I lost my wings, if I lost the magic that lets me fly...I think I’d rather die,” he said softly. “But I’m a sky drake. Flying is who we are. It’s *what* we are. To have that taken away from us, it would destroy us utterly. But, I think your intended is right. I’ll talk to the council and arrange a place where you can learn safely where nobody will see us. And I’d be honored to be there to help you,” he offered. “All I can really teach you are the very basics, because how you fly will be different from every other dragon flies, even the water dragons. You’ll take what magic was given to you and apply it to your body’s capabilities to form your own style, learn to fly on your own, and then you can teach the others when we find a way to give them the gift. Be assured, Kell, the council is *very* serious about empowering every single earth dragon. We see it as the most important thing we can do to protect magic, because if you can fly, it gives you a powerful means of escape if you’re threatened by humans. They can’t fly, and most of their weapons can’t hurt you, so that’ll let you get out of danger quickly and easily. Besides, most of us feel that we *owe* it to the earth dragons. Giving you this gift is one big way we feel we can atone for what we did to you.”

“And if they tell me I can’t fly ever again?”

“Look at it this way. Would you rather have the memory of it to carry with you for the rest of your life, or regret that you never once *did*?”

He looked up at the much larger dragon, his eyes a bit surprised.

“Regret is the one thing you can never fix, Kell,” Hinado said sagely. “Because it represents an opportunity forever missed.”

“When did you get so wise, Hinado?” Kell complained, which made the sky drake laugh.

“Flying gives a dragon a lot of time to think, Kell,” he replied lightly, smiling down at him. “So, what do you say?”

“I...I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” he replied hesitantly. “But I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do.”

“Alright then. Be here on the aerie tomorrow at noon,” he answered. “I’ll arrange everything. In fact, I think I know the perfect place to take you, a place with a knob of rock that’ll give you somewhere dry to perch but plenty of water to land in when you lose control. You’re the one dragon I’m positive won’t drown if he crashes into the ocean,” he chuckled.

“As long as I don’t land on my head after a thousand foot fall,” he corrected mildly.

“I’ll be there to make sure you don’t,” Hinado assured him, then he rose up into the air and spread his sail-sized wings. He put paw on Kell’s back and picked him up, then quickly and easily brought him back down to the farm. Kell was set down right at the entrance to his burrow, and he turned and looked up at the hovering sky dragon. “Tomorrow at noon,” Hinado repeated. “I’ll warn Ferroth the council is borrowing you for a while.”

“Alright. See you then,” Kell answered.

Hinado nodded and turned his body upwards, then rocketed up and into the night sky, the light he was using to see retreating rapidly, then disappearing over the top of the volcano.

Kell stood there a moment, unsure of tomorrow. The idea of learning appealed to him on a deep, visceral level, but the fear of what it might mean

for earth dragon society warred with that youngling dream. But, he couldn't argue one thing, and that was that if he could do it, he *should* learn how. At the very least, so he didn't embarrass himself when the time came—if the time came—that he would fly openly.

Gaia forbid he make a fool out of himself.

Chapter 27

4 October 2017, 21:09 DMT; Gaia's Talons

He honestly had no idea how to feel about this.

Kell was perched on the top of one of the five rocky spires that abruptly rose up from the ocean, the remnants of a volcano that had exploded and destroyed itself hundreds of thousands of years ago. All that was left was the five spires that curled jaggedly inward, like some gigantic titanic forepaw reaching up from the depths to close around some imaginary object. The formation was known as Gaia's Talons, and it was about 30 kilometers south of the island. This was going to be his first night of flying training, and the council had arranged everything. They'd be doing this at night over the next few weeks, and the water dragons had already been ordered to avoid the area around the Talons, so they'd be doing it in privacy and secrecy.

It had taken a few days to set up, but it certainly wasn't because the council disapproved of the idea. That little twerp Kammi had broached it to Anthra, and she's taken it from there.

As for Kell, he had...well, he didn't know exactly what he should feel. The idea of being able to fly still wasn't something he'd entirely processed, like he was living in some hatchling dream, and here he was about to learn how to do it. He'd actually be flying tonight, as in *real* flying, not just flapping his wings hard enough to pick himself up off the ground. He had no idea what to expect, so he had no idea how he was going to react to it. This was unexplored territory here. But, as a field agent, he was ready for the unexplored. That was what they did. He'd do his best because he

wouldn't be able to tolerate himself doing any less than his best, then worry about how it made him feel afterward.

Above him, Hinado and Faralla both hovered in midair, wearing precious and very valuable night sight goggles. They only had three pairs of them, so losing even one would be a terrible waste. Hinado had spent most of the day over at the island teaching the humans, and now he was here doing this. But he had no intention of missing it, so he was going to have a very long day. It had to be either Hinado or Faralla anyway, since *only* the council, Kammi, and Ferroth knew about this. With the sky wrym right over him, Kell was again reminded about how big sky dragons were. They just didn't seem quite so big because they were so slender.

"The first thing you have to understand, Kell, is that your swimming skill will help you understand the basics, but they're going to hold you back once you get the hang of it," Faralla began. "Swimming is *vaguely* similar to flying, but the fact that water is much more dense than air means that the maneuvers you learned swimming don't work the same way in the air. In reality, the water dragons would be much better flyers if they practiced more, but the simple fact of the matter is, they're too stubborn about treating flying like swimming through the air. It's almost like they think that learning the difference between the two will make them poorer swimmers or something," he said with a snort of disapproval.

"So, some of the things we're going to teach you, Kell, you already know as a swimmer. But the *execution* of those moves is going to be different in the air," Hinado continued. "And for you, it's also going to be a little more difficult because your tail isn't exactly aerodynamic. You're going to have to really practice your turns to get proficient. Unlike the water, flying is much more tail-intensive."

"At least water dragons have their flukes, those help in the air," Faralla nodded. "What that means for you, Kell, is you're not going to be very maneuverable. There are some tricks we can teach you to increase your agility in the air using only your wings, but you're never going to exactly be graceful in the air. So be careful."

“Are you ready?” Hinado asked.

“I’m ready,” Kell answered.

“Then let’s start.”

And so, they began. Kell spent nearly half the night sitting there on his perch learning the art of flying not by doing it, but by studying it as a science. The two sky dragons conjured up illusions almost like a school chalkboard and explained the science of flight to him, teaching him terms like drag, lift, angle of attack, terms he already knew, but having them all presented to him as a whole so he could see how each affected the other in a practical situation. And once they finished explaining things, they started him on the practical side of things...just not on his own. Instead of having him just try to take off from the spire, Hinado instead picked him up and carried him as they had him open his wings, and Faralla explained everything he was feeling as Hinado carried him around. And that *helped*. To feel the air pressure on his wings and have one of the sky dragons explain what he was feeling, to feel the force of banking, to feel how moving his tail affected his direction, it tied in with the lessons and showed him how things worked.

But even that wasn’t enough for the sky dragons. After carrying him around, they had him land on the spire and hold himself down as he practiced flapping his wings, having him do what he thought he needed to do to go straight, or bank, or climb, or dive. The two of them analyzed his wing movements and corrected them, then had him practice those wing movements while his claws kept him anchored to the spire for literally the entire night.

And that exercise told him much, especially how correct they were about water dragons. The wing movements they taught him were *similar* to swimming maneuvers, but since water was so much denser than air and gave a dragon much more buoyancy, the wing movements to produce a similar motion in the water were much more subtle. He could see how water dragons would be less nimble in the air because of their skill in swimming,

since those subtle differences between air and water were just close enough for them to not want to learn them, for fear that it might make them poorer swimmers. So, they lived with less skilled flying to maintain their swimming proficiency. Kell himself suffered the same problem, constantly trying to do things as if he were in the water, and he got constantly chided for it from both of his teachers. They drilled him constantly until he started doing it right, but it wasn't easy. He'd been doing things the swimming way for years, and to suddenly have to do them a different way, well, it wasn't easy. But, where he had a wing up on the water dragons, he didn't spend most of his time in the water, so learning a different technique didn't go against everything he'd been doing since he was hatched. He was able to learn, to adapt, and he made significant progress over the night.

As the sun rose, he decided to broach the subject with them, and both of them chuckled. "You're not *ready* to fly yet, Kell," Faralla told him. "When you master the wing movements for basic maneuvers, *then* you'll be ready."

"We know you won't be hurt if you crash into the ocean, Kell, but flying is more about confidence than it is about skill," Hinado agreed. "If you constantly crash, you're going to get discouraged, but what's more, you're going to get tentative. Flying is not for the meek. Again, this is why we think the water dragons aren't as good flyers as they *could* be. They're overly cautious by nature, so they don't take the risks they need to in order to learn effective flying techniques. So, they learn bad habits as hatchlings and never try to correct them. We're not going to *let* you start off with bad habits that we'll have to break later," he declared.

"You're the professionals," Kell said with a shrug of his wings as Hinado put a paw on his back and picked him up off the spire.

After his morning examination by the chromatic sages, which found nothing new, he was dropped off at his burrow. Kammi was laying at the entrance, and she almost bounded around him like an exuberant puppy when his paws hit the ground. "Come inside, quick!" she declared, then

dragged him down the ramp as an amused Hinado watched them descend.
“What was it like? Did you go far? How—“

“Slow down, silly hatchling,” he chided. “I never left the rock spire.”

“What? What did you do all night?” she challenged.

“Classroom instruction, basically,” he answered.

“What? They made you sit there and listen to lectures all night?”

“Not entirely. I’ll explain it while we eat, then I’m going to sleep. I’m tired.”

In the burrow, he explained the night to her as they ate breakfast, and she pestered him for every single detail...mainly so she could start practicing on her own. He made sure to describe the sense of familiarity he got from their wing movement lessons, similar to swimming, but just different enough to cause him problems. “At first I thought it would be just like swimming through the air...and a few of the movements kinda are,” he said as he finished a breakfast of beets and potatoes. “But as soon as you try to turn or change your altitude, it suddenly becomes completely different.”

“How would you know, they didn’t even let you try,” Kammi fumed a bit.

“I’m in no hurry,” he shrugged.

“Well, I am,” she grinned. “I wonder how long it’s gonna take the council to start searching for more magicians.”

“I’m not sure, but Hinado did let something slip last night.”

“What?”

“They’re going to be creating a scion in two weeks, during some astrological event that will empower magic to the point where they can pull it off,” he answered. “And they’re creating a second one on the solstice on December.”

“We need at least one back up and running,” she nodded. “Are they putting them down in the city?”

He shook his head. “They thought about it, but the sages said that they won’t work down there. They have to be above ground, but they’re not putting them up on the aerie again. So they’re going to put the first one here in Dawnmist, right by where the tunnel down to Sanctuary City comes out.”

“Wow, that’s right on the edge of Patron’s farm,” Kammi realized.

“We’ll be able to see it from the north slope. Maybe even from the roof of Jenny’s house,” he nodded. “The second will be put in Long Hill Village, and the third one they intend to create will be placed at Darkwood Village, but they don’t have a solid date for that one yet. When they have all three up, that puts a scion on each side of the volcanoes, and fairly centrally located for each side, and a scion as close to Sanctuary City as they can get it.”

“Making it easy for us to reach them,” Kammi mused, to which he nodded.

“Once they have a scion up, it’ll make getting back and forth to Imakaii easy,” he mused. “I think that’s why they’re pushing it to create one before the solstice. Hinado said they can do it, but it’s gonna wipe all of them out the way restoring the cloaking magic around the island did. And then they wipe themselves out again with the second scion.”

“Well, it proves they’re serious about keeping us safe,” Kammi chuckled.

Him having to do lessons didn’t excuse him from his real job, so he walked into the department office right behind Kammi not long after breakfast. He settled in at his terminal and got down to business, and that business was keeping an eye on China. They were still reeling from the devastating attack the department laid on them a couple of days ago, and they still hadn’t recovered. The virus that allowed the dragons to take over their entire intranet was still running rampant through their system, since

just a single infected device that was turned off when the Chinese tried to purge it could reinfect the *entire* intranet once it was turned back on. It was the self-replicating and spreading nature of the program that was causing the Chinese so much heartburn, and had thus far thwarted their IT gurus' six different attempts to purge their intranet of the program and regain control.

It was all their fault. They were the ones that wrote their spyware in such a way that allowed a program like that to work against them in the first place.

It wasn't just computers that was giving their government problems, either. The civil unrest in some of China's largest cities was still happening, though now that the government could call in the military, many of the protests had been forcibly quelled...and the images of that bloody crackdown were spreading through China in the windows when the intranet's censor filters were disabled due to the program. Each violent crackdown caused more protests to flare up, protesting the brutality of the crackdowns, and that incited the government to get even more violent in response. Things were starting to spiral out of control, and if the Chinese government didn't back off, they were going to cause a full-out revolt.

The other field agents spent almost the entire day keeping a very close eye on everything China was doing, both visibly and behind the scenes, but they took no direct action. Though the program was still wreaking havoc on their intranet, that was the program doing what it was written to do, and it was up to the Chinese IT professionals to fix it their own damn selves. While they were doing that, Kell was primarily combing through the data the bomb team pulled out of the Chinese military network. Since Kell spoke the best Mandarin in the department, he was the best choice to go through that data, where an accurate translation was absolutely necessary to get good intelligence. There were also some new reports from the technicians going through the *Mao Tse Tung* and its fighters before they dismantled the ship for its steel and other resources, adding even more data for Kell to pore through.

He had so much work to go through, he barely had any sleep at all before Hinado picked him up at sunset and carried him out to Gaia's Talons. He yawned widely as he was set down on a flat spot at the top of the tallest spire. "You sleep at all today, Kell?" Faralla asked.

"A little," he replied. "We've got too much going on for me to get out of work. But I'll be alright. Earth dragons can deal with losing a little sleep. We're tough," he said lightly.

"Well, we're about to find out if you're as brave as you are tough," Faralla answered, lowering the precious night vision goggles he was given over his eyes. "Given how well you did yesterday, you may be ready to try your first flight by midnight."

"That's going to depend on how well you do right now, though," Hinado added. "Let's get started."

They again went through all the wing movements he was taught the night before, and Kell acquitted himself nicely, proving that earth dragons were quite athletic, and Kell more so than most due to his job and his skill in swimming. He was able to accurately reproduce the wing movements they taught him without backsliding into the swimming forms.

After a few hours, they started to teach him actual flying...they just didn't let him actually *fly*. "You know how to glide, Kell, so we're going to start there with the most important thing you can possibly learn," Faralla said as Hinado picked him up off the spire. "How to slow down."

"You mean like stalling out when I glide?" Kell asked.

"Exactly," Faralla nodded. "For you, it's much safer for you to arrest your forward airspeed, stall, and then recover from a stall fall than to crash headlong into something. That's something I've seen earth dragons do while gliding, so I'm fairly sure you're familiar with the maneuver already."

"Yeah, it's part of the training we get in gliding. Any earth dragon can do it," Kell nodded.

“Alright, let’s see how well you do. If we’re confident you can slow yourself down, then you’ll be giving this your first real try.”

“Alright.”

Hinado carried him up nearly a thousand meters, and then sped up to about the speed an earth dragon glided and let Kell go...and as soon as he did, Kell realized that he wasn’t descending nearly as fast as an earth dragon should. Earth dragons lost nearly a meter of altitude for every meter they traveled forward, and Kell was not. He was barely losing half a meter for every meter he traveled forward. The magic that infused him that allowed him to fly even affected his gliding, just as he suspected it would, causing him to soar along without flapping his wings and lose altitude very slowly, thanks to a very gentle updraft wafting up off the surface of the water below. The two of them moved with him as he achieved a more realistic glide angle for an earth dragon to maximize his speed without diving, then he demonstrated the air brake maneuver he’d learned as a juvenile, when Keth and Kanna taught him how to glide. He pulled up, his wings filled with air as he ascended slightly and slowed down, then he tilted his wings and dropped sharply, descending before he completely stalled. He pulled out of the sharp dive and again assumed an optimum glide angle.

“Very smooth, Kell. I had no idea you were so good at gliding,” Faralla complemented.

“I do it a lot more than most earth dragons,” he replied modestly. “So I get way more practice.”

“Well, after what I just saw, I think you’re ready,” Faralla said as they descended towards the water. “Pull up again, and this time, try to fly forward once you level out.”

“Alright,” he said, taking in a deep breath and tilting his wings to both slow down and ascend, the stalling maneuver earth dragons used when gliding, primarily used to slow down in preparation to land. He felt no anxiety or anticipation or anything as he felt himself slow, no eagerness or any other emotion, because he was too busy thinking about what he had to

do to worry about how it might make him feel. When he felt himself start to ascend slightly, he snapped his wings up, tilted them for maximum lift the way they taught him, then raked them down with great force. He felt himself surge forward, almost like gliding, but he wasn't descending the way it usually felt. He beat his wings again, and again, and yet again, and he started to realize that he was staying level, he was staying aloft.

He was flying. He was actually *flying*!

And *that* was when he lost his concentration. The sudden surge of surprise swirled through his mind and made him lose his focus, and that caused him to lose his bearings. He didn't realize he was tilting to the left until he was nearly sideways, and he was so scattered by the sudden emotional reaction that it dulled his usual quick response. He turned completely over and couldn't remember how to right himself, and since he was still trying to hold himself up against gravity, all that work was now being applied in the same direction as gravity, and that caused him to suddenly dive right at the ocean "above" his eyes. He lost his sense of orientation, couldn't tell which way was up, and for a fleeting moment he couldn't understand why the ocean was suddenly over his head.

The sky dragons didn't intervene. They followed him as he plummeted towards the surface of the ocean, let him try to figure it out and correct it himself. It took him a moment, but Kell finally realized that he was falling, he was nose down towards the ocean, and he remembered the lessons they gave him in how to pull out of a full power dive.

And he would have done so, if he wouldn't have run out of air.

The splash when his belly hit the water was impressively loud and spectacular, a veritable fountain of water geysering into the air as his head, legs, and belly plowed a deep furrow out of the water, then he went under. And the instant he was surrounded by water, years of swimming took over. He nosed down to fully own the dive, then he curled around and up and beat his wings down, accelerating him up towards the surface. He erupted from the water before the spray from his collision fully returned to the sea,

causing him to rise up through the tail end of it, and he gave a powerful downstroke of his wings and pulled himself higher into the air. And higher. And higher still. He then leveled out the way they taught him, and this time, he concentrated very hard on what he was feeling on his wings, how the wind was playing over his head and tail, feeling for those warning signs that he was drifting off course. After just seconds in the air, he could already feel the effort in his wings and chest as his wings worked harder than they ever had before, even harder than when he swam, to keep him level and stable in the air.

In a very short time, a stark truth hit him. Flying was *hard*. Not just a lot of work, but it took so much concentration and effort to keep himself flying in a straight line, he almost felt like it wasn't worth the effort. But then again, he'd felt the same way when the pod taught him how to swim when he was a hatchling, how hard it seemed to him, how scary because he was under the water.

The council was right. Anthra was right. Kell might be the only earth dragon alive who had wings *strong enough* to fly, at least as things were right now. Keth and Kanna might be able to do it, Kammi...probably not, but fairly close. Because of his status as the mud dragon, Kell was the only earth dragon who had enough wing power to get off the ground.

"Nice recovery, Kell," Faralla complemented as he came up to him, then he laughed. "I've never seen you look so serious."

"This is hard," Kell said in a voice of intense concentration, focusing every fiber of his being on one objective, one goal; flying in a straight line.

"It'll get easier, Kell," Hinado assured him. "Flying is a skill, and like any skill, it gets easier and easier as you become proficient."

"Let's try a turn," Faralla suggested. "Get ready to execute a gentle banking turn to the left, Kell. Remember the wing movements?"

"I do," he replied in that same voice.

"Alright, let's give it a try."

Kell turned, all right...straight into the ocean. He lost control the instant he stopped trying to fly straight, and again he couldn't figure out how to correct before he hit the water. But again, he was barely in the water for a second, again diving down and then erupting from the water, almost like a water dragon, and used that slingshot out of the water to get up enough speed to stay airborne.

"He was definitely the best choice for this," Faralla noted to Hinado. "His swimming skill lets him execute a water takeoff like a water dragon. Alright, Kell, let's get some altitude before we try again. That should give you time to correct if you lose control again."

It didn't help very much. Over the next few hours, about the only thing Kell did consistently was crash. Again and again, he completely lost control when he tried to turn, and he failed to correct and recover before hitting the water, over and over and over again. He understood Hinado's comment about confidence after about three hours, as he got really frustrated, to the point where the two sky dragons had to walk him back in his lessons and again have him glide, have him turn while gliding so he could get a feel for it, then apply that to trying to turn while his wings were flapping.

It was well past midnight when Kell managed to make his first turn, a very gentle bank to the left, without crashing into the ocean. He wobbled dangerously as he began it, very nearly did lose control, but managed to barely hold on by his clawtips and hold both his altitude and his intended direction. And he barely even realized that he'd finally managed it, since he was so wrapped up in trying not to crash that he didn't register that he wasn't going straight anymore.

With that victory under his claw, they drilled him on it, hour after hour. When the sun finally came up that morning, Kell was able to fly in somewhat stable circles around the rock spires, though he was in no way graceful or elegant. He was also *exhausted*. He was entirely correct in how much work it was to fly, and his wings burned in ways they never had when he learned how to swim. He was almost grateful when Hinado put a paw on

his back in midair as the sun rose, allowing him to stop flapping his wings, then the two sky dragons turned to the north to take him back to the island.

But, there was a simple truth here that he couldn't avoid or deny. Last night, today...he had *flown*. As in actually done it. And it made him feel... he still wasn't sure. There wasn't much time to revel in it given how much work it was, how hard he had to concentrate to keep from crashing. He was sure that he'd form a more emotional opinion when he had time to consider the matter more reflectively. But, looking back on it from a position where he could rest, he did feel a little, well, a little *happy* about it. It was too much work to be fun, but in a way, the challenge of it appealed to Kell's earth dragon nature. By Gaia's horns, he was going to learn how to do this, and he was going to be good at it. He was looking forward to tonight not as another chance to fly, but as another opportunity to practice, to not be terrible at something, which was utterly intolerable to an earth dragons.

Earth dragons didn't half-ass *anything*, even things they hated doing. It was anathema to an earth dragon to not do something to the best of their ability. And since Kell was capable of flying, he was going to learn how to do it *right*.

It didn't do him much good to be happy or enthusiastic about it in any other way. He had to keep it a secret, so he couldn't do it anywhere but at the talons at night. He had to be constantly mindful of the fact that now that he'd learned to do it, now that he could take off and stay in the air, he had to be very careful. He fully intended to not even so much as open his wings all day, to prevent even the most accidental movement or second of inattention from revealing his secret. He'd have to continue to enforce his "no gliding" self-ban, because the magic that allowed him to fly allowed him to glide like a flyer as well. Because of that, it made it hard for him to know what he was supposed to feel about this, or even how he felt about it, really. He was too busy hiding it to really think about it.

Instead of taking him home, Hinado took him straight to the Library of Eternity, where the sages were waiting for him to give him his daily examination. He'd gotten accustomed to sitting on the table while the sages

inspected him, and had gotten used to the occasionally invasive questions they asked. Most of their questions today, however, were about his flying lessons once he told them that he did more than cling to a rock and flap his wings all night. They had this curious idea that actually flying might incite something new to show itself, might have triggered something, so they asked all kinds of questions about his night, including how he felt about it both while he was doing it and afterward.

But, it wasn't the usual examination. The sage that had been monitoring the magical tethers linking him to the humans revealed the results of his inspection to the other five sages and Kell. "The process is complete," he announced. "The tethers from the humans have fully anchored to Kell and entwined themselves. At this point, it will be impossible to sever any one tether without severing all of them."

"So, I'm more or less stuck with this now?" Kell asked.

"In a way," the sage answered. "But answer honestly, young earth drake. Do you *want* the tethers removed now?"

"I still haven't entirely decided," he replied honestly. "I'll know that when the council reveals this to the others and we see how they react."

"I think that will go just fine," one sage said. "After all, why in Gaia's love would the earth dragons *not* want this gift?"

Kell turned to look back at the sage. "It's not the gift, it's who gets it and when," he told him.

"I'm sure the council is working on that as we speak," the sage told him, nonplussed.

"I'm sure they are," he replied, a tiny bit caustically.

Irago arrived just before the examination was over, and he carried him directly to Council Aerie. The council members were already there, and Irago set him down beside Ferroth, who was sitting behind Anthra and Geon's podiums. "What's going on, chief?" he asked in a quiet tone after

the young sky dragon flitted over to hover behind the podiums of his own council members.

“Not sure, Irago met me at the tunnel to the city and brought me here,” he replied.

“Now that we’re all here,” Jussa said, rearing up a little on his podium. “This council is in session. Chief Ferroth, we call on you to give testimony.”

Ferroth stood up and walked around Geon’s podium to take his place in the center. “I stand ready to speak to the council,” he intoned ceremoniously.

“As chief of the department, you are the primary dragon to discuss when it comes to security, Ferroth,” Geon said. “So we seek honest answers about the possible risks to our security to bring a human family to the island to live here on a permanent basis.”

Kell perked up, his eyes widening in a bit of surprise and excitement. They were going to bring Jenny to the island!

“I’ve investigated the matter thoroughly, esteemed council member,” Ferroth replied confidently.

His own worries were forgotten as he attended what was to him to be a very important council meeting. Both Ferroth and Kell were put before the council to answer questions for hours, and all of them revolved around the potential risks to the dragons having Jenny on the island might pose, keeping her out of mischief, and providing for the needs of her and her family. Keth and Kanna were also summoned to testify on the matter, since they would be Jenny’s hosts, in a way her babysitters, given Jenny’s house was on their farm.

The questions got rather involved, mainly because of Jenny’s responsibilities if she moved to the island. They were bringing her here to represent all of humanity, not just the United States, and she would be the spokeswoman through which the dragons would disseminate information

into the human world. Many of the questions they asked Kell revolved around his relationship with her, and whether or not she could discharge those duties in a way that wouldn't cause her to show favoritism towards her home country. And what Kell knew of her, he knew that she could.

But, Kell could tell that the decision of the council had already been made from the way they framed their questions, and they were just making sure that their decision was a good one.

And it was the answer that Kell had wanted to hear from them. They were going to let Jenny move to the island.

He was there all morning and half of the afternoon, and in the end, the decision Kell hoped to hear came from the council. "In a vote of nine for and zero against, the motion passes," Jussa declared, slapping his tail on the aerie behind his podium. "We will extend an invitation for the human Jenny Edwards and her family to move to the island to serve as our ambassador to the outside world, representing the interests of all of humanity to the dragons and acting as the main spokeshuman to speak for us.. She and her family will be hosted by Patron Keth and Matron Kanna of the earth drakes, who will be charged with both her well being and her good behavior. Kell of the earth drakes, we believe that it only proper that you be the one to tender the invitation," he said, looking over at Kell. "And to impart to her the duties we expect her to take up if she agrees."

"I have no doubt she'll say yes, esteemed council member," Kell answered confidently. "But, I do have something of a request."

"What is it?"

"Something like this should be done face to face," he said. "With the council's permission, I'd like to be allowed to go to Imakaii to speak with her."

"Truly," Jussa nodded. "Does anyone object to the earth drake's request?"

"So long as he is suitably protected, no," Sessara answered.

“He’s going to Imakaii, Sessara, he won’t *need* any protection,” Geon chuckled. “The humans there are absolutely no threat to him.”

“Then I believe we have unanimous consent to approve your request, Kell,” Jussa nodded to him. “I think tonight would be an opportune time to make the trip,” he added knowingly, looking towards Hinado meaningfully.

“We can stay over tomorrow and return tomorrow night,” Hinado agreed. “If she agrees, I can call in a flight of sky drakes to carry her and her things back here.”

“That might be too long a distance to carry humans, Hinado,” Essan cautioned. “We can always have the humans bring her close to the island on a boat and then carry her from there.”

“The humans have a means to get her here, sea planes,” Kell announced. “They brought them to Imakaii just after they returned from the island.”

“What is this sea plane?” Jussa asked.

“A plane that can take off and land in the water, and the one they brought in is fairly big, able to carry twelve humans. Jenny said they brought in three, enough to carry all of them and some extra cargo,” he answered. “They thought the sea planes might be much more useful if they ever came back to the island. The plane can take off and land from the water, and it has the range to get down here. We can just tell them to land close to the island and carry them from there.”

“Then that should make bringing her here fairly easy,” Trejem declared.

“Kell, you are dismissed,” Jussa told him, looking over at him. “You were up all night, and you’ll be up all night tonight. Go home and get some rest.”

“I’ll be at your burrow at sunset to pick you up, Kell,” Hinado told him.

Kell nodded. "I'll be ready, esteemed council member."

Irago was the one that carried him down, since he couldn't trust himself to glide, and he had the chance to spread the news almost as soon as he was put back on the ground. Keth and Kammi approached as Irago set him down just outside his burrow. "What news, youngling?" Keth asked eagerly.

"They said yes," he replied with a bright, toothy smile. Keth gave a happy smile as Kammi gave a little squeal and literally jumped up and down in place a couple of times. "I'm going to go to Imakaii tonight and officially invite her."

"Why you, intended? Why doesn't the council go do it?"

"They gave me the chance to do it, and of course I said yes," he replied easily. "'Hinado's going to carry me out there tonight and bring me back tomorrow night."

"And what about me?" Kammi demanded.

"Not this time, intended," he told her gently. "I'm not going to need a second pair of eyes to protect me."

"Well, you need company anyway!" she said indignantly. "You're my intended, you shouldn't go anywhere without me!"

"I think you can live with not going this one time, Kammi," Keth said gently, but with a calm command.

"Patron!" Kammi almost whined, looking back at him.

"We need to get the house ready for Jenny," he declared. "She's going to need food, and I recall that you'll need to install computers inside the house for her."

"Sort of, there's a little work we have to do," she admitted, almost sullenly. "I'm gonna need a hider."

“And we also have to make sure everything’s working properly. Even though it’s only been empty for a week, everything inside is newly built. We’d best make sure it’s as ready for Jenny now as it was when she came for the summit. Go fetch Kanna and the hatchlings, Kammi. All of them,” he ordered. “We’ll work on the house while the hands finish up the chores, and give Kell a chance to get some sleep before his journey tonight..”

“Yes, Patron,” Kammi grunted, then she almost stomped off in a huff.

Kell just had to chuckle. “Thank you, Sire,” he said lightly.

“She’s a delightful young drake, but she can be a bit too energetic sometimes,” he chuckled in reply. “Best keep her busy and give her a chance to use that energy productively.”

“And I’d best take your advice to heart and get some sleep. It’s a long way to Imakaii.”

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Hinado was never a drake to pass up a free meal.

They were a tiny bit late leaving because of Kanna’s instinctive need to feed anyone and anything that wandered into her clutches, and Hinado was no different. But, Kell couldn’t deny that a large filling meal was just what he needed with what he knew was coming, and that was a long night of heavy work, at least for him.

Hinado all but affirmed it as he carried Kell up and away from the family farm, turning towards the north as they ascended. Hinado was wearing a pair of night vision goggles, a very nearly priceless magical object given they only had three of them, his paw bonded to Kell’s back and sides as he carried the much smaller earth drake up and over the southern volcano. “We’ll get about twenty *draman* out from the island, and you can make your own way,” Hinado told him. “It’ll be good practice for you, both

in flying and in navigating. Though, I doubt you need much practice there, given you go out a long ways swimming with the water dragons.”

“I know how to navigate,” he affirmed. “That’s something else we’ll have to teach the earth dragons when the time comes. Most of them have no idea how to make sense of their internal compass.”

“Field agent training or Surreal?”

“Both,” he answered. “Field agents have to be able to navigate on the ground, sometimes the scions couldn’t bring us out close to our targets. And I’d *better* know how to navigate while swimming or Surreal would disown me.”

“You may be one of the most educated earth dragons on the island, Kell,” Hinado chuckled as they passed over the northern volcano, and Kell got a look down into the caldera, its floor covered in lava and a large flow about ready to breach the north wall and flow down the side. “Looks like the volcano’s about to erupt again,” Hinado mused.

“It’s always erupting,” Kell corrected. “But it looks like it’s gonna send out enough lava to start a new flow.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t cause any problems.”

“Looks like it’s gonna just run parallel to the current one,” Kell mused, looking down.

Hinado carried him out away from the island, and when they got far enough away to satisfy the sky drake, he slowed down. “You ready?” he called.

Kell opened his wings and took a deep breath. “Ready,” he replied, then he started flapping. As soon as he did so, Hinado let go of him, and he wobbled dangerously in the air when he was suddenly responsible for his own direction. He managed to correct, then he banked slightly to the west to adjust his course, pointing his nose directly at Imakaii. “We’re not

swimming, Kell,” Hinado chided gently. “A straight line isn’t the fastest route there.”

“I don’t know how to calculate a pilot’s arc,” Kell admitted.

“Well, we’re up here for you to learn, and learning how to fly in arcs is part of what you need to know to be a good flyer,” Hinado said easily. “It’s a simple formula based on your current speed and your distance to the target,” he continued. “Simple calculus, Kell, and I know you know calculus.”

Hinado taught him the method of calculating a navigational arc, and Kell acquitted himself by managing to get the right answer. He then put it into practice by adjusting his course—not very gracefully—shifting his course several degrees north of Imakaii with the intent of slowly and constantly turning towards it as they approached, flying in a pilot’s arc, which was the shortest distance between two points on the surface of a sphere...or in this case, a planet.

It wasn’t a pleasure cruise. Kell had to work, and work hard, hour after hour, both to keep himself stable in the air and also keep himself on course. He’d never flown for so long that high up before, in much thinner air that made him work even harder to maintain his altitude and speed, and about halfway there, he was starting to feel the effort in his wings. He couldn’t just lock his wings open and soar effortlessly because there wasn’t enough updraft for him to hold his altitude, so he ended up having to soar to rest his wings and lose altitude, then get it back when they hit patches of uplifting air. Hinado didn’t spend the night silent, either, he constantly explained things, things that weren’t easy to talk about when he was just flying in circles around the talons. This was Kell’s first long distance flight, and Hinado’s instruction was all about just that, from how to navigate to how to conserve his energy to how to locate and utilize thermals and updrafts rising up off the night-cooled ocean below.

But there was one thing that Kell hadn’t expected, and found rather pleasantly surprising...the fact that he wasn’t *slow*. He wasn’t very graceful

in the air, but he wasn't just puttering along, either. He was honestly surprised when Hinado took hold of him again as they neared Imakaii, and Kell realized that they'd only been in the air for about ten hours. He did the math, and realized that he'd been flying nearly 180 kilometers an hour for the entire trip. That wasn't shabby at all, given how new he was to this. Hinado made sure to mention the same thing as they started to descend. "Not bad at all, Kell," he complemented. "Your wings tired?"

"They feel like they're about to explode," he admitted, which made the sky dragon chuckle.

"Well, you held a pretty strong pace the whole way, far faster than I expected given this is your first long distance flight. And with some more practice and some stamina-building exercises, you'll easily be able to keep up with a fire dragon from the island all the way to Hawaii," he predicted.

"And here I thought my wings were sturdy enough already," Kell panted a little bit as he folded them back, grateful to finally get to rest them."

"Swimming isn't quite as strenuous as flying, Kell, because you can always just rest a little bit before you keep going when you're swimming. You can't really do that in the air," Hinado chuckled. "But I'll tell you this. You held your speed far longer than I ever dreamed you would. All your swimming training prepared you well for flying, Kell."

"I just hope things go smoothly when they reveal this to the others," he sighed as the lights of Imakaii winked on the horizon.

"I think things will be fine," Hinado said. "The important thing for us is how fast we can set up some kind of process to locate humans and get them bound to your kin. That's what we've been discussing the last couple of days. We want to teach them about magic, yes, but its far more important to find them and get earth dragons in the air than it is to start formally training humans in magic. We're still fighting about that part," he grunted.

"Chromatics?"

“Trejem’s nowhere near as prickly as the former chromatic council member, but he has some reservations about the idea of teaching humans. Seems the chromatics are still holding a grudge over what the humans did to them, and all the dragons, that ended us up on the island. He’s not completely against the idea of teaching magic to the humans, he just wants elaborate safeguards to make sure they can’t betray us again. And oddly enough, he doesn’t object to training Jenny and the Hunters. I think he trusts them. And he honestly likes Jenny.”

“He trusts some humans, but not all of humanity,” Kell reasoned.

“Aye,” Hinado agreed. “And you were right about Jenny, Kell. She’s *charismatic*, at least to dragons.”

“I noticed it the first time I saw her in person,” Kell agreed. “There’s just something about her, something that makes dragons like her. She has to have a dragon’s soul.”

“I think so too,” Hinado agreed. “She’s one of the unlucky ones that came back as a human instead of a dragon.”

“Well, it did put her in the right place at the right time,” Kell mused.

“Truly. Gaia moves in mysterious ways to us mortals,” he agreed.

Hinado set Kell down on the pool deck of the large mansion about an hour before sunrise, and their arrival was not missed. John Mercer, the site supervisor, ambled out of the main house as soon as Kell put his feet on the concrete, and the burly black man hadn’t changed a bit since the last time Kell saw him. He was wearing a tee shirt and a pair of shorts rather than a suit, probably his sleeping clothes. “Kell, they didn’t tell us you were comin’,” he said in greeting as he approached.

“It wasn’t exactly planned,” he replied mildly. “How have you been, John?”

“Fine, fine,” he replied. “Things have been nice and quiet since you last visited.”

“They haven’t gotten too primadonna on you, have they?”

Mercer laughed. “Only Olivia, and she’s easy enough to manage,” he grinned in reply. “Say, you think you can spare about an hour later today? I need a little help cutting back a rock face, and you’re better than any jackhammer.”

“I don’t mind,” he answered. “Think you can dig us up some food? I’m pretty hungry, and it was a long trip.”

“Sure can, they keep a good stock on hand for when Hinado visits. Mornin’ Hinado.”

“Morning John,” he said in thickly accented English. “Food for both of us, good?”

“Sure thing. Come on around.”

Around turned out to be the flat lawn to the side of the main house, which had been converted into something of a dragon cafeteria. Mercer had some of the house workers bring out nearly a flatbed’s worth of food, mainly fruits and vegetables, and the two dragons started on it almost before the little electric truck came to a stop. The burly black man sat on the top of the cart, his feet on the flatbed portion, as they ate, and he made polite smalltalk in both English and draconic, clearly practicing the language with Hinado. Kell was more impressed with Hinado’s English than he was with Mercer’s draconic. He’d clearly picked up quite a bit of it in his many visits to the island to teach magic to the Hunters.

Right around sunrise, their little threesome was crashed by the very human Kell was there to see. “Oh my god, Kell!” Jenny said in surprise as she came out of a side door, then ran over to them. The same thing that happened to Julia Walker had happened to Jenny, and the face that Kell remembered had changed in slight but significant ways since the last time he’d seen her. She still looked like Jenny, but she looked younger now, much younger, and there was a glow to her skin, the glow of health and vigor, that even a dragon couldn’t miss. The magic had affected her human

female attributes as well, making her breasts perkier than he recalled, but hadn't altered their size or shape. Kell wrapped a foreleg around her as she hugged his shoulder. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"It was short notice for me too," he said in a gentle voice, keeping his paw around her waist as she looked up at him. "I'm here to talk to you."

"If you're here in person, you must have something pretty important to talk about," she surmised.

"Fairly," he agreed.

"Well, mind explaining it?" she asked. "Or is it something that involves all of us?"

"I'll explain it after you have breakfast," he told her. "We'll need Greg."

She gave him a curious look, then smiled slowly.

She didn't have long to wait. After she woke up Greg and they had breakfast, Kell met with them out on Davie's playground. Greg showed significantly more change than Jenny did, for Greg's maturity had been replaced by a sort of agelessness, where it was hard to tell exactly how old he was, but the onlooker was sure that he was young. He too had lost some weight in the transformation, losing some of the fullness from his face. And unlike Jenny, Greg's hair had changed, for it was much thicker now, the new hair growing in much shorter than the rest of it. They sat in the swings as he sat on the sand in front of them, Hinado hovering behind him. "The council's made a decision, Jenny. They're inviting you and Greg to move to the island permanently," he began. "But it's not as simple as you might think it will be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're not being invited as a Hunter, or a magical student," he answered. "You're being invited to come to the island to represent all of

humanity to the dragons, and also to represent the dragons to humanity. They want you to be an ambassador, Jenny, an emissary, the point of contact between the human world and our world. What that means is that you won't be representing America on the island, you'll be representing all of humanity, every human in every nation, and you have to be *neutral* to any one nation. I know that may not be easy for you since you're in your government, but that's what the council wants from you. The dragons have decided to come out from hiding, to take a more active role in the world, so the council has decided that humans need a say in the decisions we make, since they might affect you. Jenny, you will be that voice," he said, looking at her evenly. "And when we need to talk to the humans, you'll be the one that translates between the magical world and the mundane one."

"What, you mean I won't just be learning magic?"

"Oh, you'll be learning magic," Kell told her. "But you'll also be talking with the council, they'll be asking your opinion on things from a human point of view, and you'll be teaching the dragons about humans even as you learn about us."

"Me? I'm not qualified to do any of that!" she protested. "You need someone like Kent for that!"

"You no hold to yourself," Hinado chided, then he shook his head and switched to draconic. "You have no faith in yourself, Jenny. I for one think you'd do a good job. I was one of the ones that lobbied hardest for you in council."

"Hinado, I don't know how to be a, a *politician*!" she protested before Kell could translate.

"They don't want you to be, silly," Kell told her. "They want you there to provide an *opinion*, an opinion based on the fact that you're human, and how the decisions the council makes might affect the humans, or how they'd react to them. I think you know enough about being a human to be able to provide an opinion on how a human would react to something. And

you'll still be doing everything you've probably thought you'd be doing on the island. Learning about magic, learning about dragons, and so on."

"Well, when you say it like that," Jenny mused, scratching her jaw. "What do you think, love?" she asked, looking over at Greg.

"I'm not entirely sure," he replied. "You make it sound like we'll have to renounce our American citizenship."

"No, but Jenny can't show favoritism to America when it comes to representing humanity to the dragons," Kell warned. "You'll be there to represent *all* humans, magical or mundane, black or white, rich or poor, no matter what country they're from. You might be asked to tell your President something he doesn't want to hear," Kell warned. "And if you take this job, he won't be your boss anymore. You'll be a woman of every nation, not just one, representing the totality of your people. That's what they want from you, Jenny, and for one, I think you're more than up for the job. Just be yourself, and you'll have all the answers they'll ever ask of you."

"Excuse me if I'm a little more intimidated than you, Kell," she said acidly, which made him laugh despite himself.

