



CAVEMAN ALIEN'S

CURSE

CALISTA SKYE

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Epilogue

- NICHELLE -

“We will return home.” The giant caveman looks down on me, no emotion on his alien face. “The dragon isn’t coming.”

I sigh and slowly get to my feet. My legs and arms feel cold and stiff after sitting on the ground for an hour. “Told you it wouldn’t work.”

“You did say that,” Torant’ar rumbles, looking around for dangers. “And yet we know no other way.” He starts walking back to the treehouse, and I follow.

I know there are two other cavemen less than thirty feet away on two sides, but I neither hear nor see them. These guys are good at being quiet, and the jungle is so dense I wouldn’t spot a school bus until it was right on top of me.

The night is cool, and the moon Yrf turns the treetops blue. Down here on the ground, I can only spot it occasionally when there’s a small gap in the foliage above me. The air is still and calm.

It should be a good time to hunt dragons. But tonight we had no luck.

As always, I wish I was back on Earth. I hate it here. I hate the jungle and the dangers and the lack of basic conveniences and

comforts. I hate the sudden noises in the jungle, the sticky sap that drips on me and the stiflingly humid air. With every fiber of my being I wish I was back on Earth. Back on the coast, sitting on a rock and looking out at the horizon, smelling the briny sea.

That's my home. Not a treehouse in this insane alien jungle right by an active volcano.

Iris meets me at the foot of the ladder to the treehouse. "Nothing?"

"I guess the tied-up virgin isn't as attractive to dragons as the myths lead us to believe," I tell her as we climb up the rope ladder to the kitchen level.

"What? They tied you *up*?!" Iris exclaims.

"No, no," I assure her as I sit down on a low, three-legged stool and grab a clay pot with some caveman booze in it. "Just a figure of speech. I was sitting on a piece of fur, pretending to be making arrows. He didn't take the bait." I take a sip. *Frit* will never be my favorite wine, but it's better than nothing.

"Yeah," Iris sighs. "Betruchael's smarter than that. It's like he can sense the cavemen from a long distance. And when there's three of them, there's no chance he'll get close. Even if we're using the best bait we have. The guys have injured him too many times. He's got to be gun-shy by now, pardon the expression."

We're pretty sure Betruchael is an actual dragon. We've only seen him in his human form, a giant, intensely beautiful man with gold for skin and stars for eyes. There's a hint of scales to his skin, and whenever he's close, we girls get scared. As in, panicky without having any obvious reason to. Even when we can't see him.

I wipe my mouth. “Yeah. I didn’t feel anything. Not a twinge of fear. Nothing. Just boredom. So he’s miles away.”

Iris looks out the small window, towards volcano Cronk. “Think it might be because of that?”

“Because Cronk has been acting up? I don’t know. I guess it’s possible that he was on the wrong side of the lava stream when it overflowed, and now he can’t get back to our neck of the woods. But something tells me that’s not it.”

“Yeah. It would be too easy a way to get rid of him,” Iris ponders. “And planet Xren never gives you a break.”

Cronk’ax climbs past with the blunderbuss in his hands, holding it like a puppy. “No catch today. Perhaps tomorrow. We shall go farther from our home and see if that makes a difference.”

He carefully gives the primitive gun to Iris, who’s become its unofficial custodian. I give the gun a quick glance to check that it’s uncocked. This is a stone age planet, and the cavemen are completely new to guns and related topics like gun safety.

“Good idea,” she says as she places the gun on the floor, pointing at a wall with only empty air behind it. “We’re not giving up.”

The reason we want to kill Betruchael isn’t that he’s an absolute jerk who accosts us in the jungle, makes us scared, tells us sneaky lies, and tortures us every chance he gets. There’s another group of Earth girls on Xren, and they have access to flying saucers which we suspect can take us to Earth with no trouble. Which is weird, since our home planet must be several light years away. But those girls have let us know, in the nicest possible terms, that they don’t want anything to do with us until we get rid of Betruchael. To that end, they’ve

lent us that homemade blunderbuss. It's loaded with black powder and pieces of gold, which they claim is poison to dragons.

The implication is clear: kill Betruchael or forget about ever seeing Earth again.

And we've been trying for months. But he's a wily dragon, and we haven't seen him for a while.

I hide a yawn. "We're not giving up. But maybe we have to think of another way. We can make a trap, maybe. Trick him into falling in. Or we can lure him away to the Trantu tribe. He wants gold, we know that. They have a big totem pole covered in the stuff."

"But their village is on a small island, and he knows the Trantu tribe would kill him on the spot."

I take off the earrings and the tiny necklace and hand them to Iris. "Better keep track of these."

She opens the small, iron box where we keep our most valuable possessions. I glimpse my old, dead cell phone in there before she closes the lid. "Yep, that gold is part of the bait. You should get some sleep now, Nichelle. Sleep in, too. It has to be two in the morning. Nobody expects you to do much work the day after being dragon bait."

As if on cue, from an upstairs level of the treehouse there's the thin, but piercing sound of a two week old baby waking up hungry. Haisley's delivery was easy and much less anxiety-inducing than Jinx's, because we knew the magic space gel would make it smooth.

Soon, Jinx's baby Terra will start up too, her several months older lungs making her a much more effective alarm than Haisley's little Jorda.



“If I can get any sleep.” I yawn as I climb up to the next platform. “I’m betting I can.”

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“We might be able to sail there,” Iris says. It’s the next day, and all we girls are sitting on the kitchen level, eating dinner at sunset. Today it’s all vegetables and fruit, because the lava stream has widened to where the cavemen can’t get across it to hunt.

I dip my wooden spoon into a bowl of a tasty casserole we’ve come up with. “I bet the guys could build a ship. Karet’ox knows how to make boats, anyway.”

“And do what?” Jinx asks, cradling little Terra in her arms. “If we can even find their village. ‘Hi, here we are, despite you saying you didn’t want us to be on the same hemisphere as you.’”

Haisley snorts. “Or we could say ‘Yo, we don’t like you hogging all the flying saucers that we think you are using to shoot back and forth to Earth on shopping trips.’ I mean, this all has an ethical side. Those girls are leaving us to fend for ourselves on a Jurassic planet, despite having a bunch of saucers. Or claiming to have, anyway. The more I think about it, the more mad I get. They know we have a baby, too.”

“There’s more going on there than they told us,” Iris says. “Aurora and Phoebe were careful not to say that they could in fact fly back to Earth. I suppose it might be true. And yet Phoebe was wearing shining white sneakers that wouldn’t last

a full year here on Xren. Was it a puzzle? Were they trying to tell me something?"

"No," Jinx chews. "They could have just told you straight. I'm actually getting mad myself, Haisley. Do they know the volcano is acting up and that one of our ways out of this part of the woods is cut off by lava?"

I finish the final spoonful of the veggie casserole. "Nobody's seen a saucer here since then, so I'm guessing not."

"But if Cronk erupts for real, how screwed are we?"

Haisley shrugs. "Totally? We're living on its lower slope. If it starts shooting rocks the size of buses, or it sends lava streams down here, we'd have to be really fast to get away past the lake. Or across it."

"The real danger of a volcano eruption is not really lava," I tell the girls, geology being a minor subject of mine before the abduction. "Lava flows pretty slowly. It's pyroclastic flows that's the real killer. Imagine a million tons of dry cement coming at you at eighty miles an hour. Now imagine that the cement is a thousand degrees or more. It's what killed all those people in Pompeii a couple thousand years ago."

"Well, you're a ray of sunshine tonight," Iris grumbles. "We actually have to seriously consider leaving and setting up shop somewhere else."

"I agree," Jinx says and strokes her baby's head. "How far would we have to go to be safe from an eruption, Nichelle?"

"It depends. Several miles, probably."

"Several miles into the jungle," Haisley says thoughtfully. "We'd have to go down that invisible river, I guess. Settle on its banks."

“And immediately we’re much less safe,” Iris says. “This place was good because nobody could get here without going past the volcano crater where the ground is burning hot, or through the lake. All the tribes left us alone.”

“We could go to Capree’s tribe,” I remind them. “We’d be safe there.”

“That’s probably our best bet,” Jinx agrees. “It gives that tribe a lot of power over us, though. I’m not saying I think they’d abuse that power, but right here we call all the shots without having to ask someone.”

“We built something good here,” Haisley muses. “In this hostile place, we’re prospering. I’m proud of what we’ve done. But that volcano is freaking me out. I don’t sleep well at night. Mostly because of my little Jorda, of course. But also because I worry about an eruption. And now I will worry about pyrotechnic flows. Thanks, Nichelle.” She gives me a lopsided smile and nudges me with her elbow to show me she’s joking.

“Anytime,” I tell the girls. “I’ll make you scared of volcanoes and earthquakes whenever you want. Oh, did you know volcanoes can just explode without warning?” I smile sweetly.

“Stop it!” Jinx groans and throws a small piece of fruit at me. “Things are bad enough as they are.”

I pop the fruit into my mouth. “They are. Just saying, everything can always get worse.”

We don’t reach an agreement about moving, but it does look like we’ll be ending up at Capree’s tribe. I’m not thrilled about it, but the girls are right. This place isn’t safe.

One by one the girls get up and climb the ladder to the sleeping platforms higher up. I slept until noon after the

nighttime dragon hunt, so I'm not that sleepy and sit there by myself, staring into the dying fire in the kitchen stove.

Reaching out, I get the iron box of valuables we still have from when we were abducted. They're odds and ends, whatever we were carrying when we were taken. The shiny, black screen of my dead phone is the closest thing I have to a mirror.

I don't often check my appearance, because there seems to be no point. And sure enough, there I am, much like before. Pale skin, nose a little too wide, eyes too close together, hair a mousy brown, now totally straggly and greasy after years of no shampoo.

I sigh as I replace the phone. Maybe we shouldn't blame the cavemen for the dragon not being tempted enough to show up.

All three cavemen are upstairs. There's no need for night watches here. This patch of the jungle is safe from both dinosaurs and tribesmen. Only Betruchael has shown himself on our turf. And that was a good while ago.

I reach out and lift the gun down from the shelf where it resides. It's heavy and primitive, a steel pipe made in a caveman's forge. The butt is wood, and the simple mechanism is mostly on the outside of the barrel. It's the kind of pirate-age gun Jack Sparrow might have carried. It's loaded and ready, just needing to be cocked.

It will only fire once, so Aurora and Phoebe told us to be sure we hit the dragon. In the chest or face, was their recommendation.

The solution to all this is obvious. The cavemen are useless for hunting Betruchael because he won't go near them. I'm the

only unmarried girl in our tribe, and I'm probably the only one who's not pregnant. I'm the most expendable of us.

But if I were out in the jungle on my own, would he approach me and demand gold? Would he be able to smell the gold that the blunderbuss is loaded with?

Not impossible.

Shit. I wish I could postpone this. But the earthquakes are more frequent now, and the lava streams are wider and run faster down the sides of the volcano. It's clear to me that there's an eruption on the way. And if I have to choose between spending the rest of my days in a caveman tribe *or* an Earth girl tribe with new sneakers and actual flying saucers, then I for one would really enjoy racking up some frequent-flyer miles.

Holding the gun in one hand, I climb down to the ground and walk into the jungle at random.

The night is quiet, and I see the peak of the volcano high above me. It glows in orange and yellow, meaning the crater must be just about full of lava. Yeah, we have to get out of here as soon as we can.

The jungle smells different at night. Some flowers send out intense scents in the dark, probably trying to lure insects to them. The insects are usually fifty times the size of Earth insects, so I stay alert and move carefully, freezing when I see the tiniest hint of movement.

Branches and twigs seem to stretch out to touch me. All around me the undergrowth rustles with life. While there aren't any dinosaurs, there's a lot of creatures I would prefer not to think about. It's not the first time I'm out in the jungle

alone at night, but it's a hateful experience I'm not keen to repeat.

This patch of jungle that we call ours is big, but not infinite. I've walked for maybe forty minutes when I see the blackness of the old lava in the distance, lit by the moon Yrf. That's where the side of the volcano starts to slope up at a much steeper angle. Soon I'll have to turn back—

A cold shiver goes down my back, and I have a strong urge to turn and run.

He's here.

“Out so late?”

His voice is smooth, deep, and perfectly melodic. It's both the most masculine and the coldest voice I've ever heard. He spoke English, but that doesn't surprise me. The girls told me he would.

I turn slowly, holding the gun with both hands at hip level, aimed straight ahead.

He's just standing there in the classic contrapposto stance, turned half away from me. His golden skin shines in the darkness. He's studying the claws on his fingers, his movements so smooth and perfect that something primal in me tells me to bow down and accept him as superior, just so he won't kill me on the spot.

He's wearing tight, dark pants and long, shiny boots. And nothing else. There's no weapon, no shirt, no jewelry. He needs none of that to be the most eye-catching thing on the planet.

“It's not late,” I tell him with a voice that shakes. “It's actually really early.” God, I wish I hadn't done this. He's a deadly

creature, and as opposed to the dinos, he's fully capable of being actually cruel and torturing for the thrill of it.

"That must be an attempt at a joke," he sighs. "Perhaps it were better if you didn't try to be funny. Did you catch the implied question in my observation?"

"I'm out because I couldn't sleep," I tell him. All I have to do now is aim the gun properly, cock it, and shoot. And all our problems will be solved.

I put my thumb on the hammer.

"Sleep? Ah yes. Just another of the needs that your inferior species use to fill your useless existence."

I pull the hammer back, making sure my thumb doesn't slip. "Do you have no needs, Betruchael?"

The act of preparing to shoot him is focusing my mind and makes it just about possible to speak without it turning into squeaking. He instills terror in me just by existing.

"I have few needs, little female. But they are strong and infinitely important." He gives me a smile that on any other guy would be boyish and cute. On him, it's just chilling.

*Click.* The hammer settles at the back of the mechanism. I carefully take my thumb off to see if it's being held there. "I heard that gold is one of them."

"Your hearing must be very sharp. Who would ever have thought that a *dragon* would want *gold*?" His voice drips with sarcasm.

"I've never seen a dragon before." Now all I have to do is raise the muzzle of the gun, point it at him, and pull the trigger. I do my best to empty my mind of all thought, but his presence overpowers me. He's so majestic, so unique, so

heart-achingly beautiful. Even in this dark jungle his features are clearly visible.

His eyes sparkle like distant stars. “There aren’t many of us left.”

I swallow, but my throat is as dry as sandpaper. Am I really going to do this? “Why is that?”

He looks away. “We are always hunted. You know that. Even you have taken part in such things. Recently, too. I saw you with your slayer friends, just waiting for me to appear so they could hack me to pieces with those swords.”

This is my chance. He’s not looking at me.

I raise the blunderbuss, steady my trembling arm with the other hand, and point it at the dragon’s chest.

My index finger finds the cold iron of the trigger.



- **BETRUCHAEL** -

“You saw me? I didn’t see *you*.” Her voice is distant because she’s busy pointing some kind of weapon at me.

Oh, the little idiot. Doesn’t she know there’s nothing she can do to hurt me? Those big slayers might be able to injure me with their immense blades. If I were in my real form, even they would have no chance to even nick my scales.

But they *would* try. This little female won’t.

I look at her, ignoring the weapon. “I can’t help but wonder what I have done to deserve being hunted. Have I killed anyone? Have I hurt anyone? Have I done anything other than helping your friends and saving their lives?”

“You have hurt them,” she tells me, still holding that weapon. “You pinched Iris’s ear, and you threatened to kill her.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Is that what she said?”

“They say you’re famous,” she persists. “You’re one of the worst dragons. The shamans know about you. They call you Betruchael the Evil. And The Curse.”

The idea of my name being that well known gives me a warm thrill. “Your tribe wants to kill me because I’m famous?”

The weapon trembles visibly. “I... they...”

“What am I supposed to have done?”

“I don’t know. But I know you’ve hurt my friends.”

“Has it crossed your mind that perhaps it is they who have hurt *me*?” I point to a thin line on my leg, the only visible mark after one of her slayers slashed his sword at me some time ago.

It’s fun to play with her mind. If she were to attack me with the weapon, she could do me no harm. But it’s more fun to stop her from using it at all. I wonder if I can make her give it to me. There’s some gold nearby, and I think it’s the weapon.

She gradually lowers the weapon. “They had to defend themselves from you.”

“Are we now talking about your friends with the swords that are as long as you are tall? Defending themselves against *me*, being entirely unarmed?” This female is unexpectedly attractive. I wonder what she would sound like if I were to rip some holes in her and then hold her up, watching the blood dripping to the ground.

“I don’t think you need weapons,” she says. “You’re dangerous without any.”

“Dangerous? I’m still waiting for the long list of your friends that I have killed or caused harm to.”

She has to think about it, her gaze never wavering from my face. “Iris and Haisley,” she finally says. “You hurt them both.”

“Oh. Are they still recovering from their grievous wounds?”

“They didn’t have wounds like that,” she admits. “Iris’s ear was sore for a while.”

I let the sentence hang in the air, forcing her to hear how ridiculous it is. “Her ear was sore?”

Her face goes red. “Because you pinched it with your claws.”

“Did it perhaps happen when I was busy pulling her out of a river? And killing a winged attacker with a venomous spike that was trying to get her?”

“I don’t think so.” The weapon is hanging limply down by her side. “She said you were dragging her along, forcing her to run.”

“Dragging her away from a venomous attacker, perhaps?”

“No. I... don’t know.”

“For someone to *know*, they really should have been there, yes? Oh, if only you could ask someone who was present at the time...”

“You’re saying Iris lied to us? I don’t believe that.”

I shrug. “Believe anything you want. Oh, you’re not pointing that weapon at me anymore. Aren’t you here to kill me? You should lift it and aim it at me.”

“I was,” the female admits. “Now I don’t think I will.”

“You needed to get away from your friends to think for yourself, perhaps. It is an interesting weapon, I must say. Did you make it?”

“No.”

“May I see it?”

She tries to hide the thing behind her. “I don’t think so.”

“Afraid I’ll use it on you? By your own statement, I’m famously dangerous even with no weapon. If I wanted to harm you, surely I wouldn’t need a weapon. Oh, never mind. I was

just trying to be polite and pretend to admire the workmanship.  
What is your name?"

"Nichelle."

I look her up and down, pausing at two places on her unusually feminine body. I hear her sharp intake of breath at the intensity of my gaze. I'm rewarded by an immediate scent of aroused female.

"Goodbye, Nichelle." I turn and make as if to walk away.

"Wait," she exclaims, as expected. Like any inferior female I show the tiniest degree of interest, she can't stand the possibility of being without me forever. Using her name was overkill. Hearing her name spoken by me places her deeply in my power. She should never have told me what she's called.

"Hmm?"

"You can see the gun if you want." She does something to it, probably rendering it harmless. Then she holds it out, presenting it to me.

"You want me to look at that thing?"

"You said you wanted to."

I look past her, into the woods. "Why should I?" She will now think it was her idea.

"Please."

I graciously lean in and peer at it, not touching. Yes, there is gold there. No doubt about it. And not just any gold. "It is called a gun? What does it do?"

Nichelle swallows visibly. "It makes a big bang."

I cock an eyebrow. "A bang? And you think that the sound would kill me?"

“It also shoots out metal pieces.”

I reach out and slowly grab the gun. “I have heard of such things. And I suspect some have been used on me in the past.” It’s a heavy metal pipe, ugly and badly made. But there is gold in it. I look inside it. It’s dark, but I see a pack of something rammed into it.

“Did they miss?” the female asks. “Since you’re alive, I mean.”

“Some missed, some hit. None did any harm.” The pipe is too small for me to poke a finger into it, so I rip a twig off a nearby tree and ram it into the pipe.

“What are you doing?” Nichelle asks, reaching out to take the weapon back.

The twig breaks, and I pull it out and examine the tip of it. There’s one small flake. “Such a valuable weapon.” I get another, thicker twig and bite it so that the end is pointy. Then I ram it into the pipe many times, perforating the thin fabric separating the gold from the air.

Finally I turn the pipe over so the contents fall into my palm. It ends up as a glittering little heap of gold.

I let it pour from one hand to the other. The warmth from the wondrous substance goes through me and makes me feel whole. “One wonders where this comes from.”

Nichelle frowns. “What is it?”

I drop the weapon and lazily reach out and grab her by the throat. “Never do that again, pitiful little female. You can’t deceive a dragon.”

“I’m... sorry,” she splutters, little fingers of both hands clawing at mine. “They... gave it to us!”

“Gave you what?”

“The gold!”

“Who did?” I marginally loosen the grip, but keep my hand right where it is.

“The other girls! Those that fly in the Plood saucers!”

I have of course noticed the Plood craft in the air over this planet. And I have been puzzled about why they haven’t tried to land and assist me. The Plood are our servants, after all. But if those things are not flown by Plood, but by females like this one, then that explains it. Though it doesn’t explain everything.

“Where do they live?”

“I don’t know,” Nichelle squeaks. “On the other side of the planet, we think.”

I examine the gold. It’s close to completely pure, and it appears to be mostly links from a thin chain, such as inferior species enjoy hanging around their necks and wrists. It’s not nearly enough to give me back my strength so I can Change to my true form, but it’s a start.

And it’s a clue.

“This is hoard gold,” I say softly. “It has been part of the hoard of a dragon. A mighty dragon, without question. Not long ago, either. It’s warm to the touch.”

That increases its value to me. But not by enough.

Nichelle starts making strange noises.

Hm. I had forgotten about her.

I release the grip on the female’s throat. “I would need more of this.”

She staggers backward into a bush, gasping for air and clutching at her throat.

I get my hoard pouch out of my pants. Inside it there's only a feather-light roll of gold leaf and some odds and ends that have no particular value, but have at least been made with care by sentients. It says a lot about my desperation on this goldforsaken planet that I'm adding forged steel items to my tiny hoard, for the miniscule value they give.

I carefully pour the small gold items into the pouch, grinding my teeth over the fact that my entire hoard on this planet can be contained in a bag the size of my thumb.

Nichelle is backing away, hand still at her throat. She intends to escape, that much is clear. Her breath is fast and ragged, and she smells like a prey animal trying to escape. Which is appropriate.

"Come back here," I calmly command.

She stays where she is, dark eyes darting around for some kind of rescue. But I sense none of the sword-bearing slayers around, so I'm quite safe.

"It's so unwise to disobey me," I tell her with a warm smile.

"Now come here, and I will tell you about the future."

- NICHELLE -

He's changed completely. In the beginning he was icy, but he said some things that I couldn't dismiss.

Shooting him was completely out of the question from the moment I laid eyes on him. I should have known that. I can't kill in cold blood. Or, very possibly, even in boiling hot blood.

But then I started to hope that maybe there was another way. Maybe it would be possible to talk to him, to reason with him, to make friends with him, even. I couldn't take my eyes off his beauty, and everything he said was so reasonable it made me sound and feel like a bigot and a terrible person. I was not prepared for him actually having a scar from that sword injury.

Then he got the gold in his hand and he became much more dangerous.

"The future?" I don't know what to do now. Should I still try the friendly thing?

He turns his luminous eyes on me. "Come here first. I want to see you compliant."

I hesitate for two seconds, having a strong urge to obey this demi-god of an alien.



Then I bolt.

Bushes and twigs whip my legs and my chest as I sprint. I duck under branches and run around thick tree trunks with long, wide roots. It's not a quiet way to run in the jungle, but the greatest danger is the dragon. The fear makes me run faster than I ever have before, but still it feels like it's far too slow.

The treehouse isn't that far away. I could probably scream right now, and the girls would hear it and send the cavemen.

The next moment he's right in front of me, golden scales glinting. "Oh, were you going on ahead? Such a nice thought. But you silly female, I didn't tell you *where* we're going." His voice is just exaggerated enough to make me understand he knows perfectly well that I was trying to escape.

"I'm not going with you," I wheeze, already so out of breath that I don't know if I can scream that loud to get help.

"You are, don't worry. I allow you to come with me. Because, and I know this will excite you, we are going tooo... those saucer females who gave you the gold! Aren't I kind? Now smile."

I draw breath to scream.

In the same moment he's on me, his hand at my throat again and lifting me to my toes. "I said *smile*." His voice is like frozen iron.

I have no choice. He's going to strangle me.

I bare my teeth in a caricature of a grin.

"That's better," Betruchael says. "Now say 'thank you'."

"Thank you," I wheeze, a tear of terror running down my cheek.

He abruptly lets go, and I drop to the ground.

“I’m not sure why I want to bring you to those other females,” he says in a conversational tone as if nothing had happened and we were just discussing last night’s episode of *Game of Thrones*. “It’s just a whim, really. But I think you may come in handy when we get there. And perhaps we can have some fun on the way! You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Some *personal* attention from Betruchael, most fearsome of dragons?” He fixes his gaze at my hips. “That was a question.”

“Yes,” I croak.

“Yes what?”

“I’d love that.” I can barely get the words out, because I hate saying them. But he may well kill me here.

“Of course you would, you little minx. You reek of lust. Now, our first aim is to get past this volcano and away from it on the other side. If it is as you say, and these gold females live on the opposite side of the planet, then it doesn’t matter much which way we go. Does it?”

I sink to my knees and clutch both hands at my throat, protecting it from further violence. This is getting really bad, and now I can’t scream for help. The girls won’t know what happened to me. Getting to the saucer girls on foot has to be impossible — even if they live on the same continent, it would mean walking for years. If we meet an ocean, I don’t think we can get across it.

“It does,” I wheeze. “The saucers usually come from there.” I weakly point west, to the direction where the sun sets. That also happens to be towards Capree’s tribe.

“Ah. Now you’re being helpful.” The dragon comes in close.

I scramble to get out of his reach, fearing more torture. But I'm too slow and feeble compared to this semi-divine being. He grabs me with hard hands, lifts me, and tosses me over one shoulder, barely avoiding impaling me on one of the spikes.

"I suspect you'd be a slow travel companion," he says brightly. "So let's start like this."

I'm disoriented about what happens next. All I see is the ground and Betruchael's black boots. Various branches and foliage stroke my raised hips and butt as he walks past trees and bushes.

Damn. It's hard to imagine my hunting expedition going any worse than it did. It's backfired in probably the worst way possible.

It goes through my head that he's surprisingly warm, despite the golden sheen. He's not made of metal, then. I'm not sure it helps. I can hear big dinosaurs hundreds of yards away scrambling to get out of his path, breaking down trees and trampling through bushes. Even they are terrified of him.

Okay, I have to start thinking properly, not just panicking.

The girls will notice I'm missing, along with the gun. The cavemen will follow my tracks to the end of our patch of jungle, they will find the gun and hopefully notice that the charge has been ruined and the gold taken out. From that, they will conclude that I went to shoot Betruchael but was caught by him instead. They will see my tracks from the escape attempt, and they will hopefully be able to follow Betruchael's tracks now that he's carrying me. I know they have great trouble tracking him when he's alone.

And then? In the best case, that will happen hours from now. Betruchael walks fast. We'll be miles away by then. With each

step, he's putting distance between me and the girls.

Maybe my only hope is Capree's tribe. Perhaps we'll pass close enough to her village that they can hear me if I scream.

That won't endear me to Betruchael, and there's little chance the cavemen from that tribe will actually be able to reach me before he exacts his revenge on me.

The fact is, I'm completely at his mercy. And he doesn't strike me as a merciful type.

"I have to stop," I tell him, dangling over his shoulder.

He ignores me.

"Hey!" I yell, kicking with both legs. "I have to stop!"

Betruchael stops, and in one vicious movement yanks me upright and stares me down. "Did I hear you squeak?"

I can't meet that intense stare. "I have to stop. I'm about to die."

"Indeed I shall kill you if you slow me down," he agrees. "Let's go on."

"No!" I exclaim before he can throw me back on his shoulder. "I told you I have needs. *Needs*. As in, I'll die if I don't get certain things at certain times. Like food and water. I *need* those things. Now it's getting close." I pretend to swoon, having to steady myself on a tree.

I have no idea how well he knows humans. He's plainly an alien who has no physical needs the way people do. There's a chance those human needs are as mysterious to him as he is to me.

"You're close to death?" he asks, frowning. "You seem so alive."

I let my eyes roll back in their sockets and cling to the tree. “Please,” I wheeze. “I need food. Fruit or a steak. Water too. *Clean* water.” It’s not a performance that would fool a three-year-old, but it’s the best I can do.

Betruchael stares me down. Shit, he’s not going for it.

Then, to my cautious optimism, he looks around. “A steak?”

“You have to hunt for a creature that can be cut up and fried,” I explain, dramatically clinging to the tree. “Urgently. I have to sit down.” I slide down the tree trunk until I’m sitting on the ground, my head rolling back until it hits the bark. That’s unpleasant, so I let it roll forwards again until my jaw is hanging down to my chest in a caricature of a zombie from *Dawn of the Dead*.

I’m hoping this makes me enough of a hassle to get him to continue on his own. I want him to see me as a useless burden.

My eyes are closed, so all I hear is an annoyed snarl with deadly undertones.

I count to two hundred before I carefully open an eye. Betruchael is gone.

Staying still in case he’s close, I hear nothing and there’s no movement. I think he’s gone for good.

I take a deep breath, bounce to my feet, and run back the same way we came. This time I make sure to be quiet, placing my feet only on rocks and firm roots and dry ground.

As my fear subsides, confirming that he’s not close, I start to worry about what to say to the girls when I get home. ‘*Okay so I lost the gun and the gold. Yeah, I just gave it to him because he asked. But I think he’s on the way to the saucer girls, so now he’s their problem*’.

It might work. This could have worked out okay—

A twinge of fear hits me, and I stop, drawing close to a tree trunk as thick as a church steeple. He must be nearby.

I spot movement in the dim moonlight and push myself harder into the hard tree with its rough bark.

But it's not Betruchael. It's a raptor.

Of course that's not really what it is — the velociraptors from *Jurassic Park* lived on Earth, and these things are alien dinos that just look somewhat like them. But they're bigger and much less affectionate.

I reflexively check my pockets for weapons. I have no knife in my belt, and of course I couldn't bring a spear when I was carrying the gun.

The raptor trots into the single moonbeam that penetrates the leafy canopy high above.

Green slime hangs from its immensely toothed mouth and its small, yellow eyes have an evil look to them. It has forelimbs with long claws and a mess of thousands of brown teeth.

It's the size of a horse, so not a really big one. But it scares me almost as much as the dragon does.

The raptor turns its head to stare right at me, then takes another few steps closer.

My heart beats like crazy, and my face scrunches up from sheer terror. This could be my last moment alive.

I try to shrink into the tree, but it's hard and unyielding at my back.

Running from this thing won't work. It was born in this jungle and can run ten times as fast as I can.

On an insane impulse I take a step towards the predator dino. It's not something I would have done if I hadn't been in Betruchael's company just a few minutes ago. But compared to his icy, deliberate menace, this thing is all instincts and only eighty percent as scary. It seems that's all I need to be brave.

It stands still, just tilting its head to the side as if puzzled.

I take another step. "Go away!" I yell as I wave both my arms in the air, my voice little more than a squeal.

Well, at least it's not coming for me yet.

I speed up to a jog, waving my arms and trying to look bigger than I am. "Go! Shoo! Get the hell away from meeeeeaaaieeee!" It turns into a scream of terror.

The raptor bounces towards me, jaw opening wider.

My tactic has backfired and I whirl around, sprinting away from the predator, who's now maybe ten feet away.

But running in the jungle is difficult at the best of times, and I immediately trip over a root and fall headlong forwards.

Before I've landed I turn myself around to face my attacker.

Except there isn't one.

The raptor is on the ground, powerful feet kicking at the air before it goes still.

Over it stands a figure in gleaming gold, stroking his chin as if pondering how to dispose of the dino.

I get up, and he turns his head to stare at me. "Can you eat this?"

My knees are like jelly, and I have to focus to stay upright. "Eat... that?"

Betruchael shrugs. “It’s right here if you want it. But I see you’re not dying after all.”

“It scared me,” I manage and take a shaky step towards him. “So I ran. How did you...”

“I graciously went to get food for you,” the dragon says in his silky voice. “Thinking you were about to die.”

“I was,” I say quickly. “But I saw the raptor and it scared me so much...” I’m almost all the way up to him now.

A strangely attractive impulse hits me. Running right at the raptor didn’t work. But maybe this will.

“Surely it couldn’t have scared you more than—” Betruchael begins.

He gets no further before I reach up, put my arms around his neck, and get up on tiptoe to place a kiss on his golden chin, the highest place I can reach. “Thank you for saving me.”

I feel like I’m committing a crime, as if placing my lips on this image of golden perfection is against some global law. As if I’m stealing something of great value that’s only meant to be enjoyed by far superior people.

I slowly let go and look up at him, keeping one hand on his hard, warm chest. My heart is beating like crazy. Oh, *please* let this work...

The dragon stares at me for several heartbeats, clearly not sure what just happened.

“And you got food!” I continue before he can say something mean. “Both a raptor *and* fruits! Oh, you are my hero!”

Indeed he’s holding three small pieces of orange fruit in the hand that’s not dripping with the cold, watery blood of the raptor.



“You said you needed it,” he rumbles as he recovers from the shock. “But now I think it wasn’t entirely true.”

“It’s true,” I tell him, not wanting to lose the initiative. I reach out and try to take a piece of fruit out of his hand. “If I don’t eat, I die. May I have one of those fruits, please, Betruchael?”

It’s a gamble to be this forward with him. And the stakes are the highest possible. The fear of him is still almost petrifying me. But now I have to continue, doing something unexpected.

He loosens his grip of the fruits, and I grab all three. I put one into my mouth without looking too closely at it — it’s not the freshest one I’ve seen.

But it’s sweet enough. “Yum. Delicious. Thank you very much. Now I will survive for another hour or two.”

I chew while the dragon’s eyes shoot white fire and he decides how to kill me. My guess is ‘painfully’.

“I don’t recall this being where I left you,” he finally says. “Perhaps your hunger wasn’t quite as desperate as you made me think.”

“It was desperate,” I reply, juice running down my chin. “But you saved me. You saved my life.”

I don’t even know how I’m able to keep this act going. Not only do I now have to gorge myself on jungle food every two hours for him not to call my bluff, I’ve also started being really brash with this dragon. It’s so far from my usual personality that I don’t know if I can sustain it much longer.

Betruchael ignores me and kicks at the raptor carcass. “Indeed one would have to be desperate to want to put this in one’s mouth.”

“I can’t really eat that,” I tell him as I throw away a pit. “It’s big, but there’s no good steak inside it. It tastes sour, too.”

“You said you were desperate.”

“I was, and if you hadn’t brought me these pieces of fruit, I would be on my knees right now, trying to suck the acid blood out of the raptor. Now I don’t have to.”

“That’s a remarkably disgusting thought,” Betruchael grunts. “Can’t you smell it? I noted its scent for a long distance. Or perhaps it smells good to you?”

“Like I said, I was desperate,” I tell him, finishing the last of the overripe fruits and trying not to retch at the almost-rotting taste.

“But fruits work well, I see.” He looks me up and down, and I can’t help but notice his gaze snags at my hips and chest.

Sweet dactyl, is he still thinking about those things? That bulge in his pants should be an indication. And if so, whatever he keeps behind it is huge and may well have spikes on it like his shoulders. *That* would kill me.

I swallow in a dry throat as another thought sneaks in. Because if it *didn’t* kill me... it would be pretty sweet to have had a dragon lover.

But deadly at some point, no doubt. A simple quarrel about him not taking out the trash would end with me as a red splotch on the floor, I’m sure.

I sigh. So now I’m thinking of this thing as a *boyfriend*?

No. Just *no*.

“They work well,” I tell him to keep us both talking. “I can eat smaller animals, too. Not that one, but the small ones that are

fluffy. The sheep-like ones. But I'd also need to cook them over a fire. Do you know how to make fire *accchhhh...*”

My question is cut short as his hand shoots out and closes around my throat again.

“I would recommend,” he says calmly, “not finishing that sentence. I can sense a joke about dragons and breathing fire about to enter it. Joking about me is not generally a good idea.” He lets go.

“I wasn't going to,” I assure him, clutching at my throat. “I would never joke about you. And you can stop always squeezing my throat. That could kill me really fast. Have you tried talking like a regular person, *without* throttling someone?”

“There's little that's regular about me,” he says, “and thank *god* I'm not a *person*.”

“Because you're a dragon. Right?”

He chuckles coldly. “You use that word as if you have any idea what it means. If you knew, you would be cowering before me. But don't worry. I'll have you crawling before you know it.”

Yeah, there's a lot to unpack there. But I'm not his therapist.

“I'm done eating,” I tell him, just to keep surprising him. I stride into the jungle in about the same direction that I came from. “Shall we go?”

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

Nichelle vanishes in among the trees.

I don't know whether to laugh or kill. Does she think she can take the *lead*?

It's not that I have anything else to do here, and she's going in the right direction. But this can't stand.

I catch up with her, grab her from behind, and toss her across my shoulder again. "This is better."

She squeals and hammers at my back with her little fists, but she's been acting extremely weird and I have to remind her of her place.

And also I enjoy her soft warmth against my skin, as well as the way her thigh feels under the hand I use to keep her steady. Soft and smooth and alive. Her shape is luxurious in a way I can't remember even seeing before. I do enjoy her scent, wild and scared. And aroused, too.

"If you thought that calling me a hero would change anything, you may have been mistaken," I inform her.

She calms down and goes quiet.

I can't believe her. Calling me a hero? Clinging to me like I had saved her? *Kissing* me? None of these things have happened to me before. She's not cowering, not crawling at my feet, not mewling for mercy. Is she perhaps some kind of lunatic? Does she not realize the danger she's in?

I stride on for a while, annoyed at the blood that covers my hand. When I thrust my claws into the monster's throat and ripped its arteries out, I never thought it would contain so much blood.

It's just another consequence of me being in this pitiful state! For years I've been separated from my hoard and its strength. Now I'm as weak as any creature, almost.

"Are you all right, Betruchael?" comes a thin voice from behind my back.

I've half a mind to whirl her around and slam her head into a tree. That would shut her up.

"No!" I growl. "The fact that I'm stuck on this goldforsaken rock, having to deal with creatures like you and hunting for gold every waking moment is a constant source of misery! How can you *stand* this? You who are born to it, you who are mortal and pitiful from the moment you hatch until you die. It's sheer torture! I'm crawling in the repulsive mud of this planet! Rot and decay everywhere!"

"Let me down, and I'll explain," Nichelle squeaks. "I have to —"

"I don't need you to explain anything!" I bark.

"I mean, I don't have to explain. But I really have to get down and—"

"I'm Betruchael the Evil! Nothing you say is of any interest to me."

“You may be interested when it starts to run down your chest.”

I can't decipher her mysterious utterance, possibly a product of her lunacy, so I keep walking.

