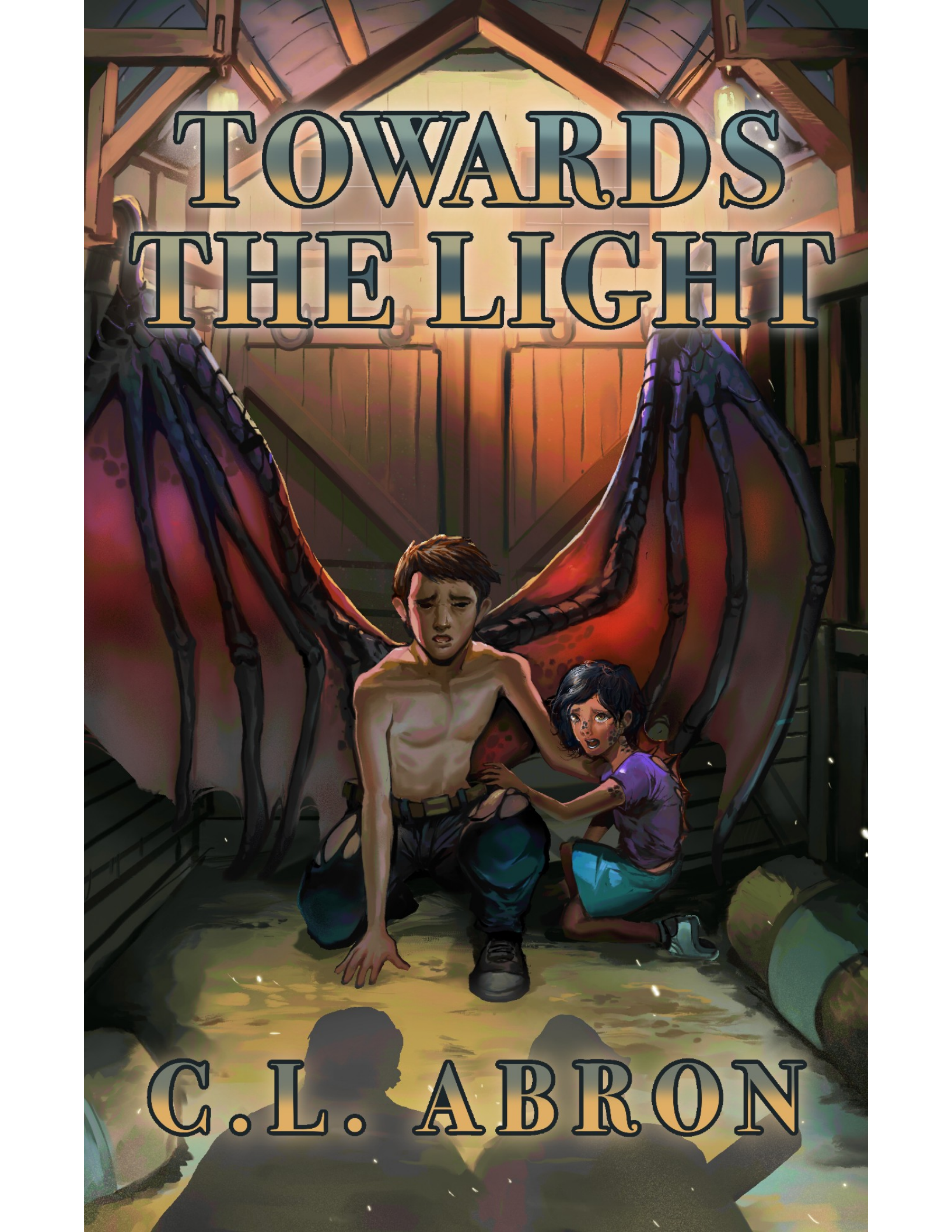




TOWARDS THE LIGHT

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Chapter 1

When Nicholas woke, he immediately knew something was wrong. His body was sore all over and the welts on his back from where he had been struck the night before still stung, but that wasn't it. This problem was something new. Something was holding him in place.

He tried to rise from the cold metal floor of the cage that held him, but he was stuck. The new parts of his body that had not been there a few days ago had grown too large during his rest, and instead of simply brushing against the bars of the cage, they were now jammed against those same bars. Whatever they were, they were evidently flexible enough that they had been folded back towards him, and bones that he hadn't had days ago were being pressed together. They prevented him from wearing a shirt, so all he had to wear was a pair of jeans and some socks, both in dire need of washing and far tighter around his legs than they had been a week ago.

At first he had not known what to make of the aches and soreness on his back, passing it off as having slept poorly. But when it was clear from the way his shirts fit poorly he grew more concerned, and his sister had told him there were 'weird lumpy things' on his back. And they were big enough to be noticeable even with a loose shirt – which meant his parents had noticed them, and that had landed him in the cage where he was now trapped. He didn't know enough about what was going on to even know if he ought to panic, but worry ate at him nonetheless, as those strange protrusions had only grown more and more since their first appearance. And he had no idea what they were.

He tried to pull himself forward, but his hands could not get enough traction on the cage floor. Reaching out to his side, he fumbled for the bars of the cage to get more leverage, unable to see – though unlike the protrusions on his back, his blindness was not new. It had been with him since birth.

His fingers found one of the rusty cage bars, and he gripped it tightly, trying to pull himself forward. The protrusions from his back were stuck fast, and his weak body couldn't muster the strength to free himself.

"Jennifer?" he called out, his dry throat giving him difficulty. He hoped that she was nearby, but no response came, at least not from the woman he had called out for.

"Nick?" a voice asked from nearby – the voice of his sister Sophia. She was so young, only five years of age to his seventeen, but he knew she was in a cage much like his somewhere close by.

"Sophia, I'm stuck," he replied weakly, giving up his struggles. Slowly reaching out, he tried to find the water bowl his parents had left in the cage, hoping that Jennifer had refilled it while he had been asleep.

He heard sounds and focused on them. Sophia was to his immediate left, several paces away by his estimate. She was moving, perhaps to get a better look. He heard the wind blowing and felt it on the bare skin of his chest, as well as on the protrusions on his back, though it didn't seem to chill them quite as much. He could also hear the sound of a television set in the distance, most likely the one in his parents' mobile home, coming from behind him. Somewhere further away, behind him and to his right, he heard a goat give a single bleat. The particular inflection of it told him it was Gerty, one of the other animals at his parents' petting zoo. And probably better treated than he was.

His fingers made contact with the cold metal bowl, and he carefully slid it towards himself, not wanting to spill its contents. It felt heavy, so it couldn't be empty. "It's your wings," Sophia told him as he carefully lifted the bowl and brought it to his lips. The water was lukewarm, but clean and refreshing, and he drank down several mouthfuls.

"My what?" he replied, briefly lowering the bowl from his face.

"Your wings," Sophia repeated. "The, um, thingies on your back. They're bigger. And they look like wings now. Sort of. But they're stuck."

"Can you describe them for me?"

"Um. They're black," Sophia began.

"Sophia, I can't see colors..." Nicholas interrupted, doing his best to put on a caring tone, but she grew frustrated regardless.

"They're big!" she snapped. "And, um, they don't have feathers. I don't know how else to say it!"

"It's okay," Nicholas consoled her, taking another drink of water. Putting down the bowl, he rested his hands on the floor of the cage, trying to push himself up onto his hands and knees. But his wings had grown in his sleep and were firmly wedged against opposite sides of the tiny cage, and he couldn't even do that. The cage he was in was not one of the largest ones they had, normally intended for transporting sheep or goats, but the fact that his wings were so large as to fill it and get him stuck was frightening. Had any of the rest of him grown? Was his whole body getting bigger? How could he hope to tell?

"Do you have wings too?" Nicholas asked her, ceasing his struggles again for a moment.

"I dunno. There's a thing on me behind me. I can't see it." He barely heard her straining for a moment, making a small noise of effort. "And I can't touch it."

"Does it hurt?"

"It hurts. And my shirt is too small," she answered, sounding glum. "It's squeezing me. And my nose itches. I wish someone could put a band-aid on it and make the hurt go away."

He took a breath and took a moment to think, feeling an itch on the back of his hands and rubbing at them gently. The scales growing there had spread too, and were almost to his knuckles and wrists. He had felt scales before at school, on a corn snake kept in a terrarium, and he knew that all reptiles had them. His scales were quite similar, but not identical.

Could he control these new parts of him? He'd tried before but nothing had happened, when he'd first felt the strange growths on his back, but they were much bigger now. Jennifer had told him about wings before, saying that they were like limbs that some creatures could fly with. Humans didn't normally have them, but 'normal' had lost much of its meaning ever since that strange TV broadcast he had heard his parents complaining about, the same day he first felt itching on his back...

Drawing a breath, he prepared to move his wings before realizing he had no idea how to do so. How, exactly, was someone supposed to control a brand new limb? But he could feel them pressing against the rusty cage bars, and he focused on that feeling of scaled flesh meeting old iron, and tried to move the parts pressing against the bars, seeing if he could flex them or make them react at all...

To his surprise, not only did the new limbs move to his command, but they were strong. Their weight on his back was from muscle, strong muscle at that. The wings extended to his sides, and he felt the bars of the cage give way. A metallic cacophony reached his ears as he accidentally buckled the bars and broke the cage open, the top of it falling downward onto his wings and smacking him on the top of his head. Wincing and letting out a cry of pain, he stayed there for a moment, reaching up and pushing the cage roof off of himself so that he could hold his head with his other hand, rubbing where he had been struck.

There was a gasp from his left. "Nick! You're free!" Sophia cried excitedly, and he heard metallic thumping sounds – she must have been jumping around inside of the cage.

"I'm free?" he repeated in a daze, and then he fully realized the implications. No more cage. No restraints. He was free! He could leave! He could get away from the beatings and abuse, and being forced to sleep on the cold floor of a cage. He had no idea where to go, but anywhere would be better than here.

But he couldn't leave Sophia behind.

Clambering out of the remnants of the cage and knocking aside the water bowl in the process, Nicholas got to his feet. It was difficult with all the extra weight on his back from his wings; they forced him to hunch forward, and he staggered a little as he made his way towards where he had last heard Sophia, his hands outstretched. His foot collided with something short and wooden, and he winced and gasped, moving a little more slowly to avoid stubbing his toe again.

"What in the hell was that noise?" Nicholas heard his father yell. He didn't have much time.

"Sophia, where are you?" Nicholas asked quietly.

"Over here!" she said, and he corrected himself, moving a little more to the left. His hands came into contact with something cold, metal, and rusty: her cage.

"Where's the door?" he asked her, feeling around, running his hands down two of the bars, but not finding the locking mechanism.

"Right!" she told him, and he moved his hands to his right. "No, the other way!" she quickly said, and he moved left instead, to what would have been her right.

Moving his fingers down, his pinky finger bumped something hard between the bars. Feeling over it, he felt the lock, but of course there was no key in the keyhole. He tugged, but the rusty bars were too sturdy for his weak arms. Could he maybe use his wings? They were much stronger—

Footsteps were approaching. He didn't have any more time. He was going to be caught if he didn't flee now.

But he wouldn't abandon his sister.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" his father's drunken voice roared out, and Nicholas backed away from the cage. All he could hope for now was to save his sister from being beaten as well.

"It was an accident," Nicholas tried to explain, backing away from the approaching footsteps. "My wings—"

He got no further before something struck his front. Something hard, metal, and painful, leaving a welt on his bare chest: the buckle on his father's belt, most likely. With a pained gasp, Nicholas fell to his knees and one hand, the other clutching at the injury.

"Nick!" Sophia cried out tearfully.

"You ungrateful little shit!" his father yelled, and Nicholas collapsed when the belt struck his back, leaving another welt. "I've fed and clothed you for seventeen years, and THIS is how you repay me?"

Nicholas braced himself for another strike, but it didn't come. "Ed! What are you doing?" a female voice called out – Jennifer's. Nicholas let out a sob, both from pain and from relief. She would try to help him as much as she could.

"The boy broke out of his cage!" Nicholas was unprepared for the strike that suddenly hit him in the back, and he fell to his front, sprawling on the dusty ground.

"I told you that cage was too small for him!" Jennifer protested. "It's not his fault!"

"Then find me a bigger one!" Ed yelled back at her. "What do you think I'm paying you for? Go do your damn job!"

Nicholas heard footsteps retreating, and he despaired; if Jennifer was leaving, his father would continue beating him. But more footsteps approached, saving him from further punishment, and he tried not to move.

"What's going on?" came another woman's voice; Nicholas's mother's. "What was that awful racket?"

"The mutant broke his cage," Ed repeated, and Nicholas braced himself. The blow came, but it struck his back close to the base of his wings, where there was scaling. He felt the impact, but the scales protected him, and the buckle bounced off harmlessly, though Nicholas still let out a gasp from being struck nonetheless.

"We'll need something bigger and stronger," another, younger male voice replied. That was Alex, the veterinary assistant to Jennifer.

"I told Jennifer to go find something," Ed told them. "I'll need your help to get him in there."

"I can get a sedative ready," Alex offered, "But I'm not sure if the dosage will still be right. His wings are a lot bigger. Who knows what else about him has changed."

Nicholas heard a heavy footstep very close to him, probably his father's, as he moved closer to where Alex's voice was coming from. Nicholas tried to

listen in on what was whispered to Alex, but the pain from the welts on his body made it too hard to focus, and he missed it.

"Okay. I'll be right back," Alex said, and Nicholas heard his footsteps getting further away.

There was a brief pause, and then Ed's voice roared out again. "What are you standing around gawping for, woman? Make yourself useful! Go get me some rope!"

Nicholas could hear Sophia sniffing. "Why are you hurting Nick?" she asked quietly.

"Shut your trap!" Ed shouted at her. Nicholas heard metal clang against metal and Sophia let out a cry; Ed must have swung his belt at her while she was in the cage.

"Leave... her..." Nicholas forced out as he tried to push himself back up onto his hands and knees. He was expecting it when the belt hit him this time, but if it meant his father was beating him instead of his sister, it was worth it. He tried to focus on that thought even as he fell to the ground in pain with a fresh welt on his back, coughing from the dust that got sent up when he collapsed.

"Stop it, Ed! I found where the alpaca cages had gotten to," Jennifer's voice cut in before he could be hit again. "We can move him in one of those."

"Don't tell me what to do unless you want a taste of this!" Ed threatened. "Don't forget that I'm in charge here, and I know where you live! So shut your trap and do your damn job!"

"All right, all right!" Jennifer acquiesced. "Do you want to move him, or shall I?"

"Alex is on it," Ed grumbled, annoyed at being talked back to. "And Mary's getting some rope."

"Rope? He's not an animal, you don't need to—"

"Shut up and let me handle this! Do I tell you how to do your job?" Ed shouted back at her.

"Yes, and quite often at that," Jennifer muttered quietly. Nicholas barely heard it, but Ed evidently did not.

More footsteps approached. "Here you go, Mr. Jackson," Alex's voice came.

"Alex!" Jennifer protested suddenly, in a way that made Nicholas worry.

"What are you doing? You can't use that on—"

"I thought I told you to shut your trap!" Ed bellowed. "Or do you want me to come by and say hi to your folks with this thing?"

Jennifer let out a frustrated exhalation that Nicholas barely heard, but she made no further protests. Nicholas had no idea what was going on until he felt something touch his back.

He preferred the belt.

Nicholas let out a yell as he felt pain course through him from where he had been touched, an electric shock jolting him and making him spasm on the floor even in his weak state. The wings on his back moved without his control, fanning out and spreading suddenly, and Nicholas gasped as one of them struck Ed and shoved him away.

Nicholas heard his father roar "Oh, you're in for it now!" and he barely got a second to try and recover before he felt the object being jammed against his back harder than before. Electricity surged through him again, and it felt like his entire body was on fire. He heard voices yelling, but couldn't make them out, all of his awareness consumed by agony. Even when his father moved the object away from his back, he was breathless and dazed, and were he not already prone on the ground he would have surely collapsed.

"Niiick!" he heard Sophia cry out tearfully, his awareness of his surroundings gradually returning.

"That'll teach him," Ed grumbled. "Now tie him up and drag him off to the cage. Alex, if he tries to get away, shock him with the cattle prod again. Put him in his place."

"Yes, Mr. Jackson," Alex replied calmly. "Should we move your daughter too?"

Sophia was sobbing, but Ed paid her no heed. "She ain't got any wings yet. Just that fin on her back. Her shirts ain't gonna fit much longer."

"Maybe you could cut some holes in a garbage bag?" Alex suggested.

"Hey! Not a bad idea! You should be the one calling the shots around here."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Alex replied humbly. "We'll leave her where she is for now, then."

"Good! Take care of it for me," Ed said with an air of finality, and Nicholas heard him walk off. Even if he had had the will to move at that point, Nicholas's body refused to listen to him, and he lay unmoving.

"Nicholas?" Jennifer asked quietly, and she felt his hand on his back near the welts his father's belt had left. "Bear with me a little longer. I'll get some antiseptic for these soon." There was a brief pause, and then she said, "Alex, stop that. He's not an animal, we don't need to tie his limbs."

"How else are we going to move him?"

"I'll take his arms, you take his legs. I'm not going to have him hog-tied and dragged through the dirt. But his wings will get in the way - we're going to have to tie those just so they don't get caught on anything."

"Suit yourself," Alex replied indifferently, and Nicholas felt a pair of hands grab onto his wings.

"Be gentle!" Jennifer said sharply, "They're probably very fragile. Here, let me do it, just watch."

"All right."

Nicholas couldn't muster the strength to move at all and simply lay there as Jennifer carefully folded his wings properly and looped the rope around them to tie them just enough to keep them folded. He could feel her gentle touch as she pushed the bones of his wings together, the membranes between them folding together. And whenever her fingers brushed against those membranes, he could feel the warmth of her digits against them as if they were his skin, unlike when she touched the bony parts of his wings which seemed to lack the same sensitivity.

Having someone touch a part of him that had not existed a week ago was just as strange a sensation as trying to control them, to say nothing of the folding motion that no other part of his body could make. Parts of the wings felt sort of like arms with a joint in the middle, but between them was some kind of thin fleshy membrane, and feeling it fold against itself was a completely alien sensation. but Nick was too defeated to react. Would he ever get used to having wings? Or would they always feel like they didn't belong there? Had he been in a better state of mind, he would have tried to practice opening and closing the wings himself, but instead all he could do was attempt to commit the feeling of his wings being closed to memory so that he could try to do it himself at another time.

"Nick!" Sophia's voice came as Jennifer was midway through tying the ropes. "Is he okay?"

"He'll be all right, but we have to move him," Jennifer answered. "I'll take care of him, just trust me." Someone, presumably Jennifer, carefully tugged on the ropes to test them for a moment; they had a little slack but were still holding his wings above his body. "Okay, Alex, take hold."

"Nick!" Sophia called out from her cage, more insistently this time, as Nicholas felt hands grabbing his legs near the ankles. "Where are you taking him?"

"I'm sorry, Sophia," Jennifer said as she took hold of Nicholas's wrists. "I'll come move you over with him later, but I have to get him moved first."

"Let us out!" Sophia pleaded.

"I can't do that, you know that," Jennifer replied sympathetically. There was a pause and then she quietly added, "Your father is threatening my family. I have to do what he says to keep them safe; the police won't come out here anymore."

"I can look after the animals if you need to leave," Alex asserted. Nicholas felt the two of them lift, and he was pulled upwards and off of the ground, swaying helplessly between them as they walked slowly. Despite being suspended between them, his wings were so large he could feel the very ends of them dragging on the ground even while tied up.

"If only I could, but my grandparents are too stubborn. They insist that they've lived in that house since they married, and they won't move, end of the world or not. Even if one of them starts to mutate too, I doubt it would get them to leave." With a sigh, Jennifer added, "Besides, you're still only an intern. You need more experience."

"If you say so," Alex conceded, but with an apathetic tone.

Nicholas tried his best to figure out where he was being taken, as Sophia's cries grew fainter. He trusted Jennifer would keep her word and move his sister closer to him, but he didn't know if his father would let them stay together. He could hear some of the nearby animals, and unfortunately could smell them too – it was the alpacas for sure, which made sense if she was putting him in an alpaca cage.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," Jennifer told him softly. "Please don't give up."

He tried to reply, but all he could manage was a low groan.

Chapter 2

Grumbling, Sophia rubbed at the patch of weird rough skin on her nose. Scratching at it hurt, but rubbing helped. A little. It did soothe the itching a bit, but it also didn't feel quite right, like the shape was off, not sticking out quite as much as it used to.

She couldn't sleep. She was too cold. She had a blanket that Jennifer had given her that was spread out on the cage floor, but it was rough and scratchy, and the stupid thing on her back that Jennifer had called a 'spinal fin' meant she couldn't wear a shirt any more. Not that Sophia knew what a 'spinal' was. Maybe it meant the shape – it sounded kind of like 'spiral' – but Sophia couldn't see it, and though it had grown enough for her to touch it, bits of it were sharp and she had pricked her fingers trying to feel along it. The fin had eventually gotten her shirt stuck on her at first, and then had ripped her shirt open at the back after it grew some more. Nobody had bothered giving her another, so she had continued wearing what was left of it. She'd had to undo some of the buttons because of how tight the shirt was, but her skirt wasn't fitting her very well either, and she'd had to loosen the velcro strap a few times over the last couple of days.

She couldn't sleep on her back either because of the fin; if it got bent too much it started to hurt. Even though the rough skin and scales had spread more, now covering the front of her neck and her upper chest, it still meant most of her skin was exposed to the cold air, and she shivered. It was too dark out for her to see much at the moment, but she could at least hear her brother's snoring nearby. How could he sleep like this?

It didn't help that her parents were making a lot of noise. She could hear the TV in their mobile home through the open door of the barn, but couldn't make out anything the TV said since her parents were both talking loudly, probably not even watching it. Not that they ever watched anything fun. She hadn't seen any cartoons ever since she'd been thrown into the cage.

"I'm tellin' you, Mary," her father slurred, "People will come from miles around to see them! How far do people come to see goats and ponies and

shit?"

"'cause they can't see goats and ponies in the cities!" Sophia's mother insisted. "But those monsters are everywhere these days. Imagine how bad it must be for the city folk! Can't stick your head out the window without some beast getting in your face."

"But they ain't caged! This'll let people get all up close! Maybe we can get Alex to put somethin' in their food – keep them all quiet so people can still pet 'em. Like we had to do with that one donkey years back."

"I've got a better idea." Something about the way Mary said it made Sophia nervous. She didn't really understand what they were talking about, but it couldn't have been anything good.

"What's that?"

"Remem—" she coughed and continued, "Remember when that circus came through here? That place was packed! Cars for miles on the sides of the roads!"

"Yeah, I remember. We got some good business that week."

He let out a belch, and Mary cut in. "Well, we can do the same! Make them put on a performance! Do tricks! People will love it. They'll come from all over!"

"Hey, that ain't a bad idea at all!" Sophia's father said enthusiastically. "Y'know my favorite trick is when they do that thing with the lions – put their head in the mouth. Audiences love it!"

"Exactly! We can train them, just like you'd train any other beast. Even the dumbest animal understands fear, and they're learning to fear the prod."

Sophia trembled a little. She still felt a lingering pain on her lower back from where her mother had shocked her yesterday despite her screams begging her to stop. Any time Sophia or Nick did anything their parents didn't like, they'd either threaten to use the prod, or worse, actually do it. Nick had even begged Mary to have her shock him instead, but Mary had jolted Sophia anyway for begging to be let out. It had been horrible. Sophia couldn't even muster the strength to cry aloud, just tremble and sob

quietly into her blankets, curled up in a heap on the floor of her cage, wishing for the thing on her back to go away.

"We can charge tickets," Ed suggested. "Ban cameras too so that people have to come here if they want to see it."

"And charge for parking, and snacks..."

"Yeah, like goin' to the movies! The bastards are always nickel-and-dimin' you. Well now it's our turn! We can have premium seats! You think we can really train 'em though?"

"If we can't... I have an even better idea."

"What's that?"

"No-one's going to care about goats and pigs when there's a dragon to see." Sophia clutched the blanket a little closer against her front. She'd never seen a dragon in person before. It had always been on TV or in books. What would it look like? Would it be a friendly dragon? Or one of the ones that kidnapped princesses? "So why don't we put them to use? Let people see how ferocious they are – like when you go to the zoo and they toss a carcass in there. Visitors love that, but we can do it with a live animal! The beasts will savage them! That stupid donkey will finally be good for something!"

Sophia's hands gripped at the blanket. She didn't want to hear what her parents were saying, but she couldn't tune it out. She didn't want anyone to hurt the donkey! She'd fed him carrots and petted his nose before – at least before she'd been locked in a cage. She felt even sorrier for him now than she had before, knowing what it was like to be locked up.

"Yeah, that'd draw a crowd!" Ed agreed. "What if we could get people to bet on it somehow?"

"We could get some other animals in. Maybe that friend of yours who goes bear hunting every summer."

"Anderson?"

"Yes, him! Get him to capture a live one and have them fight! Or maybe... maybe we could have them fight each other! Dragon versus dragon! It'll

serve 'em right, those mutants are ruining our lives – we'll have them ruin each other instead! Just don't tell anyone Nicholas is blind, and make Sophia look like an underdog, everyone will bet on him and we can rake in the money!"

Sophia started to sob as she realized her parents were talking about her. Was she a 'dragon'? Was that what the rough skin and scales and fin and wings meant? Did that mean she was turning into some kind of animal? She lifted up one of her hands and stared at it, looking for any sign of change, and found none. But for how long? What if she grew claws and teeth like a lion? She trembled in fear; what if she became a wild animal and attacked things around her? Even worse, what if she attacked Nick?

She didn't want to hurt her brother. Would they really make her do it if she didn't want to? She couldn't! He was always so nice to her! But... what if they made her, like they said they were going to? What if they forced her to hurt Nick and the other animals? She couldn't stop herself from crying, and buried her face in the blanket to muffle it so that her parents wouldn't hear and shock her again with the prod.

"Now that would be one hell of a sight! I bet some TV studio would be all over it! Those kids will make us famous!"

"They're not our kids, not anymore," Mary said sharply. "They're just mutants now. We might as well make them useful for something." Sophia trembled in her cage and clung to the blanket tightly, hugging it against herself to try and gain some small amount of comfort from the rough, scratchy fabric.

"We've gotta find some way to make 'em grow faster, then. But the phones are still fucked up. Might have to drive into town and see if anything's working there."

Light and movement nearby caught Sophia's eye, and she gasped and hunched down in reflex. "Nicholas?" Sophia heard, and she relaxed slightly; it was just Jennifer. She lifted her head and looked up, still sobbing a little, squinting when Jennifer swept the flashlight she was holding over the pen Sophia was being kept in.

"Sorry," Jennifer apologized as Sophia held up a hand, turning the flashlight beam away from her. "I didn't realize you were awake."

"Nick's asleep," Sophia told her, rubbing at the rough skin on her face again. "I dunno how."

Jennifer turned towards Nicholas's pen, and Sophia squinted in the darkness. She couldn't make out much, but Jennifer was wearing the long white coat she always had on while working, and had a plastic bag in her other hand. Her long auburn hair hung down to her shoulders, and as she moved, the hay on the floor rustled with each step she took. "I brought you two some fresh water and clean blankets," she said quietly, entering Nicholas's pen and moving out of sight.

"Can you let us out?" Sophia asked.

Jennifer sighed. "I wish I could, but as I said the last several times you asked, no. Ed is threatening to come after my family if I don't do what he says. I don't know if he would, but... my grandparents are old and can't fight back. It's a moot point anyway, Ed has the keys, and I don't have anything to break open the cages with. Even if I did, he'd hear the noise."

"What's a 'moot'?" Sophia asked, but Jennifer didn't answer. Sophia heard some noises from Nick's pen, but couldn't identify them – a light thump of one object being set down, and the rustling of fabric. "I don't want to be here," Sophia groaned. "I want to go home. I want my bed."

"I know. I'm sorry," Jennifer said softly. She got up and made her way to Sophia's pen, the flashlight illuminating Sophia's surroundings.

Sophia squinted from the light, but was able to make out Jennifer setting the flashlight down on the ground, digging into the plastic bag and taking out a bottle of water for her. Jennifer twisted the cap, making a snapping sound as she broke the seal, then very loosely put the cap back on before slipping the bottle through the cage bars, having to wiggle and push on it to get it through.

Sophia reached out and grabbed onto the bottle. It would be better than the water in the bowl. A little clumsily, she took the cap off and drank from the bottle.

"Don't forget to put the cap back on," Jennifer told her, and Sophia dutifully did so. Rummaging in the bag again as she moved to the side of the cage, Jennifer took out a folded blanket, and reached through the bars with both hands, trying to unfold it and toss it over Sophia's prone form. "There. That should help keep you warm."

"Thank you," Sophia said quietly. This blanket was much softer than the one on the floor, but it caught a bit on the thing on her back and Jennifer had to lift it up and toss it over her again.

"I want to do more, but my hands are tied," Jennifer said quietly as she retrieved the flashlight.

"No they're not," Sophia said, pointing towards Jennifer's hands.

"It's a figure of..." Jennifer began, and then sighed. "Never mind."

Jennifer started to turn. "Don't go!" Sophia pleaded softly.

"It's late, Sophia. We should both be asleep. I shouldn't even be here."

"Please," Sophia begged. "...can you tell me a story?"

Jennifer hesitated, but then turned back towards her and crouched down next to the cage. "Okay. One story. And then you need to sleep. All right?"

"Thank you," Sophia said with as much sincerity as a 5-year-old could muster.

Jennifer leaned against the cage as she began to tell the story to Sophia, about a princess in a far-away land. Jennifer had to keep stopping and looking around as she thought of what the next part would be, so it wasn't like having a book read to her, but Sophia didn't care. Just having someone there talking to her was nice. Nick was nice to her, but his stories were terrible. Except for that one time when Jennifer had given him a 'brail' book for his birthday, with all the pages printed in dots instead of letters. But it was in their bedroom now, so he couldn't read from it.

At some point Sophia fell asleep, listening to Jennifer's gentle voice. She wished Jennifer was her mom instead.

Chapter 3

Cold. Dark. Alone. Figures moving. Her father's indistinct voice. Nick's screaming. He wasn't stopping. It just kept going.

"You're next..." Sophia heard from several directions at once in her mother's voice. "You're next..."

"You're next..."

"You're next..."

"You're next..."

Sophia tried to turn, but it was all just darkness and shadows. "Help!" she heard Nick cry out between his screams; "Help me!"

And then something touched her back, and everything hurt worse than she had ever hurt before—

Letting out a gasp, she squirmed and lashed out at her surroundings as she woke from her nightmare, striking one of the cage bars with her fist and crying out in pain.

"Help me!" Nicholas called out from the pen next to her. As the hazy memories of the dream, and Nick's screams, both faded away, she realized that he was calling for help for real.

"Nick?" Sophia called out to him, rubbing her hand where it still ached from hitting the cage. She ached all over, though. The changed bits of her nose itched, and there were scales in the very middle of it now. The fin on her back had ripped her shirt open completely, held in place only by the collar, and the bottom of it didn't reach her waist any more either, leaving her belly exposed. The scales around her chest had spread out more, too. She felt sore on the inside, twice over. And her wings hurt, pressed against the cage bars...

Sophia blinked in confusion, trying to turn around to look at her back; she couldn't see herself no matter how she wiggled, but she was able to turn. She didn't have wings! Why could she feel them? Why did it feel like she was stuck? She could move just fine. "What's happening?" she wondered aloud. She knew Nick was there with her. Not just because she could hear

him speak, but in some... other way. She didn't know how to describe it – she simply knew.

"I'm stuck again!" Nicholas answered, having heard her words. "Jennifer, help me! I can't move! I'm stuck!" He seemed to be trying to pull himself free; Sophia could hear the rattling of the cage as he struggled inside of it, but because of the divider between pens in the barn, she couldn't see him. He let out a pained cry as one of his wings got pressed and folded harder against the bars, and Sophia cried out too as she felt her wing folded the same way. The wing she didn't have! What was going on?

"Help, please!" Nicholas called out. "Jennifer! Help!"

Unfortunately, his cries got the attention of someone else. "Shut your goddamn mouth, you ungrateful little wretch!" Nicholas's father roared out from somewhere outside. "Or I'll get the prod and shut it for you!"

Sophia shrank towards the back of her cage when she heard 'the prod'. Alex had called it a 'cattle prod', but she didn't know what a 'cattle' was. She did know, though, that it hurt. A lot. Her scales itched more and she rubbed at them as she pressed her back against the corner of the cage, her fin pressing against the bars a bit, and she had to shift to the side to let it slip between them. But Sophia didn't turn around, staying facing forward, fearfully glancing around and looking around just in case her mother was somewhere nearby.

"No, no!" Sophia protested in a panic.

"You too, you little bitch!" Ed shouted into the barn.

Sophia whimpered but kept quiet, trembling in the corner. But she felt something else beyond the fear. It was something complicated and strange, some feeling she'd never had before, and it didn't feel like her. It was a worry, a panic, one that was for her, but wasn't her own feeling, as if she was worried about someone else, but that someone else WAS her. Trying to understand it only made her more confused.

Nicholas stopped calling for help, but didn't stop struggling, occasionally rattling the cage or grunting in his efforts to try and free himself. "Sorry

about that," Sophia heard Ed say to someone, and she cautiously, warily crept forward to the other end of the cage to try and listen in better.

"It's fine, Mr. Jackson," Alex replied in his usual noncommittal tone. "Did you need me to bring them water or something?"

It was her mother's voice that responded, however, and Sophia shrank back again. "No, Alex. This isn't about work – well, it is, sort of. How would you like to be a business partner?"

"A... business partner, Mrs. Jackson?" Alex replied. Sophia had no idea what one of those was either. Nicholas gave a little gasp as he tried to squirm, and Sophia winced, feeling part of the wings she didn't have getting pinched together.

"Yes!" her mother continued. "We've had an idea on how to make these two little brats useful for something, but we'll need your help."

"That bitch you call a boss would never agree to it," Ed grumbled, "But you're a more sensible lad. You could even take over for her and earn her salary instead of what you're currently getting."

Alex's tone abruptly shifted to one that was more interested. "Really? Go on..."

"That's the spirit!" Mary encouraged. Nicholas did something in the other pen, and Sophia tried to reach up to rub at her hurting wings in a reflex, but there was nothing there, and she went back to rubbing her nose. It felt weird and differently shaped, like it was sticking out a bit further at the top, and there didn't seem to be as much space between the bottom of her nose and her upper lip as there was the previous day. She tried to look at the bit that was sticking out, but it only made her go cross-eyed, so instead she slid her fingers around the front of her face to feel its shape. Even her cheeks seemed to be sticking forward now. "You're a smart man, and we need more of that around here. You see, it sounds like these mutants are all over the place and causing trouble. So we had a great idea: we can make an attraction using them!"

"An... attraction?" Alex inquired, sounding lost again.

"Yes! Like we are now, but even better! We can advertise on the highway! They're worthless mongrels right now, but once they finish growing into fierce beasts, we can pit them against other animals and each other! People will love to see it. Maybe we'll even get a TV deal..."

Mary went on for a short time, but Sophia was distracted by Nick's cage rattling, and the twinges of pain and the persistent aches in the wings she didn't even have. "Pardon my interruption, but where do I come in?" Alex cut in suddenly.

"Well, beasts aren't easy to control, and we'll need your help. Feeding them, training them, sedating them, and so on."

Ed added, "And that's why we want you to be a business partner. We need a better vet than the one we've got now, and we think you're it. So stick around and we'll make you rich!"

"Rich?" Alex repeated, sounding intrigued.

"Yeah! Think about it! Tickets! Food! Gambling! This place will have it all, we'll be raking in money! And we won't be able to do it without you, so we'll cut you in on the proceeds."

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Jackson. How much are we talking?"

"Well, we'll figure that out, we needed to see if you were interested first. Here, let's talk about it over some drinks – beers are on me for this one. Come on! I've still got plenty of cases."

They started to walk away, and Nicholas strained again, grunting. He cried out and Sophia felt a sharp pain in her right wing all along it, but especially near where it met her back – or where it would have, if it were real! She collapsed onto the blanket on the bottom of the cage and whimpered, but the pain remained there.

"J... Jennifer!" Nicholas called out, loudly struggling against the cage. "Help me, I'm stuck!"

But his parents weren't far enough away yet. "One sec, Alex," Ed grumbled, "I need to go teach him a lesson. Where's the prod?"

"Hung on the wall inside the barn like you asked," Alex answered.

"Good! This won't take long. Mary, take our new vet back home and get him somethin' to drink, will you?"

Sophia crawled back as far as she could inside the cage as she heard her father's heavy footsteps approaching. She expected him to yell something, but instead she just heard the sounds of him moving around and grabbing something heavy and plastic. Holding the second blanket Jennifer had given her over her head, she tried to peek out, but she couldn't see over the walls of the pen, and her father wasn't anywhere near the pen gate either.

"Help—" Nicholas began.

"I told you to SHUT UP!" Ed bellowed.

And then Sophia felt it. Every bit of her body felt like it was on fire, and as Nicholas yelled out in agony, so did she. The cacophony from Nicholas's pen as he thrashed around in the cage while stuck barely registered as she squirmed and flailed, trying to get away from the thing shocking her. But she was alone! The prod wasn't hurting her, it was hurting Nick!

She finally understood what was happening: she was feeling what her brother felt! The electrical current surging through him, and the pain from his wings thrashing against the bars holding them fast... she was feeling them as though they were her own. She didn't want to! She wanted to cry out to plead for someone to make it stop, but all she could do was scream in pain.

She felt the torturous pain of the prod suddenly stop, and Ed shouted over the sounds of Nicholas's screams, "Shut up, or you're next!"

You're next...

You're next...

You're next...

Sophia couldn't stop herself from crying even though she didn't want to. She felt Nicholas's pain and his panic. He was trying to say something, but it was completely incoherent, little more than babbling noises leaving his mouth, and everything she felt from him seemed warped and distorted,

like a slowed-down video. She couldn't form any words of her own past her sobbing, but her mind was filled with that same intense begging and pleading: Make it stop! *Make it stop! MAKE IT STOP!*

Nicholas took a deep breath and tried to speak. "Sho... faaa..." he gasped out in an attempt to call her name. He tried to say more, but his words were heavily slurred.

"Quit your blubbering! Both of you!"

Sophia sobbed, and then the agony returned. She and Nicholas screamed in tandem, and her body was on fire from within. She collapsed and sprawled on the floor of the cage, her legs refusing to hold her up, her arms twitching and flailing against her will—

And then it suddenly stopped.

Sophia felt a momentary relief, gasping as the pain ended, lying there and trying to recover.

She couldn't feel Nick any more. His wings, his pain, his fear and panic and concern for her all vanished like a light going out, gone in the blink of an eye. What had happened to him? How badly was he hurt?

"Nick!" she cried out breathlessly. "NIIIIICK!"

"I thought I told you to shut your trap!" Ed yelled, and she heard Nick's pen door opening, but she didn't care.

"I can't hear Nick! Nick! Please!" she cried out. Her father – fat, balding, with a short and messy black beard, wearing a blue T-shirt a size too small and patchy jeans older than she was – stormed around the corner, swinging open the gate to the pen she was in. He had the prod in his hand, a black rod, and she stared at it fearfully, backing into the corner of her cage, but she had nowhere to flee to. Without another word, her father walked up to the cage and shoved the prod in through the bars, making contact with her bare arm.

Sophia let out a shriek as she felt intense pain all over her body, just like she had felt from Nick. She managed to pull away from it and sprawled on the floor just out of reach, but unlike with her brother's pain, it didn't go

away. She could still feel the lingering agony, especially on her arm where she had been touched which felt like it was burnt. Ed pulled back and moved around the cage for a better angle to—

At long last, Sophia heard another voice. "What the HELL is going on in here?" Jennifer yelled out from the entrance to the barn.

Sophia sobbed, wanting to get Jennifer's attention, wanting to tell her that she couldn't hear Nick any more. She wanted to break the bars of the cage open like Nick had broken his cage the other day, but all she could do was lie on the cage floor on her blanket and cry. She couldn't move, she couldn't speak, as if her own body wasn't listening to her.

"You mind your own business—" Ed began, walking back out of the pen and leaving Sophia. With great effort, she was barely able to get onto her hands and knees and grasp at the cage bars with both hands, looking up, but she was so low to the ground that she couldn't see anything. All the walls of the pens were solid, and only the gate offered any visibility into other parts of the barn.

"What... what have you done to him?" Jennifer snapped, aghast at whatever it is she could see. "I told you to stop using the cattle prod on him!"

"I don't tell you how to do your—" Ed began as he left Sophia's sight entirely, but he was cut off again by something else.

There was a brief struggle, and Sophia heard Jennifer shout "Give me that!" before she grunted and Sophia heard footsteps in the hay.

Ed's tone abruptly changed, and Sophia finally saw him past the bars of the door to her pen, backing away from the entrance to the barn, both hands held out in front of him. "Hey now, don't do anything rash," he told Jennifer, continuing to back up.

Sophia felt elated at seeing Jennifer a moment later, dressed in her lab coat and a pair of boots, her auburn hair tied back and hanging around her shoulders, a pair of glasses resting on her nose. But Sophia's relief was crushed when she saw that Jennifer was holding the prod in her right hand. Whoever held the prod always hurt Sophia or Nick with it. Sophia backed

all the way to the back of her cage and hid under the blanket again. Even the sight of the prod filled her with fear. She was afraid of it, afraid of the pain it made her and Nick feel. What if the prod itself made Jennifer hurt her with it? Sophia sobbed wordlessly, filled with a terror she couldn't comprehend.

Jennifer's glance flicked over to Sophia, but only for a moment. "I've had quite enough of this," Jennifer said firmly. "I told you this thing was dangerous."

"THEY'RE dangerous!" Ed protested.

"They're CHILDREN!" Jennifer shouted back at him, driving Ed back another step. "And you've killed one of them!"

"He ain't dead!" Sophia heard her father insist just as he stepped out of sight. "He's still breathing!"

There was a pause. What was 'dead'? Sophia didn't understand. Was it why she couldn't feel her brother? Could Jennifer fix it? And could her father be trusted at his word?

"Then open his cage," Jennifer ordered. "Let me tend to him. I can't believe I let it come this far, but this has to stop."

"He's just an animal now, he ain't good for—"

"He's your SON!" Jennifer interrupted. "Now open the cage, or I'll see how long it takes to knock YOU out with this thing."

"You wouldn't dare...!"

Jennifer took another step forward, dropping her voice menacingly. "Try me."

"Okay, okay!" Ed relented, and Sophia heard the jingling of keys. "I'll open the cage, just don't do anything stupid!"

"I'll leave you to do all the stupid things," Jennifer said darkly as she backed up, keeping the prod held out towards Ed. "You seem to be so good at it."

Sophia saw her father walk past the gate again, arms still held out with his palms forward, but now he had a keyring in one hand. Then she saw

Jennifer turn, and they both went out of sight again.

Turning and looking in the direction of Nicholas's pen, Sophia could see just the very top of their heads as they got close to the front of Nick's cage, but nothing more. "Open it," Jennifer commanded, and Sophia saw Ed's head duck down, then heard the rattling of keys and the clicking of the lock.

If Nick needed help, then...

Get up! Sophia pleaded with Nick, trying to think 'at' him. She thought of Nicholas, and kept facing the general direction he was in, but she had no idea if it was working or if he could even hear her at all. *Nick! Get up! Get free! Help me!* But nothing happened, at least as far as she could tell, and she heard nothing back.

"Now stand back."

The top of her father's balding head reappeared and she saw it move away from the cage. Then, Jennifer's head ducked down, and Sophia heard more moving around. "Good, he's alive," Jennifer said, and Sophia felt relief wash over her, even though she still hurt and ached and felt sore everywhere. She didn't know what Jennifer meant, but it sounded like a good thing.

"He's unconscious, though..." Jennifer murmured aloud, but Sophia wasn't paying attention. Her father was moving closer, and she just barely heard the jingling of keys. Something bad was going to happen. She took a breath, clutching the cage bars to try and give her strength.

"Jennifer!" Sophia cried out, but not fast enough.

She heard the cage door slam shut and then the click of a lock. "What are you doing?" Jennifer demanded, grunting as she tried to do something; Sophia saw her father move back suddenly, standing at the corner of the pen.

"If you care about that mutant so much, you can stay in there with him!" Ed gloated, his subservience having vanished now that he was back in control.

"Let me out this instant or—"

"Or what?" he taunted. "Gonna shock me? Not from in there you won't, bitch. I'll be back later with a gun, but don't worry... I'll need you alive. If people love seeing those freaks fighting animals and each other, imagine how popular it'll be to see them eat another human!"

"You're insane!" Jennifer hissed.

"If I'm crazy, then how come you're the one trapped in a cage?" Ed sneered. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go congratulate Alex on his new promotion."

He began to leave. "Get back here!" Jennifer shouted, but Ed ignored her and simply left. Sophia felt glad he was gone... but then the reality of it began to set in. Jennifer was trapped with them now, too. She didn't have anyone else to help her. She failed to hold back a sob, and began to cry.

"Sophia?" Jennifer asked softly, and Sophia sniffled.

"Y-Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

Sophia sniffled again. "N-No," she answered. "I'm hurting. All over. And now you're stuck too. You're gonna get hurt too."

"I'll find a way out of here," Jennifer muttered, though she didn't sound very confident.

"Is Nick...?"

"He's unconscious."

"What does 'unconk'— um, 'uncons'—...?"

Jennifer gave a small sigh. "It means... he's asleep, but not intentionally. Either Ed used the prod for too long, or something about this transformation made him more sensitive to it."

Sophia bit her lip. Jennifer was using too many big words for her to follow along. Intentionally? Transformation? What did these words mean? But right now, she was much more concerned about her brother. "Will he be okay?"

"I think so. But we're both stuck in here. His wings are jammed against the bars, and there's barely any room for both me and him in here. I'll try and free him or at least make it less uncomfortable, but other than helping to fold his wings, there's not much else I can do for him but wait."

"Do you still have the prod...?" Sophia asked fearfully.

"Yes," Jennifer replied, and Sophia shrank back. "But don't worry. I'll never use it on you. If I get my hands on Ed, though..."

Sophia felt strange as Jennifer trailed off. She felt angry, but in a different way. She didn't want to yell or shout like she did when she was normally upset. It was like a fire burning inside of her, but a small one. Reaching out, she gripped the bars of her cage, and squeezed them tightly. The weird anger smoldered inside of her, the fin on her back rising up on its own, and she thought about what Jennifer had just said. She hadn't thought of it before, but if the prod could make them feel like they'd made her feel...

"I want to do it," Sophia murmured quietly.

"Do what?"

"Prod them."

Jennifer paused, and Sophia wasn't sure she'd heard, but then came the reply. "No, you're too young," Jennifer said quietly.

"But I wanna—!" Sophia protested, feeling a more normal anger rising inside her.

"Please be quiet, Sophia," Jennifer pleaded. "We don't want your father to come back early."

Sophia went quiet and curled up on the blankets, clutching at them with her fingers. It didn't matter, anyway. They were all trapped. The only person who could help her was trapped too, now. She needed someone else. Someone who could help her before she was forced to hurt the animals, Jennifer, or Nick.

Help me... she thought, closing her eyes. Someone, help me...!

Chapter 4

Sophia clung to the blanket tightly with both hands. She wasn't sure how long it had been since Nicholas had been put to sleep, but she couldn't get back to sleep herself. She'd pulled the blankets over her head, even though they caught on the thing on her back, and had surrounded herself with relative warmth. The blanket was too thin to completely block out the light, but hiding under it, she felt a little more safe. Once, she'd hidden under the blankets so that monsters wouldn't get her. But now it was her parents she was afraid of the most... even though she was the one turning into a monster. She had a reminder of that right in front of her all the time now: her nose had grown outward, getting longer and wider as the rough black stuff grew over it. While she normally could only see her nose if she focused on it, the snout she was growing now was always visible to her, if only just barely.

Jennifer had been doing something, but Sophia had kept quiet as she was asked, so she didn't know what was going on. Jennifer had the prod now, and if she didn't keep quiet, then it might make Jennifer hurt her next. She'd be next... she'd be next... she'd be next...

Sophia shivered under the blankets, then let out an "Owww!" as she suddenly felt aches and pains all across her body. Her back, her arms, her legs, and especially her wings...

She reached up and tried to rub at the wings, but again, there weren't any there. She didn't have wings! Only Nick did, and...

"Sophia, are you okay?" Jennifer asked quietly.

"Nick!" Sophia called out, lifting the blankets a bit and squinting at the sudden increase in light. "I can feel Nick! He's awake!"

"How can you..." Jennifer began, but she trailed off, and Sophia heard her moving a little. "Nicholas?" A low, pained groan came from Nicholas, and Jennifer suddenly spoke again. "Don't move. I was able to fold your wings but if you try and spread them out they'll just get stuck against the bars again."

"Nnngh..." Nicholas grumbled, "What... happened...?"

"Your father—" Jennifer spat, putting a considerable amount of venom into the word, "—knocked you out with the cattle prod. You've got a burn on your back now. Those things aren't meant to be used on people! Especially by someone untrained!" She gave a frustrated sigh.

"Water..." Nicholas groaned.

"Of course. Here," Jennifer said. Sophia couldn't see what was going on, but she heard the scrape of the metal water bowl a moment later.

"Nick, you're hurt. I hurt." Sophia kept the blanket close, lifted just enough for her to peek out. Amidst the pain, she felt a tiny bit of relief from her brother and could just barely hear him gulping mouthfuls of water.

"He's not doing too well, no," Jennifer agreed. Nicholas gasped in pain and Sophia whimpered as she felt an ache flare up on her back. "I'm sorry, I should have done something about this sooner..."

"How did... you..." Nicholas managed to force out.

"I came in here to try and help you after you got knocked out, and Ed locked me in. I can't tell if he's crazy, evil, or both," Jennifer muttered darkly. "I don't know what's going to happen next. We need to try and find some way to escape. Alex can't be trusted, but maybe I can trick him into letting me out..."

There was a shuffling sound, and Sophia cried out as she felt pain in her wings flare up again suddenly. "Careful!" Jennifer called out, "You'll get your wings stuck again!"

"I can't... control them..."

Sophia pulled the blankets down again as Jennifer tried to coax Nicholas into going still again. Nick was okay, but now what? Jennifer was trapped too. If she called for help, like she'd done the other day, her mother would come and prod her.

Help me... help me! Sophia thought desperately, trembling under the blanket. She kept thinking of her brother, and how hurt he was, and how much she wanted someone to help. But she didn't even know who she could ask for help. She just wanted anyone to help her...! She felt so scared

that she began to cry again, sniffing heavily and making the nostrils on her snout flare out, but instead of a sob, a strange noise came out of her like a breathy whistling noise, even though she wasn't trying to make that sound.

"Sorry... Sophia..." Nicholas groaned.

"Sorry for what?" Jennifer asked, but Nicholas didn't reply, while Sophia lay there, squeezing at the blankets. "Never mind, I suppose. We have to find a way out. Maybe I have something to try and pick the lock with, though I've never done it before. Not that I have anything better to do with my time right now—"

She was interrupted by a great crash from somewhere else in the zoo.

"What was that?" Jennifer wondered aloud.

"What th' *hell* was that?" Ed bellowed a moment later.

"Probably looters! Get your gun! I'll go find mine!" Mary yelled back.

Sophia lifted the blankets just a little bit and quietly asked, "What's a 'looter'?"

"A thief," Jennifer answered. "But maybe... maybe they can help get us out. They can have my wallet for all I care at this point..."

"Someone can help...?" Sophia asked, lifting the blanket higher. She didn't think about it any further than that, reaching out and grabbing onto the cage bars. "HELP!" she screamed as loudly as she could.

"Shut'cher traps!" Ed shouted at them from somewhere further away than before.

But Sophia wouldn't listen. Someone could help her! "HEEEEEEEELP!" she cried out, as loudly as she could.

"Screw it, I'll take my chances," Jennifer muttered, before inhaling. "OVER HERE! COME HELP US!"

Sophia winced as she felt more of Nick's pain, but he only gave a small grunt. "Help...!" he called out as well, his voice hoarse. He tried again a moment later and managed to shout a louder "HELP US...!" to add to the calls.

Sophia's parents didn't yell back at them that time, and she kept screaming as loudly as she could manage. She only stopped when she heard her father yell, "Who the fuck are you?" and she quieted down to listen.

"What's it to you?" an elderly woman's voice answered. For a moment, Sophia hoped it might be grandma, but the voice wasn't quite right.

"I own this place," Ed replied. His words were slurred; Sophia knew he spoke funny whenever he'd been drinking the stuff from the cans. "And if you don't get'cher raggedy mutant ass out of here, I'll shoot you!"

Sophia heard Alex's voice timidly cut in, "Uh, I don't, um, think you need to..."

"SHUDDAP!"

"You're trep— trespis— trapas—... not welcome here!" Mary yelled at the new arrival, her words equally slurred. "Go crawl back to your filthy hole!"

"Of course," the old lady sneered, "I suppose I should go get the *police* to help me find whoever you've got locked up."

"She knows!" Jennifer said with a gasp, and then yelled again, "YES! OVER HERE! COME LET US OUT!"

"HELP!" Sophia cried out, and as she did, she thought it too: *Help!*

And to her surprise, she heard a response in her head. It was not in the form of words, but rather, an emotion, one that wasn't hers, but it was a brief burst of acknowledgement. "The only pigs out here're in their pen!" Ed bellowed back. "They ain't gonna help ya!"

"I see," the woman responded. "Just remember that that goes both ways."

"T'hell with ya...!"

Sophia heard a gunshot, and she gasped and shrank back down under her blanket. Her father normally shot – or tried to shoot – empty beer cans and bottles, but this was the first time he'd ever shot someone else. She felt something hit her front, like if she was poked really hard, but when she felt over her front there was nothing there. "*Salaud!*" the woman shouted, and Sophia had no idea what she meant - was she shouting about salads?

More gunshots came, in close pairs, with metallic sounds and the noise of breaking glass, but Sophia felt more emotions come across to her from the other person. It was a mixture of brief panic almost drowned out by anger and irritation, but if it was coming from the old lady, it meant that she was still alive.

"M-Mrs. Jackson, that's my car! Stop shooting at my car!" Alex moaned in a panic.

"Holy..." Jennifer said under her breath. Sophia rattled the cage bars, she wanted to see what was going on! She tried to 'talk' to the other person with her brain again, but all she got back was a curt burst of frustration in response.

"I've gotta reload...!" Mary griped, ignoring Alex's protests. "Where did I put the spare clip...?"

"I told'ja to get a revolver, woman!" Ed shouted at her. "That shitty twenty-two bounced right off her!"

"You two idiots could barely hit the broad side of a barn!" the old woman yelled at them.

"Come on out from behind that car and say it again!" Ed taunted. There was a pause, and then a single gunshot. Sophia felt something hit her again, but it struck way behind her. She looked back, but the place it felt like she had been hit not only didn't exist, but if it did, it would have been outside of the cage entirely, sticking through the wall!

Maybe whatever was making her feel these things happen to other people wasn't working right? Once more it only felt like she'd been poked really hard, and it had happened after another gunshot. Whenever her father shot at an empty bottle, it always broke when he hit it, but assuming the feeling came from the old lady, she was barely hurt at all!

"I don't think I will," the old lady mocked. "*Va te faire foutre!*" And then, Sophia felt more emotions being sent to her, a vague feeling of wanting someone to help. Did the lady want her to help? Sophia felt confused, and she must have somehow sent that confusion back, because a moment later she felt a brief irritation from the other person.

"I don't understand!" Sophia shouted.

"Shut the fuck up!" Ed shouted, and Sophia heard another gunshot. But something struck the wood of the barn, and Sophia let out a frightened yell as Jennifer and Nicholas did the same, but right after that, she felt emotions come across: approval. Approval to her. For what? What had she done?

"I stand corrected, you CAN hit a barn!" the lady taunted.

There was a metallic sound and then more gunshots, and suddenly Sophia felt an intense pain in her left arm. The woman blurted out a "Merde!" that was almost lost among the gunshots, but Sophia clutched at her upper arm and let out a screeching sound. It hurt worse than the belt, worse than the prod, and to top it off, squeezing her arm didn't help at all like it usually did when she was hurt. She fell onto her back on the cage, kicking her legs in the air and sometimes hitting the cage bars, her pain only intensifying as the fin on her back got bent and folded.

"I told you to shut—!" Ed began, but he was cut off by more gunshots. Over all the noise, Sophia heard a high-pitched whistling sound, and then suddenly there was a loud explosion.

It felt like Sophia's right leg had just been sliced up all over, and she rolled around on the cage floor clutching at it with both hands, uncaring even as the thing on her back got squished and folded under her repeatedly. Her screaming became a high, keening wail unlike any other sound she had ever made before, unlike any she had ever heard before, but she could barely focus at all through the agony she was feeling.

"Nice shot!" Ed's voice barely registered on her awareness. "You think that got her?"

"I wasn't aiming for the barbeque, you stupid—"

"*CASSE-TOI!*" Suddenly, the old lady's rage and anger poured into Sophia along with the pain. She heard a tremendous crash and a final gunshot, followed by an absolute cacophony of twisting steel, breaking glass, splintering wood, and three shouts, two of which were abruptly silenced. There was a brief pause and then another loud metal crash came, and a

few faint sounds of broken glass hitting the ground. Somewhere in the distance, some of the other animals in the zoo were kicking up a fuss from the noise; Sophia could just barely hear the braying of the old donkey and the bleating of some of the goats.

"Oh... oh shit, oh shit...!" Alex burbled in an uncharacteristic panic. "You... you killed them!"

"*Imbéciles*. I just wanted them to run off," the old woman responded very matter-of-factly, her pain creeping into her voice. "Now, are you going to be a smart lad and help me, or—"

"No, no, I don't want to die!" Alex yelled out, and his incoherent frightened yells began to get fainter as he ran away, his footsteps rapidly disappearing into the distance.

"Coward!" the old woman yelled at him, but apparently she didn't feel the need to pursue. Sophia heard another metal sound, but she didn't say anything; she was clutching at her leg and whimpering, more breathy whistles escaping her. There wasn't anything wrong with her leg at all, but it hurt so much, and no amount of rubbing at it made it hurt less.

"Hello?" Jennifer called out. "We're over here!"

"Keep your britches on, I'm coming!"

Footsteps grew closer, but they sounded weird to Sophia; they were very slow, and every other one was a metal thumping sound. Who was it? Did they have a fake leg? Was it a pirate? Or a robot? Or—

"In here!" Jennifer called out. Another couple of footsteps. Then there was a new sound: something being dragged through the hay on the ground. Sophia briefly wondered what it was the old lady was dragging, but she still felt intense pain in her arm and leg, and it was hard to think.

Jennifer let out a gasp, but it was the old woman who spoke. "You're not the one who was talking to me before," she said in confusion. Sophia crawled to the edge of the cage, trying to peek out of it and see what was happening, but the woman wasn't in a place she could see.

"Hello?" Sophia called out, but Jennifer spoke over her.

"Yes I was, I was calling for—"

"No, not out loud," the old woman interrupted. Another metal thump. Sophia could just barely see some curly gray hair over the pen wall, but nothing more.

"Your leg...!"

"Yes, thank you, I noticed when they damn near blew it off!" the old lady snapped. There was a pause and then she continued, "You look like a doctor. Can you help me?"

"I'm a veterinarian, but I can still treat you if you can get me out of here."

"Who... are...?" Nicholas managed to ask.

"Introductions come later, young man. Where are the keys?"

"Ed has them, last I checked," Jennifer answered.

"Is he the fat one?"

"Yes..."

"Then I'm going to find another way to get you out, 'cause he's currently stuck under what's left of that other kid's Cadillac."

Sophia didn't want to interrupt, but she was curious. "What's a cad-a-lack?"

"Hm?" The old lady began moving again and Sophia heard another metal thump. A face peered over the pen wall at her, but it was a strange one: while she looked for the most part like an old and pale woman, with short and curly gray hair on the top of her head, she had big fins on the side of her head instead of ears, covered in black scales, with red bits in between the long parts. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses rested on her nose, with a chain that went around the back of her head.