"Jenny, you're an amazingly intelligent woman with a great deal of common sense. Just be true to that, and you can't go wrong," Kell told her, to which Hinado nodded in agreement. "Just think about it for a while. Talk with Greg about it, since it's going to affect him too. After all, I don't think you're going to leave him here and move to the island by yourself. And it's not like we're here to take you back with us. You have time to think about it before you make a decision."

"Well, no harm in that, I suppose," she said, giving Greg a tentative look. "But you guys are asking an awful lot of me."

"Look at this way. This is your chance to go someplace where you can walk around naked as the day you were born and not have anyone give you a single strange look. You know, show off that magical youth."

"And why would I want to do that?" she protested.

“So you can finally give up your completely silly and ridiculous habit of wearing these things,” he replied, reaching out with a clawtip and snagging her tank top, pulling on it slightly.

“That doesn’t sound all that bad to me,” Greg said with a grin. “It might be a liberating experience.”

“Hush, you,” she told him.

“So, how are the others handling it? Being young again? And what does Yancy look like now?” Kell asked.

“Fairly well, all things considered, and Yancy is completely unrecognizable now,” Jenny answered. “He’s eighteen again, Kell. He even has his hair back, and he spends like every minute running his hand over his scalp, since it’s only a few days of growth. But I can admit that Yancy’s fairly handsome now,” she said, leaning back in the swing a little bit. “Olivia’s like insanely pretty now,” she said with a tiny bit of jealousy in her voice, “and most of the guys look like they’re fresh out of boot camp. Winters doesn’t stand out quite so much anymore. The only one of the boys that doesn’t look like he’s still in high school is Tom. He’s still huge and hulking, only his face has turned back the clock,” Jenny chuckled. “And even then, not by much. He looks older than anyone, but he still looks young.”

“Tom Wilson wouldn’t be Tom Wilson if he looked like a high school freshman,” Kell mused. “I bet he looked like a college student when he was in middle school.”

Jenny laughed. “You’re not far off the mark,” she agreed.

“What does Ross look like?”

“I don’t know, she went back to Washington before she changed,” she answered. “They hired a professional makeup artist to make her look older, and I think they’re using her as a test subject to see if they can hide it.”

“That’s fairly clever,” Kell chuckled.

“Kell! What are you doing here, Kell?” Julia Walker’s voice reached him. He turned to see her hurrying over from the house, stepping onto the sand of the playground. She was wearing a pretty tight pair of shorts and a bikini top, showing off a very flat, trim belly.

“Hello, Julia,” he said in greeting, reaching a clawed finger out towards her. She took hold of his claw and stepped in to put a hand on his jaw, her smile bright and sincere. “Why are you up so early?”

“I’ve always been an early riser,” she answered. “Morning, Hinado,” she said to the sky drake in draconic, and fairly good draconic.

“Good morning, Julia,” he replied, looking down at her. “Are you well today?”

“Yes, thank you,” she answered, then switched back to English. “Now why are you here, Kell? Checking up on us?”

“Bringing news, Julia,” he answered. “The council has offered Jenny a place on the island to act as an ambassador from human kind, and to speak for us to human kind.”

“Oh really?” she asked brightly. “And you said yes, dear?”

“We haven’t talked about it yet, Julia,” Jenny replied. “What they’re asking is pretty demanding, including me more or less abdicating my citizenship.”

“I did no such thing. I just told you that you had to speak for *all* humans, not just Americans.”

“That’s kind of the same thing, Kell.”

“No it’s not,” Julia told her. “He’s not asking you to give up who and what you are, silly, he’s telling you that there will be times that you’ll have to speak for the entire human world, and America is a *part* of it.”

“Well, I’m glad someone understands,” Kell said.

“I’m older than Jenny, Kell, I have more experience. Even if I don’t look it now,” she laughed, touching her own face absently. She then looked back to Hinado. “Are the sages coming, Hinado?” she asked him in draconic.

“Tomorrow,” he answered.

“I thought there was a sage here,” Kell said, looking back and up at the sky drake.

“There’s one here now, but more are coming tomorrow,” he answered. “She’s been observing the humans. “They’re going to do a more detailed examination.”

“What has the sage learned so far?”

“Not much more than the sages observing you,” he answered. “There’s no interaction at all between the humans from a magical standpoint. All the interaction seemed isolated to you.”

“Interaction?” Jenny asked.

He looked at her. “The bonds between me and you guys can’t be severed now,” he told her in English. “At least any single one of them. The only way they can be severed is if they’re all severed. The way the sages described it to me, your different bonds have twined together to form a single entity, like the strands of a rope. No bond can be severed without cutting all the rest.”

“And that means that it would take a tremendous amount of power to do it,” Hinado continued in draconic, surprising Kell a little bit with his command of English. “They’re observing to see if anything changes for Kell or for you now that that process is complete.”

“Anything new to report on that front?” Jenny asked, at least after Kell translated Hinado’s statement for Greg and Julia. He had the feeling that Jenny understood the whole thing.

“Oh, we’ve noticed a change all right,” Kell said dryly, which made Hinado grin a little. “But sorry if I can’t tell you. It’s something that’s fairly sensitive, and if it got out, it could cause a little chaos.”

“Among the dragons?”

He nodded. “When the council reveals it to the other dragons, then I’ll tell you about it. But until then, sorry guys.”

“It’s no worry, at least as long as it’s not harmful to you, Kell,” Julia told him with a smile.

“No, it’s not,” he assured her.

They discussed other matters, mainly Julia and Greg discussing the offer with Jenny, then as the others woke up, they had breakfast out on the patio. Kell endured a bit of attention from the Hunters as they realized he was there, and he got a chance to see them...and Jenny was right. They looked like a pack of college friends on spring break, given most of them came out in shorts or bathing suits, and Olivia also came out in a bikini top, and while he could recognize almost every face, every face looked so *different*. They were so young, young and radiant, as if they were overflowing with youthful vigor and energy. And Gaia was Yancy different! The old curmudgeon that Kell knew and admired looked like a high school senior now, his no longer bald head showing the shadow of a head full of brown hair growing in. His skinny frame had filled out, his skin smooth and unwrinkled and missing the age spots, and he was quite muscularly defined. And given he came out wearing only a pair of shorts, showing off his lean torso, it was easy to take measure of him. His voice was different as well, as the decades of cigar smoking that had damaged his vocal chords had been wiped away, but his voice was still deep and sonorous, which was a bit surprising given his size.

After breakfast and some catching up with the Hunters, Kell decided to go knock out Mercer’s errand while the sage gave the humans their morning examination. Mercer walked him up to one of the ridges overlooking the main house, and he saw why he wanted Kell’s help when they got there. A

large section of the rock face looked about ready to collapse, so Mercer wanted to take down the unstable overhang before that happened. Kell enjoyed a little simple work, digging out the unstable rock face and smoothing it out, giving it a stable slope that would anchor the earth above the rock face, and doing it far faster and better than any human machine could ever hope to do it.

He carried a few of the larger pieces he'd dug down with him and amused himself whittling with them as the sage finished her examinations, carving them into whimsical shapes as he laid near the edge of the patio, continuing it as Gressa gave a lesson in draconic over video conference, projected on a whitewall on the patio. Hinado then took over, teaching them about magic as Gressa remained on the conference program so she could translate for the sky drake...and that explained to Kell how Hinado had been teaching them without an earth dragon or one of Shii's pod here to translate. The sage, the same wizened female that had such an interest in Prisma and Kell, observed from the other side of the patio from Kell, making copious notes in a book. She came over to Kell's side of the patio near the end of the lesson, as Kell set down a piece of rock he'd whittled into a pretty faithful likeness of Yancy, just at one quarter scale.

And he was a little surprised by her reaction when she came over to him. She suddenly bounded up the remaining distance with youthful speed and nearly skidded to a stop, her claws tearing furrows in the patio stones. "Don't move!" she barked commandingly.

"Don't what?" he asked as all the humans turned to look.

"Don't move. Not a muscle," she ordered, advancing past him, getting behind him. He moved anyway, turning his head to look behind himself at her. She carefully stepped up to his tail and reached down and picked something, then held it up. It was a flower, a tulip from the look of it, from the flower bed just behind where Kell was sitting on the edge of the patio stones, just far enough in so his swishing tail wouldn't go through the bed and tear it up.

There were flowers blooming all through the bed, he noticed. And he didn't remember seeing them when he came up here.

"This flower is imbued with magic," she said, which caused Hinado to drift over and hover of the two of them. "I can't tell what kind."

"These flowers weren't here at sunrise," Hinado said in a clinical voice.

"Magic is the power of life," the sage muttered under her breath, then gave a loud cackle that nearly startled him. "Gaia's horns!"

"What? What, most wise?" Kell asked.

"You're doing this, earth drake! You're doing this!"

"Doing what?"

"Your presence is making the flowers grow! Your aura is affecting the plants! Magic is the energy of *life*, I should have predicted this! Hinado, we need to summon the other sages! We must study this! We must find out if it's his proximity to the humans bonded to him causing this, and what else it can affect!"

"I'll inform the council, most wise, and arrange sky dragons to carry the other most wise here. You contact your brothers and sisters and arrange things."

"Wait, I'm making the plants grow?" Kell asked. "How?"

"That is exactly what we're going to determine, earth drake," she answered.

And Kell was more or less taken prisoner by the sage. She moved him to the lawn between the patio and the beach and began conducting experiments, at least after she gave him a nearly three hour long examination. And being out there that long, Kell could see that something was going on, because the grass around him grew nearly eight centimeters, out to a radius of around seven meters, and the closer the grass was to him,

the higher and faster it grew. When he noticed the grass growth, he had to agree with the sage, that somehow, he was making it happen. She'd had him sit in the same place the entire time, and he was at the exact center of the growth effect. She had the humans come and go as experiments, to see if it altered this strange aura of growth around him, and she dragged out the tests long enough for the other sages to arrive...as well as the council. Sky dragons had carried them, and had hauled ass to get to Imakaii as fast as they did, since they arrived just after lunch. They must have flown them here as fast as was safely possible for carrying other dragons. Once the other sages arrived, he was again given an exhaustive and nearly invasive examination, and their arrival supplied at least a couple of answers.

"It's an alteration of his aura," one of the sages reported to the council, with the humans well back and away so they wouldn't hear. "He's still radiating an earth dragon aura, but his has changed, has started radiating pure life energy in addition to magic. This aura is affecting the plants around him, causing them to grow at an accelerated rate. We suspect it also has an affect on animals, but we need further study and experimentation to prove it."

"What kind of effect?" Jussa asked.

"We don't yet know. That's why we need to study this effect, and perform some experiments."

"As of right now, it seems to be autonomic, like any earth dragon aura," another sage continued. "The earth drake was unable to exert any kind of voluntary control over it. Tests with the humans bonded to him show that they have no effect on it either. Their presence doesn't alter the power of the aura. The aura is currently slowly *increasing*, and we do not know yet how far it will extend before it reaches its full power. We speculate that this is a permanent change incited by the full entwining of the bonds connecting him to the humans, which took some time to develop and become noticeable."

“This may not be easy to conceal,” another sage said. “The earth drake’s burrow is on a *farm*. We might need him to stay down in the earth dragon city, keep him away from any growing plants, else it might be noticed by the other earth dragons. They are very observant when it comes to their farm plants, they will notice if they start growing at an unnatural rate.”

“The effect may or may not be stable,” another sage continued. “We are closely monitoring it to see if the rate of increase changes or reverses, if the presence of other objects affects the strength of it, and we will also undergo a series of tests and experiments with the earth drake to see if he can exert any control over it.”

“As an earth dragon, I can say that this just made things even more complicated,” Anthra said ruefully. “As if what we already knew binding humans to us gives us the power to fly wasn’t enough, the idea that this will cause our crops to go at an accelerated rate...we may have a riot over who gets it first.”

“Truly?” Hirrag asked.

“You don’t understand how we feel about our farms, Hirrag,” Geon nodded in agreement. “If there is any one magical power that earth dragons would covet as much as flying, that would *define* us, this is it. We are connected to the earth, to the way the earth grows and nurtures things, in ways you can’t really understand. That’s why we are a race of farmers, Hirrag, so we can nurture life, make it grow, flourish, then provide for others. At our core, we are *nurturers*. In a way, it doesn’t really surprise me that this seems to be the innate racial magical power of the earth dragons, even over our auras. We don’t *control* the earth, control our element the way the other dragons control their elements, we *enhance* its lifegiving properties. Besides, I’ve always been told that stone is impermeable to magic, so it doesn’t seem all that logical that we’d have magical control over it.”

“Gaia is the mother of life, it does make sense that her closest, dearest children share that aspect of her,” a sage agreed. “I believe the esteemed council member is onto something, and we should research the matter.”

“Thus far, we’ve learned a few things about the drake’s aura,” the wizened female sage continued. “We’ve learned that its effect depends on the size of the plant exposed to it. Smaller plants grow much faster than larger ones, which is why the flowers and the grass grew so quickly. The effect has a current defined range of exactly ten *dram*, with the effect at the edges of the effect weaker than in the center, much like his normal aura. The closer a plant is to him, the more it’s affected by his aura. Plants beyond that perimeter don’t show any sign of growth, though they *do* show signs of exposure. That exposure leaves a lingering trace of magic in the affected plants, and the effect seems to intensify the magical properties of the plant. If the plant can serve as a familiar in magic, exposure to the aura magnifies the plant’s familiar effect. We can use this in the creation of a new scion, esteemed council members,” she informed them. “If we expose the familiars to the earth drake’s aura before we cast the spell, it will significantly reduce the drain on us.”

“Further, we’ve determined that stone does *not* absorb this effect the way it does magic,” another sage continued. “Which is why we should have the drake stay down in the earth dragon city for a while, to physically separate him from growing plants by distance. Just putting him in his burrow wouldn’t work, the plants over his burrow will be affected by his aura.”

Kell felt very much like a lab rat as he was forced to sit there and listen to the sages and council discuss this, like he wasn’t even there, casually making suggestions that might imprison him in Sanctuary City, or pull him out of the department, or cause a huge and wholesale disruption in his life... and he wasn’t entirely happy about it. After nearly an hour of listening to them debate, he very nearly interrupted them to disabuse them of the notion that they owned him when one of the sages suggested putting him in magical sleep for a few months to see if that affected his aura, when they mercifully ended debate on such things. “I don’t think we need to get exotic

here, most wise,” Anthra said, rescuing him from being rude. “Let’s restrict the study to finding out if he can control the aura, the effects and limits of the aura, and how strong it’s going to get. And I don’t think making him stay in Sanctuary City is necessary.”

“It’s going to be noticed,” a sage protested.

“That won’t be an issue in a couple of days,” Geon answered. “We’ve almost finished our debate about what to say and how to say it, and we’ll be informing the other dragons very soon. The main thing we need to work out is the process by which we find the humans, and with the planned restoration of a scion, that is going to be much easier.”

“You’re going to use the scion,” Kell blurted.

Geon nodded. “There won’t be a need to bring the humans all the way over here. We’ll send dragons out to find the humans we need, mainly elder sky dragons with the magical skill to detect and identify human magicians. Then we can utilize the scion to bind the humans to an earth dragon.”

Kell was so intrigued by that idea that, after the council session finished, he chased down Geon as the others went to go talk to the humans and more or less cajoled him into elaborating. “We’ve been doing real work up there, Kell,” Geon chuckled. “Trejem and Jussa more or less worked out the plan, and I think it’s a good one. Sky dragons will find the humans in a clandestine manner, using magic to stay hidden from the humans and their cameras, then we’ll use the scion to take the earth dragon to the human and bind them as we find the magicians. We’ll only be operating in countries where we have permission, mainly America right at first, but as we get more access to the other countries, we’ll expand our operation. We can leave the humans where they are until such time that we can bring them in and train them in magic, once we have a school set up capable of handling thousands of students, yet still get earth dragons their birthrights.”

“Birthright,” Kell mused.

“That’s what the other dragons are calling it,” Geon said with an amused look. “And we’ve decided how we’re going to handle the order.”

“How?”

“Pure luck,” he replied. “That way nobody can complain about favoritism.”

“A *lottery*?” Kell asked in surprise.

Geon nodded. “It’s the only truly fair way to do it,” he answered. “It will even apply to me and Anthra. Every earth dragon will enter the lottery, and we draw numbers as humans come available until everyone’s empowered. There’s only going to be one exception, one dragon gets to cut to the front of the line, and I don’t think *any* earth dragon will complain that much.”

“Jengo,” Kell blurted.

“Yes. At least sort of. Jengo can’t grow spikes anymore,” Geon said. “So he has no way to bind humans to him. But, the sages said they’d study him and see if there is some way to incite him to grow spikes one last time, then use that window before they fall out to bind the humans to him to empower him. If they can do it, then Jengo gets put in the front of the line. Until they manage it, the lottery will continue as planned.”

“That’s almost *too* fair,” Kell said wryly. “So, they’ve worked out a way to find humans easily?”

“The sages came up with a spell,” he nodded. “Only chromatics and sky dragons can cast it. It allows them to see the aura of a magician, so they can spot them from a distance, without having to touch the human the way Hinado and Sessara did. The sky dragons capable of casting the spell will be flying around the smaller cities and larger towns, communities with maybe fifty thousand humans in them, which gives them a large pool of humans to check but isn’t so populated that they can’t easily operate. Those mid-sized cities, they’re the perfect blend of population density and openness, which will let us bring earth dragons there by scion secretly.”

“A spell affecting the senses, no wonder only chromatics and sky dragons can cast it. And that’s pretty smart,” Kell complemented.

“I’m so glad you approve, Kell,” Geon said dryly, which made Kell chuckle. “We have a plan, so now we just need to get permission from President Walker to put it into action. Once we have that approval, we’re going to reveal everything to the others. And then the jockeying begins,” Geon chuckled. “We’re going to make everything very open and transparent to squelch any rumors of bias, so everyone will know who has which lottery numbers, and the drawings will be public. I’ll bet you a month’s allotments that some dragons are going to offer serious barter to take the place of a lottery winner. Whoever’s lucky enough to get picked first might end up being a very rich dragon.”

“You’re going to allow that?”

“It’s not our place to tell a dragon what they can or cannot do with what belongs to them, Kell, and that lottery number will belong to the winner. He can sell it if he wants. We’ll just put our spikes in if things start getting out of control.”

“Well, I suppose that might work,” Kell mused as they reached the main house. “Except for one thing. Those humans are going to end up being young again, like the Hunters here. They’re not going to be as anonymous as you might expect.”

“We thought of that, Kell,” he replied confidently. “That’s why we need the government’s help. People who we find and bond will be moved.”

“How do you mean, moved?”

“Just that. The government will move them to a new town, get them a new job, and so on. The magician’s family is going to know, we can’t do anything about that, but the magician himself is going to be taken care of. After all, the people in the new town will have never seen the magician before, they’ll have no idea he’s been bonded. The government will help

change the pictures on his identification, and when he moves to a new town, boom. As far as the new neighbors know, that's how he's always looked."

"That...might work," Kell mused after thinking a moment. "It puts a lot of trust in the human governments, but there's not much else we can do."

"Exactly. We can't take in the magicians here, we don't have room or the resources, so we have to rely on the human governments to help hide the magicians until we're in a position to train them. Yes, we'll have to make some concessions, but the council can live with that. In the interests of magic itself, the council is hell-bent to get every earth dragon they can empowered, as quickly as possible. They feel that we're too vulnerable trapped on this island and unable to fly. China's attempt to attack the island proved that to them."

"Well, getting the scions back up is going to fix a lot of that, but still. Speaking as an empowered earth dragon...it's starting to grow on me," he admitted. "I *flew* here, Geon. It was way too much work to be much fun, but I did it. I kinda feel, well, *liberated*. Like I can go places, because now I can just fly there. The idea of crossing the island doesn't seem like so much of a chore now."

"It sounds like we may be grounding you," Geon chuckled.

"Not really. I'm not hopping up and down in delight every moment, but I have to admit. Flying here to Imakaii, being able to do this, it's changed my outlook. It's opened my eyes, in a way, to new possibilities."

"That's what I hoped to hear. And I take it that you approving of our plan is making it seem much less intimidating?"

"Oh yes," Kell agreed with a nod. "I think the plan will work, and what's more, I think the earth dragons won't riot when they hear it. It's *fair*, and nobody can dispute that. And that's going to go a long way to keeping everyone calm about this. We just have to keep decorum as earth dragons get empowered. Like rules saying we don't fly around and rub it in the faces of the unlucky ones."

“That goes without saying. So, you feel like you’re going to be ready to give your first flying lesson?”

“Only if you want to learn how to crash with style,” he replied, which made Geon laugh. “Leave the flight training to the sky dragons. They’re the experts.”

“So, it comes back to the humans,” Geon said as they joined the others. “And the U.N.”

“I take it we don’t start anything until we have recognition from the U.N.?”

“Yes we will, but only with the humans we know beyond doubt that we can trust, that already recognize our sovereignty,” Geon answered. “We’ll be operating in America, because we trust in the word of President Walker. After all, he’s one of *us*.”

“I’d hope that you trust my husband, esteemed council member,” Julia said easily in English as she stepped up to them.

“Your draconic is quite impressive, Julia,” Geon said in English with a nod of respect.

“I have a very strong motivation to learn,” she answered honestly. “And what are you going to trust Jack about?”

“Having dragons come into America,” he answered. “To find other magicians. And to be safe and protected as they do so.”

“He’ll do it,” she predicted. “The government did a very good job making the dragons appear as *friendly* as possible, so there’s strong public opinion in favor of dragons right now. He won’t have any problems approving programs that bring dragons into contact with humans, because right now, dragons are the hottest thing around in American pop culture. If you went on a tour of American cities, you’d be like rock stars. The fears that your appearance would start crazy cults and half-baked armed hate groups were fairly baseless.”

“Not completely. There are a few of those kinds of groups out there,” Kell said.

“But not nearly as many as there could have been if the introduction of dragons to humanity had been botched,” Julia pointed out.

“Good point,” Kell nodded.

“The entire council is here, Geon. This might be a good time to get on videoconference with Jack and talk about it,” Julia prompted. “The system here is encrypted and secure, so this is a good place to do it.”

“It just might,” he agreed. “We need to explain what we’re doing here anyway. Did you talk to him about Kell?”

“I sent him a few texts,” she nodded. “That we’ve found out what the earth dragon gets back from us. But I haven’t told him everything. I felt that was your place, not mine.”

“You are a wise and thoughtful human, Julia,” Geon said with a nod and a smile.

“You’re my friends, Geon,” she said with a smile, putting a hand on his jaw. “In a way, you’re like my family now. I *am* one of you. Or, more to the point, I am one of *us*.”

“That you are, Julia Walker,” Geon agreed seriously. “That you are.”

She turned to Kell. “So, Kell, what do you think about your new little trick?”

“I think it’s not all that big a deal, at least from my perspective,” he replied honestly. “It’s sorta cool, but it doesn’t really affect me or change my life or anything. But I’m sure my sire’s gonna love it,” he chuckled. “He might have me walk up and down the tracts to get the crops growing faster. Gaia’s love, we do need the food,” he admitted.

“It does make sense,” Julia said seriously. “Jenny once told me that earth dragons are connected to their farms the way human parents are to

their children. It just *makes sense* that your magic would be to make plants grow, because it's a fundamental part of who and what you are."

"That's one of the most accurate descriptions of us I've ever heard," Geon said, his voice impressed. "The earth is Gaia, and Gaia is our mother, in ways far beyond she is the mother of the other dragons. I rather like the idea that our magic is part of her, because we are part of her."

"That's why you're my favorite dragons," she winked, patting both of them on the sides of their heads.

"Don't let Hinado hear you say that. He might snatch and drop you," Kell said.

"I'll take my chances," Julia winked, which made both of them chuckle.

Kell had a little quiet time to think about things as the council did as Julia suggested and had a conference with President Walker. He did so as he held a flower, watching it visibly grow and bloom in his paw, a very visual example of how his life had changed today. His very presence incited plants to grow. It was a simple thing, but Julia and Geon were right, it was...it was *who he was*, as an earth dragon. He wasn't like most of his kin, he was a technical dragon, not a farmer, but that basic, instinctive need to nurture, to make things grow, care for them, that was as much a part of him as it was any dragon. And sitting there looking at that flower bloom, knowing that it was him causing it...it made him feel so strange. So, so, so...*connected* to it, like that tiny flower was a part of him, and he a part of it.

Prisma's descriptions of the ancient earth dragons made much more sense now that he had found this magic, how the earth dragons of old could be so pacifistic. Maybe they were much more in touch with the true soul of their kind than the modern earth dragons were. Maybe they had never forgotten who they were even if they didn't have this magic, where the modern earth dragons had been forced to bury it deep inside themselves to deal with an unfriendly world, facing hostility from both the humans and the other dragons. It would explain why they wouldn't even kill animals to

eat them, not if doing so made it feel like they were killing a part of themselves.

He had killed in his life. He had killed animals, men, and even other dragons. And in that moment, looking at that tiny flower, it made him feel...*ashamed* to have done so. The magic of earth dragons was *life*, to take it, to kill, it was a direct violation of the magic that Gaia had blessed unto him.

An odd feeling for a drake like him, who was much harder and pragmatic than most. His job had required him to be downright merciless at times, and he wouldn't change his past for the world, but this new change in him did put things into a new perspective. Watching that little flower's stem grow, lengthen, wrap gently around the finger of his forepaw, it was almost...almost *religious*.

Was this what it truly meant to be an earth dragon? Did it make the earth dragon he was before all this began any less an earth dragon than he was now?

Of course not. As long as he was true to himself, then he would be an earth dragon...no matter what kind of earth dragon that may be.

The council took Julia's suggestion, and about half an hour later, they were talking to Jack Walker, with Kell serving as the translator. Arlen Kent and Ross were also present on other viewing windows of the video conference. Kell was a bit surprised that the council revealed most of their plan to him, describing their plan of searching for humans in the mid sized cities, then securing government cooperation to move them, help conceal the fact that they became young again, and allow them to simply go about their business until the dragons could train them in magic. "It's too bad there's no spell that would just hide the fact that they're younger, some illusion or something," Walker mused as he took some notes.

"That kind of detail in an illusion would make it impossible to lock it to a crystal," Hinado replied which Kell translated, "because the person hiding under the illusion is moving. A sky dragon could easily use magic to

do something like that, but they'd have to be there to tailor the illusion to the circumstances. And we can't really devote a sky dragon to every human."

"Eh, it was a thought," he said wryly. "But, I do think your idea will work, esteemed council members. We can expand our witness relocation program to help relocate bonded magicians, issue them new IDs with their new appearance, help them get new jobs or transfer to a new location if their current job allows it and just hope and pray they don't talk too much," he frowned. "That's the only real weak link in this plan. If the humans you bind start crowing about it over social media, this could get potentially messy. We'll need to keep this as low key as possible, at least at first. We can eventually move it out into the light and make it a public program, but while it starts up and gets going, it needs to be confidential."

"We agree with that, Mister President," Trejem nodded after hearing Kell's translation. "So, you can assist us?"

"Yes, we can set up what you need," he nodded after hearing Kell's translation. "Give us about a week to get everything organized, and you can begin your operation. You'll just need to let us know where to go. You identify the humans, my people will make contact, explain things to them, and after they're bonded, help them relocate so their sudden youth doesn't attract unwanted attention."

"We have a starting city chosen already. Everett, Washington," Anthra announced. "Its humans have a very high rate of literacy and education, which will be very useful when it comes time to train them in magic. The city isn't too large or too small, and there are plenty of places for us to move an earth dragon in and out without detection."

"Alright, esteemed council member. I'll have my agency set up in Everett. Just give us a few days warning before you start operating in a new place, and I can have our people there and waiting when you arrive. How are you going to manage getting the earth dragon there?"

“We should have a scion restored in about two weeks, Mister President,” Trejem answered. “We’ll be moving the earth dragon to and from America by scion.”

Walker’s eyes just lit up. “I was hoping to see one of those!” he said eagerly. “Do you think it might be possible for us to *borrow* the use of a scion from time to time, esteemed council member?”

“For what purpose?” Trejem asked, a bit suspiciously.

“Nothing military. Mainly so I can go back and forth to Imakaii to see my wife, without it being public knowledge,” he answered.

“I don’t think we’d have an objection to using it in that manner,” Jussa said calmly. “But be warned, Mister President, we will be extremely selective about when and how we allow a scion to be used. Whoever we take through the scion would have to come to the island first, and as you know, the number of humans we allow on our island encompasses only the humans sitting in on this conference.”

“I understand, Jussa,” Walker nodded after hearing the translation. “I’ll put my people on this, and we’ll have a report ready to give to you that fleshes out the idea into an operational plan. We should have that report ready for you by tomorrow morning your time. I’ll have it sent to Imakaii, and the Hunters can send it on to the department. We can iron out the details once you read it, and together we can come up with a system that works for both of us.”

“That’s just fine, Mister President,” Jussa said after hearing Kell’s translation.

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I need to make a whole bunch of calls,” Walker said with a smile. “Oh, Jenny, have you made a decision yet?” he added, his eyes shifting to look at where she was on his screen.

“Oh, that doesn’t put any pressure on me at all, Mister President,” she accused, which made him laugh shamelessly. “But yes, we have. Me and Greg talked about it, and we’ve decided to accept the council’s offer. I’m

not sure if I'm the best choice to speak for the entire human race, but if the council wants me to try, then I'll try."

"Very good, Jenny, very good," Walker said with a proud nod.

"In that case, we need to arrange for you to move to the island, Jenny," Jussa told her. "How soon can you be ready to go?"

"I don't have that much here, esteemed council member. Truth be told, we'll be ready to leave in the morning."

"Then we will all leave in the morning," Jussa answered. "Have that water plane Kell described to us ready to go in the morning, and you can go with us. Well, *almost* all of us," Jussa corrected, glancing at Kell. "Kell will need to go back tonight."

"Will it be able to keep up with you?" Jenny asked.

"It can easily go fast enough to keep up with a fire dragon," Kell supplied. "In fact, the fire dragons may have issues trying to keep up with the plane."

After the conference ended, Kell was again kidnapped by the sages, and spent most of the rest of the day being poked, prodded, and trying to exercise conscious control over his newfound ability, with no luck. They were so pushy that Jussa had to intervene just so Kell could get a few hours of sleep before flying back to the island that night, given he hadn't slept in two days. The Hunters made sure to be there when they were about to leave, and he went down the line, accepting farewells and patting several backs. When he came to Jenny, he let her hug his shoulder, then looked down at her when she stepped back enough to look him in the eye. "So, I guess I'll see you in the morning," Kell told her with a smile.

"Guess you will," she smiled in reply. "Is the house ready for us to move in?"

"After we finish arming all the traps," he teased, which made her laugh. "Sire and mother have been getting it ready since they heard about

the council's decision. They were certain you'd accept the offer and move in."

"I had to think about it," she admitted wryly. "I'm still not sure I'm the best person for the job, Kell. Kent should be doing this, not me."

"You'll be fine, Jenny," he assured her. "Just make sure they don't get rid of that sea plane. That's going to be how you're getting most of your supplies for a while."

"We've already worked that out," she nodded. "While the sages were torturing you. It's going to be coming down every three days bringing the things we need and can't get on the island."

"Torturing is a good word," he said, rearing up to rub one of his forepaws.

"Any breakthroughs?"

"Nope. But they think I can control it," he answered. "I just have to learn how."

"I just hope you have a lawn mower at the burrow," she grinned. "You're gonna need it."

"The grass planted around the farm doesn't grow very high," he said dismissively. "I guess it would come up to your thighs when it's fully grown out. That's when we cut it for hay and sell it to the ranchers. Though, we'll be keeping most of it now for our cows and buffalo."

"And how does an earth dragon cut grass?" Wilson asked.

"Easy," Kell said, dropping back down and bringing his tail around. He extended and spread his spikes and turned his tail sideways, presenting a fairly nasty trio of leading edges of razor sharp crystal parallel to the ground. "One swipe at ground level, and the grass is cut."

"Is there anything you can't do with those tails?" Price asked with a chuckle.

“It’s our thing,” Kell shrugged, retracting his spikes, which caused them to return to their rigid positions in his tail.

“It’s almost sunset, Kell,” Hinado prompted from where he was hovering above and behind him.

“Time for me to go, guys,” Kell said, giving Jenny another hug, then offering his claw to Yancy. “And I can’t get over the younger you, Yancy.”

“I’m still staring at myself in the mirror,” he grinned in reply.

“I’ll see you guys soon,” Kell told them as Hinado reached down and put a paw over Kell’s back, then picked him up into the air. He was honestly surprised when Faralla fell in with Hinado as he started ascending, and he was carrying Jussa. “Jussa, you’re going back early?” Kell asked.

“Yes, there are a few things I need to arrange,” he replied. “I’d rather swim back, but I need to get back fast, and I don’t want to exhaust myself with an aura current.” He looked over at Kell. “We’ve decided to reveal our plans to the earth dragons tomorrow, Kell,” he ventured. “So this is the last time you’ll have to hide your secret.”

“I’m not going to be flaunting it even when the others know, Jussa,” he protested. “It might cause bad feelings to fester. I plan to be as discreet as possible until other earth dragons start getting empowered.”

“And how do you feel about things now?”

“A whole lot better,” he answered. “I think the plan you’ve made is sound, and I think Anthra and Geon went about handling empowering the others in the best way possible.”

“I disagree with that, but I can understand why you think so,” Hinado said mildly. “You should be empowering earth dragons by importance, with those who need it most getting it first.”

“But that’s the thing, Hinado. No individual earth dragon really *needs* it,” Kell countered. “There are prominent earth dragons who could make a case that their status should put them at the front of the line, and that’s

exactly the kind of situation that Anthra and Geon were sure to avoid. When earth dragons start putting themselves over others, it threatens our entire society. I'm sure you've noticed that Anthra and Geon don't act like council members around other earth dragons. Yes, they demand respect and they get it, but they don't think they're *better* than any other earth dragon. We are all equal under Gaia's gaze. By making the entire thing random, even for Anthra and Geon, it puts every earth dragon on equal footing. And that's *exactly* what they needed to do to prevent any major problems. There are going to be some angry earth dragons, and some others that will start scheming to find a way to get to the front of the line, but it's nothing that Anthra and Geon can't handle." Kell laughed. "Gaia's horns, when Kammi finds out, she's gonna be pissed."

"I take it she's one of those ones that thinks that her status should put her at the front of the line?" Jussa asked mildly.

"More or less, yeah. I love her, but sometimes she's so immature," he sighed.

"Kell, you're not exactly a paragon of maturity yourself," Hinado chuckled.

"I'm young, Hinado, I have an excuse," he replied in a bland voice that made the sky drake laugh.

"Sometimes I forget how young you are, Kell," Jussa told him, a bit proudly. "To think that you've come so far at your age, it's truly impressive."

"Well, thank you for your confidence in me, Jussa," Kell said modestly. "But if you want to thank anyone, thank Ferroth. He trained me, and all the other field agents."

"That is one formidable earth dragon," Faralla mused. "I must admit, when I was first placed on the council, I severely underestimated him. He may be the most clever and cunning dragon alive."

"I'm glad you see what we see, Faralla," Kell said seriously.

“I think we’re far enough away now,” Hinado prompted, ascending a little bit. “You ready, Kell?”

“As I’ll ever be,” he said in a grim voice, spreading his wings and giving them an angle that wouldn’t slow Hinado down.

“This is one reason I decided to go with you. I want to see this for myself,” Jussa said with a little eagerness, looking over at him.

“I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed, Jussa. I have trouble flying in a straight line. And we won’t even talk about what happens when I try to turn.”

Jussa laughed. “Flying is a difficult skill, Kell, I didn’t think you’d be a master of it in just a few days,” he assured him. “I’m sure you’ll be just fine with practice, practice, and more practice. And with us revealing the plan to the island, you won’t have to do that practice in the dead of night in remote places.”

“I should make you practice your own preaching Jussa,” Faralla chided. “Water dragons could be *much* better flyers, if you’d just practice.”

“We spend too much time under that water to worry about above it, Faralla,” he answered with a slight smile.

“Well, you’re going to look awfully silly when Kell turns out to be a better flyer than you,” he teased.

“And I’ll applaud him if he achieves it,” Jussa replied lightly. “You assume I have an inflated ego to bruise, Faralla. I’m no sky dragon.”

“Oh, here we go,” Hinado said darkly, and Kell gave a bit of a squeak of surprise when the sky drake let go of him without warning. He nearly turned over and spun out, turning sideways in the air, but managed to recover and get back to a level plane. He had to climb back up to where the others were, and the two sky dragons slowed down considerably to keep pace with him.

“Very well done, Kell,” Jussa complemented. “You’ve learned a great deal in just a few days.”

“Too busy, can’t talk,” Kell said in a distant, disjointed voice of absolute concentration, his eyes straight ahead and his full attention on making sure he didn’t fall out of the sky and crash into the ocean two thousand meters below. And from that altitude, that crash would be very hard and very painful.

“Good, that means we can go back to our discussion about inflated sky dragon egos,” Jussa said liltingly, which would have made Kell laugh if he wasn’t so focused on the task at hand. But it did show off Jussa’s dry, subtle, understated sense of humor, and the fact that he felt comfortable enough with Faralla and Hinado to tease them a little bit. Water dragons were too big on propriety to ever do that with someone they didn’t know very well, or consider a friend.

Jussa considered the sky dragons friends. Kell wasn’t too busy to miss that important bit of information as he concentrated very hard on not falling out of the sky and looking like a complete idiot.

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He was glad there was nobody up to see him fail spectacularly.

To be fair, he tried. He tried *very* hard to at least look halfway competent when he slowed down as he came in over the cove, but he was just too new to this flying thing to manage an advanced maneuver like slowing down even as he ascended in preparation to land on the knoll behind his burrow entrance. So, instead of alighting at the top of the knoll, he instead lost control of himself trying to slow down and plummeted straight into the cove, very nearly wiping out several of Shii’s kelp stalks.

He should have just glided. That, at least, he knew how to do, and he could have landed with at least some modicum of his dignity intact.

Hinado and Faralla had the grace not to laugh as he surfaced and shook his head, clearing a strand of kelp from his horns, then he swam over to the edge and vaulted up to the top the old fashioned way, by diving down, curling back upwards, and snapping his wings just before breaching the surface to give him more than enough momentum to reach the top of the bluff. He grumbled a bit as he shook the water off his wings before folding them, then looked up at the two sky drakes and water dragon. Faralla set Jussa down beside him on the bluff, and the large water wyrm stretched a bit. "You made even better time than the trip up, Kell," Hinado declared.

"We did have a tailwind for half the trip," Faralla pointed out.

"You do wonders for my confidence, Faralla," Kell said caustically, which made the two sky dragons grin down at him.

He should have known that some dragon would notice his arrival. Kammi yawned as she came out of the burrow, then bounded over to him eagerly. "Intended! What are you doing back at this hour?" she asked, nuzzling him.

"What are you doing up?" Kell asked.

"Just finishing up some work for chief. I was about to go to bed," she replied. "China stuff."

"What's going on?"

"That's not what's important here," she countered. "How did it go? What did Jenny say?"

"She'll be arriving around noon, if I'm not mistaken," Kell told her, which made her grin brightly. "The house ready?"

"Yup, we finished the last of it yesterday afternoon," she answered. "Welcome back, esteemed council members," she added, looking at the others. "Where's Essan and the fire dragons?"

“Still on Imakaii, we came back early,” Hinado answered. “There’s a lot we have to do.”

“Oooh, that sounds interesting,” Kammi perked up. “What’s going on, Kell?”

“Oh yeah, ask me with them right here to hear it if I say something out of bounds,” Kell accused, which made her grin at him impishly and Hinado chuckle.

“Since I’m sure you’re going to find out anyway,” Jussa said mildly, giving Kell a look that made him a bit sheepish, “we’ll be revealing Kell’s little secret today.”

“Whoa, already?” Kammi gasped.

“Yes. We have a plan in place for the earth dragons, and they have to know what’s coming so everyone can be ready when we put it into action.”

“Awesome! So, when do I get my turn?” she asked quickly. “Is there a list yet? Where am I on it?”

“There won’t be a list,” Kell told her. “The council decided that the only fair way to do it is with a lottery. So where you are on the list depends entirely on pure luck.”

“A *lottery*? Seriously?” she asked, and when Kell nodded, she reared upon her haunches and put her forepaws on her hips. “That’s entirely unfair!”

“It’s the fairest possible way to do it,” Kell countered. “Even Anthra and Geon will be drawn by lottery, intended.”

“But I’m your intended!” she protested.

“And what difference does that make?” Kell countered.

“You’re supposed to look out for me, you dingbat!” she retorted, which made Hinado stifle a laugh. “What good is it being your lifemate if you

keep throwing me under the bus! Where's the wheedling to get me a guaranteed spot on the list, huh?"

"I believe we'll leave you two to discuss this without an audience," Jussa said with barely suppressed amusement.

"Coward," Kell accused, which made Faralla burst out laughing.

"It's called prudence, Kell," Jussa replied with an amused look, spreading his deceptively large wings. "The last place I want to be is squarely between two headstrong young earth drakes. I may come out of it looking like a target dummy."

"A roasted one," Hinado agreed with a fanged grin.

"We'll send for you when the rest of the council gets back to the island, Kell," Jussa told him. "There's a lot still to talk about, plans to make, and we'll need you and Ferroth to give us some unbiased opinions of the plans that the humans send to us from a security point of view."

"Alright, esteemed council member," Kell answered. "If the others leave at sunrise, odds are they'll be back here around noon. It'll depend on how fast they can carry Essan."

The three much larger dragons left Kell to his fate, and Kammi showed her displeasure by whacking him with the underside of her tail. "Ow! Back off, female!" he barked.

"I am not gonna back off, not until you remember who your intended is!" she retorted.

All in all, the fight wasn't nearly as spectacular as some of the others they'd had. Since they were outside, the only real damage was to the grass around the burrow entrance. But the two of them looked a tad silly, two fully grown drakes scrapping like angry clutchmates over a toy. Kell had learned over the months that though Kammi was small, she was a vicious little thing, and more often than not he was on the losing end of these little squabbles. But he had a secret weapon, and after throwing her off when she

tried to pin him down, he jumped backwards and up into the air, unfurled his wings, and then a powerful downstroke pulled him higher. “Hey! That’s cheating!” Kammi protested, rising up onto her back legs and shaking a clenched paw at him as he rose up even higher with every wingbeat.

“Not for me it’s not,” he taunted in reply, then gasped and frantically tried to get out of reach when Kammi vaulted up at him, and very nearly got hold of his tail. He very nearly lost control and crashed, but he managed to right himself and pull up into a hover out of Kammi’s jumping distance.

