Chapter 1

It was Friday, August 2nd, and I was early for work by a little under seven minutes--too early to clock in but too late for a quick look around the nearby shops. It was also far too risky to get anything besides maybe a small order of fries. Knowing my store, we were likely behind on everything, and I'd be hurried to fix the dwindling levels lest I be blamed for their poor state.

There were five minutes before my shift started.

I held down the side button on my old Android phone and tapped 'power off' when prompted. I unzipped the side pocket of my backpack, slotted it in the opening, and headed up to the employee-only door. The door was rather thick and somewhat imposing--more so than I felt was necessary for a fast-food restaurant--but I wasn't an interior designer, so I shrugged it off and numbly punched in the store password: zero, four... something, something.

Muscle memory was a wondrous thing.

Still tired from last night's shift, I rubbed my eyes as I stumbled my way into the break room, which doubled as a changing room. I exchanged nods with an employee whom I was vaguely friendly with. He was an older guy, mid-fifties if I had to guess, but I'd long since stopped caring about the age of people I interacted with.

In the small stall, I changed into my ever-so-slightly oversized uniform, slapped on my embarrassing cap, and stuffed my casual clothes into my bag.

Before I unlocked the door, I checked the time on my watch: 10:57. I let out a soft sigh, unlocked the door, and re-entered the break room. The older worker was gone, and in his place were a handful of teenagers who were loudly chatting with one another. I squeezed past the chubby blonde girl standing beside the table, put my watch into my bag, my bag into a free locker, and left.

I tapped my ID code into the tablet on the wall and approached Tom, the tall, blonde, surprisingly young shift manager who just so happened to be in the building that day. "Hey, Tom," I started, standing awkwardly to one side so as not to be in the way of those who already knew their positions. "Where do you need me?"

"One second, James," he said, reading from his notepad whilst simultaneously checking something on the electronic screens of the deep fryer units. "Some moron messed with the temperatures earlier," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

I nodded dumbly, as though he could see the gesture with his face a millimetre from the screen. I shuffled away from a worker who was carrying a fresh bag of diced lettuce. "Yeah... okay..." He got up, knees cracking. "You're on the chicken batch, but don't use this one." He tapped the middle-most fryer with his blue, ballpoint pen.

"Okay, don't use that one," I repeated, and after that was sorted, we wordlessly swapped positions. I looked up at the stack of trays and held back a pained groan. Piled up high were yellow chicken nugget trays, along with the dreaded cyan ones. Cyan blue was for mozzarella sticks, and they had a nasty habit of sticking to the metal of the basket, so they were enemies.

Five fryers, one busted, and more than double that in food that needed cooking.

Math was not on my side that day.

I shook my head free of unnecessary thoughts, grabbed all of the trays, and got to work. I slapped two baskets onto my fryer tops, pulled out two bags of frozen nuggets, and poured one bag into each. I placed the baskets into the oil and hit the start buttons. Next, I got the slim metal basket from the cheese-only fryer and carefully filled it with mozzarella sticks.

With that sorted, I looked up at the remaining trays and noticed a black tray--chicken saver. I grabbed it but then paused. I couldn't use the centre-most fryer. My worry mounted before I scoffed mentally at myself and placed four mayo chicken pieces into a basket stolen from the premium chicken deep fryer and put them into the oil of the regular fryer. I used the timer from the broken fryer to time them.

I looked up, looked down at the fryers, and prepared to use the premium fryer to set off another batch of nuggets before realising that I would need to keep it open if any chicken selects or the new fang burgers needed firing.

So I just stood there, arms crossed, praying that no one asked me why I had a spare chicken fryer, as apparently it doesn't work didn't compute for some people.

Eventually, I caved and filled it with three fang burger chicken pieces, just in case. They were dragon-adjacent, which meant that when a bus of the iguanas was inevitably brought our way, the orders would come flying through.

"Okay, so far, so good," I murmured to myself quietly, pleased with how relatively boring my shift had been so far. It was rare that I could relax so freely, and I made sure to savour every second of it.

I looked at the time on the food queue: 11:16.

With a moody huff, I pulled out the drawers of the freezer and silently counted how much stock was left. Nuggets were good, sandwiches were good, spicy was good, but... crispy needed restocking. I checked the left side and noted that I was also low on fish and apple pies.

After double-checking the trays, I left to retrieve the missing stock.

On the way, I spotted Markus, another manager, chatting quietly with another one of the higher-ups. They seemed rather pleased with themselves, like the cat that caught the mouse. I didn't bother listening, as I didn't earn enough to be bothered about anything beyond my immediate work. I literally could not afford to care.

Something, something dragon.

After three hours of tedious work, I was at last given a short reprieve in the form of a break. I undid my apron, and rather than swapping my shirt, I simply put my old green hoodie on. I entered the dining area through the heavy door and made a beeline to the closest ordering kiosk; I got my usual nine-nugget meal with a Fanta and medium fries.

Idly, I scratched my right eyebrow whilst the receipt printed. When done, I took the receipt, unzipped my hoodie so my co-workers could recognise the uniform, and stood beside the till.

It took a minute to get noticed, but when I finally was, I passed the receipt to a bored-looking teenager who left to give it to a manager, who would then process the free meal.

Generally, I always got whatever had been most recently cooked, so in my case, nuggets, as I had put a fresh lot in not three minutes beforehand.

After getting my meal I took a seat at a table near the employee-only door, so as to not risk the chance of running late. I took my ageing phone out of my backpack and, after turning it back on, idly scrolled through Reddit, not properly paying attention to the posts I was skimming.

I checked out a few of the more popular subreddits, but there was nothing especially good that day, so instead of wasting more time on the app, I swapped over to Twitter to see what political nightmares were happening across the Atlantic Ocean.

Wow, an assassination attempt? No way that just goes away.

Dragon's Bane to be renamed? Makes sense, I guess, but damn, that name was good.

Bjorn is a cute kid; it's good Will and Rose are still friends.

I checked the time and saw that I had less than twenty minutes left, so I closed Twitter and spent a handful of minutes just trying to decide what to do with my remaining break.

Eventually, I gave up and stuck to eating my meal. The fries were good--salty and crispy in the best way possible. At least I had that going for me.

For a moment, I looked up from my table to glance at the entrance to the restaurant for no particular reason, and in those briefest of moments, I spotted something I had only seen ten times in a total of four years.

A dragon. A dragon by itself, unaccompanied, simply standing there as if it were the most normal thing in the world, and they hadn't come from a literal, magical portal.

There was no fanfare, no legal official coming in to check the restaurant before inviting in a dozen of them to try the latest thing, as I'd gotten accustomed to.

I choked on my fry and, to my great shame, attracted the attention of everyone with my impromptu coughing fit. It took a hearty swig of Fanta and several heavy chest thwacks to save my life, but by the time I did, everyone else was busy staring at the cobalt blue creature standing in the middle of the dining area.

It was a she; I wasn't completely sure, but there was something about the smoothness of the snout and the general curvature of her form that seemed especially feminine.

She looked around at all the people, her nervousness obvious on her snout and her tightly bundled wings twitching. Her eyes were a solid scarlet red--a contrast to her near shaking state.

She looked at me, then at the till, then back at me. Slowly, she began to approach. I turned around and attempted to see if she was trying to look past me. "Do you... um, do you work here?" She raised a slim claw and levelled the digit at the yellow badge pinned to my shirt. "I, uh, I'm starting here today."

"O-oh," I stammered, genuinely taken aback, "yeah, let me get Tom or, uh, whoever is in the kitchen right now." It took a moment to stumble my way out of my seat. "Just give me a second, alright?"

"Thanks," she said, an accent I couldn't quite place tinging each syllable. "I'll just be over here waiting." She made sure to point several times at her chosen table. As if simply being anywhere in the restaurant wasn't enough of a sight.

"Yeah," I replied automatically, almost bumping into an equally surprised customer as I hurried over to the employee-only door.

It took a minute to find the shift manager. He was sitting in the break room, checking something on his phone, and drinking from a small coke cup.

"Tom!" I called out. "Tom, we've got a new- um, dragon! A dragon in the lobby!"

He looked up from his phone. "A dragon?"

"Yeah, a dragon!" I clarify, feeling more confident with each moment that passed. "She's at a table. I-I think she's waiting for you."

"Shit," Tom muttered, "Right, yeah, okay... I'll be right there, just let me grab something first. Elizabeth, hold the fort." The last part was said to the brunette beside him, the unofficial second-in-command on site. She gave a thumbs up but remained in her seat, continuing to enjoy her own meal.

I lightly jogged back to the lobby. I saw that the dragon had taken a seat, her long, lithe body just barely squeezing underneath the table. She looked up at me, head tilted ever so slightly to the left, but I averted my eyes and busied myself with standing around and looking stupid.

Tom eventually appeared, seemingly out of breath. Papers were clutched tightly to his chest. "Hey there," he greeted her. "You must be my new employee?"

She licked her seemingly dry lips before nodding. "Y-Yep, that's me! I'm Alys. I'm here for my first shift. I got the, uh, email."

"It's nice to meet you, Alys," I overheard Tom say after I'd sat back down. "Did you remember to bring your uniform?"

I leaned my head back just far enough to see that Alys had a modified backpack on, which she took off to open up, revealing a cap, an apron, and a nametag.

"Perfect!" Tom said cheerfully, his tone unusually chipper. He then got her to step out from her seat and stand beside the table.

"Okay, Alys?" Her head snapped up as soon as Tom spoke. "You are quadrupedal, which means your..." His face twitched, a tinge of nervousness visible even from my position several tables down.

"Paws?" She corrected softly.

"Right, yes, paws. Your paws are on the ground at all times, which is a big no-no here. In order to work here, you must be able to keep one paw up at all times. I know you said it was alright during the interview, but now that some time has passed, can you do it?" He was being shockingly kind, which was odd. The guy wasn't bad or anything, but he was certainly no saint, even with new starters.

I looked down at my phone.

I was late.

After I returned to my position by the deep fryer I did not see the blue dragon for some time. Unfortunately for me, whoever took over for the forty-five minutes I was absent somehow did a poorer job than I did, for the pile of trays I was presented with was worse than when I'd initially started.

I silently seethed to myself as I did my best to bring the area back to level. Several times, Michael, my personal least favourite member of the crew, asked how long for food, almost always minutes after I'd already told him. "How long, an hour? Two?" He questioned.

"Twenty-one seconds!" I called out, shoving a tray of fang patties into the warmer and nearly forgetting to hit the timer. Over the sound of beeping and steaming meat, I picked up on the sound of Elizabeth quietly chastising him.

I ignored both of them. I was a grown man, and whilst irritating to deal with, I didn't truly care about a random co-worker making a few annoying comments. I was more bothered by the fact that his interruptions would knock me out of the flow, and force me to double check the timers.

As I was clearing the backlog of trays, I finally caught sight of Alys; she was near the very back end of the kitchen, standing on her hind legs and mopping up a very minor spill--someone had knocked over their Coke or some such soda. The base of her tail was cleverly used to keep her upright.

The little apron was cute, I thought, like a dog with a top hat. But like a dog with a top hat, I couldn't understand why she was wearing it. Since when did dragons have to work minimum-wage jobs? I wasn't an expert in mythological politics, but surely the government provided?

"James," said Tom from beside me, giving me a nasty fright. Near-instantly, I spun around to meet my neutral-looking manager. "I know she is a bit unusual looking, but try not to stare too much, okay?" I nodded, ashamed at being caught so easily.

"I'm sorry, Tom, but... it's kind of sudden. Is she gonna be working here now?" I couldn't help but ask. "I thought they received government support." I didn't know--I had heard it from a friend of a friend, but it sounded truthful.

The man shrugged. "It's being reduced," he said, tapping the off button on one of my fryers as I raised the basket up into the air. "They'll need to get jobs like the rest of us."

With that little titbit of information delivered, Tom departed, leaving me with the realisation that she would actually be joining us permanently.

It seemed, however, that some in our little group didn't entirely appreciate her presence. As soon as Michael's eyes landed on the unwieldy way in which Alys held the mop in her claws, those beady eyes of his lit up with a juvenile excitement most tended to grow out of after leaving high school.

"Careful not to scratch it, okay? Otherwise, you'll be paying for it." He said it loud enough for her to hear. None laughed, most rolled their eyes or otherwise ignored him.

Her small ears swivelled in his direction, her attention fully on him. "Excuse me?" She asked, looking down at the mop in her claws as though she'd missed something mission-critical. "I... okay, I'll be careful!"

She was trying her best, but it was clear that she was unaccustomed to handling such a device. I wondered to myself how exactly her kind cleaned their homes.

Their... caves? Surely they didn't live in actual mountains, I pondered. Alys was a small thing, not even six feet tall.

Twenty minutes later, during a lull, I was sipping from the extra small cup of Coke we got complimentary, and still, she was mopping. I cringed at the sight, not only at how slowly she was doing it but also at the way people were openly staring at her.

She knew they were watching as well. There was a light dusting of ashamed heat on her cheeks and an extremely thin sheen of sweat on the smooth scales of her forehead. It was hard not to look at her, made worse by the badly disguised chuckles directed at her failed efforts.

The lunch rush was ending, and at last, I had a couple of spare minutes to myself. I watched her for a moment longer, slowly gathering the confidence to approach and offer my help. I had been there myself--the new guy who people rolled their eyes at for every minor mistake they made.

Before I could make a move, however, Tom came to her rescue.

He walked over to where she had gotten and said, "It's alright, Alys; let's move over to the grill and see if Karen is in a good mood."

Alys smiled shakily, her expression that of visible upset. She put the mop back into its bucket and followed after the manager, her right, front-most paw remaining raised. She had to limp, of course, and the effort she was putting into such a low-tier job just had to be respected.

I couldn't imagine going through the pain of working the grill with both a limp and a missing hand.

Commendable or not, dragon or not, working a job like ours drained your energy eventually, and in no time my mind had gone from tired to slush. But, despite the lobotomy, the hours were beaten back.

I was free.

I slotted one last tray of mayo chickens into the heater, wiped down my area, and approached Elizabeth, who had taken over from Tom earlier.

"Hey, Elizabeth?" I said in greeting. She turned around and smiled tiredly at me. "I'm heading out now, but the levels are fine."

"That's alright," she answered, nodding, "thanks for the hard work." I gave her a quick thanks as I turned away and left, but chose to take the path on the left so I could get one last look at the dragon who had joined us.

She was able to set out the patties with a gloved paw, but she was far from quick, and there were a fair few trays waiting for her to get to. Still, she was trying her hardest despite the clear disadvantage she was at.

She caught my eye, possibly recognising me from earlier. I gave her a quick nod as I walked by her. She seemed stressed. I couldn't blame her; the grill had been my least favourite by far in the beginning. She smiled back, accidentally showing off her sharp fangs for a split second.

It was unnerving, I thought with a shudder.

Michael was in the break room, eating some brand of crisps I couldn't recognize. He didn't say anything to me as I entered nor as I retrieved my backpack. I got changed in the stall and took a moment to check the time: 19:03.

I left the stall, ready to set off.

"What do you think of the dragon?" He asked me, specifically me, as we were the only ones in the room. I looked back at him, confused as to the reason for his question.

"Why?" I replied cautiously.

"Like, why her?" He almost sounded offended that I hadn't immediately grasped the reasoning behind his question.

"I don't know," I said honestly, "Does it matter? Look at where we work; it's not very hard to get a job here. She's got legs, a heartbeat, and didn't mess up the grill that badly." I paused my own train of thought. "Why are you even asking?"

"Just wondering is all," he shrugged, returning to his crisps.

I didn't give it much thought, and by the time I'd entered the dining area, I had managed to forget pretty much the entirety of the conversation.

The guy was so comically rude that it was sometimes hard to get bothered by the things he said.

I took a seat near the middle of the mostly empty restaurant and pulled out my phone. It was past seven, meaning most shops around me were closed, but I knew for a fact I would be hungry later on and that I didn't have anything heartier than instant noodles.

I opened up my employee app and scrolled through all of the discounted lunches I could get. With it being so empty and my lack of a time limit, I could actually pick whatever I wanted.

I got the nine-nugget meal with a Fanta and fries, except this time it was a large.

The employee discount worked wonders at times.

I sipped on my Fanta and scrolled Friendster for a bit, playing a game of counting the number of whining posts my middle-aged aunts and uncles posted. My great-aunt Sarah was on a record high of eight in one whole day!

I hung around for a little longer, mostly just to kill time until my bus was due.

Around fifteen minutes after I finished and right before I got up to leave, Alys entered the dining room, her bag slung upon her back and an exhausted expression on her maw. She looked vacant and drained. Internally, I laughed at the familiarity in the look, though a kinder part knew this to be cruel. Non-human or not, she was a living being who had not done any harm to me.

Big wings, I thought tiredly, drawn to the unusual appendages. But, wouldn't they need to be like twenty feet long to generated enough...

She caught me staring, so I looked away, annoyed at myself for being so rude for the second time in one day. She ignored my staring and got to work tapping at the kiosk screen a few times, seemingly getting nowhere based on the mounting anger in her sharp features.

The screens are buggy; I recalled in a rare moment of mental clarity.

I left my bag by the table and pretended to head over to get more salt. Along the way, I dramatically bent my neck and looked at the screen. "Oh!" I said a little too loudly. "Yeah, the screens are buggy." I stepped an inch closer and tapped to the side of the food she'd been trying to select. "You have to click to the left of the box for it to actually work," I said.

She mimicked my action, producing the exact same order as me, funnily enough. Right down to the size and everything.

"Oh, okay," she smiled sweetly, seeming genuinely grateful. "Thank you..." She paused, and her smile flickered, overtaken by an apologetic frown. "Um, sorry, I have a terrible memory, but what's your name again?"

"James," I answered, "nice to meet you."

"My name is Alys."

Chapter 2

It was Wednesday, August 7th, and like every other day where I didn't have to work, I woke up in the middle of the afternoon.

As I was only ever scheduled for the busier days, I didn't work most Wednesdays. This drop in hours had both good and bad qualities to it. It meant I didn't have to constantly burn myself on hot oil or listen to that incessant beeping, but at the same time, that was money lost.

My meagre wage only just covered the rent. If my hours were to have suddenly dropped, then there was nothing I could have done about it besides grabbing a paper cup and sitting outside, hoping people passing by were feeling extra generous. That or move back in with my parents... which was an automatic no.

It took a solar death ray aiming itself directly into my closed eyelids to force me into actually getting up. Already I was suffering from a headache due to the unusually long sleep I'd given myself. I rubbed at my crusty eyes and thumbed circles into the sides of my temple.

Wednesday was grocery day; otherwise I might have been tempted to simply sleep the entire day away, as I had done an undisclosed number of times.

I crouched down beside the ceramic bathroom sink and grabbed at a half-empty box of paracetamol. I popped two tablets out and swallowed them with a mouthful of water from the cold tap.

I looked in the small, rounded shaving mirror and cringed at the sight; I hadn't shaved in a good few days, and it showed. Too tired and without work to report to, I almost skipped it once more.

Ignoring the stubble for a minute, I groggily brushed my teeth and gargled on my too-strong peroxide mouthwash, ensuring that at least my gums were healthy and that my teeth remained white.

As I caught my reflection in the mirror for a second time, I froze. God, I thought with a shudder. I look just like my dad--same dull brown hair, same faded blue eyes. Jesus, we even shared the same pale complexion. The greatest offence was that he also had a permanent beard of stubble.

"Fine," I hissed, grabbing the bottle of shaving cream, a slim pink razor, and a small black towel. Reminders of that man, even those that came from me, always lit a fire in me. I have to be better than him, I thought sulkily.

After wiping my face and cleaning off my razor with some water, I managed a decent smile in the mirror. I didn't look too bad, actually, family resemblances aside.

I left the bathroom, a slight pep in my step, and entered my kitchen-living room hybrid. There was a fair few shopping bags near my front door, steadily piling up and spilling miscellaneous rubbish onto the wooden floor. I had been using them as rubbish bins during a bad mental rut and had somehow forgotten.

Jesus, that's bad...

I soon got them sorted, along with some quick hoovering.

That small bit of housework done, I grabbed my phone from my bedroom and sat down in the kitchen to check my notifications: a cousin of mine's birthday, an upvote achievement on Reddit, a text from my sister, and a notification from Twitter that Stephen King had tweeted. I turned the device off and placed it on the kitchen side whilst I fished about for some late breakfast.

I dug through my cupboards for a while, eventually coming back out with two fruit and grain bars along with a clean glass that I filled with milk. The drink tasted strangely sweet, almost like a thin milkshake. I looked down at the white liquid, swilled it around for a bit, and shrugged.

Whilst sipping my suspicions milk, I turned my phone back on and pulled up the Friendster Messenger app to see what my sister wanted.

"James, James! Check your Friendster." Was the first message.

"Father has betrayed us!" Was the second. They were sent about an hour before I'd gotten up, so knowing her, she was still online--the shut-in she was.

I tapped out a quick message.

"What's up?" I asked, but before she had the chance to answer, I opened up the cursed blue app and scrolled for a bit.

Sponsored add, open group I'd never liked, Sharon's whining, my cousin's birthday--something I made sure to like--and nothing else of any importance.

Not seeing it on the first bit of browsing, I typed in our father's name and dug through his profile. He hadn't called in about two months, but Sarah's dramatic messages had me curious.

"Hah. What were you expecting though?" I typed out upon seeing a photo of him in a tuxedo, standing beside his sisters and brothers-in-law. They were all at a wedding we weren't invited to. A tingle of irritation ran up my spine, even having assumed he would still go.

"idk more good?" Sarah elegantly replied.

I scoffed and closed the app.

"I could've guessed he'd do that. Actually, I did!" I thumbed out while stuffing the second bar into my mouth. The milk stained glass was placed into the sink for later cleaning.

I tossed the empty plastic wrappers into the kitchen bin and left my phone on the table while I got changed in my room.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go shopping in pyjamas.

From my drawers I pulled a pair of blue jeans, my black trainers, a blue shirt, and a tough raincoat--because I lived in England. I looked for my backpack for a while and, for reasons still unknown to me, found it within my sock drawer.

How even...?

I tightened the straps and threw a book from my desk into it because British transport could not be trusted.

I grabbed my phone off the table and my keys from the hook.

"Still scummy," was the message I'd missed whilst getting ready.

"Eh, if you really want to complain, tell Nana--she was there too. I'll talk to you later. I've got shopping to do."

I locked the door and left.

It didn't take long to reach the bus stop, but unfortunately for me it was packed, forcing me to stand off to the side. I took my phone out and loaded up some games. There was no way I was about to whip out a book like The Gryphon Generation in front of so many normal-looking people.

Five minutes later, a dull white and purple number 40 bus pulled into the side, exporting a half dozen people onto the curb before being besieged by those waiting at the shelter. I flashed the ticket reader my monthly pass and took a seat near the back.

Disinfectant mixed with alcohol and stale sweat drifted into my nostrils, but I was so numb to it that I was able to tune it out without much difficulty.

When bored of waiting to have enough cookie currency to buy a fourth wizard tower in my game, I reached into my coat's breast pocket and took out my wallet to see if I'd be able to afford real food or if I was on noodles for another week.

I had seventy pounds until next Tuesday, which was more than enough for someone who grew up in a council estate near Harehills. Ten a day, with a little change on the side, was fine by me.

If I budget it right, I can get something from Hellmouth, I realised. The new volume of Draken Kaisen was out that day, and whilst it would cost a full day's budget, I was determined to at least try and get a hold of it.

Thoughts of budget, however, soon brought forth thoughts of where exactly I gotten that wage from. At that point in time I'd been considering leaving, as well as starting to send out applications for places that were hiring, but I was starting to hesitate.

Contract hours... Better pay, more hours--consistent hours.

But I'd be stuck, not enough time to study...

I got off in the city centre and went straight for the nearest One Below, a popular budget store. I grabbed a box of instant vanilla latte along with a caramel variant. I already had milk, so I left that section untouched. I also got myself a multi-pack of chicken noodles and some off-brand cola.

My backpack was only just big enough to fit all of my purchases in, so I made a mental note to get a plastic bag at the next store.

Next up was Heron Foods for actual food.

Six chicken burgers along with six burger buns for a total of £5.50. I scanned the rest of the aisles and nabbed myself some eggs and salt, as I hadn't bought either of them since I'd moved in four months ago. Butter was next, then toilet paper, thin sliced bread, and some salt and vinegar crisps as I had some change to spare. I stuffed them all into my brand new plastic bag and checked my wallet.

£49.61 left.

I grinned smugly to myself, adjusted my grip on the carrier bag, and headed down the street to Hellmouth. It was late by the time I finally got there, but according to my watch, I still had about thirty minutes before they closed up.

Hellmouth smelt like nerd. It always did no matter how often it was cleaned, what day it was, or what month it happened to be. Anyone who's been in a comic book store knows what one smells like.

Plastic, fresh sweat, cheap deodorant, and lingering dust. The first floor was mainly merchandise: figurines, cosplay masks, card game sets, and shirts that totally weren't made in foreign sweatshops. There were a few slim western comics off to the right in cardboard boxes, but I hadn't touched them in years and so ignored them entirely as I went to the back of the place.

The Alien collectibles are always so good-looking, I thought as I pulled back a Xenomorph empress I couldn't afford. Childish as it sounded to say out loud, looking at stupid stuff I didn't have the money for always made me want to work harder, to do more. It reminded me that I needed to put more into my university fund.

A fund that desperately needed more attention.

I placed her back on the metal rack and left to go to the downstairs area.

On the way, I overheard two workers talking loudly to one another, complaining about a new worker not knowing how to use the till. At first I didn't bother listening in and only did so when they said the magic word, dragon. I stopped in my tracks and pretended to dawdle near the stacks of My Little Pony Funko Pops.

"It's not really his fault," said the younger one on the right, a blonde guy in his twenties. "I'm not sure they even had a choice in where they were ending up. Besides, this place is corporate, isn't it? They can afford to spend a bit on them." There were very few customers up top, so I understood why they were having such a private conversation.

Still... a little open isn't it?

"Yeah, but isn't it a little unfair to everyone who applied and didn't get the position, all because they need jobs? There were people with relevant experience we could have hired instead," countered the older one on the left, a red head in his late thirties.

I was reminded of when Tom had told me that the monetary stipends that dragons received were slowly getting lowered. I wondered if that extended to every dragon, but without more to go on, I had no idea.

Tired of the depressing socio-economic talk, I headed down into the lower section where they kept the manga and light novels. Somehow, there were even fewer people milling about. I hurried myself up, aiming for the spot where the manga was alphabetised.

Along the way I caught sight of Hellmouth's very own draconic employee--he was light blue, green-eyed, and, to my surprise, lacked wings. He was larger than Alys, who stood beside him, chatting excitedly about something clutched tightly in her right paw.

My brain popped mid-step, nearly causing me to stumble.

I watched the two talk for a moment longer before confirming that yes, it actually was Alys and not my inability to distinguish similar-looking dragons; She was busy waving her book in front of the male's stubby snout, trying to get him to see something.

Likely sensing that she was being watched, her red eyes flickered over to me for a fraction of a second before suddenly returning to the task at paw. We both saw each other, but neither said anything--that, at least, was very human of her.

I stopped staring at them and instead busied myself with scanning the shelves for the latest volume of my second favourite manga.

I checked the spines for numbers and felt my heart drop at the distinct lack of a volume eleven. Either the store hadn't gotten it yet, or someone had managed to snipe it before I had the chance to get my mitts on it.

I leant back away from the section and sighed audibly, more than a little annoyed that my trip to the store had been pointless. There was no other manga I wanted, and I was too broke to afford any merchandise besides a pin. I mean, I could have gotten one, but I'd have had no way to excuse it like I could a book.

Waterstones was closed as well, so no God Emperor of Dune.

"James?"

There came a voice I didn't recognise immediately, nor after giving it some thought. "It's James, right?" I turned around, just checking in case it was someone I knew and I was being a bad friend. Instead, I saw the male of the dragon duo looking straight at me, right front paw raised in greeting.

"Hey?" I replied, giving my own little wave. Alys grabbed the worker's shoulder, whispering something angrily into his ear.

I cringe internally and make eye contact. "Oh, um, hey, Alys, how've you been?" I decided to speak first, seeing as she looked about ready to explode.

"I've been good, yep, good!" was her rapid answer.

A beat passed.

"You're so awkward, Alys, I swear to fucking Skie. Go! Go talk with your friend!" He actually shoved her forward a few steps. I could only watch in amused horror as she turned around and tried to push him back.

I could tell what was happening, or at least what would happen. I approached the pair, walked up to the guy, and held out a hand. "I'm James," I announced, "nice to meet you."

"Rhys," he took my hand with gusto, shaking it with a seemingly practiced confidence. "Alys was just saying you work together and that you helped her out when she couldn't get a machine to work. She also said that you're really good at your job."

That's... Kind of sweet, I thought.

"Nah, not really." I shrugged off the compliment, not used to receiving them. "I've just been there too long. Do you, uh, work here?" I try to navigate the conversation away from myself, as I always do.

"Yep!" He said proudly. "I finished about thirty minutes ago, but I get, like, a 15% off discount, so I was helping Alys figure out what to buy. You read manga, right?" He asked suddenly. I stared at him, wide eyed at the perfect guess. "It's just that I saw you over there looking through it."

"Oh, yeah, I've read a few. What are you looking for?" I angled my head downward and spotted the first omnibus collection of Berserk held tightly by Alys. "Whoa, the first few volumes of Berserk?" I asked, surprised by the choice. "It's pretty brutal if you've not read too much seinen."

"I've read a bit, but it was all online," Alys said, claws tapping against the hardback cover of the omnibus, producing a relaxing sound, "so I wanted to get the proper physical copies. Have you read it?"

"I've seen memes and a few of the more graphic pages. So, uh, no, not properly." I felt a little bad for letting her down. "I really need to start reading it, everyone always says that it's one of the greatest mangas, so I've got to at least try it once before I die."

"You should! The plot is really good, and the characters are so well written! I use, um, a place called readberserkonline.com." She stepped a foot closer, eyes wide and maw open in a fang-filled grin.

"Readbeserkonline?" I mimicked, "A little on the nose, isn't it?"

Rhys chuckled. "I thought she was joking when she told me. I'm thinking it's on purpose, because who would name a pirating site something so obvious?"

His accent was different from his friend's--less noticeable. I wasn't sure why I'd only just caught on, but at last I did.

"So, are you two together or something?" I asked, biting the bullet so I wouldn't be forced into any more awkward situations. They looked similar enough to be siblings, but their eyes were noticeably different, and I still couldn't be sure it wasn't just my snout blindness.

"No, she just lives in my house," Rhys replied flatly, tone completely deadpan.

"Room-mates...?" I questioned.

"Technically, yes."

Alys groans. "He's my brother," she explained, giving her sibling a glare--a surprisingly vicious-looking expression. Despite her soft tone of voice and manner of speech, it was sort of terrifying. It was like when the family dog spots a cat and suddenly it looks like an actual predator.

"I thought you were," I say, keeping my tone casual, "but I didn't want to guess and have you think I was being, um, species-ist?"

They simultaneously look up at me. "It'd be a pretty easy guess," Rhys said easily. "We're basically just gender swapped versions of each other aside from the eyes. By the way, is that a word? Species-ist?"

I shrug. "Probably not, no, but it sounded right."

"Humans have a lot of words--too many, actually. No offence, but your language is insane," Rhys suddenly said, eyes alight. "English was what we were taught, but good skies above was it hard to figure out."

"You're not actually the first person to tell me that, you know. I've got online friends from abroad who are learning English, and they all complain that it's miserable." I find myself smiling warmly at the memory. "I'm so glad I was brought up speaking it so I don't have to learn it. Honestly, though, you two speak it so well it's actually kind of crazy."

"I am pretty great, yes," Rhys said proudly, tapping his chest and nodding his snout. "And Alys too, I guess," he smacked her on the shoulder a few times until she swatted at his limb. They're like cats, I thought, but didn't dare say.

I looked down at my watch during a quiet moment and frowned. "You should hurry to the till; you've only got like seven minutes before it closes up." I announced, looking at Alys, who actually looked anxious at the prospect. She licked her lips and turned to her brother, who immediately began to hurry up the stairs. I followed the pair--not because I was following them, but because I didn't live inside the basement of a comic book shop.

There was no issue with the payment. In fact, by the time Alys had put the book into her backpack, they were able to catch up with me as I was leaving the store.

I was expecting some difficulty, given the older worker was the one at the till, and how he clearly didn't want Rhys to be working there.

I stood a distance away from them when we were all outside. "Right... I've got dinner to make, so... I'll see you guys later. Or, um, at least you, Alys." I reached out for a hand shake, which Alys moved to reciprocate but was stopped by her brother who stepped forward.

"Do you want to go out for dinner?" He asked.

"W-What?" I blink, no fully understanding. "Why?"

"Not like courting!" He laughed, "I meant us three. You also get a discount at that place you work at, don't you?" I nodded yes. "You totally don't have to, but we were going to head to that small one in town, and I figured we may as well ask if you want to join us." He paused, likely to gauge my reaction. "It's cool if you don't--I'm not going to roast your anything for saying no!"

He sounded desperate, something that I felt was unusual for a dragon like him.

I was curious as to why, as well as kind of hungry, so I nodded and said, "Sure. It's probably going to be better than my expertly planned out dinner of two bowls of instant noodles and a diet cola."

"Whoa... So nutritious that you only need two!" he said cheekily.

Me and Rhys joked with one another for a short while as we walked. He reminded me of my oldest brother, and after telling him that, he mentioned wanting to meet him. There was a certain click with male friends, and it seemed that kinship extended to dragons as well.

I looked back at Alys, who had a vaguely lost look about her. She seemed... It was so hard to tell with a snout, but if I were forced to pick... I'd have said she looked left out.

Feeling somewhat bad for causing her to look like that, I let Rhys lead our walk north and used that to trail back a bit so I could stand beside his sister. I waited a moment before speaking. "So, Alys, how've you been? I think we've been given opposite shifts." I knew what being a third wheel was like and didn't wish that fate on anyone.

"Um..." She looked up at the rapidly darkening sky, picking her words carefully. "Stressful?" Was her chosen answer. "It's hard to do most of the stations with only one paw, and, um, some of the other workers are a little bit..."

"Annoying?" I offered.

She guffawed. "Hah! Yeah, a bit." She was so much more reserved than her brother; it was astonishing to me. My sister and I weren't twins, but we were incredibly similar. "But I get it! They're all busy with their own work, a-and I've not been there for very long, so they're probably trying to let me figure it out on my own."

It wasn't directed at me, not at all, but I felt guilty nonetheless. If I had been quicker when she was struggling to do something as simple as mop up, she might not have looked so dejected as she did in that instance.

"Maybe," I squeak out before clearing my throat. "That's sort of what happened to me, actually. Have you met Elizabeth, though? Tall, blonde? She's pretty cool. Helped me out a tonne when I first started."

She brightens a lumen. "Yeah, she is," she concurred. "I forgot to clock in two days in a row, but she just said it happens all the time and fixed it for me straight away."

"She is pretty great, yeah. Straight up, she's one of the reasons I didn't leave in my first few weeks." I scratched my chin, which was still a little itchy from when I'd shaved. "The early days can be the hardest, but once you get past them-" I made a swiping gesture with my right hand, "-that's as hard as it gets; the rest is way easier."

"At least I've got that to look forward to," said Alys. "Oh, also, thanks for helping me with the kiosk--I probably would have lost my mind if not for you."

I once again wave away the compliment.

"Nah, it's alright. It would've been pretty shitty of me to watch you struggle and not do anything. Especially when I was less than four feet away. Only someone truly evil would do something like that." I give her a knowing look, which she smirks at and lets out a chirp-like snicker.

As we're walking, I take out my phone, turn on my mobile data, and check the bus times for the 40--for once they were running fine. I turn off the data and put the Android back in my coat pocket. It seemed the buses were actually running on time for once, but still, I aimed for the 18:55 one.

When we entered our restaurant's sister location, Rhys quickly grabbed a free table beside the windowed area on the left. I followed and sat opposite him, with Alys on her brother's right. I took my phone back out, and after connecting to the place's terrible internet, opened up my McDonald's app and swiped to the offers section where the employee discounts were hidden.

9 Nugget meal with fries and a medium Fanta, my beloved.

I pay and sit back, fingers tapping against the table. "What are you two going to get?" I ask to make conversation.

"Is the fang burger too obvious of a choice?" Asked Rhys, "I don't want to be stereotypical, but it looks really good."

"Horrible name, by the way," added Alys quietly.

I shrug. "I know right? It is pretty alright, though. It's got a lot of tomatoes and a lot of chicken," I explain. "If you like both of those things, then you'll love it."

"I don't know a dragon who doesn't like tomatoes." Rhys lent over to look at what his sister was ordering, and so did I. Doing so, I found myself fascinated by the thick, brick-like device she had slapped onto the table.

"Whoa. I've never seen a tablet like that." I admitted.

It was a solid black device, with a tough-looking screen and wide, raised edges. It definitely looked scratch-resistant, along with bomb resistant.

To my slight surprise, Alys pushed the tablet forward so I could get a good look. I didn't do much to it besides landing a few taps to the side to test the material. "This thing looks seriously durable," I commented.

"Drop-proof, fire-proof, scratch-proof," explained Rhys, who then took it and flipped it over before pressing a talon against a small crack on the back, "except she somehow still managed to break it! Look, you see this?" I craned my neck down and, after throwing in a squint, spotted a small, jagged line. I looked to Alys, who glanced away. "How'd you do it, Alys?" Rhys asked, prodding her side.

"I, uh, dropped it." She said quietly. She then took the device back and returned to ordering her food. She kept her eyes glued to the bright screen.

"How far?" I ask, finding myself genuinely interested in the story.

"Pretty far," she answered, still not looking directly at me or her smirking sibling.

"How far is far?" Countered Rhys.

She mumbles, but I couldn't hear, so I leant in closer. She looked up, making eye contact for a moment, and looked away. "Sorry, what was that?" I asked.

"Nearly a kilometre." She finally groused out. "I... I wanted to see what the city was like from high up, so I, uh, you know, went up and tried to take a picture, but when I was getting it out of my bag, it slipped. I tried to dive down to catch it, but I kept missing. I was lucky that it landed in a tree."

I look at her tablet in astonishment. "What the fuck is that thing made of!?" I gasped, "Adamantium?"

Alys snickered, not entirely getting the reference but likely still understanding the message behind it. "That's a real metal, you know. It's used to make fire-resistant armour on Reon."

"Reon?" I recall the name. "That's your home planet, isn't it?" They both nodded, though a flicker of misery flashed across their collective snouts at the word.

This gave me pause, and quickly I tried to steer the conversation away.

"It's kind of weird to think about, but you guys are technically aliens."

Idiot!

"We're literally aliens," said Rhys, "and to us, so are you," he added.

"Huh," I say audibly, relieved that they had taken the proverbial bait. "I always imagine aliens as, like, humans with green skin, not dragons."

"Oh, yeah, you humans are pretty weird when it comes to creativity. It's either the most boring things I've ever read or something I could never imagine even if I had a thousand years." Rhys said.

"Probably because there's so many of us," I suggested. "How many dragons are there back home?"

WHAT THE FUCK!? Am I having a stroke!?

There was a lull in the conversational flow, like a rock in a narrow stream.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, I forgot that things were rough back home. Sorry for bringing that back up." I rub the side of my forehead out of reflex--a trait shared with my father.

"It's fine," Alys tried to sound casual, but I had good hearing. She failed. "To be fair, I-I'm the one who brought up Reon, so it's, uh, how do you say? Water under the bridge?" She licks her dry lips and looks down at her tablet. "James, can you show me how to use the discount? I can't figure out how to do it."

I silently thank her for the change in conversation. After shaking off my anxiety, I motion for her to pass me the tablet. When in my grasp, I removed the previous order and swiped her over to the offers section before turning the screen over so she could see. "Thank you," she said as she angled the device so her brother could order.

As they were sorting their food out, I heard my number get called and leave to retrieve it. I trusted them enough not to steal from me, so I left my backpack behind on the seat. I thanked the man at the counter and took the tray of food back to our table. On the way, I was at long last able to notice just how many people were staring at my temporary companions; most of them, I realised, had likely been doing so the entire time.

I sit down and look back at the watchers; most of them pretend to look elsewhere upon spotting me, but some were brave. I scowled as I ate, the expression caught by the duo, who then glanced around. "It happens," Rhys said with a dismissive shrug, "makes me feel like a celebrity."

"I don't like it," Alys said, her talons digging into the sides of her tablet, "at least at work most people are too busy to stare. Too busy to be rude." The middle of her snout was scrunched up in a frightening display of aggression. Once again, I was reminded of a predator about to pounce.

Without meaning to, I lent back.

"But..." And just like that, the tension left her body. A puff of smoke wafted from her nostrils as her eye flickered to the world outside the nearby window. "This isn't our world, so... so I can understand why they'd be staring."

I didn't say anything. She was being shockingly mature, more than I would have been given the circumstances.

Their meals come, and we all eat in relative silence. There was still an oppressive air of misery among our group, though--one that could be physically felt. Determined, however, to try and salvage the situation solely for her sake, I looked down at what Alys was eating and smiled.

"Stereotypes aside," I said jovially, placing my chin in my palm and my elbows on the table, "how is it?"

She looked up, the shape of her sleek maw allowing me to see pieces of tomato and batter crumbs sticking to the sides. After licking her lips free of excess food, she scoffed. "I think... they need to stereotype harder, actually," was her equally mocking answer. "This is great, but next time they should bring me a fresh harvest of tomatoes and a whole chicken carcass."

The air lightened just a bit. I was glad she was at least playing along with me.

"You do work for a fast food restaurant. Maybe you could be a consultant for reptile-kind?" I pinched my chin in mock-thought. "Any other fantastic ideas, boss lady Alys?"

She smirked. "I think that--this isn't for me, of course--they should let everyone with blue scales get free food. Imagine the exposure they'd get; it would definitely be worth the very minor cost."

"The very minor cost?" I question with a raised brow.

She laughed. "Yes. Very, very minor. Or are you saying I'm fat? That would indeed be quite rude of you to do!" Alys raised her head up high.

"Of course I'm not!" I let out an exaggerated gasp. "But, lady Alys, I am surprised you were able to fly up high enough to drop your tablet. Surely you'd need a crane of some sort to hold your regal self?"

Rhys let out a loud laugh, as did Alys, who took the barb on the cheek, not seeming offended in the slightest. "Exactly! That's why I couldn't catch the tablet before it hit the ground--the straps were too tight!"

"Of course, of course, I completely understand now," I nodded sagely.

It was a nice moment, one I was grateful for, as it allowed them to forget the people who were still staring. They hadn't stopped, and they wouldn't stop. But that was life: a blend of bad and good, great and terrible. Without one, the other would mean nothing; emotions would lose their depth without opposition.

I glanced at Alys, whose laugh was like that of a predatory bird and whose teeth I felt belonged in a cheesy horror movie. She drew attention to herself without meaning to--fear, suspicion, and revulsion. It would have been in my best interest to avoid her after that day, to spare myself the trouble of standing out, to save myself.

But... I didn't care; in that small moment of peace, I didn't care how others thought of me because, for the first time in a long time, I was content with myself.

Chapter 3

It was Thursday, August 15th, and I was lazing about, waiting for my brother to get back so I could leave for work. Without much else to do, my thoughts, as they often did, returned to home.

Earth was so very different from what I'd grown up knowing.

The government was stricter, infinitely more than our collection of rag-tag tribes and hives, but so much more rewarding. Money was not a foreign concept to me, but for a Reonic dragon, gold meant status and nothing else. On Earth, coins could get you absolutely anything you wanted--warm homes, good food, an assortment of menial services, and whatever else you could think of.

And the internet... Dear skies above, the internet was the most wondrous thing I had ever laid my eyes upon. It was greater than any warlord, more knowledgeable than any sage, and rife with so many fascinating videos that it would make your head spin were you to watch even a fraction.

Living in this world cost money, however, and that required me and Rhys to work. Many dragons thought this was a pain, that they were beyond it, but... I wasn't.

I didn't care about their perception.

If they wished to wallow in filth, then I would not stop them.

"Alys, did you fall asleep with your eyes open again?" Asked Jarys, my youngest brother. He looked like Rhys, only thinner and shorter, the same as I had been before my first few growth spurts. He shared our mother's downward curving horns, like I did, but had our father's eyes, as Rhys did.

I leant down and nuzzled him, ensuring I lingered long enough for it to annoy him. Only when shoved sufficiently far away, did I answer him. "Nah, I'm awake; I'm just thinking about what to get you for your tenth!"

He gasped, got up off the soft sofa, and galloped over to his room. We were in the living area of our small home--a round, circular area with a low, wooden table which imitated a hive hub. Jarys came back quickly, a colourful, well-worn human magazine held tightly between his childishly uneven fangs. He dropped the now slightly torn booklet onto the table and took a seat close beside me.

He was bouncing with energy as he flipped through the pages.

"What's a Lego?" I asked, squinting at the colourful squares he was excitedly pointing at. "They look very fragile."

"They are!" He shouts, causing me to wince, "but look!"

He flipped the page once more to display some sort of human home made entirely out of the miniature bricks. "How do they stay together?" I asked, "surely you would need some sort of material to keep them bonded."

"They click together," Jarys pointed at the circular connectors atop a slightly larger piece. "But you can take them apart and make something else. I've seen people on YouTube build whole cities! Oliver has a bunch of them, and sometimes he sneaks them into school so I can see."

I took the magazine from him and reviewed the prices for a few minutes. They were hefty purchases, even with a proper job, but the bills were paid for, and it was an important birthday for him, so I allowed him to pick whichever ones he wanted--besides the £99.99 sets--because we still needed to eat solid food.

Plus, his birthday was a day before I got paid so we had to be conservative.

"I'll have a look, okay? That reminds me, have you invited all your friends to your party? Because I've only spoken to a few moms." I asked whilst scratching down notes with an index talon, using a pot of ink as fuel. Jarys nods but then stops, his snout twitching with an easily read nervousness. "What's wrong? You did invite all of your friends, right?"

"Yeah, but I wanted to invite Oliver, but I didn't want you to get mad at me, so I... didn't." Confessed the young dragon.

I stared at him, stunned for a moment. "When did I say you couldn't invite Oliver? Aren't you guys best friends? I even got food specifically for him." I tried to sound supportive, but he looked upset. "Oh, come on, Jarys, don't be sad; just ask him tomorrow if he wants to come and say that..." I stopped to think of an excuse. "Say that your sister was being stupid."

It worked to cheer him up, but not me. I had no memory of ever saying that he couldn't invite humans, nor anything that could have been misinterpreted as such. My exact words had been; Make sure you invite your friends I hadn't said; Make sure to invite the other dragons, for that exact reason.

Surely, I thought, Surely Rhys hasn't said something. I didn't think he had. He liked James enough to invite him out to our dinner when cousin Samys had watched Jarys that one time, so there was little chance of it being him.

"Why did you think you weren't allowed to invite Oliver?" My brothers were astonishingly simple creatures; therefore, a direct approach was usually best. "Has someone said something to you?"

He looked away. "N-No. I just thought you'd be mad."

He was so easy to read.

"Jarys, who said you weren't allowed to invite humans?" I purposefully softened my tone. "You aren't in trouble; don't worry; I'm just wondering is all."

He fiddled with his claws for a while before answering. I didn't rush him, as that was how Mother had handled us, and therefore I made it my mission to do the exact opposite. "Samys doesn't like humans very much," he said it so quietly that I nearly mistook it for the wind outside. "Every time one walks past the window, she looks all mad. I asked her if she was coming to my party, and she said that, um, she said she would but that she'd leave if there were any humans. She didn't say the last part to me, but I heard it by accident."

Ah.

I counted backwards from one thousand by seven at a time to keep myself from stomping over and verbally tearing our moody cousin's throat out.

"...Right." I clicked my tongue and got up to drink from the low taps the local council had installed. When a pinch calmer and far more refreshed, I returned to the table. "Invite Oliver, as well as any other human friends you want. Actually, bring a few more so you can make some new ones. Everyone loves a party."

"But, why? Why doesn't she like my friends?" The innocence of the question itself and the phrasing made my heart melt.

"It's... Complicated, I guess. Back ho- back on Reon, humans and elves were... they didn't like us very much. They thought we wanted to hurt them, so we kept getting into fights, and we kept losing." I was skipping context, massive context, but that truly was the long and short of it. "Samys hated losing most of all and one day went out to finally win, but she, uh, well, she lost, lost a wing too."

"Oh," he murmured, "that's why she only has one. I thought she hatched funny. But humans are good here, aren't they? My friends are good."

"Mostly, yeah. They gave us this house, money, and looked after us when we first moved. They gave me and Rhys jobs so we can buy things. Humans here are different--no magic too, which means they can't hunt us."

"They can't use magic!?" He gasped, sounding horrified.

"No, they can't. I don't know if they don't have mana like we do or if they just don't know how to use it, but no, they can't use magic. I think that's why they have so much stuff; to make up for it." I hadn't thought about humanities lack of sorcery, but now that I myself had pointed it out, it was on my mind. There were magical humans on television and in books, but I hadn't seen any in the real world.

A couple of minutes later I check the time on the wall clock, and after realising that Rhys would be back within the hour and that work would be starting soon, I got busy cutting the pork I'd picked up from town last Wednesday. We could eat it raw, but our family had become spoilt by human luxury. It was hard to go back to raw meat after you'd tried sauce and seasoning.

I lifted myself up onto the counter using the metal bars installed on the sides to hold myself upright for longer than I'd normally be able to in order to properly season the meat. I rolled the pieces around in the mix and, when ready, placed them atop a flat metal tray before sliding it into the oven.

I clambered back down, cleaned my paws in the basin, and sat back at the table, my eyes glancing over momentarily to the small television we had been given. Jarys was watching some inane program about a human sorcerer that could capture magical creatures using a powerful orb. It was rather disturbing to witness, especially from a dragon's point of view.

I was pretty sure that a relative of ours had suffered that exact fate.

"Ooh, now I want that." I heard him grumble. I look up, realising that in the short few moments the program had been on, my brother had already grown bored of watching it. On the machine now was an advertisement for some video game about a knight whose job was to hunt down monsters.

The player would then take the pieces of these beasts and create armour and weapons from their body parts. It was absolutely vile, made worse by the fact that dragon-skin armour did in fact protect human warriors from flame, much the same as adamantium.

"Alys, can I swap my Lego for this? I can play it on your computer when you're not here."

"N-No, you can't."

"I promise not to spill any more drinks on your keyboard!"

My talons dug into the sofa. A sword made from bones, a spear that conjured parasites. Sweet skies above, it was vomit-inducing.

"We can both play it! It's not multiplayer, but we can take turns."

How did the humans on Earth know that those specific body parts could be used in a way such as that?

Surely they haven't...

"Alys? Are you okay?" Jarys asked softly.

I sat up, my body woozy, and look to Jarys, who was wholly unaffected by the grotesque sight. It took me a minute to realise that his impressive resistance was not due to maturity but something else entirely; it was fiction to him. From his point of view, it was simply a video game with a vaguely interesting mechanic to it. He may have even thought it fascinating--wielding a dragon bone sword. He wasn't Reonic, not entirely.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just... Thinking."

Jarys had been moved to earth when he was but five years old, and even when on Reon, he had been kept away from the horrors of our daily lives, so I could not blame him for not understanding. He was a child and deserved protection. He did not need to know about our past; I would ensure he never did. If I could have, I would have told him he was born on Earth.

"Are you bringing anyone to my party?"

I had zoned out for the third time that day, staring absentmindedly out of the window and panting, all the while my brother had kept jabbering on at me. "Sorry, what?" I had caught the last part of his question, but it felt rude not to at least try and speak to him like I was a functioning adult dragon.

He huffed dramatically. "I asked if you're bringing anyone to my party. You're allowed to bring one friend."

I laughed. Despite the shakes, I laughed. "Excuse me, brother-o-mine? Who's the creature that's setting all of this up?"

"Rhys?"

"Me!" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Your cool, big sister! I'm really only allowed one person? What kind of dictatorship is this!?" He pulled away and hopped into an aggressive fighting stance.

"My party, my rules!" He snapped back, trying to sound domineering but failing due to the clearly visible grin and his eternally squeaking voice. "Do you even have more than one friend?"

"I have many!" I tackled him to the floor, and after a bit of rolling and some light biting, pin him down. "Many, many friends!"

The sound of a lock opening and a handle turning drew our collective attention.

The front door swung open, and in shambled the third sibling.

Rhys wiped his snout, looked at me pinning the nine-year-old dragon and snorted. "What did he do now?" He pulled his bag from his back, slung it at the low sofa, and went straight for the kitchen fridge after closing the front door. "Also, is that dinner I can smell? Smells good."

"Your worship is appreciated as always," I called out. "How was work? You look tired."

"Alright, a bit busy though," he grunted, retrieving a pack of ham from the fridge and carrying it in his mouth. "I'm off to my room for a bit. Call me when it's done."

Before he could get very far, I shouted out to him, "Don't go to bed! It's gonna be done in a few minutes." He made no indication he understood what I was saying. "I'm not kidding, don't go to sleep!" He made a chatting gesture with a forepaw but didn't say anything else.

Reminded of dinner, I climbed off of Jarys and got to work checking on the meat. A little longer, I decided as I closed the door and plopped myself back onto the sofa. I didn't want to leave Jarys alone whilst I lazed about on my laptop, so I was forced to suffer the boredom of a mid-week afternoon.

Work wouldn't start for a while and I had already sorted my bag out, so there was literally nothing to do.

"So, who are you brining?" Asked the youngest of our litter. I didn't look at him as I pondered about his question.

"I don't know. Honestly, it's probably going to be pretty small--a few friends and family." I found myself pausing. "Is that alright? You won't be upset if it's small, will you?" It was irrational, my chain of thought; he was a good kid and surprisingly polite for a dragon who'd grown up on luxurious Earth, but I'd always felt bad for taking so long to get my visa.

"No, I just don't want to share my cake with a lot of people," he admitted with the open honesty only a child could conjure. "Especially if they're old and boring like you."

"Excuse me." I jabbed him in the side. "I am still a young, fresh dragoness, and I'm also the one who's going to be making your dinner, so maybe you need to be a bit nicer."

"Twenty-four is old, Alys. It's, like, end of the world old."

"Twenty-four is old!?" I laughed, but it was more of a shocked giggle. "No. No way is being twenty-four old. I've got my whole life ahead of me, you evil goblin."

"No, it's end of the world old," he repeated, "grandmother old."

"Oh, then you shouldn't trust me to feed you, right? Too high a chance that I'll mess up and drop something into the food? Actually, yeah, you're right, I am very old, so I'll eat all of the food, so that there's no chance of that happening."

"What, that's not fair!" He whined. "Oliver said grandmas make cookies and stuff, which is why you're a really good cook."

I placed a paw on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. I dropped my voice several pitches. "It's okay, dear boy; I'll take the risk and eat the food. I can't allow you to sacrifice yourself for something so menial. You can go and eat bread instead. Don't worry, it's okay, just let this happen."

"But-"

"It's okay, it's okay." I tightened my hold on him. "I'll miss you, but it's all going to be okay. Just let it happen." I shushed him and began to get up, only for him to jump atop me, nearly winding me.

"Stop being fat! You can't eat all the food!"

"But I'm hungry." I whined petulantly, pouting. "And I can't share since it's poisoned."

"Your food is not that bad."

"Okay, now you're definitely not..."

A strong, smoky smile wafted weakly into my nostrils. I paused our playing immediately. I leapt to my paws and hurried over to the oven, where I immediately ripped open the glass door and pulled the now singed meat out.

The metal tray was so hot I could feel it through my scales. "Bastard," I snarled at the roast. "Little fucking..." Jarys was watching, an almost expectant look on his snout. "Tell school I said that, and I'll melt your tablet."

His smug expression dropped instantly. I knew for a fact that the only reason he wasn't playing Roblox on it currently was because I was in the room with him.

"Go get Rhys whilst I try and fix this mess." I pointed a paw in the direction of our brother's room while the other was busy flipping pieces of seasoned meat over.

I saved the food by adding extra sauce, hoping nobody would notice, wherein It was then plated and placed atop our round table. Once everyone was present, dinner at last began.

My brothers and I ate our meal in near silence, as we often did. The trip with James was an exception, not the norm. Meals were contemplative when prepared by paw, but all the while I slowly filled myself up with self-generated anxiety for the upcoming work shift. I was getting quicker--not yet good, but quicker at my job--and so I was being given more work. The only problem being that as people were eating later, shifts were therefore also getting later.

When I'd spoken to James on Monday, he had said that night shifts were both the best and worst parts of the job, and I was starting to see why. There were generally fewer orders, but sometimes weird humans would order bulk amounts late at night. Another annoyance was that because most people were bored, they gossiped loudly with one another.

I wasn't a social pariah, but my family had grown up in quiet caves for centuries, and I often missed that peace. The human world was louder and busier in every aspect.

Heavy benefits, heavy downsides, same with everything on Earth.

"You look like the Misera," said Rhys, pulling me from my reverie.

"The miserable old statue you kept even though it was absolutely disgusting?" I asked, recalling the horrible piece of marble work.

"Yeah, that one." It was rare he spoke during dinner, which I took to mean he was genuinely worried about me. It made me realise I was wearing my heart on my snout. He paused before continuing, long enough for me to gather my thoughts. "Anything I need to worry about?"

"No," I shrugged my wings, "just thinking about boring, grown-up stuff. Something you don't have to worry about." My attempt at a joke was met with a weak, painfully forced chuckle.

"Hah... sure... Alys, are we really gonna do this?"

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Jarys tensing. I recognised the expression, and it pained me to see. "Jarys," I said softly, "why don't you get a doughnut and play on your tablet for a bit whilst I get ready for work?"

He hesitated, as if readying to say something, but didn't. I didn't force the issue, but it left a sour taste on my tongue.

When he was past earshot and the sound of YouTube were audible, I looked to my only other remaining sibling. "It's nothing big, honestly," I mumbled as I begin gathering up the plates, "but have you ever gotten something new and shiny, and it's clearly an upgrade over your older, worse item? But every now and then you want the shitty one?"

He frowned. "Alys-"

"It's just... I guess that I kind of miss home. Old home, I mean. It was familiar and predictable. Not good at all, but familiar."

"I see." He took a breath. "Alys, I get it; I do. We both grew up there; it was home to us, but... no."

I double take, surprised by the assertiveness of his voice.

"Alys, Reon on its best day was a tense, stressful place where you could fly around for a bit, but on average... Alys, it was horrible. If we hadn't left, Jarys would almost definitely be dead by now. I-I have no idea how you lasted so long. "

I paused, the weight of his words sinking in slowly, shamefully. Of course he was right; Reon was not truly a home; it was a blade filled cage, a place of uncertainty, a place of raw survival. But even so, it was hard to let go of where I'd hatched.

"You're right," I said slowly as I scraped the plates clean. "But I still miss it sometimes. Not the danger or the stress, just... the familiarity. It was bad, but I could predict it. Everything here is so... new. I keep catching myself doing something wrong or embarrassing myself."

Rhys leaned back into the soft front of the sofa, an expression of warm sympathy on the snout--the kind only a sibling could muster. One of shared experiences and kindness. "This place isn't perfect; it never will be; nowhere is. But it's good. Earth is a good home, especially for Jarys. He has friends, shelter, food, and more luxury than any dragon ever had."

I looked out to the sky at a small white bird flying freely. It was beautiful, but it flew away before I can get a proper look. "He's spoilt in the best way possible," I added on.

"And so are we."

"I guess we are, and I guess you're right." I couldn't help the wistful inflection, but Rhys didn't mention it. "I think I'm just stressed about tonight and overthinking things again."

"Don't you need a brain to overthink things?"

"Yeah, which leaves you safe." I snickered, but it took an effort.

We split apart, him putting something on the television me getting ready for work. It didn't take me long; it never did. I strapped my backpack to my lower back and wrapped my claws around the door handle.

As I leave, I craned my neck back.

I looked at our new home, at the new things we had, at the luxury we have, at the riches we had compared to five years ago. Materialism wasn't all there was to life, but it was enough to push me out of the doorway and up into the cool afternoon air.

On Reon, I was what was known as an escape dragon, which essentially meant that I was very fast.

During my first few visits to the human doctors--which was essential to obtaining a visa--they had held me longer than most others, as it was rare for mammals, reptiles, or even birds to get past sub-sonic levels.

I couldn't go nearly that fast in city limits, however, as there was a set limit of one hundred and sixty kilometres per hour for dragons flying lower than two hundred meters. Kin or not, police service dragons always told the truth to their superiors.

I didn't rush that day, however.

Instead, I relaxed, gliding over the cool night air, all the while trying to ignored all of my problems

A dragon should never be bored.

I caught a heavy stream of wind, folded my wings a half-degree tighter, and sped up.

Maybe I'm lonely?

I rolled to the side, avoiding a group of small birds. The restaurant was within sight.

No, that can't be it.

The yellow lights were garish to my sharp eyes.

It can't be.

I flared my wings, catching more air as I lent my upper body back, allowing me to land in a low crouch in the abandoned car park.

It was not completely empty, however, as just up ahead I spotted a wild James, sitting on a metal railing and staring at me, his mouth stuffed with an unknown food. He waved and tried to say something, only to sputter and choke as he did. He lent over, took a swig from his metal flask, and breathed deeply.

All in the span of maybe four seconds, five tops.

I already felt better.

"Did you just choke on that..." I squinted. "Hamburger?" I asked when close enough for conversation not to be totally stilted. He waved me off, busy massaging his sore throat.

"Only a little." He coughed again and took another drink. "Jesus, what a stupid way to die that would have been."

"Choking on a hamburger and falling off a fence?" I enquired.

He laughed warmly, visibly pleased by my string of words. "First thing." He smacked the railing, producing a reverberating clang. "It's a railing. And second, I didn't fall; I nearly fell. Also!" He opened up the burger to reveal a crispy, golden chicken patty. "It's a chicken burger, not a hamburger."

"Ah, yes, my mistake," I nodded solemnly, "it makes a huge difference."

"You're forgiven this once." He rolled up the sleeve of his hoodie to check something on a curious-looking wrist device. "Ah. I've only got nine more minutes of doing nothing before my break is over." He pushed himself forward and took a seat on one of the nearby benches.

"What time is it, actually? I'm starting in a bit." I took the seat opposite him but had to squeeze in a little due to it being made solely for human use. "Also, don't you usually start a lot later?"

"Nine twenty exactly," he said. "And yeah, I normally do, but there's been some mixing up with shift hours, and I've been working a bit earlier than normal. To be fair, though, I never get set times, so I'm sort of used to it. I'm surprised you were given nights; I figured they'd keep you late-midday."

"How come?" I asked.

"Because it's busy enough to force you into getting good, but not so busy that you get overwhelmed. It's what they did to me and a few others. Speaking of... How've you guys been? It's been a minute since I last saw you."

Last Wednesday at the comic book shop, Monday for less than a couple of minutes. It's Thursday today, right? Yeah, it's Thursday.

"I've been alright, yeah, just working, you know? It's my younger brother's birthday in a week, so I'm trying to save some money for presents. It's a, uh, big age thing for dragons; around ten is when you can physically produce fire, so he's pretty excited about it. How about you?"

I found myself curious. He was actually quite hard to read, as his tone rarely matched his expressions.

"Nothing," he shrugged, "literally nothing. I am very, very boring. In fact, yesterday I had so little to do I actually opened up my PC and did a deep dust clean. It was very tragic."

"You have my condolences, you poor, strange creature." I tapped the table twice, not quite comfortable enough to tap his arm, as I would have done with my brothers or cousins. "Wait, you took your machine apart?"

"Yeah, it was pretty easy since I'm the one who built it. Honestly, it's way harder to clean them than it is to actually assemble them. Do you know much about computers? I remember you said you read online, so is that with your tablet or something else?"

"I have a laptop," I explained. "A relative of mine was given it by a human friend, but he didn't use it, so he gave it to me for pretty cheap. Honestly, I don't know much about machines."

"To be fair, a lot of people don't, and I don't know that much myself, just enough to set stuff up. If you do ever have problems with it, I could take a look at it for you. It'll cost you a hundred pound, though."

"A hundred? Does it really cost that much?"

I made sure to sound as serious as possible, and waited until he looked nervous before laughing. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding, but, uh, thank you. That's actually really nice of you to offer. I mainly use it to watch videos, though, but Jarys always wants to play games on it."

"Jarys is the younger brother?" James asked.

"Yep, he plays stuff on his tablet, but apparently there's certain games he can't get on it, so he needs my laptop for it." I shrugged. "I might get him one for solstice later this year, but I'm not really sure how much they cost."

James looked thoughtful for a moment. "How much would you be willing to spend? If you've got a few hundred, you might be able to set up your own PC, and then he could play whatever."

I thought about our finances. "I'm not sure, but probably not enough for just him to get one."

"What if you guys got one for everyone to share? If you budget the parts and go for a lower-end one like a, um, a ten-eighty video card with a twenty-six hundred, it might..."

The rest was completely illegible to me, simply a series of numbers.

Is he speaking English?

He stopped himself from talking, likely catching the look of raw confusion on my snout.

"Or you could just do what you were thinking. Sorry, I got carried away for a second. Computers are sort of my thing."

"That was gibberish to me, sorry," I confessed, "but, yeah, honestly, a computer for everyone to use would be pretty good, actually."

"It's not hard," he shrugged, "a few YouTube videos, a screwdriver, and you're set. You can even get pre-made ones if you don't want to do it yourself."

I supposed it was my arrogance speaking, but for some reason I assumed he was about to offer to help, but he didn't. Instead we lapsed into silence, with him checking something on his phone and me sitting quietly.

"Nine-thirty-one. We should probably get going."

I was in a pretty good mood at that point, but as soon as we entered the building, the staring began. Our fellow workers had begun to adjust, but customers were almost always new and were almost always shocked to see me. I ignored them and focused on the back of James' head. He had brown hair, light brown, mousy almost, with a smooth, pale neck.

So soft looking. I kind of want to touch it...

As we walked, he quickly removed his green hoodie, swapping for a black apron and cap, all within such a short span of time that I'd barely seen him do it.

I gave James a nod goodbye as I entered the far too cramped changing stalls. It didn't take long as there wasn't much, but fitting into clothing was never enjoyable for a creature that preferred freedom. How humans suffered wearing so much cloth was beyond me, but according to a rumour, they were always in heat and therefore needed cover.

Poor things.

After leaving the small room, I placed my pack into one of the rare free lockers, and headed to the main area. Before I progressed further, I remembered to begin walking solely on my left forepaw.

I entered the room to the immediate right of the kitchen, a place I'd internally named the clean room. I placed my right paw into the frustratingly high sink, and after lathering it in hygienic soap and scrubbing boiling water into the scales, I placed a dragon-proportioned plastic glove over the offending limb. I hobbled awkwardly back into the kitchen, where I was then able to quickly find Thomas.

"Hello, Thomas. Do you know where you need me to be?" I asked politely, standing at attention. I made sure my wings were held tightly and my tail coiled professionally.

He smiled weakly, looked about the place, tapped his clipboard, and pointed at the beeping chicken fryers. "Max, swap with Sarah up front - she's finishing in five anyway. Alice is moving to the chicken batch." The young human male in charge of the fryer gave a thumbs up before setting down a batch of chicken patties.

"It's, um, Alys," I said quietly, correcting his slip-up without sounding too put off about the mistake. Surely, I thought, it was a simple oversight due to the busy nature of our work.

"What? Oh, Alys, right. Sorry, love." Thomas scratched his chin, gave me a nod, and left us, retreating into the back where I had yet to journey.

"Do you know how to use this? What trays mean what?" Asked Max as he began to undo his apron and step away.

"Yeah, most of them, but, uh, which is the select and which is the spicy? I haven't used it in a little while."

He tapped the trays that were already in the heater. "Big red is select, little grey is spicy. Little yellow is premium. Black for mayo, small red for chicken sandwiches. You get all that?"

"Yes."

As soon as he was more than a metre away from me, I forgot every word he said. Somehow, through the grace of Skie, I managed not to entirely mess up the system, although this was likely bolstered by the lateness of the shift.

Big red for selects, little red for sandwiches. Big red for selects, little red for sandwiches. Big red for selects, little for... for sandwiches.

I was getting faster at getting batches out, and against all odds, I kept up with the pace of the restaurant for once. I pondered idly, however, just how much better my work could have been had I been allowed access to both of my limbs.

Two hours passed, and the orders--as I initially expected--slowed down even further. I managed to get an early break, one that was coincidentally timed with James' departure.

"Hey, you want to have a little pre-courting snack?" I asked jokingly as we once again sit opposite one another. We were in the main area of the restaurant, close to the tills. He flinched and looked up at me, not fully understanding what I'd said but still able to rationalise enough to get the general tone of what I'd implied.

"A what?" He eloquently said, seemingly not quite believing what I'd said.

"A, uh, pre-courting snack? You know, for the... energy," I explained, ears growing hot with embarrassment. "I-I'm kidding. I, uh, meant, do you want to have some food?" I clasped my talons and looked elsewhere, avoiding James' eyes at all cost.

A dragon would have laughed and said yes.

"Ah... I get it, and, sure, yeah." He tapped the table. "You can eat if you want; I won't stop you, but I'm kind of broke, so I'll just be sitting here and staring."

"I could share," I suggested. "I've already had some food so it's not like I'll be going home hungry."

"Nah, nah, it's cool. It's karma for laughing when you choked last Wednesday."

"Oh! Yeah, you did, didn't you!" I got up from the table. "I'll be sure to eat very loudly," I said as I plodded over to a nearby kiosk to order from. "Very, very loudly. If you're good, though I might think about throwing you a chip." I was beyond relieved that he'd brushed past my blunder, not bothering to rip into me for my poor courting skills as others had.

"Yes, mistress Alys, I promise I'll be good, mistress Alys."

When the food was ready, I picked it up from the worryingly young worker and sat back down opposite my friend. I'd already eaten, but the food was free and therefore that much more delicious.

"Mistress Alys, can I have a chip, please?"

"Of course, my dear human."

"Fuck me, you guys are cute."

I jumped at the interjection of an unfamiliar voice, as well as the realisation that we were not in fact in our own little world. Behind me, with his hands in his pockets, was a human of average build with yellow hair and dark blue eyes.

"Ha-ha, y-yeah," I whimpered. We both don't say anything, each of us stuck on how to respond to the sudden presence.

"Nah, nah, don't let me stop you. I'm just surprised is all." He checked something on his phone before turning his attention towards James, whose expression was visibly duller and more neutral than it had been moments ago. "James, man, are you two going out or something?"

James hesitated. "No, we're just friends. I know her brother." I appreciated him being the one to clear up any misunderstandings, as I knew for a fact that I would have somehow made the situation infinitely worse.

"Seriously? Nah, you guys were mad flirting. No way are you calling her mistress and still walking home separately. Ah, wait, I get why you two are quiet now! Don't worry, lad, I won't go telling no-one about youse."

I felt my ears get hotter, more from annoyance than embarrassment, but there was definitely both present.

He's just being friendly, just being friendly... Don't be so weird, Alys.

"We're just messing about, Michael; we're not dating or anything. Why are you grilling us so hard, man?" He expressed himself in a calm manner, but there was a tension in his voice, one my more sophisticated hearing could detect. He sounded resigned, frustrated, like he'd done this more than once.

"I'm not!" He laughed. "It's just banter. Anyways, I'm off; I'll see you two later, alright?" He buttoned the rest of his coat up and left the restaurant, all the while his proud grin did not once drop.

"Prick," I heard James mutter.

His reaction to the whole situation worried me. Sure, Michael seemed a bit too pushy for my liking, but aside from that, he didn't seem all that bad. In the kitchen, a week or so ago, he had told me to make sure I didn't harm the cleaning equipment, so at least he was a professional.

I began to wonder if his suggestion of us courting was what made James so upset. The idea of us dating was ludicrous, an impossibility, but his expressions during the talk...

Don't be so soft. It was just... awkward, that's what it was; awkward.

"I didn't know you were so speciesist, James!" I fake laughed, trying to scrape away the layers of his reaction to deduce his true thoughts. At his lost expression, I internally beamed and said, "You looked very offended when he said we were courting."

"Wh- Oh! No, no, it's not that. That guy just--he's just a bit of a dick, is all."

I was glad he looked nervous, as to me it proved his innocence, as cruel as that felt to think.

I shrugged, gave him a nugget, and said, "Good human." My reaction was slick, sarcastic, but inside I was dancing. Truly, I could not imagine us together, but him being opposed to the possibility would not have been a good sign.

He chuckled. "It's a free chicken nugget; no price is too high, and a bit of servitude is definitely not beneath me. I'll polish your horns for half a chip if you're looking for a servant."

"Half a chip? Good skies above, James, does this place really give us so little coin?" I mock gasped. "But, no. You'd probably mess it up. No offence, but you'd have absolutely no idea how to do it."

"I could learn; maybe even go up to a full chip per job."

"And have you as my personal groomer?" I tapped a talon against the underside of my snout, entertained by the idea of a human servant. "Tempting, but I don't think it would work out. I'm far too selfish when it comes to food. Besides... I doubt it would help the rumours Michael has of us, would it?"

"Ah, that's too bad."

James pulled the sleeve of his hoodie up and clicked his tongue at an apparently displeasing sight. "Half past midnight. I'm going to have to walk. Right, Alys, I'll see you later, alright?"

"Wait!" I went to grab him, but stopped when he flinched at the sudden attempt at contact. "Sorry, but, um, do you want to come to my brother's party? It'll be kind of lame, but I promise that other, uh, adults will be there." I bit my lip. "We could have some drinks afterwards."

Humans loved alcohol; the internet had told me so.

"Um," he stammered, taken aback by what was likely my sudden forwardness. "Sure... When is it? I've got a family thing this Saturday, so that's off limits."

"It's this Tuesday, so you should be safe. Like I said, it'll be a bit boring, but there's free food if you're interested in that kind of thing." I smiled, but it was strained. I didn't understand why I wanted him to come so badly. He was a friend; yes, I definitely counted him as a friend, but I had put less effort into inviting closer companions.

"Yeah, I'll come." He nodded. "Let me, um... gimme a second." He dug around his coat but failed to find whatever he was looking for and instead turned to his backpack, where he was at last successful. He retrieved his phone, a small black thing with visible cracks along the glass. "I've got a crap memory, so I'll write it in my notes. Okay, okay... Tuesday, the 20th of August. Where did you say it was, again?"

"It's called the-" I paused to make sure I got the name right. "East End Park working man. Near the Yorkshire road. A friend of a friend recommended it to me."

He typed for a bit before stopping to look up at me. "You mean working men on York Road?" At my nod, he finished typing. "Wicked. What time should I show up? Oh, um, do you want me to bring a present? He's ten, right? Am I allowed to bring a present or..."?

"No, no, no, it's fine; you really don't have to bring anything. Oh, actually, if you do want to, you could maybe bring cupcakes? I haven't tried them, but Jarys says he really likes them. Cupcakes aren't expensive, are they? It starts at five-thirty by the way."

He chuckled. "Nah, they're pretty cheap. I'll bring a big box for everyone and a smaller, nicer one for your brother. Is that cool?"

I gave him a few salty fries. "Perfect. This'll show him..."

"Show who?"

"My brother said I only get one invite because apparently I only have one friend."

James smirked. "Don't you?"

"Well, yeah, you. Relatives and stuff don't count."

"Wait, so how is this showing him?" He questioned, "It would basically be admitting that you do only have one friend."

I clasped my forepaws together fiendishly. "Because you will lie and say I've got a ton. It's a fool proof plan, trust me."

"Deal! But I want one of the cupcakes as payment for the scheme." He checked his wrist once more. "Right... Yeah, it's getting seriously late, so I'll need to go like now-ish. Alys, I'll see you later, and if not, then at the party."

"Okay, nice; see you later, James!" I waved him off, glad that I had actually managed to invite a friend. Despite having known him for a relatively short amount of time, James was fast becoming a near-essential part of my work life. In the best way possible, he was a distraction--a fun, sarcastic distraction that made work a bit more bearable.

I wondered how my family would react to him.

A few humans would be there, but by and large the majority would be dragons. Older, more traditional dragons, and this fact gave me pause. Would they say something? Would I be forced to pick between his or their approval? Whose would I pick?

On reflex, on instant reflex, I picked James. A week and a half of knowing him, and already I'd have picked him. Great-aunties were blood-bound kin, but they hadn't done much in the way of affection or enjoyment. Neither had James, in truth, but that was down to time constraints, not a lack of effort.

...I'd probably pick him again.

Chapter 4

Fucking balloons...

It was Tuesday, August 20th, the day of Jarys' tenth birthday.

"That's three you've popped now!" Rhys called out cheerfully, safe from my wrath by being a good fifteen feet away. "I know they're freaky looking, but you've got to remember that they're plastic and can't hurt you, okay?"

"And you've got to remember that I can hurt you."

I discarded the lump of deflated plastic, tossing it into the nearby bin.

The room we had rented for the night was decently large and well furnished.

It had a designated dance floor, a raised section for food, a wide seating area, and lastly, a small bar near the bottom for humans to buy drinks from. Chairs, along with tables, were thankfully provided, which was something that I had initially been worried about.

The price of everything, presents included, was a fair bit higher than both me and Rhys had initially expected, though not hugely so.

"Rhys, what time is it?" I called out, too far from my tablet to be able to quickly check. "I have a feeling that we're running late."

"Quarter to five," Rhys answered, knocking a chair behind him into a place with a bump of his tail.

"Right, I'm nearly done here anyway," I said, but then paused as my mind digested exactly what he had said. "Wait, quarter to five? Where is Polys? She was meant to be here like twenty minutes ago!" Polys was an aunt of ours who'd offered to help set up the party. "Four fifteen, she said."

"One second, I'll check your tablet--I don't have her on my messenger. What's your password?" He opened up my satchel and took out my device.

I left the balloons behind and quickly shuffled over to my brother, who was busy trying to break the password. "Nope, give me." I held out a paw. "You're not going through my tablet."

"Why?" He grimaced. "What have you been doing on here that I can't see? Gryphon stuff? You always had a-"

With a swipe of my claws, I snatched it from him. "None of your business, that's what. Right, where is Polys...?" I scanned my scant few messages and found her quickly. I growled weakly at the reveal. "Great! Her hatchling's sick, so she's had to pick him up early and can't help us." I scrolled down to read the rest. "But she's still coming to the party."

Rhys rolled his eyes. "Reaping the crop without having to sow? Sounds like that side of the clutch. Hey, remember that whole thing over the, uh, fire crystals?"

I shivered, recalling how we'd accidentally helped her son steal a gemstone from a particularly grumpy lindwyrm

"I'm still mad we got blamed for that," I rumbled. "What a lame two seasons that was." I typed out a quick message to our aunt before turning the device off and placing it back down on the food table. I rubbed at my tired eyes and looked about the room. "I'm a bit worried we won't be able to finish it. What do you think?"

"Eh, we'll probably be fine. What's left to do anyway? Foods done, chairs are sorted, presents are here." Deciding to push his luck, Rhys leaned down and took his tablet out. "I think we're nearly done, actually."

"Rhys, the happy birthday sign needs to go up; I've still not sorted balloons out, and we've still got crisp to set. Not to mention the music isn't even sorted. We can't-"

My brother placed a paw on my shoulder and shook me weakly. "Calm down, calm down. We can easily do that in forty minutes. I know you want this to be perfect for Rhys, but we're only missing like two balloons. I'll go sort the crisp out; can you double check if James is still coming, and what time?"

He went over to the buffet table, took out a box of crisps, and began adding them to a pile on the long, wooden table.

I looked over at him, brow raised. "How am I supposed to know when he'll be here? He just said he'd see me here," I asked, genuinely lost.

He stopped his gathering of crisp packets to give me a funny look, head lightly tilted to one side. "Your messenger? You know, how normal people talk to one another over long distances?" He placed a pawful of crisps on the table but then stopped. "Wait... do you not have him on Messenger?"

"No, no, I do not. How do you have him?"

He snorted, resuming his piling. "I clicked add friend like everyone else does. There's only one James Morris who lives around here."

"How do you know his clan name?"

"By asking what it was?" He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I scoffed and kicked at the carpeted floor. "Well, why didn't he add me? I would have accepted."

"Why didn't you add him first?"

I frowned, annoyed at myself and at the human. I would have enjoyed talking with him outside of work and away from Rhys. "I forgot to, okay? I keep forgetting that there's more you can do than watch videos and read."

"Oh, right. I actually, um, keep forgetting that you've only been here a couple of months and not a year and a half like I have. You learnt English too quickly for your own good, methinks. And, to be fair, he could've added you first."

"Methinks? Dumb fucking word." I murmured, not missing Rhys' slight head tilt at the curse. "But what if he doesn't accept it? If he really wanted us to be friends, then-"

"No, no." He stood up and pointed an accusing claw at me, as if warding off a curse. "We're not doing this! Alys, ask him to add you, and he will; trust me. Just ask; that's it. Actually, even better, add him now."

"Now? We're busy, Rhys. Besides, he might be doing something important."

"Like riding a bus?"

Probably.

"Just let me finish sorting stuff out first." I wanted to add him; I really wanted to add him, but that would mean admitting defeat in front of my brother, and so I curbed my enthusiasm and focused on hurrying up our efforts.

Wings helped hang the banner, and not rushing helped me stop bursting the horrid little balloon things. I could understand why Jarys didn't mind them--he'd never met a winter lantern, but Rhys had; he had the scars to prove it. For him to be so casual was... it was both bizarre as well as inspiring.

"Five fifteen!" I shouted out after placing the last party popper on the final table. "Rhys, you done?"

"Yeah!" He answered. "Everything is perfect, thanks to me!"

I dragged my gaze across the room.

"Alright. I think we've managed to pull it off." I exhaled. "Good skies; what a pain in the flank that was. I don't think I've ever seen a celebration as big as this." A flicker of painful nostalgia struck me upside the head. "Wait, actually, do you remember... uh, what's his snout...? Grey drake, blue eyes. You remember him, right?"

"Oh, um, Saren? Holy gods, what a spoilt little freak he was." Rhys shook his head. "I honestly still can't believe he hit his mother. Oh, also, didn't his grandpa-"

"Mount a rock? Yes, yes, he did."

"The entire thing; just a mess." He sat down beside me, the back of his head resting on the back of the chair. "I'm guessing that won't happen here, though, seeing as Jarys isn't a total monster."

"That, and our grandfather's been dead for like, what, six seasons?" I tacked on.

"Yep. Shame it took so long, though." He looked at my tablet as I switched it on and began swiping. "What are you doing?"

"Samys," I replied.

"We set off ten minutes ago. Jarys should be there for around 17:25."

"Why she's giving such a specific time?" Rhys muttered from his new position over my shoulder. I covered my device with a wing.

A pang of guilt rang in my chest. Samys was great with Jarys and truly cared for her family, and yet I had refused to tell her that the party would be full of humans. We weren't especially close, but kin was kin, and we were meant to look out for one another.

"Perfect," I replied, "everything is all ready, so come straight up when you're here."

While still on the device, I swiped over to the internet browser and quickly checked when my next shift would be. Seeing this, Rhys returned to his seat and busied himself with staring at the lights hanging from the ceiling.

Thursday. Night shift. Great...

"Understood. We should arrive in five minutes. All is good."

I sent a dewclaw-up picture and went to turn the device off, only to stop when I noticed a pop-up from Facebook, just sitting there and waiting for me to click. I pressed a talon into the pressure-sensitive screen and was sent through a whirlwind of posts and comments.

Friend request, friend request...

I checked the notifications.

Dammit.

It was a message informing me that someone had shared a link to something in which I had absolutely no interest.

I turned the device off and laid my snout back onto the table.

"Rhys?"

"Yes, my very depressed-looking sister?" He answered cheerily.

"Why did..." I grimaced, realising what he'd said. "Why did you want to know how long James would be? Is he bringing something?" I wasn't comfortable with the idea of Rhys asking our friend to donate presents or food without him first offering.

"I asked him to help with the music. I can't figure out how to connect all the wires to your laptop or my tablet." He said it casually. "Since he was coming, I thought that I may as well ask."

"Isn't that kind of rude?"

He looked over at me, brow raised. "Rude? How?"

"He's here to relax, not sort out machines for us. It's kind of... presumptuous?"

"He's hitting shuffle on your laptop and sticking a few wires in, Alys, not carving a statue of me. Plus, if he didn't want to, he would just say no. He's an adult."

"If it's so simple, then why don't you do it?" I countered, unusually snippy.

"Because I don't understand what all the wires mean, and he said he does. Also, I'll be on relative patrol; you know, making sure they don't try and eat any of our very clearly human guests." He puffed a waft of smoke away and sighed. "If you're going to be all prissy about it, then I'll do it. I'm sure YouTube will have something."

I groaned, ashamed by my sudden aggression. "No, no... it's fine. I'm just tired, sorry. You're right; he's a grown human; if he didn't want to help, he'd just say no." I wasn't sure why I was fighting so hard with him. "Did you check when he'd be here?"

"Yeah, like ten-ish minutes, he said. But you could also ask him yourself, you know."