The night is becoming day when I sense that there are slayers nearby. It's not a sound I hear or a sight I see — I just feel danger, and the only danger to me on this planet is the slayers.

“Betruchael,” Nichelle pipes up. “Seriously. You have to let me down, or it could get really unpleasant. I'll just go behind a bush for a minute, and then we can go on.”

“Be quiet!” I hiss. “Or I'll give you to the first monster I see.”

“Even so,” she hisses right back. “I take no responsibility for what is about to happen.”

Her voice is tense, as if she's saying something of actual importance.

The slayers are still close, but not alarmingly so.

I stop and drop Nichelle from my shoulder, only grabbing her ankle at the last moment so she doesn't break her neck when she lands.

“Well? What is it?”

She gets up and brushes herself off. “I told you about the needs, right? To eat and drink? It's just, what goes in has to come out, too.”

“Of course,” I tell her after a short break to decode what she means. I take a quick step back, because terrible images fill my mind. “I have heard of these revolting things. Well, get out of my sight and do whatever draining must be done.”

“Sorry,” she says and scurries off.

If it wasn't so undignified, I would groan in frustration. I've never moved slower through these woods, and I've been in this slimy hellhole for such an infinity of days that it may well be years.

I've never met a worse burden than Nichelle. She slows me down and makes me do ridiculous things, like picking fruits and hunting for food.

Oh, the humiliation of it all! It's all I can do to not rant at the sky.

But I think my decision to bring her was the right one. When I reach the small females that have gold, I will think of a plot to put this female to good use.

She's taking her sweet time with her draining project. But of course that's the way it is for those inferior species. They go through the most nauseating procedures and think nothing of it —

I reflexively crouch when a sound reaches me from the jungle. That was the metallic scrape of a sword being drawn. The slayers are closer than I thought.

Normally I wouldn't fear them at all. In my dragon form, I could turn them all to ashes in a moment. Now, it seems I'm vulnerable to even primitive iron blades, to the point where they can cut my divine skin and draw ichor. I would not have thought it possible. But this planet seems made especially to humiliate and weaken.

There are voices. Some are deep, one is bright and clear.

No, I will not stand for this.

I run towards the sound, knowing from experience that my speed, at least, is as it should be and that those inferior creatures can't see me as anything other than a blur.

There they are. Six slayers with their swords out, and Nichelle in the middle. Those are not the men from her pitiful group, and doubtless they are trying to abduct her and take her from me.

I go up behind one of them, grab his neck, and fling him at a tree. "I think you'll find that female is *mine*."

The other five react fast, and immediately go into a defensive formation with Nichelle behind them. Their blades slash through the air, and I have to pull back, run and attack from another angle. But the slayers are quick. They bark short commands and warnings, adjusting to my movements. Again I'm met by a wall of blades, swishing through the air too close for comfort.

"Leave," the men bray in their harsh language. "Go back to where you come from, curse of a golden devil!"

I laugh at their cluelessness. But I also fret at their skill at keeping me separated from Nichelle.

This won't do. I run around them twice, full circles at full speed. That confuses them and spreads them out.

I use the openings in their formation to get close up to Nichelle. But not as close as I would wish.

"Come here," I command. "They want to steal you from me."

She only needs to take two quick steps towards me, and I can grab her and run.

But she doesn't obey. She looks right at me, eyes wide, and then she backs off from me towards the swordsmen.

She's choosing these terrible slayers over me, getting out of their way so they can cut me up with their swords.



- NICHELLE -

I never knew a growl could be this loud or this full of anger. And it's not just a sound — it's sheer fury that penetrates the mind. It makes me throw myself to the ground and curl up. Betruchael is obviously extremely upset.

His eyes flash, and his body tenses up. For a moment I think he'll attack the cavemen and kill them all. He could — they're paralyzed by the violence of his telepathic ferocity.

But when he goes quiet, he simply gives me a strange look.

"As you wish," he says and vanishes in among the trees.

"He's gone," the leader of the group from the Telaxi tribe says. "But probably not forever. We must be on our guard on the way home. Are you all right, Queen Nichelle?"

He's a green-striped warrior from Capree's tribe, and so he knows that we girls have given ourselves royal titles. It's something we did back when we were living alone in the tuna can, because we had to meet the chiefs and shamans of various tribes without feeling too second-class. So we're all queens of the Amazing tribe.

"I'm fine, thank you," I tell him in cavemanese. "I'm glad I ran into you."

He glances over at his injured tribesman who was flung at a tree. “It’s rare to see the dragon here on our turf. Beter’ox, check on Frest’az. I think he’s broken an arm.”

They get the warrior to his feet and find his sword. I can still picture the four-hundred-pound caveman rotating through the air and spilling his sword and possessions before he hit the trunk with a sickening thud. Betruchael is insanely strong, and I think he could have hurt these guys much more.

They escort me to Capree’s village. I think Betruchael is still around, because I still feel a hint of the fear he creates in me just by being near. But now that fear is mixed with something else, too. Something I don’t want to analyze too closely.

Capree comes waddling when she sees me being escorted in through the village gate. Her pregnancy has developed super fast, but that seems common when the father is a caveman. A pregnancy can last from four months to six, from our experience. If the volcano hadn’t been acting up, Capree would now be at the treehouse to get ready for the birth. As it is, she’ll take her chances in her own village. She has a sufficient amount of the magical space gel that makes medical emergencies less dangerous.

“Nichelle! Hi!”

We hug and snuffle from seeing each other again. It’s only been a week or so since she was at the treehouse, but on planet Xren, we take nothing for granted.

“Sorry to intrude this early in the morning,” I begin when she’s sat me down outside the Chief’s hut and put a mug of steaming not-tea in my hand. “But I didn’t have much of a choice.”

I tell her about the gun and Betruchael, leaving out the kiss and the things I was thinking at the time.

“Thank God the patrol happened to be there,” she exclaims. “If not, he might have dragged you through the whole jungle.”

“Yeah, it got pretty close. I told him I needed to powder my nose, and after a while I noticed I was surrounded by your warriors. They had turned their backs to me, though. Very gentlemanly.”

“We’ve had to work on their manners.” Capree chuckles. “But now I guess they’re okay. So he wanted to use you as a guide, or what?”

I lean back against the wall of the hut and cradle the cup of not-tea in both hands. “I don’t know what he’d planned. My guess is nothing. He doesn’t strike me as a planner. I think it was a spur-of-the-moment idea, and then he just went for it. Feels like I would have slowed him down a lot. What with my need to eat every hour and so on.”

“I can’t believe you outsmarted him like that. I mean, I believe it. But my impression of that dragon is that he’s a really sly one. They call him ‘the Evil’, and there has to be a reason for that.”

“I think that maybe I got through his defenses, in a way. He seemed almost... I don’t know. He’s not nice. Not at all. He’s an absolute jerk. But I’m starting to wonder if him *not* killing and maiming and torturing is the closest he gets to being kind. He might have actually been doing his best to be nice to me. Well, apart from the clutching-my-throat thing. He’s obviously capable of murder and mayhem. He threw one of your guys at a tree like he was a rag doll. And I have no idea what he did to that poor raptor.”

“Maybe,” Capree says, clearly not buying it completely. “If there’s a planet where *not* killing at every opportunity would be considered kindness, I suppose it could be Xren. Well, at least you’re alive. And now you’re safe. You’ll stay here, I hope. I think the Amazing tribe has to set up shop here until the volcano settles down a little. We should be safe from it here, right?”

I gaze in the direction of volcano Cronk. It can’t be seen from here because of the dense jungle. “We should. It can’t fling rocks this far, and the various flows of lava and ash will seek the shortest way downhill.”

“Then it’s settled,” Capree says and grins. “We’ll get a hut built for you. And for the girls and their guys.”

“We still have to get rid of *him*,” I remind her. “And we don’t have the loaded gun anymore.”

Capree takes a small sip from her own mug. “I’ve been thinking. Yes, I know. Alert the media and so on. But that gold thing. We could try to actually find some to reload the gun with. This planet is essentially unexplored, and most of the tribes don’t care much for gold. It’s too soft to have much value for them other than as pretty decorations. And with no women around, I guess nobody needs wedding rings that much.”

I scratch my chin. “You think we should start a gold mine?”

She laughs. “Hey, I’ve watched gold-mining shows on Discovery! I’m practically a certified prospector. We need a river and a pan. I actually made one from clay a few months back.”

“We know there are rivers,” I ponder. “*One* of them must be filled with gold dust, right?”

“We won’t know until we try. We know that island tribe that Karet’ox comes from have a way to get gold, anyway.”

“He doesn’t know how, though. That gold leaf had been there from before he was born. But it means there must be gold in this jungle somewhere.”

“Or maybe just on that island. I guess we’ll find out. How about today? We’ll ask the guys where the closest creek is. I mean, not this one.” She points to the stream that runs through the village and provides drinking water for the tribe. “We want that as untouched and clean as possible. But there must be other ones.”

She calls a tribesman over and asks, and then she organizes a gold-panning expedition without leaving her bench.

“That should do it,” she finally says. “Let’s go.”

I smile and put a hand on her shoulder. “Oh no, you don’t. You could pop at any time. You’re not leaving the village until you’ve got a baby in your arms, and even then you’ll need permission slips from the Caveman Department of Health and your husband and your adopted son *and* the Queens’ Council of the Amazing tribe. So to sum up, forget it. I’ll go.”

She gets up. “Nope. I’m not missing this. We’ll both go. I’ll send you those documents later. The doctors all say it’s good for a pregnant woman to pan for gold. Or to watch someone else do it. We’ll get an escort, of course.”

I get to my feet. “If you promise to only watch and supervise and issue orders. So, sure. Get us an escort of some hunky warriors. A half dozen should do.”

Capree won’t let me leave the village until I’ve had breakfast and a nap in her hut, and she sends a couple of warriors to tell the girls where I am. She makes me feel both welcome and

important, which makes me regret the disaster with the gun and the dragon even more.

She gives me some things that I really should have brought with me from home, such as a knife and a water skin. Well, I wasn't planning on going this far from the treehouse.

When we get to the creek with the squad of cavemen, I step into the cool water and simply follow her gold-panning instructions. I get sand from the very bottom, among the boulders, trying to figure out where really heavy stuff like gold would stick in cracks and such. Then I swish it around in the pan and let the light sand swirl its way out, while the heaviest stuff stays.

The cavemen stand on the bank and watch, mystified.

"That's it," Capree urges me on from the bank. "Is there anything?"

I wade over and show her. "You tell me."

She swirls the water around more. "Yes! Look! That has to be gold."

It's a tiny speck that shines among the black sand at the bottom of the pan.

"Not exactly endless riches," I ponder. "You'd need a million of those to make up one earring."

"Yes, but it proves there's gold here. That's all we need. I think."

After an hour we've collected four tiny specks that kind of look like gold, and they seem pretty heavy compared to the sand. But it could be fool's gold, for all we know. There should be a lot of yellow, sulfuric rocks in this volcanic area.

I keep catching myself staring over to the other side of the creek, as if I expect to see a golden shape moving around there.

“I don’t think he’s close,” Capree says softly, reading my mind. “I don’t feel any fear.”

“Me neither.”

What’s he doing now? Walking on to the other side of the planet? It’s as harebrained a scheme as any I’ve ever heard. But there’s also something charming about it. Something strong. Because I think he might be able to do it.

God, his eyes when I chose to stay with the tribesmen... *‘they will steal you from me’*.

That choice was actually not easy to make. My first impulse was to run to him. But that would have been reported to Capree and the girls, and for some reason that’s what swayed me in that split-second decision. What *they* would think of me.

Well, they are my tribe. Going with Betruchael would have been hard to explain, even to myself. And still, right now, I can’t help wishing I’ll get a second chance.

I fill the pan with sand and water. “He’s mean and brutal, but there’s more in him. He could have killed that warrior that he flung at the tree. Heck, he could have killed them all. He could have massacred the Amazing tribe anytime he wanted to. I’m sure of it, with his strength and his incredible speed.”

“Probably,” Capree nods. “You mean he chose not to? I suppose he may be more complex than we give him credit for.”

“He saved Iris’s life a couple of times. In all his interactions with us, only he has ever gotten hurt. He’s got a couple of sword slashes for his efforts. They were well deserved, I don’t

mean to say anything else. He totally deserved it, the way he acted. But do we need to go out and shoot him *dead*?”

“It’s a desperate thing to do,” Capree says. “The saucer girls told us to do it, if we want to have anything to do with them and their spaceships. I personally don’t need those. As far as I’m concerned, we can leave him alone and hope he goes away. Which he may, after the Amazing tribe moves to my village. He won’t get within miles of this place.”

“He seemed so confused,” I seethe. “So *lost*. Aggressively confused and lost.”

“You think he needs some kind of guidance?”

“I don’t know. But it’s funny you should say that. I got the weirdest feeling that he chose me as his guide. Maybe not to find the saucer girls, but to learn to live here on planet Xren.”

*They will steal you from me.*

“He’s an alien, and a really weird one,” Capree reminds me. “We should be careful about assigning him intentions and ideas that make sense to *us*.”

“I’m just thinking out loud,” I tell her. “Should we move a little bit upriver?”

“Sure.”

We move fifty yards up and keep panning. I sift through some small rocks from the bottom that look interesting. Most of them lose their shine and look much darker in sunlight and air than when underwater, so I toss them away.

This time we double our result, with eight shining specks of maybe-gold.

“This is better than I thought,” Capree enthuses when we walk slowly back to the village. “I thought we’d get zero gold. But



we got twelve pieces! That proves there's gold in the river. All we need now is a place where the pieces get trapped over time, so they stack up for years and years."

I smile. "I'm starting to think you really *are* a certified miner."

She waves it away. "Oh, it's easy. Gold is lazy. That's all we need to know."

"So we're thinking, what? Load the gun with this stuff?"

"Something like that. I think we'd need more, though. To make an impact on him."

"Or do we pan enough gold that we can bribe Betruchael to leave us alone?"

She shrugs. "Maybe. I haven't actually thought that deeply about it. I just wanted to pan gold."

"At this rate, it might be years before we'll collect enough to matter. But it's a plan, maybe."

At the village, the hut that will be mine is already being built. Capree and Morfan'ox had already laid out the part of the town that will belong to the Amazing tribe, and it's a nice hilly area that has already been mostly cleared of trees. The thick wooden palisade that shields the village from the dangers of the jungle has also been expanded.

"You've been planning this for a while," I say as we sit down by the hut again. "Now I think you're the one who made the volcano act up, just so you could get your friends to live here."

"Well, duh," Capree deadpans. "Of course I did. Hey, can you blame me? I'm all alone here! Except for all the cavemen. A girl needs some girly company, too! And anyway, that volcano was easy to aggravate. I just told it about its mama and how she would erupt for *anyone*."

I laugh and grab her arm to squeeze it. “That should do it, all right. Volcanoes are really sensitive about those things.”

The day passes, and before the evening meal in the tribe is served, my hut is done.

“More or less done,” Capree says when we inspect it. “It should be okay to sleep in until tomorrow. It needs more thatch on the roof, and some of those cracks should be sealed. And we usually like a decent floor, not just dirt. But there’s a bed, so you won’t be sleeping on the ground. We’ll get you furs and stuff.”

“It’s very kind of you,” I tell her, genuinely grateful and feeling really bad. She doesn’t deserve what I’m going to do.

The evening meal is so cheerful and nice that I almost change my mind. The whole tribe is eating together at a huge, round table, illuminated by lamps burning dinosaur oil. The mood is cheerful and chatty, despite there being no booze being drunk as far as I can see.

If this is how it usually is in this tribe, then maybe I should just stay here. It all speaks to something deep in me. This is how humans on Earth lived for hundreds of generations, and I swear I can feel it in my bones.

I take part in the conversation as well as I can, noticing that many of the warriors are glancing my way. No wonder — Capree and I are the only females in the tribe right now, and she’s married to their chief.

I lie down on the furs and hear how the village slowly goes quiet around me. There will still be guards at the gate, but they will be more interested in someone trying to break in, rather than someone breaking out.

Because that's what I'm going to do. I have unfinished business.

When I deem that the village is as calm as it will ever be, I write a short sentence in the dirt floor of the hut, sneak out, and make my way to the spot where the palisade has been moved outwards to make more room on the inside.

I noticed before that it's not finished. It looks like they were just one log short, so they strung ropes across the narrow opening while waiting to plug it with a full log. It's not a big deal at all — no dinosaur could get through that slot, which is only wide enough for me to slide through sideways.

Then I'm out in the jungle at night, with sticky sap dripping on me and bushes rustling all over the place. This is so far from the treehouse that dinos are absolutely going to be an issue. I would feel better with a spear, but I have a knife and it's pretty big. So I keep it in my hand, ready to stab any attacker. If I get a chance before they eat me.

Betruchael walked really fast, I realize. Even with me on his shoulder, he got pretty close to the village in just a couple of hours. Normally, that's a full day of determined walking.

So this is probably a useless thing I'm doing. He must be miles away. Tens of miles.

I try to clear my mind of overthinking. But as usual, that just makes it worse. I could go back inside Capree's village and follow the plan there. Or I could go back to the treehouse, which will make the girls think I'm crazy.

That's not actually too far-fetched a conclusion. There has to be something wrong with me. That fucking dragon has twisted my mind all out of shape—

“Out so late?”

Relief and sudden terror compete for my mind, reaching a nervous stalemate.

“It’s not late,” I echo our first conversation. “It’s early.” The tremble in my voice is the same, too.

He’s off to the side, a perfect Greek statue completely out of place in this dirty, living jungle. He should be on top of a plinth in a white marble temple at the peak of a mountain, gazing out over the lands and being worshiped.

“It was a fun game the first time,” he sighs. “Now, it’s getting repetitive.”

“Wait, I’ll surprise you,” I tell him and defy my basest survival instinct by sauntering all the way over to him.

“I wish you could,” he purrs. “But alas, your kind is incapable of— ah.”

At one foot distance from the golden demigod, I reach up and put the tip of the knife at his throat. “Did it work?”

“Oh, it’s mildly astounding, I suppose. I shall now show you what actual surprise feels like.” His hand moves faster than I can see, and then there’s a long, sharp claw under my chin, pointing up in such a way that I can feel my own furious pulse beating against it. “How about that?”

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

“Didn’t surprise me at all,” Nichelle squeaks, her heart beating like crazy. Which is understandable. She’s never been closer to the end. But the tip of her knife is remarkably steady at my throat. “I only do it this way because I’m tired of you strangling me. And I kind of need you to listen.”

“Did you have a plan for how you’ll get out of this?” I reasonably ask. “Or is it a straight suicide?”

“There’s a plan,” she assures e. “But the outcome could be bloody. I hope it won’t.”

I push the claw a fraction further into her soft throat. “Then let’s find out.”

“You want to get gold,” she splutters. “And I want to get a flying saucer that can maybe take me home to Earth. The saucer girls have both.”

“Hence why I want to get there,” I remind her. “And why I offered to take you along.”

Her rapid heartbeat resonates up my arm. How terrible it must be to belong to such a fearful race!

“I don’t know why you wanted to take me along. I don’t think it was because you wanted to be nice to me. But I don’t care that much. I really want to get back to Earth, you see. One way was to kill you. That’s not really a thing anymore, if it ever was. So actually going there with you and then seeing what happens is the only thing I can think of.”

“Then we are back to where we were before,” I point out, exasperated. “Except now I know you’d pick a gang of dirty, rusty-bladed primitives over me.”

“We’re *not* back where we started,” the female disrespectfully contradicts me. “Because we will do things differently now. Here’s how. You will not throw me over your shoulder. You will not carry me at all. You will never choke me. You will never hurt me in any way. You will not be mean to me. In return, I will do my best to help you get to the saucer girls, and to persuade them to give you gold, and maybe even get gold long before we get there. And I will try to not slow you down.”

She smells of fear and smoke and slayer. But she also smells of female, a scared female alone in a deadly world. A scared female holding a knife to the throat of a dragon.

I chuckle from her sheer audacity, then lazily grab her tiny wrist and push the knife away from my neck. “Nothing about that makes sense. You will not slow me down, but you will not let me carry you. You don’t want me to discipline you, and you won’t let me choke you. Which is the mildest form of rebuke I can imagine. You are telling me you want to help me, but only if I’m no longer a dragon.”

She swallows visibly, clearly realizing the danger. “It makes perfect sense, Betruchael. I just don’t want to die on the way there. You don’t realize how hard it is for me to stay alive and

unharméd in this jungle. Being constantly choked *will* kill me.”

“Say that again,” I command.

She hesitates for a moment. “Being constantly cho—”

“No! Say my name.”

Her eyes widen. “Betruchael.”

“Again.”

“Betruchael.”

I have never heard my name spoken like that. There’s no affection in Nichelle’s thin voice, but I would never expect that. What surprises me is the absence of hatred. Whenever I hear my name spoken, it’s always with terror and hate. It has a sound to it that’s like spitting, like hissing, or like a desperate plea for mercy, depending on the situation and what it is that I have done to them.

Why does this affect me, then? I enjoy being feared and hated. It’s part of the point of being a dragon, part of the joy. It must only be the novelty of it. If I kept hearing my name spoken without hatred, it would also get old, like everything else.

All it means is that I haven’t given her a reason to hate me. Perhaps I should. Perhaps that’s what’s missing here. Perhaps I should push my claw all the way into her brain and ruin her. In fact, why haven’t I done it yet? I’m standing here, passive, like an inferior creature.

“Try to keep up,” I tell her as I drop her arm, turn my back, and walk into the jungle. “If you turn out to be a burden, I’ll leave you for dead. Or leave you actually dead.”

She scrambles to catch up. “Is this the fastest you can go? It’s really far. It could take us months to get there.”

“It’s the fastest I can go in this cursed form with you in tow,” I tell her. “If I had an actual hoard, instead of nothing, I could fly. Do you understand what that is?”

“I know what flying is,” she pants, practically running beside me. “But I don’t understand how you would be able to do it. Will you grow wings?”

“With a hoard to strengthen me, I would grow wings and a tail and a long, elegant neck and many more things. What you see here is a pale shadow of who and what I really am.”

“How much would you need? Gold, I mean. And could we slow down?”

I slow down a miniscule amount, only because I’m interested in this topic. “If it were hoard gold, like the stuff you gave me, then I would need... let me see...” I stop and turn so suddenly that Nichelle crashes into my chest. “Pick up a handful of dirt. Now!”

She panics, bends, and does my bidding so eagerly that she comes up with two handfuls.

Letting her hold the dirt in her small hands while I inspect it, I gingerly pick out a pebble and gauge its weight. It’s not enough, so I pick up another. “Drop the dirt. Quickly!”

She obeys again, her breath ragged from the walking and the fear I know I’m putting into her.

“Hold out one hand. Good gold, it’s filthy. No, hold it out! You can lick it clean later, or whatever your species does. Now I’ll place these small stones in your palm. This is the amount of weight I would need of additional hoard gold to regain enough of my strength to Change. And that wouldn’t last for long.”

“How long?” Nichelle asks, staring at the pebbles.



“Perhaps half of one day.”

“That could be enough time to cross an ocean,” she says. “If you fly fast. Because that may become necessary.”

“An ocean?” I fret. “Cursed rock! I did see some water when I came from the Void, years ago.”

She keeps looking at the stones. “This is the weight of gold you need? What if it’s some other kind of gold? Pure gold, but not hoard gold?”

“About twice that,” I estimate. “More gold than I’ve ever seen on this planet. Hoard gold is more valuable because it must have been stolen from a dragon hoard. Why?”

“Because...” Nichelle goes quiet, thinking.

“Because?” I urge, sensing something important about to be said.

She looks up at me with big, clear eyes. “Because I know where you can get some.”

- NICHELLE -

It's still dark, which isn't ideal. The jungle is hard enough to navigate in the daytime, without an impatient dragon breathing down my neck. But I had a feeling this would happen, and after retracing my steps a couple of times I'm able to find the same creek where I panned the gold for Capree. It clucks on its merry way over round, smooth boulders and fine sand.

And gold.

The handful of specks I showed to Capree were not all the gold I found in the creek. There were two real nuggets that I hid under a special rock that stuck out of the water, right by the opposite bank from the village.

That's the bank we're on now, and I wade right into the stream and try to find the right boulder. The gold will still be there, I'm sure. Gold doesn't like to move, and the creek flows pretty slowly.

"Well?" Betruchael inquires for the seventeenth time. "Drink your fill, and let's be off."

"I'm not here to drink," I tell him. "I'm looking for gold."

"Ah yes. The jungle river on an alien planet, that ever-so-common storage place for treasure." His voice drips with

sarcasm.

I send him a glance. “You can’t feel it? You said you could sense the gold in the gun. But here you can’t?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Now that you mention it, this river has a certain appeal. But there’s no hoard gold nearby, I know that.”

I splash on along the bank, trying to keep my balance on the slippery rocks. “This gold would never have been part of a hoard. It’s been washed right out of the bedrock and mixed with sand over the course of millions of years. And those things tend to end up in rivers.”

“Fresh gold,” the dragon scoffs. “The least valuable type. But I suppose it will do. If there’s enough of it.”

The darkness is making it hard to see my surroundings, and I don’t recognize anything on the other bank. One spot is much like another, and I start to worry that I won’t find the gold.

I’m considering giving up, and I’m thinking of how to phrase it to Betruchael when I hit my knee on the right boulder. I crouch down and put my hand under it. It closes around two cold pieces of rock with an almost oily feel to them.

It’s the two nuggets I found earlier, each the size of a hazelnut. One is long and narrow, and the other is an oval shape. Both have a surface like popped popcorn, smooth and rough at the same time. And they are surprisingly heavy.

I get ashore and hold my hand out. “How about this?”

Betruchael grabs my wrist and stares at the gold in my palm. “Fresh gold. Quite pure. And you fished these straight out of a creek?” He tips my hand so the nuggets fall into his.

“It took a lot of searching,” I exaggerate. “Almost a full day.”

“Then perhaps, if given more days, one might find additional pieces.” The white stars in his eyes have turned the same color as his skin.

“Maybe,” I tell him. “But this is very close to a tribe. They’ll spot us if we’re here in the daytime. In fact, we should get into the jungle now. The sun is about to rise.”

It’s another exaggeration, but a part of me has strong reservations about finding more gold for the dragon. First of all because I might spend the rest of my life doing that, because he gives me a feeling that he would never be satisfied. Second of all because I have no idea what his dragon form looks like, and I would hate to be in a position where he’s permanently turned into some cruel, fire-breathing monster from out of the ancient legends. So limiting the amount of gold he has access to might be wise. He’s quite terrible enough as he is.

Betruchael smiles as he stares at the gold. “This is promising. Yes! The strength is coming back.”

“Let’s go,” I urge. “Those cavemen get up early to hunt.”

He reluctantly follows me into the woods. “Surely there must be more gold in that stream.”

“Only small specks that you can barely see,” I tell him. “It took two of us a full day to find those two pieces totally by accident. Will they be enough for you to fly?”

“We shall see,” he purrs. “The more gold, the better.”

“The saucer girls have hoard gold,” I promise, not too sure about any of it. “What happens if you had lots of it?”

“Lots of hoard gold? I will Change to my real form, get my revenge on those who have crossed me on this planet, and then return through the Void to my real hoard.”

“Is it far away?” I kind of like his almost chatty mood now. It’s better than his silent brooding and teeth-gnashing. So I’d like to keep it going, and maybe I’ll even learn something useful.

He turns and stops me with one hard look, and his hand shoots out towards me. But just as I think he’ll choke me, the hand stops and he just flicks my chin with one finger. “It’s unwise to ask a dragon about the location of his hoard. Inferior creatures have been burned to a crisp for less.”

I take a step back. “All right. I won’t. I’m sure you know that I don’t really care about your hoard. But I know nothing about you, except that everyone fears you. Despite you not having killed anyone, like you pointed out.”

A tense moment passes as he stares at me, possibly planning my demise. But of course every moment is tense when Betruchael is there.

“Keep up, or I’ll leave you behind.” He turns and marches on.

I scramble to stay close, because as weird as it seems, I feel safer with him than alone in the jungle. That terror he instills in me has faded to a low-level anxiety. But that’s not too different from what I usually feel anyway.

Except the excited part. It’s all physical, of course. It’s my body telling me to have his offspring at any cost. He’s plainly an apex species, even above humans. That’s so intense my lizard brain goes into some kind of Stone Age mode where all it wants is to procreate with the strongest male around. And Betruchael kind of breaks the scale to the point that I have to deliberately look away so I don’t just throw myself at him.

He takes all my attention. I have some genuine trouble believing he is for real. He’s too perfect, too shiny, too

muscled, too dreamy. He casually strolls through the deadly jungle as if he owned it. Or as if he'd planted every tree and arranged every bush. He never puts a foot wrong. Whereas I keep having to untangle my feet from vines and pull my dress out from thorn bushes, walking around trees and tripping over roots. And that's despite him having obviously slowed down for my benefit. It all keeps me feeling just as inferior as he keeps telling me I am.

The dragon stops and taps his foot from impatience. "I seem to remember someone saying that she wouldn't slow me down. Do you need something again? Fruit, perhaps? Raw meat? Leaves to chew on? Or some more fluids to drain?"

I've been able to snatch some fruits from trees we've passed, so I don't actually need that much right now. "Sorry, it's just that these damn bushes keep catching my dress."

He gazes at the dense jungle around us. "You expect no more bushes from here on?"

I stroke my hand down my shin. It comes back with small streaks of blood from where the thorn bushes have ripped the skin. "I'm walking as fast as I can. If I'm slowing you down, it's not on purpose."

"And yet you *are* slowing me down."

I want to grab my primal brain by its over-aroused lapels and yell at it to calm the fuck down. Because every time Betruchael gives me attention, like he does now, it keeps telling me to strip naked and put my ass up so he can breed me and make mean little dragon spawn. "I know. I'm thinking of how to not do that. If we found a river going the right way, we might be able to sail on a boat or something. It would be faster."

“Of course!” he exclaims. “And there are *so* many rivers and boats around. We can take our pick!”

“Do you think you’re helping when you talk to me like that?” I snap from annoyance, mostly with myself. “This is hard enough without you making me feel small and stupid every time you open your mouth. Yes, you don’t have to say it. You think I *am* stupid.”

Betruchael frowns, managing to make it a heartbreakingly attractive expression. “You are plainly small. ‘Stupid’ is not a word I’ve spoken about you, or even thought to myself.”

And that’s all it takes to cheer me up. Oh, I can’t *believe* how needy I’ve become. “Fine. All right. Sorry, it’s just... yeah. I want us to get there as soon as possible, just like you do.”

“Then we will continue,” he says, sighing. “Tell me about your various needs.”

“Wait.”

He raises one perfect eyebrow.

“I know I said I didn’t want you to carry me. But we moved much faster when you did. I think maybe we can try again. Not in the same way! You’re really strong. Try to lift me and carry me in some other way. Or I can sit on your shoulders—okay, we won’t do that.” His eyes flash at the mere suggestion that I ride on him.

Instead he comes in close, grabs my waist, and hoists me up until he’s supporting my butt with one arm while I put one leg on each side of his upper waist. It’s the way you’d carry a toddler, and the size difference between us is so big that it almost feels natural. A little degrading, perhaps, but better than being carried over his shoulder like a sack of cement.

And it does get me really close to him. I foresee that being both good and not very pleasant at all. But we'll see.

"Hm. Oookay," I say as I make myself comfortable. I have a pretty good view up here, and his face is really close to mine. "Are you able to walk like this?"

In response he strides on, so fast the wind pushes my hair in front of my face

"I guess you can," I answer my own question. His warmth feels good against me, and his gait is so smooth it makes me feel light. I could get used to this, but it will take a while. It's one of the most awkward situations I've ever been in.

"So," I begin, feeling that I have to say something. Also being this close to him and having his scent in my nose and his flexing muscles pushed right into me is having its effect down below. I guess there's a fine, fuzzy line between fear and arousal. "You don't want me asking questions about you. Is there anything you can tell me that I would need to know?"

"I'm sure there must be."

Not in a talkative mood anymore, I guess.

But I don't really care too much. Being carried like this pushes me into him. He has a heartbeat, I notice. It's hard and slow, and it resonates through me. With one leg on either side of him, something hard is rubbing against my inner thighs. His hipbone, probably. Or a muscle that keeps contracting. With one simple adjustment, I could push the joint of my legs even closer to him, and then I could *really* enjoy this ride.

No, I don't want to enjoy it *that* much. He's maybe the hottest and strongest and most god-like male I've ever been around, but he's also the meanest and probably the most dangerous.

We walk on.



There's a lot of blue sky up ahead, and I wonder why until I see the silvery sheen of a lake. It's so big that for a moment I wonder if it may be the ocean already. But when we get all the way up to it, I can see the other side just on this side of the horizon. Betruchael walks along the dry part of the beach, his feet making the round pebbles crunch.

"Betruchael," I say softly.

"Oh good gold. What *is* it?"

"I've been thinking about you."

He strides on. "Of course you have. It's pitiful, but natural. I overwhelm you with my presence."

"Well, yeah. You do. But before, I mean. Before I went out with the gun. Before we met."

"And you think this is some kind of surprising revelation to me? That a small, lesser female thinks about me when I'm near?"

I curl my leg up, clenching it around his waist so it won't interfere with his walking. "No. Everyone thinks about you a lot. But maybe I think different things about you than they did."

His smirk goes stiff. "This is moving into dangerous territory."

"They all think you're cruel and deadly. And I'm sure you are. But my thought is that you're trying to not be. Can I ask you a question that of course you will only answer if you want to?"

"The way this is going, it's probably better if you don't."

I bite my lip. "I think I will do it anyway, and then you can toss me into the lake if you deem it inappropriate."

“Thank you *ever* so much for the permission,” he says with that usual sarcasm.

“All right. So here is the question: You’re clearly extremely powerful and strong, and you see everyone else as inferiors. As far as I can tell, you could kill with the flick of a finger. So when you *don’t* kill and maim and murder — is that you trying to be nice? Is that how you make friends?”

He turns to the right and walks right up to the water. I cling to him as hard as I can, since he’s plainly preparing to throw me in the lake. “Sorry, I guess that wasn’t the best question—”

“Can you drink this?” he interrupts. “Is water useful to you at all?”

I keep my grip on him. “Umm... yes...?”

He drops me to my feet. “Then drink. There may not be a lot of chances to deal with all your various needs in this rotting cesspool of a jungle.”

That might be a good point. Letting go of him, I walk to the edge of the water and scoop some handfuls into my mouth. It might not be the cleanest water around, but the girls and I have drunk worse than this with no ill effects that we know of. Probably the bacteria and such on this planet are so different that they can’t do much damage to our alien bodies.

Betruchael is gone, I notice. But the way I know him, he’s probably not far away.

My thirst sated, I walk up the beach to find him standing there, with a small heap of fruits beside him. Some are unripe and some are overripe, but a couple of them are just right and I eat them fast.

“Thank you,” I say as I wipe my mouth. “That will keep me going for a while.”

The dragon looks away. “Yes, it must be *immensely* exhausting to sit still and be carried.”

I adjust my dinosaur-skin dress, wishing it fit me better. “So if I’m right, and you *are* really trying to be friendly, being that sarcastic is kind of working against it.”

He comes in close, and as usual it makes me jump. “Perhaps you should keep your theories to yourself from now on.”

“Perhaps,” I swallow as my heart rate shoots up. Well, at least he’s not choking me. I think that must count as pretty good progress.

“You have ingested tepid, muddy liquid and these bulbs of rotting goo,” he points out with distaste. “Now I suppose there must be some draining to do.”

He has the worst way of describing my lunch, but again I think it’s progress.

“Not right now,” I inform him. “I will tell you when that time comes. Do you mind if I climb that tree?” I point to a crooked old giant of a tree that leans out over the lake in an awkward curve. Its crown is the size of a hot air balloon and as red as a fire truck. But the bark interests me more — it has a weather-worn, cracked look to it that makes me think I might be able to climb it without too much danger of plummeting to my death. And anyway, the lake is right under most of it.

“Will it slow me down further?” Betruchael asks.

“Yes,” I admit, “but maybe I can see the best way to go from up there. If I get high enough.”

“Make it quick,” he seethes. “Patience is not something I have.”

I jog over to the tree and find that it is indeed easy to climb. The cracks are both vertical and horizontal, and they go pretty far into the tree. It's not much different from climbing a ladder. When I get to the curve it gets even better, because the trunk becomes almost level as it stretches out over the lake. I walk out on the horizontal part, focusing on where I'm going and not on how high up I am. The only fear I never had in crippling amounts was the fear of heights, so I should probably make the most of it.

The tree bends upwards again, but it's still thick and the bark is cracked, so I climb that ladder too until I'm way up in the crown of the tree. I have a pretty good view in most directions from up here. The first thing I notice is that volcano Cronk is barely visible in the far distance, a black cone with a cloud of steam at its peak. It must be dozens of miles away.

Damn. What are the girls doing now? They must think I've been taken by Betruchael. Which is only half true. It can't possibly cross their minds that I'm here from my own free will.

I concentrate on the view. In just about every direction, there's only jungle. But I spot a glint of something shiny in the far distance, exactly in the opposite direction from Cronk.

It could be a lake. But it could also be the ocean.

Or it could be a mirage or a cloud.

I climb back down to the horizontal part of the tree trunk. From here, I have another nice view: Betruchael is strolling impatiently back and forth on the beach, his golden scales shining in the sunlight. It's not the polished golden sheen of an Academy Award statuette, or of C-3PO, the prissy robot from *Star Wars*. No, this is a dull, silky shine that looks both natural and impossible at the same time. Seen against the backdrop of

the Xren jungle, he's unspeakably beautiful and so out of place it makes me ache for him. Maybe I can comfort him in some small way.

My thighs rub together all by themselves when I start to think about how that might happen. The ancient instinct to get bred by that thing as soon as possible is not going quiet. If anything, it gets louder and louder the more time I spend with the dragon. It helps that I'm not his captive now. We're on a more equal footing, having agreed to a deal.

I can't believe he can't smell it on me. Or maybe he can, but he's too polite to mention it. Or he simply can't imagine giving in to any urge he might have himself, despite that constantly twitching bulge of his. Although he said something different before—

With a loud *crack*, the dry spot of bark I'm standing on falls off the hard, smooth inner wood of the tree, making me lose my balance. Screaming from shock and fear, I slide off the trunk and plummet through the air.

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

Nichelle screams as she falls.

I sigh. Lesser species struggle with clumsiness as well as all their other weaknesses.

I've seen the signs of creatures in this lake. Sudden waves, strange shadows under the surface, movements where there should be none. It's my inborn instinct to look for other dragons, because we all hate each other, and the only creature that can really harm us is another of our kind. This one is not that, but it has similarities.