Sophia stared up at the woman in a stunned silence, even moreso as the woman drew closer to the opening to Sophia's pen. Her neck was longer than normal, and had stripes of black scales similar to the ones Sophia had growing up the side of it, all the way down to where it met her shoulders. But when the woman stood in front of the pen gate, Sophia saw that she

was wearing a pale blue apron-looking thing, like she'd seen people in hospitals on TV wear sometimes. It barely fit her, leaving her sides and back exposed, and it was torn in several places. There were even a couple of small holes that revealed more black scales underneath.

However, Sophia was shocked to see that the woman's scales weren't quite like her own. Whereas Sophia's were smooth and flat against her body, this woman's scales were... spiky. They raised up and partly overlapped each other and they looked sharp! It was probably why she wasn't wearing anything other than the torn hospital clothing: the scales that Sophia could see covered almost everything except her arms and legs, going from the shoulders all the way down to her waist and the top bits of her upper legs as well. The woman's chest looked bigger than what seemed normal to Sophia, much broader than normal for sure, and she was just barely able to see the base of a very thick tail behind the woman too before the pen wall blocked her sight.

The woman's arms and legs were only lightly scaled, but they looked oddly strong for someone as old as she was, covered in surprisingly thick muscle. At first it looked like her legs were bending the wrong way, but then Sophia saw that she still had a knee, it just seemed like there was an extra bend further down them. The woman's bare feet also seemed to have partly scaled over, and her toes had gotten bigger and spread out more. But Sophia also saw that the old woman's right leg was bleeding heavily and covered in wounds, and her left arm was bleeding as well from a dark red hole. The woman had a bent and charred bit of metal she was using as a cane to keep her weight off of the injured leg. So many cuts, so much bleeding...

Sophia absently looked at a bleeding gash in the woman's leg just above her knee, and reached down to feel herself there. Yes, she was hurting in the same place. And the hole in the woman's arm was where her own arm hurt, too.

"You're hurt...!" Sophia said sadly, her fin flattening against her back, lowering the blanket with it.

"Yes I am, sweetie," the woman said in a gentler tone that reminded Sophia of the one her own grandma had used when talking to her. "Are you the one whose... *comment dire ça*...? ...'thoughts' I heard?"

"Thoughts?" Sophia asked, tilting her head.

"What thoughts?" Jennifer echoed.

"I don't know how to put it. But I felt someone else's emotions reaching out to me. Someone who needed help."

"That's me!" Sophia answered. She crawled as far forward in the cage as she could, gripping the bars. "Are you going to let me out?"

"Yes," the woman said, and Sophia's eyes lit up.

"And Nick!" Sophia added, pointing towards the other pen, "You have to let Nick out too!"

"I'll get you all out as soon as I can figure out how to do it," the lady told her, leaning over the fence a little. "Let me see if I can get your friends out first, then I'll come get you, okay?"

"Okay," Sophia said dutifully. Her leg and arm still hurt – with the spiky lady's hurt, not her own – but she was still so glad. She was going to be free! She'd be out of the cage, and could say goodbye to it and the prod forever!

Turning, the old woman began to hobble away with her makeshift cane, giving a low "*Merde*...!" as she did, and Sophia felt a sharp pain in her leg for just a moment. As the woman turned, Sophia saw that she had wings on her back, too – though they were tiny, way smaller than Nick's. But what wasn't tiny was the woman's tail, which dragged on the floor behind her, sweeping loose hay about. It was thick, covered in even more spiky scales, and absolutely huge! All the way down it along the top was a series of thin black spikes that had thin red fleshy bits connecting them – maybe it was like the 'spy-nul' fin that Jennifer had said was on Sophia's back? It ran all the way down to the tip of her tail, which came to a point at the very end. The fin itself was small at the ends and big in the middle, like one big long curve, except for a downward dip right where her tail met her back.

Sophia remained in awe at the size of the old lady's tail. It was so big! None of the animals at the petting zoo had a tail anywhere near that big! It had to be over twice as long as the teeter-totter at school. It was even longer than a car, and maybe even longer than her home was wide. It was so big that when the old lady turned, the tail curved to follow after her moments later. Would she get one too? And would it be that big?

"Thank you," Jennifer said from the next pen over as the old lady hobbled her way into it, pushing open the gate. "I'm Jennifer, and you are...?"

"Evelyn," the old woman replied. "Are these your kids?"

"No. They're the owner's kids."

Evelyn paused briefly. "You're telling me that those drunk bastards out there treated their own kids like wild animals?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Well, that's a weight off my conscience," Evelyn glowered. "Let's see about getting you out. Got any ideas?"

"For...?"

"For getting that cage open. Or do you like it in there?"

"Of course not. But why can't you get the keys?"

"I told you that the fat man is under a car," Evelyn grouched, her patience audibly thin. "I'm not in any shape to pry it off of him."

"Then how did he get under it in the first place?"

Sophia heard a loud thump and the rustle of hay. "I managed to swing my tail hard enough to hurl the car at him," Evelyn explained. "I don't think you'd want me trying to do that on the cage while you're still inside of it."

"Definitely not," Jennifer agreed. There was a pause. "Can you move it normally?"

"I'm still getting used to it, after going ninety years without one. I don't think I can do any sort of precise movements with it. You try imagining suddenly growing a whole new limb! Why do you ask?"

"Turn around. If we can wedge the end in between the bars, you can just pull it sideways and open it that way."

"I don't think that will work," Evelyn grumbled. "I don't have good control over it like I said. But maybe if I had something to use as a lever..." Sophia raised her head, but still couldn't see over the divider, so she had to simply listen, occasionally feeling a sharp pain in her leg whenever the spiky lady stepped on hers wrong, making Sophia whimper in response.

"There are some tools around here," Jennifer mused after a few moments of thought, "Try the shed over that way, behind the donkey's pen."

"I'll take a look," Evelyn agreed. "I'll be back."

She left, or at least, Sophia assumed she did, as she heard footsteps, the metal thumping sound, and the shuffling of Evelyn's tail on the floor all getting more distant and quieter. Even though Evelyn had left, Sophia didn't feel like she was gone at all: she could still feel the pain from Evelyn's leg and arm just as much as if she were still in the barn with them. But with nothing to distract her from the pain, she curled up in a little heap on the floor of the cage and whimpered, vainly clinging to the bits of her that hurt, even though she was uninjured.

"Are you all right, Sophia?" Jennifer asked as she heard Sophia's quiet crying.

"It hurts," Sophia complained.

"Evelyn will be back soon to get us out," Jennifer reassured. "Then I'll take a look at you, okay?"

"Okay..."

Sophia felt a sudden frustration from Evelyn, soon followed by a tremendous wooden crash from elsewhere in the zoo. Both Sophia and Jennifer went quiet, and there was a pause, but then suddenly Sophia felt a brief triumphant emotion from Evelyn that died down to a feeling of satisfaction. Soon enough, she heard the thumping of the piece of metal that Evelyn was using as a crutch, and the old lady returned to them.

"What was that noise?" Jennifer asked.

"It was locked," Evelyn stated matter-of-factly. "Fortunately, I had the key." She stopped and lifted up her tail high enough that even Sophia could see it over the pen wall, and then lowered it back to the floor. "I will refrain from trying that on your cage, as I'd like you to live through it..."

"Appreciated," Jennifer replied.

"But I found a crowbar. Help me get it into place and I can try giving it a shove with my tail. That ought to pop it open for you."

"Sure. Pass it here..."

A few moments passed as Sophia listened, but heard little beyond some small metal sounds. Then, Evelyn gave a grunt of effort, and Sophia heard the sound of metal creaking. It happened again a few moments later, then suddenly there was a louder sound and something banged against the divider separating the stalls.

"Thank you!" Jennifer called out, then in a quieter tone continued, "Take my hand, Nicholas. Let's get out of here."

"Thank you..." Nicholas groaned.

"What's his problem?" Evelyn asked.

"He's blind," Jennifer replied. "Careful, Nicholas. Keep your wings folded so they don't get caught."

"I'm trying, but it's hard," Nicholas groaned.

"Try touching them when you want to move them," Evelyn suggested. "It helped me to focus when I was learning to move my tail."

Nicholas gave a little grunt, and Sophia felt a small amount of frustration from him. "I can't... I don't have enough space."

Jennifer consoled him, "Okay, then hold still, let me try and fold them for you..."

"I'll try and get the girl out while you're doing that." Sophia heard the sound of something dragging in hay again, with occasional metallic thumps. Soon she saw Evelyn's face peering at her over the divider as the older lady returned, pushing open the gate on the pen once again before

hobbling inside, holding a small metal bar that was flat at one end and curved back on itself at the other.

In a much softer tone than she had just been using with Jennifer, Evelyn asked, "What's your name, little girl?" Dragging her long tail into the pen through the gate, she added, "I don't think I caught it earlier."

"Sophia," Sophia answered. She stared up at the woman, looking hopeful. "Are you gonna let me out now?"

"Yes, yes, just give me a moment. Can you do me a little favor, Sophia?" Sophia gave a nod, so Evelyn made her way over to the cage and pressed the flat part of the bar against the door to the cage, wedging it in place. "I need you to hold this for me. Can you do that?"

It seemed easy enough. Sophia shuffled forward and reached through the bars, holding the metal thing with both hands. "Like this?"

"Yes, just like that, good girl. Be a dear and hold it there for a moment." Evelyn turned around, and dragged her tail into the pen, but it was so big that it took up most of the remaining space inside, and sent hay scattering all over the place where it dragged. Setting aside her makeshift crutch, Evelyn braced herself by putting both hands on the divider and standing on her good leg, keeping the injured one off the ground. Carefully, looking back over her shoulder, Evelyn moved her tail, and Sophia stared in awe as the tapered tip of it slowly reached for the crowbar and gently rested against it.

"Now let go," Evelyn instructed, and Sophia did so. "Move back please, just in case. I wouldn't want you to be hurt by accident."

Sophia grudgingly shuffled back from the cage door, but watched closely as Evelyn began to push on the metal bar with her tail with a small grunt of effort. Feeling a brief surge of determination from Evelyn, Sophia watched as the bar moved a little and the cage bars creaked in protest. Part of the door buckled, but didn't give way immediately.

After taking a moment, Evelyn tried again, the metal around the lock bending further and making more metallic creaking sounds. Keeping very still, Sophia watched Evelyn give another firm push, and this time she bent

the metal with enough force that the lock on it broke and the bent door swung outwards, banging against the dividing wall next to the cage just like Nicholas's had done.

Evelyn let her tail flop against the floor, the bar she had used to force it open falling to the ground and making a metal rattling sound. She reached out for the charred bit of metal she had been using to hold herself up, but accidentally knocked it over, and it clattered to the floor, uttering a curse under her breath in response. Sophia didn't care, though; with the door open, she wasted no time in getting to her feet, clutching the soft blanket tightly to herself. Bolting out of the cage as fast as she could go, she tripped over Evelyn's tail and sprawled on the hay-covered floor, flopping against the side of another part of Evelyn's huge tail.

"Careful!" Evelyn warned, but Sophia got back up and kept going out of the pen.

"Nick!" she called out as she ran to the other pen. She found Jennifer helping her brother out of the cage, holding his wings in a closed position as he crawled out from his prison, its door broken open in a similar way to how hers had been. She hadn't seen her brother in over a day, and his wings were definitely bigger than they had been before. Not just them, but his upper body was bigger too, and looked stronger, especially around the shoulders. His jeans were in tatters, probably because his legs had gotten so big he had burst them open from within, and they were barely hanging on around his waist. Even once he got out from the cage and Jennifer helped him to his feet, he remained hunched over under the weight of his wings, an arm outstretched as he groped blindly for the wall of the pen, brushing his hand against the divider.

"Sophia, where are you?" he asked, turning his head in her general direction. Like her, he had to go without a shirt, though his chest was still largely bare of scales, leaving most of his pink skin exposed. Some scales were creeping around to his front under his arms on spots that had been skin the last time she'd seen them, and his front was also dotted with scabs from welts that had healed over. His short blonde hair was a filthy mess, partly matted to his head by sweat, and his jeans were dirty and dusty,

especially the knees, his feet covered only by visibly dirty and stretched-out socks.

"Over here," she told him, and he walked forward under Jennifer's guidance, reaching out and putting a hand on Sophia's head. It was dirty too, just like the rest of him, but she was just happy to see him again.

"Sophia..." Nicholas said softly. Even though he wasn't looking at her, his eyes closed as they always were, she could tell he was just as glad to be with her again. He knelt down slowly, keeping his hand on her head until he was able to shift his arms to hug her for a moment, and she hugged him back. Nick was all right. Everything would be all right, now.

Behind her, Evelyn shuffled out from the pen Sophia had been held in. Sophia glanced over and saw that Evelyn had abandoned her makeshift crutch entirely; she had curled her tail around to her side and was alternating between taking a step with her left leg and using the end of her tail to bear her weight. It looked awkward, but Sophia didn't feel as much pain from Evelyn's leg, so it must have been working.

"There's a first aid kit in the office, but I think I'll need more than that to help you," Jennifer said, standing next to the pen wall to peer over it, taking a longer look at Evelyn's leg. "Mary's probably the one with the key to that..."

Hearing her mother's name made Sophia frown, pulling away from Nick. Was she really free of them? She had to see for herself. She turned and ran out of the barn, evading the hands of Jennifer and Evelyn trying to grab her, squinting as she came out into the bright outdoor light.

Winding her way between pens to close the short distance between the barn and the mobile home just outside the front gates of the petting zoo, she came to a sharp stop and almost fell over. There was a huge hole in the side of the mobile home, caved in by Alex's car, which lay upside-down beside it. The car's windows were all smashed and its side crushed inward, too, just like her home's, though with a much narrower dent that ran along most of the length of the car's side. The barbeque that had been near the RV was knocked over, mangled and charred, surrounded by pieces of burnt metal, and the white tank that had been next to it was gone.

And sticking out from under the car, she could see her parents. They weren't moving at all, not even breathing. Their bodies were twisted strangely, both of them bleeding heavily from multiple spots. Sophia stood and stared, feeling nothing at all for a brief moment, and then emotions began to well up within her, reaching a boiling point within seconds.

Trembling in rage, her fin standing up until it felt tight as if it couldn't go any taller, she kicked a rock that struck her father's arm and bounced off, but she only grew angrier. Dropping the blanket and picking up a bigger rock with both hands, she let out a yell as she hurled it, the rock striking the side of the mobile home and damaging the wood before clattering to the ground. She felt angrier than she had ever felt before, blinded by hatred for everything that she had suffered through. She ran over and aimed another kick at her father's arm, but the fact that he didn't react at all only made her even more incensed, and she let out another angry yell.

"Sophia!" Jennifer called as she caught up with Nicholas in tow and Evelyn hobbling along further behind them.

"Sophia, please stop," Nicholas called out.

But she didn't listen. She looked around and found a piece of metal that had fallen off the car and picked it up, yelling out again as she swung at the knocked-over RV. It struck hard but accomplished nothing, and she swung it at her father's body instead, climbing over him to take a second swipe at what little of her mother protruded from underneath the wreckage of the car.

"Sophia!" Jennifer yelled again, more insistently, leaving Nicholas behind to approach her.

Sophia turned and glared at her, the girl's face twisted into a mask of rage, even if her scowling face felt strange with the scales that had covered her lips completely. She could see a black stick poking out of a pocket of Jennifer's labcoat, and pointed at it, dropping the metal scrap. "Gimme the prod!" she demanded.

"What? No!" Jennifer insisted as she approached.

"I wanna pay them back!" Sophia shouted, stomping one foot against her father's chest. "They made me hurt! Now it's my turn!"

"No, Sophia, stop this," Jennifer insisted, holding her hands out as she drew closer.

Sophia took a step back; she wasn't going to let Jennifer grab her. "I want the prod!" she repeated. Jennifer took another step forward, and Sophia stepped back again, feeling something hard under her foot.

She looked down, and saw that it was her mother's gun.

Taking her foot off of it, she bent down to pick it up, but just as her hand was about to touch it, she was grabbed by Jennifer and hauled up into the air. Screaming and kicking, Sophia struggled as hard as she could, but she couldn't do anything to stop Jennifer from pulling her away from the wreckage and back towards the others.

"Sophia," Nicholas begged as she was pulled back over to him, "Please, stop!"

She stopped her screaming, but continued to squirm in Jennifer's grip. "Tell her to let me go!"

"I can feel how angry you are," Nicholas said quietly. "I understand. They hurt me too."

"Then let me hurt them back!" Sophia insisted, thrashing around, forcing Jennifer to readjust her grip. "They hurt you! They hurt you more than me!" She couldn't understand why he was just standing there, and almost screamed, "Aren't you mad too?"

"No," Nicholas told her calmly. "This isn't what I want. Please, stop it. We shouldn't act the way they did. We're better than that."

Sophia settled down a little, panting for breath. His words didn't make any sense. "But..."

"We're free of them," Nicholas said, though he wasn't quite looking directly at her. "We can have new lives. A new start. We can leave all this behind. Please. Don't be like them. I don't want that. I want you to be happy, not angry."

His words were only part of what convinced her – she could also feel his emotions, all of them strong. Sadness. Grief. Pity – for her, and not for their parents. "Nick..." she mumbled, ceasing her resistance. She didn't fully understand, but she did know that what she was doing was making her brother very sad. And she didn't want that either. "I'm sorry..."

Jennifer gently set Sophia down on her feet, releasing one arm and then the other, and Sophia simply walked back over to her brother. "It's okay, Sophia," he told her, reaching out with one hand, and she reached up to grab onto his wrist and pull it down towards herself so he could touch her head.

"I don't understand..." she told him quietly. "Why aren't you mad...?"

"You'll understand when you're older," Nicholas told her quietly. She pouted; she hated hearing that from grown-ups. "I know you don't like that answer, but it's true... if you hurt them back, you'll be just like them."

"Good job wrangling that kid," Evelyn complimented Jennifer.

"She's feisty, but the animals put up a better fight," Jennifer replied jokingly, then sighed. "It feels wrong to say, but I'm not exactly sad to see those two dead."

"Some folk just need killing," Evelyn grumbled. "We should get out of here."

"What about the animals?" Sophia asked, turning a little in place. "We should free them too!"

"We should..." Jennifer agreed cautiously, "...but they're very timid, domesticated animals. They won't survive out in the wild."

Sophia tilted her head. "What's do-mess-cated mean?"

"It means..." Jennifer began, trailing off as she tried to think of how to phrase it, but Evelyn cut in.

"It's like being a pet," Evelyn tried to explain in a gentle tone. "They rely on humans to feed them. They don't know how to find their own food."

"Exactly, thank you," Jennifer said gratefully. "If I just open the doors and let them out, they won't survive very long."

Sophia looked downwards sadly. "But... I don't want them to be in cages...!"

She sobbed a little, and Nicholas reached out slowly towards her, brushing one hand against her arm and then working his way up to hold her shoulder. "They're not like us, Sophia," he tried to tell her, "Someone has to look after them." But she didn't understand. They were animals, didn't they belong outside? Her brother's gentle hold helped her relax a little, but she said nothing, sniffing occasionally.

Jennifer took a deep breath and then looked over at Evelyn and her injured leg. "One thing at a time. We have to get you treated first. I can get the first aid kit for your arm, but I don't have what I need for an injury like the one on your leg here. However, I'm friends with the owner of the vet's office in town. He should have what I need to treat you there."

Evelyn snorted derisively. "The vet's office? Why not the doctor's office?"

"I don't have a spare key to that, like I do for the vet," Jennifer answered, "And I'd rather not break into Dr. Sandford's clinic if I don't have to."

"Very well," Evelyn conceded. "How are we going to get there?"

Jennifer gave her another look. "I don't think you're going to fit in my truck. You might have to hop in the back of it. Nicholas's wings are far too big, too... I think I can fit Sophia up front, but that fin of hers might cause some issues."

"I can put up with an uncomfortable ride," Evelyn reassured her. "How far is it?"

Jennifer shrugged. "About a one-hour drive? It might be a little faster without any traffic, but these roads are pretty quiet to begin with."

"Then it'll be fine. I've put up with worse."

"What are you going to do after that?"

Evelyn exhaled. "That's the \$64,000 question, isn't it? Let's talk about it later. I need to do some thinking on the way."

"If you're not coming back, then I'll have to leave you. I have a family that I need to look after."

"Of course. I guess your old folks weren't as lucky as me?"

"Lucky?" Jennifer repeated, giving a questioning look.

"Oh, I know I look like hell, but two weeks ago I was just waiting for the end. Wasting away my days on painkillers watching daytime TV at the hospice. My family was coming to take me out so that I could live out my last days in the comfort of my own home. But then later that day, there was that broadcast on the TV, and..." she looked down at herself, and gestured with one hand to the tail she was using to prop herself up. "...this happened. I was halfway into the grave, and now look at me. Only took a couple of days for my arthritis to clear up. I don't know what I'm turning into, but it seems my time on Earth isn't up just yet."

Jennifer glanced between Evelyn and the children. "You seem a lot more... changed than they are."

"If it had been any slower, I probably wouldn't be here," Evelyn said flatly.

"Now, are we going to stand around here all day, or what?"

Jennifer gave a nod, turning back to Sophia and Nicholas. "Okay, you two," she said in a gentler tone, "It's time for us to get going."

"Okay," Nicholas acknowledged, but Sophia didn't say anything, still sniffing.

Jennifer crouched down a little and put a hand on Sophia's other shoulder. "It's okay, Sophia. After this I'll come back, and I'll keep looking after the animals. I'll make sure they're happy."

Sophia looked up with watery eyes towards Jennifer. "Do you promise?" she managed to ask in a shaky voice.

"I promise," Jennifer told her. "I want them to be happy too."

"Okay," Sophia said, brightening up just a little bit. "But remember, you promised!"

"I know."

As Jennifer stood back up straight, Evelyn hobbled a little closer. "Before we go, can you do me a quick favor?" She pointed with her good arm towards the car wreck. "Can you give me his gun? He's not going to need it anymore."

"Sure," Jennifer agreed. She stepped carefully over the bodies pinned under the car wreck and picked up both of the guns that had been dropped, bringing them back over to Evelyn. "I don't know where they keep their spare ammo, and I'm not dragging them out from under the car to search their pockets."

Evelyn took the revolver that Ed had been using carefully, looking it over. "It's been a long time since I last fired a gun," she murmured, popping the cylinder out and looking inside. "Five rounds is better than none..."

She frowned, however, when she tried to put a finger inside the trigger guard, and shook her head, holding up her hand closer to her face. "Didn't realize just how big I was getting. Even my fingers are growing. They barely fit now, I can't imagine that'll last for long. You take it, then."

Jennifer took the gun back and put it in a pocket on her labcoat along with the pistol. "Are you sure?"

"It won't do me any good. Besides, where would I keep it?" she asked rhetorically, gesturing to indicate her lack of clothing beyond the medical gown. "I'm going to have to learn how to use what I've got instead."

"You *did* throw a car," Jennifer pointed out.

"That I did," Evelyn agreed. "I'll manage without a gun. I ain't getting any younger, so let's get a move on."

Jennifer nodded in agreement. "We'll stop in at my office and bandage your arm, then head out."

Chapter 5

Although Sophia was excited to be allowed to ride in the front seat of Jennifer's truck, her excitement was severely curbed by the fin on her back pressing into the seat when Jennifer put the seatbelt on her. The fin getting bent hurt and she had cried out, but Jennifer had eventually found a workaround, sitting Sophia sideways in the seat instead and on her knees. It was a little awkward, but it meant her fin wasn't getting crushed, and she could look out the side window instead.

After clearing the back of the truck of Jennifer's work things that were in it, Evelyn had climbed up onto the truck bed, which had immediately presented a problem: her tail. It was so long that it hung off the back of the truck, and if she tried to curl it up inside of the bed, then Nicholas wouldn't have any space to join her. But Jennifer had had an idea, and had attached an empty animal trailer to the truck. Evelyn was able to stand on the truck bed and hold onto the top of it, with her tail stretched out and threaded in through the open trailer window to keep it from sliding around. With some spare blankets laid out on the truck bed, it still wasn't the most comfortable thing, but it would be tolerable enough for the drive.

That just left Nicholas, who had, with Jennifer's help, fumbled his way back into what was left of the mobile home to ditch his tattered jeans and wrap a blanket around his lower body instead, abandoning his shoes as well in favor of two pairs of socks. When Sophia asked him he said it was because of how tight his shoes were, which made sense to her, so she had done the same and felt much better without her feet feeling so cramped all the time.

Nicholas had been able to climb into the back of the truck, but Jennifer quickly realized another potential problem: if his wings caught any air while they were driving, he would be pulled clean out of the truck. So they had been delayed in leaving again while she tied up his wings loosely, leaving a little room for them to move while making it impossible for them to spread properly. He had had to lie down next to Evelyn as well to keep them as low as possible, but even so, they did further block the view from the rearview mirror. It was hardly comfortable, and there was so little space that one of his legs had to be slung over Evelyn's tail, pressing the fin on it flat against her back. Sophia had heard Jennifer say "If there even

were any cops left on the roads, I hope they have better things to do than pull me over for this setup."

Fortunately, the trip itself was uneventful. The country roads seemed fairly empty, and Sophia was content to stare at the fields, trees, and sometimes animals that they drove past. Sometimes her sight grew blurry, or her eyes itched, forcing her to close them and rub at them with her fists, like she did when she got something in her eye. Her lower face was sore too, and whenever she rubbed at it it felt... bigger. Sort of like being swollen, but it wasn't squishy like the one time she'd gotten a bump on her leg. And a lot bigger, too. Rubbing over the bigger bits helped, but only a little. While her nose had kinda-sorta been in her view before, she'd always tuned it out. But her muzzle was getting so big that she could see it all the time, and every time she breathed in or out she could see her nostrils flaring. She wasn't used to it being so big either, and when she tried to press her face against the window she kept bonking her nose on the glass by accident.

Jennifer tried to turn on the radio, but got little more than static. Occasionally a tiny bit of music or heavily garbled words came through, but the only signal that was clear was a local emergency broadcast telling people to shelter in place, so she quickly turned it off again.

Sophia had been to the town many times before to go to school, but she had never before been to the part of town that Jennifer took them to. Nothing in the town was higher than two floors, and the vet's office was no exception, but Sophia did like the picture in the window of the cartoony smiling horse wearing one of those head-mirror things.

The street seemed oddly empty and it was easy to find a place to park right outside. The lights were off, and there were no signs of anyone inside. "They're closed," Sophia grumbled.

"That's fine, I have a key," Jennifer said. She turned towards the passenger seat and reached for the glove compartment. Sophia turned her head and looked back over her shoulder, and Jennifer gave her a smile - then stopped suddenly and stared at her in shock.

"Sophia...!"

"What?" Sophia asked, confused, tilting her head.

"Your face!" Jennifer gestured towards her own. "You didn't have that much scaling when we left! And..." she leaned a little closer, while Sophia stared back at her. "Around your mouth and nose... everything here is protruding outwards," she said, holding a hand up near her mouth and gesturing.

Sophia tilted her head. "What's 'pro-truding'?"

"I mean that it's... growing outward, it's swelling a lot. And there's more scaling. Does it hurt?"

"Huh? What's scaling?" Sophia asked in confusion, rubbing at the itchy bits on her face. Her nose wasn't as bad any more, but all the bits around it were, and she felt sore there too.

"The rough bits on your face. And your eyes... they look different."

"Huh? I wanna see!" Sophia turned back towards the window and pressed her face up against the glass, trying to look in the side-view mirror, but she couldn't see very well with the reflection on the glass from outside.

Jennifer opened up her purse and took out a small hand mirror, tapping Sophia on the shoulder. "Here, take this, but be careful with it, okay?"

Sophia twisted again and gently took the hand mirror from Jennifer, peering into it. She hadn't seen herself in a mirror ever since her parents had thrown her out of the house. The itching part of her face was covered in black scales, and her nose had flattened out as the bottom half of her face began sticking out, kind of reminding her of a horse or a sheep.. And Jennifer was right, her eyes looked different: the black bit in the middle wasn't a circle any more, but it was tall, kind of like an oval, but pointy at both ends instead. And the colored bit around the black part had changed too, growing bigger. She used to have brown eyes, but now one of them was a bright violet in color, while the other was violet in some bits and blue in others.

She let out a small gasp of amazement as she stared at them, seeing the black bits sometimes get a little wider or narrower. "The colors look pretty...!" she exclaimed, holding the mirror closer to her face. "Cat eyes! I

have cat eyes!" She tried holding the mirror directly in front of her snout, only for it to disappear. She could still feel it in her hand, though, so she turned her head a bit, and it reappeared. Moving her head back and forth, Sophia found that anything right in front of her face got hidden behind her own snout, whether it was the mirror or even her own hand.

She stared open-mouthed for a few seconds, mystified by how different everything suddenly was. But then she saw her pointy teeth and quickly closed her mouth so that she wouldn't have to look at the much fiercer animal traits she was getting. "Do your eyes hurt?" Jennifer asked her.

Sophia had to think about that one. "Only a little?" she said eventually. "But everything hurts." Looking over the front of the car, she peered down the road, surprised at just how far she could see. "I can see more!" she gasped out.

"See... more?" Jennifer inquired, not understanding.

Pointing, Sophia tried to explain. "I can see alllllllll the way over there!"

Jennifer looked in the direction Sophia was pointing. "What are you pointing at?"

"The big metal thingy!" Sophia insisted. It was right there. Couldn't she see it?

Jennifer looked thoughtful for a few moments. "The radio tower?" she guessed.

"Yeah!"

Jennifer squinted off in the right direction, but from the look on her face, Sophia didn't think she could actually see it. Eventually, she sighed and shook her head sadly, gently taking the hand mirror back. "I'll see what I can do to help you after I take care of Evelyn," she said, quietly before popping open the glove compartment and pulling a keyring out from it.

She got out and went around to help Nicholas out from the truck first, while Sophia turned in her seat, standing on her knees to look out the back window. Nicholas's movements were slow and stiff after being stuck in the back of the truck for so long, and Jennifer had to guide him, helping him

use the edges of the truck and the back of the trailer to brace himself as he climbed down. Once he was out, Evelyn took the initiative to get up and off the truck by herself without Jennifer's assistance, and Sophia felt the truck shift upwards under her as Evelyn stopped weighing it down.

With the back cleared, Jennifer came around to the passenger side to help Sophia out from the truck so she could join the rest of them. When she got down, Sophia stumbled a bit, feeling strange and unbalanced without knowing why. Fortunately, she only fell against Jennifer's leg, and Jennifer helped her stand back up straight. Looking down, Sophia saw that her legs were further apart and her hips had gotten wider. She hadn't noticed while sitting down, other than the constant discomfort, but now that she was actually trying to walk around it felt weird. Curious, she raised one leg and tried to shake it a bit, losing her balance and quickly putting a hand on the truck door to stop herself from falling over. Could she run faster? Jump higher? Maybe her legs would get bigger and she'd get taller!

Nicholas was complaining about the ropes around his wings, so once they had all gathered on the sidewalk, Jennifer took a look at the bindings, frowning when she failed to untie the knots. "I could have sworn I left some slack on these. You must have grown during the trip..." Jennifer murmured, struggling with the bonds again in a last-ditch attempt. "I'll have to cut them. Stay still for a moment." Jennifer went to the front of the truck, and Sophia saw her return with a utility knife, sawing at the ropes until she was able to cut through them and the remnants fell to the sidewalk.

The front doors were too small for Evelyn or Nicholas, so Jennifer guided them around behind the building to where a set of double doors was located that led into an examination room, "for handling livestock" as Jennifer explained. Even so, Nicholas had a hard time stopping his wings from getting caught on the doors, and Jennifer had to help him keep them closed again so he could get inside. Evelyn didn't have it much easier - her neck had grown longer during the trip, and she had to stoop down heavily to get under the door frame, to the point that she had to get down on her hands and crawl through.

The room inside had a big pen not unlike the one they had been trapped in at the petting zoo, but the edge was made of loosely-spaced wooden planks and could easily be seen out of, with a much wider gate and a lot more hay. There was also a shiny metal table that Jennifer led them to, but Evelyn wasn't really able to sit on it very well with her tail. So instead, Jennifer had dragged over a spare stool, allowing Evelyn to sit down and keep her good arm on the table to hold herself steady while Jennifer treated her injuries. Even on the stool, Evelyn's tail gave her some trouble, and she had to sit at the very back of the stool to be remotely comfortable.

Sophia saw Evelyn's huge tail hanging over the back of the stool onto the floor and walked over to look at it; it was so big that it crossed the entire floor and bumped into the pen, curved to the side, and just kept on going all the way to the double doors. She reached out and touched it, feeling the smooth sides of the spiky scales, but Evelyn turned her head and told her gently not to touch, so she took her hand away, stepped back, and found a seat on another nearby stool instead.

"I'll do what I can," Jennifer said as she placed her collected supplies on the table next to Evelyn. Sophia didn't know what any of it was; she had just been expecting some band-aids. A lot of them, maybe, but it didn't look like Jennifer had any. Instead, she put on a pair of thin whitish gloves, then took out a bottle and a wad of cotton and poured something onto the cotton before pressing it against the wounds on Evelyn's leg—

Evelyn hissed. "That smarts!"

Sophia squeezed her eyes shut and let out a cry. "It hurts!" she whimpered, kicking her legs under the stool for a moment, then grabbing onto her right leg where she felt the burning, stinging sensation.

Jennifer looked over at Sophia. "Hold it on the wound," she instructed Evelyn, then hurried over to Sophia. "Sophia, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?" she asked.

Sophia shook her head. "It hurts," she repeated.

"What hurts?"

"Right here!" Sophia pointed at her right leg where she was holding it.

Jennifer gently pried Sophia's hand away and rolled up the leg of her pants, looking in confusion at her leg. "You're not hurt."

"But it hurts!"

"I think she's feeling it from me," Evelyn grumbled as she dabbed at her wounds with the cotton, wincing. Each time she did, Sophia felt a spike of pain again, and cried out.

"She's... what?" Jennifer asked, turning back to Evelyn.

Evelyn reached up and touched her own face lightly with the fingertips of her right hand. "I can feel her pain, too, from the bits of her that are changing. It's nothing compared to what I've been going through the last few months even on morphine, but I can feel it. And I think she can feel mine."

Jennifer glanced between Evelyn and Sophia. "Nicholas, can you feel anything from them?" she asked.

Nicholas gave a shrug. "Sort of? I can feel Sophia and Evelyn's pain, but... only sometimes. I do feel other things from her too. I've been able to feel when she worries about me."

Jennifer seemed thoughtful, idly fiddling with the lapel on her labcoat, until Evelyn cleared her throat and pointed to her leg insistently. "Yes, sorry," Jennifer murmured as she returned to Evelyn's side to continue her work on tending to the old woman's injuries. Sophia gave small cries and groans as she felt the stinging pain each time Jennifer touched one of the numerous cuts in Evelyn's leg, but Evelyn was taking it stoically, so Sophia tried to do her best to do the same. However, even the burn wounds were too much for Evelyn, making her wince and hiss in pain each time Jennifer tried to clean one, while Sophia clutched at her leg and cried out.

But eventually Jennifer finished her work on Evelyn's leg and moved on to her arm. Sophia looked over to Nicholas, who was sitting on a stool identical to hers, his head down and his eyes closed, breathing in and out gently. Reaching over, Sophia prodded him in the leg. "Nick?"

He straightened up with a start, his wings opening up behind him and brushing against the wall. Surprised, he reached around himself with both

hands, feeling through the air. "Nick," Sophia repeated, reaching up and grabbing onto his wrist. He reached back and gently felt around until he touched her hair, then rested his hand on her head and relaxed, leaning back a little in the chair, the back of it too low to squish his wings against him.

"Sorry, Sophia, I must have dozed off," he murmured, stroking down the back of her head, his fingers brushing to one side of her fin. "I haven't been sleeping well since this began. I keep waking up in the middle of the night aching inside."

"Me too," Sophia grumbled, putting her hands on her belly. "My insides keep hurting. They feel all squirmy."

"Yes, that has been happening to me too," Evelyn chimed in, briefly wincing as Jennifer cleaned her arm wound. Gesturing with her uninjured arm she added, "This... mutation that's happening to us seems different for each person."

Sophia frowned, but said nothing, leaning a little closer to her brother, sniffing loudly as she did, the nostrils on her long snout flaring out as she did, before she leaned back and made a face at him. "You stink," she declared. "You're smelly. Smelly and stinky."

"I know," he said quietly. "We're both pretty filthy."

"I would be too if I were stuck in a cage for days," Jennifer muttered darkly. "There's a hose around here that you can use to clean yourselves up with, just make sure to lower the pressure."

"What's a pressure?" Sophia asked.

"It means how hard the water comes out," Evelyn told her, relaxing a little as Jennifer straightened herself up and let go of Evelyn's arm. "We should clean off when we're done here."

Shortly thereafter, Jennifer put down her equipment. "That'll have to do," she said, peeling off the disposable gloves she had been wearing. "I'm not a surgeon and I almost never have to treat gunshot wounds on animals, let alone people. I'll wait until after you've washed up to bandage it so that

you don't get the bandages wet. You should try and find a doctor as soon as possible to treat it."

"Aren't you a doctor?" Sophia asked, tilting her head.

Jennifer looked towards her and gave her a gentle smile. "I'm an animal doctor," she explained to Sophia. "Medicine for animals is different than medicine for humans! ...or whatever it is that you're turning into."

Evelyn gave a long look at Nicholas's wings, turning her head to look at her own tail, then stared at Sophia's muzzle. "*Dragonnes*," she murmured quietly to herself.

"Pardon?" Jennifer asked.

"Dragons," Evelyn repeated in English. "Look at us. Wings, tail, scales... I saw people on the TV too with claws on their hands and faces that looked like a dragon."

"What's a dragon?" This time, it was Nicholas asking the question, not Sophia.

"It's..." Jennifer began, trailing off for a moment, thinking how to explain it to him. "If I had a figurine, I'd let you feel it. They stand on four legs, they're covered in scales instead of fur or skin or feathers, and they have wings."

"What kind of dragon are we?" Sophia asked, sounding worried. "Are we good dragons?"

"I don't know what kind of dragons you are," Jennifer replied patiently.

"But I think whether you're good or not is up to you. I can't tell you anything more because dragons are fictional creatures."

Evelyn lifted up the end of her tail, wiggling it back and forth before lowering it back down slowly. "Not fictional any more, it would seem," she mused.

Chapter 6

Jennifer did what she could for Nicholas and Sophia, but other than giving their injuries from Ed's belt and the cattle prod a fresh disinfecting, there wasn't much she could help with. Sophia complained she was getting hungry, so Jennifer volunteered to go get some food for them while they washed themselves up.

Just as Jennifer had said, there was a hose by the animal pen, as well as some brushes, sponges, and other tools usually used for cleaning animals. Sophia wanted to play with the hose, but Evelyn took it before she could get hold of it and insisted on spraying down both of them one at a time. Sophia had asked why she couldn't just do her and Nicholas at once, and Evelyn had evaded the question with a blunt "Your parents should have told you that" before insisting that she sit and wait while Nick was hosed down. Evelyn was gentler on his wings, turning down the pressure on the hose to soak them before using a big sponge to clean them up, a process made more difficult every time the sensitive wings flexed from the contact. Finally it was Evelyn's turn, but Sophia was disappointed again when Evelyn gave the hose to her brother instead, having to vocally direct him on where to aim on account of his blindness.

After being cleaned came the process of drying off, which took extra time due to the size of Nicholas's wings and Evelyn's tail. Sophia cried out in discomfort when the towel snagged on her fin and tugged in the wrong way, and Evelyn took more care after that to avoid hurting her. Getting them both dressed again afterwards had been an ordeal as well, with both of them having trouble with the too-small socks. Sophia in particular was still getting used to the way her face had changed, and kept trying to look downwards at her feet only for her muzzle to get in the way, until Evelyn had taught her to turn her head sideways a bit. Sophia also had to secure her skirt with only a tiny bit of the velcro strap, because it was too tight otherwise. Taking a bit of medical tape from a cupboard, Evelyn had been able to secure it a little better while still leaving some room for more growth, but it seemed unlikely to last much longer.

Eventually, Jennifer returned and began unloading several bags of groceries from the back of her car. "I have good news and bad news," she told them

as she brought the bags in and set them out on the floor, where Sophia ran over and peeked inside. "The good news is that the corner grocer was still open and had food. The bad news is that they had very little of everything that wasn't local produce, so most of it won't keep for very long. I got what I could beyond that, but there's not much."

"It's a moot point anyway, we won't have a fridge with us," Evelyn observed.

Jennifer set down the jar of peanut butter she had taken out of one bag. "Are you leaving?"

"We can't very well stay here forever," Evelyn said with a wave of her hand. "But my family should be in the city. They were on their way to come see me when all hell broke loose out there. If I can find them, they might be able to help."

"It's a big city," Jennifer pointed out. "And it might be dangerous."

"And what else do you expect us to do?" Evelyn asked sharply. When a response was not forthcoming, Evelyn went on, "We have no money and no home. I can't hobble back to the hospice and even if I go back home, I won't be able to fit in the front door. Even if we don't find my folks, there ought to be someone out there who can help us or point us in the right direction. Before the TVs stopped working, I'd heard rumors that FEMA and a bunch of others were sending out aid workers to the cities. We just have to find them."

Jennifer gestured towards Sophia and Nicholas; Sophia was staying quiet, not wanting to interrupt the adults and get a beating for it. "And what about them? Can you care for them?"

"Can you?" Evelyn retorted.

Jennifer went quiet and folded her arms. "No," she admitted. "I have to look after my parents."

"Then the three of us will have to rely on each other. I've lived through worse. I survived the Great War; whatever the city throws at me can't be any worse than being hunted by fascists." She thumped her tail on the ground for emphasis. "I may be unarmed, but I'm not defenseless."

Taking a deep breath, Jennifer let it out as a sigh. "All right, then," she conceded. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you," Evelyn said, softening her tone a bit. "I think we'd better stay the night here and get some rest before we head out."

Jennifer nodded in understanding. "Just let me bandage your wounds before I go. I'll leave the keys here for you and you can lock up when you're ready to head out. Please put them under the trash can behind the back door."

"Will do."

Jennifer took the keys from her pocket, and Sophia watched her leave them on the metal table next to Evelyn. "You're not coming with us?" Sophia asked quietly.

"I can't," Jennifer answered, turning to Sophia. "I have a family of my own to look after... and, I promised to take care of the animals, remember?"

Sophia nodded to her. "You promised!" she agreed.

"Exactly. So please be careful, and stay safe." She reached up and rubbed the top of Sophia's head, making her smile a little bit.

"When will I see you again?"

Jennifer hesitated before answering evasively, "I don't know, but I hope it is soon."

"Where can we sleep?" Nicholas asked her.

"I brought some extra blankets from the petting zoo, they're in my truck. I have a road map too, I think you'll need it more than I will."

"Okay. Thank you for all your help," Nicholas said sincerely, slowly reaching out with one hand.

Jennifer gently took it in both of hers and held it briefly. "I just wish I could do more," she told him. "And Nicholas... I'm sorry that it took me so long to even do what I did. I was worried what Ed would do to my family, and so I turned a blind eye to your suffering."

"You did," Nicholas acknowledged, but then followed it with, "And I forgive you. You were looking out for your family. I would have done the same to protect Sophia."

"Thank you," Jennifer replied sincerely. Releasing his hand, she turned to Evelyn, who held her arm out obligingly, crouching to make it easier for Jennifer to reach her arm as Jennifer picked up a roll of bandages.

"I appreciate all the help too," Evelyn said solemnly. "Take good care of your old folks, you hear?"

"Trust me, I will. I'll never hear the end of it otherwise," Jennifer remarked as she carefully wound the bandages around Evelyn's arm.

After tending to Evelyn, bringing in the blankets and map, and saying her goodbyes, Jennifer finally left. They didn't have anything to cook with, so their dinner was an assortment of vegetables whose only preparation was being washed, much to Sophia's disappointment. And yet, she was so ravenously hungry that she kept crunching on carrots and cucumbers and little tomatoes, eating far more than she usually did before her stomach was finally calmed. Nicholas and Evelyn seemed to be in a similar situation, and Sophia could feel her brother's satisfaction from his food even though she wasn't the one eating it.

By the time they had had enough, it was only just starting to get dark, so Evelyn spent some time poring over the map. Sophia was very quickly bored, and she wished a bit too late that she had gotten some toys from the wreckage of her home before they had left. Nicholas tried to keep her company, but his stories were still bad, so she tried telling him one she had read at school about a dragon. However, she kept forgetting bits of it, and he kept interrupting her to ask about the dragon and what it was like, absently rubbing at the scales that were growing over his sides.

"Are you okay?" Sophia asked after the third such moment in a worried tone. "You look, um... worried."

"I don't know what's happening to us. Of course I'm worried," he told her quietly. "But I'm fine. With you and Evelyn here... I'll be okay."

She drew a little closer to him, keeping her head down. "Do you think we're going to hurt people?" she asked quietly.

He made a confused sound and reached out slowly, bumping his hand against her arm before gently holding it. "Why would you think that?"

She looked at his hands. They were bigger than before. He didn't have any claws and neither did she, but what if that changed? They were in an animal doctor's place right now. Because they couldn't go to the human doctor.

"We're turning into animals," she mumbled. "Big ones, with claws and big teeth. The kind that hurt people."

He pulled her a little closer. "We're still ourselves," he told her. "Animals hurt people because they aren't as smart as people are. Even if we get claws and sharp teeth, we still decide how to use them. And if you don't want to hurt anyone, you won't."

She felt more reassured by his presence than by his words, but she still relaxed a little and leaned against him for a bit. When she was finally tired, Evelyn directed Nicholas to help her pile up some of the hay so that they could lay the blankets on top of it, forming three makeshift beds. Sophia climbed up onto the middle one and tried to pull a blanket over herself, but her fin was even bigger than it had been in the cage, and it kept snagging on the blanket until Evelyn reached over and helped her.

As she tried to get comfy, Nick lay down on the one next to her on his front, his huge wings spreading out a bit. One of them rested on top of Sophia, and she almost pushed it away. But something about his presence seemed comforting. Some... odd, but not unpleasant smell, like when they'd been to the house of some friend of her mother's once, where they had a fancy kitchen. She didn't know why, but the smell helped her relax.

Rolling from her front to her side, she reached up and gently touched her brother's wing. The dark red fleshy bit between the long scaly parts was smooth to the touch, and having it over her was sort of like having an extra blanket. It was like her brother was shielding her and protecting her. With a

little smile, she pulled an armful of blanket close to herself, and closed her eyes. "Goodnight, Nick," she murmured. "Love you."

"I love you too, Sophia," he said to her softly.

Chapter 7

It would have been nice if Jennifer had gotten a box of tea.

Evelyn gave one last half-hopeful rummage through the final grocery bag, but she had no luck. Once more, overnight, whatever process was working its magic on her had continued to do so, further altering her body and making her even less human. She had grown larger still, and knew that they couldn't hang around for much longer, otherwise she wouldn't be able to get back out through the double-doors they had come in via. As it stood, she could crawl back out again, but at the rate she was growing it wouldn't be long before even that was insufficient.

Her neck had grown substantially, now much longer and thicker than when she had gone to bed. Its growth was all the more obvious as it left almost no slack on the chain that held her glasses around her neck, even after she had pulled them up a bit. How much longer would that final physical remnant of her old life remain with her? The hospital gown she had been wearing when she left the hospice wouldn't last much longer; it had held out at first but now that scales had grown under where the straps were, it was fraying and threatened to come apart. It was only a matter of time until she'd have to discard it. The extra length of her neck also led to a change in perspective: she was so much taller than everyone around her now, even tilting her head downwards to look at them when speaking to them wasn't enough, and she had to lower her neck down like some kind of snake.

Other gradual changes had taken place: her arms and hands were bigger and stronger once again, but now, her shoulders were covered in scales, which continued to come in rough and spiky compared to the smooth scales the two kids had. Her wings were almost skeletal, with just the big outer bones covered with flesh and the beginnings of more pointy scales, little more than the barest frames compared to Nicholas's. He had given her a better idea of what she was turning into, but it only eased her uncertainty a little. Many of her teeth had grown larger and pointier, and her tongue was getting longer as well, making it a little harder to speak clearly, not to mention how it got in the way while eating.

She watched him as he lay next to his sister, the latter still asleep upon the straw, though fitfully. The little girl kept tossing and turning, her fin raising and lowering of its own accord. Nicholas was quite awake despite his closed eyes, partly rolled onto his side with his hands holding his belly, periodically grimacing in pain that Evelyn felt too as the transformation kept its effects within him. Despite this, he still had one wing stretched out over Sophia to serve as her blanket, mostly covering her body. The back of his head had grown a patch of scales that weren't there when he had gone to bed, and his neck was beginning to lengthen just like hers had already done, scaled along the back. His lack of a shirt allowed her to see more of the spread of black on his body, hide and scales growing over his shoulders and onto his arms, while his spinal fin had spread further both up and down.

Beside him, Sophia shifted in her sleep. Her partial muzzle had grown out completely, yet with her scales having only progressed up her face to her brow, she seemed reminiscent of a children's cartoon character: flagrantly not human, yet still with distinctly human hair. At least for the time being. Evelyn had found that everywhere else on her body that scales had grown, the hair had been removed, and it seemed logical that the hair on her head would go too. In addition, the back of Sophia's skirt was being raised up by a protrusion that had to be her own tail coming in. For now it was small and stubby, just like Evelyn's had been when she had first noticed it, but that wouldn't remain the case for long.

Other than the plethora of other small changes they all seemed to be going through, as bits of them got bigger and stronger here and there, it was obvious to Evelyn that Sophia's spinal fin had changed quite heavily overnight. Running from the back of her neck all the way down to the small of her back, its height varied heavily, waving up and down like waves on the ocean. Each individual little spike on the fin seemed not to care one whit what the height of its neighbors were, coming in at apparently random heights, the membrane between each following suit. Yet the membranes themselves had changed greatly while Sophia slept, turning from a dull grayish-brown to a vibrant and bright rose-red, in comparison to the deep wine color that Evelyn's fin membranes were.

Slowly, Evelyn rose to her feet – or at least, one foot and her tail – exhaling at the discomfort and pain. True, a week ago, kneeling down on the ground would have been a one-way trip; even getting out of bed and onto her feet unassisted would have been a stretch. The fact that she could crouch and kneel and get back up afterwards was nothing short of a miracle thanks to the transformation deciding her arthritis was undesirable. Compared to that, the aches and pains of her bones twisting and growing and her body being reshaped by whatever was changing her were nothing; the knowledge that such pains were temporary made them feel insignificant. Even the bullet wound – though it still hurt like a bitch.

Her leg was another matter. Jennifer had done a good enough job of cleaning it, and thankfully, none of the disinfectant had decided that the non-human parts of her body also needed to be killed off. But it was going to need more time to heal, a lot more time. Unsurprisingly, the vet's office did not have any crutches lying around that she could find in the back room they had taken shelter in, so she would have to make do with her tail. The more she used it, the more familiar it became...

...but damned if it wasn't still an alien feeling to her to have a new appendage after ninety years. And now, she had a new set of teeth. At the front they were all sharp and pointy, not at all suited for eating the fruits and vegetables Jennifer had left them with. She did still have grinding molars at the back of her mouth, but it felt like each day when she ran her tongue over the inside of her teeth, either there were more of them or their shapes had changed. Would whatever she was turning into end up being a carnivore? Would she start to hunger for raw meat like a wild animal? Absently, she shifted her tongue within her mouth, noting that the wet appendage had changed its shape to one that was pointed on the end. It was affecting her speech slightly, making her 's' sounds slightly longer like some sort of cartoon depiction of a snake, and there was no telling what else it might cause if it changed further.

What was going to happen to her? Or those two kids, for that matter? Would she ever find her family? And even if she did, would they believe her if she told them who she was? Would she even be able to still talk to them? Would she even still be herself by that time? Frowning, Evelyn

shook her head. She just wanted one last cup of tea before that ended up being a luxury taken away from her for good just like so many other—

Sophia tossed and turned a little more, snapping Evelyn out of her doldrums. The little girl gave a quiet groan and mumbled something quiet in her sleep; normally she wouldn't have been able to hear it, but her improved hearing let her easily pick up the girl's quiet "No... don't..."

Nicholas seemed to have heard it too, though he didn't respond verbally, and instead Evelyn only noticed him move his wing closer to her. Sophia went still briefly, then rolled over again, pushing against Nicholas's wing and making him draw it back a little. "Stop...!" she weakly cried out, rustling hay underneath her with her movements.

"Sophia," Nicholas said through gritted teeth, reaching out and grasping her arm first before blindly moving his hand up to her shoulder, giving her a shake. "Sophia, wake up."

She didn't take much effort to wake, trying to push her brother's arm away at first, then eventually grabbing onto it and holding tightly, gasping and sniffing a bit. "N-Nick...? What..."

"Ssh, it's okay," he told her. "You were having a nightmare."

"Nick, they... they want to hurt us..." Sophia sobbed.

Nicholas winced and clutched his belly with his free arm, but kept the other one close to Sophia. She cried out a little in turn as she felt his pain, grabbing for her belly too, while Evelyn simply grimaced and kept watch. "Who..." Nicholas forced out, "...wants to hurt us?"

"The big people," Sophia answered, taking a breath. "They're hurting you... they'll prod you..."

Nicholas shifted a little closer on the mound of straw to put his arm around her back. "Sophia, they're gone," he told her, pausing a moment as they all winced again. "Our parents... they can't hurt us any more."

"And Jennifer took the cattle prod with her," Evelyn added. "If anyone tries to hurt you, they'll have to go through me."

Sophia looked up at Evelyn through still-bleary eyes, her gaze drifting to her own muzzle, her eyes focusing on the end of it for a moment. She seemed surprised, but Evelyn was sure she would have been surprised too if she had been in that situation, considering how much Sophia's muzzle had grown overnight. "You'll help me?" Sophia mumbled, still seemingly half-asleep as she returned her gaze to Evelyn. "You'll keep the bad people away?"

"I will," Evelyn promised. Sophia settled down a little, so Evelyn continued, "Now, it's time to get up, sleepyhead."

"I'm tired," Sophia complained, reaching up and rubbing at one shoulder. "I kept waking up."

"I know, sweetie," Evelyn consoled her, "But we can't stay here all day. We've got a long way to go, and I don't know about you, but I feel like I could eat an entire buffet and still have room for dessert."

Her remark was met only with a look of confusion from Sophia, who asked, "What's a 'buff-ay'?"

It soon became very clear that they were not going to cover a lot of ground particularly quickly. It didn't help that the road between the town and the city didn't have a sidewalk, forcing them to walk in the road, but there was an unnatural dearth of cars so they didn't have to worry about sharing the road. They had enough to deal with from the ongoing aches and pains of their transformation.

For Nicholas, walking in his stretched socks on the road wouldn't be comfortable, but it was better than going barefoot. Sophia's socks had already given up the ghost due to her more drastic growth, but fortunately Sophia's soles had thickened and grown a layer of unscaled hide suitable for walking on.

Evelyn's injured leg forced her to use her tail to keep the weight off of it, preventing her from walking at a good pace. Her shoulders were changing too, which affected how much she could swing them as she walked, throwing her off of her usual stride. Not that it mattered, since even

though Sophia seemed to have grown quite a bit bigger since Evelyn had first seen her, she was still mentally a small child. Her hips were getting broader and her legs were changing, further hampering how quickly she could move. And Nicholas, being the only one neither injured nor a preschool child, had been given the job of pulling the little cart they had taken from the vet's office to carry the remaining groceries in. Being blind made him a far from ideal candidate, but they were going at such a slow pace that it hardly mattered, and Evelyn continually glanced back as they walked to make sure he didn't stray off of the road. Yet he was following her well enough; perhaps the sound of her tail dragging on the ground was easy for him to follow.

But just because there weren't any cars didn't mean there was nobody else out there. The first time Evelyn saw a group of people heading in the opposite direction, she thought little of it. But the second time, with a group pulling suitcases along, made her a little suspicious. Some groups they went by gave them passing greetings, but many did not, looking exhausted and dirty. Not all of them were human, either, giving her a better idea of what she would turn into: one group had a person who had already been forced into a quadrupedal stance, walking on hide-covered hands and feet with lengthened digits, and another had facial changes even more extensive than Sophia's, whose greeting was a completely unintelligible mixture of clicks, whistles, and other unusual sounds.

Sophia tried to imitate some of the sounds without much success, and Nicholas was incredibly confused by the cacophony. Evelyn wanted to ask them what was going on, but the other group hurried forward, refusing to stop and talk. Had it been some sort of language? Would she start making those noises some day? Were they just trying to talk and having it be garbled by an unfamiliar mouth, or did those changes run deeper – making mental changes and not merely physical ones? It had taken her a long time and a lot of practice to learn to speak English fluently. Yet in just a handful of days it seemed people were speaking a language new to the entire planet...

Evelyn eventually made up her mind. "Stop," she said to Sophia and Nicholas as she saw another group approaching. At the front was a man

much taller than the humans with him, presumably his wife and child. They were untouched by the transformation, yet he clearly was not, forced into wearing a bathrobe due to the tail that almost reached the ground and the bare scaly legs sticking out from under the bathrobe. Evelyn could see they looked like the hind legs of a dog, crouched at the ankles with the heel no longer resting on the ground. Scales had covered the man's throat and chin, preventing any stubble from forming there as there was on his upper lip. Black scales also covered part of his arms, and he barely fit into the bathrobe at all.

Evelyn tried to raise her arm to wave, but couldn't quite reach up as high as she ought to have been able to. Regardless, she gave him the best wave she could manage as they approached. She noticed the woman with him was armed, the handle of a gun sticking conspicuously from the pocket on her jacket, and the woman's hand began to move towards it. "I just want to talk," Evelyn explained, "So don't act like an old woman and a couple of kids are going to rob you."

The man turned back in place, and Evelyn saw he had an ear-fin but only on one side of his head. With a calming gesture he motioned for his apparent wife to put away the gun, and he turned his attention back to Evelyn. "I'm sorry about that, but you can't be too careful," he told her. "I'm afraid we can't spare anything. We barely have enough for ourselves."

"I just want to know why I've seen so many people going your way," Evelyn informed him, cutting to the chase. "We're trying to get to the city. Is there something we should know?"

The man frowned, idly reaching up with one hand and rubbing at part of his face where scales met flesh in discomfort. Discomfort that Evelyn could feel from him. She was never going to get used to that, and yet she didn't really want to find it normal, either. "It's chaos," he told her at last. "Anarchy, even. We're not safe there. Our car got smashed up, so I'm heading to my relatives' place. I have to keep my family safe."

"What's an 'ann-are-key'?" Sophia asked. Now that they had come to a stop, she had sat down at the side of the road to give her feet a rest. Because of her new tail, even though it was small, she had to lean heavily

to one side, resting on one thigh and her hand instead of sitting like a normal human might.

"I'll tell you later, Sophia," Evelyn told her softly, then turned her attention back to the other family. "Is it really that bad?"

The man nodded to her. "The police can't do anything. There were so many riots and people in the streets for days. Our neighbor had two bullets go through her kitchen wall. There's gangs and looters roaming around like they own the place. Or maybe they really do, now." He reached behind him and put an arm around his daughter, only a few years older than Sophia from Evelyn's best guess. "So I'm getting out. You should do the same. You can't replace family."

"I know," Evelyn told him. "And my family is in there somewhere."

"I see," he replied in understanding. "Then I hope they're still safe."

Evelyn muttered quietly, "So do I." Taking a breath, she cast a glance down the road. It was still a long way away yet, especially at their pace. "Thank you for the warning. I'll be careful. Safe travels."

"You too," the man told her, and with the conversation at its end, his group grabbed their things and continued walking.

Evelyn watched them go for a few moments. "Let's take a short break," she murmured, seeing that Nicholas looked a little tired too as he rested on the cart.

