

The Majestic Ice Dragon of Frost Peridot Cavern

By: A.X. Bueno

“Wait up guys, *puff* this cold is hard... for me... to run through and I’m fr-fre-freezing ” I shout in-between icy wheezes as my two friends finally stop racing up this mountain we’re hiking and look back at me as I struggle.

“Sorry bro, sometimes it’s easy to forget you’re not quite warm-blooded or furred like us. Though I will say you’re keeping up pretty well especially given how slow turtles are supposed to be.” I groan at that remark. Richie and I have been friends since back when we first started middle school together. Me, Richie and Bashia which was a little over ten years ago now and yet he still never fails to bring up how surprisingly fast I am for a turtle. “Anyway we’re almost to the top and the whole reason we’re here, you can make it just a little farther right? I’ve always wanted to see it and I promise I’ll make it up to you when we get back to town.”

“Oh, alright. Fineee but you owe me for this and I’ll take my repayment as some hot cocoa or something else warm.” I say rubbing my hands together in a futile attempt to warm them up.

“So do you guys think it’s already back up there? Ohhhh what do you think it’s doing right now!? Getting back from stretching its wings, resting up for tonight, standing guard over all those gems and looking glorious? Oh my goodness, I can’t wait to see it, I’m so excited from all those legends my tail can’t stop wagging, woohoo!”

“I’m excited too, Bashia. I just know whatever we see up there will be a sight to behold, don’t you think so too Box?” **There** is Richie’s nickname for me.

“I mean it’s definitely a sight few have ever seen up close before and I’m feeling why right now. *Brrrr*” I shiver then continue. “Though yeah I’m also excited I just wish it wasn’t so cold, luckily I’m not completely cold blooded either or I’d be a t-turtlesicle by now.” I shiver slightly though it’d be worse if I weren’t a hybrid. I still can’t help being cold though. I just wonder how Bashia and Richie are handling it so well, fur and being warm-blooded aside not one of us is wearing an actual coat or cold weather clothes.

“That’s because you’re half leatherback. That makes you a umm what was it again, a mesiotherm, mesmatherm... mesatherm.”

“Mesotherm!” Me and Bashia both yell in sync correcting him before we both start laughing at the fact we still have to do so. Richie takes it well though.

“Right, right. You two always were too smart for me.”

“We wouldn’t be if you had spent a little less time goofing off at the beach and just a bit more time studying with us. Besides we’ve both corrected you like a couple dozen times by now how has it not sunken in yet? Ahaha” Bashia chuckles and I join her. At this point correcting Richie on the pronunciation has become more of a joke between us though I’m glad she’s continuing it so I don’t have to. He’s always been smarter than he gives himself credit for though.

“Yeah I suppose you’re right. I could have studied a little harder but hey I still graduated with both of you so I guess I didn’t need to *thattt* much right?”

“I suppose. Maybe it’s for the best though, I don’t think I could handle you being fast and smart. Then you’d be too powerful and I’d really feel as slow as a tortoise supposedly is next to you, haha.”

“Aww come on now. Do I really make you feel slow, Baxter? You know I’m only teasing you when I bring up turtles and slowness, right?”

He gives me a hesitant smile waiting for me to return it and reassure him. Which I do because I was already intending to and then Bashia starts snickering next to us, thankfully this whole mountain path is actually kind of wide. I’m about to ask Bashia what she’s snickering about when suddenly I see a glint in the distance which I squint to see as Richie asks Bashia the question instead.

“What’s got you laughing like that, hmm?” He raises an eyebrow and looks right at her.

“Nothing, just thinking about older times and you two. That’s all.”

“Okay then...sorry to interrupt you guys but look up ahead.”

“Why, what’s a...head? Woah! You know what that could mean?!”

“I think so but refresh my memory anyway.” Bashia says while scratching behind a perked ear

“It’s been said that in those caves there isn’t just the dragon but also a huge hoard of treasures as well as a really rare gemstone that’s mainly found in caves surrounded by cold.”

“I’d heard of the treasure hoard but not about the gems. What’s the gemstone called? Where’d you hear about it Richie? I’ve never seen it in any of the books or photos of the dragon and its cave back in town.” I say as we resume our trek to the cave entrance and are now a stone’s toss away.