Nichelle's scream stops well before she splashes into the water. I assume it's deep enough to catch her so she won't hit the bottom, which I imagine would be a problem for someone like her.

The surface of the lake develops a strange, moving shape that comes this way fast.

Ah. That's the creature I sensed. And it's coming straight for Nichelle. It looks a lot like an attack.

I tap my lips with one hand. Will she be able to take on a water creature and win?

The answer is obvious. She's too small to fight anyone or anything unless she has a weapon. And she lost that ugly knife of hers.

Her head appears over the surface, spluttering and coughing. I don't think she knows.

Sighing deeply because getting wet is something no dragon relishes, I walk into the water, staying on the bottom.

The fluid resists my movements to a shocking degree as I stroll down the slope. Soon the water closes above me, but it's clear enough to see the creature. It's a ball-like thing with many limbs, soft and as long as ropes. Plainly another jungle monster.

Looking up, I see Nichelle, still on the surface, kicking her legs and doing something ridiculous with her arms. This view is actually quite fetching — just enough of her female charms are hidden to make it enticing and interesting.

One long, dark rope shoots out from the monster's body and encircles one of her legs. She starts thrashing wildly in the water, legs and arms moving frantically.

I laugh at the spectacle, then stop because I get water in my mouth.

Kicking off from the bottom, I shoot up towards her and grab the monster's tentacle that has her. I rip it in half, then grab another that comes shooting and hold onto it until yet another tentacle comes close enough for me to grab it. I tie the two limbs together in a hard knot, then unwind the severed one from Nichelle's leg and put my head above the surface next to her.

“Has your bath lasted long enough, you think? There are limits as to how clean you can get.”

She doesn't reply, just splutters and gargles, hair smeared across her face and eyes rolling.

Ah, very well.

Grabbing under her arms, I lift her higher in the water. "The monster is busy below and won't be able to complete your fun game. Shall we just go back to shore? Or will you wait until he can undo the knots? I must warn you that it might take the rest of his life."

"Land," she gasps. "Back."

I bring her ashore as fast as I can without losing any dignity.

Dumping her on the beach, I get busy wringing out the water from my pants. "These were once part of Maraxeral's hoard," I fret. "I killed him and took it all. Mountains of gold. And these pants, which he was too fat to wear. It's the first time I've gotten them wet. If it ruins them, I will come back here and tie the monster's remaining arms into a single knot he will never be able to loosen!"

"Take them off," Nichelle rasps, on all four on the pebbles, still coughing. "The sun — *cough* — will dry them out."

I squint up at the planet's sun. "How will it do that?"

She gets up and wipes a hand across her forehead. "The warmth from the sun will dry out the water. The air will help, too. It works best if you're not wearing it. If you want, I'll get a branch to hang it on. But it will take a long time."

"How long?"

"All of today and then the whole night. Tomorrow morning it will be dry, probably."

"The whole *night*? But there's no sun at night!"



“But there’s air. And sometimes a breeze, which helps a lot.”

I look down myself. The pants are getting cold, and it’s remarkably unpleasant to wear them. “I think we shall do no more climbing in trees.”

“I think so too,” Nichelle wheezes. “Sorry. The tree wasn’t as solid as it looked. And that monster... it wanted to drag me down. Thanks for getting it off me.”

“Silly monster,” I ponder as I pull off my boots and undo the drawstring of my pants. “It must have felt that I was close. And yet it chose to attack.”

Nichelle glances at me. “Do you mind if I... my dress is wet, too. And my underwear.”

“While it is of course a *great* relief to know that I’m not completely alone in this predicament—” I begin what is intended as a sarcastic harangue, then stop when Nichelle pulls her dress over her head and is left with only small leathery garments covering her most interesting parts.

“Oh,” I continue. “*That’s* what you meant.”

“I have to hang it up somewhere,” she says as she sashays over to a tree and starts breaking branches off it.

My gaze follows her as if glued on. Her behind is more luxurious than I thought, and it jiggles in a way I find immensely alluring.

Her display of femininity makes it remarkably hard to get my own pants off without ripping them at the groin, and when she returns with a heap of branches I still haven’t succeeded.

“Looks like they’re tighter than before,” Nichelle says, eyes darting all around me. “Want me to help?”

“Grab the bottom of the leg and pull,” I command.

She obeys quickly, taking hold of the leg opening and pulling as hard as she can. Which is not hard at all, but together we manage to get that leg a finger's length down.

"Now the other," I order. Again she pulls, and with a strange creaking sound the pants slide down to my thighs. I kick them off and toss them to Nichelle. "Dry them well."

"Um. Okay," she offers, eyes glassy and focused on my crotch, where there is a good amount of swelling going on.

"Stare if you must," I tell her with a smirk. "Dragons are special in every way."

She doesn't reply, just arranges the branches and makes some kind of triangle from where she hangs my pants. She puts her dress there as well, both angled towards the sun.

She pulls at her lower garment. "I'll have to... I mean, you're not wearing anything, so maybe it's okay if I..."

"Go ahead," I tell her generously. "The female body holds no mysteries for me."

"Could you maybe turn around or something?"

"Why?" I cross my arms over my chest, expecting an interesting show.

She shrugs and quickly takes off both her slivers of some leathery substance, then hangs them both on the triangle.

My crotch swells to a painful degree when she's revealed fully. Good gold, she has a fullness all over that I've never seen before. She may be small, but the roundness and the shape make up for it. Easily.

"Come here," I tell her.

She hesitates, glancing at my full-masted midsection. “Um. Why?”

I give her a mild frown. “Because I say so.”

She stays put. “Maybe we can just... sit on the ground?”

She’s being ridiculous. The air is practically misty with the scent of her aroused juices.

I take one long step to close the distance and put one hand behind her head.

She gasps in a prey-like way and raises her hands as if to defend herself.

“You want this,” I tell her softly as I let one thumb stroke her hair. “You can’t fool a dragon.”

“I know,” she swallows, breath catching in her throat.

Leaning in, I place a light kiss on her soft, thick lips.

She gasps at the touch, then closes her eyes and surrenders into it.

The tip of my rock-hard manhood touches her midsection, and she puts three fingers on it.

Letting one hand slide down her back, I cup one heavy, bare cheek and squeeze lightly.

She moans in the way of an aroused female who knows where things are going. Her eyes are dark slits with fluttering eyelids as I let my fingertips slide down and inwards—

Something cold touches my throat.

I whirl around.

There’s a band of slayers, ten or more, all with swords drawn, all staring at me.

“Oh, do go away,” I sigh, one hand finding a metal loop around my neck. “You’re interrupting important proceedings!”

“Dragon,” one of them whispers in their throaty language. “The gold dragon! The *Curse!* We have him!”

“And a woman,” another marvels. “We have them both.”

- NICHELLE -

It's a gang of cavemen, all with pale stripes in different colors.

"Foundlings," I quickly tell Betruchael. "Cavemen abandoned by their tribes when they were babies because they had something wrong with them. Some survive and are found by gangs like this one."

The dragon fumbles with a steel wire loop the foundlings have put around his neck and tightened. "Get me the gold!"

His pants are hanging on the drying rack I made from branches, and I assume his little pouch is still in one of the pockets. It's just that there are a half dozen cavemen between us and it, along with their bared blades. Some are swords, while some are more like long, rusty machetes.

"I don't think I can," I tell him, extremely aware of my nakedness as the foundlings stare unashamedly at me.

But it's obvious that this phase of the encounter won't go on much longer. The cavemen start moving in from the outside, some to get a better view, others just to get closer to us.

Betruchael slides both his hands inside the metal loop around his neck and tries to pull it apart, but it's a strong steel wire that looks braided in a way that I haven't seen on Xren before.

He really gives it his all, veins popping out all over his body. And to my astonishment the individual wires of the loop start breaking, one after the other giving off a high-pitched *twang* as they snap.

The foundlings aren't going to watch the dragon break free. They move in fast, grab my hands, and tie them behind my back.

Others pull Betruchael towards the big tree by the steel wire. He doesn't go willingly — his arms and legs are a blur of punches and kicks. Several of the foundlings fall to the ground, screaming and clutching bleeding cuts and broken bones. For a moment it looks like he'll get free of the heap of cavemen, but they crowd him and toss the loose end of the wire over the horizontal part of the trunk. They pull it down with all their weight, dangling from the thin wire and pulling Betruchael up on tiptoes.

His fingers are still inside the loop, and the strands are still snapping. But he's really struggling, and the cavemen aren't going to wait to see what happens. They tie the loose end of the wire to the tree, then start cutting down other trees and building what looks like a big fire.

I tug at my ropes. The situation seems hopeless. I'm tied up and naked, and those guys have nothing good in mind for me. With the dragon rendered harmless, they start to talk and giggle as they look me up and down. Others go through our clothes, and I hear an exclamation of surprise that has to mean they found Betruchael's gold.

The foundlings discuss for a while, and from what I can hear, they're planning to take me to their village. I suppose that gives me a little more time before they'll do whatever they want with me.

It's all happened really fast, and only now do I realize how bad this could get. Something has to happen.

I tear myself out of the state of shock.

“Stop!” I yell in cavemanese. “I am Queen Nichelle from the Amazing tribe. I am a powerful witch! Release me, or I will cast a spell on you so bad you'll wish you were dead!”

It's not something I'm coming up with on the spot. We girls had a run-in with a gang of foundlings before, and they really hate the cavemen from actual tribes. That includes the myths, which the foundlings believe in more than the cavemen do. In other words, the foundlings we've met were highly superstitious. Also, women are mysterious to them. We figured that maybe those two things combined might work. So one night a while ago we thought up things to say if we ever saw the foundlings again, or had to impress them somehow. We were mostly joking around, and the witch thing is all I remember.

It has the effect I expected: not much.

The foundlings light the fire, watch it until it catches for real, and then empty a water skin filled with fine dust onto it. Immediately the smoke turns from gray to red in a tall column that becomes bright pink where the sun lights it up. I have no idea what the point of that is.

They take my ropes and drag me into the woods, despite my struggles to not leave Betruchael.

“I'll come back for you!” I promise him as I'm being dragged away. I'm mostly trying to give myself some courage and a goal to strive for. I can only hope that whatever these guys do to me won't kill me right away. Maybe I'll be able to get away at some point.

These guys are less crazy than the last gang of foundlings. It seems like they have the ability to think before they act, and not just murder any woman they come across.

They ogle me like crazy, and their loincloths are showing signs of activity under them, but they don't touch me at all.

They drag me through the jungle for a good while before we get to their village. I spend the whole time resisting and making life hard for those who drag me, but they're almost as big and strong as real tribesmen, and they're not slowed down much.

The village looks much like I'd expect from a regular tribe, with huts and a palisade and guards at the gate. But it's nowhere near as nice as Capree's village. The huts are carelessly built and are falling down in places, the jungle is really close to the fence, rotting pieces of dinosaur lie scattered around, and there's a faint smell of sewage in the air.

The foundlings sit me down on a tree stump, wrap the rope around a boulder, and form a circle around me. I was never a fan of being the center of attention, but nothing will ever compare to being naked in the middle of a circle of virgin cavemen. The mood is tense.

A foundling elbows his way to the inner edge of the circle and takes a step forward, looking at me in a less gawping way than the others. He doesn't even look much like a foundling — he has nothing obviously wrong with him, and his red stripes are still bright and clear. He looks like a regular tribesman.

“Greetings, alien female,” he says in clear cavemanese and takes up a wide-legged stance in front of me. “We are the Hard Blades. My name is Grokar'ox. Do you understand what I am saying?”



“I think the question is rather, did your men understand what *I* said before?” I reply on impulse, doubling down on the witch thing. Well, it’s either that or curse him out.

“Oh, they understood,” Grokar’ox says. “They immediately sent two runners to the village to make sure I knew that you claimed to be a witch. Seeing as you were in the company of a dragon, they were inclined to believe it. I am less so. With each passing moment that you sit here as a prisoner, I grow more certain that you do not possess any magical powers.”

“What are you going to do with me? And my friend?”

“Your friend is the dragon? We will do nothing else with him. He’s stuck where he is, and we will keep signaling for someone else to come for him.”

The stump is rough against my bare butt, and it’s giving me a dozen splinters in some sensitive areas. That doesn’t make me less irritable. “You answered half my question.”

He shrugs. “I gave you the easy answer first. What I will do with *you* is harder to answer. We have more options for that.”

“Do you know who I am?” I try not to make it sound snooty. I just need to know.

“I have some idea who you are. In a way I wish I didn’t. It would make my decision easier. Here is my problem: I would prefer to not make enemies of the Amazing tribe. But I would also prefer to keep you here as my... guest.”

“Your mating slave, you mean.”

An excited murmur goes through the crowd.

Grokar’ox arches his eyebrows. “If you insist, I suppose that can be arranged.”

I fix him with what I hope is a hard stare. “Even *considering* that is dangerous for you. If you don’t release me, my tribe will kill you slowly. Have you heard how they do it? The big pot of water being brought to a boil?”

“I must confess I have not. But I know the reputation of some of the men in your tiny tribe. While mighty warriors, none of them are given to outright cruelty.”

“Losing a woman from their tribe could make anyone pretty mean,” I inform him.

“I agree, and that makes my problem harder. You see, all my tribesmen have seen you. Indeed, most of them are staring at you right now. If I were to send you away, there would be... anger. Fury. These are simple men. And while your tribe has some renowned warriors in it, they are far away, and there’s only a handful of them. If even that. Whereas we Hard Blades are many more.”

“I see your Hard Blades,” I tell him, trying to sound contemptuous. “They’re no match for even one of my tribesmen. And this may be the time to tell you that a hard blade is the last thing you want in a sword. They break, you see.” I think having to deal with Betruchael for a while has made me tough. These guys may be dangerous and chilling, but they’re not *dragon* chilling.

Grokar’ox nods and glances at his men. “Unfortunately these are not the deepest of thinkers. They had given themselves that name when I found them. My suggestion to change it to Sharp Blades was not approved. Or understood.”

“You found foundlings,” I scoff. “How appropriate. But you’re not one yourself. Outcast?”

For the first time there's a spark of anger in Grokar'ax's eyes. "We all have in common that we were rejected and thrown out to die by tribes we should be able to trust."

"The tribes don't cast men out lightly," I tell him, sounding like an expert on the topic. "What did you do?"

"He burned down the village," one of the foundlings says with pride, eyes rolling around. "And they only saved one Lifegiver!"

"My only regret is that I didn't destroy them all," Grokar'ox says lightly. "But I will finish the job one day. Then they will have no Lifegivers at all."

I'm shocked. The Lifegivers are how the tribes have babies. They are the entire future of every tribe. Destroying even one is a terrible act. And if he burned several, there was bound to be growing babies in some of them. He just about destroyed his tribe, and I'm surprised he was just cast out and not slain on the spot.

Grokar'ox must be able to see the disgust in my eyes. His face suddenly goes through many strange contractions and expressions, then ends up with an evil smile. "It's interesting to be reminded of that. I now remember more clearly who I am. I sometimes forget!" He laughs suddenly, then comes closer. There's an insane look on his face as he reaches out and touches my hair. "I should tell you that I don't see much of a problem here at all. I just enjoyed toying with you. Your tribe is far away, and you are the property of the Hard Blades now. We will all have great fun with you."

I lean to the side to get away from his searching hand. "What will happen to the dragon?"

Despite my efforts, his hand slides down to my shoulder. “Someone will pick him up. The smoke will signal to him.”

I do my best to avoid the hand. “Who will pick him up?”

“That other dragon,” Grokar’ox drawls as his hand slides down my upper arm. He’s getting very close to the breast.

I try to think of something to say that will get me out of this. He didn’t go for the witch idea, and while he seemed normal enough at first, now I think he has something badly wrong with him.

A confusion goes through the foundlings, and they start to turn around. At the outer edge, their gang members start flying, cartwheeling and diving through the air.

Then there’s a general chaos as they understand they’re being attacked. Swords and machetes are drawn, but it’s too late. Something is making its way through the crowd like a weed whacker through a field of dandelions.

That something has a golden sheen to it, and it’s definitely a dragon. It looks a lot like Betruchael, but he was very securely fastened to that tree—

No, it’s him, grabbing foundlings and throwing them aside. I notice he’s leaving a trail of golden liquid that runs down his upper body from his neck and from his hands.

Grokar’ox draws his sword. “Stop, curse!”

But Betruchael is done talking, not that he talked much in the first place. He quickly steps close to the caveman leader, grabs his ears, and twists his head so his spine creaks. The useless sword drops to the ground.

“Who told you to catch me?” Betruchael purrs.

“The dragon,” Grokar’ox wheezes, clearly aware that all Betruchael needs to do to snap his neck is to twist his head another fraction of an inch.

“That much I suspected. But which dragon?”

“Silver dragon,” Grokar’ax gasps.

“I see. Now apologize.”

The caveman doesn’t dare move. “I’m sorry, sir—”

“Not to *me*, you idiot! To *her*. And be specific. You must apologize for everything you’ve done to her.” He twists Grokar’ox’s head so the caveman has to turn his body at the same rate until he’s looking at me.

“I’m sorry,” he wheezes. “For catching you and tying you up and making you think there was a chance you would be released and for touching you and...” He struggles to think of more things to apologize for.

“Betruchael!” I hiss. “Could you please get me *untied*?”

The dragon picks up Grokar’ox’s sword and slices the ropes off me.

It’s a relief to get off the stump, and I spend some time brushing sawdust and wooden splinters off my behind. In the meantime, Betruchael has Grokar’ox return his pants and little pouch of gold, which he carefully checks.

He tosses my still wet dress and underwear over, but having been naked for this long, it feels like I’m pulling on the finest Balenciaga.

“What shall we do with you?” Betruchael asks, still holding a firm grip on Grokar’ox. The foundlings are still strewn around the landscape, moaning and whining. “You caused me

grievous harm. As the leader of this pitiful band of misfits, what would you have done in my place?”

“I would have killed you,” Grokar’ox admits.

“Is that what you recommend I do with you?”

“It’s what I would do,” the caveman repeats.

Betruchael looks at me. “Nichelle, walk back to the lake. Just follow the trail of my sacred ichor, and you will find it. There are no dangers nearby.”

I hurry over to him and put a hand on his chest. “You’re better than him. There’s no need to kill him. He can never hurt you again.”

The dragon nods towards the village gate. “Get going. I’ll catch up.”

I do as he says, noticing my hand is sticky with his golden blood. I’m only too glad to put that village behind me.

At the lake the fire is still burning, sending a pillar of red smoke high into the air. That must be the signal to ‘the silver dragon’, whatever that might be. But I suppose that if we have one dragon, there may well be two. Or more — Betruchael seemed to think there might be more than one.

The steel wire is still hanging from the tree, dripping with golden liquid. The loop is broken. He must have worked his fingers to the bone snapping all those strands. Can he lose that much blood and still be okay?

I turn around as he comes sauntering, carrying a sack that he holds out to me. “What do you think about this?”

I gingerly grab the sack and peer inside, fearing I’ll see the head of Grokar’ox staring up at me.

But it's not him. It's various types of food, wrapped in leaves. There are fruits, too.

"This should be good," I tell him. "Thank you. And thanks for coming to get me."

He looks away. "I think we will go on without drying out the clothes. I don't like that signal fire. I will not carry you. The ichor of a dragon is sacred, but you don't want it smeared all over you."

"Do you know other dragons here?" I ask as we walk into the jungle again.

"It seems I know *one*," Betruchael says darkly. "Let us walk in silence now."

He lets me walk in front, and I keep turning to see if he's okay. His bleeding has stopped, but he must have lost a lot of his 'ichor'.

He keeps us walking for the rest of the day, only stopping for me to rummage through the sack and find some food items that are edible and at least somewhat appetizing. Most of them are, as it turns out.

We keep going for a while after dark. I keep hearing dinosaurs getting out of Betruchael's way — they crash through the jungle in a panic, making a terrible ruckus. I don't mind if it means I'm safe from the regular Xren monsters.

Finally I stop. "I can't see in the dark. Can you?"

"I have fine eyesight, but I suspect this is a way for you to say that one of your incessant needs must be filled."

"Something like that," I admit. "I need some rest. It's been a long day."

He leans against a tree, looking casual. "Then rest."

I check the dress for moisture. It's still damp. "I can't just lie down and rest. Can you help me gather firewood? Dry sticks and leaves, I mean. Things that will burn well."

He sighs, then vanishes into the jungle without a word.

I get busy finding firewood myself. I would like a ring of stones too, but I can't find any rocks, so I just dig a pit. It's not like I desperately need a fire — it's not cold, and I could probably lie down on a bed of leaves and sleep. But I have a plan for this, and it involves Betruchael.



- **BETRUCHAEL** -

Here I am, gathering firewood. If any other dragon saw me now, they'd laugh their scales off.

And yet I'm not too furious. It felt good to beat up all those inferiors who caught me and drew my ichor. It feels even better to know that Nichelle is here, waiting for me and being grateful for saving her from that lunatic of a slayer.

"Here," I say as I dump the dry wood on the ground in front of her. "Don't ask me to light it."

"I won't," she assures as she gives me a little smile and gets busy building a fire in a pit she's dug. "What did you do to Grokar'ox, anyway?"

"It crossed my mind that leaving him alive would be the worst punishment he could get. Considering how he lives in squalor, surrounded by nitwits. I just made his life a little harder."

Nichelle takes a dry stick and puts the end on another, then starts rotating the first between her hands. "How?"

"I made his nitwits think he had arranged it all and that he has made secret plans with me," I tell her. "Plans that involve you. It will be difficult for him to deny it, seeing as all his men got beaten up pretty badly while he is still unharmed. Then he got

me his sack of delicacies. They're a simple group, those foundlings. And I know how to make people believe things that aren't necessarily true."

"They're crazy," she agrees as small wisps of smoke start to appear where the stick she's rotating rubs against the one under it. "I guess now he won't be able to make his men take more orders from the silver dragon, whoever that may be."

"The silver dragon is Kyandros," I tell her, because I see no reason to keep that a secret. "He is my brother. Well, half-brother."

Nichelle looks up, surprised. "You have a brother here?"

"So it appears. I wasn't too sure. I know a lot of dragons came here when I did, expecting riches. But it was a trick by an enemy, and we were all stuck in this goldforsaken, slayer-infested swamp. Then it became possible for everyone to leave, except for me."

I'm being far too talkative, against my usual habit. It must be the loss of ichor. It takes my strength.

Nichelle stops rubbing sticks together. She takes a tiny ball of dry, glowing grass between two fingers, blows on it, and puts it at the heart of the fire, then blows more until the flames start licking up from the pit. "Why couldn't you leave?"

"I'm not popular with the king. Or with his sons, Yranox and Caronerax. And it was they who found the way for everyone to leave."

"Except you and your brother."

"So it seems."

Nichelle brushes various debris off her hands. "Do you know what he wants with you?"

“Kyandros? I imagine he wants to kill me.”

She frowns. “Your own brother? Why?”

“All dragons hate each other. Siblings with extra intensity.”

She sits down and starts breaking leaves into small pieces. A clear, sticky sap runs out of them. “There’s a lot I don’t know about dragons. But I know you bleed ichor. Would you sit down, please, Betruchael? I will try to help heal your wounds.”

I inspect my fingers, finding the ichor dry. “They will heal by themselves.”

“Maybe this will help them heal faster,” Nichelle says.

Her demeanor is so unusual that I’m tempted. She talks to me in ways that nobody else has. And she understands things that I thought were impossible to grasp.

“Maybe,” I accede and sit down in front of her. “Is it the substance from the leaves?”

She holds her hand out towards the light from the fire. In her palm there is a glob of the clear liquid. “We use it on our wounds when we need it. It doesn’t sting, so we think it can’t do any harm.”

I grab her wrist and bring the little hand to my nose. It has a fresh, leafy smell. Dipping a finger into the liquid, I put a tiny pearl of it where the wire cut the finger next to it. She’s right — it doesn’t sting.

“Try a small amount,” I instruct. “If it’s poison, I will murder you right here.”

Nichelle dabs a little bit on another of my fingers. “Of course it’s not poison. If it stings or feels weird, let me know. And

just for the record, I may be the only person on planet Xren who does not want to kill or harm you.”

Still I put a hand on the back of her neck, one long claw resting directly on a bone in her spine. “At the slightest pain from that fluid, I will murder you,” I coo.

It does feel weird to have her gently smear healing liquid on my wounds. First of all, I can’t remember a time before I came to this swamp planet when I had a wound. Even during fights to the death with other dragons, I always came out victorious and mostly unharmed. Only on Xren, in this pitiful human form, have I received injuries. Second of all, I’m pretty sure I have never had anyone touch me without some evil intent. It is truly strange.

“It feels weird,” I tell her.

Nichelle freezes. “Where? Should I stop?”

“No.”

She carefully finishes with the fingers. “I will do the neck too, if you want.”

“Do it,” I command.

Her touch is soft and cool, and I want more of it.

She obeys and smears a thin layer of the primitive substance on the cut that the steel wire made all around my neck before I could snap it.

“There,” she says as she finishes up. “See? No poison, and no pain. I really don’t want to hurt you, Betruchael. I’m a little disappointed that you think I might.”

“I’m a dragon,” I state. “We only have enemies.”

“I’m not your enemy,” she says softly as she scrapes the sap from her hands. “I used to be, but I couldn’t kill you.”

“And you find that *not* killing someone makes them your friend? I see.”

The fire crackles while Nichelle eats some fruits.

“Did you kill any of the men today?” she asks softly.

“I took no care to *not* kill them,” I reply. “I simply got them out of my way in the easiest way.”

“It worked,” she says and hides a wide gape behind a small hand. “Sorry. I’m not bored. This is a ‘yawn’, and it means I need sleep.”

“Then sleep,” I tell her. “How long does it last?”

“Until sunrise,” she says as she pulls her dress off and hangs it close to the fire. Then she slowly curls up on the ground. “Betruchael, do you mind if I rest my head on you? The ground is cold.”

“Sunrise,” I repeat. “Many hours of delay.”

“But you move so fast,” she says as she puts her head on my thigh. “A few hours won’t matter.” She closes her eyes.

“Every single moment in this pitiful form is torture,” I growl.

“How long have you been here?” she asks, eyes still closed. “On Xren, I mean.”

“Years and years,” I fret. “Separated from my hoard. Separated from gold. I wandered for a long time, getting weak with the lack of a hoard. But I was not alone — the other dragons also struggled without hoards. I stayed as far away from them as possible. Then Yranox managed to get them all off the planet. He must have found a lot of gold and then given it away to

them. He must have given away gold! I can't wrap my mind around it. It's extremely unlike a dragon. Especially a mighty royal like him. I don't know the specifics about it. But now I know that Kyandros is here somewhere. And that he wants to find and kill me."

"No. I won't let him," Nichelle says slowly.

Then she goes quiet for hours.

I must be close to death, terribly weakened by the loss of ichor. I, the most feared dragon in the world, am sitting still, serving as a bed or a pillow for a female of a lesser species, and I'm not furious about it. Indeed I'm almost... content.

Good gold. I must be dying.

But the little pouch that contains my laughable hoard warms me. I'm always aware of it, sensing it as a warm, shiny presence in my mind. Now that I have it, I can turn into a dragon at any time. I'll wait until I can get no further on foot. Then I will Change and soar majestically into the sky. I will locate the real hoard and the females who own it. Then I will steal all the gold they have and make my way through the Void to my own hoard.

Yes. It's only a matter of days, and then I'll be free.

And why am I dragging this female along, anyway? All she does is slow me down.

- NICHELLE -

I wake up with a start.

The dragon is gone, and my head is resting on the ground.

Picking strands of dry grass from my face, I get up in a sitting position.

The fire is only gray, cold ash and the food left in the foundling sack is no more appetizing in the morning. Still I force down some fruit and a couple of slices of meat that seem to have been smoked and don't taste all that bad.

I get my dinosaur skin dress and put it on. It's as stiff as cardboard from drying in the heat from the fire.

What do I do now? What if he doesn't return? I'll have to make my way back to the treehouse.

Alone, knowing the shortest path takes me past at least one tribe of foundlings.

I have no spear, no bow and arrow. I lost the knife Capree gave me. I have no way to keep the dangers away. If I get home in one piece, it will be a miracle—

“Out so late?”

I whirl around, relief flooding through me. “It’s not late. It’s early.”

Betruchael dumps a handful of fruits onto the foundling bag. “For once I agree. Here, eat something so we can continue. Are you done with the draining of various fluids?”

“Not yet,” I confess. “But I’ll deal with it now.” I tiptoe behind a cluster of trees.

I can’t believe I’m relieved to see Betruchael. He still scares me, and that low-level anxiety is still present. But now it’s much less sharp, and most of it has been transformed to a constant heat low in my pelvis. Something’s been awakened there, something animalistic that I’m not sure I can keep at arm’s length much longer. My genes are totally overwhelmed by this creature, so obviously superior that he can’t be expected to obey the ethical rules that most humans try to stick to. He’s acting from his nature, just like a lion or a shark would, and I don’t feel like I can blame him for that. I can just try to make him less deadly.

“How is your neck? May I see?” I ask when I emerge again.

“If you must.”

I get up on tiptoe and check his neck. There’s still a dark ring, but there’s no sign of any ichor.

“Healing fine,” I tell him. “That ichor — is it real gold?”

“Probably not,” he drawls as he looks me up and down. “Are you ready? Dress all dried?”

“I’m ready. How do we do this? Same as yesterday?”

Instead of answering, he bends down, grabs me, and lifts me the same way as before. “It seemed to work.”



Then we're walking again, so fast my hair blows out behind me. But I think he could move even faster, from what I've seen and heard.

And of course he rubs against me in the best way. Or worst, because it's becoming impossible to ignore. I squirm and try to squeeze my thighs together so I'm not being rubbed right *there*.

Betrucheal is carrying me with one arm under my hips, and gives me a slap on my butt. "Stay still or I'll leave you here."

"Sorry," I whimper because this is becoming ridiculous. The rhythm and the lightness of the contact and that exact rubbing motion — soon I won't have much of a choice. Can I even climax without him noticing? It would be too embarrassing for words if he knew.

"I need some water," I tell him with a thick voice. "Or some very watery fruits."

"Watery fruits?" he asks, not slowing down. "Do you see any nearby?"

"No. But there must be a creek. There always is."

"Yes, there always are. We have crossed dozens only today. You didn't need to drink, then?"

"Well, I—"

My improvised explanation is cut short by a screech from above. I know that that means.

"Dactyls," I exclaim and stare up towards the dense canopy of leaves above. "They must have seen us."

"They probably heard you whine," Betruchael grunts. "Most of the monsters here are so afraid they never go near me. But those flying ones sometimes attack."

While he's still speaking, something comes crashing through the foliage right above us, breaking thick branches.

It's a flying dinosaur with bat-like wings and a long beak. They look so much like pterodactyls that we girls just call them that.

The monster is one of the smaller ones, and once it gets under the canopy of leaves it's able to flap its wings and control its flight between the thick tree trunks.

The sight of it sets my heart racing.

"Should we do something?" I ask, desperate to run away from that thing but still being carried.

"Why?" Betruchael rumbles.

The dactyl spots us with its lifeless eyes, screeches once more in triumph, and folds its wings close to its body, diving down at us.

Betruchael doesn't even look. He takes up his usual, bored stance and sighs while the dactyl plummets down on us, beak open and revealing rows of pointy teeth the size of my fingers.

I can't hold back a scream of horror, but the dragon simply takes a quick step to the side, reaches out, and gives the dactyl a punch on top of its head as it swishes by. The monster loses control, hits the ground beak first, and digs up a good amount of dirt with its teeth. It still manages to stay airborne, beating its wings madly to rise back up.

Betruchael calmly puts his foot on its long, spiked tail and stands on it while the dactyl struggles wildly to get away, using its claws and wings to no avail, spraying dirt and rotting leaves.

"Wait here," the dragon says and puts me down on the ground.

Then he lazily bends down, grabs the dactyl's tail, and starts swinging the whole dinosaur around him like an Olympic athlete competing in the hammer throw event. The dactyl is twice his length and still fighting, but it's also clearly helpless as he swings it through the air, faster and faster until he lets it go.

The dactyl tumbles through the air, flying in a new way, wings and claws and beak nothing but a chaotic blur, before it hits a tree trunk with a wooden *bonk* and slides down to the ground. It's out of the fight for good.

"That's the wildest thing I've ever seen," I state as I straighten from my reflexive crouch. "I thought he'd eat us."

Betruchael straightens his pants and checks that his hoard pouch is still there. "I didn't."

I just stand there looking at him. Surely this is more than any girl can be expected to handle. Not only does he look like a Greek god, all beauty and grace and power; he also acts like a legendary hero, easily defeating one of the worst dinos on Xren while making it look like a fun game. And he makes sure I'm safe. *And* he makes sure I have everything I need. Grudgingly, perhaps, but he's not my lap dog or my servant. All that for a member of a tribe that's hurt him and even hunted him. He's showing admirable restraint by any standard.

Seriously, I'm only human and he's a weapons grade assault on my senses, my mind, and my emotions. I was *not* designed to deal with this. He claims to be a superior being and right now, I have no choice but to agree.

"You're incredible," I manage as I walk over to him on weak knees. "Can we take a break? Those foundlings interrupted something." I reach up and place a hand on his chest.

“You need water,” Betruchael says and lifts me back up like before. “I think I hear some.”

I’m disappointed, but I have no choice but to go along, so I keep trying to think of something else and to not rub up against him too blatantly. Or at least not moan too loudly while it happens.

Sweet stars, something has to give soon. I can’t think straight. I know that just about everything that’s happening needs serious thought and planning. But my mind is all a purple, warm goo and the world is only the dragon, me, and nothing else. In that order.

Either he has to fundamentally disgust me somehow and totally turn me off, or I have to get it out of my system.

Thinking of sad things like what the girls must think of me right now, I manage to keep the arousal almost manageable until we’re at a small creek that clucks cheerfully over round rocks and sand.

Betruchael sets me down. “I assume you can drink this.”

I kneel down, scoop up some water, and take a sip. “I assume so, too.”

“You can look for gold while you drink. And after.”

Dutifully lifting rocks and examining some of them, I’m pretty sure there won’t be any. At least not close to the surface. If I were to dig into the bottom, I might find some specks. But he doesn’t know that, and I’m not about to tell him. I have a feeling that he has enough gold.

“I’m feeling dirty,” I tell him as I wipe my lips. “Do you mind if I take a dip? Just a quick one.”

“More time wasted,” he sighs, but I actually don’t think he minds it too much, because his gaze up and down my body is pretty intense.

Well, he’s seen it all before, so I pull my dress off without much hesitation, despite his unashamed stare.

As opposed to the foundlings, it gives me a thrill to be naked in front of him. He has the most invasive way to stare, and there’s obvious action in his pants. Maybe he should get it out of his system, too. Although he seems to function just fine.

I turn my back to him and gingerly wade into the cool water. It’s not cold, just not as hot as the jungle air. Bending over, I scoop some water onto my thighs and scrub with my hands.

Then there’s a big presence behind me, and two big hands cup my breasts from behind, pulling me into a hard chest.

“Enough teasing,” comes the bassy growl in my ear. “The whole jungle can smell your excitement.”

He turns me around and kisses me deeply, star-like eyes piercing me and his hard, alien cock poking me in the stomach. Something gives inside me, and I’m filled with heat. Finally this is happening. And he’s right — I have been constantly ready for days.

“I didn’t tease you,” I tell him, voice raspy. “I just can’t help it.”

“Nor can I,” he says and reaches down to lift me onto him by the hips. “Don’t resist. I could kill you without intending to.”

I splay my legs with one thigh on either side of him and put my arms around his thick neck.

“I’m not resisting. Do it. Take me. Just don’t hurt me,” I plead as the tip of his cock swipes across my lower lips.

“We’ll see,” he growls as he lowers me an inch onto him.

It should make me worry. But I’m so turned on, it’s like being drunk. I’ve got severe tunnel vision and my pelvis is twitching, wanting more than just the tip.

He lowers me further, sliding in so easily it should make me blush. There’s a moment of pain as he breaches me and slides deeper without pausing. My womanly center adjusts to the intrusion with a burning sensation that passes quickly. I cling to him, cheek pressed to his chest, his complex scent filling my nose and adding to the feeling of unreality.

A dragon is fucking me.

When he fills me up all the way, I twitch again as some kind of appetizer for what is bound to come later. His satisfied growl makes my chest tremble, and I try to lift myself up so I can feel him plunging back in.

He takes the hint and lifts me higher, his arms supporting me as steadily as if they were silk-clad concrete.

“Slowly,” I whimper, not because it hurts but because I want to feel it all, every part and every weird feature. I haven’t even taken a good look, but there are thick parts and ridged parts and I think also moving parts.

I sink down on him and feel them all, but I can’t distinguish between them. All I know is that there’s a party in my pussy and I’m an honored guest, while Betruchael is being the perfect host.

“I’m going crazy,” I moan as he bottoms out in me and I swear I’m going to come, because this is better than I ever dared dream.

The dragon lifts me again and keeps going, faster and harder. My sex loves it — it’s just at the edge of being painful, and of

course that's where the best pleasure is.

He pushes me to him, and the root of his cock just touches my clit with each thrust.

"Female," he growls, and he's right — I've never felt more womanly than right now.

"Witch. I never believed it before. But now..." He grunts as he lets me drop, making me impale myself on his dragon cock before he takes up my weight again just before he bottoms out. It's accompanied by a wet squelch such as I have never heard before.

"Dragon," I moan, delirious as the climax is forced from me with each of his quick, unstoppable thrusts, while my clit is being stimulated just right by his thickness.

I lose the ability to form actual words as I become all heat and sex, groaning and moaning uncontrollably.

"Good female," Betruchael growls. "You're all mine now."

I barely register the words, but they make me come harder. Right now, anything would.

He fucks me faster, and then I swear the whole, giant dragon trembles as he roars out his own climax. I swear I can feel his spray of juices inside me, hot and hard.

Clinging to him as best I can, I ride the orgasm out while he slows down until he's buried in me to the hilt, breathing deeply into my ear. "You're *mine*."

"I'm yours," I wheeze, because right now, it's just true. And I want it to be true.

With surprisingly gentle moves, he sits down on the grass at the bank of the creek with me on his lap, his cock still inside me and still half-hard. It's strangely nice to know that he has a

weakness, too — he's not totally hard at all times. If that's even a weakness.

I lean into his chest and enjoy just being alive. Which is never a given on planet Xren.

"I think you must be right," Betruchael growls. "I *am* trying to be nice."