She felt a tugging on one of the membranes of her spinal fin running down the length of her tail, and she turned her head to see Sophia gently pulling on it to get her attention. "What's an 'ann-are-key'?" Sophia said, repeating her earlier question.

Evelyn gently shifted her tail away from Sophia, pulling the membrane out of her grip. "It's a bad thing," she mused out loud. "It means people can do whatever they want to each other. It's dangerous."

Sophia looked down at the ground. "Oh," she murmured sadly, and a few moments later she added, "I'm scared."

"I am too," Nicholas agreed. Not that she needed either of them to say it: she could feel it through whatever empathic bond she had formed with them. She thought about that for a moment, her tail-tip idly tapping on the ground. She could feel their high-level emotions, and it seemed like it worked the other way around, too. Perhaps she could use that to help them, somehow.

"Don't be," Evelyn told them, trying to rally them both. She puffed her chest out with confidence, trying to project it to the others – though she had no idea if she was doing it right or not. As she did, she picked up an odd scent, like the ground just after rainfall, but ignored it to focus on the moment. "It'll be more dangerous for them than it will be for us." She raised the end of her tail and thumped it against the road for emphasis. "Having guns didn't do your parents a lot of good, did it? And we keep getting bigger and stronger." She knelt down slightly towards Sophia. "I'll keep you safe, don't worry."

"Do you promise?" Sophia asked, looking upwards hopefully. It seemed to Evelyn that what she had attempted worked, as both of the kids' fears had abated somewhat, their emotions calming.

"I promise," Evelyn answered, and returned the smile Sophia gave her.

After taking a break to rest and eat, they continued onwards. Little else of interest happened other than passing occasional groups, but with what the man she had met earlier had told her, she feared it was merely the calm before the storm.

Nicholas stoically kept up, but Sophia frequently complained of being tired or hurting. Not that Evelyn blamed a child her age for that, but it didn't help. She couldn't do anything to help Sophia with the various aches across her body, but she tried her best to keep talking to Sophia as they walked, asking her about her life before her parents had locked her up – school, her hobbies, and so on.

She'd hoped to try and calm Sophia by talking about 'normal' topics, but it had had the opposite effect, making her angry about how her parents had

treated her and how she'd never been allowed to go see her friends from school. So instead, Evelyn had tried telling Sophia about her life when she was Sophia's age, and how things were different 'back then' – before computers and video games, when most people had a radio instead of a TV, and when she walked to school in Saint-Cirq Lapopie, her hometown which Sophia tried and failed miserably to pronounce the name of herself. Sophia had an endless number of questions, only some of which made no sense, and Nicholas had some questions too, all of which Evelyn was happy to answer. It reminded her of talking to her grandchildren, and helped the time pass more easily.

However, they were still a long way away from the city when the sun started to get low in the sky, and Evelyn grew concerned. They didn't have any camping gear, and nothing more than the blankets they had brought with them to sleep on. She had greatly underestimated how slow they would be walking, and there was no way they would make it to the city before nightfall. If she were alone, she would forge ahead, but with the other two...

Keeping an eye out, she began looking for somewhere that might offer shelter by the side of the road, but the opportunities were few: one gas station in particular had seemed promising right up until Evelyn and Sophia saw armed figures roaming around it, so they passed by that turn-off and kept going along the main road.

Just as it was almost dark, they came close to a small encampment, though calling it such was charitable: there were only two tents and the other residents had only sleeping bags or piles of blankets laid out on the grass. There didn't seem to be any dragons in the group, only unchanged humans, gathered around a small crackling fire they had clearly lit only for warmth as one of them was tending to a portable stove close by.

Evelyn had no idea if they were trustworthy, and studied them as she drew closer. Her first guess was two families, given that there were a few children present and the family resemblance among some of them. However, there were a couple of clear outliers: a man with darker skin and a thick beard staying close to what was presumably his son, lying by the fire and coughing periodically. It was unlikely they would cause trouble, so

she led Sophia and Nicholas towards them. Some of them took notice, and one of the men by the fire, wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, his chin covered in black stubble, gave an obvious look to his side where a hunting rifle was propped up against a pile of their belongings.

"Excuse me," Evelyn said to get their attention once she drew closer, though several of the adults had already been eyeing her as she approached. "Do you know how far it is to the city from here?"

The man with the rifle answered her. "It's still a ways yet," he answered with a bit of a country accent. "You're not gonna get there tonight on foot, that's for sure. S'why we stopped here for the night."

Evelyn gave him a curious look. "You're heading into the city?"

"Yep," he told her. "Tryin' to get to the hospital. We've got sick and injured among us." He gestured towards other members of the group as he said that, keeping his attention on Evelyn, looking at her bandaged wounds. "I don't suppose you folks have any medical supplies with you?"

"I'm afraid we don't," Evelyn said apologetically, shaking her head.

She was going to continue when Sophia cut in with a whining, "I'm tired."

Normally, she would have been annoyed at the interruption, but it seemed to soften the man's expression a bit. "If you folks need somewhere to settle in for the night, you can stay here with us. I'd hate to just send you off on your way in the dark."

"Really?" Evelyn asked as she gave Sophia a reassuring pat on the back, taking care to avoid touching the girl's fin. "We'd be greatly appreciative."

"I'd be lyin' if I said it's not weird at all to see a bunch of half-humans up close like this, but so long as you don't cause any trouble, I won't either," the man clarified. "There's safety in numbers, and, well... We've only got the one gun to protect everyone here. We don't know a whole lot about what's going on with, well..." he gestured towards Evelyn's group vaguely. "...but it wouldn't hurt to have a few of you on our side."

Evelyn tried not to frown too heavily despite how much his comment annoyed her. Did she really look that threatening? But maybe he had a

point. She cast her mind back to the petting zoo: she had been under fire at the time, yes, but still, one swipe of her tail had been all it took to kill two people she had only been trying to scare off. Even if they had deserved it, she was still far stronger than she realized, and more so every day. Perhaps he had every right to be concerned, and she wasn't without doubts of her own.

Still, in the interests of having somewhere relatively safe to sleep, she kept as straight a face as she could and nodded towards him. "Thank you. It's nice to know there's still some gentlemen in the world."

"It ain't nothing," he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Thank you," Nicholas added, though he wasn't facing quite the right direction to look at the man, who took notice.

"I'm over here, kid. Are you blind?"

"Yes," Nicholas answered simply.

"Oh," the man muttered, chastised. "Sorry. I didn't mean no offense."

Evelyn gave Sophia a gentle nudge with her tail, only realizing fully what she had done a moment later. Even her subconscious movements were being adjusted by this transformation she was going through. The thought of her natural behavior changing so much without her realizing it was happening troubled her.

Sophia looked up at Evelyn curiously, staring with her mismatched eyes.

"Say 'thank you' to the nice man, Sophia."

"Thaaank yooou," Sophia intoned, bouncing a little on her feet.

"You're welcome. What's your name, little girl?"

"Sophia!"

"And how old are you?"

"Five!" she answered just as eagerly.

"Five? You're almost up to my shoulders. Biggest five-year-old I've ever seen! Well, come on over and take a seat near the fire, we'll make some

space for you."

Evelyn guided Nicholas into leaving the cart close by so they could gather around to make introductions. The man with the rifle was Richard ("but you can just call me Rick like everyone else does"), and he and his family had been off on a fishing trip with his friend and their family, when the transformations had started. "Nobody we knew, thankfully," he explained with a hasty "No offense" tacked on afterwards, but there had been panic at the campsite regardless when one of the guests began growing scales.

Unsure of whether to go home or not based on the reports from the radio, they had initially remained at the campsite, until a scuffle broke out between the transforming guest and their own family. When gunshots were fired, they fled in their cars, but ran out of gas due to the service stations all being shut down due to 'safety concerns', and had to abandon their cars and go on foot. Along the way, Richard's friend's wife had injured her leg, and they'd also come across and picked up the other man and his son, who was sick with something they couldn't readily identify. So, once they reached the main road, they decided to head for the city to try and find someone who could help them.

"But enough about me," Rick said with an air of finality. "How'd you end up here? That's gotta be the more interesting story."

"Now I haven't the foggiest idea what would make you think that," Evelyn remarked sarcastically, fanning out her ear-fins as far as they would go. She was sitting on the grass, but the digitigrade shape of her legs made it far more comfortable to sit on her haunches like a housepet would. At least the weight of her tail meant she didn't have to hold herself up with her hands, but at the rate she was growing, it was only a matter of time.

She took a glance to her left, where Sophia was sprawled on her side near the fire, looking absolutely exhausted after all the walking they had done. Her neck had grown long enough that even in that position, her chin was flat on the ground as she stared into the crackling fire. On her other side, Nicholas's wings had forced him to settle down further away from the fire, lying on his front on his blanket as he listened to the conversation.

Taking a deep breath, Evelyn turned her attention back to the others who were listening. "It was almost a week ago now. I was off at a care home. The cancer had spread too far, and it was better than being stuck in a hospital – everyone, including me, knew the only way I'd be leaving was in a box."

"Sorry to hear it," Rick mumbled.

Evelyn shook her head and made a dismissive gesture – with her tail, rather than with her arm, as she normally would have. She gave her tail a glance as if it were some other creature, then turned her attention back to Rick. "Don't be, I had a good run. My two beautiful children are both about to retire, and my great-grandkids are growing fast, mischievous little scamps that they are. The less said about my son-in-law, the better, but my daughter can handle herself." She gave a wistful sigh. "I knew they'd all be fine without me, but I wanted to see them one last time before the end... before they could pay one final visit, something peculiar happened. One morning, I felt stronger. I was able to sit up without having to call the nurse over! Something didn't feel right, though, when I did it. Not just because my arthritis wasn't as bad as usual, but I felt some bit of me trapped under my body that shouldn't have been there. ...turns out, it was a tail. Or the beginnings of one, at least."

She raised the last two feet of her tail up, shaking it a little for emphasis before continuing. "It caused quite a stir after the nurse saw it. They kept me locked in my room and brought me meals while they tried to get the phones to work. Finally they got hold of someone important, but it turns out I wasn't the first case. To not belabor the point, they kept me in isolation. And all the while, I just kept getting better. I could stand up again on my own for the first time in a year. I didn't even need my cane! I felt ten years younger, and the tail kept growing. I went to bed and woke up to find it had gotten three feet bigger overnight. The scales kept spreading, I kept getting bigger... but then three things happened."

She paused for a moment and Rick leaned forward to ask, "What were they?" in the moment of quiet.

"First, they told me the CDC was coming out. I didn't want to become some lab experiment. I wanted to go outside and walk around again! Go down the nature trail without having to be in a wheelchair for it! Get some fresh air! But then the second thing happened: the broadcast."

"What broadcast?"

Evelyn tilted her head to the side a little and gave him a skeptical look. "The TV broadcast, son."

Rick shrugged. "We were out at a lodge. It has electricity but no TV. I haven't seen any since we left home. We were off the grid completely! No TV, no radio, no phones, just us and the great outdoors." He gave a sigh. "It was a great trip until we came back and found the whole lodge in a panic."

"Well," Evelyn intoned, leaning forward, "About... I'd say, four days ago now, all the TV stations and channels got taken over. Radios, too. Phones, computers, you name it. Even if it was off at the time, it'd turn itself on! No matter what you did, all you'd get was the same thing: a black screen with big white letters. I remember when that sort of thing was common on TV, but this was no war-time message. ...I confess I've forgotten most of it, but I do remember one line quite clearly: 'Do not harm the Children of the Egg.'"

"Children of the Egg?" Rick repeated questioningly. "What the heck are those?"

"I believe," Evelyn told him with slightly narrowed eyes, "That you're looking at three of them."

With a chagrined look, he lowered his head slightly. "Oh. Sorry, no offense."

"It might behoove you to watch your tongue, young man," Evelyn said flatly.

His wife chimed in, "Oh, honey, I've been telling him that for fifteen years, it's just the way he is."

He chuckled nervously and then motioned for Evelyn to continue. "So what happened with this broadcast?"

"Well, that was all there was to it – just some words on the screen, and a voice reading it out. You know when you call some company and they have a system that tells you to push 1 for this and push 2 for that? It was like that, but even more lifeless. There was a lot of confusion, and it didn't take long for people to start asking questions. Who sent it? Did it have a deeper meaning? They kept asking me, as if I was supposed to somehow know everything about it just because I'd grown scales and a tail. I had to keep telling them: I don't know any more than you. I've got nothing special going on except what you can see. And I believed it... until the third thing happened: I heard someone in my head. Or perhaps, not heard... but *felt*." She paused for a moment to choose her words, but was uninterrupted this time. "It wasn't words, but emotions. Feelings. Someone was hurt, and afraid, and in need of help. I didn't know it at the time, but that someone was this little tyke right here."

Evelyn reached over and gently set a hand on Sophia's side. "Huh?" Sophia asked, raising her head up without moving her body from where she lay. The distinctly inhuman movement visibly unsettled the campers, and Evelyn saw them lean back reflexively. As for Sophia, it didn't seem like she'd been paying attention, but she was tired, so Evelyn couldn't really blame her.

"Don't you mind, sweetheart," Evelyn told her gently before looking back at the others. "I tried to talk... well, *feel* back at her, but I don't think it worked. I knew the general direction she was in, though. I could... 'see' her, but not with my eyes, if that makes any sense? It was like following a distant light on a foggy night. By that time, I could walk around, and more importantly, I wouldn't fit in my room much longer. Just getting out the door was a struggle. The nurses wanted to stop me, of course, but I told them that I was going to leave, and that's that – when you go from a terminal patient to a terror that towers over them in just a few days, people know better than to get in your way, apparently. I kept following that voice – those feelings, rather – until I found these two. Held in cages by their parents along with an innocent woman. I broke them out, the woman patched me up, and I decided to take them into the city to try and find my family. I know they're in there somewhere, I've just got to find them."

Rick rocked back and forth in his seat. "What happened to their parents?"

Evelyn lifted her gaze a little, fixing him with a hard stare, the fins on her back and head bristling. "They started shooting at me." Lifting her tail up higher, she slammed it against the ground, shaking everyone a little bit and making nearby loose objects rattle. "I didn't take kindly to that."

An awkward silence fell over the camp, and Evelyn noticed Rick's hand move subtly towards his rifle. "Now I know what you're all thinking," Evelyn spoke up. "She's dangerous! She's going to hurt us! And let me tell you that as long as you don't do anything stupid, like say, point a rifle at me, you have nothing to be afraid of." Rick shrank back a little under her gaze, returning his hand to his lap. "I have no desire to see anyone get hurt, much less do the hurting myself. But..." Lowering her voice to a menacing growl, she went on, "*Je le jure devant Dieu*, I will not let anyone or anything harm them."

Her words had their desired effect, and silence pervaded long enough for her to add, "...they've suffered enough already."

"You've made yourself crystal clear, ma'am," Rick replied after a moment. "Rest assured, I'm just looking out for my family." Rick seemed convinced, but the other man near him was giving her a suspicious look. She'd have to watch out for him.

"As am I," Evelyn replied. "These two are not related to me by birth, but whatever is happening to us has brought us together. I will protect them as if they were my own flesh and blood. And so long as you don't do anything foolish, I'll protect you as well."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied, though he quickly turned to the man who had been side-eyeing Evelyn to change the subject.

Evelyn didn't mind ending the conversation there. It was getting late regardless. After a minute or two, she gently shook Sophia's arm. "Let's go to bed, Sophia."

"Okay," she said in a quiet and slightly grumbly voice. Evelyn didn't need their empathic link to know that the girl felt tired and sore all over, but she

helped Sophia to get up and gather up her blankets so she could move over to where Nicholas was lying.

Tiredly, Sophia laid out her blanket haphazardly next to Nicholas's, having to push away his wing a bit to get close enough. He obligingly lifted it and folded it, seeming to have some better control over the new appendage than he had previously, though his movements were still slow. Sophia sprawled out on her blanket after she had put it down, resting against her brother's side, and he lowered his wing when he felt her there, draping it over her like a blanket as he had done at the veterinarian's office.

Evelyn watched them, feeling a mixture of bemusement at seeing the distinctly inhuman behavior on the two of them, and also something else. A vaguely familiar feeling, though one she hadn't felt in a very, very long time. It was as she had told Rick: they weren't related to her, but for all practical purposes, they were her children now, and seeing them safe and relatively comfortable stirred something up inside of her.

Only partially cognizant of her actions, Evelyn put down her blanket and sat down on it before lying down in that same digitigrade stance, much like a dog or cat would. Couchant, it was called, wasn't it? Carefully, slowly, she curled her massive tail around the two children protectively, as if to shield them. Even with how much both of them had grown, her tail had lengthened too, and was long enough to almost fully encompass the two of them as it lay on the grass.

The humans around the fire were giving her odd looks, but she couldn't care less. Something about the situation felt right; having the other two with her so closely, and feeling her tail brushing up against them, was comforting in a way she couldn't quite put a finger on. Despite the aches and pains over her body, it didn't take her long to drift off to sleep.

Evelyn's soreness was not aided in any way by sleeping outdoors with only a blanket to separate her from the ground, but she didn't feel as bad as she would have expected. Her sleep had been rough, interrupted frequently by aches or pains deep within her. What she wouldn't have given for a shot of

morphine! But for all she knew it would be a deadly poison to a creature like her.

She had grown overnight again, that much was immediately obvious: the moment she opened her eyes, she saw the tip of her tail in front of her face, now long enough to fully encircle the other two. It moved – or rather, she moved it – and as she watched it sweep against the grass and dirt, she felt it too, a wondrous sensation of each blade of grass brushing up against this part of her that had not been there a week ago. It was astounding to see an appendage that originated from her lower back reach so far around, and she lifted the tip of it up and set it back down as she watched in wonderment. She'd gotten a lot better at controlling it, as was to be expected with all the practice she'd been getting. Whenever she got wings of her own, would it be the same?

That wasn't all that had changed. When she raised her head on its long neck, she could see higher than she had the previous night. She flexed her hands, looking at them, and could tell they had grown larger. Her tail no longer ached all over, just in a few spots here and there instead – had it finally reached its full size? She hoped so, given how immense it was. It had to be a good thirty-five feet long. As she twisted her neck to look at her tail, she also saw that her wings had grown too, with additional bones covered by thin flesh and black scales growing between the main bones to make up the 'fingers' of her wings – they were starting to look recognizably like Nicholas's, yet still lacked the membranes.

She turned her gaze towards Nicholas, who still had a wing spread over Sophia like a blanket. She was acutely aware of their own discomforts too, feeling them alongside her own yet able to pick them out distinctly. It astounded her how well they were holding up, given the circumstances, especially Sophia. If it had been Evelyn's own daughter, back when she was five, she would have sat and cried and moped constantly in such a situation. But not Sophia. Was it some effect of the transformation, or did she have a stronger will than other girls her age before that? On the other hand, she could only guess at what their parents had put the two of them through...

Nicholas himself had clearly undergone a growth spurt during the night, judging by the sudden increase in his size relative to Evelyn's, even with her own growth. His blonde hair lay on the grass, the scalp that it had previously covered now scaled over smoothly. His neck was lengthening like hers had done, and was obviously just as sore as hers: not only could she feel it through him, but he was already awake and rubbing at it with one hand, taking care not to scratch himself with the claws that had grown in at the ends of his fingers. Some scratch marks along the flesh of his neck indicated he had already made that mistake once. His feet also seemed to have grown suddenly as well, so it was a good thing he had left his shoes at home, for his socks now lay in tatters on the ground. The arches of his feet and his toes had both lengthened considerably, which would perhaps make walking easier if his weight was spread over a larger area.

Sophia next to him had grown also, though not as much as her brother. She, too, had lost her hair, with her scales spreading up from her brow to cover most of the space, and her ears stretched most of the way into ear-fins like Evelyn had on the side of her head. Evelyn could see scales on Sophia's back now as well, spreading around from her sides, and the girl's tail had grown longer as well, lifting up the back of her skirt, which barely seemed to fit her at all now. Her legs seemed disproportionately strong for someone her age, covered in thick muscle, the scales taking their time to come down from her hips. In contrast, the scales spreading down her arms had made substantial progress, all the way down to her wrists, her arms larger again...

Evelyn's attention was suddenly drawn to the absence of pain in her arm. Turning her head, she looked at her left arm, and saw that her upper arm had grown scales of its own, though they were raised and spiky much like on the rest of her body. Yet surprisingly, where they had grown over the bullet wound in her arm, her flesh and muscle had mended and healed. That wasn't to say there was no trace, however, as where the scar would have been, the scales were a bright silver in color, and when Evelyn lifted and turned her arm to look at the other side, the exit wound had healed similarly, with more jagged edges around the edge of the silver circle.

They couldn't stay lying there forever, so Evelyn gently shook Nicholas. He grumbled a little, and she felt just how sore he was around his joints, particularly at his shoulders and hips. He remained where he was and she shook him again, a little more insistently this time. "Time to get up," Evelyn told him.

He groaned and clung to Sophia a little, making her wriggle. "I'm still tired... I barely slept," he murmured.

"I know, I didn't have it any better," Evelyn empathized, "And it doesn't feel like Sophia did either. But we can't stay here all day long. We'll get through it. Now, up and at 'em."

As he tried to stand up, he let out a cry of surprise and lost his balance before falling back onto the blanket, his wings flaring out in reflex but not stopping him from ending up tumbling onto his side.

"Nick!" Sophia gasped out in concern, getting up onto her knees and reaching out towards her brother.

"What...?" Nicholas groaned out. He tried to rise again, more slowly. Evelyn was able to see this time what was wrong: his limbs had shifted overnight, changing the angle of his arms and legs, and they did not bend the same way they used to. It could only mean...

"Nicholas," Evelyn told him firmly, "Don't stand up like that. Get on all fours."

"On...?" he began, then took a breath and slowly tried to do as asked. He was able to lift his upper body, and then his hindquarters, the blanket around his hips showing a lump at the back that indicated the beginnings of a tail. But with his legs the way they were now, the blanket was just getting in the way. His feet remained flat on the ground, yet his legs had not yet changed to the digitigrade shape that Evelyn's were, making it awkward for him to stand in such a position.

"I can't... I can't get up higher," Nicholas groaned out, spreading his wings and bumping them into both Evelyn and Sophia as he did. "What's happening to me?" he asked, the fear in his voice matching the fear that Evelyn could detect from him. Sophia, in turn, felt even more concerned,

reaching out and holding onto his arm with a worried expression on her face.

Evelyn tried to think of a good way to explain it to him, and Sophia chimed in. "You'll be okay! You're just standing like the animals do!" she blurted out. "I bet you can kick real hard, just like the donkey!"

"Don't be afraid," Evelyn told him, trying to be a little more comforting. "Soon, Sophia and I will be just like you. It's part of what you're changing into."

"I don't understand..." Nick moaned out quietly.

Evelyn glanced over at the humans who were up and about. The younger ones were staring in wonder at the scene before them, but the adults were less enthusiastic. Confusion and fear on most, and Rick's friend wore his revulsion plain on his face. Was this what it was like to be an animal at a zoo? "Just try not to worry about it," Evelyn insisted, turning her attention to Nicholas. "I know it's frightening for you. But we have to adapt to whatever these changes do to us."

He didn't seem terribly convinced.

Frowning, Evelyn looked over at Sophia, who stared back at her in wonder as she sat back down. Puzzled, Evelyn gave her a strange look, but Sophia answered the question before it was asked, raising her arm and pointing to Evelyn's face: "Your eyes look different!"

"They do?" Evelyn asked, confused.

"Yeah!" Sophia said, seeming a little excited. "They look, um..." she trailed off, staring off vacantly, idly pawing at the ground with one hand before suddenly blurting out, "Like a cat!"

Curious, Evelyn raised her head as high as she could on her elongated neck. She peered off into the distance, and while it was hard to tell, it seemed like she could see further than she could the day before – distant shapes were less blurry, and things felt sharper and more refined. Was it merely the transformation undoing the deterioration of her sight with age, or was there more to it than that?

Despite their changes, the morning routine was largely uneventful. The sick boy did not seem to have improved any, but had not grown any worse. Rick's friend's wife still had a bad leg, but she had an improvised crutch fashioned from a branch, not unlike what Evelyn had done at the petting zoo. Although they were not willing to share their limited food supplies, Rick and the others were willing to at least let Evelyn's group use the fire and cooking implements. Evelyn did her best, grateful that her hands were still – for now, at least – human in shape and function, and she was acutely aware of not just her own ravenousness but that of the other two dragons. Their supplies would not last very long at the rate they were going through them. Would the humans be willing to trade in exchange for the protection offered to them...?

She had to shake herself out of such thoughts as she ate, realizing upon looking back how strange they were. Already dividing their group into 'humans' and 'dragons', even though she had been just as human about a week ago. Perhaps it was not merely her body, but also her mind that was changing. Not merely subconscious movements and behaviors, but the way she saw people around her. And also, how she saw herself.

Furthermore, the moment she had risen from where she was lying, she encountered a new problem: the straps on her hospital gown had finally given up the ghost overnight, no doubt from her shifting about trying to get comfortable despite her aches. Only the strap around her neck remained, but without a way to stop it from getting blown about, it would be a liability more than anything else. So, she simply discarded it. Perhaps some influence of the transformation kept her from being too self-conscious about walking around naked, yet in a way the scales covering her, while a part of her body, made her feel like she wasn't truly exposed. Besides, she was mostly an overgrown lizard, now. It hardly mattered if people saw some more smooth black scales. That thought gave her pause a moment later; was that really her reasoning, or some influence from the changes themselves...?

Nicholas was in a similar boat: he'd tried draping the blanket over his back half, but it hadn't worked very well, so he had instead donated it to Sophia. Her skirt barely fit at all and the medical tape was already coming off its

Velcro strap, so she used the blanket as a makeshift skirt instead. It would have been far too large for her not long ago, but with how much she had grown, it worked reasonably well.

Sophia, despite the hunger that Evelyn could feel, seemed to be very distracted by something, staring off into the sky over and over for several seconds at a time. Evelyn tried to see what she was staring at, but even with her improved sight, she couldn't pick out anything in particular – at least, nothing that Sophia seemed to be fixated on. She could certainly see and identify birds at a much greater distance now.

"Is something bothering you, Sophia?" Evelyn eventually asked.

"Can't you hear it?" Sophia answered with a question of her own.

Evelyn gave her another puzzled look. "Hear what?" she asked, fanning out her ear-fins, but hearing nothing new.

Sophia looked and felt frustrated to Evelyn, even though she couldn't make a human-like frown: her eyes narrowed, the corners of her mouth turned down, and her fins lowered a bit. "The... feeling!" she said vaguely to attempt an answer.

It didn't really answer the question, but Evelyn got the idea: Sophia must have been feeling something, or perhaps someone, just like Evelyn could feel Sophia and Nicholas. But Sophia seemed to have gotten good at identifying whose feelings were whose. So was there something new...?

Evelyn closed her eyes with the intent to focus, but immediately realized she had no idea what to focus on. So instead, she tried to clear her thoughts, thinking of nothing, simply listening, and not just with her ears...

There. She heard it. Or rather, felt it.

Her fins flared as she located it. Yet, whatever 'it' was, it was very vague and abstract. Some sort of emotions and feelings, reminding Evelyn of those that had driven her to leave the care home, yet they definitely weren't coming from Nicholas or Sophia. It could only be another dragon.

Once she had detected those foreign feelings, Evelyn focused on them. It was a wordless communication, and yet as unusual and alien as it felt to

her, she felt like she could understand it on some subconscious level – perhaps thanks to the changes that had already happened to her body. There was a great feeling of peace and tranquility and calmness being sent to her, one that made her relax slightly where she stood. Other sensations, too; the feeling of grass underfoot, the smell of pine needles, the sound of a burbling stream. The feeling of being outdoors, with complete freedom, with nothing but nature in every direction for miles...

Then, suddenly, those sensations were replaced by something else. An emotion, a strong one: a welcoming feeling, akin to that of having an old friend show up at your door. Then it multiplied, blossoming into the sensation of being surrounded by friends and family, all welcome and happy together.

The feelings shifted once more, but this time it was not an emotion that Evelyn felt. It was a pull. Not physically, but mentally, as though it was a direction that was being communicated to her. As she focused, that direction seemed to be in the way they were already heading, towards the city. Keeping her eyes closed, she shifted and tilted her head, bending her long neck about, getting a better feel for the direction before it disappeared.

She had once heard that birds always knew the direction of magnetic north – was this that same sort of feeling? It was as if she had felt a guiding presence, if only for a brief moment. Like a lighthouse, perhaps, though it felt more as if she had been lost and then had taken out a compass, and suddenly knew which direction to go on. She 'listened' once more, but the message – if that was what it was – did not repeat.

"What was that?" Sophia asked.

To Evelyn's surprise, Nicholas spoke. "It was some kind of message," he said quietly. Evidently he had heard it too. "Someone was trying to tell us something. Where did it come from?"

Evelyn's tail-tip thumped against the ground in thought for a few moments before she realized that it was doing so, and she held it still. "One moment," she said, before turning her head towards the humans, who had gone back to their own preparations. "Rick!"

He looked up from the bag he was rummaging through and over to her.
"Yeah?"

"Did you hear something just a moment ago? A sort of... mental message?"

Rick raised an eyebrow to give her a very skeptical look. "No ma'am, I did not," he answered. "Any of you hear anything like that?" he asked his companions.

A collection of negative responses were given, and he turned his head back to Evelyn. "You're just hearing things."

"All three of us?" Evelyn insisted.

"Then it must be, I dunno, some kinda egg-children thing," he suggested with a shrug. "Are you picking up radio signals now?"

"She does have satellite dishes on the sides of her head," Rick's friend joked grimly.

Evelyn gave a sigh and looked away before rolling her eyes, her fins flattening against her head and back. "Never mind, carry on," she told him, looking back at the other two children. Nicholas had chosen to lie back down on the ground, perhaps for comfort, but Sophia was rubbing at her wrists where scales met flesh.

"Jennifer's radio didn't work. It was all, krrrrrrrsshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh." Sophia did her best to mimic the sound of static, but her draconic muzzle gave the sound an extra rumbling to it.

"That feeling just now wasn't the radio," Evelyn told her firmly. "It must have been another person like us."

Sophia's eyes widened a bit in awe, and her muzzle hung open a little.

"Another dragon?" she asked excitedly, bouncing in place on her toes.

"Where are they? Who is it? I wanna see!"

"I don't know who they were, but..." Evelyn lifted her head and stared off in the direction she had felt communicated to her. "...I think I know where we can go to find them."

Sophia was still excited. "I wanna try and talk to them!" she declared, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes. Evelyn was just about to ask what Sophia was trying to do when she felt it instead: a feeling of... friendliness? A youthful sort, certainly, and one that Evelyn hadn't felt in several decades: the excitement of seeing someone she wanted to befriend and attempting to make an introduction.

"What are you trying to do?" Nicholas asked, perhaps feeling what Sophia was doing as well.

"Talk to the dragon!" Sophia replied excitedly, hopping around a bit in excitement. "I want to say hi!"

"What dragon? I can only sense you two..."

"That other dragon!" Sophia insisted unhelpfully. Evelyn couldn't help but smile a little bit; Sophia's first instinct at meeting this strange far-away person was to try and befriend them.

Her smile disappeared and was replaced with a shocked expression when she felt an emotion come back.

Similarly to before, she felt someone else's sensation of welcoming a friend, and then the pull of the direction again. Was it an answer? An acknowledgement? Had Sophia really sent a message of her own? And if Sophia could, then could she?

Sophia giggled, bouncing in place again. "They heard me!" she said gleefully. "They said hi!"

Evelyn blinked in surprise. "They spoke?"

"Uhh... no..." Sophia admitted, then forged on, "But I felt it! It felt like a 'hi'!" She gave a little huff and folded her arms; evidently, that was the best explanation Evelyn was going to get from her.

But could she do the same? There was only one way to find out. Evelyn closed her eyes and focused. What was she meant to do? She tried to think of the direction she had been sent, and then repeated over and over in her head a short message: *Je m'appelle Evelyn Archambeau. Peux-tu m'entendre?* She soon realized that it was highly unlikely the other person

knew French and tried again: *My name is Evelyn Archambeau. Can you hear me?*

However, there was no response. Evelyn frowned. Perhaps she was trying something too complex? The feelings that had reached her were just that: feelings and emotions and sensations. Not words or sentences. So, drawing in another breath, she prepared to try again. But what emotion to send? She tried to focus on thinking about that, only to be distracted by her tail tapping against the grass subconsciously. Despite the thickness and spikiness of her scales, she could feel the grass against her somehow. Perhaps she could send that feeling, if only as a test...?

She tried to focus on the direction she assumed the other dragon was in, as well as the feeling of grass on her tail. But she had little idea what she was doing, and her attempts to project the sensation were not met with any reply – if they even went anywhere.

"Um..." Sophia piped up, looking up at Evelyn. "What're you doing?"

If Sophia couldn't feel it, then the stranger certainly couldn't. "Nothing," Evelyn grumbled. Perhaps the ability would come to her in time. After all, most of Sophia's head had been changed, while for Evelyn, she only had those ear-fins – and eyes too, if Sophia was to be believed.

"You all right over there?" Rick asked, and she looked over to him. "You were lookin' like you were a million miles away."

"Just lost in thought," Evelyn said, then forced a small chuckle. "When you get to my age, your mind starts wandering, you know?" she remarked self-deprecatingly.

"Fair, fair," he admitted.

"By the way," she quickly continued, "How well do you know the wilderness around here?"

At first he gave her a questioning look, then grinned wide and stood up from his seat on the ground. "Pretty darn well, I've been going on huntin' and fishin' trips for years," he boasted. "Why?"

"Is there a place where I would find..." she cast her memory back, recalling the sensations that had been broadcast to her. "...pine trees... and rivers..." without thinking, she used her tail to gesture, pointing in the direction she had felt communicated to her. "...somewhere in that direction?"

"Oh, that's easy!" the man told her confidently. "Gotta cut through the city, but keep going thataway and you'll come to the national park. Can't do any hunting there out of season, but it's a beautiful place."

Evelyn lowered her voice. "That must be it," she told Sophia and Nicholas. "That's where that other dragon is, at the national park."

"What's a 'nah-shun-ul'?" Sophia asked.

Evelyn stared off into the distance again, ignoring her tapping tail this time. "Why don't we take you there and you can see for yourself?"

Chapter 8

Sophia had never walked so much before. Strangely, though, it wasn't her feet that hurt – despite having gone so far without her shoes, the thick black bottoms of her feet seemed perfectly fine for walking on. Not only that, but her legs seemed a lot stronger than they had been before, as she had found when she tried to jump to look over a fence and had gone up higher than she expected. For a little bit she had bounced around gleefully, until she tired herself out.

No, her feet were fine, but the rest of her ached: her arms, her legs, her... well, everything, really. The only bits that only felt a little sore were her muzzle and the 'spy-nul' fin on her back. And she was getting so big! She'd barely noticed it at first, but with the other humans around to compare herself too, she realized she had grown really tall. She would be able to go on ALL the rides at the theme park next time! She'd had to finally throw away her shirt, though, since it kept pressing on the fin uncomfortably and it was already half torn to bits anyway.

Nick wasn't doing so well, though. She could feel how much he was hurting having to walk on his hands and feet. Since he couldn't pull the cart any more, the big man that Evelyn kept talking to had taken it instead, and the other people had loaded some things onto it to make them easier to carry. They were still going pretty slow, with Evelyn using her tail and one leg to walk on, and now also the sick kid who was being carried on his father's back.

Sophia had been pretty disappointed when they had reached the sign welcoming them to the city, and yet, they still seemed like they weren't in a city at all – they had kept going along the edge of the road with only grass and trees, but at least they could see all the tall buildings off in the distance. For a while there had only been gas stations and motels and other little buildings all by themselves, sometimes with a parking lot. But then they started to come across houses. At first they were really small ones, really spaced out from one another, with no sidewalk by the roads. Eventually they started looking a bit more like the houses Sophia had seen in the town near her old home: orange sloping roofs, white painted fronts, all two floors tall and in neat rows.

Yet even with so many houses, there was nobody outside. Even on quiet days in the town when her parents had taken her in the car to go grocery shopping, there was always some noise in the background. Usually cars, or dogs barking, or someone running a lawnmower. But here it was mostly so quiet it reminded her of nighttime at the petting zoo: just the rustling of trees in the breeze, and instead of insect noises she could sometimes hear birds either in the trees or sitting on power lines. Now and then, though, the quiet was broken by far-off noises, loud enough to be heard even from such a great distance: gunshots and explosions that echoed for longer. Evelyn would often stop when she heard one, and Sophia would see her looking around warily and wiggling her ear-fins, before motioning for them to continue moving again.

That didn't mean there were no signs of people at all, though. Once in a while there would be brief movement at a window when someone inside tried to peek through the curtains or blinds. Sometimes lights would turn off as they went by. Some of the houses that had porches had placed big objects to block the stairs leading up to the front door, and a few houses had nailed boards over the inside of the windows. Sophia wasn't sure why she was suddenly able to see the people so well through the tiny gaps in their blinds or curtains when she tried to really look at them – it had never worked before – and the humans traveling with them could never see what she saw. Evelyn did, though, but she told Sophia not to pay any mind to the "onlookers," whoever those were.

"Stop," Evelyn suddenly said from the front of the group. She kept her head facing forward as she turned her lower body to hold up one big hand towards the group behind her, the end of her tail curling up as well in a secondary gesture. It looked really silly. "I hear something."

Nicholas, Sophia, and the humans all came to a stop. "Hear what, now?" Rick asked her.

"Ssh," Evelyn insisted, sounding a bit like a hissing snake. Sophia could see the long black sail-looking fins on the side of Evelyn's head wiggling a bit. Sophia had some of her own now, and she tried wiggling them herself, but she couldn't figure out how, so she reached up with her hands and poked at them, wiggling them directly that way.

There was a distant sound she could hear, but it was hard to make it out. It reminded her a bit of the announcement system at the zoo that her parents had used to announce when they were closing – or rather, what she heard when it went off while she was indoors, because it sounded so distant and muffled and completely unintelligible.

"It sounds like an announcement," Evelyn told the group after a few moments. "But I can't make out what it is. Whatever it is, it sounds like it's moving."

"Moving? On a truck, maybe?" Rick offered as a suggestion.

"Maybe. Let's keep going and see if we can hear it better."

A thought occurred to Sophia. "What if it's an ice cream truck?" she asked, her fins wiggling in excitement. She was momentarily annoyed that they seemed happy to move on their own, but she couldn't get them to move when she actually wanted them to.

Evelyn gave her a firm look. "It's not an ice cream truck."

"Aww..."

She followed along grumpily as they started moving again. Now she wanted ice cream. Maybe they could find some. They didn't have a fridge, but that would just mean they'd have to eat it all right away, and she could help with that.

Soon they reached streets with real sidewalks, which meant they didn't have to walk in the road. As they progressed, she overheard one of the people behind her say they were in the "suburbs". Sophia didn't know what that was – it sounded a bit like 'submarine', and some of the buildings had little metal pipes on the top that kind of looked like the ones that stuck out the top of submarines, but she couldn't see any similarity otherwise. It wasn't just houses any more – there were shops and restaurants too, which had big piles of trash bags either next to them or out front, and lots of them really stank. She made faces each time they had to go past one.

It didn't look very nice, though. She saw a lot of broken windows, and some places had their doors left open a bit. Words she couldn't read had

been spray-painted on a few of the buildings, and she kept seeing some symbol that looked like a triangle with an eyeball. At one point they walked past a car that was all gray and black and smelled really weird, and when Sophia peeked in the broken windows she saw that the inside was all burnt up.

Evelyn stopped them again when they heard the garbled sound off in the distance getting louder. It was still hard to hear, but Sophia was able to make out some of it, though there were a lot of big words, and the voice was really flat and boring. It sounded like a news report on the TV. Whatever it was, it definitely meant there wasn't any ice cream in her near future.

"Hmm," Evelyn hummed after some time listening to the message.

"What is it?" Rick asked her. "Could you hear it?"

"Yes. Couldn't you?"

He shook his head. "It's a real mess from this far away, can't make out a damn thing."

"Same for me," Nicholas added. "I can hear it, but I can't understand the words."

Sophia saw Evelyn's sail-like fins wiggle again. Nick didn't have any, so maybe that was why he couldn't hear it? "I caught almost all of it. It's the police, they're saying that residents are to shelter in place and stay indoors."

"Are we gonna get in trouble?" Sophia asked, concerned.

"Who knows? We're not residents. And some of us are trying to return home," Evelyn answered, inclining her head towards Rick and the others traveling with them. "Besides, I think they have more important things to be worrying about."

She said that while looking off to the side at a nearby building, and Sophia followed her gaze. There was a big cardboard sign in the window, and Sophia stared at it intently as she tried to read it. However, other than an "I" in the middle of it and something that was either a "2" or a "Z", she

couldn't read what it said. The windows next to the sign looked like they had been broken, so she tried to look inside, but it was dark and she couldn't see much more than the shelves.

"What does that sign say?" Sophia asked Evelyn, pointing with one hand. As she did, she noticed the black scales had spread across her wrists and were just starting to grow up the bottom of her hands, and she stared at them a little bit. Fear started to creep into her mind: would she end up with claws? Would she turn into a monster after all? Would she end up becoming a beast like her parents had said, even if she didn't want to?

"It says, 'Don't loot, I have 2 children.'" Evelyn answered. Before Sophia could ask what it meant, Evelyn continued in a grumble, "Fat lot of good it did them. There's always some thieves looking to take advantage of a crisis."

"This used to be such a nice part of town, too," Rick lamented with a sigh. "I'm startin' to think we should have just stayed out in the woods!"

Several blocks down the road they began to pass by homes and businesses that had barricaded themselves with wooden planks and boards put up over the ground floor windows. Some of them had messages painted or sprayed on that Sophia had to ask Evelyn to read, and then in most cases to explain. "Go away" or "Leave us alone" was simple enough that she knew what they meant, but "Looters will be SHOT" she didn't, and Evelyn just told her that it meant they should stay away. "They are watching," "They did this," and "It was THEM," all accompanied by the triangle-eyeball, were easy enough for Sophia to read. But when Sophia asked who 'they' was, neither Evelyn nor anyone else seemed to know the answer.

After another few blocks they came to the corner of a big field, mostly surrounded by a chain link fence. It reminded Sophia a lot of her school, but it was bigger. However, the grass field behind it was covered in colorful tents, and she ran up to the chain link fence and clung to it as she stared through it, accidentally bending the metal inwards from the new strength she kept forgetting she had. So many tents! All in different shapes and sizes and styles and colors! And there were lots of people around too, sometimes walking about but usually sitting near their tents.

"Look, look!" she called out, though Evelyn and the others were already making their way over. "We can stay here!"

"No, Sophia, we can't," Evelyn gently scolded her after looking out over the field for a moment.

"Why nooooooot?" Sophia demanded, turning her head and looking at Evelyn with one eye.

"What's going on? Where are we?" Nicholas asked.

"It's a refugee camp," Evelyn explained to both of them, but Sophia didn't get it. "It's not safe for us there."

"What's a 'ref-oo-gee'?" Sophia asked, but Evelyn didn't answer, and she grew more frustrated. Even though she wasn't actively trying to make it happen, the fin on her back and the scales on her body stood up a bit.

"Now hold your horses a moment," Rick piped up, raising an arm and pointing. "Look there by the school. That's not a tent."

Sophia looked where he was pointing. There was some kind of stall set up that reminded her a bit of the farmer's market in town she'd seen a couple times: it had a table and several poles holding up a cover. A few people in bright white clothes were there taking stuff out of boxes and bringing it over to hand out among the tents. A big van with some logo on it Sophia hadn't seen before was parked nearby, its rear doors left open. The logo had a circle of hands of different colors around a globe, and a bunch of words that Sophia couldn't read that didn't even look like English.

Evelyn stared into the distance, craning her head forward a little. "I think those are aid workers," she said after a moment. "They might be able to help us."

"See! Told you!" Sophia called out.

"They might be able to help us, but we still can't stay here," Evelyn insisted, and Sophia huffed, making a deeper sound than she usually did that surprised her when she heard it. She made the sound a few more times experimentally until Evelyn shushed her.

Again they made their way along the road to the entrance of the school at the far side of the street they were on. As they went up the street entrance into the school towards the parking lot, some of the 'aid workers' spotted them, and one came over. It was a man with very dark skin and short black hair wearing all-white clothes, blue gloves, and a blue mask over his lower face, reminding Sophia of a doctor, except that he didn't have one of the listening-thingies around his neck or the round mirror on his head.

"Howdy there!" Rick called out to the man. "Do you think you could help us out?"

The man gave a quick look over their group and spoke in a deep voice. "I'm sorry, but we do not have anything for victims of the transformation at this site."

Sophia wanted to ask what a transformation was, but the adults kept talking. "I didn't think a cure was terribly likely," Evelyn muttered. "How would one even cure... this?" She flexed her partly-grown wings, spreading the long bony bits. Turning her attention back to the aid worker, she went on, "I'm looking for my family. Have either a Pascal Archambeau or a Joan Crane come this way?"

"I will check for you," the aid worker replied.

"We could use some help, too," Rick went on, gesturing to himself and the other humans. "My buddy's wife hurt her leg."

The tanned man that had been traveling with them came forward and pushed past Rick to speak up. "My son is sick. Please help him."

The aid worker looked at them both and nodded. "We don't have much medicine here, but we'll see what we can do. Come with me."

"Oh, thank you," the man with the sick child said gratefully.

"You all just wait here, we'll be right back," Rick told the others. His friend helped his wife to her feet, supporting her from the side as they followed the worker, and Rick went along with them.

Sophia watched them go. She could see them really well even as they got far away from her, and as she tried to listen to what the people in white

clothes were saying, she could feel the fins on the sides of her head wiggling a bit on their own. It was a lot of big words and boring stuff though, just like every other conversation she tried to listen in on, so she quickly lost interest and looked around instead. Several of the people in the tents gave them suspicious looks, and some looked afraid, especially of Evelyn, with many of them going back into their tents. Sophia looked around, but she couldn't see any other dragons or part-dragons around.

Eventually the humans returned, with a different aid worker trailing them and holding a clipboard. "Well, I've got good news and bad news," Rick announced as he got closer. Sophia saw he was carrying several bottles of water under his arms, and when he tried to put them down gently they slipped out and fell all over the grass. "Good news is, I told them what happened to us and they gave us some water. Got one for each of us and two for the half-dragons, you probably need more of it the way you're growing."

"And the bad news?" Evelyn inquired. She began to hunch over to pick up one of the bottles, only to wince as she tried to bend her injured leg, making Nicholas and Sophia gasp out in pain as well. Rick obligingly reached down and grabbed a couple of the bottles to hand to her, and she in turn passed two of them to Nicholas, who sat down so that he could try to open one. He looked really silly, kind of like a dog, but Sophia didn't laugh; she could see him wince and felt a sharp discomfort from him as he sat with his weirdly-shaped lower body. He fumbled a little with the cap on his bottle, but eventually managed to twist it open and carefully bring it to his mouth to drink from.

"They gave Jimmy's wife a splint for her leg, but they can't help Amar's son other than with the water and some extra blankets," Rick grumbled, grabbing a water bottle and tossing it to his son. "They don't think he has anything immediately life-threatening, at least. But they say their main camp is further north from here on the other side of the river. If we head over that way, they should be able to help him. It's a long way on foot but it's our best shot."

"I hope you got some better directions than that."

The aid worker, a young yet haggard-looking woman with red hair, spoke up. "It's at the football stadium, it'll be easy to find." She glanced over the group and continued, "Was there someone who was asking about their relatives...?"

Evelyn swallowed a mouthful of water and spoke up. "That would be me."

The red-headed woman looked at Evelyn with mild surprise, but quickly composed herself. "Good afternoon. Unfortunately, I'm sorry to say that neither a Pascal Archambeau or a Joan Crane have come this way."

Sophia saw Evelyn's ear-fins and bony wings sag slightly. "I see. It was worth a try." Straightening up, she went on, "If you do come this way, could you let them know that Evelyn Archambeau has been here, and that I went to the stadium? I'm their mother."

"Are they victims of the transformation as well?" the woman asked, lifting her clipboard and preparing to write on it.

"I don't know," Evelyn admitted. "I haven't been able to get in touch with them since this all began. All I know is that they are in this city somewhere. I hope none of them are going through this too... or if they are, that they are at least having an easier time of it."

Writing on her clipboard, the aid worker nodded solemnly. "I see. I can't promise anything, but if they come here looking for you, I'll pass your message along."

"Thank you," Evelyn replied gratefully.

"You're welcome," the aid worker replied, turning to leave.

Sophia held out both hands insistently to Rick when he looked away from Evelyn. "Oh, sorry, kid," he muttered, giving her one of the water bottles. She'd tried before to open them and had struggled every time, but this time she easily twisted the lid off, spilling some of the water on her hands in surprise. "Careful now!" Rick cautioned her.

"I'm sorry," Sophia said sadly. She lifted her hand and tried to lick the spilled water off of it – her tongue was much bigger than it used to be, and yet she still seemed to have good control over it as she lapped the water

off her fingers and the back of her hand. Rick gave her an odd look before going back to passing out water to the others, while she tried experimenting with her new tongue. She tried sticking it out as far as she could, though weirdly she couldn't see it until she moved it around to the side of her head. Staring at it with one eye and then the other, she gave a muffled giggle as she wiggled her tongue around in front of her face.

"Let's rest for a bit and then keep going," Evelyn directed. "We've still got a lot of ground to cover."

"Yes, please, I'm very tired," Nicholas murmured between sips of water. "I didn't sleep well."

"None of us did," Evelyn said flatly. "But we'll never get anywhere just sitting around, so rest up while you have the chance and take some weight off your feet."

Sophia groaned a little bit as she sat down on the grass. Walking was boring! Grumbling, she brought the water bottle to her mouth and awkwardly poured some of the water into it. Drinking from the bottle with her scaly snout was definitely harder, and she spilled a little down her chin. It didn't help that when the bottle was directly in front of her snout, she couldn't see it; instead it was only when it was to either the left or right of her muzzle that it was visible to her. She tried tipping her head even further back, but because of her long neck she couldn't hold the bottle that high, so she tried biting into the neck of it a little before tipping her head back instead. Though it was a bit awkward and the water came out a little too fast for her, she soon found that if she only did it for a brief time she could drink it without spilling any. Her front was very wet by the time she figured that out, though.

"I never liked walking so much when I was your age either," Evelyn said sympathetically, curling her tail and lightly resting it against Sophia's side. "Let's keep an eye out as we go. Maybe we can find a game or something we can bring with us, hm? I could teach you some card games if we find a deck of cards."

"I know card games!" Sophia said, a little excited at the idea. "I can play Go Fish."

"You're a little young to play most of the games I know," Evelyn mused, "So Go Fish it is. Assuming we find some cards..."

"Okay! I'll make sure to look!" Sophia promised, raising her bottle for another drink.

"I spyyyyy with my little eeeeeeeeye..." Sophia intoned in a sing-song voice, or at least the best she could manage – something was wrong with her voice. She could still speak but it was hard to make some sounds and pitches. She'd asked if anyone had any 'throat medicine', but nobody had. Weren't adults supposed to always be prepared for stuff?

"Something beginning with..." She glanced at her surroundings as they walked onwards. There were a lot of things she didn't know the name of. And Evelyn's words were way harder to guess. She'd already done car, house, fence, truck, bird, tree...

She saw something move on the tree she was looking over, and quickly recognized it as a squirrel. "S!" she declared, feeling smug. There was no way Evelyn would ever–

"Squirrel?" Evelyn guessed.

Sophia huffed grumpily and folded her arms. "You cheated!"

Evelyn gave a little chuckle. "Not intentionally, but I felt you get all excited when that squirrel moved, and it seemed like too much of a coincidence." She looked back at Sophia for a moment. Evelyn's eyes had been changing even more while they walked, sometimes causing her to stop and blink rapidly for a short time. They had already been slitted like a cat's, but now they were a funny-looking bronze color, with no whites at all, though she still had black bits in the middle.

"What's a 'co-incy-dance'?"

"Hmm..." Evelyn thought on that, and Sophia looked back at the others. Nicholas was behind them, with Rick's son tailing along with him and assaulting him with questions – was he really blind? What was it like? What was it like being a dragon? Could he breathe fire? Could he fly? Did he lay

eggs? Had he ever eaten a live animal? Could he move his wings? Nick had done his best to try and answer most of them, but there were a lot of "I don't know"s as well as various points where he stopped talking due to a twang of pain that Sophia felt from him.

"Well," Evelyn began, "A coincidence is when two things happen together that seem like they are connected, but they're not."

"Um..." Sophia didn't quite understand.

"It's like..." Evelyn began, but then trailed off as they approached an intersection. As with all the others, the lights were still working, but there was no traffic for them to direct. Sophia felt a lot of worry from Evelyn all of a sudden, but more than that, she smelled it too – all of a sudden at the same time she picked up a smell that kind of reminded her of dry leaves. Or was that one of those 'co-incy-dance' things?

"Stop," Evelyn called out to the rest of the group, who gathered up behind her. Sophia shuffled around to look past her at where Evelyn was looking: at the opposite corner of the intersection there was a corner store. The lights were off, including the big sign above the doors.

There was also a big sheet of cardboard over the front doors with words spray-painted on it. Sophia was able to read it, but only because she'd seen a bunch like it already and had had Evelyn read them for her: 'Looters will be shot.' Evelyn still hadn't told her what it meant, though.

Like other stores, the glass was broken. But there was something in the broken window, and as Sophia peered at it, she saw what looked like a pair of pants and shoes and a t-shirt and... it was a person! And there was a lot of blood around them too, and they weren't moving or saying anything.

She let out a gasp. "That man's hurt!" she called out and began running towards them across the intersection. Her motions were clumsy and awkward and she stumbled frequently, the claws on her toes scraping on the ground. She tripped on the blanket she was wearing and fell forward at one point, but the hide that was growing over her palms protected her when she put them out to brace herself. Evelyn called out for her to stop, but why should she? If only Jennifer was there to help!

"I'm coming!" Sophia called out. In her haste she tripped on the curb and went sprawling again, and she quickly got back up, ignoring the calls from the others who were coming up behind her.

"Hey. Hey!" Sophia continued to call as she approached the person, but they didn't move at all, even when Sophia reached out and poked their side. They felt weirdly cold through the t-shirt they were wearing, and the blood on it was all dried out. And they smelled bad – really, really bad. They must have been super sick, worse than that one time she got 'food poisoning'.

"Sophia, get away from there!" Evelyn called out more sternly. Sophia shrank away in fear of being punished; what if Evelyn had a prod on her or a belt? She didn't want to make Evelyn mad at her.

"But... but they're hurt..." Sophia protested, turning back towards Evelyn as she lumbered forward on one leg and her curved tail. Sophia pointed towards the person in the window, staring at the others. Most of the others hung back, except for Nicholas, who fumbled his way forward slowly until his hand bumped into Evelyn's tail, trying to ask the humans what was happening. "Why aren't you helping?" Sophia demanded. Evelyn had always helped her! And those other humans! Evelyn wasn't like her parents! She always helped, like Jennifer! So why wasn't she helping?

"Sophia..." Evelyn murmured quietly, and Sophia both felt sadness and at the same time smelled something else from herself. It must have been sadness too.

"Help them!" Sophia insisted. "You're a grown-up! You have to help!"

"*Mon dieu...*" Evelyn mumbled softly, taking a heavy breath. "Sophia... I can't help him. There's nothing any of us can do. He's dead."

"Huh? Dead what?" Sophia responded. She'd heard the word before a few times from her parents – it always just seemed like a word that made another word stronger. Dead simple, dead tired, dead silence, dead center. But it didn't make any sense here. Unless she meant dead tired – he wasn't moving at all, he must have been really deeply asleep...

But then she remembered. Dead. 'I'm not exactly sad to see those two dead' – that was what Evelyn had said, back at the petting zoo. When her parents were hurt so much that they didn't get back up. When they didn't react to anything that she did or said. When they were just... still, and silent. But they'd all run away before her parents had gotten back up, before they could hurt her again. So why did that mean they couldn't help the injured person in the window...? "I don't understand," Sophia said quietly.

"Oh, Lord," Rick muttered quietly, glancing away. The other humans also seemed unwilling to answer her question. Even Evelyn seemed hesitant.

"When something is dead..." Evelyn began, trailing off a little. Glancing away from Sophia and taking a breath, she gestured to the person in the window and continued, "...they'll be like that, forever. There's no fixing it. No coming back. It's permanent."

Sophia gave a quiet whimper. No, they had to be wrong. Maybe she couldn't fix it, but all they had to do was get to a hospital! A hospital always fixed everything.

"Sophia," Nicholas said, and she looked over at him. Of course! Nick would help. Nick always helped. Even when it hurt him, he always helped her out, unless he was asleep or that 'un-conch-us' thing that Jennifer had said.

"Nick, help me!" she told him, "Over here!"

But he shook his head. "Nobody can help him, Sophia," he told her in a flat tone of voice. "I can't hear him breathing. And I can smell decay, like a dead animal. Sophia, he's gone."

"No he isn't! He's right there, you silly! Come here!"

He didn't, though. "Sophia, listen to me. Remember... remember when the old white goat disappeared?"

"Macy?" Sophia asked.

"Yes, her. Mom and dad told you that she'd moved to another zoo."

Sophia nodded. "Yeah! I wonder which one?"

Nicholas shook his head again. His feelings were... complex. A whole bunch of them all together, and she didn't understand very well. "She didn't. They lied to you. Macy died. She was old."

Sophia trembled a little bit. "But... why?"

Her brother approached her slowly, feeling around for the edge of the curb so that he didn't bump his clawed hand into it. "It's just the way things are," he explained. "Every living thing dies eventually."

"No!" she called out, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. "No, no, no!" She stomped one foot on the ground, squeezing her eyes shut. "You're... you're lying!" she accused, but she couldn't really believe it; Nick had never lied to her. He always told her the truth.

"I know how you feel," he said sympathetically. "I felt the same way when I learned this." She felt the back of his hand brush against her side, and then she felt something big wrap partly around her. Opening her eyes, she saw that he was sitting next to her in the way that dogs did, and he had stretched out one of his wings, wrapping it around her. It was like a hug – his arm didn't bend right to hug her any more the normal way, but still, he pulled her against his side. Sobbing a little, she rested against him, feeling his emotions – picking out some of them she could identify. Concern. Sadness. So many strange smells, too.

"Nick..." she whimpered quietly.

"It's okay, Sophia," he whispered to her. She sniffled and said nothing else, feeling a little comforted by having his wing around her. The warmth of his body, the way his wing covered her, and the dragony smell she had come to associate with him all helped her feel a little better, but she still felt very sad.

Evelyn turned towards the others and began speaking quietly, but Sophia wasn't listening. She kept pressed up against Nicholas, staring at the ground. She wanted to go and hide somewhere, but there wasn't anywhere, and she would have to leave Nick, and he was the only thing she could rely on. Everything would be okay if Nick was there... but what if he

wasn't? What if the 'death' happened to him too? What would she do? She didn't know, and just thinking about it frightened her...

It wasn't until Evelyn moved, her long tail sweeping over the ground, that Sophia looked up again and listened in on what was being said. "I'd say he's been lying there a couple of days," Evelyn was murmuring, first inspecting the man in the window, then turning her head and looking in. "But I don't see any other signs of life inside. We should take a look."

Several voices spoke up in response. "Me? No." "Not it." "No, you go." "I can smell it from over here...!"

"*Lâches*," Evelyn grumbled. "I can't fit inside of there! If I poke my head in there first and look around, will one of you check afterwards?"

"Ugh, I... I suppose," Rick eventually volunteered. "We've gotta get that guy outta the window, though. Don't need him attracting flies."

"Give me something to put over my face," Evelyn instructed.

Rick gave her a funny look. "I don't think a handkerchief's gonna be big enough for your face."

Evelyn sighed in exasperation. "Then find me something bigger."

They rummaged around in their belongings for a brief time and eventually came up with a big checkered picnic blanket. "Here, try this," Rick's wife offered.