“Get back down here and fight like an earth drake, you weenie!” she barked, glaring up at him. But that glare turned to a shocked double-take, then she turned and bolted with a squeal when Kell dove at her. They both tumbled when he crashed into her, and the two of them bounced past the entrance and off the bluff, splashing into the cove. And Kammi showed her experience by immediately and desperately moving to get out, because she knew that she was no match for Kell in the water. But Kell was one move ahead of her. She disappeared under the surface as if grabbed by a giant shark, and the water frothed as the two of them continued their epic battle just under the surface of the water. Seconds later, Kammi burst from the roiled water and managed to scabble up the bluff, then looked back down and shook her paw at him again. “I am so gonna get you back, Kell!” she threatened. “You just wait til I have you far away from the water!”

“If you can’t handle the sharks, don’t swim in the ocean,” he taunted, then his head slipped back under the agitated surface, leaving her no idea where he was, since she couldn’t see past the water’s surface with her thermographic vision. That left Kammi with only one option, and that was to curse at him from the top of the bluff, doing it in English to make sure that her curses were strong enough to satisfy her sense of moral outrage.

It was nearly half an hour later before Kammi realized where he’d gone. She stalked into the burrow to find him sitting at one of the workstations in the workshop, and he had to chuckle when she swatted him with her tail irritably when she reached him. “Forgot about the cove entrance, did we?” he teased.

“Oh, shut up,” she retorted, which made him laugh. She struggled a bit when Kell grabbed her as she passed and nuzzled her, then she gave up and accepted his attention. “Don’t think this gets you off my spikes, intended,” she warned.

“Stop being silly,” he told her. And with her calmed down and listening, he caught up on what the department had been doing while he explained everything to Kammi, from the plan to find humans to what they’d discovered while he was on Imakaii. She seemed much more interested in the plan, and they discussed it for nearly an hour from him catching up all the way to them climbing up onto the sleeping mound. “I think it relies a bit too much on the humans, but outside of that, it has some potential,” she surmised. “Once they have a scion back up, it’ll be a simple matter to get us out there and back. All we really need is to know where to go and have the cooperation of the human.”

“It’s actually better if the humans handle that side of it,” he said as they dug out a hollow in the mound, then they laid down. “It’ll be a little less traumatic for the magicians if a human explains everything to them. And we’ll need their help hiding the magicians until they’re ready to train large numbers of them at a time.”

“They’re gonna need some kind of large-scale school,” Kammi noted. “But it can’t be in any one country’s territory.”

“I’m sure they’ve got a plan,” Kell said confidently, then he yawned. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m gonna go to sleep. I’ve only had a couple of hours of sleep the last few days.”

“I’m tired too, so I’m not gonna keep you awake,” she said, snuggling up against him.

Things...were a bit crazy when he woke up.

He felt it before he saw it, a strange softness around him, like he was sleeping on sand instead of earth. But when he opened his eyes, he realized

that the sleeping mound wasn't a mound anymore so much as it was a small hill, covered with grass, the small clover-like plants that grew on the south side of the island, island wildflowers, and a few crop plants, like bean vines, a few tomato vines, an eggplant, and even a half-grown wheat stalk. The seeds mixed in with the earth of the sleeping mound had sprouted and grown while he was asleep, exposed to his aura, so he woke up and found himself laying in a hollow depression of verdant bloom. Moss had grown on the floor and ceiling around the mound.

"Holy Gaia!" Kammi blurted when she stirred and woke up, then burst out laughing. "Well, this is new!"

"I'm amazed it would grow without light," Kell mused as he settled into a half-laying position, looking around.

Kell's aura had had other effects, both above and below the sleeping chamber. Kammi reported that the mushroom cellar was almost overrun with giant mushrooms, unnaturally oversized, and were even growing on the bare rock on the ramp down into the room. Up above the burrow, the grass had grown nearly half a meter directly over the sleeping chamber, at the edges of the range of Kell's aura. And within the burrow, moss had grown on the walls and floor around the sleeping chamber, including in the workshop, but thankfully there were no plants growing on or in his computers or other equipment.

The sages were right in one way...there was *no way* he was going to be able to hide this. Not even if he stayed in Sanctuary City, since his aura would incite plants to grow even in absolute darkness. So, it was a good thing they were going to go public today, or else he would have had a whole lot of trouble with this. It might have even gotten him exiled to Imakaii until the council was ready to go public, if only to hide it.

And as he cleaned moss off a workbench in the shop, he realized that he'd *better* learn how to control this, if he could indeed control it. If not, he might damage or destroy all his stuff because of plants growing in and around it. The sages seemed confident that he could exert control over his

plant-growing aura, and he made a mental note to concentrate on those lessons until he could turn this off, or tamp it down, or something. If not, he might ask the sages if there was some magical trinket they could make that would cancel or absorb the aura so it wouldn't affect things. Because, as he surveyed his moss-infested shop, he decided that his plant-growing magic was more of a nuisance than a benefit, at least for him.

He was forced to cut the grass over the burrow, which attracted unwanted attention. Keth wandered over just after sunrise, as the family and the farmhands filed out of the burrow to start the day's work, when Kell was about halfway through the high grass, slicing it down close to the ground using the edges on his tail spikes, using his tail like a scythe. "This is a little strange," Keth mused, looking around.

"Yes it is, Sire," Kell answered. "But there's an explanation for it."

"One of Hrada's experimental fertilizers?"

"No. Me," he answered. "I was going to come over for breakfast and explain, but I got a little sidetracked trying to clean up the burrow. We've got moss everywhere down there, and the I was going to ask Mother to come over and clean out the mushroom cellar while we're at work. It's a little crazy in there."

"What, they gave you some experimental magical trinket to study?"

"No, Sire. *I'm* the cause."

"You?"

He nodded, slashing more grass down with his tail. "Don't bandy this about, Sire, but all the stuff I've been doing at night lately, it was all part of a magical experiment. The tail of it is, we earth dragons *do* have our own magic. We just need help to bring it out," he explained. "We need the humans to unlock our magic. The humans that came to the conference unlocked my magic, and I've spent the time since then trying to learn how it works."

“Really?” Keth asked with sudden interest. “And they’re going to unlock the magic for other earth dragons?”

“They can’t,” he answered. “It’s kind of hard to explain, but I guess the shortest way to explain it is that they unlock our magic by binding to us, like a magical connection. A human can only do it once, for one earth dragon. But the council has a plan to do it for all the other earth dragons, and that’s part of what they’re going to reveal today.”

“So, this magic is that it makes grass grow?”

“It’s an aura of magic that affects plants, make them grow with magical speed,” Kell explained. “It just showed up yesterday, while I was on Imakaii, and I haven’t learned how to control it yet. The chromatic sages are convinced I can control it, and Gaia I hope so. The burrow’s almost overrun with moss.”

“Really?” he asked, his eyes widening. “You mean that if I unlock this magic, I could make my crops grow in a matter of days?”

“If you focused on just a small tract, probably,” he nodded. “It’s not instant, Sire. What you see here is from several hours of exposure,” he added, motioning at the high grass around the top of the bluff. “Your farm is way too big for you to affect all of it. If all of us and the farmhands were all empowered, it might make the crops come in about twice as fast as normal, just from the exposure as we go about the daily chores and weeding.”

“This is quite surprising. And quite welcome!” Keth said with sudden enthusiasm. “I could use magic to make the crops come in faster! What an amazing thing! And what luck, they discover this when we need it most, when we desperately need food!”

“It is pretty convenient,” Kell chuckled, scything down another swath of grass. “There’s more to it, though, sire.”

“What’s that?”

“The magic allows us to fly,” he said evenly, looking at Keth.

“Are you serious?” Keth gasped.

He nodded. “It triggers the same magic in us that the other dragons already have, that cancels their weight. That’s what I’ve been doing the last week or so, Sire. Every night, the sky dragon council members have been taking me out and teaching me. I’m terrible at it, but I can do it.”

“I...I can’t believe it,” he said, sitting down on his haunches. Hard.

“It’s been quite an adjustment for me too,” Kell said with empathy. “I’ve been terrified since the conference, that I might accidentally do something that would expose it. And I was seriously worried that revealing it to the other earth dragons might cause a riot, or completely destroy our entire society as we fought over who got to receive this gift first, but now I’m not worried about that so much. The plan the council has is a good one, and I think the earth dragons will accept it as entirely fair. The council’s made me keep it a secret from everyone until they had a plan in place to help the other earth dragons get it. They didn’t want to cause any upheaval. And I agree with that decision, which is half the reason why they chose me to be the experimental guinea pig. The other half is because of what happened to Julia.”

“When she got young?”

Kell nodded. “I sorta *already* had one human connected to me, so they decided to use me as the test subject because of it. The humans get that out of it, Sire, it makes them young again. Well, what we get out of it is it unlocks our magic.”

“All this time,” Keth whispered. “All this time, we could do magic. And we never knew.”

“Well, not quite. We can’t do magic the way the other dragons can,” Kell corrected him. “But at least we get to fly, and we have an innate racial magical ability the way the other dragons do. But we can’t cast spells, or do any of the other magic that other dragons can do. I don’t think many earth dragons are going to complain all that much, though.”

“No. No, they will not,” Keth said, then he gave a rueful laugh. “It seems I owe you an apology, youngling,” he said, looking over at him. “All those years I told you not to pine for what you couldn’t have, and it turns out I was wrong.”

Kell just had to laugh. “Apology accepted, Sire,” he grinned. “And I don’t think I have to ask you not to repeat that until after the council reveals it, or I’ll get in trouble.”

“No, no. You’re right,” he agreed, standing back up. “But after they announce it, youngling, I’d like to see it. See it and know that it’s real, that’s it’s truly possible for us to fly.”

“After they explain everything, I’d be happy to do just that for you, Sire,” he nodded.

“Now, let me help you cut down this grass, then you can bundle it and take it up to the livestock pen,” he declared.

Kell laughed easily. “Yes, Sire,” he answered with a smile.

After tending that chore, Kell was carried up to the Library of Eternity, and his long day of being a lab rat began. They first gave him another exhaustive examination, and then he spent the rest of the day trying to exert conscious control over his aura. The sages almost drove him crazy having him try different approaches, teaching him mental techniques the other dragons used to control magic, and all of it failed. But, at the end of the day, not long before the council was set to make their announcement, one of the sages stumbled across something as he had Kell describe how it *felt* to do what he did.

“You felt a connection, you say?” the sage asked quickly when Kell described how he was feeling when he was holding that flower.

“Yes. It’s hard to explain. It was...it was like I was connected to the flower.”

“Then perhaps your control over your aura is *emotional*,” he surmised, pushing a small plant in a pot at him. “Try to connect to the plant. Feel it. In a way, *love* it, young earth drake.”

“That sounds kinda...well, weird, but I’ll try,” Kell said, sitting on the base of his tail and taking the small potted plant in his forepaws.

And that was the trick of it, Kell learned. In a surprisingly short amount of time, he’d stumbled across the means to control his aura, and that they were indeed tied to his emotions...or more to the point, they were tied to what seemed to be the core of an earth dragon’s magic, *symbiosis*. Earth dragons gave a part of themselves to the humans, and received something back for that gift. Kell learned with that potted plant that the key to controlling his aura was by giving, giving it his empathy and attention, and it gave back to him by growing, which triggered an emotional reaction in him that resonated with the very core of his earth dragon soul. Using that technique, Kell learned how to incite wild growth in plants in a short time, and also learned how to seriously tamp down his magical aura so it barely had any effect on the plants around him at all, by *distancing* himself from them. The more attention and empathy he showed to a plant, the stronger his aura became, and the faster it grew.

He even learned that nature was no boundary to his power. He learned that his aura could incite a plant to grow far beyond its natural limits, like how the mushrooms in the cellar had taken on unnaturally gigantic proportions, and that he could exert willful control over it. It was almost bizarre, it was like Poison Ivy from the *Batman* comics and cartoons, able to incite a plant to grow with insane speed, and even control its movements as it grew to, say, wrap around the legs of one of the sages to snare his legs, hinder his movements. He couldn’t make a plant move, but he could direct how it grew, to do something like cause a vine to only grow up and around a trellis, for example. He could cause crop plants to produce unnaturally large fruits or vegetables, flower plants to produce oversized flowers, and could even influence woody plants like bushes and trees in how they branched.

And it was all *easy*. It was almost like he'd known how to do it all his life, and he'd just needed a kick in the tail to make him remember it.

What annoyed him, though, was that the sages wouldn't allow him to go down and greet Jenny when she arrived. He had *just* discovered his ability to control his aura when word came that the council was back with Jenny in tow, and the sages wouldn't allow him to stop to go greet her, not when he'd *just* learned how to control it. He very nearly rebelled, but in the end, his own interest in what he was learning quelled his defiance. He too was intrigued by what he'd just learned, and the allure of learning more had overwhelmed his desire to go meet Jenny and her family at their house.

As he was practicing under the watchful eye of the sages, Geon came into the library. "Kell," he called.

"Esteemed council member," Kell said from his table, where he was sitting on the base of his tail and influencing a pumpkin to grow to giant proportions. "How was your trip back?"

"Fast," he replied with a chuckle. "My face almost feels like the wind scoured off my scales. They flew us back as fast as they could safely carry us, so they could keep up with the plane."

"So, Jenny's here?"

"Yeah, we got back about two hours ago," he answered. "She's settling into her house right now. But, we have a couple of stowaways with her. Julia came along with her, and she'll be housing both the plane's pilots in her house overnight."

"They let them on the island?" Kell asked in surprise.

"Yeah, mainly because we found out when we met them this morning that both of them are magicians," Geon answered. "So now they're the dedicated pilots that will ferry Jenny's supplies down here until we get the scion, and that way we can keep track of them so they'll be available when we start empowering other earth dragons."

“Wow, both of them?”

“Yup, it shocked the hell out of Trejem when he used that spell that they came up with just out of curiosity,” Geon chuckled. “They already know that none of the staff on the island are magicians, but the pilots were just brought in a few days ago, and nobody had thought to assense them.”

“Well, that gives us a head start. We’re already two down for the first seventeen.”

“Yup. Anyway, Kell, they’ll be making the announcement in about an hour,” he told him. “They’re assembling the earth dragons at the food allotment area right now. When the time comes, Anthra wants you to fly in and land near the TV projectors.”

Kell gave him a look. “I told you that I’m not good enough to make a precise landing like that, Geon,” he protested. “Odds are, I’ll crash. I might very well take out the projectors, and that’ll piss off the fire dragons. If you want me to prove that earth dragons can fly, it’s best if I take off from the floor and fly up to the rim. That, I can do, because I’ll more or less be crashing into the wall, and when I’m ready for it, I can make it look halfway intentional.”

Geon burst out laughing. “I’ll let Anthra know. Have you made any progress with your aura?”

“We’ve made great progress today, esteemed council member,” one of the sages said animatedly. “Young Kell has learned how to control his aura, and now he’s practicing focusing it so that it affects some plants but not others.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to demonstrate it? In a way that the others will see?” Geon asked.

“Yeah,” Kell answered, pointing at the pumpkin. “Watch.” He took a deep breath and centered himself, then *connected* to the pumpkin, reaching out and putting his paws over it, close to it, because he needed close physical proximity to make something grow with that kind of speed. When

he did so, he poured his magic into it, and Geon gasped when the pumpkin visibly grew, getting both larger and fatter, almost as if the gentle movements of Kell's paws above the pumpkin were pulling it like taffy, making it bigger.

"Amazing!" Geon exclaimed, then he laughed. "Well done, Kell! There's no doubt you were the drake for this job!"

"It's actually pretty easy," Kell admitted. "It's like I always knew how to do this, but forgot that I knew it until just now."

"Innate magical powers are like that, young Kell," one of the sages told him. "It is *instinctive* knowledge. That's why all dragons are able to use their innate racial abilities without training, but they need training to master them."

"That makes a lot of sense to me now," Kell said, patting the pumpkin sitting between his feet.

"I can't wait to learn myself. I pray to Gaia I get lucky with the lottery," Geon chuckled.

"When are they drawing the numbers?" Kell asked.

"Today, we've had Jukra and the builders whittle numbered tokens all day, and we're going to put them in a covered container and draw them one by one until everyone has a number," he replied. "We all draw to assign numbers, then, when we're ready to empower an earth dragon, the most wise will draw a number using the same tokens. Their neutrality is beyond reproach, so nobody can possibly accuse them of bias, especially since they won't know who has which number. That way nobody knows who's going to be first, and the lucky winner won't know until they literally come for him to take him to the humans."

"And that just bypassed all the potential mayhem over who has which number," Kell noted, which made Geon grin and nod.

“Just because you draw lottery number one, it doesn’t mean that you’ll be first,” Geon agreed. “Believe it or not, Sessara came up with the double draw idea. It’s pretty clever.”

“Well, Sessara is one of the smart fire dragons,” Kell said, which made Geon chuckle and nod in agreement. “When do you need me to come to the aerie?”

“I’ll send a sky dragon for you when it’s time. You just keep practicing, Kell. You’re going to be teaching all of us what you’re learning, so learn everything that you can.”

“We’ll make sure he’s ready for that task, esteemed council member,” one of the sages assured him.

About an hour later, Irago came to get him. The young sky drake carried him to the aerie, where the council, Jukra, Ferroth, and several other dragons were gathered, and then they all went to the food allotment area. Kell was set down on the stage near the projectors that Jukra’s builders and set up, and Kell got to look down on the entire earth dragon race. Every single one of them, from hatchlings just old enough to leave the brood chamber to the venerable Jengo, who sat in the place of honor at the very front and center of the gathering. They filled the entire floor of the caldera, and some were even sitting along the bottom edges of the rim of the caldera.

And looking out over his kin, he wondered if any of them—outside of Keth—had any idea how their lives were about to change.

There weren’t only earth dragons there. The rim of the caldera was starting to line with other dragons of all four species, who no doubt had become curious about this gathering and had landed along the edges of it to see what was going on. Some of them were undoubtedly fire dragons who had come to watch TV, and found their TVs turned off and this little gathering instead. Kell saw Gressa up there among them, and he saw Prisma sitting with some of her chromatic classmates not far from her. Sella and the

entire pod was also present, sitting together almost directly across from the stage.

And much to his surprise, *Jenny* was there, with Greg and Davie, the humans on the backs of his parents and Davie sitting on a very eager-looking Kammi's head.

It was Anthra who stepped forward from the council, sitting on the base of her tail and rising up to a vertical base, holding up her forepaws to get everyone's attention. "Everyone settle down!" she called, her voice carrying easily over the caldera floor. Anthra could be very loud when she wanted to be. "This meeting of all earth dragons will come to order!"

"I'm sure you're curious as to why you're here, or why there was such short notice. I assure you, you're here for a very important reason," she began as the caldera went quiet. "There have been certain revelations revealed to us over the last few weeks that we will now pass on to you, revelations so important that it's going to shake up our entire society," she warned. "Change the most basic aspects of our lives, but change them for the better. This is *good* news, my friends. Very good news!"

She had everyone's attention now. "There's no easy way to explain this or break it to you, so getting it all out right at the front is the best way to do this. We've come to learn that earth dragons *do* have their own magic," she declared. "But it's not a magic that we can use by ourselves, on our own. Simply put, my friends, our magic depends on us forming a symbiotic magical bond with human beings who are magicians," she said, pointing at Jenny and Greg. "This is why we've never discovered this before, because for most of our history, we've kept ourselves apart from the humans. But lately, with our involvement with Jenny and our other human friends, we quite accidentally stumbled across this revelation. What this symbiotic bond does for the human magician is it gives them back their youth, and extends their lifespan to be more like a dragon's. For us, it enables our own innate racial magical abilities, and it also empowers the innate magic that nullifies the weight we carry from the rock and stone we eat to fuel our breath weapons, empowering this magic enough to allow us to fly."

And that caused an instant uproar, and Anthra had to wait a moment before she could get everyone to calm down enough so they could hear her. “We know this for a fact, friends, because we’ve got one earth dragon that’s empowered in this fashion,” she declared. “And we’ve learned how it works, so now we can empower *all* of us to do the same.”

“How? How can this be?” someone shouted.

“As I said, it’s because of the humans, specifically the humans who are magicians,” Anthra repeated. “An earth dragon forms a symbiotic bond with seventeen human magicians, each of them giving a little bit of themselves to us as we give youth and vigor to them, and their combined effect on us empowers the weight-canceling magic that makes us not gain any weight when we eat stone to power our breath weapon,” she explained patiently. “They empower this magic enough that it cancels enough of our weight to allow us to fly. It takes seventeen humans to form this bond with an earth dragon,” she continued. “And we’ve spent the time since we learned about this miracle coming up with a plan of action to give this gift to every earth dragon. It’s going to take some time, my friends, time for us to find the human magicians we need, and devise a way to safely get an earth dragon to the humans to bond them and then bring them back home. But we have that plan now, my friends, and since we have the plan, we now reveal this to you so you may prepare for what is to come.

“When it comes to who gets this gift first, my friends, we have decided that the only fair way to do this is for it to be complete random chance,” she continued, as Jukra stepped forward and set down a large stone box, then pulled out a small gray disc. A number token. “Every one of us will draw one of these numbered tokens from this box, and the number on the token will be assigned to you. But,” she warned before anyone could say anything. “That is *not* the order in which earth dragons will be selected. When we find seventeen magicians and have them ready to bond to an earth dragon, the sages of the chromatics will draw a number out of the box, and whoever has been assigned that number will be the earth dragon that bonds the humans. The sages will not know which earth dragon has that number, and they will draw that number in the presence of the council to ensure

complete fairness. Even me and Geon will be assigned numbers, my friends. Our status as council members will not in any way entitle us to go before anyone else,” she said strongly. “But there is *one* earth drake that will be allowed to be placed at the front of the line. Jengo,” she said, looking down at the startled earth drake. “Your unique status allows you to bypass the random draw, but it’s not going to be immediate. You have to have tail spikes to bind the human to you, so the wisest sages among the chromatics and the strongest healers among the water dragons are going to find a way to cause you to grow tail spikes long enough for you to bind the humans to you. The lottery is going to go on as I described while the sages find a remedy for you, and when they find it, you will be placed at the front of the queue, because you’ll only have a short window of time to bind the humans to you before you lose your spikes. Does anyone have a problem with that?” Anthra asked forcefully.

Silence was the reply.

“Very good. So, my friends, that’s how it’s going to work. The order will be completely random, and only one earth dragon will be given any special consideration, and *only* because of his medical condition. This plan is going to be enacted starting in about two weeks. That’s when we start selecting earth dragons. The reason for that is because human magicians are fairly rare, and it’s going to take our sky dragon friends time to find the humans we need. Consider the scope of this task, friends. It takes seventeen human magicians to empower an earth dragon, and that means it will take some fifty-two *thousand* of them to empower every adult earth dragon. And that doesn’t even include the hatchlings,” she reminded them. “That is a *lot* of humans, and only one out of every one hundred humans is a magician, which makes finding them much, much harder. So, it’s going to take time for the sky dragons to find the humans we need. We also have to wait until the chromatics restore one of the scions, so we can be taken out into the human world to bind the humans and then come home. Once an earth dragon is empowered, the sky dragons have agreed to teach you how to fly, and the earth dragons that are already empowered will teach you how to control your innate magical abilities. So, remember, friends, that if you are

lucky enough to be selected early, you're going to be teaching those who come after you.

"I know it's not going to be easy, friends, and that it's going to be quite a chore to wait, but until we get this operation going, everyone needs to continue on as normal. But there are things you can do to start preparing for the changes to come," she called. "And the other dragons have agreed to help us prepare. All of us currently don't have the wing strength to fly, even if we're empowered with the magic to do so," she warned. "We don't really *use* our wings, and flying is a very demanding thing to do. So everyone will need to strengthen their wing muscles. The water dragons have agreed to help us with that. They're going to teach us how to swim the water dragon way, using our wings, and that will strengthen our wings and get us ready to fly. The sky dragons and fire dragons will be teaching us other exercises we can do when not swimming to further strengthen our wings and give them the stamina they'll need to let us fly longer than a few seconds. The sky dragons are also going to be teaching us the *science* of flying while we prepare, teaching us the physics behind it, teaching us as much as they can about it before we can do it for ourselves. All of us are also going to be doing refresher gliding training, to get used to the idea of being high up in the air and refreshing ourselves on basic gliding maneuvers, which we've been told will help when the time comes that you can fly. Everyone needs to do what they can to be ready when your number is called," she told them in her powerful voice.

"There's more to it than that, friends. When empowered, you'll also gain innate magical abilities similar to the innate powers of the other dragons. Our own magic, however, isn't about controlling our element. We don't control rock and stone, our magic is based around plants and other growing things. Our innate magic is to make them grow," she explained, then she looked back. "Kell."

He felt *seriously* self-conscious as he stepped up to where she was, and one of the sages brought over a small pumpkin. Every earth dragon was looking at him, some of them wide-eyed, a few glaring, because they'd figured out that *he* was the empowered earth dragon. He took the pumpkin

from the sage and held it in his paw, sitting on the base of his tail, then he took a deep breath and focused on it, *connecting* to it.

There was a rippling gasp that swept across the earth dragons before him when the pumpkin began to grow with magical speed, growing in mere seconds from a tiny thing that would fit in the palm of his paw to a massive behemoth that required him to hold with both paws just to keep it from falling to the floor.

“This is our magic, my friends,” Anthra called. “The magic of life, the magic to make plants grow. It is a reflection of who we are as dragons. We are the children of Gaia, and for myself, I think it’s entirely *proper* that our magic honors our mother this way,” she said with simple dignity, which caused a ripple of assent to rumble through the crowd. “And, to prove to all of you that we haven’t completely lost our minds,” she prompted, giving Kell a meaningful look. He sighed and put the pumpkin down, took a few steps back, then charged the edge of the stage. His wings unfolded and snapped down when he reached the edge, vaulting out over Jengo, and then he started ascending over the earth dragons below, a bit awkwardly, wobbling in his intended trajectory and struggling to keep from spinning upside-down. He heard their startled calls as he rose up over the congregation, aiming for the edge of the rim past the projection screens. He reared up and stalled out as he neared the lip, just under a surprised fire drake, then he managed to land on the steep face in a mad flapping of his wings, his claws digging in and granting him purchase. He climbed up beside the unknown fire drake, who was looking at him with shocked eyes, then the drake grinned at him almost mischievously and reached out and patted him on the back for some strange reason.

“Proof,” Anthra called loudly. “Kell was chosen to be the test subject for one reason, my friends. He was the only earth dragon among us who already had the wing strength to fly. Everyone here knows of his swimming skill, and how the water dragons call him the mud dragon,” she said lightly. “All that swimming made his wings strong enough to get him into the air. And now all of us are going to follow in his pawprints, learning to swim the water dragon way so we can get our wings strong enough to follow him.”

Kell stayed up on the rim, almost feeling safe among the fire drakes, as the earth dragons below seemed to seesaw their heads between looking at Anthra as she went into more detail about their plans and looking up at him, as if disbelieving what they'd seen with their own eyes. It made him so uncomfortable that he decided that he was too much of a distraction, so he backed out of sight of the caldera floor, turned and took off from the side of the volcano, again demonstrating what he could do. He glided more than flew down to the base of the volcano, then entered the tunnel leading to the elevator back up to the top. He climbed up the shaft and sat just inside the entrance, which was behind the stage, and listened as Anthra finished up relating the upcoming plans to the earth dragons. She opened the discussion up for questions, and spent nearly two hours answering a long series of questions, most of them about flying. And much as he feared, a few were angry demands about why Kell was chosen to be the first empowered earth dragon. After the third such question, Anthra stared down the young earth wyrm that asked it. "And if we gave it to you, Velik? How would it help you if you don't have the strength to get off the ground?"

"I'd, I'd at least have it for when I could!" he replied indignantly.

"And how does that help *everyone else*?" she pressed. "How can you teach others something you can't do yourself? If you didn't notice, *I* didn't take it. Geon didn't take it. Because we *weren't the right choice*," she said intensely. "We weren't about to let our own personal desires get in the way of the needs of the entire earth dragon race. Kell was chosen because he was the only earth dragon alive *capable* of flying once he was empowered. None of us can say that. Not you, not me, not Geon, not anyone. Kell was the only earth dragon capable of it, so he was the only logical choice. And when the rest of us get there, he'll be there to teach us what he's learned. Does that answer your question?" she asked, staring the younger, smaller wyrm down.

And that answer prevented anyone else from asking a variation of that question. And after answering just two more questions, they started drawing numbers. Jukra was the one that recorded them, writing the name of the drake and the number he drew, and that process took nearly three hours. Kell

watched all of it, since the council hadn't dismissed him, and he came back out when his family came up to draw. They were allowing hatchlings to draw if they were over the age of 20, so his siblings got to draw their own numbers. Kell found it darkly ironic that Kammi drew a very low number, drawing number 12, but that really didn't mean all that much. In fact, she looked quite annoyed when she presented the token for Jukra to see, so he could record it, like she'd burned all of her luck on something meaningless.

Kell stayed until his family drew their tokens, and he joined them as they climbed up the shallow side of the caldera to get to a perch where they could glide down to the farm. He was keenly aware of the earth dragons who were waiting to draw stare at him, how their eyes followed him and his family. "Why you little sneak, Kell," Jenny accused from Keth's back, where she was being carried. "I had no idea!"

"We didn't tell anyone," Kell answered. "Not until we had a plan."

"So, you've been able to fly—"

"Since that day you guys took my tail spikes," he affirmed. "But we weren't sure that it would work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it was a *theory*, based on how Julia's bond was affecting me," he answered. "I've spent the time since then learning how to fly. And not doing so well," he admitted wryly. "I'm terrible at it. About the only thing I can do is fly in a straight line. Any time I try to turn, things get messy."

"But you *can* do it," Jenny declared, to which he nodded. "What does it feel like?"

"It's too much work and worry to be fun," he said honestly. "The second my feet come off the ground, I'm doing everything I can to keep from crashing. There's no time for fun or even relaxation like that."

"Well, it should get easier as you get more practice," Greg said from Kanna's back, then he leaned down and took hold of the end of her horn

when they started up the steep incline of the caldera wall.

“And I saw that you’ve gotten a lot better with that growing magic,” Jenny noted.

“I can control it now,” he nodded. “Even focus it. It’s actually pretty easy.”

“I’m sure Patron has some plans for you,” she noted, patting Keth’s neck.

“Oh, I do, believe me,” he agreed, which made her chuckle. “But only on a small scale. It would be wrong of me to exploit Kell’s magic for personal gain when none of my neighbors can do the same. Kell’s going to be helping me with the wheat so we can build up more seed. Other than that, he’s not going to be speeding up our harvest, at least unless the council orders it of him. And if they do, any food he produces will be given over for the island. It won’t be our personal stores.”

“That’s a very noble point of view, Patron,” Jenny said with respect in her voice.

“It has nothing to do with nobility, Jenny. It has everything to do with fairness,” he replied simply.

“Have you settled in yet, Jenny?” Kell asked.

“We didn’t bring that much, so it wasn’t that hard,” she answered. “Just some clothes and our personal stuff. And I’m starting work tomorrow,” she laughed. “The council wants me at the aerie at sunrise.”

“What are you going to do tomorrow, Greg?”

“I’m not sure yet. Probably get the house squared away, at least until it’s time for our lessons. Me and Davie are going to be taken to Gressa’s den and be like right there when she does her language lessons with the Hunters over videoconference. That should be interesting. I’ve never seen a fire dragon den before.”

“Gressa’s den is pretty big,” Kell told her. “And I’m sure they won’t let you get lazy.”

“I won’t mind. I’ve been a house husband for the last few months, and it’s been driving me crazy,” he admitted.

“Trust me, *nobody* is allowed to be lazy on Sire’s farm,” Kell warned, which made Keth chuckle.

“I can put him to work if he wants something to do,” he agreed.

Shii and the pod met them up at the lip of the caldera, and he endured a little good-natured teasing from Sella and Surrat. “And are you the reason they closed off fishing around the talons, Kell?” he asked playfully.

“Afraid so, Patriarch, they had to find somewhere for me to practice where I had some vertical space and a lot of water, so I wouldn’t hurt myself,” he answered.

“I’m quite happy for you, friend,” Sella told him, nuzzling him a little. “What’s it like to be able to use magic?”

“It’s a little overwhelming right now,” he answered. “I almost had an identity crisis when I started using it.”

“How so?” Jenny asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” he said, sitting on his haunches. “It’s like...like finding out that my magic is all about life made me doubt some of the choices I’ve made in my life, about the things that I’ve done. I can’t really describe to you how it feels to use it. It’s almost *religious*, it’s...it’s just so hard to explain,” he repeated ruefully. “Actually, well, it’s like when I use my magic, I *connect* to the plant that I’m influencing. I can feel it grow in my soul, and feel like it becomes a part of me, and me a part of it. It’s an *emotional* experience, because I can get attached to the plants I’m affecting. Like that pumpkin. I made it grow, and a small part of me recoils at the idea of *eating* it. It’s like I’m betraying it somehow, like I gave it a part of myself, and killing it will kill that part of me too. And for a drake like me,

that's an *alien* feeling," he admitted. "Hirrag told me that the fire dragons respect me because they know I will kill. Now...I don't know if I could ever do it again," he said in a soft voice, looking at his paw. "It would be like...like I'm betraying Gaia. I've *felt* life, felt it from the inside with the plants I've affected, yet I've taken life...it made me feel *ashamed*."

They were all silent, giving him thoughtful stares.

"It's a strange feeling, and a strange position to be in," he told them. "And I can only hope that I can honor this gift Gaia's given to me."

"I think you'll be just fine, Kell," Shii told him warmly, patting him on the shoulder.

"I hope so. But for now, I just have to get through the next few weeks without causing any major problems. Or getting killed by a jealous earth dragon because I got this first," he added in a low voice, glancing down into the caldera. There were more than a few earth dragons looking up at him.

"Then we'd better get you home, intended, so we can put you in a cage and keep you safe," Kammi teased lightly.

"Yeah, just try it, Kammi," he retorted, which made her laugh.

"We should get back to the farm. There's much to do, and I think all of us are going to be going out for a very long swim this afternoon," Keth said, looking at Shii and Surreal.

"You certainly are. We need to get your wings ready for when they call your number, my old friend," Surreal agreed. "Given how strong of a swimmer you are already, it won't take much for you to be ready. And I hope you all get lucky with the draw."

"Don't we all, Patriarch," Jenny agreed.

"And all this time, we had no idea that you being mud dragons would be so important," Shii laughed. "Is it true that it was why they chose you, Kell?"

“Yeah,” he nodded. “And given what I know now, they’re right. Sire could get off the ground as it stands now, but he wouldn’t be able to stay up more than ten seconds. All of you are going to have to do a lot of work before you’re ready. And it almost makes me feel sorry for everyone else,” he chuckled without humor, looking down into the caldera again. “They have no idea what’s in store for them, given they have to take the one part of their bodies they never exercise and turn it into the strongest, fittest, most durable part of them as fast as they can. There are going to be nights they collapse on the ground outside their burrows and just sleep right there, too tired to even get to their sleeping mounds. After they get a taste of it, they’ll understand why I was picked. And hopefully that’ll take some of the heat of the stares they’re sending up at me right now.”

“It’s just the emotion of the moment, youngling. Things will be much better tomorrow,” Kanna assured him.

“So, it sounds like we have some planning to do, lifemate,” Surral told Shii. “We already have a good idea of how strong all of them are. We’ll just need to get them up to where Kell is.”

“It shouldn’t be that hard for us, lifemate. But it will be for them,” she said, giving Kanna a sly look. “Long hours of swimming every day await you, my friend.”

“I won’t mind it. No matter how tired I get, the prize waiting for me is all the motivation I need to keep going,” she replied.

“Then let’s get back home, have some dinner out on the beach, and make some plans,” Surral proposed, reaching out and taking hold of Jenny gently, picking her up off Keth’s back, then pulling himself up into the air. “Sella, you carry Davie. We’ll meet all of you on the beach.” And with that, Surral turned and flew out over the steep slope, turning to follow the rocky ridge and descending towards the cove.

“Come Davie, let’s go flying,” Sella said gently, advancing over to Kammi and reaching out to the child. Davie held his arms out fearlessly and

let her pick him up, and she held him firmly but gently in her forepaws as she opened her wings. She jumped up into the air and followed after Surrall.

“I am *so* glad he’s not afraid of heights,” Greg mused as Shii picked him up.

“He trusts us, so he has no reason to fear,” Shii told him. “He knows Sella would never drop him.” Kell followed his family as they leaped off the side of the caldera and started gliding down to the farm, feeling a little hopeful. Kanna was probably right. Hopefully they wouldn’t be so mad at him tomorrow, and he was sure that after they got an idea of what it took to fly, they’d understand why Kell was chosen. But either way, there was a whole lot of work and preparation waiting for the earth dragons. They still had to get as much food grown as fast as they could to alleviate the food shortage, and then they had to start exercising their wings to get ready to be empowered on top of it. Every earth dragon was going to be insanely busy and almost perpetually exhausted for the next few months. And while they got ready, Kell had to master flight and master his growing magic so he’d be ready to start teaching the others when they were empowered.

But they’d manage. When it came to getting things done, no dragon was as good at it as an earth dragon.

Chapter 28

16 October 2017, 06:17 DMT; Dawnmist Village

He was almost getting used to this...but it still made him almost feel like a duck with fifty shotguns pointed at it.

Banking slightly to adjust his course, and managing to do it without crashing because he was gliding more than flying, Kell looked down to see the earth dragons on the four farms northwest of his family farm getting going. The pre-dawn and dawn chores were done, so now the earth drakes were outside near their burrows and doing the exercises the fire and sky dragons had taught them, exercising their wings before going out into the fields to get the day's work started. And even from a hundred meters up, he could see how stiffly their wings were moving.

Simply put, the earth dragons were in *misery* right now, because of the exercise. They were undergoing swimming training with the water dragons in the afternoon, and after that, they recovered while sitting in classroom instruction, learning the physics of flight from the sky dragons that they could put into practice when they were empowered. After the instruction, they did exercises with the sky and fire dragons coaching them, strengthening and stretching out their wing muscles, as well as learning how to control them with much more precision.

Earth dragons didn't really *use* their wings. Yes, they knew how to move them, and used them for gliding and a few very limited applications where the membranes wouldn't be damaged, but the vast majority of the time, an earth dragon's wings were folded above and to the sides of their back. And since they didn't use them very often, most earth dragons had wings that had virtually no physical strength and had almost no flexibility

and limited range of motion. However, Kell's wings, and the wings of his family members, had much more strength and flexibility because of his swimming. They were much stronger than just about any other earth dragon's wings, but they were also more flexible and had a much greater range of motion. So, the earth dragons weren't just wearing down their wing muscles, they were stretching them as well, and that combination was very, very unpleasant.

They'd only been at it for about six days, but in those six days, they'd come to learn true exhaustion. The water dragons wore them out, the sky dragons made them feel like their wings were going to be ripped off, and then they woke up and started it all again with the new morning exercises they were taught that were designed mainly to stretch the muscles, getting their wings limber. Just about every village was filled with moaning and complaining drakes and wyrms, but there was absolutely no shirking of the exercises. No matter how awful they felt when they woke up in the morning, they came out and started the exercises without too much complaining, but an awful lot of groaning and growling.

Not even his own family escaped it. His parents, Kammi, and his siblings had much stronger wings than other earth dragons due to their swimming, but after six days, the training and the exercises were starting to break them down. Last night, after a long swimming session with Shii and Surrall, Keth's wings were very nearly dragging in the sand when he came up the beach. They weren't swimming for fun now, so it was a lot more strenuous. Kell felt that they didn't have to strengthen them much more to get to where they could at least get into the air, but they wouldn't get very far. For that matter, Kell's own wings weren't fully conditioned yet, so he had work of his own to do to get to where he could fly long distances without his wings feeling like they were about to fall off. Kell had the strength, but what he lacked was the stamina, and that was what his own exercises were designed to address.

Kell had been doing his own exercise over the week, which wore him out nearly as much due to the fact that his exercises were meant to increase his stamina, and that meant he had to fly himself to exhaustion every day.

He'd been pulled out of the department so he could spend his daylight hours both learning how to fly and mastering his magic, and he'd made real progress on both fronts. He spent most of the mornings with the sages, practicing using his plant-affecting magic and allowing them to study it and him, and then spent his afternoons before the earth dragons started their exercises practicing flying with the sky dragons, increasing both his skill and his stamina, and he felt rather honored that Hinado and Faralla were continuing to teach him. Both of them were clearly invested in the idea of teaching an earth drake how to fly, and intended to train him until he was proficient.

Usually, he'd be just arriving at the Library of Eternity to begin his training, but today had been a bit different. The sages had been preparing the materials to create a new scion the last few days, and they'd been having Kell imbue the plant and animal familiars with his magic to lessen the impact on the dragons when they cast the spell. Today, he'd already finished what they needed him to do, he'd had to do it at night for some reason that was based on magical rules he didn't know. He'd been at the library for nearly four hours before dawn, imbuing about fifty different plants and several pieces of wood with earth dragon magic, which the sages said was the most favorable time for him to perform the magic to create a maximum effect in the familiars. And while he was there, the sages went ahead and did their daily examinations, doing them as he imbued the familiars. With Kell's help, the sages said, the creation of a new scion wasn't going to be nearly as draining on the chromatic and sky dragons that would perform the spell.

That was something new that they'd learned. An earth dragon's aura *did* have an effect on animals, humans, and possibly even other dragons, but as of yet they didn't understand exactly what it did or how it worked. But the one way they did understand how it worked was that Kell could imbue animal-based familiars like fur, bones, teeth, and blood with magic, which empowered their magical properties.

That was how earth dragon magic worked at its core, the sages believed. Yes, they could do some things like make plants grow, but what it

did at a fundamental level was *infuse* and *imbue* other objects and other creatures, causing magical effects. They gave of themselves to allow others to prosper or gain a boon, which was a fundamental part of earth dragon identity long before they knew about their magic. They already knew what that infusion did to plants, but the sages were still studying to understand what it did to animals...at least animals not human magicians. They already knew how it affected them. It was entirely possible that Kell's effect on animals was something that wouldn't show up for months, or even years, of constant exposure, but the sages were anything if not patient. Their long lifespans made them see a five year study as no time at all. Five years to a dragon that might live to be 600 was a blink of the eyes.

Kell was a bit startled to learn that. The chromatics usually kept their ages a closely guarded secret, but the sages had decided to share that secret with him. All of the sages were 400 years old or older, the average age was around 500, and the oldest was 628. The oldest chromatic in their history had lived to an astounding 833 years. Four sages' parents had lived before the time that the dragons came to the island. They were just hatchlings at the time, but they were alive, and had told the sages stories of the exodus to the island and the struggles the dragons endured learning how to live together in the first years. It certainly hadn't been a smooth and orderly transition, the sage told him, filled with rivalries, fighting over dens and territory, and clashes of culture that put the dragons at each other's throats.