“It’s called Frost Peridot and all I’ve heard about it other than its rarity is that it’s got an incomparable beauty that’s supposed to absolutely radiate off it so I can’t really describe it that well to you guys. As for how I know about it, my grandpa told me. He told me the story of how his dad, my great-grandpa, took him out to try and see the dragon’s cave when he was a kid, about 10 or 11. They made it to just outside the cave’s entrance like us and were about to enter it but then one of them slipped on some ice, almost fell off a cliff’s edge and needed to be rescued which stopped their progress and made them turn back afterwards. My grandpa says a sea lion was the one who slipped but my dad says he found out it was actually a fellow otter, his brother, my great-uncle and I think it’s best to believe my dad because my grandpa...whoops got sidetracked. Anyway that’s how I know, my grandpa came up here once and made it to about where we are right now, we’re actually about to make it further than them with just a few more steps and maybe even see the dragon in the flesh!” Richie says as he pumps his webbed fist into the air and his blue eyes almost shimmer with excitement.

“I know right!” Bashia’s fluffy brown tail goes back to wagging as she says that and here I am too worried about how I’m still freezing to be as excited as both of them.

From the outside we look into the almost pitch blackness beyond the entrance of the cave and I gulp as does Richie but not Bashia who simply stares intrigued. There’s few spots of blue and green light glowing. The entrance itself has icicles growing on the top and like the rest of the mountain there’s snow and ice around though strangely less around it. It’s also massive, about the size of at least a two story house, maybe even bigger than that. It definitely looks fit for a dragon to walk through its smoothly eroded edges.

We’re all hesitant to take the first step inside but honestly I’m hoping it’s warmer inside than out and I take a few steps forward after fetching a flashlight I was stashing inside my small shell prepared to pierce through the darkness. Bashia follows me forward and then Richie comes after. My hopes were right and it is warmer though still a little below freezing it feels like, not an ideal temperature but a more bearable one. It takes me a few seconds to find the button to turn on the flashlight but I do after feeling for that on button with a finger and the awaited beam of light finally shows. It gives us a better view of our surroundings, of the actual inside of this cave we’ve only previously seen in storybooks and pictures.

It’s a sight to behold. I shine the beam around and it takes us all a second to realize that we’re almost completely surrounded by a hoard of treasure beyond anything any of us had ever beheld before. There’s a plethora of jewels of all kinds and sizes, an abundance of gold and silver in several different shapes and forms, and even some of the three colors of jade. Along with all that there’s jewelry like necklaces some of which are made from bone and then there’s the relics. I can feel the intense amount of history here, things from paintings to urns to what look like

ancient coins put in their own special little pile and so much more. I take in all this splendor as do Richie and Bashia as we all gaze around awestruck at everything and then suddenly I hear Richie say catch and I brace my dark green flippers to feel something land in them, an old fashioned film camera.

“Come on bro, take some good shots. We could use an extra set of them and it’s best we split the film. You want something to take back with you right?” Richie says as he hands a camera to Bashia that I’m not sure where he was storing since his pants only have one pocket from what I saw and that’s where he seemed to be storing about four rolls of film one of which he tosses to me and I catch it. They both start to take pictures but I’m just confused.

“Wait, huh? Couldn’t we just take a piece of treasure back with us? The dragon isn’t back just yet and I don’t think it’d notice if we took something small.”

“Are you crazy?! That’d be super disrespectful to the dragon that’s protected and helped our town all these years. Besides I’ve heard dragons have some kind of horde sense or something that’ll let them know if their horde is in danger of being robbed even if it’s so much as the tiniest flake of gold from it. Best to just soak everything in, take some pictures and head back in one piece to tell this story.” Bashia says and I just say “fine” back and get to also taking photos.

We snap photos of mounds of gold and jewels and of some of the individual relics like an ancient helmet that’s metal and looks like it was made for war or some ancient pottery among other things. Our local dragon is surprisingly well organized it seems with all the various parts of its hoard separated and in appropriate piles spaced out enough to give us decent sized pathways. Then I see the next most notable thing about this cavern besides the not present at the moment dragon, the frost peridot littering the floor and some of the hoard piles. It’s got this beautiful mostly clear crystal shell that almost looks like ice with the way a few spots have a sort of cold fog about them along with the way it almost looks like it’s dripping thanks to how the crystal surrounding the gem is shaped. Like a big teardrop with a jagged middle but larger ‘droplet’ covered yet almost smooth bottom. The gem inside is mostly a beautiful light green but with a few tiny spots of an ocean blue.

I reach out to touch it and a shiver instantaneously runs down my spine, it’s so very cold making me pull back my scaly hand. Despite that cold feeling I can’t resist reaching out again for reasons I don’t fully understand and yet do anyway. Wrapping up this one gem from the pile in my flipper and just holding onto it and as I do I notice it’s starting to warm up strangely like it’s actually reacting to my body heat and then **SHOOM** there’s suddenly a small explosion of light above my head. The shock of which almost makes me drop the gemstone but I manage to keep my grasp on it and gaze in wonder at the light, it takes me a second or two to realize after the shock wears off that it’s taking a shape and that shape is one of a mini aurora borealis. It’s

magical and like nothing I've ever seen before, I put the gem back in the pile to see what would happen and almost immediately once it's no longer in contact with my body the display of light stops. I pick up another, different frost peridot gem to make sure if it'd have the same reaction and sure enough it does, giving off a similar display of light though the color hues are slightly different being just a bit brighter. Fascinating.