"This was *terrifically* nice," I manage.

Finally Betruchael lifts me off him. "I will find some fruits for you."

I don't protest, just saunter to the creek and clean myself for real, scrubbing as much of me as I can reach with coarse, red sand from the bottom.

Betruchael returns with the fruits, still naked and clearly fine with it, being achingly beautiful wherever he goes or whatever he wears. But I do prefer him like this, hyper-masculine and mythical, with his big cock completely intimidating even when only half stiff.

"We should move on," he says as he dumps the fruits on the shore. "The day is passing quickly."

"I'm ready," I assure him as I pull my dress over my head and grab the fruits. "Maybe we'll reach the coast soon? The jungle smells differently now."

He raises a perfect eyebrow. "It does indeed."

Pulling his pants back on, he wades into the creek and rinses off his feet.

Good God. If I had a camera, I'd win every photography award known to man just because of the model and the scenery: a golden demigod in a crystal-clear stream on an alien planet.



Heat gathers in my center again. I'm more than ready to be thoroughly taken again. So much for getting it out of my system.

Being lifted into his arms again, I glance over at where the dactyl crashed. It's gone now, so it must have been trying to be quiet as it recovered and took off. It warms my heart that Betruchael sometimes goes out of his way to not kill. It would have been so easy for him.

I kiss his cheek. "Thank you for not killing everything. I know you're the strongest force on the planet."

"Probably," he agrees. "Killing is easy. Not killing is much harder. But as you said, I am trying to make friends."

"You are?"

"I think I've made *one*. I can't tell you how unheard of that is for a dragon."

"Am I the one?"

"So it seems."

His words send a warm glow through me.

He walks fast, and now I don't mind rubbing up against him. We took the edge of some of the most urgent need, but it's building back up at an alarming rate.

"Are we going uphill?" I ask to distract myself.

"We have been for a while," Betruchael rumbles. "And the ocean smell is getting stronger."

A few minutes later the jungle gives way to bare rock and smaller plants as we get to the top of a hill. And then, without much warning, the ocean is there.

It's blue and calm, stretching all the way over to a wide horizon. Except straight ahead, where there is a low and dark bank of rainclouds that seem to be coming this way. Far beneath us, waves roll onto a gray beach. A mild breeze blows at us, carrying the scent of shore.

It's so familiar I tear up, despite this being an ocean on an alien planet, and I've never seen it before. But Earth oceans are much like this. At least the one I know. The one at home.

"Ah," Betruchael says with satisfaction. "The end of the walk."

I wipe my face. "Maybe. I can't see land in any direction. Can you?"

"There could be land, even if not visible from here."

"Could be. I thought maybe it would be possible to see it. If not, you might be flying out over an ocean with no land for days."

"That is a concern," he agrees, still holding me. "But this is an interesting place. We're not the first to come here."

"Oh?"

He turns and points to a spot higher up. "Someone's been burning fires here."

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

I let Nichelle down, and she runs up to check.

“There’s definitely been fires here,” she says in her bright voice. “That ring of rocks you spotted has a lot of old ashes inside it. There must have been cavemen sitting here and looking out over the sea.”

“They were not slayers,” I tell her. “They were females. Small ones.”

“Why do you say that?”

I point. “You tell me.”

Under a bush there are two long sticks with pointy ends, some rags, and a woven basket.

Nichelle picks up a stick. “This looks like the primitive spears we had in the beginning. That basket looks like the ones we make at the treehouse.”

“And the rags?” I pick one up with the tip of a claw. It’s soggy with old moisture, and the weave has loosened with time. Most of it disintegrates as I lift it, rotted through.

“There’s a label!” Nichelle exclaims and takes hold of it. “Hanes. Small. Thirty-four to thirty-six.” Her voice has a tiny

tremble in it. “There were girls here, Betruchael! Girls from Earth! They may still be here!”

She then spends a good while searching the hill for where those girls may be now. I stay close, enjoying watching her move around and making sure there are no flying enemies to harass her.

Finally we get down the beach, and I immediately spot a small hut where the sand meets the rocky foot of the hill.

“That’s it!” Nichelle says and jogs towards it. “Hello? Anyone here?”

But the hut is empty.

“They’re gone,” she concludes and stares down on the sand, where small footprints can still be discerned. “Where did they go?”

“Taken by foundlings, or by the local tribe, or by one of the predators,” I suggest, not that interested.

“Or taken by a flying saucer,” Nichelle ponders. “They left their spears and some of their rotting clothes up on the hill. Maybe they were given new clothes and then they entered the saucer and just left.”

I turn and walk out to the surf, my hoard pouch in one hand, enjoying the heat from the gold and the brightness it creates in my mind. I can Change to my dragon form at will now. I can leave this weak form, fly across that ocean, find the alien females, and force them to give me all the hoard gold they have.

I glance over at Nichelle. She’s wandering the beach and the narrow belt of grass between the sand and the bare hillside, searching for clues about those who lived here.

It's lucky we found this hut. Nichelle can stay here when I go across the water.

For some reason, the thought of that doesn't give me much pleasure.

She saunters over. "They must have been here for a long time. They had everything you need to live. Water, two small fields where they were growing things, fruit trees here and there. There's a path going up the hill to the jungle, too. A kiln to fire pottery. They've been gone for months, I think. But not many months. There were two of them."

"How do you know?"

She points with her slender hand. "Two sleeping spots in the hut. It's just dry hay. God, it must have been a terrible experience for them. We are five girls, and that's hard enough. They were only two. I can't imagine what it would have been like. I hope they're fine." Again she wipes moisture off her face. "Anyway. When will you... when will you Change your form?"

As if on cue, the first raindrop falls on her nose. She looks up, exposing her white throat to me.

I instinctively grab it with one hand, but no pressure. Bending down, I kiss her lips more gently than I've ever kissed. Not that I was ever a big kisser — Nichelle brought that out in me.

"Not until the rain stops," I tell her when I disengage. "Let's find out how weatherproof that hut is." I keep a loose hold of her throat as we walk there, enjoying the rapid heartbeat and the softness of her skin.

Inside the hut it smells better than I feared — the ocean breeze is ventilating it well. The roof is still whole, so I kick the two

mounds of dry grass into one heap, pull her ludicrous garment over her head, and lie her down on it.

My own pants are quickly discarded, and underneath it I'm more than ready for this.

Nichelle must see the eagerness in my eyes, because she immediately closes her legs. "Gently, please. I'm still sore."

"I'm a dragon," I tell her, and I can see that she understands what that means. I will do this any way I want.

But as it happens, with a female as small and beautiful as her, I won't be as rough as otherwise.

The hut smells of her arousal, and one quick check with a finger tells me that she's soaked. That doesn't surprise me.

She looks up at me with glassy eyes, her mouth half open in expectation. I savor this short, tense moment when the mating is inevitable and the possibilities unlimited.

I tug on her final garment, and she eagerly lifts her hips so I can pull them off.

"Good woman," I praise as she reveals her sweet charms to me.

Last time it was all a feverish rush of mating instincts. She was about to clean her scents off her in that creek, but I had to have her before that. I wanted her as raw as she could possibly be. This time I want to take my time.

Squeezing both breasts with clawed fingers, I make sure to not cause pain, but also to remind her of the honor I'm showing her by coupling with her. She moans in response, and a fresh wave of her scent, signaling readiness, wafts through the hut at the same time the rain starts drumming on the leafy roof.

The reminder is unnecessary — she spreads her legs and her sex all by herself. “Take me, dragon!”

- NICHELLE -

I can't believe I'm being this wanton. But it feels so natural — Betruchael is not a male who'd have patience with coyness and pretending to be hard to get. For him, I'm the easiest thing ever, and I'm fine with that. It's not like I have a reputation to protect.

He caresses my breasts with his fingers, dangerous claws millimeters from my nipple but never touching.

Suddenly his face is right above me, the stars in his eyes so bright they blind me for everything else. "You're mine," he growls, and another hard shot of heat goes through my center.

The noise from the rain increases as he licks his way down my front, tasting me and lightly biting my nipples and my soft skin further down. His destination is obvious, and I can't wait for him to arrive. I shudder with hot-cold delight when he gets almost all the way down and then veers to the side, his rough tongue sliding slowly beside the most sensitive parts of me.

I buck my hips as his mouth sets up shop down there, swirling around the main event without touching. I'm tempted to grab his head and push it to where I want him, but I'm too scared.



He's clearly in charge here, and I don't want to anger him. I *really* don't.

But I can encourage him, so I spread myself in the most shameless way and lift my pelvis, offering myself.

"What do you say?" he growls.

"Please," I manage, breath ragged.

"Please what?"

"Please lick me."

He breathes on the wet, feminine flesh down there, raising goosebumps all over me. "Should you be more specific?"

Oh damn. He's really making me beg.

"Please lick my pussy."

He lets my plea hang in the air, then chuckles evilly and gives my sex a long, slow lick, from the bottom to the top. "Like that?"

I whimper and push my center higher. "Please. More. Don't stop."

But of course that's exactly what he does. I'm about to protest when I notice he's changing his position. And the only thing I want more than his tongue is his cock.

Primal breeding instinct taking over, I lift my knees and open myself totally for the dragon. "Fuck me."

He's between my legs, cock pointing skywards, thick and alien and impossible and irresistible, all at the same time.

*"Please fuck me."*

He places the tip at my entrance, and I gasp, expecting and needing him to push hard into me.

When he doesn't, my eyes fly open.

He gives me an evil smirk, and of course that's when he penetrates me. He slides in, helped by my own traitorous flesh and juices. All the way in he goes, making me whimper again. Despite the copious amounts of juices, it's a tight fit. But now that I know it does fit, I can relax and let him do his thing. He goes deep, each time feeling like he opens me anew. My sex still has to stretch for him, and I don't think that will ever change. Nor do I want it to.

His sparkling stars are piercing my soul just as hard as his cock is piercing my body, reminding me with each thrust that he's above and I am below. My primitive mind embraces it and spreads wider for him.

His exotic cock churns up more and more heat, and I know he's holding back — he could have made me come at any time. He's reinforcing his mastery, making sure I know he's in charge.

I swear the little hut echoes with wet noises, his deep grunts, and my moans of delirious surrender and pleasure. The rain is falling hard, and I kind of wish this would last forever.

But the dragon is here now, and he's fucking hard and I might as well just... accept it...

I draw breath to scream as I'm brought over the edge and my body bucks and jerks and shivers under him.

His body is on top of me, smooth and hard and warm, holding me down and allowing me to let go completely and just ride the climax. When he speeds up I know what's coming, and the sounds and sensations of him coming deep inside me makes my whole pelvis twitch as another wave of heat and delight washes through me.

He lies on top of me for a long time, and I just wish time would stop. When I open my eyes, the light in his eyes is strangely warm and calm.

I may never feel like I'm in the right place, but right now I am.

"I love you," I manage in the calm, soothing bliss that fills everything, like a pink cloud in the sky.

He just gives me a little smirk and repositions himself behind me, cock still deep inside.

"I'm glad we have this hut," he rumbles lazily.

"What did you do before?" I ask, careless on my fluffy cloud.

"I mean, you didn't have a hut, did you?"

"I was never rained on," he says. "I walk faster than the weather."

"Oh. You out-walked it. But what else did you do? You said you've been here for years."

"Time passes differently for dragons. I looked for gold and for those who might have it."

I'm too lazy right now to continue that topic. "You're an incredible lover. I'm sure two dragons mating must be spectacular."

"It is," he confirms. "A spectacular fight, sometimes to the death. The fire lights up the night and other dragons will see it, nod, and say something like 'Teragreia is finally going to lay eggs'. Dragon females are rare and fierce. When one of them seeks you out and is especially belligerent, it means she's ready to mate. She needs to be forced, and she needs to be satisfied. And the male must survive long enough to complete the mating. More dragons die from mating than from anything else. Even attacking a dragon on top of his hoard is less

dangerous, because then at least you have the option to leave if things don't go your way. When mating, the female will hunt you down and either kill you or be forced into submission so the coupling can take place. There are no other outcomes."

I suppress a yawn. "Sounds stressful. I think our way is better."

"Less dangerous, certainly."

The rain hammers softly on the roof. It's a well-built hut, I notice with the expert eye of someone who's only ever built a small part of a treehouse. The two girls who lived here may have had good lives. They had a long beach with fine sand, they did farming, and they clearly went into the jungle when they had to. They even made a system of wooden pipes to reroute a stream down the hill nearby. I wish I could have met them. They must be pretty resourceful.

I wake up, and it's getting dark outside.

Huh. I guess I took a nap.

Betruchael is gone, but it's still raining. I sit in the opening to the hut and just look out at the evening. The surf makes a hypnotic hiss, rising and falling as the waves roll in. It's as peaceful a place as I've ever seen on Xren. The absence of the jungle all around me helps. I'm sure the ocean is full of terrible monsters, but I think I'd be able to take a short swim in the shallows close to the beach. In daylight, of course. Not now.

"Out so late?" comes the deep rumble from off to the side.

"I think you'll find I'm out early," I counter. "It's not night yet. Barely dinnertime."

Betruchael comes sauntering, carrying fruits. "I hope these are ones you can eat." He drops them on the sand and watches me

as I eat them.

“These are delicious. Thank you,” I tell him, almost tearing up from him thinking about getting me food.

“Perhaps those females left more things you can use,” he says as he leans against a tall, palm-like tree and studies his fingers.

“I looked,” I tell him. “There are some wooden tools for working the fields, but not much more. Won’t you come in from the rain?”

“I’m already wet.”

I get up and walk over to him. “Then we can be wet together.”

He looks down on me with wonder. “You are a very strange female.”

“You’re not the first to notice,” I reply as I lean back onto his chest, cold drops hitting me.

“But you’re strange in a remarkably attractive way. Let’s get inside. Your dress is still not soaked.”

He takes my hand and leads me back inside the hut. “There is a heap of firewood not far from here. It’s in a dry spot. I imagine the females collected it.”

“Oh, nice. When it’s dry we can build a fire.”

He sits on the ground with his long legs outside the hut, while I sit between his legs and lean back into his chest. He puts one strong arm across my front, resting lightly on my hips.

There are many questions I could ask Betruchael. He’s still mostly an enigma to me. But I’m not going to. I won’t do anything to ruin this moment.

It’s the weirdest thing. Here I am, an abductee on a dinosaur planet, light years from Earth, sitting by an unknown ocean

with a dragon alien who could leave at any moment, who thinks he's a superior being and is probably right. The future has never been less certain.

And it's the happiest I've ever been.

"Did you see any monsters?" I finally ask before I doze off again.

"Only you," Betruchael says.

"I mean, any *dangerous* monsters?"

"Only you."

"I'm actually neither a monster nor dangerous," I tell him as I get to my feet. "If I scream, will you come rescue me?"

He scratches his chin. "Is that something you plan to do?"

"Maybe."

"Then I suppose we'll see."

Coming from any other guy, it would be a joke: of course he'd come rescue me. With Betruchael, I can't be sure. I can never be sure about him. I wonder if that's what makes him so attractive.

I walk out of the hut and find the place the two former residents prepared for needs like the one I'm feeling, complete my errand, and wade into the water until it's about to mid-shin. Then I pull my dress up and sit down on the bottom, letting the warm waves wash me clean for a second. It feels downright luxurious.

When I want to get up, I suddenly feel heavy. It's as if the water won't behave like water — it's all viscous and sticky and weird all around me. The waves have stopped right here, too — only several feet away does the water flow normally.

“Shit.” I use all my strength and manage to get to my knees and turn around, but now the gel-like water is trying to pull me out. It’s got me by both ankles, and slowly drags at them.

“Damn it!” I pull at my legs and dig my hands into the wet bottom, but it gives and I find no hold. And now the sticky water’s got me by the knees.

“Betruchael,” I call before it becomes too critical. “I need some help here.”

It must be some kind of jellyfish. If so, it may have long, poisonous tentacles too, like they do on Earth. Maybe it’s many small jellyfish joining forces.

I throw myself towards the beach, but I’m being dragged into deeper water, and the movement is definitely outwards and downwards.

I need help.

“Betruchael!” I yell. “Help me!”

The movement gets much stronger and faster. I can no longer reach the bottom with my hands while I keep my head above water. Yep, it’s become critical.

I curl up and try to remove the sticky stuff from my legs, but it slips through my fingers like slime and is impossible to get a grip on.

“Betruchaeel!” It’s a panicked scream, because I’m definitely being dragged down by something really heavy.

“Heee—” My final scream is cut off because I get salt water in my mouth.

Fuck. This is it. I’m going to drown.

**It looks like I *will* come to your rescue,** says a deep, icy voice into my mind. Then the world turns to pure light and searing heat.

I'm being pulled, then pushed up above water. The chaos is indescribable — it's like a tornado and a firestorm all at once. The water churns like crazy, starkly illuminated in golden flames.

Long, orange tendrils stretch skyward like waving spires, searching.

Then I'm held by hard claws and dragged out of the water. I'm carried through the air and dumped on the beach, fifty feet from the surf.

I should cough and wheeze and get the water out of my lungs, but he commands all my attention, even now, even half drowned.

Because *that*... yeah, *that* is a dragon.

He's long and graceful and even more beautiful now than in his human form. Golden and majestic, he soars into the air and beats the world into submission with his powerful wings. His tail flows after him, spiked and deadly. His head is small and perfect, with a hard, spiked ridge going down his strong back.

A flame shoots into the air in front of him, a hundred feet long and shining like gold. Not yellow or orange, but really metallic gold in a way that should not be possible.

I crouch down and hide my face in my hands, over-awed by the presence of the mythical creature, wanting to weep and laugh at the same time. This is what he really is, and he's so clearly superior that it fills me with fear. And with intense pride, because he's entirely magnificent.



**That was a strange monster you found,** he says right into my mind.

It's Betruchael, but this is a cold, hard version of him. The menace in him makes my blood run cold, and I feel small and naked.

I dare to glance up as he races into the clouds and blows a long flame, making the cloud look like it's on fire on the inside. Then he dives down, tail blown straight, and thunders past me so fast it creates a shockwave that rattles me and knocks the breath out of my lungs.

**This is fun.** He soars out of sight.

"Don't leave me," I whimper. Because that's what he has the gold for — to be able to change to his dragon form and go to find the saucer girls. I can't bear the thought of it.

Betruchael dives down with perfect control, careens across the sky, zooms and loops and shoots fire, clearly enjoying himself.

He lands in front of me, as long as a bus but so elegant and sleek my mind can't process it. He's *divine*.

I'm already on my knees, crouching again because his presence is just too powerful. "Thank you for rescuing me!" My voice shakes in terror and awe.

**You see me as I am for the first time. Am I as you expected?**

"You are incredible!" I tell him, averting my eyes. "I expected nothing like that."

"Everyone is surprised at what a dragon is really like," he says in the normal way. "It would be nice to Change and stay in my real form permanently."

I look up. He's Changed back to normal, just a huge, golden demigod alien man standing on a beach.

"I had to burn it," he says. "It was too big to fight in any other way. But it was a glorious fight."

Over at the beach there's a blob of something that's washed up, singed black, smoking and hissing and the size of an Escalade.

"It's huge!" I exclaim, my throat sore from the water I swallowed.

"That's a small part of it. Most of it is still out there. And before you ask, yes, he is alive. Even dragon fire loses some of its power underwater."

Even in the darkness, I spot a spray out in the water, like the white spray from the bow of a big ship. Behind it there's a row of waves, and a big, dark loop of an immense snake's body, half out of the water, moving out to deeper waters.

"It's like the Loch Ness monster!" I marvel, barely able to believe my eyes. "It must be the size of an office building!"

"It is the largest creature I've seen on the planet," Betruchael says, losing interest and turning his back.

My skin creeps at the sight of what almost got me, so I back away and hurry after the dragon. "But not the strongest."

The rain has stopped, and the low layer of clouds means it's not completely dark.

Catching up with Betruchael, I grab his hand.

He looks down at me. "Now you've seen the dragon."

"Is he different from you? I mean, it's you. No doubt about it."

“The dragon is more pure,” he says as we enter the hut. “Stronger of will, cleaner of purpose. It’s one reason why I hate this weak human form. The dragon is *me*. This... is not.” He slaps his own arm with contempt.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” I say as I sit down, still shaken but recovering fast. His presence pushes everything else to the background, and I’m pretty sure I’m not going to have any kind of trauma after the ocean monster. Already the experience is fading in my mind, and the only thing I can recall clearly is the dragon in the sky. “Again, I mean.”

“It’s strange,” he mutters as if to himself. “I would not have guessed the dragon form would come to your aid. But I didn’t hesitate.”

Still having a grip on his hand, I tug at it so he will sit down, too. “I’m grateful you didn’t. I only had seconds more to live.”

He remains standing, showing me that he will do what he wants. “It was glorious to be a dragon again. Even now I can barely resist Changing.”

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

“You’re magnificent,” she says. “I will find more gold. There are so many creeks. One of them must have nuggets like the ones I found before.”

“You will start searching tomorrow,” I decide, although I’m close to commanding her to start the search right away. A weaker creature would have wept bitter tears at having to Change back from the dragon form and once more inhabit a body as pitiful and limited as this one.

“Yes,” she says obediently.

I sit down next to her. “Your dress is soaked. Take it off and dry it.”

“Your pants, too,” she says, checking with one hand. “Actually, you’re still pretty dry. Those pants change when you change? And the boots?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “Such concerns are beneath me.”

She wrings her dripping clothing off and hangs it on the inner structure of this laughably primitive hut. “But not beneath *me*.”

I follow her moves, enjoying the fluid and tremendously feminine jiggle of her behind.

She notices and sends a glance to my crotch. “Can I see it?”

“For what purpose?”

She kneels facing me. “Maybe something you’ll like. I don’t know, though. I’m not an expert. Barely a beginner. But I’m coachable, and I will try to—”

“You want it, you must unwrap it,” I tell her to stop her babbling.

With eager little fingers, she gets busy undoing the drawstring and freeing my manhood from its confines. It bounces up, hard and ready.

Nichelle’s eyes widen. “I can’t believe that all fits inside me.”

“I’ll prove it to you,” I promise.

She grabs the hard rod with both hands. “I’d love that. But can I try this first? I’ve been wanting to since we met.” She bends her neck and kisses the tip.

I lean back on straight arms, letting her do whatever she needs to. I have never shown anyone this level of trust, but Nichelle is the only creature I’ve met who doesn’t hate me with a passion.

She touches and squeezes and kisses and licks, and some of it feels good.

“Whatever you do, keep your teeth away,” I instruct. “Use both hands and slide them up and down, without too much pressure.”

She obeys and soon gains confidence enough to take the entire head in her mouth, stimulating it with surprising skill. More

and more goes in as she surrounds me with smooth, wet warmth.

An involuntary jerk goes through me when she swirls her little tongue around a very sensitive part.

“That’s... nice.”

She flashes me a glance, cheeks sucked in, then goes harder and starts sliding her mouth up and down in rhythm with her hands.

“If you keep that up,” I tell her, “I will honor you with my seed.”

She doesn’t stop, just keeps going with great energy. The sensation is intense, and before I know it, I’m spraying hard spurts. Nichelle senses it somehow and takes her mouth off, but the first spurt hits her face.

When it’s done, I lean back, exhausted.

“Salty,” Nichelle says as she licks her lips, where some of the juices went.

I gaze at her with some suspicion. “Are you a witch after all?”

“Of course,” she says cheerfully, clearly happy from her accomplishment. “I have magical secrets.”

“Hmm.” I don’t believe she has actual magic, but she certainly has skills that could be mistaken for that.

She comes to sit on my lap, leaning into me. “Thank you for letting me do that.”

“I’m sure you can do it again sometime.”

“I hope you’ll let me.” She curls up, and I put one arm around her to keep her in place.

The hiss from the surf has a strange hypnotic effect, and after a little while I sense she has entered her sleeping stage.

It's surprisingly pleasant to have her rest on me, but I shudder to think what other dragons would say if they saw me now. Betruchael the Evil, conqueror of a score of hoards from the most famous dragons, the scourge of kings, the enemy of princes, now sitting still on a dirt floor with a lesser female sleeping peacefully on top of him... My reputation would plummet.

I stay like that until I feel a familiar sting.

Lifting Nichelle off me and placing her on the straw heap, I walk out and make my way up the hill to the top of the bare rocks.

And then he's there, circling me.

**There you are.**

"What do you want?" I demand, fully aware that I'm in this pitiful form and he's a full dragon.

**Everyone asks me that, he chuckles. I would have thought that you, of all creatures, would not need to.**

He comes in to land, keeping his distance, although he must be able to see my wretched state.

I get ready to Change. If he's here to fight, I will surprise him.

"Oh, are we insulting each other now?" I inquire, tenser than I've been in a while.

"You *look* like a creature," he says, having Changed to his similarly weak form. "Although of course you are a dragon, without creator and thus without master."

"I hear you've been looking for me, Kyandros."

He grins, white teeth and silver scales glinting in the dark. “I notice you are rushing to come to me when I snap my fingers. Perhaps you’d like to lie at my feet?”

“You saw my flame in the sky,” I take a guess. “You thought, ‘My elder brother is there! I must hurry to get to him and serve him!’ And here you are. Good boy, Kyandros. I will think of suitable tasks for you. Tasks that don’t need too much brain power to complete.”

His smile turns into a snarl. “Always needing to have the last word, I see. But I’m not here to serve you. We can both serve ourselves and still get what we need. I sense you have gold. Hoard gold, too. From a hoard I know. Although you only have a little. Is it inside you somewhere? Someone used a weapon on you, it got through your scales and caused an injury that hurts more than it should?”

“I understand from your words that you have detailed knowledge about such a fate. But I must disappoint you. My hoard is entirely external. Small, yes. But it’s there. Well, now you know. Goodbye.” I turn my back to leave.

“Brothers must stick together.”

I freeze. It’s the strangest thing I’ve ever heard. “What?”

“Yranox and Caronerax are brothers. Now they are King Yranox and Prince Caronerax. Do you know why? They fight together. It makes them strong. So strong that I helped them chase all the dragons off the planet. Except me and Aragadon. And you, I suppose.”

“Dragon brothers hate each other,” I remind him. “More than we hate anyone else.”

“As do they. And still, when they’re able to fight for a common cause, they’re impossible to defeat. Now, Yranox and



Caronerax are together. They can't be defeated.”

“So you are in a feud with them? And you think, ‘I need someone to trick into fighting for me.’ Well, you might be right. But I’m not the easiest dragon to trick.”

Kyandros looks up at the cloudy sky. “I *am* in a feud with them. We only fight sometimes. But things are building up to a final battle. I would need someone to fight with.”

I chuckle. “I assume Aragadon was not persuaded?”

“I never tried to persuade him. I can't trust him. He knows the two brothers and fought with them. Although he is also feuding with the rest of us. Still, if he knew about my scheme, he might tell them, and they would all three attack me. No, Betruchael, you're the only dragon possible. Because they don't know you're here. They will not expect the attack.”

I don't bother asking what the feud is about. Dragons hate each other from the moment they hatch and need no reason to be enemies. “You think you can trust me, then? Why would I not run to Yranox and ingratiate myself with him?”

“You have never fought alongside the new king, like Aragadon has. He would have no reason to believe you. And the idea of Betruchael the Evil, murderer of royals, being a lickspittle and tattletale for the king is absurd. You are the worst enemy the royal family has among dragons. I don't remember how many of them you have killed, but it must be close to a dozen. You have no choice, brother. You must side with *me*.”

“And then? When we have slain the king and his brother, and Aragadon has stayed out of it?”

“Then their hoards become ours. They have gold. Lots of it. Do you not feel it? Do you not know whose hoard it comes

from, that pathetic piece of gold that warms your mind and heart?”

“Caronerax,” I guess with certainty as if I already knew. “It comes from Caronerax’s hoard. He brought it here. *Prince Caronerax.*”

“Lucky guess,” Kyandros scoffs. “Yes, it comes from his hoard. Although he now has hoards of various kinds.”

I frown. “Of various kinds? What would a dragon keep as a hoard if not gold? You’re not making any sense, little brother.”

“Oh, I am making perfect sense. If you come with me, you will see what I mean. And we can fight together. You may keep the major portion of their hoards.”

I laugh at how transparently devious he is. “You would let me keep the largest share? You expect me to believe *that*? This planet has made you lose what little mind you had.”

He takes a step closer. “I live close to Yranox and his brother in a village. Aragadon does too, but he mostly stays away. I often fight Yranox and Caronerax, but only one at a time. If they suddenly decide to destroy me, they will fight against me together. Two at the same time. And while I’m among the most powerful of dragons, even I can’t expect to triumph against the king of the dragons and his brother. Come with me, Betruchael the Evil! We shall attack them first, kill both princelings, one after the other, and take their hoards. You can Change and leave this goldforsaken place once and for all! It is what all the others have done.”

I’ve never seen Kyandros passionate before. Nor any dragon, except for females, who can be passionate in their fury.

“You’ve changed,” I snort. “Pleading with me to join you in a feud? Do you think I am that stupid? All four of you would

gang up on me the first chance you got! There is some sordid cleverness here, Kyandros. Do you think I can't tell?"

He looks away with a little smile on his face. "There is always shrewdness with me. But not the way you think. Well, I can see you won't be persuaded. At least for now. But I think you will. Who is the female you're keeping in that hut?"

I stiffen. "What do you know about her?"

He smirks. "I sensed her as I landed. An alien female of the kind that has become quite common on Xren. I recommend enjoying her body before you burn her to a small cloud of dust."

Ah, so that's why he's here. He will steal Nichelle from me!

I get ready to Change to full dragon. "What I do with my own female is none of your concern, Kyandros. Now *leave*."

"You think I will *take* her?" He laughs, and there is something very strange about his laugh. It's mean and evil, as usual and appropriate. But it's also... joyful? "I need no more females, I assure you."

He Changes to his dragon form, and I get ready to do the same to defend myself.

"What do you mean?" I demand. "No more? Implying you have some already!"

**Just one, Betruchael. But she's all I can handle and all I want.**

He takes off on mighty wings, long silver body glittering in the dark.

"Stop!" I command. If he knows alien females, perhaps he knows this. "She said she loves me. What does it mean?"

The beating of his wings falters for a split moment, and he looks down at me, eyes sparkling in silver. **She said she loves you?**

“Yes! What does it mean?”

A heartbeat passes. Then Kyandros laughs, a storm of mirth that echoes in my mind. **You idiot. It means she loves you.**

“But what does that *mean*?”

He soars and sets course out over the ocean, laughing uncontrollably all the while.

“Kyandros! What does it *mean*?!” I roar in fury. Now I’m sure he knows the answer.

There’s no reply except his laughter, slowly fading as he shoots across the waves.

I itch to follow and beat it out of him, but I have little gold to spare for that.

I’m left standing on the rock, fretting and wishing all silver dragons to the bottoms of the lowest, darkest, smelliest swamps on Xren.

The rain starts falling again.

- **N**ichelle -

A ferocious roar wakes me and makes me bounce straight to my feet, heart beating wildly in my ears.

There’s immense danger here, fury and power and evil beyond description.

Fleeing naked out into the night, I cling desperately to the trunk of a tree, wanting to be invisible.

A bolt of silver lightning shoots over my head and continues out to sea, making me throw myself down to the sand in fear.

The panic subsides as the bolt vanishes in the clouds.

I get back up on shaky knees, brushing the sand off me. *That* was scary.

Betruchael is not here. Was that him? Did he leave me?

It didn't feel like him. That was an icy laughter, evil and gleeful. And surely *he* would look like gold, not silver.

A silver dragon, then. Kyandros, Betruchael's hated brother. The one who wanted to capture him.

"Betruchael!" I scramble up the bare rock to the spot where the silver bolt came from. What if he's dead? Or captured?

I'm not even halfway up when he comes down towards me, lifting one eyebrow. "Out so late?"

I go straight in and hug him tight. "I heard the yell. I saw... was it Kyandros?"

"Perhaps," Betruchael says. "Now I know which way to fly when the rain stops and the clouds lighten."

Not wanting to think about him leaving, I grab his hand and follow him down to the beach. "What did he want?"

"I asked him the same thing. He seems quite confused."

"He must have a hoard," I conclude. "If he's able to fly back and forth across the water."

"So it appears," Betruchael says darkly. "Are you done with your sleeping duties?"

With him beside me, the fear of the other one dissolves like a wisp of smoke in a storm. "Not yet. I'm not fully rested. Can you please keep me company while I... umm... work at it?"

He ushers me into the hut, sits down, places me with my head in his lap, and brushes dry hay over me. “Can you work on your sleep like this?”

I close my eyes and make myself comfortable. His scent fills my nose again, and I’m tempted to get back up and spear myself on his cock. But I do need some sleep. “Absolutely. It’s hard work, sleeping.”

My heart rate slows down now that he’s here. Everything else is washed away.

This time he’s still there when I wake up, and to my joy it’s still raining.

I eat fruits while he stares across the ocean, then consider putting my still damp dress on. Instead I build a fire, light it, and hang the dress close to it to dry out, along with the sliver of dinosaur skin that I call my panties. The bra piece I’ve lost somewhere along the way.

“But it gave zero support anyway,” I mutter as I put more wood on the fire.

I get Betruchael to keep me company while I take a quick bath as far from the charred part of the ocean monster as I can get, then declare that I’m almost ready to go on a gold-finding mission.

“But my dress isn’t dry yet,” I whine. “Can I wait until then?”

Betruchael takes my wrist and leads me towards the hill. “No.”

I actually don’t mind being naked around him. He’s seen it all, and the way he looks at me, it just makes me feel attractive and sexy. I’ve not been spoiled with *that* in my life. And it’s not like there’s anyone here who can report me for indecent exposure.

“Wait,” I say when we’re on top of the hill. “I’m not wearing shoes.”

He looks down to confirm that I’m not, sighs in a way that I suspect is very male, and then lifts me like before, one hand under my ass and me clinging to him.

I don’t have any more dignity to lose, so I rub myself up against him in a way that’s pretty lewd. But hey, he came right in my face last night, so it’s not like he’s on some kind of moral high ground.

Of course he notices.

“I know that smell,” he says without slowing down as he walks down the hill to the jungle. “Someone is in need of mating.”

“Speak for yourself,” I tell him, humping his hip. “I can get by just fine... like... this...”

He resolutely lifts me, lowers his pants, and threads me down on his cock before I can come from the humping. But I’m practically there, so after three hard thrusts I’m trembling and jerking and clinging to his dragon’s body.

He notices and starts using me for his own purpose, keeps thrusting and comes himself, grunting and growling and putting his teeth at my throat. I offer it willingly, and the submissive act makes my whole body twitch in prolonged ecstasy.

Betruchael doesn’t bite, just lets me feel his teeth while he sprays inside me.

Drained, I hang from his arms like a ragdoll. “Not wearing a dress is convenient,” I pant. “Maybe you should just leave your trousers at home, too.”

He doesn't comment on my silly suggestion, just carries me on until we reach a stream, where he sets me down on my feet.

"I will sense any gold there may be," he rumbles, "and you can pick it up."

"Mhm. Why can't you do both?"

He gives me a look that has me take a quick step back. "I would prefer not to get my pants wet. Whereas you..." He nods to my nakedness.

"Okay, I get it," I hurry to agree. "Fair enough."

He walks along the bank, looking like a character from a fairy tale. Then he stops and points. "Here."

I dutifully wade into the cool stream and look down. The water is clear, but there are so many rocks and pebbles and sand that I can't spot the gold. "Can you be more accurate?"

"No."

"Whatever," I mutter as I lift some rocks at random. "Is it a lot of gold?"

"No."

"You're being a great help." I lift more rocks out of the water, none of them promising. Using both hands, I scoop a heap of pebbles from the bottom and put them on the bank. "Any in there?"

He saunters closer and looks down. "No."

I scoop up more and dump it on the grass. "There?"

He bends down and picks up a piece of gold the size of the nail on my pinky finger. "Yes."

"That's not a lot of gold."



“Precisely. So the sooner you find more, the better.”

He puts the tiny nugget in his hoard pouch and takes a few more steps before he points again. “Here.”

I repeat the procedure, which in fairness seems pretty effective. Again it takes a couple of tries before Betruchael picks up another speck between two claws. “Not the best source of gold. It will take a long time to collect even a small amount.”

I shrug. “At least there *is* gold here. I think that’s lucky.”

“We shall try again, then find another river. I remember having heard the term ‘gold mine’ at some point in my life. Is that what this is?”

“A gold mine? No, that’s where they drill and blast their way into a mountain to find the gold that’s still inside the rock.”

“That sounds more effective.”

I push hair out of my face. “It does. It also sounds like you’d need drills and explosives. And a mountain that actually contains gold.”

“Don’t all mountains contain gold?”

“Most mountains don’t. It’s pretty rare. On Earth, anyway. On Xren, I honestly don’t know.”

“Earth is very different from Xren?”

“Not very different. Just different. Xren is what Earth was like a quarter billion years ago.”

“There.” Betruchael points at a new spot in the stream, and I splash over to dig up the bottom.

This time the nugget is the size of a peanut, so by far the biggest we’ve found today.

“Some progress is being made,” the dragon says. “But it is slow.”

“And boring,” I add. “I never knew dragons would lower themselves to doing work.”

He bores two golden holes into my head. “What?”

“That is what you’re doing, if you didn’t know. You’re *working*.” I’m guessing he’s not going to stand for that. Even to me, a dragon doing dreary work like this feels like it doesn’t fit.

“Is that what this is?” he asks with obvious distaste. “Work?”

“Seems like it would be beneath you,” I say innocently. “So many things are.” I do want him to have gold so he can Change to his dragon form, because he clearly wants it desperately. But I’m also much more scared of him in that form than this one. So I’d like to postpone his next Change as much as possible.

“It *is* dreary,” he ponders. “And yet without me to determine where there might be gold, it would take you much longer. This once, I will deign to do work. Then never again. And you will never tell anyone!” He bends down to focus his gaze on me.

“I won’t,” I squeak. He still has the ability to intimidate me.

We keep going, only finding small amounts. He carries me to another stream, and we do the same thing with much the same result. The rain stops, and the clouds start breaking up.

“This must be the slowest and most tedious way to find gold,” Betruchael growls. “You say a gold mine is not a possibility. What other ways are there? Except for stealing someone’s hoard.”

“I don’t know,” I tell him, straightening up and pushing my hands into my lower back. It’s getting sore from all the digging. “Some say there’s a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but I’m not so sure.” I nod into the distance.

He follows my gaze. “That *is* a rainbow, but surely it’s impossible to find its end. Plainly a myth for children.”

“Plainly,” I echo and wade further up the stream. “On the other hand, you’re a myth, too.”