The chromatic sages made Jengo look like a young adult by comparison.

That was a sobering thought. There were *first generation* chromatics on the island, where Jengo was the *fifth* generation, and Kell was the *eighth* generation of his family of earth dragons that had been born on the island. And there were earth dragons on the island who were maybe the tenth or eleventh generations of their line that had been born on the island. The island was all the earth dragons had known for generations, where there were chromatics who had parents who had lived before the time of the island. Talk about a difference in perspective...the island was the entire

world for the earth dragons, where the chromatics remembered a time when the entire world was open to them.

Dipping a wing and both turning and descending, Kell came in over the south hill tracts and lined up to land beside Keth and Kanna's burrow. He'd gotten much better at that kind of maneuver, because since he was so used to gliding, he'd been constantly overshooting his target. He filled his wings with air just as he neared the ground, and with a surprisingly deft maneuver for one who hadn't been flying very long, he managed to execute a very professional-looking landing, his back feet coming down first, then dropping down to all fours. His family, Kammi, and the farmhands were already out of the burrow, down by the beach going through the exercises they were taught, and they weren't alone. Jenny and Greg were both there, in workout clothes and doing what almost looked like yoga, while Davie played in the sand not far from them.. The pair had promised to exercise with the family in a show of support, and also because they needed to exercise to do magic. They'd been told that their magic would put stress on their bodies, so they had to be physically fit in order to channel the energies to cast spells.

The exercises the earth dragons were doing in the morning were mainly stretches, so his family was moving their wings in ways to stretch out the muscles, going far beyond the usual range of motion that earth dragons usually did with their wings. Because of the need to protect the membranes, earth dragons didn't use their wings except in very specific ways, and most of those ways involved using the "arms" extending out from their backs. One of their carts was designed with a pull bar that went in front of the wings, for example, and the user of the cart pulled it along using his wings as the anchor point. About all most earth dragons did with their wings was flap them to fan air or point at things, and the fact that they were landbound meant that earth dragons rarely if ever swept their wings down past their own feet. Flying required them to move them a whole lot more than that, and that was what his family was out here addressing... though not nearly as miserably as other earth dragon farms. Because all of them were proficient swimmers, his family and Kammi had far more

flexibility in their wings because they *did* use them much more, so the exercises they were doing weren't nearly as hard on them as they were on other earth dragons, like their farmhands. "Morning," he called as he walked up to them. "You're at it earlier than usual."

"We're almost done," Keth answered.

"You okay over there, Fia?" Kell asked the grimacing earth drake.

"I'll be okay," she replied. "This hurts is all."

"It's not so bad, Mother," Feno piped up.

"You're younger than I am, hatchling," she retorted shortly as she raised her wings over her back until they touched, and held them there.

"How did the swimming go last night?"

"The water dragons took us out to an undersea mountain!" Fai said excitedly. "There were different colored bands of rocks at the top, it was so pretty!"

"Wow, all the way out to the painted mountain? Impressive," Kell said. "That's a long way to go for a drake still learning how to swim."

"Swimming is fun, we've been doing it with your brothers and sister since we moved here," Fila told him.

"Guess I've been too busy to notice," he chuckled.

"It was definitely a workout for some of us," Jenri noted. "I wasn't sure I was going to make it back."

"They won't let you drown, Jenri," Kell told her. "Granted, the teasing for weeks afterward may make you wish they did, but they'll make sure you get home."

"They only do that to you, intended," Kammi chided him. "The best way to counter a jerk is by being a jerk, after all."

The three farmhand hatchlings all giggled, then they broke into laughter when Kell raised his tail threateningly in their direction. “Why you three, I oughta,” he teased, which made them laugh harder. The hatchlings certainly weren’t intimidated by him anymore. The three of them were just as energetic as his hatchling siblings, full of life and adventure, and it showed more and more as they got used to living on a new farm and got to know the drakes around them. And all three of Feno and Fia’s hatchlings *adored* Jenny.

Almost as if mentioning the water dragons summoned them, Surrall burst from the water just off the beach and landed in the surf. He shook the water off his wings before folding them as he advanced up to them. “Patriarch,” Kell said fondly, advancing up to greet him at the waterline. “What brings you by so early?”

“You do,” he replied. “You said that you have the morning off, and there’s a school of shimmerscales west of here.”

“Shimmerscales? Go, intended, go! Those things are delicious!” Kammi blurted behind him.

“Sounds great to me, Patriarch, I could use a break after the last week,” he replied earnestly. “I’ve been poked and prodded so much, I’m surprised I still have any scales left.”

“Have to make sure they aren’t ruining you after I spent years training you,” Surrall said with a toothy grin, which made Kell laugh.

“I haven’t forgotten how to swim,” he challenged.

“Time to prove it, whelp,” he said, turning around meaningfully.

Minutes later, Kell was exerting himself in the way he was used to, and that was using his wings to propel him through the water. He and Surrall caught up to the rest of the pod, which was already on the move, and he slipped into their formation with practiced ease. As usual, Surrall used no magic to assist him, so he had no breathing bubble...but he didn’t need one. Despite all the flying training, Kell was still the strongest swimmer among

the dragons that wasn't a water dragon, and he could still hold his breath more than long enough to drown virtually every other non-water dragon on the island.

But, the ability to fly did add a new dimension to fishing with the pod, he supposed. Instead of just lifting his head up out of the water to breathe, he instead launched into the air and flew just over the surface for a moment from time to time, practicing his flying even when on a fishing expedition.

But, once they reached the shimmerscales, it was a welcome return to the simple joys of life that Kell had started to miss since all this insanity started. Kell had worked with the pod more than long enough to know exactly what to do even if they couldn't communicate with him the way they could with each other, working as a unit to tighten the school of shimmerscales into a ball so they could be divided and harvested.

But things were definitely different in one small but important way. One of the perks of fishing was being able to eat as many as they wanted without having to worry about a tithe, and the first time he darted after a straggler...he couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to kill the fish, even though he'd most definitely eat the fish. Just not alive. It was almost a paradox, since he didn't feel any sort of connection to the fish, yet the idea of killing one caused him to pause, literally with his jaws open and the fish inside the boundaries of his teeth.

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it. He had felt life in the core of his soul, and he couldn't bring himself to take it. He would eat the fish, but after it was already dead, and it wouldn't die by his own fangs. Someone else would have to do it for him.

Though, he found that when he had his aura fully tamped down, suppressed it as much as he could, he didn't have nearly the same amount of empathy for other living things, almost to the point where he'd been before he'd become empowered. He wasn't *connecting* to them, so he didn't have the same emotional complications that would come with the thought of them suffering harm due to his actions. He knew the fish they were

catching would die, but that didn't bother him...so long as *he* didn't have to be the one to do it. He could march a condemned man to the gallows, but he wouldn't pull the lever that would drop him.

So, the fishing expedition was educational, because it taught him that his empathy towards others was dependent on his aura...or that his aura was dependent on his empathy towards others, at least up to a point. If he didn't connect to something, he didn't have the same regard for it...and that made sense. He had to distance himself emotionally from everything around him to suppress his aura, and that allowed him to treat other living things not as part of himself, but as dinner. However, he still couldn't bring himself to kill, not even the fish, because he knew what life *felt* like, and he was not going to end it. He did also understand that if he imbued those fish with his aura, his attitude would be entirely different. They would become part of him, connected to him through his magic, and he wouldn't want to do them any harm. So, the key to fishing was to minimize his aura so he didn't feel any empathy towards his future dinner, and so long as he didn't have to kill them himself, he was more than happy to condemn them to the dinner plate. Much like many humans could be loving and compassionate towards their pets yet also hunt and kill other animals for food, or even for pure sport, he had to compartmentalize his empathy to discern friend from food. It was all about *who* and *what* he allowed to be affected by his aura.

It took them about an hour to tighten the school down to a ball and then split it, so half of the shimmerscales could survive to reproduce, and Shii and Surrall netted the remainder in a ball of solid water as the hatchlings, Kell, Sella, and Ralla harried the freed fish to make them go on their way, chasing them from the ball to break the school impulse that would make them try to stay together. Just after they finished, Sella got his attention and pointed up. He looked up to see the shadow of a dragon over the water, the size of the wings making it clear it was a sky dragon. He swam up to the surface and poked his head out to see a sky wyrm that he didn't know hovering just over the water. "What is it?" he asked the female.

"You are being called to speak before the council, earth drake," she answered.

“Oh, okay,” he replied. “At least they waited until we were done, we were about to come home,” he added with a chuckle.

“It took me a while to find you,” the wyrm said with a wry smile. “I forgot that you are the only earth drake on the island that spends so much time out in the open water.”

“I gotta be me,” he said lightly as Surrall surfaced. “Council is calling me, Patriarch,” he told him. “Afraid I have to go.”

“Well, I suppose you helped enough to get your share,” he said with a grin.

“You just try and steal my portion of the catch, Patriarch, my spikes still work just fine,” he threatened, which made him laugh. Kell turned his nose down and descended with a snap of his wings, then arced up and executed a water takeoff, erupting from the water and ascending more than high enough to open his wings and snap them down, holding his altitude as he gained forward speed. A week of constant practice had increased his skill significantly, but he still flew with very visible awkwardness. The difference was, he didn’t feel like he was on the edge of crashing any time he turned anymore, as long as he turned very slowly and very carefully. He was starting to gain proficiency with turning, and could now fly in a straight line relatively well. As the sky dragons had said, flying seemed less and less difficult as he gained skill in it. He wouldn’t be doing any aerobatics anytime soon, but at least he could now fly in a straight line without feeling like he was going to lose control at any moment. The sky wyrm didn’t help, she took up a parallel course several meters above and to the left of him and allowed him to make his way back to the island on his own. “I still almost can’t believe my eyes,” she remarked as they leveled out about 300 meters above the surface, high enough for him to feel comfortable that he could recover before he hit the water if he lost control.

“Believe me, it’s just as weird for me to do it as it is for you to see it,” he answered her. “I think it’s going to take me years to get to where I don’t

feel like I'm in danger of breaking my muzzle every time I get into the air. I'd be swimming back if it was anyone but the council that called me back."

She had to chuckle. "Flying isn't easy."

"I'm appreciating the truth of that statement more and more with each passing day," he agreed. "I used to dream of being able to fly when I was a hatchling. None of those dreams involved the actual work required to do it, or maybe I'd have been dreaming of something else."

She laughed brightly.

It only took them about half an hour to return to the island, and since they came in from the west, Kell had to fly over the majority of the extinct southern volcano to reach Council Aerie. And as he looked down, he saw quite a few earth drakes working the farms that had been converted from ranches on the western coast just south of the Darkwood looking up at him. Even from that distance, there was no doubt just who it was flying, since earth dragons looked nothing like any other dragon. Even his silhouette from a distance was unique compared to any other dragon in the air. The wyrm did intervene as they approached the aerie, getting over him and putting her paw on his back, mainly because he asked her to do so. Trying to make a controlled landing on an aerie with so many dragons on it was a recipe for disaster, so he wasn't even going to risk crashing into a council member. There were nearly thirty dragons on the aerie, the council members and their staffs, and Jenny was also present, sitting in a rather comfy-looking chair sitting between Anthra and Essan's podiums. The sky wyrm set him down on the edge of the aerie, and he advanced up to the edge of the ring, advancing to stand just beside Jenny's chair. "I answer the summons of the council," he called politely.

"Which was over an hour ago," Jussa said dryly.

"I was out fishing, esteemed council member. It took the sky wyrm a while to find me," he apologized.

"Any luck?" Jenny asked in draconic with a smile.

“We don’t come back without a catch, Jenny. Patriarch would murder us all for sheer incompetence,” he replied in English in a voice that made her laugh. A couple of the council did as well, proving that they’d been very diligent in their English lessons.

“You’re here now, so we can focus on the matter at hand,” Jussa declared in draconic, a slight smile on his muzzle showing a hint of a fang.

It turned out that they’d summoned him to give a report, discussing his progress with the sages learning to control his aura and his progress in flight training, and Jenny was there so she could answer questions about any possible effect the bond between him and the humans had on her. And since Jenny was there, they couldn’t be completely truthful about things. The sages still weren’t entirely sure that an extended lifespan was the only boon the humans received, so Jenny was answering questions from the council about it. Several of the sages were also there to provide testimony on their findings. The council members asked quite a few questions, some of them far too technical for him to answer them, which the sages often had to answer for him. He may know more about magic than most earth dragons, but that just meant that he was the smartest of the ignorant. He didn’t know how his magic worked, he just knew how to control it without really understanding what he was controlling.

But, the sages were quite happy to give something of an overly optimistic, glowing report in his opinion, reporting his progress in learning how to control and focus his aura to produce additional effects and again speculating on just how his aura would affect animals. They knew it had an effect, they just hadn’t figured out what it was yet. He couldn’t make animals grow, not even baby animals, his aura didn’t cause them to become young again, didn’t make them healthy or otherwise heal them, didn’t imbue them with magically augmented physical traits or magical powers. It just seemed to just imbue them, and then...nothing. The only thing they’d figured out so far was that Kell could imbue animal-based familiars and greatly enhance the effect they had on magic.

And that was also part of why he was summoned. “When will Kell begin the process to prepare the familiars for the magic,?” Jussa asked.

“He’s already done so, esteemed council member,” the sage answered. “He’s been working on them for four days now, and has managed to imbue most of the familiars we had stored we will use for the scion. We’re at the point now where we’re waiting for the sky dragons to bring in the perishable familiars, and he imbues what they bring in the next morning, just before his training session. Actually, it’s more accurate to say that his work is the first exercise in his training session,” he corrected himself.

After about another hour or so of answering questions about both his progress and his flight training, the council seemed to be satisfied. They dismissed both Kell and Jenny, since it was time for her own lessons, and Irago carried her down to her house with Kell escorting...and the only reason he could was because it was gliding more than flying. He landed in a mad flapping of wings just off her patio, the large paved area where she could entertain dragons behind the house, then advanced up as Irago gently set her down. “Thank you, Irago,” she said in draconic. “How goes your lessons?”

“I’ve learned a lot of English,” he answered in English. “Still not too good.”

“I think he’s going to make it in the department,” Kell chuckled as a much larger dragon circled over them in a descent, then landed. It was Gressa, folding back her wings as she advanced up onto the patio. “Gressa,” he greeted.

“Kell, Irago,” she returned with a nod of her head. “Are you ready, Jenny?”

“Just about, Gressa,” she answered as Irago drifted over to hover just beside the fire drake.

“So, she’s been doing her lessons from here?” Irago asked.

“It’s easier for all of us,” Jenny answered as she walked over to a table holding a computer, with a camera mounted on the side of the house. That was so the Hunters could see Gressa and Irigo, whom it seemed was going to sit in on the lesson as well. The fire drake sat behind Jenny’s table as she sat and took hold of the mouse, and since he didn’t have anything to do at the moment, Kell padded around the large fire drake and sat down behind and beside Jenny, lowering his head down close to hers so they could see him from her webcam. She started the conference program, and the briefing room at the resort in Imakahi appeared on her monitor and a large TV mounted at the base off the balcony so Gressa could see them without craning her head down. They were all there, and Kell again had to marvel a bit at how much Wilson and Yancy had changed.

“Are you sitting in, Kell?” Yancy asked.

“Just stopping by to say hello,” he replied. “Gressa will probably bite me if I try to hijack her lesson.” They all laughed when the fire drake reached her foreleg out and tapped him on the top of his head with one of her long, wicked claws. “And she’ll definitely bite me if I stop her from getting started,” he added with a chuckle. “I have a bunch of my own lessons to do today, so I may as well take some initiative and go practice.”

“We heard,” Olivia said. “Jenny said that you can fly now.”

“Yup, but I’m terrible at it,” he replied. “That’s part of what I get out of the bond, what you guys gave to me. I’ve done my magic practice today, so I’ll go out over the deep water and practice flying for a while.”

“They’ve kicked you out of the department, eh?” Michaels asked.

“Not exactly, but what I’m doing now takes precedence. I fully intend to go back once I finish with all this,” he chuckled in reply. “But that won’t be for a while. Once I master my magic and flight, I’ll be responsible for teaching others.”

“Jenny told us about that too. It sounds like a good plan,” Juarez said. “We’ve been wondering how crowded it’s going to get here.”

“It won’t. The others won’t be sent there, they’ll just be hidden by the government until we can figure out how to train them,” Kell answered.

“Good, we like our swanky little private island,” Olivia smiled.

“You are such a prima donna,” Kell accused. “And I’ll leave you guys to it before Gressa roasts me for taking up her time.”

Kell retreated back to the farm, and instead of spending his time practicing flight, he instead practiced his growing magic by magically enlarging the harvested food that was part of the tithe, which was sorely needed right now. They’d managed to bring in some tomatoes already, and he spent the time Jenny and Gressa were in their lesson making them as large as possible without them falling apart or all but exploding when they were picked up, where they got so heavy that they couldn’t support their own weight. They’d learned that he could only affect *living* plants, so he could only affect the crops that were recently harvested. The crops were still alive for a while after being taken off the vine or out of the field, and it was in that window that Kell could affect them. He was able to get quite a few of them enlarged since he didn’t have to do it one at a time, was able to affect entire piles of them at once, which would help increase the allotments and keep dragons from going hungry...and that made him feel good about himself.

Oddly, though, his aura could affect dead plant and animal parts, but he couldn’t make them grow, he could only imbue them with magic.

Over at Jenny’s house, Gressa and Irago were replaced by Hinado, and no doubt he started their lesson in magic for the day. Kell finished enlarging all the harvested tomatoes, then ended up being called back to the Library of Eternity, where he spent the rest of the morning imbuing some familiars that the sky dragons had just brought in to create a new scion. After lunch, Faralla claimed him, and he spent the rest of the afternoon practicing flight out over the open water south of the island, well out of sight of the other earth dragons.

As Faralla shadowed him as he practiced flying, he revealed a little more about the council's plan, which surprised Kell a little bit. "Tomorrow, we're going to be drawing the first token," he mentioned as Kell leveled out a good five hundred meters over the water. The sky wyrm was flying over him, and when Kell looked up in surprise, he had a good look at Faralla's face.

"Already?"

"The sages requested it," he answered. "They want to see if breaking the bond Julia made with you and reestablishing it had any effect on you by binding the two pilots to the next earth dragon immediately."

"I hadn't considered that," Kell mused. "So they think that my magic may have been affected?"

"It's entirely possible, and worth investigation," he nodded. "It's possible the next earth dragon's magic will work differently, or not. Either way, it's good to know, for both you and us."

"Are they going to do it publicly?"

"Yes, and Anthra and Geon are going to have your village leaders spread that at your evening village meetings," he answered. "The sage will draw the token tomorrow at sunrise at the allotment area."

"There's going to be a crowd," Kell predicted.

"Good, we want the earth dragons to know for a fact that things are being done fairly," he said. "The sages have no idea which earth dragon has which number, the list is locked in Ferroth's office down in your underground city, and they'd have no real reason to cheat anyway. So, that means that tomorrow, you're going to be starting your training of another earth dragon," he warned.

"There's not much I can do until he's empowered, outside of trying to explain what to expect, and how it feels."

“The sages believe that will help,” Faralla told him. “That dragon will also be observing your training sessions, so he has a head start.”

“I guess that won’t be so bad,” Kell mused wobbling dangerously in the air as he made a turn, but managing to correct before he lost control. “Now stop distracting me.”

Faralla chuckled. “We’re going for distance today, Kell, to build up your stamina. Calculate a navigation arc for three hundred *draman* due south and put us on course.”

The flight kept him out almost all day, to the point where it was sunset when he came in low and fast just outside the cove, dove into the water, and then swam the rest of the way. He burst out of the water and landed on the knoll just outside his burrow entrance, shaking the water off his wings before folding them as he advanced towards the entrance. He didn’t expect Kammi to be home, she was most likely still out swimming with the pod, but he was only stopping in to pick up his tablet before heading across the small valley to Jenny’s house. As usual for her at this time of the day, she was entertaining guests, and one of them was almost always Gressa, Prisma, and after they finished their exercises, a drake from his farm. She almost always had a couple of other dragons on or around her patio, exercising her open door policy where any dragon who was curious was more than welcome to stop by and chat, to get to know her and let her get to know them. And so far, there wasn’t a single dragon that left her house that didn’t have a good impression of her. She was truly a dragon magnet, possessed of a personality and charm that made just about every dragon that met her like her almost immediately. Greg was getting used to the idea, and Davie had the utter fearlessness of a child, who had spent more than enough time with the fire dragons at the volcano to feel completely comfortable around any dragon...and Jenny and Greg’s comfort exposing their child to dragons so much bigger than the boy afforded them a great deal of respect. Tonight, she had Gressa, Prisma, and a sky drake Kell knew from the team that attacked the Chinese fleet named Karana hanging out on her patio. Karana was a fairly young sky drake, but from what Kell had learned during the trip over there, she was a very strong magician, much like Sessara, who had an

affinity for weather magic. Even fire wyrms were afraid of Sessara because of her magic, which made up for her smaller size when she came up against them in fire dragons' eternal squabbling.

Hirrag shared that distinction. Most dragons didn't consider his *magical* skills given his sheer size, but Hirrag was actually a very strong and very skilled magician.

"Kell!" Davie said happily ambling over to him as he came up onto the patio.

"Hey Davie, how you doing today?" he asked, picking up the child and setting him on top of his head. Davie took hold of his horns and laughed when Kell bounced him a few times.

"I'm okay," he answered. "How you?" he asked in draconic.

"I'm doing fine," he answered in draconic. As fast as Jenny was picking up draconic, Davie was the true star...but then again, human children his age seemed to learn languages very fast, according to what Kell had read. "How was class, Prisma?"

"Boring," she replied, rolling her eyes a little bit. "It was the later part of the day that was much more interesting. I've perfected a spell for imbuing a generator so it turns at the proper speed without damaging it, which can be suspended so the generator can be turned off without canceling the spell," she announced. "I've prepared an experimental generator to present to the department for testing."

"That sounds like you're doing what we hired you to do," Kell noted lightly.

"Much like how a driftlight can be turned dark without ending the spell?" Karana asked curiously.

She nodded. "That was the model of my alteration. I've locked the first such spell to a crystal and installed it in a generator, and if it works the way

I hope, it can be turned on and off with a simple command without damaging the machinery. I'll be presenting it to Chief Ferroth tomorrow."

"The department hired the right chromatic," Jenny told her in draconic, which made her preen a bit.

"I still can't get over how much draconic you speak now, Jenny," Kell noted.

"I seem to learn it more easy," she replied.

"You sound almost conversational. It may only take you a couple of months to become fluent," Kell said in English. "How have your English lessons been going, Prisma?"

"Well," she replied in English. "It's not that hard."

"You're giving me a complex, Prisma," Greg complained, which made Kell chuckle.

"Chromatics are more or less bred to learn things, Greg, so don't ever compare yourself to them," Kell told him.

"I need to learn that language. I'm being left out," Karana complained.

"Well, you have a teacher right there," Kell noted, pointing at Jenny.

"As if I don't have enough to do already?" Jenny protested in English.

Kell had to laugh. "Things are going to be interesting around here until you two master draconic," he told Jenny and Greg, then he switched to draconic to address the other dragons. "Speaking of interesting, I found out today that they're drawing for the first earth dragon tomorrow morning."

"We heard," Gressa nodded. "Sessara told us earlier. She left not long before you arrived."

"She said the earth dragon will bind the two pilots," Jenny added in English, then translated for Greg.

“That’s what Faralla told me. He said the sages want to see if things are different for that earth dragon, given I had Julia’s bond, broke it, then rebonded her.”

“A sound theory worth investigation,” Prisma mused. “There’s no telling if the process would be different for other earth dragons, since how they become bonded is different from how you did, Kell.”

“I hope they’re doing the drawing in public,” Karana noted.

“Faralla said they are. Sunrise at the allotment area on top of the volcano,” Kell affirmed. “The earth dragon village leaders are supposed to spread that at the meetings tonight after they finish their exercises. Whoever wins is going to sit in during my training sessions with the sages so he can start learning.”

“It’s a good sign,” Gressa said. “Every dragon I know wants the earth dragons to be empowered quickly.”

“Why for?” Jenny asked.

“Protection,” she answered. “The earth dragons’ greatest weakness is that they can’t fly as they are now. We would feel much more secure in their safety if they had the ability to fly away from potential danger. And it is their right as dragons to be granted the magic—“ she cut herself off. “It’s their right to enjoy the same magical gifts we have.”

“I’ll feel a lot less self-conscious when there are others,” Kell said, moving the conversation along before Jenny got too curious about Gressa’s near mistake. But he could understand how it happened...just about every dragon that knew Jenny was so comfortable around her that they often forgot that there were things they couldn’t tell her. “Careful, Davie, don’t cut yourself,” he warned as Davie dug his fingers into the ridges on Kell’s horns. His horns had no nerves in them, but he could feel the child’s fingers moving along them from the vibrations he could feel in the base of his horn. “The ridges on my horns can be sharp.”

“I’m okay,” he assured him.

“With luck, there will be other empowered earth dragons very soon,” Prisma noted. “I’ve heard that the sky dragons are already searching for more human magicians, and once we create the scion, they may have the humans located and ready to empower the lucky first earth dragon the next day.”

“I’m not worried about this side of it, I’m worried about the other side,” Jenny said soberly. “There’s no telling how those humans are going to act after they find out. After *this* happens,” she said, motioning at herself. “They’ll have to keep it a secret, but something like this isn’t exactly easy to keep quiet for most people. I mean, most humans don’t have the discipline of the Hunters.”

“I think your people will surprise you, Jenny,” Karana said after hearing Kell’s translation.

“I hope they do,” she nodded up at the sky drake before Kell could translate. “Then again, the first time they see *this*, I think they’ll do anything you say just to learn more,” she said, taking hold of her talisman and looking down at it. She then ran a finger along its edge, which she tended to do. Even now, days after getting her talisman, she was still nearly mystified by it. And she never, ever took it off. “I can’t explain to you how I feel when I look at this. It’s like...like I can *feel* the magic,” she mused. “But only my own talisman.”

“That’s to be expected,” Prisma told her. “That talisman represents who you are as both a magician and a sentient being, a representation of your very soul. It *should* move you to see it with your eyes.”

“That’s certainly how it feels sometimes,” Greg agreed after hearing Kell’s translation, looking at his own talisman. “Yesterday I nearly had a panic attack when I didn’t feel it against my chest.”

“Did it fall off?” Kell asked.

“It got swung around behind my neck while I was taking a nap,” he answered. “They told us to guard them with our lives until we learned the

magic to make sure we couldn't lose them, and believe me, we're doing just that."

Another dragon swooped down over the house and landed just off the patio, and Kell was a bit surprised to see it was Trejem, the chromatic council member. The large chromatic advanced up onto the patio and came to a stop beside Prisma, who bowed her head to him respectfully.

"Esteemed council member," Jenny said in draconic.

"Good evening, Jenny," he said in a pleasant voice. He reached into a satchel hanging off his shoulder and presented a book in her direction.

"This is the book I want you to study, as soon as you can use your clever machine to translate it. It should complement the primer you're already studying very well."

"I eager to do so," she replied in draconic as Prisma floated the book over to her. It was so large that if she stood it up on the deck, the book would extend up to her ribcage.

"Getting involved, esteemed council member?" Kell asked curiously.

He looked over at him. "I've been studying the history of the human betrayal of the dragons, and I've come to learn that the humans turned against their own magicians as well as the dragons, and that the human magicians tried to defend us. If humans could be on our side then, they can be on our side now," he said simply. "I have my misgivings about humanity as a whole, but I also must follow the mandate Gaia laid before us to spread the knowledge of magic to all who carry her gift."

"Artfully spoken, esteemed council member," Prisma said respectfully.

"So, are the chromatics going to get involved with the Hunters?" Kell asked curiously.

"We're still discussing it. But we *will* be aiding in the education of Jenny and her family," he said, looking towards Jenny and Greg with a warm expression. "They were willing to leave their world and join ours, and we will honor that commitment by helping to train them."

“That’s good to hear,” Jenny said in draconic. “Education would not complete without chromatics.”

“I do believe I understand what you mean, Jenny,” he said easily, then he spread his iridescent, rainbow-colored wings, the colors shimmering as his wings moved as the light refracted off the multitude of tiny, supple scales that covered the membranes of his wings. Kell had always admired chromatics for the beauty of their wings. “Now, I hate to be rude, but I’m late for a prior appointment. Have a pleasant evening, all of you.” And with that, he used his magic to lift his large body up off the patio, using floating magic the same way Prisma and sky dragons often did, then he ascended in the direction of the Library of Eternity.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Gressa noted to Kell, looking down at him. “The chromatics are getting involved.”

“I’m glad to see it,” Prisma said, looking up where her council member had flown off. “Jenny is right. She can’t be properly trained in magic if the chromatics don’t aid in her education. As skilled as Hinado is, he simply can’t do some of the magic that Jenny can learn.”

“That’s something I was curious about,” Karana said, looking down at the petite chromatic. “Do humans have the same restrictions as dragons? Do they have an innate racial field of magic?”

“Humans are like chromatics,” she answered. “They have no racial focus to their magic, but individual humans have inclinations that will make them stronger in some forms of magic and weaker in others. Humans can theoretically learn almost any spell, at least when taken as a whole, but like us, they aren’t as strong in a field of magic inherent to another race of dragon. It depends entirely on the individual human what magic they can learn, and some, like Jenny and Greg, are capable of using nearly any school of magic. That will make human magicians quite versatile.”

“At least once we learn,” Jenny said ruefully in English as she and Greg wrestled the huge book onto a patio table, then Greg opened it to

display the title page. “Greg, honey, be a dear and go fetch the tablet. As big as this book is, it’s gonna take us a couple of hours to convert it to a file.”

“Is that one of the books in your library, Prisma?” Kell asked. “If so, you already have a file.”

She shook her head. “I fear not, Kell.”

“Oh well, looks like Jenny’s going to be busy while I cook dinner,” Greg said.

They got one more visitor as Greg went inside to cook and Jenny started taking images of the page of the book with her tablet, which allowed the translation program they’d developed to scan the draconic writing and convert it into English. Ferroth stumped up after gliding down from Council Aerie, sitting beside Kell. “Chief,” he greeted. “On the way back down to the city?”

“In a bit,” he replied. “We just got our first report in from the sky dragons searching for magicians in Everett. I just delivered a copy of it to the council so they can read it over.”

“And what did you find out?” Gressa asked in earnest curiosity.

“You won’t be the only empowered earth dragon for long, Kell,” he replied with a slight smile, glancing at him. “They’ve found over six hundred human magicians over just two days.”

“Six *hundred*?” Kell asked in surprise. “After just two days?”

He nodded. “The spell they came up with is damn effective,” he said. “It lets them see the aura of a magician, even if they’re inside or in a car or something, and the range is line of sight. So they’re flying high over the city and looking down at thousands of people at a time. They haven’t identified them yet, or told the American government about them, but that’s the raw count after two days of searching.”

“For a city that size, that sounds about right,” Prisma mused. “The texts say that only one human in one hundred had magical ability. The city

has hundreds of thousands of residents, so the sky dragons should find thousands of magicians. But finding them is the easy part. The hard part will be the humans that work for President Walker identifying them, explaining things to them, then preparing things for them. We can move no faster than how fast those humans can do their jobs, else we put the magicians at risk. Or risk exposing the operation to the mundanes.”

“So we need to get Walker’s people moving,” Ferroth grunted. “I’d like to have at least two earth dragons ready to go when they create a new scion.”

“Are you going to be at the drawing in the morning?” Kell asked.

“Of course, just about everyone will be,” he replied. “I’ll be making some contingency plans in case things get ugly tomorrow.”

“How so, chief?” Prisma asked.

“There’s always a chance that a dragon wins that first draw that will put the entire thing in doubt. Imagine, whelp, if *Kammi* gets drawn tomorrow,” he said, looking at Kell. “Or Anthra, or Geon, or another field agent, or even me. It’s entirely possible, since the entire thing is random. Me and the council members are going to be discussing that as soon as they finish their meetings and come down to the department. We can’t tell the winner what to do, but most likely, but I’m going to ask the drakes in the department to decline and have the sages draw another token if they get chosen.”

“The odds are pretty slim for that to happen, chief,” Gressa said.

“But it *can* happen, so I’m planning for it,” he replied.

“Well, there goes any chance I had at a peaceful night,” Kell said in disgust. “Kammi’s gonna be pissed when you ask her to do that.”

“She’d be the type to refuse what’s best for all over what’s best for her,” Prisma said. “With respect, Kell.”

“Even I can admit that my intended can be immature and selfish sometimes, Prisma,” he grunted. “But not over this. She’d agree with chief’s request. She just won’t be happy about it...and she’ll make damn sure that I *know* she’s not happy about it.”

“Just keep the fight out of your computer room,” Ferroth said with dry humor.

“She’s get physical over it?” Karana asked.

“You don’t know earth dragons, Karana,” Gressa said with an easy, amused look at Kell. “They can be as unruly as fire dragons, at least in private. Especially the younger ones.”

“It’s a form of play for them,” Prisma said calmly.

“Well, Kammi plays rough,” Kell grunted, which made Jenny laugh.

“Where is she, anyway?” Ferroth asked.

“Out swimming with the pod,” Kell answered as Davie slid down his neck, then dropped to the ground and ambled into the house, no doubt lured by the smell of cooking food wafting through the open door.

“Then I’ll let you pass along the order when she gets back, whelp.”

Kell gave his boss a dark look. “Coward,” he accused, which made the three dragon females try hard not to laugh.

17 October 2017, 06:15 DMT; allotment area

Just about the entire island had turned out for this.

Kell watched from the lip of the caldera, sitting with the pod and his family so they could avoid getting jostled down there, and they weren’t alone. Other earth dragons and dragons from the other four races were surrounding them, two sky drakes hovering directly overhead and Gressa

sitting beside Kanna as they watched the sages land on the stage, which hadn't been taken down since Anthra used it to address the earth dragons. The sages were the ones that had custody of the drawing tokens, one of them carrying the large chest using floating magic, but the list of which dragon had which token was in Anthra's office down in the department, to ensure that the sages did not know which earth dragon had which number. That ensured absolute fairness and neutrality.

Everyone already knew that the winner wasn't going to get empowered immediately, that this drawing was for who was going to be first, but that didn't make the earth dragons any less excited and hopeful, some far more than others. And Kell also knew that some changes were going to have to be made, as he looked at Kitta. She had been allowed to draw a number, but she didn't have a full set of spikes in her tail. She wasn't old enough yet to grow the full 17, and it was going to be a couple of years until the last three spikes she was missing grew in. They let the younglings draw out of fairness, but if one of them actually won, they wouldn't be able to do anything. No doubt the sages would study the process, allow the youngling to bind humans to him or her as their spikes grew in to study the process, but it was more or less just a wasted draw.

A hush fell over the caldera when Anthra and Geon arrived, the earth wyrm carrying the book holding the numbers. "Looks like it's time," Surrall said, who was sitting beside Kell. "Good luck, friends."

Surrall didn't hear Kammi's grumble.

Anthra certainly didn't want any time. She set the book on a podium that had been made, and then looked meaningfully at the sages. The chest was set down, and a small door in the top was opened, only just large enough for the sage to stick his paw inside. He even looked away as he put his paw into the chest, then pulled out a stone token and presented it to another sage, still not looking at it. "The number is five hundred and ninety three," the sage boomed, her voice all but echoing across the caldera.

There was a lone scream of glee far in the back of the gathering inside the caldera, and almost all heads turned in that direction.

“That number belongs to Rika of Red Valley Village,” Anthra shouted after referring to the book.

When the lucky earth dragon reached the stage, Kell almost instinctively looked back at Kitta. It was just a youngling! It was a young juvenile female earth drake, half the size of an adult, and Kell’s eyes quickly went to her tail...which had a full set of spikes on it, which made him almost sigh in relief. She looked *barely* old enough to have a full tail. “I’m Rika!” she said eagerly, nearly jumping up and down in place on the stage. “I’m Rika, esteemed council member!”

“Do you feel you’re ready for this task, youngling?” Anthra asked, looking down at her. The youngling barely came up to Anthra’s knee. “You have much work ahead of you, and a great deal of responsibility that will be placed on your shoulders.”

“I’ll make you proud of me, esteemed council member!” she retorted almost immediately.

“Welp, that proves beyond any doubt that the draw is random,” Surrall said dryly. “Having someone that young be the first draw isn’t exactly a good thing. The earth dragons will be taking lessons from a juvenile. I think you’ll end up doing almost all the work, Kell.”

“Not to mention some of the elders are going to be offended having to take lessons from a youngling,” Shii added.

“True, but this is the task Gaia gave us, so we’d best roll with it,” Kell declared. “I can teach her...if she can keep her enthusiasm under control,” he added dryly as the young female was jumping in place in front of Anthra. “Jenny, when is the plane supposed to arrive?”

“Around ten,” she answered, referring to the cargo plane that brought Jenny’s family supplies every three days. “I don’t think anyone told them that they’re going to be bound today.”

“Then it’s going to be an eventful day for more than person today,” Kell noted, which made Jenny chuckle as the earth dragons started to make their way out of the caldera, either climbing up the sides or going towards the elevator. “And we’d better clear out so we’re not in the way,” he added. “I have to report to the Library of Eternity, so I’ll see all of you later.”

“Good luck with the youngling, Kell,” Keth told him.

Before the earth dragons could reach the top of the rim, Kell turned, bounded a few times, then launched himself off the side as he opened his wings, then pulled himself into the air and banked to the east, proud of himself that he didn’t nearly lose control...he really was getting better at flying. He flew over the majority of the extinct volcano, then managed to land on the deck in front of the door of the Library of Eternity...and he couldn’t help but look further down, to the door into the chromatic council chambers where he’d killed the former council chromatic. That memory caused a shiver of shame to flutter through him, but it had nothing to do with who he killed, it dealt with the fact that he had killed *period*.

There was nothing like feeling life deep in his soul to change his point of view when it came to taking it.

Not all the sages had come to the drawing, so there were more than enough to start his daily examination, putting him on his favorite table and studying him to see if anything had changed since yesterday. About half an hour later, the door opened, and two sages and Anthra escorted in the youngling. Her eyes were wide, her mouth agape as she slowly looked around the room, filled with magical trinkets, books, charts, and jars and jars and jars filled with fetishes, familiars, and other magical supplies. “Kell, this is Rika,” Anthra introduced as the starstruck youngling walked into the chamber. “She’s your first student. Rika, this is Kell.”

She bounded up at to him and reared up, putting her front paws on the lip of the table and gazing up at him in awe. “It’s so nice to meet you, Kell!” she said eagerly. “It’s such an honor!”

“I wouldn’t see why,” Kell said dismissively. “I’m just a field agent, youngling.”

“You give all of us younglings hope and inspiration! You’ve done so much, and you’re not much older than me!” she gushed. “It makes us feel like we can do anything!”

“Well, if you want to make your mark, then you’d better be ready to work hard,” he warned. “It took years and years of work to get where I am now...just not sitting on this table. That was more blind luck,” he admitted, which made the sages give him an amused look. “The only reason I was chosen was because I was the only earth dragon with the wing strength to fly.”

“I’ll do my part!” she promised with enthusiasm.

A small figure came through the open door, and Kell saw Jenny stepping inside with Irago hovering behind her. She’d been in the library several times already, so she wasn’t quite as distracted as the juvenile female. “There you are, Jenny,” one of the sages called. That made Rika turn her head, then she dropped back down to the floor and stared at Jenny as she approached.

“Congratulations, Rika,” she said in draconic, putting her hands on her knees and leaning down to look at the youngling. Her head only came up to Jenny’s chest, which made Kell realize that Rika wasn’t much bigger than his younger siblings. He’d bet that she grew in her last spike maybe just a couple of months ago. Jenny put a hand on the female’s head, just in front of her horns, and gave her one of those Jenny smiles that just seemed to make any dragon putty in her hands. “Are you ready?”

“I’ll do my best,” she promised.

“That’s good to hear.” She patted Rika’s head and stood back up. “I’m ready, most wise.”

“Come along, Jenny,” one of them said, then she floated up into the air and onto the table beside Kell’s, where a stool was sitting. She sat down on

the stool as the rest of the sages entered the chamber.

Kell didn't do much teaching as the sages explained to the excited juvenile what was going to happen, from binding the two pilots to her later that morning to her daily examinations and lessons on top of the wing exercises and swimming she had to do. "So, I won't be able to fly until I have seventeen humans bonded to me?" she asked.

"We're honestly not sure, youngling," a sage told her. "How it worked for Kell may not be how it works for all other dragons. Given your smaller size, you may theoretically be able to get off the ground with fewer humans bonded to you. We know virtually nothing about this magic, about this process, and you are here to expand our knowledge more than anything else. But regardless, you won't be able to fly until your wings are strong enough to get you off the ground," he added, tapping her folded wing with a claw.

The examinations ended just as they got word that the cargo plane had arrived, and moments later, the two pilots were brought up to the library, which were very unusual in that both of them were female. Captain Lucy Evers and Lieutenant Pamela Strong were not the usual military pilots, who were mostly male, because both of them were tall, fit, and rather pretty. Captain Evers had brunette hair she wore short, and Lieutenant Strong had dirty blond hair she had tied back in a small tail. They were chosen because they were some of the few pilots in the Air Force that had amphibious plane certification and were trained to fly the sea plane they were using for the supply runs. Both of them looked intensely curious as they were brought into the library, then their attention was focused on the small earth dragon standing eagerly beside Kell's exam table.

Jenny stepped up to them. "Lucy, Pam, good to see you again," she said. She knew them fairly well since they talked to her every three days, and once stayed overnight in her house when the weather was too rough for the plane to take off. "I'd like to introduce you to Rika," she motioned with her hand. "She is *your* earth dragon, she's the one that will be bonding to you the way I'm bonded to Kell."

“She’s awfully young,” the brunette, Lucy, said. “But I guess that doesn’t make a difference.”

Rika bounded up to them and reared up on her hind legs, which put her head almost on level with theirs, and reached out with both forepaws. The two humans each took one of them, stabilizing her. “Hi, I’m Rika!” she said in English. “I’m so happy to meet you!”

“So, you’re going to be our dragon, little one?” Pam asked with a smile.

“Uh-huh! And you’ll be two of my humans! I hope we’ll be as good friends as Kell is with his humans!”

Kell dropped down off the table and padded up to stand beside Jenny, then sat down and gave her an amused look. “My human, eh?” he asked lightly.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she retorted, which made him chuckle. “You speak very good English, Rika,” she complemented.