Evelyn reached out with one big arm and took the blanket, bending her neck to lower her head to within reach of her arms. Holding the blanket by the top corners, she tied it behind her head, letting the rest of it hang over her lower face. She definitely looked a little silly to Sophia, but she wasn't in the mood to laugh. Turning, Evelyn approached the window and then bent over at the waist, using her long neck to stick her head in through the broken window and look around.

"Hello?" she called out, "Anyone here? Please don't shoot if you are!"

There was no response, and Evelyn hummed in thought, taking a look at the dead person. With one big hand, she reached out and lifted him up from the window by just a few inches, and Sophia felt a combination of

disgust and pity from her. "Eugh. Yep. Shot. Didn't read the sign. Young people can be such fools..." she murmured, lowering the man back to his original position.

"See anything in there?" Rick asked her.

"No people," Evelyn answered, "But there's still plenty of foodstuffs in here. I suppose if I were a looter, I'd stay away from the store with the dead body in the window."

"Yeah, that's... a fair point," Rick conceded. "Can you, uh... get him out of the way?" he asked squeamishly.

Evelyn gave another annoyed sigh, but reached down with her free arm and grabbed onto the person in the window. Sophia watched as he hung limply from Evelyn's hand, and she seemed to have no trouble picking him up – with differences in size, it reminded her of herself picking up a doll. Evelyn set the man down on the sidewalk away from the store, then, after a moment's consideration, pulled the blanket up and off of her head. Taking a moment to untie the knot, she then stretched it out over the dead man, covering him completely. "There," she declared, "Better than just leaving him to rot in the sun."

Still with some hesitation, Rick readied his rifle and approached the front doors, trying to pull on one. They opened, but a little bell jingled when he did, and he froze in place, as did Evelyn. When nothing else happened after several seconds, Rick stepped inside, muttering, "They didn't lock it when they left, that's all... nothing to worry about..." Despite him being so obviously worried, Sophia couldn't smell it at all. Was that only a thing dragons could do, maybe?

Rick called out, hesitantly and quietly at first, then gradually louder and with more confidence when there was no reply. Despite her anxiousness, Sophia's curiosity compelled her to creep forward enough to watch what he did through the window, though she glanced aside at every little noise in her vicinity. She watched him walk around the inside of the store and then come back, poking his head out of the window to address the others.

"Well, Evelyn's right, I don't see anyone in here. Register's empty and some of the stuff is gone but there's still some food in here. Maybe they left or maybe they're hiding upstairs, I can't tell you. I don't want to hang around too long, but... we don't have a whole lot of food left of our own... I don't want to just steal it, but..."

He trailed off, but Evelyn gave an unamused sound from outside. "Well, if you're that worried about it, leave some money for him."

"Yeah... yeah, okay. That seems fair," he agreed. "Don't have a whole lot of use for money right now, glad I took out some spare cash before going on our trip. Can't rely on there being an ATM out in the woods, you know?" He gestured towards his son and added, "Okay, junior, bring the cart over here. Good thing we've got a couple can openers. Let's load up." Waving over his friend, he called out, "Jimmy, you give me a hand too. It'll go faster with more help."

They began to take what they could from the shelves and a few things from the fridges too, but they didn't bother with any food from the freezers. Sophia, Nicholas, and the other humans remained outside, watching – or at least Sophia watched, while Nicholas simply sat there and held her. Evelyn wasn't able to help directly but she did poke her head in to look around for anything they might have missed.

But eventually they had filled the cart up. Rick took out his wallet and hesitated. "Hello?" he called out again, loudly, but there was still no response. "I, uh, dunno if you're up there, but... we're, uh, leaving something for you. We're not stealing. I, uh... hope that's okay!" After a few more seconds of silence, he pulled several bills out from his wallet and reached over the counter to slide them into the open cash register, then closed its tray before leaving.

"Let's get out of here, I'm getting the willies hanging around," he grumbled after closing the front doors.

Nicholas gently nudged Sophia. "Come on. We have to go," he told her, drawing his wing back. Despondently, she stood straight and let go of him, trudging along silently behind Evelyn as they continued on their way.

She stared at the pavement in front of her as she walked, full of sadness. Thinking of Macy and other animals that had 'moved to another zoo'. She remembered Nick falling 'un-conc-us' when her father was zapping him with the prod, and then Jennifer saying he'd 'killed' Nick – but her father had said that he wasn't dead. But what if something happened to Nick? What if one day she couldn't feel him... and he didn't come back? She whimpered a little bit to herself. Nick had said that 'every living thing dies eventually' – did that mean her, too? And him? Would he really leave her? He couldn't! She sniffled and wiped tears from her eyes on her hands, crying out a little bit as the scales around her eyes rasped against her bare fingers.

"What in... oh, *merde*," Evelyn said suddenly as they came close to a corner. "Stop, everyone stop."

Sophia almost tripped over Evelyn's tail. She looked up, but Evelyn was in the way again.

"What in the hell...?" Rick began as he peered past Evelyn. "Oh, that's... that's not right, that's... oh..."

But it wasn't worry that Sophia smelled and felt from Evelyn this time. It was something else. Anger, and pity, and... fear? But that wasn't right, Evelyn wasn't afraid of anything. She had never felt fear from Evelyn. Anything that Evelyn was afraid of she should be afraid of too; whimpering, Sophia hunched down, trying to hide behind Evelyn.

"Wait here... I'll take a look," Evelyn told them, but she sounded uncertain. She walked forward, and Sophia hid behind the little brick and iron fence that was around the yard she was next to, stretching her neck out to peek out around the corner cautiously.

Out in the middle of the street there were three more people – they had to be dead, too. There was blood all around them and on them, and they weren't moving. But they were all tied up, too, with ropes around their wrists and legs, and gags around their mouths. One of them was like her, a dragon-human, a shirtless woman with scaled arms, wings, and a partial muzzle, plus a small tail sticking out from under her skirt... not unlike her own, a thought that made her shiver and feel afraid. The other two were a

man, and a boy that was about her size – before she had begun turning into a dragon, anyway.

Suddenly, something covered her eyes. "Don't look, little girl," Rick said from behind her, "It ain't right for you to see this."

She fought back and, much to her surprise, overpowered him quite easily, pushing his arms away and removing his hands from her face – she'd never been able to fight back against a grown-up like that before. "No!" she called out, but she didn't know why other than not wanting to be told what to do. She almost wanted to go over, but she could still feel fear coming from Evelyn as she inspected the dead people. There was writing spray-painted on the ground all around them too, but Sophia couldn't read it.

Rick didn't try to cover her eyes again. "Strongest 5-year-old I've ever..." he muttered, backing away.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked. "What's going on? Why's everyone so afraid?" Sophia could feel it too from him, but it sounded like he was afraid because they were. She still didn't know why Evelyn was afraid, and kept hiding behind the fence as much as she could.

"Ohh..." Rick moaned despairingly. "There's... there's more bodies, kid. Three of 'em, this time."

"More looters?" Nicholas asked.

"No, these ain't no looters. These're... this is a whole family. Someone murdered them."

Sophia felt a sudden and very intense unease from Nicholas, and she shrank down a little more, crouching and lowering her neck to bring her head closer to the ground. This was worse than the other dead person, but she didn't know why.

"A robbery...?" Nicholas asked aloud.

"No," Evelyn announced grimly. "They were executed. *Nom de dieu...!*"

The distress in both Evelyn and Nicholas filled Sophia, and she whimpered. "Why...?" she asked aloud, not understanding what was going on.

"I can't see, what's going on?" Nicholas asked.

"There's... there's writing all around them," Rick said for Nicholas's benefit in an unsteady voice. "It's all... 'Death to the monsters'... 'Go back where you came from'... 'Sympathizers will die'... stuff like that. Oh, god... I think I'm going to be sick... I've never seen anything like this..."

Evelyn sighed and shook her head. "I have," she told them, speaking in a flat tone. "Back in the Great War."

"Why here?" Rick bemoaned, "This was a nice area... now look at it! I thought my old folks would be safe, but now, who the hell knows...?"

"My wife," the man with the sick child said suddenly, "I have to find my wife. She's not safe!"

Other similar worries rose up among the humans, but Sophia didn't listen to most of them. All she could focus on was the whirling storm of emotions from Evelyn. She was staring at the dead family, but it didn't look like she was *really* looking at them, as if daydreaming. Yet all of the feelings that Sophia detected were bad ones, all mixed up with each other around her fear, so much fear, so much...!

Sophia trembled heavily as Evelyn's emotions overcame her, and she heard Nicholas groan beside her. She didn't know why, but she was afraid, more afraid than ever, more afraid than she had been when she'd seen the prod or when Nick had been hurt or...

"*Non!*" Evelyn burst out, silencing the humans. The storm of emotions inside of Sophia seemed to clear to a more manageable level as Evelyn stood straight, taking deep breaths, her broad scaly chest visibly growing bigger and smaller. "No. I didn't let the fascists win then, and I won't let them win now." She lifted her tail and thumped it hard against the road. "If I find who did this, I will make them pay."

Turning her head and neck to face the others, she went on while she had their attention. "We only lose if we give up hope. We will find safety and shelter, so long as we keep looking. If you are worried for your loved ones, then we must find them. But giving in to despair does not help any of us."

There was a brief moment of quiet. "You're... you're right," Rick said, breaking the silence. "But what are we going to do...?"

"We're not going to just leave these people here," Evelyn told them. Looking around, she lifted one arm to point to a nearby house, and the end of her tail rose as well to indicate the same direction. "The house with 'Monsters will die' sprayed on it is obviously theirs. Let's at least bury them in their yard before we move on."

"Bury them? How?"

"Look around!" Evelyn snapped. "Check their yard, see if they had a shovel or something else to dig with." Approaching the open fence gate, she continued to order the others around: check around the back, look inside, check for a tool shed key, and so on and so forth. Sophia just stared at her in silence, and Nicholas remained where he was, slowly reaching out with a wing to curl it around Sophia's form.

Most of the humans disappeared into the house. Sophia kept glancing over at the people in the street; she didn't want to, but she couldn't help herself. All of them were perfectly still and unmoving, just like the man in the shop window earlier. They didn't smell quite as badly, but it was still enough that Sophia shook a little against Nicholas's side. A foul smell that she hadn't known before today, but now she knew what it meant: the stench of death.

She stared at the ground, wishing she could forget it all and go back home. Just wake up back in her house and find out the whole thing had been a bad dream. Home, where she had Nick, and Jennifer, and the nice teachers at her school, and her friends, and...

Shaking her head, she slipped away from Nicholas. She wanted to get away from the street. "Sophia?" Nicholas called after her, but she ignored him and went into the house – she could still fit, but Nicholas would never get through with his wings, and Evelyn couldn't possibly fit through the front door. She heard people shuffling around in the downstairs rooms, so she ran upstairs instead, trying to get away, trying to be alone, trying to hide.

The first room she came to was a bedroom, and it must have been the son's: the wallpaper had pictures of clouds and the messy blankets on the small bed were bright blue and decorated with racecars. The bed was too small for her, but Sophia didn't care; she grabbed onto the blankets and lifted them up, shoving her upper body underneath them, and letting them fall over her head, uncaring that they caught on the top of her 'spy-nul' fin.

Warmth and darkness surrounded her upper body. There, she trembled and clung to the bedcovers, sniffing and making a breathy whistling sound despite her best attempts not to cry. She was hiding, hiding from all the bad things, hiding from the death. If she just stayed hidden, the bad things would go away.

But it didn't work like that any more. She could still feel her own body aching and hurting, particularly her legs and feet which had been getting bigger and bigger, and her tail which was sticking out from the blankets behind her, the tip resting on the floor. She could feel Nick and Evelyn's pains too, and now that she didn't have anything to distract her from them, it was all she was aware of. She wanted to go home, but she couldn't. No... not home, not really. Home was a bad place. And she didn't have a home any more. But she wanted to be somewhere safe. Somewhere comfortable and warm where she didn't have to walk so much. Somewhere without any death. She'd thought her parents were just 'un-conch-us' like Nicholas had been, but now she knew they weren't, they were dead too.

And it wasn't just pain she could feel. Evelyn and Nicholas's voices were indistinct out by the front of the house, but she felt their emotions. Worry and concern... for her?

"Sophia?" she heard from behind her. It was Rick. "Evelyn and your brother are worried 'bout you."

"I know," she said quietly, "but I'm scared."

"Aw, hell..." he mumbled sympathetically. "You ain't the only one. We all are. I had no idea how bad it had gotten in the city while we were gone. Everyone's hiding, and there's looters, and people being murdered in the street! I'm afraid too. I'm terrified."

She sniffled a little. "Why aren't you hiding?"

"Because it won't help," he told her. "I've got my wife and my son to look after. I've gotta go find out if my parents are okay. And my brother, too. And I won't find any of that hidin' under a blanket."

Slowly, Sophia raised her hands and lifted the edge of the blanket just a little, though her fin also raised up on its own and pushed the blanket up too. Peering out at the wall in front of her, she saw a dresser just within her field of view, and the mostly clear skies out through the window. "But it's dangerous..."

"Life's dangerous, kid," he said bluntly yet softly. "But it's less dangerous with people looking out for you."

Sophia took a deep breath as she stayed under the covers. Everything was scary. But Nick was able to face it. And he would protect her, like he always had. He would keep her safe from the scary things and the death. As long as she was with Nick, she'd be safe. And with the strange powers she had now, Nick was always with her. She could feel his presence even though he was outside and she was inside. He was worried about her. He wanted to protect her!

"Come on, let's go back," Rick urged.

"Okay," Sophia conceded, trying to tug the blankets away. They got stuck on the fin on her back, and Rick had to come over and lift them up to get them off of her. She started to get up, but something caught her eye: a toy that had been directly in front of her snout in the spot where she couldn't see stuff. Had it been there the whole time? She turned her head to look at it and it disappeared again, so she turned her head to the side so she could see it, leaning in a little closer for a better look.

The toy was a plush dragon – though very much unlike what she and the others looked like. It wasn't black at all: instead, it was green, and the ridge on its back was bright yellow and red. The wings were way too small, too, and the head was comically big, but other than that it didn't seem too far off the mark. Ignoring Rick's "What'cha got there?" as she picked it up,

Sophia looked it over some more. It was obviously meant to stand on four legs, kind of like what Nicholas was doing...

An idea came to her. "Nick, Nick!" she called out, getting up and rushing past Rick, who was a bit surprised by her sudden movement. Back down the stairs she ran, continuing out the front door, almost bumping into Rick's friend, until she reached the spot where Evelyn and Nicholas were standing out by the street.

"Sophia?" he asked as he heard her coming out. "Are you all-?"

Clutching the toy tightly, she got right up in front of him. "Nick, hold out your hand," she told him.

Momentarily bewildered, he sat down and did as asked, though he couldn't seem to turn his hand all the way over to hold the palm upward. She'd seen him take things before and run his hands all over them to figure out what they were shaped like since he couldn't see them himself. He'd seemed so confused ever since his legs had bent all weird, and seeing the toy had reminded her of how he usually understood how things looked. "Here!" she said as she pushed the toy against his palm. "Feel it!"

He had to shift in place so he could free up his other hand. He had claws on the ends of his fingers, but she saw him handling the toy with the utmost care, slowly moving his hands around it, sometimes rubbing just one finger along bits of it like the wings. After touching the wings for a few moments, she saw him flex his own, lifting them up and down as his finger raised and lowered the wing on the toy. "Those are way smaller than yours," she informed him, and he murmured in agreement as he continued to turn the toy over and over and feel it.

"Is this really what I look like?" he asked after a little while.

"It's close," Evelyn told him. "The proportions aren't quite right. But can you feel how the legs are all pointing down?"

"Yes," he replied, but Sophia saw him move his hands over to the legs anyway, his fingers brushing down them.

"Yours are almost like that," she said, watching as he slid a hand down its back and kept going. "That's the tail!" she told him excitedly. It wasn't often

that she got to teach Nick something.

Silently, he pinched the tail between his thumb and forefinger and slid his grip down to the very end. It had a big triangular pointy bit on the end, but Evelyn's tail didn't, so when he got to it Sophia told him as much. His own tail was so tiny and stubby though that he could barely move it at all, and she only noticed it because she saw his hips moving. "Evelyn's is really big! You've just got a tiny one. Mine's bigger than yours."

"Thank you," he said quietly, but she could feel how grateful he was. He was... happy! She'd made her big brother happy! She beamed brightly, but doing so made Evelyn react strangely, leaning back a little. Why? She felt confused and frowned.

"You have a lot of very large teeth," Evelyn explained, having felt Sophia's unease. Sophia didn't quite get what she meant, so she tried running her tongue over her teeth experimentally, and was still puzzling it out when she heard Rick clear his throat and she remembered where she was and what had been happening.

"Excuse me," he said to Evelyn.

"Yes?"

"Whoever ransacked this place didn't take much, they just messed it up a whole bunch. No shovel, though, just a little trowel for the flowerbed."

"I see..."

"They've, uh..." he trailed off, sounding a bit apprehensive. "We're tryin' to be respectful. We're leaving anything with sentimental value alone, and I only looked through their papers and stuff just long enough to learn their names. But... they've still got a bunch of food. I hate to steal from the dead, but even with what we got earlier, at the rate you three eat..."

Evelyn gave a deep sigh. "It's that or we leave it here to rot or be taken by someone else. Let's finish burying them first."

"Gonna be hard to dig without real tools, though..."

"I have an idea. Nicholas?"

Nicholas gave the toy back to Sophia and raised his hind legs up to stand on all fours. With Evelyn's guidance he was able to get into the front yard, having to lift his wings high to get past the gate. Holding them up made it difficult for him to move and messed with his balance, but as soon as he got past the gate Evelyn told him to lower his wings again and directed him to where she wanted him to dig. Rick started him off by digging out a few divots, and with the claws on his hands, combined with his four-legged stance and his much increased size and strength, Nicholas was able to dig up a patch of the lawn in a big rectangular hole. Sophia didn't know why they were doing it, but she watched curiously, looking at the pile of dirt growing behind Nicholas. He was going to need another spray with the hose just like at the vet's office.

Eventually Evelyn told him to stop. He fumbled around the edges of the hole to pull himself out of it, then slowly made his way back out from the yard to the other two dragons, lifting his wings up high once again to get past the gate. The humans took over from there, going out into the street in pairs and taking the dead people back individually, bringing them to the hole. One by one, they set the bodies into the hole, with the son going last. Then, Evelyn stood with her back to the gate and her huge tail sticking into the yard. Getting onto all fours to hold herself steady, she used the massive tail to sweep dirt back into the hole to fill it – some of the dirt scattered all over the lawn, but it was good enough to cover the hole back up.

Sophia had held onto the toy tightly the entire time as she watched the proceedings. She didn't understand what was happening or why, but she could tell from the way people were acting that it was a very sad moment, more than just finding the dead people. With the hole covered, Rick put his hand over his chest and began talking, so she leaned closer to Nicholas. "Why did they do that?" she asked him quietly.

"Do what?"

"Put the people in the ground."

"It's called a burial," he told her softly. "It's..." he faltered for a moment, and from his emotions, she guessed that he was thinking hard. Was he

trying to remember? But that didn't seem right. "It's a way to... say goodbye."

"But why?"

"It's..." he paused again, and she leaned on his side. "...it's respectful. And it's so that everyone feels better about what happened."

Sophia stared at the bare patch of dirt that no longer had any grass on it. "Even the dead people?"

He didn't answer for a moment, but then said, "...yeah. For them, too. So they rest easier."

She squeezed the dragon toy again, then looked down at it. It wasn't hers. As much as she wanted a toy, someone else needed it more than she did. "I'll be right back," she told her brother, then walked in through the gate.

Rick trailed off and looked at her as she walked over to the dirt, and then gently laid the dragon toy down on top of it. "Here you go," she whispered. "Thanks for letting me borrow it."

Standing up straight, she saw all the humans staring at her, though it wasn't the weird looks they'd given her when they'd first seen her. Were they confused? "He'll feel better with his toy, won't he?" she asked.

The reaction was not what she expected. Rick grimaced and put his hand to his face, choking back a sob, the other adults there seeming a lot more grim all of a sudden as well. She even felt sudden sadness from Nick and Evelyn in response to her words. Why? Grown-ups were so strange, sometimes. She almost thought she understood, but it didn't quite make sense. Glancing away, she left the yard again to go back to Nicholas and Evelyn.

"I'm back," she told her brother as she touched his side gently. As Rick tried to get a hold of himself, Sophia watched for a few moments, then asked, "Nick?"

"Yes?"

"...are you going to leave me too someday?"

He paused, then leaned closer, wrapping his wing around her more tightly. "I won't," he told her.

"I don't want to be alone..."

"You won't be," he reassured. "I'll always be with you, no matter what happens."

Some warm emotion crossed their mental link, and Sophia smiled just a little bit. Everything would be all right, as long as Nicholas was there.

But something wasn't right. Evelyn was staring over the fence too, but she wasn't like the others. The others were all so sad, but her face was a stern, stony mask, the scales around her eyes making her look more menacing. And Sophia didn't know why, but Evelyn's emotions were different. There was a little sadness, but also... anger. A lot of anger. And yet she didn't show it, just standing there in silence.

Frowning, Sophia leant on Nicholas's side. Everything would be okay, as long as he was with her.

Chapter 9

"Watch it, Nicholas!" came Rick's voice from behind, and Nicholas stopped abruptly. "A little to your left."

"Thank you," he replied as he adjusted himself accordingly. The city's sidewalks were absolutely littered with obstacles – road signs, trash cans, benches, and more, none of which he could see coming and many of which were too narrow to avoid easily simply by following someone ahead of him. Even when he didn't bump into them directly, his wings had brushed against or been caught on road signs several times, and he had toppled a few haphazard piles of trash bags and cardboard boxes. Not to mention the sidewalks were covered in trash and detritus too; every so often Nicholas would crush something under one of his feet, and if he was lucky it would just be a food wrapper or a cardboard box. If he was unlucky it would be something made of glass, and while the hide on his feet was too thick for the bottle he had stepped on earlier to seriously injure him, it had still hurt to have the shards jam themselves into his palm.

"Stay close, Nicholas," Evelyn urged from ahead of him.

"I'm trying, but there's a lot of noise," he protested. It had been a couple of hours since they had buried the dead family. As they had gotten further into the city, it had stopped being so quiet. More police vehicles declaring the stay-at-home order were roaming around, but they weren't the worrying part. Distant sounds of sirens, car alarms, burglar alarms, helicopters, or the crackling of fires were seemingly randomly interspersed with gunshots, glass breaking, screams, and at one point, an explosion that had made the group seek cover for a good half-hour before moving on again when nothing else happened.

Even though he couldn't see the carnage around him, it was plain enough to his other senses. In addition to the noises he caught, now and then he could smell ash from the remnants of fires or the distinct smell of burnt metal. More concerningly, he was now quite familiar with the scent of blood enough to distinguish fresh blood from dried. Sometimes the objects he crushed underfoot were bullet casings. Only a frantic shouting from the humans behind him had helped him avoid stepping on a corpse left on the

sidewalk at one point. It seemed like things were going to get worse before they got any better.

"If only I had something to tie us together..." he heard Evelyn muse.

"If you keep talking, I can follow the sound of your voice," he suggested. Even though he could sense where Evelyn and Sophia were, it was imprecise. He knew the right general direction to approach them, but following a sound cue from them was much easier.

She gave a little chuckle, an odd cross between the usual sound of an elderly woman and the deeper tones she was gaining as part of the transformation they were going through. "Asking an old woman like me to keep talking? You're playing a dangerous game. I'll talk your ears off. Or your ear-fins, once yours come in. What can I tell you about?"

He lifted a hand and brushed at the side of his head to check, but his ears still seemed to be normal, though he could feel a patch of scales on his cheek that hadn't been there earlier. His legs and feet were still shifting and changing, but while the actual process ached, the more it continued the less and less uncomfortable it got to move and walk around, as strange and alien as it still was to walk on all fours.

"You fought in World War 2, didn't you?" he asked her. "You mentioned earlier..."

"Mm. I did," she answered him, sounding solemn, though she didn't appear to have any reluctance to answer his question. As she kept talking, he found it easier to follow along behind her. "I was only about your age at the time. How much do you know?"

"Just what I've heard in school," Nicholas admitted. "I've never met a veteran before."

Evelyn gave a snort. "Don't call me that. I'll tell you one thing right off the bat: war is hell. Ugly. Vicious. There are no heroes. There is no glory. What they put in the movies is a lie. Be glad you'll never have to go through anything like that, no matter how bad this gets."

Rick chimed in with, "She's right, kid. Had a friend of mine who got sent to Afghanistan. An IED blew up his truck and his mother never recovered from

it. War's a terrible thing."

"And yet here we are, walking through what almost looks like a war zone," Evelyn grumbled.

"What's an 'eye-eedy'?" Nicholas heard Sophia ask as he detected a sudden short drop in the ground – they must have been at a crosswalk.

"A bomb," Rick answered bluntly.

"Anyway, I wasn't in the army," Evelyn went on. "I was part of the resistance. A lot of cold, dark, hungry nights. Every time you hear army boots, you hope to God they're going to keep on marching past wherever you're hiding. Best we could do was to steal things and sabotage equipment here and there. Breaking one vehicle doesn't accomplish a lot, but breaking their spirits does. Anything we could do to weaken the fascists and make their lives as hellish as they had made ours was a victory."

"What's a 'fash-ist'?"

"Bad people," Evelyn told Sophia in a gentle tone. "Very bad people. Think of the worst people you've ever known. They're ten, maybe even a hundred times worse than that."

"Did you kill any of them?" Rick asked her.

Evelyn's response was curt. "Yep. I told you: there's no heroes in war. You come out of it with blood on your hands or you end up in an early grave. But I wasn't going to give in to them, not to the horrors I've seen. One execution in the street is bad enough. But I could find more than that in a single day back then."

"Were you the leader?" Nicholas inquired.

"No, not even close. I was just a teenage girl who could get into tight spaces. I had a knife and a stolen MP40 – it's a type of gun," she added to cut off the question Sophia had just started asking. "Our leader was a soldier who got separated from his platoon. Monsieur Renard, as he asked us to call him. He—"

A shrill scream cut through the air from somewhere nearby, and Evelyn abruptly stopped talking. Hearing the footsteps around him cease, he came

to a half as well. Trying to focus, Nicholas listened out for more; there were indistinct voices nearby, a man's and a woman's. Something metallic struck the ground, partly hollow – a trash can? There was a gunshot, and another scream from the woman.

"Aw, hell," Rick muttered quietly. "And here I am the only one with a gun."

"Shush," Evelyn said sharply. After a moment she spoke again. "I don't hear any other people. I'll go check. Watch my back."

"Are you even going to fit?" Rick asked, but there was no response from Evelyn. No verbal response, anyway – Nicholas heard her hobbling away, her one-foot-plus-tail movements making a distinctive sound.

"What's going on?" Nicholas asked quietly.

"She's, ah, headin' into that alley there," Rick answered. If he was gesturing, Nicholas couldn't see it. "*She* might be some kinda war vet, but I've never even aimed a gun at a person before, much less fired...!"

Nicholas took a deep breath and focused. He could feel Sophia – both physically, as she drew close to him and clung to his right arm, and also mentally, as her fear and worry crossed over their mental link. In similar fashion he could feel Evelyn too, but from her, he felt only caution and determination.

Then, suddenly, a spike of anger.

"*Fils de pute!*" Evelyn yelled loudly enough for them to hear it clearly. "Get away from her!"

Nicholas could make out a mix of a woman's sobbing and a man's threatening voice, but he could only pick out the occasional word – and enough to hear "I'll shoot." He felt worried, but when he did, he felt a brief surge in the confidence from Evelyn, as if she was telling him not to worry.

"With that peashooter? It'll be the last thing you do," Evelyn promised him in a menacing tone.

There was a brief scuffle and Nicholas heard a rustling, something hitting a big hollow metallic object, and rapid footsteps. There were more words,

and they seemed closer, allowing Nicholas to pick out more of them: 'give', 'money', and a 'bitch' at the end for emphasis.

"Money? Are you *that* stupid? Does it look like I have money on me?" Evelyn retorted, also sounding closer.

The footsteps approached them rapidly. "Rick, no!" Rick's wife chastised, and Nicholas heard the rattling of wood and metal next to him – she must have grabbed onto his rifle, but he wasn't struggling, so he probably let her push it down or something similar. "Over here!" his wife called out.

"Help me!" a new woman's voice implored tearily, panting for breath as she approached.

"We will. Get behind us. Sorry for aimin' at you, I was just jumpy," Rick told her.

Nicholas nervously pawed at the ground. He felt so helpless, and all he could do was stretch out his wing and put it around Sophia protectively, holding her against him.

He heard Rick move next to him, uttering a curse under his breath. Then he picked up the aggressive man's voice again, but it wasn't from the direction that Evelyn had left in – were they still at the intersection? She must have gone into an alley and chased the man out from another side. "Stay put, don't try anything funny or I'll shoot!"

"No; you drop the gun and start running," Evelyn growled.

"Fuck you!"

"Idiot. Do you really think I'll turn my back on a man with a gun? Drop it."

A sudden surge of worry and panic rose in Sophia that Nicholas could feel. She pulled back from him and slipped away even as he reached out and tried to grasp at her. "Sophia, no!" he called out.

"Don't hurt Evelyn!" Sophia yelled out in a begging tone.

More footsteps. "Get back," the man demanded, "Or I'll shoot her—"

That was as far as he got; Nicholas felt such an immense surge of protectiveness and rage from Evelyn that he wanted to run forward himself

with no regard for his own well-being. Evelyn let out an angry shout that was halfway to being a roar, Nicholas heard a gunshot, and then a cry from the man that was cut off by the sickening sound of snapping bones. The people around Nicholas began to panic, and Sophia ran back to him with a frightened cry, hiding underneath his right wing. Uncaring if anyone was in his way, Nicholas stepped forward, turning to the side to place his own body between the violence and his sister.

But he needn't have done so; it was already over. "*Imbécile*," Evelyn grunted. Nicholas didn't feel any pain from her beyond the usual, so the bullet must have either missed her or hit her scales. He relaxed and let out a sigh of relief.

"Holy shit, he's dead! You killed him!" Nicholas heard from behind him; it was Rick's friend. Jimmy? James? Nicholas had heard both at different times.

"I was just trying to knock him down," Evelyn said, her frustration crossing to Nicholas's mind. "I didn't used to weigh nearly as much."

"Fuck, I knew they were trouble. They'll turn on us eventually!"

"The hell are you on about?" Rick demanded, "Jimmy, she just saved us!"

He didn't seem very convinced, and Nicholas could hear the panic in his voice. "Even if it isn't their fault, they're turning into beasts! They've got that same killing instinct! Did you see her? She just lunged at him like a dog!"

"And if I'd shot him, would you be saying that about me?" Rick pointed out.

"Take a deep breath and calm down."

"That's not the same! What if it gets worse when they change further? What if they stop being human and go wild?"

"Jimmy—"

"Hey." Evelyn's voice cut in sharply, silencing both of them. "I'm right here. I can hear you talking about me like I'm some kind of animal."

"You are! Or you're halfway there already! Forget this, we're leaving."

"I'm not an animal!" Sophia suddenly blurted out tearfully, and Nicholas reached out with a wing towards her. He couldn't find her, though, and his wing touched nothing. Was she crouched down, maybe? Jimmy's comment had upset her greatly, and Nicholas shuffled towards the direction he sensed Sophia in, eventually managing to touch her with one foot, resting it against her side reassuringly.

"But daddy—" a girl's voice began to protest. Jimmy's daughter? It must have been. Nicholas didn't know of any other young girls in their group besides Sophia.

"Go ahead," Evelyn said calmly, despite the anger and annoyance that Nicholas could feel coming from her. "Take your wife, with her injured leg, and your daughter, who's not even ten. Take them into the city, alone, without any weapons, and with nobody else to protect you. I'm sure you can fend off muggers and rapists just fine by yourself." There was a moment of silence. "Well? Or are you starting to realize how stupid that would be?"

"I don't have to listen to—"

"Swallow your damn pride!" Evelyn snapped at him, her anger flaring. "I get it. You just watched me kill a man in front of you. In case you didn't notice, he was pointing a gun your way! Wouldn't you rather have me on your side than face that kind of danger alone?"

He grumbled a little. "How do I know you're not going to turn on us?"

"You don't," Evelyn said simply. Nicholas heard her thump her tail on the concrete. "But if I were you, I'd take the hypothetical threat that probably won't even happen over the very real threat you just barely escaped from."

Silence held for another moment before the woman they had rescued spoke up. "Ex... Excuse me?"

"Hello, dear," Evelyn greeted her. "Are you hurt? He didn't get to you before I could help, did he?"

"No, he... he hit me, and he tried to..." Nicholas could hear the tension in her voice, and she seemed unwilling to talk about what had happened directly. "I just... thank you."

"You're welcome. Do you live around here? We can try and take you back home."

"Kind of, but I... my husband was changing into... into one of you... and I, I panicked, I ran away. I tried to get to my friend's place, but... that man started chasing me, and then... I... thank you for saving me."

"Don't mention it. One less would-be rapist in the world," Evelyn remarked grimly.

"What's a—?" Sophia began.

Evelyn's response was sharp. "No. You'll find out when you're older." Nicholas heard an odd sound, like Evelyn's scales made when her tail dragged on the road, but much sharper and sudden. She must have made some gesture he couldn't see for emphasis.

"Aww...!"

"No buts. There are some things girls your age shouldn't know." Evelyn took a breath and seemed to return her attention to the woman. "What's your name?"

"Claire."

"Well, Claire, is there anywhere else we could take you to?"

There was no immediate reply – she must have been making some gesture that Nicholas couldn't see. "It's not that much further to my friend's place. But I... I feel bad for running away now. I thought you were monsters, but... well..." Another pause. "My husband must be worried. I need to try and find him. We didn't have much food left either, I hope he can manage while I'm gone..."

"Then we'll go with you."

Claire made an uncertain noise. "Where are you going?"

"We've heard there's an aid camp at the football stadium. And if that doesn't work out, we're going to head for the national park up north."

"But... how? The roads out are blocked!"

"Are they?"

There was a brief pause again – she must have been gesturing. "The highway is closed. I heard it on the TV. The National Guard have shut down the roads!"

"That might be a problem," Evelyn conceded. "But we can worry about that when we get there. Which way is it?"

"This way," Claire said, presumably pointing, though Nicholas couldn't see it.

"Then let's get going," Evelyn ordered. "Hey. You."

"Me?" Rick's friend answered.

"Go grab that punk's pistol," Evelyn told him. "Two guns are better than one. We might need it to defend ourselves."

"You're not afraid I'll use it on you?"

Evelyn snorted in a mixture of derision and amusement. "After you saw what happened to the last person who tried that? I trust you not to be *that* stupid." Nicholas heard her feet against the concrete as she shifted position. "He hit me right here and it didn't even make a dent. So take his gun; the more people we have that are armed, the better."

She began to walk away and Nicholas followed after her distinctive foot-and-tail sounds on the concrete so that he wouldn't get left behind. Sophia was quick to follow him as well and stayed close to his side.

"Psst!" she hissed at him quietly, "Nick! What's a 'ray-pist'?"

He frowned and replied just as quietly, "No, I'll tell you when you're older."

"Niiiiick!"

"Okay, okay. It's... bad thing. A bad person."

"Is that like a 'fash-ist'?"

Nick's frown deepened. "After a certain point, there's no point comparing them," he muttered.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. They're both really bad. That's all you need to know."

"Okaaaaay," she said, giving in for now. Even though the danger had passed, he couldn't help but worry. What other horrors would his sister be exposed to before this was all over?

It was getting dark. Even without sight, Nicholas still knew – the cooling air, the lack of heat on his back from the sun, and the hum of streetlights they passed by that had turned on were all familiar means for him to determine the time of day. On top of that, the membranes on his wings and spinal fin seemed particularly sensitive, giving him an acute awareness of not just the ambient temperature, but other things as well. By raising and fanning out his wings he could get a good sense of the direction and speed of the wind, the humidity, air pressure, and to a certain extent how much light there was, too. The first time he had tried it one wing had collided with a streetlight, reminding him of just how big he now was. Out in the country, Nicholas also knew when it was nighttime from listening to the local wildlife, but there was little of it out here aside from insects and birds in the trees and parks that became rarer as they got deeper into the city.

The ever-present aches of his body and the other two dragons remained, and they had changed over time. His legs and feet were far less sore, as he shifted more and more over time into a proper four-legged stance, and the hide on his hands and feet had toughened enough that he was less bothered by the rough concrete. It also helped that as night fell the pavement became less hot to the touch. Walking this way was an incredibly strange and inhuman experience, doubly so as he was simply moving his limbs in ways that felt natural and didn't hurt or discomfort him. But was there something else, some instinct added to him that helped him walk appropriately in this new body? When walking, he'd sync up his front left and back right feet, then the other two, without even consciously trying. On rare occasions where he needed to go faster he would trot at a decent pace in a way that physically felt natural, yet mentally felt completely out of place.

And while his limbs felt better, replacing those aches and pains were new ones: the tail that had first appeared that morning continued to grow, and his face was stiff and sore. Careful rubbing with the back of his hand had confirmed that his lips and chin had scaled over, and it seemed that he had a slight overbite now that was not the case before.

He also could tell, with a little focus, that Sophia's wings were growing, as he felt the familiar sensations to when his own had come in through the mental link they shared. He couldn't have explained it in words if he'd had to, but something about those sensations felt just slightly different enough that he knew they weren't coming from him, and with a little consideration he could tell which of the other two they actually belonged to. Such as Evelyn's legs, which had similar aches to his, likely indicating they were taking the same dog-like arrangement his legs had gained, yet it felt like hers were changing more rapidly. It made little sense to him how all their changes could be so different, but it made just as little sense as to why they had begun turning into dragons when others did not. Or, for that matter, how and why people had begun spontaneously turning into dragons at all.

"I'm tired," Sophia grumbled, the first words she had said in a while. She had not been talkative for the same reason both Evelyn and Nicholas himself had been quiet: the soreness and aches from their constantly shifting and changing bodies. He couldn't feel her aches the same way she could feel his, but she had complained of them enough times that he had no reason to expect her discomfort had mysteriously gone away.

"I know, dearie," Evelyn told her softly. "We're looking for a good place to sleep."

"But there was a park...!"

"We need to find somewhere better. Somewhere safe."

"Like what?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but we have to keep looking. We'll know it when we see it."

Another voice came up from behind Nicholas. "It'll be more dangerous if we're out here at night," Claire announced in a worried tone. "We need to

just find somewhere. Anywhere."

"And I'm exhausted," Rick added. "Been walkin' all day, and we've been taking turns lugging this cart around."

Evelyn gave a sigh, the gentle tone she used for Sophia vanishing immediately. "We need a place where we won't get attacked in our sleep. Somewhere enclosed. But it needs to be somewhere big enough that Nicholas and I can fit inside."

"Me?" Nicholas asked, not sure what she was driving at.

"Your wings," Evelyn informed him. "And you're smaller than I am, but not that much smaller. For your body, anyway. Your tail is still very small, especially compared to mine."

Nicholas stopped suddenly. The changes had all been so gradual, and without any visual frame of reference, he couldn't tell... "How big am I?" he asked.

"I'm taller than you!" Sophia declared proudly.

"Yes, because he's on four legs now," Evelyn informed her. "You're about... hm... do you remember that lady's truck?"

"Jennifer!" Sophia offered helpfully.

"Yeah," Nicholas confirmed.

"You're about that big. Your feet are where its wheels would be, more or less."

"And your shoulders are above mine," Rick added, though it was of little help to Nicholas who had no idea what the man's height was.

Still, it was disconcerting to have a better idea of just how big he was. He had thought his difficulties in avoiding obstacles in the city were from the greater density of them and the additional background noise – he had known he was bigger, yes, but not *that* large. Would he even have been able to fit back in his home, were he still there? He would have been forced to sleep outside in an animal pen even if his parents hadn't thrown him out from sheer malice. Was the indoors completely off-limits to him now?

"You okay there, Nick?" Rick asked him.

"I'm... I'm fine," Nicholas replied and began walking again. "I'm just tired too." That part certainly wasn't a lie; he was about ready to fall over and sleep.

Fortunately they didn't have to go much further to find a potential candidate. Evelyn ordered them all to stop, then sent Rick and James (or "Jimmy" as Rick kept calling him) inside of whatever building it was to have them look around, since they were armed.

"Where are we?" Nicholas asked once those two had left. What kind of place could they possibly be at?

"Mike's... Clear... Clearin... Clear-ance..." Sophia began; she must have been trying to read some sort of sign.

"A furniture store," Evelyn interrupted, ignoring Sophia's follow-up inquiry about what a 'clearance' was.

Nicholas frowned. "Why?"

"For one thing, it looks abandoned," Evelyn explained. "Whoever was working here probably just ran off back home. Not exactly a lot of call for a new sofa in the middle of a crisis, is there? Too big to steal too, and this isn't exactly high-end furniture. It's not worth it to loot, so nobody's bothered trying to ransack the place. If those two tell me it's all clear then I think I can get in at the back – they'll have a freight entrance there I might be able to fit into."

"What's a 'frayt'?" Sophia asked.

"It's for trucks."

Nicholas thought it over. He'd probably have to go with Evelyn, but it still sounded relatively safe, and maybe Sophia could still fit in the front and sleep on a bed, if there were any. It would be sheltered, and for the reasons Evelyn had given, safe from looters...

Suddenly, while he was deep in thought, he heard Sophia giggling. "Nick, your tail looks like a dog's!"

"What?" he asked in surprise, going still out of reflex.

"It was going back and forth like this," she said. She made some gesture that he couldn't see, but he could hear her scales rubbing against each other, and was able to detect the disturbance in the air she made on the membranes of his wings. "But slow."

"Hang on, here they come," Evelyn told Sophia before she could get much more excited.

Nicholas listened for the pair of footsteps approaching. "Seems clear," Rick told them bluntly.

"Some punks broke open the cash registers, but that's all," James added.

"Yep. No sign of anyone else hiding out in there, and there are some beds. Nothing great, but better than sleeping bags on the ground. We got into the back area just fine, if you come on around we can raise the shutters for you."

"Good. That should work," Evelyn said approvingly.

"Of course, we're not going to be this lucky every night," Rick pointed out. "We'll need to put some thought into where else we can hole up for the night going forward."

"Yes, I agree. But I'm not going to think about it this late at night. Let's head in, eat, and get some sleep."

"Amen to that!" Rick agreed eagerly. Nicholas followed after Evelyn, listening to the distinct sound she made as she moved with her leg and tail, going around the back with her. Whatever space they were passing through needed to be big enough for trucks to get by, so they were able to make it around behind the store without much issue. Shortly after they arrived, Nicholas heard a mechanical sound as the shutters were raised, and the others guided him inside after Evelyn, closing the shutters once they were inside.

"Goodness, it's dark in here," Evelyn commented. "How can you two see in here?"

"I've got a flashlight," Rick told her, and Nicholas heard a click. "We just decided to keep the lights off while the shutters were open to avoid attracting attention from outside."

"Good thinking."

"There's no way you're fitting through these doors, so you and the other dragons can stay out here," James added. Nicholas tried not to react to the displeasure evident in the man's voice that James used when addressing them, but Evelyn was not so tactful.

"You're still free to wander off into the sunset any time you like, young man," Evelyn warned him, following up her remark with a low rumbling sound akin to a growl.

"Settle down, settle down," Rick intervened. "He is right though, you're gonna have to sleep out here. But I bet there's some mattresses in some of these boxes, somewhere..."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Nicholas offered, taking a step forward.

"Stop!" both Rick and Evelyn warned at the same time. Nicholas froze, and Rick let out a sigh. "You were about to plow into that shelf. If one of those things comes down on you, I don't know if we'd be able to dig you out."

"Just stay where you are," Evelyn told him, "There's some room for us here by the shutters, but not much more than that."

Nicholas sat down, trying not to fret. At least Sophia seemed to be okay – she was off with the humans in the front part of the store, and he could feel vague happiness coming from her. Maybe she was talking to James's daughter or Rick's son. He couldn't help but worry about her, though; it was the first time the two of them had been separated since they had left the petting zoo.

The other three looked around, though Evelyn was greatly restricted in how far she could look. Fortunately they were able to locate some mattresses that were pulled free and easily dragged around by Evelyn, who evidently didn't even care enough to remove the plastic wrapping around them before arranging them into whatever arrangement it was she had in

mind. Once she was done she bid Rick and James goodnight, though only the former returned it.

Nicholas heard Evelyn moving around, giving a quiet groan as she got comfortable. "Better than the floor," she grumbled. "Come on over."

Cautiously, Nicholas approached, feeling around for the edge of the mattresses. They seemed to be lined up against each other in an approximate grid, and he was careful not to knock them askew as he climbed up, feeling his claws digging into them by accident sometimes. For a moment, he hesitated, suddenly far more acutely aware of just how much bigger he was than he used to be. His bed back at his old home had been the right size for a single human, naturally. Yet now if he were to try and fit onto a single mattress, even tucking in his limbs wouldn't allow him to fit, to say nothing of his neck, wings and tail all sticking out over the edges even if he somehow found a bigger one.

Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, he lay down close to Evelyn, much like he had done the previous night at the campsite. He let himself lie down in a comfortable position and could feel the small gap underneath him where one mattress met another, a suitable enough way to give him a sleeping surface big enough for his new body. As he settled in, he heard a shuffling from all around him – Evelyn must have been curling her tail around him again.

For some reason, that felt comforting.

"Goodnight, Nicholas," she told him. "Sweet dreams."

"Thank you," he replied quietly, trying to find the best way to sleep with his unusually bent and arranged legs, eventually settling in with his rear legs stretched out by his side with his front legs in front of him, allowing him to rest his head on his forelegs.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been lying there before he heard another sound, and he raised his head to listen. More footsteps? But he felt Sophia's worry for him, and sure enough, he heard her ask, "Nick?" when she drew close.

"Sophia?"

"...can I sleep here?"

Evelyn gave a low chuckle. "There's room for three," she invited, and Nicholas heard something drag over the plastic wrappings covering the mattresses – probably her tail.

Sophia came closer, and she lay down somewhere very close to Nicholas, then shuffled a little closer to rest her flank against his own. "Weren't you having fun out there?" Nicholas asked her.

"Yeah," she replied, "but you were worried about me. I could tell." He didn't deny it; he had been concerned. "And you promised you'd always be with me, right?"

"I did, and I will," he reassured her.

"Good," she told him, sounding happy. "And... I dunno. I just... wanted to be with you. I dunno how to say it."

Nicholas put his head back down on his hands. She, perhaps, felt the same longing for the company of other dragons at night as he did. It was safety in numbers, right? But there was something more. Something about the transformation that brought him closer to others like him. He just wished he could see what she looked like.

"It's okay, Sophia," he told her, suppressing a yawn. "I feel the same way." For some reason he could pick up a scent of lavender from her. Had she gotten into some sort of perfume or air freshener while she was away? But then again, maybe it was some dragon thing; there had been all sorts of strange scents around them that seemed out of place, and one in particular that made him feel like he was in a busy kitchen.

There was a brief pause. "Goodnight, Nick. Love you."

"Goodnight, Sophia. I love you too."

"Get some sleep, you two," Evelyn mumbled to them both.

Nicholas woke in the middle of the night from sudden pain, but it wasn't his.

Sophia was writhing and thrashing next to him, and as he fully woke up he became more aware of her panic. "Sophia?" he called out, his voice laden with worry, "Sophia, what's wrong?" He tried to identify what was wrong: the pain was largely in her throat, but her legs were aching as well. The latter discomfort he recognized; she was on her way to walking on all fours like him. But he had no idea what was going on with her neck.

She moved away from him, though he wasn't sure if she did so voluntarily or if the movement was from whatever spasms she was having. Was this something with the transformation? Was it going wrong? Was this going to happen to him too? But those worries were overridden by a greater fear: was he going to lose Sophia?

"Sophia, say something!" he begged, a panic even stronger than Sophia's rising in him.

He heard her talons scrape on the floor and then heard her coughing wetly from a position below him; she must have been on her knees. The scent of dragon blood reached his nose and his concern only grew, echoed by Evelyn's as she shook off her sleepiness. "Evelyn, what's happening?" Nicholas asked, though he was afraid of what the answer might be. He wanted to embrace Sophia, but he didn't know if it was safe to do so.

"I don't know," Evelyn replied, her voice flat. "She's coughing up blood, but beyond that, I can't tell you."

Nicholas wished he could do more. "Sophia, I'm here for you!" he called out to her, trying to reassure you. "It'll be over soon." He hoped it would be, anyway. She didn't answer, coughing again, making a racket as she struck something – a shelf? Just some boxes? – and knocked it over.

The noise drew more attention, prompting angry voices from somewhere further to Nicholas's left. Rapid footsteps approached, and then Nicholas heard Rick calling out, "What's the heck is going on in here?" There was a pause and then a mumbled "Oh, sorry" that Nicholas barely caught over the sound of Sophia's claws scraping on the ground and her bony wings flailing as she convulsed once again.

"Stay back," Evelyn warned him. "If she hits you by accident, she could seriously hurt you."

"Already on it, don't worry about me," Rick murmured.

After another heavy wet cough and a splattering sound, Sophia settled down and gasped for breath. Was it over? A lot of her pain had abated, though there was still an ache persisting in her throat that he could feel. Nicholas carefully approached her, reaching out with one foreleg, his knuckles brushing against the end of her tail, which he carefully took in his grip. "Sophia, are you okay now?" he asked her, trying to be as reassuring as he could.

But instead of a response, Nicholas heard a series of noises: high-pitched growls, hisses, warbles, and chirping noises. Raising his head, he wiggled his ear-fins a little without consciously attempting to do so, trying to determine what the sounds were. ...ear-fins? They must have started growing overnight. He remembered feeling some on the plush dragon toy Sophia had lent to him, but his seemed a little different. He had been so focused on Sophia had he had only just consciously noticed them. Putting those thoughts aside, he asked aloud, "What was that?"

Nicholas felt confusion from Sophia, and more of the noises came, mixed with the sound of her scales shifting as she got to her feet, her tail tugging at his hand. "It's Sophia," Evelyn informed him gravely. "She's making those sounds. I think she's trying to talk."

"What?" Nicholas blurted out, and began to panic again. "Sophia, you're not speaking English. I can't understand you. Can you understand me?" he moved forward and reached out with one hand, trying to find her arm, his hand brushing against her back before he finally felt her arm. Her arms were completely scaled over, and much stronger than they once were, barely reminiscent of the thin limbs his sister had had while they were humans.

"I'm guessing it's some kind of dragon language," Evelyn suggested. "I can't understand it yet, but maybe we will in time."

Nicholas drew a deep breath. "But I can't understand her, I can't see her... what if it's permanent? What if it's not a language, and the changes went wrong and messed up her speech? Or what if this is just the start of something worse? I assumed we were going to keep our minds, because nothing had happened to them yet, but what if we do? I... I don't want to forget who she is or for her to forget me! What if she forgets us and just leaves some day?"

As he said those words, he felt a sudden spike of fear from Sophia, and she made some sort of clicking sound as she pulled away from him. "Sophia?"

More odd sounds came from her, a cacophony he couldn't even understand the tone of. If not for the fear and sadness he felt from her, he would have had no idea what she was going on about. "Now you've done it," Evelyn muttered, "You've terrified her."

"She really looks like a frightened animal," Rick added from his safe vantage point off to the side. His comment only made things worse, and Sophia gave a mix of a squeak and a rasping sound, her fear intensifying.

Nicholas felt guilty, and tried to reach out to her with a wing, but she had moved too far away from him and his wing only embraced empty space. He lowered himself down towards the mattresses a little bit. "I'm sorry, Sophia. I'm just worried. What if James is right? What if—"

"*Nom de dieu*, don't say that out loud. The last thing we need is for him to hear you say that," Evelyn griped. Rick stifled a chuckle, only to stop abruptly; Nicholas could feel Evelyn's annoyance and assumed she had done something to silence him. In a much softer tone of voice, she addressed Sophia, "Ignore him, dear. Don't worry about it, you'll be alright. After all, you seem perfectly fine to me, hmm?" Sophia made some more noises, in response to which Evelyn cleared her throat – which made a deep rumbling sound with her dragon neck – and spoke again. "Sophia, you CAN understand what I'm saying, can't you? If so, raise your right arm."

A single chirp, and a pleased feeling from his sister, with a satisfied emotion from Evelyn. It was reassuring, if only a little. "We can't understand you," Nicholas reiterated. "You're making weird sounds. You have to speak English." Sophia bubbled with annoyance and gave a series

of noises that, while completely unintelligible, Nicholas assumed were some sort of displeasure at what he had just said.

"She can't," Evelyn told him flatly. "But she definitely understands us."

"Oh, that's good," Rick murmured from off to the side. "I was getting worried. God, it looks like a slaughterhouse in here."

"Get us some blankets or something," Evelyn ordered. "A mop would be ideal, but anything that can clean this up will have to do."

"All right," Rick agreed, and Nicholas heard his footsteps move away, though only a little. They were in the storage area already, after all.

"Sophia," Nicholas whispered, reaching out towards where he had last heard his sister make a noise. "Please take my hand."

She made a warbling sound, but did as asked, and Nicholas relaxed as he felt her fingers grip his hand. Yes, she definitely understood him, and she hadn't lost her mind. They would have to find some way to communicate, but she was still with him. He hadn't lost his sister. He thought back; she had felt far more afraid after Rick had mentioned something about them becoming animals.

"You're not an animal," Nicholas reassured her. "We're not animals. You're my sister. And I'll always be here with you. So don't worry, okay?"

She hesitated briefly, and Nicholas felt her doubt emanating from her, accompanied by the scent of curdled milk that seemed to reflect her worry. After a few moments, she leaned against him more, emitting a different scent that Nicholas found comforting. He tried his best to feel confident for her, trying to embrace her in as many ways as he could, with his wings and tail together.

"You two get back to sleep," Evelyn told them, "I'll help clean this mess up once Rick brings me something to mop it up with."

"Did it get on the mattresses?" Nicholas asked.

"Only one at the edge. Sophia, lead him over to that side instead," she instructed, probably pointing somewhere Nicholas couldn't see. "We'll deal with this in the morning. For now, we need our sleep."

Nicholas was inclined to agree; now that the tension had passed, his tiredness was returning. Keeping hold of his foreleg, Sophia led him to whatever spot Evelyn had indicated and lay back down. Carefully, he lay next to her, and even though it was awkward to do so, he put one limb over her protectively, fanning a wing across her like a blanket. He focused on her, ignoring Rick and Evelyn talking behind him, thinking only of Sophia and worrying for what else might happen to them next.

As always, Nicholas slept poorly, even accounting for the interruption in the middle of the night caused by Sophia losing the ability to speak English. Once, his restless nights had been because of the poor insulation of the house, too cold in the winters and too hot in the summers; so long ago it seemed, though it couldn't have been much more than a week. Now, though his scales kept him fairly insulated, they didn't yet cover his body fully exposed to the cool morning air creeping into the storage area they had spent the night in, and he still ached and felt sore in numerous places on his body. His sleep had also been interrupted by the changes his body was still undergoing, primarily along his tail and all along his back.

He slowly rose, pushing his upper body up from the mattresses first using his arms – or were they front legs now? – then bringing his rear legs up a moment later. It was a strange and alien motion to him, but it didn't feel uncomfortable to do with the new arrangement of his legs. In fact, a notable source of discomfort seemed to be gone: his legs. Experimentally lifting one and then lowering it so he could do the same with the other, he felt them bend without stiffness or pain. He identified the low, rasping sound close to him as Sophia's steady breathing as she slept by his side, but he could not detect the rumbling sound Evelyn normally made. He could sense her somewhere nearby, so hopefully she was just talking to the humans. He didn't want to consider the possibility that she had lost her voice as well. But surely he would have been woken up if she had...

Stepping away from Sophia a little while still remaining on the spread of mattresses, he twisted and turned his body so that he could reach out and touch one of his rear legs, but it was still quite awkward and he couldn't quite figure out how to do it without tipping over. Sitting down, he felt his

tail slide against the mattresses. It had gotten notably bigger, perhaps double what its length was the previous night. Slowly and with great care, he tried moving it, bending it around to touch it against his own leg. With a bit of effort he felt the scales of his tail slide against those on his legs, until they suddenly met the uncovered fleshy parts halfway to his knees. His ankles were much, much higher than they used to be, nowhere near the ground. But they seemed to have taken their final shape, for only the general soreness of his spreading scales remained, not the pains and discomfort of his bones re-growing into new shapes and arrangements.

He flexed his hands as well; though he could still move his fingers well enough to continue calling them hands, the palms had scaled over. His feet seemed capable of the same motion, and for a moment he realized how odd it would be to grasp something with one of the feet he had always only used for standing on. Lifting one arm, he touched the other, finding that his scales had almost completely covered it but for a small band over his elbow. No doubt before the end of the day it would be covered, too.

Suddenly he heard a sound from somewhere to his left and raised his head. He had gotten distracted checking the extent of his changes, but now that he was brought back to reality, he heard the scraping of talons against the floor. He could sense that it was Evelyn, but he couldn't hear the distinctive sound of her tail dragging. Had something changed? "Evelyn?"

"Good morning," she replied, and he relaxed. "Something wrong? I saw you checking yourself over."

"No," he answered. "Or, well... nothing more than usual."

"Still turning into a dragon," Evelyn remarked wryly.

"Yes. But nothing is broken, just... different. Anyway, is something wrong? I can't hear your tail... did something happen?"

"Oh, something happened, all right," she griped, and Nicholas heard her tail thump against the ground. "You're not the only one walking around on all fours any more. When I woke up, I couldn't stay up on two legs and kept falling back down to four. And it seems like Sophia is the same, just judging

by the way her legs are bent. At least my tail isn't dragging on the ground any more... as strange as it is to say 'my tail' out loud."

That explained why he couldn't hear her tail: she wasn't using it as a crutch any more now that she could walk on her forelegs. "I see. Has anything else about me changed...?"

"Quite a few things," she observed. "Looks like your head is changing properly now. You've got ear-fins like us, and you've got a muzzle coming in too."

Briefly perplexed, Nicholas reached up and felt the side of his head gently. He remembered now; he had forgotten about discovering them the previous night, remembering only what had happened to Sophia. His fingers brushed against the fin there, a series of small bones with membranes between them. With a little effort, he was able to move them, but not very much, and they still seemed quite small in comparison to his head, so perhaps they weren't fully grown yet. Moving his hand forward, he touched the front of his face where he felt the most soreness, finding that his nose had flattened out a bit while his upper and lower jaw had grown outwards by a few inches. For a moment he rested his hand there, then lowered it, unsure of what to make of it.

"Open your mouth," Evelyn told him. The request took him by surprise, but he did so, holding still. He heard her draw a little closer, and then she gave a small satisfied noise. "Yep, same as me. You're got more teeth and I can see your tongue changing shape too."

Experimentally, Nicholas moved his tongue around in his mouth. It definitely had a different shape to it and it seemed longer as well. "Will things taste different?" he asked her.

She gave a derisive snort in response. "I can't answer for most types of food yet," she remarked glibly. "Ever since my tongue changed we've been making do with what we can find – not exactly the most refined diet, is it? Meat tastes better, but we haven't had much of that. I have no idea if I suddenly like chewy bacon more than crispy because of all this, or just because Madeira is a good cook."

"Madeira?"

"Rick's wife. I was talking with her a little this morning. I was hoping she could fix my glasses."

Nicholas was puzzled. "What happened to them?"

"The chain snapped. I'm surprised it didn't wake you up. I woke up because it was getting too tight, and I tried to tug it upwards to loosen it and broke the damn thing."

"I don't recall..." Nicholas murmured. "Do you still need them?"

"No. But they were a gift from my eldest, and I'd like to keep them. I'm having Madeira hold onto them for now in the hopes that we can at least find some tape somewhere." He heard her talons tap on the floor. "Have you tried checking if you can see?"

It hadn't occurred to him to try, but when he opened his eyes, there was no difference: he was still blind. "No, I can't," he told her, closing his eyes again. "Do they look any different?"