“No planet ever forgets being honored by the presence of a dragon,” Betruchael says, still staring at the distant rainbow. “We’re remembered through fairy tales and legends forever. Some think those myths are false, and most of them are. But the most important element remains real: the dragon. Come here, Nichelle.”

I like the way my name sounds in his deep, silky voice. But I’m not going to just run to him when he tells me to. “Look, this rock looks like a potato.” I hold it up.

“If it’s not gold, you can toss it away and come here.”

“And this one is shaped like a strawberry. On one side, anyway. The other is more like... a rock. Look.”

“Drop those worthless pebbles and come here *now*.”

I wade further upstream. “Oh, that one looked like gold, but it’s more orange. It could be iron.”

There’s no reply. And when I look back, Betruchael is gone.

Damn. He lost patience. I just wanted to demonstrate that I’m not his servant to command and yank around. Now I’m naked *and* alone.

The fear of the jungle comes creeping. It’s been days since I felt it last — the dragon’s presence completely outshone it. It’s

quite unpleasant, and I want it gone.

I step out of the creek and jog along the bank to where I saw him last. There's no sign of him, but I don't think he went back to the hut. So I hurry in the approximate direction he was looking.

He can't believe in the rainbow thing, can he?

I walk fast, suddenly hyper aware of the many sounds all around me, the rustling and the scurrying and the scraping. The jungle around the treehouse isn't alive like this, because the cavemen live there and probably because the dragon used to be there a lot. He would scare away all kinds of dangers. But now he's not beside me, and the wildlife in this part of the woods is probably just keeping quiet whenever he's nearby. Now, he's not.

I itch to return to the beach. But what if he never returns? I don't want to be without him. I told him I love him, and that's true. He's incredible, and I don't have a choice in the matter — my emotions are overwhelmed, and my rational mind doesn't get much of a vote.

A butterfly comes fluttering towards me, bobbing in the air. It's the size of an umbrella, with many colors and a thin little body that shines in metallic green. Its large, rounded wings are transparent, delicate, and strikingly beautiful.

In panic, I pull a sapling up with its roots and hold it in front of me like a weapon. "Shoo! Go away!"

The butterfly hangs in the air, bobbing up and down, long antennas waving. Its wings flap erratically in innocent confusion at my sudden unfriendliness.

Then it turns around and flutters away. A ray of sunlight catches the drop of clear liquid at the tip of its long, practically

invisible stinger.

“Damn monsters,” I mutter as I make my way among the trees. What the hell am I doing? Chasing a dragon through an alien jungle, in search of the end of the rainbow? And it just might kill me—

I round a thick tree trunk, and there he is, golden and magnificent.

Relief floods through me, followed by the urge to turn around and put my naked butt in the air for the demigod. Sweet Plood, he’s got me good.

“About time,” he growls. “Dig here.” He taps the toe of one boot at the ground.

I toss the sapling away and brush some jungle debris off me. “Why?”

“It’s the end of the rainbow. Well, it was. Now the rainbow is gone. But any gold there is should still be in place. Dig.”

“It’s just a myth for children,” I sigh. “I thought you understood that.”

“And you pointed out that I am a mythical being. And yet I am doubtlessly real.”

The ground looks just like everywhere else in the jungle — layers of increasingly slimy and brown leaves until they become dirt. “Can you tell if there’s gold down here?”

“Dig.”

“Using what? I don’t have a shovel.”

He grabs my wrists and holds my arms up. “These should do.”

“Only if you help.”

He tries his trick with the piercing eyes again, but I just look away.

“You have to dig, too. The gold is for *you*, not for me.”

He stiffens and draws breath as if to blow fire. My whole mind knows that I’m about to die. That was it, I provoked him one time too many.

But he catches himself, quietly takes his boots off, and kicks at the ground with clawed feet, kicking up dirt and making a surprisingly deep hole.

I get down on all fours to help, knowing that if I had been anyone else, I would right now be a red splotch dripping from a bush. But if he’s my boyfriend, the way my crazy little mind is dreaming of, I can’t have him commanding me like that.

We dig in silence until my nails scrape against something hard. “It’s a rock.”

Betruchael puts a hand on my shoulder and pushes me a couple of feet away. “Let me see.”

Bending down to use his hands, he quickly excavates around the rock and then pulls it out of the hole.

It’s a jagged, dirty rock the size of a baseball. Three quarters of it is simple quartz, while the last quarter is definitely gold.

“Well, it’s not a *pot* of gold,” I protest against this unscientific success. “It’s just a coincidence.”

“If you were mythical yourself, you’d understand,” Betruchael rumbles, tossing the nugget into the air and catching it again. “As a hoard, it’s pitiful. But it is sufficient for now. Come.”

He lifts me with one big hand under my hips and carries me back the way I came, holding his boots in the other hand. When we get to the creek, he gently sets me down on the bank

and wades in himself. He scrubs the dirt and rotting vegetation off his feet, then takes my hands and does the same to them, his touch light and careful.

“It’s nice when you don’t bark at me,” I tell him softly. “I want to help you. But when you order me around, it makes me resist.”

“Why resist?” he asks, puzzled. “I am a dragon. You are not. It’s only appropriate for you to obey.”

“I was hoping that maybe we could be more than just dragon and servant,” I try the waters. “But maybe that’s not possible.”

“Anything is possible,” he says with confidence as he uses his big hands to scrape the water off both mine. “As you pointed out, I am a mythical being. There’s a lot of magic in myths.”

“I’m a mythical being,” I mock, making my voice deep in an imitation of his. I’m still miffed about him finding gold at the foot of the rainbow. “Still you’re here. With me. And I’m the least mythical being in the universe.”

“Perhaps that’s what I like,” he says, seemingly not noticing my imitation. “Perhaps one part of my life should be non-mythical. Perhaps it should be *real*.”

I reach up and stroke one hand along his golden hair. It’s immediately buried in his thick, dark locks. “Are *we* real?”

He blows hard on my other hand to remove the last of the moisture. Only warm air comes out, not fire. “I have reason to believe that we are.”

“It would be nice to be real,” I tell him, pulling his head down to me and being happy that he lets me. “Really real.”

He kisses me on the lips, just a glancing touch. But it carries the promise of so much more.

“Then let’s be really real.” He holds on to the back of my head and kisses me more deeply.

He walks ashore and sits down on the bank, with me on his lap. There’s not much preparation needed — I’m bare already, and now I know how his pants work.

I lower myself on him, both of us ready as always. With his hands under my hips to take my weight, I can half control the depth and speed. But only as long as he allows it.

As it happens, I want it slow and deep, and that seems to suit him as well.

His cock fills me up beyond capacity, but that’s the way it should be. I *want* my sex to have to adjust for his size. It makes me feel even more delicate and small.

I cling to his neck, and he pulls me close while he lifts and lowers me, his strength impressing me every time. The wet squelching from my crotch overpowers the soft clucking from the creek. I’m in a constant state of uncontrollable horniness around him, and I don’t even know that it will ever change. He’s so much larger than life, so *male* that it forces me into the extreme opposite. I can feel girly and dainty around him, even attractive because he has trouble taking his eyes off me. I don’t know if I should love that as much as I do. But fuck it. I’m on an alien planet. I can be whoever I want. And right now, being the horniest girl in the galaxy suits me perfectly.

As usual Betruchael’s many features and movements down there set me boiling in no time. It’s the kind of thing I’d love to last, but I also want to get where we’re going. And ultimately, it’s not my choice. He starts something moving right at my clit, and then I’m going over the edge again.



Whimpering and shaking and groaning, I come hard on his cock, my pelvis rubbing against him.

He comes too, his instincts making him push me down on him hard when he sprays inside me. He wants to get deep, too.

We rest for a minute, and then he gets up with his pants still hanging on his hips and his hard cock still inside me. He carries me through the jungle, up the hill, and then down to the beach. I lose track of how many times I climax along the way. But I don't care — I have a dragon cock inside me, and I can't stop what it does to me.

And now that he said we are real, I love it even more.

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

Nichelle makes many interesting sounds on the way back. I let her down on the beach at a safe distance from the water.

She checks her dress for dryness and wrinkles her nose. “What’s that smell?”

I walk over to the part of the monster I burned the other day. It stinks as it rots, so I take my pants off, wade into the sea, and toss the disgusting glob of burned jelly out into the waves so it will drift to shore some other place.

Putting my pants back on, I check the gold. The new piece is plenty for me to Change, to fly over the sea to the other landmass and do what must be done to force hoard gold from the alien females there. Things are suddenly looking very good. And probably I can turn Kyandros’s problems to my own advantage.

Nichelle is building a new fire outside the hut. “Do you think there’s fish in that ocean?”

“Small monsters that can be caught, gutted, and eaten,” I tell her, having heard of fish before.

“Um. Something like that. We don’t call them monsters, really.”

I stand and watch her build the fire. “Are there signs that the previous residents of this beach caught and ate such things?”

“I actually found their trash heap,” Nichelle says as she rubs sticks, trying to light the fire. “There are definitely fish scales and fish bones there. But I haven’t seen any bait or fishing line or hooks.”

Reaching out, I casually stroke her smooth, long hair, marveling that any lesser being would let a dragon get this close and not cower or hiss. “These are instruments for fish-catching?”

“You need thin line and small steel hooks. And bait, but that’s not the problem.”

“Where have you looked?”

She blows on the smoking kindling. “All around the hut and the fields they made and the kiln they had for making pots.”

“Is a beach a good place for catching those edible monsters?”

The fire catches, and she blows on her singed fingers. “I don’t know. Probably not. The water may be too shallow.”

“Come with me,” I tell her and lift her, carrying her to the end of the beach. Here the water comes straight up to bare rock, and there’s a narrow spit of bedrock that continues further out into the ocean. “This would be a better place to keep those contraptions of fish-capture.” I walk over to the nearest tree.

“There’s line!” Nichelle exclaims, pointing at a place on the tree where a twig has been cut off halfway down its length, leaving a hook-like offshoot with something hanging from it.

I walk so close that she can reach the length of braided string and the small, black hook attached to it.

“This isn’t steel,” she says, turning the hook over in her hand. “It’s silver. They used their jewelry to make it. Look, this was an earring once. They bent it and hammered it into a fishhook.”

“Resourceful ladies,” I offer, once more struck by how overwhelmingly difficult this world must be to the lesser kinds. They have to fight for every little scrap.

“Resourceful and tough,” Nichelle says, her voice cracking. “There was just two of them. I really want to meet them and tell them how great I think they are.”

“And now you want to use this?” I take a guess. “To catch the edible sea monsters?”

“Fruit is nice,” she says carefully. “But sometimes I need something different. Grilled fish is delicious, too.”

I glance at the piece of string and the badly-tarnished silver hook. “What else do you need?”

“I would need bait, I think. Worms or smaller fish or... I don’t know. I’ve only ever been fishing a couple of times, and I didn’t like it much.”

I let her down to the ground. “Prepare these things and wait here.”

Walking fast past the beach, I ascend the hill and get to the jungle. I think I’ve seen living things here that aren’t able to escape fast enough when they sense me coming.

After a quick search I find what I seek and bring it back to Nichelle. “What about this?”

She turns to face me. “Let me take a loooooooh *fuck*, keep that thing away from me!”

I hold the worm in one hand. “This might work as bait. See, it’s still wriggling.”

“It’s bigger than *me!*” Nichelle exclaims and takes a step back. “Do you think we’ll be catching *whales?!?*”

The worm is perhaps on the long side, but it’s an eye-catching white, and it looks fat.

“It must be tempting to sea monsters,” I tell her. “Look how it moves!”

“I meant *small* worms,” Nichelle says. “But there aren’t really small insects on Xren, are there? With small grubs?”

“Let’s try this one,” I decide. “Or perhaps you can eat this as it is? It looks delicious, yes?” I lift it closer to her.

She backs off and makes a face. “Oh damn. No *thanks*. I’m not *that* hungry. And I never will be.”

“Shall we just throw it away, then?”

“Or just put it back where you found it? I only want to catch small fish.” She shows me, both hands held close together. “So the worms can be tiny.”

“I have never seen anything that tiny on this swamp of a planet,” I tell her. “What did the former residents use?”

Nichelle studies the hook. “I don’t know. But let’s try something.”

She starts rubbing the dull, black hook on her dress, polishing away the tarnished part and revealing the shiny silver underneath. “That looks better. Let me just do that to the whole thing.”

When she’s done, the hook is remarkably shiny and reminds me of Kyandros.

“Not quite hoard material, but it’s pretty enough.”

She holds the hook up, making it shine in the sunlight. “I wondered why they’d hammered it so flat. I think it’s a lure.”

I nod wisely. “Ah. Of course. Yes. I was about to say it.”

“You were?”

I look away. “Perhaps.”

“No shame in not knowing that a lure is,” she says. “I barely know it myself. But I think the idea is that the hook itself looks like a tiny fish. Or, as we seasoned and expert fisherwomen call it, ‘bait’.”

“You did say that bait could be small fish,” I recall. “And while that hook isn’t an actual fish, it might look like one to larger fish with more meat on them. Thus they will try to eat it, with the result that the hook spears their mouths and hooks them irreversibly. Because the hook is attached to the line, you may then pull it in, larger fish helplessly attached.”

“That’s a fantastic summary of what I want to do,” Nichelle enthuses. “Are you sure you haven’t gone fishing before?”

“I would remember,” I assure her. “Get to it.”

She goes out to the farthest point of the spit and throws the hook into the sea, letting it sink.

Meanwhile I carry the worm back to the jungle and set it free.

When I return, Nichelle has caught two shiny creatures with fins.

“You’d prefer to eat those over that nice worm?” I ask. “They could be the spawn of Kyandros, all silver-scaled and slimy.”

She puts her hands at her sides, clearly proud. “These are not dragons at all. They’re surprisingly similar to Earth fish, so

I'm sure I can eat them just fine. After we grill them."

We return to the hut and Nichelle cooks the creatures, then proceeds to pick them bare of their white meat, which she chews happily.

"I've never been happier about not having to eat," I tell her. "But I'm glad you like those."

She sucks her fingers clean of the fat. "Delicious. Could use a little pepper, but I'm not complaining. Betruchael, what will you do when you get to the other place? Where the saucer girls live?"

It's something I haven't given much thought. Being here with Nichelle is surprisingly pleasant, and the rest of my plan is vague.

"I never plan such things. A way will show itself."

She looks out at the ocean. "Will you take me with you?"

"Take you with me? I will have to fly to get there."

"Yes, but when you rescued me from the sea monster, you carried me in your claws. I think. I wasn't too aware of everything that was going on."

It's a completely new idea to me. I've never flown any distance with someone dangling from my talons. The air resistance would be immense. "I think that would be difficult."

"I might be able to help you over there. With the girls."

"You might," I concede, "although it's hard to imagine my needing any help from anyone in my dragon form."

"I'd love to come with you," she says quietly, her dark gaze darting shyly to me and away.

For a long time, the only sounds are the crackling from the fire and the hiss from the waves at the beach.

Finally I sigh. “*If* the dragon allows it, and *if* the other shore isn’t too far away, maybe I will carry you with me.”

She gets up and embraces me. “That’s all I ask. I know the dragon with wings is different from the one you are now. But maybe he likes me, too.”

I shrug. “He likes you enough to take you back from a monster ten times his size, so it’s possible.”

We sit on the sand, side by side as the sun sets and creates some interesting colors in the sky.

“I want to take a bath,” Nichelle says while it’s still light enough to do that. “Maybe you can check the beach for monsters first?”

I walk to the sea and wade in, making sure all creatures can feel my presence and swim away as fast as they can. “It should be safe now.”

Nichelle pulls her dress off without any hesitation, revealing her astounding shape. “Thanks.”

I watch her wade into the surf, small feet careful on the pebbles until she swims a couple of strokes and then sits on the bottom with her full chest above the surface.

“Can you swim, Betruchael?” she asks, voice bright as she scrubs herself.

“I’m sure I can if I must,” I tell her from the shore. “I just make sure that I never must.”

“Smart policy,” she chirps, then gets to her feet and walks towards me, gloriously naked and shiny in the red light as the



water drips from her. “I wish I had a towel. Oh, if only there was some way I could get this water off me...”

I chuckle. “Female wiles don’t work on dragons. Well, not *this* dragon. Come here.”

She sashays over, and I squeeze water out of her hair, then wipe as much as I can off her face, her neck, and her back. I spend considerable time wiping her behind, both because it is quite a big area and because I thoroughly enjoy it.

“I thought you said it wouldn’t work,” Nichelle says when I declare that she’s dry. “I think it worked just fine.”

“Female wiles don’t count when the male knows he’s being tricked,” I explain, giving her behind a loose, but loud slap.

She squeals in mock outrage. “Hey! Anyway, I thought those wiles worked much better when he *does* know, but does what she wants anyway because she’s so cute.”

I go in closer and cup her breasts from behind. “You may be onto something there. Let’s go to the hut.”

“Wait. I was thinking,” Nichelle says, her voice more raspy than usual, “that the grass is still warm from the sun and it’s all soft and such. And the weather is nice. See the red light in the sky? It’s so pretty!”

“You want to stay out here,” I conclude. “Yes, why not. But if so...” I turn her around and bend down to kiss her.

She responds to it with passion, hanging off my neck with her eyes closed and her face angled up to me, so open and genuine. She gives herself over to it, without reservation, and that fans the flames I’ve had inside for a while.

Nichelle is more than ready, that much is clear from the scent alone. It makes me heady, and I am always ready for her.

Lifting her and placing her on the soft grass at the edge of the sand, I discard my pants.

“Wait,” she says in a breathy voice. “Now I want it like this.”

She turns over, getting onto her knees.

The sight of her charms presented to me so blatantly makes my breath catch in my throat and my cock twitch. She is the most enticing and arousing female I’ve ever known.

To make matters even more urgent for me, she dips her back and stretches her arms in front of her in the image of absolute submission.

On weak knees, I kneel behind her and position my rod at her entrance.

“You are incredible,” I growl, unable to speak normally. “But I’m glad you’re not a dragon.”

Her sex is swollen and ready in front of me, glistening with the most wonderful liquid.

I take the time to look around. The sky has an almost insultingly vivid golden sheen to it, the ocean is red, the breeze is warm, and the bushes create a fresh scent.

Then I focus only on Nichelle.

I place my cock at her entrance and push.

- NICHELLE -

The next day is sunny and clear, and it's obvious that Betruchael is leaving. He stands on the beach and stares towards the horizon, then climbs the hill and stares from up there, too.

He gets me a heap of fruits and refills the firewood stores, all without me asking for it. It's obvious that he's preparing to fly off without me.

Well, I'm not going to beg, though heaven knows what will become of me if he leaves. He's been the glorious sun in my life for a week now, although it feels like years. I've barely noticed anything else. It's been like watching a movie with him as the hero. All I've had to ask was 'I wonder in which spectacular way he'll get out of this one.' I was even fine with being the comic relief. But if he goes and leaves me here, my life will become a tragedy.

"Betruchael, if you see the girls with the saucers—" I begin, then change my mind.

He gives me a glance. "I can promise nothing. The dragon in me decides."

I stand back while he takes out his hoard pouch and absentmindedly tosses and catches it, staring out at the ocean.

Then he turns on his heel, marches over to me, and looks down on me from his great height, eyes shining steadily. He seems to be struggling to come up with something to say.

“Perhaps I will come back for you,” he finally growls.

“Perhaps you will.”

He looks as if he wants to say more, but then he turns away, walks a few paces on the beach, and then Changes to his dragon form. It’s a weird thing to see, and it kind of turns my brain inside out. But that’s forgotten the moment he’s a full dragon, achingly beautiful and perfect.

He beats his wings, sending a spray of sand over me as he soars into the blue sky, shining in the morning sun.

I manage to stay on my feet, although my instinct is to throw myself down. Some of the old terror comes creeping, but I’m determined to not give in to it.

He beats his wings and flies high, spiraling up with total ease, as if he weighed nothing. Then he comes diving down, a golden meteor shooting across the sky. He levels off before he hits the ground, zooming over the sea at such a breakneck speed that he leaves a foaming wake on the surface, twenty feet under him.

Despite him being about to leave me, it makes me proud to see his magnificence. For a short while, I was as close to him as anyone has ever been, I think. And we did some incredible stuff.

He does a lazy loop, then speeds away, straight out from the beach.

I sigh. I was hoping the dragon would want me to come along. But of course he can't. I'm nothing like him. I'm all problems and obstacles and time wasted...

He does a tight turn and races right back. He's coming straight for me.

I want to run away, expecting the searing heat from his flame a split second before it turns me to smoke.

He does a lazy turn and lands on all four legs. **Well? Climb on.**

I don't know what to do. Climb on?

"Can I?" I ask carefully. "Ride on your back?"

**Watch out for the spikes.**

I hurry over and put one hand on his warm scales. "Are you sure?"

**Less and less so the more you tarry.**

Okay. Using his scales and his legs, I manage to climb onto his back, right where the long neck flows into the back. There are indeed many dangerous spikes here, but I manage to place myself so I'm between them and not on top of them.

A swarm of butterflies are doing somersaults in my stomach. This could get... interesting.

"Should I hold on?"

**If you wish.**

I grab two of his golden spikes that are thankfully only pointy and not sharp like knife-edges, lean forward for balance, and try to press my knees into him. "I'm ready."

His wings are right behind me, so when he beats them my hair gets blown every which way.

He takes off, and I squeal in thrilled terror.

**You're being annoying.**

“Sorry. I'll tryyyaaaieeee!”

I scream as he speeds up, wings beating hard. The beach is shrinking away below, and I don't feel the least bit steady. The wind blows so hard in my face I could be blown off him at any moment. Oh, what I'd give for an airplane seat, firmly bolted down and equipped with sturdy seatbelts!

“I'm not sure if I can hold on,” I yell, about to panic.

**Then don't.**

“I mean, I want to! But you're moving so fast, the spikes are slipping from my hands!”

**This is not fast.**

“Even so, you're very slippery!”

His scales are like glass, and his immense muscles moving powerfully right under my butt aren't helping me feel safe: It's like riding the most insanely murderous bull at a rodeo that's also the coolest thing in the world.

I push my cheek into his scales. “If I fall, will you catch me?”

**Hmm.**

“Don't *think* about it!” I howl. “Just say *yes!*”

**Yes.**

“Now I don't trust you-*hu-hu!*” I'm so scared I'm on the verge of tears, clenching my eyes shut and holding on for dear life

We're flying higher and higher. When I dare open one eye for a split second, I can only see the blue of the ocean, and the occasional white-foamed wave.

Betruchael settles into a steady rhythm with his wings. To top it all off, this is making me horny. This is the calm, inescapable, and perfect rhythm he likes to fuck me to.

But it's at least somewhat familiar. Once I get used to it, I'm able to relax a tiny fraction.

I stick my head up an inch or so. Ahead there's land. A huge sliver of land that must be where the girls live. There are clouds and green woods.

Clutching the spikes like the only things that are keeping me alive, I dare a glance behind us.

There's land too. But it doesn't look as big as the landmass in front of us. I think I spot the small, black triangle that must be volcano Cronk. We must be super high up.

"Betruchael!" I yell, suddenly even more scared. "I need air to breathe and to stay alive! There's not much of it this high!"

His heavy sigh goes through my body and my mind. **Such a needy species.**

"Sorry."

He goes into a shallow dive that I like better than going up, because his wings stay mostly still.

For the first time I'm almost able to enjoy it. I'm riding on a *dragon*. Actually, I'm riding on *my* dragon. Maybe. If he wants to be. He said we were *real*.

It's actually thrilling.

No, it's beyond thrilling. It's totally magical. And if he ever lets me do this again, I'll be able to enjoy it more. I hope.

Down at a more manageable altitude, I'm feeling better and the rhythm is getting to me. He's always doing *something* that

turns me on. Even now.

I move with the flow of his muscles, learning where I should place myself to get the most enjoyment out of it.

He turns his long neck around and stares at me from up close.

**What's going on back here?**

If I thought his eyes were piercing in his almost human form, now I'm looking straight into the center of the Sun.

"Nothing," I hurry to say, retinas seared forever. "Just getting comfortable."

**I'm sure you will be much more 'comfortable' with my help. *After* we land.**

"Yes. I'm sure, too. Sorry."

To my astonishment his beautiful dragon's head shoots in to boop me, snout to nose. Then he turns around and flies on.

I'm left with my heart beating like crazy. Getting that kind of very close attention from a dragon activates my prey responses. Even if I know him.

"And those responses start with fear," I mutter, "and then they turn to... yeah, there we go." The urge to rub myself on him is greater than ever, but there's no chance I'll give in this time. I'm just getting really exciting for us to land.

After a good while of flying, we reach the other coast. First the air changes, from a fresh ocean quality to a humid, dense atmosphere with a smell of decay and flowers and life. I remember it from my own jungle.

Below the land is dense treetops, green and red. There must be rivers and lakes, but the treetops stretch across them and hide them. And anyway, they'll mostly be overgrown and look nothing like waterways.



“Do we know where to go?” I yell into the wind.

**Not exactly.**

“Not exactly, but approximately?”

**Look for rising smoke.**

The jungle beneath is hazy, and I can't imagine it would be possible to spot the wispy column of smoke from a campfire. But I gaze down as much as I can. It's all jungle, and it's gigantic.

“Betruchael.”

**What?**

“Can we land? I have one of those needs. I don't think you want me to do it while riding on you.”

He immediately banks hard and goes into a spiral that descends so fast I have my hands full just staying on. Once we get down to just above the treetops, he levels off. But he doesn't slow down, racing over the trees so fast he makes the treetops sway.

“Um. It would be easier if we land...”

Betruchael doesn't slow down. But I notice he turns his head to the side, as if to see what's behind us.

I turn, too.

“Shit!”

It's a dragon. Green and sleek and dangerous-looking. It's beating its wings hard, keeping up with us. It could probably incinerate me with one flame of its fire. And of course Betruchael can't fight it with me on his back.

“Set me down fast,” I urge. This is looking really dangerous.

### **Hang on.**

He turns in the air so fast the blood is pushed from my head down to my feet, and I start to see the world pulling away in a dark tunnel. Then there's a terrible ruckus as we're crashing through foliage, branches and twigs being broken off and raining around me.

We hit the ground with an uncontrolled *thud*, then bounce around for a second. Betruchael is back up in no time, and I see something green and shiny pass the hole we've made in the leafy canopy high above us.

### **Get behind that tree.**

I scramble to my feet and seek shelter behind the thickest tree around. I squat down and push my back into it, trying to be invisible. In front of me there's only dark jungle, threatening and unknown.

I hear Betruchael beat his wings and take off, then crash up through the leafy canopy from below. Making a new hole, I'm sure, taking the other dragon by surprise.

But the green dragon is smart, too. The moment Betruchael crashes up, the green one dives down through the first opening he and I made.

Betruchael follows right on his tail, but the other dragon gets a second alone with me. He settles down on the ground and stares at me with sparkling eyes.

### **Ah. An alien female.**

Betruchael lands between the green one and me. ***My female, Aragadon. Be on your way now.***

The other dragon Changes to human form. He's large and shining green, muscular and incredibly scary. I can feel the

old, sharp terror growing on my mind.

“*Your* female, Betruchael? I see. I won’t take her, so no need to worry. See how friendly I am?”

Betruchael stays in his dragon form. **You would never do anything from friendliness. State your business so I can decide whether to incinerate you on the spot or just singe your tail.**

“I’m surprised to see you here, Betruchael. I didn’t even know you were left on Xren. All the others are gone, I’m afraid. Well, most of them. But I don’t hold much hope for you. I doubt our new king and his brother will give you enough gold to leave.”

Betruchael Changes to his human-ish form. “Oh, I never expect or ask for alms. That is for lesser dragons. Such as you. Didn’t they offer you a pittance of gold to get you to leave?”

Aragadon laughs. “Oh, they’ve offered me more than a pittance. A king’s ransom, in fact. Several of them. But I have my reasons to prefer Xren. Although I preferred it more before. And you, Betruchael? Here to kill your brother?”

He gives me a glance. “Perhaps.”

“It’s astonishing how you must have hid out in the jungle somewhere for all this time and only now decide to show yourself. It makes no sense at all. I wonder what really happened there. And I wonder if *you* know what has happened *here*.”

“I’m sure I can’t stop you from telling me at great, tedious length,” Betruchael sighs theatrically. But I can see he’s tense — he may be acting superior, but he must respect this other dragon a great deal.

Aragadon looks up at the treetops as if interested in leaves. “I will tell you nothing in particular, except that if that female of yours hopes to find shelter here, she will be disappointed. There was a village of females in this jungle, but it has changed.”

“Changed how?” I dare to interrupt the conversation between clearly superior beings.

“Oh, the female pipes up!” Aragadon chuckles. “Very brave, that round little thing of yours.”

“She may be round and brave,” Betruchael growls, “but she *is* mine. Keep your distance.”

“Roundness and bravery appear to be common for her kind,” the green dragon ponders. “I shall reward her with an answer.”

“Get ready for the longest, driest tale you’ve ever heard,” Betruchael warns me wearily, taking a step closer as if to shield me. “Dragons live long lives, but even for us, Aragadon’s harangues are always insufferably lengthy.”

“There was a time,” Aragadon says, giving the golden dragon an annoyed look, “when there was peace. There was a village with alien females. Four dragons lived with them. I was one, Kyandros another. Possibly you can guess who the last two were.”

“Yranox and Caronerax,” Betruchael groans. “Oh my gold. This is taking longer than I thought.”

“Some of this is for your female’s benefit,” Aragadon says, giving me an icy look. “I’m sure you haven’t told her that dragons can’t live close by each other for long. We all hate each other, you see, female. And so we fight. It started with Caronerax and Kyandros. One day they happened to both be coming in to land in the same spot at the same time. One talon

touched a wing, and then... well, do I need to say more? Six houses were burned to a crisp, and the ground got so hot it couldn't be walked on for days. Two fields of useful plants were ruined forever, the soil charred many feet deep. Only the intervention by the females stopped the two from destroying the whole village while killing each other. As it was, they both escaped with only minor burns. Since then, there have been many fights and many injuries to our scales. Yes, mine too. Now, Betruchael, hear me: you are here now. We know you're here, nearby. The royals have no love for Betruchael the Evil. You will be attacked and killed. Unless you find a friend."

A coldness goes down my back. The saucer girls didn't tell us they live with dragons. They were just really eager that Betruchael not go there. What other absolutely vital information did they hold back from us?

"A *friend*?" Betruchael says, clearly skeptical. "I have never had a *friend* in my life, and neither have you. It's not a thing dragons do." He gives me a glance as if to tell me that I'm the exception

"True. And of course it pains me to suggest it. But Caronerax and Yranox are brothers. Royal brothers, who have a strange tendency to fight together. They are able to put their hatred aside for a while and fight as one. For a short time only, of course. But that is enough. It means that they win."

"Yes, yes," Betruchael sighs. "And now you are about to suggest that you and I gang up, fight together, and take the others by surprise, killing them one by one and stealing their hoards."

"Perhaps," Aragadon says, taken aback. "It would be the wily thing to do. The evil thing. The *dragon* thing."

Betrauchael leans against a tree and studies his fingerclaws. “Why not be *friends* with Kyandros, if those two princelings scare you so much?”

“I and Kyandros,” Aragadon growls, “don’t trust each other. If I were to suggest something like that to him, he might run and tell the royals in an attempt to ingratiate himself with them and keep them from killing *him*. King Yranox and Prince Caronerax are extremely hard to fight at the best of times. Even in single combat, neither I nor you could be sure to win. But if we were to fight *together*... I will say no more. Think about it, Betruchael. If there are to be friends here, I and you are the natural pairing. And be quick about it. Or perhaps all four of us will gang up against *you*.”

“You can try,” I say into the silence. I’m not sure what exactly I mean, I just want the green dragon to know that Betruchael is not alone.

Both dragons stare at me — Aragadon angrily, Betruchael amused.

Aragadon suddenly Changes back to his dragon form, making me gasp.

**I will do more than try, little female. If it comes to that.** He stretches his wings out.

“Where is this village?” I ask quickly. “With the alien females?”

**It’s no secret where it is,** the dragon says into my mind before he beats his wings and takes off, hovering above, green and terrible, his hard eyes looking at me as if he’s considering burning me to a crisp.

Then he stretches out his long body and flies up through the hole in the leafy layer above and is gone.

“Damn, he’s intense,” I pant when he’s gone. “How many of these things *are* there on this planet?”

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

“Only five,” I tell Nichelle. “An uneven number. I see now why everyone is so eager to have me join them.”

She tries to bring her hair in order, using both hands. “Was that what Kyandros wanted, too?”

“It is what he *said* he wanted. Gold only knows what he *actually* wanted.”

“The dragons live with Earth girls in a village,” Nichelle ponders. “That sounds strange to me. Do you think the dragons are keeping them captive? Or are they on friendly terms?”

“It all sounds highly suspicious,” I tell her. “Why are there dragons living close to each other? So close that there’s a scuffle when they come in to land?”

“Do we need to care?” she asks, peering into the dark jungle. “It sounds to me like there is a village with both Earth girls and dragons. That must be where the gold is and where the flying saucers are. It’s all we want in one place. If we find it, we can maybe get those things and leave. I mean, leave the planet. For good.”



“You’re starting to think like a dragon,” I tell her, strangely proud. “Perhaps there’s a way.”

“The way is probably me going there,” she says, “being all innocent and checking out where the saucers are and where the girls keep the gold. Then we can plan how to steal it.”

I frown. “You would steal from the other alien females?”

She shrugs her narrow shoulders. “A half hour ago I would not have thought about it. But now it seems they’ve been lying to us about important things. They’re *living* with dragons? While telling us we have to kill *you*? I’m not sure I owe those girls much consideration.”

There’s a cold anger in her that I haven’t sensed before, and I can’t help liking it. “Dragons aren’t always truthful,” I warn her. “Aragadon may have exaggerated.”

“Then we should find out. Do we walk or fly?”

I think about it. “We will wait until dark and then fly. The village will be easier to spot, if they have a campfire.”

Nichelle comes all the way over to me and puts her little hand on the front of my pants, giving me a sweet smile. “Any idea what we’ll do until then?”

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**D**arkness falls, and Nichelle steps out of a stream we found. She’s not been looking for gold, just taking a bath after our intense activities while waiting for evening.

“I guess it’s time,” she says, pulling on her dress. “I wish I had something nicer to wear. But maybe it’s better the less put-together I look. I want them to take pity on me.”

I casually reach out and stroke the curves of her body with the back of one finger. I don’t get tired of her luxurious roundness. “I think you’d look alluring in anything.”

She freezes and looks up at me, shocked. “Betruchael!”

“Mm?”

“Did you just *compliment* me?!”

I think back, genuinely surprised. “So I did. Huh. Although it may be said that I was simply stating a fact. Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

“Now that you’ve lost *that* virginity, you might as well keep doing it. I like it.”

I Change to dragon form, noticing Nichelle takes several steps back and half hides behind a tree. **We shall see.**

“Also, could you tell me when you’re going to Change? Please? I nearly get a heart attack every time. You get so *intimidating*.”

I swing my head around on my long neck so I’m looking at her from above, very close. **Oh, but then it makes you feel so good. I smell new juices.**

She blushes. “Hey, you can’t blame a girl for her natural responses. Do I just climb on?”

I lower myself so she can get on. **You should be aware that this is not something a dragon ever does, letting someone ride on him.**

She swings herself onto my back, grabbing hold of the spikes. “You know, I had a feeling this is a rare experience. I don’t think I can get more honored than I am already.”

I beat my wings and make sure she’s sitting safely. Then I fly up from the trees and into the darkness. It’s not a complete dark — the annoying blue moon is a luminous crescent straight up. But it shouldn’t be much of a problem.

“Remember I can’t survive if we go too high,” Nichelle reminds me. “But we should be high enough to see a good amount of the jungle.

I’d already figured that out, so I’m getting to a good altitude.

“There are so many campfires!” Nichelle exclaims. “They must be villages of cavemen.”

Looking down, I see what she means. There are small clusters of little, flickering lights in many spots. They are separated by a day’s walk worth of jungle, but from up here we can see many at the same time.

**Indeed they are gatherings of slayers, I confirm. We shall avoid them.**

We’ve been up high for a good while when Nichelle leans to the side. “Now *that* looks like a city.”

I turn to see what she means. **Ah. That’s the biggest cluster of lights I’ve seen on Xren.**

“It has to be a town!” she exclaims. “Do you think that could be it?”

**It does stand out.** I go into a shallow dive to take a closer look. But not too close — if that is the place, then there may well be dragons nearby. And while I’m nearly invisible in the night sky, they will be, too.

Checking where the moon is, I fly closer to the lights in such a way that I won't be silhouetted against it.

**We must be quiet**, I instruct, knowing how far sounds can travel in still air at night.

Keeping my wings only half folded out to minimize the sound they make cutting through the air, I set up a fast, quiet glide across the outer parts of the light cluster.

It's risky — if anyone looks up, they might see the moonlight or the light from their fires reflected from my golden scales.

We pass over them with no mishap and only the minutest hissing from my wings. I sense both dragons and slayers, and I hear the bright sound of alien females like Nichelle chatting.

**That was it**, I tell her when we're at a safe distance.

Nichelle straightens up on my back. "I heard girls. I couldn't hear what they said, but it sounded like English."

**Did you hear dragons?**

"No, but I heard cavemen. Many of them. Sweet gold, Betruchael! With all those fires, there must be hundreds of them!"

**Hundreds of slayers. Dozens of females. Five dragons, including one king and one prince. All against Betruchael and Nichelle. It doesn't seem fair, does it?**

"It's totally unfair," the female chirps. "They don't stand a chance."

The strangest thing happens. I, Betruchael the Evil, known from the legends only as The Curse, eleven hundred years old, slayer of a score of dragons, of which several were royals, owner of the largest hoard in the universe, *laugh*. I laugh from

sudden, surprised delight, not from scorn or sarcasm or from seeing someone die in flames.

**I like the way you think.**

“And I like the way you laugh when you’re happy,” she replies. “It’s like nice church bells in my head. Should we just get this over with? Set me down not too far from their town, and I’ll walk in.”

**I will find a spot.** I turn lazily in the air.

“Will they know that I know you?”

**Aragadon saw you, Kyandros didn’t. Still you should assume that he knows who you are. I doubt those two will have told anyone else.**

“Okay. Keep in mind that this will take time. Probably a day or more. I will give you a signal when I’ve found the things we seek.”

**That would be difficult to arrange. Instead, on the second night, walk straight north from the largest campfire they have. I will meet you then.**

“All right.”

I land in a small clearing and fold my wings in.

Nichelle gets off me. “They won’t smell you on me, will they?”