"I'll ask when he's here. He'll be less likely to say no when it's snout to snout."

"Hah, clever, but kind of creepy. Still, just do it now."

"No."

"Why?"

"Why do you care so much?"

"I don't, but you obviously do! Like trying to peel bad scales...

"Well, what if he doesn't accept it, and then when he's here he... um, what if, wait... Anyway, if he did want to add me, he would have already."

"Alys, you're driving me nuts. Either do it or don't. You clearly want to."

I raised my head up from the table and looked over at him.

"So, what have you two been talking about anyway? Boring male stuff?" I asked, trying to deflect the conversation away.

He caught the ploy based on the unimpressed look, but still, he relented, knowing precisely when to put the pressure on and when to pull back. I sincerely doubted he would try and ask a third time.

"Pretty much, yeah. We talked about how trash power scaling is, some manga we both liked, and, uh, yeah... that was pretty much it. We didn't have a, like, four-hour long discussion or whatever you're thinking."

"Did you mention me?" It came out automatically.

"Technically? He asked how the party was going, and I said you were going insane trying to set everything up."

I waited for him to continue, but he refused to do so.

"And then what?"

"He just said, lol. Like I just told you, it wasn't a long talk; it was barely thirty minutes. If you want to tear a bunch of information out of him, ask him yourself."

The battle had been lost, my verbal armies broken, but by refusing to continue, I had locked our long-term war in a permanent stalemate. Childish, and also effective. I made sure not to look at him directly, for fear of him performing the dreaded head shake of mild disappointment.

My sensitive ears swivelled, tracking Rhys as he dragged my bag over to the buffet. I heard him unzip the side, take out something that clacked, and place it upon a wooden seat. After a pause, Rhys began to type away, paused, and then resumed.

"You can't get past the lock screen; it's too good of a password," I called out, busy watching the balloons bob up down near the dance floor.

"Can you at least give me a hint?"

"It's seven words long."

"Seven? Hang on, is your password just an actual sentence?"

"Uh-huh."

He tried one more time before groaning in defeat and closing the top shut.

"Ugh... Alys? Alys, I'm bored, and James is ignoring my texts. Let me play something on your laptop, please." The last word was dragged out.

"Nice try, loser. Also, how can you possibly be bored? Aren't you reading like twenty different books right now?" Bored of ignoring him, I looked him in the eyes.

"I'm all caught up! Chainsaw Guy is back to biweekly, and Draken Kaisen leaks only come out at, like, six in the morning."

"Too bad, don't touch my shit, okay?" I snarled, suddenly furious.

His brows twitched and his tail swished sharply.

"Calm down; I wasn't actually going to go through it. I was just joking." He held up a paw defensively. "Seriously though, are you alright? You've been kind of funky for a while now."

I grimaced and placed the end of my snout into my paws, my wings growing limp with regret. "Yeah, I'm just... sorry, I'm just really tired."

"It's alright, I'm not mad at you or anything--just a bit worried. You do look pretty tired, but are you sure it's not-"

A light padding upon carpet could be heard nearby. I jumped at the chance to avoid any talks about seasonal moods, especially with my own sibling.

"Shush, Jarys is here," I said, sitting up properly.

A half-moment later the doors burst open and in galloped an excited Jarys, eyes wide and snout overtaken by a wide, fang-filled grin. "Yes!" He shouted, scarlet eyes practically glowing with delight as they ran across every surface in the room. "Ah! It all looks so cool! "You got banners and food, and are those speakers!?"

I got up and walked over to my youngest sibling, who didn't bother waiting and instead barged straight into me, knocking me backwards a pace. "I know, I know, I'm great, aren't I? The best? The absolute best?" I said, tail swishing with pride.

"Yeah!" He held me tighter, and so I returned the gesture, practically crushing him. "And you too, Rhys! Thank you so much. I promise I'll be so good from now on."

"It's alright, bud. It's not every day you turn ten, after all."

Samys entered soon after, looking as blank-snouted as usual. She was a tall dragoness, taller than me by a fair few inches, and far better built. She was blue like all in our collective clutches, but it was a much darker shade--midnight, almost. Such a colour was denoted as bad luck back home--something she took great pride in.

She looked to Jarys, to Rhys, and then to me.

Her eyes were golden and regal, unlike our shared red.

"He behaved very well on the transportation," she said calmly. "No fussing, no aggression. He is well deserving of his celebration."

I smiled weakly at her, still unused to her way of speaking even after decades of knowing her. "Thank you, Samys. I really appreciate you bringing him."

"It was no issue." She slowly removed her pack, unzipped it in a single swift stroke, and retrieved from it a tough-looking leather guard, which she then gave to Jarys directly, brushing past me to do so. "This is a wrist guard, Jarys."

"Whoa... like knights have?" He asked as she assisted in fitting the armament.

"No, like dragon warriors have," she corrected, a glimmer of tension creeping past her mask of indifference. "Human and elven soldiers were poor imitations. This is a genuine armament and will help keep your claws safe, especially the dewclaw."

"Wow," I stammered. "That's really great of you." I was in astonishment at the gift's quality. "Where did you even get it? It looks real."

"That's because it is. It was our grandfather's. I merely polished the metal and buffed the leather." She said softly, eying not me but Jarys as he tested the tool, twisting and bending his paw in increasingly difficult ways. "It is a fitting gift for one turning ten years of age." At last she looked up, locking eyes with me, the territorial arrogance rolling from her in waves. "What did you get him?" She asked.

I couldn't resist the urge to frown. "Legos, toys, books, and some other stuff."

The corners of her thin, dark lips twitched upwards. "Human gifts?"

"Yes," I growled, "human gifts--which is what he asked for, because we live in a human world."

Samys snorted and followed us to the centre-most table, her head perfectly level and her striding form elegant. The only thing that could be called a flaw was her distinct lack of a left wing.

"So, when do I get to open my presents? Oh, what about food? I'm starving!"

"When more people start arriving, Jarys," answered Rhys from further up the table, his eyes on his tablet, which he had taken out mere moments prior. "The party starts in a couple of minutes, so you only have to wait a little longer. Let's just relax for a bit."

The little drake harrumphed and laid further back into his chair. His smaller size allowed him to sit somewhat comfortably in human furniture, something I envied.

"So, Samys, what have you been up to?" Enquired Rhys after he turned his tablet off and placed it back down on the table. "You started work yet?"

"Yes," was her tense, oddly hesitant answer. "I assist in placing products in plastic bags for humans. It... pays," she murmured. "I would rather gather my own food, but this country lacks sufficient wildlife for proper hunting. Pigeons are not nutritious enough to subsist on, and, besides, I get... odd looks for it."

Rhys stared. "You've been hunting pigeons?"

"Yes."

"What do they taste like?" Was Jarys' question, and if I were being honest, mine as well. "Are they good?"

She shrugged, her one wing twitching, resisting the urge to flare. "Quite tangy. Not nearly as good as chicken or turkey. Besides, they're surprisingly fast."

"They're also illegal to kill, by the way, so I wouldn't go chasing them down," supplied Rhys. "A ness at work said her friend got like two months in jail for it."

"Really? This place is so bizarre. These birds are a pest race, so why would they punish anyone who is willing to clean up their town?" She shook her head in disappointment.

"Because they're wildlife, like hawks and stuff, so they're protected."

I glanced at my eldest brother. "Why do you know so much about pigeons?"

"My co-worker likes birds, and we were bored one day, so she just told me about them."

"Can I hunt pigeons?" Jarys asked.

"No, you'll get in trouble," I answered.

"Samys did it!" He retorted, pointing at our cousin.

"They are right," she said after a pause, "if it is indeed a crime to injure these birds, then you should not risk it. I was mistaken to do so. Humans may be foolish creatures, but their laws are ours for now."

What? What do you mean, 'for the time being?'

With that, the young dragon grew quiet, which bothered me. He had listened to her unquestionably. Sure, he had heard Rhys say so himself, but for him to respond so well to her... it kind of sucked.

"When are people arriving again?" Rhys asked, scratching behind his left ear.

I switched my tablet back on and checked the time. "Should be in a couple of minutes, but you know how people are." I clicked my tongue and looked back over to Jarys. "Actually, you know what... I think we should open up at least one present, and I know a really good one."

"Yes!" Chirped the suddenly energised hatchling.

After sorting through the parcels and deciding which one was which, I picked up a small, slim envelope and passed it over to the cheery drake. He held it gently and slowly opened it, using one of his few sharp claws to cut the top off.

Within was a receipt confirming an online purchase of tickets to LEGOLAND in Windsor, indicating entry for a day.

"Are we really going?" He asked to be sure, eyes locked onto the slim slip of paper. "Like, actually actually?"

I snorted. "Obviously. If not, then that was probably the meanest trick I could have pulled on you." I then jabbed him in the chest with a talon. "You better be good when we go because the computer map says it's a long trip. Okay?"

"That and they're expensive," Rhys said, saying what I was thinking but would not say out loud. I sent him a blatant death glare for the comment. "What? They were."

"I know that! You're not meant to say it, moron."

"How expensive?" Asked Jarys, anxiously frowning.

"Not super, but, a bit, okay? More than fifty pence." I answered with a smile.

"Isn't everything more than fifty pence?" Asked our other brother.

"In the store I am forced to work at, they sell these strange sweet treats for fifty pence," commented Samys idly. "Surprisingly, they are very pleasant."

"Technically, that's still more than fifty pence," said Rhys, earning my befuddled stare.

"What? No, it's not; it's fifty," I replied.

"Yeah, which is... well, it's not less."

"Obviously! It's an equal amount, not more! Fifty is not more than fifty!"

"Well, it's not less."

"Yes, and what is your point!? It's obviously not less than itself. The point was that the sweets cost fifty, which is not less or more!"

"And?"

"And? What even is your point? Is your brain leaking out of your ears?" I snapped, pointing a shaking talon in his direction. The worst part was that I wasn't even one hundred percent sure that he was in fact joking with me.

Rhys waved a paw at me. "You just can't understand my genius, sister-o-mine. Your simple mind is just too small." He then paused and glanced at the buffet table. "What time is it anyway? I think I'm-"

"Just go..." I flopped my head down onto the table in defeat. "Jarys, Samys, you can go grab some food if you want. I thought people would be here by now and we'd have to wait, but... I give up; he's too determined."

I looked back to the entryway, and after seeing no one and hearing no one, I raised my head back up, slumped backwards into the uncomfortable chair, my wings forming a makeshift blanket, and pulled out my tablet. Both I and Rhys had developed a habit of turning the device on for a moment and then immediately turning it off, usually forgetting what we had even powered it back on for.

I say this because, as I was about to place it back onto the surface of the table, a Friendster notification stopped me. I considered ignoring it but decided against that as I had not much else to do besides watch my family devour food, which in itself was not a rare sight.

Friend request.

I sat up, eyes locked onto the little number one next to the friend request. I clicked, revealing a circular picture of James posing with two other humans who somewhat resembled him. I hit accept and began going through his profile. It was mostly family and some friends I did not know, sprinkled with birthday wishes.

With a tap, I took myself over to the photos section, where I found myself drawn to all of the humans he knew. He was fairly good with a camera device, I noted, as most of the pictures were framed excellently.

A message popped up, making me jump slightly.

"How's the setup going?" Was James' seemingly earnest question.

I straightened my posture, placed the tablet down, and began typing away.

"They're eating the food already. There's probably not going to be much left."

A few bubbles of indecision popped up, stopped, and started up again.

"Any cupcakes?"

"I forgot."

"It's a good thing I'm here to save the day."

"Thank you, Cupcake Lord." I giggled at my own joke.

"You are welcome, strange blue iguana."

I tilted my head. "What's an iguana?"

The bubbles hesitated.

"Check it."

Next was a picture of some sort of short, chubby reptile with a strange frill beneath its neck. "Cool, right?" Was the most below the image.

"That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." I was being honest.

"I'll tell him you said that. He won't be very happy, so I hope you know what you're getting into."

"Who? The lizard?"

"Yeah." Two more pictures, each of the lizard, one with James holding it in both hands, smiling dopily at the creature's presence. "He's awesome. How could you hate on such a cool lil guy?"

"Wait, is he your pet? Where did you even get him?"

"Nah, sister's. Not enough space in my flat to keep him."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah. I've got two brothers and two sisters."

"Sounds painful. Having two brothers is bad enough."

Another pause in the typing.

"I'm telling Rhys you said that. He'll kick you out, and I'll get all of the food."

"I dare you."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Hmmmmmm."

I copied his text.

"Hmmmmmm?"

"Yeah, all the extra m's show how hard I'm thinking."

I grinned, detecting a perfect setup.

"You can think? Wow, I'm proud of you."

"Ouch... my manly feelings..."

"Manly?"

Another pause, another minute of me biting my lip and waiting.

"Geez... Way to bully the poor, poor human."

"Great, right? I'm trained to do it."

"I can tell."

I went to respond, but was beaten by an unexpected second message.

"Hang on. Check this."

I sat hunched over my table, waiting.

Ding.

It was a picture of James, posing in front of a closed door. The entryway door, from which you could see me at the table through a window near the centre.

"She's super cool, but kind of evil. What should I do?"

Huh, that's pretty sweet of him.

"Beautiful too; try offering cupcakes, and she might accept your stupidity."

I caught the odd meaning at the end of my message, but by the time I realised how it could be interpreted, it was too late and James had already entered.

My gaze flickered to the device before returning to the human. For once, he wasn't wearing a hoodie, but rather a slim-fitting black coat and a fairly nice blue shirt. The jeans were the same as usual, but the white shoes seemed new, primarily based on how clean they looked.

"How long were you standing there?" I asked, amused by his overdramatic display but also anxious as to whether or not he'd read my last message.

"Enough to take more than three pictures. The hard part was getting you in the frame since you... wow, they are really going to town on that food. I thought you were joking." He nodded towards the buffet table, where I at last took notice of the carnage.

"Hey!" I called out, turning off the English for a moment. "There's food for like twenty dragons there, and you've already eaten a quarter! What are you, hatchlings!?" Even Samys had the good sense to look guilty, but that soon changed to a stoic façade as she spied the lone human.

"Jarys is a hatchling." Said Rhys through a mawfull of food.

"Yeah, and you're not." I countered. "I swear, like lindwyrms... Ah, sorry about that. It just cost a bit, and there's more dragons coming."

"It's cool, them not being my family and all; I'm not gonna say anything. Oh, wait, that reminds me." He reached into the plastic bag he was carrying and pulled free a tub of small, pink-topped cupcakes. "Ta-da! Stylish, right? I got two."

"Whoa, you actually got them?" I clambered out of the seat and accepted the box, holding it by the corner and raising it up to my snout to examine. "What's the pink stuff on top?"

"Frosting--basically just sugar."

"Is it good?"

"For you? No. But it does taste good. I think these are... yeah, they're--no, wait. Raspberry, yeah, they're raspberry-flavoured."

"Ooh, cupcakes!" Shouted an excite Jarys as he bounded over, bright scarlet eyes looked onto the treats held between my talons. "Are they ours?"

"They're a present from my friend. Um, James, this is Jarys. Jarys, this is James." I made sure to point at each with a claw as I said their respective names. "He helps me out at work."

"Are you her boss?" Asked the small dragon. I sent him a deathglare.

"Oh yeah, big time." Said James as he knelt down and offered a closed fist. I didn't understand the meaning, but Jarys did as he swiftly returned the gesture. "I get to boss her around and make her do all sorts of boring things."

"Like what?" Whispered the miniature traitor.

I wasn't sure what James told him when he lent down to his ear, but it made him laugh, and so I didn't mind. It was heartwarming to see, along with a relief, as I'd had some distant, irrational fear that they wouldn't get along.

"What are you two whispering about?" Enquired Rhys as he and Samys re-joined us at the table. "Secret stuff?"

"Yeah, yeah, secret stuff," answered James. "So, where's these speakers you need help with? I can't guarantee anything, but I can definitely try."

"Who is this?" Asked a very neutral Samys. "Some sort of delivery human?"

Just a question, a simple question. A question that actually makes sense!

"Oh, this is James; I invited him. He works at the same place as me." I explained simply, casually, as if his being human had never crossed my mind to begin with.

"And? This is Jarys' celebration, not yours. It is unnecessary to invite him."

Please don't.

"He brought food for free and is helping Rhys with the music; he can stay if he wants to." There was force behind my words--not aggression, simply force. "Jarys is okay with it, and so is Rhys."

"Hey... If there's something up, then I can go," said James, holding up his hands in a calming manner, displacing the plastic bag still wrapped around his wrists. "I really don't want to get anyone upset or ruin the mood."

"Good. Go."

No, no, no...

"Samys, there are more humans coming to the party," I at last confessed. "A few of Jarys' friends are humans, and most of them are nine years old, so obviously I invited their parents to come along. There'll be at least four more humans coming soon, so you better not make a fuss."

She looked aghast, her snout twisted into barely restrained anger. "Fuss!? Me? Why didn't you tell me!?"

"I shouldn't have to!" I snapped back. "I shouldn't have to warn you that there will be humans coming! They live here too, and we're starting to interact with them more and more; of course they'd be here too."

Rhys had taken our brother aside, along with lightly pinching the hem of James' coat to pull him away. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him telling him something, but I was too busy to focus on the words.

"If you had told me, then I could have stayed home! I didn't have to bring Jarys, but I did because we're family! If I stayed home, I wouldn't have to see those things!"

Ah, this is what I've been waiting for.

"How are you ever going to leave your nest if you refuse to see any humans? How are you going to make money? How are you going to live?"

"It's different at the job," she snarled. "I don't have to see them as living things there because I know I'll never see them again. Alys, this is supposed to be different; this is supposed to be a family celebration." The hurt in her voice was a physical thing I felt in my heart. "It's supposed to just be us, not them."

"If you want to have a celebration without humans, then you can! Nobody is stopping you, but Jarys has human friends--a lot! Of course he would invite them to such an important birthday. He likes his friends, and they like him!"

"Tell them they can't come; tell them that something happened."

I hated it.

"No! Don't be such an idiot. That would be so rude to both them and him!"

"Listen, I should really-" I felt bad for snarling at James and causing him to visibly jump, but I had to prove a point to my foolish relative. I was lucky that Rhys was there to place a sympathetic paw upon his back and speak to him.

I hated what Samys was saying, what she was doing, and what she represented.

"He can get used to it," she hissed, "it's not like we're staying here forever."

She was me.

"Where else is there to go? This entire world is human occupied."

She was what could have been, should have been, really.

"We can go home," she at last said. "Th-Things just need to calm down, is all."

"They won't." I whimpered. "Samys, I was on one of the last groups to escape, and, even though humans and elves still can't get near the portals, they keep trying. Everywhere outside of a certain point is taken over. Samys, the mountains aren't even ours anymore. The only place left is on another continent that is so far away it can't be reached by wing. It's over, we lost."

I hated it.

I hated that she already knew that but had forced me to remember in a desperate gamble to divert our argument.

"That's not... It doesn't matter. None of that matters," she said through the gritting of her teeth. "This is our party, and if he is staying, then I am going."

It was not a choice between her and James, for if it were, I might've picked her, but rather it was a choice between the old and the new.

She had set herself up in the worst way possible--by wallowing in the past, she had become unable to see the future, unable to become more than she already was.

I steeled my nerves and pushed past the tension in my dry throat and the dull, hollow ache in my chest.

I readied myself and chose.

"Then go."

Chapter 5

"Then go."

It was Tuesday, August 20th, and I was speechless.

I had expected, when the argument first began, for Alys to ask me to leave the party, and I was okay with that. It would have hurt a little bit, and I'd expected myself to avoid her at work for a day or so, but I would have done it if asked.

But she hadn't.

"W-What?" Samys stammered, equally shocked at the straightforward command her cousin had given her. "Why are you... You're really picking him?"

Alys remained firm; her scarlet eyes narrowed sharply. "No," she said clearly. "I am simply not picking you. Besides, this is not between you and James, but rather yours and Jarys' happiness in this moment. You know who he is, right? Your cousin? The drake who loves you and looks up to you, and who didn't want to invite his best friend because you said something horrible?"

The golden-eyed dragon faltered, her tough expression failing for a half moment. "There are reasons for what I said," she growled back, quickly regaining her previous energy. "Reasons you all of people should be able to understand!"

"Right." Rhys removed his paw from his brother's back and approached his female relatives. He was a table away when he decided to at last speak up. "You two need to stop this right now. It's childish and won't fix-"

Alys baulked, taken aback.

"It is not childish to tell Samys to stop!" She snapped, her calm demeanour vanishing in an instant. "She is going to end up ruining this entire celebration, and you're calling me childish!?"

Jarys flinched bodily, reminding me of just whose party was being put on hold. Despite barely knowing the boy, I reached into my plastic bag and took out a pink frosted cupcake. "It's alright, Jarys," I said quietly, moving a little closer in hopes of providing some small comfort to him. "They're not mad at you. You're okay."

He accepted the treat with shaky claws. There were no tears in his eyes, but there was a very clear look of upset on his snout. I realised then why Rhys had tried to intervene--he didn't care about the argument but rather its effect on his brother.

"I am trying to keep you three safe!" Snarled Samys, singular wing flared angrily. "You are too trusting, too carefree! You are going to-"

"So all humans are bad!?" Alys strode forward, snout to snout with her taller, more muscular, and infinitely more terrifying cousin. "Every single one? There are no good ones? Not here, not on Reon? None!?"

"None," Samys answered, undaunted by neither the closeness nor the boldness.

"None? That's what you're saying?" Alys said softly, almost ominously. "Do you really want to go down this path again?"

Some kind of emotion flickered across Samys' regal eyes--something deeply fearful and shameful. "You wouldn't dare," she growled, but made no effort to retract her prior statement.

"Hyd yn oed Aiden? Oedd e'n ddrwg? Onid ef oedd eich cydymaith agosaf?"

Wait.

I felt my jaw clench up as a near-physical smack of shock wrecked my nerves.

Alys' words were like a spell upon her cousin.

Samys took three heavy steps away, her eyes wide with shock and betrayal.

Her ears folded tightly against the back of her head, and her tail curled inwards. Her singular wing, once stretched wide in familial defiance, folded against her, embracing her tightly when none other would.

That was Welsh.

She looked down at the floor, and despite the distance between us, I was just about able to see the internal struggle, the pull between wanting to fight and wishing to give in.

It was so sudden a shift in emotion it nearly gave me whiplash. Combined with the unexpected use of a second human language, my mind was on the fritz.

That was Welsh, actual Welsh.

"Peidiwch â'i wneud i mi, gwnewch e i Jarys. Dim ond hyn unwaith," said Alys, the words almost imperceptible. Rhys, who had since moved beside her, nodded in agreement.

Despite being surrounded both physically and emotionally, Samys persisted in hiding away.

A moment of silence, of collective anxiety, passed. The pressure was cataclysmic, nearly crushing in its intensity. The tension upon us was lifted when, with a great, shudder-induced huff, Samys at last looked upon Jarys.

"Jyst..." Samys muttered, snout hidden away shamefully. "Jyst heddiw?"

Alys nodded, her features firm.

"Okay," said the darker-scaled dragon, marking the return to English.

She broke away from her older cousins and made a beeline straight for the youngest of the four, embracing him immediately when close enough. "I am sorry," she said quickly. "I did not mean to ruin your party; I truly did not. I... I will stay only if you wish me to."

"Yes, please stay, but no more fighting," the little dragon mumbled, clearly still upset.

"T-Thank you, Jarys; you're a good drake to be forgiving."

The two nuzzled for a moment longer. The arguing and complaints were temporarily frozen for as long as the party persisted, I realised.

Temporarily, specifically, for when the dragoness caught my more than obvious staring, the look she gave me was anything but accepting.

She hadn't even begun to trust me.

Fair enough, I guess, she doesn't even know me.

"I am sorry, human," she said, eyes still on me, face suddenly neutral as opposed to one of blinding affection. "You may stay if you wish; I have no problem with it."

Totally no problem. Totally.

Wanting the argument to be done with, I simply smiled and said, "It's fine, water under the bridge." I was still somewhat miffed she'd derailed the party, along with mine and Alys' conversation, but it felt unnecessary to drag it out any further.

Her ears twitched.

"Thank you," she said, sounding almost surprised by my relaxed answer.

There was no time for hugs or apologies, for before the last letter of Samys' response could escape her maw, a new dragon entered the room--a tall, yet lanky green drake. "Hello, is this Jarys' tenth celebration?" He asked. "I have Retsa here."

From behind him scampered out a small, light yellow dragoness roughly the same size as the birthday boy. She looked around, and after spotting her friend, she immediately gave chase, much to the embarrassment of what I assumed to be her father.

"Yeah, come on in; we're just putting music on!" Alys called out shakily, emotions still running high despite the impromptu resolution. "Rhys, talk to the dragon. Um, James, can you help me with my laptop?" She looked around for what I assumed was the device in question, only to come up empty. "Rhys-"

"Food table," her brother said loudly as he hurried to greet the drake.

"Got it!" Alys replied, trotting to the table. I followed after, but not before catching the stare Samys was still sending my way when she thought nobody was looking.

Alys found her knapsack sat upon the surface of the table, and within it was an older generation laptop, a grey Acer, which she carefully opened up and began typing on. The front of the thing, especially the mousepad, was rather badly scratched up. I wondered how she used it with her talons, but that was quickly answered when she took out a wired mouse and used it to navigate to the password bar.

Her slow, cautious typing allowed me to catch a fair few words: dragon, cool, and really. Feeling creepy, I looked away and chose instead to crack my back on the short metal railing that boxed in the raised area of the buffet.

"Okay, I'm logged in," she announced. "Just give me a second to... uh, clean."

Still sensing some tension, I decided to risk a joke in an attempt to lighten the mood. It was risky, as there was only really one to make given the circumstances.

"Just move your porn to a separate folder so Windows Media Player doesn't pick it up." I said, to which she froze. "Or are you using YouTube or something for the music? The ads on Spotify would probably ruin the flow, so I wouldn't use that."

It was an effort, forcing myself to speak so rapidly, but one I felt necessary.

"I don't have-" She stopped herself, glancing over to where Jarys was chatting excitedly with his newly arrived friend. "I don't have that kind of thing on my computer."

Honestly, I wouldn't have even had to look at her screen to confirm it; despite being a grown adult, she was actually pretty easy to fluster when pushed.

"Really?" I asked, arms crossed. "Is it really so valuable you won't share with the class?" It was close to being too much pressure, but I was fully prepared to pull back in case she actually got annoyed with my pestering.

She wrinkled her nose, inducing a quick, sharp note of fear in my chest. "I could probably beat you up, you know?" Her word choice immediately dissipated it, however.

"You totally could," I grinned, glad she didn't seem mad and even gladder that she seemed to have relaxed somewhat. "I would stand no chance! Still, any good stuff? We could trade, actually."

She sniffed in amusement, giving up the ruse. "I doubt you'd like it. Besides, I'm saving it for something. So no, you keep yours, and I'll keep mine."

"Okay, now I'm actually curious. Is it all dragon stuff, or have you got a secret stash of gryphon photos?"

She paused her sorting to look into my eyes. "You're weird for a human, you know that? I can't tell if you're extremely open-minded or extraordinarily sarcastic."

I thought about the assessment.

"I am... mostly going with the flow. I'm basically still in shock four years later, actually, and just sort of cruising through life." My answer wasn't an answer, just something that vaguely felt like one.

If I were being honest, despite all the weird stuff I'd seen online, she was probably right that I wouldn't have liked her collection.

It was different when real and in front of you.

"So what do you have anyway?" I said, trying to distract both her and myself.

"Mostly you," she said airily, catching me completely off guard. "Some photos I took when you were leaning over at work. Very nice, by the way. Have you been exercising?"

I laugh-snorted.

"Okay, you win." I held my hands up, to which she shook her head, her expression suddenly that of total seriousness.

"Oh no, it's okay!" From her bag, she took out her durable black tablet, which she then aimed in my direction. "Can you lean extra hard against that railing for me? I'm sure the nesses in the human appreciation group would love this." She paused. "Actually, I can pay if you want."

I blinked.

"There's a human appreciation group?" I asked, ignoring the rest.

She laughed. "Probably! I have a few relatives who are into that sort of thing, believe it or not." That immediately caught my attention.

"Wait, seriously?" I asked, disbelieving.

She narrowed her eyes, mistaking my surprise for interest. "If you ask me to introduce you to them, I will kill you on the spot. You are barred."

Fine by me; I think my family would kill me first, though.

"What?" I mock gasped, deciding to play along to continue lightening the mood. "What did I do? Oh, wait, I see... you're jealous!" I clutched my chest and held on to the railing. "It's okay, you can say it; I am your favourite bald monkey."

She rolled her eyes.

"If you're a good boy all night--and don't let my cousins drag you off--then yes, I will say you are my favourite bald monkey. Deal?" She gave her laptop one last look before passing it over to me via sliding it across the table.

I took the laptop and moved over to an incognito tab in Firefox.

"Wait... did you just say drag off? As in, grabbed by the ankles and taken into a dark alleyway." I opened up YouTube and found a decently long kid's bop mix.

"Yes, yes, I did."

With laptop in hand and my chosen music paused, I crept around the side of the buffet table--which was not in fact one long table but rather three regular ones sat beside one another--and crouched beside the black speakers. They were bulky and scuffed, but surprisingly new.

"You're joking, right?" I dug through the small mound of wires before noticing a round, circular button that, when pressed in, produced a light blue light. Bluetooth, I realised, turning to the laptop and opening up connected devices.

"Only a little." Alys shrugged, squeezing past the table to see what I was up to. "They've been here for at least two seasons, so... yeah, poor humans."

Poor humans indeed.

It took a moment, but I was able to connect with the speakers.

"I seriously can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not. No way you've got cousins sleeping with humans. Isn't it, like, illegal or something? Or at least super taboo." I got back up, placed the laptop on the table, and opened YouTube back up.

"Illegal? Why would it be illegal?"

"Because, like, humans are humans and not dragons? So the, uh, dragon government wouldn't want you mixing because you were mortal enemies."

"No, it's not... okay, maybe in some places it was, but for most it was just really, really looked down upon," she explained, making sure to stress the word. "Rare too, super rare. Being friends with humans was practically a sin, so imagine if a ness or drake decided to up their game."

I fiddled with the volume, trying to get a rough guess on how loud the speakers would be. To be safe, I set the Windows volume to twenty-five.

"We're friends, aren't we?" It felt awkward to ask, but I felt I had to.

"Yes, you're here, aren't you?" She answered quickly, throwing me a warm smile that I made sure to return straight away.

I hit play on the video, forcing the poor speaker to blurt out a pre-pubescent version of Fight Song.

"I could be imaginary."

"You-" She laughed, interrupting herself. "You're a very convincing hallucination then, seeing as you made the laptop float."

I slid the laptop back over to her. "Don't play videos on the laptop since the sound will transfer over." I took a cocktail sausage from its plastic tub and tossed it into my mouth. "And, yep! I am your deeply repressed psyche; I know all of your deepest secrets. Ask me anything!"

Before answering, Alys glanced over to the entryway where more dragons had shown up. "Alright, imaginary James, what is my most well-kept secret?"

Huh. Interesting question.

"Your most well-kept secret is... that you love sappy romantic movies." I kept my face and tone as serious as possible, acting as if that was my best guess.

"Really?" She smirked. "That's the best you've got?"

I shrugged. "Either that or you weren't joking about that stash of James Morris brand photos--by the way, if real, send them to me so I can mesh them all into a wallpaper for my room."

"Ugh, don't say that--you sound like Rhys. Hey, can you hold this for a second?" She pushed the laptop back towards me, which I accepted immediately.

"Sure. Poor thing, though, being tossed around so much." I carried the laptop back to the table for her. "So, are you going to reveal your deep, dark backstory now, or do we have to wait for the act two low point?"

"We have an act two low point?" She asked, ears aimed to the left, where a light thud sounded--some kid had run into a wall. "What's going to happen?"

I smiled and put my chin in my palm when seated. "I'm thinking... misunderstanding a situation? A classic, but it's a little played out."

"Do you have any vengeful ex-mates?"

I shook my head. "No, they're all boring. You'll have to clutch it, sorry."

She exhaled dramatically. "I'll take the misunderstanding cliché..." Her surprisingly good acting got a good laugh out of me.

"God, you understanding all that in like a year implies you watch a crazy amount of movies." I prodded at the little limb she'd laid on the table. "Have you been rotting on Netflix, Alys?"

"The red and black one? Yeah, I've seen a few; they're very addicting. I don't really understand how they do all of the magic stuff. I thought humans couldn't use magic. I think I told Jarys that you couldn't."

"We can't. It's all CGI and stuff. You know about video games, right? You said he played games the other day."

Realising that I hadn't seen nor heard my friend's moody cousin, I looked around for her and found her stacking a paper plate with food. I found myself amazed she had been able to evade us effortlessly.

"So it's fake, like Roblox? But... it looks really real," said Alys, sounding even more lost than she already had been.

I looked back over to her. "Uh, yeah, they've got a way bigger budget so more people with better computers can add, like, machine images and videos." It was hard to word it to someone who didn't properly understand what CGI was.

"Weird," she mumbled to herself, still not sounding entirely convinced.

"Hey, can I ask you about magic? Actual magic?" I'd wanted to ask ever since I first met her, but there hadn't been a good opportunity to do so--her mentioning it herself was practically the perfect set-up. "If you're okay with it, I mean, I get why it'd be a bit iffy. I really don't want to upset you."

Did that sound condescending? Nah, I should be okay.

"It's alright, I'm okay. You don't have magic here, so I already guessed you'd be curious." She shrugged. "I'm a pretty simple ness, so I only know the basics, though."

"That's fine. Um, okay... how does- how does it, like, work even? In the simplest way of describing it."

Okay, yeah, I wanted to use it, obviously.

It was magic.

Magic.

She mulled the question around, her dark tongue poking out in thought.

"Well, it's different for humans--I know that much. For me, for example, to breathe fire, I have to take mana from in my chest and sort of... vomit? The more energy you put in, the hotter it is. Flight's different; you've got to layer your membranes with it, and that makes you float." She tapped her chest and throat and then brought down a wing to poke at. "But you can spread it across your entire body to cut through the air quicker."

That's so fucking cool. Completely useless to me, but still awesome.

"Can you run out? Or is it infinite?" I'd often wondered the same thing about Harry Potter--they never seemed to get tired of casting spells.

"Yeah, you can run out if you use it stupidly. It comes back, though. For some dragons, it's quickly; for others, it takes days. I, um, don't know where it comes from; all I know is that it always comes back."

"Can humans breathe fire?" I asked, my question genuine.

"Hah!" She laughed. "No, no, they do things completely different," she explained. "Lots of hand gestures and weird, squiggly writing. Actually, I think I can remember one." She pointed at my hands. "Make a ball."

"Ball?" Not entirely sure what she meant, I interlocked my fingers, making a sort of ball shape, with my thumbs pointing back at me.

"Yeah, like that. Now take your... the talons in the centre; point them at the ceiling."

"Like I'm flipping people off on both sides?" Despite my snark, I did as was told. "Now what? Can I make fireballs?"

"No, it's just a hand sign a human once showed me." She shrugged. "I think he might have said it does something called a domain-"

"Why are you showing him that?" Said Samys from behind me, her accusing statement ruined by the food in her maw muffling the words.

Jesus christ!

I untangled my fingers and put my hands on the table.

"They don't have mana, Samys; it's not like he could do anything with it--he was just curious." Desperate to change the topic, she looked at the plate of food. "Food alright?"

Samys frowned but said no more on the matter as she sat beside her cousin. "Yes, it is alright. Dragons are finally turning up as well. Jarys is playing with his friends, but I have noticed some light nipping."

Alys groaned, her slip-up seconds prior already forgotten. "Should I go tell him off, or do you want to?"

She shook her head. "Not necessary; I already reprimanded him. I told him it was childish and that he was a mature drake."

"Does nipping happen a lot with young kids?" I asked, resting my chin in my palm.

Samys frowned at my intrusion but once again said nothing.

"Mostly, yeah. It usually happens when excited or jumpy. It can also happen when scared, but to yourself. Do humans have an equivalent?" Alys enquired, ignoring the stares her cousin was sending my way.

"I think chewing our nails might be a similar habit." I put a finger in my mouth to accentuate my point. "Even I do it a little bit when I forget I'm an adult."

"You're an adult?" Grumbled Samys, expression dry.

"Yep, I am a grown man." I smiled at her, trying not to appear bothered. "And you must be some sort of grumpy teenager? Seventeen, right?"

Remember, she's terrifying.

"I am twenty-nine years old."

That's... kind of boring, actually.

I thought these guys were all a hundred or something since... Oh, wait, Jarys is ten and seems about ten. How old is Alys then?

I winked and pointed.

"You're just saying that so you can get drinks, aren't you?" I said cheerily.

She moved her face closer; her eyes narrowed.

"I do not drink."

"You don't drink?" I smiled despite the heavy beating of my anxious heart in my chest. "How are you still alive then?"

Her yellow eyes widened. "Alys, control your monkey before I eat it." When she looked back at her cousin, who did not in fact control her monkey, she found that Alys was busy covering her maw in an attempt not to laugh. "What is so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing. Can you guys watch my laptop whilst I get food, please?" I nodded and shuffled a seat over, resting my fingers on the laptop as if that would stop a ten-foot-long lizard from taking it. "Thank you."

I gave her a quick okay sign.

It was quiet for a moment until, when Alys was out of earshot, Samys decided to speak up. "Why are you here?"

The tone of her question made me feel oddly self-conscious, as though she knew something about me that I wasn't aware of. "What do you mean? I was invited."

"I know you were, but why did you come? This is a children's celebration, not an adult's." She eyed me sceptically, the distrust clear in her dull expression.

"I think you're overestimating my deviousness. She invited me; she's my friend; I accepted. It's something to do on a Tuesday." I tried not to sound defensive, but part of that tension trickled out of my mind and into my words.

"Did you really have nothing else to do?" She enquired, not entirely believing me, it seemed. "Do you not have human friends?"

I felt my eyes widen at the barb.

You bitch.

"Do you not have dragon friends that aren't related to you?" I snipped back after recovering from the blow. "Or even a mate?" The dig was borderline instinctual; were I to have planned the rebuttal, I would have said something less sharp.

Her nostrils flared. "That's none of your concern, James. Do you?"

"No, not right now," I answered back, equally as on edge. "Have you ever had a mate, or have you scared them all off before you could make an omelette?" I could practically feel her claws on my throat, but I refused to let it show just how shaken I was.

"You tail-chasing little freak! I'm... h-hey, Jarys!" Her anger vanished as a miniature Rhys snuck up behind her and tried to shake her from side to side, only to fail spectacularly in thanks to her impressive weight. "Enjoying your celebration? You've got a lot of friends."

"Yeah! I'm waiting for Oliver, because he said- he said his mom might get me a car." He stammered and tried to say something else, only to get tagged by one of his friends. He jumped and chased after the young dragon.

Samys turned back around, but before she could turn me inside out, Alys returned with an overflowing plate of her own. I returned to my earlier seat, and she once again resumed her role as the wall of separation.

"Are you two playing nice?" Asked the smaller blue dragon through a mouthful of sandwiches.

Samys glowered at me. "He implied me to be a virgin."

Alys choked for a moment before gulping down her food in one long, snake-like motion. "Did you?" She stared at me, failing in her attempt not to smile.

"Kind of, yeah..." I admitted, a little ashamed of my childishness. With her returned, the rush of hot blood slowed, and I could think on my words. Some insults were deserved, but not at the risk of ruining the party atmosphere a second time.

"Oh no, she's definitely not." Alys laughed and leaned in, voice dropping. "We grew up in the same clutch, and one season when she was twenty-one, she and--"

"Alys, don't." Rather than embarrassed, Samys looked suddenly upset. "Please don't."

A look of immediate regret washed across Alys, who bit her lip and backed away from me. "Sorry, Samys, I got carried away. I didn't mean to bring that up."

"It's fine," she said softly. "And I am sorry for my behaviour, James. You do seem... okay. I will- I'm going to get some water." She stood up but then paused. "Where is the water?"

"At the bar." I got up out of my seat. "I'll go with you; I need a drink as well."

She didn't say anything, choosing instead to silently accept my company.

I hurried ahead of her when near the small, alcove-like bar. "Glass of tap water and... um, actually, two tap waters, please." I moved out of the way and stood beside the wall, which was soon occupied by Samys as well.

"Sorry for that," I said, trying to start some sort of non-argumentative conversation. "I didn't mean to get so defensive, but really, I am only here because Alys asked me, and she's my friend."

She didn't answer, but a piece of the tension in her jaw faded.

The tap water was taking some time, I realised after my second sigh.

"Can I ask you something without you killing me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Depends."

"Why don't you like Earth humans? I know that's super vague, but, like, I don't even think we're the same species as who you fought with--we just look similar." I crossed my arms and waited for an answer, along with our waters.

Samys exhaled slowly and looked over at me like I was stupid.

"You are the same species--down to the blood in your veins. I can smell it on you. You people are completely identical." She explained, nodding towards the man at the bar when he came back with our glasses. I took the drinks and walked slowly.

"But we're from different worlds; that wouldn't make sense," I countered, sipping from the glass on the right, which I had designated as mine. "It doesn't even make sense that you look like actual dragons, because that's an Earth thing."

"There are a surprising amount of similarities."

Welsh for one. I still need to ask about that later.

"Okay, but, no magic," I added.

"Have you tried?"

"Yes," I said quickly. "I can't think of a kid that hasn't tried to make things float at one point or the other. It doesn't work; we can't use magic. We're not a threat; look at how crazy big your teeth are compared to mine."

She hummed.

"Then I guess you aren't a threat, but that's probably due to a lack of talent as opposed to an absence of ability."

...bitch.

"Either way, threat or not, I don't have to like you. Nor do I have to hate you, I suppose." She looked back at me and, for a fraction of a second, fucking smirked. "You're just that weak, James."

"I don't like the way you say my name. It feels like a really nasty slur." I placed the glasses on the table and took my previous seat. "Where's Alys gone anyway?"

Samys glanced at the entryway and grimaced. "Talking to the human guests and their hatchlings. Now, be good and quiet whilst I eat my food."

Deciding to do as told, I ignored her painfully loud chewing sounds and took out my phone to check what people had been up to in the hour I'd not been logged in.

Twitter wasn't interesting, nor were Facebook, Reddit, or even YouTube.

I closed the apps and opened up the liked songs list in Spotify. Ads were avoided thanks to a nifty little download courtesy of a friend more tech-savvy than me. Before doing anything, however, I made sure my earphones were properly plugged in.

Shuffle hit me with Virus by Andrew Stein.

"This isn't just a game anymore, and you're like a virus, slowly infecting me, pretty poison rushing through my heart~" I mumbled the words silently, head bobbing softly against the back of the chair.

I wasn't sure why, but as soon as the conversation died--as soon as I was given a moment of silence--I began to feel odd. I was out of place; obviously, I didn't know the people, but... That wasn't quite it.

It was such a sudden onset that my first thought was that something was wrong with my water.

"...and you're like a virus; uncontrolled. A dangerous and deadly work of art."

But it stuck with me.

That nagging tension.

Fortunately for me, Alys returned soon, accompanied by a tired-looking Rhys. "You two have been busy," I said, taking an earbud out so as to not seem rude. "Anything interesting happening?"

Alys groaned, sounding drained. "Not really, no. A few of the moms were a little nervous, so I had a talk with them, but everything is alright now. I'm more... are you alright?" She looked over to Samys after asking, who looked almost offended by the accusatory stare.

"O-Oh, yeah, just kind of wiped is all--super late shift last night."

Not really; I'd left only an hour after Alys had.

She nodded, seeming understanding, but the light twitching of her long ears gave me an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. "Yeah, I left before you yesterday. A-At least we get paid today!" She smiled wide, looking at me dead in the eyes.

"Yeah, we... wait, you do mean last night, right? Midnight?" I asked.

"Midnight tonight, or midnight last night? I thought we got paid later."

"No, it's Tuesday crew-wide. Do you get paid a day later or something?"

"My worker said it would be tonight," she answered, lips pursing. "Maybe it's because it goes through the integration program?"

Oh, so they're not technically employed by the company, but by the government? I wonder if they get paid less.

"How much do we get?" She asked, apparently a mind reader.

"Depends on the hours. I get eleven sixty an hour and I do about thirty-five ish, so... that's like four hundred a week, every four weeks, so sixteen hundred. Then there's tax, so... um, the answer is, not great. Enough for rent and food is all I'll say." In the end, I babbled and shrugged, not even entirely sure myself.

"How many hours do you do, Alys?" Rhys asked his sister as he took a seat beside me, which also served to remind me he was present. He'd been unusually quiet.

"I'm not sure," she answered, her eyes narrowed in thought. "Maybe... thirty? Six a day, I think."

Eleven sixty, times thirty, times four, times... point eight for tax... Eleven...

"About one thousand one hundred," said Rhys a few seconds before I was about to reach my conclusion. "After tax."

"Jesus," I blurted out, "how did you do that so quickly?"

He shrugged. "I didn't; I rounded. I have no idea what the exact number is."

I took my phone out, turned off the music, and opened up my calculator.

"One thousand one hundred and thirteen. You were off by thirteen pounds. Still, that was fast."

Alys looked surprised. "That's a lot of money, a lot more than we usually get. Is it a lot for humans, James?" The surprise gave way to excitement.

I shrugged. "Depends where you live, I guess. It's more on the lower end, but not, like, poor or anything. If you've got your bills paid, then you've got some decent pocket money at least."

"I wonder what I should buy," she said quietly, tapping her claws together in deliberation. "What... what can you buy with a lot of money?" She looked to me. "What do you normally get?"

It was funny, really; whether human or dragon, payday was something that put some excitement in you. I'd constantly caught myself forgetting that Alys was in fact a dragon, despite that fact literally being in front of me any time I saw her.

Her fluttering wings and wagging tail did serve to remind me of that, however, but it didn't bother me.

"Most goes towards rent, then bills, then food, then bus fares, and then savings. I tend to waste the rest, honestly." I listed the examples on my fingers. "You could get more of your Berserk collection. I remember you getting the first one a bit ago."

Her eyes lit up at the possibility.

"Yes! I can get that, and then food!" She nodded to herself, wings fluttering cheerfully. "Lots of food would be good."

"You could get clothes. I heard they do dragon clothes," I said, snapping my fingers on reflex as the memory struck me. "I think I saw an ad for leg stuff online yesterday."

The earlier feeling, the discomfort, was forgotten. Not gone, but forgotten.

"You mean warmers? I saw a pair in a shop a few days ago." She looked down at herself, specifically her front limbs. "Would that look good on me?"

You're on your own with this. Blue shirt and a black coat was as much drip as I could manage.

"I think so," I said after some thinking. "I've only ever seen one with them on in the ad, and I can't really remember how it looked."

"Go with green," Rhys said with a nod. "It matches our blue."

"Wouldn't red be better?" Samys, surprisingly enough, added, her words half gibberish thanks to the sheer quantity of food stuffed into her maw. "It contrasts the blue and matches your eyes."

This conversation is kind of weird. I don't even really have an opinion.

Honestly, I don't even really look at her all that much.

Blue scales, red eyes, a pair of curved, upward-facing horns, and a second pair of downward-curving ones with the tops covered by her ears. Big wings, long tail... surprisingly lean.

Huh, black underbelly. I thought it was blue?

Ooh, that's kind of mean.

"Um, what about something to cover your paws and wrist?" I suggested, feeling suddenly guilty. I ran a finger from the palm of my hand to just below my elbow. "For humans, they're called arm warmers. They don't touch your upper, uh, leg, and they can also keep your paws clean."

Realising I was jabbering on a little, I quickly looked up arm warmers on Safari's browser, and after finding a flattering photo, I showed Alys the accessory.

"Ooh, I like them." She leaned in closer, eyes flickering from the picture to her own legs. "How expensive are they? They look very finely made."

As I'd never looked them up before, I was curious. I swiped over to the Amazon tab I had been idly looking through on the bus to the party.

"Cheaper than I thought they were," I announced. "About six pounds for human ones, but that's not what we're looking for, so just give me a second." I added dragons to the search term and swiped for the average cost. "Twenty-ish, for decent ones. They're a lot more durable, but the patterns and colours are exactly the same. Actually, look, there's a picture of a girl wearing them."

I enlarged the photo of the jubilant-looking brown dragon and once again flipped my phone backwards for her to see.

She cooed immediately, eyes glittering with imagined beauty. "She looks really pretty. Rhys, check it out." She tugged on my sleeve, bending my arm so her brother could see, but he didn't seem all that interested in the sight. "What do you think? Would I look okay in them?"

"I'd go with green, with frills at the top," he said clinically, pointing at the versions available for purchase. "They'd be a bit too military-looking without some kind of soft-looking extra part."

"Let me see," commanded Samys, to which I hesitated but still did as was told. She tilted her head, opened her maw, and then shut it. "They're actually very nice looking, but... not something I would ever wear--too soft."

A blatant lie is blatant.

"Black would suit you," Alys pointed at her cousin's paw, which was idly sat upon the table. "Not with frills, just plain." The dragon in question looked down at the limb and seemed to consider the accessory. "If it comes in a group, we could split the price. Clever, right?"

"Maybe." Samys frowned at her plate, which dared to be empty for a second time. "Please excuse me a moment; I need to get more food." She quickly left the table to journey over to the buffet--a popular location, it seemed, based on the horde of ravenous dragons swarming it.

So many, all happy, all well fed, and among family and friends. It was beautiful, even to someone who didn't share even a single familiar trait. I myself couldn't even recall the last time I'd been at a party like the current one. My family didn't really do celebrations beyond a quick post on Friendster.

...I was jealous.

The discomfort, the pit in my stomach.

Jealousy.

"Jarys sure is popular," I observed. "A lot of people turned up."

"It's an important birthday," she answered. "They'd be mad if I didn't invite them, to be fair, so it's more of an honour thing. Makes me glad, though; it's been a while since I've seen so many dragons so happy."

I didn't say anything on the matter; my mind was too occupied to do so.

"I'm also glad to see Samys enjoy herself, even if it started out so badly," she said suddenly, speaking a little louder than she had been moments prior. "It's hard to see, but this is the happiest I've seen her in years. Thanks for forgiving her."

"It's fine, no need to thank me. She, uh, looks a lot like you guys, I've noticed," I commented, nodding in her general direction. "I know she's your cousin and all, but it really is uncanny. If it weren't for the eyes, she could pass for your more muscular twin."

It was an obvious deflection, but she didn't seem to mind.

Alys laughed. "Probably because we're very closely related. Our fathers are brothers, and our mothers are sisters. She's basically our sister."

I felt my eyes widen at the reveal. "Really? I was googling something sorta related to that the other day, you know. Apparently they're called double first cousins, and they have as much blood closeness as half-siblings. If you squint really hard, she's kind of like a sister."

She looked over to Samys and hummed. "I thought she was my sister when we were younger, actually. It was Mother that said she wasn't one day." A strangely annoyed look flashed across her features. "We were all raised in the same clutch, and if not for her mentioning it, I probably wouldn't have ever known. I think she thought the same, because I remember her being upset about it..."

"Jarys loves her," said Rhys. "He really does, probably as much as he does us." He swallowed. "James, I am sorry about how she behaved earlier. I know she means well, but that's no excuse. You didn't do anything."

"It's cool." I shrugged, feeling a little shaky at the return to the topic. "I'm not mad or anything, especially not at you guys. It's kind of hard to be upset at somebody who doesn't like an entire species. I'm me, not all of humanity. And, yeah, I can tell she didn't do it to hurt me, but to try and protect you guys. You're her family."

I was being honest, truly. Hating a species eight billion strong was just too big of a reach; too fantastical for someone like me to care about. It was the same reason I didn't bother with politics.

"That's..." Alys stammered, taken aback. "That's so kind of you to say, thank you. I'm so glad you decided to come. I-It means a lot to me, really..."

I felt my heart jump.

Oh... wow.

I felt more flustered than when we were discussing literal pornography earlier, but it wasn't embarrassment. There was something different in Alys' eyes--genuine warmth, almost too much to handle.

It was a rare event indeed when I came across someone who was so... grateful. I wasn't used to people thanking me like that, not with such sincerity.

My initial instinct was to make a quick joke to deflect, but I just couldn't quite bring myself to do it. What she had said meant something to me.

"Thanks for inviting me, Alys. I... I haven't been out with friends like this in a while, and it turns out I've actually missed it." I swallowed the uncomfortable lump in my throat and pushed on. "Any time you guys need anything, just ask."

I was so used to irony and sarcasm that true honesty felt like a treat to my apathy poisoned brain. Only with my siblings and a scant few friends had I ever been so open, and despite only having known them a few weeks, I felt safe in doing so.

The contrast that my confidence had been placed in the claws of creatures not even human was not lost on me, nor was it a negative. If anything, it spoke well of their characters that I cared more for them than I did other humans.

A few weeks prior, I'd have found this fact depressing, but now I honestly couldn't care less. Even despite liking them, some small part of me felt a tinge of embarrassment or anxiety that people would judge me, and even though a fragment of that remained, for the most part I didn't care... I was free, in a sense.

"Hey, uh, slightly out of place question, but can I take a photo?" I had to prove this realisation right, to myself and to them, not that they knew this of course. "Like a group selfie of us? It would just be on my Friendster account."

Alys grinned. "Sure, let me just get in a cool pose." She looked to Rhys who shook his head no and shuffled out of his seat closer whilst she stood beside me, claws wrapped around the side of my right shoulder.

"Nah, I don't like seeing my own snout in photos," Rhys said, shaking a paw. I shrugged and took my phone out.

I could feel my legs shaking out of nervousness at the thought of posting it to a page where my friends and family could see, but I pressed on. I opened up the camera and clicked on the front camera option.

"Ready?"

"Yep!" Alys chirped, putting on a wide grin.

I threw up a peace sign with my free hand.

"Right. Three... two... one."

Click.

Chapter 6

It was Wednesday, August 21st, grocery day, and for once I was up early.

I'd snagged an extra shift a few days prior in order to bulk out my college fund, but that meant I had to do my grocery shopping in the morning as opposed to the afternoon so as to leave me time to lounge about before heading back out.

As I was sitting in my kitchen at the dinner table, enjoying some toast, when I got a call.

Sarah Morris: 0784###

With food still in my mouth, I took the call.

"What's up?" I asked, voice muffled.

"Eh, not much," she answered. "Work and stuff, but, uh, James, have you checked Friendster recently?" Taken aback by the sudden shift in conversation, I took a moment to reply.

"I'm twenty-four, not forty-six. I only check it like once every few days or whenever I get a message." I paused to swallow. "Did someone get into an argument again? Was it interesting at least?"

"Kind of," she said slowly, her anxious tone of voice setting my nerves on edge. "You know that picture you put up last night, the one with that blue dragon?"

A hot shiver ran up my legs and into my sides.

"Y-Yeah?" I stammered, the hold on my phone tightening.

"Big comment clash," she said quickly, her admission followed by a relieved sigh. "Lots of nasty shit. I'm surprised your post wasn't removed, actually. Have you really not seen all of the notifications you've been getting?"

"I had to get up early today, so I went to sleep at like eight. Plus, I've had it on charge with do not disturb on." I minimised our call and quickly swiped over to Friendster. "Anything really bad?" I felt my eyes widen at an internal realisation. "Oh fuck, Alys probably saw all of that--I tagged her in it. God's sake."

"Alys? Who's Alys?"

I finally found my post.

"The, um, dragoness in the picture. How'd you not know her name? It's right there on the post." I paused, spotting the red heart. "Huh, look at that; she left a love heart." Rhys had liked it, as had Sarah and an auntie on my mother's side. The real treat, however, were the thirty-eight comments. "Okay, thank God, she hasn't replied, and neither has her brother."

"James..." She said quietly, her voice cautious. "You guys aren't, like, dating or anything, are you? I-I don't care if you are; I'm just curious is all." I believed her; she was honest to a fault. "You look close."

"Nah, we're just good friends, is all." I felt my heartbeat quicken just a little at the question. Wanting to divert, I quickly said, "God, actually, that reminds me; you remember that Michael I told you about? The one from work?"

"Yeah?" She asked, bait taken.

"He also thought we were a thing. Came up to us during a lunch break and asked."

"No way!" She laughed.

"Yes way. Although, to be fair, he probably only said it to be a dick." I thumbed through the comments, making sure to delete the bad ones--karma, it seemed--for setting my post to public and not just friends and family. "I don't get how that guy can be older than me and still act like a high schooler."

"Some people just are," Sarah explained through a mouthful of crunchy snacks--crisps, I assumed. "Have you gotten to the comments yet?"

"Yeah, I have; I'm removing a bunch of them now." I grimaced. "What a stupid place to have a political debate; underneath a selfie celebrating a ten-year-old's birthday party... It's like marching through a fucking Build-A-Bear or something."

I scrolled down, coming across an especially nasty one.

"It's sad to see such a nice young man with a dragon. You could have a real relationship if you just tried!"

A real relationship...?

I stared at the dim screen, my chest constricting painfully at the accusation. It was easy to tell myself that their opinions didn't matter and that I was free to do as I pleased, but the sting still hurt.

They didn't know Alys like I did--they didn't understand, couldn't understand.

Surely, I thought, surely he wasn't the majority?

Surely it was just him, just him and his vitriol.

Right?

"Did you see that one saying you should be careful because they, uh, are dangerous or whatever it was he wrote? I blocked the guy." I was thankful for the interruption.

"Y-Yeah, I got it. Good call; actually, I'll do the same." I'd always considered political echo chambers to be a bad idea, but neither was open war. Especially given the field of said battle. "Aw... Cara's defending her." I tried, masking my tension.

"She's a university student; of course she's defending an interracial couple."

"Technically, it would be interspecies," I corrected. "God, the comments are going to look so barren without... wait, I'm stupid." I clicked back out of the comment section and disabled them entirely, wiping the bottom of the post clean. "It's such a pain that I had to get rid of them all because of a few dumbasses."

"Since when did you swear so much?"

I paused. "You know I'm twenty-four, right? And have a flat and a job? Besides, they are dumbasses." I clicked out of the app and sat back for a moment, trying to calm my shaking nerves.

I knew the selfie would stir up trouble, but still I pushed onwards. Despite their reactions, and despite the dull pain in my chest, I didn't regret posting it.

"Fairs." I could hear a shuffling of papers and pens. "Dad messaged."

"Why?" I was immediately suspicious.

"Asking how you are."

I clicked my tongue, resting my head on the backboard of the dining chair. "That's why you asked about Alys, isn't it? Are you spying on me?"

"Yes, but for my own consciousness, I was going to tell him whatever you wanted me to say. But, yeah, just the usual prying. I think he's only doing it because he got a new girlfriend, though--trying to impress her or something."

"Oh totally. She knows he's literally homophobic, right?" I finished my now cold toast and grabbed my backpack from its comfy spot on the sofa. "Or is he keeping that little nugget to himself?"

She laughed, though it was stilted. "I doubt it, but I'm not calling her up and telling her that. We'll watch that bridge burn when we come to it." She paused; the only sound I could hear was a light creaking--her gaming chair, I reasoned. "Have you spoken to Connor?"

"Not a lot," I answered weakly, metaphorically winded by his mention. "But he does message when he's not busy. I-I don't mind; I know he loves us and stuff; he's just working a lot." I felt a pit form in my stomach at his mention, and I knew for a fact that Sarah felt the same, so why she asked, I had no clue. "Have you seen Sam or Oliver recently?" I enquired, needing a change of topics. "They look just like Connor."

"Whoa... I wonder why that is!" She breathed in heavily, as though shocked. "Almost like we've got the same dad or something!"

I snickered.

"Yeah, but he looks like mum, so it's weird they both look so similar." Realising it was later than I'd expected, I quickly put on my shoes, along with the new black coat I'd worn to the previous night's party. "Right, I need to head out now. I'll talk to you soon. Love you."

"Love you!"

I ended the call after a moment of silence passed between us.

Curious for anything else I might've missed, I checked my notifications and found that I'd received a message from Alys, of all people. I considered leaving it a minute while I got ready, but then I realised that it was a recent one.

I put my plate and coffee mug into the sink for later and opened the message.

Alys Morgana.

"Morning. Last night was really fun! Thanks so much for coming!"

- 08:29

Aw, that's actually sweet. Only thirty minutes ago as well...

I swallowed a lump of nervousness and began typing.

"Yeah, it was fun and great hanging out. with you everyone. We should do it again when not busy whenever."

I put my phone back in my pocket after hitting send and grabbed my keys off their hook, only to jump when my phone buzzed almost the instant I did.

"When?"

I felt my eyebrows raise at the forwardness before reasoning with myself that she had likely taken my comment as meaning literally whenever.

"Just when neither of us have some free time. We could grab Rhys or whoever and go out for food like last time."

The little bubbles hesitated.

"How about now? Are you doing anything now?"

"Just getting ready for a grocery shop. What about you?" I had an idea of where she was taking the conversation but needed confirmation.

"I just dropped Jarys off at school, so I'm not doing anything."

You cannot be this nervous over meeting someone in town. Just relax, relax...

"We could go to a café? Starbucks has better coffee, but Costa is a bit cheaper, and their hot chocolate is nicer." As soon as I'd sent it, I regretted it. It was minor, yes, but I'd wished I'd been a bit more confident and simply picked one. "I'd go with Cost-"

"I can't drink hot chocolate."

Thank God she types so quickly...

"Starbucks it is! You can get it without lactose."

Ah, I kind of wanted hot chocolate.

...

Wait, shit, I could've picked Costa, and she could still have gotten lactose-free coffee!

Also, weren't they going to rename those places?

... Actually, a few places were supposed to be renamed but weren't. I think it's literally only been a few games, some manga, and fucking Facebook of all things...

It's almost like the government is lazy or something...

"Nice," she replied. I went to put my phone back in my pocket, only to stop when she texted again. I sighed and resolved myself to keep it out as I jogged down the steps to the lower levels of my flat. "Where is it located? Also, where will you be?"

"Hang on, let me grab the location real quick." I knew where it was, but only based on nearby places, so I was forced to look up the actual address. "It's at 48 Albion Street, LS1. It's near the shopping centre and a pharmacy."

"Shopping centre? Also, what's a pharmacy?"

I took a moment to think.

"What place do you know really well? I could meet you there, and we could just walk there."

"Yes. Thank you," she answered quickly, her nervousness obvious even through text. "I know the green sushi place. Very good fish."

"That's actually close to the cafe, lol. I'll meet you there in like thirty-ish minutes. It might be a bit longer if the buses are running slow."

"I'll get there quickly, just in case. I think there's a landing pad nearby."

Landing pad? Oh, right, wings.

Wait, does Samys walk, or does she get a bus? A car? How do dragons without wings get places?

Questions for later...

As if the universe were telling me that it would be a good day, my bus turned up almost immediately. My second boon was the near-empty downstairs compartment.

When in my seat, I checked to see if anybody could see me, and once certain of my solitude, I put my fingers into the hand sign Alys had shown me.

Nothing happened, obviously.

There's no way I'm the only human to have made this shape before. Surely someone was bored one day and did it. Maybe it needs mana?

I pulled my fingers loose and took my phone back out.

"Hey, quick question; how would someone (me) get mana?"

"Be born on Reon? Trade blood with me?" Were her very helpful answers. "Why?"

"Tryna blow up the guy in front of me with that hand thingy you showed me." An idea struck me. It was a bit forward compared to how we usually chatted, but I felt confident enough to try. "Blood? Would saliva work?"

A pause, then: "(o\_O)" --exactly what I expected. "I know exactly what you're thinking, and no, it wouldn't work. Not enough magic."

"You could still try."

"James, I am not drooling into your mouth so you can blow people up."

"What a shame, what a shame. ( :( )"

There was a lull, one that stretched on long enough to make me regret the joke. I briefly considered backtracking but was unable to even begin typing.

"Maybe if you're a good human, I can try, but we'd need a private booth. I'm not a voyeur. ( ;) )"

"You sure?" I was glad for the empty compartment, for I could feel my cheeks warming up. "It could be a political statement; like that selfie, but messier."

Hey, look at that, bucket list--flirting with a mythological creature.

"Would you post it online? Show everyone?" She enquired.

"Oh yeah, it would be a permanent statement for all to see."

"Lol. I'm a bit confused on how this statement's going to work. Are we kissing, or am I literally dribbling into your mouth like a weird waterfall?"

"Dragon's choice?"

"(:O)"

I went to type but was stopped by her rapid continuation.

"Do both; we could see which one gets the most fame, then delete the less popular one. When are we doing this, by the way?"

"When in Starbucks, obviously, lol."

"Obviously, they appreciate interspecies spit-swapping."

I looked up from my phone, finding that I'd missed my stop.

I smacked the stop button and hurried off the bus when it pulled up at the next station. "Missed my stop, gonna." I decided against messaging and instead rang her up using Friendster's built-in caller.

"Yo. Guess who missed his stop?" I said cheerfully.

"I'm flying; if I crash into a building, I'm blaming you," she stated, the sound of tearing wind audible through the connection. "How'd you miss your stop?"

After getting the bearings of where I was, I began walking.

"Well, there's this one blue dragon who kept flirting with and harassing me."

She sniggered. "I doubt it. I think you started it by mentioning a slimy way to acquire magical powers, and she just played along."

"Specific guess." I crossed the street when the funny little man turned green.

"Yeah, I'm smart, plus... hang on, James. I'm not seeing a landing pad nearby; I'm going to have to circle around and then head back up. I think I see one near that big, uh, train place."

"The train station? I'm close to that street now, actually, so I'll head down there and meet you. Then we can go to the café if you still want to."

"Yeah, it sounds nice. Rhys drinks a lot of coffee, and it always smells really good. Where should we go afterwards?"

I nodded politely at a car that let me pass.

"We could just do some shopping? Have a look around for a bit? Kinda boring, but there's not much to do in town today."

"I really don't mind. Relaxing all day is my main goal in life now. I've had enough excitement to last a hundred years."

As I walked, I got a surprise message from Sarah.

"Hey. Dad wants to meet today at Costa. He's dragging me with him. What time is work for you?"

"I'm doing eight till half-one. I'm out with Alys today rn."

"Cute. You and your dragon girlfriend doing okay?"

"I hope you get buried alive."

"Hehe (:D ). I'll TTYL."

I quickly dealt with the messages before turning my attention back to Alys, who was still on the line. "Sorry, sister messaged. We, uh, it might sound sort of lame, but we could go to the park near the top of town? I heard it was pretty popular with flyers."

"You mean with girls?" She teased, and whilst on the phone, I could picture her smirking.

"Wait, so the guys really don't have wings? I thought it was just a coincidence that only you and Samys had them."

I jogged across a thin road during a red light, making sure not to drop my phone as I did. "Males do not," she said matter-of-factly. "But they do have better fire and tend to be stronger. Some nesses can't breathe fire at all."

"Can you?"

"You bet I can. Not as well as Rhys, obviously, but I'm pretty good."

I was on the main street; the train station at last visible.

"Can Samys?"

"No, she's unlucky. Whereabouts are you now?"

I looked around, recognising a few shops and locations.

"Near the big shopping centre, close to the pharmacy. I can see the train station from here. What about you?"

She paused, the sounds of a busy walkway all I could hear for a long moment. "I... I think I can see you, actually. Are you wearing the same jacket as last night?"

I squinted, at last able to make out the vaguely draconic shape. She was standing beside an old telephone booth.

"Yeah, I got you. Jesus, I really need to wear my glasses if I'm missing giant, blue lizards."

"...you wear glasses?"

"Um, no... Just a, uh, saying," I replied, realising that I'd given away a valuable secret to someone as snarky as Alys. The chirping laughter vibrating my phone didn't help settle my nerves.

"I'm ending the call; see you in a bit." I put my phone and hands into my pockets as I speed-walked to the sushi place and waited for her to reach me.

She approached quickly, tail swaying idly and wings folded tightly by her sides. As she neared, I noticed a fair few things different about her: golden bangles on both of her lower horns, along with her top right one, and a faux nose-ring attached to the end of her snout.

"Busy today," she said when close enough for non-stilted conversation. "Also, do you really wear glasses?"

It was a surprisingly good look for her. Punky, without being too strong. Just enough to stand out--which, to be fair, something she didn't need help with to begin with.

I sniffed. "Yes, I do, and no, I won't wear them. My eyes aren't so bad that I need them on all the time; they're mainly for reading." I nodded towards her. "I like your new look. Where did you get the jewellery?"

She angled her jaw up to allow a better look. "Family jewellery, plus a borrow from a friend of Rhys. Is it actually alright?"

I nodded. "Yeah, you look great, really."

Yeah, that sounded fine. Plus, she does look good.

"Thanks." She smiled, her expression softening for a second before returning to its usual composure. I nodded in the direction of the coffee shop and began walking. She followed quickly. "I like your, um, hair," she added, a little awkwardly.

I ruffled it, making sure not to disrupt the styling too strongly. "Thanks. I do think it's getting a little long, though." I tugged on a strand, discovering it could reach the tip of my nose. "I might get a haircut soon. Maybe whilst we're out today."

"No, it looks good," she said quickly, sounding almost panicked. "It's so fluffy and soft-looking. I always want to touch it-" She snapped her mouth shut. Catching my smirk, she looked away. "N-Not in a weird way. I'm just curious what it feels like."

I stopped and lent my head to the side. There weren't too many people on the sidewalk, so I felt safe doing it.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

I lent my head further down. "Do it..." I said. "I know you want to~"

She grimaced and looked around before quickly reaching up to feel. "Ooh," her tension faded quickly. "It's like wool! Ah, so nice..." She paused her feeling, her expression suddenly looking mischievous. Before I could move, she did her best to mess up my carefully constructed hair. "Big weakness, though."

Hang on, is that the first time she's actually... No, wait, paw on my shoulder in the selfie.

"Ha-ha, comedian dragon." I pushed her away and got to work fixing it. "And here I was going to buy you an overpriced croissant and a large coffee. I see now where my generosity gets me."

"Aw, that's..." She paused, ears flicking back. "Wait, really? How come?"

...huh. Why? Good question.

"Paying you back for last night?" I tried, not sure myself.

"You brought cupcakes."

"Cause it's a date?"

Her wings flared and her eyes widened, showing me that I'd said it with far too much conviction.

"I-I'm kidding!" I let out a chuckle; the sound clearly strained. "Sorry, it's early, so my humour is kind of trash until I've had some caffeine." Her response was a smack on the arm and a closed-eyed pout. "Relax. As an apology, I'll buy you an overpriced croissant and a medium coffee."

"You said large." She poked me in the arm with a sharp claw. "Don't go back on your word and ruin our date." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a woman hitch in her walking and look at us, mouth open--something I was grateful Alys didn't catch.

"Not a date." I poked her back, feeling for a moment how strong her arm felt despite being so lithe. "Otherwise we'd be having dinner."

"You're buying food and drinks, and we're making a political statement--that sounds like courting to me," she listed off, technically correct in her assessment.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I don't think we're actually doing that. I've seen enough online politics to last me. Plus, my family would probably murder me the second I posted it."

"So you care more about your own flesh and blood than letting me drool in your mouth?" Another strange look, one she did catch, based on the flicker of her eyes and the faltering of her smirk.

"Oh no, that's a definite goal--but I do care about being murdered."

Alys hesitated before continuing. "Would your family actually be that mad? I know that's a bit rich coming from me, but I thought most humans were pretty open-minded, or are you an exception?"

Open minded?

Oh, right, laptop jokes, and well... everything else.

"Honestly, no. As mean as it sounds, I don't think dating dragons is on most people's minds. Friends, maybe, but our brains just aren't wired for interspecies relationships. We've just grown up in a world where we're the only intelligent species."

"I guess it's different than on Reon, where there are multiple sapient races."

I wanted to ask more, but the idea of making her uncomfortable was itself uncomfortable. "Would you court a human?" I asked, sticking to the topic but still diverting it away from murkier waters.

"Yeah, sure."

I blink, taken aback by the bluntness. "Really? If you don't mind me asking... why? Is that not a bit weird to you? What about sex?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't really see it as dating a human, but rather a person who was human. As for sex... I don't know; seasonal moods do some pretty crazy stuff to your body. I know a ness who met a gryphon one season, and wow, poor little clipped claws."

Clipped claws?

Oh my God, was that a slur?

"Seasonal moods? Like, uh, heat? Do dragons really have a heat cycle? I kinda thought that was a rumour."

She nodded. "Yep, every four months or so, for about a week I turn into a monster, eating the furniture and crying about how fat I am." Alys nudged me with her wing. "I'd recommend you avoid me during that unless you like sharing food. It's really nasty without a mate."

Don't ask, don't ask, please don't ask.

"I can imagine. Do you have a mate?"

I hate you.

The question hung, floating between us until it began to drag the mood down.

"N-No, no, I do not," she stammered, looking away, her cheeks turning a darker shade of blue. "In my defence, neither do a lot of nesses I know--a lot of them have been without one for a while. More females are born than males, and trust me, we're not exactly tripping over them here." Despite the way she'd said them, the words had weight to them, reminding me exactly why the dragons were on Earth to begin with and why there were so few.

She didn't let it get to her; however, as quickly afterwards she grinned and said, "And no, I'm not answering the question you've probably got, so save it."

Unable to help myself, I caught myself quickly scanning her.

Nah... no way. Around Samys' age and that decent-looking... for a dragon, I mean.

Fucking Freudian slip.

I held my hands up, ignoring the light flush creeping up my neck that resulted from my staring at her legs. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Besides, it's not good to talk about exes when on a date."

"Exactly!" She chirped, practically bouncing on the pads of her paws. "Don't go ruining the happiest night of our lives by mentioning those that may or may not exist!"

Another weird look, one more obvious than the others.

"Sorry," Alys muttered, excitement dropping in an instant. "I said that a bit too loudly."

The good mood we'd worked to build up began to fade.

"Don't apologise," I said, waving it off. "Ignore them." I kept walking, pretending their reactions didn't bug me. The opinions of strangers weren't going to change anything--that much I was sure of. But still, I was human, and that meant anxiety was a constant companion. "Let's just enjoy today. Who cares what they think?"

She lent in close as she walked, wing brushing against my side, but I said nothing about it. She was determined to keep in contact, it seemed. "Thanks, and again, sorry."

I shook my head, feeling strangely guilty for her upset. "Please don't apologise."

We were finally at the café. I moved in front of her and opened the door widely, allowing her to enter first. To avoid others, we took a booth near the back, one that separated us from the other patrons, some of whom had already begun staring and whispering, unable to help themselves.

She slid into her seat, taking a moment to adjust to the leather seating. In the end, she decided to lay on her front, angling her left side towards me.

"This place is nice," she said, looking around, ignoring the customers. "You said it was the one that cost a bit more?" Something was off about the way she spoke.

"Only by a little bit," I explained. "But it's drinks are better--except the hot chocolate; this place doesn't do it as nicely."

She hummed, sinking into her seat, her expression softening, shifting. Her eyes moved over to the nearby window, her gaze flickering between all of the passing humans. "We people watching for a bit?" I joked, unable not to.

"A little, yeah." Her light smile faltered. "You know," she began, tracing a claw along the leather of her seat. "Not to, um, taint our fun, but... sometimes I do wonder what life would be like if I stayed back home. I mean, humans here are cool and make great things, but they're so unpredictable and different. Sometimes I do miss being surrounded by my own kind, where things just... make more sense."

I nodded, unsure of what to say. "Y-Yeah, I get that." I didn't. How could I have really understood what she was going through? Sure, I was able to relate on some level, but it wasn't the same. She wasn't just different--she was entirely other. My stomach flipped at the thought of her leaving, of her not enjoying my company any more.

"But I wouldn't trade it for anything." Her words quickly raised my sinking spirits. "I have so many wonderful things here and so many opportunities." She pulled her gaze from the window, looking me straight in the eyes. "And wonderful friends like you..."

Oh... wow.

Fuck...

Answer her.

The way she was looking at me was soft, vulnerable. Jesus, it was so sudden, so... real.

"I... I'm glad you feel that way," I said, trying not to show just how off guard she'd taken me. "I mean, I feel the same way. You've made things... different, but in the best way possible."

Her wide smile stayed for a while longer, allowing me to feel the near-physical warmth between us. She lacked her usual teasing, yes, seeming instead genuinely content, and for some reason, it made the moment feel good.

Banter was fun, but I felt as though we'd become too dependent on it.

"You know," she continued, her long tail swaying lazily beside her. "I don't think I've ever met someone like you before."

I laughed, unsure if the observation was a compliment or a veiled barb. "I'm pretty sure most people say or think that after meeting me, so thanks?"

She smirked, but it dissipated into a smile. "I meant it as a compliment; you don't need to be so self-deprecating all the time."

I held my hands up, feeling a light shake in them. "I'm just prepping for the worst," I said, leaning back into my chair. "It's a perfectly healthy defence mechanism."

"Uh-huh, totally," she teased, before her expression warmed again. "But, seriously, I don't think I would've been nearly as happy as I am without you."

I felt my stomach flip. Something in her tone--warm, honest, gentle--made the sweet, simple comment feel heavier than it was.

"Yeah, well," I started, trying to sound casual despite the odd mix of emotions churning around inside of me. "I guess we're a good match then. I help you out; you help me."

She smiled. "Maybe that's it. Not quite so give-and-take, but maybe."

As the conversation came to a close, I took out my phone and opened up the café's app, both to save time and also to earn myself some points. I considered ordering Alys' for her, only to stop myself. "Do you know what drink you want?" I asked. "I can recommend some for you."

"Something sweet? Do they make sweet coffees? I mostly eat a lot of food from our work or just meat," she answered, claws clacking together quietly as she considered her options.

"This place has brought out a sort of new drink that I've been wanting to try. Some sort of cinnamon latte. It should be really good. We can each get one to try if you want." I flipped my phone over to show her the frothy, orange-tinged drink. Normally I got something cheap but strong, but I was open to change.

"Ooh, I like it. How much is it?"

"That," I paused for effect, "is none of your business, dear iguana. Hey, can you drink regular milk? Like cow's milk?"

She shook her head. "No. Apparently we're all lactose intolerant. It's why we can't have chocolate."

"Soy milk it is then! Right, let me just tweak mine real quick."

"I was joking about you paying," she grumbled, trying to sound annoyed and failing. "I have coins; you don't have to do it." I smiled at that, happy she felt like she needed to treat her friends.

"I have coins too--I was paid a day earlier than you, remember? Plus, it is a date; normally the guy pays."

She rolled her eyes but was unable to hide the small grin. "That's a lame rule," she announced. "For dragons, we would trade gifts and food over the course of a day. So, in human terms, we'd both pay."

"Fine," I said, throwing my hands up. "You're going to get me a can of coffee then."

Her head tilted to the side. "Really? Just that?"

"Yep. I normally grab one whilst walking around, so if we're heading up to the park, then you can buy me one. Deal?"

"Very well, if that's all you want, then throw your treasures my way. But what's the actual reason for not letting me pay?"

I thought about deflecting, but that felt disrespectful given all she'd said. "It's a treat," I said honestly. "For you, I mean, for hanging out with me, and I know I brought cupcakes, but it's also for the party. Even the messy part of that whole thing ended up okay. It was a really great night."

She hesitated before nodding softly. "Thank you, James. I won't forget this." She sat up properly. "It's just a shame Jarys' friend couldn't come; apparently he's still sick."

"That's a shame," I commented, recalling how upset the little Drake had been at the time. "Didn't you say his name was Oliver? I've got a younger brother called Oliver, funnily enough."

She hummed. "Yeah, I don't know his clan name, though. His mother did send a letter with some money in it, so at least he got some sort of gift--he'd have preferred his friend showing up, though." She rubbed beneath her long ears, waiting a moment before continuing. "What are you doing after this?"

"Aren't we going to the park?"

"I mean after today. Did you really come to town just for coffee?"

"Oh, right. Nah, I came because it's grocery day, remember? After town I've got work, then... um, sleep, I guess."

"Work, sleep, groceries, and... repeat?"

"Pretty much," I shrugged. "I mean, I've got to save up for school, you know. Not everyone's got wings to fly to Paris on." I made sure to cross my arms and lean back, as I felt I'd put too much heat into my words.

She shook her head, then froze for a moment before smiling. "I could take you flying one day--show you what you're missing out on being human."

I felt my eyes widen at the idea of fulfilling a childhood dream. "Really? What's the catch?"

"No catch," she said, her tone surprisingly sincere. "It could be fun to stretch my wings." Unable to help herself, however, she quickly added. "Plus, I'd get to see you panic when I accidentally drop and then have to catch you. It's all part of my plan to seduce you and steal your wallet."

"Alys, you're like eleven feet long and about as tall as I am--you could probably sneeze me into a hospital bed, no seduction necessary."

"Then I'm doing it for the fun of it!" She declared loudly. "Think how mad it would make Samys!"

"Alys, she would kill me, then you, and then..."

Aiden. Shit, don't mention him. Talk later.

"...the world," I said lamely.

"The world?" Alys chuckled. "I don't think she'd be that mad, James, sweet Skie. You should-" she suddenly looked over at something, her ears twitching madly. I followed her gaze, but all I saw was a couple sitting down, enjoying their drinks. Alys made a clicking sound and turned back to me.

"What?" I asked, noting the drop in temperature.

"Nothing; I thought I saw someone I recognised is all."

I hadn't known her long; I really hadn't, but...

Pinned ears, flicking tail-tip, talons clacking quietly together... How they got away with anything remotely deceptive, I had no idea.

"You sure everything's alright?" I asked, leaning forward a little, my voice quiet. "You look... upset."

She waved a paw dismissively, but the gesture was too quick to be natural. "I'm fine. Like I said, I thought I saw someone I recognised--nothing important."

I thought about leaving it--letting the anxious feeling in my chest pass as it usually did--but the way her shoulders sagged made that an impossibility.

"You're a terrible liar," I said gently, offering a weak smile. "You don't have to tell me, but..."

"I'm fine, James." She'd cut me off, but it wasn't harsh--more like she was trying to convince herself and not me.

Before I could push harder--something I'd likely have regretted--a waiter brought our drinks over on a black tray. Two golden-brown drinks topped with too much cream and far too much dusting awaited us, the steam tantalisingly white. The staff tried to remain professional but failed, eyes repeatedly roving over to Alys. I didn't blame the guy, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

Speak up for once, Jesus.

"Is that it?" I asked, earning his suddenly nervous stare. I kept my tone polite; he wasn't being rude, but she already seemed upset, and I didn't want to make it worse, whether by allowing the staring or making a scene.

"Oh, yeah, just this. Enjoy!" He left thankfully quick, returning to the counter he'd come from. Just to his left were the couple Alys had looked over at.

"You know, if someone's talking about you or us," I began, voice light but steady, "you don't have to let it get to you. Like I said, they're not even worth paying any attention to."

She didn't respond right away, choosing instead to absentmindedly trace a claw around the rim of her glass, collecting whipped cream on the singular talon. Then she gave a soft sigh, her voice barely audible. "It's just, sometimes I hear things that people say. Mostly about me, but also you. I-I just don't want to embarrass you, I guess."

Me? Why me?

I didn't know what exactly she'd heard, but it wasn't hard to guess.

People could be... well, people.

I took a moment to try my drink, allowing her words to slowly sink in.

Embarrass me?

The idea felt so foreign it almost made me laugh at the absurdity.

"Alys." I placed my drink down on the table and lent forward, trying to catch her gaze again. Her eyes were still fixated on her drink, the whipped cream melting slowly under the heat. "You could never embarrass me. I mean it. Anyone who has a problem with the two of us hanging out, or just with you, well, they're just not worth thinking about. They don't matter at all."

Her gaze lifted for a brief moment, something unreadable glimmering in her eyes--doubt, maybe. "You say that now, but you can't hear like I can."

The walk up...

I only caught the occasional look we were getting, but she probably heard everything.

I exhaled. "No, you're right, I can't. But that doesn't mean I can't imagine." I placed my palms on my lap. "Like I said, people are always going to talk. Alys, I don't want you to feel like you have to worry about what they think for my sake. It sucks, yeah, but I'm here with you because I want to be. You're important to me, and that is what matters; you, not them."

The dragoness paused, her eyes searching mine, and for a moment, the world around us faded into a soft, warm blur. She took a deep breath, the tension in her easing a fraction. "Thank you, James. I mean it, thank you."

"Of course," I replied, unable to suppress the smile that crept back onto my face. "I've got your back."

She nodded, and for a short while, we simply sat in comfortable silence, sipping our still-too-hot drinks. I glanced around the café, watching the other patrons laugh and chat with one another, but they felt miles away. It was just us, cocooned in our own little world.

Eventually, of her own power, Alys broke the silence, a playful glint returning to her scarlet eyes. "So, if this is a date, does that mean I can make you buy whatever I want?"

I raised an eyebrow, placing my glass back down and leaning back in my chair. "Depends. What do you want?"

She smirked, her wings fluttering lightly, almost stroking her sides. "How about the ridiculously overpriced croissants? You said you were buying."

"Oh, I completely forgot," I realised. "Fine, but you're sharing."

She hummed audibly. "On one condition." She held a single claw up. "Give me the glasses I now know you need."