"Hey you guys, I found some frost peridot! You've got to see it, it's so pretty and it can do something really incredibl-!" I shout out to Bashia and Richie wanting them to see this but I stop when I feel a sudden gust of wind, which is something I shouldn't be feeling especially this far into the cave. I look around and then up and see the source of the gust of wind, it's a massive ice dragon, presumably the who's cave this is looking down and right into my white and black eyes with his pure light blue ones.

"HELLO THERE, YOUNG ONE" The dragon shouts with unbound enthusiasm and a voice that sounds resoundingly masculine, startles me bad enough it feels like my heart is about to burst out of my chest. I leap back about several feet in shock and the dragon seems to notice with some concern, its expression becoming more somber as it takes two giant steps back and gives an icy sigh. I can see it a bit better now; it's covered in navy blue scales everywhere except it's arms which were a brilliant white, it had teeth like daggers, eyes that have yellow sclera with a white tinged blue iris that resembles the ice of a river, huge majestic bat-like wings that are also navy blue plus look like they've got quite the wingspan, then finally there were the orange spines that ran all along it's back.

"Oh no. So sorry if I startled you, I'm not really used to guests and got excited. Wait a second...are you holding some frost peridot there?" The shock of seeing this icy behemoth actually made me hold onto the stone harder rather than drop it and I guess it was still visible in my flipper.

"I sensed a couple of the gems had been moved. Was that you? I hope you weren't trying to steal some of my horde were you? Do you know what happens to those who steal from dragons?" The dragon raised an eyebrow and got a little closer as it looked me right in the eye in a way that made how capable of crushing me it is very clear.

"Haha! I'm only teasing, no need to worry so much." The ice dragon chuckles as its tail thumps the ground jovially. By the way you can tell your friends there to stop hiding in the shadows, I can see them from here." I didn't even realize Richie and Bashia noticed what was going on and were hiding somewhere though I don't blame them for doing so.

"H-H-Hi Mr. Dragon, it's a pleasure to m-meet you. My name is Bash-Bashia " Bashia stammers out after emerging out from a pile of ancient vases and giving a nervous bow.

“Bash-Bashia eh? That’s an interesting name.”

“A-Actually...sir it’s just Bashia.”

“Ahh, okay. Well my name is Ekarios, not Mr.Dragon, thanks. So how about your otter friend over there?” Ekarios points a huge claw right at Richie and this makes him step out of his hiding spot behind a mound of various emeralds.

“My name is Richie si- Ekarios, if I may use your name.” Richie rubs a webbed paw behind his head.

“You absolutely may. You’re the first people to actually climb up to and visit my cave and me in quite some time. I was beginning to think your little town had forgotten all about me, what an interesting bunch they sent though. A river otter, a german shepherd, and either a turtle or a tortoise I’m sorry I can’t tell. So what brings you here, more offerings finally?”

“Our...our town didn’t send us noble dra- I mean Ekarios. We just wanted to see you in all your splendor and excellent glory, you’re very much a local legend to our town. And it’s probably difficult to tell if I’m turtle or tortoise because I am technically both. I’m a hybrid.”

“Aww you flatter this old dragon umm... did you give me your name yet young hybrid?”

“I haven’t yet, it’s Baxter sir.” As I say my name Ekarios rises to get onto two legs from the four he was standing on before sitting down cross-legged and taking up the entire path where he’s sitting. He then lets out an icy sigh before putting his hands on his thighs and looking considerably more lax although his eyes still beam with enthusiasm and are still fixed on us to indicate he’s listening. I guess he just wanted to be more comfortable after flying to and from who knows where for who knows how long.

“Please you can just call me Ekarios or Mr. Ekarios if you still want to be formal. If you would indulge my curiosity, which species are you a hybrid of?”

“My mom was a Leatherback Turtle and my father was a Galapagos Tortoise so I’m a hybrid of both of those species.”

“Fascinating” Ekarios says before an “**Ahem**” is heard coming from Bashia.

“For sure. Sooo... I’ve got to know, are you really older than our town? Do you know about the history of it? Do you remember what it used to look like? I’m sure you’ve got so many interesting stories you could tell us being here as long as you have!”