“They taught us while we were down in the city,” she replied. “I kinda like it. It’s a little weird, but you can say some things in English you can’t really say in draconic.”

One of the sages padded over, and the two pilots looked up at the aged chromatic. “The two of you have been summoned to accept the bond from this earth dragon,” he said, which Kell translated. “Are you ready, fully understanding the duties and responsibilities it places on you, as well as the changes it will make to your life?”

“I do,” Pam said, looking up at him with a nod.

“Everything was explained to us, most wise. I accept,” Lucy agreed.

“Then let us begin. After you had been bonded, we will examine you and assense you so talismans can be made for you.”

Just the mention of a talisman made Jenny put her hand over hers through her shirt.

“We’ll need a healer,” Kell prompted.

“I’m capable of healing magic, Kell,” the sage nodded to him as another came over.

“Young Rika, remember most keenly which spikes the humans take from your tail,” she prompted. “I’ll be recording it, but it’s also your responsibility to remember. Ensure that the next humans you bond do not try to take those spikes.”

“I will, most wise,” she said eagerly, dropping back down and then carefully bringing her tail around within reach of both the pilots.

“Okay, so, what do we do?” Captain Evers asked.

Jenny stepped up to Rika’s side. “Take a firm hold of one of the spikes, Lucy,” she instructed. “It has to cut into your skin, your blood has to come into contact with the spike while it’s still in her tail. It’ll then turn red and come out. Afterwards, the sage will heal your hand,” she said, motioning at the chromatic. “The spike is yours to keep, but it’s not part of the bond, it’s more or less a souvenir. I have mine and Greg’s hanging in the living room of the house.”

“I remember seeing them,” she noted to herself, flexing her hand a few times. “You ready, Rika?”

“Ready!” she affirmed, lifting her tail up to Captain Evers’ lower chest level.

She didn’t waste any time. She reached out and grabbed the closest spike, the lowest one on the center row, and closed her hand around it until she winced, when the razor-sharp ridges on the sides of the spike cut through her skin. The spike flushed red quickly and then released from its anchor. “Wow those things are sharp,” she said as she pulled the spike away from Rika’s tail. She took a step back, then stepped towards the sage

when he motioned to her, hunched down from sitting on his tail to get his head and paws close enough to her. Lieutenant Strong looked at the sixteen remaining spikes, then took the next one in line on the center row, sliding her hand down even as she gripped tightly. The spike also flushed red and came free, and she kept hold of it as her blood started oozing down the sharp edge of it...she'd grabbed it a little too hard, it seemed.

"Congratulations, ladies," Jenny told them as the chromatic leaned down even more, looming over them, and did what Prisma had done with Julia months ago, licked his finger and then set it against the cut on her hand. He repeated the process with the other pilot as Rika showed her tail to the other sage, who marked which spikes had been pulled out of her tail on her slate. "Now you get to experience the boring side of it, the examinations," she said, pointing at the sage. Kell gave a startled chuckle when the sage bumped the tip of his feathered tail against her backside, and Jenny laughed as well. "Hey now, I expect that kind of rough-housing from him, not you," she protested, pointing back at Kell.

"Even us withered old dragons are entitled to a bit of mean-spirited fun," he replied, and Jenny burst out laughing before Kell could translate, in either direction. That told him that the sages were learning English at a very fast rate.

Kell got to enjoy watching another dragon get poked and prodded, when the sages put Rika on the table and began their initial inspection of both her and the two humans, who were sitting on chairs on top of the table with her. Rika just kept talking, gabbing at the two humans, trying to get to know them. "The tethers have formed," the male sage declared. "The bonding is true. They have yet to start entwining. I theorize that that won't take place until all seventeen bonds are formed."

"Rika and her two humans will give us the chance to determine that," the other sage nodded. "Kell only had one human bonded to him, and then the other sixteen were formed within hours of each other. This gives us the opportunity to see how two formed bonds will behave." The female sage came around to face the three of them on the table and addressed them.

“Within the next two to four days, you are going to undergo the change,” she told them, Kell translating for her. “What you receive from the bond is renewed youth and vigor, and it will have an effect on your appearance. You will appear much as Jenny does, appearing much younger than you truly are. Exactly when this will happen, we cannot say, but do not be surprised when it does. And when it does, inform Imakaii immediately and they will send that on to us.”

“Over the next few weeks, young humans,” the male sage said to them, which Kell translated, “we want you to carefully observe yourselves both physically and mentally, both before and after the change. We’re still learning how this process works, so anything you notice will be helpful to our research. No change is too small or insignificant,” he stressed. “To fully understand the process and how it affects you, we need as much information as you can give us.”

“We can do that, most wise,” the brunette nodded, which Kell translated. “We can start keeping a journal.”

“Excellent,” he praised.

“Is there anything we should know about these bonds, most wise?” Strong asked. “Can Rika make us do things using it?”

“The bonds are passive, young humans,” the female sage told them. “She cannot control you, you cannot control her. They give each of you a boon, a blessing, based on the inherent magic of earth dragons, which is symbiosis. Earth dragons give of themselves and receive back a boon of equal value. You give to her magic to enable her to fly and use her racial magical abilities, and in return, she grants you youth and vigor. It is not about taking, or controlling. It is about *giving*. You give to her, she gives to you, and both of you benefit.”

“Huh,” the blond said, looking over at the young earth dragon. She put her hand on Rika’s shoulder fondly. “That sounds like a fair trade to me,” she told the earth drake.

“I think I get way more out of it, but I’m happy you like what you get,” she replied eagerly.

“You don’t know human women, Rika. Trust me, the idea of being young and beautiful for a hundred years is the best gift ever.”

Kell sighed and shook his head, and the two pilots laughed when Jenny elbowed his shoulder irritably.

“I’m quite pleased that both of you are female. We only have three bonded female humans available for examination and thirteen males, and that’s not enough of a pool for us to get definitive research on how the process affects human female biology. You two expanding the pool will give us much more accurate data to study.”

“You make magic sound like science, most wise,” Strong noted.

“It *is* a science, young one,” he said with a smile after hearing the translation. “We study it as diligently as human scientists study their chosen fields. And when you begin to learn magic, if you approach it as a science, you will learn it much more easily.”

“Now it sounds much more interesting,” Evers said. “I studied aeronautics and physics in college, and if magic is the same as science, I think I’ll learn it much faster.”

“Trust me, girls, you will,” Jenny said. “Magic has rules and laws, and while they’re not based on physics, they have *logic* to them. It really is like learning about science, just a science with its own unique rules. Once you start understanding how they’re different from physics, it gets easier.”

“Just so,” the sage nodded approvingly.

“Have they added you to the classes they teach at Imakaii?” the other sage asked.

“We start tomorrow,” Evers answered. “They wanted us to do this before they’d teach us,” she added, holding up the red spike in her hand.

Both of them had been carrying the spikes since they'd pulled them from Rika's tail.

"That's because the bond you hold with Rika connects you to our world as much as it does her," the sage answered after Kell translated. "I suspect that no human will be given instruction until they bind to an earth dragon, as proof that you are committed to be a responsible member of our society."

"What does being responsible entail?" Strong asked curiously.

"To uphold your duty to Gaia to learn as much about magic as possible," the female sage answered her before Kell could translate. "To honor her and her gift by using it responsibly and wisely. To represent the magical world to your people with dignity, so they might accept us. You are the children of Gaia, young humans," she told them proudly. "You carry her blessing, and your actions should honor her and her gift to you."

"Exactly who is Gaia?" Evers asked.

Jenny chuckled ruefully. "That's a bit hard to explain," she said. "In a way girls, she's the earth. As in the *planet*, not the ground. The dragons believe that our world has its own sentience, its own soul, and that is Gaia."

"Just so," the female sage nodded, which Kell translated. "Gaia is the power of life, the wellspring from which all life on our world comes. Magic is also the power of life, which we who are blessed by Gaia can access and control."

"So, she's like, a god or something?" Strong asked.

"A god, not *the* God," Jenny answered. "Or more to the point, she's a being of immense, god-like power performing the task God gave to her. The dragons revere Gaia, even worship her after a fashion, but even they acknowledge that *the* God is above her."

"Wow, you've been studying," Kell noted to her.

“I had to reconcile dragon teachings with my religion, Kell, of course I had to study,” she replied. “I see Gaia as one of God’s servants, like the angels, making sure things go the way He wants them to go. And some of the most obscure teachings in Christianity actually match up to what I’ve learned about Gaia, like how the souls of the dead will remain on Earth until Judgment day. They’re not sleeping in their graves, Gaia is taking care of them until God calls them to be judged. And the Christian concept of resurrection is the basis of the reincarnation of souls, just not quite the way that Christianity says it works. Instead of coming back to our own bodies, we return in new ones. I can see in those ancient writings the influence the dragons had on my religion, thousands of years ago, and how the church tried to change them after they turned against the dragons to remove reference to Gaia from their teachings.”

“You do us proud, Jenny,” the male sage said, which made her smile up at him.

“Wow, so most of what I learned in Catholic school is gonna get shook,” Evers chuckled.

“A little, but I don’t think you’ll have a crisis of the faith over it,” Jenny told her with a smile. “Just remember that when Jesus was born, the dragons were part of the world, and there very well may have been a dragon at the manger to welcome him. That was before they left for the island. Jesus lived in the world with dragons, in a world of magic, and nowhere in the bible can you find Jesus saying they’re bad, or evil. If he had, it’s a guarantee they’d have left those versus in after the church turned against the dragons.”

Kell gave Jenny a surprised look. She’d clearly *really* thought about this.

“Well reasoned, Jenny,” the female sage said approvingly.

“I have no idea what any of that means,” Rika said.

“You’re young, Rika, you haven’t been taught about things like that yet,” Jenny told her supportingly. “And we haven’t learned anywhere near enough about you! What’s it like on your farm?”

She went right back to talking, and everyone in the room learned all about life as a farmhand on one of the small farms in Red Valley Village, farms much more representative of an earth dragon farm. The farms in Dawnmist were all very large, with Keth’s being the largest and one of the largest farms on the island, where a more typical farm was only about a quarter of the size of his family’s farm. The farm owners were very kind, almost like parents to her, and she was a very rare only child, but had three other hatchlings around her age on the farm as friends and playmates, the children of the farm owners. She’d been born on a farm in Sea Spray village, but her parents had moved to the current farm not long after she was old enough to leave the brood chamber. Like many earth dragons, until they retreated to Sanctuary City, the farm was all she knew, it was her entire world and her entire life. Like many earth dragons, going to the city, learning new things, had changed her outlook, made her curious about the outside world, made her look beyond the farm. Because she was the child of farmhands, would probably never own a farm of her own, she’d gotten interested in the department after seeing what they’d done during the conflict with the other dragons.

By the time the exam was over, the two pilots knew quite a bit about their very young earth dragon. They were helped back down to the floor, and Kell approached them with Rika. “Guess we’ll be seeing you in three days?” he asked.

“Unless things change,” Captain Evers nodded. “We’ll be flying back as soon as we’re done here.”

“Flying...I can’t wait until I can do it!” Rika said, spreading her wings and tilting them back and forth as if she were in flight. “I can’t wait until they open the scion! I’ll be just like Kell, I’ll be able to fly and do magic! It’s gonna be so awesome!”

“One step at a time, Rika,” Kell told her. “Let’s get you ready first, so you don’t hurt yourself the first time you try. And there’s a lot you need to learn before you can control your magic.”

“I want to learn!” she said eagerly. “Everything you can teach me!”

“That’s the kind of enthusiasm I expect out of my dragon,” Captain Evers told her with a smile, putting her hand on Rika’s neck. “We’ll see you when we do the next supply run, okay Rika?”

“I’ll be waiting!” she bubbled.

Sky dragons carried the two pilots and Jenny off the aerie, leaving Kell and Rika with the sages. “Alright, then, Rika. If you want to learn, let’s get started,” Kell said as they walked back towards the sages. “There are things I can teach you about our magic before you can do it. Hopefully, it’ll help you master it faster than I did.”

25 October 2017, 10:47 DMT; Dawnmist Village

This was the day.

Quite a few earth dragons were watching from a safe distance as a large congregation of dragons of all four of the other species were gathering around a stone platform built not far from both Keth’s farm and the entrance to Sanctuary City. Today, they were going to create a new scion. The conditions were nearly perfect for casting the spell, and the presence of a multitude of imbued fetishes and familiars, they hoped, would take a big bite out of the effort it was going to take to do it.

This was high order magic. This was the kind of magic that required 247 dragons working on concert, and the effort would exhaust them. And for a spell like this, it would require all four magic-using species of dragon to enact. The scion was primarily a spell of change, so it required sky dragons. But it was also a spell of scrying, the scrying element required to

allow them to properly aim the scion at a new location when its terminus was moved, which required chromatics. The act of piercing time and space to create a portal in the initial casting required fire dragon invocation magic, and to make the magical portal stable, safe to use, required the protective magicks of the water dragons. The most skilled and most powerful of the elders of the four races were gathered around where the scion was going to be placed, and Kell was proud beyond measure to see Surral among them as one of the 27 water dragon elders that would enact their part of the ritual. Around the elders were other dragons that would lend their magical strength to the primary casters of the spell.

Kell had his place in this ritual, in two ways. Firstly, it was one of his tail spikes that would serve as the spell's focus, the crystal to which the complex and powerful spell would be locked, and yesterday the sages had spent nearly six hours carefully studying his 17 spikes to pick the best one to use. Secondly, he would be there to further help empower the other dragons by granting them the magic of his aura, reducing the drain on them by constantly supplying the magic they were using, just like the younger dragons. He would, in effect, be a battery to power their magic. In that respect, he wasn't the only earth dragon that would participate. Four other earth dragons would assist as well; Kammi, Jirran, Trekka, and Girk. The other four field agents were chosen because of their discipline and ability to follow orders and not disrupt the ritual. Each of them would stand in the center of the elders of a species, and Girk was chosen to stand with the sky dragons. Kammi would stand with the water dragons, Jirran with the fire dragons, and Trekka with the chromatics. Kell would stand in the center, and his aura would cover the four primary casters, the main shapers of the spell, Trejem, an elder sky drake named Pelara, Hirrag, and a water wrym elder named Thren Pelara and Thren were more skilled at this kind of magic than their council members, so they were the ones selected to control the spell on behalf of their race..

Because of the use of earth dragons in the ritual, Jenny and Greg weren't allowed to witness the casting. They were a bit sulky about it, but bought the explanation from the sages that they might represent an

unknown factor that could possibly destabilize the casting. Magic had many obscure rules, and the sages were going with *your very presence as human beings might upset the spell as an insulating fetish*. They weren't in their house, they and Davie were out on an expedition with some of the younger sky dragons and water dragons, taking them over to Gaia's Talons for a little sightseeing, getting them well away from the island.

So, Kell and his field agent comrades found themselves standing in the middle of a circle of the strongest and most skilled magicians of the four other dragon races, and the tip of Kell's tail spike was planted in the stone platform where the scion would be anchored, standing upright and already cleansed of stray magical emanations by the sages and ready to accept the spell about to be locked to it. They were waiting now, waiting until precisely 11:01am to begin the ritual, which was the peak of some magical cycle that would make casting the spell give the best result.

"Is everyone prepared?" Trejem asked, standing in his place of honor in the center of a throng of chromatics, and Prisma had earned a place... almost with them. She stood just behind them, one of the dragons that would lend them power as they cast the spell. But that was still a high honor for a chromatic that had yet to even finish school. When the others called in assent, the four primary controllers of the spell stepped forward, surrounding Kell. They had to step carefully around the many fetishes and familiars laid out on the stone platform, each carefully placed in a specific location so as to have maximum effect, and each one Kell had handled over the last two weeks, imbuing them with his earth dragon magic to enhance their beneficial effect on the spell..

That was the other reason he was selected to be in the middle. It was his magic imbuing the fetishes and familiars, and since they were linked to him, they wanted him in the middle, granting the four primary shapers of the spell his aura.

"Are you ready, Kell?" Trejem asked.

“I won’t really be doing anything but staying quiet and not breaking your concentration, esteemed council member,” he said dismissively. “But yes, I’m ready to do that.”

The other elders stepped behind the four primary casters, and everyone made sure they were where they were supposed to be as a sage kept careful watch on a small crystal disc he held in his paws, which would tell them when to begin the spell. The entire host went silent as they waited, each dragon preparing himself or herself mentally for the task ahead. The four primary casters sat on the base of his tail and took a vertical base. Kell followed suit, opening his wings a bit to keep the tips from scratching across the stone beneath him, going over what the sages told him about this. It would take them about a half an hour to complete the spell, what they called a ritual, where each group of dragons would take command of the spell to do their part, first the sky dragons working alone, then the chromatics working alone, then the sky dragons and chromatics working together, then all both of them would work together with the fire dragons, then the water dragons and chromatics would complete the spell. The first stages of the ritual were about preparing the spell to be cast, then when the fire dragons were brought in, the actual spell itself would be cast to form the scion. That was when the spell would become visible. The water dragons and chromatics would then finish the final aspects of the spell, and the chromatics would lock the spell to his tail spike. Once the spell was locked, that was it, the scion could be used.

They waited for long moments in silence, to the point where he was nearly startled when the sage watching the disc called out. “It is time! Begin!” he boomed.

Kell couldn’t see anything, but...but he could *feel* it. He could feel the magic around him, feel it as the sky dragons elders began casting the first stage of the spell, felt the elders each take a part of the burden and allow Pelara to guide the overall shaping of the magic. He could feel the power build, shiver through his aura.

It was the power of life, granted to the dragons from Gaia, and he could feel that power resonate in his aura, resonate through his very soul.

He almost instinctively *connected* to the magic, like it was a plant, and caused it to be affected by his aura of life energy by supplying it with his own life energy. The effect was amplifying the power of the spell, as if Pelara were a microphone, he an audio amplifier, and the spell was a speaker.

He made the spell *grow*.

He heard every dragon around him gasp, Pelara nearly lose control of the spell and recoil physically as Kell raised his forepaws and connected to the spell, which increased its power by a significant amount.

“Do not lose it, Pelara!” Trejem suddenly shouted.

“What goes on?” Hirrag demanded. “Kell, what did you do!”

“He’s affecting the spell itself like it’s a plant!” Trejem told the massive fire wyrm in sudden excitement. “He’s empowering the spell to make it easier for us to cast, easing the burden on us! He’s *amplifying* our own magic! Pelara, work with it!”

“I see!” she declared eagerly. “I can see how he’s doing it!”

His eyes closed, Kell tuned them out as he concentrated on the magic that surrounded him. He could feel it flow, feel it be shaped, feel it move, and he remained connected to it, emotionally and magically, granting it his power as if it were a plant he intended to make grow. He was unable to control the magic himself, but what he could do was feed it, give the life energy which constituted it some of his own. He became aware of light, dimly aware that the light was radiating from his horns.

“He has stabilized his aura!” Trejem barked. “Pelara!”

“Hold your aura steady, Kell!” she called. “Keep it steady!”

He didn't reply, he sat there and concentrated on the magic, felt it when the chromatics took command of it so they could do their part, add in the scrying elements necessary to properly aim the scion. He could feel Trejem through his connection to the magic, and then moments later, he felt Hirrag and the fire dragons join the spell, as they, the chromatics, and the sky dragons performed the actual magic that caused the scion to form. Behind him, the tail spike embedded in the platform rose up into the air and flared with brilliant light, and then a magical vortex swirled into existence around it, the spike vanishing within the magical energy. He then felt Thren and the water dragons take over, assisted by the chromatics, performing the last parts of the ritual to stabilize the vortex, make it safe to use. He then felt the chromatics seal the spell to his tail spike, and when they did that, the spell *disconnected* from him, established a permanent connection to the tail spike, and became self-sustaining as the scion automatically drew the magic it needed through his tail spike rather than through the dragons that cast the spell. The sudden loss of the spell scattered him for a moment, made him drop back down on all fours and shake his head as if shrugging off a blow.

He was almost mugged by chromatic elders and sages as they swarmed around him, nearly ecstatic at what he had done. "Why did we never see this before?" Trejem asked. "We've used magic around him since the day he bonded the humans to him, and this has never happened before!"

"We've never tried to have him affect *magic*," the sage replied. "I never even considered the possibility!"

"I...I helped?" Kell asked woozily.

"You can't imagine how much you helped, Kell!" Trejem told him in excitement. "If not for you, right now I'd be so exhausted I could barely move! I'm too tired to cast spells right now, but you definitely took a significant part of the burden off of us!"

"That's...nice," he said, then his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed onto the platform.

“Kell!” Surrall said in sudden fear, pushing other dragons out of the way to reach his young friend’s side, beating Kammi and the three other earth drakes to him by about two steps. He put two fingers down on the side of his neck and used a spell of assessment, a water dragon spell that determined the cause of maladies and located injuries hidden from the eyes. It was a healing spell, and as such, only water dragons and chromatics could use it.

“Patriarch?” Kammi asked. “Is he okay?”

“He’s completely exhausted, but otherwise unhurt,” he answered. “He needs rest. Lots of rest. He’ll be unable to do much of anything for several days, until he can recover his strength. We need to get him to his sleeping mound, right now, indoors, in a controlled environment to take as much strain off his body as possible.”

“He shouldered the burden,” one of the sages said. “The drain that should have left all of us laying on the platform was carried by *him*.”

“Such a beautiful irony Gaia has placed on our earth dragons cousins,” another sage said. “Unable to use magic themselves, but able to amplify the magic used by others. It would almost seem cruel, in a way.”

“Gaia has a design, but we cannot see it,” Trejem said as Surrall and the four earth drakes carefully picked Kell up of the stone platform. “Perhaps in return for that sacrifice, Gaia has given to them a boon we have yet to discover. And I hope it is something truly special,” he added, looking at them as they pushed through the crowd, carrying Kell away.

“This must be studied,” a sage said. “The implications, the potential, it is considerable. The presence of an empowered earth dragon may allow us to use high order magic even at unfavorable times. As it stands, I believe we could create a second scion within a matter of days with the earth drake’s assistance. His aura of life energy will counter the ebb of magic in the waning phase of the cycle.”

“Within reason,” Jussa said as he stepped up to them. “If *that* is the result of an earth dragon’s aid...I would prefer not to ask it of them,” he added, pointing at the unconscious earth drake as the water drake and his intended carried him in the direction of his burrow, trying to go as quickly as they could without jostling him. The chromatic youth Prisma floated over them and picked him up with her powerful floating magic, and hurried towards his burrow with the five of them running after her. “It is unseemly to demand that the earth dragons give more of themselves than we are willing to give ourselves.”

“Truly,” Trejem agreed. “But still...maybe we *should* have seen this. Magic is the energy of life, as is an earth dragon’s innate magical ability. Kell radiates an aura of life energy when he’s not tamping it down, and it affected the spell as we cast it, since magic is the energy of life. He, he boosted the spell, amplified it, by giving it his own life energy. He can’t shape the magic himself, but he can supply the energy to another and have them do it for him. It’s like another expression of an earth dragon’s aura, the aura of magic they radiate that empowers us and allows us to use magic. Just on a more direct level.”

“An *active* level,” a sage speculated. “He was actively using his innate ability to boost the spell. Instead of affecting a plant, he affected the spell itself. Astounding,” he breathed. “That was why we haven’t seen this before. He’s never tried to empower a spell the way he empowers a plant to make it grow. Clearly, we have been lacking in our research.”

“The research will have to wait, most wise, until he is recovered,” Trejem said. “I don’t want him doing *anything* until he is fully recovered, and we’re completely sure that there were no lingering effects from this.”

The sage nodded silently. “But one thing is for certain. We must explore this, research this, and that means that empowering more earth dragons is our most important task. Kell’s ability may be unique, or a fluke, and we need more research subjects. With the scion open, we can now start that process.”

“I will speak to Jenny and tell her to convince President Walker to devote more resources to their operation to assist the human magicians, that we will begin the process in earnest as soon as his people are ready.”

1 November 2017, 13:26 DMT; Dawnmist Village

He felt...awful.

He wasn't entirely sure when he became aware again, but one thing he was certain of was that he was stiff, he was sore, and he had a massive, massive headache. He also felt like he'd run for ten days straight without rest, so tired that he almost felt like he couldn't move. He could tell that he was laying on his side on something soft, that smelled of earth and grass, one wing laying on the ground behind him and the other folded over his side like a blanket. He could smell earth, stone, grass, and crops, like the smell of the farm when the crops were in the fields and close to harvest, and he could hear the distant sound of one of the ventilation fans...the sound of it telling him he was in his burrow. He knew that fan, it was the one he could hear in the sleeping chamber.

So, he was in his burrow, on his sleeping mound. But how did he get here?

The last thing he remembered, they were doing the spell to create the scion. He remembered that...that he'd gotten entangled in it somehow, that he'd become *part* of the spell, and then...blackness.

He hoped he hadn't ruined the spell somehow.

It took real effort to open his eyes, taking in a deep breath, and found himself staring at the thick stalk of some kind of vine. It was growing just centimeters from his eyes, and seeing it made him dimly aware that his aura was radiating uncontrolled. His aura must have become uncontrolled while

he was asleep, which made the plants grow amok around him. And if he was in his burrow...yikes.

He shakily raised his head and found himself laying in a depression in the sleeping mound that was filled with grasses, flowers, and vines, some so high that they grew up over his body, partially concealing him within them. He heard some kind of gong go off elsewhere in the burrow, and seconds later, Kammi charged into the sleeping chamber and vaulted up onto the top of the mound. "Kell!" she said in a frenzy of concern. "Oh, Kell! Are you okay? How do you feel?" she asked, nuzzling him urgently.

"Exhausted," he replied weakly. "What happened?"

She laughed ruefully. "Just you being you, intended," she smiled down at him, then nuzzled him again. "Now can you please do me a favor and tamp down a little bit? I've been working non-stop to keep the plants from taking over the burrow."

He chuckled weakly. "I must have been completely out of it, then. I must have been unconscious, not just asleep."

"For six days," she told him seriously.

"Six days? What the hell happened?"

"Well, for one, we found out that we can affect more than living things with our aura," she replied, sitting down beside him and cutting down the stalk with her claw. "They've figured out that we can affect spells cast by more than one dragon, what they call ritual magic," she explained. "We can't affect spells cast by one dragon, but if two or more dragons work together on a spell too powerful for either to cast by herself, we can affect that spell with our aura, amplify it, supply it directly with magic to boost its power and let the dragons cast it with much less effort. Oh, and you're not the only empowered earth dragon anymore," she grinned, then she rather victoriously brought her tail around and showed him a series of half-grown nubs rather than full grown tail spikes. "There are four of us now. You, Rika, some rancher drake from Longrass Village, and me."

“What, seriously?”

“Seriously!” she said with a bright smile. “They drew my number yesterday, drew it in front of everyone, and I bonded my humans just last night! My magic should become active in a couple of days! Believe me, it’s the only thing that could have made me leave the burrow,” she told him with a loving smile.

“There is no way you got that lucky,” he accused.

“Are you accusing me of cheating, intended?” she asked, an edge to her voice.

“You? No. But I think the sage that drew the number was up to some shenanigans.”

“Even if he was, everyone bought it,” she winked. “Nobody complained, everyone says I won fair and square. They saw him pull my number out of the box, and then Anthra read my name out of the book.”

He gave her a long look, and she burst out laughing. “Gaia, I hope nobody realizes they cheated,” he sighed, putting his head back down. “And I wonder what made them decide to change their minds about not allowing anyone to get empowered that might arouse suspicion.”

“No idea, when my number was drawn, chief didn’t say a word. If they changed their minds, they didn’t tell us why,” she said. “So, we’re going to be together again, intended,” she smiled at him, putting her paw on his neck. “When it wakes up, you’re going to teach me how to use my magic. Hopefully you’ll be recovered by then.”

“Well, that tells me the scion is up,” he noted.

“Yup,” she nodded. “And the humans have done a pretty good job securing the cooperation of the magicians in Everett. We have four empowered dragons already, and another will be empowered today. They’re holding the drawing just after lunch.”

“Did you fly?”

“About twenty meters, and I crashed hard,” she said, making a face that made him chuckle softly. “You weren’t kidding, intended, flying is *hard*. Hinado says I don’t have the wing strength yet to fly more than a couple of minutes at a time, but they’re going to work with me as I build up my wings so I know what I’m doing when they’re strong enough.” She made a face. “Not like *fucking* Rika,” she said, using the English swear word because no parallel existed in draconic. “That little jerk is already flying around!”

“She’s so small, her wings don’t have to lift as much weight,” Kell realized. “I guess it scales down disproportionately.”

“And her wings were pretty strong to start off with, because you know how hatchlings love to rough-house,” she snorted. “Seems she learned this trick of using her wings as anchors in tug of war, and it made them pretty strong.”

“So...you bonded humans. What are they like?”

“A diverse bunch,” she answered. “A couple of teenagers, eighteen and nineteen, a couple of elderly humans. One’s an executive for Microsoft, and seven of them are college graduates,” she answered. “One of them is a math professor at U-Dub. I get the feeling that I’m going to like my little coven. The Americans have already started the relocation process for them.”

“How hard will that be for them?”

“Not too hard,” she answered. “They’re not moving them across the country, just into a new house or apartment in Everett, to places where people don’t know their faces. Yeah, they all had to quit their jobs or get assigned to a different city if they stay with the same company, they can’t really hang out with their friends anymore, but they’re not complaining too much. The Microsoft exec got transferred to a facility in Tacoma, which isn’t too far away from Everett, and the math professor is taking a new teaching job at another university in Seattle. So yeah, it disrupted their lives a little bit, but the government’s doing what they can to make it as minimal as possible. They’ve even got the Hunters involved, they’re running a little

side operation that goes in and replaces all photos of our humans with updated ones once they change, so if anyone looks them up on the internet, they see the new faces, not the old. But they've gotta wipe their Facebook and Instagram of all selfies, and that made my two teenagers a bit mad," she laughed.

"What about their families?"

"That's the only real sticky part. My humans can't really hide the change from their families, so they have to be told. The government's already warned them that if they start spreading it, they'll get arrested for divulging state secrets. But even with that threat, you know it's not gonna stay secret forever."

"Barely more than a few months," Kell reasoned, to which she nodded in agreement.

"What they're doing, though, is looking for new magicians within those families, you know, to keep it in the family," she told him. "Like my math professor. Turns out his sister is a magician too, so she's going to be bonded to the earth dragon they pick today. Prisma said that according to history, magical ability is hereditary, so the best place to look for new magicians is in the family trees of our current ones, which should keep them from talking."

"I'm glad to hear it. And cheating or not, I'm happy you're empowered, intended," he told her. "Now I don't feel like there's something separating us."

"Aww, I love you too, intended," she smiled warmly at him, patting his neck. "Now, you need to go back to sleep, and let me clean up the burrow again," she frowned. "I have to tell the council and the sages that you've finally woken up as well. They'll send a water dragon healer in here to give you a once over, and he'll report your condition to the council. Essan and Geon are the only ones that can come this deep in the burrow."

“My condition will be asleep,” he yawned. “I’m so tired I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“The sages said that that’s normal, and nothing to worry about. You just exhausted yourself, intended, and need lots of sleep to recover. They said that now that you’ve woken up, you’ll be back on your feet in a day or two. I’ll have some food waiting for you when you wake up again.”

“Good, because I think I’ll be hungry by then,” he said, closing his eyes. And barely two seconds later, he was asleep again.

Chapter 29

4 November 2017, 04:26 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It was the first time in over a week he'd left the burrow...but he didn't remember much of it.

Padding up the ramp and to the edge of the opening, Kell took a deep breath and looked up into the predawn sky. The world was colored in the hues of heat to his thermographic vision, the grass and crops and earth colored in vibrant shades of greens, blues, yellows, and oranges. The reds and yellows of his family and the farmhands were visible in the distance as they tended the pre-dawn chores, getting everything done so they'd have time for their morning exercises. This was a scene playing out on every farm on the island, as the earth dragons started their day well before sunrise every morning. By the time the other dragons awoke, earth dragons had already been active for hours. It was a good thing that earth dragons didn't need to sleep nearly as much as the other dragon species seemed to, else there wouldn't be enough time in the day to get all the work done.

He still felt a little tired, but to be honest, he was sick of being stuck in the burrow. The water drake healer that had visited the last couple of days had proclaimed that he was recovered enough to get back to his normal routine—though he was supposed to take it easy today—and he was more than happy to do just that. Earth dragons did *not* like to be idle, it tended to drive them crazy, so that made earth dragons probably *the worst* patients a doctor would ever have to deal with. Telling an earth dragon to just lay on their sleeping mound and do nothing were very nearly fighting words.

He hadn't been completely lazy yesterday. Chief had sent him some data to go over from China, and that was something he could do laying on

the sleeping mound using one of his larger tablets. That was technically resting, and it kept his mind occupied as he studied a series of reports snatched from their government network about the bad state of things in the country.

China was in serious trouble. The civil unrest triggered by the loss of censor controls on their intranet had gotten worse over the last week. They were still struggling to clear things up and restore their controls, mainly because several protesters with hacking skills had seen the holes in the Chinese system exposed by the dragons, and had also picked apart the code of the attack programs they'd used to disable the spyware and hijack the system and were starting to modify it to counter government programmers' attempts to purge it from the system. The dissidents had taken over where the dragons left off and were trying to keep the censor filters down, keep their spyware down so they could plan over the intranet without government interference. And the battles between dissidents and the government weren't limited to cyberspace. Just two days ago, a riot had erupted in the city of Zhangzhou, and reports were that nearly 16,000 were killed when an all-out battle between soldiers and protestors raged in the streets. It started when soldiers opened fire on a group of protesters and killed several dozen children, and that so inflamed and infuriated many in the city that a massive swarm of over 100,000 attacked the soldiers using anything they could get their hands on before the soldiers could withdraw. The protesters managed to take a large number of the guns that the soldiers had been using, and they used them on the soldiers.

The military's response to that said everything that needed be said about China's government, and why they were going to lose control very soon. A government like that only understood terror and force. They were incapable of talking to the dissidents, negotiating, the only thing they could understand, the only thing they were capable of doing, was to keep killing people until the survivors were too afraid to say a word. They were sending a full military battalion of soldiers to Zhangzhou with orders to *pacify* the city. That meant that they'd kill anyone on the streets, shoot at anything that moved, until the city was under full military control and the survivors too

terrified to come out of their houses. And once they had control, the purge of dissidents from the city would begin, in the form of sham military tribunals, executions, and lots of mass graves.

That was just one of China's problems. They were still struggling to restore the censor filters and spyware that controlled their intranet, now fighting against dissident hackers, and their military computer network was still in complete shambles from the bomb program the other team had set off on them. They were at the point where their techs were combing the public data archives that held their own military secrets along with every other intelligence operation on the planet to see how much had been exposed, what the world knew and where they could start trying to pick up the pieces.

Then there was what was going in the government itself. Their Politburo was at war with itself as the daggers came out, as everyone was trying to blame someone else for the debacle, and there was going to be a lot of blood on the floor until things settled down. So far, the biggest casualty had been the President, who had been arrested by the Politburo three days ago, removed from office, and replaced by some moron that wasn't going to last two months.

With that one operation, between the earth dragons and the sky dragons, they'd effectively removed China as a threat. Government officials were now too worried about getting beaten to death in the streets by protesters to try to send another military invasion to the island.

A small island with only about sixteen thousand inhabitants had brought one of the most powerful nations on earth to its knees, and did it in a matter of *weeks*.

One thing was for certain...the rest of the countries were taking the dragons *very* seriously now. They'd seen what the combination of earth dragon technical savvy and magic could do when used together, and they feared it. Actually, they'd seen it in the water dragon attack on the Chinese fleet, but the attack on Beijing was much more visible and much more

frightening. Sinking a few dozen ships in a squall was nowhere near as impressive as parking a typhoon over one of the major cities of the world and pounding it into submission with deadly winds and driving rain. But more than that, the earth dragon attack on China's computer network had made the entire world sit up and take notice...and put the department at the top of their lists of major threats in the intelligence community.

Kammi came up the ramp behind him and stopped beside him, looking over at him with an eager expression. In one respect, this was a new world for them, because any time now, maybe today, maybe tomorrow, Kammi's magic was going to manifest. It took some time after the bonds were formed for it to show up, after all the bonds braided together to form that singular entity the sages talked about, and Kammi was right about there. She'd told him that the two earth drakes empowered before her had had their magic manifest, and now that Kell was recovered, he'd be training them. And with luck, he'd be training Kammi as well by this afternoon.

In a visit, Essan had more or less admitted that they'd cheated with Kammi, but their reasoning had been quite flattering. They'd cheated with Kammi for two reasons; for one, because she was a field agent and was actually a fairly good teacher, and they felt they needed a second competent teacher to move things along. For the other, she was empowered as a further reward to Kell for his service to the council. They felt that empowering his intended mate was one way they could show their regard for him, help keep the peace between him and his intended, and provide the sages with a all-but-mated pair to study to see if two empowered earth dragons living together changed anything. So, Kammi's empowerment was half gift, half experiment...but he didn't care. He was just happy that she was given what she wanted.

There were six of them now. Two more earth dragons had been empowered since he woke up, and curiously enough, both of them were wyrms. One was very young, a little older than Kell, and the other was a mature adult, a farm owner up in Sungrass Village on the northeast shore of the island, which was about as far from Dawnmist as one could get and keep one's feet dry. The earth drake bonded after Rika and before Kammi

was a farmhand about Keth's age named Linno, so that gave them two older dragons and four younger ones that were empowered so far, four drakes and two wyrms.

And from what Essan had said, the sages had been both studying and teaching Rika and Linno while Kell was laid up, had helped them gain control of their auras using what they'd learned with Kell and taught them the basics of their magic. Kell would teach them the more advanced tricks that he'd learned so far, and all of them would continue to practice, to see what else they could do, while the sages studied everything they did and everything about them. He wasn't surprised that Rika had control of her magic, since Kell had worked with her for nearly a week before he got laid up...and he couldn't deny that he liked the energetic youngling. She was tireless, curious, maybe a touch too mischievous for the sages to entirely appreciate, and enthusiastic about everything she did, displaying the overflowing energy common in earth dragon young. Half the reason parents put their hatchlings to work so early was to keep them busy, to burn up some of that endless energy, and keep them out of trouble.

There was probably nothing more dangerous on the island, maybe even the entire world, than a clutch of bored earth dragon hatchlings.

It was not a joking matter, however. It was those aspects of earth dragon hatchlings that had killed Kell's two brothers. The greatest danger earth dragon hatchlings faced after leaving the brood chamber was themselves.

"Today just may be the day, intended," Kammi said in a quiet yet eager tone, her voice hushed to match the stillness of the predawn morning. The grass was wet from an overnight shower, and the mist that gave the village its name was banked out over the cove and ocean and rolling in, reducing the range of their vision as it swirled in from the cove and swept over the burrow entrance. The mists that dominated the south coast of the island were much more prevalent after the rainy season, when a change in the seasonal winds made conditions favorable for it to form. January through

March, the south and southeast sides of the island were covered in fog nearly every morning.

“Who knows, maybe it is,” he replied. “You’d better not embarrass the department by taking longer to learn how to control it than Linno and Rika.”

He chuckled when she whacked him with her tail.

A small sky drake descended over them, moving slowly and carefully in the light fog and with a bright magical light guiding him down. It was Irago, coming to a stop over them. “Morning,” he said. “Ready, Kammi?”

“Ready,” she replied eagerly, and the drake put his paw down on her back and lifted her off the ground. “I can’t wait til you don’t have to do this anymore, Irago!”

“Me either, I have to collect the other earth drake after you. This is turning into a chore,” he noted.

“Can you even pick up the wyrms?” Kell asked before Irago got too far away to use a normal voice.

“No, they’re too big,” he replied. “A sky wyrm is going to do that.”

Kell turned towards the cove and vaulted off the bluff overlooking the ocean, opened his wings, and then pulled himself into the air. He was almost proud of himself as he performed a banking ascent over the cove without crashing, circling around and starting to ascend, putting himself on a vector that would allow him to get to the top of the volcano. Irago followed behind him, knowing better than to crowd him or get in his way since he was still learning flight skills. But he certainly felt it barely halfway up the volcano, felt the effort and fought near exhaustion as he ascended, and nearly sighed in relief when he leveled out over the peak of the ridge and lined up to reach the Library of Eternity. He landed on the aerie holding the large building, flapping his wings a couple of times before folding them as Irago set Kammi down beside him. And Kell was almost shocked to see little Rika land about ten meters down from them...though it

was technically only a landing in that she was no longer flying. The little drake overshot the edge of the aerie, hit with her front legs instead of her back legs, then twisted sideways and rolled in a tangle of legs and wings all the way to the wall. She laughed after coming to a stop and sorted herself out, then shook herself as if shaking off water before folding her wings back again.

“At least that was more dignified than yesterday, Rika,” Kammi said playfully.

“I know, I’m getting better!” she said brightly, which made Irigo roll his eyes. “Flying is so much fun! And it’s great to see you back, Kell! I’ve missed you!”

“I’m surprised you can fly at all,” Kell noted.

She laughed. “I know, the sky dragons and sages are surprised too. I can’t fly for more than a couple of minutes before I get tired, but I can do it long enough to get here from my burrow. The hard part is getting up this high, then it’s just flying in a straight line. I can fly straight pretty good, it’s just when I have to turn that I have problems,” she said, which made both Kell and Kammi chuckle.

“That sounds familiar,” Kammi grinned.

“Tell me about it,” Kell nodded. “And you need to work on landing.”

“I can’t slow down very well,” she laughed. “I can’t figure it out.”

“Since when does an earth dragon youngling slow down?” Kammi asked sagely as the door to the library opened.

Irigo went off to fetch the last of the drakes, and two sky wyrms carried in the earth wyrms. One was considerably larger than the other, and Kell realized it was Ferl, one of the largest earth dragons alive. He was only a little smaller than Anthra, and was the farm owner wyrm Kammi told him about. Kell had dealt with Ferl before on behalf of the farm. The other wyrm was a young adult female, not much older than Kell, but over twice

as large, more in line with the average size of an earth wyrm. Kell also knew her name, Tethri, having met her when they were all down in Sanctuary City. Tethri had a lifemate and hatchlings of her own despite being so young, and her family had dug their burrow in the city in the same passageway Kell's family did, so they were neighbors of a sort. Tethri was from a farmhand family much as Rika and Linno were, though Linno's family were ranchers rather than farmers. They'd worked on one of the larger ranches in Longrass Village, which was fairly close to Dawnmist, with the largest herd of cattle on the island...before the sky dragons destroyed the ranch and killed all the cattle. Now they were working the farm that had been built where the ranch pastures once stood, weeding crops rather than herding cows. But like about any earth dragon, they knew how to work a farm.