I rolled my eyes but did as told. "I don't need them; they're reading glasses, not, like vision glasses or whatever they're called." I took the case out of my backpack and handed it over to her.

The blue dragon accepted them with surprising soft hold, carefully taking them out of their case and cautiously tilting them, examining the black metal and clear glass. "Try them," I suggested. "With the jewellery, you'd look good. I can even take a picture for you and send it over on messenger."

She opened her mouth to respond but stopped and carefully slipped them on--the frame just barely fitting her snout.

I was right--she looked good.

Gotta watch that...

"This is weird," she mumbled, her eyes straining. "Everything is all blurry up close. How can you even see with these on?"

After digging through my pocket, I took my phone out and aimed my camera at the smiling ness, making sure to fit as much of her head in as I could whilst still setting up a decent angle.

I hadn't taken a year of photography for nothing.

I mean... I'd dropped out, but it still counted!

There was a certain point in her posing where her smile stretched wide enough to force her eyes shut. There was a subtle dusting of her heat on her cheeks. I quickly snapped a photo.

"Nice," I said, mostly to myself as I zoomed in on the image, surprised by how well it had turned out. "I'll send it over now so you can post it if you want."

"You could post it," she said, passing me my case back over. "You did say you wanted a political statement."

"Absolutely not. If I post a picture of you wearing my glasses, people will one hundred percent think we're going out--I'd think that too if I saw that. It's better to put it on yours."

Alys leant forward, a subtle smirk on her face. "But wouldn't that make it more interesting? Imagine the comments."

I hesitated, surprised by the sudden forwardness. "Yeah, but after everything we just talked about, do you really want to stir up that kind of attention now?"

She tilted her head. "True, but wasn't part of that about how we can't let others dictate what we enjoy. We're having fun, right, so why bother worrying?"

I sighed. "I know, I know, but it still feels kind of risky. What if it does actually cause a scene? What if they say something to you?"

Alys shrugged, wings ruffling. "It's sort of annoying, but my main worry was you. If you don't care, then neither do I. Besides, it's all on the computer, not in the real world."

A real relationship, I recalled, that earlier anger and fear bubbling back up in equal amounts.

"Alright," I said, pulling up the app. "But you're doing one of me in exchange."

Another shrug. "Easy deal. Pose really quick for me."

Without warning, she pulled up her tablet and took a quick picture. When shown, it displayed a James, mid-blink, mouth open in an attempt to say no. "Please don't post that," I begged, already picturing the comments, but she was already creating a post. "Oh, come on, I actually look horrible."

"Exactly!" She laughed evilly. "It'll have people talking for days."

I placed my forehead against the edge of the table, trying to hide my embarrassment. "I'll never live this down. My internet fame is in tatters."

"Don't be so dramatic; it's just a dumb photo. No one's going to make fun of you--too much. Besides, you look super cute."

I felt a sudden heat rise to my cheeks, suddenly very thankful for my obscured face. "I look like an especially startled fish."

"Fish or not, it's a memory," she insisted. "And that's what matters."

"Fine..." I yielded. "But you owe me a better one later."

"Deal!" She declared, the sound of fluttering wings reaching me. Bored of the headache, I sat back up. "Alright, it's up. I tagged you so... oh, your sister is laughing at it."

I scrambled over to her side of the booth, avoiding sitting on her stretched-out form. "Weaboo shut in!"I snapped at the emoji before taking out my own phone to scroll through the post.

In the twenty or so seconds it took for me to find it, Sarah had already left a comment comparing me to a rotting potato. I looked over to Alys, who kept her mouth shut tight but was clearly on the verge of breaking. "My turn." I took a very quick, very unflattering photo, the flash highlighting all the wrong parts.

"Hey, no fair!" She tried to swipe at the device, but the weird angle I was sitting at meant she couldn't bend her forelimbs nearly far back enough. She circumvented this by rolling over so her back was against the headboard. Quickly, she grabbed my wrists. She grinned, her red eyes sparkling. "Are you going to delete it now and only have good Alys photos?"

"Probably not, no," I said, somehow out of breath from the two-second scuffle. "You make a very cute startled fish." She tightened her hold, bringing her snout closer, the smell of cinnamon on her breath. "A very, very cute fish?"

"Very flattering," she replied, her face visibly hot.

"I'm good at flattery," I said, my back pressed further into her stomach. After a pause, I asked, "Isn't this position uncomfortable? I'm kind of squishing you."

"I'm used to sleeping on rocks, James; this is nothing. Now, are you going to delete that photo, or are we stuck here forever now?"

"Tempting... You're super warm."

"I should hope so."

"Why? Are you looking into a career of heating up humans?"

"Possibly, are you interested?"

"Maybe."

With a playful shove, she at last let me go. I stumbled but caught myself quickly. I straightened my clothes and turned back around just as she said, "Next time I won't let you off so easily," she teased.

"Next time, huh?" I shot back, patting down my shirt. When satisfied, I took my previous seat. "For now, is it a draw, or did I win the photo conversation?"

She let out a small snort, her tail swaying in amusement. "You won this time because I let you."

"Course, course. Do you still want that croissant?"

"Yep, we've had drinks, and now it's time for the dinner portion of the-"

"I will post it if you say it."

"-date."

"Get ready to be famous," I grumbled, but rather than doing so, I instead moved over to the coffee bean app and ordered two croissants--one for us now and one to chew on whilst we were walking around.

She shook her head, but then her expression twisted. "One second, I just need to go to the toilet really quickly." I gave her a lame thumbs up and finished confirming the payment. She hurried away quickly, going straight for a worker as opposed to the restroom itself.

Apparently, whatever the barista said was unsatisfactory, as once their conversation was over, she dashed back to the table.

"Are you alright?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

Alys hesitated, her tail giving a quick, almost nervous flick before she spoke. "Y-Yeah I just need to head over to that big uh shopping place. They've only got human ones here." Her voice wavered just a little before she glanced out of the window at the target location. "Please wait here."

I nodded and tried not to think too hard about the specifics. "It's fine, Alys. I'll just order our food and hang out for a bit. I'm not going to run out on you because you needed the toilet." I waved her off.

She left the café, but not before lingering, her gaze roving over to the couple who she'd worried about earlier. She departed, however, before I could say anything.

I sat in silence, worried...

For about five seconds, as Sarah's TTYL finally came into play.

"Yo, it's confirmed. Costa, 2pm. How's Alys?"

"She's Alys, I guess. Do we really have to meet him? We're adults; we can just ignore him."

"She's Alys? Vague. And yeah, we do. I don't want him whining online again. Just say to him; work gives money, life is good, and then we get to leave."

I huffed.

"Fine, but if he's difficult, I'm walking."

"I'll join you. Just bear with it this once for me, please."

A pang of guilt hit me--Sarah never really understood the full weight of our dad's selfishness. She was younger, shielded from the worst of it.

"Fine, fine." I felt a stroke of inspiration. "Actually, meet me before 2 p.m., and you can meet her."

"Your girlfriend?"

"Sarah, I swear to God. But yes, Alys."

"Nice. Where?"

"I'll message."

"Poggers." The conversation drifted off, and during the lull I opened up a Tetris ripoff. I scarcely had time to enjoy the game before another interruption pulled me back to reality.

"Hey... Can I ask you something?"

I looked up, already half-annoyed at being disturbed. A young man--sixteen, maybe seventeen--stood nearby, his stark white hair and bright purple eyes catching the light in a weird way. Contacts, probably. Some sort of goth. I sighed internally, preparing myself for whatever awkward conversation was coming.

"Sure, what's up?" I responded calmly.

"You and that dragon--are you two dating? Or just friends?"

The casualness of the question caught me off guard, and for a split second, the room felt... different. Like the air had shifted, just slightly cooler than before. I blinked, brushing it off.

Jesus fuck, there's no way we seem that much of a couple.

"We're friends is all," I said, carefully choosing my words. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged, taking a seat at a small table nearby. Thankfully, not in Alys' seat. Something about him sitting there would've felt wrong. His eyes, though--still locked on me--felt just a little too focused, like he was sizing me up.

"Well, there's this..." His voice dropped lower, almost like he didn't want anyone else to hear. "Gryphon..."

Oh... right...

"And are you, um, interested in her--him, uh, them?" I cringed at myself but managed not to let it show. "Like, do you wanna ask them out, or are you just friends?"

He fiddled with the paper menu on his table, his fingers moving nervously, but his face didn't quite match the energy. The hesitation seemed more like an act now--something was off. But I couldn't place what.

I let his words hang, giving myself time to think. But more than anything, I was feeling that strange vibe creeping up again. Like the air around me had thickened, or the room had gotten quieter without me noticing.

"It's easy to say and hard to do, but... fuck 'em. If you like this girl and she likes you, who cares what people think? People are always going to judge you no matter what you do, so why let it get you down to begin with?"

His eyes lit up, and suddenly, all the nervousness was gone. His voice shifted, too--stronger, more confident. "And you really believe that?" It was a near-physical shift, his posture straightening as he leaned forward.

"Yeah," I said, a little thrown off by his sudden change. "I mean, it's not like I don't get affected by it. I still feel weird when people say stuff or look at me funny, but it's always temporary. So yeah, I believe it."

The kid nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed on me, but he didn't say anything for a moment. Something had changed--he felt more... present now. More aware. It was subtle, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

"You seem like a good person, more so than that Teran kid at least; I hope he's having fun with his new friend..." He muttered, his voice neutral as he tapped his fingers lightly on the table, a mirror of the nervous fidget I hadn't even realised I'd been doing. "This was a valuable talk, and now I'm sure I made the right choice with this place. I'm glad Alys picked you."

I blinked.

"Picked me? What do you mean?"

He ignored the question, standing up with a smoothness that made him look taller than before. "I've got some things to take care of. Exterminating, mostly."

My stomach twisted. "Exterminating? You got rats or something?"

He gave me a half-smile, but there was nothing friendly in it. "Something like that." He started to turn away, then stopped. "Don't worry, though. Not your problem--at least, I hope not..."

I stared after him, unsure what the hell that was supposed to mean. My brain raced to catch up, but all I could do was watch as he strolled toward the door, hands in his pockets, like everything was perfectly normal.

"See you soon, James."

Jesus Christ, what a weirdo. Why the hell did I even talk to-

I froze.

He called me James.

Chapter 7

It was Wednesday, the 21st of August, and I was doing my very best to try and calm down. I was in the large, quadruped-only bathroom, situated in a nearby shopping centre, as the café I'd been in earlier didn't have one that fit me. In truth, I didn't actually need the bathroom; I just needed somewhere private, but being away from James certainly helped steel my nerves.

All day had I caught myself attempting physical contact, be that brushing up against him, bumping him, or even more egregious--literally pinning him when he'd sat against me in the booth. Of course, I assumed he didn't know the meaning of such an action, but still... I felt guilty. I felt I'd used him to satisfy my own flailing emotions.

Despite the strength of our scales and the sharpness of our claws, touch was everything to dragons.

It wasn't his fault, nor was it mine, I told myself. It was getting warmer; I could feel it in my itching horns and aching stomach. It meant heat was dawning on the of-age females. The weeks leading up weren't too bad, but that didn't mean it was easy. Emotions and instincts surged drastically, and James being so kind and accepting only worsened them. He was always there, always willing to talk and to help.

Had I not gathered my willpower and shoved him away earlier, I'd have likely bitten his neck and put him on his back.

A harrowing thought.

He might...

I shook my head and turned up the pressure on the cold tap, blasting the heated scales of my cheeks, physically cooling me down, and distracting me from such predatory thoughts. Worse still was the fact that the base of my horns were getting painful, a clear sign that they were starting their growth once more. I made a mental note to get the shaving blade from Samys when I got back home, lest I end up looking ridiculous by solstice time.

I felt myself frowning at the mention of my cousin, or more specifically, the mess she had nearly made of Jarys' birthday party.

Still... It had ended up alright--James had even brought the hatchling a gift--a Lego set that allowed him to build either a red dragon or some sort of bird.

The fuzzy feeling I'd felt in my stomach when I'd watched them build it together... It was part of the reason I'd asked him to meet me and hang out.

With one last splash of freezing water, I removed my snout from the sink basin and shook my scales free of the cool liquid. I unlocked the door and pushed it open with my head, only to bump into a small mess of feathers and fur.

I took a confused step back, realising that a gryphon of all creatures had invaded my personal space. "S-Sorry," she stammered, her accent odd through the small beak sat squat on her wide face. "I didn't think there would be anyone here." She tried to quickly squeeze by, her sleek feathers daring to brush past me. I snarled rudely and strode forward, easily knocking her smaller frame aside, earning a disgruntled, fearful squawk.

With a slight huff to my breath, I hurried back to the café, heat-induced paranoia telling me that my friend would search what exactly pinning meant and would be trying to leave. This was, of course, pure insanity, but still, it put an anxious pep in my trot.

After entering the coffee house, I quickly galloped to James and found him with a half-eaten croissant lodged in his mouth, thin fingers busy with a loud, block-matching game on his phone. I swallowed, forcing down my nervousness, and slid back into my seat. "You started without me?" I asked.

James looked up, head tilted, before blinking, a look of realisation washing over him. He wiped the crumbs from his mouth with a napkin before pointing at my side of the table, eyes on the uneaten croissant I'd missed, which was sat upon a white plate, a small block of butter off to the side.

"I thought we were sharing?" I questioned, the query sounding more upset than I'd meant it to.

He placed the remainder of his food back on his own plate. "We are sharing," he said simply. "This one is mine, and that one is yours."

I felt my ears flick back. "Oh," I breathed out, stretching my long body across the soft leather seating. It felt colder without his presence. "I thought you meant that we would split one pastry and then split another."

He turned his phone off and placed it into his coat pocket. "Um, sure... that sounds fine with me." He pushed his plate forward, granting me the remainder of his meal. I reciprocated by tearing mine in half with my claws and passing him the larger half. "Thanks," he hummed, taking a gentle bite of the pastry.

I swallowed mine in one long, serpentine gulp. James glanced over, squinting at the gesture. "You should really chew your food, Alys. Gonna get yourself a stomach ache."

"Nope!" I chirruped, flashing my fangs at him cheerfully.

James took one last drink of his coffee, finishing it off in a single gulp. "Some weirdo came up to whilst you were out," he said, placing the glass back down. "Emo-looking guy. I think he was listening to us, cause he knew our names."

"I think he was just jealous that you've got such a good-looking dragon with you." I forced a grin and raised my head up. "I can't blame him."

"I guess," he said, smiling faintly at the quip. "Oh!" He sat back up, eyes widened with clear excitement. "I saw a gryphon." The joy in his voice sent a rush of irritation through me, stirring the early anger. "Grey feathers, yellow eyes, super fluffy. I've never seen one before." I knew exactly what creature he was referring to.

Pridefully, I'd expected him to wholeheartedly agree with me that he was in fact with a good-looking dragon, and so his change of topic to a rival race bothered me greatly. "Eh, they're not that impressive," I said, shrugging my wings. "Small wings and smaller claws."

Some of his excitement faded, which both made me happy and guilty. "I, um, guess, but aren't they super rare? Apparently most of them ended up in East Europe."

Stop talking about them!

"I think," I muttered dismissively. "But they're nowhere near as interesting as us. I mean, they're just dull birds, they..." I stopped myself, finally noticing the uncomfortable look he was giving me.

"Alys," he said slowly, cautiously, hands folded over one another. "Have you got a problem with gryphons or something? I think I remember you calling them clipped claws earlier." He paused, looking me square in the eyes. "Is that a friendly term, or..." His words made my stomach twist.

"It's, uh, mostly? I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so mean-sounding," I apologised, as though he were an upset gryphon and not a concerned human. "I just... I was playing a-and pushed it too far. I'm sorry," I lied, desperate not to have him thinking less of me.

He blinked, eyes searching. "Right, um, okay." He tried to take another drink but found that his glass was empty and so put it back down with a quiet sigh and a quirk of his mouth. Quickly, I shoved my half-full glass forward, resulting in it spilling dramatically over the table. With a squawk, I sat up, twisting my body awkwardly as I grabbed at a bundle of paper tissues.

James climbed out of the booth and grabbed another table's tissues, helping me wipe up the mess. "Careful, these glasses tip really easily. Sorry about your drink; I know you were just trying to share." It felt like, and likely was, that he was placating me, which only served to worsen the painful tension in my chest. In less than five minutes, I'd messed up what had been a near-perfect day out with my closest friend.

"Sorry," I said again, trying and failing to ignore the sting in my eyes.

"It's fine," he answered, looking me over. "I can get you another one if you want. It's no big deal--it can even be in a takeout cup so you can walk around with it."

I slid out, tail sore from my awkward positioning. "It's okay; I already drank most of it." I ran a paw against the base of my throbbing horns, the stress causing them to ache more than they had been. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make everything so weird."

After throwing the wet papers in a bin and handing our glasses back to the employees, we left the café. "Nah, we're cool; I was just surprised about the whole gryphon thing." He clicked his tongue and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Sounds like something Samys would say, honestly."

"Ah, that stings," I murmured, half joking, half serious. "But, yeah, we've had some trouble with them. We used to fight over territory, food, and... everything. Ask one of them, and they'd probably say the same thing." I sat down near the pavement and raised a hind leg to scratch at my ear. James watched, a vaguely amused look on his face. "What?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, shaking his head. "But, I mean, you can't keep thinking that sort of thing while here. It's gonna get you in trouble--again, like Samys. Imagine Jarys makes a gryphon friend and invites you to a party. Would you blow up like she did?"

I winced, hissing lightly as though struck. "I'd be better at hiding it, maybe? But..." I looked away, the confession bitter on my tongue. "Ah, maybe you're right; maybe I should try and put it past me. I've been so off recently, so I guess I've regressed, in a way."

James kicked at a loose pebble, sending it skittering across the pavement. "I get that, and I can sorta get why you'd think that," he said, his tone heavier than I'd heard before. "But you seem--and are--so good. It doesn't feel like you to hate an entire group like that." He scratched at the side of his jaw, and for a moment it seemed like he wasn't sure what to think. "You're too good."

I stared, a flicker of surprise warming my chest. "You really think so?"

He scratched his cheek again and looked away, seeming almost embarrassed by the sudden confession. "Yeah," he replied. "A new world, a new start... We can pretend nothing happened. Sound good?"

I nodded. "Sounds perfect." At last I closed the distance between us, allowing myself to walk by his side like I had earlier. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He shrugged, hands still in his coat pockets. "I'm not a gryphon; I'm just... looking out for you, I guess?" He exhaled, holding the duck-faced expression for a moment. "You know what else sounds perfect? Snacks."

The unexpected change made me tilt my head. "Snacks? What snacks?"

James hummed. "Do you really want to go to the park without snacks? What would we even do--hang out in the fresh air, with nature all around us, relaxing? Sounds boring..."

With the air lighter, I felt comfortable enough to brush past him, lightly smacking him with a wing. "Even with your favourite dragon?" I asked.

I spotted the smirk before it even formed--it was a twinkle in his eyes, a slight narrowing. "Rhys is coming?" He questioned, leaning back slightly as he walked, as though he were checking the area. "I didn't know."

"Ooh," I bumped him with my side, causing him to stumble. "Extremely low blow--despicably low blow." He bumped back, mirroring the contact, sending butterflies through my stomach. "And here I was going to buy you a drink."

He tilted his head from side to side, as if considering his options. At last he sighed, raised his head, and looked at the clouds above. "Fine..." He groused out. "Alys, you are my favourite dragon."

"Aw..." Deciding to push my luck, I brushed the side of my head against his, letting our ears rub together. "You're my favourite human too." He didn't rebuke me immediately, so I held it until he did, laughing as he nudged me away.

We continued walking, with James leading us towards a large, human-populated store. "Oh, and by the way," he started, picking up a basket as he did. "Her wings weren't as big as yours."

The smell of stale food and disinfectant greeted us. "You can't just say that, James!" I smacked him with my tail. "You'll get in trouble."

He swung the empty basket back and forth lazily. "I'm being friendly; you're the one burning crosses in their gardens." He picked up some kind of plastic device from a rack on the wall, which, when aimed in my direction, flashed me with a bright red light, temporarily blinding me.

I shook my head, blinking. "I don't understand your human references, but I'm assuming that's bad."

He added the device to the basket, which rattled when he resumed his idle swinging. "Pretty bad, yeah." After a pause, he raised the plastic container and hung it on the back of my primary horns. "Hold that for a second," he said, beginning to walk away. I hurried after him and bumped him with my head, knocking the basket onto the floor.

"Ooh, don't break store items, Alys," he said loudly. "You'll get in trouble."

"Carry the basket, human pet."

"Yes, mistress," he grumbled, picking it back up and hooking it on his fingers. He then unbuttoned his coat. "It's warm today. Why the hell are they putting the radiators on?" We soon approached the refrigerated section, wherein James threw a can of iced coffee and a bottle of fizzy black drink into the carrier.

"Poor humans," I said, picking a bottle of fruit juice with a paw. "You can't control your body temperatures, can you?" Since I was paying, I added a second bottle. "So poorly made," I tacked on, closing the fridge door for us.

"Our knees are also shitty; don't forget that," he said. "Also, you can control that? How?"

"No idea," I said honestly. "Magic, maybe. We can make our insides boiling hot; it makes us basically immune to diseases, and..." A flash of sour nostalgia struck me, and for a moment I considered not telling him a particularly interesting story before recalling who exactly I was talking to. "And it also resulted in a very gross story, if you're interested."

He levelled a disbelieving look my way; his eyes narrowed the tiniest of amounts. "Alys, come on, it's me; obviously I want to hear the very gross story," he said. "I'm assuming it involves temperatures?"

"Yes, yes, it does." I cleared my throat. "Okay, so I have an uncle on my mother's side who was a bit... loose. He cheated on his mate with another, younger ness, and somehow my auntie found out." Like it was a secret, I lent in close and whispered, "It was me; I told her. I saw him."

"Ooh," James cooed, leading me down to an aisle of plastic-wrapped sandwiches.

"Yep. I told her during a hunt for wyverns. Anyway, like a week later, when they were mid-mate, she made her, um, insides hot--really, really fucking hot. Scorching hot."

He looked to me, eyes widening.

"Burnt his dick off," I finally said, unable to hold back my manic smirk. "We're heatproof on the inside, but as it turned out, not completely heatproof everywhere else, and I, um, guess us females more so." I distracted myself momentarily with the logistics before giving up. "It ended up being a huge scandal for everyone involved. I got dragged in, and my aunt was going to get in serious trouble until the younger ness came forward and explained everything. All of our rations got cut down for two months, though."

"Wow," was my friend's philosophically succinct response. "Wow," he repeated. "Wait, he wasn't heatproof down there? I thought you were?" I'd already explained it, but he looked traumatised, and so I gave his tiny human brain the benefit of the doubt.

"I guess when it left him, it didn't count as internal anymore? To be fair, she hurt herself badly as well."

He pursed his lips, his mouth shut tight. "Wow. That's nuts. What a use of magic..." He laughed nervously, rubbing at the back of his neck. "The guy probably had it coming, but jeez... I think I'd jump out a window if that happened."

As I was behind him, I was able to place the bottom of my snout on his shoulder and give him a sideways look. "Don't cheat on me then," I said lowly, teeth bared.

"But the gryphon's paws..." He whined, his words strangely familiar.

I held up a paw, prodding him in the forehead with the limb. "Look, paws."

"Well, yeah, but gryphons are lions and birds, Alys. That's like twice the animals, and therefore would get me twice the judgement!" He beamed at me, flashing a wide, cheeky, and familiar smile.

I blinked, a rush of memories overtaking me.

Word for word, that's what Aiden said.

This conversation... he and Samys had it years ago.

"Alys, are you alright?" He asked, poking at the snout that was still sitting on his shoulder.

"Um, yeah, sorry. What were you saying?"

"Ah, you ruined my joke!" He pouted. "Hang on, go back to being all dopey; I've forgotten what I was going to say.

The similarities, thankfully, are only in expressions.

Otherwise, I'd...

...

... I don't know.

I pulled away, just as he snapped his fingers, seemingly remembering his joke. "I don't know, Alys. That gryphon had some very soft-looking feathers. I bet she'd be fantastic to lay on, you know, during a cold night."

I pulled back on the urge to nip him for the comparison. "Did you not just hear me tell you that we can control our internal body temperatures? I would make a fantastic bonfire." He tilted his head, as if looking at me for the first time.

"Scales," he announced, prodding me on the shoulder. "Pointy." He gestured to my twin pair of horns. "I'd get murdered during bedtime."

"You would not get murdered; you'd get injured--there's a difference," I corrected before jumping up to my back legs and standing with my forepaws on his shoulders. Fully raised up, I towered over him by a fair few feet. I set my snout on his head and placed my paws across his chest. "See? Nice, right?"

He chuckled, shaking his head a little, brushing his soft hair against my scales. "Yeah, I guess I can see the appeal. Can you let go, though? I feel like people are going to think you're planning on eating me."

I hummed, the sensation reverberating through him. "Fine, but I will need food to placate my ravenous appetite." He laughed and slipped from my grasp, allowing me to land with a soft pad against the store's tacky, linoleum flooring.

"You already sound like you've swallowed a thesaurus," he commented, reaching up to the higher shelves and grabbing a pair of chicken-filled sandwiches. "Maybe take it easy."

"No!" I chirped, getting back up and shaking him. "I want fish!"

James stumbled, but quickly grabbed the shelves.

"Sorry," I said quickly, pulling back and stepping away.

My heart was pounding, the sensation bounding through my ears. The heat that I thought I had control over had slipped past me, forcing me into performing a show of size and dominance. "I didn't mean to do that. I don't know what came over me."

He looked apprehensive, eyes wide and hair frazzled. He quirked his mouth and silently placed a tuna sandwich in the basket. "You, um, could have just said you wanted fish; you didn't need to try and fly off with me." Slowly, he brushed his hair back in place and fixed his coat.

"I, uh, wanted to give you a better view?"

"Is that a question, or are you telling me?"

Okay, he's letting you off. Ease back into it.

"Telling you," I clarified falsely. "I was going to grab you and fly off to my nest. Gonna feed you to my hatchlings. It would have been very gruesome."

"Wow, yeah, that would be gruesome, damn." There was a stiffness to his response that let me know for sure that the near fall had startled him. "What snacks do you want? They do crisps and whatever else. We could-" Suddenly he paused, the nerves fading in an instant. "Chocolate!"

"Chocolate?" I questioned, unsure of where he was going with the topic.

"Lactose-free chocolate!" He said loudly. "You can try chocolate. They did a, uh, vegan version. I remember seeing it a while ago, and I've just remembered." Without waiting for a reply, he hurried away, disappearing down the aisles. I galloped after him, finding him crouched below a selection of slightly pricier treats.

I sat down beside him and watched him skim.

"What kind do you want? White, plain, milk, or dark?" He asked.

"I don't know what those words mean."

"I would go with... not white, plains a bit bitter, same as dark, so... milk it is." He reached out and picked up a bar, which was then thoroughly inspected. "Yep, no lactose." The human spun on his heels and flashed me the treat, to which I only smiled weakly, enjoying his energy. "Ta-da! Feast your eyes on this bad boy!" I snatched it from him and held it up to the fluorescent lighting as though it were a treasure.

"Whoa, it's so amazingly amazing!" I cooed before turning back around and bonking him on the head with it. "Such a goober." He pouted before taking it back and adding it to the basket. "A very sweet goober," I clarified, standing back up and performing a quick stretch.

Only to audibly hiss in pain as a flare of agony surged from the base of my lower horns.

James got back up immediately. "What's up? You pull a muscle?"

"No," I groaned. "I've just... My horns are just growing again. Feels like a bad one; might be a wisdom barb, actually." I shook my head and raised a paw to massage the sore spot. It was made that much worse by it being right beside my ears, which in turn made them throb.

"Do you want a painkiller? I've got some pretty strong ones in my bag."

"Painkiller?" I said, massaging the sides of my head. "That's medicine, right?"

"Kind of. I've got, uh, co-dydramol. It's pretty strong. A lot stronger than paracetamol. Might make you a bit woozy, though." He looked around the aisle and, after finding it empty, took a strip of white tablets from his unzipped backpack. "Wait, actually, we'll do it outside."

The worry he was showing made my chest warm, and so I played it up a pinch.

"Yeah, we've got chocolate, sandwiches, and drinks. Let's go." He placed a hand upon my shoulder and speed-walked out of the aisle. As we left, however, I snagged a bag of crisps that I'd liked eating at the party.

When at the self-checkout, James took the plastic device out of the basket and used it to scan each item. He paid with his phone and placed the items, save for the chocolate, in his backpack.

After leaving the store, we stood off to the side, next to a collection of trolleys, for a minute. "How are you feeling?" He asked, unscrewing the cap of his fizzy drink. "Still hurting?"

I nodded. "They've been achy all morning," I said.

He bit his lip and slowly made his way beside me, where he lent in and looked behind my head, at the base of my lower horns. "Can I-"

"Yes, you can touch my ears."

He grasped the edge of the long extremities and bent them to the side carefully. "James, they're very floppy; you won't hurt me," I said softly. I felt him nod and then bend further, leaning in closer, trying to see.

The pain was at the very base, as horns themselves couldn't ache. Otherwise, all of the times I'd broken mine flying would have sent me into shock.

"Um... It's kind of hard to see," he said, "but I think they look a bit swollen. Do you want the painkiller? Do you know what you're allergic to?"

I recalled my visits to the human healers. "Lactose and penicillin," I recited. "The doctors were surprised that it wasn't more. We have pretty similar internals, apparently, but your immune systems are better."

He let go of my ear and took the strip of medicine back out of his bag before pausing and sniff-laughing. At my questioning look, he said, "Nothing, nothing. It's just that this situation is kind of funny. A human feeding dragon opioids in a car park. Here's your drink." He popped out two and passed me my fruit juice.

I swallowed both and exhaled, waiting.

"Now what?" I questioned after a beat.

"It takes a bit to kick in. They're strong, but not morphine strong. You might not even feel them all that much."

It could've been the onset of heat, the drugs working faster than expected, or maybe just the way things felt in that moment, but I found myself saying, "I like being with you, James."

James glanced back, puzzled. "Hm?"

"I like being with you."

"Oh." He blinked. "I like being with you too," he said, scratching his cheek again.

It was strange, but, out of everything we'd talked about, including mating, heat, and me pinning him down, it was that innocuous comment that got the biggest reaction out of him. He kept his hands in his pockets, face forward, but the dusting of heat in his cheeks let me know how he felt.

"You softy," I whispered, bumping him again once close enough for contact.

"I will bin your chocolate," he grumbled, holding up the bar. "Don't tempt me." I ignored him, and using my teeth, I snatched it from his hold. "Aw..." Quickly, however, he stole it back. "Wait for the park, greedy iguana."

The park, as it turned out, was further away than he had initially thought, and twice as we walked, he begged for us to take a bus, but I hated using them and would instead walk behind him and push him forward.

We reached it within an hour. A limp, sad James stood beside me, hands in his pockets.

It was larger than I'd expected, more like a woods than a patch of grass.

The park sprawled out before us, a mix of open fields, shaded corners, and a small play area for hatchlings. Trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, clearly pleased with their placement. I fluttered my wings, letting them stretch for a moment as I glanced over at my friend. His eyes swept across the park, likely scanning for a good spot to set up.

With a nudge, I bumped with the side of my head, ears brushing against his own. "Come on, human pet," I teased, curling my tail in the air. "Before all of the other dragons take the best patches of grass."

"Ugh," he grumbled, placing his hands against his back and surprising me with a loud crack. "Please, I have a gift for finding prime picnic spots. I'm practically a master."

I snorted. "Of course you do, pet. Go on then." I flared a wing and pushed him forward with it. "Go find us a spot." He grabbed the fingers of the wing and pulled--not very hard, mind you, just enough for me to feel it. Not that he could have hurt me; my wings were likely tougher than my actual legs.

"You're helping," he pulled again.

Together we wandered down one of the winding paths, lightly shoving one another and eating our food early until we found, at last, a nice spot under an old, broad oak tree. It was perfect, I thought, with a smile--partially shaded yet with enough space for a dragon to stretch out comfortably. As I settled down, nestling against the tree, I felt warmth spread through me. Not heat, but a soft, comfortable sensation.

"Oh, crap," I heard him say. He was standing, staring at the ground, as though the grass had offended him. "No blanket. Where do I put the food?" He looked over at me and was given a snicker.

"Use your coat," I suggested, half joking.

He walked over to me and placed the plastic-wrapped sandwiches atop the spread membranes of my wings. "Hold these," he said, tapping the limb. He then reached into his backpack and tore apart a white plastic bag he'd stashed before spreading it out on the grass. "Holy shit, that's so brokie," he laughed to himself as he placed a chocolate bar and then a pack of crisps atop it. The snacks were soon joined by the sandwiches. "At least they won't melt in my bag."

I couldn't help but chuckle at his ingenuity--or maybe it was just desperation--but either way, it was endearing, lovable almost. "Fantastic work," I said as I rubbed the scales of my spine against the hard bark of the tree. "Couldn't we afford an actual blanket?"

James threw his hands up. "Hey, at least I didn't just dump the food on the ground," he said, settling down beside me. "Plus, now I don't have to worry about grass stains on my coat. I'm a genius." I curled the tip of the tail against the family-sized bag of crisps and used the limb to flip the snacks in my direction.

"A genius of improvisation," I corrected, opening the bag and popping a pawful of crisp into my mouth. They were salty and satisfying, and I found myself devouring them. "We really are living the high life out here, huh?"

"Yup." He at last removed his coat, placing it against the tree as a makeshift pillow. "Good food, good company, and top-tier luxury." He took his backpack off for further comfort. "Like millionaires." He closed his eyes and lent further back.

I glanced over at him, watching his chest rise and fall with steady breaths.

He looked more relaxed than I had ever seen him, the warm sunlight catching the raised strands of his hair. It surprised me how effortlessly happy he seemed, sending a flutter of warmth into my chest. I fought the urge to reach and touch him to see if he...

I sucked in air and pulled back, silently reprimanding myself for nearly giving in to needless, basic instincts. I had to remind myself not to ruin such a moment, not to push too hard for the sake of urges that would likely fade within a month.

With a forced calmness, I laid back.

It all felt so peaceful. Being out in the open, the sun warming my scales, the faint rustle of leaves, and James just... being there. I wanted more, selfishly wishing that every day could be so perfect. It was greater than any day back home besides the hatching of my siblings.

As the warmth of the sun wrapped around us and time passed, I found myself shifting slightly, inching closer to him under the shade of the tree. I let my shoulder brush against his, hoping he wouldn't notice.

It's fine; it doesn't count.

Humans lay beside each other all the time.

I closed my eyes for a moment, savouring the soft rustle of leaves overhead and the steady rhythm of his breathing. The peacefulness hung in the air, and I felt a flutter of anticipation, wondering if he could sense my presence beside him.

"Alright," he suddenly said, startling me and sending a rush of nerves through me. "Are you going to try that chocolate, or are you going to stare off into space all day? I've been waiting for your reaction for like twenty minutes."

I snorted and picked up the bar, fumbling with the wrapper for a moment before at last getting it open. "You sure I'm not going to hate this?" I asked, holding up a piece of the dark brown confectionary.

"Only one way to find out." He watched intently, as though expecting me to have some sort of dramatic reaction.

I chomped down, severing a large piece off before quickly swallowing, not tasting much besides a quick bout of sweetness. I looked to James, unable to hide my disappointment. "It's a bit-"

"Alys, you're supposed to chew it," he said quickly, sounding startled. "Not gulp it down like a dying fish."

"Like a dying fish!?" I gasped. "After I eat this, I'm going to pounce on you."

"Wait, what?" He shuffled back. "No, don't. You'll squish me!"

"Squish!?" I broke another piece of and chewed intently, keeping heavy eye contact with him as he anxiously backed away. "Oh, no. I'm not taking that from such a soft, weak-looking creature. I am going to pin you down and set your hair on fire. It's a loss I can live with."

"Shit, fuck, no, wait!" He tried to escape, but I was done enjoying the treat--it was nice, very nice in fact, but I was ticked off, and his terrified scuttling was triggering predatory instincts. "I'm like, weak and sad; I don't think I'd survive a wild dragon attack."

The heat under my scales flared, fuelling an urge I couldn't suppress. "Then you'd better try harder." I launched forward, wings flared wide as I pounced, knocking him back down. He hit the ground with a thud, and I pinned him easily beneath me, a grin spreading across my face. "Wow, you're right," I teased, leaning in closer. "You really wouldn't last long."

"You cheated!" He pouted, squirming beneath me. "I wasn't ready."

A dark thrill ran through me as I pressed down harder. "A dragon doesn't wait for her prey to get ready," I purred. "You should know that by now." I leaned in until my breath stirred his hair. "Now... hold still, or you're going to regret it."

The air was cool that day, the light breeze attempting and failing to lessen the heat beneath my scales. My ears twitched back as a shout was heard in the distance, but I was too lost in the moment to notice or care.

James twisted madly, managing to push against my shoulder, rolling us sideways. I allowed him to have the upper paw for just a moment, only to shove him back down, pinning him more firmly, his face in the grass. "You are terrible at this," I commented, snout against his ear, holding back the urge to nip at his neck and/or ears.

His muffled voice rose up from the ground. "Well, excuse me, but I don't practice wrestling dragons in my free time."

I huffed a laugh. "Maybe you should start," I suggested, loosening my grip enough for him to turn his head, along with allowing him a fighting chance. Males could be such sore losers.

He twisted, managing to shove against my shoulder and roll us sideways. For a moment, he was on top, his hands braced on my shoulders, his mouth wide with a satisfied grin. But I was far more experienced. My tail lashed around his waist and yanked him back, throwing him off balance.

He yelped as I drove him back into the grass, claws locking around his wrists as I held him down. My wings flared wide, casting a shadow over him, his breath coming in rapid, shallow bursts. His pulse quick and frantic beneath my grip.

"Pinned," I said, my voice a low growl. "And this time, it's final."

The human laughed shakily, his chest rising and falling beneath me. "Fine, fine, you win... Just don't set me on fire." He looked down at his shirt and the green staining it. "Ugh, this shirt is so wrecked..."

The playful tone faded, replaced by a tense stillness. The world around us seemed to fall away, leaving only his warmth, the rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my claws, and the ragged sound of our breathing.

"You're, um... really strong," he murmured, his soft voice breaking the silence. "And kind of terrifying."

"Oh, yeah?" I whispered, bringing my snout closer until our noses almost touched. His breath came out in uneven gasps, the tension thickening with every second.

"Yeah," he stammered, trying to move but finding no escape. His eyes flicked to mine, wide and searching.

How easily I could have...

What am I doing?

"Alys?" His voice trembled with uncertainty. "Alys, are you okay?"

His breath came in quick, erratic gasps, as if the realisation of the situation was hitting him in waves. My pulse pounded in my ears, the air between us crackling with something I couldn't ignore.

His lips... looked... so... soft.

"Alys?"

I need to pull back.

I need to let him go.

But instead, I tightened my grip on his hands and pulled him closer, the scales of my snout brushing against his nose. I could feel his breath on my lips, tinged with cinnamon, hot and inviting. The world narrowed to that single point of contact--the rise and fall of his chest, his unsteady breaths, and the wild, reckless need that surged through me.

Don't.

Please don't.

"A-Alys...?"

My own mind screamed at me to stop, but a desperate, heat-tainted part of me took over, ignoring the warning. I closed the distance, pressing my mouth gently to his. His lips were still at first, frozen as though unsure what to do.

I pulled back, hesitating for a heartbeat, my breath mingling with his as I searched his eyes for some sign that he wanted this too. There was only a flicker of uncertainty there, but it wasn't enough to make me stop. The need burning inside me roared louder, demanding more. I leaned in again, pressing my mouth back to his, one claw gripping his soft hair, and another, his shirt.

Then, slowly, tentatively, he began to move along with me. It was hesitant, nervous--a kiss that barely counted as a kiss, as though he was letting himself test the waters before committing to the plunge.

That faint pressure, however, was all it took to set something ablaze inside me. I latched onto it, deepening the kiss with a fevered urgency, my claws digging in as my body lowered over his. My wings curled around us, encircling him like a cage.

His lips felt soft, fragile under mine, and I tried to coax them open, my longer tongue slipping out to trace the closed seam of his mouth, urging him to respond. I tilted my head, angling the kiss to better fit the flatter shape of his face, pressing harder, more insistently. I felt him quiver beneath me, a shudder that traveled from his chest to his throat, where it vibrated against my lips.

His hands slid up to my shoulders, gripping tighter, as if holding on for balance. The gentleness from before slipped away, lost in the desperate need to keep that small, trembling kiss alive. His mouth moved against mine, soft and careful, but it wasn't enough. I needed more.

I shifted my weight, pressing my body fully against his, letting my scales slide over the warmth of his skin and the smoothness of his shirt. The sensation was electric, a rush of heat that seared through me, and I arched my back slightly, letting my chest press into his. I tried to draw him in, pulling him closer with every motion, my tail curling tightly around his legs. My wings wrapped closer, as if I could force the world to shrink to just the two of us, sealed inside this moment.

My tongue pushed its way inside at last, first feeling the softness of his lips and then tasting the warmth of his mouth. I traced the roof of his mouth, felt the texture of his teeth, each touch a desperate plea for him to return the kiss with the same urgency. He tensed as my tongue invaded, his breath hitching sharply, and for a moment his lips tightened against the intrusion. The hands on my shoulders pressed more firmly, as though trying to create a bit of space.

It wasn't a forceful shove--just a soft, nervous effort to pull back, to remind me that this was too much.

I ignored it, too lost in myself and the scorching heat.

With an unbecoming moan, I leaned in deeper, clinging to the kiss, my tongue pushing further as if I could will him to respond through sheer force of need. I felt his body tense beneath mine, the shudder of his breath as it caught in his throat. His taste was unfamiliar, tinged with fear, and that fear only stoked the wildness inside me.

Please kiss back.

Please.

But his lips had stopped moving, leaving only the hesitant pressure of his hands against my shoulders, trying weakly to push me back. The realization sank in like ice water--he wasn't reciprocating anymore.

He was just enduring it.

What am I doing?

Why am I pushing him like this?

The questions hit me like a slap, and with jarring clarity, I tore myself away, breaking the contact with a sharp gasp. The cool air stung my lips, a harsh contrast to the fevered heat that had consumed me. I stumbled back, my breaths ragged and uneven, as though I'd just come up from drowning.

I stared at him, searching for something in his expression--anything to make sense of what I'd done. His eyes were wide, shock and confusion swirling in them, his breaths coming quick and shallow. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of hurt.

"Oh, no... James, I--" The words died in my throat, choked by guilt and regret. What could I even say? An apology felt hollow, and the truth... I wasn't even sure I knew what that was anymore.

What have I done?

Oh gods.

Please.

Please say something.

But he didn't.

Chapter 8

The day after the kiss, James missed work, and whilst I had wanted to, I was too fearful to reach out online.

When he returned the Monday afterwards, he was quiet.

It was Tuesday, August--I didn't know the date.

He didn't seem angry with me--just... not quite present. Less responsive and more withdrawn than he ever had been--as though something physical weighed him down, as if the connection I valued so highly had gotten twisted. I didn't blame him for it, not at all.

I had taken the smallest of responses and pounced on him for it.

After getting back from the park, I told Rhys what I'd done, and he snapped at me, words cutting deep. All I had been able to do was mutter apologies and shrink in on myself. He, of course, knew why I'd done what I'd done--males had a rut of their own--but that didn't make what I did okay. When James had joked about him being his favourite dragon, it wasn't a complete exaggeration--they spoke online more than he and I did.

The fallout of my actions seeped into everything I did. When at work, my focus slipped, resulting in me not being able to control my paws. The mounting heat was also beginning to have literal, physical reactions that made staying on track near impossible. The Tuesday following our trip, I dropped a full tray of patties onto the floor and could do nothing but stand there, staring, unable to understand what was happening.

Tom, the floor manager that day, hurried over, brows furrowed. "Are you alright, Alice?" He asked. I didn't care enough to correct him.

"Yeah," I lied, not meeting his eyes, instead fixing my gaze on the now-empty grill. "I'm just a bit tired. Family stuff is all." I fumbled for something to do, grabbing a stack of frozen burgers to distract myself, pretending that there weren't nearly nine wasted patties sitting on the floor. Unable to help myself, I said, "H-Has James said anything?"

The older human glanced over at James, who quickly averted his gaze. Even when busy with work, he looked worried--for me, I hoped selfishly. "No, not that I know of," Tom said quietly, as though weighing his options. "Is something going on?"

I winced, regretting speaking up at all. "No, it's nothing." I replied too quickly, placing the patties in an incorrect pattern.

The manager's eyes stayed on the nervous-looking James. He lent in, voice lowered. "He did seem a bit worried when you first started. If he's said something to you, I can have a word with-"

"No!" I snarled, the word coming out far more sharply than I'd intended it to, drawing the attention of everyone who wasn't already staring--James included. My heart sank as I lowered my trembling voice to whisper. "We had a... um... falling out."

His expression softened, the worry shifting to actual sympathy. "Right, okay. Do you want to head out early, Alice? You're only scheduled for another hour." He paused, looking down at the grill. "Or do you think you can tough it out for a bit longer?"

My paws shook despite my best efforts to stay composed. "C-Can I go home, please?" I stammered.

"Sure," he replied, nodding. "Sign out, and you're free to go. I'll tell Cameron up front that you weren't feeling too good."

I tore the grime-soaked glove from my left forepaw and chucked it into a nearby wastebasket as I plodded unevenly over to the keypad, wherein I quickly entered my ID code. I typed it in wrong the first time, and whilst trying a second time, glanced over at James, who once again averted his eyes, a faint look of tension on his face. He seemed conflicted, and for a long moment I considered approaching him, but... I just didn't have the strength.

We were trapped in limbo, both of us too anxious to make the first move, and so instead we slowly, surely drifted apart from one another. It stung so much more than if he had simply told me off and cast me aside--at least then I would have known where I stood and been able to move on with my life.

After finally signing out, I tore off my uniform and shoved it into my backpack with trembling talons. The air inside the restaurant was stifling, heavy with a weight I just could not shake. I needed to get out; I needed to breathe; I needed to escape the pressure that was trying to crush me. I pushed through the back door and burst out into the fresh air of the outside world, wings uncurling widely on instinct.

After gaining a start, I leapt into the sky, desperate for the rush of the wind to clear my head. I climbed higher and higher until the houses and the streets below blurred into a hazy, grey patchwork, the cool altitude prickling gently against my heated scales.

Despite the minute relief, it felt that no matter how high I forced myself to go, I couldn't ignore the painful ache in my chest nor the growing burning in my loins.

Why did he have to return it? Another uneven beat of my sore wings. Why did he stop? I curved sideways, trying to physically shake away my painful thoughts. Why didn't I stop?

The air grew thinner with every shame-filled flap I forced my tortured wings to perform.

He could have... I-I could have...

It was the same painful lines of thought I'd mulled over again and again and again without stopping. He had kissed back, softly, weakly, gently, but still--it was only the briefest movements of his lips.

Before I pushed too hard.

I hovered in the sky, wondering what would have happened were I more gentle, had simply asked, or had pulled away first. I felt in my heart, and knew on some level, however, that it still would have ended the same, but at least the resolution would have been swift and simple. We might've been able to return to some sense of normalcy after a few tense days.

What if...

The constant itch at the base of my horns and the painful heat in my stomach throbbed in time with my heavy pulse--a constant reminder of the raw, restless feeling that no amount of flying nor physical exertion could burn away.

Channelling all of the built-up tension and anger, I let out a screeching roar, the sound tearing up my throat as I let loose a great gout of scorching white flames, burning the air and blowing back a nearby cloud. It was a release, but not nearly enough to satisfy me.

I returned home, limbs shaking with more than just the strain of heavy flight. I stumbled through the front door, slamming it shut with a hindleg. With an arching swing of a forelimb, I launched my backpack somewhere in the direction of the sofa and dragged myself towards my bedroom.

With a slump, I collapse onto my wide, circular bed, and without bothering to pull over the covers, curled up tightly, tail wrapped around my body, holding me during a time where no one else would. I buried my snout into my stomach, but it provided me no comfort, and I pulled it free at the scent of myself. The flat was too quiet, too empty, and to top it off, my mind kept circling back to the moment at work and the way he had looked away from me.

The frustration that had built up from over a week of tension, a week of fake, false politeness, and a week of loneliness began to surge out from me. No longer was I able to hold back the upset tears that at last spilt from my eyes.

They came slowly at first, a few heavy droplets of stinging pain that clung stubbornly to the thin scales of my eyelids. But then I allowed myself to truly feel, forcing them to fall faster, leaving streaking trails down the bumps of my cheeks, soaking into the mattress.

Realising that I was quickly falling apart, I tried to swallow back the burgeoning sobs, to choke down the lump in my throat, but it was of no use. Everything I'd been trying to hold in--the shame, the regret, the fear of what I might have lost--it all came rushing out at the same time.

I'd tricked myself, pretending to feel distantly bad, distantly upset, but I hadn't realised just how much it hurt until that point. I hadn't allowed myself to feel the full weight of what was happening to me.

James' shocked expression flashed through my mind--the way his eyes had widened, the way he recoiled--not harshly, not angrily, not even seeming irritated, but... like he just didn't know what to do or even who he was looking at. I felt I'd scared him--that I'd crossed a line that should never have even been approached.

The greatest sin hadn't even been that, but what I'd done afterwards.

I had run away.

Quite literally, I had tucked my tail and flown away, barely squeaking out an apology before escaping up into the air, freeing myself temporarily of consequences. Afterwards, I refused to even attempt communication, not even when he skipped work nor after we met again in person.

I had done nothing. It was my fault from start to finish.

Eventually, however, the tears dried up and the weak, wracking sobs died down, fading into low, ragged breathing. I was completely and utterly drained, my throat raw and my eyes sore, but even then I found no relief in the silence that soon followed. I rolled onto my back, limp wings stretched out, my bleary eyes locked onto the bare ceiling.

I can't keep doing this...

Lying there, wallowing in my own emptiness--it wasn't going to fix anything. I needed to actually do something to try and bridge the widening gap between, even if I didn't know what that entailed. But where to begin? I had no idea what to say that would make him understand. Heat would make a good scapegoat, I told myself, but even then it still didn't feel like enough.

He had pushed back, stopped returning the kiss, practically shoved-

I took a breath, and after dragging myself from my bed, I stumbled into the bathroom and splashed ice cold water against my snout, trying to clear away the dense fog in my head. Through my blurred vision, I stared at my reflection in the small wall-mounted mirror, cringing lightly at my state.

Both pairs of horns were becoming a mess; they were already longer than what was presentable with small, quickly growing barbs branching from the bases. My scales had become bright, flush with heat in an attempt to appear more presentable to males, but there was a... dullness to me, a shade of grey that could be felt as opposed to seen.

After shaking the droplets from my scales, I shambled into the living room, put on some mindless program on the television, and lent back into the soft leather of the sofa, sinking into it, closing my eyes on reflex and focusing on the heavy but steady beat of my heart.

I opened my eyes, picked my backpack back up, and pulled the tablet free. I laid back, curling up on the cushions as I switched on the device, my claws digging into the metal guard of the screen. It felt like a lifeline that I was too afraid to reach for--potentially the only thing that could re-connect me to my friend if I just had the courage to use it.

But even if I did, I told myself, what would I say?

Swallowing a lump of nervousness, I opened up Friendster's messenger app to see a whopping zero notifications. He hasn't blocked me yet, I thought. He's not said anything either.

I scrolled up, feeling upset pangs ringing in my chest as I read the older messages.

"Lol. I'm a bit confused on how this statement's going to work. Are we kissing, or am I literally dribbling into your mouth like a weird waterfall?"

"Dragon's choice?"

"(:O)"

"Do both; we could see which one gets the most fame, then delete the less popular one. When are we doing this, by the way?"

"When in Starbucks, obviously, lol."

"Obviously, they appreciate interspecies spit-swapping."

I turned the device off and laid back down, eyes closed tightly, trying to figure out what I could possibly do. I would give him space, I eventually realised, as much as he needed. And when the time came, when it felt like I could face him without falling apart, I'd try to make things right. It felt cowardly to just sit back and wait for things to get better, but it was all I felt I could manage.

.....

The days passed quickly, and before I knew it, it was Friday, and still we had not spoken beyond the most casual of greetings. I wanted to--needed to--talk to him, but every time I thought I might be ready, every time we had a moment alone, the words would die on my tongue and the ache in my chest would tighten.

Instead, I kept my distance, watching him from the corner of my eyes, trying desperately to decipher the expressions on his face--hoping to see if there were signs he might be ready to talk.

And there were.

There always were...

I'd repeatedly catch him looking at me, only for him to quickly turn away after realising he'd been caught. A look of tense conflict had overtaken his usual mask of calm. He himself always seemed a hair's breadth away from wanting to speak, to do something. Whether he wanted to resolve the conflict or at last chew me out, I couldn't tell, and that uncertainty killed me--it made it impossible to approach him.

I needed an end to the tension.

To pile onto my suffering, heat had completely consumed me, and being in the same restaurant as him every day of the week was ruining me. The constant, familiar, almost pleasurable scent of him was making it impossible to stay on track. It was a reminder of the fact that I had actually tasted him, felt his body, and--worst of all--rubbed my own unique marking scent into his skin. He was lodged in my mind until the season faded or until he rejected me.

Which he hadn't done yet.

Friday was also the day I lost control.

As the clock ticked ever closer toward the end of my shift, I threw myself into work, seeking comfort in the familiar rhythm of mindless tasks. I scrubbed dirty trays as best I could, each harsh swipe an attempt to scrub away the burning need coursing through, relentless and unyielding.

"Great work, Alice," the manager that day--an older, dark-haired female--said as she passed by, a warm smile on her face. "You're getting quicker!"

"T-Thanks," I replied, forcing a smile. The compliment felt heavy, a reminder of why exactly I was trying so hard. I breathed more evenly, resolving myself to focus on the task at paw.

As I wiped down a grimy table, my co-workers flitted around me, chattering excitedly about their plans for the weekend and laughing at inside jokes I didn't understand. One of them pointed out a customer that had requested an apparently insane request. The light-heartedness felt distant, as though I were watching from underwater. I was grateful for the distraction, but the envy only amplified the sense of isolation I felt.

While I arranged condiments and restocked napkins, I tried to join in the chatter with a few of the friendlier humans, but my mind was elsewhere. The mounting pressure of heat within me was becoming harder and harder to ignore. I could feel a sheen of sweat beginning to form beneath my scales, each mindless task just barely pushing it back.

Then, a familiar smell wafted through the air--a cheap cologne, unmistakable James. It clung to the space around me, wrapping me in a wave of longing that made my heart race. It was the stupidest smell--some kind of mint that felt almost childish. He strode past the group of us, and I bit my lip to avoid staring, but this strain was noticed.

One of the girls paused, concern etched into her soft features. "Hey, Alice, are you feeling okay? You look kind of hot. And you're, um, panting." She looked closer, at last allowing me to hear the heavy sounds of my own breathing. "Are you feeling okay?"

I blinked, ears flicking, caught off guard by her observation. "N-No, I'm fine," I replied too quickly, trying to dismiss her worry. I was anything but fine, and it was only getting worse.

As I tried to focus on cleaning, I caught a glimpse of him through the glass door. He stood just outside, stretching his arms above his head, his forehead glistening with a light sheen of sweat--likely from a long shift behind the grill. The way his muscles flexed under his shirt sent a jolt of heat through me, intensifying the pressure I was already feeling. My thoughts spiralled, the ache within me morphing into an unbearable throb.

"Are you sure?" Asked the same girl. "You've been a little... off tonight," she said, thin brows furrowing as she studied me closely. I wanted to snap back, to say I was fine, but my focus kept drifting back to James. He hadn't moved at all, seeming almost like he was waiting for something... or, I suppose, someone.

.....

When my shift finally ended, I bolted to the staff room and hurried to the female changing stall, desperate to escape the stifling atmosphere of the diner and the heat radiating from my body. The moment I trotted inside, urgency washed over me. I peeled my apron off and threw the hat from my head, freeing my burning ears.

Glancing at the small mirror, I caught sight of my flushed cheeks, my scales shimmering under the harsh fluorescent lights. A deep sense of self-disgust washed over me. I barely recognised myself, a creature utterly consumed by desire, unworthy of the attention I so desperately craved.

But the moment was fleeting; the lingering scent of James enveloped me like a suffocating blanket, thick and intoxicating. On reflex, I inhaled deeply, confusing him for a mate, letting his aroma wrap around me. A shiver ran down my spine, igniting a fire deep within that I loathed to acknowledge.

That's when I felt it--a hot slickness gathering between my thighs. Panic flooded my chest as the realisation hit me. "No... please, not now," I whispered, my voice barely audible as the pulsing ache intensified, mocking my attempts at self-control.

In desperation, I grabbed my apron from the floor, pressing the fabric tightly against my slit, scrubbing furiously as if I could erase the heat and the slickness that seeped through.

But each frantic drag only deepened the ache, my hips pressing instinctively against the rough cloth. I bit down on a gasp, pressing my forehead against the stall door, hoping the cold wood would steady me. It didn't.

I tried to ignore my own slickness soaking through the apron, my claws clutching tighter as my hips rocked forward, driven by a maddening, helpless rhythm. But it wasn't enough--each rub only inflamed the need, and I could feel myself spiralling, helpless to resist.

The stall seemed to grow smaller, the walls pressing in as if to trap me in my shame, the clinging smell of him lingering in the air, feeding the urge I was fighting to contain.

Stop it... stop.

I whimpered, but my body refused to listen. The apron was soaked now, damp and useless, unable to satisfy the gnawing ache that grew sharper with every touch. Abandoning it completely, I sat on my hindquarters, shaking legs spread, eyes closed.

The thought of him, the feel of his fingers against my shoulders, the taste of his mouth, and the pleasure of being pressed against him. It sped me up.

I reached down, my claws grazing over the entrance to my sex, each movement more desperate than the last. But the sharp, hooked tip of my claw caught against the soft, slick, heated fold of my cloaca, sending a sudden sting through me. I gasped, pulling back sharply, staring down at my trembling claws in a mix of frustration and shame.

"Damn it," I whispered, my voice cracking as I felt the humiliating pulse between my legs. I clenched my claws, trying to resist, but the instinct was too strong. My mouth was dry, my stomach churning with disgust, but the ache drowned it out, screaming for release. I had to do something.

My paw shook as I lifted it, a sick idea quickly taking hold.

Stop, please...

But the need only intensified, clouding my thoughts until all I could think of was silencing it, even just for a moment. I brought the tip of a claw to my maw and bit down harshly, each crunch of my teeth against the sharpened end sending shudders through me. The edges dulled slowly under my bite, each press a reminder of the desperation that had led me here.

This is what you've come to? Dulling your own claws just to...

The thought twisted my stomach, but the heat coiled tighter, relentless. When the edges were rounded enough on two of my four digits, I lowered my paw, trembling, and hesitated.

This is disgusting.

But my hips were already moving, a treacherous instinct driving me forward, the ache too deep to ignore. With a shaky breath, I let my claws trace over the sensitive area, the dulled tips still rough but no longer sharp. It wasn't painless--the pressure sent shocks through me, part pain and part satisfaction--but the sensations only added to the torrent of shame and desperate need that filled me.

"Oh... fuck," I whispered, pressing a single digit inside, biting down on my lip to stifle a groan as the dulled claw dragged against sensitive walls, the ache merging with the heat coursing through me. Each movement felt raw, primal--rougher than the touch I truly craved, but it kept me going, my hips rolling to meet the rhythm. The pain transformed into something darker, sharper, igniting a spark deep within, one I couldn't resist.

Each thrust was a jagged, stinging pulse that forced me to grit my teeth, fighting against the surge building inside. My body demanded more, deeper, sinking further into the relentless pace. I whimpered, breaths coming in shallow gasps, struggling to hold back the moan clawing at my lips. Slickness began to stream down my paw, betraying my shameful arousal as I pushed in a second claw, the stretch filling me in ways I had barely imagined.

It was maddening--each thrust a ripple of pleasure and discomfort winding through me. Tension coiled tighter, like a spring pulled taut, aching for release. Heat and wetness pooled along my trembling thighs, each movement fanning a flame in my core. My whole body shook with need, the edge of release tantalisingly close, yet instinct demanded more, urging me onwards into this consuming rhythm.

"Just... hurry up," I whimpered, voice strained, helpless against the waves of pleasure overtaking me. I pressed the back of my head against the stall, horns scraping against the cool wood, a contrast to the heat engulfing me. Eyes squeezed shut as if to blot out the shame that clawed at my mind, caught between desire and guilt.

Desperate to finish, to get the humiliation over with, I focused once more upon that moment in the park, imagining how things could have gone, should have gone.

With each thrust, my need grew, thighs trembling as my claws slid in and out, pace shifting into something raw and feral. The world outside faded; only my ragged breaths and the wet sounds echoed in the confined space, leaving me captive to this dark impulse.

I moaned, unable to hold back, surrendering to the sensations consuming me. My claws moved faster, stoking a desperate frenzy as I pressed harder against the wall, lost in a rhythm both liberating and terrifying. Each thrust pushed me closer to the edge, the pleasure an unbearable crescendo.

"Please... please," I gasped, body trembling at the edge, tension reaching an excruciating peak. I felt as if I were teetering on the brink, crushed under the weight of need and shame.

With a final thrust, I plunged my claws deeper, to the knuckle, tipping me over into a blinding wave of release. My body convulsed, wings trembling as pleasure surged through me like a breaking wave, filling me with a fierce, all-consuming ecstasy. Still I kept going, drawing out as much fast-fading ecstasy as I could manage, claws shaking as I continued pleasuring myself, producing a vile sloshing sound.

The release washed over me, a white-hot flash, leaving me breathless, trembling, the stall walls pressing in as the reality of what I'd done closed around me.

As the pleasure faded, the reality of what I'd done slammed back into me, cold and harsh. I pulled my claws away, staring at the sticky fluids coating my paw, the shame twisting in my stomach as the weight of my actions settled over me.

"What... what is wrong with me...?" I whispered, the words barely audible as I hugged my wings close to my body, trying to hide from the crushing shame that suffocated me. I could still feel the lingering warmth within me, a bitter reminder of how completely I'd lost control.

Forming tears stung at my eyes, but I blinked them back, more ashamed with myself than upset.

No one can know.

No one can ever know.

The thought echoed in my mind, each repetition carving the shame deeper, a weight I couldn't bear yet had no choice but to carry. I sat there for a while staring at my soaked paw, my once immaculate talons dull and cracked. They were essentially useless until they grew back.

.....

I needed to escape, I realised as I shakily stood up, lifting myself up from the now sticky flooring. I quickly wiped it up with my apron before stuffing it inside my backpack. My legs shook, but the thought of James seeing me in such a degraded state proved enough motivation. When cleaned up somewhat, I rushed out of the changing room, pushing past a few more human females, desperation fuelling me.

As I burst into the night air, the cool breeze stung against my flushed scales, but it was a welcome relief, grounding me in the chaos of my emotions. I felt utterly broken, lost in a storm of shame and regret. I unfurled my wings, taking to the sky with a fierce urgency, desperate to outfly the torment that had become a part of me.

The rhythm of my wings slicing through the air and the steady pulse of mana offered a momentary distraction from the spiralling thoughts of self-loathing. But with every powerful stroke, I could feel the remnants of my earlier indulgence pulsing beneath my scales, a hot reminder of my vulnerability that refused to fade--a brand of shame burnt into me.

The ache still coiled deep within, waiting for another crack in my restraint, despite the humiliating release I'd succumbed to back in that changing stall. I'd sunk so low, clinging to James' scent on my apron, using it to fuel a shameful need I could barely control. The memory made my claws itch; it was a moment of weakness I wished I could erase. Even now, I could feel the lingering heat clinging to me, the weight of my desperation clinging to my body like a stain I couldn't wash off.

As I flew, I realised I wasn't just trying to escape the space I'd been in--I was running from myself. The wind lashing against my scales reminded me of everything I couldn't outrun: the reckless loss of control, the way I'd forced myself on James, taking something he hadn't wanted. The hurt in his eyes, the way he'd tried to stop me--all of it haunted me with each beat of my wings.

When the familiar streets of home came into view below, I descended in a heavy, shaky glide. My landing reverberated through my body, amplifying every ache and pulse. I barely registered the climb up to our flat complex, feeling weighed down, trapped by the frustration and longing that churned within me, tightening like a vice around my heart.

At the entrance, I spotted Samys sitting on the steps; her sharp golden eyes locked onto me with a piercing clarity that cut through my haze. She didn't look surprised to see me; instead, there was a calm, knowing edge in her gaze that told me she'd been waiting.

"Rhys told me everything," she said before I could speak. "I'd ask what you were thinking, but... I can guess."

I sank down beside her, exhaustion settling heavily into my limbs. "Yeah, I screwed up. I know, you don't have to--"

"You don't look like you know." Her words sliced through me with brutal precision. She looked me over, her expression shifting as her nose crinkled slightly in disgust. "Alys, you reek. What have you been doing?"

My jaw tightened, heat rising to my cheeks as shame flared up again. Of course she could smell it. I hadn't even thought to cover my tracks, too consumed by the humiliation of that moment to think clearly. "Nothing," I muttered, voice tight.

Samys shook her head. "It's... fine. But you're clearly in heat--and it's early."

I exhaled, the last shred of denial slipping away as I stared down at my claws and the two broken talons on the right. "Started a week ago," I admitted, my tone sharp with frustration. "Kissing him probably forced it on."

"Of course it did." She raised an eyebrow. "Sticking your tongue in someone's mouth whilst laying atop of them will do that. Rhys also told me he tried to stop you when things went too far. So, how'd it feel? That moment of power?"

I flinched, her words hitting deeper than I cared to admit. My claws curled against the stone steps. "I tried to apologise," I replied, voice trembling as I fought the urge to bare my teeth. "But he just... he looked so lost and confused."

"Then try harder." Her voice held no softness, only a firm, unwavering insistence. "Did you think a quick sorry would fix everything? You crossed a line, Alys. A real apology means you need to earn back his trust, not just say the words."

"Earn it back?" The frustration inside twisted, raw, and painful. "What if he doesn't forgive me? What if it's over?"

Samys' expression softened just slightly, a flicker of sympathy in her gaze. "Then at least you'll know you did everything you could. But giving up now? You deserve to lose him if that's all the effort you're willing to give."

I dropped my head into my claws, her words sinking deep, settling like stones inside my chest. "I don't even know where to start," I whispered, the admission feeling as raw as it did shameful. "What if he doesn't want me around anymore?"

"Then you'll accept that," Samys replied bluntly. "But at least face him with some spine. Show up, do something, and stop pretending one mistake ends everything. If you want to fix this, act like it."

She rose, her gaze unyielding, a demand that wouldn't accept excuses. "Get some sleep. Sort yourself out." She paused, giving me a lingering look. "But I need to know--was it all instinct? Every bit of it?"

I hesitated, breath catching in my throat. The question lingered--a small spark of truth I couldn't deny. I shifted my gaze to the grass, reluctant to answer. "I... don't know," I murmured, almost too quiet for her to hear. "I want to believe it was only that. That when the season's over, it'll all fade away, and I'll just... look back and cringe. But maybe..." My voice trailed off, barely above a whisper. "Maybe some small part of me did want it."

Samys nodded slowly, her eyes on the darkened horizon as if seeing something distant. "If that's the case, you need to figure out what this actually means to you. If you don't know your own heart, how can you hope to make things right?"

Her words lingered, a quiet, undeniable truth that twisted painfully inside me. She turned, her voice softening in a way that almost hurt more. "Three weeks isn't love, Alys; it just isn't. You're lonely and desperate."

The truth of it cut sharply, yet Samys' gaze softened even as her words struck home. "But maybe... there's something. Small and weak, perhaps. And maybe it's like..."

She stopped herself from continuing, gave me a weak smile, and departed.

Her words sank into me, stirring a reluctant warmth amid the lingering ache. I managed a small nod, unable to shake the quiet realisation taking root.

Guess it runs in the family...

Inside, the flat was cold and dim, and the stillness wrapped around me like a shroud. I paced the living room, my claws clicking softly against the hardwood, my mind racing with Samys' words. Could I really face James without understanding my own reasons? I'd blamed it all on the heat, the instincts I'd barely managed to control--but it couldn't be that simple, could it? I wanted to believe that my behaviour was nothing more than a temporary loss of control, but a nagging thought remained: maybe, deep down, I'd chosen not to stop.

If I were honest, I could see why James' presence stirred something in me. He'd always been a little hesitant, never quite as close with others as he was with me, and I had latched onto that bond, letting myself feel something more. Maybe I had been lonely, purposeless, and James had made everything seem less isolated, even in this strange new place where so little felt familiar. I'd wanted him to want me, in some way that I couldn't quite name, but the desire was real, tangible.

I slumped onto the sofa, wings curling around me like a protective shield, my mind playing back the small moments that I'd come to cherish. The teasing remarks, his quiet smile, the way he'd blush at my jokes. I'd clung to each one, reading into them, maybe too much. Each lingering look and soft laugh had felt like something only I could see, even if he didn't feel the same. But that didn't excuse what I'd done. No amount of closeness justified crossing the line.

A tremor ran through me as the memory of his expression came back--his confusion, his shock, and that brief flicker of fear. I'd missed all the signs, ignored his hesitation, and twisted something innocent into a mess of impulse and assumption. I should have let him take the lead, given him room to show me if he wanted something more.

Instead, I'd forced my feelings into his space, taking what I thought was owed to me, and in the process, I'd risked the friendship I'd come to rely on.

I let out a slow breath, gathering my resolve. If I'd ruined something that could have been, then so be it. I could face that. Life moved on; it always did. But first, I needed to apologise properly, to reach out, and at least try to make amends.

With heavy steps, I moved to the kitchen, more out of habit than hunger. I prepared a quick snack, the motions calming me just enough to think. My thoughts lingered on what I'd realised when I left work: this couldn't go unresolved. I needed to break the silence hanging between us, to say something that could bridge the gap I'd created.

Picking up my tablet, I tapped open the messaging app, my heart thudding in my chest as I typed his name. I hesitated, every word feeling both too much and not enough. What if he didn't want to hear from me? What if he'd moved on? Still, I took a breath and began typing, fingers shaking as I poured out the apology I should have given days ago.

"James... I don't know if you even want to hear from me right now. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't. But I have to say I'm sorry. I crossed a line I shouldn't have, and it wasn't fair to you."

I paused, feeling the weight of each word, then continued.

"I let my instincts take over, and I know that's not an excuse. I didn't think about how you felt, and I'm sorry. I just... I hope you can forgive me, even if you need time."

After rereading the message, I hovered over the send button, nerves twisting tightly in my stomach. I wanted to add more--to tell him how much I regretted everything, how I wished I could pull us back to when things were simpler, before I'd complicated everything. But I knew now wasn't the time for more words, and pressing him would only make things harder.

With a deep breath, I steadied my talon. This was it. I hit send.

As the message vanished, I exhaled slowly, a heavy tension slipping away--only to be replaced by a gnawing worry that coiled in my stomach. What if he doesn't reply? The thought sent a chill through me, but I steeled myself. I had crossed a line, and he had every right to ignore me if that's what he chose.

Trying to push the anxiety down, I cleared away my snack and tossed the wrappers, feeling the grime of the day clinging to my scales, along with the unmistakable, lingering scent of my own arousal. I tossed my tablet onto the bed and hurried to the bathroom, desperate to wash away any trace of that humiliating reminder.

The water cascaded over me, hot and soothing, as I scrubbed at my scales with the sisal brush. The coarse bristles bit into my skin just enough to ground me, helping me shed the grime and the day's weight. With each pass, I focused on the sensation of the boiling water carrying away not only dirt but the stress and guilt that had clung to me like a second skin.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I stepped out into a thick cloud of steam, unable to see my reflection but feeling cleansed in a way that went deeper than just my scales. I shook myself vigorously, sending droplets flying, and hung the stained apron in the washer before heading to bed, wrapping myself in the softness of my blankets. I doubted a shower and a single message would solve everything, but for the first time in days, I felt ready to face whatever might come next.

Just as exhaustion began to weigh down my eyelids, a buzz from the tablet jolted me awake. I reached for it, hope flickering tentatively in my chest as I unlocked the screen and opened the message.

"Hey."

One small word, yet it sent a rush of emotions surging through me--relief, anxiety, and a lingering dread. He was there, at least, still willing to talk. My heart pounded as I watched the typing bubbles appear and disappear, each pause stretching into eternity.

After what felt like ten minutes, he continued.

"Got your message. I'm still processing everything. I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you or anything. I just need some time to figure out some things. We should talk soon. Just not now, okay?"

I stared at the screen, absorbing his words. They were a reassurance, yet they carried the weight of everything I'd done, a reminder of the line I'd crossed. My heart pounded as new doubts crept in. Processing--did that mean he was angry? Disappointed? Did he think less of me?

I took a steadying breath, reminding myself he needed space to sort through his feelings. I had to respect that.

"Thank you," I typed back quickly. "Hope you're doing okay."

I hesitated, wanting to say more--to share my regret, to tell him how much I wished we could go back to simpler times. But I knew that now wasn't the time. Instead, I hit send and set the tablet aside, sinking back against the pillows, eyes fixed on the ceiling above me.

Chapter 9

"Pinned." Alys' voice came low, almost a growl. "And this time, it's final."

I forced a shaky laugh, trying to keep things light despite the weight of her claws against my wrists. My heart hammered under her grip. "Fine, fine, you win... Just don't set me on fire." I glanced down at my shirt, smeared with a thick green stain. "Ugh, this shirt is so wrecked..."

Her silence settled over us, wiping away any humour. The world seemed to collapse inward, tunnelling down to the weight of her body pinning mine, the heat radiating from her, and our breaths mingling in the stillness.

"You're, um... really strong," I managed, feeling my own voice falter as I searched her eyes. "And kind of terrifying."

"Oh, yeah?" She whispered, her snout coming closer until the space between us was no more than an inch, her nose just above mine. The air felt thick, charged, as I felt her breath flow just above mine.

"Yeah," I stammered, barely able to hold her gaze, my heart pounding frantically. I tried to move, but I was caught--pinned by her heavy grip, by her gaze.

"Alys?" I said, my voice trembling with uncertainty.

Her eyes flicked down, as if to my mouth, and a sudden, overwhelming realisation crashed over me.

"Alys, are you... okay?" I tried.

I barely recognized my own breaths, coming shallow and uneven, like I was struggling for air. She didn't answer, but her gaze grew even more intense, something restless and raw simmering behind her eyes.

Then her gaze flicked down again--to my lips.

"Alys?"

For a moment, I thought she'd pull back, break the stare, and laugh it all off. But instead, her grip tightened on my wrists, and she leaned in even closer, the smooth scales of her nose brushing against the tip of mine, her warmth bleeding into me. Her breath carried a faint chocolate sweetness, edged with a unique spice.

"A-Alys...?"

I couldn't finish. She closed the last inch of space between us, her mouth pressing against mine, rougher than I expected, the texture strange and unfamiliar against my lips. I froze, caught completely off guard, unsure of what to do or what was even happening.

She pulled back, hesitating, her breath mingling with mine in the heavy silence as her eyes searched my face. I didn't know what to say or do, but the look in her eyes left no room for questions. She leaned in again, capturing my mouth once more, her clawed hands winding into my hair and clutching at my shirt as though afraid to let go.

I didn't push her away. Instead, I felt myself responding on sheer instinct, a slow, tentative kiss, even though uncertainty still pulsed through me. Her lips were unlike anything I'd ever felt - flat, rough against mine, strange and almost electrifying.

As I moved weakly against her, she deepened the kiss, her urgency mounting as she pressed harder against me, her long, forked tongue tracing the closed seam of my lips. Her claws dug in and I felt a wave of heat shiver through me as her wings wrapped around, enclosing us. It felt... overwhelming, like I was completely surrounded, both exhilarated and held captive.

Alys shifted, her weight pressing harder against me, sealing me in place beneath her. With a tilt of her curved snout, she found a better angle, able to press her lips against mine more deeply. I shuddered, a flush of warmth blooming from the subtle movements of her body as she adjusted her position. My arms reached up, holding onto her strong, sleek forelimbs, torn between holding on and pushing her away.

Taking this as a sign, her mouth opened against mine, deepening the already intense embrace. I tried to meet her pace, my mind struggling to catch up, but her intensity was relentless. I could feel her whole body pressing into mine, her scales sliding over my skin, her breathing heavy and rapid.

When her hips purposefully ground against mine, I gasped, the reflexive gesture allowing her tongue to at last slip between my lips, to taste my mouth and trace every inch with a feverish, insistent urgency that left me feeling physically dizzy. A shiver ran through me as her muscular tail coiled tightly around both ankles, her need so strong it left me breathless.

For a second, I managed to increase the push on her shoulders, trying to ease her back. My fingers pressed into her muscles, hoping she'd understand, but she only seemed to press closer, as if she hadn't noticed.

"Alys," I tried to say against her lips, but it was swallowed by the heat of her kiss as she leaned in deeper, her flat lips moving against mine almost desperately.

My breaths came short, nearly panicked, as she overwhelmed me, filling my senses with nothing but her warmth, her weight, and the smell I was beginning to notice. The tang was sharp and almost acrid, like something fierce and burning at the edge of my senses. And then I felt her paws pressing even tighter on me, the hold on my hair near-harsh, her body shuddering with some barely contained need.

With an audible moan, she pressed deeper, her tongue pushing so deep I nearly gagged. I went still, feeling her desperation turn to something more consuming, something that made my pulse race with fear. It was too much, far, far too much. My hold on her, my light budging, became a push, but her strength and weight were beyond me.

Her maw continued its feverish assault, and I could feel her breathing grow rougher, her movements almost feral. Her talons dug into my skin painfully, her need relentless as she pushed forward, deeper, her lips demanding more even as I pulled back. A chilling realization hit me--she wasn't letting up, but was instead pushing forward.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, she pulled away, her eyes wide and her breaths ragged as she stumbled back from me. The cool air hit my face, and I barely managed to catch my breath as I took in her expression--searching, lost, desperate, guilty.

"Oh, no... James, I--" she stammered, her voice catching, but whatever she was about to say broke off, as though she couldn't find the words. An apology? An explanation? Neither would make this any clearer.

What... what just happened?

Say something.

But I couldn't. The silence stretched on, and on, and on...

Until.

"Sorry."

...Hm?

What...?

I barely even registered her departure. One second she was there, holding my gaze with an unreadable look--regret, confusion? And then she was gone, a burst of wind and a beat of her wings carrying her away into the sky. I just sat there, glued to the spot, staring blankly at where she'd disappeared over the treetops.

My mind felt blank, as though the shock of it all had wiped me clean.

Gradually, however, the silence around me faded, the haze lifting. I blinked, the world falling back into place: the rustling leaves, the hum of distant traffic, and the smell of crunched grass beneath me. It all felt so surreal, like I'd somehow wandered into someone else's life, yet there was no one there to wake me up.

I looked down at my hands, numb, as though waiting for them to reveal something, anything. My palms felt clammy, fingers shaking ever so slightly as I lifted myself to my feet and stumbled over to my backpack and our discarded food.

What just happened?

My mind couldn't hold on to the memory; it kept slipping away from it, like it was too big or too strange to process all at once.

My eyes drifted down to the scattered remnants of our faux picnic. Right, yeah. Packing. I focused all of my energy on the act, feeling the familiar motions carry me along like a river's current. I gathered up the untouched sandwiches, the half-eaten packet of crisps, and our drinks. Each movement was slow, automatic, mechanical.

And yet... no matter how much I tried to hold on to that haze, small flashes kept bleeding through it--her eyes, glassy yet intense and scorching, the solid weight of her atop me, the roughness of her lips. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying desperately to will the images away, but they stuck stubbornly to the edges of my frazzled mind, glowing like embers determined to live.

As I continued, my hands began to tremble more noticeably. I paused, staring down at them, unsure whether it was the fading adrenaline or something else entirely. Alys... Alys was my friend. My dragon friend. She was someone I could laugh with, share a meal at work with, maybe even count on in a tight spot. But this? Whatever this was? The edges were blurry, strange, impossible to define.

Why...?

Why had I... Why had I leaned into it?

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the thoughts, but they seeped in anyway, unbidden and unwanted. She'd leaned down, pressed her lips to mine, and in that single, shocking moment, I hadn't pulled back. No, worse--I'd felt something, something new and uncomfortable, but... electric. A brief spark, buried under layers of shock, but it was there. And it made my skin crawl.

The chocolate bar was the last thing on the blanket, half-wrapped in its foil. I picked it up, my fingers brushing the bite marks she'd left. I tucked it into the bag with the other items, as though maybe I could pack away the whole experience, stuff it deep in the backpack where I wouldn't have to look at it again.

But the memory of her lips, her rough, solid weight pressing against me, stayed etched in my mind, refusing to fade.

I stood there, staring blankly at the cleared patch of grass where our picnic had been.

It felt like hours had passed since I'd packed everything away, and yet my feet wouldn't move. I kept thinking, She kissed me. And I...

I stopped myself. No. I couldn't dwell on it. This wasn't something I could allow myself to pick apart, to analyse and sort into neat little categories.

I forced myself to take a deep breath and turn away, finally lifting the backpack onto my shoulder and heading toward the trail. With each step, I hoped the shock would fade, that maybe, if I kept walking long enough, the numbness would settle into something manageable. But as I walked, it felt like my chest was being squeezed, a dull ache spreading through me that I couldn't shake.

By the time I reached the edge of the park, my legs felt heavy, every step a quiet reminder of what had happened. I kept my head down, avoiding eye contact with the occasional passerby, barely registering their faces. It was as if I was moving through a fog, disconnected from everything around me. My body was going through the motions of normalcy, but my mind was trapped in that single moment, replaying it over and over like a broken record.

My mind was so twisted up in shame and confusion that I barely noticed where I was going. The path had led me off the park's beaten track, and I'd wandered further out, onto the busy road just beyond the tree line. I didn't even see the curb in front of me until it was too late.

My foot hit the edge of the sidewalk, and I stumbled, loosing my footing and putting myself right in the path of an oncoming car.

Headlights blazed in my vision, a pair of searing beams that swallowed everything else. My body froze, my legs locked as panic surged, every thought scattering like startled birds. The car's horn blared, sharp and piercing, and I saw the flash of the driver's face, wide-eyed and horrified.

The screech of brakes filled the air, tires squealing against the asphalt as the car hurtled closer, unstoppable.

I was about to die.

In that split second, however, something jerked me back, hard, yanking me out of harm's way. I stumbled backward, a rough hand gripping my shoulder, and the rush of air from the car whipped past me as I landed roughly on the curb. The driver shot me a wild, bewildered look as they sped off, leaving me alone, breathless and shaken, my heart pounding in my ears.

I turned to look for whoever had pulled me back, my eyes scanning the sidewalk for any sign of them. There had been something--a flash of purple and white, a glimmer just at the edge of my vision before I'd fallen back. But now, the sidewalk was empty, just a bare stretch of concrete bathed in the dim glow of streetlights. There was no one there.

Had someone... helped me? Or had I simply stumbled back?

The memory of that grip lingered, the solid, unmistakable pressure of fingers digging into my shoulder. I'd felt it, and I'd heard someone, too, a low, sharp voice muttering a single word, the sound almost lost in the rush of my own heartbeat.

"Idiot."

.....

I didn't show up to work the following Monday, and then when I did the day after, I barely spoke to anyone, certainly not Alys. I wasn't mad at her, per se, although maybe I should have been, but I just didn't have the energy for it. I was just so... lost.

She'd forced an idea upon me that hadn't even been a flicker of thought--dating a dragon - dating something that wasn't just another gender but rather another species entirely.

I had tried to bury the thought beneath my routine, beneath the fast food trays, the orders to fill and the stilted conversations with co-workers. But no matter how hard I tried to focus, my mind would always wander back to that kiss. Alys had been so... desperate, and yet so unsure, as if she didn't want to hurt me but couldn't stop herself.

And now she was here again, behind the grill, her wings pressed tightly against her sides as she flipped the burgers with methodical precision. She hadn't made any noise when she entered the kitchen. But I noticed her right away. It was like my body had learned to sense her, to recognize that presence even before I could see her.

She worked in silence, her movements sharp and deliberate, but there was something off about the way she carried herself today. The usual fluidity was gone, replaced by a tense, almost robotic rhythm. Every motion felt more deliberate, as if she was forcing herself to keep going, to keep moving, even when her mind was clearly elsewhere.

I could see it in the way she held herself, the tightness in her posture, the way her claws clenched against the spatula with just a little more force than necessary. A faint tremor ran through her shoulders, but she kept her head down, not meeting anyone's eyes--not mine. It felt like she was trying to disappear, to become invisible.

I focused on the fryer, trying to distract myself, but it was hard not to glance over at her. There was a heaviness to her, a weight that she couldn't shake off. Guilt? Regret? Whatever it was, it wasn't like Alys at all. She was always the one with the sharp grin, the one who would flirt or joke around with me while working. But now, she was just... here. Present, but not really.