“Are you trying to call me old, young pup?” His brow is raised and he’s smiling slyly

“Of course not great Ekarios. I don’t know much about how dragons age but I do know you’ve got quite a history with our town. Please don’t take offense at my curiosity.”

“He he he. Don’t worry so much youngling, I’m only teasing you. You can tell when a dragon is properly annoyed, trust me. As for your questions I’d be more than happy to answer them. After all it’s been a while since I’ve had any guests and you are all residents of a town named after me so I’m sure you’re good folks.” He flashes another toothy dragon smile only this one is a lot more warm and happier and the three of us all smile right back.

“Wow! So you **are** the reason our town is Ekari’s Town.” Bashia exclaims practically with stars in her wide brown eyes

“Yep! Now scooch in a little closer and let me tell you some history of your town and this valley which I am also older than by the way.”

We all do as he says, Bashia and Richie especially, both getting a tiny bit closer than me and we listen as he tells us stories starting at a time when this valley didn’t exist yet. When there was no river running nearby and there was a small mountain in our town’s place. He goes on to say how back then there was an entirely different dragon that lived here before him, one that breathed some kind of super corrosive acid and how it seemed only interested in destruction. Ekarios says how it melted the nearby trees, smashed boulders for fun, messed with the flow of the river and eventually when our ancestors first settled here it destroyed their crops, livestock and sometimes their very homes. It terrorized the valley for what was probably over a thousand years and then those who tried to live here for maybe a thousand more, on and off until Ekarios, much younger than he is now came from the north looking for a new home after he was the last thing left at his previous one for reasons he won’t tell.

After an awkward pause he goes on to say how he, being a ‘protector and lover of life’ couldn’t stand by and watch this bully of an acid dragon continue to wreak havoc’(his own words) and challenged the destructive dragon to an old fashioned brawl. It consisted of a lot of back and forth ice and acid breath against each other, clawing, some biting, and boulders as well as punches thrown. Eventually a hard fought victory came about for Ekarios and the other dragon left to lick his wounds and never be seen again. With that said their battle changed this area into more of the valley we know today, according to Ekarios and thus while that other dragon may

have been a real jerk he did change this place enough that it could become a better, more permanent home for those who were settling down here. While they wouldn't thank someone who caused so much harm and only did good inadvertently they would be grateful to and show appreciation for Ekarios, coming to name their new and properly formed city after him in reverence.

After that he starts talking about how many people used to bring him so many varied offerings and visit him so much more often, mainly grateful to just be around their famous ice dragon savior and bask in his glory. Ekarios gives the backstories of some of the offerings like one of the vases and how it told the story of two residents of the still developing town, a bark scorpion and a chameleon, and how they met and fell in love despite the risk there. Or this really ancient scroll that apparently contains the writings of some of our town founders on how they felt at first settling here and their backgrounds before they did so. He also touches on the stories of some of the gemstones like a sapphire with cracks along it that apparently used to be part of a much larger gem before people starting breaking off chunks of it and this cracked chunk of it is all that remains now and was given to Ekarios by a docent who said the museum he volunteered at didn't want it anymore with how it looked. Or this strang emerald which had an orange glow around it that apparently had a scientific explanation for that.

Ekarios kept telling us these stories for hours admitting that we were the first people to visit him in an entire generation and goes on to also talk about various visitors before us. Everyone from nobles and the powerful to those just dropping off things they thought he would appreciate, visiting mountain climbers looking to escape the cold here and how he was willing to offer a place to stay and chat with all of them like he's doing with us now. Occasionally he goes off for a few minutes to take a water break, drinking from the river and offering us some too with these three flasks from his hoard which look almost a century old but he stays he cleaned them well so we drink from them. Eventually it's Richie who first looks out toward the cave entrance and tries to get our attention with an "ummm, guys". Ekarios and Bashia then also look at the cave entrance and I do too to see that the sun has actually started to set with the sky becoming tinged with red and orange as well as the daytime blue.

"Oh my! Look at me yakking all of your ears off. Sun's already going down and it'll be dark soon. You should probably head back now." Ekarios says with a bit of sadness in his voice and face.

"Oh man. How did it get so late? We have to climb back and we're not going to be able to get back to town if it's dark." Richie says worried.

“Speak for yourself, I’ve got pretty good night vision. Although, yeah I don’t think I want to climb back to town in the dark either. What should we do, any ideas?” Bashia says while looking around at all of us, especially me.

“Ekarios, do you know any shortcuts back to town? Something that will make our climb back shorter so maybe we can make it before the sun goes down?” I ask and Ekarios stands on all fours again though really three as he’s using one hand to scratch his chin while he thinks before his face lights up with what could be a good answer.