"No. That's unfortunate. Maybe even this transformation can't cure something you were born with. Regardless, that's what I've been doing; thought I'd let you two sleepyheads rest a bit more before we head out. They've got some food set aside for you, but even with what we got yesterday, we don't have much. Corner stores aren't exactly troves of health food, either."

"We'll just have to search for something."

"We will. Who knows what we can find or what's still left out here. Haven't heard any cars go by, and even those police vans seem to have stopped. It's eerily quiet. Other than the occasional gunshots, that is. Claire was telling us that in the first couple of days, some people were panic buying, and others were hoarding, so it might not be so simple for us to find food. But we'll manage... somehow. At least the water's still running in the bathrooms, so we'll have something to drink."

The mention of water made Nicholas more aware of how parched he felt. He'd probably have to ask someone to bring him some water, but before

he could dwell on that much, he became aware of Sophia rousing from her sleep, woken by their voices. He noticed both her low grumbling, and the vague feeling of her mind connecting with his, along with the various sensations she felt: lingering tiredness, and the aches and pains of transformation all over her. From what he felt, it seemed like her wings and hands were growing particularly rapidly: the speed of their transformation caused them to hurt much more than the general ache they usually went through. Thankfully, the soreness on her face seemed to have mostly abated, but he could feel how much her legs were still in pain as they completed their shift to a quadrupedal stance.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said to her softly.

"Nnnnn—" Sophia began, then growled with frustration, a matching emotion spilling over the mental link. "Nnnnnnnnn—" was as far as she got on the second attempt to say his name, and she coughed, seeming to have great difficulty.

"Don't strain yourself," Evelyn urged, and Sophia went quiet. "I think it's safe to say that she still can't speak English, but she would if she could. This is concerning, no matter what. We need to be able to communicate with the others somehow, even if we all become unable to speak English. I could try and teach them the hand signs we used in the Resistance, but that's just for basic communication... and it wouldn't help you."

Worry crept into Nicholas again, then intensified. He had always had to rely on speech and sound to talk to people. He couldn't read books unless they were braille, and he didn't know how to write. His breathing quickened; what if he couldn't be understood, and still couldn't understand his sister and Evelyn? That was a distinct yet still terrifying possibility compared to losing his mind. He would be completely isolated and helpless. Having Sophia with him gave him hope, but if he was cut off from her...

Perhaps sensing his fears, Sophia seemed to reach out to him with her mind; feelings of reassurance entered his awareness, and he couldn't help but relax a little. She touched his forearm with one hand, and though she made a few more of some quieter sounds he didn't understand, he still understood her emotions perfectly.

"...thank you," he said softly. "We'll always be together, no matter what happens."

"Panicking won't do you any good," Evelyn told him. "We'll take things as they come."

Sophia gave a chirp of what seemed like agreement. "Okay," Nicholas conceded, "What will we do, then?"

"While we can still talk, we'll figure out a way to communicate with the others. Pens and pencils are too small for us to hold, but maybe a paintbrush would work. But that doesn't help you... do you know Morse Code?"

"I don't," Nicholas admitted.

"Then I'll teach it to both of you as we go. If nothing else, you can try tapping out letters on the ground."

It was better than nothing. "Thank you, Evelyn," he told her. "I really appreciate the help."

She gave a short laugh, much deeper than it should have been for someone her age. "Someone's got to look after you kids! Your parents sure didn't. So it falls to me to keep you on the straight and narrow. Now let's get some food before all the bacon is gone. They're cooking it all now before it goes bad, but Rick's been wolfing it down, and we need as much food as we can get."

Chapter 10

Even living through a war hadn't prepared Evelyn for what anarchy would be like.

Out in the suburbs there had been occasional broken windows, smashed-up cars, or other forms of vandalism, but here, entire streets were wrecked in ways that suggested it wasn't just a bad neighborhood. Glass shards that hadn't been swept up yet, fresh-looking boards over windows, bloodstains, bullet casings, burnt-out fires, and worst of all, more bodies. Mostly human, but one decaying corpse of someone halfway to becoming a dragon riddled with bullets in their vulnerable human parts was particularly disturbing to everyone present.

It wasn't just that Evelyn had narrowly avoided the same fate in her altercation with Nicholas and Sophia's parents – it was that it was just as bad, if not worse, than living through fascist occupation. This wasn't some greater force of evil at work killing these people, it was citizens turning on each other, resorting to violence in a crisis that should have demanded unity instead of savagery. Bodies left where they fell, danger around every corner. It was pure anarchy.

It kept them on alert, though it seemed that few of the local residents were willing to take on three dragons, even before factoring in the humans with them who kept their guns as visible as possible. More than once Evelyn made eye contact with someone peeking around a corner or out of a rare unbroken window, only for the observer to quickly hide under her piercing gaze. She hoped that nobody would be foolish enough to press their luck; she didn't want to take any more lives, but if someone was pointing a gun at her or her companions, it would be the last thing they did. Fortunately, nothing more serious than hearing fleeing footsteps, slamming doors, or one panicked "The dragons are coming, quick, hide!" happened to them.

As they pressed on they gradually entered a part of the city in a less ruinous state, where the worst problems were trash, glass, and graffiti – rather than bodies and burnt-out cars. Yet Evelyn couldn't help but keep alert just in case the comparatively pleasant moment came to an abrupt

end. All it would take was one group with more guts and guns than sense, or the aftermath of such...

Evelyn remained at the front, leading them onward and staying out of everyone else's way, with Nicholas and Sophia trailing behind her. She, too, was on four legs now, just like Evelyn and Nicholas. When they left that morning, Sophia had had to forego the bedsheet she had been wearing, which was now packed into the hand cart so she could sleep on it later; her tail had grown large enough, and her hips broad enough, that the sheet had just been getting in the way. Now, she had only her scales to protect her from the elements, just like Evelyn and Nicholas.

Evelyn heard a thumping on the ground, and a spike of curiosity from Sophia, who was pointing with her tail, though she had trouble holding it steady. Evelyn looked in the direction Sophia was pointing and frowned; a large brick wall, already heavily decorated with graffiti, had something new sprayed over it in red. Over and over and over, the same words: They are watching. They are watching. They are watching. Near each instance of the phrase, the All-Seeing Eye had been hastily spray-painted.

"They are watching," Evelyn read for Sophia, who tilted her head, and Evelyn felt her confusion. "I don't know what," Evelyn told her. "Don't pay it any mind."

Evelyn winced again as she accidentally put weight on her injured leg. It wasn't as bad as it had been before, but despite scaling over and going fully digitigrade, the wounds from the exploding propane tank still had not healed fully, even though the bullet wound in her arm did. Another one for the list of mysteries about the transformation.

She was going to be done first, there was no doubt about that. She had gone completely bald and other than a patch of skin where the back of her head met her neck, the only thing left on her head to change was her muzzle, which wasn't as proportionally long as Sophia's yet. Her neck, arms, and hands were almost completely covered by scales, and her wings had grown the last remaining bones, with the membranes only partially formed. Every time she caught sight of herself in a reflective surface, usually on one of the rare intact storefront windows during the day or on

the surface of a well-polished car, she was reminded just how inhuman she was becoming. At a glance, she certainly would look fully like a dragon, especially now that she was on all fours, and with each passing day more careful scrutiny was needed to find some last vestige of her old body. Not to mention, she was so large that she had no choice but to go down the middle of the road, but thankfully, the only cars they encountered were parked at the sides of the street.

That didn't mean the other two weren't still growing plenty in their own ways. Nicholas's head was shifting, his jaws extending into a muzzle, and a pair of ear-fins growing on the sides of his head. The fin running down his back had extended all the way down his tail, and while it was a steady height across his body, once it reached his tail it gradually curved upwards all the way to the tip. Sophia's legs were covered in scales completely, but it was her wings that had experienced the most drastic growth, with almost all of the bones grown, stretching out like spindly limbs of a tree without any membranes between them yet. They hung from her back if she didn't consciously lift them up, which meant the black claws at the end of each wing bone dragged on the ground behind her. Nicholas had had to 'teach' her how to fold them by making the motions himself while she watched, but all too often Sophia would forget and let them drag on the ground again. Such rapid growth did not come without a price, and while Evelyn felt proud of Sophia for enduring the discomfort that was detectable to the older dragon, she was nonetheless disheartened that such a young child had to live through it.

While they had covered good ground, they had had no luck on finding more supplies, and while what they had scavenged should have lasted a week or more, the three dragons' ravenous appetites caused a great deal of it to disappear, much to the chagrin of James. Every other store they came to had already been looted and picked clean of anything remotely edible.

She had, at least, had some success with teaching Morse Code to Nicholas and Sophia. To her surprise, Sophia had picked it up even faster than Nicholas had. The emotions coming across the mental link seemed stronger and more nuanced, too. Was something else going on inside the

little girl's head? She had seemed quite happy and pleased with herself, tapping out words like N-I-C-K and H-E-L-L-O with her tail, which was easily long enough to reach the ground.

It wasn't just Sophia either, and not even Nicholas. Like looking over a city and seeing flickering lights in the distance, Evelyn was aware of... others. Other dragons. Very little about them: only their presence, at best. But maybe Sophia wasn't the only one changing. She could tell very little about the other dragons except that they existed, and even trying to pinpoint a direction seemed beyond her. For now, at least.

"Excuse me!" Evelyn heard someone yell at her, and she came to a stop, with the others halting behind her.

Without turning around, she twisted her long neck to look behind her, peering down at Amar with one eye. He was standing all the way back behind her tail, and it was momentarily disorienting to realize just how far away he was while still being 'next' to her – that the entire long black body stretching out was, in fact, her own. His son still seemed sick, but whatever medicine he had been given seemed to be helping, and he at least was able to walk on his own with one hand tightly held in his father's. Rick and James were just behind him, guns drawn, both keeping an eye on their surroundings, just in case.

"You don't need to shout, I can hear you just fine," Evelyn told him.

"Oh!" he replied, chastised, then quickly lowered his voice. "You can hear me all the way over there?"

"Yes. Anyway, what did you want?" Evelyn inquired.

"I know where we are," he told her, raising his free hand to gesture as he kept a tight grip on his son's hand. "Over that way, on Chapel Street. There is a food market. A big one."

Rick glanced over in the direction Amar was pointing, keeping both hands on his rifle. "Probably already been looted."

"I'd be surprised if it made it even a single day in this part of town," James muttered darkly, anxiously tapping his index finger on the side of his pistol, eyes scanning for trouble.

"Probably," Amar agreed, "But it's very, very big. There could still be something."

Evelyn gave a nod, ignoring Sophia sitting on her haunches nearby and tapping out F-O-O-D on the ground. "I don't see any reason *not* to go check. Can you give directions?"

"Certainly," Amar answered. "Take a left at this next intersection first."

His directions led them among streets lined by apartments. It was a part of the city that looked like it once had been lively despite its poor state, with currently-empty washing lines hung between buildings and bright paint on the outsides of some of the buildings and local businesses. But now it was deserted, the shops and restaurants shuttered. Sometimes she was sure she could see movement near windows, likely from locals peeking outside and then hiding when they saw the dragons and the group with them coming, but nobody came out to cause trouble.

The food market was, as promised, absolutely enormous, though only one story tall, an odd sight amidst the taller buildings that surrounded it on all sides. Glass walled it on many sides, yet despite some knocked-over garbage cans and occasional panes of broken glass, it seemed relatively intact. Posters up in the intact windows promised, in both English and Spanish, foods of all sorts at cheap prices, so long as you were willing to buy in bulk.

"Hot damn!" Rick exclaimed as he tried to peek in through the windows. "How has this place not been picked clean?"

Sophia said something, but it was all just chirps and growls. "Who cares?" James added, pressing himself up against the windows to look inside as well. "If even half the stuff is gone, there's still a mountain of food in there!"

Something didn't feel right to Evelyn. She looked around, able to lift her tall neck over the top of the building, but there was nothing up there except some vents and machinery for the air conditioning. The surrounding buildings would be better lookout points anyway if someone wanted to keep an eye on it...

"Let's take a peek inside," James suggested. "Just a quick look. If it's safe, we'll come back out and let the others know."

"And if it isn't?" Rick asked.

"We come out anyway, but faster. Or she'll hear the gunshots," James said with a jerk of his thumb towards Evelyn. "She can help us out. She's the reason we're almost out of food again, after all."

"I'm right here," Evelyn muttered darkly, fixing him with a firm gaze from the eye closer to him. "And I can't fit inside of there."

"Hey, I'm over here," James snarled, waving a hand at her. "At least look at me when you're talking to me."

"I *am* looking at you," Evelyn told him pointedly.

"No you're not, you're looking over there," he insisted, pointing in the direction Evelyn's muzzle was facing.

She narrowed her eyes a little. "If I point my nose straight at you, then I can't see you," she told him, speaking as though addressing a child. Ironically, Sophia understood the concept well enough considering she was dealing with the same problem. "With how my eyes are positioned, anything too close to my face is blocked by this big snout of mine."

"Whatever," James muttered apathetically. "If you hear any trouble, just roar or something, that'll scare away any looters. Otherwise just be quiet. I'm going to see what's on the menu."

Evelyn was going to protest further, but James was already heading for the double doors. She gave a sigh and watched, hoping that he wouldn't get himself killed. He was an ass, but he also knew how to use a gun, and that made him a useful ass.

Sophia continued to chirp, and Evelyn looked over at her. Sophia's emotions were a mixture of caution and frustration. "What is it? Spell it out," Evelyn suggested, but Sophia's frustration only grew, as did the volume of her noises. Did she not know a word?

D-A-G, Sophia tapped out, then felt frustrated again. "Dag?" Nicholas asked from nearby, keeping himself still and his hands spread out on the ground

to feel the vibration. Evelyn didn't understand what Sophia was trying to say. Was she getting a letter wrong, or misspelling the word? Sophia grumbled, shaking her head, and began tapping again.

D-R-A-G... "Dragon?" Evelyn guessed, and Sophia hopped about in place and seemed excited, but she also waved a hand and held up three fingers. Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "Three dragons?" Sophia nodded and beamed widely, baring numerous sharp teeth as she did.

"Yes, we're three dragons," Evelyn said, narrowing her gaze. "This isn't the time for games, Sophia."

She expected Sophia to feel disappointed, but instead, Evelyn only felt growing anger and annoyance across the mental link they shared. Again, Sophia waved a hand as much as her quadrupedal stance would allow, stabbing upward with three raised digits, then pointed off in a direction with her tail.

"Three dragons... that way?" Evelyn asked, and Sophia nodded, making happy chirping noises. However, when Evelyn followed up with, "How far?" she only got a shrug in response, though it was made with Sophia's wings rather than her shoulders. Evelyn still couldn't discern anything about the presence of other dragons in the area, but maybe Sophia's abilities were more refined. How ironic that the child would be better at this than her...

As she mulled that over, the doors to the food market opened again. But Rick and James weren't the first ones out: instead it was a pair of armed youths with slightly browned skin and colored bandanas over their mouths who held open the doors for Rick and James, who emerged with their hands raised over their heads mid-protest: "...just lookin'! We don't want any trouble, I promise!"

Apprehension gripped Evelyn as she assessed the situation quickly. At least those two fools weren't harmed, but what had they gotten into? Others like the first two guards came out as well, with submachine guns aimed at Rick's and James's backs.

Of course, it didn't take long for them to spot her – given that she was taller than the building they had come out of. One of the youths escorting

Rick and James lowered his gun and pointed with an empty hand towards Evelyn and called out, "Dragón! Dragón!"

Evelyn lowered her upper body and tensed her muscles, and some subconscious instinct made her flare her partially-grown wings out wide, her tail lashing back and forth. The fact that they were lowering their weapons implied they weren't hostile, but it was better to remain alert. Others came rushing out from the building to see her, and she saw some faces pressed against the glass on the inside too, staring outwards.

The tallest among them, wearing a bright green soccer jersey and white shorts, came forward and approached her, waving with both arms over his head. "Hey, big dragon!" the youth yelled past his bandana, speaking English with a noticeable Mexican accent, "These two with you?" He gestured towards their captives, who had turned to watch what was going on while slowly lowering their arms; everyone seemed to have forgotten about them.

"Yes," Evelyn replied tersely, staying hunched down just in case things went sour. There were far too many armed people around for her liking: not just the two that had escorted out Rick and James, but from a quick glance she could easily see that more of the youths were armed than not. But they weren't pointing the guns at her, and were holding them non-aggressively as they looked between her, Nicholas, and Sophia. Was it just a ploy or could she trust them?

The one at the front turned away and spoke to some of the others. Evelyn understood just barely enough to recognize it as Spanish, but the content of the actual conversation eluded her. As he talked, gesturing towards Evelyn, the others with him began to put away their weapons, and Evelyn finally relaxed as the tension faded. Eventually he turned back towards her, gesturing to her and the others behind her with an empty hand. "You're all together?"

"Yes," Evelyn acknowledged.

"You must be really hungry, being so big." Gesturing vaguely behind him, he went on, "We have three dragons. They eat so much food!"

"Three dragons?" Evelyn repeated, before glancing at Sophia. She was peeking around Evelyn's large body warily at all of the armed strangers in front of her, and only gave Evelyn a brief glance, so Evelyn returned her attention to the youth addressing her.

"Yes! None as big as you." He pointed with one finger towards her, wagging it a little. "Come with us to see José, and we'll forget about you coming into our turf. He wanted us to find the special dragons, and I think that's you!"

Evelyn took a moment to think it over. The encounter could certainly have gone much worse; she didn't fear too much for herself against the guns they had, but she didn't know how well Sophia or Nicholas's scales would hold up to gunfire, to say nothing of all the humans that were with her. The opportunity to speak to other dragons also intrigued her, especially some who had been in the city the whole time and might be able to fill her in on some things.

"Very well," she conceded, relaxing her body at last by rising from her crouch, her fins folding back down to less bristling positions. "How far is it?"

"Just a few blocks," the youth told her, pointing. "Come, come!"

She began to walk, while Rick and James hurried over towards her. "Are you crazy?" James hissed; she heard it perfectly well even with how far away he was from her head. "You're just going to follow a gang back to their hideout?"

Evelyn turned her head to give him a firm look over her shoulder, continuing to walk. "Do you intend to fight them?" she asked pointedly. "With your wife and daughter nearby?"

Chastised, James bit his lip, but he didn't look happy. Quietly, Rick told him, "Let's just be thankful we're not Swiss cheese. I'm a little wary too, but I think we should at least go hear 'em out."

"Fine, fine. But I'm staying behind the dragons in case bullets start flying."

"Fine with me," Evelyn grumbled, pressing onwards.

Chapter 11

Sophia was amazed at how different the various parts of the city looked. At first it had been small houses, then buildings for or five floors high. She'd passed several parks and statues and occasional weirdly-shaped buildings she didn't know, and now this part of the city was wildly different. Most of the buildings were painted in such bright colors! Lots of them had little balconies by the windows, many of which had people standing on them holding guns. From some of the ground floor buildings she could pick up traces of delicious smells of food she didn't recognize. She wondered what it looked like when it was busy – instead of now, when it seemed mostly deserted.

And it was strange that it seemed both nicer and worse than other parts of the city. The buildings seemed to be in worse shape overall with more rust and broken bits on the edges of roofs or whatever. And there were still plenty of things like the little metal things someone had called 'bullet casings' on the ground, broken windows and glass, and wrecked cars. There was so much more graffiti around, too. But they didn't see any more bodies, even if there were bloodstains, sometimes big ones, and that alone made Sophia feel a little safer. She didn't like seeing bodies. It always made her feel scared, especially when it was someone who was a dragon like her – or was halfway towards being one, at least.

It was less deserted than other parts of the city, though. People at their windows watched more openly, and now that they were following the big group of people, there were some coming out onto balconies to watch their whole group pass by. Sometimes she saw a child watching her, and she would do her best to wave, but having to walk on all fours like Nicholas had been doing made it harder to do. Getting an idea, she tried waving back with one of her partly-grown wings, but the first time she tried it she smacked her wing against a streetlight by accident, and took more care after that.

She didn't know what was going on, but with all the other people she was seeing now, things seemed to be looking up. She had been afraid when she saw all the guns, but nobody shot anything in the end. But more than that, she felt the other dragons getting closer.

She'd tried to tell Evelyn what she felt: that there were three other dragons nearby. But Evelyn had misunderstood her, and Sophia didn't know how to tell her that. Ever since that morning, she hadn't been able to speak – at first she'd thought she was speaking just fine until Nicholas had told her he couldn't understand her. But she understood her own words, why couldn't he or Evelyn? Even if it was dragon-talk, they were dragons too.

And then, Nick had scared her by wondering if she would leave them or forget who they were. She knew he didn't mean it, Nick would never try to hurt her. But she had remembered her parents talking about making her fight her brother, and her fears about turning into an animal had returned in full force. Even now, it still bothered her, so she kept looking over at Nicholas every so often, reminding herself that he was her brother. She'd heard that repeating something helped you remember it. So if she kept doing that, she would never forget him, right?

She continued to mull that over as they arrived at their destination: a big U-shaped and graffiti-covered building around a grassy area that was probably meant to be some kind of a park, though it wasn't much of one, just some grass and a couple trees and some signs she couldn't read that had red circles with lines through them. What drew her attention, though, was how many people were out and about in the grassy area, milling about and talking. At one corner, several kids were playing with a soccer ball, and at another, people were cooking something delicious-smelling that her muzzle picked up even from such a distance.

Even more notable, though, were the other dragons. It was undoubtedly the three she had been able to sense earlier: the three 'lights' she had been aware of were right there, lining up with where she saw the dragons. Their light wasn't nearly as bright as Evelyn's was, about the same strength as Nick's, but it was still enough for her to be aware of them. Like her, they weren't fully dragons yet, though: one, sitting and watching the soccer game, still had very short arms, reminding her of a T-Rex, their tail and wings still stubby, with a fin so small it was barely more than a tiny line running down their back. They had what looked like a bunch of checkered tablecloths sewn together covering their front, with big straps around their back holding it in place.

Another, near where the food was being cooked, looked all patchy and uneven, with one leg changed but the other not as much, and the same for his arms, while his scales were coming in as little patches all over his body seemingly at random. Even his face was half dragon, with the right side covered in scales, his eye a bright red, the other half of his face still human. Sophia also saw that while the fin along his back had grown, it was super wavy, going up and down a lot. With such a strange body shape, it seemed like no clothing could possibly fit him, for he wasn't wearing any!

The last dragon was at the very back, with a grand pair of wings and a huge tail. His arms and legs were transformed, but most of his torso still seemed to be covered by skin and not scale. Probably to keep him warm, he was wearing what kind of looked to Sophia like an apron, made from one of those big blue plastic sheet things and a big loose rope that he wore around his neck, with another rope roughly around his waist.

Sophia could sense things from them too, just like she could with Nick and Evelyn. They all felt... curious, for one thing, as Sophia's group approached. And they all felt sore and aching in different places too – the patchy dragon most of all. But there were other emotions mixed in too; a sort of awe and wonder. Was it for her? Or maybe Evelyn? Probably Evelyn, since she was so big.

She felt like she should say something, but they probably wouldn't hear it. But maybe she could think at them like she'd done to that one dragon that was super far away? She called out "*Hiiiiii!*" and fanned out a wing to awkwardly wave with it, and as she did she tried to think the greeting at them too. It must have worked because the dragons immediately turned their heads towards Sophia, but if they were trying to reply to her, she couldn't sense anything.

It wasn't just the dragons that noticed their arrival. All of the nearby humans stared, but Sophia noticed they were all looking at Evelyn instead of at her. It helped that Evelyn's head rose higher than the few trees in the grassy area. Conversations ceased and things went quiet, though Sophia saw and heard several others nearby whispering to one another. Although she could make out the words, she didn't understand the language they were speaking in. Having the entire crowd looking their way made her feel

self-conscious, and she shuffled over a little bit to hide behind Evelyn's much larger body, craning her neck out to peek around so she could still see what was going on.

The dragon with the blue-sheet apron stood on two legs, though he had to spread out his wings a bit for balance to do so; maybe he would soon be on four legs like Sophia, Nicholas and Evelyn all were. The human who had been talking to Evelyn outside of the grocery store ran off ahead towards the apron-dragon to speak with him, exchanging a few words. It didn't take long before that dragon came forward, the crowd of humans readily parting to make room for him; he wasn't nearly as big as Evelyn, but he was still much larger than all the people around him. Evelyn watched him closely, and Nicholas sat nearby, while all the other humans kept well back behind Evelyn, observing from a distance. They seemed really scared to Sophia for some reason, and she didn't know why.

The apron-wearing dragon stopped before them, looking at each of them in turn, and then he spoke. Yet when he did, even though Sophia understood it, something about it sounded very different. "*We meet at last,*" he said to them; the words weren't English, and the sounds weren't like anything she'd heard from people at all, yet she knew their meaning perfectly.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," Evelyn told him.

"*I do!*" Sophia chimed in. Then, an idea came to her head, and she asked, "*Can you understand me?*"

He looked between the two of them briefly. "I caan uunderrstaand youu," he said to Sophia, now in English, deep and rumbly yet slurred a little bit here and there. To Evelyn, he asked, "Is thiiss betterr?"

"Yes, thank you. So, she's speaking some kind of dragon language?"

He gave a nod. "Yeess. If youu doo not yett, youu will soooon." Changing his tone to something more stern, he continued, "I ammm toold youu weere tryying too steeal froom uss."

"It wasn't—" Rick began, starting to move forward from behind Evelyn, but she glanced back over her shoulder and took a single step to block him

with her body. He went silent and backed away again, so Evelyn returned her attention to the apron-wearing dragon.

"We are almost out of food," Evelyn explained. "The three of us eat far more than those who aren't being transformed... I'm sure it's the same for you."

"Yess, it iis," the other dragon confirmed. "Too muuch bloooood haas beeeen sspiilllledd heerree rreecenntlyy. Ssoo, iif youu caan answeerr some queestionns, I will seee too it thaat youu doo not goo hungryy toonightt."

Evelyn tilted her head a little. "What kind of questions?"

"Whaat youu aare dooing, wheere youu aare gooing, aand whaat youu caan doo. Youu twoo aare speciaal, buut wee doo not knoww hoow."

"*Special?*" Sophia asked.

"Yees. Wee weere awaare of youu loong befoore youu got heere. I aasked mmyy... *coommpaññerros* too fiind youuu aand briing youuu too mmee."

Evelyn gave a deep hum of thought. "How? And why?"

He held up one hand towards her, palm out. "Oone thiing aat a tiime, *seññora*. I doo noot liike too taalk on aan eempty stoomaach. I am Joséé; whaat aare yoour naames?"

Evelyn went through the introductions, starting with herself, then Sophia and Nicholas, and then the humans in the group. Sophia paid little attention to it though, distracted by her surroundings; some of the conversation and activity in the open area had returned, particularly where the food was being cooked. She began to wander over towards it, but stopped when she heard Evelyn call her name sharply.

"*Sorry*," she murmured, sitting down and looking back towards Evelyn and José.

"Doo noot worryy," José reassured her, "Wee will noot hurrt herr, oor aany of youu – even the woould-bee thieeves." he added, giving a pointed look past Evelyn. "Coomme, youu aare guessts toniight! Youu aand I haave a loot too discuuss, Eevelynn, buut the oothers maay doo as theey wiish soo lonng aas theey caause no troouble."

"Very well," Evelyn agreed, turning her head around using her long neck without moving her body, so that she could address Sophia and Nicholas. "I'm going to see what I can learn about what's going on. Get yourself something to eat, but behave yourselves."

"*Okay*," Sophia replied.

"I'll stay with Sophia," Nicholas added.

"Good. But don't hesitate to come get me if you need help." She paused for a moment and then asked, "Nicholas, do you know anything about what José mentioned? Are you able to... 'sense' me?"

Nicholas pawed at the grass a little in thought. "Sort of? You and Sophia... I can sense emotions and pain... wait, no." He frowned, which looked odd to Sophia, before he went on, "I can only sense it from you and Sophia, not from José."

"That sounds less like you sensing us and more like us... broadcasting it to you," Evelyn suggested.

"Maybe. It sounded like José knew roughly where you were, but not precisely. It's the same for me. I know you're nearby but I have to rely on sound to follow you."

"*Si*," José agreed. "Thaat iis whyy II haad too haave ootherrs lloook ffor yooou. II coould nnoot teelll theem wheere too goo."

"*I can do it!*" Sophia insisted, "*I can see her light!*" But at Evelyn's blank look, Sophia grumbled. Was it really so hard to understand her? But if the other dragon could speak several languages, why couldn't she? Focusing, Sophia moved her lips and tried hard to speak in English.

"IIIIIIII," she managed, getting out the first syllable, but the rest of it was such a mess of noise that even she had no idea what she had actually said. Frowning in frustration, she tried again with even worse results, and grumbled to herself as she looked down at the grass.

"Was that Sophia?" Nicholas asked in a worried tone.

"Yees," José cut in. "Shee waas trying too saay thaad shee caan seense yooou, Eevelynn. Aall of uus coould aat differennt tiimes – youu'll leearn iit

eventually. I also couldn't speak for a little bit after I first began speaking like a dragon. As you can tell, I am still not quite there yet. It just needs practice."

Nicholas visibly relaxed next to Sophia, and she felt it from his mind too, and smelled something from him that also told her how relieved he seemed to feel at hearing that. Sophia shook her head; she was starting to get overwhelmed, feeling so many extra sets of emotions and picking up so many scents. Not just from the dragons, but also from where the food was being cooked nearby...

"*I'm hungry*," she grumbled.

"*Then go eat*," José suggested with a wave of a wing.

"*Okay!*" Sophia replied, getting up and trotting off towards where she smelled the food. Other people were quick to get out of her way, but as she got close she bumped into a child and knocked him down onto the grass.

"*I am sorry!*" she cried out, trying to turn around – only to knock into more people with her hips. Her partly-grown tail also bumped into a few people, as she wasn't used to having it yet, and not being able to see it made it even harder to keep track of.

Starting to turn back, she began to panic from seeing the people she had knocked over, when the patchy dragon nearby stood up and called out, "*Hold still, fledgling!*" to her. He was walking on all fours as well as he approached, going slowly enough for the people around him to get out of the way, and giving them gentle nudges when they didn't see him coming.

"*I am sorry!*" Sophia repeated, hanging her head and crouching down, pulling her wings close against her flanks. She'd done something bad, right after Evelyn told her not to, and she felt bad about it.

"Sophia, what happened?" Nicholas asked from behind her, sounding and smelling worried.

"*It was an accident!*" she tried to explain, looking around. The child was getting back up, but she had hit several people with her tail who were disentangling themselves from one another.

The patchy dragon reached her, and she could see that he was having great difficulty walking; because of the way he had grown with his differently sized limbs, he limped and stumbled a lot as he moved, and he bumped into someone as he did, though they were caught by another person nearby and avoided falling onto the grass. A human woman came right behind him wearing an apron and ranting in a language Sophia didn't understand, but from the tone she guessed that it was scolding.

"*Sorry, sorry!*" Sophia protested. "*I do not understand!*"

"*It is fine,*" the patchy dragon reassured her with a little bit of mirth to his tone and his scent. "*She is just saying that we are nothing but trouble.*"

"*Oh...*"

"*She said the same thing to me and my brother before I became a dragon,*" he remarked in amusement. "*It does not look like anyone is hurt. Perhaps we should just sit down and keep still so that we do not knock over anyone else?*"

Sophia gave a nod and sat down, but Nicholas remained where he was, right behind her. "Sophia?" he asked again.

She thought for a moment. How could she talk to him...? But as she realized her tail was flicking against the ground, she got an idea. It wasn't anywhere near the size of Evelyn's tail, even in relation to her own body, but it was big enough for this. Turning her head on her long neck, she saw that he was just close enough for her to rest her tail on his right hand. Nicholas seemed startled and pulled away from her with a sharp scent of panic, and she called out to him, annoyed that he had moved away from her.

"Was that you, Sophia?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said to him, and though he didn't understand the word he did recognize her voice.

"Sorry, I didn't know what that was," he murmured, shifting closer to her. Again, she rested her tail on his right hand and trilled at him as she did, then after a moment she raised the tail-tip and tapped it against him to spell out S-I-T in Morse Code.

"Hm...?" It took him a brief moment to understand the meaning, but then he sat down on the grass behind her. "Is everything okay? Tap once for yes, twice for no."

She gave him a single tap, and he relaxed. "Okay. I'll be right here, Sophia," he said to reassure her, but she could tell he still felt a little worried. She wished she could tell him with words...

"*You are Sooo-phiiii-aaaaa, is that right?*" the patchy dragon asked her, speaking slower when he said her name, having great difficulty making the non-dragon sounds, and she turned her attention to him, giving a nod.

"*Yes, that is me!*" she said proudly. "*This is my elder nestmate*, Nnnn... Nnnkkk..." She huffed and gave up on trying to pronounce her brother's name, prompting a small chuckle from the patchy dragon. Maybe she could get Nick to do it himself. Raising her tail-tip again, she tapped it against Nicholas to spell out N-A-M-E.

"Huh?" Nicholas asked in confusion. "My name?"

"Yyyyyooooouuuuu," the third dragon said, nodding for emphasis even though Nicholas couldn't see it.

"Nicholas," he replied. "Who are you?"

Slowly, the answer came back: "Frannnn-ccccisssss-coooooo."

"*Nice to meet you!*" Sophia replied, then glanced around again. The people she had knocked over had all gotten back up, and were watching the three dragons curiously – from a greater distance. There was a bit of an empty space around all three of them now, and while Sophia didn't like that people were backing away from her, she liked that Francisco wasn't trying to get away from them. Nicholas was staying close, oblivious to what was going on around him. Or was he? She could see the small fin on the nearer side of his head wiggling and fanning out now and then. What was he listening to?

"*What brings you here?*" Francisco asked her.

Her nostrils flared as she picked up another delicious smell from nearby. "*I am hungry*," she answered him.

He gave a rumbling sound that Sophia understood as a dragon's laugh. *"I am too, my mother is working on it,"* he answered. *"Her food is the best! At least, I think so. You will like it. But I meant: why are you here in the city?"*

"We are going to the..." she began. A word for 'stadium' didn't come to her immediately. *"Game-field-arena-place,"* she eventually cobbled together from other words.

He seemed to understand. *"Over the river?"*

"I think so."

"Why?"

Sophia churred in thought. There was some reason, but she had forgotten it. Evelyn would know. *"Ask..."* she began, and she tried to say Evelyn's name, but it came out as *"Eeeeeeevvvllllmmmmn,"* and she huffed in frustration. *"The really big Child of the Egg."*

"The other Matriarch?"

Sophia blinked, screwing her eyes shut for a moment. That word, whatever it was – it felt like she had no idea what it meant, and at the same time, she also knew exactly what it meant. It was a dragon, a special dragon, like Evelyn. Like how she had that brighter light than all the other dragons. Except for one...

"Are you okay?" Francisco asked.

"That word sounds funny," was the best Sophia could do to express her frustration.

"It is a Child of the Egg like you or her," he tried to explain.

"Me?"

"Yes. You are special like her. Did you not know? You have a light. We can sense you from far away."

Sophia froze for a moment as she tried to understand, but she soon grasped it. She was special too! Not just Evelyn! Maybe she would get really big too, or all spiky! *"I am a Matriarch!"* she exclaimed, partly as a question, and partly in wonder.

Her sudden excitement caught Nicholas's attention. "Sophia, are you all right?" he asked. She rubbed her tail against his side to try and answer, tapping out Y-E-S with the tip a moment later just to be extra-sure. She felt a little bad that he was being left out, but it was only because talking to him was impossible right now.

Francisco gave another draconic chuckle while she was tapping out her message. *"You are funny. How old are you?"*

"Five!"

He looked surprised, his scent and the emotions she sensed matching it. *"Really?"*

"Yeah! I will be six in a few months! How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You are older than Nnnnnnkkkkkkk... my elder nestmate!"

"The Child of the Egg beside you?"

"Yeah! He cannot see. And he cannot understand me right now. But he is smart and nice." Sophia beamed happily, glad that Nick was with her even if he couldn't be part of the conversation. She rubbed her tail against his side a little more, and he fanned out a wing over her, resting it loosely on her back, making her smile. Someone nearby called out to them, and Sophia heard Francisco's name amongst a bunch of words she didn't understand. Francisco raised his head and said something back that sounded kind of similar. *"What was that?"* Sophia asked him.

"What was what?"

"All of those funny words you just said."

Francisco gave her a curious look, but merely chuckled. *"You have never heard someone speak Sssppppaaaannniisshhhh before?"* he asked, struggling with the English word.

"My elder nestmate knows it!" Sophia asserted. Nicholas had mentioned learning Spanish at school a few times, but she didn't know any of it.

"Really?" Francisco asked, then glanced past her at Nicholas.

"Nnniiicchhhooolllaasss," Francisco began, before saying a bunch of words Sophia didn't know, especially when they were all slow and slurred.

Nicholas seemed surprised to be addressed, but gave a reply, sounding much better at it than Francisco since he wasn't messing up his words. The two of them talked for a moment before Sophia felt Nicholas lean in and press his head against her neck, making her giggle a bit.

"You are right. I am surprised. He is quite good, considering it is his second language."

Sophia beamed, happy to hear someone praising her brother. *"He is smart! I want to speak Sssppppsssshhh,"* Sophia tried to say, mangling the word. *"Sssppnnnnhhh. Sssppnnnnsssh."* Laughing, Francisco shook his head, the ear-fin on the dragony side of his face flapping, and Sophia simply stuck out her tongue. *"So you are from Ssspaaannn?"*

"You mean Ssspaaaiinnn," he corrected her, *"And no. Most of us here are from Mmmeeexxiiccooo, or our parents are."*

Sophia frowned, her tail rubbing against Nicholas as it moved while she thought. *"Then why do you not speak Mmmeeexxcxaaannn?"*

"There is no such language," he told her patiently. *"You live in Aaammmeerrriiccaaa, but you speak Eeenngggllliisshhh, it is like that."*

"I see!" Sophia said excitedly.

Francisco gave her a nod, then changed the subject: *"After the game-field-arena-place, where are you going?"*

Sophia closed her eyes. There was that other light. It was like Evelyn's, but a little brighter, and way, way further away. But it was in the direction they were going, or had been, at least. She tried to raise an arm, but with the way it bent now it was difficult, so she instead tried to point with one of her bony wings. *"That way,"* she answered, opening her eyes. *"There is another Matriarch that way."*

Francisco tilted his head a little. *"How do you know? I do not sense another light."*

"I can see her light now, but we felt her a couple of days ago. She is in a nice place. A really big park! We are going there. It will be safe there. I think."

He looked and smelled thoughtful. *"Is it not dangerous for you?"*

Sophia huffed a little. *"Eeeeeevvllll... the big Matriarch says we have to go. It is dangerous everywhere."*

Francisco thought that over, but any further things he wanted to say were cut off by his mother and several others moving past them with pots and plates of food. It was strange and unlike anything Sophia had ever had before, but it all smelled so good and she was so hungry that she wanted to devour it all. Francisco tried to tell her what some of it was, but the words were in another language and slurred heavily. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed to know what a lot of them were, or at least knew the words that Francisco was trying to say, and was able to tell her... sometimes only after he took a moment to smell it and think. It all went well until she picked up another delicious smell and craned her neck out in that direction, sniffing at a delicious-looking cake with what looked like some kind of thick white coating on top that someone nearby was holding.

"No!" Francisco told her sharply, reaching out with his big arm and putting it between her and the person with the cake. *"You do not want that."*

"But it smells so good!"

"I know. But if you eat it, you will regret it."

She blinked a little. *"Is it bad for Children of the Egg?"*

"Oh yes. Very bad," he told her with a fervent nod. *"Anything with milk is very bad. You will be very sick and make a big mess everywhere."*

Sophia frowned heavily. *"But I thought milk was good for you."*

"Not for Children of the Egg! You should eat more meat instead, that is what mom says."

"No milk? Not even a little?"

"No milk! No cheese! No ice cream!"

Sophia let out a little gasp. "*No ice cream?*" she lamented sadly, a strong smoky scent emanating from her. She loved ice cream! She couldn't eat it any more?

"Sophia? Sophia, are you okay?" Nicholas said suddenly from behind her. "What happened?"

"*I cannot have ice cream!*" she wailed to him. He didn't understand her words, but he did understand her emotions, and shuffled around to her side so that he could hug her with his wing more tightly to reassure her.

Sophia's sadness over the loss of ice cream was short-lived once dinner was declared ready. José and Evelyn returned as all of the dragons were gathered in the middle of the big grassy area where there was the most available space. Sophia was given a quick introduction to the third dragon, Paloma, who only spoke the dragon language and the other language Sophia kept hearing. With José acting as a translator, when Paloma was informed of Sophia's name, she seemed quite excited and replied that she had a daughter named Sofia, claiming it was some sort of good omen.

As food was handed out, José stood tall to speak, though even so, Evelyn's immense size still overshadowed him. Sophia tried to listen but he was speaking in another language, and she quickly lost interest, though whatever he said got enthusiastic cheers from the people gathered around him. Instead, Sophia watched hungrily as food was brought out, some of which she recognized from Francisco and Nicholas telling her about it earlier, and most of which smelled great – though it had far too many vegetables mixed into it for her liking.

They weren't even eating with silverware, not that Sophia's big hands would have been able to use it well, and instead the food was given to the dragons in big wooden mixing bowls for them to eat out of. Sophia simply shoved her snout into one and ate out of it directly, but the adults seemed to either scoop it out with their hands or stuck just their tongues into the bowls instead of their whole muzzles. Other food had been skewered with big wooden sticks that made it easier for them to pick up. Some of the food she saw had fried eggs on it too, which puzzled her; weren't eggs only

something you had for breakfast? But she quickly changed her mind after eating one: eggs with dinner were great!

"This is very good," Nicholas said gratefully, having just finished eating some sort of rolled-up fried thing with meat inside of it. Sophia didn't know what it was, but she began looking around to see if she could get one for herself.

"Wee doo noot haave muuch moneyy heere, buut wee haave exxcellennt coooks," José remarked mirthfully. "Eat all youu neeed, wee aare graatefuul foor youur aassistaance."

Nicholas made a curious noise and asked, "What assistance?" as Sophia reached over and stole one of the fried-things-on-a-stick.

Evelyn, resting on her front on the ground, turned her head and cut in. "I made a deal," she explained. "We're badly in need of supplies, and with that food market, they still have plenty to go around. But what they don't have is any doctors or medicine. Neither do we, but we're already on our way to the stadium to find some... so, we'll be taking a few people with us. It doesn't change our plans, and they'll send a few people along to... escort us, for safety."

"Escorts?" Nicholas inquired.

José gave a laugh. "Thiis cityy iis daangerouus, mmy frriend!" he declared. Sophia stuck the fried thing into her mouth and tugged it off like she had seen the other dragons do, biting into it. The meat it was stuffed with was delicious and juicy, seasoned with something she hadn't had before but liked the taste of. "Iit iis alwaays daangerouus. Aand whiile wee wwere paart of thaat dangerr noot long agoo, wee knoww whaat oother daangers aare still oout theere. Thieeves aand loooterrs aand muuch worrse thaan thaat. Thee poliice caused uus muuch trouuble, buut theey wwere truuly thee lessserr of twoo evils, foor noow wee musst keeep oourselves saafe."

His manner of speaking confused Sophia. "*What does he mean?*" she asked Francisco, who was sitting across from her, using the one still-human hand to pick up and eat food from his bowl.

He raised his head and gave her a strange look. *"You are a bit young for that, I think."*

Sophia huffed and thumped her tail against the ground. It didn't make nearly as much noise as when Evelyn did it, though. *"People keep telling me that! It is rude!"*

"What are you talking about?" Nicholas asked.

José tilted his head a little at Nicholas. "Haave youu noot heeard thee vooice yyet, eeitherr?"

"What voice?"

José leaned forward, though Nicholas couldn't see it and didn't react. "Wheen youu fiirst beginn too underrstaand the neww tonngue of theese bodiees, youu will heear a vooice. It saaid to mee... 'Wellcome, Child of thee Egg' aand theen vaanished. Aafter thaat, I coould noot speeak aanything buut the draagonn speeeech, buut with deterrminaaation aand praactice myy mooother toongue caame back too mee, aand Ennglissh soooon aafterr. I shoould bee aable too speeak noormally agaain soooon."

"I heard that voice! I thought it was just a dream!" Sophia piped up, distracted from her thoughts of taking another one of the fried-stick-things.

"It was no dream," José told her. *"I was in the middle of a patrol when it happened to me. I nearly fell on someone!"*

"And I was trying to wash myself," Paloma added. *"I thought someone was peeking on me!"*

"Youu will heear thee vooice sooner orr laater," José said to Nicholas, retaking control of the conversation. "Of thaat, I aam suure. Inn tiime, youu will speeak aas youu doo noww oonce agaain. Buut aanywaay, eeat uup. Youu will neeedd youur strenngth ffor thee triip aheaad, aas youu will neeedd too set oout aas soooon aas possibble."

Evelyn tilted her head. "Can't we leave in the morning?"

"Nnoormallyy I woould nnot miind lletting youu staay the niight, *seññora*," José explained, "Buut wee doo noot knoww hoow llong youu will bee aable

too mmove freeeely beefore thee Nnationaal Guaard comes iin."

A deep frown crossed Evelyn's features, including her partly grown muzzle. "I thought they were just blocking the roads out."

"Theyy weere, buut wee have heeard onn the TV thaat theyy aare spreadding oout aand prepaaring too enterr the cityy. Wwith thee poliice havinng goone to hiide aat theeir staation like thee doogs they aare, iit seeeems they will bee sendiing in thee aarmy too taake controll. It iis noot a thiing I expeected too see heere in Amerrica, buut theese aare straange tiimes. Buut somethiing iis delaaying theem – thoough wee doo noot know whaat. Whoo caan saay hoow long theyy hoold befoore theyy maarch? Sso youu musst noot delaay any loonger than necessaary."

"*Nom de Dieu...*" Evelyn muttered. "That is troubling."

"It will bee the ennd of oor eeveniings of foood aand laaughter outdooors," José lamented with a touch of sarcasm. Standing, he thumped a scaly fist against his chest, then held his hand up to make a gesture unfamiliar to Sophia, that Francisco mimicked with his human hand. "Buut thiis is oor hoome aand iit alwaays haas been. Noo one – noot thee poliice, noot the thieeves, aand noot the aarmy – wwill taake it from uss!"

Evelyn began to rise from where she had been lying on the grass. "Then I'd better tell the others before they get too comfortable. Thank you for your help; we will do everything we can to hold up our end of the bargain. Are your people ready to leave?"

"Wheen youu haave liittle, it iss eeasy too paack liight," José remarked. "Theyy will bee readyy too go wheen I giive the oorder."

"Have them meet us by the entrance," Evelyn instructed. "Nicholas, Sophia, come with me. We will have to get going soon so we can cover more ground before it gets dark."

"*But I do not want to!*" Sophia whined.

Even though Evelyn didn't understand the words, she seemed to get the gist of the whistles and thrums that came from her throat, and Sophia saw

that Evelyn was looking at her fins too. "I don't want to either, Sophia, but we have to go. Say goodbye to the others and thank them for the food."

Pouting, Sophia turned her head back to the other three dragons. They seemed so nice, she wanted to stay with them. But, grudgingly, she got to her feet. "*Thank you!*" she told them, "*I want to see you again!*"

"Thank you," Nicholas added as he rose to his feet.

Paloma gave a nod and a smile. "*Stay safe.*"

"Taake caare of ouur frieends!" José reminded them.

"*Good luck,*" Francisco added simply.

Evelyn led them back to the entrance where Rick and the others were, seemingly reluctant to split up from one another, though from the empty bowls piled up on the ground between them it appeared that food had been brought to them.

"There you are," Rick greeted brightly. "What's the news?"

"Have you gotten us a place to sleep?" James asked gruffly, his arms folded.

"Change of plans," Evelyn told him. "They're going to give us food, but we'll need to get moving."

"What? Why?" Rick asked in confusion.

"It's better this way," James said. Sophia was puzzled; normally it was James who made a big deal out of stuff.

"Don't be like that, Jimmy! Just 'cause they ain't from around here—"

"It's because they're gangsters!" James hissed.

"Sure," Rick conceded, "but they're fairly friendly for a bunch of gangsters, don't you think?"

Evelyn frowned heavily at him until he glanced away. "They are helping us," she reminded him pointedly.

"Because we're useful to them," James asserted. "Just because they're friendly now doesn't mean they are our buddies."

"Would you rather have been shot and left in the street?" Evelyn asked bluntly.

"Of course not. But I don't think a bunch of gangsters can turn over a new leaf that quickly or easily. Just because they can throw a street party doesn't mean they're model citizens all of a sudden. Did you already forget how many guns they pointed at us earlier? And how many armed guards were up on the balconies on the way here? They might be all nice now that we're at home and they've got their families watching, but don't forget that—"

Evelyn cleared her throat with a deep rumble that interrupted the two men. "You would do well not to complain too loudly when the host has a dragon's hearing," she reminded them, and James finally went quiet.

"There's also another reason we have to get going."

James folded his arms again. "I should've known. What's the catch? Why're we moving out again?"

"We're leaving not because of them, but because the National Guard are preparing to come into the city," Evelyn informed him. "We don't know how long we'll have. We need to get to the stadium before that happens."

Now, both Rick and James looked worried. "*What's a National Guard? Is it like a National Park?*" Sophia asked, but no-one understood her questions.

"Holy Jesus, are they really putting down martial law?" Rick wondered aloud.

"Seems like it," Evelyn muttered. "So if you want Amar's son and James's wife to get treated properly and not get tossed in the back of a truck, we'd better cover what ground we can while it's still light out."

James bit his lip and looked aside. "All right," he conceded. "Where're the supplies?"

"They'll be carrying them," Evelyn said, continuing her explanation. "We'll be having some of them join us." James looked like he was about to object, but Evelyn put one of her huge front feet forward and loomed over him, silencing him before he could speak. "They have sick and injured too, and

we were going to the stadium anyway. They'll carry supplies for us and give us some protection."

"Aw, hell," James muttered, "I'm gonna be trusting my life to a bunch of criminals..."

"You can leave any time you want to," Evelyn reminded him firmly, and he went quiet again. "We'll leave as soon as they join up with us."

"How do you know we can trust them?"

Evelyn looked down her muzzle at James, fixing him with a hard stare.

"Because they need our help just as much as we need theirs. We have a common goal and nothing to gain by turning on each other."

"They're still people, right?" Rick added, trying to help. "We're takin' their friends and their families with us. People they care about. Some of 'em aren't even part of the gang, probably. It'd be like sendin' your wife off with someone else, you wouldn't do anything that'd put her in danger."

James didn't look very convinced, but offered no further protest. Soon, Francisco and José arrived with several humans by their sides: four of them were armed youths with backpacks, and Sophia took a moment to count the seven other people with them: a man with an improvised crutch and a bandaged leg, a woman with a baby wrapped in rags, a man with a coughing son that reminded Sophia of Amar and his son, and two more armed youths who both had bandaged wounds, one on his leg and the other on his left shoulder.

Francisco, on the other hand, was pushing a huge plastic bin on wheels with more supplies inside of it. It would have been quite a struggle for an adult, but he was so much larger than them that it didn't seem to give him much trouble – and it even gave him some stability. He was able to keep his front two limbs on it instead of having to wobble along on the ground, though he still walked with a noticeable limp from the different sizes of his legs.

"Is this everyone?" Evelyn asked.

"Aand oone moore," José informed her. "Fraanciscoo will bee cooming aloonng with youu."

Evelyn seemed a little surprised, but Sophia gasped happily. She'd just started to make friends with him when they had to leave – but now he could come with them! "The extra help is welcome, but... why?" Evelyn asked.

"Too seee if thee Nnationaal Paark youu told uss aboout is reeal," José replied. "Oor raather, the ssafe haaven wwithin iit. Yoouu toold mmee oof thee briight liight much llike youurs that waay, buut thaat is aall I knoow. If iit iss, hee will retuurn aand wee will maake oor ownn plaans too leeave, iif we sstill caan." Francisco nodded to her, but said nothing since she wouldn't be able to understand it. "I wwould goo myseelf, buut I mmust staay heere too watch oover the oothers. Theere aare sstill maany dangerrrs here, aand thiis is sstill mmy hoome, mmy communnity, thaat I haave knoown all mmy liife – I wwill noot abaandon iit whhen I caan insteaad keep iit ssafe."

"Fffrrraaaaannnnssshhk!" Sophia called out excitedly, making her best attempt at pronouncing his name.

He gave a little laugh and waved to her with his human hand. "*We will be traveling together! Are you excited?*"

"*I am!*" she replied, bouncing in place. "*I wish we could play together!*"

"*Maybe when we reach this safe place of yours, how about that?*" he offered.

"*Yeah!*" Sophia agreed, jumping up and down in excitement – and alarming the humans nearby who felt the vibrations she made each time her feet thumped against the ground.

Chapter 12

At the head of the group, Evelyn's kept her head high, glancing back and forth for somewhere – anywhere – they could reasonably settle in for the night.

Even though her leg was gradually healing, and she moved easier on all fours, they were still slowed down by the sick and injured members of their growing group. They had already passed the 'before it gets dark' threshold – but with only apartment buildings and offices lining the roads, they had had to press on. The park had been tempting, but with no fences or hedges around its perimeter, it had been far too open and exposed. At least the streetlights were still working, but it wasn't a risk they could be taking every night.

This part of the city seemed better off than others they had passed through, but signs of past chaos still remained. Empty tear gas canisters told the story of a police presence that had since left the area, along with barricades that had been moved, dismantled, or heavily mangled as though run over by large vehicles. The bloodstains and bodies were fewer, but the spray paint was more common, with large numbers of anti-government and anti-police slogans mixed in among the paranoid "They are watching" markings and the periodic "Death to mutants" or similarly violent declarations.

Yet despite the darkness, even when she closed her eyes, Evelyn could see lights – or perhaps 'see' wasn't quite the right word. It was some sixth sense humans were not meant to have, an awareness of others within her proximity, 'seen' with her mind's eye. Sophia's was the brightest, which lined up with what she had learned from her conversation with José and how he, Francisco and Paloma had sensed her and Sophia approaching. Yet they were not able to sense each other, and she had noticed that their lights were not as bright as Sophia's, so something about her and the little girl was different.

It was one of the more unnerving changes Evelyn had experienced so far. It was one thing for her vision to be improving past even its height in her youth: plenty of creatures had vastly superior senses to humans. Her sense

of smell picking up indicators of emotions or fear seemed like an extension to that, and she wondered if it was some insight into how dogs experienced the world. Would she one day be able to track someone by scent alone? Her improved hearing was similarly relatable. But this... this wasn't merely something better. This was foreign. Alien. No creature on Earth that she knew of had this sort of sixth sense. Even seemingly hive-minded creatures couldn't locate each other from range. What else might happen? Would seventh and eighth senses come to her? Would she come to perceive the world in a way so different that it alienated her from it?

Somewhere during the last few hours, her awareness had grown, too. A myriad of lights, stretched out, so numerous and clustered together that it was nearly impossible to pick out just one, like gazing down at the sand on a beach. If the other dragons were lightbulbs, Sophia shone like the sun, and these other lights were little more than tiny sparks. It had to be the humans. If she concentrated hard she could bring her attention to the ones nearby, moving behind her – the rest of the entourage. She was aware of very little other than their existence, but who knew how this new ability would develop? At least it would make it easier to keep watch on her surroundings, but such inhuman senses made her concerned for what else might happen to her.

Sweeping this newfound awareness around as she walked down the middle of the street, she sensed something slightly out of the ordinary. Humans clustered together was not that surprising, even in the current situation. What was odd about them was that there was a gap around them – small, barely perceptible, yet still there – before she could sense more lights. What might cause such an arrangement? Perhaps an open space like a park. With any luck there would be enough space to share, if the current residents were friendly enough.

Sophia voiced some whining complaint to her; Evelyn didn't understand the words, but there was only one reason a child like her would be making such a racket in this situation. "I know you're tired," Evelyn reassured her, turning her head as she walked onwards, "I am too. I'm looking for somewhere we can sleep." Sophia's grumbling was sufficient to communicate her lack of satisfaction with that answer.

It was not hard to locate the anomaly in the arrangement of humans, especially when it was heralded by the roads being blockaded: black and white police cars had been parked sideways across the roads, and two intersections past them Evelyn saw another blockade that employed a van alongside the cruisers. Black and yellow tape had been thoroughly strung across the streets along with simple barriers to tell people to go away in numerous different ways.

It was also easy to see what the blockade was for: the roads that had been blocked off were leading to the police station, clearly marked by the stone lettering over the front entrance, the sign on the roof advertising a tip hotline number, and additional signs on the brick fence surrounding the open-air parking lot. Even from this distance, she could read the letters over the door: it wasn't just any old police station, it was the police headquarters for the whole city.

The lights were on, not just inside the building but also for the sign on its roof where Evelyn easily picked out a quartet of men with scoped rifles, one of whom was already calling out to the others and pointing her way. Floodlights at the ground level pointed up illuminated nearby buildings, and more armed officers patrolled both inside and outside the building. All it needed was some barbed wire and sandbags to look like a small fortress. Memories of buildings in Paris captured and fortified by the Nazis started to come back to her, but she closed her eyes and shook her head for a moment to dismiss them.

Disparaging-sounding remarks towards the *policía* came from behind her, and Evelyn frowned. It was likely the safest place they could possibly find for quite some distance, but would they even accept her, or would they turn her away? And would the former gang members with her cooperate? For that matter, would the police?

There was only one way to find out.

Evelyn turned her head and neck without moving her body to look behind her. "Rick," she said firmly.

He was a few steps behind the end of her tail, looking exhausted. Most of them did, and even the armed guards that had been tasked to go with

them were starting to look tired. She hoped it would make them more likely to compromise in the name of sleep and less likely to cause problems. "Wha..." Rick began, stifling a yawn. "What is it?"

"Have you got a white sheet I can borrow?"

His brow furrowed. "What d'you need that for? I've got a blanket, but..."

Evelyn raised a wing, pointing with the claw at the point towards the police headquarters. "I'm going to try and talk to them."

It was Francisco who raised an objection, as he understood English much better than the others who had come along. "Nnnnoooo p'liiiiiizzz," he insisted as hard as he could despite the difficulty he was having with the words. Sophia asked him something in the dragon language and he replied, but Evelyn cleared her throat before their conversation could get any further.

"Do you want to keep walking all night long?" Evelyn asked him pointedly.

"Nnnooo pooooliiiiizzz," Francisco repeated with slightly more success.

"I knew they'd be trouble," James grumbled from near Rick. "Bunch'a criminals. I ain't super keen on the cops right now but I'd trust them more than this bunch."

Francisco took a step towards James, but Evelyn straightened her tail out to stick it between the two of them. "Stop it," she commanded. "If you want to stay here for now, fine. But I will talk to them."

To her surprise, Francisco acquiesced immediately, taking a step back and going quiet. "Yeah, you—" James began, but Evelyn thumped her tail on the ground, cutting him off.

"You too. If you're not going to help, then don't cause trouble."

James folded his arms, but didn't protest further, so Rick began digging into his family's camping gear. The sheet wasn't perfectly white, especially when it was in need of a wash, but it would do for her purposes. Evelyn kept an eye on the others while she waited; Nicholas and Sophia stayed together, though they didn't talk to one another. Instead, Sophia said occasional short things to Francisco, who responded when he wasn't trying

to talk in slurred Spanish to the other Mexicans who had come with him. For their part, the armed ones hung back in the shadows away from streetlights, keeping their weapons close but out of sight, while the sick and injured ones simply found spots to rest while they weren't moving. Claire hung close to James and Amar's families, who remained silent and watched.

Eventually the sheet was dug out, and Evelyn lay down on her belly, holding a wing down low so that she could instruct Rick to attach the sheet to it. The membranes on her wing had grown a little more over the last few hours, but were only a little over halfway completed. Only a few tiny patches of skin remained on her on the back of her head and neck – the rest of her body was fully covered in scales. It wouldn't be long before the transformation was complete, or so she assumed. Then what? She would suddenly one day wake up speaking the dragon language like Sophia. José's ability to converse in English and Spanish implied she would still be able to speak French and English... eventually. But would there be more? Would a fully scaled body be the end, or merely the beginning?