"Tethri! You won the draw?" Kell asked as she advanced towards them.

"I did, Kell, good to see you," she smiled down at him, bumping forepaws with him.

"I had no idea it was you who won, Tethri!" Kammi greeted her. "How you been since we left the city?"

"We're on a new farm now, and it's good," she replied. "They're drakes, though, so we had to dig a new burrow," she said with a bit of a face. "All of us moved into it and the farm owners turned the old burrow into storage. They like the new one, it has way more space," she chuckled. "They had the chance to make a really big, nice burrow with us helping dig it out."

Kell laughed. "Few drake burrows are dug out with wyrms in mind," he said. "Ferl, good to see you. How is your farm now?"

"Fully recovered, Kell, thank you for asking," he replied in his deep, strong voice. "We should have our first harvest of eggplants in soon. They do well in the rainy season, and they grow fast enough."

“This is my first day here, so, how does this work?” Tethri asked. “The sages weren’t all that specific.”

“It’s a little boring at first, then it gets fun!” Rika answered. “First they do their exams, you know, looking for things, and they ask a bunch of weird questions, then after all that’s done, we get to practice using magic!”

“Yours won’t show up for several days, so you’ll be learning about how it works before you can use it,” Kell told her.

“I got my magic while you were away, Kell!” Rika told him exuberantly. “So did Linno! The sages already taught us how to tamp it down, but they said you’ll teach us how to make plants grow!”

“I’ll do my best,” he told her as Irigo returned, surprisingly quickly, carrying Linno. Because Long Grass Village was so close to Dawnmist, Kell had met Linno a few times when buying cows from the ranch on which he worked, and Linno had come to the farm a few times with the ranch owner, Harva, to barter for the hay they grew on the fallow fields and the border strips that separated the tracts

The connections of his family were one reason why Ferroth had hired Kell for the department in the first place. A farm owner like Keth knew a whole lot of other dragons, and Ferroth was savvy enough to cultivate a connection to a drake with that many connections of his own.

“You’re looking good, Kell,” Linno said as Irigo set him down.

“Still feel a bit tired, but I’ll be alright. I couldn’t stand just sitting around the burrow anymore,” he replied. “When are you guys going to convert your land back to a ranch?”

“Hopefully in the middle of next year, once we build up enough of a food reserve. Believe me, I’d rather be managing herds than tending corn,” he grunted.

“What’s this? An earth dragon that doesn’t like to farm?” Kammi asked playfully.

“Don’t you work in the department, Kammi?” he countered, which made her laugh.

“It’s time to begin,” one of the sages called from the open door.

It was a fairly momentous day for Kell, because now instead of being here alone or only with Rika, he was part of a group, and all of them were the same as him. He was no longer unique, he was no longer the only one, and for an earth dragon, that made him feel much better. Earth dragons considered themselves part of a group before considering themselves as individuals, always part of a family, or part of a work group. They were, by far, the most social of all the dragon races, having lived in villages where multiple family units existed in close proximity to one another since long before they came to the island, something that only the water dragons displayed in their organization into pods. But before the island, water dragon pods didn’t live close to each other, where earth dragon families did. So, being part of this new group, the group of empowered earth dragons, made him feel much better, like he was no longer isolated from the others, no longer alone.

And thank Gaia for the decision of the council to put Kammi within it.

As they did their morning examinations, they found out that their group would grow again. They were going to draw another name this afternoon, just before the evening allotments, because the government workers in Everett had secured the cooperation of 17 more human magicians, and that meant another earth dragon would be empowered. Kell wasn’t surprised. Really, he could imagine the human magician screaming consent the instant after they heard that what they got out of the deal was 100 years of guaranteed youth and vigor, and a potential lifespan that might stretch 200 more years, given that they’d still be young when they started aging again, and very well might live 100 more years if they took care of themselves. And for someone like Yancy, who was 63 when he was bonded and now had 100 years of youth ahead of him before he started aging again, his lifespan might reach 260 years when all was said and done.

After exams, Kell now had two active students to teach. He explained how their magic worked to the group as they all listened, but was focusing mainly on Rika and Linno, since their magic had manifested. They'd learned how to tamp down their auras, so the first thing Kell taught them was how to voluntarily affect plants, how to control the aura and how their magic was tied to their emotional attachment to what they wanted to affect. And just like him, Rika and Linno seemed to catch onto the idea of it fairly quickly. Linno was able to selectively affect only what he wanted after only about two hours of practice, and Rika managed it about an hour after that. They spent the rest of the morning practicing affecting the plants that the sages supplied to them as Kell worked with the two wyrms and Kammi, explaining how it *felt* to use the magic and how he controlled it.

By the end of the training session, Kammi got her wish. The sages examined her again just before they were going to finish for the day and proclaimed that her magic was active, that her aura was just beginning to manifest. They kept her there to examine the process of her aura forming, since they caught it early enough, and the others went on to their flight training while Kell sat beside the table and watched on with some amusement as Kammi got her turn being the lab rat.

“This is so awesome! So, when will it be at full power?” she asked.

“It should be so within the hour,” the sage replied. “It manifests quickly once the process begins. Kell, you need to teach her how to control it.”

“We can work on it after she finishes her flight instruction,” he nodded.

Since there were six of them now, more sky dragons were involved in the training...but Faralla was dedicated to the idea of teaching Kell to fly, so it was the council member that came to fetch him for the next phase of his daily training. But he brought Kammi along with them to teach her himself, carrying her as they flew out to Gaia's Talons, his favorite place to fly around. Once there, Faralla taught Kammi the basics as he observed Kell's practice, and Kell got to see Kammi fly for the first time as he

perched on one of the formations and watched his mate. He had the sense not to laugh when she only managed to fly about five seconds before losing control and crashing into the water, because he'd been there himself not even a month ago. Flying was hard, it was incredibly hard, and he was more impressed that she managed to keep herself steady that long rather than laugh at how bad she was at it.

She was the one who laughed when she surfaced, erupting from the water with some velocity, digging her claws into the side of the rock face when she landed on the side of it, and started climbing back up. "Where did I go wrong, Faralla?"

"You overcorrected when you started listing to the left," he replied. "Remember that there's nothing anchoring you, and that even the smallest move you make is going to affect your flight. Correct only enough to *almost* return to center, and allow your inertia to bring you back to center as you stabilize. If you try to correct to center, you actually overcorrect and that happens. Flying is an art of subtle movements, so be subtle," he said, one of his favorite sayings when training Kell.

That advice helped. She managed to fly nearly 700 meters on the next attempt before losing control, and when she climbed back up, she was panting a bit. "Need to rest," she wheezed. "Gaia's love, my wings are burning. After just that!"

"It's hard work, intended," Kell told her soothingly. "That was impressive given you haven't been swimming all that long."

"Listen to your intended, Kammi," Faralla told her. "You're doing very well indeed, and the more you exercise, the longer you'll last."

"Thanks, Faralla."

"Your turn, Kell. Twenty laps around the talons while Kammi rests, you need to work on your banking maneuvers," Faralla ordered.

"Yes, esteemed council member," he said, opening his wings.

It was very fun to train with his intended. Kell did his thing and she did hers, but he was always close enough to watch her progress, and she really enjoyed herself. That was a reaction that Kell expected many earth dragons to have, to finally be able to *fly* after a lifetime of wishing that they could. The hard work to do it would just make it that much more satisfying when they were competent and physically conditioned enough to stay up in the air. Kammi could barely fly a minute before her wings gave out, but she managed to get a little bit further every time she flew, both in lasting longer in the air and learning how to keep control. By the end of the training session, as the sun crept towards the western horizon and a bank of clouds started moving in from the south, she managed to stay in control long enough to have to stop flying, gliding down into the water because her wings were simply too tired to flap hard enough to keep her lift. And that was marked improvement from her first attempt.

Kammi was completely exhausted by the time the lesson was over, to the point where her wings trembled with effort just to stay folded as Faralla carried her back to the island. She was set down by the burrow entrance, and she didn't even bother to move, she just rolled over on her back right there and let her wings lay limply on the grass as a fairly heavy shower started to fall over the farm. "Gaia, my wings feel like they're about to fall off," she complained as Faralla gave her an amused look.

"You did well today, Kammi," he complemented. "As soon as you feel up to moving, make sure you do your stretching exercises, it will help. And we'll do this again tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm both happy to hear that and glad that I'm too tired to spike you, Faralla," she replied, which made both him and Kell laugh.

"I think I'm safe enough with you laying like that," he said lightly.

"Not her, you're not," Kell warned with a playful expression as Jenny half-jogged up the hill to join them, an umbrella over her to ward off the rain. She was wearing a pair of shorts and a tank top, with jogging shoes on. "Hey Jenny," he greeted.

“Are you okay, Kammi?” she asked, standing by her head and looking down at her, her hand on her knee.

“I will be,” she answered. “I don’t think I could move my wings right now if I tried.”

“Ohhh, flying practice,” she said in draconic, looking at Kell. “How many times crash?”

“Enough to keep me entertained all afternoon,” he answered, speaking draconic mainly so Faralla could understand...because he was almost certain that Jenny would. Faralla chuckled when Kammi smacked Kell’s foreleg with the sides of the spikes on her tail. “See, Faralla? Forget her breath weapons, when it comes to Kammi, her tail is the most dangerous part of her.”

“I see her magic working now,” Jenny said, looking around as the grass around the burrow visibly started to grow.

“Yeah, I’ll have to teach her how to tamp it down tonight,” Kell nodded.

“I’ll let you get to it, because I’m hungry,” Faralla said easily. “Jenny, see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, esteemed council member,” she nodded up to him, and the sky wyrm rocketed up towards the volcano with a single beat of his wings, creating a trail through the falling raindrops. With Faralla gone, Jenny switched to English. “So how did it go? Did you fly far today?”

“I sure did!” she replied in English. “I managed to stay in the air long enough for my wings to tire out! I was so proud of myself!”

“You’re always proud of yourself, intended,” Kell teased.

“Lick my tail, Kell,” she huffed, which made Jenny laugh.

“He can’t lord it over you anymore, Kammi,” Jenny winked. “Now you can chase him if he tries to fly away.”

“She’s got more work to do before she can chase me down in the air,” Kell chuckled. “And I’ll be overjoyed when she can.”

“Ohh, ohh, who won the draw today?” Kammi asked. “Were you there, Jenny?”

“Afraid not, but it wasn’t anyone on the farm,” she replied. “I’d have heard about it if it was.”

They found that out when Jenri wandered up to them on her way back to the family burrow from the north coastal tract, crossing over the grassy strip that separated the north and south tracts. “Oh, Jenri, who won the drawing today?” Kammi called as she passed by the base of the hill. She detoured up to them and joined them.

“It was a bit of a mess,” she replied, speaking passably decent English. The months of lessons down in the city had paid off for many earth dragons. “A hatchling won, one that didn’t have a full tail of spikes. Since he couldn’t bond the humans, they ruled that he has to wait until his spikes grow in, but when they do, he gets put in the front of the line. So they drew again. A drake named Penti won, farmhand from Two Cliffs Village. I saw them taking him through the scion a couple of hours ago, I suspect they’re all done and he’s back by now.”

“I figured that might happen,” Kell mused. “But I think that’s a fair ruling. The hatchling won the draw fair and square, but it’s also not fair to everyone else for him to bond humans with the spikes he has and deny the dragon behind him.”

“You done for today, Jenri?” Jenny asked.

She nodded. “We’re about to go out on our daily swim,” she answered. “My wings are burning just thinking about it.”

Kell chuckled. “Just keep at it, Jenri, it gets better,” he encouraged.

“It’ll feel much more worthwhile when I finally win the draw,” she chuckled. “We all can’t be as lucky as Kammi.”

“Hey now, I won fair and square,” she grinned up at the older drake. “But I don’t think you’ll have to wait long. They’re bonding one or two dragons a day, and I’ll bet it goes faster when the humans streamline the process on the other side. At the rate they’re going, it won’t take more than five years to bond every earth dragon.”

“That never seemed like a very long time until I wanted something,” Jenri said ruefully.

“I’d disagree with you, at least until I think about how long I’m going to live now,” Jenny said, twirling her umbrella absently. “Five years seems like a long time, then I think that I’m going to live for another one hundred and eighty years or so. Compared to that...it’s not long at all.”

“Now you’re thinking like a dragon, Jenny,” Kammi told her. “I mean, I’m sixty-two, so five years doesn’t seem like much time at all.”

“You’re still a youngling, Kammi,” Jenri told her lightly. “I’m one hundred and nine.”

“Not even middle age for an earth dragon,” Kell supplied to Jenny.

“How old is Keth?” she asked curiously.

“Oh, one hundred and forty one, but he doesn’t really count,” he answered. “That’s just into middle age for an earth dragon, given we live around three hundred years or so. Mother’s older than him by two years, there was a time when Mother’s clutch and Sire’s clutch were sharing the same brood chamber. So, they’ve been together as long as they can remember. But the oldest dragon around here is Shii. She’s one hundred and ninety six. Surrall is only one hundred and fifty three.”

“Is that kind of age difference normal in mates among water dragons?”

“Entirely normal, they were both considered to be mature adults when they mated, so they were in the same age range, the same generation,” Kell answered. “When they mated, though, Surrall was only about one hundred.

The joke on the farm was that Shii was seduced by Surrall's youth and vigor," he chuckled.

"Ah, so Shii is the ancestral cove drake?" Jenny asked.

Kell nodded. "Her parents held the cove before her. She inherited the cove almost by default, since her clutchmates didn't find kelp farming to be all that exciting, so they struck out on their own and established their own pods. Surrall's family pod has their den on the north side of the island."

"And how long do water dragons live?"

"Oh, around four hundred or so," he answered as Kammi rolled back up onto her feet, mainly because she seemed to get tired of the rain getting in her mouth. Her wings were drooping heavily, still too tired for her to fold them. "So, while Shii is nearly two hundred years old, she's just hit middle age. In human terms, she's like forty."

"Huh," Jenny breathed, then she chuckled. "That explains so much. I notice that Shii seems to get a whole lot of respect. It's because she's older."

"Nope," Kell told her. "Shii's actually one of the younger Matriarchs on the island that didn't establish her own pod, but despite that, she's highly respected by most every water dragon. She's respected because she's Shii. She's very intelligent and very wise, Jenny, and water dragons respect wisdom, even in a younger dragon." He chuckled. "But it's Surrall that has the attention of the rest of the water dragons right now. They had no idea he was so skilled with magic, and the fact that he's so young makes it even more impressive. In water dragon circles, one hundred and fifty is considered barely old enough to be competent with magic, and here he is, designing his own magical spells. That's major among the water dragons."

"How could they not know?"

"Water dragons consider bragging to be extremely rude, Jenny," Kell answered. "So, most water dragons don't tell others what they can do, what they've learned, because it can be seen as being boastful. Surrall spends a lot

of time practicing his magic, and all the things he's learned how to do, he didn't really tell anyone because he didn't want to be seen as boorish."

"Yeah, I could see that," she said, tapping her chin with her free hand. "So, it's possible the pod knows magic spells that other pods don't know."

"It's a fact, not a possibility," Kell affirmed. "I mean, what other pod would need to learn a spell that mends kelp stalks, or one that scares away kelp-eating lobsters? Shii and Surrall have created unique magic they use for kelp farming, and since there are only three pods on the island that farm kelp, the other pods really had no reason to create that kind of magic. And I'll bet that other pods have created their own spells over the years to assist in their preferred methods of fishing, though they'd never brag about it if they did. It only makes sense."

"Well, I've learned a lot more than I expected today," Jenny chuckled. "I'll leave you two to your lessons, guys, Matron is waiting for me. Jenri, mind walking me down to the burrow?"

"Not at all," she replied as Jenny stepped past them. The two of them engaged in conversation as they walked down the slope towards the family burrow, and the two of them watched them go.

"When did she take over our farm, Kell?" Kammi asked lightly.

"More or less the minute she moved in. And who says this is your farm?" he countered.

"I gotta enjoy it while I can, since you're not gonna inherit," she grinned.

"That's Gaia's truth," he agreed. "Now let's get started teaching you how to tamp down your aura, the grass is starting to get a little out of control. I'll hate to see what the mushroom cellar looks like."

"At least we'll get to eat the results," she chuckled as she turned and walked with him down the entry ramp.

18 November 2017, 04:47 DMT; Dawnmist Village

It was now a new routine.

Licking a bit of pumpkin flesh off his teeth, Kell ambled out of the burrow with Kammi beside him, getting ready to start the day. For both of them, the morning would be a combination of teaching the newest empowered earth dragons the basics of their magic and practicing themselves. Because they were field agents, it fell primarily on Kell and Kammi to do the teaching, since they were trained to relay information and that applied to teaching others. The others were doing some teaching, but they just weren't as good at it as Kell and Kammi were.

They weren't just a pawful of dragons anymore. There were 19 of them now, and there would be 20 by lunch, and that was too many to roam around the Library of Eternity. They were now meeting on the old department aerie, using the open space to the sides of the dorms they'd built for the humans that came for the summit, and the sages were coming and going to do their exams and studies. None of the new dragons were anyone that Kell knew, and they were truly a random cross-section of earth dragon society. There were 14 drakes and five wyrms, roughly half of them were young adults or juveniles and the other half mature or older dragons, and all of them were farm workers. No one from the department or the factories or other technical jobs other than Kell and Kammi had won yet—and neither of them had truly won—which wasn't that big of a surprise given how much of a minority the technical dragons were.

After lunch, they'd go to flying training. Kammi's wings had toughened up considerably over the last two weeks, mainly because she spent almost every waking moment exercising them, even during magic practice. She wanted to be able to fly more than two minutes at a time as quickly as she could manage, and he could admit, she was pretty good at it. Kell could now fly without crashing as long as he didn't do anything exotic, and Kammi was trying to catch up to him. Faralla was still training them,

teaching Kell more advanced flying techniques and teaching Kammi the basics, fully invested in the idea of seeing just how good an earth dragon could fly if trained properly.

There were three earth dragons in the air now. Because of Kammi's months of swimming training, she had the wing strength to fly short distances, maybe about three or four minutes, and Rika could now fly about five minutes before her wings gave out. Kell had also been working on his endurance, and could now comfortably fly for hours before he started feeling it. All those years of swimming hundreds of kilometers a day had given him the stamina to stay up in the air.

"Hmm, wanna drop in on the drawing and see who wins before we head to the aerie?" Kammi offered.

"That won't be til sunrise," Kell protested. Not quite as many dragons were showing up for the drawings, but enough were still coming to make it a bit of a spectacle. The novelty of it was wearing off, and some dragons were getting tired of being let down day after day when they didn't win. Besides, the corn they'd planted was getting close to harvest, which would be the first major harvest after the farms were repaired, so there was more work to do on the farms to really justify taking even more time off than they did already for their morning exercises. Real work had to be done now, and that took precedence over flights of fancy.

"Like it's more than two minutes to the allotment area from the aerie," she protested with a bright smile. "And to think, just a few weeks, ago, that was a fifteen minute walk for me," she added, wagging her tail a little. "I tell you, intended, I *love* flying."

"I'll love it more when there's more of us doing it," Kell said evenly, watching as his parents, siblings, and the farmhands started gathering at the beach, getting ready to do their morning exercises...and he had the feeling that his parents just might be able to fly as soon as they were empowered. Both of them were back up to trim, able to swim long distances again, and that was what they needed most.

“Well, let’s go now, so there’s nobody for me to crash into when I try to land,” she grinned.

That was about a true statement. She was about where he’d been after a couple of weeks, able to fly in a straight line so long as she didn’t face adverse conditions, like strong crosswinds, and able to turn as long as she did it very slowly and very carefully. She still had major trouble landing, however, and still tended to lose control trying to slow down enough to land. He let her go first, staying out of her way as she opened her wings and vaulted into the air, then opened his wings and followed behind her as she ascended in a straight line towards the top of the extinct volcano. He watched her fly with both a bit of amusement and a lot of pride, heard her grunt with effort as they took a fairly steep climb angle that would certainly exhaust her in moments...but that was probably the reason she chose it, to make her work. In that respect, she was certainly doing things the right way. She never shied away from the difficult, she sought it out so she would improve. He was almost amused when she banked towards the allotment area rather than the aerie, then managed to land on the lip of the caldera without breaking her teeth, though she did nearly stumble off her front legs when she came in too fast and too steep. Kell landed much more professionally beside her, and she gave him a dirty look when he folded his wings. There were a couple hundred dragons in the caldera, and the sage and Anthra were already there. Just as the light of dawn started painting the west side of the caldera, the sage drew a token out of the box and held it up. “The number is two thousand, one hundred and one,” he called loudly.

Anthra gasped loudly without opening the book. “That’s *my* number!” she blurted, then shook her head, almost violently. “Draw another, honored sage,” she ordered. “I would rather see another earn that gift than me right now. I have too many other duties to fulfill the obligations that being drawn now would entail. There will be plenty of time for me to take my turn later on.”

“Wow, Anthra got pulled?” Kammi breathed to him.

“It *is* random, intended,” he reminded her. “And I think she’s doing the right thing,” he added in a whisper.

“Only when you show proof that it is your number, thus your prerogative to decline,” the sage answered strongly. “Show me your name in the book.” She opened the book as he walked over, then pointed at a page with her claw. “It is your number,” he declared. “And you decline?”

“I decline,” she said strongly. “Draw another.”

“As you decide, esteemed council member,” the sage said, going back to the box.

Kell figured that Anthra earned the undying loyalty of quite a few earth dragons with her decision, having the nobility to refuse being empowered because she felt she couldn’t live up to the obligations receiving it would place on her. The sage drew another token, and Kell almost laughed out loud when he heard a number he knew...a number he was almost praying would come up very early in the process.

Gev.

Now *that* was Gaia’s justice, Kell believed. If there was any earth dragon Kell knew that would do almost anything to fly, it was Gev. He’d been obsessed with it since he was a hatchling, and since they found out about being empowered, no dragon worked harder every day to strengthen his wings than Gev, much to the irritation and dismay of his lifemate, Getren.

“What’s so funny?” Kammi asked.

“That’s *Gev’s* number,” he answered, pointing at the mature adult drake, who was attending the drawing and was nearly jumping up and down like a hatchling at hearing his number called. “Good for him, he’s dreamed of flying his entire life. I’m glad he got his wish quickly.”

“That number belongs to Gev of Dawnmist Village,” Anthra called after referring to her book, and Gev was all but charging the stage.

“I’m Gev, esteemed council member!” he nearly screamed in delight, vaulting up onto the platform. “I accept this honor!”

“Congratulations,” Anthra told him. “If you’ll come with me, I’ll explain what happens next, and when you’ll be going into the human lands to meet your humans.” She rose up onto her haunches and spread her wings. “Another drawing will be held today just before evening allotments,” she called loudly.

“Two in one day? Awesome,” Kammi said. “Guess the relocation guys in Everett are on the ball.”

“Yeah, I think they must have built a pretty effective operation over there. Maybe too effective,” Kell noted as they turned away from the caldera. “I don’t think the council wants *all* the humans to come from America, and at this rate, they will be.”

“Well, that’s the world’s fault, not ours. They said that they won’t look for humans anywhere that our protection isn’t guaranteed by law,” Kammi said. “And so far, the only ones that have done it are the Americans.”

That was true enough, but how Walker did it was something of a political football at the moment. He declared that the basic human rights enshrined into American law would be extended to dragons by his administration, that dragons would have all the same basic rights as human being non-citizens under the law. And that was already being challenged in court by a few of the wingnut conspiracy groups that had popped up over the appearance of the dragons. The loudest and most violently opposed to the dragons was, amusingly enough, Franklin Graham, a televangelist and so-called religious leader. He was one of those extremist dingbats who told his followers that the appearance of the dragons was right out of the Christian bible’s Revelations, that they were demons sent to Earth by the devil to lure away the weak from the word of God and overthrow Christian rule in the western world. He called dragons beasts, as in *the Beast* from Revelations, and was openly advocating over his television show and other

media appearances for humanity to exterminate the dragons to protect the Christian faith itself.

“Something tells me that the Americans are dragging their feet introducing the resolution to the United Nations, trying to corner the market on magic before we spread it further,” Kell noted dryly as Kammi opened her wings, then vaulted off the side of the caldera. She didn’t answer because she was too busy concentrating on not crashing into the side of the volcano as she banked towards the old department aerie, and he followed her for the two minutes or so they were in the air. She managed to land without digging a furrow out of the stone platform with her chin, this time just gliding in and hopping to a stop once she hit the ground, and Kell again landed much more professionally on the edge of the aerie, his back feet coming down right at the edge. He advanced up onto the aerie towards Jenny, who was talking with Rika and one of the newer earth wyrms in their little group, a mature adult male farmhand named Pral.

“Kell, Lucy and Pam are coming today!” Rika said excitedly as they approached. Rika *really* liked the two pilots who were bonded to her.

“They come every three days, silly,” Kammi chided her.

“Well, I know, but they’re staying today! The sages want to do some exam things, so they’re staying the night.”

“I’ll need to make up some bedrooms for them,” Jenny said. “And maybe just let you stay in the burrow under the house tonight,” she added with a chuckle, patting Rika’s head fondly.

“My parents would kill me if I did that,” she complained.

“Well, bring them along, silly. I’d love to get to know them,” Jenny told her. “There are two sleeping chambers down on the second level, complete with sleeping mounds. Your parents can stay in one and you in the other.”

“Cool! I’ll ask my parents when I go home for lunch!”

Irago swooped in and came to a halt, hovering with his feet just off the aerie. “The council is summoning Kell, Kammi, and Jenny immediately,” he announced.

“What for, Irago? You know?” Kell asked.

He shook his head. “I was just told to bring you back to the aerie. Jenny,” he prompted. She stepped over to him, and he very gently and very carefully closed his forepaws around her middle, then picked her up. “I’ll tell the council you’re on your way,” he told the two earth dragons, then his wings pulled him higher into the air and turned him back towards Council Aerie.

“Well, wonder what’s going on. Probably another status report,” Kell said. “Rika, Pral, tell the others we’ll be gone a while. Rika, you and Linno will have to do the teaching today.”

“No problem, Kell. I’m getting good at explaining how the magic works,” the youngling told him.

“You are at that,” he agreed. “You’re getting a new dragon today. Gev won the draw, and they’ll bring him as soon as he’s bonded. So you’ll be starting at the beginning with him.”

“We can handle it, Kell. You’d better go before the council gets mad at you.”

It was a short flight to the aerie, and again, Kammi managed to land without breaking her teeth or wiping out any other dragon, though she did almost come in too low and slam into the edge of the aerie. Kell again upstaged his intended with a very smooth landing, folding his wings back as they advanced past the aides and reached the ring of podiums. Jenny was in the act of taking the seat they’d put out for her, between the earth dragon and chromatic podiums. “We answer the summons of the council,” Kell called.

“Very good, Kell. We need you and Kammi to set up the video screens. President Walker will be attending the council,” Anthra told him. “Kammi,

if you please, translate for the council.”

“Sure thing, esteemed council member,” Kammi replied as a sky dragon came up over the edge of the aerie, carrying Ferroth, with Prisma flying beside them. The sky dragon set him down as Prisma landed, and the two of them advanced up to the circle.

They had all the equipment there, so it didn’t take long. Kell and Kammi set up three screens in a triangle in the center as well as a series of cameras on a stand between the three of them that would let him see the council members, then they connected them and the microphones set up at each podium to the aerie’s computer. Kammi stayed at the computer to connect to the White House. Moments after she took up her position at the computer, Walker’s face winked onto the screens. “Council members,” he said with a nod, Arlen Kent moving into the view behind him.

“What news do you bring, Mister President?” Jussa asked, which Kammi then translated.

“We finally have a firm date set for the introduction of the resolution at the U.N.,” he announced. “It will be voted on two days after it’s introduced. It’ll be formally introduced on December first, and the vote will be on the third. But, the text of the resolution will be available to the ambassadors to read on November twenty sixth. That resolution hasn’t changed, it’s the same one we showed you, word for word. What you need to decide, esteemed council, is if you are sending a dragon here to address the general assembly. We need to know now so we can arrange it with the U.N. and set up the logistics and security.”

“We haven’t made that decision yet, Mister President,” Jussa answered.

“There’s a little more. I’m sure the department has been keeping you up to speed, but just in case they haven’t found out yet, both Canada and Great Britain are moving on legislation to recognize dragon rights without waiting for the U.N. Both have just introduced the legislation, so now they have to go through their parliaments. And there are about ten other nations

that are planning to do the same, but haven't decided on the exact language of the resolution," he continued. "Nine are part of the European Union, and the tenth is Japan."

"The department has told us about them," Jussa nodded, looking towards Ferroth.

"Canada and Great Britain just copied the legislation I sent to the House, almost word for word, so you already know what theirs say," Walker told him.

"Any further heartburn from the crazies over the executive order?" Kell asked him.

"Only about twenty new lawsuits since Monday," he said acidly. "As far as the legislation goes, the biggest pushback is the magic clause, declaring magic a legal action when used for lawful means and giving legal protected status to magicians. And I'm almost shocked at the amount of opposition to the bill I sent to be introduced into the house. I want Congress to pass it as law so the next President can't just undo my order and leave you out in the cold."

"Those Representatives are probably from the south," Kammi said dryly. "You know how fundamentalist Christians flip out when the word *magic* comes into play."

"Mostly, and remember that I was living in Tennessee before I became President, Kammi," he said lightly.

"You're not to blame for their stupid, Mister President," she replied with a toothy grin.

"Anyway, that's about where things stand," he continued. "But I will ask that if you send a dragon to address the General Assembly, I'd like him or her to also address a joint session of Congress. The dragon can use a scion to get to Washington, address Congress, then the next day we fly him or her to New York to address the United Nations. I want them to see you in person, see you standing in the well of the House and be absolutely unable

to deny that you're sentient beings deserving of the same legal rights as humans. I think that would go a long way towards squashing the objections in Congress and expediting the legislation to my desk."

"Going inside the buildings? Only an earth dragon could manage that," Trejem mused.

"A very small one," Essan agreed, almost deliberately glancing over at Kell as he said it. "There would inevitably be a press conference as well."

"It would be prudent. I think the media would outright revolt if you came and went without giving them a chance to ask questions," Walker nodded. "And it's a dangerous thing to upset the media. They can decide to turn against the dragons, and if that happens, things might get messy."

"They did behave themselves when we were at Kilauea," Kammi mused.

"As long as we can control their access, I don't see a problem with that," Jussa said. "And whether we send a dragon to the U.N. or not, I think it would be wise for one of us to address your Congress, Mister President. At least if chief Ferroth thinks it's a good idea."

"It is, esteemed council member," he affirmed. "After what we did to China, it would be best if we move out into the open."

"Why is that, chief?" Sessara asked.

"Because after showing the humans the true power of magic using it against China, we need to put a friendly face on it and on us," he explained. "The humans have seen that we can defend ourselves. What we need to make sure of is that they understand that we only strike when we're attacked first, that we don't attack unprovoked."

"I think the term the chief is looking for is *damage control*," Walker said dryly after hearing Kammi's translation. "You scared the hell out of quite a few countries with that hurricane you parked over Beijing. You need to ensure everyone that you won't just whip up hurricanes willy-nilly and

throw them at people for the fun of it. That your actions are *justified*. You had every right to attack China, because they attacked you first. Now you need to assure the rest of the world that you can be peaceful neighbors.”

“The President puts it clearly,” Ferroth agreed, nodding towards the monitor. “It’s in our best interest to be public right now, to make sure that the curiosity the humans have about us doesn’t turn into fear. In fact, I was going to suggest to the council that we allow Jenny to make some recordings of daily life on the island and release it to the media. Go around and record earth dragons working their farms, a water dragon pod fishing, chromatics studying, fire and sky dragons training, that kind of thing.”

“I could do that, chief,” she told him. “But it would more or less expose me.”

“The world already knows that you’re deeply involved with us, Jenny,” Jussa told her after hearing Kammi’s translation. “They just don’t have a name to go with the face.”

“Actually, they do have her name,” Kell corrected. “She was introduced at the press conference in Kilauea.”

“And to add to that, I think the humans would feel a little more comfortable knowing there’s a human here looking out for their best interests,” Hinado mused.

“So, it’s your recommendation that we send a representative out into the human world, chief?” Jussa asked.

“It is, esteemed council member,” he replied firmly. “The nature of the mission requires it to be an earth dragon, because only an earth dragon can fit in human buildings. And with all due respect to Geon, I think it should be a field agent,” he said. “Kell and Kammi are the best choice, Kell as the primary emissary and Kammi as his assistant and protector. They have the experience to deal with humans, Kell has proven in the past he can speak with the weight of the council, they work very well together, and since they’re empowered, it gives them a means of escape if things go wrong.

Kell has the right mix of diplomacy, cunning, patience, and restraint to complete the mission, and Kammi has proven in the past that she's observant, she'll be Kell's eyes when his attention is elsewhere. And let's be honest here. I'm not allowing a council member to risk himself on a mission like this, where he'll have very little support or protection," he said bluntly. "Kell and Kammi are trained for situations like this, so in my opinion, they're our drakes. This is a field operation, so we need field agents to accomplish the mission. We should step back and let them do what we trained them to do."

Kammi nearly beamed as she translated for Walker.

"I find the chief's words as wise as ever," Hirrag said in a strong voice. "Kell is the warrior among the earth dragons who has the respect of the fire dragons, and Kammi has proven her courage in the past. They are good choices for a mission like this."

"I'll need to go along with them," Jenny spoke up.

"That goes without saying, Jenny," Jussa agreed after hearing the translation. "But for now, I would ask our guests and witnesses to return to their other tasks and allow us to debate this matter without distraction. President Walker, Jenny will call you when we are ready to reconvene."

"Of course, esteemed council member," he said, nodding to the camera after hearing Kammi translate. "I'll have Arlen send Jenny a written outline of my idea to have a dragon address Congress so you can see what we have in mind."

"We'll consider it as we deliberate on the matter, President Walker," Jussa assured him. "Have Arlen send it at his earliest convenience so we can read it."

"I'll have it there in just a few minutes, esteemed council member," Kent said, then he moved out from behind Walker's chair.

"Then I'll talk to you again when we reconvene," Walker said, smiling into the camera. The feed then winked out as it was cut from the other side.

“Whelps, come back to the department, so we can work out a plan to present to the council,” Ferroth ordered.

“Sure thing, chief, Rika and Linno should have things well in paw on the aerie,” Kell replied. “Rika may be very young, but she’s actually not a bad teacher.”

The three earth drakes relocated to the department, and both Kell and Kammi submerged back into their chosen profession with confident speed. Ferroth explained what the mission would entail, and then the seven of them, five field agents, Kintel, and Ferroth, sat in the main field agent office discussing the requirements and dangers of the mission. They’d have to rely on human security for most of the trip, with Kell and Kammi having only each other for protection. The Washington leg of the trip would be safer by comparison in terms of security but more dangerous in the length of time they would be. Ferroth’s idea was for Kell and Kammi to be flown to New York from Hawaii to conceal the fact they had scions, schedule it so they arrived in the morning, go straight to the U.N., and address the General Assembly. They would then go straight to the airport and be flown to Washington. They would visit the White House in the early afternoon and be available for a press conference, address Congress in prime time, then go back to the airport and be flown back to Hawaii. That minimized the danger to the earth drakes by compressing the entire trip into one day and making sure that they spent the least time possible in New York, where it would be more dangerous than Washington. Though Kell and Kammi would be on their own in most ways, Ferroth fully intended for a flight of sky dragons to be high overhead everywhere they went, in position to dive down to protect the two earth dragons on a moment’s notice.

Kell was almost surprised by how much he missed being where he felt he was supposed to be. After weeks of learning to fly, then learning about his magic, it just felt *right* to him to be back in the department, back among those that shared his interests, back among those he called friend. As much as he was enjoying being able to fly and intrigued by his magic, most of his life had revolved around the department. From working his tail off to become a field agent, studying for years to prove to Ferroth that he had the

motivation and the ambition for the dangerous job, to the training once he was accepted, to the actual missions themselves, his life had revolved around technology and intelligence. And while the awakening of his magic had changed him, made him reluctant to kill—which was a job requirement for a field agent—this was where he wanted to be most. Sitting at a computer keyboard, surrounded by his fellow field agents, Kintel, and the chief, and doing his job.

He knew then, sitting there typing up part of the proposal they were going to send to the council, that this was where he belonged. When he finished all the magic training, when he became a skilled flyer, he would return to the department. He'd be too old to be a field agent by then—he was borderline out of the program now, as were Jirran, Trekka, and Kammi—but he was sure Ferroth would put him and the others to the task of training the next Stone, Onyx, Jasper, and Shale. Girk would be one of those four, and over the last few months, despite Kell's misgivings, he'd proved he was more than capable of earning one of those titles. After that, they'd probably move over to the programming team, or perhaps a job like Kintel's, becoming supervisors. Kintel had been a field agent himself, and became the supervisor of the field agents when he was too old to do the job.

It took them about four hours to have everything ready, and they sent it to the council by courier and to Kent by encrypted email as they read through what Kent had sent them about the humans' ideas of the plan. Kent's team had had many similar ideas, and it wouldn't be that hard at all to merge to the two proposals together into a single plan that incorporated both the itinerary and security. Kent's plan had the dragons staying for two days rather than one, providing them housing at Andrews, keeping them on a military installation to keep them further protected. Kent's plans were for more than just Kell and Kammi. His plan had five dragons coming, Geon as the primary ambassador and the four field agents acting as his translators and protection. Kent correctly realized that only earth drakes could conceivably fit inside human buildings. But, he also had three contingency plans to back up the primary plan, and in each of those, it was Kell coming instead of Geon, with differing dragons coming with him. Kent had detailed

plans laid out if Kell came alone, if he came with non-earth drakes, and if he came with the other field agents. But all four of his plans were thorough, providing adequate security for the dragons and getting things done without dawdling too much. Kent planned more down time to give the dragons a chance to rest after the long trip, thus the planned two days in Washington, and also included an opportunity for the dragons to tour one or two human installations, like the Mall or the Pentagon, as both photo op and leisure activity.

Kent either didn't know or had forgotten that the field agents had been to Washington before. Many times.

They had Kent on video conference, him and Ross sitting at desks on a split screen as they went over the two proposals and decided how to merge them together to have a unified plan to present to both President Walker and the council. Ross wasn't wearing her makeup that hid her youth, and Kell could see that she did in fact look both different and the same, much like Wilson and Greg. The black woman's facial structure hadn't changed, but her skin had a youthful glow, was more firm, and her hair had grown quite a bit. Kell had to remark about it while they were waiting for Kent to finish a call with Walker. "I feel a lot more different than I look," she said with a chuckle, touching her cheek. "I guess in a way, I'm like Wilson. Not to sound too racist," she winked, "but I think us black people are affected a tiny bit different than white people. Wilson looks more ageless than young, and I kinda went the same way."

"Both of you have that kind of austere handsomeness that translates well no matter what age you are," Trekka told her. "So I don't think it's a black thing more than it's a beauty thing. Both you and Wilson are going to look good, no matter how young or old you are."

"Thank you for the complement, Trekka," she said with an honest smile.

"Does it take a makeup artist to get you ready for the day, or have you learned how to do it yourself?" Kammi asked.

“I can do it myself now, it’s not that hard,” she replied. “I’d love to stop doing it, I’d love more than anything to go to Imakaii and start my training, but I can’t. I’ve decided to stay in my post until we have everything settled down and Arlen resigns, then both of us are moving to Imakaii. The President wants us to undergo magical training, but right now, he needs us more here. Arlen can’t afford a deputy that doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, given what’s going on, Kent needs someone on the inside at his right hand,” Kell nodded.

“Too bad you can’t start taking satellite classes or something from Washington,” Jirran chuckled.

“We already are,” she replied. “The Hunters send us recorded video of their lessons and comprehensive reports on what they’re learning by courier, and we’re learning from them. Even President Walker is studying them. He fully intends to join Julia on Imakaii and learn magic when he’s done with his political career, and he wants to be ready so he can jump in with both feet when he finally has the chance.”

“That may not be for seven years,” Kammi noted. “I get the feeling that Walker’s gonna be a shoe-in for re-election.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ross said soberly. “It’s all going to depend on how the next year or two go. If the return of the dragons causes any upheaval and Walker takes the blame, he might face a major challenge in 2020. But, if it goes smoothly, then yes, I think he’s a lock for re-election. The people will see him as the man who guided America through an earth-shaking event that altered the fundamental fabric of our society and will want him to stay at the helm for another four years.”

“That is a good point,” Kintel told her with an approving nod. “What have you heard about the other countries passing the dragon rights laws?”

“On the surface, it’s to look like they’re welcoming to dragons. But under that, most of them have found out through their own spies that the

dragons won't teach anyone magic that won't recognize their rights...so do the math. They're trying to entice you to come to their countries to teach magic, just as we have."

"So it's not about trying to prevent another China?" Kintel asked.

"Most every country knows why you went after China," she answered. "We spread it around that they tried to invade your island, and you retaliated by attacking the mainland after you sank their invasion fleet. In that respect, most countries can respect your actions. But how you did it scared them to death," she said honestly. "It made everyone realize just how powerless we truly are against magic, and they've realized that the only way to protect against your magic is with their own magic. So, here we are."

"Yeah, well, I don't think they realize that if we teach them magic, then they don't have to worry about us attacking them," Kammi mused. "I mean, they'll be part of our world, on our side, and we wouldn't really have reason to."

"What Kammi means is that the council believes that if we teach humans magic, it will secure our place in human society much as it did a couple thousand years ago," Trekka added. "They'll have no reason to attack us, or us attack them, because we're the ones teaching them."

"If I recall, that didn't stop things from happening the first time," Ross said seriously.

"That happened because Catholics are ungrateful dicks," Kammi said in a voice that made Ross laugh suddenly. "Seriously, that's what Prisma's dug up from our history. The Catholics turned on us because of what happened to Camelot, after everything we did for them. The man that became Pope was at Camelot when the earth dragons destroyed it, and it poisoned him against us. He didn't care that we had complete justification for destroying Camelot, he only cared that dragons were mean to him."

“Now you’re getting into history I don’t know,” Ross said, her voice curious. “Exactly why did you have justification?”

“The treaty between the humans and the earth dragons made it clear that Camelot would only stand so long as Arthur’s line held the throne,” Kell told her. “The earth dragons built Camelot for Arthur to pay him back for a great service he did for the dragons. Arthur was a hero to the dragons as much as the humans, an icon, and building him his own kingdom was the least the dragons could do for him. When Lancelot and Morrigan le Fay exterminated Arthur’s line, the earth dragons took Camelot back, and they were mad enough to not be nice about it. The humans in Camelot didn’t want to obey the treaty and leave the city, so the earth dragons evicted them by force. The priest that would eventually become the Pope that turned against the dragons was in Camelot when the earth dragons destroyed the city. The earth dragons tore down every building and even carried away the stones, completely taking Camelot away from the humans. He never forgave the dragons for that, even though their actions were justified by the treaty.”