I dropped a few more baskets into the hot oil, the sizzle filling the air, but even that sound couldn't drown out the quiet tension between us. Alys flipped the burgers, her movements jerky, the quiet scrape of the spatula against the grill louder than usual. Her eyes never met mine.

Why couldn't I just brush it off? It was just a kiss--a stupid, impulsive kiss. But every time I tried to forget, it came rushing back, like a ghost haunting me.

When I stole another glance at her, I caught the visible tremor in her talons as she turned a patty over. Her wings, usually relaxed and flowing, were held tight to her sides, as if they, too, were trying to shrink away.

I didn't know what to do. What could I do? We had crossed a line that neither of us could erase, and neither of us seemed brave enough to face it. I couldn't just ask her if she was okay. The question felt hollow. She wasn't okay, and I wasn't okay, and neither of us knew how to fix it.

The fryer beeped, signalling that the chicken was done, and I focused on pulling it out, keeping my hands steady, trying to ignore the way her presence still filled the room, even if she was avoiding me. Her movements were getting slower, her focus slipping further away. She didn't make any of her usual comments, didn't shoot me any playful looks. No, that day, she just... worked. Like she was going through the motions, but none of it meant anything.

Finally, the orders started coming in quicker. I couldn't keep staring at her, but I couldn't help it. Every time I glanced over, she was there--her eyes not quite focused, her head low, her breath even but shallow, as if she were trying not to break. I caught her rubbing the back of her neck again, her claws dragging slowly along her scales, and I could almost see the weight of whatever it was she was carrying.

I wanted to say something. Anything. But my mouth wouldn't cooperate. What could I say to make this better? How could I make her feel better when I didn't even know how to fix myself?

And when I caught her eyes for just a second, she quickly looked away, as though she couldn't bear to let me see the hurt in them. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. Instead, I just kept working, focusing on the fryer and the orders coming in, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness inside me.

The kitchen was quiet, except for the sizzle of the grill and fryer. It was like the whole world had shrunk to just the sounds of cooking--my mind a million miles away from anything else, but somehow always tethered to her, to the way she stood there, so distant, so lost in her own thoughts.

Finally, the shift ended, and I could feel the air shift, like a weight lifting, even if only for a moment. Alys didn't look at me as she gathered her things, moving as if she were afraid to make a single sound. I wanted to say something, but nothing felt right.

There was nothing I could say to fix it.

The days became a blur, a mess of splintered thoughts and half-baked attempts to talk--each of which ended with me looking away every time she finally met my gaze. I could see it in her eyes: she wanted to talk. Or maybe she wanted me to talk. Either way, neither of us could seem to find the words.

Every moment with her felt heavy, weighed down by the unspoken tension between us. I'd catch her looking at me sometimes, only for her to glance away, her wings shifting uneasily like they wanted to shield her from whatever was going through my mind. And every time I thought I might say something, my courage faltered.

What was there to say? Sorry for being distant? Sorry for feeling... what? Confused? Scared? Intrigued?

I didn't know what to say, nor even what to think. I couldn't even understand my own feelings, let alone hers.

But the more I avoided her, the worse it felt. Like the silence was building a wall between us that neither of us could tear down. Every time I saw her, it felt like she was slipping further and further away, and I couldn't shake the thought that if I didn't do something soon, she'd be gone entirely--physically and/or emotionally.

By Friday, the weight of it all was too much to bear. I couldn't keep floating through this fog, dodging glances and swallowing words that needed to be said. I didn't know what I felt or what I wanted, but I knew I couldn't keep running from it.

And so, that Friday, I resolved myself to fixing the puzzle that was my thoughts.

.....

The blinking cursor on my screen pulsed like a heartbeat, a silent dare. My hands hovered above the keyboard, motionless, as if typing would somehow solidify the mess in my head.

The living room was silent, but my thoughts were louder than any noise could ever be, drowning out everything else. I tried to focus, to shove it all aside, but her face intruded every time. Her scales catching the sunlight in streaks of blue. Her bright, piercing eyes. And her lips--no. Stop. Stop thinking about it.

My hand flew to my hair, tugging at the roots until it stung. Eight days. It had been eight days since that kiss. Since Alys leaned in--scales glinting, wings half-folded--and pressed her lips against mine. Eight days since my brain turned to static, leaving me sat there, stunned and overwhelmed by feelings I couldn't even name. Feelings I didn't want to name. Feelings I shouldn't have.

But it wasn't just the kiss that haunted me--it was what came after. The way I'd leaned in, almost instinctively, only to yank myself back as if I'd touched a live wire when it became too much. The way she'd looked at me then: part regret, part fear, part something I couldn't understand. And then, she'd left. No explanation. No words. Just gone.

And today--God, today--seeing her at work had been enough to derail me completely. Across the room, her presence was a gravitational pull, impossible to ignore. My heart raced, palms damp, mind screaming, What the hell is wrong with you?

Was there something wrong with me? That was the question that refused to leave me.

Alys wasn't just different--she was a dragon. A literal dragon. Wings, scales, a tail--all of it. And yet, none of that had crossed my mind in the moment. All I'd thought about was her. Her laugh, her voice, the way she made the world seem just a little less heavy.

But liking her? Kissing her? That crossed a line I hadn't even realized existed until I tripped over it. I groaned, slumping forward until my forehead thunked against the desk. My chair groaned in protest, and for a moment, I wished it would just collapse and swallow me whole. I couldn't keep spiralling like this.

What I needed--if I even knew what I needed--was advice. Someone to tell me I wasn't completely broken for feeling this way. Or, alternatively, someone to shake me and shout, Yes, you are! Snap out of it!

I thought of my friends first--guys I'd known since high school yet hadn't spoken to in a while. The group chat had died some months back, and aside from the occasional meet-up, no one really talked to each other anymore--at least, not to me. There was still the chance they'd respond, but it would likely be nothing but jokes about scaly girlfriends, and... nah.

With a sigh, I set my phone aside, ignoring the new notifications lighting up the screen. My "friends" weren't the answer, not this time. My thoughts shifted to my sister next. She'd listen. She'd understand. She always did, and she'd been in a good mood ever since we'd sat together with dad, as awkward as it had been.

But even the idea of dumping this on her made my stomach twist. She had her own problems; she didn't need me barging in with... whatever this was.

And what would I even say? Hey, so a dragon kissed me, and I think I liked it. Is that bad? Just imagining her face made me wince. No. I'd figure it out myself. I always did.

That left... the internet. A place where anonymity was both a shield and a curse. Reddit popped into my head first, but I dismissed it almost as quickly. I didn't want to get buried under sarcastic comments or drowned in the usual platitudes. Just be yourself, bro. Or, dragons are hot. What's the issue??

No thanks.

I needed something quieter. Safer. Somewhere I could explain without being seen. And then, almost as if summoned, I thought of that AI thing everyone used for essays and cheating at school. It wasn't a person, and maybe that was the point. It wouldn't laugh. It wouldn't judge. It would just... respond.

After googling what the site was even called and pulling it up, I stared at the blinking cursor in the chat box, my fingers hovering over my mechanical keyboard. It felt ridiculously pathetic asking an AI for advice about something like this. But what choice did I have? Taking a deep breath, I started typing.

"Hi. So this is kind of embarrassing, but I need advice about something weird. Is that okay?" The words stared back at me, stiff and awkward, like they belonged to someone else.

"Of course! Feel free to share whatever's on your mind," the AI replied almost instantly, its eternally polite tone managing to both reassure and unnerve me.

I hesitated, my fingers trembling slightly above the keys. How was I supposed to explain this? How could I put into words something I barely understood myself? Taking a deep breath, I started typing.

"Well," I wrote, "a friend of mine; Alys--a dragon--kissed me the other day. And I liked it. I think. But now I can't stop thinking about it, and I don't know if that's normal or if there's something wrong with me."

The words hit the screen with a finality that made my stomach churn. I hit enter before I could second-guess myself, leaning back as if distance would dull the sting of admitting it. My heart pounded in the silence that followed. And then the AI's response appeared.

"It's completely normal to feel confused or conflicted about your emotions, especially when they involve something unexpected. Attraction can be complicated--it's not always tied to the physical form but can instead be about connection, personality, and the way someone makes you feel. There's nothing inherently wrong with you for feeling this way. It's okay to take time to process and understand your feelings."

I stared at the response, letting the words sink in. It made sense. Too much sense. Of course attraction wasn't always physical. I knew that, as did everyone else. But knowing it didn't help. If anything, it made me feel worse. Because if it wasn't just about form, then what was it about? Did that mean I was just hopelessly open to anyone--or anything--that clicked with me emotionally?

Or maybe it was about form. That was the darker thought, lurking in the corners of my mind. Because yes, Alys was kind and funny, everything I admired in a person. But it wasn't just that. I couldn't deny the physical pull--the way her scales caught the light, the musical lilt in her voice, the almost imperceptible flick of her floppy ears when she was excited. Things that shouldn't have mattered, but did.

And that terrified me.

"Okay," I typed back, my hands moving almost on their own. "But what if it's not just about the emotional connection? What if it's physical too? I mean, it's not like I'm attracted to dragons, right? It's just her. But doesn't that mean there's something... wrong with me? That I could look at her and like things about her that aren't human?"

The pause before the AI's reply felt interminable, though I knew it was only seconds.

"Being attracted to someone for who they are as a whole--both emotionally and physically--is not wrong," it wrote. "It's natural for attraction to encompass multiple facets of a person, including their physical traits. If you're finding yourself drawn specifically to Alys and not to dragons as a species, it might simply mean your feelings are unique to her. There's no 'correct' way to feel attraction--it's deeply personal."

A dry, bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. No correct way to feel attraction? It was easy for a machine to say when it didn't have to live with the fallout. I leaned back, staring at the ceiling. My chest felt tight, like the walls were closing in.

It wasn't like I was suddenly going to develop a thing for dragons, I reasoned. The thought alone made my stomach twist. I wasn't attracted to dragons. I didn't look at other dragons and feel this flutter. It was just her.

Just Alys.

But if it was just her, then why couldn't I stop fixating on the parts of her that weren't human? The strength of her legs, the curve of her wings, the softness of her ears beneath my fingers.

And if I liked those things about her, didn't that mean... what? That I wasn't just attracted to her as a person but to her as a dragon? What did that even mean? What did that make me?

I dropped my head into my hands, pressing my palms against my temples as if I could squeeze the spiral out of my brain. The AI's words floated in my mind, calm and measured, but they felt so far removed from the storm inside me. They were right, logically, but they weren't enough to drown out the insidious voice in the back of my mind.

This isn't normal. This isn't okay. You shouldn't feel this way.

The whisper became a roar, one thought bleeding into another until I couldn't keep them straight. It's just Alys. I'm not into dragons, just her. It was becoming a mantra, one with diminishing returns. But if I like parts of her that are dragon, doesn't that mean... No, it doesn't. But what if it does? What if I'm... broken?

The word hit like a slap, stealing the breath from my lungs. Broken. That was the crux of it, wasn't it? The nagging fear that something in me wasn't wired right, that I was defective in a way I couldn't even begin to imagine.

My eyes flicked back to the screen, rereading the AI's response as if hoping the words might rearrange themselves into something more comforting. They didn't.

"Thanks," I typed, my fingers trembling, foot tapping frantically against the smooth floorboards of my flat. "I guess I just don't know what to do. I don't know how to stop feeling like this."

The AI replied quickly, its tone as steady as ever. It talked about self-acceptance, about giving myself time to explore and process my feelings. About how attraction didn't have to fit into tidy boxes.

It was good advice. Kind. Reasonable.

And completely fucking useless.

I wanted to believe it. I wanted to hold onto its reassurances like a lifeline. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the question gnawing at the edges of my mind. The question I was too afraid to type.

One kiss--one kiss and my entire life spirals.

A single kiss.

...What if I never stop feeling like this?

The thought sat there, festering, until I couldn't take it anymore. I stared at my phone, thumb hovering over the screen. I scrolled to Sarah's name, desperation overcoming fear. My sister. The one person I trusted to at least try to take this seriously.

Maybe.

I began typing out a text.

"Hey..."

"You busy...?"

"Can we talk...?"

"Yo. Me and..."

"Is it weird..."

Only to delete each and every one of them. They were all too vague, too blunt, too...

...I can't do this over text.

My fingers trembled as I turned my phone back on, thumbed over to her contact and hit call. The ringing filled my ears, each buzz dragging out for an eternity. Maybe she wouldn't pick up, I hoped; maybe she'd be busy streaming or deep into some project for one of her clients.

But then the ringing stopped.

"Yo," she answered, her voice bright and casual, the polar opposite of the complete mess I currently was. Loud electronic music thumped faintly in the background. "What's up?"

"Uh..." My throat was already closing. "Hey. Can we... talk? Like, for real?"

There was a pause, the music cutting off. "Sure," she said slowly. "What's going on?"

The words caught in my throat. It sounded so dumb. So... ridiculous. "It's... It's about Alys."

"Alys?" She repeated, her voice lifting slightly. "Your, uh, dragon friend?"

"Yeah. Her." I fidgeted with the edge of my desk, chewing on my next words. "She, uh... kissed me."

Silence. Long enough that I actually checked my phone to make sure the call was still connected.

"Oh," Sarah said finally. There was no teasing in her tone, just surprise. "Okay. Wow. And you're calling me because...?"

"I didn't hate it," I blurted, the words spilling out in a rush. "Like, at all. And now I can't stop thinking about it. And I don't know what that means, or what's wrong with me, or--"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Sarah interrupted, cutting through my spiralling. "Hold on. Let me... process this for a second."

I froze, the lump in my throat tightening. Processing. That wasn't a great sign.

"So, Alys... kissed you," she said slowly, almost cautiously. "And... you liked it?"

"Yeah," I said, barely above a whisper.

She didn't speak right away, and I could almost hear the gears turning in her head. When she did, her voice was measured but uncertain. "Okay. I mean, that's... unexpected. I guess I didn't think dragons... did that."

"She's not just a dragon," I said quickly, a defensive edge to my tone. "She's a person. She's--"

"I'm not saying it's bad!" Sarah said, cutting me off before I could push forward. "It's just... weird, you know? Like, not bad-weird, just... weird-weird. I'm trying to wrap my head around it."

"Yeah, well, try being me."

She let out a small laugh, though it was more nervous than amused. "Fairs. Okay, so... you, uh, kinda like her. And now you're freaking out because...?"

"Because it's wrong, Sarah," I said, my voice cracking. "She's a dragon. She has scales and wings and--" I broke off, heat rushing to my face. "It's not... normal."

"Okay, but who says it's wrong?" She countered, her tone hesitant but firm. "It's... unconventional, sure. But you're not exactly running around kissing random dragons, right? You're talking about Alys. Specifically, her."

"Yeah, but--"

"But nothing," she said, though her voice wavered slightly, like she was still convincing herself. "It's not like you're hurting anyone. And it's not like you planned this. Feelings just... happen sometimes."

I stayed silent, the lump in my throat making it hard to speak.

She sighed, and I could picture her running a hand through her hair, the way she always did when she was thinking. "Look, I'm not saying it's not weird. It is. But weird doesn't mean bad, James. It just means... unexpected."

"But what if it's not just her?" I said quietly. "What if I'm just... wrong?"

"Wrong?" She repeated, her voice soft but incredulous. "James, come on."

"I mean..." I said, my voice shaking. "Normal people don't feel this way."

"Okay, but what's normal, really?" She asked, though there was a note of hesitation in her voice. "I mean, yeah, this isn't exactly standard rom-com material, but that doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. It just means you're... figuring things out. And honestly? It sounds like you care about her."

"I do," I admitted, my voice barely audible. "But what if I only think it's about her? What if it's... more than that?"

Another pause. When she spoke again, her voice was careful, like she was choosing each word with precision. "Do you feel that way about anyone else? Any other dragons?"

"No," I said immediately. "Just her. I think."

"Then maybe it really is just her," she said, her tone thoughtful. "And if that's the case, then... I don't think it's as big of a deal as you're making it out to be. It's weird, yeah, but it's not like you're a monster for liking her."

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening. "But what if people find out?"

"James, the only people who'd think that are the kind of people whose opinions don't matter," she said, her voice firm. "Besides, haven't you posted pictures of her, just for fun? Because you like her?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Then that's what matters," she said gently. "It's okay to be scared. This is new, and it's not something most people deal with. But you're not broken. You're just... figuring out what feels right for you. And if Alys makes you happy, then that's worth figuring out."

Her words hit me like a lifeline, but I couldn't quite grab onto it. Not yet.

"You make it sound so easy," I muttered.

"It's not easy," she said. "But it's not the end of the world, either. You're allowed to feel what you feel, James. Even if it's a little... unconventional."

I let out a shaky laugh, the knot in my chest loosening slightly. "Thanks, Sarah."

"Anytime," she said, her voice warm but still a little tentative. "And hey, if you need to talk more, I'm here, okay? I might need a minute to, like... process again, but I'll always listen."

"Yeah," I said softly. "Thanks."

"Now," she added, her tone lighter, "go get some sleep. You sound wrecked."

I laughed faintly. "Yeah. Night, Sarah."

"Night, James."

The call ended, and her words lingered in my mind.

It's weird, but not bad.

Maybe she was right. Maybe it wasn't bad.

But...

But even if I was at last able to somewhat understand my feelings, even if I could admit that there was something between us, what did it matter?

Was I going to ask her out?

Were we suddenly going to start dating?

Hand in paw into the sunset?

No...

I wasn't sure I could. I was a wreck, in every meaning of the word, and I felt that she... she deserved better. She'd been through so much already that I didn't want to drag her down into my mess.

And besides, chatting with my sister was one thing, but if we were together, and she leaned in for another kiss, and I freaked out...? And sex, if it ever got that far?

No. I needed time, maybe more than she and I had.

We need to talk.

I swiped away from Sarah, my thumb hovering over Alys' contact, the memory of our last conversation replaying relentlessly in my head. The messages from our café trip sat at the top of our chat history--cute, teasing exchanges that felt like they belonged to a different time. Now, they were overshadowed by her most recent message.

Somehow, in all my mental thrashing, I had missed her attempt at contact.

"James... I don't know if you even want to hear from me right now. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't. But I have to say I'm sorry. I crossed a line I shouldn't have, and it wasn't fair to you. I let my instincts take over, and I know that's not an excuse. I didn't think about how you felt, and I'm sorry. I just... I hope you can forgive me, even if you need time."

I read it over and over, my heart racing. The apology was clear, genuine, but also heavy. The word instincts stood out, a weight that I didn't quite know how to carry. Yet, despite the confusion and frustration rolling around in me, she deserved a response.

"Hey," I typed back after a long moment, only to immediately realise how blasé it sounded. I bit my lip and focused up.

"Got your message. I'm still processing everything. I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you or anything. I just need some time to figure out some things. We should talk soon. Just not now, okay?"

Her reply came instantly: "Thank you." Then a pause. "I hope you're doing okay."

I paused, fingers poised over the keypad, but couldn't bring myself to continue. Instead, I closed the chat and leaned back in my chair, letting out a shaky breath. Some of the tension within me began to unwind, but only slightly. At least now, the air was clear--clearer, anyway.

Still restless, I opened my games library and scrolled aimlessly. Nothing caught my interest, but I clicked on Ark out of habit. The grind of collecting resources and mindless building offered some distraction as the hours dragged on. By the time I shut my computer down, the heaviness in my chest had dulled enough for exhaustion to take over.

The bathroom was thick with steam as I stood under the shower, letting the near-scalding water cascade over me. It wasn't just about getting clean; it was about washing away the stress, the tension, and the emotions I didn't fully understand. The heat on my skin was grounding in a way that my thoughts weren't.

When I finally collapsed into bed, the messy tangle of blankets and pillows felt like a refuge. But sleep didn't come easily. My mind raced, jumping between memories of Alys, the weight of her message, and the impossible complexity of our situation.

Eventually, I drifted off.

The screech of my alarm startled me awake. Bleary-eyed, I slapped at the clock until it quieted. My phone buzzed beside me, the bright glow of a new message cutting through my morning haze.

It was from Alys--a wall of text, sent at 7:22 AM:

"Hey, James, I need to know if you still want to meet. Should we meet at the café? The one we went to last time? Or somewhere else? I don't want to push you. I'll go anywhere you want. Morning or afternoon? I'm free whenever. Just text me. I really need to see you. Please let me know what works for you. I can wait if you need time, but I hope we can talk soon."

My groggy mind struggled to process the words. She sounded so anxious, so unlike the confident Alys I'd come to know. I rubbed my face and quickly typed a reply:

"Yeah, we can meet today. I'm not sure where, but sometime this afternoon should be good. Maybe not the café?"

I hesitated, debating whether to suggest something else entirely. Then I typed, "You could come to mine for a minute? Not being weird, just a comfortable place away from the public eye. Does this sound cool?"

Her response was almost immediate. "Really? You're okay with that? I can be there whenever! Just tell me what time works for you. I promise I won't take up too much of your time. I just really need to talk to you about everything."

The flood of her enthusiasm was overwhelming, but there was also relief beneath it. "How about around 11?" I offered after a pause.

"Sounds perfect! I'll bring some snacks, if that's okay? I just want to make it a little less serious, you know?"

"Snacks sound good. Just don't bring anything too messy."

"Perfect!" She replied, the energy radiating through her words. "I promise I won't make a mess. I'll see you soon, James. Thank you for giving me this chance."

After sending her my address, the conversation left me staring at my phone, a faint ache of guilt settling in my chest. It wasn't just that Alys seemed eager--it was the sense of desperation beneath her words that stuck with me.

I shook it off and stood, taking stock of my living space. The bachelor pad aesthetic was fine for me but would be less than impressive for a guest, dragon or otherwise. Piles of socks, shirts, and half-empty energy drinks cluttered the space, and the bookshelves were barren save for dust. The kitchen wasn't much better; plates and cups were stacked in the sink, a silent accusation of my procrastination.

"Alright," I muttered to myself, rolling up my sleeves. "Let's do this."

A few hours later, the apartment looked... respectable. The vacuum had done its job, and I'd gone through every surface with a vengeance. The living room no longer looked like a war zone, and the faint scent of air freshener mingled with the cool breeze coming in through the windows.

I even swapped into a clean shirt and jeans, double-checking the time. At 10:45, my phone buzzed.

"Nearly there. Am I still allowed over? Are you doing okay?"

I typed back quickly, "Yes. Doing fine. Just watching TV. You?"

"Flying. Doing okay, just a bit tired."

The simplicity of her response settled something in me, though the tension hadn't fully dissipated. The minutes ticked by, agonizingly slow, until the buzzer rang.

My heart leapt. I took a steadying breath and approached the door, unlocking it with careful deliberation.

"H-hey," Alys greeted, raising a paw awkwardly, rustling her modified backpack.

"Hey," I replied, stepping aside to let her in. "Do you wanna come in?"

She hesitated, then nodded. Her wings brushed the doorway as she maneuvered herself through, and I winced. "Sorry, these are single. You might have to--"

She adjusted herself, folding her wings tighter to squeeze through, scraping her sides. "Thanks," she murmured as she entered, her eyes darting around the room. Her nostrils flared slightly, taking in the faint scent of lavender from the air freshener.

"You can sit wherever," I offered, gesturing to the couch. "Want a Coke or something?"

"Water, please," she replied softly, her voice unusually tight. "In a mug, if that's okay? Glasses are hard to hold."

I nodded, quickly busying myself in the kitchen, scrubbing at the stubborn coffee stains in my favourite mug. The running water gave me something to focus on, something that didn't have bright red eyes watching my every move.

When I glanced over, just to make sure she was still there, I paused.

Alys was perched awkwardly on the sofa, her legs tucked in that odd, froglike way that made her look small for a dragon. She wasn't lounging about, taking up most of the cushions like she had in the coffee shop. Instead, her tail curled tightly around her claws, and her head hung low. It was the kind of posture that screamed discomfort, maybe even guilt.

I swallowed hard, setting the mug beneath the tap and filling it up. "You look... uh, like you're about to leap off that sofa any second."

She didn't laugh. "I don't know how else to sit here. Normally I just lay down," she admitted, her voice low.

When I handed the full cup to her, her claws wrapped around it carefully--two claws conspicuously shorter than the rest. The sight made me pause.

Her claws were broken, I realised far too slowly.

"Alys," I murmured, eyes fixed on her shortened claws. "Your claws... What happened?"

Her wings shifted uneasily, folding tighter around her frame like a shield. Her tail curled around her backpaws, the motion almost protective. She glanced at her paw, as if noticing it for the first time. "It's nothing," she muttered, her voice low. "I, uh... I crashed into a tree. They broke." She took a long sip, likely to avoid talking, her tongue darting in to lap at the water.

My gaze didn't waver. "They don't just... break. Alys, did something happen?" I didn't know if it was true. I was just pushing, like an idiot.

She hesitated, then sighed, her shoulders slumping. "If I'd left them as they were, they'd grow back wrong. So, I had to... chew them down." Her voice was brittle, the words forced. "It's like breaking a horn--they'll regrow, but it takes time."

The explanation left a hollow feeling in my chest. She was lying, and I didn't know why. "I didn't know claws could grow back."

"They can," she said, avoiding my gaze. Her ears twitched slightly, an involuntary reaction. "Warm seasons help. It's faster when it's hot."

Alys' eyes flicked to mine for a brief moment, then away, her expression tight. Her horns caught my attention next, longer and slightly uneven with small hooked growths along the edges. The ridges of her snout furrowed as she spoke, her scales duller than usual. She looked worn down.

"Warm seasons," I echoed, more to fill the silence than anything else. "You mean... heat?"

"...Yes," she replied softly, her claws tightening on the mug. The fine fingers of her wings fluttered as she spoke. "I'm in heat. I-It's messing with me--more than it usually does." She shifted uncomfortably on the couch, hindlegs searching for a better position. "Normally, I'd sleep through most of it, but I can't this time. Work keeps me moving. Plus, I've got to look after Jarys."

Her words hung in the air, and I found myself staring at her, the tension in the room crackling like static. Then, quietly, I asked the question I'd been dreading.

"Is that why you kissed me?"

The room fell silent. Her ears flicked, her wings tightened around her, but she didn't answer.

"Alys," I pressed gently, "was it just the heat? Could you not... control yourself?"

The silence was deafening, allowing me to hear just how loud my heart was.

"I don't know," she whispered at last, her voice so quiet I almost didn't hear it. Her claws tapped against the mug rhythmically, her gaze distant. "Maybe it was. Most of it was, I think. The play fight, the sugar rush, the... heat... B-But maybe..."

Her voice trailed off into a mumble, and I leaned forward, chest tightening painfully in fear of her answer. "Maybe what?"

She took a shaky breath, her gaze finally meeting mine. The slit pupils of her scarlet eyes contracted slightly, betraying her vulnerability. "Maybe some part of me wanted it," she admitted, her voice trembling with the weight of the words. "Maybe I needed it. Maybe I needed you to want it too."

The room seemed to freeze. My heart thundered louder in my chest, every word hitting like a sledgehammer.

"Alys," I started, my throat dry, but she wasn't done.

"You're the only person who's treated me this well in... a long time," she continued, her scarlet eyes glistening. Her wings unfurled slightly before tightening back around her. "It's only been a month, James, but you have no idea how much you mean to me. I-I don't have much else."

I swallowed hard, my mind racing to keep up with the emotions pouring out of her. "Alys, I..."

"I know I'm not easy to be around," she interrupted, her voice growing steadier, stronger. "I'm loud, I'm awkward, and I don't fit in anywhere. But you... you make me feel like I belong. You don't look at me like some monster or some thing. You just... see me."

Her words were like a knife, cutting through every wall I'd tried to build around myself. My mind reeled, torn between the enormity of what she was saying and the impossibility of what it meant. I had been hoping it was just the heat, that it had been a biological trick we could laugh at and move past.

"I..." I stammered, trying and failing to find the right words. "I never thought of it like that. I never thought you could ever... feel that way about me."

"Why?" She challenged, her tone unusually sharp. "Because I'm a dragon? Because I'm bigger or stronger than you? Because you're human?"

"No!" I shot back, startled by her sudden intensity. "Because you're you. You're confident, you're put together, and you... you don't seem like someone who'd really need anything from someone like me."

Her expression shifted, her shoulders sinking as the fire in her eyes dimmed. "I'm not put together," she murmured, almost to herself. "James, my life isn't great. It's a lot better than it was back home, sure, but... it's not... enough. The longer I'm here, the more I realise how much more I want. I don't just want to survive anymore."

Her voice broke slightly on the last word, and I felt something inside me crack.

"I have to put on a strong front," she continued. "For Jarys, for Rhys... for everyone. They rely on me, and I can't let them see me fall apart. But it's s-so fucking lonely, James. If I'm not working, I'm sleeping, or taking care of Jarys, or trying to keep everything from falling apart. And then... you came along."

She paused, her gaze softening as it rested on me. "You were kind and funny, and... you made me feel like I wasn't alone. I-It was the small things--talking to me at work, helping me, even just showing up at the party meant so much to me... and when you gave him a gift..."

I leant back against my kitchen counter, the weight of her words pressing down on me. It was too much--too raw, too real. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to make sense of it all.

"Alys," I said slowly, my voice trembling. "I get it. I really do. And I care about you--I really do care about you. But... I don't think I'm what you need right now."

Her eyes widened, a flicker of hurt crossing her face. "Why not?"

"Because I'm a mess," I admitted, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. "My life is a disaster. I work a dead-end job, I dropped out of community college, and I can barely remember to keep my apartment clean. You deserve better than that. You deserve better than me."

Her expression hardened, determination replacing the vulnerability. "I don't care if your life is messy, James. I care about you."

F-Fuck.

Her words hit like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, I felt myself wavering, faltering.

But I couldn't let myself give in--not like this, not yet.

"I care about you too," I said quietly, my voice thick with emotion. "But this... it's not simple. It's not just about feelings. It's about timing, and right now, I'm not ready for this. I don't want to start something I can't give my all to."

Her wings drooped slightly, ears falling flat, the hope in her eyes dimming. "So... not now," she murmured, her voice tinged with sadness. "But not never?"

I hesitated, then nodded slowly, hoping she didn't sense the reluctance in me. "N-Not now. Let's just... give it time. See where we both are later on. I need to figure some things out, and I think you do too."

She studied me for a long moment, then nodded, her expression softening. "Okay. Time. I can do that." Her words sent a surge of guilt through me, but I didn't have the heart to say anything.

The tension in the room began to ease, the air growing lighter despite the heavy conversation. Alys leaned back against the sofa, her claws still wrapped around the mug as she took a long sip of water. Her wings twitched, and for the first time since she'd arrived, I saw a glimmer of her usual self breaking through.

"So," I said, forcing a shaky smile to bridge the moment. "How about those snacks you promised me?"

She let out a small, genuine laugh, a sound that eased some of the tightness in my chest. It was an inhuman sound, one more akin to bird squawks, but that only made my smile widen. "Right. Snacks. You still hungry after all this? Or do you want me to try again later?"

The joke caught me off guard, and I blinked, then chuckled despite myself. "I think I'll survive. But yeah, maybe, uh, pace yourself on the whole trying again thing."

Her toothy grin widened, and the faintest blush dusted her dark scales. "Noted," she said, her tone teasing but softer than usual. "I'll keep my retry cooldown active for a bit."

We spent the next hour on the couch, trying to recapture the simplicity of what had been before. She pulled out a bag of crisps and some oddly shaped candies that looked suspiciously like something her brother had concocted. I put on the first Harry Potter movie, and we settled into a tentative rhythm of small talk and mutual distraction.

The awkwardness lingered, of course, as it should, but we both seemed determined to let the night end on a lighter note. When Alys finally stood to leave, citing it being dinnertime, she hesitated at the door, her forelimbs twitching slightly. For a moment, it looked like she might go for a hug, but instead, she just smiled.

"Thanks for letting me come over," she said softly, her usual confidence tempered with something quieter. "It... means a lot."

"Anytime," I replied, my voice steady despite the ache in my chest. "You take care of yourself, okay?"

She nodded, her smile lingering for a moment longer before she slipped out the door.

The apartment felt impossibly quiet once she was gone. I stood there for a long moment, staring at the closed door, before finally sinking onto the sofa. My hands ran through my hair as I let out a long, shaky breath.

Finally alone, I could be honest with myself--truly honest.

If she were human...

If she were human, I wouldn't have hesitated.

I wouldn't have stopped to think about timing or complications or what either of us needed. I would have kissed her back fully, no questions asked.

An attractive girl I know kissing me in the middle of the park?

I'd have stood no chance...

And that thought scared me.

Alys wasn't human, and while that difference had forced me to slow down, to think... it also made me realise something. What she'd said about wanting more--about not being satisfied with just surviving--I felt that too. Maybe I didn't have the courage to admit it as boldly as she had, but it was there. I was stuck, coasting through a life that didn't feel like my own. And maybe it was time to change that.

I stood abruptly, pacing the small space of my living room before moving to my desk. My computer was still on, the monitor casting a faint glow over the cluttered surface. My fingers hovered over the mouse for a moment before I opened my bookmarks.

Near the top was a link I hadn't clicked in months:

BSc (Honours) Cyber SecurityCourse code: R70

I stared at it, my heart pounding. I'd completed the technology and math access module ages ago, but I hadn't followed through. I'd been too scared--of failing, of starting something new, of hoping for more. It didn't even guarantee a job, nor was it even an especially high honour, which was precisely why I'd given up.

But now... Now I just wanted to at least try.

I scrolled down to the start dates:

Sep 2024: Registration closes 01.09.2024.

- Start Date: 14.09.2024

May 2025: Registration closes 01.05.2025.

- Start Date: 14.05.2025

"That's... soon," I murmured, the weight of the deadline sinking in. "Why allow registration so close to the start date?"

My savings account flashed in my mind--a small but steady amount I'd unknowingly built up over the past year. It was enough to cover the course fees, and with the flexible hours, I could keep my job at the restaurant. We wouldn't see each other as much, but she had wings, and I had a phone.

"I can do this," I whispered, the words sounding almost foreign on my tongue. "I can do this."

With a deep breath, I steadied my hand and clicked the application link. The page loaded, asking for details, and I began typing. My heart raced, but for the first time in a long time, it wasn't out of fear--it was hope.

.....

The next morning, I woke to the faint buzz of my phone. Alys had sent another message.

"Thanks again for yesterday. I'll try not to botch it so badly next time. Maybe round two will go better?"

A small, tired smile tugged at my lips. Her words were playful but grounded, a reminder that despite everything, we would be friends and that maybe... maybe she was serious about trying again.

"Eh, I'll allow it, but only because I feel bad for how badly you lost the first time."

Her reply came moments later: "Woooow. Harsh."

I set my phone down and glanced up at the ceiling through bleary eyes.

Maybe Alys was right--about both of us. Maybe wanting more wasn't such a bad thing after all, in all manners of life.

Chapter 10

It was Tuesday, sometime in October, and I was trying and failing to build a Herobrine shrine in my creative world. Behind me, Alys was lying on her front, talking super loud to her human friend. Every squawky laugh made my ears twitch despite me borrowing Rhys' nice, soft headphones. They were made for dragons, and even though they were a bit big, they fit so nicely.

"No, seriously, he freaked out like crazy," I heard her say, voice practically humming with amusement. "I guess most humans don't expect a dragon to drop off their order of four large fries."

Gold, netherrack, torch... What else was I missing? Was there supposed to be a storm? I shrunk the game and pulled up Google. Oh... redstone torch. After some fiddling with the stupid controls I kept forgetting, I swapped them for the necessary block.

And... nothing.

Annoyed, I huffed out my nose and turned to Alys, wondering if James knew anything about the game. "Yeah, I'd probably be halfway out the window," his voice crackled through the tablet's speakers, voice light and warm. "Or worse, I'd try to tip you and start some sort of feeding the wildlife scandal."

Immediately, I turned back around, realising they were in one of their moods.

"Heh, yeah, you'd be the type," she teased, causing my eyes to roll as I destroyed my shrine and began work on some golden portal Oliver suggested I build. Like a nether portal, but made out of glowstone, pretty simple. "Oh no, it's a wild dragon; better offer it a fry so it doesn't eat me!"

She liked him.

Like some of the girls in my class, except she wasn't curling her hair in her claws.

"Hey, that's just survival instincts, Alys," James replied, pretending to sound serious. "But you'd be lucky to get a fry. Most people would probably run."

I wondered if she would if she had hair... I wonder what I'd look like with hair.

A quiet thumping drew my eye--her tail was swaying so rapidly it was practically wagging, knocking against the wall beside her with each exaggerated swish. "And then I'd chase them down, obviously," she shot back, grinning broadly, her cheeks warm. "What, you think I'd let them get away? No, I'm getting those chips."

...I want chips now.

Alys used to bring food home from work, but she hadn't since she got her delivery job.

The portal failed, much to my immense disappointment, and so I just sat there... sulking and not sure what else to do. I'd asked if I could get more games for it, but my sister said her computer wasn't very good, and it wasn't--it barely ran Minecraft. I opened my maw to ask if we could get a better one for Christmas, but she just kept talking.

"So, what have you been up to?" Her ears were perked up--nervous. "How's that fancy cyber-whatever course going?" She asked, her voice shifting into something more forcefully casual, like she was trying to sound cool.

I didn't get why.

Rhys said James had dumped her or something.

But... she looked so happy, and so, wanting to get why, I listened in for a minute.

"Cybersecurity," James corrected, his voice tinny but audible through the speakers. "It's going pretty good, actually. A couple of people on the course actually live pretty close, so we've met up a few times. If I'm lucky, I'll leave the course with, like, eight total friends."

He only has eight friends? I wondered. Am I a friend? He did give me LEGO.

Alys' grin faltered--not for long, but I was paying attention and saw it. She forced a laugh, one too sharp and too delayed to be genuine. "Wow, look at Mr. Popular here," she said, voice airy and a little too high. "Look at you go. Guess that makes me, what? Friend six, huh?"

"Nah, you're at least number two." James didn't sound bothered by the pauses or weird tone, but I guessed it was probably just because Alys' tablet wasn't very good at making calls.

It did put a smile back on my sister's face, one wide enough to disturb the family lines on her cheeks. "Oh, yeah?" Who's number one, then?"

"My sister," he replied quickly, his tone so nonchalant it sounded rehearsed. "I'm legally required to list her first. You know how it is?"

Alys' eyes flickered over to me, where I sat on my haunches atop her chair, forepaws gripping the back of the seat as I watched. I yelped and spun around, slipping the headphones back on and closing my game of Minecraft. But, just to be sure I hadn't missed anything, I clicked around YouTube before finding a human that was busting myths.

My sister's conversation faded into the background for a short while. With sore ears, I slipped the headphones off and prepared to climb down, only to freeze at the tone of my sister's

voice. "So, these new friends of yours... any cute nesses?"

Something about the way she said it kept me trapped in her room, rooted to the spot.

Even James paused.

Why is she asking? Didn't they break up?

"Uh... Well, one of them's a gryphon girl. She's been on Earth for a while--came over with the first group, apparently. She's pretty good with computers."

Zephyr is good with computers.

Are gryphons good with computers?

...I should ask him about the glowstone portal.

"Oh?" Alys' smile was frozen on her snout, her dangerously sharp claws digging into the tough case of her tablet. "She's cute?" Her tail had stopped moving completely.

"Um, maybe?" Her friend replied slowly. "I don't really have a reference for catbirds. I'm not exactly an expert, heh..."

I didn't know why, but everything felt off, and I couldn't stop myself from watching her face as it flashed through a variety of emotions. Eventually she settled on scrunching up her snout and pressing her lips together so tightly her uneven fangs peeked over. "Just wondering if I've got competition..." She muttered, her voice quiet and her tone... Well, it reminded me of when a teacher asked a question assuming you had an answer even when you didn't.

"N-Nah, I doubt it," he replied, words rushed. "Your wings are bigger."

What...?

Does Alys have big wings?

Her eyes snapped open, and her tail thumped once, hard, against the wall. "W-What?"

"I mean-" James' voice cracked, and he coughed to cover it. "Uh, not that I'm, like, comparing or anything. I'm just... You're fine, okay? She's not... Ugh, I'm going to stop talking now."

Alys let out a bark of laughter, tossing her head back against the pillow. Her cheeks flushed dark, and she covered her face with one paw, trying to smother the sound. "Oh my Skie, you're such a dork," she snorted, her voice breathy. "Your wings are bigger?"

I turned away from them, realising they were back to their usual gross fest.

Always so mushy...

I opened up Alys' copy of the ninja robot game, and after fiddling with the character for a while, I put her character on the jungle planet. It was alright jumping around for a while, but the controls were hard to figure out, and the enemies were too fast, so I turned it off and went online to search for the insane human Oliver had told me about--something to do with some guy that smashes food together.

H-

Hyuman porn.

Hyuman male porn.

How-

How to make people like you.

...I wasn't sure what to think, so instead I just powered through and typed in the

rest of the name, finding the guy and absentmindedly watching him destroy food and make a mess.

"You... you ever think about that talk we had? You know, about..." I didn't bother turning around, but the headphones only got so loud. "...us." I could even hear her claws tapping loudly against the tablet's screen.

Oh no.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

I went to turn up the volume, but it only went up so far. My draconic hearing betraying me. I couldn't even take the laptop with me as her charger was busted and therefore kept her computer forever on 2%.

"And... And are you still...?"

"I'm... You know... Getting there," he stammered, trailing off into nothingness before loudly clearing his throat. "I'm trying, you know? I'm getting better, I-if that makes sense? I'm not just sitting here..." He paused again. "I just think you deserve better."

What?

Getting better at work?

Why should he get better at work for her?

I gave up and, for what felt like the fiftieth time that day, turned back around to see what she was doing. I shuffled back around, placing my paws against the sides and carefully peeking my head atop the headrest--just enough to see, as one time after she'd caught me staring, she bit my ears and dragged me out of the room.

Her wings shuffled repeatedly, stretching and relaxing against the mattress. "I'm not asking you to have all the answers, James," she said quietly. "But I..." Her tapping grew louder and louder as she waited. My video had ended, and autoplay wasn't working, leaving the room in silence--aside from their loud conversation.

"But you what?"

"I just-" She started, then clicked her tongue, frustration obvious on her face. "I'm not going to wait forever, you know?" She said, finally spitting it out like it'd been stuck in her teeth. Her grin returned, smaller, weaker. "Not saying I'm running off or anything, but just so you know."

"I know," James replied, sighing audibly as he did. "I'm sorry, I'm just--" he stopped himself and took a breath. "I just want to make sure I do this right. Like I said, you deserve better."

She leaned back slowly, stretching out. "Good, because I'm amazing, and you'd be an idiot to miss out."

"Wow, humble too, huh?"

"Humble is for creatures with something to prove," she quipped, tail flicking. "I'm just honest." For a moment she waited, tail frozen. "You know... you could make up for your transgressions with some snacks." Her tone was playful, yet almost... hopeful.

"Snacks?" James squeaked. Hearing this, I peeked my head another inch over the headrest, curious about the possibility of getting sugary

food.

"Yep, only the best stuff, of course--befitting a majestic dragon such as myself."

"How about... vending machine snacks? Some crushed pretzels and a handful of squished Haribos."

She grinned broadly. "It's a date then." At the mention of the word, I raised my head even further, practically hovering over the soft headrest.

Date?

Almost immediately after the words left her maw, her head swivelled to me, causing me to jump. Her eyes bore into mine. I was uncovered, I realised quickly, unprotected by my precious seat. "What are you doing?" She asked, voice quiet and sharp.

"Nothing," I said quickly, looking back at the laptop screen and pretending I hadn't been watching the two. "You're loud."

"Don't act like you weren't listening." I didn't dare look back, thankful James was still on the line so she couldn't do anything too evil to me.

"I wasn't," I tried, but I knew there was no convincing her.

"Alright..." James said slowly. "I'm gonna get going now. Let you get back to being cool or whatever older siblings do." He paused. "Talk to you later?"

"Yeah, talk to you when we go for our vending machine date." I could practically hear the grin in her voice.

"The what? Oh... Hah, yeah, sure."

Their voices faded, and I didn't have to ask to know that the call had ended.

After a moment of pure silence, she let out a long, soft sigh.

I didn't do anything immediately. I just sat there, watching the screen, not loading anything or playing a game, just... waiting. Despite how "cute" the two had been, as soon as it was over, everything felt... off. Like she was mad at him for some reason.

"He's a dummy," I muttered, trying to make her happy and reduce the chances she'd chew on my ears.

"Yeah," I heard her say, her voice barely a whisper. "Yeah, he is. But I like him."

Another long stretch of silence.

"If you're mad, just tell him," I said, opening up YouTube again to distract myself.

"Remember, you're on my laptop, Jarys," she said, her voice sharp. "And I can take it back whenever I want."

"He'd listen to you if you said it louder," I clicked on a channel I vaguely knew.

"Say what?" Her voice was quiet, but not soft. Just distant. Like thunder.

"That you like him."

She didn't say anything for a long time, and when she did finally decide to speak, I almost didn't catch it. "Yeah, well... It's not that easy. It's complicated."

"Okay," I replied, not wanting to upset her, even despite not fully getting it.

Maybe a minute passed before my confusion overpowered my fear. "B-But why is it complicated?" I asked, still not looking back at her. "You like him. He likes you. What's the problem?"

"Jarys, drop it," she snapped, sharper.

"I'm not trying to be annoying," I grumbled. "I-I just don't get it. You're just sitting there all sad. Doing nothing."

"Jarys, I'm serious. Drop it!"

I heard her wings ruffle and the bed creak. She was leaning forward, and I realised my heart was thudding in my chest. "Is it because he's boring?" At last, I looked back at her in time to watch her mouth fall open and her eyes widen.

"What?" She stammered, voice pitching up.

"He's kinda boring.

Maybe that's why you're upset? Some humans are boring."

Her snout twisted into something halfway between disbelief and offense. "James is not boring!" She snapped. "He's thoughtful and funny and..." Her tail thumped against the wall twice, quick and clearly agitated. "You don't even know him."

"Y-Yeah, but I saw him," I said, holding up my paws. "He was just there. Only talked if you talked to him first."

Her wings flicked back against her sides as she pressed a paw to her snout, dragging it down slowly. "He's not boring, Jarys. He gave you LEGO, remember?"

I blinked, remembering the party and how he gave me a snack during the argument. I was quiet, suddenly feeling bad for what I said. It didn't make it untrue, at least not to me, but I still felt bad. "Okay, b-but if he's so great, why are you so angry with me? And why aren't you two going

out?"

"Jarys," she growled, sitting up to glare at me. "It's not about him being cool or something, and it's not that he's boring. It's..." Her jaw tightened, and she stopped speaking for a moment. Her frustration, bleeding over to faint, tired murmurs. "It's just not the right time, okay? We're not ready."

"For what?" I asked, genuinely not getting it. "Kissing? Holding paws? Didn't you already kiss him?"

Her ears shot up, and her face went bright red under her scales. "You're ten! You're not allowed to talk about that," she hissed, pointing at me with a shaky, broken claw.

"I'm not stupid." I pouted. "You kissed him, you like him, and now you're both acting dumb and just... waiting. I don't get it."

"You're dumb," she grumbled back, cheeks hot and clearly sulking. Still, her fury was gone, and I was in no danger of being bitten.

"Yeah, well, you're stuck with

me," I said, grinning. "Forever..."

Alys didn't reply. She just kept staring at the tablet, her claws tapping against it one last time before they stopped. I glanced at her for a moment longer before turning back to the laptop and saw her staring at that blank screen like she was waiting for it to light up again.

Maybe she was.

I didn't say anything else after that, and neither did she.

.....

Drop it, drop it... so mean.

Tried to help. Not fair...

Stupid Alys, stupid boring human.

Just ask the human, and then you'd stop being so moody.

Why-

"Jarys!" snapped the substitute teacher, his dark blue eyes narrowing in obvious frustration. "Can you at least pretend to pay attention to your test?"

A few students giggled, but I barely noticed, too absorbed in my sulking. It was Wednesday, October 2nd, and I was failing my math test. I'd tried to revise the night before, but Alys couldn't multiply past six without melting down, and Rhys had locked himself in his room to brood about

something.

Samys was at the head doctor's--again--and even if she'd been around, her math skills weren't much better than my sister's.

I glanced over at Oliver, hoping for some shared failure. Thankfully, he looked just as lost, his pencil hovering uselessly over his paper. Sensing my staring, he shrugged helplessly, and I knew I wasn't the only one in for a nipping when the results came back.

Alys had tried to help, in her own way, but between her limited skills and the constant distraction of her tablet's empty notification feed, it wasn't much of an improvement.

"Jarys!" Mr. Denia's voice cut through my thoughts like a lash. His tone was sharper now, and his surprisingly youthful features betrayed his irritation. Laughter rippled through the room again, making my cheeks--and the scales beneath--burn.

Before I could muster a response, he strode

toward me with a huff, his polished shoes clicking against the floor. Instead of continuing his tirade, he leaned down close, speaking just loud enough for me to hear. "Jarys, come with me for a moment."

I blinked, swallowing hard as I nodded. My legs felt shaky as I slid out of my seat, following him out of the classroom, pulse pounding in my ears. I'd already gotten in trouble a few days ago as well...

Before shutting the door, Mr. Denia pointed a finger at Zephyr. "Zephyr, you're in charge until I get back. Keep them on topic, all right?"

The gryphon drake perked up and nodded dutifully, his wings twitching with the faint excitement of authority and his chest puffing out.

The door clicked shut behind us, and the substitute leaned against it, arms crossed. His sharp blue eyes locked onto mine, calm yet intense, as though he could see straight through me. He didn't speak; he didn't scold--he just... watched.

I shuffled awkwardly, shifting my weight from paw to paw. My tail flicked once before I forced it to sit still. He was waiting for something, but I didn't know what, and the silence was making my scales itch and my ears twitch.

Finally, he exhaled, his shoulders rising and falling in one smooth motion. "Jarys," he said, his voice even but carrying a weight that made my ears flatten. "You're smart."

I blinked, unsure how to respond.

"Very smart," he continued, tilting his head slightly as if studying me from a new angle. "You should've been breezing through that test. What's going on?"

I glanced down at my paws, wishing I could disappear. "I dunno," I mumbled. "Just tired. Sorry, sir."

He hummed thoughtfully, uncrossing his arms to tap a finger against his chin. "Tired, huh?" His tone wasn't harsh, but it wasn't soft either. "How are things at home? Is your sister doing okay?"

The question caught me off guard.

"She's been late a few times this week," he added, as if reading my hesitation. His gaze was steady, but his dark eyes seemed to shimmer faintly in the dim hallway light.

"She's been... busy," I muttered, keeping my voice low. I didn't want to say anything more, but when I glanced up, something about his expression made the words stick in my throat.

Then, as I watched, his dark blue irises lightened, deepening into a bright, vivid, almost violet colour. A shade in between blue and purple. The shift was subtle, yet impossible to ignore, and when he spoke again, his voice seemed to resonate, as though it was reaching past my ears and into my chest, into my heart.

"Is that all?" He asked, his tone quieter now, yet oh so louder.

I felt my mouth moving before I even realised I was speaking. "A-And... she keeps... She's upset that her boyfriend won't ask her out."

The substitute's lips curled into a faint, humourless smile. "Her boyfriend, huh?" He leaned back further against the door, crossing his arms again. "So, you mean her friend,

then?"

I hesitated, feeling light-headed, and nodded.

"You said his name was James, right?"

Had I said that? My head felt hazy, like I'd just woken up from a nap. But when his bright violet eyes bore into mine, I found myself nodding again.

"James won't ask Alys out," he mused, his voice laced with amusement. "Good Skie, even Teran bent the knee quicker than this." His chuckle was sharp, the sound echoing faintly down the hallway. "...Maybe they just need a little push."

He tilted his head, his glowing eyes narrowing as his gaze locked onto mine. "What do you think, Jarys? Should I leave those crazy kids alone, or try a quick little jealousy arc?"

I stumbled back a step, the ground beneath me feeling unsteady.

"Careful there," he said, stepping forward to steady me. His hand rested lightly on my shoulder, his grip firm but not harsh. "Jealousy, huh? That's your suggestion?" His grin widened, showing teeth that seemed just a little too sharp. "You're a clever one, Jarys."

He crouched slightly, bringing his face closer to mine. "And besides," he murmured, his voice dropping lower, "if it doesn't work, Jamie can always shack up with that cute gryphon girl--what's her name? Galia? Could be fun for the few months he's got left...."

His words hit me like a stone, the meaning sinking in slowly. Months left? My chest tightened, and I stared up at him, unable to speak.

"Alys... well," he continued, almost as if to himself, "then we'd be two for two on sad little nesses. Poor thing that Leena was. At least her human got something."

The floor felt like it was tilting beneath me, and when he released my shoulder, I stumbled back, landing on my haunches with a dull thud.

The substitute straightened, rolling his shoulders back before arching his spine in a long, fluid stretch, seemingly cracking each vertebra at once. The movement was too smooth, too deliberate, like a predator loosening up after a hunt.

I felt like I might vomit. Something... something was wrong.

He turned back to me, his earlier amusement replaced by a faint but unsettling calm. "Relax, kid," he said, his voice audibly softer yet rolling in danger. "I'm just playing around. Besides, some people need a push, not you though. You're a good kid--friends with a gryphon and a human? I've always had a good feeling about you."

After straightening his messy hair, he snapped his fingers. The haze around me thickened, and before I could stop myself, I stumbled back into the classroom.

Everything felt weird and foggy, like trying to remember a dream. He'd asked me something about school--if it was going okay? I think I told him I was tired. Shaking my head, I focused on the whiteboard at the front of the room. The new teacher was writing out some formulas, simple enough that even I could follow them. He glanced at me, his expression serious as he nodded briefly, then turned back to the board. I wasn't sure why, but for the first time all day, I decided to pay attention.

The test didn't go great, but I didn't think I'd failed, at least. Poor Oliver looked even grumpier than usual, though. Probably because he knew his brother was coming to get him. Oliver always talked about how smart he was--something about glasses and books--but honestly, he sounded pretty boring to me.

When the bell rang, the teacher stood by the door, clipboard in hand, calling out names as parents or guardians arrived.

"Naomi Mercer!" I watched as Naomi darted out, her silver scales flashing as she clutched her backpack between her teeth. Oliver swore he didn't like her, but I wasn't buying it. "Daniella Stephens!" A maroon-scaled ness stepped forward. I paused, as always, when I heard her name. Hers felt so out of place--human. Too

Earth-like--according to Samys.

"Nathmurr!" A black drake sauntered past. His bright eyes made me look twice. They were the same as the teachers. Were they purple? But... no... As I squinted at the twiggy human, I realised they were just a deep blue. Funny--I could've sworn...

"Jarys Morgana!" I hurried out, my pack bouncing against my back as I burst into the cool air outside. Alys was already there, sitting on her haunches with her tablet in her paws. She smiled when she saw me; she went to stuff the device in one of the many leather bandoliers strapped across her chest.

"Wait! I need to show my friend my avatar!" I begged. Alys rolled her eyes but handed it over after flicking through a few apps with her damaged talons. I wanted my own so badly, but I had to wait until I turned thirteen.

She followed as I waited for my friend, practically hopping in place while I checked out her screen. Then I smelt something--something vaguely familiar and... minty? Like mint ice cream and our computer room mixed together somehow?

"James?" Alys' voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I looked up, and there he was, standing there like he'd fallen out of the sky. He looked different, though--cleaner somehow. His hair was

shorter, his face less tired-looking, and he was even wearing a pair of nerd glasses.

He stared at us, wide-eyed, before smiling. "Are you following me, Alys?" His hands slid into his jean pockets like he thought it made him look cooler. His gaze shifted to me, and a spark of recognition lit his face. "Wait, no way--this is Jarys' school?"

Alys puffed up like a peacock, her muscles flexing in a way so obvious it was lame. "Yep, I always pick him up." I opened my mouth to say that Rhys usually did it, but one look from her shut me up fast. "What about you? Are you following me?" Her grin widened. "You could've just asked."

James blinked, then laughed awkwardly, scratching his neck. "Hah, yeah, no. I'm here to grab my brother and, uh, my friend, who...is..." He trailed off, looking around like he'd lost something.

A soft whoosh of wings made me turn. A gryphon landed lightly nearby, her feathers fluffing as she folded her wings. "Sorry, James," she murmured, her voice quiet. "I--I dropped my glasses and, ooh!" Her golden eyes went wide when she spotted us, and she jumped back.

"Sorry! I didn't see you there."

She was tiny, even for a gryphon, barely reaching James's chest. Her soft purple feathers looked like something out of a colouring book, and her smudged glasses were pink, framing her wide, owl-like eyes. A red scarf was wrapped around her neck, its ends fluttering in the cool breeze. I suddenly remembered what we'd learnt in science--she was a Dalmati gryphon. All bird, no cat.

"Hello," she squeaked, raising a claw in a shy wave. "I'm Galia. Are you a friend of James?"

Silence.

Long, tense, uncomfortable silence.

"She--she works at the same place I do," James finally said, his eyes darting to me, a flicker of understanding passing between us, like we were silently agreeing on how awkward it had suddenly gotten. "We've been friends for a while now."

I caught the way Alys' ears pricked up at the word friend--before immediately flattening.

She stepped closer to the small gryphon and held out her paw--the one without the broken claws. Galia hesitated, her smaller bird claw hovering in the air before she offered it reluctantly. Alys took it in a firm grip, squeezing just enough to make the gryphon's sleek beak twitch.

"Nice to meet you," my sister said, her smile too toothy to be friendly.

"Uh, you too." Galia hummed nervously and pulled her claw back too fast, the movement jerky and half desperate.

"Zephyr Walsh!"

The sound of the teacher calling my friend's name broke the weird tension--like snapping a rubber band. I instantly forgot about the staring contest and dashed over to meet my friend halfway. He, like his sister, was a small fluffy thing, looking more like a freshly hatched chick than a fearsome predator--like me, of course. The only difference between them was their colour. Whilst she was sort of purple, Zephyr was a dark grey.

I flopped down beside him and opened up Roblox. Together, we focused on tweaking my avatar. "Check this out," I said as we debated a new hat or maybe some wings. I always picked wings.

"Zephyr?"

The gryphon hen's soft voice caught our attention. Both of us glanced up as Galia called out again. "Do you know Alys' brother?"

"Yeah!" Zephyr said brightly, already turning back to the tablet. "We were playing that natural disaster game yesterday. You should load it up!"

Galia laughed awkwardly, her feathers fluffing a little as she glanced at Alys. My sister was still staring at her, not saying anything and also not blinking much.

I glanced over to James. He wasn't much better--his hands were stuffed into his pockets so tightly that his shoulders hunched, and he kept swaying on the balls of his feet like he wanted to bolt. After what felt like forever, he finally muttered, "One second," like he was cutting into a conversation instead of... whatever this was.

James walked over to the substitute teacher, who was standing near the door, herding the last few students out. I perked my ears to catch bits of their conversation.

"You're Alys' boyfriend, right?" My teacher asked quickly, his tone so casual it sounded fake. "I've got to say, I wish I

had that kind of confidence. Takes a lot to mingle outside the regular crowd."

James froze mid-step, then quickly shook his head. "No, I'm not. I'm here to pick up Oliver."

That made my teacher pause, blinking like he'd heard something ridiculous. "Oliver?" He repeated slowly. "Oliver who?"

"Oliver Harvey," James said, sounding like he was trying not to sigh. "Didn't our dad call ahead?"

The substitute shrugged. "Nope, no call. You're his actual brother?" His surprise shifted into something closer to amused disbelief. "And you know Jarys' sister, too?"

I glanced back at Galia. She was making an effort to talk to Alys, though her feathers still fluffed up every few seconds, like one of those spiky fish. "So... You and James work at the same place?" She asked. "He said it was... kind of terrible. N-No offence!"

"I do deliveries most days now," Alys replied, her tone clipped.

"And is that... fun?"

"It's okay."

Galia nodded, clearly running out of things to say. Her golden eyes darted to Zephyr, then back to James. When neither moved, she finally said, "Um, Zephyr, we need to go now. You can play with your friend tomorrow. We've got to hurry."

Zephyr sighed dramatically but got up, promising to message me later. I waved him off, a little bummed, but Alys... Alys looked happy.

She tracked the two gryphons as they left, her narrowed eyes following them

until they disappeared from sight. Only then did her shoulders finally relax.

I went back to playing on the tablet, trying to act like nothing weird had just happened, but I couldn't quite shake the heavy feeling. The world around me buzzed with tension, and no matter how hard I focused on the game, I couldn't make it go away.

James came over with Oliver in tow, looking slightly annoyed. He glanced around briefly before asking, "Hey, where'd Galia go? She was supposed to send me some files."

Alys shrugged, her wings giving a faint flutter. "She took her brother and left a bit ago," she said, her tone flat.

I motioned for my friend to come over, but his brother kept him half pinned.

"Oh, hm." James glanced at her. "Alys, are you alright?"

She flinched, her ears twitching. "What? Why?"

"You looked kind of tense when Galia showed up," he said.

Quickly, Alys shook her head, her ears flopping. "N-No!" She said, her voice rising a bit. "I'm just really tired from flying all day, you know? Plus, I just wasn't expecting her, is all."

Lies, I realised anxiously. I couldn't tear my eyes away. Something was happening, and I just didn't know what.

"Right, yeah, that makes sense..." James muttered, though he sounded distracted. Then his face lit up. "Oh! Um, look!" He turned around, planting his hands on Oliver's shoulders and steering him forward like he was showing off a prize. Knowing how much Oliver liked scary characters, I immediately opened my inventory of horror character parts.

"Hello, Oliver. I've met him before. I've talked to his mother." She paused, but I couldn't see her face as I was busy checking for Trevor Henderson pieces. "Wait, was that your mother?"

"Nah, different mum, same dad," James said. "But damn, talk about coincidences... You even mentioned his friend being sick at the same time this one was also sick, and I just never made the connection."

"Yeah... How come I've never seen you at pick-up? Have you been avoiding me...?" Alys asked, her voice light but carrying a sharper undertone, one that made me freeze. It was the tone she used whenever she knew you were already in trouble. I swallowed and looked up, my claws tapping madly against the screen,

"Oh yeah," James said with a crooked grin. "I've been avoiding the creature that can smell what I've had for lunch three days ago. Still can't believe--"

"I wasn't talking about your lunch," Alys interrupted, her smile razor-thin. "But thanks for confirming you've been hiding."

James blinked at her, then gave a quiet, almost defensive laugh. "O-Okay, sure. Let's go with that."

He paused and tapped his sides. "Oh, um, speaking of lunch, Oliver and I are going out to KFC." Once again, he wrapped his fingers around his younger sibling's shoulders and shook him. "Little family bonding trip, y-y'know?"

Oliver shuffled uncomfortably, and I decided to try and help. "H-Hey, James, didn't you and Alys talk about going on some kinda snack date yesterday?" I asked, looking between them, trying to smile. "Isn't this the same thing? But, you know, with actual food?"

James glanced at me, startled, then at Alys. His expression flickered for just a second before he cleared his throat. "Uh... I mean, not really?"

Alys' ears twitched, her smile turning sharper. "Oh, right. That was just a joke," she said. "This is different, of course. KFC's way fancier than a vending machine. You

could always take Galia along--she'd probably love that."

They both grew quiet, Alys staring at him, waiting for him to say something. He looked back, blinking, mouth opening and closing for a moment. It was like he'd just been slapped.

Eventually, James let out a laugh, a little too loud to feel natural. "Y-Yeah, I don't think she'd be into it. Bird and all." He shook his head quickly, brushing the comment aside.

Alys' wings twitched, and for just a moment, her smile faltered. "Suit yourself," she said softly, but the words carried just enough weight to make James glance at her again.

The human rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little cornered. "It's not like that. Oliver's been asking for it all week, and--"

"Oh, so it's Oliver's idea," Alys said, her tone sweet but a little too polished. "Makes sense. Can't say no to family, right?"

What's

happening?

James hesitated, his smile faltering. "Yeah... something like that." Then, almost like an afterthought, he glanced at her. "You could come, you know. If you wanted."

Alys' ears perked up slightly, but her wings shifted tensely. Her voice was casual, but the words landed harder than they should've. "Nah, I wouldn't want to ruin your important family time. You two go enjoy your greasy fries. I'll stick to actual food."

James exhaled sharply through his nose, his shoulders tensing just slightly. "Right. Got it." He turned to Oliver, ruffling his brother's hair with maybe a bit more force than necessary. "C'mon, let's get out of here before you start complaining again."

"Not fair," Oliver grumbled as they walked off. "You're the one who takes forever to decide between hot wings and a burger--"

I didn't even get to show him my new outfits, I thought, trying to push down the upset sting bubbling in my chest.

As their voices faded, Alys let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping slightly. I glanced up at her, unsure if I should say something, but decided against it. Instead, I turned back to my game, muttering angrily under my breath, "So stupid."

"What was that, Jarys?" Alys snapped, her voice sharp and harsh.

"Nothing!" I said quickly, flinching, not daring to sneak a glance at her.

For a moment, we just stood there, the cool breeze ruffling her wings. Finally, after what felt like forever, she sighed and nudged my side with her snout. "C'mon," she said softly. "Let's go. I'll grab you something on the way home."

"KFC?" I asked hopefully, half-smiling.

"Don't push it," she shot back.

Even as we walked away, and the anger evaporated, I couldn't help but glance up at her every so often. Whatever was going on between her and James, I didn't get it. But it was definitely bothering her more than she wanted to admit.

.....

I hated buses.

They smelt weird, like wet metal and old coffee, and there was never enough room. Alys always had to stand in the middle aisle, one paw hooked around the rail, claws curling lightly for balance.

She was big. Not too big, but big enough to look weird. She folded herself up as much as she could--legs tucked close, tail coiled tight, neck pulled in--but her horns still came dangerously close to poking people.

She didn't seem to care.

I was small enough to sit, so I took a seat where I could be close to my sister. I sat sideways, facing the window with my back to Alys, yet despite this I kept my tail curled tightly around her own, holding on for support as I stared intensely at the passing streets and the great, dark clouds in the sky. It was raining. It was always raining.

Everything felt too loud for me: the roar of the engine under my paws, the constant murmuring of chatting humans, and the occasional rattle of the bus as it hit a bump for the hundredth time that trip.

But mostly, my head was still stuck on earlier.

James' face kept flashing in my mind, the way he'd looked--confused, cornered--when Alys talked to him outside. It wasn't like her words were mean, not exactly, but there'd been something in her tone, sharp and...off, that didn't seem right.

The bus jerked forward, and I dug my paws into the windowsill I was facing to keep from sliding off, my tail constricting around my sister's. Alys shifted, claws scraping the floor as she steadied herself. She didn't stumble. She never stumbled. I didn't even need to look over to see that she'd barely budged.

I flicked my eyes toward her, but she was staring out the window at the front of the bus, her expression completely blank. Her wings were pulled tight against her back, her tail coiled around mine, the tip resting against the front of my seat.

I curled my claws into the edge of the tough plastic, trying to ignore the tension buzzing in my chest. Whatever was going on, she wasn't going to talk about it. She never did.

The man

standing near her cleared his throat, sharp and loud. I glanced over and immediately wished I hadn't.

He was staring at her.

It wasn't even subtle. His eyes locked on to her long horns, then her wings, like he was sizing her up. Like she was taking up more space than she needed.

My sister didn't look at him. She just stood there, quiet and calm, her gaze fixed on the rain outside. One of her paws flexed on the rail, claws digging in slightly before relaxing.

The man sniffed. Then he whispered, just loud enough to be heard over the hum of the bus, "Aren't you too big for a bus like this?"

Alys turned her head slowly, her expression calm but unreadable. "It's tight, yeah," she said evenly. "But I'm fine."

"You sure?" He said, louder now. "Looks like you're about to block the whole aisle. I thought your people were supposed to fly."

I froze. My tail tightening against her own, my claws pricking at the edge of the hard plastic.

Alys tilted her head slightly, her tone polite but distant. "Flying's faster," she said, "but it's not free. Same reason you don't run everywhere."

The man's eyes narrowed. His lips twitched like he wanted to say something else, but he hesitated.

"Just saying," he muttered finally, "you take up a lot of space for someone who didn't pay extra."

Alys didn't flinch. She snorted softly, barely a sound. "I paid the same as you," she said, not even looking at him. Her tail coiled tighter around mine, almost painful in its intensity.

I hunched my shoulders, my claws beginning to tap anxiously against the window. I could feel the weight of the earlier conversation pressing down on me again, mixing with the current heavy tension in the air.

The man shifted his weight, his fingers drumming restlessly on the metal pole. "Yeah, well," he muttered, leaning forward slightly, "doesn't mean you should act like you own the place."

Alys turned to look at him properly now, her horns tilting forward just slightly. Her voice stayed level, but there was a warning edge to it. Her ears were raised, and her wings were starting to twitch--she was trying not to flare them, I realised. Any dragon would have seen the signs of a potential snap. "I'm just standing. Same as you."

I knew that tone. It was the same one she'd used with James earlier, sharp and steady, like she was daring him to push just a little further.

The man opened his mouth to say something else, but the bus lurched suddenly, throwing him off balance. He stumbled, bumping into Alys' side. Her claws scraped the floor as she steadied herself, her hold on my tail nearly pulling me off the seat.

"Watch it," he muttered, glaring at her like it was her fault.

My ears twitched, and I sat up straighter. "You watch it," I said before I could stop myself. "S-She's only here because of me. I can't fly!" My voice came out louder than I meant it to, almost a shout. The man turned sharply toward me. Immediately, I clamped my mouth shut.

"What was that?" He snapped, moving as though he were about to take a step. At the mild threat I shrank back, holding on more tightly with my tail. I didn't have to scamper away as Alys herself moved closer, bringing her snout close to the human's left ear, teeth near this neck.

"Don't," Alys said quietly. Her expression was completely blank, yet the red in her eyes was blazing.

The bus hissed as it pulled to a stop, only a moment later, the doors swinging open with a jolt. Alys turned to me, her tail's hold on mine loosened enough for her to slip free and begin walking away. "Come on," she said softly. "Let's go."

I hopped off the seat and hurried after her, the cold air outside hitting me like a slap. The bus pulled away, but I could feel the man's eyes on us until it turned the corner.

Alys walked ahead of me, her wings tucked close, her tail swinging low. She didn't say anything for a long time, and I didn't know how to ask what I wanted to ask.

"Are you okay?" She asked finally, her voice quiet.

I glanced up at her, startled. "Y-yeah," I said quickly, my claws clicking on the pavement and my heart pounding. "Yeah, I'm okay."

We hurried home after that; the elevator ride to our floor was totally quiet except for my nervous fidgeting and Alys' wings constantly rustling. She couldn't stop moving them, always readjusting, making little shuffling sounds that bugged me.

The grocery bags attached to her satchel were noisy too, rustling like a bunch of paper bags being dragged across the floor. When we reached the door, I noticed it was unlocked. I gave Alys a look, but she didn't say anything--she just walked in like it didn't

matter.

"--for sure, it was just an issue with that one shift manager. He doesn't..."

We both turned into the kitchen and saw Rhys sitting at the table, his headset on, talking to someone on the other side.

"Oh, um, one second, James." Rhys paused when he noticed us and waved a paw as if to say hang on.

James?

Alys didn't wait for me. I watched her tail swish once in annoyance as she shuffled past me, walking straight to the sofa. She tossed the bags onto it, not even trying to put them down neatly, before heading to her room without a word. Rhys watched her, his lips tight, but he didn't say anything. Then his eyes moved to me.

"Hey, Jarys," he said, a half-smile forming. "How was

school?"

"Okay," I muttered, but then the frustration from earlier came back. "Alys saw James' new friend and got jealous. She's--"

Before I could finish, Rhys waved me off, a forepaw flicking side to side of his headset. Immediately, I realised it was exactly the human I was talking about on the other line. "Yeah, sure. Whatever." He tapped at his laptop with his talons, glancing over at me as if warning me of something.

I scowled, annoyed, still wanting to go on. "And then she took me shopping for ages while Oliver got to go to KFC," I continued. "J-James invited us, but she said no!" I was pouting by the end.

Rhys rolled his eyes and didn't look up from his game. "Uh-huh... Uh, latch the door for me, Jarys. And no, you two needed food for the week. You couldn't have gone to hang out with your friend or hers."

With a groan, I turned and locked the door, not bothering to argue. Rhys always had a reason to shoot down everything I wanted to do. He was already tapping away on his shiny laptop, the one he never let me touch. I hated that thing--it was way cooler than Alys' old one, but he never let me use it. Not even to try.

He was busy playing some ninja robot game, but I wasn't really paying attention to it. I snatched up the chocolate bars we picked up, and after breaking it up, I popped a piece into my mouth, feeling the sweet warmth spread through me.

"Jarys, don't eat all of that for Skies' sake," Rhys grumbled without looking up. "Uh, yeah... Jarys is just eating all our food."

I rolled my eyes but didn't stop munching on the chocolate. "I'm not eating all of it," I said, but I knew he was right. It was too good not to eat. "I'm just... eating."

Rhys didn't even bother to reply. He

was too focused on his game, his talons clicking away. I knew better than to try talking to him when he was like that.

I glanced toward Alys' room. The door was still open, and I could hear her soft breathing from here. I crept in quietly, my tail dragging on the floor as I snuck past her. Her silver laptop sat on the desk, still plugged in and charging like always. She was curled up in her bed, wrapped in a blanket, eyes shut. She looked drained, and for a moment, I thought about leaving her room undisturbed, giving her the sleep she needed.

But then, the thought hit me--I could borrow her laptop without having to ask for once.

I knew for a fact she wouldn't notice. She was fast asleep after all. Giving me more than enough time to untangle her charger from the extension cord and slip away with the laptop held carefully between my teeth. I was silent all the while, determined to enjoy something that day.

I didn't bother with the living room TV, like I normally would. Instead, I opened up her laptop once it was properly plugged in, the cool metallic surface feeling good beneath my digits. As I typed in her painfully easy password--Alys24--I wondered if she'd change it after her birthday.

Once in, I quickly flipped through a few games, not finding anything especially interesting, and unable to play Roblox as our internet was being janky again. Without headphones, I was able to overhear the conversation Rhys was having as if he were right next to me. My adventure in Alys' room meant I only caught the end of it.

"...it's not that different. I think you're just overthinking it. It's--"

Rhys grew suddenly silent.

"Never mind, forget we ever had this conversation," Rhys muttered, sounding weirdly uncomfortable.

"Why?" I heard James' cheery voice bounce from the headphone's fine speakers.

"B-Because I'm basically telling you why banging my sister wouldn't be weird." Rhys' voice was strained, and I could hear the grimace in his words.

Banging? My head tilted on instinct as I watched Rhys' face twist in disgust. Like... pushing? Why is them banging into each other so bad? I bang into Oliver all the time.

James' laugh came through, loud and clear. "Oh, I know. Keep going; this is phenomenal blackmail material! Imagine if Alys found out you were saying half of this."

Rhys scoffed. "She'd probably say thanks."

I blinked.

Why would she say thanks if you banged into her? That's mean.

"And Samys? How would she react to this phenomenal blackmail?"

"Samys would either kill you, then me, or... she'd explain what I missed. It's fifty-fifty with her when it comes to this sort of thing," Rhys muttered, clearly having given up.

James snickered. "Ah, of course. Internet racists and their boyfriends."

I felt my tail twitch in confusion. Racist? What were they even talking about? Who were they talking about?

Rhys laughed again, but it sounded weird. "Closer than you think." He leaned in closer to his screen, like he was trying to make sure I wouldn't hear. "Have you heard about her ex?"

I shuffled closer on the couch, my eyes wide. Is this about Samys?

"Ooh, are we gossiping now?" James teased.

"Only if you promise not to tell anyone," Rhys replied, lowering his voice like it was some huge secret. "I'm only telling you because it's kind of connected to... uh, what we've been talking about."

My ears perked.

"Did Samys date a human?" James asked. His voice was too confident, too casual. "And was his name Aiden?"

Rhys froze.

"Y-Yeah," Rhys finally answered after a beat, stuttering. "How did you know? Did

Alys tell you?"

James laughed lightly. "I, uh, heard the name at Jarys' birthday party. Sounded human, and well, you guys were talking about how we're not all bad, so... y'know. Two and two and all. It was either that or a best friend, and you did just say ex."

I felt my brain freeze.

Samys had gone out with a human?

I still remembered her getting mad at Alys for inviting my friends and James...

"Huh. That's... kind of disappointing, actually," Rhys muttered after a while. "And here I

thought I'd get to do a big reveal. Way to spoil my fun."

"I live to disappoint," James replied, sounding far too pleased with himself. "Just ask my dad."

Rhys snorted at that, caught off guard. "To be fair, James, the guy was always kind of weird-looking, so maybe he was secretly a demon or something."

James rolled his eyes. "A human and a demon? Samys really does roll with the lowest of creatures, huh. Total hypocrite."

Demon!?

Like... like demon wings and horns!?

"Yeah, but, uh, did he have, like, red skin or something?" James asked.

"Nah," Rhys muttered, leaning back in his chair, stretching his maw wide in a loud yawn. "He had white hair and purple eyes."

Chapter 11

Samys was, in a word, an idiot.

I respected her; I loved her, but dear Skie, she was a fool sometimes. Earth was a fantastic planet to live on. Sure, it was vastly different from Reon, but oh so spectacular.

Movies, television, video games, and the internet.

It was a constant rush of dopamine. Even four years later, I was still shocked by how much better everything was in comparison. Alys and Samys would talk about our home world sometimes, waxing nostalgic for a place I could barely stand to remember. Constant wars, suffering, living in a literal rock dump--why would anyone miss that? Maybe because Alys was so strong that she was never hurt like the rest of us, or because Samys had Aiden and was never completely alone.

But for the rest of us?

The common dregs of the realm without a powerful mage for a mate or the ability to throw lightning and fly faster than wind?

A horror show.

Alys had been an arrogant, spoilt dragoness with too much natural power for her own good, and Samys had abandoned us years before. It was me who'd warmed Jarys as an egg, me who hunted for food when there wasn't enough to go around, and me who pressed for us to escape to Earth--all the while Alys was busy eating gryphons.

Never again.

Still, that wasn't to say Earth was perfect.

Nowhere was.

but if there was one thing Earth could do without, it was difficult customers.

"A-And it goes like..." The teen in front of me waved his hands dramatically, nearly hitting the counter in his enthusiasm. "You know? All that happiness and then they still die? I mean, it's fantastic!"

It was Tuesday, the 2nd of October, and I was dealing with such a customer.

I nodded politely and bagged up his copy of Your Lie in April. "Yep, it's a, uh, modern classic," I said, keeping my tone neutral. "Do you need anything else?"

"Yeah, there's this other one that ends in kind of the same way, but I can't remember the name," he rambled, drumming his fingers on the counter like all of the energy in his body had nowhere to go. "It's about a human guy who goes pop in a few months. He sells his lifespan or something?"

Human guy?

No shit. It's a manga written by humans for humans.

I stared at him for a moment, watching him take a full ten seconds to pull out his phone. With a silent huff, I sat down upon my haunches, right forepaw resting on the counter, waiting for him to hurry up. The store wasn't busy, but he was eating into precious Eric time.

"Um... Three Days of Happiness!" He exclaimed, flipping his phone around to show me the title, accompanied by a gloomy-looking manga cover.

I sighed, typing it into the system. Exactly as I'd expected--it wasn't in stock. "Sorry, not in stock or our usual rotation. I can order it for you, but it'll take about a week to arrive. You'd need to pay now."

He clicked his tongue. "Okay, yeah, but can you check for a few others too?"

I swallowed my irritation. "Sure. Go on."

"I Want to Eat Your Pancreas, Tell Me How to Forget About You, Leyline Migration, and... Tokidoki."

Huh. All tragic romances...

After a few moments of careful typing and browsing, I looked over. "The first two are already in stock. Tokidoki will arrive with next week's usual shipment. I can't find anything on Leyline Migration. Is that its proper name?"

"Yes, but it was never translated to English."

I nodded. "We don't sell Japanese copies. You'd have to look online for that one. I can grab the other two now and order Three Days of Happiness. I'll set Tokidoki aside when it comes. What name should I put the order under?"

"Aiden Luscus," he said. "You want ID?"

I froze at the name, my claws freezing above the keyboard as I processed the name. "Aiden?" The name slipped out before I could stop it, a flicker of something--recognition? Dread? Sparked in my chest. "I, uh... I knew an Aiden, actually."

The boy blinked, and for a moment, there was something strange about the way he smiled--too casual, almost rehearsed. "Yeah, me too," he said with a soft chuckle. "Long time ago." He didn't elaborate. "So, uh, do you need ID?"

I shook my head quickly, my mind still catching on the name. "No, I just need an email to send you the digital receipt and the delivery alert. Bring the receipt when you come to pick them up. Wait--which volumes are you after again?"

"Volume one for everything," he said with an easy smile.

"Got it." I rang up the order. "That'll be thirty-nine ninety-six. Card or cash?"

"Cash," he said, handing over a crisp fifty. As I was counting out his change, something about his posture caught my attention. He stood perfectly still--not the restless, jittery energy of most teenagers, but something more calculated, deliberate. His pale eyes seemed to linger on me for just a moment too long, and it sent an odd chill down my spine.

As I handed him the change, he added with a grin, "You can keep the ten. Buy your brother something nice for me."

My claws stiffened at that, my tail curling instinctively. My brother? I opened my mouth to ask what he meant or how he knew, but before I could begin, he was already gone, climbing the stairs to the upper floor.

I stood there for a moment, staring after him, the words I hadn't said still caught in my throat. Something about him felt... off. Familiar in a way that made my scales itch, but I couldn't quite place it.

Shaking my head, I slipped the ten into my coin pouch and put the change into the till.

I turned my attention back to the store, the faint hum of the overhead lights and the quiet rustle of a nearby customer flipping through a manga filling the silence.

Despite my attempts at normalcy, I couldn't shake the feeling the kid's presence had left behind. The way he moved, the way he'd smiled--it all felt too deliberate, too familiar. My tail flicked behind me, restless as I tried to settle back into the rhythm of work.

"Hey, Rhys!"

I glanced up and immediately felt my ears perk forward at the sound of his voice. Eric was standing at the doorway to the back room, a stack of boxes balanced on his hip. He gave me that easy, warm smile of his, the kind that made my chest feel a little lighter no matter how heavy the day had been. His rich, tawny complexion seemed to glow in the late afternoon light filtering through the high windows, a soft contrast to the jet-black curls that framed his face.

"Got an old shipment the geniuses upstairs forgot to sort," he said, nodding toward the boxes. "You mind giving me a ha- uh, paw?"

"Y-Yeah!" I replied too quickly. "No problem." I stepped out from behind the counter. My claws clicked softly against the floor as I walked over, and I tried to keep my tail from curling too obviously.

Eric set the boxes down on the counter and brushed his hands off on his jeans. "You okay? You look a little spooked."

"Customers," I said simply, keeping my voice neutral. "Some of them just like to hang around a little too long, you know?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Tell me about it. I had someone earlier asking me to find a book based on the description of you know; it has a dragon on the cover. Took me ten minutes to figure out they were talking about Eragon. I had to explain the difference between a comic book and a book book to someone in their thirties."

I snorted, the corner of my maw twitching upward despite the lingering unease. "People are amazing."

"They really are," Eric said, his grin widening.

For a moment, the room felt quieter, the sounds of the store fading into the background. I busied myself with opening one of the boxes, my sharp claws slicing through the tape easily.

"You sure you're okay, though?" Eric asked, his voice softer now.

I paused, glancing over at him. His expression wasn't teasing or playful like it usually was--it was serious, almost worried. It made my chest tighten in a way I didn't like.

"I'm fine," I said, a little too quickly. Realising this, I looked back down at the box, pulling out a stack of manga to avoid meeting his gaze.

"If you say so," he said, though his tone suggested he didn't entirely believe me.

He moved to the next box, and we worked in silence for a few minutes. But even as I focused on sorting through the forgotten shipment, I could feel his presence beside me. It wasn't uncomfortable, exactly. It was just... distracting.

Eric wasn't like the dragons back on Reon, with their endless posturing and rigid traditions. He was just... Eric. Easy-going, steady, the kind of person who could make the world feel a little less heavy just by being there. That was the problem--because he made me want things I wasn't sure I was allowed to want.

And by Skie did I want more from this life...

Back on Reon, relationships between those of the same sex weren't forbidden, but they weren't exactly encouraged, either. Archon dragons were a dwindling species, and every union was supposed to be about survival--about producing the next generation. Two males couldn't do that, so what was the point?

But this wasn't Reon.

This was Earth.

It didn't matter what the old traditions said. Or at least, it shouldn't.

...So why did it feel like it still did?

I was so lost in thought that I didn't realise Eric had stopped moving until I felt his gaze on me. I glanced up, and he was leaning against the counter, one eyebrow raised.

"Okay, seriously," he said, crossing his arms. "What's going on with you today? You're all spaced out."

"I'm just tired," I said quickly, setting down the manga I'd been holding.

"Uh-huh," he said, clearly not buying it.

I sighed, running a paw over my snout. "It's nothing. Just a weird customer earlier. Got under my scales, I guess."