“I’VE GOT IT! Why don’t I fly you all back to your town. Consider it a token of gratitude for listening to this old dragon and making him feel special again. Please. What do you say?”

The ice dragon looks at us with pleading yellow and ice blue eyes. The three of us exchange looks with each other trying to decide if that is what we’re going to do and if it’d be okay or if we should continue brainstorming for ideas or just leave like normal. We discuss all that while huddled up for a minute before nodding in agreement on our next move. I step up to speak on the decision

“Well we talked it over and while we appreciate the offer we have to ask because there’s a distinct lack of it in any records... have you ever flown with passengers before? With somebody that you’d have to keep an eye on? Would you be careful and not too fast while flying?”

“Well I’ve never flown with passengers per-say but I have flown with cargo before and at my size you have to know how to be careful. I’ll keep you all safe while you’re with me, trust me.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if we should be doing that if no else has before. M-Maybe it’d be better if we just y’know wa...walked back ourselves. We could use Bashia’s better night vision and avoid the risk of flying up high. I mean it’s not even that far, right?” Richie asks, looking a little nervous as he does so.

“Wait, what?! This is an amazing opportunity we’re getting! Why do you want to back out and choose a more difficult way?” Bashia asks with genuine concern in her brown eyes and lowered brows.

“Your friend is right, you know. You’re free to decline of course but I’m technically giving you a historic, kind of generous opportunity and if there’s one thing my very long life has taught me it’s that it’s best to never turn down generosity or the chance to make history. I’ll give you a little more time to think it over but keep in mind the sun’s still setting fast.” I look out the cave entrance to see that Ekarios is right and that it’s almost dark and then I look at Richie as does Bashia.

“So be honest, why don’t you want to fly back with Ekarios?”

“I-I’m scared ” Richie mumbles and I barely hear

“What?! You practically whispered that, can you say it again?” I shout then ask a little less loudly

“**I’m scared!** I said I’m scared, okay?!” Richie snarls back

“I don’t understand. Scared of what? You were the one who led us here in the first place and took charge most of the way and that went fine minus the freezing cold.” Richie sighs at this.

“Well Box, I’m just nervous about doing something that’s just never been done like this and also...I’m scared...of heights. I’m scared of heights.”

“Seriously?” Bashia asks before I can, totally surprised.

“Yes, seriously!. I know I took charge and seemed confident and unafraid while we climbed up here but that was different for me. I knew where we were going and how to get there so I could take the lead with confidence plus a previously trodden trail is a little more knowable and less scary to me than open, unpredictable air.”

“Ohh... I see.” I say before I put my hand on Richie’s light brown furred shoulder with what I hope he sees as warmth. “I know it can take a lot to overcome fear but I have a good feeling this will be safe plus me and Bashia will be with you to make sure it’s all gonna be okay.”

“You know it. Besides, I’m sure Ekarios will keep us safe too.” Bashia smiles at us and then looks at the big dragon.

“Yep. Plus I have something to offer a bit of extra assurance on that. Try these on.” The three of us get tossed some strange gloves which Richie and Bashia struggle to catch with their paws still holding the flasks of water even if they’re mostly empty. I struggle a bit to catch mine with these slippery hands.

“What are these?”

“Grip gloves, nervous otter. They’ve got a special adhesive on these suction cups that can be activated and detached with water. They’re pretty old but should still work and allow you a more safe grip on my scales without damaging them or me. Not that I’d be too worried about that

regardless but anyway I think those will help you be ready and I've got at least three extra pairs for your friends and also a backup. People have given me a lot of the same things more than once over the years and that gives me so many extras of the same stuff like these gloves...sorry for rambling there. Let's get moving now... if that's alright with you three." The ice dragon rubs the back of his scaly head with his big hands at those last two sentences looking sheepish while doing so and I suppress the desire to laugh at that.

Heh, all these years admiring this mighty ancient dragon from afar and through legends, thinking it was some flawless guardian and perfect helper of our small town in this valley and yet here it is rambling and being apologetic about it too. To learn its true name and to talk to it and learn that Ekarios might have personality quirks has been amusing, in a good way. After that explanation we look to Richie who nervously nods at us that he's ready and at that Ekarios gets back on four legs then lowers his body by laying down so we can climb on. Bashia goes first tail wagging non-stop as she climbs on Ekarios's back with ease and then gives a thumbs up when she's situated. I go next, walking over to Ekarios and hesitantly putting my own scaled hand over his own scaled hide. His scales are big and cool to the touch but not cold like I worried they might be, touching them feels surreal but I shake off that feeling to use them as footholds that get me onto his back.