“Whoa, wait, *Lancelot* killed Arthur? I thought it was Mordred,” she said.

“Mordred was a hostage, not a traitor, and was killed along with the rest of Arthur’s children,” Kell answered. “Had she lived, the earth dragons wouldn’t have reclaimed Canterlot. She *was* of Arthur’s line.”

“Mordred was a girl?”

“Prisma’s history books say so,” Kammi answered. “Lancelot was the real villain. He conspired with Morrigan to kill Arthur and his children and take the throne for himself. When that happened, the earth dragons attacked Camelot, killed Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table because they’d turned against Arthur, then disassembled the entire city and carried away the building stones. They left nothing but an empty field and the heads of the traitor knights on pikes where the castle once stood.”

“That’s absolutely fascinating. I’d love to speak to Prisma about history as the dragons recorded it.”

“Learn draconic and come visit a chromatic library,” Kammi told her.

“Speaking of that priest, we figure that the church will be the wild card in all this,” Ross said. “Kent’s convinced that they have very accurate records in the Vatican that they don’t show anyone that tells them what happened the first time. So far the Pope hasn’t said anything one way or the other about dragons or magic, and we suspect that’s because they’re still digging those records up. We figure it’s going to go one of two ways, either the church comes out in support of dragons, or they go the way of Franklin Graham,” she said darkly. “And if they do, things are going to be significantly harder.”

“Luckily, that’s a council problem, not a department problem,” Girk said. “There wouldn’t be much we could do about that anyway.”

Kent returned to his screen, and they got back to the real work. It only took the two offices about an hour and a half to finalize a plan they’d present to both the council and the President, and both Kell and Kammi returned to the aerie, watching as Ferroth presented it. He laid out the objectives of the plan, the dangers, and the security, stressing that Kell and Kammi would be under human Secret Service protection while they were in America, and the Secret Service was *damn* good. Under Ferroth’s plan, Kell and Kammi would only be in America for one day. They’d arrive at 09:00 local time at New York City on a military transport, flown in from Hawaii, and then go straight to the United Nations to address the General Assembly. That would take place at 11:00 (two hours to get there was a realistic estimate, given Kell and Kammi would have to be transported in the trailers of semis). After the address, they would be flown to Washington D.C., arrive at 14:30, and be taken to the White House for a visit with President Walker and a press conference on the grounds there. They would stay inside the protection of the White House until 19:30, when they’d be taken to the Capitol, to address a joint session of Congress at 20:30 local time. They’d

be taken straight to Joint Base Andrews and flown back to Hawaii after the address, and would probably be in the air by 11:00pm.

Several humans would be traveling with them at all times, and that was Arlen Kent, Ross, Jenny, Yancy, Price, Wilson, and a detachment of the Secret Service. The Secret Service agents would be hand picked by Walker and the director, the best they had, and their physical security would be their responsibility.

The entire time the two of them were in America, many more dragons than Kell and Kammi would be there, just hidden. Sky dragons would be lurking high overhead, ready to intervene at a moment's notice if the two of them encountered something they couldn't handle themselves. Along with them would be the chromatics' most skilled and powerful spellcaster that wasn't a sage, a chromatic young enough to be able to handle the rigors of such an operation. The chromatic would get there by scion and be mixed in with the sky dragons, shadowing them from the air using an invisibility spell, and move by scion from New York to Washington when needed. His job was to be close by to use his magic if Kell and Kammi were attacked and the sky dragons couldn't get them out.

Kell and Kammi themselves would be going in with special equipment. Both would be wearing message bands on their horns, like the one that Kell wore in the attack on the Chinese fleet, and would also be equipped with a device that would extend to them immunity to plastics and other synthetics, covering their weakness to things like teflon-coated high powered armor piercing rounds. The chromatics had already researched the magic necessary to create the devices, so all they had to do was lock the spell to a crystal and embed the crystal in an amulet or other device they would wear like jewelry. Given earth dragons were immune to most human weapons less powerful than five hundred pound bombs, and Kell and Kammi were highly experienced swimmers that could easily operate in water if they had to escape by themselves, Ferroth felt that that was all the protection they needed.

But Ferroth being Ferroth, he had contingency plans for if things went wrong. He presented no less than eight escape plans, four for New York and four for Washington, that the two earth dragons could follow if they had to escape, and all of them revolved around them reaching the scion gateway that would be moved into place to facilitate their escape. Two of the plan for each city directed them to fly to the scion, and two directed them to seek out the nearest body of water and swim to the scion, if for some reason they were unable to fly away. Not even a human speedboat was going to keep up with Kell or Kammi in the water, and no helicopter that may follow them would be able to do much to stop them from escaping.

The council debated the overall plan only for about an hour before approving of it, and then they brought President Walker back in over video conference. “The council has reviewed the proposed plan, Mister President, and we approve,” Jussa said, Kammi translating for him.

“So did the Secret Service and myself,” Walker answered. “So that means that the plan is a go?”

“It does,” the water wurm nodded. “As soon as you have a date arranged for both of the speeches, we will have a timeline.”

“I already have a date in mind. December first,” he answered. “That gives us a good three weeks to get all the security arranged, and gives your sky dragons time to scout out perfect locations for the scion in case Kell and Kammi have to run. All I ask is that you send me a copy of the speeches you intend to give so I’m not surprised by anything,” he said, his eyes shifting to look at Kell, who stood beside Anthra’s podium.

“Don’t look at me, I’m not writing them,” Kell said. “I’m a field agent, not a diplomat. The council will be preparing the presentations. I’ll just be giving them.”

“Then I’d say we have an agreement,” Jussa declared. “Kell, Kammi, you are going back to the department to prepare for your mission. I’m certain that three weeks will be sufficient for both of you to be completely prepared.”

“More than, esteemed council member,” Kammi said confidently. “We won’t let you down.”

“We know, Kammi,” Jussa said, looking back at her and smiling. “Now get to work.”

Chapter 30

30 November 2018, 18:39 DMT; Council Aerie

Everything was ready.

Standing beside Anthra's podium with Kammi, Jenny, Wilson, and Yancy, Kell listened as the council discussed the final points of the trip with Arlen Kent and President Walker over encrypted teleconference. Price and Yancy had been on the island for three days to be there in person for the briefings, flown down on the sea plane and staying in the guest bedrooms in Jenny's house. Price was the original choice because he was the best choice in a security situation, but because not all of his family knew about him being young again, he had to bow out. They decided to go with Wilson instead, mainly because he was Jenny's partner back in the Hunters and they worked well together. That put them on the farm, so Kell had seen quite a bit of them over the last few days, time he honestly enjoyed. He both liked and respected Yancy, and the now-young former leader of the Hunters had found himself in the middle of things, because Ferroth had spent a lot of time on the farm while he was here, discussing shop with him. Ferroth had developed a tremendous respect for Yancy when the Hunters were formed and started interfering in field missions, and Kell had the feeling that their mutual respect for each other had evolved into a solid friendship. Kell and Kammi would be carrying shoulder satchels with tablets holding both their mission briefings the two speeches Kell would deliver, and some games...after all, it was going to be a long flight. They would also be taking a few tablets each they'd be leaving behind, holding files and information they intended to deliver to both the United Nations and to the Americans.

They would be beginning the mission as soon as they were done on the aerie. They would travel to Pearl Harbor by scion, the scion already in

place, and then board a C5 Galaxy transport that would fly them to New York City. That was a seven hour flight, but added to that was them moving forward through the time zones, so that effectively added five hours to the journey. they would arrive around 08:00 at JFK airport, and then would be immediately loaded onto a trailer and brought to the United Nations building. Kell would give his speech, then they'd go right back to the airport and fly to Washington. He'd visit the White House, have a press conference there with Walker, then they'd have a private conference before he addressed Congress. The two speeches would have some similar elements but would be different, mainly because the United States was thus far the only nation on earth to recognize the sovereign rights of the dragons. He didn't have to plead his case to Congress that he was a sentient being who deserved the same rights and protections as humans under international law, and that the dragons were an organized society with territory that had defined borders that should be recognized by the United Nations and granted sovereign status.

“Is everything ready?” Jussa asked, looking to the chromatic sage standing beside Trejem's podium.

“All devices are prepared, esteemed council member,” she answered. “And the humans have already applied the oil.”

The council looked a bit unsettled at that. It was decided—not entirely enthusiastically—that the Hunters should have strong magical protections while on this mission, so the Shao Kai oil had been manufactured for them to use, to grant them an earth dragon's immunity to most human weapons and limited resistance to fire. They'd applied it like suntan lotion, and wherever it was rubbed into their skin, that skin would be like an earth dragon's hide, unable to be penetrated by earth, rock or metal, and granting them resistance to changes in pressure, which would protect them from the blast wave of explosions. The sages had them apply it to literally every square inch of their bodies, even rub the oil on the inside of their noses and mouths, and had even gone to the extreme of developing an eyedrop that safely applied it to the eyes. The protection would last for exactly three days, which was more than long enough for them to complete the mission.

The amusing part of that was the sages' unfamiliarity with human modesty. They'd wanted Jenny to disrobe and apply the oil in front of Wilson and Yancy...but it was *Wilson* that seemed the most embarrassed by that idea, probably because he all but considered Jenny the daughter he never had. Kell had no idea the imposing man was so modest, especially since he had a body and face that human women would find very attractive.

Yancy, that old pervert, had been more than willing to show off his youthful body.

"We have everything prepared on our end, Jussa," Kent told him. "The Galaxy is fueled and waiting by the scion terminus, with the Air Force and Secret Service security detachments standing by, and I can be out there to greet your team five minutes after this conference ends. We'll be in the air fifteen minutes after they reach the flight line."

"The Secret Service has everything prepared in all three locations, Hawaii, New York and Washington," Walker assured them. "The advance team will meet you at Pearl Harbor, and the other agents will meet the plane on the tarmacs in New York and Washington, and they'll protect the delegation until they are back on the island."

"Most of the press interaction will be in Washington," Kent continued. "The New York leg of this trip is being kept to just the address. We will fly in, go there, Kell gives the speech, then we go straight back to the airport. Kell, are you ready for the press conference?"

"I'm ready, Arlen. It's not the first time I've been put in front of a bunch of cameras."

"True enough," he chuckled.

"It's why he was chosen to undertake this mission," Jussa said confidently after hearing the translation, being supplied by Jirran. "Then I would say that we are ready to begin. Our delegation will be arriving at Pearl Harbor in a matter of moments, Secretary Kent. We only need outfit Kell and Kammi with their devices, and they will be on the way."

“I’ll make my way down to the tarmac, then,” Kent said. “Esteemed council members,” he said respectfully, then his feed cut out.

“I’ll be monitoring everything from the situation room,” Walker said, mainly addressing Kell. “And I’ll be seeing you in about fourteen hours.”

After Walker left the conference, the council watched as the sages equipped Kell and Kammi with their magical gear. Message bands were set on their horns, the same kind he had used in the attack on the fleet, and on the other horn, a band-like device was settled against the ridged crystal. That was the device that would protect them from synthetics, which rendered plastic weaponry ineffective against them. The two bands were made to match and were fancied up with engravings and designs so they resembled jewelry. Those magical spell in those silver and gold bands was designed by the chromatics so they would only work when the band was in contact with an earth dragon’s crystal horn, so the devices would do the humans no good if they somehow took them. And because of the example of Price, the focus crystal to which the spells were locked were on the underside of the bands and the precious metal was enspelled so it was all but invulnerable, protecting them from being shot out by a marksman. Because of the rules and limits of magic, the crystal itself couldn’t be magically augmented, else that spell would interfere with the spell locked to the crystal. So the crystal was protected by putting magically enhanced metal on one side and the earth dragon’s horn, the hardest known substance to dragon science, on the other.

Nothing the dragons had ever devised, either physical or magical, had ever managed to cut or break an earth dragon’s horn. And them now being crystal did not in any way make them less hard. If anything, it made them even harder.

They were ready. Sky dragons carried the humans down to the scion, which was just off his family farm to put it close to the entrance to Sanctuary City, and Kell and Kammi got down on their own. They both landed close to where the sky dragons set down the others, giving themselves plenty of room. The scion had a fence built around it to keep

any dragon from wandering too close to it, one so tall that the humans could simply duck under it. Kell and Kammi entered through the gate as the council alighted around the fence, seeing them off. “You ready, guys?” Kammi asked as the three humans reached them.

“Ready and waiting,” Jenny answered.

“Be careful out there, all of you,” Jussa told them.

“We should be fine, esteemed council member,” Kell assured him. “And in a strange way, I’m looking forward to this. I haven’t been to New York in a long time.”

“We won’t see that much of it,” Kammi chuckled.

“Don’t have *too* much fun, whelp,” Ferroth warned.

He had to laugh. “Not much worry about that,” he said, then he turned and walked into the scion.

He stepped through the swirling energy, and when it cleared, he was inside a hangar on the flight line at Pearl Harbor Naval Station, an aviation base right beside the naval base. The hangar doors were open, and the C5 was sitting not far from it, the stern of the plane facing them and the cargo doors open and ramp down. C5s were absolute behemoths, the largest cargo plane in the American inventory, which meant they’d have plenty of space inside for two earth dragons and detachment of Air Force Security Police and Secret Service agents to serve as security. The Air Force SPs would stay with the plane, defending it when they landed at JFK Airport in New York, where the Secret Service would be going with them. They’d installed seats for 40 in the front of the cargo hold, but that barely took a tenth of the available space.

He looked back when Kammi came out behind him, and then Jenny, Wilson, and Yancy followed. The three humans looked around a little as Kell and Kammi advanced towards a very tall man wearing a black suit, standing in front of eleven other suitably dressed men. Beyond them was the squad of SPs, fifteen men standing in formation, in uniforms and

carrying assault rifles slung over their shoulders. “Ambassador, I’m Nick Lowry, agent in charge of this detail,” the tall man introduced. “We have everything arranged, and the plane is ready to take off as soon as we board.”

“Just Kell will do, Agent Lowry,” he replied, offering a single claw to the man. He saw the gesture for what it was and took hold of it, shaking it like it was a hand.

“Are our uniforms on board, Agent?” Jenny asked as she reached them.

He nodded. “Both yours and Major Wilson’s, sent in from Imakaii,” he returned. “And the suit for Deputy Undersecretary Yancy.”

“Major...I ain’t never gonna get used to that,” Wilson chuckled. “It’s easy to forget since I don’t have to wear a uniform in my current deployment.”

“I still outrank you, Tom,” Jenny winked.

“Only on paper, Mookie,” he retorted, which made her laugh.

Kent and Ross appeared, coming through the hangar’s offices to reach them, and approached them quickly. Both of them were wearing casual clothing, and aides with them were carrying suitcases towards the plane. “Sorry we’re late, I had to make a quick pit stop,” Kent apologized. “Are we ready to go?”

“We’re all ready, Mister Secretary,” Lowry reported.

“Alright then, let’s get this show on the road.”

After greeting the Captain in charge of the SPs, they boarded the plane. The seats up front were first class quality, large and spacious, and all the requirements for the dragons had been installed, including a dragon-size lavatory...the contents of which would no doubt be whisked off the CIA or NSA the moment the mission was over. Sleeping compartments were installed for the delegation, including a small stack of mats near the back for the earth dragons. The pilot and co-pilot met them at the ramp. “I’m

Major Woods,” the lean redheaded man greeted. “Everything is ready for departure as requested. The plane’s wifi will be turned on once we’re high enough that no other device can connect to it.”

“Awesome, Netflix will make the flight go by faster,” Kammi said, which surprised the man a little bit.

After everyone settled in, the cargo ramp and doors were closed, and the plane got moving. The cargo hold had no windows, with the cockpit and crew quarters up a very steep flight of stairs in the front. So, the only indication they had that they were on the runway was from an announcement from the captain over an intercom, and then the engines spooled up and the plane lifted off.

That was the beginning of a very long flight. The plane was flying over 9,000 kilometers, and it would be doing it non-stop, so everyone settled in for the journey, both delegation and security. Kell and Kammi sat up by the seats and chatted with the humans, getting to know the security details, which Kammi probably did because the nervous responses from the SPs amused her a little bit. Kammi *was* a bit mean. After going over the security to make sure both Kell and Lowry were on the same page, they ended up talking about sports. But eventually, the passengers started to take naps, the SPs and agents in shifts while The human delegation got to sleep in small bunk cubicles secured to the deck of the cargo hold, little portable bedrooms they used in military transports for passengers. Kell and Kammi also slept, but not at the same time, to make sure they were fresh for their big day.

Kell was watching a movie when the pilot announced they were an hour out from New York, and that incited the entire hold into action. Lowry and his detachment started a briefing about the detail as the SPs started gearing up, and Jenny, Wilson, and Yancy retired to their bunk cubicles to change clothes. The pilot announced that the trucks and convoy were in place at JFK and ready for them as Kell reviewed the speech he was going to give, making sure he had it properly memorized. He’d deliver it from memory, and while Jussa had given him permission to ad-lib a little bit here

and there, he had to make sure he got all the points across. The plane began to descend as the delegation came out, Jenny in her Marine Class As, Wilson in his Army Class As, and Yancy in a smartly tailored dark gray suit with a blue tie, making him look quite snazzy. Both Jenny and Wilson were wearing their sidearms, Jenny a Colt 1911 .45 pistol, the regulation sidearm worn with Class As in the Marines, and Wilson with a more modern Army issue nine millimeter officer's pistol, and Jenny had her officer's saber attached to her belt. Those weapons made it clear that while Jenny and Wilson were there as diplomats, they were armed and ready to protect themselves if necessary.

The plane landed not long afterward, but not too long after everyone was ready. Kell prepared himself for his first public appearance since the volcano, because he had no doubt that there would be press at the airport to document their arrival. The press didn't know which plane they were on, but the giant C5 landing at a civilian airport would be unusual enough for most of them to connect the dots. The NYPD and TSA had already set up a press area for the arrival, if only to keep reporters from trying to get out onto the tarmac, but it was supposed to be set up a good 40 meters away from the plane, just there to give the press the chance to get long range shots of the dragons disembarking and then getting into the trucks.

That was going to be the annoying part. They had to ride in semi trailers, and that was a bit...undignified. But they had no choice, a dragon wouldn't really fit in any other kind of ground transport. Kell wasn't that much taller than humans at a little over two meters, but he was nearly seven and a half meters long nose to tail. It was that length that was going to hang him up inside the building, though the Secret Service assured him that the hallways inside the building were wide enough for him to be able to navigate corners. And the entrance to the General Assembly chamber had large double doors, more than wide enough to let him through easily.

The five of them waited at the back of the cargo area as the plane's engines powered down, and after the pilot called back to make sure they were ready, he opened the cargo doors and lowered the ramp. Kell could see the reporters, held back by NYPD and Port Authority cops a goodly ways

behind the plane, and he saw the trailers and motorcade sitting to his right, ready for them to load up. The SPs came down first, quickly taking up positions around the plane, their assault weapons in their hands, and then the Secret Service agents escorted the delegation down the ramp. A cascade of flashes erupted from the press area, and when they came down far enough for them to see around the plane, he saw that they were pulled up near the terminal area on the left. There were people crowding the windows, both press and civilians, most of them taking video or pictures of the two dragons as they stepped down off the ramp. About twenty men in suits advanced towards them, the New York Secret Service detail, and Lowry motioned towards the open trailers. "Everything's ready, Kell," he reported. "The streets are blocked off and all security is in place along our route. We're ready to go."

"I'm surprised the Mayor's not here to greet us," he said dryly.

"He wanted to be, but we shot that down," Lowry smiled slightly. "So he'll meet you at the U.N. building instead."

"Ready, intended?" he asked in draconic.

"Ready to go, intended," Kammi answered.

"We're ready, Kell," Jenny said, also in draconic. That made Lowry give her a surprised look.

"Then let's go."

Kell watched as Kammi climbed up a ramp and into one of the trailers, making sure she got in safely, then he got into the trailer beside it. The trailer wasn't too narrow, but it wasn't wide enough for him to easily turn around. He waited until the doors were closed before he took care of that, having to rear up and squirm around a little bit. The trailer had very small, narrow windows along the sides, allowing him to see out, so he watched as the motorcade started to move. It was led by NYPD motorcycles, a procession of probably thirty vehicles, from limos for Jenny and Kent to police cruisers to government SUVs.

Once they were on their way, Kell checked in. He reached up and put a finger on the message band on his left horn. “Esteemed council member Jussa.”

“I hear you, Kell. What do you report?”

“We’ve arrived in New York City, and we’re on the way to the U.N. building. Though, I’d bet that you’re watching it on a monitor at the aerie.”

“We are, but it’s far more important to hear from you than to see what the human press decides they want to show,” he replied. *“Any issues?”*

“None,” he answered. “The flight was without incident, and thus far things have gone according to plan. We should arrive at the U.N. building in about forty minutes.”

“Very well. Check in with us again after you finish your speech and are on the way back.”

“Yes, esteemed council member.”

It was quite a drive to the U.N. building from JFK—LaGuardia was closer, but the Air Force preferred to land their C5 at JFK due to the airport’s layout—and Kell mentally prepared for his speech as they moved. He saw people lining the streets once they came down off the expressway, like it was some kind of parade, and not all of them were friendly. He saw multiple signs denouncing the dragons and human involvement with them, most of them the religious zealots whipped up by Franklin Graham from the religious flavor of signs, but they were all peaceful from the look of it. The crowds got thicker and thicker as they neared the U.N. building, until they disappeared entirely when the motorcade went through a security checkpoint. The entire building was surrounded by cops and security forces, keeping the crowds well away from it, and he looked through his little window as the motorcade went around the side of the building and pulled into a sheltered area that held a loading dock. Because of their size, Kell and Kammi couldn’t go through the front doors.

“We’ve arrived, Kell,” Kent’s voice came from an intercom speaker installed in the trailer. “They’ll open the doors in just a moment.”

That happened seconds later, and he climbed down to the ground as Secret Service opened Kammi’s trailer. Kent and the others exited their limos and approached them as the Secret Service tightened up around them, Jenny refastening her saber to her belt. “The hallways have been cleared for you,” Lowry told them. “All the ambassadors are in the assembly chamber and waiting.”

“Not even press?”

“No, and they’re very mad about it,” he replied, which made Kell chuckle.

“Then let’s go,” he prompted.

They entered through a loading dock, moved through a storage area, then entered the main building. The halls were indeed wide and tall, more than big enough for them, and the corners were wide enough for them to get past them without losing scales or tearing holes in the walls. Kell centered himself, taking on a calm expression as he prepared the speech in his mind. The speech wouldn’t be that long, more or less laying out the dragons’ position and advocating for the passage of the resolution recognizing their rights and the sovereignty of their territory. But he would talk a little magic.

It didn’t take long at all to reach the chamber. Two guards opened the doors for them as they approached, and then they walked in. The doors opened at the well of the assembly chamber, on a side wall between the tiers holding the ambassadors from the various nations and the dais holding the staffers and the lectern for those giving speeches. Kell wouldn’t fit there, so a temporary lectern had been erected in front of the dais, at the proper height so he could rear up and sit on the base of his tail and have the microphones close enough to his mouth. The room fell into complete silence as Kent, Ross, Jenny, Wilson, and Yancy entered, then Kell, then Kammi. Their human friends took seats on the dais behind his podium, Kell stepped up to the podium and took a vertical base, and Kammi sat on her

haunches beside and slightly behind him, so she could keep an eye on everyone and protect him. That was her job in this operation.

A small red light turned on at the base of the microphones on his podium, telling him they were hot. It was time. “Good morning,” he said in English. “My name is Kell. I am an earth drake, one of the five races of dragon kind. This is Kammi. We represent the island of Draconia, the homeland of the dragons, and we are here to advocate to you, our human neighbors, to recognize dragons as a sentient species deserving of the same rights and protections as humanity, as well as to recognize the sovereign borders of our territory.

“As most of you know, we have kept ourselves apart from humanity for over a thousand years. The why of that decision is complicated, but the core of it is that we decided that us remaining involved in human affairs, and them in ours, might lead to bloodshed, so we removed ourselves from the world to protect lives on both sides. But things have obviously changed. We feel that humanity has matured enough to accept us back into the world, that you have grown past the fear and violence that consumed you long ago. You are ready, and we are ready to return to the world and find our place within it.

“But before that can come to pass, we dragons have two very simple requests. First, we would see the resolution introduced by the Americans passed by this body, which establishes that dragons are sentient beings entitled to the basic rights and protections afforded to all men as established in the United Nations charter. The fact that I am here now, speaking to you, should be compelling evidence that I qualify as a sentient being,” he said bluntly. “We don’t want any special protections or legal status that puts us above humanity. We wish only to be treated as equals, nothing more, nothing less.

“There is obviously much we have to offer the world if you pass this resolution and we return to it. And clearly, I’m talking about magic,” he said strongly. “Before I discuss what we intend to do with our magic, I should explain to you what it is, and assuage certain fears that some of you

might have based on religious beliefs. Magic is not evil,” he said strongly. “It is not fueled by the devil, it is not practiced by witches. Magic is the power of life, a power that those with the gift can manipulate and control to produce effects that reach outside the limitations of physical law. Magic is part of God’s design, because He created the world with magic in it. Magic is a natural force, part of the natural world over which Christians believe that God granted to them stewardship and dominion, and the good or the evil that it does depends entirely on the intent of the person using it. We dragons believe that magic is a gift to us from Gaia, which is the sentient awareness of planet Earth itself, and the energy that fuels it is generated by all life on the planet. Think of it as the Force from *Star Wars*,” he said dryly, which produced a few chuckles. “But those who can access it aren’t Jedi. Magic is not tied to any religion, and anyone, no matter what religion they follow, can learn what magic has to teach. After all, the most fundamental rule of magic is that it is the energy of life, and thus may never be used to kill. That is a tenet followed by several religions. *Thou shalt not kill* is a commandment that shares its lesson with magic.

“That is what magic is, and it is not a gift that dragons enjoy alone. Humans also carry the gift of Gaia, are capable of using magic. Our records indicate that about one out of every one hundred humans is capable of using magic. That means that there may very well be people in this room right now that could be magicians, if they studied,” he declared, looking around deliberately. “And that is the most important thing that we can offer to the world. In the old times, before we left the human lands, we worked side by side with human magicians, and what our two species created together was beautiful. Great cities like Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople, Athens, Prague, Ane Menda, Shangri La, Mestictotan, Camelot, and Atlantis were built, and magicians came from far and wide to study the magical arts in the great libraries of ancient history. After we left the world, it seems that humans have forgotten the magic they once knew, and we would help you rediscover those lost arts. The chromatics believe that they were commanded by Gaia to spread the knowledge of magic through the world, that it is their duty to teach all who carry the gift, and this is what we offer to the world if you allow us to return to it. The dragons offer the

opportunity to learn magic once again, but *only* if this body recognizes our rights as sentient beings and recognizes our island and the waters surrounding it as our sovereign territory. And also only if we are welcomed within your territory. We will not go where we are not wanted, so it is every country's decision whether or not they wish to allow their citizens to learn about magic. If you feel that your culture or your religion are opposed to magic, then we will respect your views and your position and we will leave you alone. All that we ask is that you extend the same courtesy to those who disagree with you. You may object to magic, but that does not give you the right to impose your beliefs on others.

“Our demand when it comes to territory is modest, but is a bit unorthodox. Because water dragons live in the ocean, we would ask that an area of ocean approximately twelve hundred square kilometers be recognized as sovereign dragon territory, with several uninhabited islands within that area considered part of that claim. Even though we are ready to return to the world of man, we still desire to dwell apart from you. Not only is humanity not ready for us, we are not ready for you. We have lived apart from you for a thousand years, and we've got a lot to learn about you before we feel comfortable returning to your world. Perhaps in a few decades, once humans and dragons have had time to get used to one another, we might leave our island and live among you once again. But for now, we believe that staying on our island would be best for both our worlds. We wish to take things slow, reintegrate back into the world carefully, to give both sides plenty of time to adjust to each new step we take to bring dragons and humans back together.

“But we would not ask this of you and not give you a connection to our world. We have selected a human to serve as our ambassador to the outside, the point of contact between the human world and the dragon world, to represent the interests of humanity in the decisions that we make and guide us as we seek to re-establish our ties to humanity. The identity of this ambassador will remain secret for now, but we felt that this body deserved to know that humanity will have representation in our council. We value the

ideas and opinions of our human friends, and will not shut them out in the decisions that we make that might affect you.

“We are not asking for anything outrageous, august members of this body. All we ask is to be given equality with humanity in matters of rights, to be considered equal citizens of the world with you. We ask that the borders of our territory will be honored, which are modest and should cause nobody in this room any undue burden. And most importantly, we ask that we be given the chance to reintegrate with the world beyond our borders, to give us the chance to find our place among you, to share our knowledge with you and share our magic with you. Once, long ago, humans and dragons were fast friends, accomplishing great things together. It is our hope that soon, we may be again. Thank you.”

The ambassadors began to applaud, at least most of them, and Kell stepped away from the podium and dropped back down to all fours. “Not bad, intended,” Kammi said in draconic as Kent and their procession stood up and came down off the dais.

He said nothing, only gave her a knowing look as Jenny and the others stood up, and they filed out in the same order they came in.

They exited the building without incident, and Kell and Kammi again climbed up into the trailers. Once the doors were closed and he again wriggled around, he contacted Jussa once again. “We’re done at the United Nations and heading back to the airport, esteemed council member,” he reported.

“We were watching a broadcast of your speech,” he answered.

“I hope I didn’t look silly.”

“Not to us, and you stayed remarkably on script,” he replied lightly.
“You had the proper gravity in your delivery.”

“Thank you, esteemed council member,” he answered. “I’m sure chief is there. What word on the media’s reaction to the speech?”

“It’s too early to get a good estimation. Only now are the news channels starting to discuss the matter,” he answered. “The department is monitoring all channels, as well as the social media. If they find out anything important, no doubt they’ll report it to us immediately.”

The trip back to the airport was uneventful, but as soon as they were back on the plane, everyone crowded around a TV that had been set up at the back of the seating area for them, with another TV set up at the front for those sitting in the seats. The TV was hooked into the plane’s wifi, and they were streaming CNN. Kell and Kammi loomed over Jenny, Wilson, Yancy, Kent, and Ross, who were standing back with them while the rest of the group was sitting in the seats. They had a whole table of pundits discussing the speech, with video of Kell delivering it playing on a monitor behind them. “It’s very clear what the dragon was saying,” one of the pundits said as the plane’s ramp and cargo doors were being closed. “They’re offering to teach magic to anyone that recognizes their rights. That makes me wonder if they’re not already secretly teaching magic to the Americans. It explains President Walker’s decisive moves when it comes to having his DoJ treat dragons the same as people when it comes to the law, even in the face of fierce evangelical opposition. The evangelicals *are* part of his base, and he’s making them very angry.”

“Well, that one’s pretty sharp,” Kammi noted lightly.

“The one thing I’m surprised the dragon didn’t address was the attack on China,” another pundit said. “They claimed responsibility for the attack while it happened, but since then, not a word. And how they did it, with that hurricane, surely must scare quite a few world leaders silly.”

“In more than one way,” the host injected. “What might happen in twenty years, when magic is part of a nation’s military strength? Are we going to see hurricanes, earthquakes, and other biblical level disasters being used as military weapons?”

“Yeah right,” Kammi snorted. “It took an entire flight of sky dragons to make that typhoon.”

“He does have a valid point,” Yancy said. “After all, my new office was created to find ways to use magic to protect the United States, both directly and covertly. And we’re not exactly hiding it from the dragons, you know.”

“And we don’t really have a problem with it,” Kell shrugged. “As long as you don’t try to use it against *us*.”

“What you do with magic is your business,” Kammi agreed. “The only reason they’re teaching is you is because you’re part of our world,” she said strongly. “And we don’t mind all that much if you use magic to defend yourself against those that *aren’t*.”

“All of you have dragon souls. That makes you part of us,” Kell agreed, putting a paw on Jenny’s shoulder, very carefully. “And most of you belong to me.”

“You mean you belong to us,” Jenny said teasingly, looking up and back at him with a smile.

“He belongs to *me*,” Kammi corrected forcefully, which made Jenny laugh.

They listened as the pundits continued to discuss the speech, as the plane took off and started the rather short flight down to Washington. There was a whole lot of speculation about the press conference that would be held on the White House lawn, and if his speech to the joint session would be much different from his very brief United Nations address...and it would be. His speech to Congress would be nearly an hour long, and would go into much more detail about things. But, at least the speech to the United Nations did the job, and that was to put all of the world’s attention squarely on what would happen in Washington later that day...which was probably Walker’s intention.

They landed in Washington right on time in a cold, dreary rain, and the plane taxied up to the location where the President usually boarded and disembarked from Air Force One. It was the high security area of the flight

line at Joint Base Andrews, and the Air Force had a *massive* security presence on the flight line. There was a veritable row of limousines and escort vehicles parked and waiting, and standing where the plane would park was a large welcoming committee, led by Deputy Secretary of State William Blake, whom Kell and Kammi had met before. Blake was third in line in the State Department, behind Kent and Ross. Usually Kent would be the one in that spot, but since Kent and Ross were with Kell, it fell to the highest ranking member of State in Washington to do it.

The President *did not* greet visitors at the airport. They came to him.

“Welcome to Washington, Kell,” Blake said, shaking his claw when he reached them. “President Walker is waiting for you at the White House, and everything’s ready for the trip.”

“Another trailer. Whee,” Kammi said dryly, which made Blake chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Kammi, but it’s all we have. We promise to have something a little less demeaning next time,” he smiled as he shook her claw.

“Next time we’ll have sky dragons with us to carry us there,” she retorted.

“I’m looking forward to the time when the dragons feel comfortable doing just that, Kammi,” Blake said seriously. “Secretary Kent, Deputy Secretary Ross, welcome back,” he greeted as the humans came down the ramp. “We have everything ready.”

“Then let’s get things going, William,” he said with a nod.

Kell checked in with the council while they were on the move, driving the short distance between Andrews and the White House, and it only took another moment to arrive by the time he broke contact with Jussa. His trailer pulled onto the White House grounds, and through his small slit of a window in the trailer, he could see an veritable army of reporters packed in front of the building, braving the cold rain with umbrellas, their cameras covered in special plastic sleeves. Kell and Kammi were too big to fit into

the building, so they'd erected a very large heated tent for them on the south lawn, where they'd be conducting their discussions with Walker both before and after the press conference. The press conference would also take place out there due to the rain, but that would take place under an even larger pavilion tent, one with no sides.

Walker was waiting for them at the tent, shaking Kell's claw, and then Kammi's, with a smile on his face. "Glad to see you finally get here, Kell," he said brightly. "I just wish it was the full council. After hosting me several times, I sincerely hope I get the chance to host them before I leave office."

"I'm sure they'd love to be able to come," Kell said as the others filed in behind them. "Now, let's talk about what we're going to talk about during the press conference."

The council joined via teleconference, and they discussed a few of the things they were going to reveal at the press conference. They'd already agreed to reveal Julia Walker's involvement with the dragons, not as a magic student, but as a member of the American diplomatic team that was holding talks with them. That would explain her extended absence from the White House, which had been noticed by quite a few reporters. The fact that America *had* a diplomatic team would also be revealed, something Kell had teased in his United Nations speech, revealing Jenny's position without naming her. What they weren't going to reveal was the program to find magicians to empower earth dragons, even though the risk increased every day that the program would be revealed...not by the magicians, but by family members. So far, every single magician had kept his mouth shut, and at least so far, their family members that knew about them being bonded had kept quiet. But neither the dragons nor the Americans were planning on that being the case for much more than six more months. As more and more earth dragons were bonded, that was seventeen times more of those empowered earth dragons in magician's families that might reveal the program. Basic statistical probability said that someone was going to reveal the program to the press within the next six months, and both the dragons and the government were preparing plans to deal with the operation being exposed.

But the program would not stop. The need to empower earth dragons would ensure it.

A pretty nice lunch was put out for them, loaded with several dozen loaves of artisan breads for Kell and Kammi to enjoy, and about 13:00, the pavilion tent was starting to be prepared for the press conference. Because it was relatively close to the tent they were using, they curtailed any confidential discussions in case a reporter had a shotgun microphone or exceptionally good hearing. They instead discussed something that would make the fire dragons insanely happy...a chance to see the L.A. Dragons play live next season. The owner of the team was quite serious about his invitation to them to watch a game at the stadium, to the point where he was having a section of the Coliseum renovated to give the fire dragons an aerial perch that would hold their weight, yet also keep them safely away from the rest of the fans....safety for both the humans and the dragons.

Then, the time came for the press conference. Walker's press secretary started it while they were still in the tent, laying down the ground rules for the reporters, then Kell, Kammi, Kent, Ross, Blake, and Walker walked from their tent to the pavilion tent. Flashes went off like mad as Kell and Kammi filed in behind President Walker and Arlen Kent, with Ross and Blake beside them, and Walker and Kell stepped up to the two podiums that had been erected for them...one much larger than the other. "Good afternoon," President Walker said as soon as he was at the podium. "First off, I'd like to thank the dragons for accepting my invitation to come address a joint session of Congress. I think it's in the best interest of both our races to start a dialogue, which will bring understanding between us and hopefully bring us closer together. This visit has taken quite a bit of effort to bring about, effort I feel must be duly recognized and commended. The Department of State has been working behind the scenes for nearly four months, to establish a dialogue and amicable relations with the dragons. Secretary of State Arlen Kent has worked tirelessly with a team of diplomats and specialists, both civilian and military, to establish permanent relations with the island of Draconia.

“I think it fair to inform everyone that my wife Julia has been part of this effort, not because I needed someone to look over State’s shoulder, but because she has been sincerely interested in the dragons since she met them on Mount Kilauea during our visit there. She joined the diplomatic mission with the hope of learning more about the dragons, to get to know them, and has become one of their most involved members. She’s been working with Kent and his team for three months, and is still in Hawaii. She sends her deepest apologies that she couldn’t be present at this conference and at tonight’s address, but currently she’s involved in discussions too sensitive to break off.

“My wife and members of Secretary Kent’s department are part of a permanent diplomatic mission to the dragons. They’ve set up a permanent diplomatic consulate on one of the uninhabited islands in the Hawaiian chain, close enough for the dragons to fly there so talks can be conducted in person. These talks have produced results, including the dragons accepting one human diplomat to move to the island to represent the human race to the dragons, to be our ambassador to their world. The ambassador and her family moved to Draconia approximately three weeks ago. In the interests of security, I won’t be revealing the Ambassador’s identity until security can be arranged for her extended family.

“One of the results of these talks is the executive order I issued two weeks ago, as well as the legislation I’m hoping to have introduced into Congress that grants dragons the same basic rights afforded to human beings. My Department of Justice is already working under these rules, which affords my two esteemed guests here the same rights that would be afforded if it was the foreign minister of Great Britain or Canada or France. The dragons deserve to have that recognition, to be acknowledged as sentient beings with all the same rights as humans under the law. What many of you may not have realized is that those considerations work *both ways*. The dragons have agreed that if a dragon commits a crime on American soil, then the dragon should be subject to our criminal law. The dragons haven’t sought to hold themselves above our laws. The dragons

have agreed that to be granted the protection of the law, they must also be subject to it, just like we are.

“As Kell intimated in his address to the United Nations, in return for the recognition of their rights, the dragons are willing to teach American citizens magic,” he declared in a strong voice, which created a new firestorm of camera flashes. “Exactly how we’re going to do this, we haven’t worked that out yet. Needless to say, this is quite a major undertaking, both as a big step for us humans and a major logistical challenge, since the dragons live on their island and their students won’t be going there. So, we haven’t decided how we’re going to do this, or when, or where, but we’ve agreed in principle that it would be good for both the dragons and America for them to teach us magic. The dragons feel it’s their duty to teach humans about magic, and for one, I think that it’s only right for us to reclaim a birthright that’s been forgotten by the human race for over a thousand years. There were human magicians long ago, and in time, there will be again.

“I know that many of you have been asking why I’ve taken the position that I have when many who supported me are against what I’m doing, and the simple answer to that is, I believe they’re wrong. Frank,” he said, motioning towards the small table behind the podium. “About two months ago, as part of our negotiations with the dragons, they gave me this book about magic. It’s a beginner’s book, it explains the basics, both in how magic works and what the dragons believe, both philosophically and theologically. I read this book,” he said, taking a book from an aide and holding it up. It was Jenny’s primer, the first book they gave her, reprinted for human size. He held it up so the reporters could see the cover, which read *A Magical Primer: Understanding Magic, the Treasured Gift from Gaia*. “So others can understand this book as well, we are going to release copies of it to every reporter in this conference, every Congressman, and send copies to every public library, as well as make its contents available online on a government website. I think that once people start to understand magic, they’ll start to understand that magic is a part of the natural world, and as such, that means that it is part of God’s design. Are there some parts

of it I have problems with? Yes, particularly the dragon belief in reincarnation. But what I don't agree with in this book does not disqualify what I do agree with. I can hold to my Christian faith and still support magic, because I don't see a conflict between them. And I sincerely believe that anyone who reads this book with an open mind, not holding a preconception they seek to validate or justify, will draw the same conclusion I did. Kell," he prompted.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," Kell said in a calm voice. "I am Kell of the earth drakes, sent by the council of dragons as their representative on this diplomatic mission. This is Kammi, who works with me in a department of the dragon government that deals with the outside world, our version of your State Department. The reason we were sent instead of a member of the council boils down to one simple reason, and that's that the two of us are the only ones with the authority to speak for the council that are small enough to fit into buildings," he said directly. "So, from a simple perspective of practicality, that made us the dragons of choice for this diplomatic mission.

"The President was fairly thorough in his introduction. His diplomatic mission has been in negotiations with us for several weeks over multiple subjects, from opening trade ties so we can get raw materials and other things we can't produce ourselves, to teaching magic to humans. We've come to know Secretary Kent, Deputy Secretary Ross, the First Lady Julia Walker, and the members of their diplomatic mission over the last few months, and we have been both impressed by them and how they represent humanity as a whole. They have given us hope that we can find a place in the human world once again.