Eric nodded slowly, his expression softening. "You've got to stop letting people get to you, Rhys. They're just customers. They come, they go. None of them matter as much as you think they do."

I wanted to tell him that it wasn't just about the customers. That it was about everything--about Reon, about "Aiden," about him. But the words wouldn't come.

Instead, I just nodded. "Y-Yeah. You're right."

Eric studied me for a moment longer, then smiled. "Of course I'm right. I'm always right."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop the small smile that tugged at my lips.

"Let's knock this out," he said, nudging another box toward me. "Then you can call it a day."

I followed him back to the boxes, my tail swishing behind me. And for just a moment, it was easy to forget about customers, about Reon, about everything.

I followed Eric back to the remaining stack of boxes, his presence a steadying force as we worked side by side. For a little while, everything else faded away--the gnawing thoughts about Reon, the strange tension left behind by Aiden, even the ever-present weight of my own doubts. It was just me and Eric, sorting through the chaos of another shipment.

And then, as always, the world came crashing back.

I was in the far corner of the upstairs store, organising some display shelves, when a pair of familiar voices reached me. The floor manager's grating tone was unmistakable.

"Eric's favourite, huh?" He sneered, his words dripping with sarcasm.

I froze, my claws tightening around the Funko Pop I was adjusting.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Someone else asked, their tone lighter, curious but cautious.

"Be serious, man. You've seen how he treats that dragon guy. Always giving him the easy jobs, covering for his mistakes. If that's not favouritism, I don't know what is. It's ridiculous."

The knot in my chest tightened, and I forced myself to stay still, to listen.

"Maybe he's just being nice," the other person offered, though their voice was quieter now, like they weren't sure they believed it.

"Nice?" The floor manager scoffed. "Please. Either he's got a soft spot for scales, or he's trying to play hero. Either way, it's unprofessional. And don't get me started on how the customers love him. Half of them are probably just coming to see the dragon employee. It's a gimmick, not sales talent."

The words hit harder than I wanted to admit. My tail swayed behind me, a physical display of the anger simmering just beneath the surface with the way it smacked into the shelves.

I wanted to march over there and demand to know what his problem was. I wanted to ask why he cared so much about me and Eric, about how we worked together, when all we did was try to make his job easier.

But I didn't. I was scared.

When I finally made my way back down to the manga section, Eric was still there, flipping through inventory forms with that same casual ease he always seemed to carry. He glanced up as I approached, his smile faltering slightly.

"You okay?" He asked, his brow furrowing in concern.

I wanted to tell him everything. The words hovered on the edge of my tongue, aching to break free. Had he heard them? Did he care? Or worse--what if he agreed with them? What if every kind smile, every effortless laugh, was just pity wrapped in good intentions? My claws flexed against the counter, a small, sharp motion that reminded me to stay silent. Better to keep the illusion intact than risk seeing it shattered.

He didn't look convinced, his expression softening into something more cautious, but he nodded and stepped aside. "Let me know if you need anything," he said quietly, his voice so steady and sincere it almost made me believe he really could fix everything.

I took his spot behind the register, grabbing the scanner without looking at him. "I'm fine, Eric. Really."

The next customer stepped forward, a middle-aged woman with a stack of brightly coloured manga in her hands. Her smile was cheerful and polite, and I did my best to match it as I rang her up. The register beeped in its usual monotone rhythm, the sound almost calming in the moment.

"That'll be twenty-two forty," I said, sliding her items into a bag. My voice sounded normal enough, detached but professional, the way it usually did. She handed me a twenty and some loose coins, and I slid her change across the counter with a paw, nodding politely as she thanked me and walked off.

I sighed through my nose, glancing over at him where he was adjusting a display shelf. He was just a few feet away, his movements casual and fluid, the kind of relaxed ease that made everything seem effortless for him. He glanced back at me, catching me looking, and raised an eyebrow. His lips quirked into a small, knowing smile.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asked again, his tone lighter this time but still tinged with clear concern.

"Yeah," I replied, the word automatic as my tail flicked restlessly behind me. "I'm fine."

The rest of the shift passed in a blur. I kept my head down, focusing on the mundane tasks in front of me--the steady flow of customers, the endless tidying of shelves, the occasional request for something we didn't have in stock. But no matter how much I tried to lose myself in the routine, I couldn't shake the weight in my chest.

The floor manager passed by a few times, his presence lingering in the back of my mind like a sour taste. I caught snippets of his voice as he spoke to the other staff, his tone sharp and clipped in a way that made my scales prickle and my ears twitch. Every now and then, I'd catch him glancing at me, his gaze cold and assessing, as if he were looking for a reason to confirm whatever weird suspicions he had.

By the time my shift ended, the store had settled into its usual late-afternoon quiet. The sun outside had softened, casting long golden shadows through the windows. I grabbed my bag from the break room, the strap awkwardly draped over my shoulder as I made my way to the front. Eric was still there, leaning against the counter as he chatted with another employee. He glanced up as I approached, his expression brightening instantly.

"Heading out?" He asked, his voice warm and familiar in a way that made my chest tighten.

"Yeah," I said, keeping my tone even, though the words felt heavier than they should have.

"You want a ride? I have a pretty nice car I could squeeze you in. I finish in five too." He offered, leaning back slightly, his hands casually resting on the counter's edge.

I shook my head quickly, almost too quickly, pretending the offer wasn't sweet. "No, I'm good. Thanks, though."

Eric's smile faltered for just a moment, a flash of something unreadable crossing his face before he nodded. "Alright. Get home safe, okay?"

"Yeah," I muttered, adjusting the strap of my bag as I pushed open the door and stepped out into the cool evening air.

The walk to the bus stop wasn't far, but it felt longer than usual. My claws clicked softly against the pavement, the faint hum of passing cars blending with the distant chatter of pedestrians. I tried to focus on the simple rhythm of my paws hitting the pavement, the familiar sounds of the city, anything to drown out the thoughts swirling in my head.

A gimmick.

My tail swished sharply behind me, a flicker of frustration breaking through the fog of doubt. I wanted to believe he was wrong, that Eric didn't see me that way. But no matter how much I tried to tell myself it didn't matter, the words lingered, gnawing at the edges of my thoughts like an itch I couldn't scratch.

When the bus finally arrived, its brakes hissing softly as it pulled up to the curb, I climbed on and found a seat near the back. The engine rumbled beneath me as we pulled away, the soft vibrations running through the floor somehow soothing.

I stared out the window as the city blurred past, the golden light of the setting sun casting everything in a soft, hazy glow. My thoughts wandered to Alys and Jarys, probably already at Samys' supermarket, arguing over whether or not he was allowed a magazine or not. The flat was small, but it was warm and familiar, a place where I didn't have to pretend to be anything other than what I was.

My tablet buzzed in my bag, jolting me out of my thoughts. I pulled it out and unlocked the screen, blinking down at the message that had popped up.

"Hey, you wanna play Warframe later?"

It was James.

The corner of my mouth twitched into a faint smile, the tension in my chest easing just a little. Leave it to James to come up with the perfect distraction, even if it was unintentional. Sometimes, just sometimes... I was jealous Alys had snagged him first. What I didn't envy, however, was the way the two awkwardly danced around one another... although I wasn't much better. In some ways I was worse.

I tapped out a quick reply, my talons clicking lightly against the screen. They didn't work on regular screens, but our tablets were designed specifically for dragons and gryphons. "Sure. Let me get home first."

As the bus rumbled toward my stop, I leaned back in my seat, letting my head rest against the cool glass of the window. The weight in my chest wasn't gone, not entirely. But for the first time all day, it felt like I could breathe a little easier.

....

I got back around five, about the same time as James, as I saw his name pop up just as I logged into Steam. I grabbed my new laptop from the bedroom and carried it into the living room. I set it down, then took the new headset in my mouth and sat down on my haunches.

I'd have played in my room, but the connection in there was atrocious.

Probably because the walls were made thick enough so that you didn't have to hear the heat induced fun your family members were having. If only Alys knew how to use a lock... Poor Jarys had walked in on her venting her frustrations with James a week back.

I shuddered at the memory as I plugged my headset into the laptop. They were so much nicer than the human ones my older sister used and complained about, seeing as they were dragon specific and hers were generic. I made more money than she did, and I enjoyed using that money.

She, like a true dragon, hoarded her wealth.

The only time I could remember her spending any was when James suggested getting leg warmers, and even then she'd only worn them once--in her room, posing in front of a mirror. I didn't count her crappy laptop as that was a full year ago, and even then she'd barely understood what the thing was for at the time.

A year and a half... a year and a half.

She'd made good progress.

Aside from the kiss and some funny interactions with some gryphons she'd begged me not to tell James about, she was behaving herself. Her and Samys. I was proud of our little family. Still... her refusal to see someone about her behaviour with the avians was a little worrying. Even our cousin had been for a few visits...

"You been levelling without me?" I blinked at James' message, at first worried I'd actually offended him before the "XD" came through. "My favourite dragon boyfriend has betrayed me."

Rolling my eyes, I typed out, "You wanna call now or after we're both in the game?"

"Call now. I've forgot my password again, so I'll need five."

I bent my mic again before hitting voice call. Almost immediately I got the James branded, "Yo."

"How do you forget your password every single time we play? Do you have dementia or something?" I booted up the game, and unlike my friend, I got the password right the first time. "Like, legit every time."

"I've got brain damage; leave me alone. I... oh no... for fuck's sake..."

I grinned, realising near instantly what he'd done. "You did it again, didn't you!?"

"Shut up, dumb iguana." He groaned, and I could hear him lean back in his chair, stretching. "I put in the wrong password when I changed my password. Now the client thinks I'm trying to hack myself."

"And, what, steal your four platinum?"

"Uh huh..." He muttered, distracted. "Just let me, um..." I sat quietly, adjusting my mods for sanctuary onslaught, as it was all he played. "Ugh, alright, I'm in. I just got a five minute... Yeah, yeah, I'm in. You in a mission yet?"

"Nah, just tweaking my mods. What are we doing?"

"Dunno."

I hesitated. James was a nerd, yet his gaming habits were a bit of a mystery to me. I could never actually tell if he played for fun or just went through the motions, sticking to specific missions he'd already perfected.

"How about we just do Mars survival for a bit?" I suggested, hoping for something simple.

"Sure, yeah, let me just swap to Styanax real quick. He needs ranking up." I sniffed and nodded, not that he could see the gesture. "What have you been up to anyway? My day has been, uh, kinda shitty, to be honest."

I finally understood why he wanted to play.

"Not much. Today was alright; I got some guy that made me do actual work for once," I said with a grin. "Had to order some manga rather than just pointing at the shelves. I also got accused of being a teacher's pet."

"Teacher's pet?" He whispered.

"Kind of. The floor manager thinks I get special treatment because... I don't know; they're idiots? Trust me, I don't. All Eric does is talk to me. They're just pissy because he makes them do their fucking jobs." I couldn't keep the heat out of my words, but that didn't matter. James was a friend, a proper one.

"Yeah, I know the type. You've got special treatment because you're the only one actually doing your job." He was placating me, but I didn't care. I appreciated him letting me get it out of my system. "I, uh, sent you a party invite."

"Got it."

We both paused, the conversation lulling.

"So, was your day as bad as mine?" I asked when our ships had finally loaded in. He hesitated, so I fiddled with the W and S keys, watching as my blue ship glided up and down.

"Eh, it was..." He paused. "Uh, I don't know how to put it, but Alys was kind of... angry with me?" I paused my spaceship's stimming. "Like, she was just sort of passive-aggressive with me?"

I chewed my lip, torn between wanting to help and wanting to shut down the conversation completely. I really didn't want to get involved in their weird relationship, or whatever you called two inexperienced morons circling each other like two birds trying to outdo each other with the worst mating dance ever.

In the end, I sucked in air through my clenched teeth and said, "What do you mean?"

"Okay, right, um... I went to pick up my brother, and it turns out it's at the same school Jarys goes to." I made a sound to show I was still following the story. "And I was with this gryphon since her brother also goes to Jarys' school, a-and Alys was just kinda weird with her. Like she got all quiet and kept staring at her." Again, I grunted, barely noticing that we'd loaded in. "And when I got back, after I had to prove I wasn't some sort of paedophile to the teacher trying to steal kids, she was just... like... moody with me."

He paused, and I nodded. "Right. What do you mean by moody?"

"Um. Ugh, I might just be reading into this, to be honest..." His words came out more like a groan than an actual sentence. "But she was joking that I was avoiding her, which I'm not, and then she cut me off, and then she suggested I take Galia to KFC instead of her and..." He paused and made an odd sort of huffing sound. "I don't even know. Am I even making sense?"

Kind of?

I sighed, leaning back in my chair and letting the game run as I thought about what to say. "Look, James, you're making sense... kind of. But honestly, this sounds like classic Alys. She's always been a bit... territorial, you know?"

"Territorial?" His voice cracked slightly, and I could almost picture his eyes widening behind his glasses. "She's not a dog, Rhys."

"Obviously," I said, rolling my eyes, "but she's a dragon. And like it or not, we've got instincts, even here on Earth. Alys is just..." I hesitated, trying to find a way to phrase it that wouldn't make things worse. "She gets... prickly when she feels threatened. Galia probably caught her off guard."

"Threatened?" James repeated, clearly baffled. "By Galia? She's like half her size! And what would Alys even have to be threatened about? I wasn't doing anything. I'm not--"

"James," I interrupted, trying to sound as patient as possible, "you could have been doing absolutely nothing, and it wouldn't matter. It's not about Galia being small or you being oblivious. It's about how Alys feels when she sees you with someone else."

There was a long pause on his end, and for a moment, all I could hear was the faint hum of his mic and the sound effects from the game.

"So... you're saying she's jealous?" He asked finally, his tone cautious, like he wasn't sure he wanted to believe it.

I sighed again, running a paw down my snout. "Yes, James. That's exactly what I'm saying. She likes you--Skie knows why--and seeing you with another girl probably poked at something she wasn't ready to deal with."

"But I'm not dating Galia," he protested, his voice rising slightly. "We're just friends! I-I barely even know her!"

"It doesn't matter," I said bluntly. "In Alys' head, you're her human. Whether or not that's actually true. It doesn't change the way she feels."

James groaned, and I could hear the faint creak of his chair as he leaned back. "This is so dumb," he muttered. "I'm not even... I mean, it's not like we're dating, right? We're just--"

"Friends," I finished for him, my tone dry. "Yeah, I've heard that one before. But James, let's be real. Do you actually think Alys sees it that way?"

Another pause, longer this time. I could almost hear the gears turning in his head.

"I don't know," he admitted eventually, his voice quiet. "Maybe not. But I don't want to mess this up, you know? She's... she's important to me. I don't want to lose that just because I said or did something stupid."

"You're already halfway there, mate," I said with a grin. "But hey, at least you're trying to figure it out. That's probably more than most people would do."

"Thanks, I think?" He let out a short laugh, though it sounded more strained than amused. "But what do you think I should do?"

"Talk to her," I said simply. "But, you know, without the weird passive-aggressive, ultra-sarcastic back-and-forth you two always do. Just be honest. Tell her how you feel, ask her what's going on, and try not to make it about Galia."

"Easier said than done," he muttered, but I could hear a faint note of determination creeping into his voice. "Alright. I'll... I'll try. But if she bites my head off, I'm blaming you."

"Fair enough," I said, chuckling. "Just make sure she doesn't take a chunk out of you for real. Those teeth aren't just for show."

He groaned again, but there was a hint of a smile in his voice now. "Great. Thanks for the pep talk, Jeremy Kyle."

"Anytime," I said, my grin widening. "Now, can we please focus on the game before you get us both killed?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, the sound of his keyboard clacking filling the call as he started moving again. "Let's see how many times I can die before you give up on me. This frame is rank one, remember."

"Don't tempt me," I shot back, my claws clicking against the keyboard as I dove back into the mission.

For a little while, we let the conversation drift away, focusing instead on the chaos of the game. But even as I tore through enemies and dodged explosions, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for James. He might not have been the sharpest claw in the hoard when it came to relationships, but at least he cared. And for Alys, that was probably more than enough.

...but.

The irony of it all, the irony of being able to help him, to be able to help my sister... and yet still feel so conflicted about Eric, about... everything in my own life. "Rhys, you're dying." I blinked, noticing my shields were down and I had less than two hundred points of health remaining.

With a groan, I activated my grappling hook ability and escaped the bundle of infected. When free, James' Styanax shot forward, sliding and spinning its polearm madly. I jumped up and hit the ground with a slam, finishing the remaining enemies off instantly. "Did you have a stroke?"

"Shut up," I huffed. "I was just thinking."

"That's dangerous."

I immediately laughed. "I knew you were going to say that!" I grinned, momentarily distracted from my musings. "Like, ninety percent certain that..." I paused, sighing. "Ugh, James, can I use my favour?"

He paused, as I expected he would. "Your what...? Since when did I owe you a favour?"

"I helped you with Alys, so you've got to help me with something similar?"

"Similar? A-And what took you so long to... Oh, oh! Oh shit, have you got a human of your own!?" James gasped excitedly, his energy forcing a flush to my cheeks. I shuffled, adjusting my tail and tapping my claws against the surface of my laptop. "I thought you were being a bit weird."

"W-Weird?"

"Like, I don't know, just sort of... well, weird. So..." He paused, and I could physically hear the grin in his words. "Who's the lucky lady?"

My heart pounded in my chest, thumping almost audibly against my ribs. "It, uh, I might have..."

Silence.

"...It's not a lady, James," I eventually muttered, barely loud enough for the mic to pick up.

James, naturally, didn't let it slide. "Not a--wait, what? Rhys! You've got to spill now." His voice was a mixture of shock and genuine curiosity, the grin still audible in his tone.

"It's not a big deal," I said quickly, hoping to downplay it. My claws fiddled with the keyboard, even though my character stood idle on the screen. "And it's not, uh, what you think."

"Rhys, come on. You just made it what I think. You can't back out now," he teased, though there was an underlying sincerity that only made the knot in my chest tighten.

I hesitated, weighing my options. Did I really want to get into this with James? Sure, he was a good friend, but this wasn't just casual gossip--it was about Eric. About how I'd been feeling lately and how much it scared me to even acknowledge it.

"It's someone from work," I admitted finally, the words dragging out of me like they weighed more than they should. "That's all."

"Ohhh," James said, dragging the word out like he'd uncovered some big secret. "So, this someone--you want to, like, ask him out or something?"

I groaned. "You think I can just... say something and hope for the best? It's not just about him--it's about me. What if I screw it up? What if he doesn't... you know. What if he doesn't feel the same?" I paused. "It's not that simple."

"Why's it not?"

"Because it's not. Same as you and Alys! You think that's simple? It's not, and you know it." I snapped, frustration slipping into my voice before I could stop it. James fell silent, and I immediately felt the heat rise to my face. "Sorry," I muttered. "It's just... this isn't Reon, you know? Relationships here are different. They're supposed to be about feelings, but feelings don't come with guarantees."

I hesitated, my tail curling around my chair leg. "Back on Reon, it wasn't like this. Mating was survival, not... whatever this is. I don't even know how to start. What if I make the first move, and it's the wrong one?"

"Okay," James said slowly, clearly trying to tread carefully now. "But, I mean, isn't it always? Like, relationships are never easy. If you like this guy, maybe you should just... go for it?"

I snorted, shaking my head. "Says the guy who needed my advice on how to deal with Alys literally a minute ago."

James sputtered, his voice rising slightly. "Hey! That's not fair."

"Isn't it?" I shot back, smirking despite myself. "Because I distinctly remember having to explain to you that Alys was being territorial and not just randomly moody. And now you're out here handing out relationship wisdom like some kind of expert?"

"That's different!" He protested, though I could hear the embarrassment creeping into his tone.

"Sure it is," I said, drawing the words out. "Totally different."

He huffed, but there was no real heat in it. "Alright, fine. Maybe you've got a point. But at least I'm trying to return the favour, okay?"

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. "Maybe. But it's not just about liking him, James. It's about... everything else. Dragons aren't like humans. On Reon, relationships weren't about feelings. They were about survival. About making sure the next generation had a chance."

James was quiet for a beat, processing that. "But this isn't Reon," he said softly. "And it doesn't sound like you want it to be."

That hit harder than I expected. I let out a slow breath, his words settling over me like a weight I wasn't sure I could carry. He wasn't wrong. I didn't want our home world's traditions or expectations dictating my life anymore. But letting go of all that? That was easier said than done.

"Maybe," I muttered. "But even if I wanted to... it's not like he feels the same."

James made a thoughtful noise. "You don't know that," he said finally. "You're not a mind reader, Rhys. And from what you've told me, this guy sounds like he cares about you. Honestly, there's a teeny chance he is giving you special treatment. Not, like, less work, but just being nicer to you. That make sense?"

I glanced at the screen, where my character stood idle next to his. James' Styanax shifted slightly as he moved his mouse, his presence steady and patient. He wasn't all that smart when it came to his own emotions, but he was a good listener.

"Maybe," I said again, my voice quieter this time.

"Look," he said, his tone lighter now, "if he doesn't feel the same, then yeah, it'll suck. But at least you'll know, right? Better than driving yourself crazy wondering what if."

"James... Do you know what irony means?"

He scoff-laughed. "Yeah, it's when you give advice but can't actually follow it yourself. Pretty sure I'm nailing it."

I didn't continue right away; I just let his words sink in. He had a point, as much as I hated to admit it. But knowing something and acting on it were two very different things.

"Hey, your work..." He paused. "They'd be cool with you two, right?"

"For sure, it was just an issue with that one shift manager. He doesn't..." I froze at the sound of rustling bags and a huffing Alys. I looked over to the front door, spotting a tired looking sister and a bored looking brother. "Oh, um, one second, James." I waved a paw at the two.

Alys made a noise and hurried past Jarys, chucking her bags onto the sofa before storming into her bedroom. I watched her, tight lipped for a moment before looking over to Jarys. "Hey, Jarys," I said. "How was school?"

"Okay," he muttered, his tone shifting. "Alys saw James' new friend and got jealous. She's-" I felt my eyes widen. My microphone was sensitive. I waved at him and flicked the side of my headset. "Yeah, sure. Whatever." I tapped at my laptop, temporarily reducing the sensitivity.

"And then she took me shopping for ages while Oliver got to go to KFC," Jarys whined. "James invited us, but she said no!" I rolled my eyes, not looking up as I spent a revive. I was running low on affinity... "Uh-huh... Uh, latch the door for me, Jarys. And no, you two needed food for the week. You couldn't have gone to hang out with your friend or hers."

I could hear Jarys huffing, along with the sound of rustling bags. "Jarys, don't eat all of that for Skies' sake," I grumbled, not needing to look over at him to tell that he was probably eating Alys' depression chocolates.

"What's up? Are the others back?" James asked.

"Uh, yeah... Jarys is just eating all of our food."

Silence reigned as my brother chewed and huffed.

"Anyway," James added after a long moment. "If you need help, I'm your guy. Relationship advice, pep talks, even a wingman--just say the word."

"Thanks, James," I said dryly. "I'll think about it. But if this blows up, I'm blaming you."

"Hey, fair enough," he said, laughing. "But I'm saying the same about your territorial sister, alright?" I rolled my eyes at that but internally conceded. "Although, if I'm being honest, I'm kinda jealous that the only issue you've got is... uh, fuck, how do I phrase this...? You don't care about the physical part, right?"

"Nah, I'm cool with that."

"How?"

"What do you mean how?" I asked, tilting my head. "Why wouldn't I be cool with the physical part? Aren't you...?" It took him pausing for me to realise he was not in fact cool with it. "James?"

Silence.

"James?" I said again, this time with more urgency. The silence on his end was stretching just a little too long, and I could practically feel the tension through the call. "You good, man?"

He sighed, a long, exasperated sound that made me lean back in my chair. "I don't know how to phrase this. It's... complicated."

"Clearly," I muttered, clicking idly on the game's menu as I waited for him to explain. "So why don't you uncomplicate it? What's actually bothering you?"

"It's Alys," he admitted after a beat, his voice quieter now, almost hesitant. "I mean, not her, exactly, just... everything. Like, me liking her, uh, physically? It feels... weird. She's not human, and sometimes I just--I don't know if that's okay. N-No offense, by the way."

I blinked, my claws hovering over the keyboard. "Nah, I get it. But, James, liking Alys doesn't make you weird," I said slowly, trying to parse his words. "Okay, maybe you're a tiny bit weird, but no weirder than me or her. Besides, she's not just some random dragon. She's... well, Alys. And if you're into her, then what's the problem?"

"It's not just that," he said quickly, his words tumbling over themselves. "It's... everything. Like, I don't even know how it would work. You know, physically."

I froze, my tail curling reflexively against the chair leg. "Physically?" I repeated, my tone wary. "James, are you seriously asking me how dragon-human sex works!?"

"No!" he yelped, though his voice cracked, and I could hear the nervous edge in his laugh. "I mean, not... directly. But, you know... kind of?"

I groaned, dragging a paw down my snout. "Skie, help me; this is not a conversation I want to have. About my sister."

"You think I want to have it?" He shot back, though there was an almost desperate edge to his words. "But you're the only person I can ask. And you seem fine with Eric, so I thought maybe... you'd get it."

I sighed, the weight of his awkwardness settling over me like a too-heavy blanket. "Okay, look," I said, deciding to just get this over with. "It's not that different. I mean, dragons and humans... we're more compatible than you'd think. Cloaca or not--" I froze mid-sentence, my brain finally catching up to my mouth. Horror flooded me as the implications of what I was saying hit like a boulder rolling downhill. "Never mind. Forget we ever had this conversation," I muttered, my voice strained.

"Why?" James asked, and this time, his tone was almost gleeful. I could practically hear the grin spreading across his face. The shift from nervous to teasing was almost instant.

"B-Because I'm basically telling you why banging my sister wouldn't be weird," I rasped.

James' laugh erupted over the call, loud and uncontrollable. "Oh, I know. Keep going; this is phenomenal blackmail material! Imagine if Alys found out you were saying half of this."

I scoffed. "She'd probably say thanks."

"And Samys," he snarked. "How would she react to this phenomenal blackmail?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Samys would either kill you, then me, or... she'd explain what I missed. It's fifty-fifty with her when it comes to this sort of thing," I muttered.

James snickered. "Ah, of course. Internet racists and their boyfriends."

I busted out laughing, remembering the weird, vaguely offensive memes he'd send me whilst pretending to study. "Closer than you think." I leaned in closer to my laptop, as if that made it more private. "Have you heard about her ex?" It felt a bit soon to tell him family secrets, but I trusted him.

"Ooh, are we gossiping now?" He teased.

"Only if you promise not to tell anyone," I replied, lowering my voice. "I'm only telling you because it's kind of connected to... uh, what we've been talking about."

I could feel my tail swish, excitement bubbling. It was one of our family's best kept secrets, and one I was proud of knowing.

It was wrecked, however. "Did Samys date a human?" He asked, sounding too confident, too casual, stating it as though it were a fact. "And was his name Aiden?"

I pause, brain flash frozen.

H-How!?

"Y-Yeah," I stammered after a moment. "How did you know? Did Alys tell you?"

He laughed quietly. "I, uh, heard the name at Jarys' birthday party. Sounded human, and well, you guys were talking about how we're not all bad, so... y'know. Two and two and all. It was either that or a best friend, and you did just say ex."

"Huh. That's... kind of disappointing, actually," I muttered. "And here I thought I'd get to do a big reveal. Way to spoil my fun." I tried not to sound so sour.

"I live to disappoint," James replied, sounding pleased. "Just ask my dad."

I snorted at the self-deprecation. "To be fair, James, the guy was always kind of weird-looking, so maybe he was secretly a demon or something." He had the magic to back it up too, and he was a bit of a weirdo.

"A human and a demon? Samys really does roll with the lowest of creatures, huh. Total hypocrite."

I sat up and rubbed at my eyes, taking a moment to take a sip of the water I'd not touched since I first sat down.

"Yeah, but, uh, did he have, like, red skin or something?" James continued.

"Nah," I muttered, leaning back and yawning. "He had white hair and purple eyes."

The sound of the sofa creaking caught my attention. I spun around, spotting Jarys watching me with pricked ears and wide eyes. "Jarys!" I snapped. "Are you spying again!?"

He squawked and shuffled over to the other side of the sofa, eyes suddenly glued to the lightly warped screen of Alys' laptop. My scales itched with irritation and worry. I wasn't sure what he'd overheard, but most of what James and I had talked about had been painfully personal. "Ugh, sorry, James, I might have to call you back. Jarys--"

"White hair and purple eyes?" James interrupted, his voice sharp and shaken. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," I replied, frowning. "Nice guy, a bit weird though. Crazy good magic."

There was a long pause, and I could hear James's breathing now, uneven and deliberate. "I-I think I met that guy," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

I froze, my claws digging into the armrest of the sofa. "I, uh, doubt it, man. He died five years ago. Alys and Samys saw the body... Are you sure you didn't just meet someone similar looking?"

James exhaled shakily, the sound making my spines prickle. "Uh, maybe? I don't know," he muttered. "It was when Alys and I went out for coffee. She left for the bathroom, and this guy came up to me--about seventeen-ish, white hair and purple eyes--and started jabbering about Alys picking me and exterminating something. I--" He hesitated, then rushed the words out. "A-Are you sure it wasn't him? Could he not have come over?"

"No," I said firmly, the certainty in my voice leaving no room for argument. "Humans can't cross over. That I know for sure. And, James, the guy was good with magic, but he was dead-dead--magic can't fix that, no matter what kind. But, yeah, that guy sounds... weird... maybe he's Earth's equivalent?" I forced a grin, though it felt awkward and hollow. "Heh, maybe Reon has a James?"

James didn't laugh. "Hm. Maybe," he muttered, the unease still thick in his tone. There was a pause, his breathing filling the silence. "I'm gonna get going, alright? I've got a ton to think about."

I didn't push him. "Wait. Are you still coming over this Friday?"

"Yeah," James said after a moment, his voice distant and distracted. "I'll... talk to you later."

"You too."

The call ended, and I sat there in silence, my character still frozen. James's unease lingered in the air, heavy and infectious. I rubbed a claw over my snout, trying to shake it off. Whatever had happened to him during that coffee trip, it clearly hadn't been normal--but the idea of Aiden showing up on Earth was just ridiculous.

Dead people couldn't talk.

I sighed, shifting my focus to something I could actually control: Friday. Alys had said she was bringing James. My tail flicked as I considered it. If she could bring her human friend, why couldn't I invite mine? The thought made my chest tighten, my stomach doing an uncomfortable flip.

Would Eric even want to come? He'd been friendly, sure, but it wasn't like we were super close. And humans weren't exactly lining up to hang out with dragons--not outside of official work or casual, surface-level interactions, anyway. Still... he'd always seemed at ease around me, not stiff or awkward the way most humans got. Friendly, caring.

That had to mean something, right?

But what if Eric said no? Or worse, what if he came and felt out of place? My tail thumped lightly against the backboard of the chair. Alys's decision to invite James seemed so easy, so natural.

She probably hadn't even hesitated. She probably hadn't even assumed he'd say no.

"Guess I could mention Alys is bringing a human," I muttered, more to myself than anything. "Might make it... less weird."

It wasn't a bad idea. If Eric knew there'd be another human there, maybe it'd make him more comfortable--or at least curious enough to say yes. And if he didn't... well, no harm done, right?

I let out a slow breath, trying to steady the mix of nerves and excitement bubbling inside me. I'd ask him. Probably. Maybe.

....

The call ended, the sudden shift in energy knocking my head back and giving me an earache. I forced my consciousness away from Rhys and paused for a tick. James' reaction stuck with me, circling in my mind like a stone skipping unevenly across water. I'd expected him to brush it off, to let it slide with his usual shrug and grin. Instead, he'd doubled down.

Way to kill the vibe, James.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to shake off the tension. My thoughts turned over restlessly, teasing the edges of anxiety. He could've drawn that out a bit longer, leaned into the physical worry, given it room to breathe.

...Whatever.

Despite my irritation, I couldn't deny it--Rhys was right. Earth really was a fantastic place to live.

Good food, warmth, shelter, water, and people who didn't constantly try to kill you. By Reonic standards, it was paradise. But even paradise had its flaws, didn't it? After years of living here, the monotony was hard to ignore.

Still... Earth humans, for all their little quirks, were at least tolerable.

But back on Reon, everything was... softening.

Teran and his bleeding-heart snake thought they could tame the world. Let the humans live freely, they said. Treat them as equals, they said. Pathetic. Dragons were hunters, not caretakers for a species that should've gone extinct centuries ago. Whatever. Teran and his mate were soon to have an egg. At least something useful would come of it, I thought.

Their numbers were returning, too.

Slowly but surely humanity was returning...

Vermin.

Another rift would fix that.

I didn't form the warp in town, of course. That would've been beyond idiotic. Earth's authorities--or worse, the dragons here--would sniff me out in an instant. The countryside was safer, far from human settlements. There, nestled in an overgrown clearing, the barrier between worlds was weak. Barely a shimmer in the air, it was a fissure waiting for the right push.

Red mana burned in my left hand, raw and searing dragonfire, untamed power that demanded to dominate. Blue mana hummed in my right, human life-force--erratic, alive, and brimming with restless creativity.

I pressed them together, feeling the energies clash. They fought at first, grinding against each other like oil and water, until they began to merge. Slowly, the colours turned purple--chimeric energy. Rare. Powerful. Unstable. It felt like holding a storm in my hands, barely leashed and ready to break free.

Carefully, I shaped the energy, sharpening it against itself until it was fine enough to cut. The air buzzed, tension building like the split second before a thunderclap.

With a sharp motion, I hurled the energy forward. It slammed into the shimmering fault line, and the air rippled like water under strain. Vibrations grew, reality itself trembling as if it might buckle under the pressure.

Then came the crack.

A jagged line split the air, the faint shimmer shattering into shards of liquid energy that twisted and spun. The fissure widened, the fragments curling inward, forming something alive.

A portal.

I grinned, running a hand through my sweat soaked and hair as I stepped closer. It wasn't quite stable yet, the edges quivering as if ready to collapse. I poured another wave of chimeric energy into it, coaxing it into shape. Slowly, the portal smoothed into a perfect oval, glowing with swirling purple light.

This wasn't just a gateway; it was a filter. Mythic creatures--dragons, gryphons, unicorns, the likes of me--could pass through unharmed. Reonic humans, though? For them, it would be a death sentence. The energy would strip them down to nothing.

Earth humans?

A mystery. Maybe it would give them headaches when shoved through.

Maybe worse. I hadn't tested it.

Yet.

For now, though, the rift would remain open, a beacon for dragons and other mythic creatures seeking escape. Humans would come soon enough, drawn by the electrical disturbances. They'd build one of their precious "transit stations" here, another checkpoint for their so-called "safe and stable" arrivals. As if they understood what truly made a creature dangerous.

The rift hummed, its violet glow pulsing steadily as it carved a path between worlds. I lingered for a moment, the energy vibrating through my skin--a reminder of the power I held.

Real power. The kind humans could never hope to control.

I turned away, the cool night air brushing against me as I headed for the trees. Behind me, the rift glowed faintly in the dark, waiting for what would come next.

Chapter 12

Pain throbbed through me, deeper than any discomfort I'd ever felt. It clawed through my body, sharper with each passing moment, each wave a reminder of the failures of the past--the bad eggs I'd buried alone, the endless cycles of hope and heartbreak, always hidden from Aiden. But this time felt different; something inside told me it was. I held onto that spark, that fragile, trembling hope, as I pushed through the pain.

My claws scraped against the ground, and my body tightened, my instincts guiding me even through the agony. I had stopped believing I'd ever reach this point, that I'd ever feel something alive and healthy within me. And now that I was here, the reality of it made me almost afraid to breathe.

My heart raced as I bore down, the ache in my muscles overpowering--but underneath it all, a strange, burning joy grew.

Finally, the first egg slipped free, and I felt a rush of warmth and relief. My breath came out in shuddering gasps as I looked down, scarcely able to believe it.

There it was--solid, whole, and perfect, its shell smooth and faintly luminous under the soft light. I ran a trembling claw gently over its surface, my chest tightening with joy and disbelief. After all this time, I had a healthy egg. My egg. Our egg.

He'd never known about the others, the small graves I'd dug out in the quiet spaces between our lives, just beyond the places he would go during his work. I'd kept them hidden, kept my sorrow tucked away as best I could, hoping that someday--someday--things would change. And now they had.

But the pain hadn't left me yet; the first egg was only the beginning. Gritting my teeth, I braced myself, determined to see this through. My claws clenched and unclenched as I felt the second egg begin its descent.

Each push sent fresh pain searing through me, but I welcomed it, let it burn through every part of me, knowing that this was pain with purpose, pain with meaning.

The second egg took longer, but at last, it too slipped free, a second miracle resting beside its sibling. I almost laughed through my laboured breathing, a shaky sound that was half gasp, half sob. I was exhausted, but the sight of the two eggs filled me with a strength I hadn't known I had. I would protect them with everything in me. I would give them the world.

As the third egg finally came, the last wave of pain surged through my body, leaving me trembling and spent. My vision blurred, but I blinked hard, determined to see the trio of eggs nestled together, each one whole and perfect. I lowered myself carefully around them, curling my body protectively, feeling the warmth radiating from their shells seep into me.

They were beautiful. More beautiful than anything I could have ever imagined. All the loneliness and quiet sorrow of the past years faded in their presence, leaving me filled only with love, fierce and boundless. I ran a gentle claw over their shells, feeling their smoothness, their warmth, each touch grounding me in a reality I had scarcely dared to hope for.

I had done it. I had brought them into this world, these fragile, precious lives. And as I curled around them, wrapping them in the warmth of my body, I realised that my life had shifted in a way I could never undo. Everything I had endured, every sacrifice, every moment of doubt, had led me here. And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

I lowered my head, pressing nuzzles to each egg. Aiden would be home soon. I could only imagine his face when he saw them, our children, the future we had unknowingly built together. My heart swelled with happiness so deep it was almost painful, and for the first time in my life, I felt truly, completely whole.

Here, in this quiet moment, surrounded by the lives we had created, I realised that I had everything I had ever needed. My joy was boundless, my love unbreakable. This was my family, and I would protect it with every breath I had left.

And as I drifted into an exhausted, blissful sleep, I knew that no matter what lay ahead, I would never be alone again.

.....

The world was dark.

A dull, heavy blackness stretched around me, broken only by the faint drumming of rain. The sound was distant, muffled, like the world outside wasn't quite real. I barely opened an eye, seeing nothing, but that was fine.

I didn't need to see. The air was cold--colder than it should have been. It curled around me, seeping through my scales, making me shiver. I shifted, instinctively drawing my body tighter, pressing closer to the warmth beneath me.

Our eggs.

A slow, heavy breath left me. I curled my wing around them, shielding them from the chill. But something was wrong. The warmth wasn't quite right. The texture was too soft, too flat, not smooth, not firm like a shell. I pressed closer, expecting resistance, expecting the solid presence of new life beneath me.

But there was nothing.

Only fabric.

A ripple of unease ran through me. I curled tighter, shifting, reaching--until my own snout brushed against my chest. No eggs. No warmth. Just me.

Something inside me twisted, sharp and sudden. My wing twitched, reaching out to gather them, to pull them back against me. But there was nothing beneath its grasp.

My breath hitched. I lifted my head sharply, my eyes darting through the darkness, my heart pounding, searching, searching-

Shapes swam in the shadows, vague and unfamiliar. My nest--no, not my nest. The weight, the shape--wrong. My tail lashed, my claws digging into the bedding beneath me. I tried to listen, to smell, but everything was... off.

The cold was wrong.

The air was wrong.

My right wing was gone.

The realisation hit like a crack of thunder, splitting through my skull. Reality rushed in, harsh and merciless, swallowing me whole.

The sound of the rain sharpened. The air smelt wrong--stale, empty, cold in a way no cave ever was. I lay frozen, breath shuddering, heart slamming against my ribs. Slowly, the dark shapes around me settled into place.

The walls were too smooth.

The air was too still.

The nest was... was... not a nest, but instead a bed.

Through the window, the sky loomed vast and distant, heavy clouds glowing faintly with the city's light. They floated in the darkness like ghosts, the only thing visible in the void of my room.

I was here.

I was alone.

My throat tightened, a sharp, aching pressure rising in my chest. I swallowed against it, forcing myself to move, pushing back the blankets. The weight of them felt suffocating now, pressing down. I crawled free, my limbs sluggish, my breath unsteady. The cold bit deeper.

I barely felt it.

I swallowed hard, throat aching, and turned my head towards the window. The city outside was shrouded in shadow, rain streaking the glass in relentless sheets. It was loud. Too loud. The roar of it filled the room, pressing in from every angle, a relentless downpour that turned the world into a blurry, shifting void.

...I was used to rain.

The dark sky beyond the window stretched on endlessly, void of stars, void of light, void of anything that could make this place feel real. The flats across the street were mostly dark, save for the occasional flicker of human life behind drawn curtains.

A world I did not belong to.

I closed my eyes, breathing through my nose, willing my thoughts to settle.

The dream had been so vivid. So real. I could still feel the weight of my eggs against my scales, the warmth of my body curled around them, the soft hum of life nestled beneath my wing. My children. My miracles.

But they weren't here.

I exhaled sharply and forced myself to my feet, my body stiff, my limbs weak. The weight of exhaustion clung to me, not from sleep but from something deeper--something I could not shake no matter how many times I woke up.

The rain outside continued, a steady, unrelenting presence.

The flat was silent.

I was alone.

Slowly, I dragged my limp body over to my closet, which served only one purpose. I pulled a small, ornate box out and slowly opened it up, revealing a large, sharp shard of petrified egg, frozen eternally by the red-haired magus who'd taken pity upon me. I did not know from which egg it came, and in some ways it helped; in others, it made it all the more agonising.

I took a breath, forced myself to put the lid back on, and walked away. I could not dwell on the past; I could not torture myself for the rest of my life. The doctor was correct; I had to push forward and focus on what I had, not what I had lost. Still, that wasn't to say I had to forget my suffering; no, that would be part of me forever, but... it did not have to consume me entirely.

However, there was not much else for me to do, and I was in something of a state, so I took my blocky tablet out from its drawer and called up my cousin, Alys. She did not answer, even after three tries, so instead I switched to Rhys, who was fortunately already up. "What's up?" He mumbled in our native language, likely too tired to bother with English.

I steadied my voice. "C-Can I take Jarys to his school?"

He paused. "Uh, sure, yeah." His voice was groggy. "Let me just... Samys, it's five in the morning," he groaned.

"I know," I admitted, before chewing the inside of my mouth and asking, "Can I come over?" Normally, I wouldn't dare show such obvious weakness, but these dragons were the only true kin I had left besides a few distant stragglers.

"Um..." I heard rustling fabric, followed by the padding of paws on bare wood. "Okay. Let me just unlock the door for you. Jarys is asleep, so don't make too much noise, alright?"

I cleaned off in the shower room, brushed my teeth, and gathered my satchel, ensuring I had my charger and the cable that would recharge it, should it die. I was ready for both work and my visit...

I raised a folded paw up to the door of their home before remembering that it was already unlocked and that doing so might wake the young drake. I slipped inside, first noting how warm it felt compared to my own abode. Not just physically, but in every way. It felt like a true home. Lived in and happy.

A quiet shuffling close by drew my gaze to the kitchen area. Rhys was fiddling with something that smelt like food. I hadn't yet eaten, but I normally skipped it regardless. "Morning," he said without turning to look at me. "You got here quick."

I removed the bandolier from my neck and placed it atop their clothes hook. A foolishly named object, for I only knew one dragon that wore clothes, and he was an oddity. "I did not have anything else to do," I explained. "And I'm taking Jarys anyway, so it felt natural to hurry. May I please have some of your food?"

He looked over his shoulder. "You don't need to be so formal all the time.... I make you food like every time you come over." He shuffled. "What do you want, anyway? Chicken, bacon, or eggs?"

My steps faltered, talons audibly scraping across the wooden flooring. "Chicken," I said quickly, thankful he hadn't noticed, or that he at least had the good sense to ignore it. "Chicken. Please."

"So good you said it twice," Rhys chirped. "Reminds me. Jarys got in trouble for that, actually." I shot him a look. "Uh, some joke about eating chicken to a gryphon friend of his. Nothing serious, but I figure I may as well nip it now before it turns into a whole thing."

"Understandable." I nodded. "This world is...odd. Both too sensitive, yet not enough in places."

Rhys shrugged, the motion rolling his muscles, which I noticed weren't quite as finely developed as they once had been. "It's just one of those things, Samys." Even his accent, despite speaking Reonic, had diminished somewhat. In a sense, it made sense; he'd been on Earth some years at that point, and yet...

He served me a bowl of chicken, cooked, again, for some reason that was lost on me. Humans enjoyed cooked meat, and Aiden had often fed me such meals, but I never really cared for it. Still, the food Rhys gave me was free, and as such, I was unable to critique him. More bowls were served by the drake, who then began gathering supplies.

Jarys' backpack, water container, and a smaller pack. He looked around, squinted, and clicked his tongue. "You haven't seen the crisps, have you?"

My head tilted as I thought on what he meant, my ears twitching in concentration. "No. I'm not sure what you're talking about. I don't eat too many snacks." He groaned, circling the sofa for his missing snack, then the underside of the kitchen table I was sitting at. "Why do you need them? You give Jarys more than enough meat for one day."

He made a sound, something between a groan and a sigh. "Because hatchlings are mean," he said, beginning to check the cupboards. "That Henri said someone at his school was picked on for not eating garbage."

"I don't..." I blinked. "I don't understand. Garbage?" The name was familiar. "And who is Henri?"

Rhys didn't find whatever he was looking for, based on the heavy sigh. "You know? Grey drake? He's, like, um... twelve? Meyr's nephew."

I nodded, shovelling, but... something bothered me. "Did you say Meyer?"

He sat back on his haunches, resting against the kitchen counter. "Yeah, Meyr."

It...

Something about the way he said the drake's name... sounded off. Meyer was an old name, Reonic, traditional, and yet...

... It was not my place, and so I banished the thoughts, distracting myself with one last mouthful.

"Where's Alys?" I asked when finished. "Shouldn't she be up for work?" Just as I spoke, the dragoness in question left her bedroom, expression dull and flat. Her wings and tail were limp, and her body was visibly sagging.

"I work nights," she said gruffly, angling her neck to crack it before stretching her large, broad wings up into the air, snapping each finger. Rhys rolled his eyes and continued his search for the missing crisps. "What are you doing here anyway, Samys? Are you taking Jarys to school?" I nodded, and she exhaled, all of the tension dropping in an instant. "Thank Faram... I really couldn't be bothered."

My scales prickled. "Are you okay?"

She glanced at me, brow ridges raised. "...yes? Why wouldn't I be?" She paused and then sighed. "I can't be bothered because I was up all night delivering humans their food."

"I was merely asking," I replied as I returned the ceramic bowl to Rhys, who immediately got to work scrubbing at it. "You look tense."

"I'm tense because I just woke up." Alys slumped atop the sofa, head lolled back into the soft cushions, horns cradled. "You don't need to dig."

"I'm not. You just--"

"Samys, stop," she growled. "It's not a sin that I'm glad I don't have to take Jarys to school. I work all night and day. I'm tired. Stop looking for something that isn't there."

I paused, a chill coming over me--a mix of shame and distant frustration. After taking a breath to collect myself, I surrendered and said, "I am sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

She mumbled something, tail twitching restlessly against the floor and claws clenching. Clearly, obviously there was something more. Aside from situations involving heat and courting partners, I'd always considered Alys a remarkably stable hen.

"Can you two dingdongs not argue?" Came the tired voice of Rhys. "Jarys is still asleep, and I kind of want it to stay that way." He ran a paw down his snout. "Alys, do you know where the crisps are? I can't find that big-ass box."

"It's in his room," supplied Alys after a beat, voice quiet.

"Why...?"

"Because he's the only one that eats them, and I was..." Her expression shifted for a syllable. "...busy."

Rhys got up off his haunches and lumbered into his brother's room, returning swiftly with a cardboard box he shifted forward with a shove of a forepaw. "Doing what?"

"What?'

Exasperated, Rhys took a bag out of the box and carried it in his mouth. Muffled, he said, "You watched him yesterday whilst I was out with Eric. What were you doing that let him steal a full box?" When his sister didn't answer, he said, "Alys."

That was all he said, just her name, and yet the tone made her freeze up, her wings twitching and then curling slightly around her frame like she was holding herself together. "What?" She grumbled, tone defeated.

"Stop. Stalking. Gryphons," he groused out, voice still caught on the plastic packet of fried potatoes. "I thought you and James sorted this whole thing out." He dropped the crisp packet into Jarys' backpack, along with a see-through container of what my nose told me was gammon. Then went in one of the chocolate bars that Alys said dragons were able to eat. "He asked me for advice and everything."

"We did," she admitted. "And he cleared everything up... all cleanly."

I felt distant. Out of place. Like I was intruding on something that did not require my presence. I didn't like the feeling and so tried to join in. "Are you two talking about James? Again?"

Alys shot me a sour look, and Rhys scoffed, finished with his packing. "When is she not?" He smiled. "But, uh, yeah. Our dear Alys has been up to some online sleuthing. Found out where someone works and everything! Isn't she smart?"

"Sleuthing?" I questioned, turning to the suddenly defensive-looking hen. "Are you... Have you been following some poor news?"

"Yes. Gryphon--"

"No!" Snapped Alys. "I searched her up twice, and Rhys is acting like I'm following her around from up high and making notes." She climbed off the sofa and stomped over to the kitchen, where she angrily devoured a bowl of chicken. "Twice!"

"Uhh, three times, actually, counting last night," Rhys said. "And you know where she works."

"It's public!" Alys defended, spitting out flecks of white meat. "Right there on Friendster. Galia Turtes. Works at One Stop." Her wings flared and then contracted, like she wanted to take flight right then and there. "It's just..." She stammered. "Uh, s-she's just so... cute."

"...cute?" I said slowly.

"Jealousy," supplied Rhys. "Galia's cute and has lots of friends, so Alys is jealous." He paused. "Despite, you know... her having literally no reason to. He doesn't like Galia. T--There's no love triangle here. Alys is--"

"Rhys!" She snapped. "Can you just be quiet?! I'm allowed to feel things, you know?"

"Yeah, no shit. But there's no reason--"

I felt bad for Jarys.

Did he have to deal with all this childish drama every day?

The bickering? The pettiness?

Will they, won't they?

Both of them were fools.

James for his waiting, which bordered on lying, and Alys for not having the confidence to tell him what she wanted outright, merely sidestepping her issues and needs for the sake of his comfort. I felt, at least from my point of view, that were Alys to openly state what she wanted, that she wished to be mates, and that if he did not, then they were done, that he would give in and finally court her.

I'd have preferred she chose a nice drake, but suggesting that would have only hurt her.

She'd struggled with courting before, failing to attract even one with her displays.

... That was mean to think.

True, but mean.

I wondered if that's why she liked the human so much. Only on a surface level could they perceive attractiveness in Archons. They didn't see small, needless details. Features not quite perfect. To James, she may have simply appeared as a blue female dragon with a vaguely crocodilian snout and large wings. He might very well not have noticed how masculine her lower horns were, how wonky her teeth were, how-

I needed to stop...

"Can you put the television machine on?" I asked, cutting through the bickering before it turned nastier. I hadn't caught every word, but something about a needy bitch in heat had made my stomach turn. The worst part was I wasn't sure which one of them had said it. Probably Alys.

They both turned to me, momentarily knocked out of their argument. Rhys opened his mouth, ready to snap something back, but hesitated. With a sharp breath, he stumbled over to the TV stand, rummaged around in a drawer, and pulled out the remote. A quick click, and the screen flickered to life.

A human in sharp black clothing filled the screen, speaking in quiet, measured tones.

"--Reports of an attack today from what officials are calling a unicorn."

My blood ran cold.

What the fuck.

My claws tightened against the floor, muscles locking into place as my mind raced. The room around me seemed to shrink, every voice fading to static behind the pounding in my skull.

"Trans-immigration officers quickly calmed the entity, with support from non-human forces."

I barely heard the rest.

A torn-open rift.

A displaced unicorn.

That was all I needed to know.

"Oh, wow," Rhys murmured, sounding genuinely surprised. The argument from earlier was forgotten; his head tilted toward the screen. "Black-mane unicorns... Haven't seen one of those in years."

I swallowed, my throat dry, but it did nothing to ease the suffocating weight pressing against my ribs.

Alys groaned. "Not those guys. Could never follow orders properly. Tell them to march in an arrow formation, and they turn into a wall." She shook her head, flicking her tail against the floor. "Only good for one thing--stripping apart spells."

She missed the way my limbs started to tremble.

The spill from a displaced unicorn herd would be catastrophic. Their severed connection to the leylines of Reon would send mana surging back into the realm like an unchecked flood. The immediate consequences alone--

"When they pulsed that discovery spell on accident and found a whole squadron?" Alys let out a low, pleased chuckle, eyes gleaming with something dark. "Poor humans."

I wanted to tell her to shut up. I couldn't speak.

Rhys hesitated, discomfort flickering across his face. "At least it was over quickly."

Alys snorted. "You must've missed the ones that ran."

She said it so casually. Like she was discussing a minor inconvenience.

Those portals were poison.

Aiden had told me himself.

They bled mythic energy like spilt acid, unravelling reality in thin, jagged tears. I had seen the aftermath before. The twisted space left behind, where time curled in on itself, where the very air felt wrong, charged with the remnants of something too powerful to be contained.

I had to find him.

I had to stop him.

"Alys..." My voice was too tight, too unsteady, but she wasn't paying attention.

"What?" She tilted her head, unimpressed. "They're not Earth humans. Who cares?"

"They're still living beings," Rhys muttered, his tail twitching. "You can't just treat them like... trash."

Alys laughed--sharp, scratchy, like broken glass. "They were, Rhys." She flared her wings, chest puffed just slightly, a glimmer of something dangerous in her eyes. "I don't get why you're defending them."

Rhys' jaw tightened. His claws flexed against the floor. "Alys. I am not defending the humans of Reon. I'm saying there's a difference between doing what's necessary and revelling in pain."

"Revelling in pain?!"

"Yes."

The room began to stink of metal and ozone. Like distant thunder rolling in from far away.

My scales prickled. My horns itched.

"Revenge--" Rhys began.

"Was deserved!" Alys snapped, stepping closer. "They deserved everything I did to them, and more." Her voice dripped with it--pure, unfiltered hatred, something raw and festering beneath the surface. Her wings twitched, air mana condensing and warping within her internal leylines.

Rhys didn't back down.

Never had.

"No," he said, calm and certain. "No, they didn't."

The family lines on Alys' cheeks lit up a blinding white.

"If I had another go--"

"Alys," I said softly.

The magic died down.

She stood there, panting, eyes burning with the embers of something old and bitter.

"Please--"

Alys turned sharply and stormed out, her claws scraping against the floor, the door slamming shut behind her with a force that made my horns vibrate. The sound lingered, rattling in my chest like distant thunder.

Rhys sighed, rolling his head back against the couch. His tail flicked irritably, but he didn't say anything.

Before he could, I did. "Tell James to speak with her."

Rhys didn't react.

"Tell him to suck it up and do something." My voice was tight, my patience thinning. "She's rolling around in that twisted half-mate connection, and she's losing herself. She would have attacked you had I not interfered."

He scoffed, shifting his weight, stretching his limbs out in that lazy, slow way of his. "No, she wouldn't--"

"Yes, yes, she would. And we both know it wouldn't be the first time." I snapped my jaws shut before I could bare my teeth. "You were challenging her."

"Challenging her?!" Rhys sat up now, eyes narrowing.

"You questioned her emotions and didn't back down when she started displaying. She is still in heat, Rhys."

That made him pause. I saw his ears flick, his expression shift--just slightly. I exhaled sharply.

"I don't know why, or how," I continued, lowering my voice. "Maybe something about Earth's food, or the leylines of this world... But she is. Some horrible in-between state. Not enough for me to smell the eggs forming, but enough to know." I met his eyes. "Tell James to talk to her, flirt with her, whatever. She needs a distraction before she explodes."

I meant that literally.

Rhys looked unconvinced, but his tail had stopped moving.

"...And if she takes all of that in-between heat energy over to him?" His voice was quieter now. "Hurts my friend?"

"She won't." I kept my tone level, finally. "She won't touch him unless he touches her first. She made the first move. He must make the second or spurn her entirely."

Rhys frowned. "That's base instinct."

"Yes," I agreed. "We are animals, Rhys."

His frown deepened.

"We're just clever enough to know we are."

The television droned in the background, shifting from the unicorn attack to some dull segment about integration efforts, public reception, and government policies. A human spoke in a measured tone about how their world was adapting to creatures like us--how they were tolerating us, as if we were some unfortunate necessity.

All very interesting.

All very...

...Whatever.

I didn't care.

I didn't care about how Earth handled unicorns, and I definitely didn't care about how unicorns handled Earth.

All that mattered--all that was left--was my family. And my family was stressed. Struggling.

Jarys.

Alys was an adult. Rhys was an adult. They were young, yes, inexperienced in all but war, but adults nonetheless. The only difficulties they faced were sexual and emotional.

Jarys was not.

He was a hatchling. Barely out of his shell, the scent of yolk still heavy on his scales. He needed stability, calmness, and attention. Not bickering. Not unresolved tension. Not the endless push and pull of whatever drama my cousins seemed determined to drown themselves in.

My eyes flicked to the bottom corner of the television screen. The time.

Quarter to eight.

Jarys' school started at half eight.

I pushed off the couch, ignoring Rhys, and padded into Jarys' room. The space was dim, the air warm with sleep. A lump of blankets curled into itself atop the bed.

I flicked the light on with a swish of my paw.

"Jarys," I said. The lump groaned.

I stepped closer, nudging his side. "Jarys, it's time for school."

He grumbled out something that sounded more like "blegh" than any actual language.

Why hadn't my cousins woken him?

He was going to be late.

I let my muzzle split in a sharp-toothed grin and leaned down. "Uh-huh. Blegh. Get up, little wyrm."

He grumbled and yanked the blankets over his head.

Fine.

I bit his tail and yanked him onto the carpet.

Jarys flailed, instincts kicking in, his eyes snapping wide as his claws scrabbled against the floor. His soft, still-pink gaze fixed on me in betrayal.

I shrugged, stretching my remaining wing. "You're going to be late."

He let out a long, suffering groan, dragging himself to his paws. "Ughh. Jesus."

I blinked, surprised by the deity's name. "Jesus?"

Jarys yawned, rubbing his face with the back of a forepaw. "I dunno. Humans say it when they're mad."

I bit the zip of his school bag, opening it up with a flick of my head. After checking his supplies, I zipped it back up, and we both left his room. "Get your paw coverings on." I pointed a limb at the objects sitting near the front door.

He groaned but obeyed, shoving his forelimbs into the padded coverings meant to keep his claws from tearing up human buildings.

Rhys, still sulking in the living room, glanced up. "Why does he have to wear those?"

"School rules," I said. "They don't want claw marks or dirt tracked inside. Most places don't bother because cleaning up after dragons is just part of life now. But schools..." I gestured vaguely. "Human children are messier, but no one expects them to walk around barefoot."

Rhys hummed but didn't argue.

I looked back at Jarys, adjusting the strap of his pack. "And I believe Jesus is a human deity," I added. "I'm surprised you said it without knowing its origins."

Jarys blinked at me.

"Deity?"

"A god. A human one."

Jarys scrunched his snout, sceptical. "Like Skie?"

I let out a small huff of amusement. "Something like that. Skie is a sky god. Faram is a war god, Orik is knowledge, and With-Deg is the embodiment of chaos."

Jarys' tail flicked as he processed that. "Are they real?"

"Yes."

His eyes widened slightly. "Have you met one?"

I let my grin return, sharp and amused. "No, Jarys. I have not met a god before."

His shoulders slumped. "Oh."

"But they're real."

He narrowed his eyes, suspicious. "How do you know?"

I shouldered his pack onto his back and nudged him toward the door. "Someone very smart told me."

Jarys huffed, following me toward the exit.

"Who?"

I let out a short, dry laugh.

"An idiot."

Jarys paused and fixed me with a look of unfiltered bewilderment. "You--you said someone smart told you they were real. How can someone smart be an idiot?"

I grinned broadly at him, stretching the scars on my muzzle that Alys--a smart dragoness--had stupidly stuck me with.

"They just can, Jarys. It's far more common than you'd expect." The doors to the lift opened up, and after leaving the lobby, we began walking to the bus stop. Along the way, he continued asking why and how, and I enjoyed metaphorically shrugging at his questions.

And then the questions began.

Alys and Rhys, it seemed, had forgotten the past twenty years of their lives and failed to clue in their young sibling on our culture and traditions. They were trying to forget, trying to start completely fresh, and whilst I could vaguely understand why, that didn't mean I liked it. Our past was just that--the past--but it was still a part of us.

"Why don't boys have wings?"

"No one really knows. Some people think that wings grow due to the presence of air mana in a hen's body, and males lack that specific energy."

"Okay." A pause. "Why don't boys have magic? You said I did."

"You do, just not air mana. It's why only females can fly and control lightning."

"Can you?"

My steps faltered. "Fly or control lightning? I can't fly because I lack a wing, and even when I had both, I couldn't create electricity."

"Can you fly without wings?"

A very good question.

"Lung drakes can. A subspecies from a long time ago. They coated their entire bodies in air and used that to fly."

"Can you do that?"

"...a little bit." I chewed the inside of my cheek. I'd never told anyone what I was about to tell Jarys. "Even if both of my wings had been removed, I still have the energy needed to fly. Once, a long time ago, I jumped off a cliff." He gasped and turned to me, his eyes wide. "And tried to fly. I couldn't, of course, magic or not, wings catch air and help guide you through the sky. I was, however, able to slow my fall to the point I was uninjured."

"Why did you jump off a cliff?"

I always tried to be honest with him.

Not this time.

"I wanted to see if I could fly," I lied, grinning. "Which was dumb of me."

He looked away. "What can boys do then?" The subject was shifting, thankfully. "If girls can fly and breathe fire? It's not fair."

"Not all females can breathe fire, Jarys. I can't." Technically I could control fire, but I'd only managed it a single time. "And males, advanced enough ones, can take fire further, infuse it into the ground and create magma, or simply move the earth."

He stopped dead and stared at me, and then he stared at the ground below him, eyes slowly narrowing. "You won't be able to do it now, Jarys," I said with an amused huff. "Or even a decade down the line. It's extremely difficult to learn and impossible to master. Even Rhys cannot do it."

He whined and continued walking. The bus stop was in sight now. "Can anyone?"

"No, not like that, guys. You swish and then swish. You've got to focus less on--"

"Yes. A few older drakes could do it. It was very effective."

"So I just have to try every day?" He asked, earnest and determined.

I smiled broadly. "You better!'

We reached the bus stop soon after our talk, spotting several familiar snouts.

"Aetphore," I said politely to the purple dragon lounging against the bus stop. She languidly turned her odd eyes to me--blue, with white sclera and pupils so round they almost seemed human. "I did not know you had use for the human machines."

She made a vaguely noncommittal sound and gestured to the brown-scaled drake beside her. "This guy went and hatched males, so I've got no choice but to take a ride on these death machines." She shut her eyes and leaned back further.

She was like, Alys, someone meant for flying, or, more accurately, flying was meant for her. She was faster than my cousin and better at controlling air and lightning. A true powerhouse, whose only negative was her refusal to fight during the war, claiming it wasn't her place, or some such nonsense.

"Is he--" I began.

"Stranded? Yes. He is."

A dragon without blood relatives. Unfortunate, but painfully common, even years after.

I nodded. "You're a good hen."

She quirked a sky blue eye my way, appearing as though she were about to speak before turning away, her attention on the adopted drake. I went to speak but found myself interrupted by another Archon of whom I was faintly familiar with. "What are you two hens clucking about?" Said Narvi, a tall, well-built drake with deep grey scales and pale green eyes.

"Archons don't cluck," replied Aetphore. "They squawk and growl. I've never met one that clucks."

"It's..." Narvi faltered. "It's a pun. The human word for hen is the same as the one for..." He hung his head low. "Never mind. Um, Samys? How've you been? How are the others? I haven't seen Alys in a while."

We stood at the bus stop, the chill of morning settling deep in my bones. The air smelt of damp pavement, cold metal, and the faint, lingering scent of other dragons who had passed this way.

Jarys and Narvi's daughter were off to the side, playing some quiet game that involved nudging stones across the concrete with their snouts. Their soft, occasional giggles were a contrast to the uneasy silence that stretched between Narvi and me.

"She's..." I frowned. "Alys is fine. She is simply dealing with some human troubles."

Narvi gave a slow nod, his expression unreadable. "Right. Human troubles."

There was something too careful about the way he said it, like he was chewing over the words before letting them pass his lips. His eyes flicked briefly to the hatchlings, ensuring they were still preoccupied. Then, lowering his voice, he said, "...Do you think it'll work out?"

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Her and that human." He hesitated, then exhaled. "Do you think it'll last?"

"That's none of your business," I said, a little sharper than I intended.

His tail twitched, but he didn't react immediately. "Samys... our numbers are bad." He spoke low, measured. "Not enough to make anyone panic, but... not good, either. The war didn't kill us off, but it set us back. If we want to rebuild, to have a future, we need to be thinking about our kind. Our people."

I already knew where this was going. My jaw clenched.

"We can't breed with humans," he continued. "They're fun, sure. Interesting. But they shouldn't be our mates."

He was wrong.

... And he was right.

"There's more to life than eggs, Narvi," I said, keeping my voice even. "The dragon population won't disappear just because one dragon courts a human."

"It's not just one, Samys." His ears flicked back. "It's happening everywhere. Humans are exotic. New. And that's attractive. Your cousins, Meyer, Ayrs, and even Carwen--"

"Carwen?" I interrupted, narrowing my eyes.

Aetphore, who had been lazily lounging against the bus stop's glass shelter, let out a soft chuckle. "Oh, Carwen..." She mused, smirking. "Lucky girl. Lucky, lucky, lucky... How her mate snuck through, I'll never know." She shook her head, letting her horns clink softly against the surface. "Stultus frater."

"Whatever." Narvi ran a paw down his snout, his tail lashing behind him. "My point still stands. Humans are interesting, but they're not supposed to be our mates."

A low growl curled in my throat, my scales prickling. "And? What's your solution? Tell my cousin to stop trying. Force her to mate with some random drake just because we're not overflowing with eggs?"

Narvi exhaled through his nose. "No. That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

"That she doesn't have to court the first male she gets close to. Most dragons don't end up mating with their first partner. It's just life, Samys. She should keep her options open, and if something does happen, she should try a Drake next."

I hated that he had a point.

Because he did.

We were adults, and this was no fantasy. No one stayed with their first love, their first partner. Nobody. Not me. Not my parents. Probably not, Alys. That was life. She wouldn't stay with James.

People changed.

They grew apart.

Grew into other people.

They--

...So why did that thought bother me so much?

I didn't particularly like James. I didn't think he was that great. But Alys did. And that was enough for me.

"Yes," I finally said. "She should keep her options open and think realistically. But she doesn't have to. She's allowed to be foolish and enjoy herself."

"But--"

"Are you two seriously having an existential discussion at a bus stop?"

Aetphore's voice cut through the conversation like a sharp gust of wind.

Narvi and I turned to her, startled.

"A bit sudden, eh?" She said, stretching lazily, her long limbs extending before she rolled her shoulders. "And besides, you're both right, so why even argue?" She exhaled, shifting to get more comfortable, her horns scraping audibly against the shelter wall. "Narvi, obviously they can't interbreed. And Samys, yeah, she should keep her options open. Puppy love doesn't last. Can you both be quiet now? You're stretching this scene out too much."

"Excuse me?" I wasn't sure which of us said it.

She ignored us, raising a forelimb and pointing a talon to the right. "Doesn't matter. Grab your kids--the bus is here. You can argue slice-of-life drama all you want afterward."

She stood, placing a paw on the shoulder of the drake who had been by her side the entire time. "C'mon, little guy."

The young drake followed silently, not even sparing Jarys or Narvi's daughter a glance.

Narvi hesitated. Then, with a long-suffering sigh, he muttered, "It will end in tears."

He didn't look at me when he said it.

"...It always does."

I turned away, watching the bus slow to a stop, the hiss of its brakes cutting through the damp morning air.

Maybe Narvi was right.

Maybe he wasn't.

Either way, Alys wasn't going to listen.

After calling his daughter to him, he boarded the bus.

"Bye, Jarys!" The young hen called out cheerfully.

I followed Narvi's lead. "Jarys!" I shouted, distracting him from something he found in the nearby strip of grass. He followed quickly.

Normally, I despised buses. They always stank of oil, metal, and humans--cramped, uncomfortable, never built with dragons in mind. But the one that took us to the academy was different--larger, with the minuscule seats removed to accommodate us.

"Were you and Mr. Gawain arguing?" Jarys asked.

I glanced at him, considering my answer. "Only a little," I said. "He made some comments about humans that I didn't agree with."

"...I thought you didn't like humans."

I paused.

"I... don't hate humans, Jarys. It just takes a lot for them to impress me." I thought back to my doctor, to the truths he had forced me to confront. "Besides... despising an entire species is stupid. You can't blame a collective for the sins of one, or even a few."

Jarys nodded sagely, as though he understood. I doubted he did, but I appreciated the gesture.

Once the bus emptied and the hatchlings were guided to their classes, I retrieved my tablet from my bag, settling on my haunches outside the school gates. I opened my communication app, scrolling to James, who had recently added me as a friend. My talon hovered over the call icon--

"So... what are you up to now, Samys?"

I moved my talon away from the button.

"Are you working today? Or just lounging around like that gremlin?" Said Aetphore from close beside me.

I hadn't noticed her sneaking up on me. She was staring at the sky, which was a clear, bright blue, with not a cloud in sight.

"I'd get inside if I were you," she continued. "It's going to rain again later. No thunder this time, but it'll be bad."

I turned off my tablet and slid it back into my pack. "And how do you know that?"

"Just a hunch. It'll start around one. Find somewhere warm, like a café--there's a nice one in town, I've heard."

She flared her wings, crouched low, and burst into the sky, an explosion of wind and mana following in her wake.

I sat there outside the school for a moment longer, then, with a quiet huff, sent a quick message to Rhys that I'd be heading into town for a bit. I boarded the next bus--unfortunately, a human-occupied one--and did my best not to explode from all the stares I was getting.

I survived, though. That was what I was best at.

.....

The energy stank of rot.

A long, winding trail of decaying purple mana starting from the start of town and stretching all the way to the nearby countryside. The walk took me a considerable time, but I had to do it all by paw lest I miss a vital clue. The woodlands were thankfully sparse, unlike the forests of my homeland, meaning it was simply time that stood in my way. Time I had in vast amounts.

Eventually, however, I encountered resistance in the form of a wide blockade stretching around a point of immense energy. Along with that were the dozens of humans milling about, along with several dragons who I assumed worked with them.

Unicorns, too. A multitude of them are communicating with my kin in our native tongue.

The fact they spoke the same language meant they were at least from the same country as us, and not an entirely separate continent, like the drifting isle that lindwurms and other such abominations hailed from.

I sunk into the underbrush, sent a steady stream of mana to my ears, and concentrated.

"Daeth allan o unman! Yn union fel y syrthiodd nhw arnom ni! F-Fel rhyw dduw... cawsom ein hachub." It was a younger unicorn mare, dark maned, with deep blue, nearly midnight black fur and bright cyan eyes. She trotted in place excitedly.

"A'r porth?" Enquired the drake, professional and distant.

"...roeddem yn meddwl mai draig ydoedd. Unicorns yn dda gyda hud. Mwy na chi bois, a gallwn ddweud... mae'n... hud y ddraig? Ond hefyd dynol?" She replied, itching at a limb with a hoof.

My eyes widened.

"What's she saying?" Asked a tired-looking human in a suit.

"That they were in trouble, and then a portal appeared where they were standing." The drake paused and clicked his tongue. "And then something showed up and saved them. She also says the portal is dragon magic but also human. I'm not sure what she means by that--I'm not used to her accent, so some words slipped. Apologies."

"It's fine," muttered the officer. "This isn't the first time I've heard a story like that. Is there anything we can do to know when and where these things are showing up? We have the resources to manage them, but the unpredictability is killing us. Eighty-four portals in the British Isles and ten in total across the rest of the world. Why?"

The unicorn's horn began to glow. Immediately, the drake stood between the mare and the officer, but all that happened was a small pop of energy. "How's this?" She said, speaking perfectly clear English. "Can you two understand me? My tonal spells are a wee bit rusty."

Odd accent.

Seeing this, the other unicorns, at least the ones that could manage it, began doing the same.

"Uhm, yes," said the drake slowly, his stance relaxing. "Your spell worked. Could you... Could you please repeat what you said? What happened before the portal opened up?"

"Portal?" The mare snorted. "T-This isn't a portal! It's a, uh... twll? No, not quite... it's..." She blinked. "This dumb-dumb language doesn't have the right word for it. But it's not a stable transporter. It's a tear, a hole. Unstable. On this side, they're pretty harmless, but on the other side? Boom! All this travelling will cause a leyline migration."

"A what? Leyline migration?"

The unicorn reached up to scratch at her mane before deciding she wasn't the right horse for the job, calling over an older-looking stallion. "Such busy words! Ahh, this is murdering my brain system. Uhh, could you explain, please, sir?"

The stallion eyed the human and dragon, then turned to look up at the sky. "Mythic and mortal creatures generate mana through internal leylines, which convert corporeal objects into energy through eating and digesting. When mana is converted into magic and expunged--fire breath, levitation, flight--that energy then flows into the air and sinks into the ground. It sticks together into clumps. Forming planetary leylines that return this energy to the creatures over time."

...wait.

With dragons, gryphons, and now unicorns on Earth...

"And a migration?" Asked the officer, arms crossed, expression pensive.

"When what forms leylines--us--migrate to somewhere new. Reon's will grow stale, weaken, and cause crashes. That energy has nowhere to go and escapes into the air. Earthquakes, shudders. Everything will... warp, but it should stabilise in time. I believe the king of the old kingdom isle is working to fix these... He and the lindwurms should be able to manage this--they were, after all, created to repair--"

The topic was shifting too quickly, and I had gathered enough to learn Aiden was not there and so began to very quietly-

"And what is the source of these portals?"

I froze and shuffled back into my previous position, focusing my hearing and sight.

The old stallion paused, pursed his lips, and said, "We don't actually know. Purely based on the composition of the rifts stabilising walls... some sort of human-archon hybrid."

"That's not possible," replied the drake almost immediately, seeming offended by the idea of it. "Archons can only mix with lindwurms, earth drakes, and sea wyrms."

The stallion flared his nostrils. "I said some sort of hybrid; that does not mean a natural one. It very well may be a creature similar to the lindwurms themselves. No matter what we think, the energy is indeed an even mix of dragon and human. That is all I am saying."

Silently, I began sneaking away, taking my time to ensure I was not detected by those present. I had learnt enough to know that what he was doing was too much to forgive.

He needed stopping.

And yet...

And yet.

...Did he?

Did he really?

He was saving dragons. Saving unicorns, gryphons, and likely many others. Multiple species would get a better life this side of the portals. So what was human life worth? One species--one violent, oppressive species against a dozen others.

I needed to go.

I couldn't stand all the...thinking.

After ensuring I was far enough away that I couldn't be heard, I began running. Mana-powered, I galloped away until I came to a long stretch of paved road. I exhaled slowly, wiping at my snout and hurrying across the road to reach the bus stop, just as one of the machines approached. I threw my pass at the startled driver and collapsed onto my lounges beside a pole after he'd scanned it.

I could have been spotted. I should have been spotted. The unicorns should have picked it up even with the minute amount of energy I was using to enhance my senses, and yet they hadn't. I assumed this was due to them being next to a literal tear in reality.

That, or they simply did not care. Both were equally likely.

The bus was quiet, leaving me open to... thoughts.

... I didn't know the drifting isle had a new ruler, nor one that was knowledgeable about magic, but Aiden had once said that lindwurms were the smartest dragon race by a rather wide margin. I'd taken offence to that at the time, but he'd followed it up by saying it's what they were "built for" and that they were cleverer than most humans. I suppose it made sense that they would get up off their tails and try to fix things.

It did make me wonder as to why none had crossed over, however. Earth had been my home for less than two years, yet I had not seen a single lindwurm. I'd spotted the odd earth drake, and apparently sea serpents were up north in a country called Ireland, but no lindwurms.

Did they not know of the portals? Or did they simply not care?

There were too many questions, too many what-ifs.

And no answers.

The bus ride passed in total silence. Outside, the city blurred past in streaks of grey and neon, softened by the relentless downpour that battered the streets. When I finally stepped out, the night air was thick with rain, the pavement slick and glistening under the glow of distant streetlights. The world felt unnervingly still--no cars, no voices, just the rhythmic drumming of water against the earth.

Aetphore had been right. It did rain.

Across the street, the dim glow of a café sign flickered against the darkness. The very same café Alys had mentioned--the place James had taken her the day her heat had begun. A place of significance, though not to me. Not truly. And yet, my feet carried me forward without thought, as though drawn by some unseen force.

The door swung open with a soft chime. The scent of coffee, chocolate, and warm bread flooded my senses, a stark contrast to the chill of the storm outside. The moment I stepped in, steam rose from my scales, water sizzling off my body in ephemeral wisps. A few humans turned to stare, momentarily startled, before quickly looking away, feigning nonchalance.

I ignored them.

A small, dimly lit cove near the back caught my eye. I sank into the seat, shifting uncomfortably, my legs forced to contort just to fit into the cramped human-sized space. My horns scraped against the cushion as I leaned back, exhaling a shaky breath.

Now what?

Now what?

Now what?

Now what?

What in the name of gryphon shit was I supposed to do?

Track Aiden down across the infinite web of human leylines? Grab him by the throat and demand he stop his pathetic, realm-wide tantrum? Shake Alys and James and tell them to end their pointless squabbling and just mate already?

Did I even have to do anything?

Why was I here?

Why hadn't I died with my children?

What was the point of me?

Who--

Who...

Wait.

A shudder ran through me. An unfamiliar sensation curled in the pit of my stomach, something cold and cloying, like the ghost of a scent long since forgotten. My gaze lifted, scanning the café, heartbeat thudding in my ears.

And then I saw him.

Near the counter stood a human male--young, at least by their standards--pale-haired, blue-eyed. The moment our gazes met, he stiffened.

Something in my chest tightened.

He looked... tired. No, not just tired--exhausted. Hollow.

I had never, in all the years we'd been mated, seen him look so dead inside.

The ever-present arrogance, the maddening smirk, and the infuriating glint of mischief in his eyes--all of it was gone. He stood there, silent and motionless, gripping a cup of coffee like it was the only thing tethering him to existence. For the first time, I realised even he had limits.

Not so invincible after all.

And then--

He disappeared.

Not with a sleek teleport, not slipping into the shadows, not even a flicker of energy. One moment he was there--staring at me, wide-eyed and terrified--and then he wasn't.

Gone.

The cup he had been holding tumbled to the ground, ceramic shattering, coffee splattering across the floor in a dark, steaming stain. Gasps rippled through the café. Humans fumbled for their phones, whispering and pointing, their voices rising in a crescendo of confusion.

The only other dragon in the room--an older drake with scales dulled by time--turned his gaze to me. We locked eyes for the briefest of moments before I looked away, my focus returning to the table in front of me.

Idiot.

Spineless, pathetic idiot.

A worthless, snivelling coward who had done nothing--nothing--in his entire, miserable existence aside from seeding my eggs.

Why was he still here?

What purpose did he serve?

Why hadn't he just given up and died?

A thousand years old, and not a single deed worth remembering. Not one.

All he ever did was hide. Complain. Run.

I wanted him to collapse. To shrivel up. To stop. To finally disappear in a way that mattered.

I buried my snout into my paws and sobbed.

.....

Several hours later, after Jarys had been handed over to a dragoness who traded care for coin, I, for the second time that day, entered Alys' home. James greeted me with that familiar, earnest smile--his soft brown hair shorter and neatly styled, his pale blue eyes carrying the same warmth, yet a hesitation lingered behind them.

He was kind, always was, from what I'd heard--but there was something about him--an edge to his demeanour that I couldn't ignore. He was good with people, yes, he understood them, but he never quite understood himself. Weak. That was what I saw in him.

Yet, when he turned to speak to Alys, when he called out that I had arrived, something shifted in him. His shoulders relaxed, just for a moment, and his gaze softened. He looked at her like she was something precious, his eyes lingering on the subtle ripple of muscle beneath, the gleam of her scales. It wasn't just admiration--it was something deeper, more consuming.

He thought she was beautiful. And maybe, for all his faults, that was the one thing I could never deny about him.

"Yo, Samys," Rhys' voice broke my thoughts, smooth and easy as always, though there was an undertone of something... nervous. He was more frightened than he let on; I could tell. His friend, an older human, wore the same air of practiced ease, though it was clear his was more practiced. "Did you drop him off okay?"

I gave a grunt of acknowledgement, using my wing to unlatch my satchel and hanging it on the hook near the door. My sharp teeth clinked against the handle as I set it down. "James was just telling us about all his babysitting adventures. Very fun!"

"To be fair," came James' voice from the kitchen, "I said weird, not fun. Your weird lizard brain made that connection." There was a soft fizz, the unmistakable sound of carbonation. "Not my fault you didn't evolve properly."

I froze for a moment, blinking at the audacity of his words.

Then I caught the smell--fermented and sweetened fruit, unmistakable.

Ah. That explains it.

"Don't humans slowly lose all their teeth and get cancer?" Alys shot back immediately, the words a bit slurred and thick-sounding, like syrup dripping from her tongue. "All bumpy and gross."

Rhys' friend snorted, drawing my gaze for a brief second before I returned my attention to Alys, sprawled out on the sofa in a way that was almost too casual, too... limp. Her hind legs were spread too wide, and she was clutching a mug of something potent-smelling in her paw. She didn't even seem aware of how absurd it looked.

I moved to sit down, my mind buzzing with unease. Alys was too far gone, and James... he was still fumbling about in the kitchen like he belonged here. Like he was comfortable.

"No, no," James replied with a playful edge. "Losing all our teeth is a British thing, not a human thing. Like how assaulting people in public parks is an Alys thing, not a dragon thing. See what I mean?"

Whoa.

"Nahhh," Alys groaned loudly, eyes half-lidded and ears limp. "That's not a... uhh... ass salt." She blinked slowly, one eye at a time. "Because you totally liked it."

James burst into laughter, loud and genuine, the sound bubbling up from him as if nothing in the world mattered. It caught me off guard, and I felt a sharp pang of discomfort in my chest.

Desperately, I turned to Rhys and his friend, who were sitting at the dining table, snickering and whispering like they'd just pulled off some grand scheme. What had they done?

A crack and a sizzle from the kitchen made my ears twitch. The smell of sizzling oil flooded my senses, making my nostrils flare.

"Fucking ass salt," James chuckled. "And, uhhhh, you've got no proof I liked it." The cupboard doors slammed open and shut as he rummaged around for something.

I took that opportunity to shuffle closer to Rhys, who immediately fell silent, his eyes avoiding mine.

"What have you two done?" I demanded, voice low but sharp. "Why are they behaving like this?"

It wasn't Rhys who answered first, but his friend. "My idea. Rhys was telling me about how they were all nervous and shy, and I suggested we get them a bit... you know..." He waved his hand, the implication clear. "Loose? Relaxed?"

My wing stiffened. "You can't do this to people," I whispered, leaning in closer, my voice harsh, and lips pulled back in a snarl. "Mess with their heads. Loosen them up."

The dark-skinned human baulked, frowning. "They're adults. It's two vodka and lemonades. I'm not shooting them up with aphrodisiacs and locking them in a room."

"It's irresponsible," I hissed.

Rhys leaned in, his tone serious, though he couldn't quite meet my gaze. "Samys, they're twenty-four. Both of them. Let them be stupid if they want to. Eric's right--they're grown adults."

"This is a mistake," I growled, my claws digging into the floor as I fought to keep my composure. "This will ruin everything."

"Who cares?" Rhys snapped, his voice sharp and defensive. "Just leave them alone to make mistakes. They were going to have drinks regardless, and it's pretty fucking obvious they both want... whatever it is they're doing over there."

I followed his gaze to the sofa. Alys and James were huddled together, whispering to one another in secret, the space between them electric with something neither was willing to acknowledge outright. The sight twisted in my gut.

I stood, prepared to march over and separate them, to rip them apart before things went too far. But then Rhys' paw landed on my haunch, his claws just digging into my scales enough to make me pause.

"Please," he whispered, voice full of desperation. "Just let them have this."

For a heartbeat, I stood frozen, the weight of his words heavy in the air. I looked at Alys and James, their secret smiles and soft whispers. And then, against every instinct that screamed at me to intervene, I sat back down.

Fine.

Let them be stupid.

I slunk back into the sole armchair. A larger, rounded thing Alys has purchased to relax atop, and I was using it for just that.