Her musing thoughts were interrupted by Rick huffing as he stepped away from her and clapped his hands once. Evelyn glanced over and saw that he had wrapped the end of the sheet around the very top of her wing joint, at the base of the spike there. "All done!" Rick declared, then grouched, "Damn, I should've shown my boy how to tie a knot like that. Somehow I don't think he'll be going to any Boy Scout meetings any time soon. Maybe another time..."

Evelyn rose up and interrupted him before he could ramble much further. "Thank you," she said simply, "I'll take it from here. Don't do anything that would give them a reason to shoot me."

"Dddooonnn'tt gggoooo," Francisco implored, but Evelyn shook her head.

"We've got to take what we can get, and there are much, much worse places to try and hunker down for the night. Wait here."

As she turned her attention back towards the police headquarters, she saw two of the men on the roof aiming their rifles at her, while the others kept

watch in other directions to avoid leaving themselves open. She hoped this was the right decision.

Approaching the barricade slowly, she raised the wing holding the sheet to let it flutter out like a flag. It wasn't ideal, but it would get the message across: she wanted to talk. She kept her eyes on the men on the roof, able to see a remarkable amount of detail despite the distance and the poor light: enough to even determine that one had his finger on the trigger and the other didn't. If she were more knowledgeable about modern guns, she could have identified the exact models, but she'd done her best to put everything military behind her after the Great War. If only she'd had eyesight like this back in Paris...

Two officers were behind the closest barricade, crouched behind the cars with their weapons drawn. Hardly a warm welcome, Evelyn thought to herself. One was on his radio, but he seemed to be having trouble with it; she noticed him repeating himself multiple times and overheard "Did not copy" from him just as often. Eventually he gave a frustrated sigh and clipped the radio back to his uniform, muttering to the other officer as he watched Evelyn cautiously.

She was about the length of three cars away when the second officer, who seemed a little more jittery, raised a megaphone. "Stop!" he shouted through it, though she could have heard him just fine without the megaphone. "Remain where you are. Drop your weapons and put your hands up!"

Standing firm, Evelyn stopped where she was, but continued to hold up the wing with the makeshift flag. She realized he was talking not just to her, but to the rest of the group behind her, not just from his command to drop weapons she clearly wasn't holding, but also from the commotion it caused behind her. Far from being compliant, there were instead shouts in Spanish, and Evelyn turned her head slowly to glance back behind her.

They had all taken what cover they could, around alleys or in the doorways of buildings, and Francisco had crouched down to allow others to hide behind him. The rest of the group was scattering, with the humans hiding behind vehicles or ducking into other alleys. Only Rick seemed to have

done as asked, placing his hunting rifle on the ground and raising his hands. Nicholas was confused and panicking from the sudden noise all around him, and Sophia was huddled up next to him, unsure what was going on and keeping close to her brother out of worry.

Turning her head back, Evelyn saw that it wasn't any better on the police's side. All of the rooftop snipers were aiming in their direction, as were the two officers behind the car. Other police officers were approaching or taking up positions in the area between the barricade and the headquarters. It was turning into a standoff.

"Drop your weapons and put your hands up!" the policeman with the megaphone repeated, to no avail.

Evelyn stood between them and held her ground, keeping the wing up to let the white sheet fly. As long as she stood between the two groups, her large body would block their lines of fire. She only hoped none of them would try to actually start shooting. Slowly, she turned sideways to block off even more of the street, staring down the officer without the megaphone who was aiming his pistol at her. It wouldn't do him any good, and from the way his hands were shaking as he tried to look for a gap in her scales, he knew it.

There was a shout behind her in Spanish, and though from the tone she could tell it was nothing pleasant, she did not know if it was directed at her or the police. Her eyes were locked on the rooftop, and she saw one of the snipers lean in closer to his scope. She had to do something more than just get in the way, and before things could get any worse she inhaled deeply, spreading her wings while yelling as loudly as she could, putting her whole force of will behind a single word:

"ARRÊT!"

The effect was immediate, beyond startling a large number of pigeons nearby that flew off into the night. The megaphone and radio the policemen in front of her had both emitted bursts of feedback. The mutterings behind her immediately ended, and she could hear the movement behind her cease just as quickly as all of the police officers she could see stopped in their tracks. Nicholas and Francisco both calmed, and

only Sophia seemed to be unaffected. Yet, understanding Evelyn's intent, she let out a yowl of her own, and though Evelyn did not understand the deeper meaning of Sophia's sound, she could *feel* it, at the same time another burst of static came from the radio and megaphone nearby. It was a plea for peace, a childlike demand for nobody to hurt one another, and even Evelyn felt a brief moment of compulsion.

Silence fell over the area in the wake of the dragons' commands. The police lowered their weapons, and with a glance behind her, Evelyn confirmed that the armed Mexican guards were doing the same, holding their guns down non-aggressively. The tension had been nearly palpable before, but as quickly as it had come, it had vanished. Evelyn's thoughts started to drift into wondering just what she was capable of – and Sophia, for that matter – but she quickly focused on the moment. The danger hadn't yet passed.

"I just want to talk," Evelyn announced calmly, taking advantage of the silence, waving the wing with the blanket on it insistently. "May I please speak with someone in charge?"

A black man in uniform separated from the others. He wasn't wearing a hat or helmet, revealing a shaved head, but that was the only notable difference that Evelyn could pick out from just a glance. "That would be me!" he yelled out to her as he approached.

"I can hear you just fine, you don't need to shout," Evelyn told him.

The man lowered his voice and approached her, gesturing to the officers he passed to tell them to remain where they were. As he got closer, he had to crane his neck back to look up at her, but did so with a confident bearing. Indicating the badge on his chest – which Evelyn was able to read even with him standing a good twenty or so feet away – he introduced himself. "Deputy Washington, 32nd Precinct," he said plainly. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Evelyn Archambeau," she answered, inclining her head towards him a little.

He folded his hands behind his back and kept his gaze on her. "Civilians are not supposed to be outside at this time, and furthermore, this is a

restricted area." His tone softened slightly as he went on, "I would ask if there was a reason why you aren't in your home, but I assume you can't fit in it anymore."

"You would be correct, and I also don't live around here." Doing her best to shuffle to the side in the surprisingly narrow – for her, at least – space between the buildings, she indicated the group behind her. "I'll get to the point, Deputy: we're looking for somewhere safe to spend the night, and then we'll be on our way in the morning."

"Then I suggest you keep looking," the deputy replied firmly. "This is a restricted area. Absolutely no civilians. Chief's orders."

"And where is the chief?"

The deputy's brow furrowed briefly. "Chief Constantine is... indisposed," he answered delicately. "For the time being, I'm the one making decisions around here."

The pieces began to fall into place, and Evelyn gave him a thoughtful look. "Then you could, potentially, make the decision to allow us to stay?"

"I could, but I won't. I have my orders."

Evelyn tried a different approach. "Would your Chief order you to turn away a group of sick and injured civilians and send them off into a dangerous city in the middle of the night?"

He frowned a little. "No, ma'am, Chief Constantine is a more compassionate woman than that," he agreed. "However, it is clear that your group is not *just* composed of unarmed civilians."

"Correct," she admitted. There wasn't any point in trying to hide it. "They are, however, still civilians. This city is dangerous, and a group such as this would be an easy target if it didn't have an armed escort." She bit back a more sardonic comment about the lack of police presence and instead asked, "Why have the police abandoned the city? Even the loudspeaker trucks seem to have disappeared."

The deputy gave a mildly frustrated sigh. "We just don't have the manpower for this. We're stretched too thin to cover the whole city at

once – same for the fire department and the hospitals. We barely have enough people normally, and when the whole city is in chaos? I'm amazed there aren't more things on fire. ...you can't breathe fire, can you?"

"No," she told him flatly.

"Good. Listen, ma'am, we've been ordered to pull back and protect... certain key locations. Someone up top thinks it's better to have us actually protect a few spots than try and fail to cover the whole damn city."

Evelyn tilted her head. "So you're just leaving the city to fend for itself?"

"We weren't supposed to be alone this long! The National Guard was meant to come in, but they're taking their sweet time getting their asses here."

A deep frown crossed Evelyn's face. Whatever that looked like with her draconic muzzle, it must have been quite disturbing, as she saw both of the officers with the deputy step back with concerned expressions. "So it's true – they're declaring martial law?"

The deputy looked very displeased. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but I'm also not supposed to be the one in charge while dragons walk around. Yes, they're meant to come in and take control and restore order. I don't like it any more than you do. This isn't some riot, or a protest that got out of hand. Bullets will fly, and I didn't join the police to see this city become a battleground."

"Is that why the chief left?" He gave her an odd look at that, a glance up and down her whole body, and she connected the dots. "Or was there another reason she suddenly became 'indisposed' when people began turning into dragons?"

He gave a defeated sigh. "Yes. The scales started on her arm," he explained, gesturing to his own left arm. "She tried to hide them at first, but we noticed that she'd gotten taller. She insisted she would keep doing whatever she had to do to restore order, no matter what happened to her. But then, she heard that her grandson was growing scales too, and she had to put her family first, so she put me in charge and left, and we haven't heard a word since. She could be dead for all I know, but I hope to God she

made it to her family. Meanwhile, we haven't heard squat since the order to hold position until the National Guard arrives. It doesn't help that the radios keep cutting out, either."

A chill ran down Evelyn's spine, making her wings rustle. "Which way did she go?"

"She lives on the other side of the river," the deputy answered, jerking his thumb behind her, and Evelyn relaxed a little. "Why, have you seen her?"

"No, but we've seen our share of bodies in the streets coming up here, including half-dragons. I was worried she might've been one of them."

"She's tough – you don't get to be the chief of police if you're not." Tapping one foot on the ground, he gave her another look. "Where are you headed?"

"We're going to the stadium. All these injured people need medical attention, and we've heard there's a humanitarian group operating there."

"Last I heard, they're still there. God bless 'em, doing that work even at a time like this. But be careful – you'd better avoid the central bridge."

"Why?" Evelyn asked.

"It's not safe, especially not for you. A bunch of terrorists have it now, they've blocked it off and fortified it. They hate dragons, and they'll shoot you on sight. Only got word of it yesterday."

Evelyn frowned again. "That sounds like your job."

"If they were holed up somewhere indoors, maybe. A fortification like that is in the National Guard's purview. They've got heavier weapons than us, but like I said, they're taking their sweet time getting their asses over here. You'll have to go the long way around."

"I see. I have a feeling I've seen their handiwork before. A whole family, executed in the street, just because one of them was partly transformed, and left as a warning to others."

His expression darkened considerably at hearing that. "That sounds like them. Where are the bodies?"

"We buried them in their own yard." She racked her memory for a moment before giving him the address.

"I see. We'll have to go conduct an investigation when... *if* everything goes back to normal. Or something resembling normal." She could hear the fatigue creeping into his voice.

"Thank you for the warning, in any case. We'll steer clear of the bridge."

"You're welcome." He gave a long sigh, and remained silent for several seconds as he looked past her at the group behind her. "Okay, Miss...? Mrs...?" She nodded her head. "Mrs. Archambeau. I've almost made a decision, but I've got a few more questions to ask you first."

"Go ahead."

"We've had some conflicting reports about the victims of... whatever this is," he began, gesturing towards her. "I'd like to hear from the source what exactly we're dealing with. For instance, you said you could hear me just fine from all the way over there."

He indicated the position he had initially emerged from, and she gave a low rumble of agreement. "That's correct. My hearing is much better than it used to be, even accounting for my age." She closed her eyes, wiggling her ear-fins as she concentrated. "That man on the right side of the entrance just wondered how long this was going to take."

The deputy glanced over his shoulder at the door, a good forty feet away at least, staring for a moment before turning back. "I hadn't been informed about that," he admitted. "All we've been told is that you're a danger to yourselves and everyone around you."

Evelyn snorted derisively. "It takes time to get used to having a tail longer than your body, but a few accidents here and there hardly make us 'a danger'."

"You're still thinking clearly? No urges to eat people or go hunting for wild animals?"

"Those campers behind me have had more urges to hunt than I have," Evelyn remarked, raising her tail and pointing in the general direction of

Rick and James with it. "I'm hungry, but only because I've suddenly grown to the size of an airplane. You would be too. The only thing I want to murder is a breakfast buffet."

The deputy gave a very brief laugh at her joke. "And you're not contagious?"

"I'd have a lot more dragons following behind me if I was. We've been together for about two days and nobody else has suddenly started growing scales who didn't have them already." She could see he was deep in thought, so she decided to press him a little harder. "Deputy Washington, most of these people are sick or injured. All of them are tired. We just need a safe place to spend the night, and we'll leave in the morning and you'll never see us again. That's all we're asking for."

He remained deep in thought for a moment. "I think we might be able to come to an agreement, however, I will need your cooperation," he informed her delicately.

"Go on."

"Your... *escorts* will have to disarm themselves. We cannot allow an armed group within the perimeter."

"Nnnooo!" Francisco called out immediately, approaching her from behind.

Evelyn turned her head and fixed him with a firm gaze. "Stop," she told him, and to her surprise, he backed down immediately. There had to be more than this than simply her size and stature, as much as being over sixty feet long and covered in scales would have helped with being intimidating. Being a dragon, or almost entirely a dragon at least, had given her the power to command others in some way or another. She would have to investigate, but not now.

She turned her attention back to the deputy. "They are a little on edge," Evelyn told him. "Let us assume for the moment I can convince them to give up their weapons. We will get them back, yes? We will need them to defend ourselves from the dangers of the city."

"What could possibly be a danger to you?" the deputy asked, a little incredulous. "You're bigger than an elephant and covered in bulletproof

armor."

She elected not to correct him on his assertion that her scales were bulletproof. For all she knew, they were. "I do not need to fear for myself, but the others with me are another matter. I cannot protect them all by myself."

"What do you mean, 'by yourself'? You've got three other dragons with you."

Evelyn narrowed her gaze slightly, but kept her tone even. "Nicholas is blind, and Sophia is five years old. Yes, she's getting bigger every day and has scales, but would you trust a five-year-old with a rifle and riot armor?"

"No, Mrs. Archambeau," the deputy admitted. "You make a fair point."

"Francisco could help, but dragons alone can only do so much. Especially against ranged weapons. We must have the means to defend ourselves. Or are you volunteering to provide us with an escort to the stadium?"

He sighed deeply, raising a hand to his forehead. "In better circumstances, that would be the best option, but we cannot at the time," he admitted.

"Let me think." Evelyn waited, aware of Francisco's worried scent from close behind her. "I have a proposal," the deputy offered after a short time.

"I'm listening."

"I will provide you with gun cases from our armory. All of your escorts will deposit your weapons into them. We will lock them and keep the keys, but you will keep the cases with you until tomorrow morning, when we will unlock them before you leave. Does that sound acceptable?"

Evelyn thought it over. She could probably smash open such a case if it came to it, though not without alerting everyone in the vicinity. It would mean that if some disaster befell them overnight, they could get away with their weapons. It would just prevent anyone from taking them without being detected. "Well, I find that to be an acceptable compromise," Evelyn told him. "Let me talk with the others."

She turned around to see Francisco giving her a pleading look. His face was still half human and half draconic, easily showing her the translation to

what a pleading dragon would look like: his spinal fin lay flat against his head, and the one ear-fin he had was drooping downwards. "Eevv'll'nnn," he begged.

She leaned in a little closer and lowered her voice. "Francisco, please tell the others that whatever trouble they have had with the police before, they must set it aside, at least for this one night. We have enough problems already as it is. If they are not willing to cooperate, then they are free to turn right around and go back home and explain to José why they have not done what he asked them to do."

He hesitated, and she could see the uncertainty on his face, so she went on, "I know that you do not trust them. I know you have little reason to trust them. So I won't ask you to. Instead, please trust *me*." She took great care not to project her will as she had done earlier – she did not want to coerce or force him. "Everyone here is tired and in need of sleep. This is our best chance to do so. And I promise that I will protect you, if it comes to that."

"...oookkaaayyyy," he eventually acquiesced, emitting a scent of agreement. His emotion-scents were not as strong as Nicholas or Sophia's, but still were understandable by the draconic influence on her brain. Turning around, he walked over towards the other Mexicans, and Evelyn put her trust in him to persuade them from there.

"You remind me of the chief," one of the officers with the deputy muttered as Evelyn turned back to face them.

She ignored him and looked at the deputy, who stared back at her long and hard for several seconds. "Mrs. Archambeau," he said at last, and she nodded in response. "I see now why you are the leader of this group of yours."

"I just want us to reach safety," she told him firmly.

"I regret that we cannot help you more, but I will do all I can to ensure you are safe for tonight, at least. You and the Chief are both really something. I'm starting to wonder if there's a reason behind who got changed and who

didn't. If it's not random, and it's not contagious, then you must have been chosen by someone or something."

"God only knows," Evelyn murmured.

"And that stunt you pulled earlier – you ended an armed standoff without a shot being fired. Can you imagine how useful that would be to the police force? I wish the Chief was still here so you could teach her how to do it."

"I'm a little surprised myself," she admitted. "You're not going to try and have me taken away for examination, are you?"

He snorted indignantly. "Maybe if I was from the FBI, but I'm just a policeman. The fewer gunfights we have in my precinct, the better." He folded his arms without breaking eye contact. "I'll send some men to fetch some gun cases, and as long as your friends disarm themselves, you can make camp in the parking lot. Don't wander around. Don't try to enter the HQ, or any of the nearby buildings. I'll assign a few men to keep an eye on you and make sure you stay safe, but don't talk to any other officers, I don't need them getting distracted from their watches." His tone softened again as he went on, "Trust me when I say that I would rather not have to arrest a bunch of refugees or start shooting anyone."

"Sensible," she agreed wryly. "Don't expect much from me. I'm probably going to fall asleep the moment I lie down."

"Less for me to worry about if you do." He began directing the two officers to unblock the road temporarily – though Evelyn would have had no trouble simply stepping over the cars and past them, she let them get into the cruisers and move them out of the way so she could lead the entire entourage towards the police headquarters. She had to wait for them to bring out the gun cases, but it seemed like Francisco had been sufficiently persuasive; though they were the last ones to come forward, the armed Mexicans reluctantly parted from their weapons, giving suspicious looks at the nearby police between glances at Francisco. As promised, the cases were locked, but Evelyn's group was allowed to keep the cases while the police took the keys back into the building.

With almost all of the police's vehicles being used to block the roads, and no visitors' vehicles, there was plenty of empty space in the parking lot. The deputy directed them to a corner, and Evelyn went first. The brick walls around the parking lot were taller than the humans with her, but even lying down she still rose over them. The paved concrete would not make for a comfortable bed in the slightest, but by borrowing some blankets to place down and then lie prone atop, the meager padding plus the scales over her belly made it tolerable. Barely tolerable, but still tolerable, enough that she curled up partly and felt tiredness already starting to overcome her.

She stopped paying attention to what the humans following her were doing and closed her eyes, but she was aware of Sophia and Nicholas approaching her. She felt Nicholas's foreleg gently brush against her side as he located her by touch, and then heard him lie down, his scaly body resting against her side. Sophia lay down next to Nicholas, while Francisco stayed close by but away from the huddle of dragons in the corner, occasionally speaking to the other Mexicans, perhaps to reassure them. Evelyn was curious about what he was saying, but she could only pick out the occasional word of Spanish, not enough to understand what was being said.

Evelyn slowly curled her tail around Nicholas and Sophia. It was long enough now to completely encircle them and still have a little room to spare. She was so tired that even the aches of her body – mostly inside of it, now that she was almost fully covered in scales – didn't keep her awake for long. But she did remain conscious long enough to hear Sophia say something quiet to Francisco, who got back up and came closer to them. Nicholas and Sophia had grown so much that there was not enough room for him within the loop of Evelyn's tail for him to join them, but he did lie down as close as he could get to the three of them.

Opening one eye a crack, she saw Sophia looking over at Francisco with a little smile, while she leaned against Nicholas's side, with one of his wings draped over her. Francisco had done his best to spread out a patchwork blanket he had brought with him to lie down on, an oddly fitting item to go with his patchy transformation.

Closing her eyes, Evelyn exhaled deeply and fell asleep soon after.

Chapter 13

Nicholas groaned and stretched again to try and ease some of his soreness. The scales helped, but they still weren't enough to make sleeping on concrete comfortable.

After waking, he muttered a few words to himself to make sure he could still speak English. He hoped that if and when he began talking like Sophia, he would be able to finally understand her again. But who knew if it would work properly? What if something went wrong? What if the only way he could communicate with his sister was lost to him? He wasn't sure he could handle it.

He moved on to feel over his body as best he could with his new hands. His wrists did not bend the same way they used to, but he was able to brush the back of his hand against some parts of himself when his fingers could not reach. He was soon able to find what had changed overnight: his nose had been completely made into part of the muzzle growing from his face, which was bigger than it had been the day before. His chin had also been moved forward as part of that same muzzle, and his neck felt longer than it had been too. His tail had lengthened quite a bit, long enough that he could move it around quite dexterously. It would be useful for finding things behind him without having to turn around, especially if he had to walk backwards at any point. He could no longer find any patches of skin on his legs, feet or hands, so it seemed like his neck and head were the main parts that remained on that front.

So, that was it, then: nothing left about him physically was human, at least as far as he knew. His mind was still his own, thankfully, despite all the new sensations and things he could detect that he couldn't before. But he would be even more of an outsider now: the transformation wasn't fully completed yet, since he couldn't understand Sophia. He was stuck in some in-between state. How long would that last? He wanted to talk to her again so he wouldn't feel so alone. At least they could still communicate in some fashion: even her short and often-misspelled responses in Morse Code were better than nothing.

From there it had been the normal morning routine of getting everyone together to eat and leave again, with a little more haste to it than usual. They had not had any trouble with the police despite the brief standoff. Having only studied Spanish in high school, he wasn't fluent enough to keep up with the Mexicans fully, but he at least got the gist of what they were talking about. In particular, it seemed that they wanted to move on as quickly as possible, distrustful of the police but trusting in Francisco's judgment. Whether it was from being around native speakers or some effect of the transformation, Nicholas didn't know, but he found that he was able to pick up new words from context far more easily than before.

Yet he still had no idea what Francisco and Sophia kept talking about. Francisco's heavily slurred Spanish was difficult but possible to understand; his dragon-speech, however, was not. Sophia was utterly incomprehensible, as all of his usual clues for discerning emotion from her voice were useless. Cheerful chirping sounds could accompany vague emotions of discomfort and grumpiness from her. Growls and rumbles sometimes paired with hopeful or happy feelings. For better or worse, he couldn't feel anything from Francisco at all, and couldn't even sense his presence like he could with Sophia. But today, he had been able to pick up something new: scents.

These scents were different. All the dragons had had some sort of baseline scent that made him think of herbs and spices, including himself. There were subtle nuances as well, and there was something about Francisco and himself that was different to the scents of Sophia and Evelyn, perhaps indicating their genders. But it wasn't just those scents. There were new smells he had grown aware of... or perhaps it was more accurate to say he understood deeper meaning behind them, like learning a word in a foreign language. Bursts of aromas like lavender or strawberries or cut grass that had mostly confused him before with their sudden appearance. But now he understood the deeper meanings they carried: emotions.

And they seemed to come not only from the other three dragons, but also from himself. Scents to indicate happiness, sadness, frustration, fear, and innumerable other emotions beyond those. He'd heard of the concept of 'body language', being able to tell things about a person by looking at

them; while he couldn't do it himself, he wondered if this would be similar. Yet he appeared to have no ability to control it. Perhaps Francisco could smell his own protective feelings whenever Nicholas felt Francisco was getting a little too close to Sophia, for he had always backed away soon after. Nicholas didn't trust him, not yet. Not when he couldn't speak to him fluently. Until then, Nicholas would keep close to Sophia at all times, staying as alert to danger as he could.

There was little to worry about in the parking lot, but they didn't stay any longer than necessary, as Evelyn soon gathered them up to leave at the earliest opportunity. The weapon cases had been dragged out to the street before being opened up, with some grumbling from all of the humans involved about the whole arrangement that were quelled by Evelyn's presence. All that remained now was just to say goodbye and they could be on their way.

He could still hear the conversation Evelyn was having with the deputy even as he waited in the street, a fair distance away from them, and he was barely aware of his own ear-fins moving by themselves to listen in on the conversation.

"Godspeed, ma'am," Deputy Washington told Evelyn as she prepared to head off. "Remember to steer clear of the central bridge."

"I will. It'll be a long detour, but we don't have much choice."

"And if you see Chief Constantine, tell her we miss her. We all hope she made it to her family and was able to keep them safe, but we're barely holding together over here. Meeting you has proven that she'll still be the same woman we've known for years up here." The pause in the words indicated a gesture, but Nicholas couldn't see what it was. "So even if she's bigger and scallier than you, we still want her back. She's always told us we're a second family to her."

Evelyn gave him a nod. "If I meet her, I'll tell her you're all still alive and waiting for her to return."

"Thank you."

"Thank *you*. And good luck, both with holding out and with not having a bloodbath when the National Guard comes in."

"Stay safe."

"We'll try."

Nicholas heard Evelyn's heavy footsteps approach, while the deputy's got further away. Squaring his shoulders and flexing his wings, Nicholas drew himself up – as best he could on all fours, anyway. It would be another long day of walking, trying to listen out past the casual conversation of the other people traveling with them, particularly the coughing of the sick ones...

He tilted his head and listened. Yes, it was still there, but it wasn't as bad. Particularly Amar's son. Nicholas could still hear his coughing, but it was less frequent and didn't sound as rough and throaty as it had been. Maybe he was finally getting better.

If only it was that easy for him. He flexed the wings on his back again, fanning them out and then folding them up. Whatever had happened to him, it wasn't going to go away. All he could do was keep moving forward...

"Stop," Evelyn called from ahead. Nicholas stopped, but it was of his own will. Not like last night, when she had shouted, and some instinct buried deep in his head had practically forced him to listen. Maybe 'forced' was a strong word, but it had been a sort of instinctive compulsion. Like hearing a command from a parent or teacher, and following it out of respect or deference. Part of him didn't like that someone else could exert that kind of control over him, but another part of him recognized what Evelyn had done with that power, and respected her for it. But how strong was that power? And while he felt Evelyn could be responsible with it, what about Sophia? He loved his sister, but she was still five years old. She might not properly be able to comprehend the abilities she had, or understand how to use them responsibly.

He put those troubling thoughts aside for now. "What is it?" Nicholas called out to Evelyn.

"Down below," she announced, but he couldn't see what she was indicating. They were somewhere high up, but still on a road; beyond that, he had little idea of their surroundings. "I can sense someone."

Sophia spoke up. Nicholas didn't understand her words, but from the positive emotions he could feel from her, he felt like it was some kind of agreement with Evelyn's statement.

"From where?" Nicholas asked.

"There's a big store down below us and to the side." Nicholas couldn't see her point, but he did hear her wing unfold a little, and then return. "The sign says it's a wholesaler. There's a dragon in there. I can feel him. But that store seems suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Rick asked incredulously from somewhere nearby. Nicholas had noticed he'd been walking further back today – probably to avoid Nicholas's own tail. "Looks fine to me. Heck, it's in better shape than most places we've seen."

"Exactly," Evelyn remarked. "It hasn't been looted. But look at it, it's gigantic. There must be tons of supplies in there."

"Let me take a look..." Rick muttered, and Nicholas heard the slight metal sounds of him moving his rifle. He must have been looking through the scope.

Sophia said something in an excited tone, and Nicholas could both feel and smell her eagerness too. "What is it, Sophia?" he asked, hoping she might be able to send him an answer in Morse Code.

"liittt iiisss... aaa ttrrruuuccckkk," Nicholas heard from Francisco. Sophia, meanwhile, seemed very annoyed at Francisco for answering when she had been the one Nicholas had addressed, and he picked up a burst of anger from her, accompanied by the scent of ozone.

"I see it," Evelyn stated. "A military truck. It's blocking one of the freight entrances."

"Shit, is the National Guard here already?" James asked.

"I think they would've brought more than one truck in that case," Rick replied. "Sure looks like one of theirs, though! Maybe someone stole it."

"Or deserted," James suggested. "Maybe we should try and take it. It'd make our lives a hell of a lot easier."

"Sounds more like a great way to get us killed," Rick muttered. "Whoever's truck it is, they're probably armed."

"So are we, and if they stole it, then we have every right to steal it from them."

"Enough," Evelyn cut in. "I think we should at least go take a closer look. There's an offramp not too far ahead. It's hard to tell... I'm still getting used to this. I'm feeling a lot of things from that dragon. But I don't think they're hostile. And..." there was a pause. "...I think they're alone."

"Like, lonely?" Rick asked.

"I meant they're by themselves. But yes, that too. So who knows how long they've been alone for? They must be about as far into the transformation as we are. Which likely means they can't hold a gun."

"That's a relief," Rick said, exhaling. "You can really tell all that from all the way over here?"

"Yes," Evelyn replied flatly. "It's... vague, but I recognize some of those feelings. They're like my own, but not... within me? It is like hearing your own voice played back on a recording. Something familiar, but not coming from me."

"Yyyooouuu aaarrreee sssuuurreee ttthhheerrreee'sss aaa dddrrrraaaggoonnn?" Francisco asked with some difficulty.

Evelyn didn't reply immediately, so Nicholas assumed she was gesturing.

"Yes. It's like when I could sense you, José and Paloma. I can only just barely sense humans, and I don't think there are any around. Not within the store, at least."

"Maybe the dragon's been scaring them off," James suggested. "If I was by myself, I know I wouldn't want to loot a store with a dragon inside it."

"It sounds plausible," Evelyn agreed. "Either way, we need all the food we can get, and that truck would be helpful too."

Sophia squeaked something, and Francisco did his best to translate.

"Ssshheee ssaaayyysss, wwwhhaattt iiiff ttthhheeyyy'rrreee sssttuuuccckkk?"

"Could be," Evelyn remarked thoughtfully. "If they're anywhere near as big as I am, they certainly won't be able to go out the front doors. And that truck is blocking the back. Let's go down and speak with them and find out for ourselves."

"Well, whoever's in there, he knows we're coming," Nicholas heard Evelyn remark.

"How can you tell?" he asked her. They had entered the wholesaler's car park just a moment ago; Nicholas had felt a short strip of grass under his feet before returning to asphalt, with some smoother spots here and there in straight lines that he could feel. Markings for the parking spots, most likely. It must have been empty, however, as he didn't bump into any cars by accident, nor did anyone have to warn him about them as they walked across the parking lot.

"I can sense his... agitation," Evelyn replied. "And he's moving towards us."

"He? You can tell?" Nicholas asked, talking over whatever it was Sophia said in response. Some question, perhaps, as Francisco answered her in the dragon language a moment later.

"Yes, it's... hard to explain. I'm still learning how to... understand the things that I sense." She exhaled deeply. "Just be careful and stay close to me for now."

Nicholas kept moving, following her lead, raising his head as high as he could. There was only so much he could determine without sight, but he did his best. His ear-fins wiggled as he listened, trying to catch any sounds of note, but other than the ever-present rustling of scales from the dragons, the rumbling of the wheels on the carts Francisco and the humans had, and the quiet conversations some of them shared, he heard

nothing of interest. He fanned out one wing to let it catch the sun, but it didn't feel very warm. It should have been nearly midday, though. Perhaps it was cloudy out? He could feel the cool air on him, particularly on the wing membranes. Wind rustled a few nearby trees that must have been around the edges of the car park, but he didn't hear any birds. Perhaps it was going to rain...

He thought on that. The air did feel different, somehow. And it was a new feeling, one he definitely hadn't ever felt before. Could he feel the air shifting as the weather changed? Every time he thought he had learned all that his new body could do, he discovered something else. How long would it go on for? Just how different would he become? And how much of him would remain the same? Would he eventually forget who he was? What if—

"Stop," Evelyn called out, and Nicholas came to a halt. He didn't feel any alarm from Evelyn, so he remained calm as well.

"What do you see?" Nicholas asked.

"Not much. The front doors are big and glass, but there's a bunch of junk piled up behind them. Looks like whoever is there made a barricade. I can barely see over it at all. One of the big plate glass windows is broken, but there's a sheet over it, and I think there's more stuff piled up behind it..."

Her musing stopped, and she lowered her voice. "Keep quiet," she hissed.

Nicholas kept his body still, turning his head and trying to listen in. Footsteps. Big ones. Bigger and heavier even than Evelyn's, and approaching them. He began to grow worried; guns didn't concern him now that he had such heavy scales all over his body, but a bigger, stronger, and faster dragon would easily best him in any sort of fight if it came to that. "Sophia, get behind me," he hissed, but she only made a small protest, and didn't move from her spot to his side.

Ahead of Nicholas, he heard a deep rumbling sound, like a beast's growling, but far louder and more menacing. And as the creature making it approached, it only got louder. Yet, the way it kept intensifying sounded deliberate, and the footsteps seemed far too heavy, as if the person making them was stomping around on purpose.

Behind him, Nicholas heard the humans cowering or muttering. "Aw, hell," Rick moaned, while James simply cursed, and Nicholas picked out an assortment of upset Spanish words.

Evelyn, however, was nonplussed. "Good afternoon to you too," she remarked sarcastically, loud enough for whoever it was to hear her.

There was a brief pause, and then Nicholas heard a baritone yet unquestionably draconic voice emanate from ahead of him. "You fools do not know to fear a dragon," it said menacingly and threateningly, "Which of you should I burn with my flame breath first?"

Evelyn snorted. "Now I know you're talking out your ass, young man. We've got four dragons out here and none of *us* can breathe fire." Nicholas felt a vibration in his legs as he heard her slam her tail against the ground for emphasis.

Another pause, longer this time. Then, Nicholas heard the sounds of metal scraping, then something wooden clattering to the ground, followed by tape being ripped off.

"Holy shit, he's huge!" James exclaimed from somewhere behind Nicholas.

But the unseen being didn't reply to him, instead seeming to focus on Evelyn, whom he did speak to. "Apologies, ma'am," the dragon said in a more normal tone of voice; still deep and rumbling, but no longer bellowing. "I thought you were more looters."

"We're not here to smash and grab anything, no," Evelyn informed him. "Who are you?"

Nicholas heard a sound similar to one of his own wings unfurling.

"Sergeant Tyler Lewis, National Guard. Delta Company, 3rd Squadron, 95th Cavalry," the other dragon answered.

Even Evelyn seemed surprised by that – Nicholas heard mutterings from behind him during the brief moment of silence that followed. "National Guard?" Evelyn probed.

"Yes. Though... I'm probably an ex-member at this point. But I need to get out of here."

"And how the heck did you get *in* there?"

"I've been here for almost a week, I got in when all I had were some scales. I... hate to admit it, but I'm trapped in here." His voice suddenly brightened up a little. "If you can help get me out of here, you can help yourself to the food. There's mountains of it in here!"

Those words certainly changed the disposition of the people behind Nicholas for the better, and he heard excited murmurings. "Now we're talking," Nicholas heard James say eagerly, "If we get a can opener and a ton of cans we'll be set for a long time."

Meanwhile, Nicholas also heard Evelyn speak, surprised that he could follow multiple conversations at once. "You can't get out the back?" Evelyn asked. "Or just break yourself out?"

"I dunno if I have that kind of money—" Rick began, only for James to cut him off.

"Money? Who cares! This isn't some mom and pop shop. Everything here'll all be insured and the only people who lose out are some overpaid suits. Let's stock up now, that way we won't even need to consider taking from local stores."

Tyler explained to Evelyn, "I blocked the freight doors with my truck when I came here. Even as big as I am, I can't push it out of the way. I could possibly break through a wall now, but it's risky. I could get stuck or bring down part of the building on top of me."

"Yeah, okay," Rick agreed with James.

"Then how are we going to move the truck?" Evelyn asked.

Tyler's rumbling voice answered, "I have the keys in here with me. I just need another human to operate it. I can tell you what to do."

Nicholas heard Evelyn's voice grow louder, but he didn't hear her feet move, so she must have just simply turned her head to face towards everyone behind her. "Well?" she asked expectantly, "Any volunteers?"

"You go," Rick said to James, quietly but not too quietly for Nicholas to overhear.

"No, you go, I'm not going in alone with that dragon."

"I've got my hands full. You go."

"Just give me the rifle, you go."

"Oh for—" Rick grumbled, then raised his voice. "All right, I'll do it," he announced. Nicholas heard the man's footsteps as he hurried forwards. "Where are the keys?"

"I have them over at my bed," Tyler answered. "Let me try and clear the doors so you can get in without having to climb through the window."

"Yeah, I'd appreciate that," Rick muttered, "That looks sharp as hell."

"Shall we meet you there?" Evelyn suggested.

Tyler's voice sounded slightly more distant. "Yes, just go around. Or can you fly?"

"No, we haven't tried. Nicholas is the only one with a fully grown pair of wings, and he's blind."

"I see. Go around to the right, it's on the opposite end of the building to here." Nicholas heard a tremendous crash from inside, and then rustling as several smaller items tumbled to the ground.

"Will do!" Evelyn called over the din.

"We'll wait here if it's all the same to you," James spoke up.

"Fine, do what you want," Evelyn grumbled.

Nicholas felt a slight tug at his mind, and picked up a curious scent from Evelyn's direction that seemed to invite him to follow her. He heard Sophia's quick trot and Francisco's heavier footsteps as they went after Evelyn, and he quickly got up to follow as well. It was only once they turned a corner that Nicholas spoke up. "What does he look like?"

"Like a dragon, but bigger?" Evelyn answered incredulously. "I couldn't see most of him. He partly tore down the blanket over the broken window. He's even bigger than I am, though, so I only got to see his head when he peered out at us."

Sophia piped up with something, and Francisco translated: "Ssshheee sssaaayyysss hheee hhaaassss bbiigg rreeeddd eeeyyyeeesss."

Nicholas gave a little sigh. "Sophia, I can't see colors..."

Her other, sharper reply came with a burst of annoyance over their mental link. "Ssshheee—" Francisco began.

"I think I understood that one," Nicholas interrupted, then sighed. "I'm sorry, Sophia. There's just... there's just been so much going on..."

He went quiet, and they continued to walk. It was a surprisingly long distance to get around the building – Nicholas was only just now beginning to understand exactly how large the wholesaler was. Not only was he able to guess by how many steps it took, but he could hear the sounds of the people they left behind getting quieter and quieter. They turned another corner and kept going for a short time. "Okay, Nicholas, go slow," Evelyn warned him after a short distance, "We're coming up on the freight doors here. Keep going..." she trailed off, and he followed her instructions. "Now turn left... a little more... now go straight... okay, stop."

Nicholas stopped and tried to listen, but he didn't hear anyone else other than the dragons he had gone with. "Are they here?" he asked aloud.

"No, but I see the truck," Evelyn informed him. Nicholas heard her take a few steps, and then strain against something. "Ngh! Yes, there's no way I can move that either. It's a lot heavier than it looks."

"Is it really that heavy?"

"The front is covered in armor plating. It doesn't look like the front and the back can come apart easily either... at least, not in any way that would let it be put back together. I hope it still works. We'd be able to get out of here with a lot more supplies if we could, and have some of the slowest people ride in the back so we can cover ground more quickly..."

As she thought that over, Nicholas heard the sound of an electric shutter door opening, much like the one at the furniture store. "Hey there!" Rick's voice called out after a few moments, while the door continued to open a bit longer before coming to a stop. "You would not *believe* how much food is in this place! There's more camping gear too so we don't have to rely on

just one stove to share! A bunch of shelves got knocked over but it's nothing important. We—"

Tyler cleared his throat, and Rick cut himself off. "Right, sorry," he apologized, and Nicholas heard the jingling of keys. "Got 'em right here. Just tell me what I've got to do."

As Tyler guided Rick, Nicholas spoke to Evelyn again. "Do you think we can get inside?" he asked.

"It'll be a tight squeeze for him to get *out*," Evelyn remarked, walking over towards him, where she either sat or lay down – Nicholas couldn't tell from the sound alone. "But we'll be able to get in if we keep our heads down. You'll need to keep your wings as close as you can."

Nicholas's thoughts were interrupted by the roar of the truck's engine coming to life. It certainly sounded powerful – and made an awful racket. It would undoubtedly announce their presence to anyone nearby if they took it with them through the unnaturally quiet city. But with an ever-growing number of dragons, did they really need to try and be quiet any more...?

He couldn't quite gauge the exact distance Rick moved the truck away, but it wasn't very far, presumably just enough to unblock the freight doors. "Finally!" Tyler declared, almost triumphantly, and Nicholas heard his rumbling footsteps. There was a scraping sound of scales against metal as Tyler grunted, seemingly only barely able to get through the gap. But it only took him a few seconds, and then Nicholas heard the sound of wings unfurling. "Much better. It's nice to get some fresh air again. I haven't had the space to fan out these wings fully until now. I didn't realize just how large they were!" There was a pause, and then he went on, "It feels so strange to be able to reach so far."

"Everything about this is quite an adjustment," Evelyn agreed.

"Anyway, thank you for your help. I was worried I'd waited too long to leave and that I'd be stuck in there," Tyler said gratefully to get back on track.

"You're welcome," Evelyn replied, candidly adding, "Now, we held up our end of the deal..."

"Yes, of course. The others already came in and are looking around. You can take what you need. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Go right ahead. I don't think I ever told you my name – I'm Evelyn. This here is Nicholas, that's Sophia, and that's Francisco."

"Are they all your children?"

Evelyn snorted. "No. *My* children are somewhere else in the city. It's a long story, and I can fill you in later."

"I see. Good to meet you all."

"Er..." Nicholas tried to raise a hand to wave, but it was awkward in his quadrupedal stance. Maybe he could try something else? He tried lifting just one wing and fanning it out to wave with it instead, offering a simple "Hello" in greeting.

Sophia said something as well, and Nicholas felt her excitement. But to his surprise, Tyler responded to her in the dragon language, an amusing contrast of his deep voice making clicks and whistles between growls and thrums. "You can speak dragon?" Nicholas asked in awe.

"I sure can," Tyler told him. "Can't you?"

"No... not yet. Did you hear a... 'voice' when you could?"

"I did. It was during my first night here. I thought I'd already gone nuts – not even a full day and I was already hearing voices and speaking gibberish. But I didn't hear it again, and I kept focusing and practicing my English until I could speak it again. Didn't have a whole lot else to do but yell at looters."

"Hey, sorry to interrupt," Rick cut in, "But you do know if this place has any medical supplies?"

"There's a pharmacy on the west side," Tyler told him. "You can try looking there."

"Fantastic. I'm going to go find James and Amar. Thanks!"

Nicholas heard Rick's footsteps starting to leave. "Wait!" Tyler called out, and Rick stopped. "Take the long way around. Don't go through the landscaping section."

"What? Why not?"

Tyler lowered his voice a little. "I've been trapped in this store for about a week. I stopped fitting in the bathrooms within a day. You do the math."

"...oh. Got it," Rick muttered, and Nicholas heard him hurry off. Sophia seemed greatly amused by Tyler's comment, going by the amusement Nicholas felt from her, but he simply frowned.

"...sorry about that," Tyler apologized.

"You've gotta do what you've gotta do," Evelyn sympathized. "But let's not stand around out here forever. We've been walking all day every day for the last week and I'd like to just sit down for a while on something other than grass or concrete."

"Where do I even begin?" Nicholas heard Tyler wonder aloud. Nicholas was only half-paying attention: he had been guided over to the bedding section where sheets and pillows were laid out on top of a grid of mattresses, and for the first time in far too long he had somewhere actually decently comfortable to rest, lying down on his belly. Everything still ached, especially his face, but at least he could sink ever so slightly into the quickly assembled arrangements of bedding and ease his weariness just a little.

Now and then he could hear noises in other parts of the store. It was a huge open space and sound carried well in it, though not well enough that he could make out what any of the voices further away were saying.

"You said you are – or were – in the National Guard," Evelyn prompted.

"Right." Nicholas heard a metallic jingling sound. "It wasn't so bad, all things considered. But after the protests began, when they turned into riots, our unit was activated and told to go help quell the riots when the police lost control. It's happened before, though rarely. Until now. All over the country people are losing their God-damned minds..."

"But you never made it," Evelyn observed.

"No, ma'am," Tyler answered. "Because along the way some of our own members started changing. And the commander of the whole unit was one

of the unlucky ones – not only did he start growing scales, they came in right in the middle of his face, right here." Wherever he gestured to, Nicholas couldn't see it. "Caused a hell of a ruckus."

"That would certainly do it. So now there's a dragon in command, and that's why you stopped?"

Tyler gave a short laugh. "No, ma'am. He didn't remain in command for long. Top brass got wind of it while we were figuring out what to do, and along came a few birds to 'secure' him."

Sophia spoke up, and all Nicholas could tell was that she was asking a question. "Ssh, don't interrupt," Evelyn gently scolded.

Tyler made an amused noise somewhat like a chuckle but with a rumbling undertone. "It's all right, my daughter does the same thing. 'Birds' here is slang for helicopters. Anyway, they came to take him, and anyone else who had started changing. We couldn't risk having any 'compromised' soldiers, especially those with knowledge of our plans, remaining in their positions, or so we were told. We weren't going to go anywhere until they screened every last one of us. And I was concealing a patch of black hide under my right sleeve that I'd found that very morning."

"So, that's why you fled?"

"Yes. I got the help of a couple of men I could trust to help me get out, though I didn't tell any of them the real reason. I just had to pretend that I was meeting up with one of our recon groups so I could take a truck, and I made a break for it. Took the highway in, and headed over here."

Nicholas tapped a foreclaw against the floor in thought. "You were the first one here?"

"Negative," Tyler told him. "Whoever got here before me broke that window out front. But even after they loaded up and left, this place was *still* piled high with supplies. There were a couple of people when I came in, but when they saw a military truck pulling up, they ran off. I figured someone would be back to try again, so I started fortifying my position. Barricaded the front doors, covered most of the windows, and so on. I

blocked the freight entrance with my truck, but didn't account for just how big I would get."

"I'd be surprised too. Look at me, I used to be barely five foot nine, and now I can see over small buildings. And you're even bigger than I am," Evelyn remarked.

"Yes. I wonder why that is? Sophia's probably the smallest because she's the youngest. You're older than I am, yet I'm bigger. You're also special somehow... your scales aren't like anyone else's here. And that's not all, there's something different about you. You, and her." Nicholas couldn't see where Tyler was indicating, but it had to be Sophia; she was the only other 'her' besides Evelyn currently present. "I didn't know what it meant when I felt you coming. Ever since I started turning into... this... you're the first others like me I've met. Now I know what those strange 'lights' are that I could suddenly sense: they're other dragons."

"Can you sense the other bright one? Off to the northeast?"

A brief pause. "No," Tyler answered eventually. "Maybe only other special dragons like you can sense them from this far away. And I only sensed you two, not Nicholas or Francisco."

"Regardless, that's where we're headed," Evelyn told him. "You can come along with us, but if you'd rather stay here..."

"I've only been holding position here so I could form a plan," he informed her. "I've had enough of this place. Damn near lost my mind in here. Second day I was here I started speaking another language. I was worried I was going to lose myself and turn into some kind of... monster. No ma'am, I'm ready to get out of here, and if there weren't a storm coming in I'd be on my way out already."

"We need to restock before we go. We've barely had enough food with how much we eat, and with an extra dragon we'll need even more. Can we take your truck?"

"It's not doing me any good any more," Tyler said by way of an answer. "Same for my gear. I can't wield a rifle and my uniform won't fit me

anymore. If someone else wants it, they can take it. Just not that duffel bag over there or anything in it – that's all mine."

Sophia piped up to ask a question, but Tyler chose to answer it in English. "My things. Photos of my family. Pictures my daughter drew. My wedding ring. Stuff like that. So don't touch any of it." Sophia gave a short reply, which Nicholas had to assume was agreement.

"Let's back up," Evelyn said, retaking control of the conversation. "What happened after you barricaded yourself in here?"

"Other than scaring off the occasional looter by yelling at them in dragon-speak?" Tyler remarked with a hint of amusement. "Well, I did everything I could to keep to my normal schedule. I thought that maybe if I kept to a familiar routine, it would help me remain human, at least inside. So I got up early, and exercised as best I could. I had to keep changing what I did as my body changed – you can't do sit-ups as a quadruped – but I never slacked on it. I'd march around, shouting orders at an empty store, which probably also helped keep away the looters. I did drills, and ran through procedures in my head. That sort of thing. It seems to have worked well enough, since I'm still here speaking to you. Unless I went so mad that I'm hallucinating this entire conversation, but I don't think that's the case."

"We're real, don't you worry," Evelyn remarked with a touch of mirth. "We all seem to be fine – other than being dragons, anyway – so I'm not sure how necessary it was."

"I don't know. Maybe it was just loneliness. Maybe it was something else. But for a little bit I thought I could feel myself... slipping away. Especially when I heard the voice in my head, but I only heard it once, and never again." He exhaled. "That's mostly it. Other than eating and listening in on my radio, I haven't been doing much of interest."

"I'm guessing that camp stove over there is what you were cooking on?"

"Yes. I figured something was up once I was able to eat a whole pot of chili and still be hungry, but I haven't been wanting for food in this place."

Nicholas's mouth watered at the thought of having some real, cooked food again. "We haven't had much. Maybe that's why you're so much bigger?"

"Could be," Tyler agreed. "Fortunately it seems like I can still eat most things. Not cheese, though..." Francisco said something in the dragon language, and Tyler gave a rumbling chuckle, before adding a simple "Yep. Never again."

"You mentioned the radio," Evelyn cut in. "What's been going on with the National Guard?"

Tyler gave a displeased sound, and Nicholas could smell the burst of resistance from him. "I'm afraid I can't tell a civilian that," he said flatly.

"Why not? You told us you were sent to help with the riots."

"That's different. When we get deployed for that, the governor announces it and it's on every TV station around. But since then we've got... new orders, and I'm not at liberty to discuss them."

"Really?" Evelyn asked incredulously. "You're not even part of the National Guard any more. I want to know if they're still going to be stuck outside the city or if we're going to be surrounded by guns tomorrow morning."

"It's still a matter of national security," Tyler insisted. "I don't want to put anyone or anything at risk."

Evelyn took a deep breath, something far more audible to Nicholas when it was a dragon's lungs inhaling than a human's. He felt intense annoyance over the mental link and a burst of an irritated scent from her, but she spoke in a more restrained manner. "I understand, however, you *are* putting lives at risk by holding back. We have people with us who are sick and injured, and we are trying to escort them to the humanitarian camp at the stadium. To get there, we must cross the river. I *need* to know what the National Guard are doing so that I can figure out if we have time to rest or if we must depart now, storm or no storm. These people following us are trusting us to see them to safety, and many will not be able to defend themselves from danger. I simply want to help them, so please, help us."

There was a long silence, but eventually Tyler conceded, "I understand, ma'am. I... will tell you what I can that is immediately relevant to you."

"Good. That will do," Evelyn said more calmly.

Tyler exhaled slowly. "Initially, as I mentioned, we were delayed due to people in the unit transforming, and we halted while that was sorted out. It sounds like almost every other unit has had similar troubles. That's been cleared up – someone else is in charge now, I won't say who – and we secured the highway out of the city. At first the order was to contain and quarantine, to stop anyone from getting in or out. And that's still an order, even though we only have all the northern roads secured right now."

"Getting out of here is going to be difficult, then," Evelyn grumbled.

"It will," Tyler agreed. "But there's more. Our units are holding back because there's been a... development."

Nicholas frowned. "What kind of development?"

But Evelyn spoke first with a guess. "It's the bridge, isn't it?"

Tyler made a curious noise. "Yes. How did you know?"

"We spoke with the police last night, and they told us. They said we'd have to go around because the central bridge was taken by terrorists."

"Ah." Tyler sighed, and Nicholas could smell relief from him. "You already know, then. Yes, it's a terrorist group, a new one that formed in response to everything that's happened. Could be an old group that's rebranded itself, but we haven't found out yet if that's the case. They're demanding that all dragons be killed – that 'Earth is only for humans' and the like. They've fortified the bridge and have already shot several dragons in the area."

Nicholas felt a chill run all the way down his spine. It continued past his rump and down the full length of his tail, a sensation that unnerved him further in and of itself. "You're not going to agree to that, are you...?"

"Hell no!" Tyler exclaimed, radiating an indignant scent. "The opposite. We need to retake the city, and that includes the bridge. But opening fire on civilians, even openly hostile ones... well, that needs approval all the way from the very top. And the president is a very busy man these days. We weren't equipped for that kind of engagement either, so we had to arrange for the necessary equipment to be delivered. All of that's causing delays."

"And how quickly will they be moving out?"

"I don't know," Tyler admitted. "I've been listening to the radio but it depends on things beyond our control. It might be days. It might be a week. They might already be moving right now."

"But it will be soon?"

"Affirmative."

Evelyn both felt and smelled pensive to Nicholas, and she went quiet. So, he spoke up, "Do you think they'll shoot at us?"

"On sight? No," Tyler replied. "They're not necessarily aggressive towards dragons, and we're not considered combatants. But with that said, they'll probably try to contain or restrain us – especially me, if they figure out who I am. And if we refuse their orders, they'll open fire."

"Then we have no choice," Evelyn muttered. "We'll have to go across the river. We can't go around."

"I've heard reports that dragon scales are too tough for small-arms fire to get through, and while the people on the bridge have sniper rifles, the only thing I've heard so far that reliably gets through is an M2. I haven't heard of anyone else with scales like yours, they might be even tougher... and for all I know, the younger ones have weaker scales. But even then, we still have weak points. Our wings are big, easy, flimsy targets, and who knows how well we'll hold up to sustained fire even if our scales can stop individual rounds. Do you really want to take that risk? And what about all the people with you?"

"I never said we would go over the *bridge*," Evelyn corrected. "Just over the river."

"I thought you said you couldn't fly, ma'am."

"I can't, but I can swim. Or at least I used to, it might take some re-learning to figure out how to do it with this body. And there must be boats nearby too – sailboats or yachts or what have you. If we stick to the shallow parts, you and I might be able to just walk across. Whatever we do, it will be faster than trying to go around."

Tyler snorted thoughtfully. "That might work... if we can get a boat. I imagine most people who have one will have fled, but they can't all be gone. It's certainly worth a try."

"I don't think we have any other options. But we can't go out in a rainstorm, and we need time to gather more supplies anyway," Evelyn mused out loud. "We'll need to leave first thing in the morning, so we'll need to get that truck loaded up tonight, and figure out who's going to ride in it. There *must* be a road map of the city in here somewhere that we can use to try and plan a route. We should have gone looking for one sooner. But no matter what, sooner or later, we'll have to get past the National Guard..."

"They'll be the final hurdle," Tyler agreed. "Once you get past them – if you get past them – the roads should be clear all the way to the National Park."

"Are you going to try and rejoin them?"

"No," Tyler said, the determination in his voice betrayed by the saddened scent that Nicholas picked up. "They wouldn't take me back. I don't have any hard feelings towards them, so I'd rather just get past without any trouble if I can."

"Then while I organize the others, I want you to listen to your radio. Tell me if you learn anything new about their movements."

Nicholas heard Tyler's wing moving again. "Yes, ma'am," he replied.

Chapter 14

"Delta Actual, this is Delta 7."

"Go for Delta Actual."

Sophia stared at the radio in silent awe, lying on her front on the blankets and mattresses while Nicholas lay next to her in similar fashion with one wing spread out over her, her tail resting against his. Tyler was sitting across from them, looking at the radio with his bright, red eyes, the pupils being the only part of them not red. Sophia had found them a little scary the first time she saw them, but now that she knew Tyler was a good person, she thought the bright red color looked nice, especially with his scales being the same boring black as everyone else's. The red matched the vibrant color of the fin running down his back, which was bigger and taller than all of the other dragons'. It helped him look bigger and scarier when he wanted to be, since he could lift it up even higher.

He was regarding the radio calmly, listening to the nonsense coming from it. He'd had Rick take it back out to his truck to charge it much earlier while he talked, telling them about his family, particularly the daughter that was 'about Sophia's age'. Evelyn had told him more or less everything that had happened to them as well to catch him up. After a few hours, Tyler had sent Rick off again to go get the radio back – by which time the storm had come in, and was raging at full force. Rick had taken a rain poncho from elsewhere in the store before heading out, and even on his brief trip out to the truck he was still dripping vast amounts of water onto the floor of the back area after his return.

It was quite a storm, too, and Sophia was glad to not be out in it. The hammering of the rain on the roof echoed within the vast empty space, and though it didn't seem to bother the humans too much, it annoyed the dragons to no end. Rain lashed at the windows of the store – the 'hole-sailer' as the adults kept calling it – and occasionally lit the sky with a flash of light, followed by a rumble of thunder. Tyler had taught her a trick to determine how far away the storm was by counting the seconds between the lightning and thunder, and Sophia had practiced counting out loud after each lightning strike she noticed.

"Stand by for SPOTREP," the person named 'Delta Seven' on the radio began. These people always had such weird names. She'd never heard of anyone named 'Delta', and yet here there were two of them, talking to each other. At least Tyler had a normal name. She couldn't imagine having to call him something like 'Delta'.

"*What is—*" Sophia started, but Tyler held up a forelimb and shook his head, so she went quiet.

"Line One: Twenty-one Fourteen Forty-five Sep Twenty-five." Sophia frowned. That wasn't how you counted! But she didn't want to make Tyler mad, so she lowered her head a little and continued to listen. "Line Two: Third Platoon. Line Three: Six vehicles and 30 MAMs..."

Sophia had no idea what any of it meant. What was a 'platoon'? Six vehicles, she understood, but what were MAMs? Were they like M&Ms? Could she eat them? Or would it be like ice cream, and she couldn't have them any—

A flash of light from outside drew her attention. "*One*," she began, but Tyler raised one clawed digit to his mouth and made a hissing sound, attempting to shush her with a muzzle that couldn't make the same noise. As funny as it seemed, she understood what he meant from the gesture, so she started counting in a whispered voice instead. On the count of four, she heard the rumble of thunder, and happily swished her tail back and forth, repeating "*Four!*" in a quiet whisper. That meant it was four miles away!

She turned her attention back to the radio, but there were just so many words she didn't know. Sometimes Tyler answered her questions, and sometimes he asked her to be quiet so he could listen. How did he know what was important and what wasn't? Was it another language? Maybe she could learn it like Morse Code, but this seemed way harder.

The voice on the radio continued, "Line Ten: Civilian technicals southbound on Walnut exchanging light machine gun fire. Line Eleven: Authentication codename Juliet Sierra. How copy?"

"Line One: Twenty-one Fourteen Forty-five Sep Twenty-five," the other voice began, and Sophia realized they were repeating all the nonsense

back. Maybe it was a game, like one of those ones where you had to remember and repeat a bunch of colors, and it kept getting longer? She frowned; they were really, really good at it if that was the case.

"Good copy, out," the original voice said after the second voice repeated the whole thing, and then the conversation stopped. Maybe they were going to go think of what to add for Line Twelve to try and mess up whoever 'Delta Actual' was. She'd at least figured out that 'out' was soldier-speak for 'goodbye', since they always said it right before hanging up. She felt proud of that one, since she hadn't had to have Tyler tell her.

Tyler reached out and carefully worked the radio, pushing the buttons with his claws, bringing the side of his head close to it to see better. He was so precise with his claws that Sophia was amazed, and though she tried to mimic his motions, she couldn't quite seem to do it as well as him. He'd told her it was just practice, but she'd been trying for minutes and couldn't do it. It must have been really hard. There were dials on the top too, but those were apparently too hard for him to turn with just his claws – so instead, he was turning them with a tool he'd called "pliers".

"Nnnnniiiiicckkk?" she asked, turning her head towards her brother. He was the only other one there, since Evelyn had taken Francisco off to go help the others move things around. She could feel them, in another part of the store; Evelyn's big 'light' and Francisco's next to her. And so many other little lights all around from the humans. They were so much smaller and harder to notice, but if she tried really hard, she could 'see' them.