"What the President didn't tell you, and something of which he is fully aware, is that the agreements we have made with him and the United States are not meant to be exclusive," he declared. "We have made the agreement to teach magic to American citizens sometime in the future, once we work out exactly how and where we're going to do it. But President Walker fully understands that we won't *only* be teaching Americans. When other nations recognize our rights and officially recognize Draconia as the sovereign

nation of the dragons, we will enter into negotiations with their governments to do the same. To give you an idea of what magic can do, we brought along a gift for the President. Kammi,” he prompted. She approached his podium and took off her shoulder satchel, then offered it to him. “Though we don’t have much on our island in the way of natural resources, we do have one thing we can offer the world. Magic,” he said, opening the satchel. A swarm of driftlights came out of it, several dozen of them, small ones sized for humans. “We’ve agreed in principle with President Walker to trade magical objects in return for food and resources, objects like these. These are called driftlights,” he said, pointing up at the glowing points of light. “Their name is a good description of what they are. They make light, and can follow their owners around, be placed where the owner wishes. We made these for President Walker,” he announced as the driftlights slowly floated over to float in a cluster behind Walker’s right shoulder. “A gift from the dragons to him, a token of gratitude for the help America has provided us.

“But these aren’t the only driftlights that we’ll be bringing to the human world. In the future, the dragons will be *selling* these objects, as well as a few other magical trinkets that humans might find entertaining or useful, in return for the things we need and can’t get on our island. The diplomatic mission saw these during one of our meetings, and asked us if we could make them in sufficient numbers to trade them. But the Department of State also asked us to look at much more valuable applications of magic for the human world, such as magically assisted power generation. They’ve asked us to find a method to turn an electric generator with magic instead of with steam or physical force, which should drastically reduce the cost to produce electricity. We’ve agreed with their request, since we can see the value in it from both an economic and ecological perspective. We were quite happy to find out that the Department of State was interested in ways to use magic to benefit all of humanity, not just the United States,” he said respectfully.

“As I mentioned in my address to the United Nations, we’ve selected a member of the diplomatic team from America to serve as an ambassador,”

he continued. “But she doesn’t serve as the ambassador from America, she serves as the ambassador of the entire human race. In effect, she will serve as the intermediary between the human world and our world, speaking for both to the other. She will represent our interests to you, and she represents your interests to us, to the point where she has been awarded a position as a neutral observer that sits in on meetings of the dragon council. In time, she’ll be introduced to you. I think the President explained why we’re keeping her identity a secret for the time being. What you should know is that she has embraced her role, and is a strong advocate to the dragon council for human interests. She has helped us see things from your point of view, and to be honest, a great deal of the good relations we have made with the Americans is because of her.

“Now, as to why I’m here. Later today, I’ll be giving an address to a joint session of Congress. The reason for this address is to advocate in favor of the legislation that the President seeks to introduce into Congress, as well as introduce America to us, the same way we have been introduced to you by the diplomats that have been working with us the last few months. We feel we’ve kept ourselves a little *too* secret lately, focusing on being accepted by the law to the point where we’ve forgotten that we have to be accepted by the people as well. That’s why I left a copy of dragon history with the United Nations, so those who are curious can see the past as we have seen it, from a point of view entirely different from yours. And given that our recorded history stretches back eighteen thousand years, perhaps what we’ve seen in that time may be of interest to you,” he added dryly. “Just be warned that our history was written from our point of view, and often two people who have different points of view can interpret the same event differently. That doesn’t make our version any more right or wrong than your version. It simply means that we drew different conclusions about what we saw than you did.” He put his paws on the podium, which creaked a little bit under his weight. “Mister President.”

“We’ll open up the floor to questions,” Walker continued. “I just want all of you to keep in mind the rules we’ll be working by, and that I expect all of you to act with decorum. Every reporter here will be given the

opportunity to ask one question, and we'll do our best to answer additional questions after everyone gets a chance, if we have time. So, keep that in mind, the less time you waste, the more questions can be asked. And remember, no comment means exactly that. Mister Palmer, if you would," he prompted.

"Lucy Frederick, CNN," the press secretary called.

A tall woman wearing a blue dress stood up and took the microphone an aide offered her. "Ambassador Kell, I think the simplest question I can ask is *why* the dragons are willing to teach humanity magic."

"To answer that, you have to understand chromatic society," he answered. "They hold a deep-seated belief that Gaia commanded them to spread their knowledge to all who can use it, including the knowledge of magic. That is why the chromatics are the teachers in our society, they teach magic to the other three dragon races that can use it. The chromatics see humans who can use magic as no different, because Gaia specifically instructed them to teach *anyone* with magical ability, be them dragon or human. And all dragons take what they believe to be commandments from Gaia *very* seriously."

And that set the tone. Virtually every question was directed at Kell, and nearly all of them revolved around either magic or what the dragons were up to. Some of the questions were confrontational, mainly from the very conservative outlets, demanding to know what plans the dragons had for humanity...which Kell had to either answer with obvious amusement or make no comment. The reporters were trying to get them to divulge exactly what the agreement was between them and Walker, and those that weren't were about magic in some way. Though they had shown the reporters some magic when they visited the exclusion zone, most humans still had no clear idea what magic was and what it could do.

Naturally, it was Gloria Brenner from Fox News that asked what Kell felt was the most baiting question of all. "Are the dragons attempting to

introduce their religion to humanity? The worship of Gaia?" she asked in a badgering voice.

"You don't understand our connection to Gaia," he told her. "We don't consider her our god. We consider her our mother, she who cares for our material forms with the world that is her body and keeps and protects our souls when we die and wait to be reincarnated. The earth dragons have a much deeper connection to her than the other dragons, because we are of the earth that is her body. All dragons honor, respect, and revere her, we obey the edicts she has passed down to us, because we love her and wish to be good children to her. Not because we worship her as a god," he replied directly. "Though Gaia could be called a god by the uneducated because she has powers far beyond ours, she's *not* God. And Christianity reflects her position in the Bible, mainly in the Ten Commandments. I'm sure you've read them," he said, a bit tartly. "*Thou shalt put no other god before me.* That means that while there are other exceptionally powerful entities out there, they are *not* God. You can recognize their power as long as you don't worship them as if they were God. So, to answer your question, Ms. Brenner, the dragons have no real religion to try to spread to humanity, and conversely, we don't want humans to try to spread their religions to us. We can believe different things and still work together for the betterment of both our species."

That produced a quite satisfying look of comprehension on quite a few reporters' faces, and a bit of surprise. He'd bet that many of them didn't think he could quote the Christian bible.

The next reporter followed up on Brenner. "Exactly who or what *is* Gaia?" she asked.

Kell leaned a little over his podium. "We call her the World Dragon, and to understand what she is, you have to know a little bit about what we believe. See, dragons believe that every living thing has a soul, from a bacteria all the way up to us. The soul is the life force, the spark that gives something life. And we believe that Gaia is the awareness made up of the totality of all life on the planet. All of us are cells in her body, and we are all

connected together on this planet which is her body. Much like your own body is made up of billions and billions of cells that work together, all life on earth is connected, working together to form ecosystems within the biosphere. We believe that the planet itself is sentient, has its own life force and its own awareness, though it's so alien to us that we barely understand it. When we say that we are all part of Gaia, and she is part of us, we are being literal," he told her calmly. "Magic is tied in with those beliefs. We believe that the life energy of all creatures on the planet generate the energy we call magic, and that those with Gaia's gift can manipulate and control these energies. Those are the magicians," he explained, "both dragon and human. So, we are all part of Gaia, and she is part of all of us. Naturally, we believe that she's a dragon," he said in a lighter tone. "But in reality, I'm not sure any label we make up would apply to her. She's a complete mystery, even to us. The only thing we know for sure is that she seems to be aware of both us dragons and you humans, and from time to time she tries to communicate with us. Those are the edicts of Gaia I mentioned earlier."

"And what do those edicts tell you to do?" she followed up.

"Well, like I said before, the chromatics believe that Gaia has commanded them to teach others what they know, to spread knowledge and education through the world, and in particular the knowledge of magic. The book on dragon history I released has some other examples in it, because the edicts of Gaia have altered dragon society in the past. As far as we earth dragons go, she's never really given us any edicts. But then again, we try to distance ourselves from the affairs of others. We are a simple and reclusive species who wish only to be left in peace to work our farms. I think that pleases Gaia, because she's never really told us to do anything different," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

They answered questions for nearly two more hours, mostly Kell with Walker just standing there, answering question after question about magic, dragons, and their plans and intentions.

He did get one intriguing question towards the end, from a man named Ali Velshi. "Why is there no recorded history of dragons?" he asked.

“Because to paraphrase an old human saying, the victor is the one that writes the history books,” he answered. “The Catholic Church controlled virtually all of western civilization when the dragons removed themselves from human contact, and they were the ones that completely purged all mention of dragons from history. But it couldn’t remove us from the memories of the people, so the memory of us and the things we left behind lived on in myth and legend. Instead of historical facts, we became the subjects of tales and legends. That’s western society. African, North and South American, and Asian societies weren’t dominated by the Catholics, but I think for them, us disappearing from the world made them doubt their written histories. The Chinese have extensive histories of the dragons and magic, but I think—and this is my opinion—that when we left, when the magicians all died out and no new ones took their place, the people began to disbelieve their history because it seemed too, well, *fantastic*. I mean, would you believe that magic was real, that dragons were real, if you’d never seen them, even though you had a history book that told you that five hundred years ago, there were magicians and dragons?” he asked. “There are still some civilizations and cultures that believe in magic, however, so not even that opinion holds for every human society. People in the modern age still believe in the occult. Creole cultures like those in the Caribbean and New Orleans believe in voodoo, and in Africa, they have witch doctors that profess to be able to use magic. And who knows...maybe they *can*,” he said. “Not even we dragons know everything about magic. Who’s to say that the African witch doctors haven’t learned how to use magic, in their own way? I’m sure the chromatrics would love to go talk to them and find out.”

Eventually, finally, Walker called an end to the press conference, and they returned to the conference tent, remaining quiet and resting a bit as the staff herded the reporters back into the building, well away from them. Only when the Secret Service reported that all reporters were back inside did they start talking again. “I think that went fairly well,” Kammi broke the silence.

“I’m just glad I didn’t have to go to that one,” Jenny declared.

“I’m sure several reporters suspect that you might be the ambassador, Colonel,” Walker told her. “You’ve been there at nearly every public appearance of the dragons. I didn’t want you there for other reporters to make the same assumption.”

“We need to contact the council,” Kell said.

“Yancy’s already working on it.”

Moments later, they were all facing a wall-size monitor set up that held the faces of the council, who were all looking at the monitors and cameras set up in the center of the circle. There were five cells on the screen, four of which held the wyrm and drake of a species and the fifth showing Trejem by himself. They discussed the news conference, getting the council’s input on how Kell answered the questions, which they found more than acceptable. Kell had prepared for that conference, and knew how to answer virtually any question that the reporters might have asked. They discussed his upcoming speech, and that took long enough for them to start running short on time. Walker’s staff brought out a meal for all of them, setting up tables for Walker and the human delegation, steak and lobster for the humans and a large barrel of assorted fruits and vegetables for Kell and Kammi, providing them with some foods they hadn’t been able to enjoy recently on the island. “I miss these so much,” Kammi said as she swallowed down a pawful of oranges.

“I can’t see how you can eat them with the rinds on,” Jenny said.

“The rinds are what make them tasty,” she replied. “I think the insides of them are a bit gross. That’s why I make sure I don’t bite into them.”

“That does take some getting used to. Watching you eat, I mean,” Walker chuckled. “It’s very strange to us that you don’t chew your food.”

“Trying to chew our food would make things a bit messy, Mister President,” she told him with a toothy grin. “Our teeth are there to chop food up into pieces small enough to swallow. Oh, and bite Price,” she added, which made Jenny laugh.

“You will never give that up, will you?”

“*Never*,” she replied in a tone so grave it made most of them crack up.

After the meal, it was almost time to go. Kell was going to address Congress at 20:30, and they had to start the process of leaving at 19:30 so they could have everything ready and prepared by the time they got there. They’d only be going a few blocks, but given how long it would take to arrange things both at the White House and at the Capitol, it would take just about the entire hour. It was dark out when they came out of the tent, the reporters allowed to gather near where the trailers were waiting, so they seemed to move through a strobe of camera flashes in the cloudy, chilly, humid December night. It took them so long to get to the vehicles that it was 20:00 by the time Kell climbed up into the trailer, and again wriggled his way around once the doors were closed.

The schedule was spot on, because it was 20:20 by the time they arrived at the Capitol, at the only entrance where Kell and Kammi could easily fit, a loading dock well hidden under the main building. Walker, their security, and Jenny and the entourage gathered with them in the small warehouse beyond the dock, and after the Capitol Police gave them the go-ahead, they were escorted through the wide passageways of the Capitol towards the House chamber. The place was probably completely packed, both on the floor and in the gallery above. They reached the double doors leading in, and they waited while Walker’s people ensured they were ready. Then the doors opened, and the Sergeant of Arms of the House gave the announcement. “Madam Speaker, the President of the United States!” Walker entered first, and directly behind him was Kell and Kammi, walking in single file. Usually the Congressmen would crowd the entryway to shake Walker’s hand, but for this address, everyone remained seated, though they did applaud loudly. The reason for that was simple; Kell and Kammi were too big for it be safe trying to crowd them. One slip and fall into their path could get a Congressman stepped on, and given how much the two of them weighed, that could be potentially fatal. They would be given the opportunity to greet Walker and the dragons on the way out, they’d been told, but even then they had to be careful not to crowd them too much.

The well was ready. The same podium Kell used for the press conference was now sitting into the open well of the House chamber, in front of the dais holding the desks for the aides and Speaker's box. The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, stood applauding as she stood beside Walker's Vice President, a man named John Kasich, who had once been governor of Ohio. Walker had kept Kasich out of the loop for most of the dragon matters, for reasons that only Walker really knew. They council had approved of Walker's decision, because as far as the dragons were concerned, the fewer people in the loop, the less chance that something would leak. As it was, the circle of government officials that knew what was going on with the dragons numbered about forty, and almost all of them were in Walker's main office or the State Department. Walker kept things so confidential, not even his Vice President was kept in the loop...and that was probably because of Julia. Ever since Julia had decided to train with the dragons, Walker had been exceptionally careful...because his wife was directly involved. Kell and Kammi walked into the well and sat down to the side as Jenny and the others took their seats, and Walker climbed up to the podium where he would give a short address before turning the floor over to Kell. "Ladies and gentlemen of the House and Senate, esteemed guests in the gallery, and to all watching around the world," he began. "Tonight I have the privilege of being the first President in the history of our nation to introduce to the Congress the representative of the dragons, the earth drake Kell, who has requested the honor of addressing this joint session. I will now yield the floor to our guest," he said, giving Kell a motion of his hand.

Kell padded to the podium, then reared up and sat on the base of his tail, giving himself a vertical base. "Good evening," he said. "I am Kell of the earth drakes, a fact of which I'm sure everyone in this chamber knows by now," he said dryly, which produced a few chuckles. "The council of dragons decided that it was time for us to introduce ourselves formally to the world, and while I could have done so at the United Nations, we felt that that wasn't the proper venue because of our past friction with the Chinese. The Americans have been good friends to us since we first approached them over using Kilauea, so it was decided that it would only be proper to allow the world to get to know us a little better here, in the People's House, and

before an audience that wouldn't start shouting me down in Mandarin," he added, which produced even more chuckles. "While you've probably seen one of us on television from the footage from Kilauea, we realized that in all those press conferences and questions, you only got a small taste of what life is like for us. So, let me describe to you a typical day in the life of a dragon."

And he did just that. Kell wanted to sound much more natural, so he didn't use a prepared speech for it, only an outline of what he wanted to say. He described a typical day on the island, not just for the earth dragons, but for all five races of dragon. He described the daily work of the earth dragons from the perspective of a dragon that had done that work himself, but he also described the fishing of the water dragons with the same intimacy, revealing to the audience that he occupied a rather unique position in dragon society as an earth dragon trained by water dragons in the art of fishing, explaining the long friendship between his family and Shii's pod as to how that would come about. But, when he started getting into the daily activities of the sky, fire, and chromatics, he managed nearly the same level of comfortable familiarity, gained by having to spend so much time with the other dragons over the last few months. He described the daily flights and patrols of the sky dragons over the ocean surrounding the island, their eternal vigil to protect the island by spotting ships and planes approaching it, then described the rather unusual daily routine of the fire dragons, since their role on the island meant they had more free time than just about any other race. They spent a portion of their day exercising, practicing fang and claw combat, and studying magic, and some were assigned duties to perform by the council or by the elders of the fire dragons. But most fire dragons had lots of spare time, which they occupied with television, personal hobbies, and sports...definitely sports, both dragon sports and human sports. He made sure to mention that fire dragons were absolutely crazy about American football, and on Sunday mornings the island all but shook with roars from fire dragons as they watched their favorite teams play on TV. But Kell stressed that their seemingly lazy lifestyle concealed the fact that they were eternally ready for battle, and the island gladly gave

them that free time in return for the fact that they were the soldiers of the dragons, ready to fight and even die to defend the others.

And what tied all of those stories together except the earth dragons were the chromatics. Kell described how the chromatics were engaged and involved with the other three races of magic-using dragons by acting as their teachers and tutors, how young magic-using dragons spent a portion of every day learning and practicing magic from both chromatic teachers and teachers from their own race, to teach them the special magical skills inherent to their race, and how many adults spent time with chromatic tutors expanding their magical skills, striving to reach their maximum potential in magic. Kell described how, when not teaching other dragons, chromatics spent long days in their libraries studying both magic and other fields of interest, from history to science. The entire world of the chromatics was knowledge, both gaining it and spreading it, and he gave them their due as the most dedicated of the dragons in their role.

After he wound through the tale, he returned to his prepared speech. He praised the American government and its people for their friendliness, then went into more detail with regard to the trade deal, where the dragons would trade magical trinkets for items and supplies they needed, as well as provide magical assistance for American infrastructure projects, again noting their intent to create industrial electrical generators powered by magic instead of steam. He painted a future world where magic would help ease the world's dependence on hard to acquire and detrimental resources like oil and gas, where magic and technology were used in coordination to create a better life for both human and dragon alike.

“But that will come in time,” he told the chamber in a strong voice. “Right now, we understand that things are too new, too unknown, for both you and us. We all need time to get used to this new normal, the dragons need time to understand the modern world, and the modern world needs time to understand us and our magic. That’s why we want to take things slow, small steps towards each other to give both you and us time to acclimate before we meet in the middle,” he told them. “I’m certain that there are those among you that are against magic, for personal or religious

reasons, and we can understand your apprehension. Western society has a dim view of magic, either dismissing it as the fancy of flighty minds or as a sinister force powered by evil entities, and we understand that it's going to take time, patience, and understanding for people to come to know magic as we dragons do. We are patient, ladies and gentlemen, and are willing to take the time and effort to show those who are against magic that it is not what you believe it to be, that it is a *natural* force, not a *supernatural* force. And in the meantime, we'll do our best to be more open with you, give you the chance to understand us, to see us as more than simply large, intimidating creatures with really big fangs and unknown and frightening capabilities. I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, we only *look* scary," he said in a voice that produced some chuckles.

"For that reason, we are extending an invitation to President Walker, First Lady Julia Walker, and Secretary of State Arlen Kent to visit the island and conduct talks with the dragon council in person, to give them the chance to see our home in return for the President's generous invitation to allow us to see yours," he announced. "In addition to the President, First Lady, the Secretary, and a select number of support and security personnel to assist them, we will allow one three person team of journalists, a reporter, a cameraman, and a producer, to accompany the President on his visit, so the entire world can see our island and hopefully understand us a little better. The specifics of the visit will be worked out with the President in the coming days, as will the selection of the media representatives that will accompany them. It's our hope that this visit helps solve many of the mysteries that humanity has about us, allows you to see us in much less formal circumstances," he said easily.

"We'll be taking a more technological approach to the issue as well. As many of you know, the earth dragons have been studying the human world and its technology since the end of World War II, so we're quite comfortable with the internet. We've established an official presence on the internet in the form of a website and social media accounts, both official accounts representing the dragon council and personal accounts of individual dragons. The personal accounts will explain who we are, what

we do, and how we live, where the official council accounts will disseminate official positions and information from our government to the rest of the world. Dragons from all five races now have social media accounts, and they'll share their everyday experiences with the world through those accounts. We've introduced ourselves to the world, ladies and gentlemen, and now we're going to invite you to take a look into our homes and lives so you can get to know us better," he announced.

"It's our hope that this visit is the first of many to come," he called. "That our two worlds can find common ground and come together, to be the single world that we once were once again. To reach that goal, we will need time, patience, and understanding, on both sides of the gulf that currently separates us. But that can't come to pass until this body passes the Dragon Rights Act," he called. "The agreements we've made with President Walker's negotiating team hinge on Congress setting our legal status into law, and granting us the same civil rights as human beings on American soil. The act makes it clear that dragons won't be granted additional rights or privileges over human beings, outside of perhaps modifying a few FAA regulations to take into account that dragons can fly and will be sharing the sky with planes, and that dragons will be subject to the same laws that apply to human beings on American soil...except perhaps indecent exposure," he said cheekily, which produced a few laughs. "We don't seek to put ourselves above the law, we only wish to be recognized as fellow sentient beings that receive the same basic rights that human beings enjoy. Pass that law, ladies and gentlemen, and the world of magic will be open to you," he told them, "at least in time. It's our hope that within two or three years, the chromatics will begin teaching the first class of human magicians. And who knows, perhaps some of the people sitting in this chamber at this very moment will be part of that first class of magicians. Our histories tell us that one out of every hundred humans has the gift to use magic, so it's a simple matter of statistics to say that there are magicians sitting in this chamber right now," he told them, which made quite a few of them start looking around in curiosity. "But another part of the Dragon Rights Act makes it clear that magic will be part of the law, subject to it, and that the magic that you do may subject you to prosecution if you misuse it," he said strongly.

“Using magic to burn down a house is just as much arson as pouring gasoline on it and lighting it with a match, and the punishment for doing either should be the same. The act lays down the framework of how magic will be worked into the justice system, defining an act of magic against the will of the victim as assault, and any effects that magic may have as a crime equal to a non-magical act that produces the same result. And we dragons fully support the implementation of that part of the act,” he declared in a powerful voice. “Our own laws codify such actions, and we fully support the laws of human nations to do the same. We understand that if we want to be welcomed back into the human world, we must abide by its laws, as should anyone who learns magic from us.

“There are other matters for this body to consider, that we dragons fully support and encourage you to consider. You must decide where magic fits into the toolkit of law enforcement, for example, when a detective can legally use magic to investigate a crime and what he may do, and when the use of magic infringes on the rights afforded to witnesses and suspects by the Constitution. But these kinds of laws can’t be written until you have a deeper understanding of magic. That’s why, as the President stated in our press conference earlier today, copies of the magical primer that was given to the President and members of his negotiating team will be made available to every member of Congress, so you can learn more about how magic works and use that knowledge to decide how magic will fit into the American legal system. We want you to approach magic with a critical eye so that you can best decide how it fits into your legal system and your society, to make magic work best for you, just as we dragons have rules and laws about magic that allows it to work best for us. We are only the teachers, ladies and gentlemen, we have no right to tell you how to use the knowledge we are offering to you. It’s up to you to decide how magic will be used within the boundaries of your nation, and it will fall upon this august body to make those decisions, to lay the groundwork with laws that define those boundaries. We only ask that the decisions you make are informed ones.

“There’s much that we can offer to America, ladies and gentlemen, just as there is much you have to offer us. It’s our hope that we can come together on equal ground and learn from each other, come to know each other, and hopefully in time, befriend each other. Time, patience, and understanding can bring us together, and when that happens, we can accomplish great things together. Thank you,” he said, in a voice that made it clear that he was done speaking, and to his relief, he was met with immediate and enthusiastic applause...but not from everyone. Many on the Republican side of the chamber remained in their seats, did not applaud, and looked quite unhappy with what he had to say.

Walker was right. He was going to face more opposition from the right wing zealots his own party than he would from anyone else, people like the Freedom Caucus. They were the ones with the deepest bias against magic, based on their religious beliefs. Or more to the point, a very narrow interpretation of those beliefs. If the legislation passed in the Senate, it would do so by a coalition between Democrats and moderate Republicans. In the House, it would pass much more easily, since the Democrats controlled the chamber.

The Secret Service detail took over, and in a surprisingly short amount of time, Kell, Kammi, and the President were escorted out of the chamber and hurried back down to the loading dock where the trailers were waiting. They paused there for a moment before boarding the trailers, as Kell and Kammi shook hands—sort of—with President Walker. According to the schedule, they would part there, with the dragons heading straight to the airport and Walker going back to the White House. “That was a shorter speech than I expected, Kell, but I think it was a powerful one,” Walker told him as he shook his claw.

“Jussa wrote it, and I’ll be sure to tell him you thought it was good,” he smiled toothily, which made Walker chuckle.

“Water dragons are good at choosing their words,” Kammi injected, shaking Walker’s hand in turn. “It was good to see you, Mister President. And here’s hoping you get to come visit us real soon.”

“I’m really looking forward to it,” he said honestly. “When will the dragons choose the journalists?”

“I think Jussa has a plan for that. I think it’s going to involve sending all of the ones that want to be considered to Hawaii along with you, and they’ll be selected there just before you leave for the island. That way the journalists can’t really prepare all that well.”

Walker laughed. “Clever,” he said approvingly, patting Kammi on the side of her jaw. “You two be good, and with luck, I’ll see you again soon.”

“This way, Mister President,” an agent prompted, motioning towards a door beside the loading dock.

Because the roads were cleared for them, they were back at Andrews and on the plane in about 45 minutes. Yancy, Wilson, and Jenny came up the ramp behind them along with the SPs and the Secret Service agents, and as soon as the ramp was raised and locked, Jenny started taking off the belt of her Class A’s. “God, these things are so uncomfortable,” she complained.

“Don’t starch them so much, silly,” Kammi chided.

“You’re telling a Marine not to starch her uniform? Are you mad, Kammi?” she protested, which made her laugh.

The plane was in the air about ten minutes after the ramp closed, and all three of their friends took advantage of the sleeper cabins to change into much more relaxed clothing. They sat on the back row of the seats to be near Kell and Kammi and discussed the speech, Kell listening carefully to Yancy’s opinions and observations. He may look young and a bit naïve, but Yancy had all his years of experience, and he was a very observant and savvy man. “Did you see the expressions of some of the Congressmen?” Kammi asked. “If they’d have had guns, they probably woulda tried to shoot us right there in the well.”

“The President wasn’t kidding about the opposition he’s been getting from his own party,” Yancy grunted. “I’ve been out of the loop since moving to Imakaii, but I know burning hatred when I see it. I’d bet that

there's been some major shouting matches over the phone between Walker and those legislators."

"You think they have the votes to kill the act?" Kammi asked.

Yancy shook his head. "The Dems control the house, and there are too many moderate Republican Senators to kill it there," he answered. "The only way it could go down is if McConnell refuses to put it on the floor. And if he does that, he'll lose his position as Majority Leader."

"Why is that?" Jenny asked.

"Because three Republican Senators have threatened to change parties if he tries," he answered. "If they do, the Democrats take control of the Senate. All three have said that this legislation is too important to play politics over, and they're not gonna let him throw a wrench into it."

"I'll bet old turtle face was screaming in his office after hearing that," Kammi laughed. "He is like the *worst* Senator ever."

"He'll do everything he can to torpedo the bill short of refusing to put it on the floor," Yancy predicted. "He could lose re-election if he allows it to pass due to the large number of religious wingnuts in Kentucky, but if he doesn't let the Senate vote on it, he'll lose his majority leadership. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer dick," he declared, a hint of his old gravelly voice peeking through. "I've met the man before, and he's the ultimate politician. A complete snake and as untrustworthy as the devil. And he's never liked Walker, because Walker put him in his place during the election campaign after McConnell called him a RINO," he said with a dark chuckle.

"So, it sounds like Washington politicians are gonna be their usual greasy selves," Kammi noted lightly.

"And validate Churchill," Kell added.

"Huh?" Jenny asked.

“Churchill once said that America could be counted upon to do the right thing, after they exhausted all other possible options,” he said, which made Jenny laugh. “So, things are looking favorable for the bill, that’s good.”

“We should turn on the TV and see what the pundits are saying about the speech,” Jenny prompted.

“That’ll depend entirely on which network you turn on,” Kell said.

Kell was prophetic in that regard. The pundits on CNN, MSNBC, the BBC, Sky News, Al Jazeera, Channel One, and NHK were fair in their analysis, pointing out some potential pitfalls in his speech while also considering its content. But Fox News, who had Gloria Brenner anchoring the post-speech coverage, was all but breathing fire, accusing the dragons of trying to cajole humanity into accepting satanic magic into mainstream society. Brenner was probably the most virulently opposed to magic of all the TV personalities, and the views she’d adopted to mirror her viewers were evident in her rant as the other three journalists at the table looked on at her with mixtures of shock and embarrassment.

“Well, I see who’s not getting the invite to the island,” Kammi said with dark humor as they listened to another pundit at the table try to interrupt Brenner’s tirade, but the woman just kept talking over him to point where she was shouting. “And that’s not exactly a good sign. Brenner’s usually nothing but a chameleon, taking whatever stance is most popular with the right wing base,” she added. “If she’s that opposed to us, that means they are too.”

“They’re only about twenty percent of the population,” Jenny said reassuringly.

“What you’re overlooking is that the crazies are disproportionately represented in Congress, due to them primarying the moderates,” Kell said soberly. “But I agree with Yancy. I think the bill will pass, but it will be a close vote. Particularly in the Senate.”

“I think the council has its work cut out for it,” Wilson finally said. But that was normal for him. “They may never convince people like her to see that magic isn’t what they think it is. They believe what they want to believe and they don’t care about the truth.”

“Then perhaps Gloria Brenner is *exactly* the journalist that should be invited to the island,” Kell mused. “Because that would mean that she’s a magician. They won’t allow any human on the island that’s not a magician, Tom. That’s why the dragons are choosing the press crew, so the chromatics can identify the magicians among the applicants. If it turns out she’s a magician, it may change her outlook a little bit.”

“That would be rich,” Kammi laughed. “And if it got out that she’s a magician, she wouldn’t be welcome among the very base she parrots.”

“Ironical justice,” Jenny chuckled.

“More like karma,” Yancy grunted.

“Karma is only a bitch when you are,” Kell quipped, which made them chuckle.

“*Kell,*” Jussa’s voice came over the message band on his horn.

“Hold up, Jussa just contacted me,” he warned, putting a finger to the band. “I hear you, esteemed council member,” he answered.

“*Are you in the air?*”

“Yes, we’re airborne and heading back for Honolulu now,” he answered. “I’m sorry I didn’t contact you immediately. We’re discussing the potential human reaction to the speech. I was going to contact you with our observations when we were done.”

“*That’s what we want to talk about. Can Jenny set up the video conferencing program while the plane’s in the air?*”

“This plane, yes she can,” he answered. “It has a satellite uplink. Jenny, Yancy, the council wants us to teleconference in,” he told them.

“Not a problem, Kell. Tell Jussa we’ll be ready in about twenty minutes,” she replied standing up. “Tom, can you grab my laptop?”

“Sure thing, Mookie,” he replied.

About twenty minutes later, they were added to a teleconference with the council, Walker, and Kent and Ross in different windows. Jenny set up the camera so it got a view of all of them, and the monitor they were using was one of the large ones that was attached to the ceiling of the cargo hold and swung down. They then spent nearly three hours discussing Kell’s speeches and the press conference in some detail, as well as their plan to bring Walker to the island in an official capacity to let the world see more of dragon culture. “We’re going to handle the security situation by using the Hunters as pretend Secret Service agents,” Walker told them. “They’re military men and most of them aren’t known to the press or public, so they can pass as agents fairly easily. We’re going to bring them back from Imakaii and have them undergo training with the service, training them in how things are done so they don’t arouse suspicion. That way we keep everything inside the family, as it were.”

“That does solve the problem,” Jussa nodded. “How are you going to get down here?”

“We need to talk to you about that,” he said. “Would it be within the realm of possibility for the sky dragons to safely land a jet on the island?”

The camera swung over to Faralla and Hinado. “Easily,” he replied. “A flight can capture it in a net of solid air and set it down anywhere on the island the council decides. We can get it back in the air the same way, though that will depend on the skill of the pilot. He’d be taking over control after the sky dragons get the plane back into the air and up to a safe flying speed.”

“Then I think we need to organize some training sessions,” Walker said. “I can arrange a military C-130 or C-141 to fly us down from Hawaii. It will have all the cargo and passenger space we need, and we should be able to find pilots rated for it that are magicians. I rather doubt that the

entire crew that mans Air Force One are all magicians,” he said. “This way we only need to find two pilots, and since those are common planes in both the Navy and Air Force inventories, we should be able to easily find two rated pilots that are magicians.”

“Send your potential pilots to the Pearl Harbor Naval base, Mister President. We can screen them and find two magicians, then a flight of sky dragons can train with them in getting the plane safely on the ground and safely back into the air.”

“So, we just need to organize exactly when and how we’re going to screen the journalists,” Kent said.

“We’ve already identified nine magicians among the journalists that attended the press conference,” Jussa said. “The sky dragons that were acting as protection for Kell and Kammi did it for us. They also identified all the magicians among the staff that works in the White House, from your aides to Secret Service agents to the custodians and food preparers. Chief Ferroth has a list of their names that he should be sending to you any time now, Arlen. You can select people from that list to accompany you to act as your personal staff, and as far as the reporters go, we’ll confer with you in choosing the three we’ll allow onto the island. That way we select ones not hostile to either Walker’s administration or us.”

“That takes care of the reporter, but we’ll need to identify a cameraman and producer as well,” Kell told them. “But they don’t necessarily all have to be from the same network.”

“There are both on the White House grounds almost all the time,” Walker said. “Council member Jussa, we can send you pictures of the camera operators and producers that work in the White House. Can the sky dragons identify them by sight from a distance and also determine which are magicians?”

“They already have, Mister President, there’s no doubt that they were identified when the sky dragons assensed everyone coming and going from the White House grounds,” Hinado answered. “Chief Ferroth has identified

every face the sky dragons identified as a magician, which will include the members of the press. We'll have him compile a list of cameramen and producers that are magicians and send that to you as well."

"Then that's what we'll do," Walker affirmed. "And I like your idea, Jussa. We can select the press detachment before we even leave for Hawaii. And that about covers all the important points. I do have to say, esteemed council members, I'm very much looking forward to seeing you and the island again," he smiled. "And this time I'll be able to do it openly. You wouldn't believe how hard it was for my staff to hide my first visit," he laughed. "But they managed to do it. I was so proud of them."

"A question, Jussa," Kent said. "Did the sky dragons identify the members of *Congress* that are magicians?"

"They have, and Chief Ferroth has already sent us a report on each of them," he answered. "They identified sixteen magicians from the House and three from the Senate. We can send you that list, and a copy of the report Ferroth sent concerning them."

"If you would, please," he said.

"Not just to Arlen, I want a copy of that as well, if you don't mind," Walker said. "I'd like to know which members of Congress are magicians and what the dragons found out about them."

"We'll send it to Imakaii on the sea plane and they can send it on to you," Jussa nodded. "The plane is still here, it's scheduled to leave in about four hours."

"Then I'd say we've covered about everything," Walker said. "Besides, it's late and I've had a long day, so I'm going to get some sleep. Good night to you all, and good work, Yancy, Colonel, Major."

"Very well, Mister President. We'll see you at our next scheduled conference."

He nodded, and his picture winked off the screen.

“We’ll end this now, so everyone can get some much needed rest,” Jussa said. “Arlen, Ross, we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“At the scheduled time, esteemed council member,” Kent nodded.

The conference broke up, which caused Jenny, Wilson, and Yancy to turn back to Kell and Kammi in their seats. “I had no idea the sky dragons did that,” Jenny said. “That was clever.”

“Chief asked them to identify as many magicians in America’s political system as they could while they were here,” Kammi told her.

“How did they get that info back so fast? Aren’t the dragons following the plane?” Wilson asked.

“Sky dragons can send images by magical message,” Kell told him, reaching up and tapping the message band on his horn. “They’re the only dragons that can, not even the chromatics can do it. No doubt they sent images of every face they identified as belonging to a magician to Irigo, he produced visual images of them that the department dragons could see, and they ID’d them...probably by the boring process of scrolling through thousands of pictures of politicians, press, and political aides and staffers.”

“Glad I didn’t get tagged for that,” Kammi chuckled.

“Why not just show the image to a facial recognition program?”

“Because cameras can’t see magical illusions. Or more to the point, only living things can actually make sense of them,” Kell answered. “Take a picture of a magical image or look at one through a camera and all you see is chaos. Record a voice magical message, and all you hear in the playback is gibberish. Magic and technology will mix in some ways, but not in others, mainly because machines aren’t alive. And only a living thing can comprehend some aspects of magic.”

“Yeah. When chromatics scry, they can’t read anything that’s displayed on a video monitor or was produced artificially,” Kammi added. “So chromatics can’t see the letters printed on the keys of a computer keyboard,

or read a report printed on paper by a printer, but they can read a letter someone wrote by hand or a slate that was etched by a dragon's claw. That's how we got around the chromatics in the department before we all became friends," she laughed. "Everything was on a screen or printed off a printer. We spoke English because the chromatics didn't know it, which got around them eavesdropping on us. And if it was top secret, it was only displayed on infragraphic monitors so only we could see it."

"Huh," Wilson grunted. "I remember Hinado talking about that, but I didn't think it made such a difference."

"That's what makes the spell cloaking the island so powerful," Kell added. "It *is* coherent when pictures are taken of it, else satellite images of the island would show a patch of pure insanity where the island is."

"I wonder how they pulled that off," Yancy grunted.

"Easy. The sky dragons effected *change* in the air above and around the island. It's not an illusion, it's sky dragons using one of their racial abilities on the air that they control through another of their racial abilities," Jenny answered. "They changed the nature of the air itself above the island so the island can't be photographed, can't be seen even by someone in a boat just off shore. The light reflecting off the island that makes it visible has to go through the air above and around it, and the air changes the light, rearranges it to hide the island. Just like how the golden circle on Council Aerie can change sound vibrations, rearrange them to make it sound like someone speaking draconic is speaking English. What the sky dragons did is a physical effect, not purely a magical one, and that means that cameras can see it. And the other side of that spell is in the ground, fixing it so only those standing on the island, or have stood on the island, can see through what they've done. Once we touch the island, the spell no longer affects us."

"That's actually very close to how it works," Kell said with an admiring look at her. "You're getting pretty good at this stuff, Jenny."

“I’ve been studying,” Jenny said with a grin. “I love magic, Kell, and the more I read, the more Hinado teaches me, the more I want to learn about it. I haven’t been fascinated by a subject like this since I got into computers.”

“Julia’s the same,” Yancy said. “She’s almost obsessed with learning about magic.”

“Yeah, she makes me look like a slacker,” Jenny laughed ruefully.

“What about you, Yancy, Tom? Does it have your interest like that?” Kammi asked curiously.

“Yeah, but not quite to their extreme,” he said, pointing at Jenny. “I want to learn, but I’m not staying up all night every night reading books the way Julia is. I think the first one of us that pulls off casting a spell will be Julia.”

“No doubt there,” Wilson agreed. “I think it’s interesting and all, but since I’m not as magic as they are, I figure I’ll learn what I can learn and go with it,” he shrugged.

“You don’t need to be magical to be cool, Tom,” Kammi grinned toothily. “I mean, look at us earth dragons. We get by just fine on our breath weapons, flight, and our growing magic. And thank you for supplying it to us, by the way,” she added with a laugh. “I’m still learning how to use mine, but I already think it’s awesome.”

“We’re not bonded to you, silly,” Jenny told her. “Kell is our dragon.”

“You mean you’re my humans,” he corrected with a sly smile.

“No,” she retorted playfully. “Ownership is decided by a vote of the majority. There are seventeen of us and one of you, therefore you are outvoted. That means you belong to us.”

He had to laugh at that.

“I’m just issuing a general statement of gratitude to humanity in general,” Kammi continued lightly. “Without humans to enslave, we wouldn’t be able to do what we can do.”

“Yeah, try to order me around, Kammi,” Jenny taunted, which made her laugh.

“I’ll let Kell do that. You are his human,” she winked.

“Have you learned how to fly yet?” Yancy asked.

“I’m getting there, but I don’t have the wing strength to stay airborne more than a few minutes,” she answered. “Let’s just say that when I am up in the air, I don’t crash into anything as long as I’m very careful. I won’t be doing barrel rolls anytime soon, but at least right now I can fly in a straight line and not look like I’m drunk.”

“What are the people bound to you like?” Wilson asked.

“They’re a widespread bunch,” Kammi replied. “Not like you guys. They’re like a cross section of human society, a few older ones, a few younger ones, some wealthy ones and poor ones, some college educated ones and some that dropped out of high school. Last time I talked to one of them, though, they said that they’ve formed something of a friendship with each other despite them being from such different backgrounds. Rose said that the one thing they all have in common is me, and it was enough to bring them together,” she chuckled.

“That answers my other question,” Wilson said. “I wasn’t sure if you talked to them.”

“I have all their phone numbers,” she grinned. “Rose is the one I talk to the most. She’s a middle age mother whose kids have all grown up—well, she’s young again now—and she’s like a typical mom. I’m like her new daughter, and she likes to keep up with me.”

“The others are the same,” Kell said. “We fully understand that we have *you* to thank for being able to fly, and we don’t forget it.”

“We get something out of it too, Kell,” Jenny laughed, touching her youthful face. “It’s a fair trade if you ask me. You get something you want, we get something we want.”

“The best kind of deal,” Kammi agreed, then she yawned. “I think Walker had the right idea, guys. I’m getting tired. It’s been a long day.”

“Amen to that,” Jenny said.

They broke up and retired, Jenny and the others to the sleeper cabins and Kell and Kammi to a pile of mats near the bulkhead of the cargo area. There was going to be a lot to do when they got back, from reports to the council to more training and practice with both flying and magic, but Kell was looking forward to it. They were entering the next phase in the council’s plan to bring magic back to the world, going from operating in the shadows with only America to being more open and recruiting more nations into the plan. It all hinged on the human nations granting the dragons the legal status they demanded, but he had the feeling that that wasn’t going to be a problem in many nations...but would be impossible in others. The European nations would most likely pass those laws quickly and easily, but religious and fundamentalist nations like Saudi Arabia, for example, would reject magic. There was also the question of how the Catholic Church was going to respond, which thus far was still a mystery. There was not a word from Pope Francis about magic, and the Pope directed policy for a church that had over a billion members.

Only time would tell how things would go. But for Kell, and Kammi, there was more than enough to do that had nothing to do with the outside world. There was more for them to learn about their awakened magic, he was sure of it, and he was looking forward to making those discoveries. He was eager to learn everything there was to know about being an earth dragon, then helping his family and friends and the others of his race to achieve their maximum potential.

In time, it would happen. And earth dragons were anything if not patient.

...to be continued...