The movie, which nobody was paying attention to besides me, was some banal terror film. A shape-shifting demon was terrorising a group of human hatchlings in a small town. An admittedly interesting video, but I found myself too busy twitching whenever I overheard one of my cousin's drunken mutterings.

A pain compounded by the fact I had two behaving similarly.

Unable to help myself, I looked back over. James had a ceramic plate sitting on his lap and a fork in his left hand. There was an eggy... thing, covered in too much salt and pepper. He skewered a chunk and plopped it into his mouth, giggling at something the dark-cheeked Alys had said.

When it came time for courting, females had the benefit of being the object of desires. Meaning the males would come up and attempt to impress them. Alys often had trouble during this, so she would be the one climbing down and attempting to speak with drakes.

I'd assumed she'd drop this after moving to Earth... but based on the slight flexing of muscles and her attempts at humour... she hadn't.

"James," called out Rhys, distracting the human. "When'd you make an omelette?"

Ah. That was the word.

"Uh, five minutes ago?" He ate another piece. "Stole one of your big Fabergé eggs, by the way. Revenge for calling the Boltor gay."

"The Boltor is..." Rhys paused. "Fabergé?"

"Yep."

Alys swung her head back over to James, her eyes slowly widening and a wicked smile spreading. "Was it blue?" She asked, teeth glinting. And then she raised a forelimb. "B-Blue, like this blue?" She jabbed at a lean forelimb.

"Yeah. Real fancy and stuff." He swallowed another mouthful. "I'll replace it. I'm just really hungry, plus your brother has shitty taste in primaries."

Eric got to his feet. "Can I try?"

"No!" Alys snapped, wings flared, pressing against the cushions in a defensive display. "Not--not for you! Go eat s-something else!" She stammered, turning back to James, eyes boring into him as he slowly ate the omelette of dubious origins.

Eric threw his hands up and sat back down. He looked miffed, and for a moment I was worried that he would say something, but after Rhys leaned down and whispered something in his ear, he chose instead to focus on his drink.

I and Rhys silently agreed to brush past what had happened and to instead try and focus on the movie, which was actually rather interesting.

Key word being try, as Alys and James would not stop talking.

"A-And he drops his food!" Alys squawked, limp wings flaring, smacking the human twice. "But he can't blame me since I already took the photo. I just went, Welp, sucks to suck, and flew off." She was almost draped over his smaller form, her body reeking of sex pheromones, the scent of which was failing to cast a haze over the human.

James leaned back, head dangerously close to hers. "How many times has that happened now? Four...?"

Alys beamed, cheeks heating up even further, hind legs shifting beneath her again. "Have you been paying attention to me?" She was practically whispering into his ear, the scales of her nose brushing against his hair.

And I was sat there.

Doing nothing

Talking to no one.

Barely existing whilst my family flirted poorly with their respective humans.

The movie was nice. I liked it...

Apparently there was a second one, and I wondered how the demon would-

What the fuck is that smell?

Mid-crunch of salted crisps, I caught a whiff of something not quite right. Vaguely musky and distantly sour. I spared a look at Rhys, who caught my eye, and then quickly flicked his gaze to Alys, who had fully committed to her well-thought-out plan of seduction. She was leaning on him entirely, left wing around his back and tail coiling tightly around his ankle.

And the smell... well, I didn't have to guess just how much the human's soft whispers were affecting her. He didn't know this either, or maybe he was braver than I thought.

Because he reached up, placed a hand against her cheek, and rubbed her marks with a thumb. All before pulling her in for a deep kiss.

It was like watching a raging sand wyrm charging forward.

You couldn't stop it; you couldn't look away.

I was trapped watching as he held her more firmly, as her sharp claws dug deep into his hoodie and pulled him closer, her eyes slowly closing and maw moving in response.

Oh no.

.....

I felt amazing.

For the first time in well over a month, I could relax--actually relax. No nagging thoughts, no weight on my shoulders, just the buzz of alcohol and the warmth of good company. Eric was cool, Rhys was, well, Rhys, and Alys had finally knocked that chip off her shoulder.

As soon as Eric had mentioned he brought something stronger than the cheap cider I'd grabbed at the last second, I pounced. Mixed with the lemonade Alys swore by, the forty-proof vodka went down like spring water. Even Alys had caved, finally taking a seat close by and launching into some rant about work, all while idly swirling her drink.

The movie playing in the background was a blur--something action-packed, probably, but I barely registered it. I was too busy laughing at something stupid Alys had said, too busy shuffling closer, and definitely not getting completely and utterly lost in her eyes.

They were so inhuman in shape and composition, but so... beautiful. Deep pools of shifting, iridescent colour, framed by the sharp contours of her face, reflect the low light of the room in a way no human ever could.

She leaned closer--not quite cuddling, but not far off. I definitely didn't copy her, tilting my head against the cushions until we were lying almost side by side.

"How many times has that happened now? Four...?" I asked, my words heavy with the weight of alcohol.

Alys beamed, her cheeks darkening, the shift in hue emphasising the whisker-like divots in her scales. "Have you been paying attention to me?" she teased, her voice barely above a whisper. The rough scales of her nose brushed against my hair, and a surge of heat flared in my chest, coiling deep in my stomach.

That smirk of hers--low, lazy, knowing. All sharp teeth and flared nostrils. Aggressively not human, but so dazzling that I found myself momentarily stunned.

"Have you?" She murmured, shifting even closer, her wing sliding behind me. The long, dexterous fingers of the limb curled around my shoulder, holding me there.

I couldn't let her win.

Why?

Dunno.

"Alys, you're a dragon. It's hard not to pay attention to you."

"So you do watch me?"

"Obviously..." She was so close now. That weird, tangy, earthy scent of hers curled around me, mingling with the faint sweetness of the strawberry body wash I knew she liked. "You make it impossible not to stare."

Her body pressed against mine, and it was strange. No true softness, no give, just sleek muscle wrapped in smooth unyielding scales. Claws and power and the controlled movements of a predator. And yet... the way her tail curled loosely around my ankle, the slow drag of its tip up my calf--it wasn't a threat.

Not that I cared.

The attention was mind-numbingly flattering, and after she'd made me take a sip from her mug of whatever poison she'd concocted, all the more so.

"Are you staring?" She slurred.

I nodded, the motion dizzying. "You're so beautiful," I admitted without a second thought.

Why would I lie?

"Got giant wings, giant legs, and so shredded."

Without meaning to, the hand that had been trapped between the sofa cushions and the curve of her wing slid forward, brushing over the warmth of her side. My fingertips traced the diamond-shaped ridges of her scales, ghosting over the subtle rise and fall of old scars.

Not that I thought her scars were hot or anything.

I mean.

I did.

But that wasn't the point.

The point was...

Oh. Right.

Conclusion.

I didn't think dragons were hot.

I just liked Alys.

Alys, who was a dragon. Alys, whose claws flexed against my side in a way that made my skin tingle. Alys, who had started nibbling my ear with teeth sharp enough to tear through metal.

Oh.

Oh wow.

That was doing something to me.

The soft, precise bites. The slow, deliberate drag of her breath against my neck. The way her talons dug in just enough to make me shiver.

I shifted, barely suppressing a groan, and reluctantly reached up with my free hand, cupping her jaw and gently prying her away. My fingers met warmth, textured in a way I hadn't expected. Not quite smooth, not quite rough, but somewhere in between.

Her "whiskers" were different.

Smoother.

Long, sharply curving breaks in her scales, almost decorative. I'd always assumed they were scars before realising her family shared them. Four on each cheek, two on her upper horns.

Did they have a purpose?

Were they for attracting mates?

I rubbed slow circles over them with my thumb.

Alys exhaled, her breath warm against my lips.

There was that smell again.

It wasn't bad, just really... strange. Like the faint tang of raw honeyed meat--rich, warm, but not quite fresh. A lingering sharpness at the edges. Natural was the best word for it.

She was right there.

Her breath ghosted over my mouth, and before I could think too hard about it, I leaned in, pressing my lips to the seam where her upper and lower jaws met.

It wasn't a kiss.

Not really.

Just... testing.

Alys was not testing.

She pressed back with enough force to nearly shove me over, her movements hungry, desperate, needy. Clumsy in a way only someone as good-looking as her could make seem hot.

I held on, steadying her, trying to slow her down, but then she groaned against my mouth and nipped at my lower lip, and--

I gave up.

Gave in.

I leaned into her, shifting my grip, moving my hand from her side to her neck, kissing her back with just as much intensity. The room spun. Not just from the alcohol, but from the sheer, overwhelming sensation of her.

Her wings flared, trying to wrap around me, enclosing me in warmth and shadow, but just as her tongue slipped past her teeth--

A sudden, lurching force yanked us apart.

The kiss broke with a wet pop, and I barely caught myself from toppling off the sofa.

My mind reeled, caught in the slow, unsteady realisation of what I had just done.

Samys stood above us, lips curled in a disappointed scowl, sharp fangs on display. "You two... need... to calm down. It..." She said the words, distorted as though I were underwater. "Smell..." I blinked up at her, rubbing at my eyes. "Legs spread."

Bleary-eyed I turned from the shouting Samys to Alys, who was laid back, limp, half-dead looking, and legs indeed spread, her... excitement was obvious and odd-looking to my buzzed brain.

Like... like... Why was it sideways?

Where was the rest of her?

How did she go to the toilet?

Why was it all shiny and wet?

Huh...

"James?!" Samys snapped, startling me from my intense staring. "What are you doing?"

I stammered, waving my hands, words indecipherable.

Alys tried to get up. "We should... we should go to my room-"

She barely had time to rise before Samys shoved her back down.

"O-Off, Samys!" Alys growled, batting at her cousin with a wing, which was too sudden, too forceful. She rolled right off the broad sofa and crashed to the ground in a heap.

Rhys immediately strode over, brushing Samys aside to help his sister, but the dragoness wanted none of it.

She staggered away, shaking him off, snarling--lips curled, ears raised, hackles bristling. "Get off!" Her hind paw caught on a discarded cushion, and she went down again, smashing bottles as she hit the floor.

"Shit," Rhys hissed, reaching for her once more, but this time, she smacked him away, harder.

"What are you doing?!" Alys shouted, eyes wild as she pointed a curled talon at her cousin. "Why are you messing this up for me?"

Samys exhaled. "Alys, you're not in your right mind," she said gently. "You shouldn't--shouldn't pursue this." Her gaze flicked to me, and I froze. "It's not the right time."

Alys reared back onto her hind legs and shoved Samys with enough force to send her skidding across the room.

That was it. That single moment splashed cold water on my drunken haze, sobering me in an instant.

Samys slid through broken glass.

I swore, stumbling as I rushed to help her up. She looked at me, wide-eyed--just for a second, I thought she'd snap. But she didn't. She just took my hand and got to her paws.

"James, you should go," she said quietly.

But Alys heard her.

"No!" The dragoness roared, wings flaring, the sharp stink of ozone thickening in the air. "Ignore that idiot!" She was still hazy, still swaying, but the anger cut through it all. "She doesn't know anything! We were having fun. We felt good, didn't we?" Her words slurred, but they still hit like a hammer.

I swallowed.

"Y-Yeah, but... uhhh maybe too much drink?" I tried, voice weak. Rhys had stepped between us now. Eric stood frozen at the edge of the room, mask of confidence shattered, looking half-ready to bolt. "Let's just calm down..."

"Coward."

It was a snarl. Alys' wings sparked, arcs of white energy snapping between her scales.

"F-Fucking coward! Always running away!" Her legs buckled again. "Hate me. Everyone hates me."

"Alys--" I took a step forward, but Samys shoved me back with her remaining wing.

"Go home, James."

"I said no!" Alys lurched toward her cousin, pupils slitted and locked on. "I starved to feed you, you ungrateful bastard! Fucking--" She tried to push past Rhys, but he caught her.

"Alys... stop. Please."

"It's not fair! Sh-She got to run off with her stupid fucking Aiden, a-and I can't even kiss someone?!"

My heart was pounding so hard it made me dizzy.

"JAMES!" She screamed. "Fucking tell them!"

I froze. "T-Tell them what?" I managed to squeak out.

She licked her mouth with a forked tongue, collecting herself just slightly, lowering her wings. "Tell them it's fine. Th-That you want this too. That you want me."

I couldn't breathe.

"That's why you kissed me, right?" She pressed. "You said you liked me too."

The whole room had gone still.

Three full-grown dragons. One heavily breathing human. And all their attention was on me.

Think.

Think.

Please, think.

Say yes, and that's it.

Say no, and it all breaks.

Fuck.

I like her.

She's so nice, and funny, and good-looking.

Just say something.

"Alys, I'm..."

Her eyes narrowed.

"...sorry."

She locked up. Wings snapped shut against her sides like someone had hit a reset button.

"You..." she blinked. "You're... sorry?"

"...Why?"

My hands were clammy. My chest was hammering, and my throat felt tight.

"I-I shouldn't have done that," I stammered. "I had too much, and I shouldn't have kissed you."

I couldn't stop clenching and unclenching my hands--a nervous tick teachers had mistaken for OCD, but no, I was just panicky.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh."

"Y-Yeah."

"Hmm."

She nodded. Tight-lipped. Ears up high.

"So--"

"Get out."

My stomach lurched so violently I nearly vomited.

"What?" I choked out.

"I said, get out."

"O-Okay. Right. Again, I'm really sorry--"

"I'm not mad you kissed m-me," she stuttered, mask cracking. I looked up, seeing the way her expression twitched. "I'm not mad you called me beautiful. I--I'm mad at myself for believing you."

Her gaze dropped to the floor. All the emotion drained out of her, leaving something hollow in its wake.

"I meant it," I tried.

"Get out. I'm done with you."

"Alys, wait--"

"I'm done with you, James!"

The mask shattered.

Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"I'm done! I'm done! I--I can't stand waiting around, hoping you'll change your mind and decide I'm worth your time!"

God.

She was right.

Oh, dear god. She was right.

"Y-You said we weren't ready," she gasped. "That it wasn't the right time. You said that! B-But when is?! A month from now? A year? A decade?! I-I can't just... I can't... I can't do this anymore..."

Her fire dimmed.

She went quiet.

I had to do something. Say something.

But I didn't.

And by the time I came to my senses, Rhys had moved behind me.

"James," he said softly. "Please leave. I'll talk to you later."

I swallowed. "Rhys--"

"I'm telling you to go," he said, voice firmer this time. "Go before you make things worse."

Before I made things worse.

Because he was right.

It was all my fault. It always was.

I listened. I grabbed my backpack from the hook near the door, spared Alys one last look--one that wasn't returned--and stepped out of the flat. The moment the door clicked shut behind me, I felt it. The finality of it. The weight of what I'd just done.

The lift ride down was silent. Too silent. I barely registered my own reflection in the mirrored wall--eyes rimmed red, looking every bit as miserable as I felt. Then the doors slid open, and the sound of the storm filled the lobby.

Rain hammered against the pavement outside, falling in sheets that blurred the streetlights into hazy smears of gold. I pulled my hood up, checked my phone was buried safely in my backpack, and then stepped out into the downpour.

The cold hit immediately. Rain pelted my shoulders, soaking through my uniform in seconds. I shivered but didn't stop walking, barely even flinching when a passing car sent a wave of filthy street water over my shoes.

Good. I deserve it.

I kept moving, head down, ears full of the roar of rain, thoughts tumbling over themselves faster than I could keep up.

Why couldn't I just say yes?

Why couldn't I just admit how much I wanted her?

Samys would have argued, obviously. She would've pried us apart, told us to cool down, and maybe thrown me a look of pure, undiluted disgust. But Alys? The day after we'd... ugh. So fucking stupid.

I just couldn't let myself be happy.

Couldn't let her be happy.

All for what?

Nothing.

I reached the bus stop and slumped onto the metal bench, ignoring the way the cold seeped through my soaked jeans. The timetable glowed dully under the streetlamp. Twenty minutes for the forty.

Fantastic.

I dropped my backpack to the ground and let my head fall back against the glass behind me.

It was cold, but I barely felt it.

I didn't feel much of anything.

All that was left was...

Was...

...nothing.

Just the rain, the cold, and the weight of my own stupidity.

I shut my eyes. Twenty minutes to sit there and drown in it.

Chapter 13

Friday, the 4th of October.

It was still raining when I got off the bus. Still raining when I stepped inside and still raining when I peeled off my damp hoodie and let it slump onto the floor, the wet thump barely audible over the rainstorm outside.

The flat was cold. Stale. The kind of stillness that only existed when no one had been home for too long or when a home wasn't one.

I put on the microwave chicken burger I'd been meaning to have for days. I wasn't hungry. I'd eaten at work and had snacks at Alys', but suddenly I needed something to do--anything to occupy my mind for more than ten seconds.

The machine beeped when finally done. I slid the steaming bun and breaded chicken patty onto a plate and lifted the top bun so it wouldn't go hard from the moisture shift. I took the sachet of mayonnaise and squeezed it out in a slow, lazy spiral, watching the pale smear spread unevenly across the fillet.

I sat on the settee, staring at the TV I'd promised myself I'd replace a dozen times but never did.

I took a bite.

Cold in the middle.

It didn't matter.

The silence pressed in around me, slow and suffocating. I chewed mechanically, trying to focus on the texture, the taste--on anything but the slow hollowing-out of my chest.

I was cold. Wet. And just so... so...

My legs started to feel like jelly, an unstable, sinking weakness. My arms were heavy, a cool numbness creeping through them as the haze of shock faded.

Oh.

Hah.

Wow.

I'd actually seen a dragon cry.

I didn't think they could.

Lizards, right? Or, um, reptiles? Could reptiles even cry? Were they reptiles?

Alys had been warm. Burning, almost, when she pressed against me, kissed me like nothing else mattered. Like... like... like she wasn't afraid.

She'd done it because I kissed her first.

It was me. All me.

I'd pulled her in.

I'd held her and pushed for it because she was beautiful, and I liked her more than I would ever admit.

More than I would admit.

Because I hadn't.

I'd backpedalled. Tried to land in the middle. Said sorry like it was an accident, like I'd stepped on her tail or walked in on her singing in the shower. Like we'd done something stupid. Like we'd done something worth regretting.

Like I'd--

Stop.

Just stop.

Game over.

It was game over.

No way to claw back into her good graces. A hundred chances to say something, to do something, and I'd screwed them all.

All because... what? I still found it weird?

Because I did.

It was weird.

It wasn't natural.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

So why bother worrying?

It was never going to go anywhere, was it? No kids. No future. No legacy. A relationship that would only ever be trouble.

People always said they were accepting. That they got it. But they didn't.

Most people were performative, lurking in echo-chamber forums that didn't make up even a fraction of the real world. Most people did care. They did find it weird. They just didn't say it out loud.

Wait.

... Had I dodged a bullet?

Was this my chance at a proper life?

Without Alys, I could meet a nice girl at university. Maybe that blonde one from the meetup. She seemed nice. Friendly.

I pulled out my phone, opened Messenger, and scrolled down to her name.

Alice.

That was it.

I'd been calling her she and her in my head, too embarrassed to admit I'd forgotten.

It wasn't that late. I could shoot her a quick text without it being too weird.

But then--

Alys' contact, right at the top. The most recent chat. Four hours ago. Some meme about the mile-high club. I hesitated. Clicked.

It was funny, so--

Ah.

Hah.

"Wow."

This user has blocked you.

Wow.

Wow.

Really...?

One fuck-up? I don't immediately jump her bones once, and she fucking blocks me? Seriously? What kind of bitchy logic is that?

Fine.

Whatever.

Rhys would know why.

He'd get it.

"Yo." I typed, fingers totally not trembling. "I think Alys just blocked me lol ."

I waited.

And waited.

And--

Still waiting.

"Yeah. She's really mad at you right now. You should leave her alone for a bit ."

Fucking finally.

I typed quickly, replying in seconds.

"But why, though ?"

No answer.

"Just because I didn't say yes quickly enough ?"

Nothing.

My breathing grew uneven.

"Seriously? What's her problem ?"

Nothing.

"Fucking I didn't block her when she assaulted me and jumped on me in the park."

Rhys.

Come on, man.

It didn't take people this long to reply. Was he busy? Right now?

Massive fucking coincidence.

"You know?"

Five minutes passed.

"Dude, don't answer me if --"

My chest felt tight.

I scrapped the message, put Do Not Disturb on, and threw the phone aside. I'd check when he messaged, but the status should hide me being online.

He deserved it.

Why message first and then not follow up?

He started--

No, wait, I did.

But he replied, so why stop midway?

He--

...

Damn it.

I turned my phone back on.

Rhys was now offline.

For fuck's sake.

"Dude, why-"

Stop.

"Tell her-"

Stop.

"Serious-"

Stop.

My breathing deepened, and I ran a hand through my hair, just barely resisting the urge to rip my roots out.

Rhys was going to tell her.

Tell her about my complaining.

Because he was her brother.

It's what I would do.

Wait.

Am I blocked?

I checked quickly, nearly dropping the device in my hurry.

No.

Not blocked.

He just refused to answer.

Great.

Great.

Why bother?

Who cares?

What's lost?

Nothing.

"Hey, Alice. Are you still good to lend me those books? Bit late, but I just remembered they exist, lol ."

There.

There, there.

All done.

Life is better.

...

...

...Oh god.

.....

I woke up the next morning, unfortunately.

Hah. Uhh, why bother? Funny guy, yeah. Nice.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes and clumsily snatched my phone from the nightstand. I didn't even remember going to bed, only the argument and getting home. There was more than one notification. New record. Yay.

Rhys.

Finally.

Alice.

Hm.

Alys?

Nothing. Of course.

Rhys went first.

"Yeah. Like I said. Just give her space ." Sent exactly an hour after I finally gave up and went to bed. Had it really taken him that long to reply? He'd basically just repeated himself! Why even bother replying at all?

Whatever.

Then Alice.

"Sorry. Gave them to Triston. You could ask him after he's done? "

Smooth. Simple. No emotion. Nothing. Like I really should have expected. I mean, really? That quick? Suddenly she likes you because you talked to her once, asking to borrow books? I didn't feel like replying. No point. I already had an online copy anyway; I only wanted to talk to her because-

Because...

Hah. I was a piece of shit.

Shocking news, really.

A bust and a bust. Fun... With literally nothing left to lose, I opened up Friendster and skimmed to Alys' account. I could still access it, as I hadn't blocked her, and it just made everything so much worse.

All of her posts that weren't pictures of family, were of us. The birthday party that felt like years ago, the café selfie she'd insisted on doing whilst blushing up a storm, and even the drinks we'd had after work - her first time in a pub.

Each of them she'd reacted to with hearts. Her own posts, and she "loved" them.

In the comments, everyone was asking who the human was, how she was doing, and she said she was hanging out with her best friend. She's doing great!

I believed her.

I felt sick.

Breakfast was nothing and two drinks. I didn't know what drinks they were. Brown. Three, actually, because why not? I dicked around looking for a mixer before realising I didn't have anything. Coke? Gone. No Pepsi. No lemonade, no fruit drinks. I had milk and instant coffee. Putting my face into my palms, I groaned so I didn't scream.

It was a mess. Some needlessly melodramatic mess.

It was like when everything piled up at once and collapsed on top of you.

I tried to put them back in the bottle, awkwardly pooling them into one long glass and tilting, but it spilt onto my side, leaving sticky, foul-smelling stains on my sides. I just barely held back the urge to smash the glass onto the floor, the terrible idea replaced with an even worse one - I tilted my head back and downed the rest. There. No more mess.

I grabbed a pack of wipes from under the sink and... whoa.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

I felt better.

The distant sting in my eyes and the tension in my chest were slowly fading, replaced by a loose, floating heat.

Finally, I eyed the bottle. Some holiday-exclusive version of a whisky I remembered mentioning to my sister once. She'd bought me it, too. So nice of her. So cool.

Would Alys-

Nope.

I wiped the sides with a jittery hand and slumped down onto my sofa. Idly, I took my phone - where was it? I stumbled to my feet, swiped it from the kitchen counter and checked the time. I had to start at quarter past one, a bit earlier than usual, but it still left me time to lounge about. Just enough time to let the alcohol burn off. A walk might-

...half one.

It was already half past one.

I shot to my feet, tripping over myself twice as I hurried to grab my uniform and apron, just barely managing to stuff them into a backpack that needed cleaning. I searched for my keys before remembering they were in my bedroom. Once grabbed, I burst out the front door, locked it and continued my stumbly, blurred vision - no glasses - rush.

I caught the bus, dropped my bus pass, picked it up and held it upside down. Fixed it. Scanned it and sat down.

I hadn't showered the previous night. I'd planned to do so in the morning, but that also hadn't happened. I'd also just had a double of straight rum, and my breath stank.

I dug around in my backpack, jostling the rumpled uniform around madly before finding a single, half-empty can of deodorant, thank god.

Dazed, I stumbled off the bus, catching myself on a pole.

I should have phoned in and told them I was sick. I should have lied. What was I doing, shuffling in, rubbing at my eyes and brushing back my hair, a total mess?

Teeth. I hadn't even brushed my teeth. That might have covered up the rum.

Someone was going to say something, giving me a look like they knew.

Or worse. They wouldn't. They'd just stare.

It was busy, too.

Because Alys worked here.

And Alys was a dragon.

And I'd kissed Alys the dragon.

Alys the dragon.

Sounds like a kid's book, I thought to myself as I clumsily changed into my work uniform and applied a generous helping of shitty Lynx Africa. I ran a hand through my hair and put on the embarrassing employee hat. My name tag was missing, but nobody actually cared about them, so I was safe from that at least.

Half buzzed or not, I washed my hands and wiped them with some tissue before approaching a stressed-looking Tom. He spun to see them, already annoyed. "James, it's nearly two; where have you been?" He asked the question; it was totally reasonable.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "The bus was late," I tried. "Some riot in--"

"Just... uh, just go on grill for me. Alys was supposed to be there, but she's late as well." He looked like he was about to say something else but held his tongue. "Just don't be late again. It's busy as shit today, and barely anyone is in. Everyone is sick."

I nodded numbly, putting on a pair of blue plastic gloves to take out the patties from the miniature freezer. Alys wasn't there, thank fucking Christ. She'd done what I should have done, and nobody had said anything about how much of a mess I looked or the wobble in my footsteps. Then again... McDonald's.

I worked the grill on autopilot, flipping patties and loading them onto trays without a thought. The heat pressed against my face, a dull reminder that I was still here, still moving. Nobody asked questions. Nobody looked at me too closely. It was a busy day, short-staffed, and everyone was too caught up in their own problems to care about the guy who smelt like he hadn't showered.

Hours passed in a haze. At some point, I clocked out. I don't even remember leaving. I just know I ended up in my apartment, shoes still on, face-down on the bed. The only movement I made was to reach for my phone, but there was nothing. No messages. No calls. Not even a scam text.

Alys had disappeared, and I wasn't sure if I felt relieved or sick about it.

The next few days blurred together in a loop of work, sleep, and staring at my phone. I kept expecting something--an update, an explanation--but there was nothing. Not from her, not from Rhys, not even from Jarys. It was like they'd all collectively decided I wasn't worth the effort.

Fine. That was fine.

I showered once, mostly because the smell of my own sweat was starting to make me nauseous. I ate when my stomach twisted itself into knots, but nothing tasted like anything. I sat at my desk, laptop open, coursework pulled up, trying to force myself to focus. It was supposed to be easy--just watch the lecture, answer the questions, submit the work. But the words blurred together, the professor's voice a low hum that didn't mean anything. My brain wouldn't connect the dots.

I tried. I really did. I wrote a paragraph, deleted it, rewrote it, deleted it again. The cursor blinked at me, silent and patient, like it was waiting for me to get my shit together. I checked the deadline. Two hours left. I forced myself to type something--anything--just to fill the space. My answers were half-formed, sentences trailing off mid-thought, ideas jumbled and incoherent.

It didn't matter. I submitted it anyway.

The instant regret was immediate.

I stared at the confirmation screen, the bold black text telling me it was received, and knew I had just completely tanked my grade. A knot twisted in my chest, but I couldn't bring myself to care. It wasn't like I was going to pass this class anyway.

I closed the laptop, shoved it to the edge of my desk, and let myself fall back onto the bed. The ceiling stared back at me, blank and unmoving, as if waiting for me to do something, anything. But I didn't. I just lay there, waiting for a message, waiting for a call, waiting for something to change.

It didn't.

By the fourth day, I told myself I needed to move. Just... go somewhere. Be anywhere but here.

I walked aimlessly through the city, hands shoved deep in my pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold. The air had shifted in the past few days, growing sharper, more biting, the kind that seeped into your lungs and made your chest feel tight. My breath fogged in front of me, curling into nothing as I kicked at stray rocks and dodged puddles. I didn't know where I was going. There wasn't anywhere to go.

Eventually, I ended up at the library.

It was warm inside, quiet in that way that made my head feel too loud. I found a seat at the back, opened my laptop again, and tried to work. The screen glowed, the deadline for my next assignment blinking at me like it knew exactly how far behind I was. I read the first sentence of the prompt three times before giving up, my fingers resting uselessly on the keyboard.

I couldn't do this.

The thought hit like a hammer to the chest. It wasn't just this assignment. It was all of it. The coursework, the job, the silence from my so-called friends. The way everything felt like it was slipping out of my hands and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I closed the laptop.

"Please put your books back," came a tired voice from the front desk. I looked over, spotting a somewhat sour-looking dragon. Dark purple, pink-eyed and seeming as if my mere presence was irritating her. I swallowed, nodded awkwardly and slotted them back in place. " Ffycin dynol," she grumbled to herself, resuming her reading - an old history book on... magic? Or whatever hocus pocus bullshit they had in the spiritual section.

Swallowing back a nasty comment, I left.

I ended up back at work the next day, somehow feeling like it was inevitable. I clocked in, grabbed my apron, and threw it on.

The shift dragged.

The minutes turned into hours. The orders stacked up, the kitchen was a mess, and I was only half present, my body going through the motions while my mind was somewhere else entirely. Everywhere I turned, I could feel the tension. Maybe it was just me; maybe I was imagining it, but something about the air felt thick with questions--things left unsaid.

I hadn't seen Alys in days.

I hadn't seen Rhys either.

I just focused on the fryer, or the grill, or whatever they needed me to do. It was better than thinking about anything else. At least when I was working, there was no room to feel anything.

If I got lucky, her next shift would be delivery, or she wouldn't be in at all.

She only did a day a week in the kitchen, so...

Oh, there she was.

Reverse divine intervention! Great. More unnecessary melodrama! It was like a parody.

Wearing the sandals I'd teased her about and the hat with the holes on top for her horns, she approached Michael, who, without even turning to her, said...

"Go help James."

No.

No, no,

"Michael's got a chicken batch. Sarah and Triston are on preparation. Christian isn't in again. Ethan- Ethan's not worked here in months..." Michael muttered to himself, tapping away at his tablet.

Alys stood by my side, tail curled close to her body so she wouldn't bump anyone. Part of why she was at our branch was because we had larger walkways so she didn't have to sit down every time she had to do something. I'm not sure if they were intentional or a happy accident. I'd not been there long enough to know. Her wings -

"Pric", she muttered quietly to herself as she undid a sandal and placed a stack of patties onto the grill. I flinched but didn't say anything.

I didn't need to know Cymraeg to know what that meant...

"What?" I replied after a beat, only able to glance at her sidelong.

She didn't say anything else; she just kept working.

She wasn't angry or disappointed; she was just there. Next to me, helping me, but not truly by my side. She didn't joke, or nudge me, or coil her tail around my leg or... oh...

I slipped a wireless earphone into my left ear. Tom was cool with it as long as we followed instructions and didn't have them in both. My phone was on shuffle.

~Now's the time to sink or swim; will you fight the tide or get lost within~

I awkwardly double-tapped the side, not wanting to listen to my edgelord songs whilst already in such a bad mood.

Only to hit every single one of them.

Irony!

Patty on the grill, press button, big flat thingy goes down. Stand around like a moron for a minute, salt and pepper shaker. Grab-

"Onions", Alys said quietly. I paused, spatula frozen mid-air. I then swallowed, nodded and said a quick thanks before adding the little vegetables with another shaker.

Onion-topped patties in one tray, plain in another. Alys was getting faster, which was odd as she mostly did deliveries. A week could go by without her stepping into the kitchen. And if we didn't see each other outside of work?

We wouldn't see each other at all.

Truth be told, I was okay with that. Or--I thought I was.

And then what?

Who would I talk to?

Who would I hang out with?

W-What was I even doing?

She was right there. She always had been.

A whole month of someone wanting nothing more than to make me happy. Someone who wanted to be happy with me. And what was I doing?

Why wouldn't I let her in?

Why did I hate myself so much...?

I wasn't that bad of a guy, was I?

G-God.

Oh god.

Shit.

I wiped at my eyes with the backs of my palms, greasy plastic gloves smearing sweat and kitchen grime across my face. My eyes were burning. In public. At work. In front of her .

And she noticed.

That stone-faced calm of hers cracked. Her eyes slowly widened the longer she stared.

"James?"

I deserved it.

I wiped at my face again, then tossed the spatula onto the freezer with a dull clang.

I had to go. I had to go. To run, to get away. But she didn't let me.

She turned to face me, wings flaring, blocking my exit like some angel of vengeance. Her voice was sharp and loud now: "James."

Heads turned. People stared.

"I gotta-" I tried, stumbling for an excuse, trying to slide past her. She didn't move.

"Don't you dare run. "

My breathing picked up, rough and shaky. I pulled my hands away from my face like that would somehow make the moment disappear.

"I-I gotta go."

People were talking. Whispering. Watching. I couldn't take it. I couldn't take them. Thinking things. Feeling things.

I was so sick of feeling.

I missed being alone. No friends, no ties, no emotions. Just silence.

I wasn't happy then--but I wasn't sad, either. I was nothing. And right now, nothing sounded perfect.

I turned sharply, bolting through the front counter. Shoved past a customer complaining about cheese on his no-cheese double cheeseburger.

Tore off my apron and gloves mid-step, flinging them aside as I shoved through the door and out into the open air.

I'd be fired. Fine. Better than being seen.

I'd have to drop my course--couldn't afford it now. That was fine too. Better than talking to people.

I wouldn't see Alys again.

But that was better than this. Better than feeling like this.

It wasn't raining. It should have been. But it was sunny. Warm. Stifling. The sun clung to me like sweat as I stumbled across the car park, barely dodging a car that honked and swerved past.

I made it to the kerb. Tesco in the distance, cars coming and going.

I didn't run. Didn't jog. Just walked. Calmly. Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Then the light shifted.

The ground darkened beneath me.

I turned--just in time to see her. Wings outstretched. A silhouette against the blinding sun.

And then she hit me.

A blur of scales and fury and heat, slamming into me like a missile. I gasped as the air was knocked from my lungs, legs swept out from under me. I grunted as we hit the ground. Her claws dug in--sharp enough to sting, enough to draw blood.

"You coward!" She shouted, her voice almost deafening. "Did you seriously just run away?! You fucking crybaby!"

Her scales were hot against my bare skin, almost scorching.

"You're done. No more running!"

Around us, tyres screeched. Horns blared. People shouted. Someone was yelling about a dragon attacking a man.

"Get off," I rasped, trying to wriggle free. "L-Let me go."

Her eyes were misty, but her grip didn't loosen.

"No."

I kept struggling, but she didn't budge. She was too strong. Too determined. Her claws trembled slightly, like even she wasn't sure what she was doing.

"I'm not letting you go unless you let me go," she said, voice cracking. "I love you."

I froze.

Her words hit like a punch. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just honest. Terrifying.

"You drive me crazy. You make me cry, and sometimes I want to smack you. But you're kind. And funny. And you've always treated me like I mattered. You're my best friend. And... if you don't feel the same, I'll deal with it. It'll hurt. But I'll survive. We're adults, James."

I couldn't speak. I couldn't even breathe.

Not again.

God.

I didn't want to cry.

She didn't look away. She didn't move. Her claws stayed where they were, sharp and real and grounding.

"I-I hate you," I muttered, half-hearted, like it might scare her off.

"I hate you too," she said gently, pressing her forehead to mine.

I went still.

Everything around me faded--horns, voices, fear.

All I saw was her.

Alys.

She'd always been there, hadn't she? Quietly, persistently. Now pinning me down, making it impossible to pretend anymore.

"I love you," I whispered.

The words didn't feel like a choice. They were just... there. Sitting in my chest. Waiting.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I gasped. "I love you. I just... I mess things up. That's what I do. I'll mess this up."

She didn't flinch.

"You won't. Trust me. I've made worse mistakes. I'm the reason Jarys doesn't have a mother."

I stared at her, trying to process that.

But I didn't pull away.

I couldn't.

She was real. She was staying.

And I wanted to stay too. I wanted things to change. I didn't want to stagnate anymore.

"...Did you hurt her?" I asked, voice low.

A pause.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Her voice dropped. "Because she deserved it."

"...Okay."

"James?"

"Yeah?"

"Say it again."

"..."

"James. Say you love me."

"...m'love you," I mumbled, cheeks burning.

"Properly."

I groaned. "Alys, we're in public. This is embarrassing."

Her tail twitched. I could feel it through.

"Say it, or I'm telling Tom you ditched work because you wanted to mate right then and there."

"That's not helping."

But I smiled a little despite myself.

"I love you," I said, louder this time. The words not feeling quite... right. With the adrenaline fading and the mood calming, I had to force them out. Did I mean them?

"There. Happy?"

"Very," she purred, snuggling in closer.

We stayed like that for a second longer. Just one.

Then reality hit like a truck.

"Okay, now seriously--can you get off me? People are going to think you're trying to eat me."

"Don't be so dramatic," she teased.

"I'm not. Someone probably called the cops. And--shit. Work. I just ran in the middle of my shift. Tom's gonna kill me."

I let my head drop to the pavement with a groan.

"This was fucking ridiculous," I muttered. "I'm never showing my face there again."

"Guess you'll have to move into my nest," she said breezily. "Add you to my hoard."

"You don't seem that concerned. You could be fired too."

She tilted her head. "Eh. I already finished getting my Berserk collection. If I buy Nagatoro weekly, I could afford it on my government allowance."

"No. You need a job; otherwise you'll rot."

"And? I'd have more time to work out then."

I tried to sit up again, but she didn't move.

"Alys. Up. I need to talk to Tom."

Sirens.

Angling my head, I could see that a police car was approaching from the far end of the dark park, along with an armoured dragon in the sky above. "Great." I ran a hand down my face, groaning loudly. Alys shuffled off me, allowing me to stand. " Great."

I brushed down my shirt and straightened the crinkles, trying to hide the bloodstains by wiping my hands on the inside of my trouser pockets. Alys snapped her wings to her sides and sat back on her haunches, her expression perfectly calm.

The police dragon landed with a heavy thud, dust kicking up around her as she folded her wings against the reinforced vest strapped to her chest. A badge was pinned to it, gleaming under the streetlights. She was built for enforcement--broad-shouldered, thick-limbed, standing just tall enough to be intimidating without trying.

Her scales were coal-black, her underplating a deep turquoise and her eyes a vibrant green. Unlike Alys, her lower pair of horns swept sleekly backward, though the smooth curve was disrupted by a jagged break in her top left horn. Scars marked her body; less than Samys had, but more than Alys.

A patrol car pulled up seconds later. A human officer stepped out, closing the door with a deliberate click. His eyes swept over the scene: Alys sitting too still, I standing stiffly beside her, the bloodstains I'd done a poor job of hiding. His expression didn't change, but I saw the way his hand lingered near his belt. Aside from the dragon beside him, he likely didn't have anything capable of harming Alys, but that didn't matter.

He spoke evenly, controlled. "What happened here?"

Alys straightened slightly, her tail curling in against her side. "Nothing criminal, sir," she said politely. "It was a misunderstanding."

The officer's gaze lingered on my work shirt. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," I said quickly.

He took a slow step forward. "How'd that happen?"

Alys hesitated. "I... grabbed him too hard."

The police dragon shifted her weight, nostrils flaring. I knew she could smell it--the blood, the adrenaline.

The officer's expression didn't change, but his voice cooled. "Why?"

Alys hesitated again.

"Personal reasons", I cut in, before she could fumble over an answer. "It wasn't an attack. Just... emotions getting out of hand." I swallowed. "We're dating," I lied.

The officer's jaw tensed. "And you're sure you're okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't on purpose."

He exhaled through his nose. The police dragon was still watching Alys carefully, but she hadn't moved. Not a threat. Not yet. If anything, she looked surprised by my confession, as did Alys.

"Do you want to press charges?" The officer asked me.

The question knocked the air from my lungs. "What? No! Of course not."

His brow twitched. "Are you saying that because you mean it, or because you think it'll make this easier?"

I clenched my jaw. "I mean it."

He didn't look convinced. He glanced toward Alys. "Ma'am, I need you to step over here."

Alys hesitated, then slowly rose to her paws, keeping her posture relaxed. She followed the police dragon a few paces away, just out of my immediate reach. Close enough to keep things civil, but far enough that we couldn't exchange looks or whispers.

The officer crossed his arms, watching me carefully. "Listen," he said, voice quieter now. "I don't know what's going on between you two, but when we get called about a physical altercation and show up to find one person bleeding, we have to take it seriously. Are you absolutely sure you don't want to make a statement?"

I swallowed. "I'm sure."

His gaze lingered for another beat before he nodded, glancing toward Alys and his partner. The police dragon was talking to her in low tones, posture rigid.

After a moment, the officer sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "Alright", he said. "You're obviously adults, and I can't force you to say something you don't want to. But if this happens again, you will be making a statement. Understand?"

I nodded.

He stepped back, motioning for the police dragon to finish up. She murmured something softly to Alys, then turned and took a step toward the car. Alys hesitated before walking back over, her expression unreadable.

The officer pointed at both of us. "Go home. Don't let this happen again."

Alys dipped her head. "Understood."

I swallowed hard, nodding stiffly. "Yes, sir."

With that, they left. The dragon followed the path of the car.

The moment they were gone, I exhaled hard, running a hand down my face.

"Well," I muttered. "That was fun."

Alys didn't say anything at first. Then, softly, "...Are you really okay?"

I glanced at her. She wasn't teasing. Not this time.

I sighed. "Yeah. Just embarrassed."

She hesitated, tail curling slightly. "Say it again?"

I groaned. "Alys."

Her wings twitched. "I just got interrogated by law enforcement because I tackled you in the street, and I've had a rough week. Indulge me."

I grumbled, rubbing my arm. "I love you."

Her tail flicked, just once. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I huffed. "Let's just go before Tom kills me."

By the time we got back to the restaurant, the adrenaline had worn off, leaving me feeling like I'd been wrung out and left to dry. Alys walked beside me, uncharacteristically quiet.

The automatic doors slid open, and the warm scent of fryer grease and stale coffee hit me. The dinner rush had died down, but the place still buzzed with lingering customers and the occasional shout from the kitchen. Tom was waiting near the registers, arms crossed, looking like he'd aged five years in the last hour.

"Break room", he said flatly.

I swallowed and nodded. Alys didn't say anything, just followed behind me as we made our way through the back. The moment the door swung shut behind us, Tom let out a sharp breath and turned to face us.

"Okay," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Which one of you wants to tell me what the hell that was?"

I hesitated, but Alys spoke first. "It was my fault."

Tom's eyes flicked to her, unimpressed. "Yeah, I figured. Leaving mid-shift? That's a big no-no."

She straightened slightly. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You should be," he said, then sighed, rubbing his temples. "Look, I get it. You're new to this-- all of this--but I can't have employees just running off in the middle of a shift, dragon or not."

Alys stiffened at that, but she didn't argue.

"Luckily for you", he continued, "you're not technically on our payroll."

I winced. Right. McDonald's wasn't even paying her--some third-party program handled that. She was practically an intern, working under some immigrant integration initiative. It wasn't like they were going to fire a dragon over a technicality, not when they could spin her presence into good PR.

Tom sighed. "So, as much as I'd love to write you up, my hands are tied."

Alys blinked. "You... you're not firing me?"

"No," Tom said bluntly. "But don't take that as a free pass. You pull something like this again, and I will send a report up the chain. Got it?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. Understood."

Tom turned to me, and I suddenly felt the weight of the past few months pressing down on me.

"As for you..." He exhaled sharply. "James, you are this close-" he held up two fingers, barely apart, "-to being out of chances."

I swallowed. "Tom, I-"

"Save it." His tone was firm. "You've been late constantly the last few days. You got into an argument with Michael. And now this? Disappearing in the middle of your shift with her?" He gestured to Alys. "I'm not even going to pretend I know what's going on between you two, but it's not my problem. What my problem is, is having reliable workers, and right now? You're not looking like one."

My face burned. "I am reliable."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Then act like it."

I clenched my fists. I wanted to argue, to say something-- anything--to defend myself, but what could I say? He wasn't wrong.

"James", Tom said, his voice softer now. "I've been cutting you slack. More than I should. You show up late, you leave early, and I've let it slide because I know you're going through something. But that goodwill is running out."

I looked away.

"You screw up again?" Tom continued. "That's it. No more warnings. No more 'One more chance--he looks upset.' You're done. Are we clear?"

I nodded stiffly. "Yeah."

"Good." He sighed, rubbing his face again. "Now, both of you--get cleaned up and get back to work. Alys, I'm putting you on the register for the rest of the shift. James, clean-up duty. And no more disappearing acts."

We both muttered an agreement, but Alys hesitated. She stepped forward.

"Wait. He's bleeding," she said. "From earlier. When I..."

Tom squinted at me. "...Seriously?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "I'll be fine. Just scratched. She didn't mean to."

Tom didn't look impressed. "Does it need stitches?"

"No. Just... bandages. That's all. Alys was gonna help." A lie. I didn't know why I'd said it.

He stared at us, then sighed and turned away, muttering under his breath. A minute later, he returned with the first-aid kit, which he then passed to me. "Five minutes. Then you're both clocking back in. I'm docking the time you both missed."

We nodded and headed into the employee bathroom; the click of the door closing behind us was loud in the cramped space. The overhead light buzzed faintly. I sat down on the closed toilet lid and opened the kit while Alys hovered nearby, tail twitching slightly.

"I can do it," I offered, already reaching for the antiseptic.

She sat down in front of me instead, carefully pushing my hand away. "No. Let me... I hurt you."

Slowly, I peeled my shirt off and hung it on the sink. The air hit the wounds on my shoulder, and I flinched instinctively. The cuts weren't deep, but they were angry and red, lined with crusted blood and raw skin where the fabric had stuck. Three gashes on the right, two lighter ones on the left.

Alys' eyes widened slightly. "I didn't think I caught you that bad..."

I managed a weak chuckle. "You've got some claws on you."

She didn't laugh. Instead, she grabbed the antiseptic, soaked a pad, and pressed it to my shoulder with care. Her claws were clumsy with the cotton, but her paws were steady, and her touch surprisingly warm. I hissed through my teeth as the sting hit.

"Sorry," she murmured, moving closer. Closer than necessary.

"I've had worse."

She hesitated at the bandages, unrolling a length of gauze before pausing. "...These aren't like the ones I'm used to."

"You've done this before?"

"Sort of. Mostly on others. But our medical wraps are different. They, uh, they stick to themselves."

I smiled faintly. "Yeah, these don't do that. You'll have to tape it."

She frowned, turning the roll awkwardly in her claws. "Why is this so dumb?"

"Because human design is held together by duct tape and prayer."

That earned a soft laugh from her, barely audible, but real. She leaned in closer as she wrapped the gauze around my shoulder, her breath warm on my neck. Her pawpads brushed my skin more than once, and I could feel the way she tried not to linger, tried not to make it weird, but something about the closeness made the air feel heavier.

"Hold this," she said, pressing the bandage to my chest so it wouldn't slip. I obeyed, watching her fumble with the medical tape.

"You know," I said, "for someone who body slammed me into the ground, you're being very gentle."

"I'm trying not to make it worse."

"You're doing fine."

She looked up at me then, just for a second, and something passed between us. Then she looked away again and pressed the tape down firmly.

"There. That should hold until you get home."

"Thanks," I said, grabbing my shirt from the floor. I winced as I slid it back on, the fabric brushing over raw skin. Alys was already standing, back to the door, lingering like she didn't know what to do with herself.

"...We should go," she said. "Before Tom sends a search party."

I nodded. We stepped out into the hallway together, the silence between us less hostile now, just... heavy. Like neither of us knew what to say that wouldn't make it worse.

I grabbed a mop and headed to clean-up duty, letting my mind go blank as I started scrubbing. I didn't want to think about Tom's warning. About the way Alys had just gotten off easy while I was hanging on by a thread. About how, despite everything, I still couldn't bring myself to blame her.

Because, at the end of the day... none of this was really her fault.

It was mine.

.....

The dining area was empty now, the hum of the drink machine and the occasional clatter of dishes in the back the only things breaking the silence. My tray was pushed aside, the last remnants of my meal forgotten.

Across from me, Alys was perched on her haunches atop the floor instead of trying to squeeze into the booth, forelimbs resting on the seat. It made sense--she wasn't that big, but she never quite fit right. She was smart enough to stop trying.

I wished I could say the same for myself.

I stared at the table, my fingers idly tracing a faint stain in the plastic, my thoughts spiralling. I should've been relieved. No more sirens. No more awkward explanations. No more questioning whether I'd still have a job. Tom had made it very clear I was on my last chance, but at least I still had one. That should've been enough to make me feel better.

It wasn't.

Because now that the panic was over, all I could think about was how much of an idiot I'd been. Not just today, but for the past two months. The past few days also.

Two months of me needing time.

Two months of avoiding the question. Avoiding her.

The day we'd talked about our feelings, about the park kiss, I was glad I didn't say yes right then. We'd known each other for a week and a half at that point. It would've been reckless. But after that, when she got moved to deliveries and things settled? We were fine. She was fine.

I think.

And I was the one who wasn't.

I kept her at a distance. I told her I needed time to figure things out, to sort through my feelings. She gave me space. She waited.

But how had she not moved on?

If she were human, she would've. Alys wasn't dumb--if anything, she was too perceptive. She had to know that I was afraid. That I was still caught up in my own self-loathing, still caught up in what caring about her could mean.

I wanted to ask her. Wanted to shake her and say, Why did you wait for me?!

Did she have nothing better to do? Why was she so obsessive? Was that healthy?

But before I could get lost any deeper in my own head, something hit my lips, and I inhaled sharply, nearly choking.

I coughed, nearly sending whatever it was down the wrong pipe before I realised what it was--a fry. A cold, slightly stale fry.

Alys was laughing - a loud, squawky sound, her tail thumping heavily against the floor.

"You deserved that," she teased, clearly enjoying herself.

I swallowed, wiped my mouth, and glared at her. "What the hell?"

She smirked. "For hurting my feelings."

I rolled my eyes. "Bringing that up? Cruel."

"You were cruel."

"Ouch."

I knew she wasn't actually mad--not anymore--but she still watched me like she was waiting for something. Maybe for me to snap out of whatever miserable spiral I was in. Maybe for me to actually say something meaningful for once.

She shifted, stretching one wing before tucking it back in. "Alright, so. You owe me."

"For what?" I groaned, dipping a chip in my vanilla milkshake. Something I'd missed doing, but was now able to thanks to the ice-cream machine finally getting fixed.

"For emotionally devastating me."

I scoffed. "Oh, sure."

She huffed. "You did! You made me cry, twice!"

I winced. Okay. That was fair.

"And you got me in trouble when you ran away like a dumbass. And you left me alone all week."

"Alright, alright, I get it. But you blocked me, remember?"

Alys grinned, clearly enjoying my suffering. "That doesn't matter. What does matter is that I need compensation."

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "Fine. What do you want?"

She pretended to think, tapping a claw against her snout. "Hmm... oh, I know. You're going to help me pick out manga next time we go to the shop."

"That's your price? That's pretty fair."

"No, no, that's just one of them." She grinned wider. "I'm making a list."

"Of course you are. But... yeah. I probably deserve it."

Alys leaned back, stretching out a little, wings shifting before settling again. She looked relaxed and content--even smug. The worst part was I almost let my guard down too.

Almost.

Then, she tilted her head, just slightly, watching me with that sharp, assessing gaze of hers, reptilian eyes narrowed. "You know", she said, far too casually, "we should probably seal the deal."

I blinked. "Seal the deal?"

She licked her sharp teeth, her tail flicking lazily behind her. "Properly. Make it official. You're my partner now."

I had expected it. Maybe not that night, maybe not even that week, but at some point, yeah. And I managed to keep my face neutral. But my fingers twitched slightly, and Alys, as always, caught it.

Her grin turned knowing. "What?"

I exhaled slowly, meeting her gaze. "Alys, I don't even know what we are right now." The words were soft, calm and honest. "We haven't spoken in nearly a week, and all of that just happened. Don't you want to at least wait a bit?"

"No."

I blinked.

"No?"

"James, if I let you wait again, it's never going to happen. So I'm deciding now that we're courting. My decision." She folded her forelimbs across her chest, head tilted up in a show of draconic pride. "You got a problem with that...?"

I laughed. It was so her. "So, what, you've had a boyfriend for a minute, and you already want sex?"

She snorted. "First of all, partner."

"Right, partner."

"And second." She leaned in slightly, her voice low and completely unashamed. "Yes."

I didn't react. Not outwardly. But internally, my brain short-circuited for half a second.

Alys tilted her head, blinking at me expectantly, like this was the most normal conversation in the world. "What else do mates do but mate?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I actually had to think for a moment.

Then, I raised a brow. " But mate? You've got long tongues. Have you really never thought about doing anything else? You don't have to just mate."

Alys' ears twitched. Her hind legs definitely shifted.

"That's..." She cleared her throat. "That's personal."

I squinted at her, fully expecting her to start laughing and say she was messing with me.

She didn't.

Which meant--

"Oh my God," I muttered.

Her tail flicked sharply, the blue of her cheeks darkening to indigo. "It's just for self-relief during heat. You don't just do that."

"That's -" I shook my head. "That's less personal."

She was avoiding my eyes now, which was new. She had no problem discussing actual sex, but the moment the topic shifted to that--

I stared at her for a long moment, realisation settling in.

"...You're legit more embarrassed about this than the other thing."

Alys' wings flared slightly before she very deliberately folded them back. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

She scoffed, flicking a fry at me. "Shut up."

I caught it, tossing it back, bouncing it off her head. "I knew you had shame somewhere."

She grumbled something in Reonic under her breath, too quiet for me to hear.

I wasn't sure why this of all things was the topic to finally make her flustered, but I couldn't stop the smirk creeping onto my face. She noticed, of course, and narrowed her eyes.

"Don't," she warned.

I raised my hands. "I'm just saying."

Alys exhaled, shaking her head before eyeing me again. "You didn't answer my question."

I straightened slightly. "Didn't I?"

"Nope." She leaned in again, lowering her voice. "We should do it."

I swallowed. Reflexively, I glanced around, checking the empty dining area, making damn sure no one was listening.

They weren't. Nobody was even left.

Alys wasn't trying to be subtle, but at least she wasn't loud. Still, my pulse jumped.

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling slowly. "We just started dating--"

"Courting".

"Fine, we just started courting." I gave her a look. "You don't think this is kind of fast?"

She blinked. "Not really."

Of course she didn't.

I rubbed my temples. "Okay, but like-- why?"

She tilted her head. "I like you."

"That's--" I sighed. "I like you too, but that doesn't mean we need to rush into this."

She frowned slightly, tail curling. "You're overthinking again."

That was probably true. But she wasn't human.

I hesitated, then asked, "Is this, like... a dragon thing?"

She considered that. "Sort of?"

I raised a brow. " Sort of?"

Alys exhaled, shifting a little, clearly trying to figure out how to explain it. "It's... natural?" She finally said. "I want you. You want me." She said it like it was obvious. Like it was as simple as breathing. "Why wait?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, glancing away for a moment. "It's just - humans don't usually jump straight into it."

"That's not true," she said immediately. "Humans have one-night stands. Rhys told me that."

I opened my mouth, paused, then sighed. "Okay, but that's different."

"How?"

"Because--" I waved vaguely. "That's casual."

Alys flicked an ear. "This wouldn't be casual. You're mine."

"I-I know." I held a hand up. "But still, think about how sudden all of this is. Just last Friday , we had a huge fallout. I'm still blocked on Friendster, Alys."

Quite smoothly, she slid her tablet from her backpack, tapped for a few seconds and then slid it back in. "No, you're not."

"Alys..."

"Do you want me to stay mad at you?" She asked sharply, an edge of irritation creeping into her words. "I get that we're different - on the inside and out - so I will explain it to you." She sat up straighter, leaning closer. "You hurt my feelings," she said. "You kissed me and then tried to run away, and that hurt me. But now -" she swiped the air with a paw in a slicing motion. "-done. All done. Got a partner. Want to mate. Want to bond."

Huh.

She... she meant it.

"Are you su-"

She smacked my right shoulder, right in the spot she herself applied the gauze. Wincing, I shuffled away from her. "Fine! Fine! We're cool."

"James, hurry up."

"No- just... Just chill, okay? I get it; you want to be mates." I flinched when she snuck closer to smack me again. "I do too, right? But why rush? We can do other stuff first."

She tilted her head back, thinking. "Like what?"

I hesitated, shifting slightly. She was watching me now-- really watching me, the way she always did when she was waiting for me to slip up and say something I didn't want to. Her pupils were wide, scarlet eyes locked onto mine, unblinking. It was the kind of stare that made me feel like a rabbit caught in a trap.

I cleared my throat. "I mean, we could... y'know. Just spend time together."

"We're spending time together right now."

"Well--yeah. But, like... more?"

She still didn't blink.

I shifted under her stare, rubbing the back of my neck. "Like, uh, go out more? Movies? A proper date?"

Her tail flicked. "We went out last Monday."

"Yeah, but that wasn't a date."

Alys squinted slightly, considering. "...Was too."

"It was getting groceries."

"And we got drinks after."

"That was because you wanted to keep talking about your dumb manga."

She huffed. "It's not dumb! Flowers of Evil is such a deep-"

"Fine, fine! What about... what about I could cook for you?" I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

Alys snorted. "James, you love cooking for me. That's just a regular Tuesday."

She wasn't wrong.

I leaned back, frowning. "Okay, well, we could... go on walks? Take it slow?"

She gave me a flat look. "You're just listing things we already do."

I opened my mouth, hesitated, then shut it again. She wasn't wrong.

Alys was still watching me. Her ears twitched, tail curling lazily against the floor. She wasn't pushing-- yet--but I could feel it coming. That expectant weight in her stare, the sharp attention she gave only when she knew she was about to win something.

I swallowed, shifting slightly. "I just--there's no rush, right?"

Her wings flexed slightly before tucking back against her sides. "I want to."

She said it so simply. No shame, no hesitation. Just a fact.

I exhaled, rubbing my temples. "I know. But--why?"

Her brow furrowed, as if that question genuinely confused her. "Because I want you?"

Alys' tail flicked once, slow and deliberate. "You want me to."

I didn't react. Not outwardly.

But she still grinned.

Damn it.

I sighed, looking away for a moment. "I just think we should ease into things."

She tilted her head. "How?"

I hesitated.

Alys just waited.

Her tail curled again, and I could see the amusement creeping in, the smug little glint in her eye. She knew I was stuck. I had to say something.

"We could... mess around a little?"

Her ears flicked. That got her attention.

I felt my face heat up, but I kept my expression neutral. "Not-- not everything. Just... something."

Alys blinked once, her pupils shrinking slightly. Then she tilted her head, ears flicking forward. "Go on."

God help me.

I shifted again, rubbing the back of my neck. "I mean, we could, uh... touch more?"

Alys' mouth twitched. "We already touch."

"Not--like that. "

She blinked again, then grinned wider. " Oh."

"Yeah."

She considered that, tail tapping idly against the floor. Then she stretched, wings flexing slightly before settling again. "I like touching you."

"...I know."

Alys tilted her head. "What kind of touching?"

I let out a quiet, breathy laugh, running a hand down my face. "You really need me to spell it out?"

Her grin turned sharper. "Yes."

Of course she did.

I exhaled through my nose, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before looking back at her. "Kissing."

Alys perked up immediately.

I sighed. "More kissing."

She hummed. "Good start."

Hesitation overtook me. But then, quieter, I said, "...Other stuff, too."

Alys' tail flicked sharply. "Like?"

Glaring at her, I mumbled out a quick, "You know like what."

She snickered. "Do I?"

"You're doing this on purpose."

"Obviously."

I huffed, running a hand through my hair, feeling suddenly sweaty.

"So, Friday, then?"

I blinked, caught off guard by the sudden change in pace. "What?"

"Friday", she repeated, leaning forward slightly. "You said we could do a proper date, right? I'm giving you a couple of days to plan. How's Friday sound?"

I paused. She'd been playing me, teasing me, and now she was serious. I nodded, the corner of my mouth twitching up into a half-smile. "Friday works." I glanced at her. "It's... just a couple of days, right?"

"Mmm," she hummed in agreement. "A couple of days. Enough time for you to get ready."

I tried not to let my thoughts wander. "Right. I'll... uh, I'll make sure I'm ready." My heart was already racing, and I wasn't sure if it was excitement or sheer panic that had me so worked up.

Alys raised a brow ridge, as if she wasn't sure whether I was being genuine or not. "Good to know. I'll make sure I'm clean, too." Her voice dropped lower, teasing.

My throat went dry, and I had to clear it before answering. "Yeah. Yeah, that's, uh... that's important."

She leaned back again, her wings folding neatly behind her. Her tail swayed, a lazy movement that did nothing to calm my racing thoughts. "Alright. Friday it is, then." She smirked, the same one that had been there since the start, when she'd been drawing this out to torture me. "Just make sure you don't forget. Or I'll be very disappointed."

I couldn't help the nervous laugh that bubbled up. "I won't forget. Trust me."

Alys studied me for a long moment, like she was trying to figure out whether or not I was being truthful. It didn't help that I felt like I was on the verge of cracking under the pressure.

"You'd better not," she said at last, her tone low but serious. "Because I won't let you off easy. Not with something like this."

I nodded, swallowing again, the silence between us stretching for a beat too long.

"I'll be ready," I repeated, this time with more confidence, even though inside, I was a mess of nerves and anticipation.

Alys gave me one last sharp look, then slowly, deliberately, stood up. Her wings shifted as she stretched, long and fluid, before folding back neatly against her sides. Her tail flicked one last time, trailing against my jaw as she turned and began padding away.

She paused just before leaving, looking over her shoulder with that same mischievous glint in her eyes. "I expect you to be as prepared as I am. If not... well, you'll find out."

My heart skipped a beat, but I managed a nod. "I'll be there."

She smiled, that grin of hers still full of secrets. Then, just before she walked out, she added, "Don't keep me waiting." The door clicked shut behind her, and I was left sitting in the dining room, heart still pounding.

.....

Friday, the 11th of October .

I brushed my teeth for the third time that day, wiped imaginary dirt from my coat and ever so gently poked a stray hair back in place. Thirty minutes to go. I smelt under my arm, only picking up mint. Wait. Did she like mint? Would it be repulsive to someone with senses greater than mine? No. She would have said-

But would she have?

Did I need another shower? Shit. The only other shower gel I had was antibacterial, and... and would that smell worse?

On reflex, I ran a hand through my hair, mussing it up without meaning to.

I sat down at my desk and angled my face in the somewhat dim reflection of my phone's camera. Not bad. Pretty good. Definitely not putting glasses on, but still... good enough? My face, I meant.

I'd been walking more since starting my online course. Trying to get more in shape by taking the long way, studying in cafés until the guilt of looking like an American screenwriter became too much for me to bear.

Okay, right.

My face looked like my face, and I was clean and dressed. All nice. Got a present in my... wait. Did people even give their dates gifts anymore? I hadn't, but it'd been over two years since I'd last been on one, so maybe...

She was a dragon, and I'd gotten her a ribbon.

Oh sweet Jesus, what was I doing?

She was giving me the look; I thought she was a dog! No. Wait. Focus, man.

You literally asked Rhys if she'd like it, and he said she would.

I pulled up and watched another YouTube video on how to tie one, and after practising it on my wrist, undid it, bundled it against some scrunched-up craft paper at the bottom of a gift bag and placed it atop my desk.

Food picked out, clothes sorted, chocolate and ribbon ready, and now... nothing.

I'd timed everything so there was nothing but time.

Hm.

There was one thing.

One niggling little thought.

One tiny, minuscule - okay, one massive - thing that scared the shit out of me.

Dragons weren't humans. Shocker.

Dragons did not have... human or even mammalian... parts. Rhys had said something about a cloaca, and when I googled that... confusion. Three holes in one hole and, like, some weird puffy thing. Something about birds. I'd tried lizards, but there weren't many high-resolution photos, and I'd begun to feel like a creep trying to tilt my head to get a proper look.

I'd almost tried porn, but there was next to none for actual dragons. A few figures and anatomy guides, as they were apparently prudes when it came to sex. Or at least when it came to sharing it with those that were not their mates.

Gryphons, however. Well... there were more than a few videos floating around.

I'd watched them.

Lots of fluttering wings and nipping.

Even still - interesting. That Lottle girl could really move.

Adam Schmidt was next. Some guy who went viral about a month back after his dragon girlfriend put a picture of the two looking all sweaty up on the internet. And I knew him. Or at least recognised him. He was in my fucking building. He and his partner, some skinny blue-grey dragon who had, I think, lost her wings.

I was tempted to ask him for advice, but I didn't know what flat he lived in, nor had I seen him since we'd both taken the lift down.

I'd been on the lookout too.

I checked my fingernails again. Clean. White. All sorted.

...I needed to relax.

But I couldn't.

It was a single date with a girl I was already courting, as she put it, but it felt like it had been building up for months.

And I was... excited. Nervous, yeah, insanely so, but also excited. It bubbled up, sending shocks through me, my right leg bouncing up and down in anticipation.

Dragons mated for life; I knew that. But what would other stuff mean?

And what if we didn't stop there?

What if she didn't want to stop?

What if I didn't want to stop?

Shit.

In the restaurant, at that moment, I'd been hesitant, too shaken up from the mess of the movie night and everything that had happened on shift, but now? After I'd had time to think, time to look back on all those little looks she'd given me?

...liberating.

Terrifying, yes, but liberating.

And she wanted to mate properly. She'd let me if I wanted to. The ball was in my court. All I'd have to do was ask. And... And I wanted to. Obviously. An attractive female who was funny and liked me back?

Maybe... Maybe I felt bad?

That if I went through with it, I was abusing her mating instincts.

Like... did she like me, or was it instincts? Was it just loneliness?

But.

She was a dragon. A fully grown, adult dragon. Physically, it was almost impossible to take advantage of her. She'd once flexed she could bench press a car, and all this time she'd been obvious about wanting it, wanting me. Pure lust didn't last that long. Heat didn't last that long.

I think.

I think she wanted it. Or... or had I misread the signs? Or maybe she was teasing.

...god fucking damnit. The wait was killing me.

Ten minutes.

Screw it, I was leaving.

I slipped my shoes on, tied my laces tight and zipped my coat up. It was new. Very new. Bought Thursday new. Totally not because it was the same dark blue as Alys, and I thought it would help.

It was late afternoon, lunchtime. I'd booked movie tickets along with somewhere for food. Cliché, but tried and true. Most of the date would involve food, but Alys loved that. If she weren't some sort of hyper-evolved magical predator, she'd have been a fair bit chunkier.

Which -

Well-

I, uh, definitely wouldn't have said no.

Focus.

After taking the lift and escaping out into the sunlight, I finally dared to check my messages. A ding from a server I only checked once a week, some meme Ethan sent about killing himself. I sent back a quick ' real' and finally opened the messages from the three dragons.

I and Rhys were cool. I apologised for all the messages, and he said it was cool; he was just busy dealing with his sister, and I told him it was cool. Guy friends. Nice and simple.

Samys had actually been super useful, sending me paragraphs on body language, what certain scents meant - despite me not being able to smell them - and even things about sex. She'd offered to send me a picture, but I had begged her not to. I didn't know if she was trying so hard because she blamed herself for how poorly last week had gone or if she was genuinely trying to help. I felt it to be an even mix of the two.

"Hey, weird question, buttttt."

I paused, trying to parse my thoughts.

"Why are you so cool with this? Not that I don't appreciate it, but you're kind of telling me how to have sex with your cousin lol."

I desperately wanted to check Alys' messages. My fingers kept twitching atop her name and profile picture, but I had to hold out.

"Why would I be?" She replied calmly. "I am helping you so she can enjoy her time with you."

"Yeah... I get that, but most of your tips are, uh, sex-related."

"And?"

An early bus rolled up. I'd wanted to pick her up, but to my quiet shame I didn't have a car. Initially, I'd felt guilty, but she reminded me she didn't really fit in most cars.

"And isn't that weird to you? If Rhys were dating my sister, I wouldn't be throwing the guy hints."

"Why not? Would you not want her to enjoy herself?"

I scanned my ticket and took a seat near the back. "I would, but I'd more give him tips on, like, foods she liked and places to take her-" I hesitated for a second before pushing forward. "-not how to make her cum."

Samys didn't even seem remotely put off. "It's less Alys specifically and more Archons in general, James. And besides, are you truly complaining?"

My fingers drummed against my phone. "No."

"Then why ask?"

"Just curious." I chewed my lip. "Thanks, though. I didn't know about all that body language stuff. Could you, uhhh, run it by me again? Like. Act like I'm five."

"I already do."

Ouch.

She began typing, the bubbles bouncing up and down.

And they kept doing that for so long that I actually managed to convince myself to check Alys' messages.

"Where are we going?" She had said.

"Secret."

"Mean." It was the last message I'd sent and therefore read.

And now...

"Where are we going?"

"James, where are we going?"

"James."

"James, I'm going to eat you."

I smiled and replied with, "Hot."

I swiped back to Samys, who was still typing. Whilst waiting, I glanced out of the window, idly watching the city whizz by. Things felt different. Lighter. Warmer. After mine and Alys' talk back in August, things had felt both heavier and yet more freeing.

Starting university had obviously been a huge change, and I'd met new people like Galia, and yet, with Alys, things grew... grew... it was hard to word. We grew closer together and also outwards in our own ways; at least I did. Sometimes I felt like she was jealous I was pushing forward.

Our call before I'd picked Oliver up came to mind. How she'd hesitated when I mentioned making new friends. At first I thought that was just normal jealousy, but sometimes...

My phone buzzed. I swiped back to Samys.

"Alright, since you're clearly clueless, here's a crash course in dragon body language so you don't embarrass yourself.

Tail swaying? Relaxed or thinking. Flicking? Annoyed or excited. Curling around something? That's protective or possessive--so if it's you, you're claimed. Tapping on the floor? Impatient. Flexing limbs or puffing out chest? Dominating or showing off. Same with humping, but she probably won't do that unless you're play-fighting.

Wings half-open? Paying attention. Rustling or twitching? Nervous or excited. Tucked in tight? Uncomfortable. If she fully stretches them out near you, that's trust.

Ears forward? Curious. Flat? Pissed or upset. Slow head tilt? Thinking, teasing, or confused. Quick tilt? Assessing or reacting to something weird.

Eyes--big pupils mean excitement (or she likes what she's looking at). Narrowed pupils? Suspicious or playful. Slow blink? She's comfortable around you. If she looks away fast? Embarrassed.

Claws--clenching or fidgeting means nervous or impatient. Flexing claws? Stretching or showing off. Keeping paws close? Reserved or unsure. If she bites you gently on the jaw or ear, she really likes you.

Leaning in? Interested. Pulling back? Hesitating. Standing tall? Confident. Making herself small? Uncomfortable.

There. Now you have no excuse to be oblivious."

Jesus Christ, I thought, my eyes widening as I held my phone with both hands and squinted at the text. Wait. Am I crazy, or do some of these contradict? Might be context related. I swear everything means its opposite. But... this is - humping?

Alys replied, but I just had to ask Samys, "Humping??"

Another quick response. "Yes. Adults don't often do it for obvious reasons, but overstimulated dragons can sometimes do it. Not long, but she may pin you for a second before realising what she's doing. I wouldn't worry about it."

...Hm.

Hmm.

Wait.

"I swear she did something like that at the park," I typed out quickly.

Samys' texting at last hesitated. "She may have, yes."

"Huh."

Feeling a natural end to the conversation, I swiped back to Alys.

"Yes. I am very hot. I'm glad you finally noticed. I was starting to think you weren't into hens."

I laughed and noticed I was finally at my stop. My heart stuttered for a moment as I realised how close the date was to starting. "Nah, my game is just that bad." Instant regret.

"Nice try, but it's too late to back out. If you try, I'll scoop you up and drop you like a turtle."

I threw out a quick cheers to the bus driver and stepped off onto the kerb. The meeting spot was only a few minutes away, which only gave me a few minutes to try and relax.

I didn't even know why I was so anxious. It was Alys. Who I joked with constantly and hung out with on break and after work and - and... yeah... I got what she meant by You're just listing things we already do.

"And then I'll eat you." I huffed out a laugh.

"That's twice now you've mentioned eating me. Starting to think you've got a biting fetish," I shot back.

Alys didn't hesitate. And it was then that I realised I'd been baited. "Oh, trust me, I do."

"Hot. But you've got some sharp-ass teeth."

"And?"

I went to reply, only to bump into the back of someone, too distracted to notice. "Sorry", I said quickly. She gave me a dirty look and kept on walking. I focused back on my phone but made sure to actually look where I was going. "Oh, nothing. If anything, it's a bonus."

I was rusty; sue me.

"Of course it is. Everything about me is a bonus."

We were meeting at the cafe we'd both gone to a while back, but afterwards I planned on taking her to the cinema and then for food. Most of the date was food-related, I realised, as the strip of shops, along with a familiar dragoness, came into view.

I paused. She was sitting on her haunches, wings lightly spread - relaxed, apparently. Both paws held her tablet, lips being chewed. I lingered, standing to the side for a second, curious what she'd do next. "I know you are," I tried. "Kinda embarrassing it took me this long to notice. Hope I can make it up-" I needed a good emoji. Too obvious, and it's... middle ground it is. "Hope I can make it up to you."

She shuffled. In place, wings twitching once before she leaned in closer, but then she froze, eyes widening and head snapping to my direction. Her nostrils flared, her posture relaxing before she slid her tablet back into the confines of the pack she always carried.

Even from a fair bit of distance away, I could see the look. Half amused, half curious.

I turned my phone off, put my hands in my coat pockets and tried not to look flustered at getting caught. My movements jostled the gift bag that her eyes immediately snapped to.

She stayed seated as I approached her, her look deepening the closer I got. When I was near enough to notice the gleam of her scales and the subtle paint on her face, she said, "Were you seriously watching me?"

"Obviously", I said cheerfully, raising up the gift bag and resisting the nerves that were doing their best to try and overtake me. "I was surprised you got here so early. That, and you look really good."

She grinned and carefully accepted the bag, sitting back further to hold it more comfortably. "Thank you." She dug in with a paw and pulled out a bar of fairly pricey chocolate - lactose-free, of course. She'd developed a taste for sugar recently. "Ooh, food already?" Her eyes lit up, and she placed the bag back down, sending a lurch of anxiety up me. "A very good start, James."

"Uh, there's something else in here." I knelt, opening the bag just enough to slip my hand inside. Carefully, I pulled out the fine scarlet ribbon--the exact shade of her eyes. I'd spent too much time zooming in on a picture to match it perfectly. "Ta-da." I held it up with both hands, the fabric catching the light.

She stilled, claws tightening slightly around the wrapper of her snack, which she'd already chomped down half of. Then, slowly--deliberately--she placed the chocolate back in the bag and reached for the ribbon. Her eyes flicked over it, unreadable. "Whoa."

She lifted it, nostrils flaring as she sniffed it gently, then ran her paw pads along its sleek surface. I watched her, waiting, but when she didn't say anything, I stepped closer.

Wordlessly, I took the ribbon back, shifting to her side as I carefully wrapped my fingers around her left forelimb. Her gaze snapped down to me, eyes wide--surprised, but not pulling away. Then, without a word, she complied, lifting her limb slightly. The back ones had a pair of leg warmers on, the.soft pink cotton framed her nicely.

I carefully tied the ribbon into a neat, overly elaborate bow. As I worked, I found myself noticing just how animalistic her paw really was--thick pads, long sharp claws and a strong, muscled forelimb, bent oddly like a dog's. Her dewclaws sat higher than a canine's, close enough to act like thumbs, but undeniably different. The pads were lightly scuffed, worn from walking on rough ground. Odd enough to make me pause, but not enough to falter, not anymore.

Once the bow was secure, I stepped back, hands in my pockets. She raised her paw, flexing her digits experimentally before looking at me again, blinking. The snark was gone, leaving only a soft, warm, growing affection.

She stepped closer and pressed her forehead to mine, her eyes closed, breathing steady. I swallowed, heart thumping loudly, echoing across my ribs. Her breath ghosted across my skin. I didn't dare move. It felt too intimate, almost too much.

"I love you."

My breath hitched, but I hid it. I knew I'd said the same last Wednesday, but that had been an emotional high. I didn't know if I was ready for that level of commitment, nor if I actually felt it that strongly.

Alys pulled her forehead away, her gaze still soft, but there was something knowing in her expression. I opened my mouth, wanting to say something, anything, but I stammered, "I... I don't know if I'm, uh..." I stopped myself, unsure of how to finish, my words getting caught in the mess of emotions inside me.

She smiled then, her expression warm and understanding. Without another word, she leaned in and pressed a kiss to my cheek, following it up with a nuzzle. "I'll change your mind tonight," she said sneakily.

I laughed and pulled away, pushing on her shoulders slightly, thankful for the shift. "Of course you will." I picked the gift bag back up and brushed my hair back in place. "Dragons know sex magic now, do they?"

The dragoness grinned, getting up and landing on all four paws and taking a moment to stretch long and lazily. "I do, at least. Trust me." Her wings stretched wide, like she was flexing their size.

"Oh, really?" On reflex, I went to put the gift bag in my backpack, only to realise I hadn't brought it. I relented to simply carrying the glittery bag. "Tried and tested?"

"I'll be testing it on you. Considering yourself honoured to be my first victim."

Seriously? Huh. Weird.

"I mean, if you play your cards right, you might get something out of this."

"If I play my cards right?" She guffawed just as I began walking up the path to a nearby road. "You're the one bringing me gifts and food like a desperate wyvern." She adjusted the bow and began following me close by, keeping her side pressed against me.

"You do remember I'm not a reptile, right? The only thing I know about wyverns is that they're just Skyrim dragons." A weak joke. I cringed at myself the second it left my mouth.

Alys hummed. "Female wyverns are nasty," she said. "They eat anything that moves--including each other, especially when in heat. So, if a male wants to mate, he has to bring the female a massive pile of food, hoping she'll be too busy stuffing her face to notice him sneaking in to, y'know, put some eggs in her before she rips his head off and slurps out his insides like wet spaghetti."

"How romantic." I grimaced and turned away, but she bumped against me, wrapping a wing around my side and pulling me close.

"Please don't tell me you guys do the same thing."

Her maw twisted into a wicked smirk. "We may do something similar."

I faltered mid-step. "Uh. I was joking, Alys. You don't- you don't actually, right? Because... like."

"Relax, you big baby." She crushed me tighter, the fingers of her wing digging into my ribs, her horns pressing against my cheek. "Just a little mating bite. Nothing big. You'll see what I mean."

"You keep saying that." I tried to budge her away, but now that she had me pinned to her side, she didn't so much as flinch. "But I think I remember wanting to take things slow. " To emphasise my point, I dragged out the words. "We've been courting a few days, Alys. We don't have to rush straight to sex, alright?"

She groaned and squished me tight enough that I made an unmanly squeak. "James..." Alys said slowly, pitch dangerously low. "What kind of a male turns down a very clear offer to mate?" Another squeeze. Harder than the last. "You know I'm being genuine, right?"

"Y-Yeah," I gasped out. "But still... there's no need to--" Squish. "Don't you want attention?" She lightened the crush. "I want to take it slow, ease into it, but if you're so-" she side-eyed me, cutting the words off. "But if you want some relief, then I can help."

"How?" She asked, finally allowing me to breathe and continue walking. A quick flick of my eyes to those around us told me that people were watching.

"Can we at least actually have our date first?" I asked, prying myself away. "It's the entire reason I got all dressed up. I-I made reservations, and we've got tickets for the cinema."

"Cinema?" She looked out into the distance and then finally let me go. "Movies?"

"Yes, you lunatic. Movies." Some of the earlier nerves were fading, but not all of them, so I fell back on our usual banter to ease myself up. "And then we've got a reservation for food. You can yell at me all you want then." We were still early for our seats, so I didn't mind, but Alys could be annoyingly single-minded at times, so I had to break her out of it then and there.

Her wing was finally let go of and folded neatly by her side. She nodded, mouth closed tightly. Taking this as a sign, I began walking. After a minute, she said, quite softly, "Sorry." I looked back at her. She was a foot away - far for such a touchy creature. "I'm sorry, James."

I bumped her. "It's alright, Alys. Chill."

"I know; I know; I just didn't mean to be so pushy. I forget you're human sometimes." Her eyes flattened against her scaly head. "Samys always said drakes would jump at the offer. I thought you were a bit hesitant or just playing so..."

"Nah, nah." I waved her off. "Most guys would too, but - it's just... uh, fuck, how do I phrase this without you killing me?" That got a reaction. Her ears raised back up, her wings fluttering once before folding back against her sides. "...it's still weird to me," I admitted. "You're amazing, really. But sometimes I feel funny for thinking that. Like, how - why does my brain think you're so hot? Shouldn't I only think that about other humans?" I was rambling, but it was too late. "I didn't think humans were wired like this."

I thought she was going to be mad or at least disappointed with me. I'd basically just confessed to thinking it was weird I liked her. During a date. But she actually looked as though she was thinking about what I'd said, as if she had also wondered the same thing. "I understand," Alys said. "Do you remember me saying that I'd see it more as courting someone who happened to be human, rather than courting a human? That, basically."

We neared the road that led to the cinema.

"So, it's entirely mental to you?" I asked. "You aren't, like, physically into humans?" I didn't know how to feel about that. "Or me?"

"No. I am."

I gave her a look, but she just grinned. "I can tell the difference between a good and bad-looking human, James. And I know what I like looking at." She finally closed that awkward distance between us, only to rustle my hair. "I like your fluff. And the- oh!" Excitedly, she reached into her bag and tore free a pair of slim black glasses. My heart sank. "These. I like these on your eyes. Makes you look all wizardy."

Reluctantly, I accepted my glasses from her and slipped them onto my nose. I'd been wearing them more often, if only to avoid visits to the opticians.

"I left them at yours last Friday, didn't I?" I asked, adjusting them on reflex.

She nodded cheerfully. "Yes. And I knew you'd not bring them if I gave you them, but if I told you to, whilst on a date..."

"Evil", I grumbled. "I thought I'd just lost them and didn't feel like looking for them." Alys just smiled, sharp teeth poking over. "So, what...? You like humans with glasses?"

"It helps."

We crossed the road, with me surrendering to wearing the eyepiece.

"And what about you, James? Do you like the colour blue?" I took my phone out of my pocket and turned on my mobile data just long enough to open up my Gmail and load the digital tickets the cinema had sent. "Or do you just like strong hens? Or is it big wings?"

I felt myself flush at the reminder of last week's event. When I'd said hers were bigger than Galia's, I hadn't realised the implications. And she knew, based on the darkening scales on her snout and the heavy sways of her long tail. But, still, I felt she deserved an actual answer, so I not-so-subtly gave her a quick once-over.

I liked her makeup: the sleek, sharp red paint above her eyes and the small symbols added to the scales on her limbs. I'd never seen dragon makeup, and it was more so the effort put in that I appreciated. The bangles on her horns were shiny and suited her perfectly.

It wasn't any one thing, I realised slowly.

"I like you." The words slipped out before I could overthink them. She blinked and stared at me, eyes wide in surprise. "All of you, I guess." I felt my hands shuffle in my pockets awkwardly, the gift bag rustling quietly beside me. "But if I had to pick, I'd go with your eyes. They're terrifying."

Her grin turned dopey, all raw affection and cheer. "That's so fucking cheesy," she said, leaning her head on my shoulder and nearly throwing me off balance with the sudden increase in weight. "But I'm in a mate-y mood, so I want a compliment that makes me all twitchy."

We entered the large movie complex and went straight to the concession stand. The young guy working the desk was shockingly unbothered by the sight of a dragon draping herself over a guy who looked like he taught history. "Are we sharing popcorn, or are you hungry?"

To my surprise, she said sharing. My wallet thanked her. "You want coke or something?"

She didn't remove her head from my shoulder, nor the wing from my side, as she squinted up at the screens. "Same as you," she murmured, so I got a large popcorn and two cokes. Ice was mandatory.

"Alys, you-" I tried to pry her from me, but she was stuck like glue. "At least get the popcorn then. My hands are full." To my surprise, she grabbed the bucket with the end of her tail, wrapped it up with the tip and continued her lounging against me. I didn't know it was that dexterous.

"I'll show you what it can do later." She leaned down to suck on the straw of her drink before resuming her nuzzling. I stood frozen, legs like jelly, before sucking it up and guiding her to the hallway where each screen was held.