I get comfy in a good spot on it and then gesture to Richie to come on in a way that I hope looks as friendly as I'm going for and not commanding or anything. At first an almost inaudible nervous squeak escapes his lips but despite that he starts slowly walking forward courage starting to build with each slow step. Right before he gets on though a look of serious realization comes to his face and he gestures to the cameras we kind of forgot we were holding before making a throwing motion that makes it obvious what he wants us to do. So me and Bashia both lightly toss our cameras along with the film within and out of them to Richie so he can presumably put them away wherever he stored them to begin with. I decide to finally see where that is finally as he puts them away while walking and the answer I see shocks and kind of grosses me out but I don't get to really comment on it as Richie climbs up the side of Ekarios. He also settles in after sitting down next to where I am on the ice dragon and dabs a bit of water on the grip gloves after tightening them a little. I intend to do so as well after just one last thing.

"Were... were you keeping the cameras and film in your armpits when we weren't using them?"

"Yeah. Otters have armpit pockets. D-Did you not know that?" Richie asks while scratching his head in confusion at my shocked question but I think I have a right to be a little shocked.

"No! No I didn't! That's... that's a little gross if I'm being honest."

“Ahaha! Where did you think I put my water bottles all this time whenever my hands were full of school books or swim gear? Besides, while maybe not the clean or ‘traditional’ way to carry things it's still a significantly less horrific thing to have than your kind of creepy teeth.”

“I guess I never really questioned it too hard. Also my teeth were and still kind of are traditionally used to swallow jellyfish down and I don’t even have as many in my throat as a full blooded leatherback I’ll have you know!” I say a little annoyed, Richie stopped doing it a long time ago but I still remember him though mostly it was other kids gawking at my teeth and trying to ostracize me for their weirdness. I can’t help having an evolutionary remnant from my mom’s side of the family tree.

“Oh please tell me we’re ready to go now, Ekarios. If I have to listen to these two squabble like a married couple even longer my fur is going to start turning white as the snow hereee.” Bashia groans while having apparently fastened her grip gloves onto Ekarios’s scales while I was uhhh squabbling I guess with Richie leaving me the only one who hasn’t done so yet.

“I’m ready whenever you all are!” Ekarios says excitedly and flaps his wings a little for emphasis though doesn’t move otherwise simply kicking up snow and dirt beneath us.

I quickly adjust the straps and looseness of the gloves so they fit well over my hands as I grip onto Ekarios’s cool navy blue black scales to be properly situated before looking towards Bashia and Richie. They both nod to tell me they’re good to go though it looks almost like head banging in Bashia’s case with how fast she’s moving her head while Richie gulps and nods with a nervousness that’s almost uncharacteristic for him. Regardless they both just gave me the go ahead so I look forward to Ekarios’s head and I say it.

“We’re ready” I say nodding my own head, I’d give a thumbs up instead if my hands weren’t fastened into these gloves.

“Alright! We...**are...OFF!!**” Ekarios exclaims enthusiastically to no one in particular it feels like since he’s only looking ahead as he flaps his wings and starts rising off the cave floor as well as blowing away very close stray gold and gems.

We barely get to react much to the takeoff before we’re out of the cave and up into the open air. I can feel the wind rush through my scales as we soar up and I stay tightly gripping Ekarios’s as Richie tightens his while giving a soft whimper while Bashia closes her eyes and leans her head to appreciate the wind flowing through her clothes and fur. After a good amount of ascension and passing through a layer of clouds Ekarios makes his body go horizontal like a bird's mid flight and with that Richie takes a breath as all of us loosen our grips with the gloves just a little. Before all I was focusing on was on what was ahead of me; the head of Ekarios with

its navy blue scales and orange spines running down the top along with his large ears and the one(visible from my point of view) eye, the light beaming through the blue of the sky, the white fluffiness of the clouds and the ever present glow of the sun.

Now that we're a bit more level in the air I can look below us and see the land, the valley and town I call home. I see the river that runs by our town a short distance away that we're speedily approaching and probably will pass soon enough. From the ground it's large and powerful with decent current to it and a small bridge to cross to get to the other side. From up here though it looks minuscule and insignificant despite it being a pretty good source of food, a nice place to kayak and several other things important to my home. The trees now look like I could hold and crush them in my hands like standing overcooked vegetables and we're high up enough that I can just barely see some grain of rice sized vague shapes around the tops of them that are probably feral birds and animals.

A little further out I can see the mountains that separate our decently sized valley from other parts of the world and can actually see a bit of sky past them, a normally imposing border now looking like we could go right through it if we really wanted to. I've never flown before and there's just so much beauty below and around us during this magnificent first experience. We're almost there now, I can tell we're almost right on top of the town and as I notice that I also notice Bashia is standing now with fluffy tail wagging and arms raised, then she shouts proudly into the air which flows through her brown and black fur.