**They will smell you and your clothing.**

“Oh. Is it very noticeable?”

**You smell good.**

“Your second compliment ever,” she says and smooths down her dress. “Keep practicing.”

**I will only practice on you.**

She stretches one hand in the air. “Come down here, please.”

I lower my head.

She puts her hand behind it, pulling me close. “I’ve never kissed you in this form.”

I let her kiss my lips, but I don’t open my mouth — there are many sharp teeth in there.

**Keep practicing,** I tell her.

She gives me a little smile and walks into the jungle.

For a moment I regret the whole plan. Now Nichelle is alone in the jungle, about to meet slayers and dragons. Gold knows what they will do to her.

**Scream if there’s danger,** I yell, taking the chance that I might be heard. But I will stay close and be able to get Nichelle out of danger.

And there will be danger. Because there are dragons.

Dragons, I realize with a sudden coldness, who might take her from me.

I beat my wings and shoot up to the sky.

- NICHELLE -

I hate the jungle at night. It's sticky and hot and things keep dripping on me from the canopy of leaves eighty feet above. The sounds are scary, too. There are so many living things in the bushes and the undergrowth. With Betruchael, I don't even notice. Alone, I tense up and freeze for any rustling that's closer than usual.

After an hour of regular walking, I stumble on something that's clearly a path. Only someone who's lived in the jungle would recognize it as one, but there's no doubt — there's a lot of traffic in this part of the jungle.

I still see no sign of the campfires we spotted, but I don't think I'll see the town until I just about walk into their wall—

“Stop, intruder on our turf.”

Big shapes come out of the jungle on all sides. They're cavemen, huge and dangerous, their swords bared.

But I've been around dragons for too long to be shaken by mere cavemen. “Who approaches me from the dark as if I were a *rekh* they were hunting?” My cavemanese is still decent enough, I notice with satisfaction.

One of them comes closer. “I am Pronat’ex, leader of this patrol. It is our duty to stop any unknown person we see on our turf. What shall I call you?”

His gaze is hard, but nothing like Betruchael’s.

“You may call me ‘my queen’. My name is for the alien females in your tribe, not for you, Warrior Pronat’ex.” Damn, I never knew I could be this snooty.

He looks down on me for three heartbeats, then turns on his heel. “Follow me, my queen.”

I have no problem doing as he says. This close to the girls’ village, that must be where they’re taking me. I think most tribes send patrols out to guard their villages, so it makes sense.

One of the men sprints past us, probably on the way to deliver the news of my arrival.

Soon we’re passing through a gate in a tall palisade, and inside is a town as good as any I’ve seen. It’s well lit with campfires and the occasional torch, revealing large huts of various types. I even spot several houses built from bricks. It’s time for the evening meal, I guess, and there’s a lot of deep-voiced talking and a good amount of staring when I pass by.

It’s a pretty long trek through the village before we pass through another gate in a low fence and approach the main campfire.

Three girls are waiting for me, alerted by the runner.

“Thank, you Pronat’ax,” one of them says. “We will use my hut.” She turns to me. “I’m Delyah. This is Aurora and Mia. Can we get you anything? Are you sick or injured? Hungry?”

“I’m good, thanks.”



“All right. Let’s get some privacy.”

“Sure.”

They lead me past a couple of brick houses that wouldn’t look out of place in a medieval village, some with two stories. Delyah opens a door and ushers me inside, a calm smile on her caramel face. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Inside there’s real furniture and even a solid bench by the wall. I sit down there, and Mia sits beside me. Aurora stands with her back to the door, arms crossed over her chest. When Iris said she looked like Xena, Warrior Princess, she wasn’t exaggerating. She has the same war-like outfit and the angry scowl.

Delyah gets busy with something that could well be a kitchen counter, rattling pots and pans.

“The kids aren’t sleeping yet,” she says over her shoulder, “so this should be a good place until they come home. You’re a queen of the Amazing tribe, right?” Her voice is calm, and she has a shy way about her. But I also get the feeling that she’s in a role of authority here.

“I’m Nichelle,” I tell her. “I’m sure you know why we started calling ourselves queens. I don’t want you guys to call me ‘queen’.”

“I know some of the story of your tribe,” she says. “It *is* actually pretty amazing how you were able to live right between two caveman tribes for so long.”

“We think so. Also, we think it’s amazing how nobody came to help us. Say, someone with access to flying saucers.”

Mia leans forward and frowns. “Didn’t Aurora and Phoebe travel to your tribe in a saucer and give you some stuff a few months ago?”

“They did,” I admit. “And we are genuinely grateful for that. Jinx’s and Haisley’s deliveries went really smoothly with that magical space gel of yours. Years *after* you guys got hold of the saucers. I’m sorry, I’m not being diplomatic. It’s just something we talk about a lot. Using *much* more direct language than I just did.”

“We would have contacted you sooner,” Delyah says and comes over with a wooden tray with cups on it. “And we would have offered to take you guys here. But not all is well in our village, and we think that you’re better off where you are. For now.”

“Looks like a nice enough village,” I tell her, gratefully accepting a steaming cup of something that smells familiar. “Brick houses and everyth— oh fuck *me*. Is this *coffee*?!”

“Green Mountain,” Delyah chuckles. “We only use it on special occasions while we try to get coffee trees growing here. It’s not as easy as we thought.”

“The soil here must be different from Earth,” Mia says as she takes a sip of her own. “And we make sure to keep any plant from home separate from the jungle. It would be sad if something we brought became an invasive species and ruined this planet. We kind of like this place now. Mostly.”

“Xren has its good sides,” I agree and take another sip, savoring it. “But still you girls go to Earth sometimes, right?”

I sense more than see the girls exchange glances.

“What makes you say that?” Mia asks. “Except for the coffee.”

“Those are Plood saucers you’re flying around in. They can travel in space. And they can travel fast, light years in a matter of hours or days. We understand you have several of them, and we’re guessing that they can’t all be broken. And also Phoebe

was wearing new Adidas when she and Aurora came to see us.”

Delyah shrugs, giving me a guilty little smile. “Shoes don’t last long on Xren. Yes, the saucers can travel to Earth, and we have done it. Well, not the three of us here, but some of the girls. We don’t go there anymore, and we probably shouldn’t have done it in the first place.”

I lean back, enjoying the smell of fresh coffee. “Then what’s the deal?”

“There are dragons,” Delyah sighs. “Dragons can be unpredictable and dangerous.”

“They can,” Mia agrees. “And I should know. I’m married to one.”

I freeze with the coffee cup halfway to my lips. “You’re... *married* to a dragon?”

She can barely hide a proud smile. “His name is Kyandros. He’s all silver.”

I take a second or two to recover. “I didn’t know they would marry us.”

Mia nods. “They will if they’re sure about it. I want to make clear that I do love him very deeply, and that he loves me with a ferocity that still overwhelms me. But dragons *are* dangerous. We worry about one of them following a saucer to Earth and then wreaking all kinds of havoc there. It just takes *one*. And not too long ago, there were a thousand dragons here on Xren. We can’t be sure they all left. Or if they left the planet, but are still hanging around in orbit or on Yrf or somewhere. They’re wily. That’s why we don’t go to Earth right now.”

I nod slowly. “Just one hanging around still could be a problem, definitely.”

Delyah peers at me over the rim of her mug. “How did you get here, Nichelle? It’s a long way from your village.”

I was pretty sure they’d ask me this, but the reply I’ve prepared doesn’t fit so well now. And hey, if these girls are marrying dragons now, then that changes things. “I rode on a dragon. His name is Betruchael the Evil. He’s all gold and fury.”

The girls exchange glances again.

“How close are you to Betruchael?” Mia asks carefully. “Dragons won’t let anyone ride on them. Unless it’s his wife or fiancée or someone like that.”

“I don’t know how close I am with him,” I reply. “He still scares me silly. But he’s changed. He was really mean before. Now he’s... nicer.”

“Where is he now?” Aurora asks quickly, piping up for the first time.

“In the jungle.”

“Nearby?”

“Probably.” I’m keeping my replies short, not really liking her abrupt tone.

“And you don’t know where you stand with him?” There’s ice in Aurora’s voice. “Maybe you should have found out before you brought him straight to our home. We have a lot of trouble with our own dragons as it is. I thought I’d made it clear to your tribe that the last thing we wanted was for Betruchael to come *here*.”

“Where else did you expect he’d go?” I fire back. “You’re the only tribe with enough gold for him to Change and leave Xren.”

“We gave you guys a loaded gun so you could shoot him dead,” Aurora points out. “You plainly didn’t do that.”

I shrug. “That’s right, we didn’t. We found it impossible to straight up *execute* a sentient being who had never caused us that much harm. Sure, he was an unpleasant jerk. But we hurt him more than he hurt us. How many dragons have *you* murdered in cold blood?” I give Aurora a stare.

She looks away. “There are more things going on here than you know. It was actually not our idea to kill Betruchael. There are some.... *tribes* here that we don’t want as our enemies.”

“The dragons we have here in the village hate each other,” Mia says. “They’re fighting more and more. Causing damage to not only each other, but to the village. But they’re kept somewhat in check by all of them being married to Earth girls. That means they do their best to control their instincts to kill other dragons. For their wives’ sake. Even so, they can’t control themselves completely.”

“It’s getting out of hand,” Aurora states darkly. “It keeps getting worse. But there’s four of them. That means they’re somewhat balanced. If two of them are briefly able to fight together, the two others may form an alliance, too. But with five dragons here, that balance is gone. There could be three against two.”

“How would that make things worse?” I ask. “If they’re already fighting.”

“Have you seen dragons fight?” Delyah asks. “It’s destructive enough with only one against one. A battle to the death with five dragons at the same time? There would be no jungle left in a large radius.”

“Some of us feel that the dragons should leave our village altogether,” Aurora growls. “With whomever would want to follow them.”

“We built this village too!” Mia snaps. “We have just as much of a right to be here as the girls with caveman husbands!”

“Not if your psychotic husbands keep burning down our fucking houses and our fruit trees!”

Mia gets to her feet. “That was one time! Nothing has burned since then. And we made sure those houses were rebuilt, bigger and nicer!”

Aurora shakes her head. “Bigger and nicer and always in danger of being burned again. There are little kids in this tribe! Holy Ancestors, I can’t believe this is even a topic for discussion! Your husbands are fucking menaces to society, and they keep getting worse!”

Delyah shrugs and sends me an apologetic look. “It’s like this all the time. It’s why we think the Amazing tribe is better off in your treehouse by the volcano.”

“I’m starting to get it,” I admit. “Even if the volcano erupts, we can always escape to Capree’s village. You guys can’t really get away. But don’t you have hundreds of cavemen to protect you?”

“That’s the only reason there’s still a village here, and not just a crater,” Delyah sighs. “But like you guys, we’d prefer not to kill the dragons outright. The cavemen could do it, we think. It has to be a last resort. They are all married to Earth girls, and

we want to stick together. We don't have the right to banish four of the girls from the village. We need the dragons to behave, that's all."

"It's against their nature to be at peace," Aurora snorts. "They *have* to fight each other."

"Can't they get their own homes some distance away? Far apart?" I suggest. "It's not like the dinosaurs will bother them."

"What about their wives?" Mia asks. "Where do *we* live? In the village, which we helped build over the course of years, but where our husbands aren't allowed? Or with our husbands in the jungle, knowing we're not too welcome in the village—oh no!"

There's a loud screech that rattles my teeth, and the hut is illuminated by piercing yellow light, like lightning that goes on for a long time. Sheer terror washes through me.

"Nichelle, you're about to see why we don't want yet another fucking dragon here," Aurora seethes before she runs out.

Seeing no reason to stay behind, I throw the last of the coffee into my mouth and go outside.

There's chaos. Babies and toddlers are screaming, cavemen are running to and fro, and Earth girls with crossbows and blunderbusses are passing by with grim looks on their faces.

Looking up, at first I can't see much. There's only the crescent of Yrf up there.

Something passes across the moon, something long and slender with a long tail.

There's another shriek that passes through my mind like a red-hot breadknife and causes me to throw myself down to the

ground. A blinding white light fills the world, and searing heat washes over me. It's immediately followed by a piercing screech and the light from a blue flame.

Cavemen yell hoarse orders, flames shoot skywards from houses around me, and sharp pieces of wood rain over everyone as something big hits the palisade and breaks part of it.

Earth girls call urgently to each other. "Caroline! You got it? Steady it at the bottom!"

"Is it loaded? Hey Emilia, is it *loaded*!?"

"Stay in the shadows! Don't get up!"

"God damn it! Can't we just *shoot* the fuckers?"

"We will. Just wait. I got it."

I can't see who's talking, but that last voice sounded like Aurora.

Someone lies down next to me. "How you like our tribe so far?"

"I liked the coffee," I tell her, voice shaking. "This light show, not so much. Oh *fuck*."

Another flame fills the air over the village and more heat rolls across me. I clench my hands over my ears to keep out some of the insane cacophony.

"This is dragons fighting," the girl says cheerfully. "Some say it's magnificent. Me, I find it beyond deranged that we even allow it. I'm Heidi, by the way."

I duck my head as more flames come our way, followed by two screeches that make the hair stand up all over me. "Nichelle. Yeah, dragons are hard to control, I guess."



Part of the jungle is on fire outside the palisade, one of the giant trees crackling loudly as its crown burns.

“Nichelle, from the Amazing tribe? Nice to meet you. I didn’t know you girls were here.”

“It’s— oh damn. That’s getting close. No, it’s just me.”

“Did you... umm... *fly*?”

“Yeah.”

Several cavemen run past, carrying big pots that look heavy. Probably the local fire department.

“On a dactyl, on one of those?” she glances up at the air.

“It was that one,” I tell her as a golden flame shoots across the sky and appears to hit something. There’s a shriek of fury and a loud crash as two dragons slam together.

I press my cheek to the dirt, terrified. It does look like the dragons will destroy the village.

“Betruchael,” Heidi says calmly. “I guess it had to happen at some time.”

“I’m sorry if this is my fault. I didn’t know it would be this bad.”

The sky is lit up by a blue light that lasts for two heartbeats.

“Big flame,” Heidi says like a sports reporter. “There goes ten thousand square feet of jungle. Yeah, these fights are bad for the village, probably worse for the kids.”

“Sorry,” I wheeze, covering my head with my hands as more dragon fire shoots down from the sky.

“But we had them before you came, Nichelle. It’s why we didn’t want you girls to live here. It’s really dangerous. Things used to be much better, though. But dragons aren’t used to

living on the same continent, let alone in the same *village*. I'm surprised they held out for so long before their civil war began. Oh, that one almost got the salen trees."

I glance up. There are five dragons fighting, blowing fire and clawing at each other and screeching and biting. It's the most terrible thing I've ever seen. Everything from the jungle to the village is constantly lit up from the stark, penetrating light from the dragon fire. The woods are on fire in four places, and two huts are burning, too.

But if I were to make a guess, I'd say the golden dragon was winning. And if I were to make another, I'd say he's doing this partly to show off for *me*.

"Crazy legendary monster," I mutter, a little smile playing on my lips.

"We don't know what to do with them!" Heidi yells over the din of the battle. "We love the girls they're married to, and we don't want them gone. And the dragons themselves have been a great help. But this is too much!"

"You're telling me," I reply tightly as a dragon swoops close by, shrieking through the air.

A girl is standing in the shadow of a house, right nearby. When stark light illuminates her, it looks like she's aiming a big blunderbuss up at the sky. It's so big that its muzzle is supported on a wooden tripod stand on the ground, and all the girl is doing is aiming.

In the next flash of light I see that it's Aurora. And she's aiming at one dragon in particular.

"Excuse me," I say and get to my feet, knees trembling from fear. I tiptoe over to Aurora, being starkly lit up with each flame from above.

Dragons tumble around above the village, shrieking and clawing at each other. Two of them are ganging up on Betruchael, it looks like — one is hanging onto his tail with all four taloned limbs, while the other is trying to get hold of his head.

Of course that means none of them can use their wings properly, so all three are falling.

“Closer,” Aurora mutters to herself as she aims the big gun. “Just a little closer...”

The two attackers let go of the golden dragon and blow fire at him, but he’s ready for it and dives hard, wings tucked in. I think he’ll plummet to the ground, but at the last moment he unfolds his wings and swoops back up with a deafening howl like from a fighter jet. For a split second he’s presenting his whole front to me.

And to Aurora.

“Gotcha,” she mutters.

I kick the gun’s wooden stand at the same time she pulls the trigger. The gun shakes as it gives off a thunderous boom and releases a huge cloud of black, acrid smoke.

Betruchael continues soaring into the sky.

Aurora spins around. “What the fuck? Did you just ruin my *shot?!?*”

I’m not going to discuss it. And I don’t think this village is the best place for me anyway. So I bolt, making for the gate.

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

There's a deep *boom* and something small hits my leg, giving a bit of a sting.

Ah. The slayers down below must be using weapons against me. For all the good it will do them. Everything will bounce off my scales when I'm in my dragon form.

The fight has gone surprisingly well. I'm sure I've hit Caronerax with at least one flame, and the others are staying back, only fighting each other with no real gusto. It's me they really want, but I'm proving too tough an adversary.

I soar high, seeing no need to continue the fight. Now they know that I can defeat them all any time I want.

It's not that surprising. While the other four are among the most powerful dragons that ever lived, they haven't fought other dragons as much as I have. And all my practice has made me good at it.

Sweet gold, it feels wonderful to win! They did not expect my sudden attack, forcing Aragadon to blow his fire first. And it feels even better to win knowing that Nichelle is watching me from down there. I want her over-awed with my magnificence.

I can picture her now, eyes wide, cheeks rosy, breath rapid and shallow, body welcoming and ready...

I fly in over the jungle, make sure I'm not being followed, and then set down, crashing through the leaves.

Changing back to human form, I check on my hoard. It's still there, but it's quite small for supporting many more Changes. I may have to be careful about it. But this once it was too tempting to take the princelings and my brother and Aragadon by surprise. Too long have I been lost in obscurity, alone in the dense jungle. Now they must remember why I've always been feared.

My foot stings. There must be a pebble caught in the boot.

Pulling the boot off, I find no pebble. But still there's pain.

Puzzled, I examine with my hand. The fingers come away with fresh ichor on them.

"Impossible!" I growl and examine my right foot. That one is fine. But the left one has a wound.

But nothing can hurt me while in dragon form!

That boom and the sudden sting — was that it? What kind of witchery are these alien females using?

I pull my boot back on. Whatever it is, it will heal like the cuts from the swords did. And I shouldn't let it detract from my victory.

Perhaps I should go back there, now that they think I'm gone. Those four are mighty dragons and must have big hoards. Even a fraction of one of those hoards would be enough to make me so rich and secure that I could leave the planet for good. If I return now, and single out one of them to a fight,

come close to killing him, and then force him to tell me where his hoard is... it would be glorious.

I wander around in this new jungle, thinking about my next move. Now that I know I can best any one of the other dragons in combat, I will wait until one of them is on his own, flying around. And then I will attack without warning, blowing fire, and then interrogate him about his hoard.

It should be Yranox, probably. Surely the king will have to greatest hoard—

“Betruchael?”

I know that voice.

“Out so late?” I inquire.

Nichelle comes out from the shadows. “I think you’ll find I’m... out late. Yes.”

“I thought we had an agreement.”

“So did I. And I don’t remember that part about you fighting every other dragon on Xren right on top of the village.”

“I’m a dragon,” I tell her. “I can’t be expected to stick to an agreement. But I did expect *you* to.”

She leans into a tree, brushing debris off her foot. “The plan didn’t work. They don’t like me in that tribe. Specifically, they don’t like that I brought *you*.”

The moment I see her touching her foot, a sharp pain shoots up from my own leg, making me groan. “I suppose that’s understandable. Did you locate the hoards?”

“I didn’t have time to look. Did you know that the dragons in this village are married to Earth girls?”

I frown. “Married?”

“I didn’t know it was something that dragons did. Kyandros is married to Mia, for instance.”

“Kyandros is married to an alien female?” I’m mystified.

“And he loves her very much, apparently.

“Does he?”

“So Mia says.”

I want to reach out and stroke Nichelle’s hair. Why must it be so smooth and shiny? But before I can do it, more pain shoots up my leg. “I can’t say I know what that means.”

“You don’t?”

I look up at the dark leaves to escape her clear gaze. “We need a new plan, I suppose. One where you find the hoards.”

Nichelle bites into a piece of fruit she’s brought. “Don’t you think those hoards will be well hidden?”

“They would, but if those dragons live in the village, they won’t want their hoards far away,” I ponder, distracted by the ache in my foot.

“That was a very... visible fight you had.”

“Dragon battles are spectacular,” I tell her. “Only dragon mating comes close for sheer deadliness.”

“They tried to shoot you,” she says. “But I ruined their aim.”

I gaze at her. “With a weapon?”

“Remember the gun I had? Like that, only bigger.”

“Is that what made that boom?”

“It was loud. And you were pretty close to it.”

I look down at my foot, where the stinging ache is becoming constant. “Was it loaded with gold, like yours was?”

“Probably. Only gold can get through a dragon’s scales, I think.”

I suddenly feel queasy. “Is that why they use it?”

“It’s why my gun was loaded with gold. That’s really all I know for sure. I heard gold is really poison to a dragon. When it’s inside his body.”

The world spins around me. “I never heard that. Gold? The most magnificent thing in the world? The very substance that gives the world value and meaning? Surely it can’t be poison when it feels so good to own it!”

Nichelle shrugs. “It’s just what I heard. Are you okay, Betruchael?”

“Yes! Of course I am. Let us find a place to stay. Somewhere you can fulfill your needs for sleep. How about right here?”

She looks around. “Um. It’s a little bit wet right here. It’s like a swamp. And we probably should be farther away from the village. The patrols might find us if we stay here.”

I sigh, not relishing the thought of walking right now. “Very well. Come along.” I force myself to walk, feeling the sting with each step.

We’ve walked a hundred paces when Nichelle comes up beside me. “How’s your leg, Betruchael?”

I keep walking. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re limping and groaning with each step.”

“Anyone would limp and groan when stuck on this planet,” I seethe. “It’s the only natural reaction. Keep up.”

“I can easily keep up. That’s what worries me.”



I send her a deadly look and keep going. But she's right — walking normally is too painful, so I do try to spare the left leg and I hear myself making a dignified little sound with each step.

"This must be far enough," I decide after far too long. The pain shoots up my whole leg now.

"Probably," Nichelle says and taps the ground. "And it's dry. I'll make a fire."

"You and your fires," I snap, the pain making me angry. "You don't think that will be seen by the slayers?"

"It might. But I also think I should look at your foot. There's definitely something wrong with it. And I'll need light for that."

I sit down heavily. "There's nothing you can do anyway."

"We'll see," she says and starts gathering firewood. After a while she has a small fire going and sits down opposite from me. "Will you show me?"

I put my booted foot over to her, and she pulls at it.

"That's tight," she says, having moved it maybe a finger's width. "Maybe that's the problem, you just need new boots."

"Keep going," I command.

She does, and finally the boot comes off.

Nichelle places herself with my foot in her lap. "Let's see... oh."

"It seems the boom weapon didn't miss me after all," I tell her.

"There's a small wound right here," she says and points. "Ichor is seeping out. If it's a gold piece, it can only be a small grain. But maybe that's enough."

“It’s enough to make it sting.”

She sits back and looks at it. “I suppose I could try to dig it out. If I had a knife or some kind of metal tool.”

The thought is too horrible to bear. “Perhaps some of that plant stuff you used on my neck would work. It’s perfectly healed now.”

“Maybe. I’ll see if I can find that plant nearby. I will need daylight for that.”

I grind my teeth at the idea of having to wait, but she does make sense. “Oh, very well.”

She curls up on the ground. “I will try to get some sleep. If I will ever sleep again after seeing that battle. What was it like?”

I think back and smile. “It was wonderful. Four powerful dragons, including my brother and King Yranox, and I was winning.”

Nichelle closes her eyes. “It looked like you were doing well. You were incredible.”

“You saw me?”

“I did. You’re the mightiest of them all.”

Her admiration makes me want her closer. “Put your head here,” I command.

She obediently comes in close and lays her head in my lap. “Mmm. That’s nice.”

“The royals are better than me with their claws,” I admit. “And Aragadon has a flame that’s legendary for its heat. Kyandros is wily and likes to feint. But none of them move like me. I’ve fought royals before, Nichelle. Strong, mighty dragons that

thought themselves invincible. The first two fights with other dragons I lost.”

“Really,” Nichelle says slowly. “I never thought you had lost anything ever.”

“I lost two battles,” I tell her, for the first time admitting those defeats. “I had to retreat. But then I won all the rest because I realized that moving right is the most important thing. Moving fast, moving in a smart way, not being where your adversary is aiming his fire. I practiced. For long, tedious days I practiced being quick. All alone. Other dragons don’t enjoy fighting each other. But I do. I really enjoy it. And so I’ve done it a lot. Being quick from my practice, I won every fight and amassed a giant hoard.”

“Mmh. Can you put a hand on my shoulder, please.”

I slowly do as she asks, laying a hand on her bare skin. She’s warm and dry and smooth, breathing calmly.

I sit in silence and enjoy the memories of my victories. It’s been a long time since I’ve thought about them, and it warms me to know I could beat every dragon in a fight. Even Aragadon. Even Caronerax. Like I beat Neproticon and Ripaxoner and Princess Saparzomara...

Before I know it, the jungle is getting brighter.

Nichelle is stirring and stretches, looking at me with narrow eyes. “Hi.”

“Finished your sleeping duties?”

She slowly sits up, rubbing her eyes. “For now.”

“I will get fruit for you,” I offer before I remember the injury. As I move to stand up, an incredible bolt of unpleasantness

shoots up my leg and into my back. “This must be what the lesser species call ‘pain’.”

Nichelle hurries to steady me. “Maybe you should just sit down. I’ll get fruit and the leaves with the gel.”

I don’t protest when she walks into the jungle. Any dangerous creatures will long since have sensed me, and they won’t be around to threaten her.

The wound in my foot is still seeping ichor, and now there’s a big area around it that’s gone darker. It’s hard to believe that gold could do that to me or to any dragon. But it makes some kind of twisted sense. Gold makes us happy, and yet it can also kill us.

Nichelle returns with leaves, but not fruit. “Let’s see if this won’t make it better. Oh, it’s getting darker around it. Is that... supposed to happen? Is it a good sign?”

“I’ve never been injured in my dragon form,” I tell her as she prods the area around the wound, causing more of the blasted pain. “But it doesn’t feel as if it’s a good thing.”

Nichelle breaks open the leaves and applies the sap to the wound.

“It’s so small, just a little puncture,” she says as she dabs it on. “Maybe the gold isn’t too far inside. We may need to get a steel tool of some kind.”

“It will heal by itself,” I state. “If it won’t, I’ll Change to full dragon and force it to heal that way. The dragon is never injured or sick.”

“All right,” Nichelle says, but her voice is uncertain.

I pull my boot on and get to my feet, ignoring the pain. The indignity of it is almost unbearable.

“We shall spend the day thinking of a way to find the hoards and steal them,” I announce. “And then—”

A shadow crosses the treetops, and then something crashes through the leaves. It’s a big dragon, blue with golden stripes.

I push Nichelle behind a tree and try to Change, but it takes more power than I have right now in my exhausted, injured state. If this newcomer understands it, he will kill me on the spot. My only hope is being so nonchalant that he takes it as an insult.

I lean against a tree. “King Yranox. After last night, I thought you’d learned not to do battle with me.”

The king of the dragons lands and folds his wings in. **Perhaps doing battle isn’t my purpose here. I see you won’t even do me the basest courtesy of Changing to the same form as I, as if I’m not dangerous enough to be worth the effort. There is such a thing as being *too* disrespectful, Betruchael.**

“I won the battle,” I remind him. “Or I would have, if it had gone on for much longer.”

“You are a skilled fighter,” Yranox says, having Changed to his human-ish form. “Nobody denies it.”

- NICHELLE -

King Yranox is blue with golden stripes. And I get why he's the king of the dragons. There's definitely a majestic air to the way he moves and talks. While he's also achingly beautiful and strong, his perfection is different from Betruchael's in the same way that a Ferrari sports car looks different from a Lamborghini.

"Good," Betruchael says. "Denying the obvious would not be worthy of a king."

"Do you want to leave Xren, Betruchael?" Yranox asks softly. "To get away from this blasted rock and fly through the Void to your real hoard? To curl up in your lair, on your own gold, all stolen, to own it, to feel it heat you from below and strengthen you while you plot which hoard to steal next?"

Betruchael stares, clearly taken with the vivid image the king is painting for him. "I would." His voice is hoarse.

"Then I may be of help to you."

"What kind of help could you possibly be," the golden dragon asks, "stuck here on this goldless planet?"

"I have gold," King Yranox says. "I would give you gold, so that you may travel away and leave this place. Forever."

Betruchael laughs coldly. “You, a king of dragons, would *give away* part of your hoard? You cannot expect me to believe that.”

The blue dragon brushes a speck of dust off his shoulder. “Strictly speaking, I would give you part of Prince Caronerax’s old hoard.”

“And I’m sure your brother has no problem with that at *all*,” Betruchael says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “He is known all over the universe as a *generous* dragon. There is a trick here, Yranox. And you must have been on Xren for too long. You have completely forgotten how tricks work.”

“Caronerax is fine with that,” Yranox says. “He brought part of his main hoard here when he came. Some was given away to other dragons, to get them to leave. But there is a lot left, buried and hidden. He’s willing to part with a great deal of it if it means getting rid of *you*. In fact, he said to me ‘take whatever you think he wants’.”

“This makes no sense,” Betruchael says, annoyed. “Why are you wasting my time and yours on such a nonsensical ploy as this? No dragon would ever give away even a tiny grain of his hoard. Regardless of how much more he later acquired, that little amount he gave away would always burn in his mind and drive him crazy.”

“That’s what I would have said,” Yranox says. “Before I got married. Now, I understand completely how my brother feels. Because I feel the same way. My Beatrice is my hoard now. I need no gold. Yes, it’s nice to have, and I sometimes lie on my gold for the enjoyment. But if it were suddenly gone one day, I’d shrug and forget about it.”

“I don’t believe it,” Betruchael says, but doubt is creeping into his voice.

“It’s unfortunate that the tribe you have been harassing for months didn’t succeed in shooting you,” Yranox says. “If they had, you would know that the gold that they shot you with came from a hoard. Caronerax’s hoard, to be exact. You would be able to feel it. And how else would those alien females have gotten hold of that hoard gold, if Caronerax hadn’t given it to them?”

Betruchael’s hand goes to his hoard pouch and squeezes it. That’s where he keeps the gold from the gun.

Shit. I can see that the king’s words are getting to him. And that means that he’s tempted to leave.

“Dragons need hoards,” I try feebly. “Everyone knows that.”

King Yranox nods regally. “True. And we all have hoards: our wives. Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous. But once you’re married, you understand.”

Betruchael laughs coldly. “Your wives are your hoards? That’s the weakest, most laughable thing I’ve ever heard. You’re not making this plot of yours easier to believe!”

“Then I will convince you,” the king says. He reaches back under his cape and lifts out a sack that looks heavy. Opening its drawstring, he tosses it on the ground. It lands with a heavy metallic rustle. “Here is all you need to leave Xren and never return. Feel it. Take it. It’s hoard gold. From the hoard of Prince Caronerax. A royal hoard, Betruchael. I know you like those. It’s yours. But you must leave.”

The golden dragon sinks down to his knees and puts his whole hand down in the sack. It comes up full of gold coins, jewelry, and various other objects I can’t identify.

“Gold,” he whispers, holding it up to his face. “Hoard gold. Royal gold. Sweet, wonderful gold!” To my astonishment, he



closes his eyes and *sniffs* it.

“You must leave *now*,” Yranox says. “If you don’t, I will alert the others, and all four of us will hunt you down and kill you. We will work together, Betruchael. We all know you’re the most dangerous of us.”

“I shall leave,” Betruchael wheezes, overwhelmed. “This... this almost makes up for the years spent here. A sack of gold from Caronerax’s hoard!”

“Don’t leave,” I urge him. “It has to be a trick!” I don’t actually think it is. I just can’t bear the thought of him leaving.

He doesn’t even look at me. “I will add it to my main hoard, and I will lie on it and *possess!*”

“Possess it all you want.” King Yranox says. “But not here. Not on Xren. You may never return.”

Betruchael laughs. “Return, Your Majesty? Return to Xren? The thought is—” His gaze meets mine, and he goes quiet.

“Don’t go, Betruchael. Stay here! Let the prince keep his gold! You can... I will... I will be your hoard.” My voice fails me. I don’t know what I have to offer him, except myself. And that’s clearly not enough.

Betruchael carefully puts all the gold back in the sack and closes it. Then he comes over to me.

I look up, hopeful he’ll change his mind.

“*You* will be my hoard?” he says, frowning. “The thought itself is sacrilege.”

“Please,” I plead. “I have nothing here. I helped you. I kept to our deal!”

A golden hand shoots out and grabs my throat, like before. “Of course you did. Moderately well, perhaps, but I’m willing to agree that the intent was there. When I leave you now, you have failed and betrayed your old tribe. You will have embarrassed yourself to your friend who showed you how to find gold. You have made enemies of the slayer tribe. You’re now despised and hated by all the alien females on the planet. What did you think would happen when you got mixed up with a dragon who is called ‘the Evil’? Did you think *good* things would happen to you?” He giggles. “But it was fun ruining your life right in front of you. You might want to consider being less trusting.”

Acid tears fill my eyes, both from being choked and from the truth in what he’s saying. The Amazing tribe knows I failed with the gun and that I left with Betruchael, betraying them all. Capree knows the same, and the ‘*Sorry. I just really need to get home*’ message I wrote in the dirt floor of the hut isn’t going to cut it. How can I ever face her again? And the saucer girls — God, they must *hate* me for bringing Betruchael to them and for stopping them from killing him. He may be leaving now, but that’s no thanks to me. I did everything wrong.

The bottom falls out of my mind, and I almost wish he’d strangle me.

He lets go of me and turns his back. “You should have shot me when you had the chance. Now you should hope I won’t burn you to a crisp before I leave.”

I collapse to my knees on the ground, wheezing and coughing.

Yranox Changes to his dragon form, and Betruchael does the same.

**You must admit I was right**, he says into my mind. **You did love the *personal attention* I gave you.** His icy laugh fills my head.

Both dragons beat their wings and take off, soaring through the leafy canopy above and vanishing from sight.

Leaving me on my own. And my soul empty.

I just breathe laboriously for a while.

At least he's gone. Everyone wins but me.

Slowly staggering to my feet, I lean on a tree.

It all makes it easier to decide what to do next. Hey, they already hate me. Another unforgivable act won't matter. And this one will be a doozy.

I pick a direction and walk.

- - -

**I** go straight back to the town, and this time I reach the gates before I'm stopped.

"Greetings. I want to speak to Mia," I tell the guards.

Two cavemen with swords escort me through the caveman section. It's much more impressive in daylight than in the dark. There are orderly rows of tents and huts, big groves of fruit trees, fields with all kinds of plants and herbs, rows of bushes heavy with berries, and even a system for watering them. And of course the dozens of huge cavemen are impressive just by existing.

“But they don’t have a steam engine,” I mutter as I cross the fence into the girls’ part of the town.

The signs of the battle are easy to spot. Slate roofs are singed and scorched, the palisade is being rebuilt where a dragon crashed into it, and several huts have burned down.

The guards sit me down at a round table that encloses a big fire ring. It must be super nice to sit here in the twilight after the day’s work is done, chatting and joking and enjoying a good meal. Much like back in the treehouse.

I notice that the guards stay next to me while Mia is sent for. Yeah, they don’t trust me at all. And I don’t blame them.

Being on the fringe of polite society doesn’t actually feel too good. I always saw myself as trustworthy and basically decent. Maybe I have to revise that opinion.

And maybe being on the shady side does give me some freedom. On a planet where your reputation is known to everyone, I can’t fall much lower.

Mia comes sauntering, chewing on an apple-like fruit that I know from experience tastes more like carrot than apple.

“Hi,” she says, sitting down. “I heard Betruchael left.”

I shrug. “Turns out that he really wanted gold. Who would have guessed? All he did was force me to search for it in creeks.”

She shrugs. “The dragons need hoards like we need to eat. Once we understand that, we understand most of what they do.”

“But you married Kyandros. And now *you’re* his hoard?”

“That’s what he says. He’s given me zero reason to doubt it.”

I look away, fighting tears. “Well, mine left the planet.”

Mia suddenly gets up and grabs my arm. “Everyone’s staring. Let’s take a walk. No, you warriors just stay. Get a drink if you want. I’ll deal with this.”

The cavemen stare at me, clearly not happy. But I sensed Mia’s strength the first time I met her. She’s used to dragons, just like me. Cavemen staring daggers won’t make much of an impact on her, and they have no choice but to obey.

“Things are tense here,” she says as we walk. “They’ve been for a while. We talked about getting you chicas here ever since we realized you were on Xren, too. But what do we have to offer you? We can’t go to Earth the way things are. Aurora is actually right — the dragons are screwing things up pretty bad for the tribe. Not only are they fighting a lot, but they cause us girls to fight, too. The dragon girls against the caveman girls. The single girls are caught in the middle. Then there’s the cavemen themselves and the dragons... it’s kind of chaotic. And we don’t know if things are going to get better. So your treehouse place starts to look kind of idyllic.”

She tosses the pit from her fruit onto a compost heap. “It used to be different. We lived for months in total peace after the dragons left. It was the best time of my life, Nichelle. I never knew it could be so good.”

I wipe my eyes. “But dragons are dragons. They won’t change.”

She squeezes my wrist. “Exactly. So I love Kyandros with a passion like... like dragon fire. But dragons are some nasty-ass jerks. Okay? They are some fucking assholes. It’s not on purpose. It’s just the way they are. You know that, I can see it in your face. God, what did he *do* to you?”

“He was a nasty-ass jerk,” I sniffle. “But he was also... the center of my life. For a week. A glorious center, a new world. All gold and bliss. I had no worries except how to get him to like me.”

Mia pulls me close and hugs me. “Oh, you poor thing. I know what it’s like. Kyandros... well, he was nasty before. Now he’s perfectly kind and loving to me. But it was close for a while. I almost lost him, and I never want to think about... those days.” Her voice breaks, and she looks away for a while.

It’s my turn to squeeze her. “It turned out well for you. You *got* him, Mia. You got the legendary demigod. I’ve seen him. He’s phenomenal. I didn’t get mine, but that’s the way it is. They’re not easy. They shouldn’t be. And they *are* jerks.”

We walk on. “So now you want to, what? Go back to the Amazing tribe?”