I awkwardly slipped my phone into my hands, holding four things in total, and showed the tickets to the man 'guarding' the rooms. He gave Alys a dodgy look. "Watch yourself," the man said, slurring his tone. I opened my mouth to snap something nasty back, but Alys just tightened her hold and dragged me forward.

"Ignore him," she chirped. "Besides, you owe me a compliment. Remember?"

"I gave you one." I scanned the aisle, finding our seats - D7 and D8. "Eyes. Remember?"

"And I wanted a twitchy one, James." I nearly stumbled with all her pushing. "James, come on." I budged her away, thankful that the screening was empty.

The seating I'd picked had reduced pricing due to the seats being quadruped-specific. Normal people couldn't get the seats, but with a dragon with me - profit.

She sat down comfortably on the broad leather chair, able to shuffle about easily and stretch out. I tried to take the seat next to her, but she grabbed me and sat me in front of her, resting her jaw atop my head, hind legs on either side.

"Uh, Alys?" I asked, finding myself trapped in place. "I paid for the seat next to you, and besides, we've got all day to-" She bit my ear, and I just barely held back the full-body flinch. "...fine. But you owe me eight pounds," I joked, submitting to her hold and trying to find some comfort, of which there were mounds, but they were yet tainted by... shuffling.

I knew what she was doing and felt she herself knew I knew.

"You're warm", she purred, raising the popcorn from the ground with her tail and slotting it into its designated holder. She wiped her paws against herself and grabbed a handful of crispy kernels, plopping them in her mouth and crunching loudly. "And this is comfortable."

"For you, maybe. I feel like a body pillow." Still, I tried. I sat back further and laid against her chest. The subtle plating of her underside was smooth and warm, comfortable almost, yet I knew it to be the most well-defended part of her body. I wiggled slightly, trying to find a spot, and she rumbled, pleased, so I stopped.

"What movie are we watching? You've not told me anything except that I'll be getting fed, which, again, screams male wyvern." Her head moved, neck resting against my shoulder, head brushing against my chest.

I ignored the last part and, rather than answering, took a long sip of my drink. "Secret". Almost instantly, I regretted my choice of words; our entire date was hanging out, but I felt admitting that would ruin things. And... shit. Aside from the movie, which I wasn't sure she'd even like, we were literally just hanging out, and like she'd said, we already did that.

My hands tightened on my cup, just as her hind legs, which bracketed me on either side, closed further around my waist. Her forelimbs slipped beneath my arms, fully wrapping me up. I didn't deserve this. I hadn't done anything worth this kind of affection. I needed to-

"You'd make a shitty wyvern," she grumbled. "Won't even kiss me."

Oh. Okay, that would help.

People were starting to enter the screening. Couples. Teenagers, and a few older folk. It was a horror, so no kids, thankfully. A few had seats near us. And, to my surprise, a drake wearing earphones. He was young and with some human friends, mostly guys. He spotted us, eyebrows raised, likely at the overly affectionate way we were sitting, but said nothing.

He sat near the bottom, motioning for his companions to take the other large seats, which they did quickly, chatting loudly amongst themselves. I made a noise, and Alys followed my eyes. "That's nice to see," she said softly. "But also distracting." Her hold on me tightened.

I took the hint and sat up higher, tilted my head to the side and looked at her, thinking on how best to do it. Wanting to return her affection, I moved an arm around one of her bent hind legs to hold her as I brushed my cheek against her neck, mimicking her nuzzling.

"There you go," she purred. Shifting and angling her neck just enough that our noses touched. I didn't wait, and for the first time since we'd met, our kiss wasn't influenced by some outward force. The first proper one, I realised. My heart stammered at her subtle murmurs as I pressed my lips against her faux ones. She was warm but strangely not soft, rather rough.

She tightened her hold on me, pressing me back against her, hips twitching in the urge to move. The hind legs that held me on either side pressed into me tightly, her free paw curling its talons against my coat, digging in deep.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see people watching. More in shock than revulsion, but the knowledge that they were looking at all did make me falter.

The fork of her split tongue flicked out, her maw opening up, the wet prongs pressing against my lips, but, despite how much I wanted to, I didn't let her in. She whined against my mouth, choosing then instead to nip. At first gently and then harshly. A warning, almost. Samys had told me about it.

A rough, almost lip-splitting bite made me twitch, but she just rumbled, amused. Her breathing deepened, the movements of her mouth and the cocooning of her larger body around mine grew more desperate and needy, and whilst I wanted to fall into that, wanted to turn around and press into her properly, I couldn't.

But still... I had to give her some sign I wanted this as much as she did. I moved my right hand from her thigh and, with some awkwardness, held her neck, fingers digging into her scales just as I bit her back, grooming, my intention sharp and electric.

And then I cruelly pulled away. Both to tease and to calm her. She did not appreciate this, however, as soon after the bliss faded and the surprise vanished, her lips curled back in a sharp snarl and she lunged forward to continue, but I laughed and moved away.

When she tried a second time, I stuffed a clump of popcorn in her mouth.

"Relax," I said, trying to pretend how unaffected I was. That I wasn't also a twitchy mess. "We've got all day to have fun, Alys." Her mind probably told her that I was simply playing with her, that I was just nervous, and that she needed to push.

"Rude," she hissed in my ear. "Are you at least going to touch me?" The lights in the room dimmed just as her wings stretched outward. I felt trapped before, and I didn't mind, because it was Alys, but in that moment I realised just how trapped I was. If her wings were even half as strong as the rest of her, I wouldn't be able to break away. "It's dark in here. Nobody would see."

"Alys", I groaned. "I'm not going to do that."

She frowned, cheeks hot, and then said, "I'm joking." Her ears flicked once, upwards. "Do you think I'd really do something like that in public?" Her head moved, raising up so her chin rested atop my scalp.

I flushed. "Right. Sorry. You just..." But then I really looked at her. The way she was wrapped around me like she was trying to hide something and just how hot her body - especially her lower half - was. She squirmed. "Alys."

She shushed me, and, mimicking what I had done, grabbed a pawful of popcorn to stuff in my mouth. "The movie is starting," she said, reaching out and taking a long drink of her Coke. " Baby."

I let her off the hook, choosing instead to chew the popped kernels and watch some adverts. The movies looked interesting. "A lot of dragon stuff has come out recently," I mentioned through a mouthful of fizzy drink. "Must be getting popular."

Alys hummed. "What about that kobold?" She said, pointing at the excitable raptor flying a spaceship.

"She's a raptor, I think. No, wait, alien." She looked familiar, but I chalked that up to likely having seen a trailer on YouTube. "The guy looks cool."

The dragon above me nodded, returning her jaw to it. "Not a lot of racing, though." She ate her food, the motion of her maw heavy against my head. "For a racing movie."

"Eh, a lot of movies with simple premises end up going in other directions. You want drama? Boom, conspiracy!" I tried to push her head back, but she refused to budge. "Please don't use my hair as a plate. You'll get bits in it." I reached up and brushed it, dislodging a handful of half-eaten kernels. "Oh, come on."

"It's bonding," she mumbled around a mouthful of popcorn.

"It's gross," I said, just as the screen changed again. A slower, sad-looking trailer played next. "Oh--wait, I've seen this one." I pointed at the orange dragoness on screen. "It's a tragic--"

"I know," Alys cut in, her voice softer. "Didn't like it."

That surprised me a bit. "Too sad?" But then I tried to smile. "You didn't like how they broke up?"

She didn't answer right away. Her paw shifted slightly on my chest, and she looked past the screen like she wasn't really watching anymore.

"I don't know," she said after a moment. "It just... stuck with me, I guess."

That didn't sound like her. She usually made some dumb joke about dragons in movies having bad wing posture or being too shiny. Or how they slept around like rutting. Or how a story that started with tea, should at least have some.

I looked up at her. "Why?"

Another pause. Then, quieter: "Reminded me of something."

I didn't speak. Didn't move. Just waited.

She drummed her talons against my chest, thoughtful, distracted. "Back when I was in the corps. I knew someone. Nothing serious, but... you know."

I didn't know. Not really. But I nodded anyway.

"We weren't really a thing," she said. "Not properly. We never even--" She stopped herself with a breath, then shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I left. He didn't."

That was it. No dramatic monologue. Just a plain sentence. But it felt heavier than anything she'd said all day.

"What happened to him?" I asked quietly, raising a hand to my chest, resting over her paw. It was larger than mine, but I still held her, squeezing her lightly.

Alys paused, pressing her chin more firmly against my scalp. "Don't know," she said softly. "Haven't seen him since."

The trailer had already ended. Something dumb and loud was playing now. I barely noticed.

Alys let out a breath like she was tired. "I didn't mean to get all... whatever. I just don't like that movie."

I reached up and gave her leg a small squeeze. "You don't have to explain."

"I know," she muttered. Then added, "You're still not getting any of my popcorn."

That sounded more like her.

I smiled. "I wasn't asking."

"How are your shoulders, by the way?" She loosened her hold on me.

"My what?" I asked, honestly lost. "Shoulders?" And then it hit me. "Oh! Yeah, yeah. They're fine." I shuffled.

"Are you sure?"

I grinned, and rubbed the paw she kept pressed to my chest, fingers intertwining with her talons. "Yeah. I'm sure."

We sat like that for a while, not really talking, just letting the noise of the cinema fill the quiet. Her paw rested a little heavier against me, but not uncomfortably so. Warm, like she was anchoring herself.

After a moment, she said, "I like the romance one better. The cheesy one. The guy in it reminds me of you."

I glanced at the next trailer, already playing. "Oh, that? Yeah, I've seen it."

She blinked down at me. "What? Since when do you watch romance?"

"I have layers," I said. "Deep, complex emotional layers."

"Yeah, like a lasagna made of poor decisions."

I groaned. "Still feeding you, aren't I?"

"And I appreciate that, softscale," she said smugly, crunching another mouthful of popcorn like it was a victory.

Despite myself, I smiled.

"How's school?" Alys asked, casual but not disinterested.

The movie had started. I'd picked a horror--mostly just to see her reaction.

"It's good," I said. "Better than I expected. I already knew some of the terms, and the stuff I don't, I'm picking up fast. People are nice, too. Chill."

She gave a small grunt of approval, which I decided to interpret as encouraging.

"The qualification's not, like, top-tier or anything," I went on, "but it might be enough for entry-level coding. Or security work. Maybe I'll make a game someday. With dragons, obviously."

That got a small shift in her weight--interest, maybe. Her claws pressed a little deeper into my hoodie without her noticing.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Deliveries," she replied, matter-of-factly.

That was it.

The movie opened on some miserable future planet, grey and rainy and full of doomed colonists. Not subtle.

"Just deliveries?" I asked after a bit. "You sticking with it?"

Her tail flicked. "Maybe."

"Forever?"

"Sure. Why not?"

I looked up at her. Tried to look up at her. It was impossible unless I broke my neck.

"Is that really all you want to do?" I asked.

She hesitated. Not because she was offended--but like she'd never really thought about it that way.

"I like it," she said. "I fly around. Drop off food. Get paid. Nobody yells at me, and I don't have to talk much. It's fine."

"Sure, but that's what you do," I said. "Not what you want."

That made her pause.

"I don't know," she said eventually, quieter. "Reon was different. I had orders, a unit, a job. There was always something next. Here I've got... nothing. But in a good way. When not working, I can sleep until noon, eat junk food, and ignore anything that doesn't involve Jarys." A breath. "Freedom's weird."

"Yeah," I said. "Kind of a curse, honestly."

She snorted. "Everyone kept telling me how lucky I was when I was told I could move to Earth. No more war. No more pressure. Just do whatever you want." Her wings shifted against the seat. "Except no one tells you how hard wanting is when you've never had to before."

That hit harder than I expected. I nodded, slowly.

"You ever think about joining the military here?" I asked, the words coming out before I could stop them. I immediately regretted it, feeling a heavy pit open up in my stomach. I didn't want her to go back to that. Didn't want her in that life again. But I couldn't ignore the truth either. It felt like it needed to be said. She needed to know she had that option.

A noise. A mix of a grunt and a snicker, only heavier.

"You want me to have a breakdown or something?" She said, her tone flat but with a sharp edge underneath. She was laughing, but I could tell it didn't reach her eyes.

I swallowed. "No, of course not. I just... you know, I was thinking. Maybe there's, I dunno, something familiar about it. You sound like you were good at it..."

I regretted that part too. I felt my chest tighten as I did my best to focus on the movie.

"I was good at it," she said, her voice quieter, almost a whisper. "I revelled in it. Taking lives, feeling the power in my claws... It felt good, James. Receiving orders. Giving orders. I was good at it."

I didn't know what to say to that. The words felt so heavy, so wrong. I had never really heard her talk about it like that before.

"It's different now, though, right?" I said, trying to make it sound more like a question and less like a statement. "You don't need that anymore."

Her wings folded closer to her body, tense. Her tail wrapped tighter around her hindpaws.

"I don't know what I need anymore," she muttered, her gaze returning to the screen without really seeing it. "I just know I don't want that feeling anymore. The power. The control. The blood." She shook her head. "But I don't know what else there is."

Her voice cracked on the last word, just barely.

I felt the weight of that crack in my chest.

"What do you like?" I asked, more gently this time.

"Manga", she said immediately. "Games. Flying. Food." Then, after a pause: "Really good food. Like that honey tofu place."

I grinned. So childish, but so understandable. "You ever think about writing? You've basically lived in an anime. You could do something cool with that."

Her words came out slow, uncertain. "Write stories?"

"Yeah. You talk about plot like it's a blood sport already."

"But my spelling's garbage."

"So? Spelling is like... five per percent of writing. And I could help with that."

She sounded thoughtful. "Okay. Okay, yeah. Maybe something like... a dragoness with a demon sealed inside her, who gets assigned to a cursed military squad."

"That's Naruto."

"It's Naruto with scales," she said proudly. "Totally different."

We didn't watch the movie after that. Not really. We spent the rest of it whispering back and forth, jotting down half-baked ideas on her tablet's budget word processor, arguing about titles and whether dragons could have magical girl transformations. We made a mess of the popcorn, filled up an entire document, and I think I laughed more in those ninety minutes than I had all week.

"And the eyes can see the leylines inside other dragons, so she--"

"That's the Byakugan," I said just as we stepped out into the fresh air. "And she's already got demon magic. If you give her too many powers, people will call her a Mary Sue - you've already made the mistake of making her female."

She ruffled her wings in a facsimile of a shrug. "I could give them to some mystical mage human."

I bumped her with my hip. "You're pushing that self-insert angle hard, aren't you?"

Another shrug. "It's my story. I can sneak my boyfriend in if I want to."

I immediately jabbed her in the side, just below the wing joint.

"Hypocrite," I said sharply. "You've yelled at me when I said girlfriend and dating instead of partner and courting."

Alys stopped mid-step, the blaring traffic framing her like the world's most depressing pair of wings. Her great counter was, "Shut up." She huffed, folding and unfolding her wings. "I offered to promote you to mate, but you turned out to be a rut lover."

Something about the way she said that...

"Oh!" I startled. "Are you seriously calling me gay?! What are you, ten?"

"You turned down mating! Pretty male lover-y to me." And then her grin turned sharp and crooked. "I hate to break it to you, James, but I'm all vent. No extra surprises."

I slowed my steps.

"Ohhh. I get it." I levelled her with a look. "Is this the part where we're mean to each other until one of us gets our feelings hurt?"

She tilted her head up half a degree, eyes sparkling.

"Considering how you've bitched out of everything so far. I think I've got this in the bag."

Ouch.

"The desperation was a turn-off." I threw up a casual shrug. "Some people like the obsessive stalker type. Not me. I like mine to have some self-confidence."

The steakhouse came into view. I was subtly guiding her there. "Wow. Painful." She smirked, her tail flicking and wings twitching. "I wasn't expecting that."

My confidence faltered, doubt creeping in along the edges. For a moment I felt I'd pushed too far. "From someone who seems like such a virgin, I didn't think you'd have standards at all. I thought you'd take whatever scrap of attention I'd throw your way and wriggle for me."

I wheezed, physically winded.

"Fuck me, that hurt."

"I'm trying to! But I'm really starting to think you'd have preferred it if my brother was here instead."

I finished off my drink and threw it in a nearby bin. "You're definitely not getting any tonight."

"I figured," she replied smoothly. "Seeing as you're not attracted to the female form." She stopped in the middle of the street to stretch her legs, which I guessed were stiff from sitting down for so long. "It would have been funny seeing you try to figure out how to handle me, since I'm guessing you have even less experience than me."

There were a few things I could have said to win, but most were unjustly cruel and would have ruined the game, along with both her and my mood. "Oh, Alys, baby. That is where you are wrong." The steakhouse was in sight at last. "But I see why you'd think that, since dragons are a bunch of lonely turbo virgins."

We waited whilst the light turned green. "Really?" She asked, seeming actually shocked, which somehow stung more than her earlier remarks. "Didn't think I was getting damaged goods. It's- wait. James. Where are we?"

We entered the entryway to the restaurant. I held open the door and let her in. "Male wyvern place", I said. "Lots of food."

She brushed against me as she entered. " Finally."

.....

After we got to our reserved table and sat down, I checked my bank account.

Just to be safe.

Alys was a dragon--obviously--and even though she wasn't some towering beast like the stories always made them out to be, she still ate like one. That fact was confirmed when she ordered two twelve-ounce steaks and a half-pound burger. Large fries, too. Naturally.

I got a milkshake and a chilli burger because, unlike her, I enjoyed having money. And also spicy food.

When our meals arrived, I leaned in, arms crossed, trying to strike a tone. "So," I said, sounding more business-casual than I meant to, "tell me about yourself."

Like some half-starved predator, she inhaled half a steak in a few solid gulps. Then, licking her chops with a forked tongue, she said, "My name is Alys."

"Is it?" I smiled. "Mine's James. Nice to meet you." I let the pause hang for a beat. "So, Alys. What do you do? I imagine dragons have... pretty interesting jobs."

She flashed sharp teeth. "I'm a chef," she said, like she was proud of it. "And also an expert flier. What about you, James?"

I bit into my burger--onions, chilli, and beef, a rare combination of actually edible. I chased it with a vanilla milkshake. "I'm a student," I said. "Also a chef."

"Student, huh?" She polished off the rest of her steak and paused just long enough to look thoughtful. "Sounds boring. You should do what I do."

I took the bait. "What--binge Warframe and hoard manga after work? I bet your Steam's always online."

She hummed, amused. "Very good guess. But, you know, after a long and very painful life, just hanging out is kind of my mission."

Something about the way she said it hit wrong. Left a sharp edge in my stomach.

"What were you doing before school? Sounds very recent."

Wait.

Her smile faltered, cracking like glass. "Because... I mean, I at least have the excuse of having a pretty fucking dreadful life up to now. What's your excuse?"

Oh.

Oh, shit.

I sat back like I'd been slapped. "S-Sorry," I stammered. "I was just trying to be funny. I didn't mean anything by it."

She slumped slightly, wings going limp, the fire in her voice vanishing. "I know... I just..." She trailed off.

As subtly as I could, I tapped my phone and ordered a pair of ciders. Prayed she wouldn't notice.

"I've thought about it a lot," she said finally. "Not recently. But what you said in the cinema... it's not the first time I've felt so... lost."

A pause.

"Remember when I invited you to Jarys' party?"

Barely. That whole day had felt like a fever dream.

"I'd had a bad day," she said, quieter now. "Bad enough that I missed home."

My stomach twisted.

She never called it home.

"I mean..." She waved vaguely around the restaurant, looking so small despite her size. "I don't even know what I'm doing here sometimes."

My blood ran cold.

"...with me?" I asked.

She didn't answer at first.

Oh god. She meant me .

The one person who actually wanted to be around me--and I'd ruined it. Just like always.

First by stressing her out in the cinema and now by being snarky.

"No," she said at last, pulling me back from the edge. " You are the one thing I get. Everything else is confusing and aimless. I don't fit in, not really." She shifted in her seat, which was meant for dragons but clearly didn't suit her. "I just want to forget that I don't. And you help with that. Because you don't care."

Finally, a smile touched her snout again.

"I hope you don't, at least. Otherwise, this date would be really awkward."

The drinks arrived. Upcharged to hell and back, but I needed it. The waiter checked my ID--Alys didn't need to, never did--and I took a long drink. Fruit cider. Pear.

"If anything," I tried, voice shaking, "it's a b-bonus."

I meant it as a joke, but it barely came out.

I was a distraction.

Of course I was.

It all made sense.

Alys grinned, wide and toothy, unaware. "Of course it's a bonus."

I finished my burger, drained my milkshake, and started working on the cider. She talked, probably said something funny, but I couldn't follow any of it. My mind was in a different place. A darker one.

I'd known. Two months ago, I knew it was a mistake. I told her she wasn't in the right headspace--and that neither was I. And yet here I was. Again.

I was twenty-four. Not sixteen. Adults were supposed to talk about things. Be honest. Handle shit.

She finished her steaks, her burger untouched now except for the drink she'd barely sipped. Her body was relaxed--wings half-unfurled, ears up, eyes softer than before. Her cheeks had deepened to a darker blue.

I got up. She looked at me, curious.

"You want to sit outside? It's hot in here."

She didn't say anything. Just followed.

We slipped out the back door and into the patio area. It was quiet. Not quite dark yet, but the sun had definitely started to fade. We'd been inside longer than I'd thought.

I leaned against a wooden fence and watched the city.

Lights flickered to life across buildings. People moved through the streets in clusters and pairs. Talking, laughing. Living.

I wondered what they were thinking.

I didn't understand people, not really. But I liked trying to.

I missed smoking. I hadn't in months--but, god, right then I would've killed for one.

Instead, I just kept drinking.

"James?"

I glanced over my shoulder. She was perched on one of the wooden tables, head tilted, ears perked with quiet concern.

"Are you alright?"

I was an adult.

And while I could feel myself faltering, I had to ask.

"Alys," I began, voice flat but steady.

She blinked, ears twitching slightly, as if bracing for something. "Yeah?"

"I need to ask you something. And I don't want you to take it the wrong way."

Alys hesitated, swallowing once before nodding. "Go ahead."

I nodded. "You said you love me. And I know that was in the moment--just a rush, maybe. But do you... do you actually even like me?"

Her eyes widened, just slightly. Round, scarlet, uncertain.

Then her breath caught.

And for a second, she didn't say anything. Just sat there, still.

"What?" She said, softly. "James, I-I've been begging you to finally admit you have feelings for me. Why in Skie's name would I not like you?"

I didn't spiral this time. I didn't retreat into myself. I held her gaze.

"It's something I've been thinking about," I said. "That you're lonely. That you're maybe even a little depressed. And that maybe you don't want me, not really. You just want someone. A distraction. It doesn't matter who."

She didn't answer right away.

Her expression didn't twist. She didn't flare up in frustration or argue like she usually might've. Instead, her shoulders rose just a little. Then slowly sank. Her ears lowered. She glanced off toward the grass behind me, then to the space between her paws on the table.

She looked smaller than usual.

When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet--not dramatic, not broken. Just... honest. And tired.

"I don't know."

I exhaled, sharp, through my nose. Raised a hand and rubbed it through my hair, destroying whatever effort I'd put into styling it earlier.

I'd expected that answer.

And it still hurt like hell.

I took a longer drink. Let it sit. Then cleared my throat.

"Alys," I said, "I like you."

Her eyes snapped back to mine. They were glassy. Maybe she'd been holding something in. Her breath caught again, shaky this time.

"I do like you. I really do. You're funny. You're smart. You're... you're kind, even if you're sort of annoying. You're beautiful, obviously. I like being around you."

I paused, letting that sink in for both of us.

"But if you're not ready for this--if you don't even know if you actually want me or if it's just the idea of having someone--then maybe we should finish these drinks and go our separate ways. As friends."

The irony wasn't lost on me.

That just a few days ago, we'd had this exact same talk.

Circles.

Loops.

...Relationships sucked.

Her claws tensed, just slightly, scratching against the wood. Her paw holding the bottle trembled. She stared down at it, jaw tight.

The date was supposed to be simple. A break. A highlight.

Instead, it was unravelling. And yet, maybe it needed to.

Maybe we wouldn't end up together.

Maybe we shouldn't.

We'd danced around this for too long--emotions flaring up, then hiding away. Always circling, never talking. This was quiet. Real. The end.

It might've been too much, but it was something.

Alys closed her eyes. Drew in a slow breath through her nose.

When she opened them again, something had shifted. Still glassy, still soft, but more certain.

"You were a distraction," she said. "At first. I invited you out because I was lonely. I talked to you because I literally didn't have anyone else that wasn't Rhys. And even that first kiss in the park--yeah, I thought you were hot and kind and easy to talk to, but I didn't really like you. I barely knew you."

I nodded slowly. No flinch. Just a quiet breath. "Yeah. I figured."

She looked down, fidgeting with the bottle. "But when you turned me down--that's when something changed. You didn't say no because you didn't like me. You said no because you did. That was... new. And it stuck with me."

Her voice steadied, gaining a bit of strength as she went on.

"My life isn't great. You know that. I work, I go home, I cook, I read, I game, and I look after my family. There's nothing else. And I'm fine with that. It's my life. Mine. I've had enough excitement for a lifetime already."

I stayed quiet, but I felt my expression soften.

"I didn't think anyone would ever make space for me the way you did. And yes, maybe you are a distraction. But even if that's how it started, even if that's still how it is, does it really matter?" She looked at me directly now, no tears, no flinching. "I like being around you. I like how you make me feel. And I know I pushed too hard at times. I'm sorry."

She set the bottle down with a soft thud.

"I'm not asking you to mate with me because I'm desperate, or horny, or looking for a thrill. Mating is bonding, James. We don't just do it for fun. It's how we show affection."

She hesitated. "Rhys... Rhys had a one-night stand once. Back when he first came here. He didn't know humans treat it differently. He was a wreck afterwards."

I swallowed hard. That image didn't leave me easily.

"If I just wanted to mess around, we wouldn't even be here. I wouldn't be sitting here, trying to explain this. I wouldn't have chased you. I-I wouldn't let you mate me. I'd have my fun and leave you behind." She leaned forward slightly, eyes sharpening, the scarlet burning. "So, tell me--do you really think I'd use you like that? That I'm that shallow?"

I shook my head, suddenly feeling on the backfoot. "No," I said, without hesitation. "Alys, I know you're not like that. I just... I overthink. I don't want either of us to get hurt. You especially."

She smiled. Not a big one--just a small curve at the corner of her mouth. "James," she said, "we've been courting for, what, five days? We're going to mess up. We're going to get hurt. That's part of the fun."

I let out a soft laugh. Couldn't help it. She was right.

With a final sip, I finished my drink and leaned back. "We really should've talked about all this weeks ago," I admitted with a sigh. "Instead of bottling it up and letting it explode in weird, messy bursts."

"Yeah," she agreed, reaching for her drink again. "Not exactly the most mature way to handle things."

"My running probably didn't help, did it?" I teased.

She snorted. "Like you said, we could've had this talk ages ago."

I kicked away from the fence and dropped onto the bench opposite her with a deliberate thump. "I wouldn't have said anything," I admitted. "It would've just sat in my head and spiralled until it all... melted." My tone lightened as I rested my face in my palm. "But now it's all clear. No stray thoughts, no doubts, no..."

I stopped and lifted my chin from my hand. "Hey, since we're clearing the air--can I ask you something weird?"

She finished off her drink and flicked it neatly into a nearby bin with a paw. "Sure. Ask whatever you want."

"Do dragons actually have cloacas, or was Rhys just screwing with me?"

Her posture froze. Eyes wide. And then she deflated--flopping into her seat, all loose limbs and laughter. "Hah." She licked her chops, cleared her throat, and leaned forward. "Would that be a problem? Or another bonus?"

I barked out a laugh, remembering something. "Did you know you gave me a whole breakdown a while back?"

"Oh, really?" Her head tilted, grin sharpening. She knew exactly what I meant--or at least had a very good guess.

"Yeah. I thought I was going nuts thinking you were hot. Stressing out about how liking your legs made me some kind of pervert. I even asked Rhys. Did he ever tell you that?"

"He did not," she said, raising a paw as I opened my mouth to continue. "Let me guess--he told you you were dumb, that it is a little weird, but mostly you were just dumb?"

I pressed my lips into a thin line. "Pretty much." Another thought occurred to me. "Hey, what's your opinion--wait. Wait. Didn't we already have this conversation today? Near the cinema? You asked for a twitchy compliment or something."

"Oh!" She laughed--a bright, squawky sound. "Yeah, we did! Y-You asked if I was into humans physically and not just mentally."

I hummed. "Amnesia."

"Yeah, well, since we're being honest again, do you want the truth?"

She didn't wait for permission. She leaned across the table. "Yeah, humans are hot. I like how soft you all look. Your fingers don't have claws, so I get to imagine how nice they'd feel on me."

Twenty-four years old, and my face flushed like I'd just had my first kiss all over again. I glanced at the glass door leading back into the restaurant. No one was coming out.

"Do you want to test how soft they are?" I asked.

Her wings twitched, wanting to flare--but she held them back. "And do you want to find out if dragons have cloacas?"

"Yes."

.....

She lunged.

One moment she was across the table; the next, her claws were under my arms, gripping tight. With a sudden beat of her wings, she launched us into the air.

"ALYS!" I shrieked, squirming without meaning to.

She curled her talons more securely, twisting her hold, wings beating powerfully against the sky. "Relax, you baby. Just look around."

I refused. So she stopped.

We hovered high above the café, her wings keeping us aloft with rhythmic flaps. Slowly, almost hesitantly, she adjusted her angle--tilting back in a way that defied logic and gravity.

"You make a lot of noise for someone who wanted to fly with me on our café 'date.'"

We were face to snout.

I tried to steady my breathing. "I'm a monkey. We're scared of falling."

"You don't think I'd catch you?"

"No."

"Rude." She grinned--sharp teeth flashing--before her expression twitched. I knew that look.

"Wait," I said, too late.

Still mid-air, she shifted me beneath her, forelimbs bracketing my body, pressing me flush to her underside. Then, with a tilt of her neck, she kissed me--deep, steady--and her hind legs flexed in a rhythm that made her intentions painfully clear.

She flew slower now, lips never leaving mine, her soft noises lost in the rush of wind. I gave up trying to think. Fuck it. It was hot. I reached up and clutched her, fingers digging into smooth, unbreakable scales.

"You're--" she murmured between kisses, "lucky. I'm. Patient. Or. We'd. Already. Be. Bonded."

I didn't answer. Just held on tighter.

She growled low in her throat, teasing and possessive, the sound rumbling through my chest. Below us, the city blurred. But up here, it was only her--the slow press of her body, the deliberate rhythm of her wings, the weight of what she was holding back.

She was savouring this.

I should've been afraid. I should've had thoughts. But all I could do was hold her closer, drunk on the heat of her, the gravity of this moment, and the primal thrum that made it impossible to think.

Then, suddenly, she pulled away.

The cold hit like a slap. My arms twitched, wanting her back, but she just huffed a breathless laugh, adjusting her grip.

"I need my arms to land, monkey."

I forced myself to let go.

We dropped fast. Her wings snapped open just before the ground, catching the air in a sharp gust. She landed in the alley beside my building, knees bending on impact, and set me down.

I staggered.

She smirked.

I wanted to wipe that look off her face.

Instead, I took a breath--shaking, humming, still reeling--and turned to the side entrance. The streets were mostly empty now, just the sound of traffic in the distance and the soft fold of Alys' wings behind me.

We walked in silence.

Or at least, no words. The silence itself was loud, thrumming with everything we weren't doing. My hands opened and closed at my sides. Her tail flicked, staying just short of touching me.

At the keypad, I punched in my code. My fingers felt too stiff. The lock clicked.

Inside was dim. Quiet. The lobby empty except for the soft hum of the vending machine. The elevator stood waiting.

I didn't press the button.

Alys stepped beside me, heat radiating off her in waves. She could've reached out. Could've pressed it herself.

She didn't.

She was waiting.

I swallowed, lifted a hand, and pressed the button.

Ding.

We stepped inside.

The doors slid shut behind us, sealing the heat between us. She was so close I could hear her breathing. Her tail twitched. My fingers curled.

I looked up.

She was staring.

The numbers climbed.

I gritted my teeth. Her claws tapped against the floor. Wings twitched.

Ding.

The doors opened.

We stepped into the hallway--quiet, measured. Every step heavy with restraint.

I reached my door, unlocked it, and shoved it open.

The second the door clicked shut behind us, she pounced.

Both figuratively and literally. She shoved me harshly toward the sofa, sending me crashing onto my back, trying to stand on either side of me. But my couch was no match for her size, and she stumbled. Growling, she surged her head down, but I threw my hands up.

"Wait. Wait."

She froze--just barely, looking seconds from either tearing my throat out or tearing my clothes off.

"Human sofa," I panted. "The... uh, bed's bigger."

She climbed down and muttered, "You need a better sofa." Without waiting for me to sit up, she started toward what she probably assumed was my bedroom. I followed quickly, nearly jogging, kicking my shoes off and tossing them at the front door. My heart thudded against my ribs.

This was happening.

She left the bathroom--wrong room--and gave me a look as I led her into the bedroom. I unzipped my coat and dropped it carelessly on the floor. My glasses were the only thing I was careful with - they went on my nightstand. Alys clambered onto the bed, claws digging into the sheets as she settled into a loose sitting position, her hind legs shifting beneath her in a constant, restless motion, rustling her leg warmers. She twitched, flicked her ears, her tail swaying, and her wings bunched and unbunched in agitation.

She looked about ready to explode.

And, because of that, I took my time.

I sank to my knees beside her, and instead of hesitating or trying to talk around the moment like I usually would, I moved first. I placed my hands on her broad shoulders, pulled her closer, and pressed a soft kiss to the end of her maw. She hummed in satisfaction, limbs curling around me, pulling me down with her as she fell back against the sheets.

The shift caught me off guard, and I had to take a moment to adjust. Now on top of her, I shifted my legs to straddle her. She was longer than me, so I found myself perched on her upper abdomen, my feet on either side of her. Her wings spread wide beneath me in response to the added pressure, angled so I wouldn't squash them.

I sat up, looking down at her. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths, her body warm beneath me. There was frustration in her gaze, a hint of impatience.

"You're softer than I thought," I said, trailing my fingers along the subtle plating of her underside. They weren't scales exactly--more like larger, bent armour pieces. They were grey, but so close to black it was hard to tell. Despite being so tough, they were smooth, almost pleasant to the touch.

My staring took up too much time, it seemed.

"James," she growled. "You better actually do something." She wriggled restlessly beneath me, hips bucking with the kind of impatience I didn't need to guess at.

I leaned back, sitting casually, trying to maintain my calm facade. "Like what?" I pressed my palms against her chest, drawing slow circles with my index finger. "I'm a people pleaser, so I'll let you pick. You're the big bad dragon here, Alys. Tell me what you want me to do."

Her mouth curled into a low snarl, nostrils flaring with irritation. "I want you to do something, or I'm flipping us over and doing what I want, and that involves egg-making and me taking a big chunk out of your neck."

A time limit on the teasing. Shame.

I shuffled back slightly. "Sounds fun, but maybe not right now. If you're good, I'll think about it."

She let out a growl--a deep, frustrated sound that rumbled in her chest. Her tail slapped the mattress once. I could feel the tension in her body, her hind legs twitching, her wings rustling, but she didn't flip us over. Not yet. Probably never.

I dragged my fingers down her chest, slow and deliberate, enjoying the way her body felt under my touch. Alys was warm. Not just the usual body heat, but something deeper, radiating. Like a coal left to smoulder, the heat steadily rising.

She exhaled sharply as I moved lower.

I let my hands wander over the firm plating of her lower ribs, across the smooth, less armoured portion of her stomach, tracing the subtle curve beneath my palms. She was so different from me, and yet I could still feel her reactions: a flick of her tail, a subtle twitch of her hind legs.

She held still. Barely.

"You're impatient," I murmured.

Alys huffed, her ears flicking back. "You're slow."

I smirked and kept moving.

Again, I shifted my weight, sliding down slowly, my knees pressing into the mattress on either side of her. From straddling her chest to her stomach, inch by inch. The lower I went, the more restless she became--hind legs spreading a little wider on sheer instinct.

Her wings twitched against the sheets, fingers stretching just slightly. Her forelimbs curled beside her head, claws pressed lightly into the fabric in preparation. Her whole body trembled, restrained, the heat rolling off her in waves.

I exhaled through my nose, still moving.

Now I was at what could be called her waist, though it wasn't quite the same. Her body tapered more smoothly than a human's, built for motion and muscle. Beneath me, I could feel the ridged plates of her underside shift gently with each breath.

I slid back a little more, letting my hands follow.

At last I was between her hindlegs, sat on her tail almost.

The plating gave way to something smoother. Softer. Just beneath her stomach, the scutes flowed seamlessly into the finer scales along her inner thighs--warmer, more supple. My palms traced slow, deliberate paths.

She let out a low breath.

I felt her shift one last time. And then I saw it.

A subtle break in the otherwise seamless plating. A smooth horizontal slit, discreet, almost hidden--tucked low, closer to where her tail met her body. Not exactly between her legs, but unmistakably there.

I paused.

Not from fear. Not from disgust. Just... processing.

Alys noticed.

"You're hesitating," she murmured, voice low and careful.

I wet my lips. My fingers twitched against her lower abdomen.

"I..." I exhaled slowly, letting my hand drag along the warm plating beside it. "Just taking my time."

She narrowed her eyes, watching me. Then she rolled her hips ever so slightly, pushing into my hand. "I told you," she whispered, "you're lucky I'm patient."

"I know."

There were no soft folds to her. Just a faint softening of the near-black scutes, a subtle parting, the edges raised where she opened. Not soft--not like a mammal--more... animal. And yet, as my fingertips dragged closer, not quite touching, I saw the reaction. A subtle flex. A twitch, barely perceptible. She parted for me, just slightly, and within that narrow opening, a cloudy wetness gathered, seeping faintly from the pinkness inside.

A pinkness that stood out starkly against the darkness of the rest of her. Like a hidden treasure.

The sight alone sent a pulse through me.

Then came the sound--a low, needy murmur. Not loud. But full of meaning.

I let my fingers hover there, feeling the heat, the tension, the unspoken demand in every shift of her body. Her tail flicked, restless. Her breathing quickened.

"That's nice..." she whispered. "Keep going."

I didn't need to be told.

But it helped.

With two fingers now, I trailed along either side of her, spreading her as best I could given her anatomy, and watching as her muscles fluttered. So responsive. And the smell--not sweet. Not at all. Almost sour, almost meaty. Like nothing I'd ever smelt before. Hard to describe, but intoxicating.

I shuffled again, my heart pounding in my chest, heat curling low in my stomach.

Yeah, no. I wasn't stopping here. I couldn't.

Her claws dug into the sheets, breath hard and heavy--but not gasping. Not enough, I realised. She deserved more. Just touching wouldn't do.

Adjusting one last time, I slid my hands from her entrance and gripped her thighs, fingernails scraping gently as I held her tight.

She lifted her head, eyes wide. "W-Why'd you stop?"

"I've got a better idea," I said, shifting back far enough to settle lower comfortably. "Remember all that tongue talk on Wednesday? How it got you all twitchy and nervous?"

Her cheeks darkened. Ears flopped. She nodded. Then, a little shyly, "Would you?"

I almost went in right then--but a bubble of evil floated up. "I would", I murmured. "If you asked."

I gripped her thigh and started kissing my way down. Small, fleeting touches against the tiny scales. Slow. Patient. Intentional. Never quite giving her what she wanted.

"Y-You..." she stammered. "That--"

I dragged the kisses lower, digging my fingers into the taut muscle beneath my palms.

"Dim ond yn ei wneud!" She gasped. Wings flared. "Ugh. James?!"

She hooked a hind paw around the back of my head, trying to shove me down. I held firm.

"If you break my neck, I can't clean up all this mess, can I?"

"Mess?"

I dragged a palm up in one smooth motion, drawing a sharp intake of breath. When I lifted my hand, it glistened. I spread my fingers. "The colour's new," I said, admiring it. "But I like it."

She groaned, head falling back, hind legs squeezing tight around me.

"I mean, I can stick with fingers," I added. "But I've got to admit--I'm curious what you taste like. All you need to do is ask."

"Clean me up."

I heard her, but...

"What was that? Couldn't hear you."

"Clean me up," she repeated, more firmly, "and I'll consider not squishing your head like a watermelon."

"I didn't hear 'please'."

"James." Her voice snapped like a whip. I flinched. "Get started, or I'll set my insides to boiling the second you stop being a baby and fuck me."

I got started.

She kept her leg hooked around my neck, locking me in place like I was hers already. I lowered my head enough that the scent hit me all over again--thick and humid, intense enough to sting my sinuses. It wasn't pleasant in any traditional sense, not floral or sweet. It was feral. Earthy. Wild. It hit something primal in me. Something hungry.

She wanted my tongue. She made that clear. But I wasn't giving it to her just yet.

I started slow. Soft kisses down her inner thigh, lingering on the tiny ridges in her scales, brushing my lips against the sensitive spot where flesh met plating. Every time I got too close, she twitched. Her hips shifted, tail curling. A growl bubbled in her throat--half warning, half plea.

I smiled. "Still so twitchy, and I've barely touched you," I murmured, letting my breath fan across her slit without touching. "Is that good or bad?"

"D-Don't talk right now," she hissed. Her claws scraped the sheets again. "Do."

I let my fingers answer. Just one at first. I dragged it slowly down the edges of her slit, watching her flex around nothing. The skin there was a strange hybrid--soft but lined with heat-hardened bumps, just giving way where the part began. The wetness had only deepened, cloudy and slick, clinging to my fingertips like syrup.

She let out a broken breath. Her tail coiled around my waist and pulled.

Still teasing, I pressed the pad of my finger to the centreline and eased just barely inside. Not a thrust, more of a dip, testing the give of her muscles. They clenched around me instantly--tight, fluttery, almost unsure how to pull me in. My breath hitched.

God, she was tight.

Carefully, gently, I let the finger sink into the knuckle, curling slightly, then back out again. Slow. Experimental. Taking my time. She gasped, trying not to buck. The initial nervous tightness faded as she relaxed and her body adjusted to the intrusion.

"Thought you didn't want me to talk," I muttered as I circled my thumb lightly over the ridge above her slit. "But you're making so much noise."

"Shut - shut up -" she breathed. "More - just... more."

"Okay," I said softly. I added a second finger.

She stiffened with a full-body jerk, wings twitching sharply under her back. " T-Tafod nawr," she hissed, voice breaking. " Ffyc. D-Dydw i ddim eisiau gorffen dim ond o'ch bysedd !"

"Easy", I whispered, slowing for just a moment to let her catch her breath, then curling both fingers in a slow, deliberate rhythm. I wasn't going deep; I didn't trust myself not to mess up thanks to her anatomy, so I focused on the upper walls, searching for that tell-tale flutter, that soft, slightly swollen spot that made her entire lower half jolt when I hit it just right.

"You look twitchy," I said, mouth brushing her thigh as I spoke. " Really twitchy."

"S-Stop saying-" Her voice choked off as I hit that same spot again, curling my fingers gently, then twisting them, angling for more pressure. I kept going in small circles inside her, while my thumb stayed planted against that outer ridge, massaging her softly. She was leaking now, glistening with arousal, her breath catching with each movement.

I took my time. Sometimes I'd pull almost all the way out and let her clench around nothing, just to see how frustrated she'd get. Sometimes I'd go still inside her completely and trace her outer lining with my other fingers, petting her like she was something sacred.

She'd snarl and groan, frustrated, but she didn't tell me to stop.

And then, when I began going faster, moving properly, she did something I didn't expect.

She whimpered.

A soft, breathless little sound, barely audible. Vulnerable.

I froze.

Her face was flushed deep indigo now, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She tried to glare at me, but it faltered. "W-Why'd you stop?"

I didn't answer. I just pulled my fingers out slowly, watching the strands of arousal cling to them, thick and cloudy, vaguely yellowish, and still dripping from her. Her eyes tracked the movement with a look I couldn't quite name--half embarrassment, half hunger.

I raised my soaked fingers to my mouth, curious. Licked them.

Tangy. Odd. Something wild underneath. Definitely not sweet. Definitely not easy to describe. But undeniably her.

"I had to know," I murmured, wiping the strands on her leg.

And then, finally, I replaced my hand with my mouth.

She gasped the instant my lips touched her - truly touched her - for the first time. I started with the outer rim, kissing the raised edges, using the tip of my tongue to trace the flexing outline of her slit. Her legs shook, claws tearing into the sheets.

When I pressed in--truly in--my tongue pushing deep within her, curling inside that wet, fluttering heat, she cried out. Loud. Raw. Her leg around my neck tightened, forcing me deeper.

I went willingly.

I held her thighs. Pulled her close. Let my tongue work in tandem with the memory of where my fingers had been, rubbing that soft spot again and again until she started to writhe. The more I tasted her, the less I cared about anything else. It was messy. Hot. Desperate. But perfect.

She was gasping broken words now, rambling half-Welsh/Reonic curses, breathy moans, and territorial threats that made no sense.

"Y-You're going to smell like me for months," she growled, voice cracking. "N-Nobody will touch you after this... all mine."

The hind leg she'd slung around my neck pressed me further down against her, and I complied, digging into her as deeply as my tongue would allow it, lapping against her, drinking her and getting lost in her. Her taste was thicker now, more intense, like her body was daring me to stay buried.

I licked up the slickness pooling just inside her, tongue curling and dragging against her trembling walls, savouring the way she clenched every time I flicked a certain spot. Her hips rolled in rhythm with me, grinding openly against my mouth like she couldn't help it, like instinct was dragging her along and she didn't care.

"B-Bet human hens don't taste this good," she groaned, her voice hoarse and breaking with need, orange sparks escaping her open maw. Her wings twitched wildly, then flared open, and I felt her tail wrap tighter around my waist, anchoring me in place. "Bet- bet - bet you won't even look at another ness after this. A-And I've not even done anything to you yet..."

Her voice broke into a sharp whimper, and I felt her whole body tremble underneath me. She tried to finish the thought, but her breath hitched.

"Y-You-"

Before she could finish, her body arched, every muscle going taut as fire exploded from her maw in a raw, shuddering burst. The flames lit the ceiling in an instant, scorching plaster and throwing flickering shadows across the room.

Her hind leg clamped down hard around my neck, her tail tightening, as her walls seized around my tongue in a convulsive flutter. The heat of it, the wet pulsing grip, the way she rocked up into my face like she was being pulled apart - it made my pulse spike, my blood roar in my ears.

A gush of slickness coated the inside of my mouth, so hot it scalded my tongue. The taste hit me all at once. Bitter, heady, almost fermented in its sharpness, and I couldn't stop myself. I drank it in, chasing every motion, trying to prolong the feeling, to keep her trembling like that just a few seconds longer. I ignored the burning. It didn't matter.

Her body moved like a storm. Wings flapping wildly, claws digging into the sheets until the fabric tore under her. She was moaning without restraint now, each sound raw and deep, half growl, half cry. And still, she rocked against me, riding out every last tremor of her orgasm with a slow, aching rhythm.

Her tail twisted around me tighter, pulling me into her as her hips jerked uncontrollably. Her breath was shallow and ragged, her entire frame twitching beneath me with overstimulation--but she didn't push me away. She wanted more. Even in the aftermath, she didn't want it to stop. Droplets of what looked like liquid flame spilt from between her teeth, falling against her and evaporating.

I was panting against her by the time her motions started to still, my jaw sore, my mouth wet and raw, and hurting from the boiling heat and motion. My body trembled, not from exertion, but from awe. From the sheer intensity of it all. I'd just... done that. I sat back.

Her entire lower half was soaked. Her cloaca was still parted, twitching as it slowly tried to flutter shut but was not yet fully sealed. A cloudy, off-white stream of fluid dripped down onto her tail, where it pooled in a messy sheen.

Dazed, I wiped my mouth with the back of my palm. Some of the slick clung to my chin and smeared across my cheek, and without thinking, I scrubbed it on my trousers--only to realise what I'd done a second later. Too late. It was already there. The scent. Her scent. Sticking to me.

And, shit, it hit me like a drug. Heady. Heavy. Hot. The air still tasted like her, and I could feel myself trembling. Not just from the effort, but from something deeper. A coil of heat had lodged itself low in my gut and refused to unspool. My lips tingled. My heart was pounding.

"Gammon and sour honey," I said suddenly, the words tumbling out, half-delirious.

She blinked slowly, lifting her head just enough to look at me. Her pupils were huge, slow to refocus. I froze under her gaze, suddenly aware of how hard I was, how tight everything felt beneath the fabric of my pants.

"Uh. Sorry," I stammered, ears burning. "You just... heat. It kind of smells like that. Acidic."

She chuckled, the sound low and velvety. Her eyes softened as she shifted her weight, and then, with surprising gentleness, she reached out and tugged me towards her.

Her wings flared open, then folded down around us, the fingers brushing against the shredded sheets as she curled me into her chest. I collapsed against her, but it didn't soothe the ache still running through me. If anything, it made it worse. The closeness. The warmth. The press of her body against mine.

"Sounds like a strange mix," she murmured, voice thick with amusement but threaded with tenderness. I felt her claws skim lightly over my arm, just enough to make me shiver. She wrapped her wings tighter, cocooning us in heat and shadow.

I was still shaking. Still buzzing. My mouth was wet with her, my tongue still sore from the heat. My hands itched with want. My whole body was burning, tight with arousal, but I didn't know what to do with it. It wasn't just physical. It was her. What she trusted me with. What she let me do.

And how badly I wanted more.

I let out a shaky breath against her scales, my face half-pressed into her chest. The beat of her heart was strong beneath my cheek.

"You good?" She whispered, the words more a purr than a question.

I nodded, but the truth was more complicated. I didn't trust myself to speak for a second, afraid my voice would break under everything I was feeling. But I forced the words out anyway, rough, rasping, dazed.

"Yeah," I said. "But, uh... you still up for... you know, sealing the deal?" I tried to make it sound light. Like I hadn't just had my entire nervous system rewired by her. Like I wasn't still rock-hard and trying not to grind against her like some desperate idiot.

I'd ask if she was willing to return the favour, but something about those teeth...

Alys paused, her eyes still watching me carefully. Her wings shifted, drawing me closer again until I could feel her snout press to my hair.

"Mmm... I am," she said, her voice deeper now, slow with heat. But then she pressed her mouth against my forehead in a gentle kiss. "Are you?"

There was a long pause. My chest felt too tight. My hands twitched with the urge to grab her, to give in to that raw instinct clawing at the back of my mind. But I wasn't scared, not really. I was overwhelmed. And I wanted her.

I nodded.

"Yeah," I whispered, barely audible, my throat dry. I didn't think I could take much more of this--her scent, her warmth, the way she looked at me. I wrapped my hands around her waist. "I want this. I want you."

"Then show me," she purred, a hind paw lifting, long claws catching my belt, her touch possessive, commanding. "Show me how badly you want me."

Chapter 14

Friday, the 11th of October.

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I didn't think. I just moved.

I surged forward and caught her faux lips with mine. Harder this time, less cautious, less polite. Just raw hunger and need. Her breath hitched against my mouth. Startled maybe. But then she melted upward into me, her maw pressing back, confident and claiming. There was no hesitation anymore.

Her tongue flicked past my lips, and I opened for her, meeting it eagerly, letting mine slide into her maw. I ignored the dull sting from earlier, too consumed with the heat of her breath, the slick glide of her tongue, and the razor edge of her teeth that I boldly let my tongue brush against.

My body buzzed with adrenaline and arousal in equal amounts. Her mouth tasted like the remains of the steak she'd had, faint sweetness from the pear cider... and something else. Something musky and thick that caught at the back of my throat and made my heart beat harder.

I groaned low in my chest and slid my right hand to the back of her head, fingers wrapping around one of her long, bent horns. My other hand curled against the thick cords of her neck. Gripping tighter, I dragged myself closer, listening to the gasps she gave against my lips as she crushed her chest against me.

Her paws raked over my back, claws scraping through the thin, worn cotton of my shirt. I winced quietly at the prickling sting but didn't stop her. Wouldn't stop her. She wanted to hold me still? Fine. I wanted her to. Her hind legs fumbled awkwardly against my thighs, uncertain but determined, and then victorious. She caught me, as did her forelimbs.

Alys tucked her wings in and rolled over with surprising swiftness for her size, putting me on my back easily, her weight - almost too much - settling atop me. She didn't break the kiss, not even for a moment. When her claws, which were still against my back, dug deep enough to hurt, I winced sharply and pulled away an inch, panting. "I-I should probably get this off."

I shuffled back and sat up on my knees, back to the headboard, the dragoness opposite me moving back to let me. But before I could strip it, the talons of her left paw wrapped gently around both wrists, stopping me with quiet insistence. Her eyes flicked down to meet mine, glinting, amused. Then she released me and tugged at the shirt herself.

I lifted my arms, letting her pull the sweat-soaked band tee over my head. My skin flushed as the air hit me. The room was hot, but stripped bare under her stare, I shivered, nerves and want crashing together. Her gaze raked down my chest, lingering at my shoulders where the bandages still clung from last week's mess. Faint red stains marked the gauze.

Alys lifted one paw and pressed the pad of it against the red spot, her tongue flicking out as her grin sharpened. "Want a few more of these?" She teased, voice low, talons trailing slow and purposeful down from my shoulder, across my ribs. She pressed forward again, shifting her weight almost fully atop me now, thighs bracketing my legs, her body radiating heat.

My breath caught as her claws dragged harder over my skin, but before I could get any words out, her muzzle dipped to my throat, and she bit down.

Not a playful nip. A real bite. Not enough to break skin but definitely enough to hurt. My back bent instinctively, a gasp escaping me, sharp and sudden. Her teeth sank deeper, paws slamming onto both shoulders to pin me harder as her wings flared wide, shadowing the bed.

I groaned through clenched teeth, head tilting back and knocking against the headboard. "Shit."

Her breath huffed hot against my neck as she ground her teeth tighter, talons squeezing, pain blooming. My heart pounded so hard it drowned out the creak of the mattress. I went to undo the belt of my suddenly too-tight jeans, all the while stars flickered at the edge of my vision.

I froze when her claws dug in deeper, my breathing ragged and hands falling limp to my sides in surrender. She let go just long enough to murmur, "Let me."

Her left paw slid down, tracing my stomach, then lower to the belt I hadn't undone. Her muzzle stayed close, forked tongue escaping and brushing my marked neck as her claws fumbled clumsily at the buckle. I moved reflexively to help her -- and her teeth clamped right back down.

A moan broke out of me, unbidden. I sank further into the mattress. My body twitched with overstimulated nerves, muscles jumping under her touch. She tried her best to work my belt open, talons shaky but determined, tugging rough at the leather, only for a mix of anatomy and nerves to halt her.

I tried again, reaching down, but she snarled, angled her claws just right, and--rather than aiming for dexterity--simply shredded through the material. Pride tinged her scent, her heat wafting again as I felt her maw twist into a smirk, teeth tightening around my throat.

When she yanked my jeans halfway down, I kicked them off eagerly for her. My cock strained painfully hard against my boxers, a dark, wet patch spreading across the front. Her right paw scratched up my bare shoulder blades now, dragging slow and deep. I groaned softly, hips jerking upward as she purred smugly against my throat.

"Don't be a baby," she taunted sweetly, her tongue flicking over the bruised marks she'd left.

Her warm breath ghosted over my throat once more as she finally leaned back, uneven fangs pricking the skin, catching briefly as she pulled away. Her claws uncurled from my shoulder and waist as her gaze dropped lower, deliberate, hungry. I followed her eyes as her pupils dilated fully--black nearly swallowing the thin scarlet rim around them.

The dragon's grin twitched sharper when it landed on the obvious bulge straining against the front of my boxers. I tried--God, I tried--to stay still. To keep breathing evenly, to not twitch under her gaze like some desperate teenager. My muscles locked tight, but it didn't help.

Her right paw lowered, slow and unhurried, and the pads of her claws pressed featherlight against me through the damp fabric. The barest touch shot straight through me. My hips jerked without permission, sharp and fast. I bit down hard on my lip, a low, involuntary sound escaping from the back of my throat.

Alys pressed down harder, circling slowly with her paw -- tormentingly precise over the aching head. Her smirk curled deeper, voice syrup-smooth and mock-innocent. "What did you say earlier?" She purred. "That you thought it was weird to think I'm hot?"

I opened my mouth to speak--nothing came out. Just a thin gasp as she dragged her paw harder in slow, maddening circles, her touch gliding over the fabric.

Her grin stretched wider, sharper. "You don't seem weirded out now. Why's that? Hm? Isn't this weird, James?"

I swallowed hard, throat tight. My voice cracked when I tried. "A-Alys..."

She tilted her head, her ears flicking lazily as if she were bored with how much she owned me already. "What changed your mind?" She murmured, claws flicking slightly. "The scales? The claws? The wet slit?"

Her body shifted above me, slow and deliberate. She rolled her hips subtly as she slid away from me, thighs clenching firm against the sides of my knees, grinding heat against my bare legs. I felt the humid weight of her arousal thickening the air between us--musky, sharp, and dizzying.

My cock twitched in response, the pressure nearly unbearable now. I squeezed my eyes shut for a breath, jaw clenched tight--and then it snapped loose.

It's all of it. The scales slick with perspiration, the claws that had dug into my skin, the teeth - too sharp - that had nearly torn my throat out. Her weight pinning me down. Her voice that was too deep. Her scent, unnatural and almost sour. Her. Always her.

I dragged in a shuddering breath, eyes snapping open to meet hers, clear and unflinching. "Everything," I rasped, voice scratchy but honest. "It's... everything. I want all of you."

Her grin cut razor-sharp. Her eyes burned. "More than a human?" She asked softly, claws curling beneath the waistband of my boxers now.

I didn't blink. Didn't falter. "Y-Yeah. Better. Always better."

Her warm breath washed over me as she hovered above me, gaze locked on mine, her expression unreadable.

I didn't drop her stare. "I want you," I said, quiet and certain. "Only you. You're perfect."

Her weight shifted heavier onto my chest, her left claw twitching against my bare shoulder, pinning me fully under her now. Her pupils twitched faintly, her grin faltering just slightly. Her throat worked around a swallow. "Perfect...?" Her voice came out quieter, thoughtful now. "You made me feel ugly, you know?"

Her claws flexed subtly against my skin, but not painfully. She wasn't taunting anymore. "Like I was a dirty thought you didn't want to admit to," she finished softly.

My pulse pounded hot in my ears--half guilt, half the blinding heat from how hard I still was, how deep she'd sunk into me already.

"You weren't ugly," I said, voice thick. "It wasn't you." I swallowed hard and forced myself to hold her stare, to keep the truth right there between us. "It was me. I didn't want to admit how badly I wanted you. It scared me." I exhaled slowly, steadily, hand sliding up to cradle her jaw, my thumb brushing the marks on her cheeks. "But I've wanted you this whole time... even back then."

Her pupils twitched. I let the memory roll through both of us.

Back then.

The talk.

Two months ago.

Every word, every glance, every moment since that talk in my living room when I saw her broken claws and overgrown horns, it had all circled back. Even when things got better, I'd clung to it like a lifeline. It shaped everything. Infested like a rot.

"You've always been beautiful to me. Always worth wanting. I-I just took too long to figure out how much."

Her paw slid away from where it had been massaging me, dipping lower and slipping inside the waistband of my boxers. Pads brushed along my shaft, ghosting up until her gentle touch settled right on the head, bent digits feeling me delicately. I gasped, hips bucking into her paw. "S-Shit."

"Dragons mate for life, James," she whispered, blinding dominance fading, leaving a faint vulnerability that built with each passing second. "You can't turn back. You can't regret this. Can you live with that?"

I grabbed her thighs, fingernails digging into the smooth scales of her inner legs, my breath sharp. I sat up slightly. "Yes."

She shifted back, eyes steady. "...Lay me on my back."

I guided her carefully, swapping positions so her back was to the headboard, all the while easing her down, or at least I tried to. She got impatient and grabbed me with her wings before I could pull away, yanking me down on top of her with an audible oof.

Ignoring my pain, she shuffled onto her back. Head propped up on a pillow, staring at me through pupils blown wide. Her ears twitched restlessly, wings half-flared, subtly showing off, body shaking with anticipation.

I chuckled under my breath, pushing myself up slightly so I could sit back. She gave a little huff of protest but didn't stop me. Swallowing hard, I hooked my thumbs into my underwear and started fumbling them down. Before I could even finish, her eyes dropped instantly, locking on my exposed length with laser focus.

Sharp, hungry, and just a little too fascinated for someone trying to look cool. Her tongue flicked out, tasting the air, then slapped back against her chops as a startled little giggle broke loose.

"N-Not as blurry as in the videos," she blurted, clearly without meaning to. Her ears flicked in flustered annoyance at herself, but her grin was wide and crooked, tail thumping once against the floor.

I couldn't help but laugh quietly. I crawled forward on my knees, settling between her legs again -- this time closer, further up. She didn't even glance at my face, her eyes still glued below my waist with a look of intense, unfiltered curiosity that made my heart twist.

I braced myself with my palms on either side of her abdomen, knees pressing into the underside of her thighs, chest near her ribs, hips aligned to hers. My tip twitched against the warm, wet slickness gathered at her slit, nudging the smooth plates of her waist.

Still odd, still alien, still moist and flushed pink. A now open gap in the plating. Sleek and functional, flexing at the raised edges.

Alys sucked in a breath, another giddy little snicker slipping out as her wings twitched wide beneath her. "Definitely not CGI," she mumbled, still grinning.

"Alys," I groaned, biting my lip and trying not to laugh again. "S-Shush. You're gonna distract me."

She tapped the side of her maw, still smiling widely, and stopped talking. I took a breath, moved forward and... did... nothing. "So... do I just...?" I stammered.

Her expression flickered -- dazed, curious, nervous, excited -- and then shifted. "Yeah, you..." Her brow ridges furrowed. "Wait. Why are you so nervous?"

I wet my lips, squeezed the sheets tighter, angled my hips-

And didn't answer her.

"Oh," she breathed slowly, realisation breaking across her snout. The light grin twisted into a smirk that tugged at the corner of her mouth, smug and yet oh so pleased.

"What?" I blurted, face burning.

"Nothing," she cooed, purring heavy with satisfaction. "I'm just happy I guessed right."

"Shut up," I groaned, heat rushing into my cheeks.

"Loser", she sang, dragging the word out as long as she could, voice thick and syrupy. Her hips rolled slightly, lining herself up to meet me. "But it doesn't matter now, does it?" Confidence crackled again - then flickered. "Just-" She swallowed. "Just go slow, okay?"

I nodded quickly, mood settling. "Yeah. Of course." Something else came to mind. Sudden but important. "Please don't burn me."

She just grinned.

I shifted my weight to one hand, the other guiding my glans down, breath tight as I angled it just right. The head pressed against her slick entrance -- so hot and wet it almost made me jerk back -- and the flexing muscle there twitched against me, coaxing a shiver through my spine. The ridges surrounding her slit weren't exactly soft; they dragged against my skin with a strange friction, but the velvety heat just beyond called me deeper. I bit my lip, braced my hand back on the floppy membranes of her wings, and exhaled slowly. "I'll go slow."

She nodded, shaky. I pressed forward.

My fingers curled closer, instinctively gripping the broad muscles at the base of her wings as I eased into her, slow and careful.

Heat. Raw, overwhelming heat wrapped around me. Then pressure -- a deep, insistent squeeze, twitching and flexing around me.

It was... odd.

Warm and slick, yes, god yes, wet enough to glide, but strangely smooth. Just pressure, a firm, pulsing embrace with no distinct texture to catch on. It gripped me as one seamless whole. Not that it was bad. Not at all. We gasped almost at the same time -- hers sharper, mine breaking as I bit back the instinct to plunge deeper all at once, to bury myself and make her squirm beneath me.

God, I wondered if she'd breathe fire again.

"F-Fuck." One of us choked it out. I didn't even know which.

I gripped her wing joints harder, nails scraping scales, chest pressing flush to her as I inched deeper. She clenched around me, breath ragged. Another inch -- she groaned, open and unrestrained -- and that broke me. My restraint snapped. I pushed in. Too much, too fast. Not all at once, but close.

She flinched, body stiffening beneath me, lips peeling back in a half snarl, eyes wide with shock and pain. "J-James?!" She grunted. "Too much!"

I yanked back instinctively, too fast, dragging sharply against her passage. She hissed, lips recoiling, sharp teeth bared -- I thought she might actually snap at me -- but instead, she took a breath, her expression softening.

"Go slow," she whispered again, steadier this time. "Humans are big, and this is our first time. Please. Gentle."

My throat tightened, cheeks burning with shame. I nodded sheepishly, sitting up. "Sorry."

Sliding my hands to her wide hips, I lined up again, pressing back into her slick heat -- painfully slow, like a breath. Inch by inch. Tight tension wrapped around me, her body gripping me in pulsing waves. Too tight, her body tense and shaky.

"It's fine," Alys murmured, rocking her hips in small, deliberate rolls to meet my pace and create her own. "T-There you go... just like that."

I shuffled closer, hands gliding from her flanks up to her waist, leaning forward again -- but softer this time. I sank into her heat slowly, watching the little adjustments of her body, feeling her clench when I moved too quickly and gasp when I brushed against something sensitive. When she relaxed, the nervous clenching lessened.

Then I felt it, a little under halfway in. A subtle give. An opening. Beyond the tight muscles, emptier but no less warm. I paused, heart hammering, unsure.

Biology my human instincts didn't understand.

"Keep going," she breathed, lifting her head and nuzzling her nose against my cheek.

I obeyed, pressing into that tight ring of muscle. A new kind of pressure wrapped around me -- firmer, coaxing a gasp from my chest as I twitched inside her. She flinched slightly, her expression twisting. Not entirely pleased.

It felt tight, warm, but not... right. Oddly textured. Ringed, almost.

When she didn't speak, I tightened my grip on her waist, pressed my thumb against her scales and rubbed slow circles as I sank deeper. A strained groan broke from her throat -- half pain, half pleasure -- her eyes squeezed shut and her brow knit tight. "Th-That feels weird," she hissed under her breath. I agreed but didn't dare voice it.

Bending my knees, I drew back an inch and thrust forward two, her heat and grip making my head spin. She sat up abruptly, gasping and shaking her head hard. "W-Wait, no- fuck. Pull out."

I did, and watched as she slumped back against the cushions, jaw clenched, face tense. Her cheeks darkened, heating visibly. "Wrong hole," she muttered through clenched teeth. "You're too low. You're in the wrong hole. G-Go again... go up. More towards my belly"

I blinked, glancing down. I was in her cloaca -- where else could-

Oh.

Realisation hit hard.

All in one.

Too embarrassed to speak after botching it twice, I just did as I was told.

I gritted my teeth, flexed my thighs and tried angling my hips higher, but the position was too awkward. Sitting upright only forced me lower, made my abs strain tight and my lower back ache. Before I could stammer out a comment, she shifted beneath me, sliding her hips back and lifting her upper body slightly to help.

I shuffled forward on my knees, arms braced stiff against the mattress, and lowered myself down fully atop her. My chest pressed flush to her plated abdomen, ribs rising fast against the heat of her underside. My skin stuck faintly with sweat where it met her scales. I exhaled hard, breath shallow and ragged against the bend of her chest.

With my hips lowered now, legs trembling faintly from the awkward position, I tilted and finally slid upward -- just as she'd told me.

I found it.

A second entrance. Looser. Warmer. Softer. I froze, breath catching as the difference slammed into me all at once.

The head of me pushed into slick, velvety heat that wrapped around me perfectly. My cock twitched, aching, and I let out a raw groan. My hips jerked forward instinctively, my glutes flexing tight as I sank deeper on primal instinct, unable to help it. Her vent's textured passage rippled and clutched at me, pulling me further in -- like it wanted to keep me buried inside.

My stomach coiled sharp with heat. I sucked a breath through clenched teeth, arms shaking slightly from holding myself up. My thighs strained, trying to control the pace as I rolled my hips deeper. The sensation dragged tight around every ridge and vein, making my toes curl into the sheets for balance.

It wasn't like before. It wasn't just smooth muscle. It was meant for this -- meant to tease, milk, and squeeze. My cock pulsed thickly inside her, smearing precum against the hot inner walls.

"S-Shit," I gasped, grinding forward in slow, shallow rolls of my hips, shocks sparking up my spine at the way she twitched and squeezed. My stomach tensed hard to brace myself. Sweat trickled slowly down the line of my back. Her forelimbs snapped up, claws hooking tight around my shoulders and dragging me down closer. Her chest rose sharp beneath mine as she gasped under me. "Fuck, you feel amazing," I panted, my voice cracking.

I thrust deeper, core muscles clenching as I pulled halfway back then slammed forward harder than I meant to, smacking flush against her muscular thighs. My hips bucked once more, helpless. The stretch and squeeze around me too much.

Beneath me, Alys moaned openly, wings flaring wide, fangs flashing as her head tipped back and her eyes squeezed shut, unrestrained pleasure washing across her face. Her horns scraped harshly across the wooden headboard.

"G-Go deeper," she panted, voice breaking and chest heaving. "Don't stop."

Chest flush to her belly, my face pressed against the curve of her chest plating, my hands trailing up, clumsy fingers fumbling across the slick, heated scales until I gripped the muscular base of her wing joints. My forearms flexed, biceps straining as I hauled her hips tighter to mine.

I angled just right, dug my toes into the mattress, and bucked into her hard -- slapping my hips against her and burying my full length inside. My lower back burned tight from the angle. She gasped sharply under me, claws clutching at my shoulders, breath harsh and broken as I forced myself not to lose it right there.

"Shit, James, that--" I bit my lip hard, pausing just barely to let her adjust, breath shaking against her chest as I savoured the dizzying squeeze of being sheathed so deep inside a dragon. I tried not to think about how little any of this would have appealed to me with a human woman. This was about her. About Alys.

"C-Can I move properly?" I rasped finally, dragging my gaze up to meet hers. My voice broke rough and low. "You feel fucking incredible, Alys."

Her ears flicked upright, jaw working before snapping shut again. Her cheeks darkened a deeper indigo as she nodded rapidly, breath hiccupping. "Y-Yeah. Move." Her hind legs shuffled, wanting to do something but unable to figure out what.

That was all I needed to hear. I drew back slowly, groaning aloud at the obscene squeeze her vent gave as I retreated. My cock flexed hard as her walls fluttered around nothing--until I slammed back into her with a full, heavy thrust. My abs clenched tight to keep balance as her back arched hard under me, nearly lifting her off the bed.

"Alys, Jesus... you-" I choked out, voice shaking. My hands dug harder into her wing bases, forearms burning, as her inner walls clamped down fast in response. "You're so warm."

Rolling my hips deeper, I ground down against her walls, pressing hard against every trembling, twitching ridge that made her jolt. Still not enough. My right hand stayed locked around her wing joint, but the other slid lower, dragging down her belly to rub slow, heavy circles over her stretched, twitching cloaca. "You feel good?" I groaned, breath hissing out sharp through my teeth. My thighs shook from restraint.

She gasped raggedly, mouth falling open. "Sh-Shut up," She gasped, tail lashing between my legs and wings twitching wildly. "Just... just keep going. No t-talking."

Her tail snapped tight between my legs. Her bulky hind legs hooked hard around my sides, claws digging into my lower back.

I drew back almost too far, the head of me catching slightly on her entrance before I thrust back in deep. Slower, but deliberate.

"Ah!" She cried out, claws raking sharp down my back in a sudden burst that bit deep. The sting seared hot through my skin, jolting me hard, breath punching out of me in a ragged gasp -- but it only grounded me harder. My spine locked tight, my muscles clenched, and I didn't stop.

Couldn't.

My hips snapped forward again, burying my full length with a strangled groan that tore out of my chest, raw and unfiltered.

"You-" My voice cracked on the word, unsteady, broken. I swallowed hard, forcing it back under control. "Are you gonna bite me when you come?"

It was meant as a tease, but it came out shaky, breathless -- I was barely holding together.

My hips kept moving anyway, fast and sharp, driven by something primal and frantic that bypassed thought entirely. It didn't feel like a choice anymore. My body chased her on instinct.

The wet, obscene smack of our bodies echoed loud and constant, raw and rhythmic, thick and slick.

She hissed -- the sound cutting sharp but crumbling halfway into a shuddering moan that cracked something raw in my chest. I felt my breath catch, ribs straining. God, she sounded wrecked.

"Arsehole," she panted, voice cracking open. Her cheeks flushed darker, the blush spreading to her ears, her breath falling uneven from parted lips. "Y-You spent all that time running, and now you're smug the second you get inside me?"

Her claws gripped hard into my shoulders, clutching tight.

"You're gonna fall apart first. I can feel it."

She wasn't wrong.

The pressure inside me was unbearable. It built fast, relentless -- coiled tight like wire snapping taut under my skin. My cock twitches thick and hard inside her, every twitch dragging along her fluttering ridges. Her inner walls squeezed and milked me in rippling waves, coaxing more from me than I knew how to handle.

My lungs burned, breath ragged and hot against her throat. My skin felt fevered, tingling, and hypersensitive everywhere we touched. I didn't know if it was just lust anymore. It felt bigger. Too big. Overwhelming.

I bit down hard on the edge of one of her chest plates -- desperate to muffle the ruined sound rising in my throat. My teeth ground against the smooth plate, jaw clenched tight as my hips jerked helplessly. Sweat rolled hot and slow down my back, stinging against the fresh claw marks.

"You're the one gripping me like you don't want to let go," I rasped against her chest, voice raw and thin. My hands twitched, fingers curling tighter around the base of her wings -- less for control now, more to anchor myself to her body.

I needed her close. Needed something solid.

If she let go of me now, I'd come undone.

Her smile curled wide, wicked and dark, but wavered with flush and heat. "Good." Her breath caught sharply. "Y-You're not allowed to go until you finish what you started."

Her paws clutched tighter still, claws dimpling deep into my shoulders. Her hind legs rolled hard, hips grinding up against me just right -- too right.

"O-Ohhh. I like that," she groaned thickly, voice trembling. Her wings flared wide under her back, shuddering violently against the mattress. That initial nervous tightness had loosened, her body now open and accepting.

Then she moved faster -- hips bracing and rolling to meet me perfectly. We locked into rhythm, bodies moving raw and frantic in tandem.

I thrust deep and hard, hips jerking sharp. She met me every time, grinding and squeezing tight.

I groaned raggedly and pinned her harder -- my grip on her wing joints was harsh enough it would've bruised if not for her scales, my arms shaking with effort.

Her breath hitched under me, her whole body fluttering against mine.

And her face-

Eyes half-rolled back, mouth slack and gasping, wings twitching and flared. But soft, open, unguarded -- vulnerable in a way that wrecked me.

She trusted me. Every twitch of her vent, every tight squeeze, every clutch of her claws and legs wanted me to finish inside her. Wanted me to stay.

Her heat rolled off her vent, heavy and suffocating, muscles locking down tighter and tighter with every second. She was drenched, soaked slick -- our movements wet, sloppy, and frantic as I pounded into her without holding back now.

Her body rippled hard, twitching and milking me, coaxing me to the brink. I gasped, hips snapping faster, thighs shaking uncontrollably as the edge tore through me.

"J-James-" She gasped, voice thin and desperate, eyes flying wide, chest heaving, lips peeling back in a snarl.

"I'm going to--"

I quickened my pace immediately. A few more broken, breathless syllables tumbled from her lips--then all of it snapped away with a sudden, vicious snarl. Her claws switched from caressing my back to grabbing at my shoulders and hauling me up.

She lunged forward, sharp teeth clamping hard into my shoulder and collar, tearing through skin and digging into muscle, blood spilling.

Pain flared, blinding white. I froze on instinct, breath caught, even as her orgasm ripped through her--her vent spasming wildly around me, cloaca squirting another hot splash of sour, near-boiling arousal against my crotch.

My throat seized. I couldn't even breathe as I felt warmth trickling down my chest. She'd bitten me. Actually bitten me. All that time, I thought she'd just been joking about it.

Even with my blood in her mouth, she kept rolling her hips beneath me, vent still fluttering and twitching in aftershocks as she rode out the end of her climax. Her tail cinched tighter, nearly snapping my ankle.

Then, at last, her teeth slid out of my shoulder. Blood that I tried not to notice dripped down onto the sheets. Her split tongue then swept out, rasping over the wound--cleaning it. Numbness spread rapidly beneath the strokes of it, soothing the wound almost disturbingly quickly.

Even after the wound was tended, she lingered, licking softly at my skin, tasting sweat and salt before blowing a slow breath and settling the back of her head against the wall once again.

Her eyes fluttered half-closed, dazed and distant. The wild energy from before melted from her body, leaving her boneless and limp. Her paws stayed on my back, claws drifting in lazy circles over the deeper scratches.

Her tail fell limp, and I heard a muted thud as it fell over the edges and onto the ground. Her wings relaxed completely, too wide for my meagre queen-sized bed.

And there I was, still poised over her--still hard, still pulsing inside her, still utterly unfinished. The bite had stunned me completely, her climax pulling the rug from under me. I'd thought I'd peak first. I'd been aching from the start.

Dragon stamina at work.

She exhaled slow and long, eyes drifting shut, body subtly rubbing against the sweat-soaked sheets--sheets that were absolutely ruined now. Her whole posture radiated contentment, spent and proud of herself.

Meanwhile, I just hovered there.

Did she think I'd finished?

Was she waiting for me to pull out?

Shit. Was I just not going to get to finish? My first time ruined?

I bit my lip hard, barely daring to move for fear of sending myself over the edge instantly.

Then some panicked, stubborn part of me--some stupid, primal instinct--convinced me that I'd messed up by not pushing through and finishing with her. I had to say something.

Anything.

"Can I come inside you?" I blurted. Suddenly. Too loud.

She blinked once, then twice, her head lifting slightly, gaze sliding to meet mine. No anger. No disappointment. Just... a flat, incredulous look.

A look of pure really?

I swallowed thickly. "Uh. Sorry. I should've phrased that way better."

"You think?" She grinned, head cocking as she peered up at me. But then she softened. "You didn't finish?"

"No, the, uh... bite threw me off. I'm just really close, but you looked so peaceful I didn't want to start up again and wreck it."

"James", she giggled, making my face burn hotter.

"S-Sorry."

Alys tilted her head back, her chuckle soft and fond. "Yeah, you can."

I swallowed hard, holding back with difficulty. "Really?"

She shifted her hips beneath me, lifting them ever so slightly. "Yeah. Just go slow, okay? I'm a bit twitchy."

I nodded quickly, then eased back and pushed into her again. The heat and wetness enveloped me instantly, reigniting all the need from before. Alys hummed, the sound more pleased than excited. "You're warm," she whispered, leaning forward to rest her chin on my injured shoulder, just barely avoiding the actual wound. "That feels nice... Keep going."

Her soft murmurs and gentle touches slowed my urgency. Instead of rutting her desperately like I'd wanted to, I instead moved slowly and deliberately, building it up gradually rather than sprinting ahead. She pawed idly through my hair, breath warm and content against my skin, happy to bask in the low, steady pleasure.

"So gentle," Alys murmured, nuzzling her cheek against mine. I groaned, pressing my face against the smooth plating of her chest, feeling just how close I was. She was still so warm, so slick, still trembling faintly around me.

Instinct surged. My breath caught. I thrust deep, burying myself to the hilt, body jerking as I spilt inside her egg passage. My hips twitched uncontrollably, grinding against her as thick pulses splashed against her walls. The rush was overwhelming--so sharp and intense it emptied my head entirely, wringing a deep, shuddering moan from my throat. I sagged against her, dizzy, every muscle loose and shaking.

Alys hummed low and pleased, her body vibrating under me. "That's..." Her voice hitched slightly, composure faltering. "That's warm..."

I nodded weakly, breathless and limp.

Silence reigned. Peaceful. Loving.

But then. "...I can't believe you asked." She lifted her head slightly, bringing it closer to look me better in the eye.

"Please don't talk about it," I groaned, unable to hold in the embarrassed little laugh.

"Alys, you feel really good, and I'm really, really dumb. Can-"

I raised a hand up and wrapped my fingers around her long, crocodilian muzzle, shutting her up. In response she licked my palm. I let go with a playful groan, wiping the drool onto her neck.

Neither of us spoke after that.

Nor when she tightened her hold on me or when her wings folded fully over me, hugging me close to her. Her paws shifted from tearing to holding. Clarity washed over me, the haze of sex and climax fading and the realisation of what we'd done settling in. She nuzzled closer, not pulling away and not asking me to pull out and...

She wasn't thinking.

She wasn't thinking about what this could mean, what this meant about her, us. If things would change or not, if this made things better or worse. She didn't think about if it was really what she needed, and... maybe she was right not to.

Maybe just this once it didn't matter.

Maybe it never did. Not really. Not when she looked so happy.

Maybe.

I was spent, physically from what we'd done and mentally from the day. Week. Month. Year.

I closed my eyes and breathed in her smell. Not just the still wafting scent of her oestrus, but the smaller, more her smell. Earthy, solid. Not something I could word. Something I did recognise and find myself smiling at was the strawberry-scented oil I knew she'd rubbed into her scales just for the date.

I held her close and for once in my life didn't think.

It was nice...

...

Saturday, the 12th of October.

I was woken up.

Not by the alarm on my cheap phone, not by the sunlight filtering in through the blinds I still needed to replace. No. I was woken up by something wet and rough slapping me in the face.

I sat up to find the source, fingers pressing against something that definitely wasn't my spongy mattress. It was too hard, too solid, too warm. My hazy mind caught up with me: Alys. The date. The flight back home. Lapping at her slit like I'd been starved and then borderline begging to finish inside her.

My face burned as I tried to scramble away, but the pair of muscular wings wrapped around my back tightened their hold.

"Nuh-uh."

My hips hurt. My back hurt. My shoulder was killing me; my tongue was sore, along with... well, other things.

"Alys", I groaned, lifting myself up to try and look at her, but all I saw was teeth and tongue. "I think you burned me," I said against her mouth as she continued grooming.

She stopped licking and tilted her head, smiling innocently up at me as it sunk back down against the pillows. "I did? Where?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. She knew. She absolutely knew.

"Never mind."

I looked away, trying to spot my clothes somewhere in the wreckage of my room, ignoring that distant tingle of annoyance, but her claws gently caught my jaw and tilted me back toward her. She held my gaze with surprising softness.

"Sorry", she said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just... hard to control sometimes. Are you alright?"

"It's fine." I got up, still connected to her, wincing slightly, barely managing to free myself from her wing's hold. "I need a shower, though. I'm all sticky."

Alys grinned. "A good sticky, right?"

I tried not to think about it. At first, on purpose, and then because something else came to mind--something that involved the mess between her... behind(?) her legs.

"Was it a good idea to finish inside?" I asked. "Is there, like, a chance that..."

She stared at me for a second, ears twitching as her head tilted. Then the meaning clicked, and she burst out laughing--loud, chirping, almost mocking but not quite.

"No, you dummy! I'm a dragon! A-And you're some kind of monkey thing."

Her scratchy squawks made my face burn, but at least the tension in my chest eased.

"Cute idea, though. Gross, fleshy hatchlings."

I huffed a laugh. "Uh huh. Laugh at the poor human who doesn't understand alien biology."

I used the moment to slide out of her, all the while trying not to make a face.

"You really think I'd let you finish in me if there was a chance you'd give me some eggs?"

I groaned and climbed off her, lying on my side. "I guess not."

She waited, eyes flicking up to the black scorch mark on my ceiling. My landlord was going to kill me.

"...I mean. Maybe." She rolled onto her side to look at me.

I glanced at her sidelong, holding the eye contact.

"You want kids?" The words hurt to say. Not because I hated the idea, but because I was scared of her answer--scared she'd realise I couldn't give her what she really wanted.

"A little bit," she replied softly. "I've done a lot of bad in my life. A lot more than the good--if I've done any at all. So much life lost... maybe one day I'll want to bring some into the world."

She exhaled, long and slow. Her chest rose and fell with the motion, but her eyes didn't blink. Then she smiled. It was forced and shaky, a bit too wry to be real. "I bet I'd be terrible, though. Wouldn't I?"

My first instinct was to say no. To ramble about how great she was. But that would've been shallow. So I thought about it. "...Maybe at first," I admitted. "You'd probably be a bit much. But you're a good person, and you love your family." Smiling gently, I added, "I'd suck. I'm really bad with kids. I used to pick on my sister all the time."

Alys chuckled. "You did? I can't imagine you being a bully. You're way too soft."

"True." I sat up and itched at my nose. "But I grew up in a rough area, so I at least know how to avoid trouble." I hummed, memories crawling into my mind. "Saw a guy get knifed once because he owed people some serious money. It didn't end well."

"Did you do anything about it?" she asked, the same way most people did.

"I am not a bulletproof lizard, so no. I called the police, didn't give my name, and closed the blinds."

My hips ached in ways I'd never felt before, and the bite on my shoulder throbbed with every shift; even my ass hurt. I subtly pulled up the torn sheet for some kind of decency.

"Bullet resistant," Alys corrected with a hum. Gotta put one in the head, or we'll be fine. But... yeah, doing that would probably have been a bad idea. Lots of holes in my favourite human."