Nicholas shifted slightly towards her, lowering his wing until it gently touched the fin on her back. "What is it, Sophia?" he asked softly. She saw him lean his neck over and carefully, gently press his head against the side of her neck. He still looked a bit silly, with a snout that wasn't quite as big as hers yet, and bits of skin still on his face here and there. She looked way more like a dragon than he did. The only thing she seemed to still need was a bigger tail; hers wasn't anywhere near the size of Evelyn's. But Nick still had a few bits of skin left, particularly on his neck.

Tyler pushed the radio buttons again, and it crackled back to life, spewing more nonsense words that he seemed to be able to understand. What was

a 'tango'? Was it like a mango? Could she still eat it as a dragon? And why did they keep talking about November? November was months away!

Then, suddenly, from across the store, Sophia felt a sharp pain from Evelyn's leg. She must have stood on it wrong, again, and Sophia let out a pained cry as she felt it hurting as though it were her own. Squeezing her eyes shut, she shook her head back and forth once and tried to shut it out—

The words on the radio suddenly were lost to a burst of static and a momentary high-pitched whine, but Sophia barely noticed as she felt Evelyn's pain... disappear? No, that wasn't quite right. It was still there, she was still aware of it. But it felt... less. A lot less.

She opened her eyes and saw Tyler staring at her, while Nicholas's ear-fins were wiggling as if to try and listen to her. "*What was that?*" Tyler asked.

"*What was what?*" Sophia replied, staring back at him curiously.

"*What you did just now,*" he insisted, the voices on the radio forgotten.

"*I...*" Sophia began, trailing off. Not just because she wasn't really sure of the words – in any language – for what she'd done, but because she felt Nicholas's confusion and... sadness, too, from not being able to understand her. So she took a breath and tried to speak with words he could understand.

"IIII doooooonnnnn'ttt knnnnoooooowwww," she managed to say. "IIII..." it was too difficult! But she didn't want Nick to feel bad... glancing down, she saw his front legs stretched in front of him while he was lying on his front. Reaching out, she put one hand – was it still a hand? It looked so different now – on top of his and rested it there, smiling as she felt a little bit of happiness from him, picking up the scent of it as well.

"*Please tell him what I am saying for me,*" Sophia implored Tyler.

"I will," he promised her. "But you did something just now, though I am not sure what it was."

Sophia hummed in thought. "*I felt Eeevvveeeelllyyyynnnn hurt herself,*" Sophia said to try and explain, recalling what had happened. "*And it hurt*

me too. It has always been like that since I started to become a Child of the Egg. Then... I tried to... make it go away? And... it did! ...a bit."

Tyler looked and smelled thoughtful, making a funny purring sound for a moment before translating for Nicholas. "She says she felt Evelyn hurt something, and she was able to make the pain stop."

She felt Nicholas relax a little. "Thank you," he said to Tyler, then turned his head slightly more towards her. "Maybe you should try doing it again?"

"Mmmaaaayyybheeee..." Sophia mumbled with some difficulty. She looked at Nicholas, trying to focus on him. He still hurt too, just like he always had ever since he'd started growing wings. And so did she, but she had grown so used to it that it felt like little more than background noise. Or was she somehow dulling it without knowing, like she had done to Evelyn...?

As she kept her attention on Nicholas, she became more aware of his soreness and pains, mostly on his face and neck. Presumably since they were where he still had skin. But now what? She hadn't really done anything deliberate when she'd helped Evelyn, it had been more of a reflex. But maybe there was some way she could... reach out to him? She tried to think at him, closing her eyes and bobbing her head towards him, but nothing seemed to happen that she could tell.

"Do I need to do something...?" Nicholas offered, and she gave a disapproving hum in response. No, no, it had been the pain that Evelyn had felt that had gotten her attention. So she tried to focus on that: Nicholas's aching neck where it was still getting longer. She felt it too, but she had gotten much better about telling whose pain was whose, and it was definitely a 'Nicholas' pain. So all she had to do was... tell it to go away, but with her brain. Right?

But despite a few moments of her murmuring and trying to think mean thoughts at Nicholas's pain, it didn't go away, and she grumbled. A loud rumble from outside caught her attention; she'd missed a lightning flash while her eyes were closed. With her focus broken, she also noticed the radio was still going, too, but it couldn't have been anything important because Tyler didn't seem terribly interested in it...

Wait, that was it. She'd tried to... tune it out, like an annoying noise. Sort of? Churring to herself, she focused on Nicholas's pain again, patting his arm with her hand to reassure him. There was an odd smell coming from her too, another one of those emotion smells. Did she make one for trying to concentrate? Shaking her head, she returned her attention to Nicholas and fixated on the ache in his neck. She didn't want Nick to hurt. She wanted that pain to go away. He was always protecting her. Sometimes he had even begged their parents to beat him instead of her when she did something wrong. She wanted to pay him back for that, to protect him for a change. Like he had done for her, she could take that pain, and then make it go away...

She focused on his pain, this time paying more attention. She felt it as if it were her own, and then... she didn't know how to describe it, but she made it... not disappear, but so small and thin and spread out that it didn't matter. Another brief burst of static on the radio came through, but it was Nicholas's surprised gasp that told her she'd figured it out, and she smiled, her tail swishing back and forth, a happy smell exuding from her.

"Gggoooooooooddd?" she forced out by way of a question.

"Ahh... yes, that feels better," Nicholas replied. "What did you do? It doesn't hurt you to do that, does it?"

"Nnnnnooooo!" she told him proudly.

"That's amazing," Tyler remarked as he stared at her. "I never would have imagined that you could have those kinds of powers. What else can you do?"

"Ummmmmm..." Sophia wasn't sure how to answer that. "*I can smell how my brother is feeling?*"

Tyler's followup question was interrupted by a thumping sound, but Sophia didn't need to look to know that it was Evelyn approaching when she could sense her light. "What's going on over here?" she asked as she carefully turned a corner between some high shelves, barely squeezing through. "I could feel you doing... something! You made my leg stop hurting!"

"I did!" Sophia proclaimed triumphantly, beaming up at Evelyn as she turned her head to look at the old lady. Like Nicholas, she was almost but not quite completely a dragon, with a bit of skin still on the back of her neck. Plus the dark red soft bits on her wings between the long black parts weren't quite as big as Nicholas's, either. It'd be a long time before Sophia caught up to her in size, though. But Tyler was big too! Maybe he had some trick, or maybe Nick was right about Tyler eating more. She'd heard from adults that she needed to eat lots to grow up big and strong, so maybe dragons worked the same way?

"She seems to have learned some new... ability of the dragons," Tyler informed Evelyn.

"I made the hurt go away!" Sophia said excitedly. *"It's gone! I ate it!"*

"She says she... ate it?"

Evelyn tilted her head and gave Tyler a questioning look. "And did she say how?"

"No, ma'am," Tyler answered, giving a shrug with his wings.

"It is easy," Sophia declared. She closed her eyes and focused on Evelyn; her neck was aching more than the rest of her, much like with Nicholas, so she focused on that. It took a moment to make it work, but it went faster than the last time; another burst of static sounded on the radio and Evelyn relaxed a little as Sophia made the pain go away.

"Oh, that's much better," Evelyn said contentedly, closing her eyes a bit, stretching her neck out and tipping her head back a little as she moved it in a circle. "Better than the painkillers they had me hopped-up on back at the care home."

"Morphine is a hell of a drug," Tyler agreed with a nod. "But think about what we could do if we all learned how to do this! If we could help all those people with you – we might be able to move faster and get them to safety quicker."

"One step at a time," Evelyn replied warily, "Let's see if we can do it, first. That static on your radio reminds me... something similar happened at the police headquarters when I was commanding people to stand down."

"Then there must be something about these... powers of yours that interferes with the radio," Tyler mused, reaching out to carefully turn it off for the time being. "I hope it doesn't make us easier to find."

"Hmm, we might need to see how far it reaches," Evelyn agreed. "I want to see if I can do it, first. Sophia, can you tell me how you did it?"

"You just focus on the pain and then think about it going away," Sophia said. It was so obvious. Why couldn't she figure it out?

"Focus on the pain... and think about it going away," Tyler translated. "Well, it's worth a shot."

Nicholas's throat thrummed for a moment. "I can try too."

"Let's not all try at once," Evelyn told them. "If it causes interference then maybe we're sending some kind of... signals to each other. We wouldn't want them to interfere with each other. I'll go first."

Sophia looked over at Evelyn, who was now staring at her. Was Evelyn trying to help her? *"My legs hurt,"* she said to try and help.

"She says her legs hurt," Tyler repeated in English.

"Yes, I can feel that," Evelyn murmured. "Let me just..."

Sophia felt an odd feeling in her head. It wasn't quite that there were thoughts that weren't her own, but it was definitely some sort of... presence. Closing one eye, Sophia made a face. *"My brain feels funny!"* she declared, to which Tyler only gave a snort of amusement.

"Focus on the pain..." Evelyn murmured, ignoring Sophia's comment. "And think about it going away..." she stood there and repeated the instructions to herself a few times, turning her head this way and that. Sophia gave her an odd look, glancing over to Tyler and Nicholas, and then back to Evelyn, feeling the strange feeling in her head change a little...

But then Evelyn seemed to finally get it, and Sophia gave a pleased sound as she felt the soreness in her legs go away a bit. Evelyn definitely wasn't as good at it as she was, but it was still helpful. "Yes, yes!" she chirped.

"I think you got it," Tyler told Evelyn.

"That's a weird feeling, to be sure," Evelyn muttered. "I had to try and... envision the feeling, as little sense as that makes. Then... take it onto myself, but it didn't hurt me directly. It was more like I... consumed it." She looked and smelled thoughtful, tapping one foreclaw on the floor. "I don't think I did it nearly as well as she did, but maybe I just need practice."

Tyler gave a snort. "No shortage of people here to practice on," he remarked grimly. "Pneumonia, broken bones... take your pick. But let me give it a shot first. What do I have to do?"

"Pick someone out, and focus on their light," Evelyn instructed.

Tyler closed his eyes, but frowned after a moment. "So this only works on dragons, then? They're the only ones who have any... 'light'."

Evelyn tilted her head to one side, one ear-fin flat against her head and the other outstretched in a questioning look. "No, the humans do too. It's fainter, you just have to look harder."

"No ma'am, I don't feel anything from them," he insisted, opening his eyes. "In fact... only you and Sophia have any 'light' that I can sense. Maybe only you can see the lights of others?"

"I can see them just fine," Sophia piped up. *"Look harder!"*

"Hmm." Tyler closed his eyes again, and several seconds passed, only for him to shake his head again. "No, it's just you two. Nicholas, do you know what they're talking about?"

"No," Nicholas replied after a moment. "I can only sense Evelyn and Sophia."

"Well, try it on one of us, then," Evelyn suggested. "Who knows how these things work? It's not like they gave us a manual."

"They?" Nicholas asked.

"I think that deputy might have had the right idea," Evelyn murmured. "It's obviously not contagious. But it doesn't seem truly random. So someone or something seems to have chosen who does and does not become a dragon. Though..." Sophia saw Evelyn give Tyler a very pointed look.

"Would you happen to know anything about that?"

Tyler stiffened up a little, his wings pulling tightly against his back.

"Anything I do know, I am not at liberty to discuss with civilians," he replied, suddenly far more serious.

Evelyn snorted derisively, but let the matter drop. "Regardless, assuming that some group or other did engineer this, along with that broadcast... why haven't they helped us? I feel like a fish in an aquarium, with someone just watching to see what I do and tapping on the glass now and then. It feels deliberately negligent, like it's part of one big experiment. Like one of those TV shows where they leave people on an island and see what happens."

"I don't know," Nicholas said quietly. "How would you even do that? How many dragons are there now, all over the world? How would you give them instructions? And what about people like me who can't see, or others who can't hear?"

"Surely some proper instincts or guidance or an instruction book wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility. After all, they planted an entire language in our heads," Evelyn pointed out. "Sophia certainly isn't a native dragon speaker, and I imagine Tyler isn't either." Sophia didn't know what that meant, and gave Evelyn a confused look. "Native speaker means you learned that language first," Evelyn patiently explained.

"I sure wouldn't mind getting a field manual for operating a dragon body," Tyler grimly joked. "I had one hell of a time just figuring out how to walk on four legs. Trust me, I'm in the same boat as you." Drawing a deep breath, he went on, "We're getting off track. Let me try again, on... Sophia, I guess? What do I do?"

"Focus on her pain, to start."

Tyler's face screwed up in concentration, and Sophia saw his tail flick. "I don't think I can," he said eventually. "I can... I know she's there, I can sense her presence, and I can feel some of her aches, but I can't seem to... manipulate it. It's there, but all I can do is observe."

"But it is easy!" Sophia insisted.

"Easy for you, little girl," Tyler grumbled, though he smelled amused more than anything else. "Seems like some of us are having a harder time."

Evelyn looked thoughtful – and smelled like it too. "This isn't the first time it's seemed like something was different about Sophia and I compared to the others. José said something similar too."

"José?"

"The leader of the place where we met Francisco," Evelyn told him. "He said something about us having bright lights that he could sense from a distance."

"Fffrrrraaaaannn-... *my new friend said we were Matriarchs!*" Sophia chimed in. "*We are special!*"

"What was that?" Evelyn asked Tyler.

"She said that Francisco told her that you and her are... hmm." Tyler trailed off. "I'm... not honestly sure how that word translates into English. *Matriarch*," he mumbled, slipping back into the dragon language for a moment. "*Matriarch, Matriarch*... it... well, it 'feels' like a... a beacon, a sort of... guiding star? Yes, that's it. Guiding star."

"And Sophia and I are these... 'guiding stars'?"

Tyler nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It does seem like a rather accurate name, not just because you have this sort of... light that we can sense, but... well, you do appear to be offering guidance to a lot of people." He gestured with one wing in the vague direction of the humans in the store.

"Hmm." Evelyn didn't respond verbally, but seemed quite thoughtful once again. Eventually, she sighed deeply. "I'm with you. I'd give anything to get a manual right about now. So you don't think you can do the... pain-eating thing?"

"That's a negative."

Nicholas shifted a little and sat up. "Can I try?"

"Hm? Go ahead, knock yourself out," Evelyn told him.

"Try my tail! It keeps getting bigger and it hurts all the time." Sophia tried to keep herself still, but it was difficult. She was excited! Learning a new thing was always fun, and it seemed like something special, something most people couldn't do. She liked feeling special.

"She said to try her tail," Tyler translated.

Nicholas's eyes were already closed like always, but Sophia could tell he was trying to focus from his emotions and scent. She sat and waited... and waited... eventually leaning forward towards Nicholas, his expression flat, his tail slowly sweeping back and forth. Still nothing happened, so she gently nudged her snout up against his side. "Nnnnniiiiicccckk?"

"It's not working, is it?" he asked sadly, slumping a little in place.

"I did not feel anything..." Sophia murmured. He felt bad, which made her feel bad, and she lowered her head a little.

"Then it seems like only Sophia and I can do it," Evelyn muttered.

"Maybe," Tyler mused, "Or maybe it's only a thing dragon women can do."

Evelyn snorted, partly in amusement and partly from derision. "Dragon women?" she said mockingly.

"You're a woman, and you're a dragon. Would you rather I said 'females'?"

"Nom de Dieu! No, I would not! This isn't a nature documentary!" She gave an exasperated sigh. "Just call me a dragoness."

"And what am I?" Tyler asked, tilting his head.

"A drake?"

"I'm not calling myself a drake. I'm a man."

"An eighty-something-foot long man with scales and wings," Evelyn muttered under her breath. "Enough of that. What makes you think only we can do it?"

"You're the only ones here," Tyler answered. "It's not solid proof, but all the dragon wo-... dragonesses we have here can do it, and the men can't."

"That's possible... we've met another one, but only briefly, where we met Francisco."

"Where *is* he?" Tyler wondered aloud. "I haven't seen much of him since he introduced himself."

"He's helping his... friends," Evelyn answered. "It is much easier for him to get things off high shelves or take down heavy boxes than it is for them."

"I see. Regardless, even if only the two of you can do it, it's still a remarkable ability," Tyler went on. "Depending on how long it lasts and how many people you can do it for at once..."

"We'll have to experiment," Evelyn said, nodding. "I seem to have some limited ability to command people, too, going by what happened at the police station. But without any instruction, we'll just be trying things and seeing what works."

Sophia made a thoughtful churring sound, her tail tapping on the floor. What could she do? She didn't have any real idea, but she could always just... try stuff. If Evelyn was special like her, a 'guiding star', then maybe her special abilities would work better on Evelyn?

She tuned out what Evelyn and Tyler were talking about as she closed her eyes and tried to focus, keeping her head raised. Evelyn's light was brighter than everyone else's, and it made it easier to concentrate on her. Sophia reached out, but with her mind, rather than with her body, trying to feel what she could – she'd felt Evelyn's pain earlier, and she could sense other emotions from her at other times. It was hard to pick just one thing! But she could certainly sense Evelyn as a whole. It was kind of like how if you got close a tree you could see all the leaves separately, but when you moved back they all kind of blended together. Yet you could still see the tree – and in the same way, without focusing on one feeling, Sophia could 'see' Evelyn, or at least her light. Was there something she could do with that...?

She prodded, or at least, tried to, occasionally moving her head or wings or tail absently. It was such an odd feeling, yet it felt natural to attempt. Did Evelyn say something? She wasn't sure, and kept focused instead. It was

like she was reaching out and trying to grab someone's hand, but she couldn't see it, and kept missing. But she knew it was there, and if she tried it enough—

Sure enough, she felt her attempt to reach out connect with something. The other mental hand took hers in a strong grip. But not as strong as Sophia's own. It was as though *she* was the older and stronger one, not Evelyn. Sophia felt something almost like a static shock run through her, and let out a gasp. Feelings and sensations suddenly overwhelmed her, as if the curtains had suddenly been pulled back in a dark room and blinded her.

"...ia! Sophia!" Evelyn was calling.

"Sophia!" Nicholas was joining in, draping his wing over her back and leaning closer to press his flank against her own.

She groaned and slumped a little, resting her head on her forelimbs as she regained her senses. Something was... not wrong, but different. Very different. She could still sense things, lights, others... but there was more. So much more! There were so, so many tiny little lights from humans, like grains of sand on a beach. And more of the brighter lights of dragons. But that one big light, the one she had sensed before they even got into the city, seemed so much clearer, so much brighter. And it was surrounded by many dragon-lights of its own!

Guiding star... now she understood. That star, that light, was where they were going, wasn't it? And so many other people had gone there already. Other dragons! Other friends!

"Sophia, please speak to me, are you all right?" Nicholas implored, keeping close to her side.

Couldn't he feel her? She blinked and lifted her head a bit, looking with one eye towards Nicholas as her sight came back into focus. It didn't look like she could see anything new with her eyes, in contrast to all the new things she could feel with her... mind? "*I am fine*," she answered, looking up at Nicholas and trying to give him a smile.

"She says she is fine," Tyler reassured Nicholas, breathing a sigh of relief of his own.

"What did you do?" Evelyn asked her. Sophia turned her head to look away from Nicholas, noticing that both Tyler and Evelyn were standing over her, radiating concern.

"*I do not know*," she mumbled. She didn't feel bad, though. And she felt happy that Nick was there, staying close to her. She lifted her head further and rubbed it against his own gently, feeling him relax.

"She doesn't know," Tyler muttered to Evelyn. "You looked pretty out of it too. What happened?"

"She was doing something, that's for sure," Evelyn told him. "It felt like someone was poking around inside my head! But..." she trailed off and took a deep breath, staring off into the distance. "Then it felt like... like a sort of connection. You know how if someone holds out their hand, or opens their arms, it's an invitation? It was like that. I wondered if she was trying to show me something. So I tried to do the same back to her, and..."

"...and?" Tyler inquired after a moment.

"It's like... some sort of amplifier," Evelyn eventually offered as an explanation. "I already mentioned I can sense dragons and humans, though they're different. I can still do that, but even further away than before. It's as if... as if we're working together? But it's not a conscious thing. It's hard to explain... *je ne sais pas*..."

"Then... are there any more guiding stars you can sense?"

"Hm... yes," Evelyn answered after a moment. "Just the one, off to the north, more or less. I'd sensed it before but only just barely. It's much clearer now."

"That must be the one you told me about at the national park."

"It must be," Evelyn agreed. "I sense other dragons near them." She took a deep breath. "I... think I can tell where the National Guard is, but it's hard to say for sure. It is a very large gathering of humans outside of the city, but there are no dragons with them."

"Probably taken away by the FBI," Tyler muttered darkly. "I was right to get out while I still could."

"Or they all escaped, but that does seem optimistic." Evelyn took another long breath. "I want to try and communicate with that guiding star in the north again. Maybe I can get something a little clearer this time, with this... joined... connection we have."

Sophia watched Evelyn settle back down onto the mattresses and blankets and close her eyes. Emotions and thoughts suddenly flickered through her awareness – she knew Evelyn was trying to send them to the other *Matriarch*, but she 'saw' them too. Feelings of... being in a group, of a growing family. Of hardship and tiredness. Feelings came back, much like they had the last time they had tried to contact that *Matriarch*: calmness, welcoming. They were still wanted and welcome. And then a direction: north.

Evelyn sent back more. Danger. Threat. North, but not as far. The other dragon sent back exhilarating feelings of flight, soaring through the air, feeling wind rushing past. Evelyn sent those feelings back – and then suddenly, a strong, negative emotion, but unspecific. Sophia couldn't have put it into words, but she got the idea: telling the other dragon they couldn't fly.

There was a pause. "Are you all right?" Tyler asked.

"Yes, this is just... difficult," Evelyn muttered. "Foreign. Like trying to play the piano with your toes."

"I see," Tyler murmured, and went quiet to let her focus.

Sophia got an idea, though, and decided to try something. Maybe the other dragon could come help them! She thought of herself, and then the other dragon – what little she knew of her, at least. Then she thought about how she felt when Nicholas was close: safe, happy, together. She sent those feelings, and hoped they would be understood.

Moments later, a complex message came back. Feelings of... responsibility. The other dragon thinking of herself, and a negative emotion. But then... a different dragon, one they didn't know, and positive emotions. The

sensation of flying, and then... a feeling of learning things. The new dragon, then back to the feeling of learning, then back to the feeling of flying. The other dragon, then feelings to indicate Evelyn. Flight, again. The chill of night followed by the warmth of the morning sun.

"...huh?" Sophia mumbled, perplexed. *"I do not understand."*

"You don't understand what?" Tyler asked quietly.

"The message," Sophia said, tilting her head.

"Did you get a... message?" Tyler asked Evelyn.

"Yes," Evelyn answered. "It's like playing charades but with mental images. I think I understand."

"Understand what?"

"Did you see what we did?" Evelyn asked, and Tyler shook his head.

"Nicholas?"

"No, I didn't get any... 'message'," Nicholas replied.

"Must be another guiding star thing. I think she understood that I said we can't fly. And I believe she is saying that she cannot come to us, but she is sending someone to us."

"We could use more help, though every extra dragon is that much more food we have to bring," Tyler thought aloud. "I know how to survive in the wilderness, but we're a long way from anything bigger than squirrels and seagulls, and neither of those sounds particularly appetizing. The truck will let us carry a lot, but maybe we can try to put together something to let us carry more. Some kind of dragon backpack, maybe. That way we can fend for ourselves more."

"Saddlebags might work better," Evelyn speculated. "One thing at a time. We'll need to try and meet up with this other dragon tomorrow."

"How will they find us?"

Evelyn gave a wry smile – as much as she could with a dragon's muzzle, anyway, but the emotion scents she was emitting got the feeling across.

"We're guiding stars, aren't we? Two of them, no less. I think they'll find their way to us, one way or another."

Chapter 15

Nicholas lay down next to Sophia's sleeping form and stretched his wing across her, snuggling up against her back as he settled in with her, carefully extending his neck to lay it across hers. Finding her was easy. There was her 'light' that shone even brighter than Evelyn's, for one thing, which meant Nicholas would never have any trouble finding her again.

But that wasn't the only reason why. She had been experimenting.

At first she had tried using her 'pain eating' on as many people as she could, excitedly finding others and getting their attention with chirps, clicks and squeaks. For many, it was a welcome reprieve. Francisco in particular seemed especially grateful, at least according to Evelyn. Some of the humans were also grateful, but not others – or at least, certainly not James, whose yelling Nicholas easily heard.

Initially dejected, Sophia had returned to Nicholas among the bedding, but after a little bit of time she had begun using her powers once more.

Nicholas had not quite understood what exactly she was trying to do when he felt her presence a little more forcefully on his mind – as if she were gently pushing at him. But when he had reciprocated as best he could, he had not been prepared for the feeling that came after.

He was suddenly far more aware of Sophia. No longer was their mental link restricted just to high-level emotions and pain. It didn't go as far as being able to hear her thoughts, but he knew every little feeling, every desire, every whim she had – and it was the same for her in the other direction. More than that, it seemed to be identical to the connection she had made with Evelyn earlier, for he was able to feel the same things from Evelyn through Sophia... and, as he learned, Evelyn could feel him.

His first reaction was shock that Sophia couldn't seem to understand. Even without words, he understood from her feelings that she had intended it as a gift of sorts. And she felt confused about his response, explaining via Tyler's translation that he had accepted the connection, so she didn't know what was wrong. After telling her that he hadn't known what it was at the time, he demanded that she undo whatever she had just done, only to feel how much his words hurt her feelings across that same link. She felt like he

was rejecting her, abandoning her, and breaking his promise to always be with her. Yet while he understood her feelings on a level he couldn't before, he didn't know the reason behind them.

And then, it had gone back and forth. When he felt how much he had hurt her, he in turn felt guilty and regretful. Then in response, she felt sad for him. Even with no words exchanged between them, only deep feelings and emotions, they understood each other on a level no two humans could ever achieve. It was an experience unlike anything else Nicholas had ever felt in his life, and from it, he understood why she wanted to form that link, that bond with him. So, with an apology, he told her not to get rid of it, and craned his head over until he felt his head bump against her neck, then moved to press the entire side of his body against hers, taking comfort in the contact of her scales against him. It wasn't the same as a hug, but it was the next best thing.

The mental link was still going to take some getting used to, though.

That had been hours ago though, and Nicholas was ready to sleep. Settling in on top of the mattress, Nicholas lay down his head. Mercifully, the pain-eating seemed to work even while they were asleep. For the first time in a long time, he would be able to get a good night's rest.

Or at least, that had been the idea.

A sudden sharp and foreign pain woke Nicholas, and he let out a gasp, aware of the noise of other dragons around him: he heard Sophia whine as she woke too, and deep curses from Tyler somewhere nearby, contrasting with slurred Spanish obscenities from Francisco. Only Evelyn was not voicing her complaints vocally, for she was the one in distress, and Nicholas recognized the pain in her neck: she was losing the ability to speak just like Sophia had done.

And then, as suddenly as it had set upon them, the pain ended, as Sophia suppressed it and gave a self-satisfied thrumming sound, exuding a pleased scent. Most of the dragons calmed, but Evelyn continued to cough wetly, though it sounded oddly muffled and strained as though she were doing

her best to keep the noise down. Across the mental link he caught snatches of her emotions: resolve, regret, and shame. Before, he might have only been aware of just that, but the link afforded him some understanding of the context, too. Her resolve was a desire to appear stoic and strong. Her regret was in response to waking everyone up. And her shame was from appearing so weak regardless.

"Hang on," Tyler grumbled, "I'll get something so you don't spew blood all over the place." Nicholas heard Tyler's scales rustling as he rose, followed by heavy footsteps.

"liit wwwiiilllll pppaaassssss sssoooooonnn," Francisco tried to reassure Evelyn. Nicholas felt momentary confusion: why was Francisco with them? Didn't he prefer to be with the other Mexicans? Evelyn managed to reply with a jumbled series of thoughts while she tried to suppress her coughs: a thought of the humans, and Francisco, and then a positive feeling. Then, a thought of dragons in general, Francisco again, and a more positive feeling. A very intense thought about dragons themselves, but not any specific one of them.

Nicholas thought he got the idea: Francisco felt more comfortable with dragons around. It made sense, since Nicholas felt the same way. It wasn't just Sophia, but there was some sense of safety and security knowing other dragons were close by while he slept. Safety in numbers, but more than that, too. He had never yet spent a night alone, and he had to wonder if Tyler had felt any sort of fear or anxiety from being deprived of that sense of comfort until now...

His thoughts were interrupted by Tyler returning, and a loud, hollow, metallic sound as something hit the floor. A bucket? No, it sounded bigger than that. Sophia sent him a mental image of a cooking pot, and though he had never seen one, he got the idea from the multi-layered thought that came to him: metal, container, two handles, for cooking.

Evelyn retched and Nicholas caught the smell of dragon blood. He felt concerned for her, yet she shrugged off his sympathy, keeping her stoic emotions strong. Knowing now that Tyler spoke perfect English along with the dragon language was reassuring, but worry still overcame him; how

long would that take? He came to the conscious realization that she wouldn't be able to talk to him any more, and shivered a little, feeling alienated. What if he never learned the dragon language? Would he be left out...?

Sensing his feelings, Evelyn's emotions crossed back to him. Sympathy, hardened with determination. She understood how he felt – on a greater level than people normally meant when they expressed the idea with words – yet he also had to get up and go on.

Sophia joined in too, perhaps not understanding his worries fully, yet still concerned for him and wanting to reassure her brother, pressing herself up against his side while nosing at the base of his neck.

Another heavy wet cough from Evelyn, accompanied by the splatter of blood, and she gave a low-frequency rumbling sound before stepping away. It seemed that the ordeal was over. In the absence of her pain, he couldn't know for sure, but she seemed much less tense.

"I'll get rid of this and get you a tablecloth or something to clean your mouth with," Tyler told Evelyn. "Don't try to speak just yet. Let your throat rest and you can work on it in the morning."

If Evelyn responded, Nicholas couldn't see the gesture. Tyler's footsteps left them, and Nicholas tried to lie back down. "Will you be all right?" he asked aloud.

Y-E-S, Evelyn tapped out in Morse code. The rest of her response she sent over the mental link: a thought of herself and an associated feeling of strength. An abstract yet much worse situation, then her, alive and well. The message was clear enough: she'd been through worse.

Then she managed to think about him and Sophia, and the vague concept of sleep. Nicholas couldn't help but smile just a little bit. Even now, she was still concerned about them and wanted them to get some rest while they could. Despite her harsh, stern nature, she cared about them. How he wished that he could have said the same about his own mother.

"Come on, Sophia, let's get back to sleep," he murmured, reaching out with his tail until he felt hers. She gave a little chirping sound of

confirmation and lay back down, slumping against his side, and he craned his neck over hers protectively.

Some presence in Nicholas's mind roused him from his slumber, a wordless request with no sense of immediate urgency. Like a gentle mental prodding. It was Evelyn. He knew that immediately from her light.

She didn't address him, at least not verbally. Memories of the previous night came to him, and he remembered that she couldn't speak any more. Yet the mental link they shared offered another way to communicate besides scents and Morse code messages. They weren't quite as cut off from one another as he had feared when Sophia had lost the ability to speak. "Good morning," he told her. "I hope you can speak again soon."

"Oooouuuuuuiiii," she forced out with some difficulty.

"Huh? ...oh, yes." He got to his feet, easily aware of where Sophia was, off somewhere else in the store. Or... was she outside? She was quite a way away from him. But he could only sense her and Evelyn, so he had no idea where the other dragons were. "Where are Tyler and Francisco?"

Her desire for him to follow her was all that was needed for him to start doing so. Nicholas kept close behind her, following her light, and avoiding bumping into anything as much as he could by trying to follow in her footsteps tightly. It was hard to gauge just how far to walk, though, and now and then her swaying tail struck his nose, not with enough force to hurt him but merely to take him by surprise, his footsteps slowing momentarily in response.

He could tell he was approaching Tyler, able to detect him by scent as well as the sound of him breathing in and out. His enormous body made a distinctive noise just from inhaling and exhaling. "Ah, there you are!" Tyler's voice greeted him once he got close enough. "Sleeping in like a big, scaly teenager?"

"Er, did I?" Nicholas asked aloud.

Evelyn said something in the dragon language, but he wasn't sure if it was for him or for Tyler. "She wanted to let you sleep in," Tyler told him. "Said

you'd earned it after all you'd been through." This surprised Nicholas, but after that he felt very grateful – feelings that she noticed and seemed to respond to with a knowing satisfaction. "Did you hear me?" Tyler suddenly asked, and Nicholas realized consciously that his exchange with Evelyn had been entirely mental.

"Yes, sorry," Nicholas apologized. "There's, um... a... connection between us now? I was... not exactly talking to her over it, but I was... communicating?"

Evelyn spoke again for a longer time. "I see," Tyler muttered.

Then, Nicholas briefly heard a very strange sound, a sort of... slurping? Like the noise Sophia made whenever she finished a bowl of soup, but far, far louder. His ear-fins fanned out and he tried to figure out what it was, but all he could determine was that it was coming from Evelyn's direction.

"What was that noise?" Nicholas asked.

Nicholas heard a heavy tapping sound near him, and realized it was Evelyn communicating in morse code. T-E-A. "Tea?" he wondered aloud.

"She saw me making some coffee earlier, and borrowed my setup," Tyler explained. "Of course, for us, a teacup wouldn't even be a mouthful, so I boil a whole pot of water and throw in an entire bag's worth of grinds, and drink it from a bucket. It's a little awkward, but it works. All she had to do was dump in an entire box of teabags for hers." Evelyn said something, and then Tyler added, "She says it's still a little weak. Next time she will try two boxes."

"Oh." Nicholas had never been a tea or coffee drinker himself, not that his parents had ever really given him much beyond water and cheap juice.

"Um, before that, what did she say to you?"

"She said she told Sophia to stop forming bonds with people without asking first – since it's an invasion of privacy, if I'm understanding what you said right?" A single noise from Evelyn, and feelings of agreement that Nicholas could feel. "Yes. It sounds very useful, certainly, but it's not something someone should be surprised with, especially not knowing what it is they're getting into."

"Yes..." Nicholas agreed, recalling the previous evening. "I'm not sure how to put it into words. It's a wonderful feeling, but terrifying at the same time."

"Sounds like it," Tyler mumbled.

"Well, er... what did I miss while I was asleep?"

"We're just about ready to move out. The truck's loaded up with supplies – mostly food, also medicine. Whatever we could get from the pharmacy. Even if we can't use all of it, we can barter with it along the way, and when we make it to the stadium, they could probably use whatever we've got left. Francisco's cart's filled up too, and I'm going to be carrying as much as I can."

"...how?" Nicholas asked, confused.

"I got Rick and the others to help make a harness for me. It took some doing to get it sized right and fit it so that it doesn't crush my fin. An awful lot of duct tape went into putting it together, but I think it'll hold – long enough, at least. I wouldn't want to take it with me on a deployment, but it should last a few days." He gave a little chuckle and added, "Besides, it'll be nothing I can't handle. I carried heavier loads during basic training!"

"Easy for you to say," Nicholas heard Rick's voice pipe up from nearby, "I'd have a heck of a time just carrying that harness around while it's empty. Morning, Nicholas."

Nicholas got over his momentary surprise; he'd been so focused on Tyler he hadn't made out Rick approaching over the background noise. "Good morning," he replied.

"I think we can leave any time," Rick informed Tyler. "I'll drive, and we've decided on who's going to ride in the back as well as up in the cab with me."

"Good," Tyler said approvingly. "Francisco and the others from his... group... can bring up the rear, while I'll stay out front with the dragons."

Evelyn made a remark Nicholas didn't understand, though he did pick up the amusement she felt as she did, to which Tyler grumbled a little. "Yes, I

am part of that group as well, even if I'd rather not think of myself as one."

"Why not?" Nicholas asked.

"I don't want to lose my grip on who I am," Tyler asserted. "I am Sergeant Tyler Lewis. I may have wings and scales and a great big tail but I am still me. Nothing can take that from me, and nothing WILL take that from me. Whatever I look like on the outside, I'm still me on the inside, and Sergeant Tyler Lewis was and still is a human! Anyway, it's about time we left. You two go first. Nicholas, turn to your 11 o' clock and go forward."

Keeping his wings folded close to his back as Evelyn led him to the back of the wholesaler and then through the freight doors, Nicholas immediately felt the warmth of the morning sun on his body and raised his head up to enjoy it. His ear-fins moved seemingly of their own accord as he listened to the birdsong nearby, and he inhaled deeply, picking up the smell of the ground after rain alongside the scents of the other dragons. Stepping further away from the building, he fanned his wings out fully, savoring the sun's warmth against the membranes.

The relative stillness of the air was broken by the sound of scraping metal and Tyler's grunting as he forced himself out through the freight door as well, a sudden tremendous clatter behind Nicholas making him worry, though he could only feel amusement from Evelyn and Sophia at whatever had just happened. "Mr. Lewis, are you all right?"

"Nngh!" Tyler grunted, making a final effort to get himself out. "There. Don't worry, I'm not hurt. I can't say the same for the shutter door, though. I knocked the whole thing down trying to get through."

Nicholas heard Tyler's heavy footsteps approaching, and backed away a bit to give Tyler some more space. Tyler gave a satisfied groan as Nicholas heard his wings unfurling, and also what sounded like claws scraping on concrete. "What are you doing?" Nicholas asked curiously.

"Just stretching," Tyler answered. "It'll be nice to be outdoors again for a while! I've had enough of being cooped up inside, other than briefly stepping out yesterday." He gave another long, low grunt, presumably stretching out again.

Sophia piped up with some playful comment, or at least one that seemed playful going by her emotions, and Tyler chuckled in response. "I look like a cat, huh? Have you ever seen a cat do this?" he replied, and Nicholas heard Tyler's wings fan out again, making Sophia giggle with whatever pose he was holding. "I'm not going to lie, though, this feels incredibly strange. Having such a long tail – or any tail at all, really – to stretch out, and these wings feel even bigger... not to mention, it's one thing to crick your neck, but quite another when it's this long!"

Evelyn gave a little chuckle at that, before saying something Nicholas couldn't understand. "Point with my tail?" Tyler replied, giving Nicholas a good idea of what had been said. "I can try..."

Nicholas suddenly heard a mix of a chirp and a thrum from a nearby dragon, coupled with amusement from Sophia and Evelyn again. "*iTteenncuuiddaaddoo!*" Francisco called out as he scampered away, his feet thumping on the parking lot.

"Sorry," Tyler apologized. "I'm still getting used to my size, especially when I'm not all scrunched up indoors."

As Tyler experimented with moving his tail, occasionally tapping or scraping it on the ground by accident, Nicholas tried to hear what else was going on, stretching his neck while turning his head this way and that and fanning his ear-fins out. While they did react subconsciously to sound, he did have some control over them too if he focused a little. There were various human voices not far away talking with one another, and occasional bangs and scrapes of various materials against metal, probably from people loading some final things onto the truck and preparing to leave. There was also the rumbling sound that hand carts made when pushed across an uneven surface, though Nicholas didn't know how many of those the humans intended to bring along with them.

"What other tricks can I try?" Tyler asked, bringing Nicholas's focus back to him. Evelyn gave him a curt response, to which Tyler gave a short laugh, or at least the cacophony that Nicholas had come to recognize as a dragon's laugh. "True. I was hoping you might know something I didn't about all this."

"Well, if you're lookin' for things to do," Rick's voice cut in from nearby, as the sound of a hand cart got closer, "We've got a few more things for you to carry if you think you can manage it."

Nicholas sniffed at the air, but he couldn't tell from scent alone what Rick was bringing with him, so it was probably packaged up. "Good idea," Tyler said after a moment, "We don't want to risk running out of clean water. Let's start with those jugs."

"God, that's so weird how you do that," Rick muttered.

"Do what?" Nicholas asked when all Tyler responded with was a rumbling chuckle.

"Talkin' without movin' his mouth! It's like a ventriloquist. Or a statue or one of those puppet things at an amusement park that's got a speaker inside."

Nicholas caught a thoughtful scent from Tyler. "I hadn't noticed it until you mentioned it, but you're right. I'm not making these sounds the same way I used to. It's from somewhere down here near the bottom of my neck." Presumably he gestured, but Nicholas couldn't see it.

"Does it feel different?" Rick asked.

"Yes and no. I think I'm used to it by now, and it's mostly subconscious. But when I focus my attention on it, I realize just how strange and alien it is. It took a lot of practice to get my words straight. Whatever organ this is that's making the sound isn't really made for human languages."

"So that's why the others sound so weird?"

"I presume so. I sounded much the same for a while." Nicholas heard scales rustling as Tyler moved. "Let's not get held up too long. Pass me that water jug, please."

"Need a hand packing 'em in there?" Rick asked.

Tyler didn't reply at first, though Nicholas heard him grunting. "I might," Tyler admitted, "My arms don't really bend back the way they used to." Then, Evelyn said something, and Nicholas heard Tyler hum in thought. "My legs? I could try that...? Let's see."

"Careful now," Rick warned, "Those back claws of yours look mighty sharp."

Listening carefully, Nicholas soon heard a thump against something plastic, accompanied by a slosh of liquid. "Hang on, I think I've got it..." Tyler murmured.

"What's going on?" Nicholas asked.

"You know how a dog-... actually, you wouldn't," Tyler cut himself off, taking a moment to focus on whatever he was doing. "Easy, easy... there! Now I just have to..." Suddenly there was a crunching sound and a splash of liquid, and Nicholas felt a little wetness against his front toes. "Damn it!" Tyler cursed, and Nicholas heard something hollow and plastic hitting the ground.

As Sophia giggled, Rick piped up, "Let me do it."

"No, I've got it, I just don't know my own strength sometimes," Tyler insisted. "I'm trying to use my foot to grip the water jug. Or my toes, at least. They're bigger and curl a lot more so they can grip things, and I can reach my sides with my feet." Tyler went quiet briefly to focus, but all Nicholas could hear was liquid sloshing and then a scraping sound.

"...there! That feels secure. I can fit a bunch more on each side, I think. Then we can get the smaller items into the upper pouches."

"It'll go faster if you let us help," Rick insisted.

"All right, all right. I don't want to be the reason we're held up, so sure. Bring all those boxes over and pack them in tight, I can carry plenty."

While Tyler loaded more water into his harness, Nicholas flexed his back feet a bit. He hadn't really thought about using his feet that way, but Tyler was right: human feet weren't really made for gripping things. But dragons? Lifting his back left leg, he curled his toes as much as he could. Yes, he could probably grip something with that. But what could he practice with? He wasn't sure what was nearby...

An idea came to him a moment later. If it was just to practice, he could try his own tail. Moving it slowly just in case anyone was close by, he curled it around back to himself until he brushed the end of it against his rear left

leg, and then pressed his foot against it. It took a couple of attempts to grip it properly instead of just pushing it away by accident, but he soon managed to grasp his tail in one foot, firmly enough to push and pull it around a little without losing his hold.

He felt curiosity from Sophia, and then some shuffling from her direction as she studied and thought about him. Was she trying to copy him?

"Wwhhaatt aarree yyoouu ddooiinngg, Nniicchhoollaass?" Francisco asked, and Nicholas suddenly felt self-conscious. How long had they been watching him? He had expected everyone would be paying attention to Tyler.

"There's trees to your three o' clock if you need to—" Tyler began.

"No, no!" Nicholas blurted out, feeling even more embarrassed. "Nothing like that. I was just seeing if I could hold something with my feet like you were doing."

"Oh! Good idea. I could clearly have used the practice," Tyler remarked, and a moment later Nicholas heard a hollow plastic sound again, likely from Tyler hitting the broken water jug for emphasis. "You just looked funny, holding your own tail."

Nicholas felt embarrassed again, but Sophia reached out and reassured him without even touching him over the mental link. For a moment he felt even more disconcerted by the strange presence in his head before her reassurance calmed him down, but his reaction didn't go unnoticed, and he felt her pull back, as if she had been chastised.

"Sophia," Nicholas murmured, stretching out his head towards where he could sense her light. His snout bumped against her side and he moved a little closer to her, his tail reaching out until it touched hers.

"Nnnnniiiiicccckkk," she forced out with some difficulty.

She felt deeply regretful about something, he could tell, and he could sense a little of Evelyn's concern as well. He managed to make an inquiry over the mental link as to why she felt that way, and the response that came back puzzled him, a thought so abstract that it seemed almost completely formless, until it clicked: she was thinking about the mental link

itself. She picked up on his understanding, and he felt one of his own emotions reflected back at him: the discomfort he had felt moments ago when she had reached out to him.

"It's okay, Sophia," he said softly to reassure her, unsure if his meager proficiency with mental communication would suffice for what he wanted to say. "It's strange to me, yes. I'm still getting used to it. But I know you didn't mean any harm by it."

A series of thoughts came from her all at once, yet he was somehow able to pick them out and understand them concurrently. A thought of him leaving, alongside the thought about the link itself again, also accompanied by a feeling of fear and abandonment. "I don't think I can leave it," he murmured to her, but she pressed herself a little closer to him, squeezing his tail with her own. Again the thoughts of him leaving, and the mental link, came to him simultaneously, this time with emotions of... giving something? Offering something?

She was giving him the chance to separate from the collective consciousness they shared.

Complicated emotions filled Nicholas. Yes, it was a strange and incredibly inhuman experience. It was odd enough at the very beginning to learn she could feel his pain, and to feel some of her emotions broadcast to him. And the deeper link she had accidentally created between them was far more than that. Everything any of the three of them felt, they all shared, to some degree. His own head was no longer a private sanctum to him that no-one else knew the contents of, and regaining that privacy was something he wanted. Had he been told what he was getting into beforehand, he likely would have declined.

Yet... now that he was experiencing it himself, it didn't seem so bad. Yes, he couldn't hide anything from his sister or Evelyn now. But the reverse was also true. He no longer had to guess at how they felt, unable to even use visual cues like most people did, having to rely entirely on tone of voice and his recently-gained understanding of dragon emotion-scents. His own... emotional exposure, to think of it that way, was just the price of

understanding the other dragons better. And they were just as exposed as he was, in that sense. Nothing to hide, and no need to hide it.

As strange as it was to be so intimately connected to someone, it wasn't as bad as he would have expected it to be. Especially right now when he and Sophia had such trouble communicating with words, but even without that, it brought them closer, in a way that could never be achieved otherwise.

So, he entwined his tail with hers a little more tightly in return. He didn't even need to voice his feelings aloud: he returned the thought about the mental link itself, and broadcast feelings of belongingness to her. He wanted to stay, he didn't want to leave this strange thing of hers, even though his joining had been an accident.

He didn't need the strong scents that came from her to understand how she felt about that: the emotions that cascaded across the mental link were powerful enough to convey the depth of her feelings. She trembled a little against his side and wrapped her tail up in his even more, her gratitude and happiness almost drowning out the pleased satisfaction Evelyn was feeling from observing them.

"Are you two okay over there?" Tyler suddenly asked, catching Nicholas's attention.

"Yes," Nicholas answered, leaning a little more against Sophia's side. "We were just... reaching an understanding about the mental link."

"I see," Tyler murmured.

"Mental link?" Rick asked.

"Some kind of thought-sharing thing they've got going on," Tyler tried to explain. "Sophia figured out how to do it."

"That sounds kind of terrifyin', to be honest with you," Rick replied.

"Agreed on that. From what they've told me, you have to accept it, so they can't just force it on you."

"That's a little more comforting to know," Rick muttered. Nicholas heard the sound of Tyler stashing another jug of water. "Careful, I don't think you

can fit any more in that thing."

"Yes, I don't want it to break," Tyler concurred. "It should last until this evening and then we can unload some of it to share around."

"I've got some spare duct tape if it starts to come apart anywhere," Rick said in an attempt to be reassuring.

"If it moves and it shouldn't, use duct tape. If it doesn't move and should, use WD-40," Tyler quipped with a hint of amusement.

Rick gave a little chuckle. "Wise words! Do they teach that in the National Guard?"

"Not *officially*," Tyler answered coyly.

"So what was your plan, anyway, hiding out here?" Rick asked, changing the topic. "Was it just to wait or did you have something else in mind?"

"Hiding and waiting was part of it, but I wanted to form a plan before going anywhere," Tyler answered. "I thought I could listen in on the radio, wait for a good time to escape, and make a break for it to get back to my family. I had no idea how large I would get or what kind of shape I would take, which threw a wrench into my plans."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Rick said sardonically. Nicholas had a vague idea of how big he was compared to a human, but he couldn't grasp just how much bigger Tyler was without a proper frame of reference. "Have you heard anything from them?"

"No, the phones haven't been working," Tyler replied, then let out a rumble of thought. "Have you checked recently? Is there a cell phone signal yet?"

"Let me see here, got 'er all charged up last night..." Rick mumbled, and Nicholas heard rustling. "Nope, sorry. Zero bars, no signal."

"Thank you for checking," Tyler said, his voice hiding his disappointment but not his scent. "I have to wonder what exactly it is that's causing the interference. It can't be an EMP, or our electronics wouldn't work at all. And the military radios are working, but they function on different frequencies."

"I sure as heck don't know."

"If you ever do get a signal again, please let me know. I want to talk to my family and tell them I'm all right."

"You and me and a lot of people here, my friend," Rick empathized. "I'll let you know if I ever get a signal on this thing again. Until then, we should get goin'."

"Are we ready to leave?"

"Almost. Best get everyone rounded up. I'll drive the truck and James'll take shotgun, we'll be right behind you guys."

"You don't want a clear road in front of you?"

Emphatically, Rick replied, "Listen, bein' in a military truck is nice and safe and all, but you're still about five times my height and covered head to toe in bulletproof armor, so I figure you can take point. No offense."

"None taken," Tyler remarked mirthfully.

Nicholas separated from Sophia as Evelyn led them over to where the rest of the group was gathering. The muddle of humans' voices grew louder as he approached them, and he was careful to move slowly just in case anyone was in his way. Evelyn sent him a mental signal to halt, so he did as asked, sitting on his haunches to wait.

As he did, he heard Evelyn say something, which apparently was aimed at Tyler. "I'm not worried about my family directly," he said in response to her question. Understanding only half of the conversation was somewhat like overhearing a person speak on the telephone. "But I'm worried that they're worried about me, if that makes sense."

He felt Evelyn's understanding and sympathy, and her reply seemed like something consoling. "Yes. It's just my wife and my daughter. But they don't live anywhere around here, they're away from the cities and should be safe. I just miss them. Even just being able to call them would put me at ease. Thinking of them has been all that's keeping me going."

Evelyn inquired again, something longer than before. Nicholas wasn't sure if he should ask for a translation or not – would it be rude to ask for a

translation to a conversation he wasn't part of? – but when Tyler replied, "She's an actuary," Sophia suddenly interjected with a question, no doubt asking what that meant.

"It's, uh... how did I explain this to Billie..." Tyler murmured, "...do you know what insurance is?"

Sophia gave some kind of reply that made both Evelyn and Tyler burst out in laughter, and Nicholas cleared his throat. "Um... I'm sorry, but I'm feeling a little left out," he piped up, "If it's not too much trouble, could you translate for me...?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Nicholas," Tyler apologized as he got himself back under control. "Don't worry about it, you can ask me any time. Until you learn how to speak dragon-ese, anyway. She, ah, said that she doesn't know, but her father always said it was 'a bunch of crooks and thieves trying to scam him out of his hard-earned money'."

Nicholas sputtered a little; he'd heard that rant from his father before too, whenever it came time to pay the insurance bill for the petting zoo. He just hadn't expected Sophia to remember and recite it verbatim.

"Okay, well," Tyler went on, seemingly addressing Sophia, "Let's just say for now that an actuary is someone who looks at statistics, okay? Lots of numbers, and charts, and stuff like that." Sophia gave a short response. "She said it sounds boring," Tyler said for Nicholas's benefit. "You're not wrong, Sophia, but don't tell my wife I said that!"

Evelyn asked a question next. "We've been married for almost ten years," Tyler replied, making it obvious enough what the question was that he didn't need to translate it directly. "Obviously, this is going to be a... challenging time in our relationship, but I believe she'll stand with me. I know that if our positions were reversed, and I was still fully human and she was turning into a dragon, I'd stay with her and help her through it."

"What if she's also a dragon?" Nicholas suggested.

"That would be... quite an interesting reunion," Tyler mused thoughtfully. "That might be hard on our daughter, though. I won't worry about that

until and unless I find out if that's what happened. We've got too many problems in our immediate future to worry about hypotheticals."

Sophia spoke up, asking something with a heavily-slurred attempt at pronouncing 'hypothetical' in the middle of it. "Hypothetical means something that hasn't happened," Tyler explained. "Where you're just thinking about it, to imagine what happens next."

Evelyn made a thoughtful sound, and Nicholas detected her contemplative feelings as well. She asked something, and Tyler translated for him, "Evelyn was wondering if some of her family might have transformed too. I suppose it's a possibility. Respectfully, ma'am, you're much older than I am, and your family is a lot larger than mine. We don't know what makes people transform. Right now, I'm just worried that they'll get to my family first and tell her that I'm MIA. She must be worried sick."

He paused to let Evelyn reply. "Oh, I am worried about her, just not for her physical safety," Tyler answered. "But in a way... that worry, that concern, was something I could hold onto. Thinking about her, keeping her in my thoughts, it anchored me when I felt like I was slipping away, alone in that wholesaler."

"Mr. Lewis..." Nicholas began, feeling a little apprehensive, "...if you don't mind me asking, what was that like? None of the rest of us seem to have gone through what you did, but..." Subconsciously, he reached out his tail towards Sophia, fumbling with it until he grasped her own, "...it sounds scary."

Tyler inhaled deeply. "It should. For me, I noticed it when it became harder to recall memories of my family. When I couldn't remember the names of my wife or daughter, I began to panic. It was like a fog in my head. I knew there was *something*, but it didn't come to me. I realized that I was becoming all too comfortable in this new body, and my old identity – my REAL identity – was slipping away from me. So that was when I began my little ritual." The tension in his voice eased a little as he gave a small chuckle. "In retrospect it feels a little silly, talking to myself, repeating the names of me and my family over and over. I'm just glad their names were on the back of the picture to help me remember. I even started writing

down the things I remembered so I could re-read them every morning and keep them in my mind. But the fact that I can say that, and feel that way about it now, is proof that it worked. Keeping to my exercise routine and maintaining my normal daily schedule, these... human things from my human life, also kept me from slipping too far, I think."

Unease gripped Nicholas, and he shifted closer to Sophia. "If you hadn't done that... what do you think would have happened?"

"Nothing good," Tyler muttered darkly. "As I fought back against it, I managed to clear that fog in my head, and stop myself from losing my mind. Whatever this transformation is doing, it's affecting more than our bodies. Left unchecked, I probably wouldn't even think of myself as human any more. I might even start to think I was always a dragon."

A spike of anxiety from Sophia caught Nicholas's attention, and she blurted out something he didn't understand. Regardless, he pressed up against her side again to try and comfort her, and was pleased to feel her relax a little in response over the mental link. "She wants to know if she's going to turn into a wild animal or a monster," Tyler translated, only to firmly press on, "And I have only one thing to say to that. You're not an animal. You're not a monster. You're a little girl with the body of a dragon. You have your brother, you have us. You're not alone, and I think that's the big thing that helps us remember who we are."

Evelyn spoke as Sophia calmed a little, partly from the reassurance and partly from her brother's presence. "Evelyn says that it sounds like dementia or... I think that was Alzheimer's you were talking about?" A pause, perhaps for her to gesture in some way, for Nicholas felt a vague affirmative emotion from her. "She's seen other people succumb to those, and says she's glad that it never happened to her. She wasn't likely to survive much longer before she transformed, but she'd made her peace with it, and would rather go out that way than become just a shadow of her former self."

Francisco was the next to speak. "I'm sorry to hear about your great-grandmother," Tyler offered in response. "Francisco said she had dementia

and died a few years ago. Before that she was a strong woman, and then barely knew who or where she was."

"As for me," Tyler continued, "I don't know what those are like and I hope I never do. But those are about losing yourself, and as much as the idea of that scares me... this was more than that. A new identity was creeping in. Tyler the human was disappearing, and Tyler the dragon was taking his place." He took a deep breath, making a sound like a bellows. "That terrifies me more than anything else. To think that something could take me over. And then what? What if my body finds my family and hurts them? Even worse, what if some small part of me is still aware of what's going on and has to watch that? I can't imagine a worse fate. I'd frankly rather be dead. It's beyond words how scary it is to think that if I didn't have the thoughts of my family to hold onto, I could have lost myself."

"W-wait!" someone else's voice suddenly cut in, and Nicholas strained to remember whose it was. A woman's voice, but where had he heard it before? "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but what you were talking about... do you think any dragon could lose themselves like that?"

"I don't know, but I don't see why not," Tyler answered. "The others here all had something to anchor them. Nicholas and Sophia have each other. Francisco had his community, from what I gather. And Evelyn is just one tough... uhhhh..." he trailed off for a moment as Nicholas felt a brief yet intense moment of displeasure from Evelyn. "...woman."

"My husband," the woman began, and Nicholas remembered: it was Claire, the woman Evelyn had saved from being mugged – or worse – in an alley a couple of days ago. "He... he was starting to transform, and I fled. But I didn't know that it could make him lose himself! What if... what if me abandoning him was too much for him? He was all alone in our apartment! What if he got stuck there and lost his mind and it's all my fault?"

"Ma'am—" Tyler began, but she wasn't listening.

"I'm sorry, I— I have to go find him!" she declared, and Nicholas suddenly heard rapid footsteps moving away from him.

"Wait!" Tyler called out. "Stop!" The footsteps continued, and Tyler grumbled something that was drowned out by the sound of him getting up and running after her. Nicholas shrank down a little, unsure if he should be doing anything, but it wasn't as though he could pursue her himself. He was more likely to crush someone or something underfoot by accident.

"Put me down!" Nicholas heard her yell, gradually getting closer.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but it's for your own good," Tyler insisted. The other humans' voices had stopped due to the commotion, and all attention must have been on Tyler. "What are you thinking, running off into the city by yourself? You won't last a day!"

"I have to find him! I have to find my husband before it's too late!"

"Just let her go!" Nicholas heard James call out. "We can't be wasting time over this!"

Others all began chiming in at once: Evelyn said something in such heavily slurred French that Nicholas couldn't make it out, but her emotions alone told him it wasn't anything flattering. Rick called out for people to not be so hasty, and other voices were a mixture of sympathy or insistence that she be allowed to leave.

"Listen, ma'am," Tyler spoke up, raising his voice to speak over and silence the others, "If you insist on leaving, I won't stop you again, but at least be smart about it. Go back into the wholesaler and get yourself some supplies and something to carry them in. And a weapon. Even if you don't know how to use it, having a big knife will at least make you a less tempting target."

"...yes, you're right," Claire conceded. "I'm just worried about him."

"Do you even know where he is?" Tyler asked, though it sounded rhetorical.

"No, but... I was going to start at our apartment. Even if he's gone, maybe someone there knows where he went."

Sophia began to speak in a mixture of whistles, chirps, clicks and other noises. "Hmm. That just might work, actually," Tyler muttered. "She says

she can sense other dragons, so maybe she can check. Which direction is your apartment?"

"Near Pine and 7th. That way," Claire answered. Whatever she did to indicate it, Nicholas couldn't see.

A mixture of a growl and a rumble from Sophia apparently indicated that she would try, and Nicholas felt her focusing on something. He could sense Sophia and Evelyn, so she must have been doing something similar to try and pick out another dragon that he couldn't detect. After a short wait she said something else, and Tyler began to translate. "She says she does sense a dragon that way, and that he feels lonely."

"That must be him!" Claire blurted out, sounding even more worried.

"And he feels like he's... confused, you said?" A squeak from Sophia seemed to confirm. "I'm not sure what that means for him. Maybe he's gotten lost somewhere?"

"I have to find him," Claire insisted. "I'm sorry. I'm grateful for all your help, but I have to go find my husband."

"Good I—" Tyler began, but Nicholas could already hear her footsteps running away from them, back towards the wholesaler. Tyler let out a sigh, a disappointed scent reaching Nicholas's snout. "Aaaaaaaand there she goes."