I sigh. “You girls hate me for bringing Betruchael here and then for stopping Aurora from killing him. Not you, Mia. I know. The others... they can never trust me. But that’s nothing like the Amazing girls. They *really* can’t trust me now. I lived with them for years, sharing everything, and then I fuck them up the first chance I get. I can’t imagine how much they despise me. No, I’m done here on Xren. I want to go back to Earth. As soon as possible.”

“We’re worried about a dragon or ten following the saucer there,” she says carefully. “We *really* don’t want Earth ruined and plundered and burned.”

“I get that. And I agree. It’s a dream for now. But maybe one day we can go. Can I see them? The saucers?”

“Sure.” She turns us to the left, and we walk past fields and fruit trees and cavemen practicing with their swords.

“There they are,” Mia says and points. “We don’t actually know much about them. Except that at least two of them work.”

My skin creeps when I see the five flying saucers sitting on the ground in the tall grass, surrounded by saplings and bushes. They’re Plood saucers, metallic and cold-looking and totally out of place here.

“We cut the grass and undergrowth around them every few months, just so they’re not claimed by the jungle,” Mia says. “Ling! Are you here?”

After a few seconds a girl sticks her head out of the open hatch of one of the saucers. “What? Lunchtime?”

“Sure,” Mia laughs. “We’ll go and get some lunch. But first, can you tell Nichelle from the Amazing tribe about the saucers?”

Ling comes over and gives me a cautious smile. “Hi. I’m Ling.” She’s wearing stretch jeans and an oversize t-shirt, as well as bright white Crocs. She’s clearly been to Earth.

“Ling is one of our saucer pilots,” Mia says. “She went back to Earth with the first saucer. And then she came *back*, can you imagine?”

Ling shrugs. “Earth has changed. What do you want to know, Nichelle?”

“Um. You can fly these things? All of you? Are they easy to fly?”

“Phoebe and I can fly them,” Ling says. “Mia too, but she claims not to. The other girls never tried, but it shouldn’t be too hard to learn. I mean, if *I* could do it.”

“You’re being modest, Ling.” Mia smiles. “They’re actually really hard to fly. And if you get something wrong, you may be screwed. We don’t even know.”

“How do you even find the way to Earth?” I ask. “It’s got to be far.”

Ling scratches her chin. “It’s complicated. But also logical, once you get the way the Flood thought.”

“Ling is still studying these things,” Mia says. “Every day.”

Ling straightens her shirt. “So when we went to Earth that first time, it got pretty dangerous. The landing especially. When we decide it’s safe to go back, I want it to be as boring and routine as possible. So I’m familiarizing myself with these things.”

“She’s probably the most important person in the tribe because of what she knows about these Flood saucers,” Mia says. “Oh, they’re extinct, did you know?”

My jaw drops. “The Flood? *Extinct?*”

“Totally. The last of them died right here. The dragons made sure of it. Well, it was King Yranox, mostly. But they won’t be abducting anyone else. You want to see what they look like on the inside?”

“The... Flood?” I ask weakly, coldness going down my back. Surely they didn’t save dead Flood aliens for me to look inside? I can’t think of anything I’d want less.

“No,” Mia laughs, “the saucers!”

“Oh, thank God. No, I’m good,” I tell her. “The less I know about the Flood and their ships, the better. You were talking about lunch, Mia? It has to be brunch time, at least.” I shield my eyes and squint up at the sun.

“It has to,” she agrees. “Ling, take a break?”



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The other girls treat me politely enough, asking about the Amazing tribe and the steam engine and such. But I'm not feeling it. I'm not a part of the Amazing tribe anymore. I betrayed them in my weakness and my lovesickness for a fucking dragon. A dragon who made sure to fuck up my life and then leave me. I don't deserve to be a queen. I'm barely a pawn.

Aurora avoids me, just sending me the occasional scowl. I don't blame her at all. I will never get a chance to square things up with her, but I'll have to live with that. If I'm lucky.

I don't talk to all the girls. A couple of them have to be the two girls on whose beach I had such a good time, but I don't feel I have anything to offer them except admiration. And the admiration of a shady and distrusted person like me may not be of much value. Especially after tomorrow.

The day passes, and I'm still impressed with this tribe and their town that they built from nothing. The dragons are staying mostly still, but sometimes one of them will fly overhead and I'm briefly filled with panic-like fear, and then a single second of breathless joy when I think that maybe it's *him*.

It never is.

Finally I find Delyah, the chief of the whole tribe. You'd never think so when you see her, but damn if she doesn't have some serious authority when she starts to speak.

She's holding a baby in her arms, clearly a hybrid of a caveman and an Earth girl.

"Hi. Sorry about before," I begin. "When I stopped Aurora from killing Betruchael and I just took off. My only defense is that I was in love."

"It's a pretty good defense," she says, giving me a little smile. "It would hold up in any courtroom on Xren."

"Except there are no courtrooms. So that doesn't matter."

She hefts the baby in her arms. "It actually does. We've all been in love. It can drive you crazy. And don't get me started on being in love with *aliens*."

I nod to the baby. "And you've been seriously in love."

"Seriously," she says. "Still am, and I don't care who knows it. He got me good. I've got another one of these giant kids at home, waiting to be fed."

I get what she means: *'I want to go home, get to the point.'* I wonder if I will ever have that kind of quiet authority that works without words.

"I'm worried," I tell her. "The way he left... he said some really nasty things. I wonder if he might come back. Just to kill me. Betruchael, I mean."

"He didn't leave for good?"

"I'm not sure. Those things he said made me scared. I don't want to be burned by his flame." For some reason, I have no problems making some real tears appear.

"King Yranox will not allow Betruchael to return," Delyah says. "If he comes back, he will be up against four of the mightiest dragons that ever lived."

“But he’s been up against them before, and he practically won,” I remind her. “I’m scared that he will dive down, burn me up, and only then leave for real. It feels like he’s still here. Nearby. Could he be?”

“In the jungle, you mean?”

“Uh-huh. Would the cavemen know if he was still lurking? Would the dragons?”

She shrugs. “They haven’t said they think he’s still here. But that dragon is worse than most of them. What can I do, Nichelle?”

“Give me a gun,” I tell her, wiping cold tears off my cheeks. “Please. Loaded with gold. It turns out Aurora had the right idea all along.”

Of course Delyah is the most decent person I’ve ever met. She looks at me with her open, dark brown eyes and places a warm hand on my forearm, which is something they do here. “I’ll station four cavemen with guns around your hut for as long as you want.”

*Shit.* Of course her kindness messes up my plan.

“You saw him fight,” I try again. “He can burn them all to a crisp with a single flame. But he won’t burn *me* like that. He will say something first. Something hurtful that withers my soul for good. And *then* he’ll burn me.”

“Not something anyone would ever want,” she concedes. “Sure, carry a gun if you want. They’re heavy, though.”

*Finally.* “They are. But I can handle it. Just a small one. Loaded with gold.”

“I’ll tell Aurora. She’s the gun expert here.” She must see the look on my face, because she smiles and squeezes my wrist.

“Don’t worry. Her bark is worse than her bite.”

A few minutes later, Aurora is handing me a gun. “You know how it works? Make sure there’s gunpowder in the tray here, pull the cock back, aim at the chest, pull the trigger. And the dragon should be history.” Her voice is gruff, and her eyes are hard.

“I’ve held one at gunpoint before,” I tell her quietly. “And I didn’t shoot. This time I will.”

“Make sure you do,” she grunts and walks away.

“We’ll see,” I whisper to her back.

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

The Void is as empty and cold as I remember it. I will be flying through it for a long time to get to my hoard.

My *hoard*.

I try to picture it in my mind. There's a cave. There's a heap of gold. It's cold and dark.

Cold? Gold isn't cold. Or dark.

I try again. It's a big cave, on a planet whose name escapes me, but there's a forest...

Or a desert? Is there any air at all? There's an ocean, I think. Or... a crater?

It's not important. My hoard is there. I should be able to feel the heat from it, calling me to it. But I'm too far away right now.

My wings slice through the emptiness, working against the pull from the planet Xren. Looking behind me, I still see it, green and red and blue. Below me is the dusty surface of the blue moon that the slayers call Yrf.

*I shall set down here*, I decide on impulse. Just for fun, while taking a final look at the goldforsaken planet that was my

prison for years.

Talons scrape against the loose, fine sand as I come in to land, sending up big, gray plumes of dust that don't seem to be falling back. The moon is much smaller than Xren and doesn't pull as much.

Tucking my wings in, I look up. Xren is hanging above, a big part of it in darkness.

Somewhere up there is Nichelle. What is she doing now? Who's with her? What's she thinking?

Will she remember me?

The sack of gold from Caronerax's hoard feels remarkably light in my talons. As if it's not important.

I frown. Not *important*? A whole sack of hoard gold?

But it's what I feel. Apart from the first moment of delirious joy, the gold leaves me cold and disinterested. Instead I keep seeing Nichelle's face in front of me and hearing her voice when she spoke my name. She spoke it without anger or fear. She spoke it with... warmth and light.

*"Betruchael..."*

I shake my head to get the images to leave. This is lunacy!

*"I love you,"* she said.

Probably my senses are affected by the injury. The tiny hole in my foot is still dripping ichor, and the dark patch has spread to cover the whole leg, sore to the touch.

I know I can easily reach my hoard, lie on top of it, and have it heal me. And yet my hoard doesn't pull at me at all. Only Xren does.

Only *she* does.

I stare up at the planet that for years I would have done *anything* to escape. And I want go back there.

No, this insanity has to end. I must be strong and do what's right. Going to my gold hoard is right. Anything else is wrong and false and evil.

I beat my wings on the air-less moon, take off, and soar up from the lifeless surface.

Lifeless, like my hoard of cold, dead metal.

Whereas Nichelle is *all* life, warm and intense.

Again these terrible thoughts!

I turn my tail to the planet and try to forget it. Ahead is my hoard. *That's* where I'm going. Nowhere else.

- NICHELLE -

“It’s not luxurious,” Mia says as she opens the flap to the tent, “but it’s all we have right now. At least it won’t burn if there’s another battle.” She’s showed me around the town until she picked up that I wasn’t really enjoying the tour.

The tent is made from the skin of a big dinosaur, and I can tell which pieces of the dino it was stitched together from. It has a rounded shape to it and smells of wildlife.

Inside, it’s big and airy, like a dome. There’s a pile of furs and skins on the ground, which is also covered by dinosaur skin. It’s one of the more luxurious accommodations I’ve been inside on Xren.

“This is wonderful,” I tell her. “You girls are being really generous and kind to me.”

“Earth girls have to stick together,” she says lightly. “And that goes triple for us dragon girls. Stay as long as you want. I’ll save you a seat beside me for the evening meal.”

I turn around and hug her, shoving the gun out of the way. “Thank you for everything.”

She hugs me back. “Anytime. I’ll introduce you to the other girls, too. Most of them are busy with their kids and such.”



“And so are you,” I tell her. “You better go check on them.”

She sighs theatrically. “If you say so. One day I’ll trick you into babysitting the dragon-slash-human hybrid alien girl I’m dealing with now.”

“Not the easiest child to raise?” I venture a guess.

“Not the easiest,” she agrees. “But maybe the most rewarding. See you.”

The flap swings as she leaves.

I carefully put the gun down and lie down on the furs.

It’s incredible what the girls have been able to make of this village. If they had steam engines, there’s no telling how good it could be. And yet, the Amazing tribe has done pretty well, too. Our treehouse is maybe not made from actual bricks, and maybe we don’t have this many fields and tree groves, but we have an almost-finished boat, and we could probably build another steam engine.

I spend a while just thinking and preparing myself mentally. Then, when I hear the sounds of an evening meal in progress, I slink out of the tent, leaving the gun.

Mia is there as promised, with an empty seat beside her. She introduces me to some of the girls, but a good few of them keep their distance and are clearly on Aurora’s side when it comes to dragons. I eat a little bit, then get up and go back to the tent. The other dragon girls are so nice that it almost makes me change my mind about what I’m going to do, and I can’t have that. So I only end up sitting there for a half hour before I get back to the tent.

I lie down on the furs and spend a restless night tossing and turning.

Deciding to skip breakfast, I get out of the tent well after sunrise. Everyone should be busy working now. I carry the gun with its sling around my neck, and I cover it with a fur so it looks like I'm carrying a huge sheepskin purse. Picking a long, complicated route through the village, I avoid the busiest places and keep my head down, not looking anyone in the eyes. I mostly pass cavemen anyway, and the ones the girls allow into the tribe know not to be too curious about alien females.

The saucers are still there, in their secluded meadow. I walk up to the one where we found Ling yesterday.

I knock on the side of the saucer, beside the open hatch. "Hey, Ling? You here?"

There's movement, and then Ling comes to the hatch. "Hi, Nichelle. Changed your mind about seeing these on the inside?"

I give her a guilty smile. "Something like that."

"Everyone always does," she says and stands aside so I can enter. "They're real, working alien spacecraft. Plainly the most advanced tech any of us have ever seen or will ever see."

"Totally," I agree. "But it's a little... sparse?" The interior of the saucer looks like injection-molded plastic, with alien shapes and instruments. It's all beige and various shades of gray, except the lounge area, which is more colorful. There's got to be room for ten to fifteen people in here, if they're fine with sitting on the floor.

"Yeah, the Flood don't go for luxury," Ling says. "But we do, so we added some cushions and things to this one."

"And it still works?" I ask, knocking on a plastic-like wall. "Like, you could take off any time you'd want and just travel

the planet?”

“Pretty much. But after we contacted you girls, we don’t do it anymore. We don’t have much to offer, except dragon battles and the magic space gel—”

I steady myself on the wall by the hatch. The hatch hisses shut.

I turn as if surprised. “Oh, sorry! I hit the button for the door.”

“It’s fine,” Ling says. “Well, that’s the interior of the thing. There’s not much to say, unless you want to know about the controls.”

I take a deep breath, placing myself between Ling and the closed hatch. “So the thing is, I want to go home to Earth.”

Ling’s getting uneasy. “We all want that. Well, some of us.”

“I have no future here,” I continue my prepared speech. “The Amazing tribe hates me. Some of you guys hate me. I doubt the cavemen will ever talk to me. And the dragon I risked everything for just left. So I really want to get home.”

“And I’d love to take you. But it’s not my decision. We agreed not to go to Earth for now. I’m sure we will, at some point. Maybe soon.” Her eyes dart all over me and end up on the fur-covered gun.

“I want to go *today*,” I tell her. “Now.”

“Oh, that won’t be possible anyway,” she says quickly. “The saucers take some prep to get safely going.”

I look her in the eyes. “I don’t believe you. I think you can take off right now. These things are far too advanced to need anything from us to work.”

“If Delyah agrees,” Ling says, not just nervous but afraid, “I guess we can go today. *After* the prep.”

“I don’t think she will agree,” I state, feeling smaller than an ant and hating myself. “But I *have* to go. For real. Don’t make me do this, Ling. You’re a sweet and kind girl, and you don’t deserve this at all.” I tap the fur that hangs over the gun.

She crosses her arms over her chest in defiance. “No. I’m not doing it. We agreed not to go to Earth until we’re sure no dragons are following us there. Do you have any *idea* what one single dragon could do to our home planet?”

I clench my eyes shut for a second to force down the tears. She does *not* deserve this.

Then I pull the fur off the gun and lift it to point at the wall right beside Ling, my finger nowhere near the trigger.

“How about *now*?”

- - -

**T**he saucer shoots skywards, and some incredible tech projects images of our surroundings on the walls and floor, making them all seem totally transparent.

Ling is at the controls, afraid and angry all at once. She occasionally snuffles and wipes her face. None of that is making me hate myself less.

“Before Earth we’ll check on the Amazing tribe,” I tell her. “We’ll move them from the volcano to some other place if they want. And maybe some of them want to go to Earth, too.”

“You may be condemning all humans to extinction,” Ling manages in a gruff voice. “If that damn dragon of yours follows us to Earth, he could lay waste to the whole planet.”

“Don’t worry. He’s halfway to his hoard by now. And there are no other dragons here. Only the four you know. He told me.”

The saucer flies high and fast, and still in total silence. It’s quite eerie how it works.

We pass over the ocean and in over the huge island where the Amazing tribe lives. Compared to the continent we’re coming from, the island is smaller. But still more than big enough to *seem* like a continent when you’re living on it.

I stare ahead. “There’s Cronk!”

But something’s wrong. Where I expected to see a black mountain with a small wisp of steam at the peak, now there’s a huge column of black smoke that stretches high into the atmosphere.

I wasn’t feeling good to start with, but now my heart sinks down into my feet. “It’s erupting!”

As we come closer, we start to see yellow, glowing lava shooting out of the crater and running down the sides. Clouds of steam rise from the surrounding jungle as the lava burns it to cinder.

I spot the lake by the treehouse. It’s the closest landmark. “Go there! The lake! Oh my God, I hope they’re okay!”

Ling expertly flies the saucer, taking us lower and speeding up. Already the lava flows are encroaching on the lake. There’s only a thin sliver of jungle left. The treehouse is clearly no more, the spot where it stood now a thick layer of lazily flowing lava with a black crust.

“There they are!” I exclaim and point. There’s a group of people on the beach, waving their arms like crazy. No wonder — the edge of the lava flow is only yards away. “We have to get them!”

“There’s no room to land,” Ling says tightly. “And I don’t know how well this thing floats on water!”

I run to the hatch, ready to open it. “Can it hover? Like a helicopter?”

“The saucer can. I’m not sure if *I* can.”

“You can. I know it. You’re a superstar, Ling! Do this and forget about Earth. Just drop me into the volcano afterwards. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

She doesn’t reply, just concentrates on the flying, using alien controls and levers and buttons like a champ.

I hit the hatch button, and it opens with a hard hiss. Immediately the heat hits me like a sledgehammer, and the sickening smell of burning sulfur fills the saucer.

I hear the girls screaming, but all I see is lava flowing slowly, orange and yellow light showing where the black crust is breaking up. It’s a hellish inferno.

“Turns us around!” I yell. “So they can jump in!”

“It’s harder than you think,” Ling replies. “I never had to hover *and* spin this thing before!”

But she’s doing it, and the saucer is slowly turning around. If I wanted, I could jump out and land on the pebbles on the beach. We must be really close to the girls.

I get ready at the opening. “Can you hold it steady?”

“Not better than this!” Ling barks. “I *told* you we needed to prep before we could take off! We really should have calibrated the horizontal inertial gyroscope controls for transverse yaw! And the vertical, too!”

I'm stunned. "You... but... it was *true*? The saucer really needs prep?"

"*Yes!*"

"Well... *fuck.*"

The saucer wobbles, but it's still turning. And there's the first person.

"Get in!" I yell and reach out a hand, holding onto the frame of the hatch.

"Get out of the way," a deep voice rumbles from outside.

I see the point, so I pull back from the opening. A girl comes flying into the saucer and lands softly on the floor, thrown with incredible accuracy and strength by a caveman.

I help her up. "Sit down there, Iris," I tell her, getting ready to receive the next one, painfully conscious that the other girls can't get in that way — Jinx and Haisley have their infant daughters in their arms.

Haisley flies in the hatch, landing as softly as Iris did. Torant'ar and Karet'ox jump in and politely push me further into the saucer.

"Stop that!" Ling yells. "Don't suddenly add weight to one side! We're wobbling!"

She's right. The saucer is wobbling like a spinning top that's losing speed. After a couple of seconds it's clear that it's only getting worse.

Still, Cronk'ax manages to toss little baby Terra and baby Jorda into the saucer, caught by Torant'ar and Karet'ox so softly that they can hardly have noticed landing in his arms.

Then Jinx flies in and is caught securely by Karet'ox, resulting in more violent wobbling.

"I mean it!" Ling yells. "*Stop* that! I'm losing control!"

"Only Cronk'ax is left outside," I yell back. "But he's really heavy!"

The lava flow has reached the lake, and the hissing and steaming is becoming deafening as the water starts to boil and evaporate.

Cronk'ax has waded out and is standing in water up to his knees, sword in his belt and a defiant grin on his face. He's ready to die.

Jinx fights her way to the hatch. "Cronk'ax! Take my hand!"

Karet'ox and Torant'ar gently lift her and move her out of their way, kicking and yelling.

The saucer wobbles so bad I have to steady myself, and outside the hatch I can only see water and sky and lava.

"Shit!" Ling yells. "I can't bring it back!"

The saucer has clearly wobbled out of control. One side dips into the lake, then out, then back in, deeper than before. Water sloshes in the hatch and the wobble turns the saucer almost up on one end.

"Get out!" I scream, because this is not going to end well. "Everyone *out!*"

The saucer is splashing through the water, quickly going deeper. Water pours in and sloshes all around the cabin, more and more, making us heavier and heavier.

Ling gets up from the controls. "There's nothing more I can do. *Thank* you for this, Nichelle! Thank you *so* fucking much."



Her eyes shoot fire.

I feel her words like a hatchet in my soul. But there's not much left there to destroy anyway.

The wobble stops as the saucer starts sinking. The cavemen take over and quickly, but surely get us all out. Cronk'ax is swimming outside the hatch and helps us all climb up onto the top of it.

Torant'ar leaves the saucer as the last, and manages to close the hatch behind him so no more water will flood in.

The saucer is floating on the lake like a deflated beach ball that's half full of water. We're sitting on top of it, the girls in the middle and the three cavemen in a triangle that stabilizes it as much as possible.

In front of us, the lava keeps coming. It flows out into the lake as a slow, but unstoppable mass of molten rock. It makes an immense amount of steam, surrounding us like a cloud. The hissing and boiling is becoming crazy, like something from an inferno. The volcano throws out lava in great amounts, splashing wildly out of it like orange juice from a mug held by a toddler.

"If we can reach the other side," I say into the hissing, "we might be able to get into the jungle and run."

"The saucer doesn't come with fucking *oars*," Ling seethes. "It's supposed to fly! And it does so *really* well when it gets *prepped*."

I have no answer to that. I'm responsible for this entire disaster, and whatever was left of my self-esteem has evaporated the same way this lake is going to.

"Can we... I don't know. Float away? Spin away?"

The three cavemen try various things by using their weight, and finally they settle on a slow rocking motion that brings the saucer away from the bank and out towards the middle of the lake. But the lava is faster, filling up the lake behind us and catching up.

“We may have to swim,” Iris says tightly. “While we can. Before the whole lake starts to boil.”

“It’s far,” Jinx points out. “I’m not sure I can swim that distance.”

“We will help,” Cronk’ax rumbles. “Three warriors and seven females, of which two babies. Easy.”

“And the monster that lives in this lake?” Haisley asks. “With the tentacles and the ears? I’m not super keen to swim, to be honest. Least of all with Jorda in my arms.” She’s holding her baby tight.

“If that monster has any sense,” Jinx says, “it will get the hell out of its lake as soon as it can. It can probably just slide down the river.”

“It’s a monster,” Haisley points out. “It may not *have* any sense— what the hell is *that*?” She points up, into the steam and past it, to the immense, black cone that is volcano Cronk.

An avalanche is coming down the slope. It’s dirty gray in the sunlight, giving off a huge cloud of dust and ash and smoke as it thunders down the side of the volcano, picking up speed. Between us and it there’s only the lava-soaked side of the mountain, creating a perfect highway for it to come straight for us.

If I didn’t think my heart could sink lower in my chest, I was wrong.

My face scrunches up all by itself, and I can't stop a thin sob of despair from escaping me. I wanted better things for my life than this. Just a *little* better.

“That,” I state after I get a grip and clear my throat, “is the pyroclastic flow I told you about before. A million tons of ash and rock and dust straight from the Earth's inside.” I stop myself before I go on with more information, such as the flow being eighteen hundred degrees and moving as fast as a race car. It will swoop right down the lava flows and across us without missing a beat, killing us instantly and burying us in a hundred feet of cement that will harden to concrete.

I force myself to breathe. “Ling, there's nothing I can say to make this better for any of us. I deeply regret bringing you into this. I *desperately* wish I hadn't. I'm very sorry.”

She doesn't even look at me, and I don't blame her. Nothing matters now. We can see our deaths coming towards us down the side of the volcano.

The flow has reached the point where the slope flattens out a little bit, but that's not going to slow it down. The front of the deadly flow is a black cloud-wall sweeping the ground. It's only a quarter of a mile away now, and we have seconds left to live.

There's the noise, too. It's like a million cotton sheets being torn apart, louder and louder, until it's so unbearable we all clench our hands over our ears.

But, I notice, that noise is coming from behind us, not from the volcano.

A bolt of golden lightning shoots over our heads at immense speed, sucking the air out of our lungs as it passes. A giant

flame shoots forward from the bolt, golden and bright, straight into the wall of dust, where it vanishes.

The noise is horrific, a screech as from a thousand jet engines.

And right in front of us, the pyroclastic flow stops. On both sides it continues past us, a terrible storm of superheated gas and rock ash. But straight ahead, it's been melted to lava. And lava is too sticky to flow that fast.

A gray apparition comes out of the gray cloud, mighty wings beating.

**Everyone get on my back.**

I barely dare think it. "*Betruchael?!*"

He comes in to land. **I can carry two light females in my talons. The rest on my back. Quickly.**

Melting the pyroclastic flow straight ahead only bought us a few seconds of time. The flow is encroaching on us from both sides, searingly hot and deadly.

I climb up on the scales and help the others get up, showing them where to hold.

Even the three cavemen climb up and hold on, while the dragon grabs Ling and Iris with the massive claws of his forelimbs.

"We're on," I tell him quickly.

He beats his wings, but we're a heavy load and he's covered in dust and ash.

He tries again, harder, and this time he gets us airborne. The scorchingly hot air from his wings washes over us like a tornado of dust. The lava stream below reaches the floating

saucer and forces it under the surface in a cauldron of boiling water, then covers it with red-glowing, flowing rock.

Everything else is a whirlwind of heat and dust and ash, dry and abrasive. Betruchael's wings beat hard and fast, but despite that I get the feeling we're not high up. A spray of water hits us as his rear legs drag on the surface of the lake for fifty yards.

I hold on and try to breathe shallowly, because the dust we're flying through can't be good for the lungs. I turn to say something, then see Jinx and Haisley have had the same thought and are covering their babies' faces with pieces of finely woven fabric.

When we clear the dust from the pyroclastic flow, we're nearly at the end of the lake and about to go over the jungle. We're only thirty feet up at most, and the dragon is struggling to stay even this high. His whole body is twisting and flexing with each beat of his wings. It's the first time I've seen him tired.

Behind us the pyroclastic flow is still coming. Now it's mixed with the water from the lake, so it's a wall of wet, steaming cement.

We're finally over the jungle on the other side of the lake, and Betruchael is still struggling to get us all to safety.

"The flow is slowing down," I report, staring back. "I think it's starting to set."

The distance to the gray wall following us is increasing, slowly but surely.

"Set us down," Torant'ar demands. "Cronk'ax and Karet'ox and I are too heavy. We will run and meet up with you, wherever you land."

“I will drop off too,” I decide. “The less weight he has to carry, the safer the rest of you are.”

**Nichelle stays on**, the dragon says into my mind. **The slayers can drop off if they deem it safe. I shall attempt to land. Hang on.**

I can tell from the way the others stiffen that they can hear it too.

We crash through the canopy of leaves, and then the three men jump off the dragon’s back and down to the ground, immediately starting to run.

Most of his load gone, Betruchael easily soars back up through the leaves and takes the rest of us far above the jungle. But his wing strokes keep faltering, more and more often until we’re losing height again.

“Set us down,” I tell him. “We’re safe. The lava and the dust have stopped.”

**I can go a little further**, he says. But there’s no force in it, no conviction. For the first time he seems weak, and it really worries me.

“There’s no need to exhaust yourself completely,” I say carefully.

I don’t think he even hears me. He keeps going until the girls in his talons start to yell because their feet are whipping through the tops of the trees.

Only then does the dragon slow down, lower himself through the treetops, and land awkwardly on the dirt, legs splayed out as if powerless to hold him up.

The girls gather in a small group, all of us in a state of shock after escaping death so narrowly.

Betruchael is lying on the ground, his golden skin now a dirty gray all over, hot to the touch.

I run to his front and kneel down, reaching out to touch his head. It's caked in volcanic dust and so hot I burn my finger.

"You're really hot," I tell him, my voice trembling.

**So are you, he says. But in a different way.**

"What can I do?"

**Just stay.**

I run my hand down his neck and place it in a spot where it is almost cool enough to touch. "Will you be all right?"

**I don't know.**

"What do you need? Water?"

**Only you.**

"What about your hoard? The sack of gold? Will it help you heal?"

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

**I gave it back, I tell her. Tossed it on Yranox's head from a great height. Just before I came here. You were not in that village anymore, but I could feel the pull from you.**

“You gave it... back?” Her eyes are big and puzzled.

I planned this moment on the way back from Yrf, but in my plans I was never dying from volcano-related injuries. So I don't remember a word of the speech I planned. But some things must be said. **Nichelle, my love. The things I said before... they were the crazed ramblings of a dragon about to do something stupid that he knew he shouldn't do. I knew you were more important to me than the hoard. I should never have accepted the gold. I should have stayed. With you.**

“I... but...” Nichelle begins, uselessly stroking my neck with her little hand, but then she doesn't know how to go on.

That's fine. I don't have much time. I'm covered with hard, caustic dust from the volcano, still burning its way into my skin. The injury in my foot aches like a red-hot needle, and I can't feel the rest of my leg. Darkness and coldness are coming for me, but these things must be said.



**You said you love me, and I wondered what it meant. I don't wonder anymore. I love you too, you see. More than I love gold. Much more. And I want you with me always.**

My strength is fading fast. The darkness around the edges of the world is creeping closer.

“I love you, Betruchael,” Nichelle says, her voice atremble. “But don't waste your strength talking. I will be here with you.”

**I must say more, I go on, using the last of my strength. There may not be another chance. I love you, Nichelle. Would you have married me if I'd understood the important things before now?**

“I would. And if you ask me now, I will.”

Her words open a bright door in my mind that I didn't know existed. I'd never expected her to say *that*. I didn't know it was an option. I just wanted to know how bad my mistake was before the end.

**Then... Will you marry me, Nichelle?**

“I will. Yes.” Her voice is shaking, but it's firm.

Just as the darkness was about to engulf me, the light and warmth from her are pushing it away. I start to feel her hand on my neck, through layers of burned-in rock ash. It's a similar feeling to being tired and lying on my gold hoard, being healed by it. But this is much stronger. This light is *alive*, this warmth is *strong*.

**Say my name.**

“Betruchael,” comes the bright voice, no fear and no hatred. Just love.

It's the most wonderful sound.

I know now what the other dragons meant when they said their wives are their hoards.

It was *this*.

**Put one more hand on me,** I say as my body relaxes, no longer needing to fight to stay awake. **I will be fine.**

- NICHELLE -

Betruchael looks terrible. He's singed and burned and gray, covered in ash. There's not a single golden spot on him anymore. He dived into the pyroclastic flow, burned the front of it to lava with his own fire, and then came to rescue us. Not just me, either, but all of us.

But he's still alive. Probably still in a critical state, but he might survive.

Iris comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder. "He saved us. I would never have believed it. Will he be all right?"

"That's what he says," I manage, though my voice keeps breaking. "I'll stay here with him. You guys should probably... I don't know. Maybe help Ling get home. She shouldn't be here at all. I forced her because I wanted to go to Earth right after I checked on you guys. Those girls hate me now, Iris. They have a lot of problems with dragons..." I can hear myself babbling incoherently.

She squeezes my shoulder. "If they don't like you, then they're no friends of mine, either. You saved our asses, Nichelle. And then Betruchael saved us again. It's the weirdest thing. Never in a million years would I have expected *him* to help."

I laugh crazily and then wipe some confused tears of relief and sadness and regret and joy. “He was always trying to be nice. He just didn’t know how. But now, I think he’s cracked it.”

Haisley joins us. “He’s incredible. Betruchael, of all people? Saving the Amazing tribe? I’m not sure if I’m dreaming. Oh, is that his blood? The golden fluid there?”

“That’s ichor,” I tell them. “Aurora shot him in the foot. It has to be a piece of gold lodged in there. It won’t heal.”

“Oh. We saved some things from the treehouse. Like the magic space gel. Worth trying?”

“Definitely worth trying,” I agree.

Betruchael is cooling down, slowly but surely. Using my hands, I start scraping the gray layers of setting volcanic concrete off him.

Jinx kneels down and hugs me from behind, because that’s Jinx’s way. “You crazy girl. Did you seriously hijack a saucer to come get us?”

“I hijacked it to go to Earth afterwards,” I specify, cracking and picking hardening concrete off Betruchael’s body. “But I wanted to check on my tribe first. I’m not proud of any of this, Jinx. I pointed a gun at Ling. She had no choice. And I fucked it up and nearly killed everyone.”

“You actually never pointed the gun *at* me,” Ling says from off to the side. “I mean, now that we’re being all truthful and honest. And you never cocked it, so there was never any real danger. What kind of hijacker leans her gun against the wall and forgets it the moment the craft takes off? Maybe I kind of wanted to go to Earth anyway, just to check what it’s like now, and you gave me a good excuse? Just saying. There’s a reason I keep tinkering with those saucers. Don’t tell Aurora, please.”

“Be that as it may,” I go on, “I did nearly kill us all because you never got a chance to adjust the ventricle side angle matrix control. That’s why the saucer was wobbling.”

“It was the horizontal inertial gyroscope controls for transverse yaw,” Ling corrects me. “And yes, that nearly killed us. Until this dragon came along like Superman and stopped the avalanche.”

It’s my turn to correct her. “It was a pyroclastic flow, and at the end it turned into a lahar. Deadliest part of any volcano eruption. Yes, he’s a special one.”

“How special?” Jinx asks as she hands me the little stone jar of magic space gel. “I sensed some talking going on here a while ago, but I don’t know what was said.”

“What was said,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice steady, “is that Betruchael and I are engaged to be married.”

The silence is deafening as I apply the gel to the tiny little hole in Betruchael’s paw.

“You’re engaged... to a dragon?” Haisley asks carefully.

Ling chuckles. “There are actually four married couples like that in the tribe, girls. I guess you didn’t know? Marrying dragons is all the rage on planet Xren. And let’s keep in mind that he’s not an *actual* dragon from the fairy tales, because those never existed. He’s just a space alien. Also, aren’t you three married to caveman aliens?”

We all stiffen as we hear the sounds of something coming closer through the jungle. It may well be dinosaurs, running from the volcano.

But it’s only three cavemen, running fast and not caring about the noise they make, eager to find their wives and babies again.

They all embrace and weep and hug and laugh. It's nice to see the deep love they have for each other.

Well, I have deep love for this dragon, too. There's much more to him than just his jerky behavior from before. He was doing the best he could.

"We can probably stay here," Ling says, "while he heals."

"No dino is going to come bother us," I predict. "Except maybe the dactyls. They have no shame."

"You sure that lava isn't going to flow all the way here?"

"I'm sure," I tell her. "The lake stopped it and turned it into concrete just like this." I pick a piece off the dragon's scales and crumble it up between my fingers.

"Roman concrete," Ling muses. "The ancient Romans used volcanic ash in their concrete, too. It's hard stuff. Some of the structures they built two thousand years ago are still standing."

"We should build our next house from that. We can stay inside and party while the lava rushes past the walls. What do you think, will the girls send a saucer to look for you?"

Ling shrugs. "I'd assume so. Someone must have seen the saucer take off. You and I vanishing at the same time must make them think about your treehouse as a possible destination. And when they get here, there's no treehouse and only lava."

I reach out to gently touch her shoulder. "Ling. I'm so sorry about the gun. I would never have shot you."

She stays at a distance. "I know that. And I know what it's like to really want to get away from here. I'd love to see what Earth is like now."

I take my hand off her. I'm not going to force her to forgive me or think better of me after what I did to her. She's entitled to be fucking mad at me, and I have to live with my actions. "Yeah. Hopefully the girls will become less strict about Earth trips. I just had a thought: why don't they use their own dragons to check that no other dragons are following the saucers there?"

"Because we don't even want our *own* dragons to know where Earth is," Ling says. "Sure, the couples are all happy and lovey-dovey now. Will they still be like that in ten years? What happens when the girls get old and one day pass away? The dragons are practically immortal. With their wives gone, will they be tempted by the knowledge of where they might find a rich planet ready for the plunder? We may not want to find out."

**Indeed**, a deep voice says into my mind. **Do not give dragons temptations like that.**

I embrace his long, muscular neck. "Feeling better, my love?"

He opens his eyes and changes his position, making himself comfortable. Dry concrete cracks and falls to the ground, and a gray cloud of volcanic dust rises around us. **Much better. I've been listening, too. You really enjoy pointing guns at people, my love. She did that to me, too, Ling. But she doesn't have it in her to shoot.**

"It's a problem I'll never get rid of," I tell them both. "I just will never have it in me to shoot someone in cold blood. And I don't *enjoy* it, just for the record. I will never touch a gun again."

**Just what I look for in a wife. When can we get married?**

I think about it. “We should find a place to live first. I’m sure Capree wants to— hmm. Actually, she might not like me much after she took me in and gave me a nice hut and then I repaid her kindness by vanishing like a thief in the night.”

**You’ve been making friends left and right, the dragon purrs. But it was all because of me, and I will explain it to everyone.**

“Capree will be fine with it,” Jinx said. “She wasn’t mad at all, just concerned about you. She’ll be happy to see us again. You know she wants us all to live in her village.”

**Then we can get married soon.**

I squeeze his concrete-encrusted neck. “As soon as we can.”

He closes his eyes and lays his head down in my lap. **Good.**

The cavemen can’t help themselves, so they start bringing us fruits and water, and they find a good place for a hut that they start building.

“You can’t stop these guys,” Ling marvels. “Wherever they are, they start building a village.”

“They like to be busy,” Haisley agrees. “But it looks like we’ll be here tonight.”

“We should wait for the various flows to cool down a little,” I suggest. “Before we start finding a way to Capree’s tribe.”

Ling points up, where the layer of leaves has a big hole in it from the landing. “I think there’s a chance the girls are looking for me with the other saucers. Maybe we can light a fire tonight, so they can find us?”

I clap the rock ash off my hands. “Good idea. If they find us, you guys got transportation.”



“I’m sure they’ll want to pick up you too, Nichelle,” Ling says. “I’m not going to be that detailed about what happened.”

“Yes, you are,” I tell her with determination. “I am responsible for it. You would never have taken a saucer by yourself. Your tribe needs to know the truth from the start, that I threatened you with a loaded gun. In fact, I will tell them myself.”

“You’re the most apologetic hijacker ever.” Ling sighs.