“I’m Flying On A Dragon!! WOOOOOOO!!!”

She startles Richie with her proclamation and he almost jumps out of his fur though the grip gloves don't allow him to move much and Ekarios chuckles lightly while looking back as best he can, probably barely seeing Bashia out of the corner of his eye. I feel compelled to shout in excitement and stand to do so though it's hard to know what to say.

“ME TOO! Wahoo!!” We both joyfully laugh after that while Richie is gesturing us to sit down.

“I'm glad you're both having fun but let me give you all something really exciting to scream about before we land. How about it, young ones?” Ekario asks

Me and Bashia both open our mouths to give an answer but before we can form the words Ekarios starts to tilt the front of his body downward from its fixed horizontal position till he's pointing at the ground. I guess the question was rhetorical. He keeps tilting till his head is pointing at the ground while his tail is pointing towards the air. The grip gloves keep us hanging on to Ekarios as he does this and thankfully none of us has any loose pockets for things to fall out of but I grip my small shell anyway and Richie keeps his arms pinned down. Then suddenly

there's a shift in gravity and Ekarios closes his wings and starts to freefall with us going along with him. Richie lets out a squeak in terror and then starts screaming and I join in though I'm a little more confused and caught up in the fall to be fully terrified as we continue to spiral downwards.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“AHH AWW AAWWWWWWW YEAAAHHH!” Bashia yells out seeming to be enjoying this more than me and Richie as we all plummet to the ground at the complete mercy of Ekarios.

We pass through the layer of clouds we were high above previously. We keep falling Ekarios just continuing to let only gravity move him in faster and faster circles as my stomach feels like it's in my throat and me, Bashia and Richie all struggle to hold on with the wind threatening to wedge itself between our iron-clad grips and separate us from the only safety we have in the incorporeality of the air. Even Bashia starts to become afraid of that starting to grip Ekarios's scales harder as fear overtakes the previous joy in her eyes and voice as the fatality of an impact with the earth doesn't just sink in but the danger of it looms closer and reality wafts up like the scent of dirt and grass from the ground we're moments from approaching. But thankfully Ekarios spreads his wings a few seconds before we could all turn into flattened paste on ground and we're soaring higher again.

He follows up his almost last second save that has us rising back up into the air with a lengthy loop de loop. It's impressive the way he spins and maneuvers his body with it and his scales defying gravity like they do but in the moment I can only be relieved to not be a smear on the soil. Ekarios finishes the loop to start flying normally for about a minute and then he starts descending cautiously right into the town named after him, my home, our home. When we touch down there's a whole crowd waiting for us; friends, neighbors, old classmates but standing right in front of them all with locked on eyes and worried expressions are our parents. So my mom and dad first and foremost with Richie's dad and mom right beside them along with Bashia's dad who's hanging back a little.

“Richardo Christoban Lotoros! Where have you been and- oh my gosh is that a dragon?! Did a dragon bring you home!? Explanation now!” Richie's mom is as worked up as ever worried over Richie up until her and his dad get a good look at Ekarios and then they wait for that explanation while we dismount from our magnificent ride and walk to our waiting parents.

“Where the heck did you kids go and why did you bring a friend back along with you? ... Please tell me it's friendly.” My dad says crouched a mere inch away from me while my mom moves my face with her green scaled hands like she's checking me for bruises.

“It’s okay dad. This is Ekarios, he’s the dragon from all those old legends. He offered to bring us back from his cave in the mountain we were hiking and did so. Thank you again, s- Mr. Ekarios.” I say pushing gently away from both my parents especially my mom’s examining touch to face the noble dragon directly.

“Think nothing of it, young hybrid. I just hope you’ll visit again soon. I’ve got plenty of stories left to tell. Ooh speaking of!” Ekarios reaches into a spot between his scales and manages to pull out an unexpected gift.

“Woah! That’s the Frost Peridot from the cave. Three pieces of it, that’s one for each of us! Bashia shouts, tail wagging as she looks like she’s about to run to Ekarios’s to grab the gems but she’s stopped by her father’s hand going in front of her.

“Hold on. I’m really not sure you should take that, sweetheart or get closer to that dragon. A dragon's hoard is not to be taken or touched without caution, local legend or not.” I have to respect the old dog for talking about Ekarios like that while he’s right there but Bashia’s dad doesn’t need to worry about Ekarios like that and I want to explain that but my mom cuts me off.

“I agree with Mr. Tomas, while I’m sure... this dragon might seem nice with the ride it gave you, I still have my doubts about it and what it’s offering you. I know next to nothing about it or what that gem is, much less why you needed a ride for what was supposed to be a quick hike up the mountain.”