She rolled toward me and tried to cuddle, but I winced and instinctively pulled away. "I think you put enough holes in me, Alys."

Finally, I got up fully and clambered off the bed, grabbing for last night's discarded boxer briefs. She didn't look very impressed as I nearly face-planted trying to put them on.

"James, I've seen you-"

"Yeah, I know. I know." I opened my closet and picked out a pair of clean trousers, a shirt, and, from my drawers, fresh underwear and socks. "It's still... weird."

When I turned around again, her expression had slid off her face like a mask falling.

All that was left was blankness.

It took me a second, but ... "I meant you seeing me without clothes on," I clarified quickly. "Not that-" I waved my hand vaguely between us. "This is weird. Maybe a little bit. But I don't..."

Her eyes softened again, and some colour returned to her face.

"I don't regret what we did," I finished.

She sat up slowly and gave me a sleepy smile. "Me neither."

And so, with an awkward little sidestep, I left the room. I closed the door behind me, exhaled long and slow, and leaned my weight against the doorframe.

I'd actually done it. We were together. Dragon and human.

Now what?

I had this... feeling.

It was weird. Like I'd turned the last page of a book, but the story just kept going anyway.

Was I supposed to just... live now?

Go to work, eat leftovers, do laundry--like nothing had changed?

...Either keep going or die, I guess.

Not much of a genre shift, but it's something.

I carried my clothes with me and stepped into the bathroom, placing them on top of the closed toilet lid. I slipped off the underwear and went into the shower.

The water was hot--too hot--but I needed it. My back and shoulder stung, but at least I knew they'd be clean. My shoulder wasn't too bad, which made me wonder if it was because she'd licked it clean. Well... clean in very heavy quotation marks.

I didn't rightly know how healthy dragon saliva was.

Still. Pain aside...

I couldn't stop thinking about last night.

How I'd made her feel so good she couldn't even control her fire or body temperature. How good I'd felt--not just physically, but something deeper, something grounding. It wasn't just the sex, or mating, or whatever the word was when it happened between a human and a dragon; it was everything. The way she trusted me and how I trusted her back. Just how close we were--and had become.

Dragons mated for life.

So... were we married now? Just dating? Was there some third option? Did I even love her?

I think... maybe... maybe I did?

Somewhere in the middle of that mental tailspin, I lathered a handful of mint two-in-one shampoo into my hair, brushing it in with short, firm strokes like the motion could help me think straight. Next came the shower gel. No scent. Just... clean. Painful as shit on the cuts, but I was too busy having a dramatic introspection.

What even was love?

...Asked the five-year-old that was apparently possessing my body.

We hadn't had some big emotional moment.

No one had been sacrificed.

We hadn't been stranded on a mountain or fought a war.

We just... hung out.

Had we 'done' enough for it to be love?

Could...

Oh. I was doing it again. Spiralling. Something I was supposed to be past. Who cared? Love was love and not a video game with stat requirements.

I stepped out of the cubicle and moved over to the sink. The mirror was completely steamed up, a thick layer of fog, like someone had blurred out my reflection on purpose. I wiped it clean with a flat hand and stood there, wet and lost, my hair dripping.

The bite on my shoulder had scabbed over already. Which meant either I was a mutant, or her saliva actually had closed it up somehow. It was going to scar. Badly. I angled my body, twisting my neck to look at my back in the reflection. Long, uneven cuts trailed down my skin--marks from her claws. The gauze she'd carefully applied last week had long since slipped off, exposing raw, red lines.

She was a dragon.

Sometimes I forgot that.

Forgot that she was an alien predator, capable of tearing a car in half or setting a house on fire. That under the softness, there was strength I couldn't comprehend.

... And I'd slept with one.

I brushed my teeth. Flossed. Used antibacterial mouthwash. Shaved with my electric razor, watching my reflection the whole time like it might flinch before I did.

I'd slept with a dragon. And the worst part?

I couldn't even feel that rush of cold fear anymore. Couldn't summon it, even when I tried. I wasn't scared, and I didn't get why. Every time I thought back on what we'd done--on what she'd looked like beneath me, the way her body had moved, the dumb, ugly expression on her face when she came--snout scrunched like she'd smelt something awful, eyes squeezed shut so tight it twisted her whole face, her weird faux-lips pulled back in a crooked, quivering grin.

She looked like she was sneezing and crying at the same time.

...Maybe I did love her.

Maybe love wasn't one explosive moment but a slow build. A quiet certainty. That feeling of wanting to be near someone, to listen to them talk even when they had nothing to say.

Of thinking they weren't just good-looking but beautiful--especially when they weren't trying to be. Of loving the flaws, even admiring them. I loved how much she cared for her family. How she wasn't perfect but still tried.

She'd twisted how I thought of dragons...

I used to think they were like gods. Distant. Perfect. Unreachable.

And now I'd seen her, half-drunk, crying and breaking down on her couch, knocking over glass bottles and screaming at her family.

My chest felt heavy in that way that wasn't quite pain but close enough.

I brushed my teeth again just to buy time. Dried myself with a towel and got dressed slowly. When I was in the hallway and not on a wet floor, I slipped on the socks my sister had gotten me for Christmas and continued fluffing my hair with the damp towel. It was stuck up in odd places, stubborn and chaotic. I had a brush somewhere in my room.

"Hey," I called out, stepping inside my bedroom. "Shower's free if you want to clean up and--"

She was sitting on the floor, head ducked low, tongue flicking out as she lapped at her cloaca, casually splayed out like a housecat. Her leg warmers and ribbon were left discarded on the bed.

I stopped mid-step and spun on my heels, facing the closet like it held the answers to the universe. My brain, of course, focused on the one thing it shouldn't--the wet, audible slurping.

"James?" She asked, pausing mid... whatever the hell that was. "What's the matter?"

"You-" I risked a glance back, instantly regretted it, and faced forward again. "Looked... private."

"Huh?" She got up, joints cracking. "Private? I was just cleaning myself."

"Oh. Right. I thought you were... having... fun."

She padded closer and rested her chin on my shoulder. "Pervert." Then she nudged my cheek with one of her horns, gave me a wet, affectionate lick, and pulled away. I didn't think on where her tongue had just been.

"Later, my mate. First up is morning exercise." She stretched long and low, wings curling in and out as her spine cracked like bubble wrap. Her wing fingers bent one by one, joints popping like knuckles.

"You could still take a shower," I said, turning to face her. "Some offence meant when I say you smell like sex and sweat."

She tilted her head, looking down at herself as if she hadn't noticed.

"I do?" She said brightly. "Good! That means everyone will know who belongs to whom." She paused. Joy flickering. "How's your shoulder, by the way? I'm worried I didn't bite hard enough. I tasted blood, but--"

"Hold up." I raised my hands. "That was on purpose? I thought it was just, like, heat of the moment! You marked me?"

She nodded, stepping closer, raising a paw to tug the neckline of my shirt aside. Her eyes widened at the sight.

"Yep, yep. I- Oh, wow. Never mind. I might've overdone it." She leaned in, snout nearly touching my skin. "Does it hurt?"

Yes.

"Just a little bit. But you actually did it on purpose?"

"It's a mating bite, James. You do it whilst mating." Alys paused, then ran her tongue across her teeth. "Your blood is very salty, by the way. I can still taste how loudly your kidneys are screaming for water."

I pulled away slightly, giving her a flat look. "Yeah, they'll beg, but all they're getting is more coffee. Still. Go take a shower."

She huffed, lifting her chin like I'd just insulted her honour. "Rude. And no. We're going to one of my usual prowling spots, so I need to let the scent linger for a bit. How else will the desperate nesses and drakes know I scored? I don't have a mark, James."

Ah.

"No mark, James. No bite mark, James. Because my mate is a dumb human."

I stared at her.

She couldn't hold back the grin as she opened her mouth and began, "Jame-"

"Sit down."

She did, with a smirk that said she was enjoying it far too much.

"Do you actually want me to bite you?" I asked. "Because I will. I just have no idea how I'm supposed to do that without breaking my jaw."

I glanced at her wings. The membranes looked soft, leathery, maybe even weak, but a mark would be hard to see there. The rest of her was... well, dragon. Covered in scales, bone, muscle, and plating. Dragons weren't built for vulnerability.

Brushing my hand against her neck, I wondered, not for the first time, how the humans on her home planet had ever posed a threat. If we'd evolved next to them on Earth, we never would've made it out of the trees.

"Under your arms?" I murmured. "Maybe in the pit? No... too awkward. Anywhere with scales is too tough. Suggestions?"

She hummed, her tail flicking lazily behind her. "The ears could work," she offered. "Samys is missing part of her right one because of gryphons, and if those-" I gave her a look. "Guys could do it, I'm sure you could leave a mark."

I leaned closer, gently holding her floppy left ear. The webbing felt soft under my fingertips. Tough, but pliable. Leathery, warm. It twitched slightly at my touch.

"Right. Okay." I hesitated. My breath caught in my throat as I leaned in, then flinched back just as quickly.

"Alys, this is-"

She moved, tilting her head and pressing her ear firmly to my lips. "Do it."

My hands shifted from her head to her neck, steadying her and myself. I positioned my teeth on the underside of her ear. At first, I barely bit down, testing it. Nothing. Then a little harder. Still nothing.

I let go, adjusted my grip, and bit again. This time with force.

Alys made a sound. I couldn't place it. It wasn't pain. It wasn't pleasure. Just a noise; rough and low.

Closing my eyes, I pushed harder, my jaw straining until, finally, the flesh gave. I felt the skin tear. Warm blood hit my tongue.

I immediately eased up, instinct kicking in, but Alys whispered, voice ragged, "A little more."

So I kept going.

It was dizzying. My teeth ached. Her blood was hot, filling my mouth with a metallic tang. When I finally pulled away, gasping, I wiped my lips with the back of my hand and tried not to gag.

"The taste is-" I began, but she cut me off.

"Clean it."

I froze, still wiping at my mouth. "I've got disinfectant somewhere."

She shook her head. Blood droplets flung from her ear, speckling my floor. I flinched.

"No. Use your mouth."

I stared at her, and for a second, I almost said no. Almost. But the look she gave me wasn't commanding. It was expectant. Trusting. Vulnerable, in a way I'd never seen from her before.

So I nodded, swallowed the urge to run on pure human instinct, and did as she asked.

I leaned in, awkward and careful, and gently lapped at the blood. Wiping it away, tasting it, swallowing it. Not because I wanted to. Because I knew she needed me to. It was strange. Sour and metallic. Tangy. Slightly off, like old pennies soaked in lemon juice. Not human.

She shifted after a moment, pulling back an inch - her cue that I was done. I sat down on the bed, breathing hard, jaw sore, needing a second to recover.

And in that pause, I looked at her. Really looked at her.

She wasn't... pretty. The thought hit me. Sudden. Mean almost. Intrusive.

No glossy hair. No soft, warm eyes. No delicate features or gentle hands. No breasts, no smooth skin, no graceful curves.

Her legs were long and muscular, her hips wide and heavy-set--built for egg laying, not luring. Scales jutted out at uneven angles from where, I assumed, she'd been hurt. Her hide was scarred. Her claws were thick, curved, and deadly.

Her face was crocodilian--narrow, angular, inhuman. Her eyes were solid red, gleaming with slit pupils. Two horns curled backward from the back of her skull, while a second pair jutted forward from beneath her jaw.

A dragon. Not stylised. Not romanticised. Not filtered through fantasy art or anthropomorphic wish fulfilment.

Just a reptile. Alive. Breathing. Pacing in front of me, her powerful limbs shifting with every step, her claws tapping against the floor like knives against glass.

And God help me...

She was gorgeous.

Her forked tongue flicked out, licking at her chops, and then she turned toward me, tail swishing lazily behind her. "Okay," she said, voice breezy. "Now I'll get cleaned up."

I snorted, introspection ruined. "Why now? What was with all that dramatic pacing?"

She didn't answer. Just turned away, heading toward the bathroom. But her left ear, the one I'd just torn open, twitched subtly as she moved, angling backward like a radar dish still locked on me.

When she turned back to toss me a glance, the ear stayed twisted.

"That's petty," I said, grinning despite myself. "You're seriously going to do that just to brag?"

She grinned back, eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

She skipped forward and dropped down with a bounce, tail swishing. "Yep! It's going to be amazing. It's not the biggest bite, but it's on the ear. That makes it rare. And it's from James, and I kind of like that guy."

"I got one from Alys," I replied, leaning forward, chin resting on my palm. "She's alright. Bit loud, though."

"Only alright?" Her claws dug into the carpet as she shuffled closer on all fours, movements eager and twitchy like a dog begging for table scraps. "I think she's awesome."

I pretended to mull it over. "Hmmm..." Then something mean and playful slipped into my mind. A test. "I dunno. Galia's pretty neat. Wears glasses. Has a scarf."

Her eyes narrowed instantly, the shift in her face so fast it was almost funny. "Oh... does she now?"

I nodded slowly, savouring it. "Personally, I think Alys is better than Galia. Galia's a nerd. Alys is strong and hot. Plus, Alys has bigger wings. And muscles. And she doesn't shit on cars or eat worms."

I nearly choked laughing. "Alys has big wings? Thought they looked pretty flat. Kinda saggy. Not much shape going on. And she's got way too much muscle, honestly -- like, unsettling gym bro levels."

Alys squinted at me, inching even closer, the warmth of her breath brushing my cheek. "...I think James is kind of lame," she said, all faux-serious. "Cries too much. Refuses to admit he prefers non-humans." Another scoot. Her snout was inches away. "And he's so skinny I was afraid I'd crush him if I climbed on top, so I had to suck it up and let him mount me."

We locked eyes, holding the tension like a tightrope. Then I leaned in and kissed her snout, quick but deliberate, a pulse of heat packed into one second, and stood up.

"True as all that is..." I stretched, arms up, spine cracking, hands locked behind my head. "...you need a shower. You've got your mark. No need to keep smelling like sex and regret."

"Fine, fine." She rolled her eyes, but her voice was light. "I can always get more later. I'll lie and say I'm in heat again and desperately need a big, strong human to help me out."

She followed me out. In the living room, I noticed the front door was still unlocked. I fixed that in a second. Grabbed a clean towel from the dryer and tossed it over. She caught it neatly in her mouth and, through a mouthful of cloth, managed to mumble, "You're screwed in four months, though."

"Four months?" I asked, flipping the kettle switch and grabbing mugs. "Why?"

"Heat. Proper heat. Not this freaky, sad in-between thingy."

"Ah." I opened the fridge and pulled out a carton of milk before remembering she was lactose intolerant. Giant lizard biology, right? No oat or soy milk either. I was a computer science student, not a vegan art major. But I had a tap. "Guess I'll bring ice packs. All this burned skin's a bit much for me." I rinsed both mugs. Almost grabbed her a glass out of habit, then paused. I remembered her saying those were tricky for her to grip, that she preferred things with handles.

"Suck it up, bitch. It's going to get so much worse."

I spun, ready to snap back, but the words got caught in my throat. The last thing I saw was her flashing a smug, toothy grin before the bathroom door slammed shut.

"Bitch?!" I called after her, louder than necessary.

A soft laugh echoed back, and honestly, it was all I needed to hear.

Breakfast was lazy like always. Eggs I cooked by leaving them alone in the pan and bacon I overdid in the fryer. Toast was the only thing I didn't screw up. Butter for me, blackberry jam for her. Tea on my end, delicious tap water on hers.

She took ages in the shower. I blamed it on the cubicle being criminally narrow -- not really built for dragons. When she got out, she smelt clean and smug. "You need scale oil," she announced, like she owned the place. "All that gel stuff just slid off me."

She didn't bother with a chair. Instead, like last week, she curled up beside me on the floor. I caught myself wondering how much a dragon-sized seat would cost -- probably more than my rent. I plated our food and sat down at the table.

"Shower gel?" I asked, mouth full of egg. "The green stuff?" I only owned the one bottle.

She nodded, then snatched a strip of bacon off her plate with her teeth, like a crocodile stealing from a campsite. Her teeth looked uneven. Not in a bad way, just... odd. I'd never noticed it before. Rhys and Samys had oddly straight ones.

Maybe she was the weird one. Maybe she needed a dentist. But she ate just fine, so I didn't bother asking.

"That stuff's made for human skin," I said. "Might not even be safe for you." I poked at the eggs with my fork, wishing I'd made an omelette instead. "Do you actually need oil? Like, is it medicinal?"

"It makes me shiny," she said between bites, chomping through the bacon in two seconds. "I don't have any of my own. I stole some of Rhys'. But it looked really nice, so I might grab some for me."

She slurped at her eggs with enthusiasm bordering on gross.

"Wait... Rhys has makeup?"

She nodded again, sipping water. "I think he's trying to impress someone. He's been wearing bangles and piercings more lately. I wonder who the lucky hen is."

"Hen?" I finished my toast and leaned back. "Huh. I thought he was only into dudes."

She choked on her water, sputtering as it spilled down her neck and hit the floor. I stood to help, but she waved me off, staggering to the sofa where she'd left her towel. "Dudes?!" she squawked. "W-What do you mean?"

I straightened up. "I mean... you know he likes that Eric guy, right? Dark-skinned dude who was over at your place the other week. Bit emo?"

"I know who he is!" She dried herself off roughly, then slumped against the sofa instead of sitting. "He kept making dumb movie references."

"He does work at a comic book shop. You've got to be at least some kind of nerd to do that." I kept eating just to have something to focus on. "Seemed cool to me. Rhys never told you?" I paused, remembering. "Didn't he say he had a one-night stand a while back?"

"He never said the gender," she muttered, staring at the ceiling. "Just kind of moped around... Ugh. Now I get why he didn't tell me her- his name."

My fingers drummed the table top. "...My older brother's gay," I said. Her head turned slightly toward me. "Came out when he was fifteen. Right after our mum died. I think he regretted not telling her sooner and just... needed to get it out."

I'd never told anybody. My throat tightened, but I forced myself on. "My dad didn't take it well. At all."

Her expression shifted -- confused, then softer, careful.

"Long story short: Connor doesn't live nearby anymore. Doesn't talk to our dad. I don't either, really. My sister does, but that's only because she's on di-" I hesitated. It felt like too much, too sudden, like I was dumping my trauma in her lap all at once. "She's on disability. Needs a carer. Sorry, I- I don't know why I- Connor left," I said finally. "Because of him."

"Oh." She blinked. "Oh, James..." She chewed the inside of her cheek. "I'm not mad at Rhys for liking that human. I'm just..." She trailed off. "Okay, yeah, it is a bit weird to me. With dragons, mating's usually for connection or for eggs. My parents didn't even like each other, but they still had us." She frowned, then glanced at me. "So same-sex coupling? It doesn't really... make sense to me."

I opened my mouth to respond, but she held up a paw.

"Yes, I get the irony," she said, reading my face. "It still makes my brain feel... weird. Why didn't he just tell me?"

"He might've been scared."

Her jaw tightened.

"...Yeah." A beat. "Sorry."

"Alys", I said gently, "I seriously doubt that you're homophobic. This is all just new to you. It's okay." I smiled faintly. "Come on. Finish your breakfast. I spent hours staring at the toaster and scraping jam. You'll need all that-"

I forced my brain to operate at maximum effort.

"Berry energy... for your workout."

It worked. She snorted and shuffled back over, sitting closer this time. She resumed crunching on her toast. After finishing the last of her water and a second slice, she muttered, mostly to herself, "I'll talk to Rhys."

I didn't say anything as I cleaned my plate and grabbed my phone from where I'd chucked my coat on the bedroom floor. Still had charge. Good old Android. I opened Messenger and spotted a few notifications. One from Sarah: "How'd it go? Has she eaten you yet?" Sent last night around nine.

I sat on the bed.

My first instinct was to make a joke -- something dumb, maybe something about her being jealous. I had a few lines in mind. But instead...

"No lol. It went super well." I smiled. "She's cool. You'd like her."

I shrugged my coat back on, made sure my wallet was in the inside pocket, and headed back to the living room. Alys was rummaging through the kitchen like she'd been there forever. She hopped up, balanced on a forepaw, and opened the cupboard with the other, fishing out my brown bread.

"You could've just asked, you know," I said. "Instead of robbing me while I was on my phone."

She bit the wrapper, climbed down, grabbed three slices at once, and started eating like it was the most normal thing in the world. I made a mental note to restock.

"We're mates," she said, talking around a mouthful of bread. "Your stuff is my stuff."

I bent down to pull on the shoes I'd kicked off the night before. "So that means I can eat all your food? And steal your manga?"

She munched through another slice, crumbs falling all over her. "Yeah. Of course you can. Won't stop me from taking it back, though."

She licked the crumbs off her muzzle, then sat down.

"Do you not want me to eat your food?"

"Nah, I was just worried you were still hungry. I've never had to make a dragon-sized breakfast before. I usually just eat enough not to starve. So, toast and coffee." I paused. "Fun fact: coffee's a hunger suppressant, I think. Supposed to make you less hungry."

She stared at me, then at the cupboards, suddenly nervous. "Are... are you really that low on food? I'm sorry if I ate your only stock."

I finished tying my shoelaces. "It's just bread, Alys. Costs like a pound. I meant I didn't want you going hungry. You're pretty big."

Pause.

Stare.

Ear flick.

Squint.

"...Because you're a dragon," I added. "A very strong dragoness. Powerful." I held up a hand, like calming a very large dog. "Generous?"

She pulled out more bread, took a bite, then stuffed the rest back. "Idiot," she mumbled through a full mouth. "Now let's go. It's getting late, and all the good spots will be taken."

I unlocked the front door. "Will there be other dragons?" She nodded. "I don't think I've met any aside from you guys." I re-locked it and slipped the keys in my back pocket. "Feels like lazy writing, but I guess that's just life."

She faltered mid-step, as if the comment needed a second to digest. "Yeah... I guess you will see other dragons." She shuffled close and nudged me. "It'll emphasise how lucky you got." She definitely Googled that word-- she said it all weird.

"These literal injuries don't feel too lucky." She stopped and sniffed the air. "They feel more like James needs to go to the hos--" She froze, sniffed again, deeper.

"Alys, what are you doing?"

"Another dragon," she said quickly, wings twitching. "A dragoness- wait, no. A drake? Ugh, this is freaking me out." The lift doors opened, and we stepped inside. "It's like... it's like..."

I tapped her on the nose. "Stop trying to track other dragons."

She rubbed her nose with the back of a paw, mildly offended. "Fine. Rude. And stop your whining. My hindlegs are killing me." She wiggled her hips. "Feels like my vent got scooped out."

I tried not to smile, but she caught the slight twitch of my lips. "Don't look so proud."

"I-I'm not."

"Yes, you are! I can see it on your lame face." I chewed my lip and tapped for the ground floor. "I was a poor delicate maiden, and you rammed me."

"I didn't ram..." I paused. "Yeah, well, you tore the shit out of my back."

"Worth it."

"Totally."

"...we should do it again."

The doors opened. Nobody was there. I made a noise and tapped the ground floor button again.

"Don't tempt me. Otherwise we'd never leave the bedroom."

"And...?"

I didn't answer. I kept my hands in my pockets.

"...Thanks for not freaking out."

"Hm?" I turned to look at her. "Why would I?"

She glanced at me, expression suddenly tense. "Because it was different. Messy." Her voice lowered. "Not like what humans are used to..."

I shrugged. "So? I'm guessing it's not what dragons are used to." Her wings shifted, fingertips brushing against my side. "It was you, and that's all that matters. I was, uh, more surprised it was horizontal than anything, though."

She rumbled. Soft. Embarrassed. Almost shy. "Oh. Right. Yeah. Mammals have vertical ones, don't they?"

I blinked. "I wasn't gonna say it like that, but... yeah."

She gave a little huff, wings twitching. "It's not weird. Just... reptilian. Functional."

"I didn't say it was weird," I said quickly. "It was just... different. But honestly, after everything, that was the least surprising part."

Her gaze flicked toward me, cautious. "Really?"

I nodded. "I mean, yeah, I obviously noticed, but I wasn't gonna be like, Whoa, Alys, you've got a horizontal cloaca, time out. The dragon thing was fine, but not this!"

She choked on a laugh, slapping a paw over her snout. "Don't say it like that, oh my Skie."

I grinned despite myself. "What? I think it deserves a little dramatic emphasis."

"Horizontal cloaca!" She repeated, then immediately winced. "Ugh, nope, regret."

We both laughed, and for a second, the weirdness lifted.

Then she glanced sideways at me, more serious. "You sure you're okay with... all of that?"

I looked at her; still rumpled from sleep and sore from everything we'd done, tail flicking anxiously behind her, and nodded. "It was you," I said. "That's all I needed."

She stared at me for a moment, then exhaled slowly and deeply.

"...Okay. Good." Alys bumped my shoulder with her neck and added, "Still, next time, I'm on top."

I didn't argue. I was too busy picturing it.

The elevator groaned as it slowed, rusted doors scraping open to reveal a man and his daughter--a little girl, probably just starting primary school. I instinctively stepped back. Alys smiled, soft and sweet, but it had just a bit too much fang.

The kid stepped forward, curious and unafraid, but her father stopped her. "Let's take the stairs." And just like that, they were gone. No grand confrontation. Just a comment and two steps to the right.

Alys' smile faded. Her eyes followed them as they left.

The doors slid shut. Silence.

I slipped an arm gently around her neck, pulling her closer until our cheeks touched. "...Want me to find out where he lives and send him twenty pizzas?"

She snorted. "My hero. Throwing him a party." But then she paused, her expression dimming. "But no. It's okay. He's not used to dragons. It's all new. Like me getting mad at... a textbook. Because I don't understand the words."

"More like if you were dumb and mad that textbooks exist. Like--why are you mad at a textbook? It's just sitting there on the shelf. You don't have to read it; nobody's holding a gun to your head yelling, Learn about cells! What--"

She bit my ear.

I yelped, wide-eyed. "Why did you do that?"

"Because you called me a textbook." The lift doors opened again, and we stepped into the lobby. Early Saturday meant it was empty. I wondered what that dad and his kid were up to. "But... I appreciate the dumb words. Thank you." We stepped outside into the daylight.

I winced. "Ugh. I forgot how much it sucks being up early."

"Still doing night shifts? You're always there when I show up for food prep."

We lingered outside the building. I had no idea where we were going or how. I'd taken three buses to her place the other week. "I think they do it on purpose," I said, checking my phone. Six fifteen. "Whenever you've got deliveries, I'm on nights. When you're in the kitchen, I'm on the day shift."

"Hm." She sat down, angled her head upward, and basked in the sun like a lazy dog. "Maybe. Maybe they know how much you like me."

I'd thought the same thing at times.

"Maybe." I opened my messenger.

"Ooh," Sarah had written. "I'm so happy for you :D" I smiled, surprised by how genuine she sounded. "So when can I meet her?"

"NEVER."

Alys stood up. "Alright, let's go. I've crushed my pride down." She stepped in front of me, spread her wings, and lowered her neck. "Get on."

"Get on?" I repeated. "Are you serious?" I moved closer, trying to figure out where my legs were supposed to go. She answered by lowering herself further. And then she waited. Patiently. Watching every nervous move I made.

"Just do it, you big baby."

Awkwardly, I stepped over her neck and stood above her, feet on either side, unsure what to say or even do. Then, without warning, she rose. I grabbed onto her neck as she pushed up, my feet lifting from the pavement. I did my best not to fall. She moved with ease, like I weighed nothing.

"Lift your legs a bit; I'm kind of short for a hen."

Her wings raised and flexed, testing their range. I did as she asked, bending awkwardly at the knees and leaning forward. It wasn't like riding a horse. More like a motorbike you were sleeping with.

"Horns, please. Not the neck--you'll slip."

I raised my hands and rested them against her upper pair, but their angle was too sharp, so I shifted down to the lower ones. That meant leaning further forward.

She was warm beneath me, her muscles rippling under scales. I could feel her heartbeat--strong, steady, alive.

"You okay up there? You're kind of quiet."

Her voice was deeper than I remembered--still feminine, but resonant. She used to be soft-spoken. Nervous. But she hadn't really changed. Not exactly.

"Uh, James?"

If anything, she was just more herself.

I kissed the top of her head. "Just thinking about how great yesterday was." I tightened my grip on her horns.

I was also thinking about how a normal person might ask their girlfriend to sleep with them again--but I wasn't about to say that aloud, for fairly obvious reasons. At least in my own head, I was safe. No one could hear the dumb intrusive things I thought. Like how relieved I'd been when I realised she was a virgin, because it meant she probably couldn't tell how inexperienced I also was.

Alys shifted beneath me and let out a snort, trotting in place. "Yeah, I am pretty great..." She hesitated, the bravado slipping. Then she began walking, slow and cautious, letting me adjust to the rhythm.

"Yeah, I had a really nice time too," she said. Her voice was softer, almost shy. Like she was letting herself be open. There was no surge of emotion like we usually had to deal with. Just honesty. "I haven't felt that good in a long time. Sometimes I fake it so I don't ruin things for the other dragons. But it... it was nice. Feeling looked at. Cared for."

Her pace quickened, transitioning from a gentle trot to an easy jog. I tightened my legs and leaned forward more.

"Me too," I admitted.

Her paws thudded heavier against the pavement. Her wings began to twitch.

"But is this the fastest you can go?" I teased. "Because I think I've seen pigeons with more speed."

Bad move. A bird comparison. Genius.

She immediately took off, now sprinting. I thanked God the streets were empty because she was moving. And then, with a few powerful wingbeats, she smashed the air and launched us upward. Through some miracle of lizard design, we shot into the sky.

"Hold on!" She shouted just as she folded her legs beneath her and pulled us into a sharp climb. "Fast enough!?" She yelled over the roaring wind.

I didn't answer. I just kept my face buried against the back of her neck, nose scraping the warm scales.

She laughed. "Come on, James! Look at the sky!"

Reluctantly, I forced my eyes open and tilted my head to the side, brushing my nose against her back.

And I was glad I did.

Pink, orange, and scarlet clouds stretched all around us. The rising sun bathed everything in gold, warming my skin until I found myself lifting my head... then the rest of me.

"...Whoa."

We were above the clouds. I hadn't even noticed us passing through them--and yet I could breathe just fine.

"Is this..." I looked around, then down at the faraway city. "Is this what it's always like for you, Alys? When you fly?"

She hummed--a pleased sound, not smug, just happy. "Sometimes," she said. "Sometimes I take my time. But a lot of the time, it's just... practical. Dropping off food, heading to work. Point A to point B. But when I do take my time..." She trailed off, then added, "It's nice, isn't it? Being up this high."

I nodded, though she couldn't see it, so I stroked her neck instead. "How can we breathe up here? I mean, I can too."

"Magic," she replied, a grin in her voice. "Literally. Same way I fly. We're in a bubble. If I go too fast, it'll pop, and you'll have to hold your breath."

I twisted my neck and angled my torso to get a look at her wings. The edges of the leathery membranes glowed faintly. I reached out and brushed my fingers against one. They were taut, stretched thin as she glided. She hadn't flapped in a solid thirty seconds. Magic, I assumed.

Warm. Very warm.

Burning, actually.

I yanked my hand back. "Ow."

"Ow is right. I'm trying really hard not to electrocute you right now."

"You are?" I shuffled forward, though she wasn't very big, so I didn't gain much ground. "How come?"

"How come what? You want me to?" Sparks danced along her wing, and I flinched. "It's muscle memory," she said. "Lightning is air and fire mana mixed together, and to control it, I had to use it constantly. Eventually, it became reflex." She chuckled. "I shocked Rhys a few times when I first came through the portal. My wings still twitch sometimes."

"Is it hard to stop?"

I leaned back, pressing a finger to the wing membranes again. They were hot and faintly buzzing, like touching the casing of an ungrounded computer tower. It stung--sharp at first, then faded to a distant hum beneath my fingertip.

"James..." Alys warned, voice dipping low.

I kept my finger there anyway and even shuffled back a little, cupping an edge piece in my hand. The sting flared once more before ebbing. "You do know touching wings is kind of forward, right?"

I'd heard something similar about pet birds.

Naturally, I dragged my fingertips along the underside, pressing gently into the taut, leathery material. "Apparently it's the same for pet birds. I saw something about it on TikTok," I said, my voice lilting toward mock innocence. "Apparently it can be misinterpreted as, y'know... sexy touches. Kinda funny to imagine a lovebird trying to smush some guy's hand."

"I'll smush you if you keep doing that."

I kept doing that.

She shocked me--an electric snap straight through my knuckles.

"Hey! That was on purpose."

"Yes, yes, it was," she cooed, syrupy and fake-sweet. Her wings flicked in smug emphasis. "Now maybe you'll stop trying to turn me on. Otherwise, I'll do it again. Did you forget you're only in the sky because I kind of like you? I could turn you into a puddle."

"I was making a point!" I shot back, but I couldn't stop smiling. "I was going to do, like, a whole thing! I was going to hold your wing and say, 'You won't hurt me.' It would've been amazing..."

Alys chortled, her whole body vibrating with delight. "That's adorable," she purred. "Very cute."

"Laugh it up. You would've melted."

"Probably." She flexed her wings once, the membranes stretching tight before she began to descend. "But seriously--that's sweet of you. Thank you... I mean it. Really. Lightning's a hard skill to learn, and it tends to... um... it damages you."

"Damage?" I glanced down--the ground fading into tall high-rise flats and a sprawling park stitched with walking paths. "Are your wings hurt?"

"No. Not like... not quite." She tipped into a shallow glide, angling downward. "They just lock up sometimes. Archon lightning is extremely strong, and it messes with the, uh... the line stuff in your body? The thing that makes you move?"

"...Nerves?" I offered, brow furrowing. "Wait. Do you have, like, nerve damage?"

She shook her head sharply, and for a split second my grip slipped. I caught hold again fast. "Nah. They only get all... dumb... if I stop moving them or stop channelling mana into them."

She dipped lower, cutting through the air with more speed than I expected.

"Dumb?" I called over the wind.

She didn't answer. Focused, locked in, intent on the descent. I took the hint and kept quiet.

The park came into full view. Dragons scattered everywhere, milling about, chatting and playing like oversized, excitable dogs. A few humans dotted the edges, clearly outnumbered and keeping their distance. Judging by the worn-down grass and trodden paths, it had been a busy park long before dragons claimed it as their territory.

Alys' wings snapped wide, angling upward as she arched her upper body back, catching as much air as possible. We hit the ground with a heavy thump, grass flattening beneath her talons and claws. She stayed still, just for a breath, long enough for me to notice how fiercely she stared at the other dragons. Her ears twitched. Her muscles coiled tight. Her tail flicked in sharp, erratic bursts.

They stared back--at her, at us.

I squeezed her shoulder--whatever counted as one--and she eased down, legs folding beneath her as she lowered herself fully to the ground and let me off.

I fell. Instantly.

My legs gave out like overcooked noodles, and I face-planted straight into the grass.

Silence. Thick, suffocating silence.

I lay there, unable to look at her. Literally. My face was still buried in dirt.

Naturally, Alys laughed.

Full-bodied squawks--sharp, birdlike cracks of laughter, like a parrot that had just watched a cat slam into a wall. I could hear the low rumble in her chest: genuine, unrestrained amusement at watching her boyfriend absolutely wreck himself in front of an entire park full of her kin. Eventually, she took pity on me. Her teeth caught the back of my coat, and with a grunt, she heaved me upright. My legs wobbled but held, mercifully.

"First-time flier?" She asked, grinning like a shark.

"Evil", I grumbled, yanking off my coat and tossing it at her. It snagged on her horns, draping over her snout like some extra-long, lopsided veil. "Now go do your dragon push-ups. I've got Facebook to check."

"Facebook?"

I flopped down onto a nearby bench, draping my coat across the backrest. "Friendster," I clarified. "They changed the name when you guys showed up--some dumb marketing stunt. Now it's the default. They got to keep the F, at least."

I thumbed open the app. A message from my sister had popped up almost instantly.

"PLEASE! I'm so bored! Dad left ages ago. Their IT department is screwed or something."

"Womp womp," I texted back. "Maybe that's why the police are so shitty. Cancer chief and cancer security."

I glanced up at Alys. She met my eyes--and only then did she crouch low, muscles coiling tight before she exploded into the sky. The shockwave rippled out, flattening grass and sending a low boom across the park. Several dragons snapped their heads around to glare, ears flattening in irritation.

I kept my eyes on her, tracking her ascent as she soared higher and higher, cutting clean through the sky. In mere moments, she disappeared into the clouds, vanishing from view.

"James. James, please. I'll sell my crutches to meet your lizard wife."

"If you do that, how are you going to meet her? Crawl through the door?"

She didn't answer immediately, so I swiped over to the main app, lazily browsing through the annoying group posts, endless ads, and statuses no one under the age of forty cared about. I didn't even know why I still used the thing. Aside from messaging family, most people I knew were on other social media.

There were still some 'uses' it had.

"Delivery dragon causes a crash in downtown Brighton."

A video of a drake freezing up at a stop played automatically, followed by the screech of tyres. The camera spun to a beat-up Mini Cooper rear-ending the beige car in front of it. The brown-scaled drake bolted.

I pushed down my nerves and opened the comments.

"Can't even do a handout job properly."

"Not surprised they freeze up. If they can't integrate into our culture properly, what's the point of having them here? Do we really have to put up with them? Did anybody even vote?"

"I was turned down by a job despite having two years of housekeeping experience. Of course it went to some lizard who could barely speak English."

"Careful, guys, you can't voice legitimate complaints. You'll have police knocking on your door calling you a Nazi."

"Pray for me, bros. I laugh-reacted. Can't wait to be thrown in prison for nine months."

...Hm.

Hmm.

I closed the app.

"Yes. I would crawl to meet her."

I didn't hesitate, but my breathing was deep. "Sure. We're not doing anything this morning, so you can pick where we go." My fingers shook. I had to rely on autocorrect to type.

Pricks.

"You're with her? It's really early."

Useless shitheads, hanging around collecting unemployment and bitching about dragons when at least they do their jobs. Who cares where they got them? Maybe if you were...

I took a breath.

... Maybe they had points.

Under all that vitriol and spite.

But why did they have to sound so... fucking awful?

"Suspiciously early... o\_O"

I focused on my phone. "She met me outside, lol," I lied. "She's showing me her exercise routine."

"Dude."

I sniffed out a half-laugh, my mood lightening. "What?"

"She's showing off how shredded she is?? That's so unfair!"

"I thought you weren't into dragons?"

An image of some anime dude saying game is game was sent my way.

"You called it weird when I had my long ramble."

"It is weird. Zoophile lite. Beta bestiality."

"Bitch," I sent, grinning. Then I looked up at the sky, at last catching sight of Alys. She was swooping, doing rolls and generally just showboating. She got in the way of a few other dragonesses. They stalled mid-air and squawked at her, but Alys ignored them, pushing past to... to swoop down at me.

Why was she swooping down at me?

I was squishy!

And then I saw a squirrel.

A small thing. Red-brown fur. It was getting close. I wondered what it wanted. Food?

And then Alys snatched it between her teeth, disappearing before I could even register what had happened.

"I think she just ate a squirrel."

I sent it on reflex. Pure muscle memory from telling my sister about whatever I was doing at the time. Sarah, of course, phoned me almost immediately.

"Yo", was her opening line. "Did she seriously just eat one? Or are you trying to hype her up?"

"Both?" I answered. "It was a cute one, too. I was just sitting here watching it, and then it was gone."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Eating squirrels? Uhhh, I'm not sure. Probably. Wildlife protection, I think."

A thud sounded from behind me, but before I could turn around, a pair of heavy paws pressed against my back, followed by overwhelming weight. I fell forward, crushed face first into the dirt, my phone slipping out of my hands.

"Shit. Alys?!"

She pressed her chest to my back, paws on either side of my chest, easily pinning me with her weight. She was buzzing with energy, shaking nearly.

"Did you see me?" She asked, bringing her muzzle to my cheek. "Did you see how fast I was?"

"Y-Yeah. Really cool. You-" Her tongue slid out of her maw and dragged across the side of my face, smearing me with dragon saliva and something that smelt suspiciously like iron.

"Ew!" I tried to scramble away, but she stayed atop me, both cleaning and messing up my face like an overly affectionate dog. "O-Oh my god." I reached up, grabbing the end of her muzzle and clamping it shut. She let me.

"You got, like, actual blood on my face! That's so nasty."

"I'm sharing!" She beamed, pressing herself further down in a slow grind. I managed to drag myself forwards a bit, only to get a bite on the ear for my efforts.

"No escaping, twink."

I froze, letting out a gargled noise of protest, digging my nails into the dirt and Shawshanking my way out from underneath her. Once free, I stood up and slumped back against the bench again.

"My sister totally just heard you call me a twink. Where the hell did you hear that, anyway? Rhys better not have-"

"He said you were one, yeah. I think he was talking to his friend."

"Arsehole." I threw a clump of grass that was stuck on my jeans at her, looked around, and found my phone under the bench, marked with muck. I wiped it on her right forelimb, then against the sleeve of my jacket before putting it to my ear.

Silence.

"...Sarah?"

"Heya, Jamie. You got tackled by your lizard wife?"

"Lizard wife?" Alys repeated, apparently able to hear her just fine.

"Sarah, she can hear you."

"Oh. Good. So, you're a twink for dragons? That's an upgrade from being a twink for no one."

Suddenly shy, Alys only nodded, smiling softly to herself, her cheek scales darkening visibly, as if she'd been caught doing something embarrassing.

"One sec, Sarah. Alys has gone all quiet."

The dragon looked up, aghast, eyes wide at the betrayal.

"I think she's shy."

She made a noise, low and pained, something between a growl and a groan. "Shut up," she grumbled, eyes fixed on the grass she awkwardly pawed at with one forepaw. Her talons flexed, slicing faint, parallel lines into the dirt.

"So!" Sarah's voice crackled through the phone, bright and unfazed. "Where are we meeting? I can get Zach to drop me off."

I blinked, her words jarring me out of the moment. "Zach?" I repeated, incredulous despite myself. No hope of hiding it.

"Yes. Zach. He's cool." There was an airy confidence in her tone, like she knew I'd protest but didn't care.

"Uh huh."

"James."

"Fine, fine." I exhaled, sitting back and chewing the inside of my cheek as I thought. Somewhere cheap, nearby, and easy to sit for a while. "You want to just go to Greggs? It's early to be splashing out, and they've got those big curved booths. I can squish Alys into one."

"...Squish you into one," Alys muttered to herself, claws digging idly into the turf as her tail gave a slow lash.

"Yeah," Sarah agreed, her voice straining--probably stretching. "I can get a chicken bake. I'll ask Zach to drop me off in... forty minutes?"

Sitting up properly, I shrugged back into my coat, slipping my arms into the slightly chilled sleeves. "Yeah, forty should be fine. Hey, Greggs does soy milk, right?"

"I think? Maybe."

Across from me, Alys' posture sharpened instantly. She straightened with a jolt, ears angling forward. "Soy milk?" she chirped, voice bright, hopeful. She got up and shuffled closer, the grass whispering under her claws. "Hot chocolate?"

"They might not, Alys. You want an orange juice or something if they don't?"

"Apple juice."

Sarah laughed softly down the line, a warm little puff of amusement that reminded me how long she'd been listening in. "That's so cute. I can't wait-"

I thumbed the call closed before she could finish and stuffed the phone back into my pocket.

"Hm," I muttered.

"Hm?" Alys echoed, tilting her head in exaggerated mimicry.

I stayed seated on the bench for a beat longer, watching her. She wasn't looking at me--her attention flicked instead to the far side of the field, where a loose cluster of dragons sprawled in the sun. Her nose wrinkled faintly as she studied them. Ears twitching. Mouth pressed tight. Tense. Nervous? Guilty? It was hard to tell.

My intrusive thoughts won.

I reached out and flicked her on the nose.

Her entire face scrunched in surprise. She sniffed sharply, ears flattening with a sharp flick before she huffed and reared back onto her hind legs. With a grunt, she threw her weight forward and shoved me clean off the bench.

I yelped, landing hard on my ass, the grass damp through my jeans. Before I could scramble away, she pounced, teeth closing around my forearm--not hard, but insistent, tugging like an overgrown, petulant dog.

"Oh, shit." I burst out laughing, trying to wrench free as she dragged me a few inches away from the bench, teeth pressing sharper now, almost too sharp. "Alys!"

"Rude!" She growled through her teeth, tail whipping in glee. "Flicking my nose! Again!" She let go just long enough to surge up and nip at my cheek, faster than I could dodge. "So rude!"

Pain flared--hot, bright, sudden. Too sharp. I hissed and jerked away, hand flying up instinctively to my face. Sticky warmth coated my fingers. Blood. Not a lot, but enough to throb meanly.

"Wait. Alys, hang on a second." My voice was firmer this time.

She did stop, standing over me with a cocky grin--until her eyes dropped to the blood on my hand. The change was instant. Her pupils shrank to pinpricks, nostrils flaring as her expression dropped into mortified stillness. She shrank in place, lowering her head.

"It's fine, it's fine." I stood, dusting myself off with my free hand and dabbing at the shallow cut on my cheek."Just chill out a bit, okay?"

Alys nodded mutely, head low, shoulders tight. Her tail curled close to her side. "Do you want me to...?" She gestured to the mark on my cheek and, after taking a breath, let her. I leaned in closer, and she awkwardly licked it clean. It stung, and I bit back a wince. Fortunately, the pain faded fast. I stood back, thanking her.

Silence stretched out between us. And then-

"Did you talk to any of the other Archons...?" Her voice was quiet, thin, almost lost to the wind. Cautious. It came from nowhere, and everything in her body language said she regretted it the second it left her mouth.

"No." I shrugged, still standing, more alert now after two ambushes. "I've been sitting here like a loser, talking to Sarah. Why? Did you see some friends?"

"N-Nah." She shifted on her feet, claws curling into the grass. "Let's just get going. We could be early. For her! I'd make a good impression!" Her tone lifted artificially, and she dropped into a mounting crouch abruptly--too abruptly. Her muscles jerked unnaturally tight.

I glanced sideways, movement catching in my peripheral vision. A pair of dragons were making their way toward us, slow but purposeful. Alys had already seen them--her gaze had locked on them long before I noticed, and though her eyes didn't narrow further, her stillness grew stiffer.

"I think your friends want to talk to us," I said carefully.

They stopped a few paces away. A red female and a brown male. The dragoness bore long, elegant horns sweeping backwards; the male's were heavier and curved forward like Alys' lower pair. Their plating shimmered in the muted sunlight--slim, angled, almost serpentine, a stark contrast to the chunkier, more armoured scutes that lined Alys' underside.

"Alys", the male said, voice calm but with a thin crack at the end of her name. His footing shifted. Taller than either of us but somehow smaller in presence. "I've been meaning to talk to you for some time. We were worried you hadn't made it through and that the--"

"I want an apology," the female cut in sharply. Her throat bobbed with a thick swallow. "You-" she coughed, voice catching hard, almost cracking. "You owe me one."

Alys' wings twitched reflexively, but she kept them tucked. Her face cooled instantly, her brow lowering and her eyes sharpening to thin slits.

"I don't think I do," she replied, tone even, precise. Measured in a way that surprised me. "What happened happened, and there's no changing it. You're alive now, aren't you? Relaxing on Earth? Why ruin it?"

"You fucking-" More coughs, harsh and grating, too many. I moved before thinking.

"Hey, are you okay?" I offered, stepping closer as if I could magically fix whatever was wrong.

They both looked at me. Really looked. As if only just noticing I existed. The drake, leaner and younger, his scales a dull brick-red, spoke first. "Sorry, but this doesn't concern-" His nostrils flared suddenly, breath halting in his throat. His head cocked, leaning in, pupils contracting. His lips parted, tongue flicking just barely. "Are you... Oh." He recoiled, stepping back quickly.

"Yes, yes. Human mate. Very interesting. Very taboo. I don't care." The dragoness's voice slid through the air, coarse but clear. Her claws dragged the grass as she advanced, head lowered and deliberate. "I want my apology," she growled, low and grating.

"Can we just calm down a little?" My voice came out quick, too bright with nerves. I slid between them, palms up. The drake's gaze snapped to mine, wild and split between pleading and terrified.

"It's been two years since I came here!" Alys spat, her head jerking sharply to him, her whole body bristling like a creature barely holding its instincts at bay. "Were you too scared, Ceirios, Cenfigennus Mae gen i gymar? Ac rydych chi'n sownd gyda'ch brawd."

Fuuuuuck. That wasn't good.

"I don't care about your pet! You owe-"

"Don't call him that!" Alys' voice cracked through the air like a whip, claws digging into the dirt. "You want me to hit you again?"

"Try me!" Ceirios flared her wings fully now, the span wide enough to blot sun-dappled patches from the grass beneath her feet. Both dragonesses squared up, wings flared and claws tearing into the ground.

"Guys!" My voice cracked, frayed to frustration. I threw out my hands, gesturing wildly to the park around us. "What are you doing? You're in a fucking park. Are you going to start fighting in front of kids?" I spun, jabbing a finger toward a small clutch of young dragons lounging and sunbathing, their tails twitching lazily. A human and his dragoness friend giggled by the benches, the dragoness flapping awkwardly as she tried to glide off a bench. "You're supposed to be adults!"

Alys and Ceirios froze mid-snarl. Both blinked at me, wide-eyed, as though the idea of not fighting hadn't even entered their minds. Like fighting or submitting were the only two modes dragons came pre-installed with.

"Alys broke her ribs in basic training," her brother blurted suddenly, voice thin and shaky. "Claimed that if she could get clocked so easily, she'd only be in the way. It healed, but they pierced her lungs, and now she's got a cough and breathing problems." His words tumbled fast, like he'd been holding them in his chest for too long and they were clawing out on their own.

Both dragonesses deflated, their anger splintering into something smaller and sadder. Alys' wings sagged a notch, her eyes darkening as her jaw clenched. Ceirios folded tighter into herself, tail curling in a loose spiral, breath visibly hitching in her sides. I could hear it now--each breath a shallow pull, dragging like wet cloth through gravel.

"Why..." My voice softened instinctively. I stepped toward Alys, slower this time. My hand rose on its own, settling on the curve of her shoulder, squeezing gently. She flinched, lips peeling back in a flash of teeth, but stopped herself. Her shoulders rolled down. Her wings dipped but never fully touched the grass--defensive, still poised on the edge.

"I was... not in the best mind-set at the time," she muttered, voice brittle, eyes on a distant point. "We were practising air combat. We guessed humans would recruit rogue gryphons, so we trained hard. I struck Ceirios too hard. She fell. Unconscious." Her claws flexed involuntarily. "I was too startled to catch her. She was injured in the crash."

Ceirios' eyes narrowed to slits, oak-brown and sharp as daggers. "And when they asked why-"

"I told them you were weak. That you'd get in the way," Alys cut in, the words cracking on her tongue. "I was embarrassed. Ashamed. I lashed out to protect myself."

Her gaze flicked to me briefly. Some of the iron in her jaw slackened. "I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, Ceirios. I'm so sorry I hurt you like that. You were my only friend..."

The red dragoness stared at her--stared through her--with an expression raw and disarmed. Her pupils dilated slowly. "Y-You are?" she rasped. "Why?"

"Because it was wrong." Alys' words came quick, earnest, like she feared they'd disappear if she didn't get them out. "I left you like that. It wasn't right. I don't know how-"

"Stop." Ceirios lifted a paw, gaze falling. Her claws curled deep into the grass. Her tail drooped, limp and tired. "Are you saying this because you mean it? Or because he is here?" Her head rose, closing the distance fast. It wasn't territorial now. It was desperate, craving clarity.

Alys didn't hesitate. She stepped forward, chest rising with a shaky breath, tail flicking once behind her. Without another word, she pressed her forehead to Ceirios'. The red dragoness froze at first--but slowly, carefully, bent her taller frame down. Both exhaled in tandem, shoulders unlocking by degrees at the contact.

I stood dumbfounded, like I'd cracked open a book on chapter thirty without reading the rest. Like they'd just wrapped a war that I'd only skimmed the prologue to.

"Of course I mean it," Alys whispered. Her wings folded back neatly as she leaned harder.

Beside me, the drake shuffled, glancing down awkwardly before stepping in close and pressing his side against mine. His scales were warm and grounding.

"I, um. I'm James, by the way." I offered lamely.

"Gareth", he murmured back. His eyes flicked sidelong. "I'm her brother." A pause, heavy with unspoken curiosity. "...How did you...?"

The way his eyes darted made it obvious. I deadpanned. "We work at the same place." But then the memory clicked--my coat, the hidden mark. "How can you tell?"

He tapped his nose with a talon, smile faint but knowing.

I made a quiet ah sound.

Thankfully, Alys and Ceirios parted gently and folded into sitting positions near the bench, their posture relaxed but close. I dropped onto the bench again, leg bouncing without thought. Still tense and jumpy.

"So," the larger dragoness began at last, her voice loosening at the edges, her brown eyes fixed lazily on Alys, "what are you up to now?"

"Deliveries," she answered easily, her posture uncoiled and easy. A relaxed smile tugged at one side of her narrow snout. "But-" her gaze slid sideways to me, light flickering there like a glint of mischief. "I've been thinking of doing something more. What about you?"

I just looked at her. Unsure of what she meant.

Ceirios puffed out her chest, or at least tried. Her sternum swelled--but just as quickly, she winced and fell into a harsh coughing fit, her wings twitching reflexively at her sides. Before I could so much as lean forward in concern, she surprised me by dipping her clawed digits into the shoulder-mounted satchel every dragon seemed to own. With an easy, practiced motion, she retrieved a large, blocky-looking inhaler. Smooth as anything, she brought it to the end of her muzzle, shut her lips tight and slammed the canister down with a hissing crack like a furious snake.

I blinked as her posture eased visibly. The tension drained out of her limbs, her chest deflated, and she exhaled a long, relieved breath. Her scales flushed subtly warmer.

"Local guard," Ceirios declared after a beat, her voice finally steady and full-chested. "My caseworker said it'd suit me."

"Local guard?" I echoed, brow quirking. "You mean the police?" My mind flickered to the black-scaled dragoness I'd seen talking to Alys a week ago--her glossy hide, the vest insignia, the clipped words, and bulky stature. "You're an officer?"

"Not yet, no," Ceirios admitted sheepishly, ears flattening tight against her elegant horns. "I'm working on it. It's hard to get a placement, apparently."

I wasn't surprised. Not even slightly.

Dragons, gryphons, unicorns--they weren't people or another race or religion. They were aliens in every sense. Entirely divergent branches of evolution, the product of another world's ecosystem. The fact that a conversation like this was even possible felt more like divine interference than anything else.

"But, uh - deliveries!" Ceirios' tone snapped brighter, dragging me out of my spiralling thoughts. "That sounds fun. You get to fly around a lot, right?"

Alys' smile appeared again, but this time there was tension to it, like a taut wire. Too many teeth. Her fangs peeked out a little too far beneath her curled lips. Her angular eyes narrowed almost completely, her pupils thin. "Yep," she chirped. Her tail twitched sharply behind her. "How... W-What do local guards do exactly? Do they go out into combat?" Her forked tongue flicked nervously across her chops. "Haven't you had enough of that? Don't you want something simple?"

My phone buzzed just as Ceirios' jaw parted to answer. I slid it out and thumbed to accept without checking the screen.

"Zach's early," Sarah's voice crackled without even an introduction. "I'll be there in, like, fifteen."

I covered the receiver slightly. "No, no," Ceirios said quickly, responding to Alys. "They're more like peacemakers. Enforcing laws. The danger's pretty low compared to how it was... Really low."

"Huh. Y-You know, I've read about that."

"Got it," I muttered into the mic. "See you soon." Sarah hung up. I pocketed the phone and rose from the bench with a faint grunt, rolling my shoulders. "Alys", I said. "We should get moving. Sarah's headed to the cafe."

"Oh. Okay." Alys straightened fluidly, wings shifting and tail flicking in a wide, rippling arc behind her. She hesitated, claws kneading the grass, then glanced at Ceirios. "Um, Ceirios, do you... uhm... do you use Friendster?"

The red dragoness' face lit, teeth glinting. "Yes. I'll add you, Alys."

The drake who'd been standing nearby, mostly silent, chose that moment to approach me directly. Before I could react, he pressed the plated ridge of his brow against mine in what I could only assume was some draconic farewell or greeting. I stood there, rigid, blinking dumbly, but I let him do it. Not because I understood the gesture, but because he was a twelve-foot-long armoured predator and I was a spindly monkey in jeans.

The pair turned and left.

I stayed put, pulse still running hot, knees just a touch unsteady and palms clammy. A near-fight and an awkward reconciliation in the span of five minutes, and Alys? Alys looked like she'd just finished a pleasant chat with an old schoolmate. Tail swinging cheerfully, wings folded neatly, her posture loose and light.

"You two made up quick," I blurted finally, unable to keep the bafflement out of my voice. "I thought you'd start fighting, or she'd walk off."

Alys let out a strange, bright chirp and gave me a quick lick on the cheek, her rough tongue flashing hot against my skin. "I told you dragons forgive easily. We would've fought if I didn't say sorry, though. It was a small thing, to be fair. Just physical hurt I apologised for. After that? Nothing left to worry over. I didn't smash her eggs or cripple her mate." Her laugh trilled out, tail wagging lazily. "That would make a dragon lose their mind."

I forced a thin smile, careful not to dwell on the image. "Yeah. Humans too. We don't usually mate for life, but we do hold grudges for ages. I'm still pissed at my cousin for deleting my FireRed save."

Alys' eyes glinted with amusement. "Imagine what a mix would be like." She bent her limbs low, crouching down fluidly. I hesitated just a breath before stepping forward and swinging astride her back, settling atop her with almost practised ease. My hands found her horns by habit, fingers curling tight around their smooth, cool curve.

"The pettiness of a human and the life-bond of a dragon."

I pictured it. Couldn't help it. My throat tightened. "That sounds... immensely depressing."

"Yeah," she agreed lightly. She rose beneath me with a powerful, effortless grace, wings flaring briefly to balance. "I kind of want to say it's cool, but no. Being miserable all the time's just sad."

"Fun talk," I muttered dryly, leaning forward as she began to walk. "Lovely date topic."

"If I die, you're not allowed to move on," she chirped sweetly. "You've got to stay sad. Forever. All the time."

"Romantic".

She didn't bounce or prance this time. Instead, she built a steady clip, gathered speed, and flared her wings once, leaping cleanly into the sky with a rush of wind. We weren't too high--low enough that the roads and landmarks still made sense to me. On reflex, I nudged her leftward with a gentle tug of her horns.

Her body banked smoothly.

"Easy," she warned. "I fly with my head, y'know."

'You do?' I tilted her again. She banked hard to the right, following.

"Are you a horse?!" I gasped, gripping tighter and angling her down. She whined in frustration but obeyed. "That's amazing!"

"James!" She squawked. "Don't do that!"

"No, wait. I think I can..."

I leaned left, scanning for the Greggs, but Alys shook her head, loosening my hold.

"James, I can't land in the street anyway. There are only two pads in the city." She took in a huffy breath. "Is it near the train station?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

She made a loud hmm sound.

Silence.

...I did it again, more subtly this time. A slight tilt. Her wings adjusted automatically, her neck following. She veered off course for a full minute before gasping and banking so sharply I almost fell.

"James!" She snapped. "Arsehole. No vent for you next season."

I burst out laughing. Couldn't help it.

And then her words sank in.

"Wait. Next season?"

She nodded. "Yeah. My oestrus has been out of whack lately, so if you're lucky, you'll get some in... two months. Give or take a week. But if you keep being horrible, nothing till the one after."

"Oh."

The wind roared. Quieter than it had been higher up, but still loud. She flapped hard, climbing, then angled downwards.

I glanced at the ground, spotting the outline of the train station from when I'd mapped the route once.

"I didn't know dragons only mated in, uh, heat."

Hm.

"Yep. Like I said, dragons mate for bonding and eggs."

Hm.

"Right..."

She stopped flapping, gliding steady now. I drummed my fingers against her horns, trying to seem casual. Not at all bothered I'd just been denied something I'd only just realised I wanted.

There was always porn, but... fuck, it'd be that white gryphon. No. Wait. Human women existed.

Damnit. Mental Freudian slip.

...would Alys let me take pics?

Snort.

I blinked and refocused. Alys was shaking, rumbling with held-back laughter.

"Oh, you fucking..." My face burnt. "You better not be messing with me."

That did it.

"Of course I am!" She squawked, laughing so hard it drowned the wind. "Did you really think we only had sex four times a year?!"

I didn't answer. She just kept laughing.

The landing pad sat atop the train station--a reworked roof with a bright orange circle in the centre. Alys touched down smoothly; my weight made no difference.

I dismounted, steadying myself. My legs were shaky, but at least I didn't fall.

She led me to a doorway and down a flight of stairs into the station proper. The door clunked shut behind us, oddly loud. I paused, tried to open it--locked. Magnetic, probably. One-way.

Huh. Neat.

We were being watched, obviously. Constant. Expected, sure, but it still got under my skin. Maybe because we were dating, and I wanted to look out for her more. Maybe it was all the crap I'd read online. I didn't know.

Whatever the reason, I stuck close to her as we moved through the bustling station and into the city streets. A small plus: everyone gave us a wide berth.

Still...

Despite how unbothered she tried to look--despite how, on our first outing, she'd said she cared more about how I was perceived than her--she looked nervous.

Floppy ears pinned back. Mouth clamped shut. Tail curled nearly between her legs, the tip twitching anxiously. Maybe it was the crowd. Maybe the extra judgemental stares that day.

I couldn't do anything either. Not without making a scene. I was just one guy.

All I could do was be there. I took a breath and slung my arm around her neck, like we were just at the movies.

My first instinct was to hold her hand--impossible--but I had to let her know somehow I was still there.

Her ears flicked up, then halfway back down. She turned to meet my eyes, smiled, and leaned over to nuzzle her cheek to mine in a slow, lazy circle, her whisker markings digging in.

I laughed, trying to push her away playfully, but she pressed harder.

"We're nearly there." I nodded. "No smushing when we're eating."

"Dumb rule."

"I know. I'm heartbroken too."

The cafe was in sight.

"Hey", I started, "what are those marks on your cheek anyway?" Zach's car tore past, speeding off like the dipshit he was. "I thought they were scars for ages."

Still don't know why Sarah talked to the guy.

"They're whiskers," she said easily, tone light. "Some dragons call them family lines since they're inherited. Samys has less on her cheeks but more on the base of her horns. Jarys and Rhys have the same as me."

"Huh." I squinted at them. Thin breaks in the scales that arched delicately from her jawline and curled along the edges of her cheekbones, glinting faintly under the afternoon light. "What do they do?"

"No idea." She shrugged, wings flicking, a strangely birdlike gesture for something so reptilian.

"You don't know?"

She raised a forelimb, spread her claws palm-up with a lopsided grin and tapped her cheek. "Sometimes they light up when using magic, but only because they're so close to my leyline system. They don't do anything on their own." With an amused flick of her tail, she bumped my hip. "What are those black things on your face for?"

Thrown by the shift in subject, I blinked and instinctively reached up. "What black things?"

"The things. The little black circles." She paused, narrowing her eyes as she searched my face. "You have one under your eye and near your mouth."

"Moles?" I tried.

"The..." Alys tilted her head sharply to one side, expression scrunched in concentration. "No, not the animal. Freckles?"

I pulled my hand away from her neck and tapped the mole beneath my left eye. "This?"

"Yes. That."

"Yeah, it's a mole," I explained. "And... I have no idea what they do. Something to do with blood? I know they bleed a lot if you knock one off." My nose wrinkled reflexively at the memory of catching one on a razor. We kept walking along the quiet street, the cafe directly ahead. I tucked my hands into my jacket pockets, consciously keeping my arms to myself in case more personal comparisons sprang up. "What are your horns for? Fighting?"

Her nostrils flared in what I assumed passed for a laugh. "Flirting and fighting. Not so much for fighting now, but do you see how the top one curves forward at the back?" She lowered her scaled head and bent down slightly, showing off the long horns that arched over her crown.

I nodded. "Yeah?"

"In, like, the pre-hive days, we'd lock horns and fight each other for territories. Kind of like deer, but messier." She straightened again and gave her neck a lazy crack, scales shifting audibly. "But then we realised living in one hive is way better than caves. Less murder. More gossip." She smirked. "What's the fluff on your head for, then?"

"I thought you liked my hair."

"I do like the fluff; now answer the question."

"No idea. Probably because humans are descended from monkeys, and they had fur. Maybe we didn't need it, and it just... fell out weirdly and left us with this." I raked a hand through my hair and shook my head. "I'm not a scientist."

The familiar blue entrance of the cafe loomed ahead. My stomach twisted in anticipation. I reached for the door handle but hesitated, my thumb resting on the cool metal. "You ready?" My voice cracked more than I wanted it to. "Sarah is cool with it, but... uh... yeah."

Alys pressed her maw shut, exhaled slowly, and nodded once, wings folding snugly against her sides like a reflexive brace. Even like this, she took up space: wide, sharp-edged, and impossible to ignore.

I pushed open the door and stepped inside. She followed.

The smell of coffee, toasted bread, and sweet syrups hit instantly. Dim yellow lights pooled over polished wooden tables, and the low hum of quiet conversation filled the air. Sarah was already here, tucked into a booth in the back corner -- perfect. Out of the way. Less chance of stares.

"Uh, James?"

I turned at Alys' voice.

She was stuck.

Her wings caught on both sides of the narrow doorframe, shoulders hunched awkwardly as she tried to shuffle through. It was like watching a large cat wedge itself into a shoebox.

I took a quick stride back and helped guide her back out, gently folding one wing tighter against her body. We stood there for a beat, painfully aware of glances flicking our way. Alys swallowed, squared her jaw, and angled her body just right on the second try, slipping through the slender doorway with only a faint scrape of scales against wood.

Inside, her scarlet eyes darted quickly -- floor, me, the staring patrons -- and back again. Her claws twitched at her sides. "Sorry", she murmured, voice flat but strained at the edges.

"Don't be," I said instantly, louder than I meant to. "Doors in public areas are supposed to be double wide. It's not your fault." Without waiting for her to stew, I led her toward the back booth.

Sarah sat upright with a grin on her face. Tall and painfully thin, her bent legs were angled awkwardly beneath the table. Her crutches rested beside her, battered and chipped.

"Yo!" Her hazel eyes widened, grin impossibly stretching. "Y-You weren't lying?" She gasped, voice far too loud as usual. "She's a dragon. Like an actual dragon." Alys shrank visibly at the words, her ears flicking flat against her head.

I nudged her gently with my side and deadpanned, "You are? I always thought you had some kind of skin condition."

Her eyes blinked -- once, twice, thrice -- with the ever-odd horizontal slide of her second 'eyelids'. "Yes," she said dryly. A pause lingered too long, but then, carefully: "And you're some kind of human, right?"

The attempt was hesitant, shaky -- but it was there. I smiled to myself.

I slid into the booth opposite Sarah, scooting towards the centre to give Alys more room. She climbed in after me, graceless and fidgety, tail curling tightly along the bench to avoid knocking the table. Her side pressed firmly against mine, her broad wing slipping behind my back. I resisted the urge to flinch as the bony fingers splayed gently at my waist, holding me tightly.

"James..." Sarah groaned theatrically, narrowing her eyes at me as I whipped out my phone. "Are you seriously ordering on the app just so you don't have to talk to someone?"

My cheeks burnt at the accusation, but before I could come up with some half-hearted defence, Alys let out a quiet chirp of laughter. "He does that all the time," she admitted shyly, her voice dipping as she lowered her muzzle slightly. There was something almost bashful in it, in the way she fidgeted and curled her tail tighter around her side. "A-At work, he got table service. For a Coke."

"James!" Sarah gasped, scandalised.

Alys wriggled in place, her tail thumping once against the wood of the booth with a muted thud. "It was a small one, too," she added with a growing grin, her muzzle warming up in a way that was easy to spot if you knew where to look. I did. "He said he couldn't afford luxury drinks since it was the day before payday."

Sarah pressed her palm against her mouth in exaggerated shock. "That's some god-tier laziness. Why didn't you just get up and grab it yourself?"

"Because that's dumb!" I finished tapping our order into the app, double-checking the table number and adding an extra steak pie for Alys. "No one's ever at the till, and I didn't want to stand around for ages just for one drink."

"No. The table service," Sarah clarified slowly, as though explaining algebra to a particularly thick child. "You basically ordered delivery. For a drink. A small drink. That poor worker."

"I am a poor worker. I'm allowed a treat."

"A treat isn't abusing the app," she shot back.

"Yeah, yeah..." I muttered, hitting pay and tucking the phone face-down onto the table.

After a beat, I leaned slightly to the right, resting my head gently against Alys' shoulder. "I got you an extra thingy," I mumbled.

"Thank you for the extra thingy," she murmured back, her voice quiet but genuine.

Across from us, Sarah sipped her green tea--too much sugar, as always--took a deliberate bite of her snack, and, with her mouth half full, said, "So..." Her wing tightened reflexively around my back. "You two, uh... you're really together?" Excitement. Disbelief. Hesitation. "Together together?"

"Yeah," I replied evenly. Calm and confident, like I was confirming that water was wet or the sun rose every morning. No big deal. "And you're cool with that, right?" I asked anyway. I had to. Couldn't not.

Sarah blinked, then nodded slowly. "Of course I am. It's just..." Her eyes flicked sideways, over to Alys. The dragoness shrank visibly in her seat, shoulders hunching, wings tucked tight. Despite her size, she suddenly seemed small--too big for the booth but too fragile for the moment. Sarah forced a smile. Broad. Too broad. "Not quite normal, b-but I mean, who wants normal anyway?" Her grin stretched wider. Friendly. Accepting. But not easy. A crinkle appeared between her brows; her eyes twitched minutely at the corners. "As long as no one's getting hurt and no laws are being broken, who cares?"

I breathed slowly through my nose.

She didn't get it.

I could see it clear as glass in the way her gaze skittered back to me, how she fiddled nervously with the corner of her napkin. Accepting, yeah. Open-minded, sure. But not really. Not down to the roots. She didn't understand why I was with Alys.

She didn't get why I'd let her bite me -- she noticed the mark. When I'd first sat down, I saw the worry on her face.

Why I'd chosen a dragon.

She couldn't comprehend that a dragon had chosen me.

I swallowed that down. I couldn't blame her. Most people wouldn't get it either.

"Exactly," I said simply, forcing the corners of my lips upward so she wouldn't see the way the moment itched under my skin. It didn't matter. She was trying. That counted for more.

Sarah muttered something about too much tea and needing the toilet. I passed her crutches over on reflex, one hand shooting out to stop Alys from moving to help her. Alys gave me a confused glance, but I shrugged lightly. Sarah wheeled herself up carefully, pulling a key from her pocket, and disappeared into the disabled toilets.

Silence wrapped around us.

I sat back, careful not to lean too hard against the wing still curled around my side. Alys' wing fingers flexed gently, holding me in place, not trapping but tethering. Just... contact. Familiarity.

"She's nice," Alys said softly after a while.

"She is, yeah." My eyes drifted towards the counter where an overworked barista darted back and forth between machines, pouring, foaming, tamping, and shouting. "You know... I've been wondering. Are we breaking any laws?"

Alys' brow arched, scarlet eyes narrowing slightly.

"You're legally a person, right?" I continued quickly, stumbling over my words before they could sound worse. "I mean- you're obviously not... I don't know. Classified as, uh... an animal? No offence."

The bell rang. My eyes flicked over on reflex and then lingered at the sight of a purple dragoness. She also had to awkwardly angle her wings to get in.

Alys let out a short, raspy snort that buzzed warmly in her throat, drawing my attention back to her. "Relax. I get what you mean." She shifted in her seat, wings rustling faintly. "No, I'm not an animal, James. But I'm also not a human. So... if 'animal' just means 'not human', then technically I would be one. But so would elves or merfolk or whoever else." Her claws tapped lightly on the seating, an absent rhythm. "I'm a person. I've got an ID and a home, and I'm classed as a citizen. I just can't vote or run for office, whatever that means. Oh - uh, I also can't leave the country."

I nodded slowly. Emergency citizenship, then. Provisional rights. Probably a lot of fine print tucked away in policies I'd never seen.

What about medical treatment? Did she have a GP? An NHS dentist? Could she get married? How did that work? Dragons laid eggs, right? I doubted hospitals had birthing plans for clutches. And the kids... Would they have full citizenship? Were they stateless? Did anyone know?

The purple dragon took the booth next to us. Quickly taking out, to my surprise, a regular phone. Not a tablet, but instead a sleek black iPhone.

I brought my attention back to my ramblings.

Four years, give or take, since dragons had appeared on Earth, and I still knew next to nothing. Most people didn't. Society had dragged its heels every step of the way, resisting even the smallest shifts. It was weird, especially considering how lax the government had been on immigration in the past.

Only recently had dragons been encouraged--or shoved--into joining the workforce, pushed to integrate properly. Even now, most were kept in isolated compounds, rarely, if ever, leaving. I'd only met dragons that were brought to the restaurant to try 'Earth food.'

I exhaled slowly and sat back, tucking one foot under the other. ...but whatever. For now, she was here. And that was enough.

It didn't matter all that much in the long run--not to me, at least. As long as Alys and her family were safe, comfortable, okay... that was all that ever really counted. Politics had always sucked and always would. The best way I'd learnt to deal with them was to toss in a vote every few years and keep my head low.

Avoid Twitter as much as humanly possible...

"You look like you're thinking really, really hard." Alys chirped beside me, her voice soft and sing-song. Curious. Warm.

I blinked back to the present and gave a faint smile. "Just life," I admitted with an exhale, breath deflating from my chest. "And how terrible politics are. Honestly? Maybe you guys had the right idea with living in hives. At least then you didn't have to deal with rent or taxes or government shit."

"Dyna'r cynllun mwyaf dumb a glywais erioed. Yn y bôn, dim ond chi sy'n crio." The purple dragon was loud, so I did my best to ignore her. Alys did as well.

She shook her head, tuning out the dragoness, and hummed in agreement, or maybe just sympathy at my words. "We did have to pay rent. Sort of. Not with coins, though. We shared almost everything: food, treasures, even hunting grounds. If you didn't bring in your share, you lost access to some of it. One season, I didn't hunt enough meat and lost rights to a really nice area. It had berries and fruit nearly all year round, but I wasn't allowed to touch it for four months."

Her expression dulled, softening and closing off at the edges. "Jarys used to love honeyberries from that grove... I remember when I had to tell him I couldn't get them anymore. He threw a tantrum. He was only five, and it really upset him. I blamed myself. He blamed me. It wasn't fun. Eventually I resorted to stealing them. Just for him..."

Her voice trailed into quiet, heavy air. I swallowed.

"...What about your parents?" I asked, carefully.

Her answer came sharp and bitter. A bark of laughter without a shred of humour. "Oh, those two useless worms didn't provide anything but the yolk and shell for our eggs." She shook her head, a snarl twitching her muzzle. "I was fifteen when I had to start looking after my brothers properly. Samys helped, but after Aiden came along, she was always busy."

"Nac oes. Dydw i ddim yn agos atynt. Mae gen i rywfaint o gynnil. Gallwch chi ddweud? O wel."

"Aiden?" I echoed, brow tugging down, trying not think about the guy.

The dragon behind us choked on her drink. We turned to look at her, but she recovered quickly, glanced over her shoulder to give us a sheepish look before returning to her painfully loud conversation.

Alys drew in a slow breath, her shoulders rising and falling. "Oh wow. I never told you about him, did I?" A small, breathy laugh escaped her. "For all her whining and snarling, her mate was a human. A decent drake, too. Strong mage. He at least tried to help. When he wasn't drowning in work, he'd find hunting grounds for me or just outright buy meat from a human hive. I... actually kind of miss him." Her gaze softened, distant and fond. "He was good to us. Helped me figure out lightning when no one else would even talk to me. Calmed me down when I was stressed."

She glanced sideways at me, the corner of her mouth quirking. "You remind me of him sometimes, you know."

I blinked. "Yeah?"

Her grin widened. "He made dumb faces too." She leaned back against the headboard of the booth, horns scraping and wings settling behind her. "Honestly? I was jealous of Samys when she told me they were together. I had a crush on him. Nothing serious--I was fourteen when we met him--but still. Silly kid stuff."

I let the information settle, working its way into my understanding of her. Slowly, the corners of my mouth lifted.

"So you've always had a thing for humans?" I teased as our drinks and food arrived, trays clinking softly against the table. "And here I thought I was special. I'm heartbroken. Absolutely devastated."

"If it helps, poor baby," she murmured, leaning herself against me, "I've never kissed a human before. A few drakes, but no humans."

I gave her a look of mock offence. "I have also never kissed a dragon. And, for the record, also no drakes."

"Humans?" She asked slyly, a brow ridge lifting.

"I'm twenty-four, Alys. It'd be a bit weird if I hadn't." The conversation was teetering on that strange, warm edge, and for once, I was thankful Sarah took ages in the bathroom. "Same with you."

"You, uh, seemed pretty quick at figuring out the tongue stuff..." There it was. The gleam in her eye, sharp and probing.

I took a slow drink of my coffee, letting the warmth steady me. "I... might've had some practice. Plus, you know, Google."

She didn't reply straight away, just reached out and cupped her drink between her paws, tail flicking idly. The pause stretched a second too long. I didn't want awkwardness settling in. Not here. Not again. So I cleared my throat and bit the bullet.

"You can ask me questions, Alys," I said quietly. "I'm not going to get weird about it."

She hesitated. Then, in typical Alys fashion, barrelled through without warning. "Is it wrong that I feel a tiny bit jealous? Of the humans you've been with?"

Straight out with it. No build up, no cautious circling. Just dumped it in my lap.

I felt my lips twitch, her bluntness cutting through my composure in the best way. "...Maybe a little bit? Okay, maybe not wrong, but a little silly. I've only had, like, three relationships, and that's if you count one when I was twelve. None of them got past messing around, anyway." Another sip. My heart was thumping now, steady and heavy.

"I know it's dumb," she muttered, curling in on herself slightly. "But like I said... dragons mate for life. I get that here on Earth that's seen as really prudish or old-fashioned or whatever, but it just... bugs me sometimes." Another sigh. She lifted a paw to rub at her eyes. "Kissing a courting partner when you're fourteen is one thing, but, like... sexual stuff? I don't want to be compared to someone else."

I hesitated. "...So you've really never done anything?"

Her ears drooped, tail falling limp. She looked away, putting her drink down. "No. I know, I know. It's lame."

"No. No, it's fine. Really, Alys. I don't mind if-"

The bathroom door creaked open. I shut my mouth immediately, the words freezing on the back of my tongue. Sarah reappeared, crutches clicking rhythmically as she made her way over. Alys felt it too. I could tell; her posture stiffened, wings tucking in close as she busied herself with her food, tearing into her chicken bake with sudden, ravenous focus. Her mug of hot chocolate was lifted fast to her maw once the meal was demolished. I mirrored her instinctively, nursing my large coffee to cover the quiet hum of unfinished words between us.

My sister glanced at the purple dragon, who simply flashed her a wide grin before turning away.

"Deliveries?" Sarah said, falling limp into the booth like a discarded coat. Alys blinked and stared at her, her mouth full, muzzle dusted in crumbs that clung to the scales around her lips. "James mentioned you doing deliveries and being stupid good at them since you can fly so fast."

Alys swallowed thickly, licked her chops, and gave a small shrug. "Yeah, I'm pretty fast, so it makes it not so hard. I, uh, get to sit down and play on my tablet if I do them early. I mostly just play games my brother downloaded. B-But I have been thinking about police work. You know? So I can do more."

I didn't even feel the mug tilt too far until the burning hit. Hot coffee shot straight down the wrong hole. I hacked into the sleeve of my jacket, heat and panic flaring in tandem. My chest jolted as I tried to suppress the cough. My throat burned, and my eyes watered furiously. Both of them turned to stare at me, Alys' ears pinning in concern and Sarah's brows inching up toward her hairline.

I waved them off hard, the motion jerky. "I-I'm fine," I rasped, voice cracking like splintered glass. "I just wa-" Cough. "Wasn't expecting it to be that hot," I lied, breathless and flushed. God.

What the hell did she just say?

Where did that come from?

Why was my coffee so fucking hot?!

It had been borderline lukewarm but when I looked down into the mug it was boiling. Literally. Bubbling. Steam wafting up. Like my hands were suddenly scorching hot or something.

Alys hesitated, visibly checking to make sure I wasn't about to keel over. When I gave a shaky thumbs up, she pressed on. "But, yeah. Uhh. I've been thinking about it for a little bit. I met a police dragon last week, and an old friend is joining too. I was in my planet's military, so it would be a nice fit. I wouldn't be in active combat, so... yeah... it might be cool."

Fuck. My heart.

I sat back slowly, setting my cup down with deliberate care, but my pulse was pounding in my ears. She was serious. Not a passing thought. I hadn't even seen her talk to people that much, let alone consider something like that. I should've been proud. I was proud. But under it, gnawing and bitter, something else clawed.

"Oh", Sarah nodded slowly, the movement jerky, mirroring my own falter. "That's... nice." Her eyes flicked sideways, catching mine briefly. A warning glance? Sympathy? I couldn't tell.

"But haven't you had enough stress? No offence, I mean."

"My friend said it wouldn't be active combat, at least. Just maintaining the peace." Alys took in a slow breath, her wings giving a restless twitch against the bench seat. "And besides, it would probably pay more than my current job. Right?" She turned those bright, steady eyes on me.

I swallowed hard, tongue dry. I chewed the inside of my lip for a beat longer than I needed to. My gut was twisting up, sharp and mean. "Uhh. Yeah." I tapped the rim of my cup absently, fingers drumming. "But are you sure? It'd be really hard to get into, especially for dragons. And there's a ton of training involved. It's not just going out in public. You've got to know the law. All of it."

"Yeah, I know," she replied, voice soft but unshaken. "But I still want to try it. You said I should try to do more."

I winced inwardly. Right. I had said that.

"I meant... like... hobbies."

Her ears flicked up sharply, wings twitching tighter against her and my side. She put the finished hot chocolate back down on the table.

"Do you... not want me to? I thought you'd be happy."

My breath caught, heart skipping. Shit. No. That's not what I meant. I forced a smile, lips pulling a little too tight. "N-Nah," I rushed out, nudging her gently with my elbow. "If it's what you want, then I'll help as much as I can. Even if it's teaching you that tackling humans in the street is bad."

Her grin tugged crookedly across her muzzle. "And if they deserve it?"

"Then... maybe?"

"Hmmm." Her tail flicked.

I tried to breathe, but it barely made a dent in the knot coiled in my ribs. She was moving forward. Actually looking ahead. My chest should've felt lighter, but all I could think about was how fast it was happening. Like if I blinked, she'd be off and away. I'd only just stuffed all my insecurities down, and yet they were bubbling.

"Speaking of people that deserve it," Sarah cut in, voice bright, tense ripping. "Do you want to come to the seaside with us next weekend? Scarborough?"

"Fuck..." I groaned, dragging both hands down my face until they tugged my cheeks. "I completely forgot about that."

"You forgot?!" Sarah laughed, mock horror dripping from every syllable. "You better not have. No shot am I going by myself."

"You don't have to go, Sarah. You're a big girl. You can hang out at home."

"Uhhh. Yes, I fucking do. Dad will get all moody with me if I don't."

My stomach snapped shut like a sprung trap. The breath caught hard in my throat, shallow and locked. "Okay, no. If he's going, there's genuinely no way I am. I'm not bringing Alys near him."

"Huh? Why not?"

Sarah's smile dimmed, something tight pulling at the corners of her mouth. "He's... uh... kind of... horrible."

"Horrible?" Alys echoed quietly, brow ridges furrowing.

"He's a fucking dick," I ground out, voice low and clipped. My hands curled into fists in my lap. "And I'm not letting him say something shitty to you, because I know he will. I'm surprised he's not made a post about it already. Kids don't ever appreciate what their parents did for them growing up. They don't get why tradition is tradition." My jaw clenched, molars grinding. "He is also the chief of police, Alys. That's why I was so quiet. He might just not hire you at all. It doesn't matter how good you are."

Alys shifted closer. I barely registered it until her wing curled tighter around me, warm and heavy against my side, fingertips digging in. "Then I guess I'll have to change his mind. If Ceirios and that black hen could get in, then so can I."

I swallowed hard, throat bobbing. God. She was serious.

"See? That's the spirit!" Sarah cheered, her grin snapping back into place. "And no, you big baby, he won't be there. He's busy, so we're safe, and you're coming with us. Do you like the beach, Alys?"

"I've never been to one, so I don't know."

Sarah's grin only widened. "Good! It'll be fun. You can splash in the ocean and try to drown James because he's a shitty swimmer."

I picked my drink back up! forced down the rest in one swallow, but it didn't help. My nerves were still burning under my skin. "I'm good at snorkelling," I muttered defensively.

"Everyone is good at snorkelling."

Fine.

"Fine. I'll go. I don't think I'm working that Saturday anyway." I glanced at Alys, my voice softening without me meaning to. "Alys, you?"

She shook her head gently. "I'm free."

"Beach trip it is, then."

Even as I smiled, something heavy still sat behind my ribs -- a stupid, selfish part of me that wanted her to stay small, stay safe, and stay mine just a little longer.