“Oh. I was going for most adorable. Was it the threats? It was the threats, wasn’t it?” I’m so relieved about everything that it makes me say strange things.

“No, you never threatened me. You were pretty cute, I guess. *Adorable* is stretching it. I’ll check on the girls.” She wanders into the woods, where the queens of the Amazing tribe are watching their husbands build the hut.

That’s happening a few hundred yards away, but I’m not going anywhere. I stroke the dragon’s head in my lap, feeling at peace. It’s incredible. Things seem to have ended up in my favor.

One big, star-like eye opens. **Are they gone?**

“They’re nearby still. Why?”

**I’m nervous with slayers around.**

“But you saved them! You let us all ride on you. I never thought you would allow that.”

**Just that once. Never again. Only you may ride on me from now on.**

“All right. I think that’s fair.”

**I am healing because of you. You give me strength. And after we’re married, you’ll be my hoard. A better, richer**

**hoard than any dragon ever had.**

I wipe dust and big flakes of concrete off him. Underneath it all he's still golden, but it's a darker gold than before, verging on copper-like. The lighter, yellow gold still comes through in patches and spots, and the effect is heart-achingly attractive.

"You're even more beautiful now than before," I tell him as I place a kiss on a random scale at his back.

**Of course. I have *you* now. I will rest more.**

The sun sets, and I light the big fire that's been built under the hole in the green canopy. If the girls pass above us in a saucer, they will know there's someone here. They may not be able to land right in this spot, but there must be a clearing somewhere close where they can try.

Iris brings me fruits and water. "I suppose you'll both be staying here all night?"

"I think so," I tell her. "He's healing fine."

"It's incredible how he just dived right into that insane avalanche and blew fire. He's a real dragon, and I don't care what other people say."

"The fire only bought us a few seconds. It created a small gap in the front of the flow."

"And it was enough. Okay, I'll leave you two alone. He makes me nervous." She sashays into the dark jungle.

**You have a need to sleep,** Betruchael says and gets up. **Sleep on me.**

He curls up into a deadly-looking copper coil.

"Just a moment. Stay like that." I kneel down and check on his injured paw. The hole is still there, encrusted with dry ichor. In

the middle is a small drop of magic space gel. And inside that drop, suspended like an ancient fly in a piece of amber, is a tiny grain of gold.

I carefully move the drop of gel to my own finger and hold it up in front of his snout. “Here’s the problem.”

He peers at it. **A grain of gold from Caronerax’s hoard. It could have killed me.**

“I think it could. You want to keep it?”

**Throw it away.**

I carelessly smear the glob of gel onto a tree, then climb up and make myself comfortable on top of my fiancé. “This is nice.”

**I love you.**

The statement is so sudden and I feel it so deep inside me that for a while I can’t reply. And when I recover enough to use my voice, I realize no reply is necessary. He knows.

I have the best night’s sleep of my life, and when I wake up, Iris is there and hands me more fruit. And, to my astonishment, a can of Coke.

“A saucer landed a half hour ago.” She laughs when she sees my facial expression. “The saucer girls are rescuing us. They’ll take us to Capree’s tribe.”

Betruchael uncoils and stretches, and both Haisley and I are dumbstruck by his remarkable display of elegance, power, and beauty.

**Nichelle and I shall go on our own.**

“Then I’ll see you two there,” Haisley says and hastily withdraws, tripping over a root and nearly falling. I don’t

blame her. The dragon *is* a scary sight when he's moving like this.

"Do we have to go right now?" I ask. "I was hoping we could get some time together first."

His head swings around on his long neck until his snout is almost touching my nose. **We will have time.**

There's a lot of promise in his words, and the breath catches in my throat.

After a while I spot the saucer through the leaves, shooting skywards. "That's them gone. You want to see what the hut looks like that they built?"

Betruchael Changes to his human form and looks down himself. "Not particularly."

I go in close and stroke one hand down his side. "You have a new color scheme. And it's better than the old."

He polishes a spot on his forearm. "It's somewhat fetching, I suppose. My love, which needs do you need filled right now? Ingesting fluids or solid material? You were just unconscious for a whole night, so I assume that need is satisfied for now? And draining required, perhaps?"

I look down myself. I'm absolutely filthy, covered in volcanic ash and mud and just general jungle dirt. "Actually, I should do some draining. And then I think there's a stream nearby for cleaning and such."

An hour later, all of that has been taken care of. We walk to the hut and inspect it. It's surprisingly big and set on a little hill where the trees have been cut down. There's even a landing spot for a saucer.

“They built this in one afternoon,” I marvel. “You could live comfortably for years in a place like this. Look, there’s a real floor, a door, a thick roof and a fireplace inside. And there are furs! I had no idea the guys went hunting last night. But they must have.”

“An impressive work, I’m sure,” Betruchael says, clearly not impressed at all. “But I know more impressive things.” His intense gaze runs up and down me, and hard tingles shoot through my center.

“I can think of a few things like that myself,” I tell him. “And there *are* furs in there.”

He grabs my upper arms gently and pulls me to him. “I noticed.”

The kiss is soft, but demanding. I melt into him and want nothing else than to be right here.

“You’re mine,” he growls. “I can’t believe it took me so long to understand what that meant.”

“And to understand that you’re mine, too.”

He stiffens, and his eyes bore into me. “Am I?”

But I return his gaze without any urge to flinch. “You are. Don’t forget it. This hoard owns you as much as you own it.”

He pierces my soul with his eyes as he processes that.

Then he chuckles. “I like the way you look at it. And now, so shall I. It makes me happy to think of being your hoard. After all, you’re not the lesser being I took you for.”

“And you’re not as evil as you claim,” I counter as I casually run my hand down his front until it hits the bulge. “Although I’m still on the fence about this thing. It’s dangerous.”

“So are you,” he growls. “You’re like gold. You can make me happy, but if I let you inside me, you can also kill.”

I squeeze his cock outside the pants, enjoying the hard, twitching response. “Am I inside you?”

Betruchael cups one breast outside the dress. “Very deep inside. You have the power to kill a dragon, my love. I can only hope you won’t use that power.”

I fumble with his pants. “I don’t think I will. I’ve tried to kill you before, and look where that got me.”

“It got you here, about to mate with a dragon. And now I think it’s time for me to be inside you, too.”

I pull my dress over my head, grab his neck, and jump up on him. “Way overdue, in fact.”

- **BETRUCHAEL** -

“That’s the place,” Nichelle says from behind my head.

**It does look like a village**, I agree and circle it once. People down there are pointing and waving as we come in to land. **A village of dragon slayers.**

“One day I will ask you to explain why you call them that,” Nichelle says. “But maybe you want to Change to your human form? You’re pretty scary right now.”

**Which is as it should be.**

“It is,” she says and strokes my scales. “But Capree is super pregnant, and I don’t want her more terrified than she already is.”

A small group of slayers and females comes to greet us. The males have their hands on their swords, and it pains me to Change to a less threatening form.

“I will do it for my love,” I sigh and Change as soon as Nichelle has climbed off me.

To my satisfaction, the very act of Changing seems to scare them, too. Two small boys start to cry, and the adult males clench their hands around the hilts of their swords.

But the females don't seem to care. They embrace Nichelle and talk quickly with their bright voices, laughing and crying and being very female.

Nichelle turns to me, her eyes wide. "Did you hear that? Capree gave birth already! Just now!"

"Lucky newborn," I state. "Born with a dragon nearby."

"It's a girl, and the tribesmen are totally confused," she laughs, wiping tears. "They've only ever had boys come out of the Lifegivers. So they're setting up for a party tonight."

"But are they willing to have our wedding here?" I ask, wanting to focus on important things.

"I have to ask. Wait." She sashays off with the other females, and I enjoy following her with my eyes.

The slayers are still standing around, not sure what to do with me. And they *are* clearly dragon slayers. I've met such warriors before, long before I came to Xren.

To entertain myself, I make a sudden movement with one hand and am rewarded with the metallic rustle of dozens of swords being half pulled out of scabbards before their owners realize I'm not going to kill them after all.

I chuckle to myself and give the slayers a warm smile. They'll all be nervous wrecks before the day is over.

To my astonishment, a boy walks towards me with determination, holding a tray with pots on it.

I tilt my head to the side, amused by his bravery or possible insanity.

"Dragon Betruchael," he says, voice bright and eyes steady. "My father, Chief Morfan'ox, brings his regards and regrets that he can't be here to greet you. He has just become the



father of another child. He will be here as soon as he can. I am Kendar'ax. Won't you take a seat while you wait, sir?" He points to a round table under a tall, thick pole finely carved and decorated.

For a moment I'm so confused by the boy's approach and innocence that I follow the invitation and sit down at the table.

The boy places a mug in front of me and pours a fluid into it, small hands shaking. "We know dragons don't need to drink, but this is more a symbol of hospitality than a suggestion that you drink it." It's plainly a sentence he has practiced. "If you need anything, let these men know."

He bows and turns his back to walks away, forcing himself to not run.

Hmm. I hope it's not a sign of me losing my fearsomeness if a slayer child can stay that calm in my presence.

But I'm not too worried. I am about to get married to Nichelle, and nothing else really matters.

The wound in my foot is fully healed, but the change of my hue from pure, yellow gold to a mix of copper and gold appears permanent. I'm not opposed to it. Everything has changed, and it's appropriate that everyone can now see I'm not the dragon I was before.

Nichelle returns, and a smile appears on my face all by itself.

"We can get married here," she says, face flushed with excitement and joy. "Tomorrow, they say. The invitations have already gone out. That means they told the saucer girls that they're all welcome to attend. Let's not expect them to, though. They say they don't hate me, but I can't imagine that it's true. The party for little baby Ardhia's birth will also be our wedding reception."

“I’m not concerned about guests,” I tell her sincerely. “I just want to be married to you.”

She places a hand on my chest. “I know. I love you for that. And for everything else. Oh, you got a drink?”

“So it seems. Ah. That must be the chief slayer.”

A slayer is walking towards us. He’s the only man here whose hand is not on his sword.

“That’s Chief Morfan’ox,” Nichelle says softly. “And his son, Kendar’ax.”

“Dragon Betruchael,” the chief says when he comes close. “Welcome to the village of the Telaxi tribe! I am Chief Morfan’ox. It shall be our honor to host your wedding to Queen Nichelle of the Amazing tribe. Though there are terms connected with it.”

I remain seated, although the man’s bearing gives me the shadow of an urge to get up. “I expected no less, Chief Morfan’ox. Your son has honored me with this exquisite drink in your absence. He is a future chief, doing his duty while clearly terrified and while being watched by equally terrified men several times his age.”

The chief’s face goes from neutral to surprised to gratified. “I think so as well, although that is many years into his future. Or so I hope. I understand you desire to be wedded tomorrow?”

“I desire to be wedded to Nichelle *immediately*,” I correct him. “But it was relayed to me that the closest possible time is tomorrow. So I will settle for that. What are the terms of which you spoke?”

The chief, having done his most formal duties, sits down beside me, but at a safe distance. “You are a dragon. We understand that there are limits to how much you can change

your nature. And yet we don't want our village burned or any of our people hurt in the slightest. We don't want dragon battles in the sky. We don't want the females to walk around in a state of mild panic while you're nearby."

"These are your terms for allowing the wedding to take place in your village? That I not kill, destroy, or cause panic? I must tell you that I only control two of those things. The panic is all within the females. I can't change that."

"That is understood." The chief looks at me with clear eyes.

"Ah. You're asking me to stay at a distance for as long as possible, so that I don't trigger panic in anyone."

"If there's no other way."

I shrug. "I have no choice but to accept your terms."

"Wait," Nichelle says. "What do you mean, Morfan'ox? Betruchael can't stay here until tomorrow?"

"The Earth females all feel a sense of dread whenever he's close," the chief says. "Surely you know this, even if you no longer feel it yourself."

"I don't feel it anymore," Nichelle admits. "But are you sure the girls still do?"

"It's what they tell me."

"Can we check? Now? He's changed a lot."

I chuckle. "I have probably not changed *that* much. And it pleases me to know that I instill terror in creatures from a distance. Only my love can't feel it. No, this is quite suitable. I shall leave and return by midday tomorrow, when I fully expect the wedding to take place without further issues."

The chief gets to his feet. “You’re an honorable dragon, Betruchael. And I want to thank you for rescuing the treasured members of my Amazing tribe. It was done at great risk to yourself, it is said. And indeed I can see that you have changed. Outwardly, at least.”

I stand up. “The greatest change has happened inside. Which hut is yours, slayer chief? Where the newborn is to be found?”

He gives me a hard stare. “I would prefer you not to visit that hut. I’m sure you understand why.”

I have long since identified the chief’s hut, but it amuses me to cause him worry. “Dragons have a different effect on the very young than on the fully grown. I bid you to carefully monitor your daughter’s interest in dragons as she grows up. I suspect it will be... *profound*.”

The chief’s worry grows deeper, and I give him my usual friendly smile before I turn to Nichelle. “My love, I will leave now. But you shall stay and prepare. It’s fitting that the bride and groom don’t see each other on the night before the wedding.”

I take her head in my hands and pull her up for a long, deep kiss that sets my crotch swelling.

The village goes quiet.

Nichelle whimpers when I disengage, looking anxiously up at me. “You will come back?”

For a second I hate the village and the chief that are forcing me to go. I tense up to kill, then force myself to relax. It is possible that she worries because I left her once before. “I will come back. And after that, I will never leave you again.”

I Change to dragon form, and the crowd of slayers pulls back in fear. Only Nichelle and Morfan’ox remain calm.

I beat my wings, causing dust and sand to fill the air as I soar skywards.

**At midday tomorrow we will marry, I tell Nichelle. I love you.**

I circle the village once, enjoying everyone's eyes on me. Then I lightly perch on the roof of the chief's hut, hearing the mewling from the baby in there as well as hushed female voices.

I blow a flame into the sky, making sure I make an unforgettable image. Then I take off and fly away.

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**I** circle the other village as well.

**King Yranox, I call. You are wanted in the sky.**

The king hears my summons and takes off to meet me, Prince Caronerax hovering a distance away. I recognize his intent — he wants me to kill his brother so that he will be king.

But killing is not my plan here. Although there is always a risk of it when dragons meet.

**What is it that you want. Betruchael?**

I laugh. **The king asks a dragon what he wants? Do we not all want the same?**

**Plainly not, the king scoffs. Most want only gold. Others know of greater treasures.**

We circle each other in the sky, each waiting for the other to blow fire. But my position is always better, as the king must recognize.

**How true, I agree. A good hoard is the greatest joy, but only when it is a wife. And my soon-to-be wife has a wish.**

**That her husband mate with her properly? the king asks. Perhaps ask a slayer to help you there.**

His crude insult encourages me. It tells me he knows he would lose a fight with me. **She wishes that the dragons of this village come to peace. That there be no more fighting, no more battles between the four of you.**

King Yranox laughs, trying to get an advantageous position behind me. **Dragons hate each other. We have no choice but to fight. It's in our nature.**

I do a simple feint and end up on the king's tail. How easy it would be to burn him, to smell his charred scales! **Is it? Before, I was sure it was in my nature to crave a hoard of gold. But it wasn't true. The last time we fought, and I was winning, it was in my nature to kill you all. And yet, all escaped alive. Perhaps killing each other is also not really in our dragon nature.**

**Nonsense, Caronerax says. We all know it is.**

**Be that as it may, I sigh, already tiring of the conversation, it will be better for the four of you if you all rein in your urge to destroy each other. I will stay away from your village, so as not to provoke you. But if you start fighting again, Betruchael shall come diving down on you with his flame and his power and his unsurpassed battle skill.**

Kyandros and Aragadon are also up in the air now, circling a distance away, listening.

**Tough talk from a dragon who was recently close to death,**  
Yranox says.

I keep seeing ways to attack and to kill. If I veer to the left now, and then drop down while turning, I can fry Caronerax and Yranox in a single flame.

**Oh, don't do it for *me*,** I respond, longing to get away from this. The urge to murder is growing fast. **Do it for your wives, who appear to love you deeply, gold help them. Keep the peace. If you don't, I will sneak up and kill you all in the most humiliating way I can devise. You will drop from the sky as a drizzle of charcoal.**

I soar high, leaving the four of them dumbstruck and shaken. They can feel the truth in my words. And they know I can do it — they all wanted me on their side in the fights.

**Also, you are all invited to my wedding tomorrow,** I tell them as I fly away. **Midday in the other slayer village. It's customary to bring a gift for the bride.**

- NICHELLE -

“I do!” Betruchael roars, setting every metal object in a half mile radius ringing.

“I do,” I echo when it’s my turn. No object rings after that. Except my heart, and maybe his.

Shaman Utin’ax lifts both hands in blessing from all our Ancestors. “Then, as you both agree and nobody objects, I declare in front of your tribesmen and tribeswomen and all other witnesses that you are now married.”

My dragon husband takes my hand, and we turn around to receive the congratulations from the crowd.

And it’s a real crowd. Not only are all the Telaxi tribesmen here, there’s also several of the saucer girls and representatives from some friendly caveman tribes. And four dragons, all staying as far away from each other as possible, scowling and doing their best to look disinterested and aloof.

Most of them cheer when we turn around as a married couple. And I do my best to enjoy being the center of attention. I have a new dress made from actual fabrics, I’ve washed my hair with real shampoo, I feel clean for the first time since I came



to Xren, and I have a really cute bouquet the girls made from the prettiest flowers in the jungle.

And I have a gold ring on my finger. Betruchael declined the one that was made for him, saying he's done with gold forever. But later he will make one for himself from hardened lava that he will melt with his flame and pour into a mold. I'm excited to see what that might look like. Hopefully it will be obsidian or something like it.

He's not dressed up, and it would be impossible for him to look better than he always does.

The weather is glorious, meaning it's not raining, and the clearing with the tribe's totem pole is filled with guests and tribesmen.

Morfan'ox is hosting the whole thing when he can tear himself away from Capree and little baby Ardhia, who's by all accounts an unusually precocious newborn.

"Congratulations, Dragon Betruchael," he rumbles and takes my husband's hand. "You've chosen wisely."

"Of course I have," Betruchael replies smoothly. "Or rather, *finally* I have."

"It takes time for all of us to grasp that they really are as good as they seem, these alien females. Tribeswoman and Queen Nichelle, we're all grateful that you've picked our village for this very special day. We shall remember it always."

"And so shall we," I reply regally. "Thank you, Chief."

Betruchael and I get separated by all the girls who come to hug me and wish me well.

"Best wedding ever," Iris says, wiping a tear. "Except for my own, but I'm allowed to say that. Those dragons really add

something.”

“Panic?” I suggest, squeezing her once more.

“Panic and a fairy-tale atmosphere. Both those seem about right for a wedding.”

Haisley squeezes me hard. “I’m so happy for you, Nichelle! I never knew it was possible to marry a dragon. And I never knew Betruchael could be lovable.”

“Only for me.” I laugh through happy tears. “I don’t expect anyone else to love him or even like him. But he *was* trying to be nice before. He just had no clue how. He’s only dangerous for other dragons.”

“It will take me a while to warm to him,” Jinx says. “If I ever do. But I’m happy he’s more of a friend now than a... oh, never mind. You know how to handle him, that’s all I need to know.”

“He was a creepy stalker and a total menace before,” I tell her. “I know it. Hey, I went out to kill him with a gold-loaded blunderbuss. And then I fell in love because he saved my life from a dinosaur.”

“It’s a story as old as the world itself,” Mia laughs. “Welcome to the club, girl,” she whispers into my ear. “I don’t mean to brag, but it’s the best club in the universe.”

“I believe it. It’s started really well, too. Mia, I’m so sorry I tricked you. You were being so nice to me back then and I rewarded that by... well, you know.”

“I forgot about that,” she says softly. “And so should you. Like I told you, I know what it’s like to be in love with a dragon. Any psychiatrist would tell you it’s a very serious condition, and you can’t be held responsible for your actions.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “How does Kyandros feel about this?”

“About his brother getting married? He laughs a lot, but it’s not an evil laugh. I think he’s just amused about it in a very dragon-like way.”

I squeeze her an extra time. “I wish they could be friends. They say it’s not what dragon siblings do, but I want to change it.”

“It’ll be our project,” Mia agrees. “We’ll always drop hints and annoy them about it. Then either they become friends or... well, they just burn us to a crisp!”

She ends the sentence with such a cheerful tone that I laugh. “It’s worth the risk, I’d say.”

The other dragon girls, Jennifer and Eleanor and Beatrice, are next in line to congratulate me. A special sisterhood is developing between us five, and I’m curious to see where it can lead.

Last of the girls are Phoebe and Sophia from the saucer girl tribe. I don’t know them from before, but I’m happy they came here in their saucer. Two of the *not-married-to-a-dragon* girls accepting the invitation is more than I had expected.

“One dragon seems about the right number for any tribe,” Phoebe says and hugs me. “Any more, and they start fighting. It’s not that they’re mean. They just can’t help it.”

“They really can’t.” I sniffle, moved that they’re here. “I’ll ask Betruchael to think of a way to keep your dragons apart. He may come up with something.”

“That would be great,” Sophia says as she embraces me. “Things are really getting out of hand. We used to be one tribe, really close-knit. Now, there are factions and cliques and *sides*.

I hate that, Nichelle. Help us if you can.” Her voice cracks, and I give her an extra squeeze before she disengages.

“Delyah wanted to be here, but her kid is needing mama a lot these days. And the others...” She looks away.

“...didn’t want to come,” I complete her sentence. “Which I totally understand. They have no reason to love me. How is Ling doing?”

“Same as always, spending all her time in the saucers, preparing them. She says she’s not traumatized, though.”

I wipe my face again. Wedding days are the *worst* for ruining makeup, especially when your mascara is soot from a fire. “I hope she’s right about that. She saved us all.”

Betruchael runs out of patience and comes sauntering. “My love, your face is all streaked with ash.”

“That’s tradition;” I tell him, wiping my nose on a coarse handkerchief I was smart enough to put inside the sleeve of my dress. “The bride must have a streaked face, or the marriage won’t last long.”

“Then I’m happy that your face is *extremely* streaked. Beloved wife, I have inspected the gifts we have received. There is much gold and even some useful items.”

I frown. “Who would give gold to a dragon?”

“Other dragons, mostly. It’s astounding that they have given us anything at all. But being given gold by a dragon — only a few days ago I would not have thought it possible.”

“There’s a lot that became possible recently, my love. Hey, you once told me that dragons don’t eat. Do I remember that correctly?”

He raises his perfect eyebrows. “Of course.”

“Because all that remains of this wedding is the eating and drinking. And toasts and such. None of us are much into that.”

His face lights up. “We can leave right now?”

“Soon,” I promise. “I have to throw my flowers, and listen to the first toast and such. But after that... I mean, there’s no cake, I specifically said there should be no speeches and while there will be dancing, it will not be a waltz. More like drunken swaying and twirling. I’ve done it myself. What do you think?”

“Soon,” he echoes. “As soon as we can.”

Since all the girls present are married, we all decide that throwing the bunch of flowers doesn’t make much sense. So I place it in a pot on the table and leave it to look pretty.

When the party is truly going, and the *frit* is flowing, I very conspicuously sneak out to a burst of laughter from all the girls. They all understand, and the cavemen think it’s normal for the married couple to leave their reception the first chance they get.

“Where do we go?” I ask when we walk to the hut Capree gave me before, where I have prepared a big pack of food and drink and furs and such. “Do you know a secret place?”

“I know of two places,” he says and Changes. **Two huts for us to use. One on a beach, the other in the jungle. I prefer the one on the beach.**

“Yeah, that hut. My love, did you know nobody knows where those two girls are? I was sure the saucer girls had rescued them. But they haven’t. I asked earlier today. Nobody knows what happened to them.”

**I think I can guess.**

“The ocean monster, right? It’s one possibility. They may both have been swimming, and then gotten stuck in that sticky gel.” I shudder. It’s not an end I’d wish on my worst enemy. “But what if they didn’t? What if they are somewhere in the jungle, needing help?”

**Then you want to rescue them, I’m sure.**

“Maybe we can look for clues while we’re there on their beach.”

**Look all you want.**

I look up at his perfect dragon’s face. I still have to pinch myself. That’s my *husband*. “Can we go now?”

**We can. But before we leave this place of our wedding, let’s kiss once more.**

We do, and again I have the thrill of feeling that I’m stealing something wonderful that I have no right to. But I *do* have a right to Betruchael now. He’s my husband, whether in dragon form or not.

“Maybe we can make some improvements to the beach hut,” I suggest as I climb onto his back. “I have some tools. We can make it more *ours*.”

We take off, and the party below goes quiet as everyone’s nervously watching us.

**I’m sure *we* can.**

“And *we* will. You don’t like work, but I will show you how to make things.”

**I already know how to make one thing.**

We soar over the jungle. Betruchael beats his wings slowly, being in no hurry.

“Love,” I conclude. “Yes, you *really* know that.”

**Let’s do more of that.**

I laugh, loudly and freely as the wind blows the hair out of my face. “I think that’s a certainty, dragon mine.”

## EPILOGUE

- NICHELLE -

“It’s weird,” Sophia says. “Since your wedding, the dragons have been unusually quiet.”

We’re walking through their village slash town, me finally relaxed enough to fully appreciate everything I’m seeing. There’s no sign of the dragon battle, apart from a patch of the jungle outside that’s still scorched black and probably always will be.

It’s quiet and idyllic. Cavemen and Earth girls are going about their business, farming and making pots and forging steel and making baskets and many other things. Some of the girls wave at me, and we go over to chat. Others pretend not to see me, still not happy about what I did to Ling and Mia, and for bringing Betruchael straight to their doorstep.

In a way, I’m fine with that. It shows that they’re loyal to their own in this tribe. If someone had held Iris at gunpoint and hijacked her sailboat, for instance, I would be pretty furious. Even if she herself wasn’t. An attack on one of us is an attack on the whole tribe, and I totally get it. Also, the thing about them demanding we shoot Betruchael, while they had dragons living in their own town, is still a sore point for the Amazing tribe.



I'm mostly here to mend fences, if possible. Maybe it shouldn't be me doing it, but I'm the only Amazing queen with a dragon to fly on.

"That's wonderful," I enthuse. "Maybe they will stay calm and you guys can focus on important things."

Sophia gives me a strange look. "Maybe. If they do, I suppose we'll never know why?"

I look right back. "I suppose so."

She gives my wrist a little squeeze in understanding, then points ahead. "So this is the place where we will put the steam engine. We don't have a fancy volcano with lava and everything, so I guess we'll have to use charcoal to run it. Unless you happen to know about a secret oil well? Or a dragon who will blow fire all day long?"

"Geothermal energy is fancy," I agree. "But I'm thinking, what if we skip the oil stage and go straight to solar? Xren *is* a tropical planet."

"You're not talking about solar panels, I'm sure."

"Nope. I mean steam engines heated by concentrated sunlight. You'll need lenses and mirrors to heat up the water for the steam engine. Those are hard to make, but not impossible. And in any case, I think they have that on Earth. In large quantities and with superb quality."

"Even if we could get those mirrors and lenses, it's not easy to make. We've talked about this for months, Nichelle. We have plans for a crude power grid, even. Some of our girls are hyper smart. But it's a big project."

"Race you to it," I challenge her. "The steam engine we have now runs on wood, but we're absolutely making mirrors next."

First tribe to make a working solar-powered steam engine that can lift a caveman wins.”

“It’s not fair,” she says mildly. “We’re two dozen girls here, not to mention the dragons and the hundreds of cavemen.”

“That’s right,” I grin. “You don’t have a chance.”

“You’re on,” Sophia says as we bump fists. “I have to warn you, though. We know how to make soap.”

I stare. “Seriously? Soap?”

She looks around, taking in her village. “We have small industries, Nichelle. Told you the girls are smart. Oh, did you find any clues about what happened to the beach girls?”

I shake my head. “Nothing new. They could have been gone for a year. But now that the dragons seem calm, maybe you guys want to do some patrols with your saucers? I’ll do some with Betruchael, but I’m not sure that’s the best solution. If I were in the jungle and saw a dragon pass overhead, I’d make sure to hide. The beach girls will, too.”

“We’re thinking about it. If the dragons stay nice for another few days, we know a couple of places we want to check out.”

The four remaining saucers give off a dull sheen in the distance. Someone’s standing there, busy with the outside of one of them. I stop and watch her for a moment, remembering the moment I closed the hatch and pulled a gun on her.

Sophia follows my gaze. “Ling’s doing fine. Just as cheerful as always. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind meeting you.”

“Could you please ask her if she’s okay with it? She might hate me.”

“Sure.” She walks over, briefly talks to Ling and points to me. Then she waves at me.

I slink over, feeling shy.

“Hi, Ling,” I begin nervously. “I’ve got something for you from the Amazing tribe. For saving us all with your incredible saucer-piloting skills.” I hand her the small, leaf-wrapped pack. “You’re a hero to us and we want you to know it every day of your life.”

“You didn’t have to do this, Nichelle,” Ling exclaims. “I wasn’t being heroic at all.” She unwraps the small dagger and pulls it halfway out of its sheath. “Oh my... it’s so black!”

“Cooled lava re-melted by dragon fire, poured into a mold and then knapped to make it sharp,” I tell her. “It looks like obsidian, so it should be the sharpest blade on Xren. Just so you have something ready in case some other love-crazy chick tries to force you to give her a lift.”

Finally she comes in close and hugs me. “Thank you, Nichelle. This is really kind of you. Sophia says you think I hate you. But I don’t! Not at all. I remember you standing in the saucer, making sure to point the gun at the floor and holding it like a kitten, far out from your body. And then you put it down and didn’t touch it again. Looking back, it’s kind of funny how awkward you were. Anyway, it ended really well.” She smiles.

I’m so relieved I laugh. “Hey, it was loaded! I’m very concerned with gun safety. It ended well thanks to *you*. You saved nine lives. Including two babies.”

We chat for a while, joking and laughing. I’m feeling much better about everything. I still have a guilty conscience, because of both Ling and Mia, but it’s not as bad as before. Ling is fine now and Mia was never that offended in the first place about me using her kindness against her. When you’re married to a dragon, not much can hurt you.

“Anyway,” I say before we move on, “we’ve been talking about asking you guys for a saucer of our own. But we decided not to. Nobody in the Amazing tribe is that interested in flying one, and the Flood thing creeps us out. For now, anyway. Things may change when the kids get older. It would be nice for them to be able to fly here and see other kids once in a while.”

“All right,” Sophia says. “I guess we’ll talk about it when the time comes. And you will have a kid of your own, looks like.” She nods to my midsection, where I’m definitely showing.

“Hopefully, every queen of the Amazing tribe will,” I tell them. “Iris is further along than me. But she’ll have a caveman hybrid, not a half-dragon.”

“They’re a handful,” Sophia laughs. “Both of those. Join us for a pre-dinner snack, Ling?”

Ling slaps the side of the saucer. “When I’m done here. Just checking the outside of this one before I move inside it.”

We eat some grilled not-sheep and drink a cup of coffee, which the girls are rationing strictly.

Then I say goodbye and walk out into the jungle, escorted by two young cavemen.

I ask them about the dragons.

“The four of them seem to have divided the village into four parts, and they never tread on another dragon’s turf,” they tell me. “Their huts are as far from each other as they can be while still being in the village.”

“Do we know why they’re being so careful all of a sudden?” I ask, just to check how much they’ve guessed.

“If I were to speculate, I think they’re afraid of something,” one of them says.

“Or *someone*,” the other adds, careful about not looking at me.

They stop and touch their swords in salute. “This is as far as you need us, Queen Nichelle. Get home safely.”

“Thank you both,” I say regally. “You’re a credit to your tribe.” I turn my back and walk on.

He’s leaning against a tree, the most beautiful creature who ever lived, looking unspeakably bored.

“Out so late?” I ask the way he always asks me.

“It *is* actually far too late,” Betruchael grunts. “What did you *do* there? Go through the lineage of every single tribesman a hundred generations back?”

“Just girl talk,” I tell him as I embrace him and kiss him tenderly. “You will learn to deal with it. Every husband does. Oh, they have pretty much guessed why the other dragons are being so good.”

The dragon squeezes my butt and kisses me right back.

“What’s that to me?”

“Not much,” I admit. “Just saying.”

“You look wonderful,” he says in his offhand way. “There’s more light to you now.”

“Your compliments are really coming along,” I praise him.

“You must have been practicing. And it’s true. I feel light. Ling doesn’t hate me, and she liked the dagger.”

“On this planet, a weapon is always an appropriate gift,” he drawls. “And it was made by *me*. She will treasure it always.”

He Changes to his dragon form, and my heart skips a beat, like it always does.

“The lava was melted by you,” I agree as I climb onto his back. “But the whole tribe helped make the dagger.”

He beats his mighty wings and we take off. **Fair enough. Dragon’s aren’t makers. We’re hoarders. Everyone knows that.**

He lifts his foreleg so I can see it. Around one claw there’s a dark band; his wedding ring that was made in the same way as Ling’s dagger. But the ring turned out as basalt, not obsidian. It fits on his finger when in human form and on a claw when he’s a dragon.

“Fine,” I concede. “You made the ring and you helped make the dagger. You’re more of a maker than I thought you could be.”

We soar over the jungle of the continent that the Amazing tribe now calls ‘the Saucer Continent’. We call our own island ‘Our Island’, which is something we should probably change at some point. But it works for now.

The wind blows my hair around my head and his giant muscles move under me. I’m less scared about flying on his back than before, but it’s still thrilling.

“My love, I just thought of something.”

**You do that a lot.**

“Yes, but this is important. See that ocean up ahead?”

**No.**

“Seriously? It’s the shining thing that- oh, I get it. Very funny.”

**It’s hard to miss.**

“Whatever. Once we cross that ocean, we’ll get to a beach.”

**Will we really.**

“And on that beach, I think that maybe there’s a hut.”

**I’m starting to suspect where this is going.**

“Also maybe that hut is deserted. You like the ocean, don’t you? The hiss from the surf, the fresh breeze, the balmy nights...”

**I do like the nights.**

“See, me too. We have so much in common!”

**It’s almost like we’re married.**

“Exactly! We totally should be. Are you single?”

**Very much and forever *not* single,** Betruchael growls. There’s a warning in his voice that probably only I could pick up: ‘don’t joke about that’.

I squeeze his scaled neck. “I know, my love. But I would marry you again and again, every day of my life.”

We zoom out over the ocean. I can’t see Our Island yet, but soon it will become visible at the edge of the horizon. First as a line of fuzzy clouds, then as a thin, dark stripe that’s land. I never thought I’d think of any place on Xren as home, but our little subdivision in Capree’s village is as close to it as I’ve ever come anywhere, including Earth.

“You know, I’m starting to like this planet.”

**One can get used to anything, they say. I only like it because *you’re* here.**

“That’s probably why I like it, too. I didn’t before. But you’ve changed everything. My love?”

**I'm right here. I'm the golden dragon against whose upper back you're rubbing your crotch.**

"Oh. I thought there was something familiar about you," I continue the joke. "But anyway: Why do you like it when I say your name?"

**Only you have ever made it sound good.**

"Betruchael," I coo as sexily as I can. "Like that?"

**Like that.**

"Betruuuchaeel." I try to make my voice raspy in a sexy way.

**The first time was better.**

"Betruchaelllll..."

**That's enough now, my love. Any way you say it is beautiful. Like you.**

"You *have* been practicing! I actually just like saying it."

Our Island is visible now, the thin stripe of land quickly growing thicker and greener. Below us the calm ocean is forming a million mild waves, going the same way as us.

We come in from the ocean towards the beach, going low so we can both look for that ocean monster. Sunset is approaching, making the gray sand look orange. The air smells like the air on Earth, on the coast. It's the smell of home.

**No signs of the previous residents,** Betruchael says as his claws dig down into the sand.

I climb off him. "We'll keep looking for clues about those girls. We don't have to get back to the tribe right away."

My husband Changes and immediately comes close to cup my lower belly with one copper-colored hand flecked with yellow gold. "How was the flight?"



“Very smooth. You’re keeping me comfortable, I can tell. And the baby.”

He frowns in deep thought, the way he always does when we’re standing like this. “Can he tell that he’s comfortable?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I don’t even know if she’ll come out as an egg or hatched or what. It’s different for every human girl pregnant by a dragon. We’ll just have to see.”

“Dragons hate their offspring,” Betruchael ponders as he leads me to a bench we made together and placed in front of the hut. “But I will do my best to be kind to ours.”

“You better,” I tell him. “Or you’ll get shot again. You know I like to point guns at people.”

He sits down on the bench and lifts me to his lap. “You don’t even have a gun.”

“Not right now. Nor will I ever touch one, actually. I promised. So be nice.”

He shuts me up by kissing me deeply, making me see golden stars and causing a warm surge to flash in my center. “Then it’s settled.”

I take his hand and find the hard circle that is his basalt wedding ring.

“It *is* settled. Once and for all.”

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**D**ear reader,  
Thank you for reading *Caveman Alien’s Curse!*

I wondered why Betruchael was always stalking the Amazing tribe, teasing and bullying them, without really hurting them that much. Now we know that he was just trying to make friends in the only way he knew how. He simply had no clue how that really works.

He was still pretty mean to Nichelle in the beginning, but I think he redeemed himself by nearly dying while rescuing her and her friends. He didn't change a lot through the book, except for discovering what love means. Dragons are dragons, and dragons are nasty. He still is nasty, but not to Nichelle.

Was Nichelle likable enough to root for? She gets put in some tough situations, and from the previous books about the Amazing tribe we know that she's given to dramatic actions. Hijacking a flying saucer in the way she did is close to the limit of what I would accept from a heroine, but she regrets it deeply afterwards. And I think Mia is right - being in love can make you do crazy things.

Ling is a really kind girl, and I think she needs a caveman of her own soon. She may need to find the anger in her.

I think the beach girls do as well. I know what happened to them, and if you keep following the series, you will know it, too.

I had a lot of fun reading up on volcanoes and the many dangers they pose. I've only ever been on one, and looking down into the steaming crater of volcano Taal a couple of months before the eruption in 2020 is an experience I will always remember. Thankfully there were no pyroclastic flows or lahars back then.

The chronology of the series is getting tricky, but the events in this book take place a year or two before the Series Epilogue at the end of *Caveman Alien's Fate*.

Anyway, I am working on the next part of the *Alien Vikings* series, and I expect a new *Caveman Aliens* book in the first quarter of 2024. If you sign up for my newsletter right [here](#), you'll know when that book is ready.

And maybe come by my Facebook page [here](#), where you'll find the coolest science fiction romance fans in the known universe :)

Thanks again for reading *Caveman Alien's Wood!* I hope you enjoyed it. See you in the next one!

*Calista*