“Mom, come on. You haven’t even given us any time to explain! I promise you that everything is fine.”

“Excuse me, Mrs...?”

“Concha, Isabél Concha”

“Excuse me Mrs. Concha but I can’t help but feel a little spurned that you and your fellows here are avoiding talking to me directly. I assure you I can provide the information and explanation you’re wanting if you’d let me. Name’s Ekarios by the way and it is a pleasure to meet you, all of you.” The huge ice dragon extends a claw to my mom and gives a friendly smile to her and everyone.

“My...apologies for the... cold shoulder. I suppose if my son was talking to you all this time it wouldn’t hurt to talk to you as well. I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“I will as well. If you wouldn’t mind, that is...Mr.Ekarios.” Mr. Tomas’s ears are pinned back and he looks worried about getting a no in response or something worse but that’s not what comes.

“Of course I wouldn’t. That offer extends to all of you, guess I should have made that clear.” Ekarios rubs behind his head with a paw and now Mr. Savado is smiling.

“Great!”

“That said, I think we should move to somewhere that’s a little less open to discuss everything.” Ekarios says before gesturing to a patch of nice tall grass just a little bit beyond the town and since we’re on the edge of it that’s just a two or three minute walk.

The rest of our parents give Ekarios a look and he nods to indicate that he means that so they start moving to that spot in the grass. Richie, me and Bashia also get ready to move to go along with them but then Richie’s dad speaks up.

“Stay here and wait for us! This is going to be a quick conversation and it’s better you stay here while we have it.”

“Aww, what?! That’s not fair!” Richie whines.

“It’s easier and faster this way, there’s probably not going to be anything we talk about that you don’t already know or already talked about. We’ll be back.”

The rest of our parents nod their heads and I know it’s not worth us arguing against them as they walk with Ekarios leading the way.

“I thought turning 21 would mean that I actually get to be involved in the adult conversations yet here we are waiting like a couple of pups. Unbelievable.” Bashia says once the adults are out of earshot while Richie just sulks with his big otter tail drooping and I can’t say I blame either of them for their reactions.

Me though, while I’m sad and annoyed I want to see how the conversation goes, even from way over here. So while the other adults go back inside to either go about their own evening routines with the sun having fully set about five minutes ago or to be nosy and watch what’s happening from behind their curtains, me and my friends stay and I watch and wait. Richie’s mom like before is at the head of everything and starts to Ekarios first, getting the closest to him at just a few feet away followed by my mom, Bashia’s dad and then both my dad and Richie’s. They talk for a while, Ekarios and our parents. Long enough that I start tracing the patterns of both my shell and then my scales out of sheer boredom.

The conversation takes several turns with emotions shifting as well as who’s talking from anger when Richie’s mom starts talking to concern when Bashia’s dad is talking to wonder as Ekarios seems to just address all five of them at once. Eventually they stop talking and Ekarios is the first to leave and I expect him to just fly straight home or something but he actually flies to where me, Bashia and Richie are in town which causes all of us to take notice instead of sulking and waiting like we were. When the three of us look up instead of saying anything he carefully plops the three pieces of frost peridot on the ground, gives a goodbye wave and then winks before he truly flies off. As he leaves our parents walk back into town with expressions that are a mix of amazed and confused. My mom walks up to me first.

“Come on son, we’re going home. There’s a lot still to talk about, like your side of things. We’ll see where things go after that.” Both of my parents walk towards the house and wait for me to come along, I’m glad they’re not just dragging me back home like a child.

“You too Richie. Say goodbye for now.” Richie’s dad says waiting for him along with his mom.

“We’re going home too. It was getting late anyway.” Bashia’s dad says waving at her to come along.

“Bye”

“Good night”

“See you two tomorrow, I hope.” I say as the last one to give a goodbye as the three of us snatch up a piece of the frost peridot each and go home.

The conversation at home actually went pretty smooth despite how heated things started off, I told my parents what happened and how we were safe the whole time(avoiding mentioning that pulse stopping loop de loop Ekarios did). I saw Richie and Bashia two days later and they said the conversations went well at their houses too. We all get permission to see Ekarios again and more times as long as we prioritize our lives first and get jobs or school if we’re going for even higher than a college degree(which Bashia is) since we finished recently with the first four years of college. Visiting Ekarios is always a real treat in between working hours, for me at least. It’s been two months since that fateful first encounter and he definitely still has more stories in him and the occasional souvenir to give us. I’ve made a shelf for all of them with the frost peridot being the first thing on it with all its strange, radiant beauty. Each new thing gifted being as magnificent a treasure as he is, Ekarios the incredible ice dragon that he is.