Evelyn began to speak, and Tyler waited until she was done to translate. "She says she doesn't expect Claire will make it far with the city in the state it's in. I don't really fancy her chances either, but what are we going to do? Tie her up and throw her in the back of the truck like a prisoner? If we try to force her to come along she'll just slip away at the first opportunity. At least it looks like she's taking my advice to prepare herself first, but that's all we can do for her."

"One less mouth to feed, too," James grumbled from nearby. He must have been helping with loading things onto Tyler's harness. "Can we get going? We should be able to get to the stadium today, but only if we get moving instead of standing around all day long."

Sophia said something, and before Tyler could translate, Nicholas was aware of her focusing. Not on him, though. "She says she's going to try and let him know someone is coming," Tyler explained, and by the time he had finished speaking, Sophia had stopped and felt contemplative.

"Did it work?" Nicholas asked her.

She replied with a series of warbles, chirps and thrums that Tyler translated as "She isn't sure. He heard her, but she can't directly get a response since he's not a..." he trailed off, using a dragon language word, but from context Nicholas guessed it was a special dragon like her or Evelyn.

Evelyn said something else that Tyler began translating as, "He feels very lonely, and afraid and confused. Evelyn says she can understand his desire to be with his wife." Another comment from Evelyn, and a frustrated rumbling from Tyler. "I'm going to try and catch up with Claire before she runs off and see if we can't at least try to point her in the same direction."

"I see. I hope it helps."

"Me too. Regardless, it seems like everyone is just about ready," Tyler replied. "I don't want to hold us up, so you all go on ahead, and I'll catch up as soon as I've spoken to her."

Chapter 16

Nicholas didn't mind going back to walking. He'd finally gotten some good sleep and they had eaten well from what remained at the wholesaler, since they couldn't possibly take everything with them, no matter how efficiently they packed it. The next brave or foolhardy group of looters would get to claim what was left.

He overheard that they, or at least, the humans, had taken the time to cover their tracks by sabotaging the surveillance camera footage at the store. There was no telling when, or even if, things would go back to normal, including the police and the justice system in general, but it wouldn't hurt to make sure there wasn't a recording of them taking things from the wholesaler. Or at least, that had been James's rationale, according to the conversations Nicholas listened in on. Nicholas wasn't sure exactly what had been done, but they seemed confident that no evidence remained.

He did not seem to have drastically changed since last night, but then again, there wasn't much left. More of his muzzle had scales on it. His neck was longer and his tail bigger; the former he determined by feeling along it with his hands, and the latter by curling it back towards himself and comparing it to where it had reached the previous day.

Sophia was speaking a little better as well, as she tried to read road signs and store names out loud as they passed. Her words were still slurred, but not as much. And in an equally promising measure, Francisco was even further along than her, though he seemed to be focusing on regaining his ability to speak Spanish before practicing his English. Now and then, Nicholas heard Francisco's voice from the back, with its distinctive dragon 'accent' of a deep rumbling sound underlying his words.

Supposedly they were going to meet someone, but Nicholas didn't know who it was, just that they had been sent by the other 'guiding star' in the National Park. Which must have meant it would be another dragon. But what would they be like? Would they speak English too? Would they be young, or old? If they were from the National Park, maybe they had been one of the rangers, or just a tourist. Or perhaps a hunter? Did they allow

hunting in a National Park? Rick might know, but he was driving the truck right now.

At least they seemed to be covering ground faster. Rick drove the truck slowly so that everyone else could keep up with it – or so that the humans could, in any case. Nicholas couldn't properly gauge the length of his strides, but if he had been the size of a truck before and had only gotten bigger since then, his leisurely pace ought to still be quite long.

After a couple of hours, he felt excitement from Sophia and curiosity from Evelyn at about the same time. "I think that's our dragon up ahead," Tyler told Nicholas, "There's a park across from the T-junction we're approaching."

Nicholas fanned out his wings a bit. It was warm out, yet he was definitely in the shade right now. They'd been moving in and out of the shade despite going in a straight line, so that must have meant there were tall buildings all around. "What kind of park?"

"A big one, with maple trees. There's a big pond in the middle of it with a fountain... and I think those are paddle-boats I see on one shore. The place is deserted, though."

That seemed troubling. "Why?"

But Tyler just chuckled. "Probably because there's a dragon in the middle of the pond playing in the fountain like a puppy with a sprinkler."

Nicholas didn't respond, but the confusion he felt must have been picked up by Evelyn and Sophia; the latter sent her own confusion, as if unsure why Nicholas felt the way he did, while Evelyn's feelings were more along the lines of amusement at his bemusement. Curiosity drove Nicholas forward, and he followed after Tyler and the others, determined to find out exactly what was going on.

As they got closer, Nicholas heard the other dragon, splashing around in the water and making all sorts of noises. To his dismay, they all sounded like the same noises that Evelyn and Sophia made – but maybe they spoke English too? "Is there anyone else around at all?" Nicholas asked Tyler.

"Hmm..." a pause, presumably as he looked. "Yes. To our nine o' clock, there's a group of... twenty to thirty people watching from about thirty yards away. They might be homeless, from the look of it. I think I see their tents at about ten o' clock. And just a pair of individuals at two o' clock deeper in, hiding behind some trees and watching."

Sophia suddenly bounded away from the group despite something that Evelyn whistled at her. But the playfulness Sophia felt easily outweighed Evelyn's annoyance when the two emotions came to Nicholas's awareness. Nicholas heard more splashing and dragon noises that he assumed were happy ones, judging by Sophia's emotions, and he couldn't help but smile a little; being able to know directly that his sister was happy was a relief from having to always guess.

"Careful, there's a fence," Tyler told Nicholas suddenly. "Iron bars. Lift your legs up high and you'll get over it."

"Thank you," Nicholas replied, cautiously reaching forward as he took each step until he felt his front limb brush against the fence. Stepping over it and onto some grass, he proceeded forward carefully, arching his back a little when he felt the lowest point on his chest brushing against the top of the fence. He took equal care to bring his rear legs over the fence too, glad to get off of the concrete: even with the hide on his soles, it was still far from comfortable.

When they got close enough, Nicholas noticed Evelyn stop when her footsteps ceased, and he halted as well. He could hear the truck's engine behind him, but further away, since it had obviously not crossed the fence and was still out in the road. All of the splashing ahead of him continued briefly until Evelyn cleared her throat – with it coming out as more of a deep rumble this time – and the other two dragons came out of the pond, the water audibly spilling off of them.

A very odd sound reached Nicholas's ear-fins after that; sudden rapid rustling of scales and brief flapping of wings, and he recoiled in reflex as droplets of water struck him. Had one or both of them just shook themselves dry? It must have been the new dragon for after a moment of

surprise, Sophia seemed to feel a playful glee and then Nicholas heard the same sort of noise once again.

Evelyn began speaking, and Nicholas's heart sank; he wouldn't be able to understand a word of it, even with the mental bond he shared via Sophia. "Tyler," he whispered, "Can you tell me what they're saying?"

"I'll try," the big dragon replied, though he didn't say anything at first. "Evelyn's asking who they are..." he began after a moment, pausing to listen. "...don't think I caught that right... neither did Evelyn..." Nicholas could tell from Evelyn's evident confusion that Tyler's assessment was correct. The other dragon repeated the sounds she had made, but a little slower. "...Leaf... Eater?"

"That's their name?" Nicholas wondered.

"Yep," Tyler murmured, then went quiet to listen again. "...they won't say why. Maybe it's a code name... says they were sent by the guiding star... to teach us." Suddenly, Nicholas heard Sophia speak. Even though he couldn't understand it, her noises sounded uniquely distinct, and very different from Evelyn's. Tyler gave an amused snort. "Sophia asked if they're a boy or a girl, and she said girl. Except it was 'egg watcher' and 'egg bearer' in that language, but you get the idea."

Nicholas gave a little chuckle. That sounded like his sister, all right.

"...Evelyn asked where she's from... she says she's from the National Park? That doesn't make sense..." Nicholas felt Evelyn's confusion and frustration as she tried to question the other dragon. "Evelyn asked where her parents are... she says the guiding star is at the National Park... Evelyn says that's not what she asked... she says Evelyn should ask better questions." He gave another brief chuckle at that.

"She's... quite something," Nicholas mused aloud.

"Yep," Tyler agreed, listening in. Nicholas could tell Evelyn was getting more annoyed. "Evelyn asked what city she was living in before she was a dragon... what...?" Nicholas didn't need a mental link to notice the confusion in Tyler's voice. "She says she's always been a dragon, and never a human. Is that even possible?"

Nicholas's mind reeled. There had been dragons all along? Where were they? Were they hiding? Where had they come from? And were they the ones who turned other people into dragons?

"She says she's tired of all these questions- oh, Nicholas, watch out—"

Even without Tyler's warning, Nicholas was aware of the other dragon approaching him; she was not attempting to hide her footfalls, and she was still speaking as she approached. "Er, hello?" he volunteered, hoping she at least understood English even if she couldn't speak it. Perhaps Tyler could translate if she didn't.

He wasn't prepared for her to shove her muzzle right up against his, and the side of her head, still wet from the pond, nudged against his own. He recoiled in surprise as she kept talking, but she darted around to the side, leaving a rush of wind in her wake, and he bumped into her.

"Tyler, what's she saying?" Nicholas demanded, feeling a little panicked.

But Tyler was laughing – or trying not to, and failing. "She likes you! She's complimenting the smoothness of your scales."

"I'm not- I don't—" Nicholas fumbled, trying to step away from her again. If he had had any bare skin remaining on his cheeks, he would have blushed brightly, and his body instead emitted a strong scent of pine needles. He could hear the humans behind him laughing as well at the sight as he backed up, his wings flaring. And even without Sophia's question before, he could certainly tell that 'Leaf Eater' was female from her scent; it had a similarity to Evelyn and Sophia's. It was mixed in with all the emotion-scents she was giving off, too: curiosity, interest, attraction...

Nicholas stepped away again, fanning out his wings wider for balance, only to step on a wooden bench and crush it immediately under his weight.

"Hey, hey, back off!" he protested, only to feel the other dragon's muzzle poking at one of his wing membranes as she growled and whistled at him.

"She likes your 'big, strong' wings!" Tyler called out to him with more than a touch of amusement in his tone.

It was Sophia that came to his rescue, as he suddenly felt a spike of jealousy from her, and she bounded over, yapping something in the dragon

language. For a moment Nicholas was able to relax as the two dragons talked back and forth, though Tyler didn't seem to be willing to offer to translate. The new dragon certainly knew how to make an impression, that was—

She was approaching again, exuding a strong scent of vanilla. It registered in his mind that it was an amorous scent scant moments before he felt her wedge her snout underneath his tail, catching him by surprise. He yelped out as she lifted his hindquarters up, surprising him further with the strength of her neck, and he lashed with his tail, making a sound like a whip crack in the air. She set him down and he all but leapt away, stumbling into a lamp post and knocking it over with his hips, the metal pole clattering to the ground. "Stop it!" he shouted as she said something to him, slamming his tail against the ground, hoping to mirror the effectiveness Evelyn had with the same gesture.

"I'm not translating that one, there are children around!" Tyler told him, struggling not to laugh.

Sophia moved in between the two of them, still feeling deeply jealous and protective. In another situation, Nicholas would have been happy she felt that way about him, but he was more embarrassed than he had ever been in his life. What would a born-dragon understand as a 'go away' gesture? He'd heard about some of the ways animals acted aggressively, even if he'd never seen them himself...

Nicholas raised his front and bared his teeth, fanning out his wings as well as far as he could. Animals would try and look big, right? He'd heard about that in biology classes at school, but was guessing at what it meant in reality. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to have the intended effect, as Leaf Eater made a remark that Tyler did translate: "She says you look very fierce and, uh... handsome?"

He gave a deep sigh and returned to a normal stance. "Evelyn, please help me," he all but begged, only to realize that she was already moving — despite the fact that Evelyn also seemed to find the display funny, she did understand his discomfort as well, and moved forward to speak with the other dragon. More draconic words were exchanged, and Nicholas heard a

noise like a sigh from Leaf Eater before Nicholas heard her sit down on the grass, a smoky scent from her indicating disappointment. Finally able to relax, he did the same.

Evelyn and Leaf Eater began to converse again, and Tyler drew closer to try and translate once more. "Evelyn's asking her about learning to fly..." he told Nicholas, the mirth from before leaving his voice. "She says she will, but... hm?"

"What?"

"...only if she can teach you first," Tyler continued. "And she wants to be part of the..." Tyler trailed off, giving a low hum of thought, repeating a draconic word to himself. "What's that word...?"

Sophia's frustration and jealousy turned to curiosity and excitement, though from Evelyn, Nicholas felt wariness and caution. "Should I be worried...?"

"She wants to join the... I can't translate it directly, but it must be that 'mental link' thing you were talking about this morning. Let's call it a network. Sophia wants to, Evelyn doesn't, they're going back and forth..."

Nicholas thought it over. At first he balked at the idea of having to share feelings with this brand new dragon who clearly didn't understand the concept of personal space. Yet... the understanding he had with Sophia and Evelyn now, he would also have with her, and more importantly, it would go in the other direction, too. She would know how he felt – and that he wanted her to back off. His scents apparently weren't clear enough to her, but such a mental link would be perfectly clear and unambiguous. If she still insisted, then they might just have to make her leave, but he wanted to believe that it was just some sort of misunderstanding due to her being a dragon... or more of a dragon than he was, anyway...

"Sophia?" he called out. "Evelyn?"

"Nnniiick?" Sophia answered, while Evelyn simply sent him feelings of acknowledgement.

He took a breath. Was he really sure about this? Was this just the dragon part of him talking? Maybe it was, but even thinking about it rationally, it

made sense... and he felt that he could rely on the other two to protect him.

But before he could speak, Evelyn acknowledged him again. Of course. She knew how he was feeling, and while she couldn't read his thoughts, she would have been able to understand his apprehension – and notice it disappearing. He didn't need to answer with words. He wondered if Evelyn was really okay with it too, but a brief feeling of assurance from her was enough to understand.

After a few more dragon words were exchanged, Nicholas could feel Evelyn emitting welcoming feelings, and a matching scent, making Leaf Eater give a warble that he presumed was a happy one. Leaf Eater's mind joining the... network, as Tyler put it, was a truly inhuman experience. One moment it was just him, Evelyn, and Sophia. The next, there was a new mind, with new thoughts and feelings. Yet it wasn't *too* alien – the emotions and feelings didn't feel all that unlike those of the other two. He had expected her to be nearly inscrutable, yet she was understandable enough that he began to wonder if maybe she really had been human once.

More than that, however, he was able to sense her 'light' like he could with Sophia and Evelyn. He knew which direction she was in and vaguely how far away she was, yet it was far fainter than with either of the original two. Perhaps they were able to amplify Leaf Eater's light enough for him to sense it? Or perhaps to pass along their own ability to detect it? Or maybe it was simply some property of how he could interact with this strange mental network.

Almost immediately, he felt her reaching out to him mentally. Yet this time as he rejected the advance, feeling uneasy and uncertain, she understood, and he relaxed, listening to her speak even though he couldn't understand it – only pick up bits and pieces from the emotions and feelings he felt from her.

"She still insists on teaching you first," Tyler informed him.

Nicholas shook his head a little bit, adjusting to the new presence of another mind in his vicinity. "Did someone tell her I'm blind?"

"Yes, but she wants to teach you anyway. She says it's all the more important that you learn how to escape danger."

Nicholas paused. It was a sensible enough response, even if it didn't really overcome the issue of him being blind. "But how will I...?" he began, trailing off as he felt things from her during her continued explanation. Mental images, with far more clarity than what Evelyn or Sophia had been able to send so far. Following another dragon that could fly, listening to the sound of their wings. Of course, the dragon in the mental image that he was following was her...

Getting up, he began to walk forwards. "Is there enough space around here?" he asked aloud to anyone who could answer.

"Turn to your two o' clock and go forward," Tyler told him, but ultimately he didn't need the instruction. Now that Leaf Eater was part of the 'network', he could tell where she was, and she bounded ahead of him into a space that offered enough room for her to excitedly jump and dash in circles. Sophia seemed a little suspicious as Nicholas moved, while Evelyn... it was a strange feeling, as though she were admiring Leaf Eater for her apparent excitability and energy.

Nicholas gasped as his front left foot suddenly was submerged in cold water. "I said two o' clock, not one o' clock," Tyler chastised as Nicholas pulled his leg free from the pond and adjusted his direction. "Hold on a moment. You can sense north, right?"

He pondered that for a moment. He did have some sort of... sense of direction. But he hadn't had any frame of reference for it, and had just assumed that pull was towards the 'guiding star' at the National Park. Focusing for a moment, he noticed they didn't quite align: yes, the guiding star was to the north, but not directly north. Assuming north was where his sense of direction was pointing...

"This way?" Nicholas inquired, turning in the direction he felt.

"Yes. Now go northeast," Tyler instructed, and Nicholas did so.

For not being able to speak to him, Leaf Eater was a surprisingly good teacher – if only because of the mental link they shared and her apparent

proficiency with it. When she crouched down to launch herself into the air, Nicholas felt all the motions, every little tension in her muscles, and the exact position he needed to be in. She leapt upwards and spread out her wings, focusing on the feeling, causing him to do the same in turn with subconscious movements of his own wings. She glided forward a short distance before dropping down and landing, wordlessly telling him how to bend his legs to absorb the impact by simply doing it herself and sending him all of the feelings of doing so, and all the thoughts she had about the process.

Proudly, she walked back over to him, getting very close. He felt a little apprehensive, but she merely gave him a little bump of her muzzle against his neck, then backed away, and he relaxed. All he had to do was mimic what she had done, and in a way, it felt like he had already done it. Yet, as he quickly discovered, her body and his were not the same – his wings felt much larger than hers from front to back, and his legs marginally less powerful. Trying to apply her feelings onto his own body was like trying to put on a shirt that was a size too small; it was so close, yet not usable directly.

Still... he got the general idea. Crouching down low, he adjusted his stance to what felt natural, yet still had the same 'feeling' as when Leaf Eater had done so. His heart raced; what if he crashed into something? Or someone? He had no idea what obstacles were around him, or how close they might be. But the others could warn him... and faster than speaking, too, over the mental link. Leaf Eater had flown all the way over from the National Park, so she obviously knew what she was doing. He just had to trust them...

Despite his fear, Nicholas overcame it enough to push off with his back legs and launch himself into the air. He realized immediately that he had no idea how high he had actually launched himself, and panicked momentarily before spreading out his wings as Leaf Eater sent him feelings of her spreading her own.

For a few moments, he felt a freedom he had never experienced anything like before, drowning out his panic. There was no ground under him. He was touching nothing, held up only by his outstretched wings and the laws of aerodynamics that he had been taught at school but had no hope of

remembering in the moment. He could, in theory, go anywhere. He was no longer limited to walking, as he had his whole life. With someone to guide him, he could-!

Mental warnings from both Evelyn and Leaf Eater came to him, and he quickly dropped out of the glide. He landed on the grass, bending his legs to absorb the impact, taking a few more steps forward from the momentum, almost at a stop when he felt his snout bump into a tree, fortunately without enough force to do anything more than startle him.

Sophia felt excited and Evelyn seemed pleased, whereas Leaf Eater was very proud. She called out something to him in the dragon language, but he didn't understand it, and the only mental images he got from her were about what he had just done and his minor collision with a tree. Whatever it was, though, Tyler seemed to think it was hilarious, as the big dragon was making a repeated ululating sound that Nicholas understood as a laugh while Nicholas began to walk back.

"What's so funny?" Nicholas asked him.

"Tree Nuzzler!" Tyler told him before laughing again.

"...what?" Nicholas asked, lost.

Tyler laughed a little more before regaining himself. "Tree Nuzzler. That's what she's calling you, she says it's your name. She's Leaf Eater, and you're Tree Nuzzler."

Nicholas furrowed his brow in frustration, still not understanding. Perhaps picking up on his confusion, Leaf Eater sent him several mental feelings: her flying and misjudging her height, crashing into the leaves of trees again, and again, and again.

"Oh," Nicholas said aloud, finally understanding. "So that's how she got her name."

Climbing out from the pond, Nicholas stood and dripped for a moment as he realized he didn't know how to dry off. He'd been badly in need of the bath after all their travel and had been grateful for the chance to wash off

in the pond while each of the other dragons took their turn learning the basics of flight from Leaf Eater. Without any sort of towels or sponges he'd had to rely on rubbing bits of his body against himself to get clean, mostly using his tail's length and flexibility to do so.

He'd practiced with her a little longer, taking off, gliding, and landing again, but he wasn't ready to try anything more than that, especially after a couple of accidents where he had landed in the pond with a great splash and another where he had bumped into another tree, which only seemed to cement the "Tree Nuzzler" nickname that Leaf Eater had given him – enough that he could even recognize the sounds she made when saying it.

The others seemed to be doing well from what he could sense and hear, though they were just making short glides as he had, learning to jump and stretch their wings and land without hurting themselves. Tyler was having trouble; apparently his wings weren't fully grown yet and so his ability to glide was impaired, but Tyler was sure they would keep growing a bit longer yet. Sophia was having immense fun leaping around and soaring about just above the grass, while Evelyn's feelings were quite odd to Nicholas and it took him a moment to understand them. Eventually he figured them out: a joy of feeling young once more, realizing just how mobile her dragon body was. He remembered what she had told him of how she had lived before meeting them; in a care home, unable to walk without assistance. To go from that to even a limited form of flight would be liberating.

Dripping wet, he brought his thoughts back to the present, lifting a foreleg and shaking it to get some of the water off. Leaf Eater must have seen and felt his predicament, for she sent him thoughts about simply shaking himself dry by rapidly twisting his whole body. It must have been what she had done earlier after climbing out of the pond. Bracing himself on all four legs, he lowered his head and tried to shake, but only ended up wiggling his body back and forth. He sensed amusement from both Leaf Eater and Evelyn, as well as new... instructions, of a sort. They were not unlike memories, in essence, from Leaf Eater demonstrating how exactly she shook herself.

He gave it another try, filling the air around him with the sound of rattling scales and his ear-fins flapping back and forth as he shook his head, sending droplets of water every which way. He overdid it a little and felt slightly dizzy when he stopped, staggering to the right one step before recovering. He was a little drier, enough that he wasn't copiously dripping water any more, at least, but it would still take some time for him to dry off completely. Maybe he could speed it up? The sun was still out and warming his scales...

While he was lying on his belly with his wings spread out wide so they would dry faster, he heard Sophia behind him give what he believed was a joyful shout before there was a big splash in the pond. Not that long ago in his life he would have immediately checked if she was okay, but he didn't need to: her mind held no panic nor fear, only feelings of happiness and fun as she splashed around in the water. A heavy thump close to him announced Evelyn's arrival, the older dragon giving off an unusual scent that Nicholas had to assume was some sort of reminiscence given her emotions about feeling young again.

"Evelyn...?" he began, then trailed off. She wouldn't be able to answer his question, at least not with words. He tried to express a thought about Sophia, and then a feeling of curiosity, hoping she would understand: what was she doing?

The reply from Evelyn came back as more feelings. Diving into water and having it surround her body. Extending her arms – human arms, so this was likely some sort of memory – and using them to push herself forward. He understood after a moment: swimming. Sophia was swimming, not just splashing around. That was a surprise, for as far as he knew, she'd never been swimming without water wings on her arms. But then again, she'd never been flying either, and yet moments ago she had been doing just that, even if it had been in a limited form.

The pond hadn't been all that deep, though she was smaller than he was. Still, it left him wondering. He felt Evelyn's curiosity probe at him; she wanted to know what he was thinking about. But asking *How* was a very different sort of question, one he couldn't think of at the moment, so he settled for asking aloud instead: "How is she swimming?"

There was a brief pause, but Evelyn felt and smelled contemplative. She must have been thinking of how to respond. Soon, though, thoughts came to him. Rhythmic motions of her tail to propel her forward. Limbs pressed close to the body to reduce drag. Wings folded tightly unless extended to steer. The thoughts were fragmented and disjointed, but Nicholas got the idea, and mentally expressed gratitude for her answering his question.

Leaf Eater landed nearby soon after – he could tell not just from her more delicate, practiced landing that made less noise, but also from her scent. She approached him, speaking in the dragon language, bumping her snout against the side of his head; yet this time as he backed away, feeling uneasy, she withdrew as well. Now that she was a part of Sophia and Evelyn's 'network', she knew his feelings and that her advances were not being received well. Not that it seemed to blunt her affection for him or her determination to grow close to him in any way, judging by the feelings from her he could sense, but it at least gave her some sort of vague understanding of personal space.

Evelyn replied to Leaf Eater, and Nicholas felt a little lost and alone, left out of the conversation. Perhaps sensing his feelings, Leaf Eater approached him again, but this time gently touched the end of her tail against his own, just for a moment. He felt conflicted; he still barely knew her and couldn't properly communicate with her. And yet even though he couldn't speak to her, the mental link they shared allowed an understanding that was in some ways beyond anything that words alone could manage.

Hesitantly, he curled his tail and brushed the tip against hers, just for a moment like she had done to him, while thinking of her so that she would know it was intentional. He was surprised at the ecstatic emotions that burst from her when he did, listening to her bounding off and saying something about him, but in its own way it was touching. Nobody had ever been so happy around him before, at least, not with the sort of affection Leaf Eater was showing him. Sophia was always glad to be near him, but that was different.

He heard Sophia climbing out of the water and quickly pulled a wing forward, just in time for it to be sprayed with water instead of his face when she shook herself dry. Trotting over to him, she sat down right by him

and nosed at his side. It was very different to when Leaf Eater did it, there was no doubt about that, not just from the way she nuzzled him but also her slightly jealous emotions and protective scent. For his part, he felt only a brotherly sense of guardianship as he craned his neck downwards to cross it over hers. "Don't worry, Sophia," he murmured to her. "I'll always be with you."

Chapter 17

It was strange just how different the city could be in such a state. Normally no matter where you went, all you could hear were cars. It was one of the many reasons Evelyn had elected to retire out in the sticks where you could actually hear and experience nature. Ironically she had ended up bedridden and trapped indoors for what had seemed like the end, but at least she could still get put into a wheelchair and taken outside.

But now, all of that was gone. Mostly, anyway; the military truck Rick was driving made one heck of a racket, and once in a while they could hear a vehicle in the distance speeding away somewhere, sometimes with gunshots preceding or following it. The truck had attracted occasional hopeful roving thugs or looters who quickly disappeared the moment they saw how many dragons were together – assuming Leaf Eater's fly-overs didn't send them hiding in the shadows. But beyond that the city was quiet enough that she could hear the river well before they reached it. Or maybe that was just from her hearing improving as a part of the transformation.

It had taken a sudden turn overnight. Perhaps it was just from being the first time they had eaten their fill, but Nicholas, Sophia, Francisco and herself all had substantially grown in size. More and more she was acutely aware of being too big for everything around her: she could see above two-story buildings easily, more if she reared back on her hind legs, making her and Tyler effective scouts even without Leaf Eater's aerial reconnaissance. Her high vantage point on a small world reminded her of the doll house she had owned in her youth, handed down to her from her mother, until she had in turn handed it off to Joan. Everything that would normally present an obstacle to a human like a bench or a trash can instead became more of a tripping hazard she had to step around. On occasion they encountered destroyed benches, stop signs or bus stations, and while skid marks on the road indicated several were from reckless drivers, others potentially indicated she wasn't the only dragon with this problem.

Nicholas was having a rough time too: she had accidentally struck him with the tip of her tail a few times from both of them misjudging how far back he had to walk. On top of that, he had bumped into many parked cars and knocked over several signs by mistake, surprising not just himself but

everyone around him with how easily his larger and heavier body knocked them around. He had turned suddenly in response to the sound of gunshots a couple of streets over, and the poor bus shelter at the corner of the street hadn't stood a chance, demolished as easily as if it had been struck by an 18-wheeler. Only Tyler seemed to be about the same size as before, but then again, he was already bigger than the rest of them, taking the lead of the group. Or 'taking point' as he insisted on calling it. You could take the man out of the military but you couldn't take the military out of the man.

"Hold it," Tyler ordered as they approached the end of the street they were on, and Evelyn stopped, giving him a questioning look. "Let me scout ahead."

She tried to 'think' her assent at him, but he wasn't part of their 'network', so she had to simply nod to him instead, sitting down as he wandered ahead down the street. She'd made the offer, of course. There had been little else to do while walking but talk, as always, and she had told him and Francisco about it as much as she could. Sophia didn't understand fully what she had done, and Nicholas's initial reaction had been something she had felt for herself over the link. She didn't want to inflict that on anyone else, now that they knew what the mental link entailed – or at least, now that they had a slightly better idea. For all she knew it could be used to send fully-formed sentences as thoughts or even broadcast music if she merely knew how to think right, but so far it had only been good for emotions and feelings and vague mental images in some form or another.

There was a word for it in the dragon language that she seemed to instinctively know, but she couldn't quite figure out a translation for it. Though it wasn't surprising; what language on Earth could possibly have a single word to describe an empathic bond between many people? It was the same with the word for the special type of dragon she and Sophia were; anything that was uniquely draconic simply had no word in English or French or any other human language. Yet she had noticed the reverse was also true; even though speaking in the dragon language came easily, if she thought carefully about some of the words to describe human things,

they weren't one-to-one, and often were multiple words glued together in an almost childlike fashion.

Tyler had rejected the offer to join the network, while Francisco had accepted. She had asked the others in the network too if they would allow him to join, which would have been a whole ordeal were it done vocally, and instead took mere moments when done through the very mental link Francisco would be joining. She had been able to ask all of them at the same time, and understood the concurrent answers, something that would have been an indecipherable mess of noise had she done it before becoming a dragon. Only Nicholas had expressed hesitation, but ultimately did not object, and so Francisco had been connected with the rest of them.

His emotions were an interesting addition to the network. He seemed to have a strong sense of camaraderie and a protective spirit for those from his home; she could feel his concern whenever one of the sick people coughed or an injured one expressed pain. Yet he also seemed to feel that same protectiveness towards the other dragons, as though he already considered them one of his fellows. It was touching in its own way, though Evelyn didn't need him to protect her.

Tyler was at the corner of the street where the road came to a T-junction by the river. They'd finally reached it, and had been careful to keep away from the roads leading to the central bridge. The distinct dearth of dragons in its vicinity that she could sense was a dire warning in and of itself, like a hole in a crowd. She saw Tyler cautiously peek his head around the corner, then pull back, raising his head much higher before looking around again, stealing brief glimpses at a time.

"What are you doing?" she heard Leaf Eater inquire from nearby, and turned her head to see the strange dragon leaning forward towards Tyler, her head tilted to one side. The dragoness's odd behavior was contrasted by her somewhat ordinary appearance: the spinal fin on her back was a consistent height all the way from skull to tail-tip. Even her eyes seemed plain, with dark gray irises and lighter gray sclera behind them. The most outstanding feature to differentiate her was her ear-fins, which seemed quite larger than anyone else's. Evelyn had to wonder if they offered greater hearing ability, for she sometimes saw Leaf Eater's ear-fins

twitching or fanning out and her head tilting in response to some noise that Evelyn had not detected. Assuming that's what it was, and it wasn't just some further unusual behavior.

"Checking if it's safe," Tyler answered without looking back towards Leaf Eater. Sophia and Nicholas stood nearby as well, while she saw Francisco at the very back of their little convoy – facing away from them, keeping an eye out for trouble. One attempted ambush, he had scared off with a roar and some very colorful, if slurred, Spanish phrases – though the gunfire from his companions had certainly been persuasive as well.

Turning her head further without moving her body, Evelyn checked in on the others. With the convoy stopped, Rick had opened the door on the truck to lean out of it, since the windows weren't capable of being lowered, while everyone else was taking a moment to rest. Evelyn gave the rest of the entourage behind her a quick glance, but everything seemed as normal.

Leaf Eater scoffed, radiating confidence over the mental link. *"Of course it is safe. We are Children of the Egg. What could possibly harm us?"*

Evelyn tilted her head and gave Leaf Eater a skeptical look. Not just for her question, but also because she had just noticed something: Leaf Eater had grown. She was standing next to Nicholas, and Evelyn remembered seeing them side-by-side in the park earlier – she had been a little bigger than Nicholas then, and she still was, despite the fact that Nicholas had continued to grow, so that meant she had as well.

And that meant she couldn't truly have always been a dragon.

Evelyn was grateful that the mental link only transmitted her feelings of doubt and not the exact nature of them, for Leaf Eater picked up on them, and elaborated *"We have claws and tails and scales. They have none of those. They are so small and fragile. Why should we fear them? If anything, they need protection from us."*

"They have explosion-projectile-weapons," Evelyn answered, doing her best to account for the dragon language having no word for 'gun'. Her thoughts were distracted, though; if Leaf Eater had once been human like the rest of

them, which made far more sense than the alternatives, why did she not remember? Was it amnesia, or something else? She was not lying about her claims – had she tried to lie, Evelyn would have instantly known, thanks to their mental link. Had her transformation gone wrong, somehow?

"They are so small, and we are not," Leaf Eater asserted, puffing out her scaled chest as she sat on her haunches. *"What can skin do to scale?"*

She may have been right... but so far, Evelyn had only been hit by small rounds. Would her scales be hard enough to stop a rifle bullet? What if they had something higher caliber? And no matter how bulletproof her scales were, she was quite sure her wings were not, to say nothing of a lucky shot if they hit her in the eye or mouth. Even if the bullet didn't penetrate, what if it broke her scales from the impact alone? She wasn't particularly willing to try being shot just to find out.

She saw movement ahead and turned her head, but it was just Tyler returning to them. "I got a visual on the bridge," he told them, speaking in English – perhaps for Nicholas's benefit, perhaps due to his own feelings about not wanting to be 'too dragon', or perhaps some combination thereof. "It's heavily fortified. Vehicles and concrete barriers blocking the roads, and at least two snipers that I saw up on the bridge itself keeping watch. They've got Remington 700s, but if they can hit anything at this distance they're either trained marksmen or absurdly lucky. I think we're far enough away to avoid drawing attention, but... we're awfully big targets."

"And how far is it from here to the other bridge?" Evelyn asked him.

"Five miles, by my estimation," Tyler muttered darkly. "Not that bad of a drive, but at the pace we go..."

"Then we need to cross here," Evelyn declared. *"One way or another."*

"Just fly over," Leaf Eater said matter-of-factly.

"Humans can't fly," Tyler pointed out, "And we're not just going to abandon all these people."

"They cannot fly, they cannot fight, they cannot join a constellation... what CAN two-legs even do?" Leaf Eater asked rhetorically, using the dragons'

word for the mental network.

Ignoring her, Tyler continued, "I think we have some options. I saw some boats left in the water. We might be able to use one to get the people across."

"But what about the heavy-load-carrier?" Evelyn asked, indicating the truck by pointing her tail at it. *"It is too heavy for us."*

"We might have to abandon it," Tyler admitted. "But let me think. Those trucks are made to go through hell. As long as the front doesn't get submerged and the engine doesn't get flooded, it'll remain operational. We might be able to drive it across somewhere shallow enough, but getting it back out will be a challenge... if there's a boat ramp in a convenient spot, that would work. But that's a big 'if'."

"It does not look that heavy," Leaf Eater said with a glance to the truck and a flick of her tail.

"It is," Tyler insisted. Leaf Eater began to turn towards the truck, and Evelyn watched her, unsure what she was going to do. But when Leaf Eater reached under the truck and tilted it slightly, Evelyn sent her the strongest mental command she could muster to make her stop, while the people in the truck yelled out. Even so, Leaf Eater did not stop immediately; Evelyn's mental commands were no more binding than verbal ones, so despite her capacity to pacify people like she had done at the police headquarters, she did not have any sort of direct control over others, even dragons in the mental network. But after a moment, Leaf Eater stepped away, mentally conceding the point and bowing her head toward Evelyn deferentially; chastised, she returned to Evelyn and sat back down, draping the end of her tail over Nicholas's. Evelyn almost smirked as she felt his awkward feelings from the contact; it reminded her a little of herself in her youth... at least, before the Germans had invaded.

Rick leaned a little further out from the open door of the truck. "Jesus Christ, you damn near gave me a heart attack! What the hell was all that about?" he inquired, raising his voice more than was necessary. Evelyn could have heard him just fine if he had been speaking normally.

"The truck," Tyler answered. "We're trying to figure out how to get it across the river."

"Oh, yeah. I don't suppose you could carry it? Like, two of you pick it up together? When I'm not in it, of course."

Tyler made a thoughtful sound. "I don't think so. I'm not even sure how we would hold it. One slip and it would fall into the water." He cast a glance behind him. "Though perhaps..."

"Perhaps what?"

"Not all of the boats that have been abandoned are the same size. The sailboats are too small to be of any real use to us, but I can take another look and see if there's a better option. Maybe a tour boat."

Evelyn took a step forward. "*Let me go with you.*"

Tyler tilted his head to one side. "Why?"

"*Other than wanting to help?*" Evelyn asked, a little surprised at the strange tone her voice took on to convey the rhetorical question. "*I am the second-biggest dragon, after you. We could push a water-platform around together.*"

"It wouldn't hurt," Tyler conceded. "Just don't get too close to the bridge."

"*I know,*" Evelyn grumbled.

"While we're doing that, Nicholas, see if you can get the others organized. Ask Francisco to help."

"Doing what?" Nicholas asked, looking confused.

"Right, sorry. Evelyn and I are going to go search for a tour boat. I'd rather not spend any more time here than is necessary, so I want everyone to be ready to move when we return."

"I'll try my best," Nicholas offered.

Evelyn felt a surge of curiosity and adventurousness from Leaf Eater as she began following Tyler; no doubt the playful dragoness wanted to come along, so she sent back a firm mental command to her to stay. At least the

strange dragon listened to her. If she were a completely loose cannon, she would have been nothing but trouble...

The river lapped gently at its edges where a road ran parallel to the water, with a barricade, a footpath, and a fence in that order separating the road from the river. Far to her right, Evelyn saw the bridge. Even before her eyesight had started to go she would never have been able to make out anything like the level of detail she could see now: each person on the bridge and, surprisingly, the weapons they were holding were clear to her if she focused on them. Even their expressions were plain to her despite the distance, when they weren't covered by sunglasses or bandanas around their mouths, at least. Mostly stern and agitated. It was one thing to hear on National Geographic about the incredible eyesight of certain predators, but quite another to experience it firsthand. She had to wonder if something had gotten their attention... or worse, if it was the two of them that had been noticed.

A deep anger welled up in her as she watched the humans on the bridge. Snipers at the top, men with rifles at both ends. All they needed was the uniforms... she shook her head before more memories could come back to her. It wasn't the time to reminisce about the war. She was no resistance fighter now – just a refugee, in a way, trying to escape to safety.

Tyler walked right up to the edge and stepped into the river, though it seemed a little deeper than he was expecting and he sank into it with a splash, his face submerging for a brief moment before he lifted his head back up out of the water. Slightly amused, Evelyn stepped forward and reached out with a foreleg, sticking a scaly finger into the water. The claw itself had no sensation, of course, but the water was cool against her scales. Perhaps it would have felt cold against bare skin, but it would be quite tolerable to her new body. So, without any further delay, she climbed in after Tyler to begin their search, ignoring the flustered feelings from Nicholas over the mental link as Leaf Eater teased him in some way or other.

The river seemed to vary in depth quite a bit at different points, but for the most part it was deep enough for her to swim when she kept her limbs close to her body. Sophia had done something similar in the park, hadn't

she? Evelyn lashed her tail back and forth to propel herself through the water, though it took a bit of experimenting to find the proper rhythm. Tyler was doing the same, both of them moving away from the bridge.

It was such an odd mix of new and old sensations. She'd gone swimming before many times, at least before she had gotten arthritis. In that sense, it was a familiar experience. Yet the motions she had to make were entirely different: she couldn't raise her front limbs enough to do a breast stroke, or any kind of stroke, instead relying largely on her tail to move herself forward. Even more disconcerting was the side-to-side movement of her hips and spine along with it, a motion very unlike any form of human swimming. Her scales insulated her from the cold temperature of the river water, yet her fins and wings, with their exposed membranes, could feel the water against them much like a human's skin would. Perhaps moreso, as they were even more sensitive. She could pick up water currents with them in a way she never would have been able to before.

As Tyler had mentioned, there were some abandoned sailboats tied up at a nearby dock, far too small to be any good for moving more than a handful of people. They simply carried on down the river away from the fortified bridge, and Evelyn kept her head just above the water so she could look to the sides for anything potentially useful. Minutes passed as they searched, finding more sailboats, patrol boats, and a dock of expensive but still too-small yachts – with most berths empty, the vessels either taken by their owners or stolen during the chaos that had erupted in the cities after the broadcast. The buildings beyond were a mix of high-rise offices and apartments, having taken over what had once been an industrial shipping area.

Their search went on until Tyler called out, "There, one o' clock!" Evelyn looked where he indicated and quickly spotted what he was looking at: a river tour boat. It was big, wide, and little more than a floating platform with a small enclosed front space, the remainder of the deck open and empty. It wasn't going to win any awards for style, comfort, or anything except low prices, but right then, it was just what they needed.

"*Mmmaaaaggniiiffiiiqqquueee*," Evelyn managed to exclaim at the sight. She tried to extend a wing to adjust her course sharply, but mostly just

ended up slowing herself down until she found the right angle to hold it at under the water. She and Tyler approached the dock where the boat was moored; the signs advertised river tours at low prices, yet the place was devoid of life, and no other boats were tied up there. Thankfully, the river was just shallow enough for Evelyn to lower her legs and stand on the riverbed – she wasn't at all sure how she was meant to tread water in this new body of hers.

Tyler did the same, able to lift part of his body out of the water as he craned his neck over the boat, inspecting it while dripping river water onto the deck. "I think it might have been under repair," he declared, "I see an open hatch inside and an abandoned tool set next to it. Poor bastards must have been working on it when the riots got close, and they abandoned the place."

Evelyn felt curious minds reaching out to hers; the others had noticed her burst of excitement upon seeing the boat. As she got closer, she sent them back triumphant feelings, hopefully to be interpreted as success. *"It is not as though we have anyone with us to make it move."*

"No, so we'll have to push," Tyler mused. Several heavy ropes secured the boat to the dock, and he brought his head close to inspect one of them. At first he made an attempt to untie it, sitting down on the other side of the dock to free up his forelimbs, but his claws were insufficiently dexterous for the task, and continuously snagged on the rope itself. Deciding to cut it instead, he picked at the thick rope with his claws, before losing his patience and bringing his head down to bite through the rope with his powerful jaws instead, his teeth slicing through the rope with relative ease.

"That is one problem taken care of. But how will we get the heavy-load-carrier onto the water-platform?"

"We'll need a ramp," Tyler replied between bites of the remaining ropes. "The boat has one, but it's for passengers. It's far too narrow, and would probably collapse under the weight of the truck anyway."

"Any large, thick metal sheet should work. We will not need it for long." Evelyn thought for a moment. *"Perhaps there is a..."* she began, struggling

to describe something that apparently had no remotely close analogue in this new language of hers. "...road-hole-digging-place nearby?"

"A what?" Tyler said, mystified. Evelyn grumbled to herself; if only he was in the network, it would be so much easier to communicate. "Do you mean a construction site?"

Evelyn was relieved. "Yes!"

He gave a snort. "In a city like this, there's always roadwork somewhere. It's just a matter of finding some."

That gave Evelyn an idea. The easiest way to find one would be by air – but only one dragon among them could possibly fly that well at the moment. But how to communicate it? She thought of Leaf Eater, managing to get the other dragon's attention onto her and away from whatever thing was happening that was making her radiate curiosity. Evelyn then tried her best to send an appropriate sequence of mental images and experiences, the strange mode of communication becoming more natural over time.

The gray rock that was everywhere with the white stripes. Yellow vehicles near it, and a big hole. Big metal sheets, over the hole. The touch of the cold metal against scale. Flight, while carrying something heavy. Evelyn, and Tyler.

For good measure, Evelyn then sent an image of the central bridge, accompanied by the strongest negative feelings she could muster. The last thing she needed was for Leaf Eater to fly too close to it and get shot. Then she sent that same feeling a second time, just to be sure.

Leaf Eater acknowledged Evelyn, and seemed happy to have a task, the other dragons seeming a little surprised by whatever Leaf Eater was doing – probably taking off. But a quick message across the mental link a moment later from Leaf Eater communicated that she was doing so at Evelyn's request, calming them down from being startled.

"Are you all right?" Tyler asked Evelyn, "You look distant."

"*Just calling for some help,*" Evelyn answered, turning her head to look over at Tyler. She hadn't even had to close her eyes that time. She was

getting better and better at being a dragon. She just hoped it wouldn't come with a price.

He sounded curious. "How? With that... mental link thing you were talking about?"

"Yes. I am still getting used to it, but practice makes perfect."

Tyler shook his head, but it was in disbelief. "The top brass doesn't realize what they're missing out on. Completely secure transmissions, impossible to intercept. Even at a distance like this. The other victims and I could've been a real asset to them."

Evelyn gave a snort. *"Only if you had a Matriarch with you."*

"True, we would need a guiding star. I wonder how many of you there are? This whole city and the towns and wilderness around it, and all the people who have turned into dragons, and only three of them are guiding stars? Is that normal? Below average? Or even above average?"

"I do not know," Evelyn muttered, her eyes scanning the skies. Sure enough, she could see Leaf Eater flitting from building to building, disappearing from view now and then behind some of the taller ones.

"Of course."

"Did you change your mind about being part of our constellation?"

Tyler gave a deep rumble, though Evelyn interpreted it as a rumble of thought. With much of his body underwater, his emotion-scents weren't coming through to her. "I want to think on it more before I commit to anything," he answered evasively. "What did you ask the others to do?"

"I asked Leaf Eater to look for a road-hole-digging-place, find a big metal sheet, and bring it to us. I think."

"Why so uncertain?"

"Communicating anything more complicated than an emotion is difficult for me. I am still learning how to do it most effectively. I think that she understood my meaning. Not to mention, her mind and way of thinking is very unlike ours. Who knows what she might bring back?"

"I think I understand," Tyler said, before walking around the dock to return to the side the boat was on. "If she's going to fly to us, we should start heading back. We can meet her halfway."

Getting behind the boat, Tyler reached out with a forelimb and gave it a push. Without anything tying it down, it moved in the direction he pushed it, though not very quickly. Evelyn came over to help him guide it away from the dock and into the river proper, before they pushed on its side to turn it to face back towards where they had come from.

Pushing the boat with their forelimbs was difficult, so instead, Tyler leaned in and gave it a shove with his shoulder instead. It wasn't the most comfortable setup and Evelyn's spiky scales scratched and chipped the wooden hull, but it was far more effective, allowing them to proceed back up the river at a faster pace. Fortunately, while they were going against the current, it wasn't overly forceful, and didn't require much effort to overcome.

As they made their way back, curiosity followed by excitement from Leaf Eater signaled to Evelyn that there had been some success. Evelyn felt a little concerned as the excitement turned to frustration, but after a minute or so an abrupt shift to Leaf Eater feeling pleased with herself set Evelyn's mind at ease. Without stopping in her pushing of the boat, Evelyn gave Leaf Eater new directions by thinking of Leaf Eater herself, then the feeling of flying, followed by brief thoughts of Nicholas, Sophia and Francisco one after another. An acknowledgement from Leaf Eater confirmed that she understood... or so Evelyn hoped.

Approaching the T-junction where they had left the others, Evelyn looked up and saw Leaf Eater flying towards the others, coming along the water so that she would have more space. Her front legs held a big sheet of steel normally laid over holes in the road to allow cars to drive over, just as Evelyn had hoped. Her grip on the inch-thick, smooth metal plate seemed rather tenuous, but she was able to land without dropping it, flaring her wings as she descended to land on her back feet on the road, dropping the road plate there so she could stand on all fours. She both looked and felt incredibly proud of herself, and had she been close enough, Evelyn was sure she could have smelled it, too. Nicholas was a little confused at what

was going on, no doubt from the racket of Leaf Eater dropping the road covering.

From there, things went as smoothly as Evelyn could have hoped. She and Tyler pushed the boat over to the nearest boat ramp along the water's edge, then had Rick drive the truck over while some of the other humans brought over the road covering. It was short, and they had to bring the boat as close as they possibly could to the ramp, breaking one of the railings near the back to make space for their improvised vehicle ramp to be placed. Rick took it slow while Evelyn and Tyler held the boat in place to stop it drifting away, but the truck made it up and onto the deck eventually. Under Tyler's direction, Rick parked it as close as he could to the center of the deck, and activated the parking brake so that it wouldn't slide around.

Everyone else was left behind – they'd made a second trip for them later to avoid exceeding the weight the deck could hold. Going directly across the river didn't take long, and finding another boat ramp required only a few extra minutes. The weight of the truck caused the boat to list slightly to one side despite Rick's best effort to park in the center, but Tyler had a simple solution: he lowered his head and pushed down on the rising side of the boat to force it back down, keeping the boat steady long enough to make it across. From there, it was a matter of placing the ramp to drive the truck off – after backing up and re-aligning the truck with the ramp a few times – and they had gotten it across the water.

Moving the people was much easier, and the boat was big enough that they only needed one additional trip. Evelyn easily felt Nicholas's intense nervousness at having to go into the water, but Sophia dove in gleefully ahead of him and swam forward, calling for him to follow her, and he hesitantly stepped into the water with her. Leaf Eater, of course, simply flew over the river and perched on top of a six-story office building on the other side, trying to tell the others to just take off and fly over – even to the point of diving into the water and then taking back off again just to prove that it was possible.

Only once everyone had gotten off the boat did Evelyn and Tyler move away from it to climb out, water pouring off both of their bodies and onto

the road until they shook it off of themselves. "That could've gone a lot worse," he mused.

"I had a harder time crossing the Ssseeiiiinnnnneeee River," Evelyn murmured, casting a glance at the humans. They were getting themselves organized again, with the truck at the front making its way towards the nearest T-junction, the slowest members of the group already loaded into the back of it again. *"Better to have it too easy than too hard."*

"It would have been so much faster to just fly," Leaf Eater said from her perch on the building. For emphasis, she puffed out her chest and spread her wings out as much as possible. *"But I suppose that is why the two-legs need us to look after them, is it not?"*

"You should get down from there," Tyler called up to her. "You're too exposed."

"Exposed to what? There is no danger up here. I am the danger!" Leaf Eater boasted. *"You are not still scared of the two-legs on the road-over-water, are you?"*

"Yes," Tyler growled. "Just because they are so far away doesn't mean they can't—"

Evelyn heard the bullet that whizzed past them in the air above before she heard the shot itself, the round striking a window in a nearby office building and punching straight through the glass with an audible crack. "Sniper!" Tyler roared. It took Rick a moment to hit the accelerator as he couldn't hear them, but the panic erupting around him got his attention quickly enough. He drove through the T-junction and only came to a stop once he was behind the building. Claire, the campers, and the Mexicans including Francisco, ran close behind, into the shelter offered by the big brick building that Leaf Eater was on top of. Tyler and Evelyn rushed for a different street so as to avoid crowding with the others, but Nicholas and Sophia were still out there.

Evelyn felt all their emotions at once, and yet she could make sense of them. Tyler wasn't panicking, but he was clearly worried for the others. Nicholas, however, was panicking, and had crouched down low to the

ground, hiding his upper body under his wings. Sophia was confused by all the commotion and by the sudden storm of emotions, while Leaf Eater seemed indifferent, unsure what all the fuss was about.

"E-Evelyn...!" Nicholas stammered, sounding as lost and afraid as he felt.

"W-Where are you...?"

"*What is happening?*" Sophia asked as well, second-hand fear overcoming her.

Another bullet struck the building Leaf Eater was standing on, sending a small shower of brick dust into the street, and she craned her neck over to look at where it had impacted, her ear-fins turning when she heard the gunshot a moment after the bullet struck. "*Here!*" Evelyn called out, but of course, Nicholas couldn't understand her... however, she could see him.

Directions! She concentrated and sent him a feeling. Left. He had to go a bit left of magnetic north. "*Come quickly!*" she called to Sophia, trying to guide Nicholas with her mind. But while Sophia took the hint and dashed over, Nicholas remained rooted to the spot.

The fear coming off of him – both the emotion-scent and the emotion over the mental link – was intensely strong. Not that Evelyn blamed him. She'd been terrified enough the first time she'd been under fire, and she had been able to see. But he couldn't stay out there. She had to rally him, but she couldn't speak to him...

But did she need to? She reached out mentally, trying to take and suppress his fear as she had learned to do for the pain of others. At the same time, she continued to communicate the direction he needed to go, and the urgency of the situation. Another bullet whizzed past them and struck the road, but Evelyn stopped Nicholas's panic from rising, guiding him instead.

"Nnniiicckkk!" Sophia called out, looking back and realizing that he hadn't come with her. She immediately turned around and ran back to him, unable to keep still and taking antsy steps around his head.

"*Come back!*" Evelyn ordered Sophia, but she didn't, instead grabbing onto the front edge of one of his wings with her mouth and tugging at it

insistently, pulling at the wing-bone in the direction of Evelyn and the others.

"On your feet, Nicholas!" Tyler barked out, "Get up and get over here!"

The combination of Evelyn's mental help, Sophia's tugging, and the others' encouragement – such as it was, in Tyler's case – was enough to get Nicholas to rise to his feet and hurry over to them, following Evelyn's mental directions, with Sophia running after him. She adjusted her guidance as he went to lead him around a parked car, and after he was in the street with them behind cover from the bridge she instructed him to halt. Coming to an abrupt stop, he panted, still in a panic, but less of one than he would have been had Evelyn not intervened. Sophia stopped beside him as well, and Evelyn could feel her reaching out to Nicholas, trying to calm him down instinctively.

"*What are you all doing?*" Leaf Eater chirped from atop the building, peering over the edge at the humans below it. In contrast to all the others, she was very unconcerned, if a bit confused at all the commotion; her only worry seemed to be for Nicholas. "*What is—*"

Pain burst across the psychic link to Evelyn and Sophia as Leaf Eater let out a yelping cry, partly muffling the sound of the gunshot. Concern from the other dragons met Leaf Eater's pain, though Nicholas's seemed strongest, a mixture of fear and panic emotion-scents suddenly bursting from him.

"Leaf!" he called out in a worried tone.

She leapt from the building and flew down to the street to join them, landing with a thud in the road. "*What happened?*" she asked, bewildered, walking around and around in a circle while looking at her own body. Evelyn saw it quite clearly: one of the dragoness's big black scales had been cracked, part of it broken off. Yet there was no blood that Evelyn could see or smell, so while the bullet had struck her hard, it had not penetrated through her scaled exterior.

"You've been shot," Tyler said matter-of-factly, keeping his head down low. "Could have been worse, from the look of it. That's damn impressive. We'll be safe now that we've broken line of sight with the bridge, but that was a close call. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

Nicholas had his head stuck out, sniffing at the air, perhaps trying to smell for blood. Evelyn sent a reassuring feeling to him, then observed, "*We must regroup with the others.*" On the other street, Francisco was still worried, so Evelyn sent thoughts of safety to him before encouraging him to move forward.

After staring at her broken scale for a moment, Leaf Eater lifted her head. "*Is that the best those humans can do?*" she asked, "*They will have to try much harder than that to get through our scales.*" As Nicholas took a wary step forward, she leaned in close to him and nosed underneath his jaw affectionately, catching him off guard. "*You do not need to be so concerned for me. My strength has proven worthy of protecting us both.*"

"Not if your first instinct is to stand around and let snipers take pot shots at you," Tyler muttered to himself.

Fortunately, the tall buildings offered plenty of cover; even at the next intersection, the bridge was completely obscured by them. The dragons got to the junction first, with Francisco at the front of the other group, followed by the truck. They found him pacing back and forth anxiously, watching the angle of their approach with his mismatched eyes: though the scales had covered the left half of Francisco's face, his other eye was a uniform deep blue completely unlike his red right eye.

When they got back together, Rick was already waiting for them beside the truck's open door. "Are you folks all right?" he called out to them. "It sounded like one of you got hit!"

"*The two-legs damaged my armor,*" Leaf Eater grumbled; Evelyn could sense that she felt insulted more than anything else. "*How did they do so, and from so far away?*"

"*I told you, they have explosion-projectile-weapons,*" Evelyn reminded her.

"*But they are so small!*"

"One moment," Tyler cut in, then turned his head. "Rick, could you bring over your rifle for a second?"

"Huh? Uh, sure," he hesitantly agreed, reaching into the cab of the truck and retrieving his rifle.

"Show it to Leaf Eater," Tyler instructed.

"Uh... no offense, but which one is—" Rick began, and Tyler raised an arm to point at her with a claw. Moving forward, Rick held the rifle under the barrel and stock so she could see it as he stretched his arms out. Full of curiosity, Leaf Eater lowered her head and turned it sideways to examine the rifle with one gray eye that moved back and forth during her inspection, her nostrils flaring as she attempted to smell it.

"*This is an explosion-projectile-weapon?*" she asked, sounding disbelieving.

"Yes," Evelyn answered.

"*How does it work?*"

"Take out a bullet and show it to her," Tyler instructed. Rick carefully worked the bolt on the rifle and pulled out a round with his fingers, holding it up between his thumb and forefinger as the dragoness in front of him stared at it.

"*What is that thing?*"

"That is what hit your scale," Tyler answered. "When the gun is fired, that bullet flies out so fast, it will hit its target before you hear it."

As understanding came to her, Leaf Eater let out a hiss and filled the air around her with the angry stench of ozone, raising her head. "*How could something so small cause so much trouble?*" she growled, making Rick step back from her even though he didn't understand her words. "*Those two-legs are far more dangerous than they appear.*"

Evelyn felt relieved that Leaf Eater finally understood. "Can I go back now?" Rick asked timidly, clearly not pleased to be so close to an angry dragon.

"Yes, go ahead," Tyler told him, and Rick hurried back to the truck, loading the bullet back into the rifle as he went. Evelyn watched him for a moment and then looked over at Leaf Eater, whose tail was lashing back and forth.

"*I must grow harder scales,*" Leaf Eater mumbled, then looked at Evelyn. Craning her neck over and giving Evelyn a little nudge with her snout, accompanied by friendly feelings and a matching scent, Leaf Eater remarked, "*Little Star, you must teach me your secret.*"

"I would if I could, but I do not know why my scales are different," Evelyn told her. "Now come on, let us go. We have wasted enough time here already."

Chapter 18

Sophia knew they were getting close to *something* cool.

She wasn't sure what, but up ahead, there were lots of people – and some dragons, too! She wanted to try and reach out to them and talk from afar, but she remembered what Evelyn had said about doing it without asking first. Maybe that funny new dragon knew what it was? Leafy, as Sophia thought of her, was kinda weird. But she was also fun, not like the grumpy grown-ups at all. And she'd taught Sophia how to fly! Well, part of how to fly, anyway. 'Gliding', she'd called it. So she couldn't be all bad, even if she had some *really* weird emotions and thoughts sometimes, especially whenever she was looking at Nick. Maybe it was just a dragon thing, and Sophia only minded so much because it kept making her brother also feel weird. But a different kind of weird. Everything was so weird to Sophia.

Leafy's response to the mental question was an interesting one. Lots of green grass, and white lines. Big white poles. People, lots of people. LOTS of people. Lots of fabric structures, too. A big ring of smooth chairs. Sophia thought that over as she looked up at Leaf Eater, who was standing on top of a building. As the group caught up, she took off and flew to another building further ahead, landing and looking all around it. Sophia wished she could do that, and flexed her wings a bit. Soon, soon, everyone kept telling her. But she wanted to fly now!

Sophia trotted a little closer to Evelyn and Tyler ahead of them. "*Are we there yet?*" she asked, excited to see what it was they were coming up on.

"*Not yet, but soon,*" Evelyn reassured her. Curling her tail, she pointed with the tip towards one of the overhead road signs.

The words on it were big, and Sophia frowned. Was it some person's name? It was a weird name though, but she'd heard a lot of weird names listening to Tyler's radio. She could read the last word on the sign, at least: "Ssstaaaddiiuummm!" Underneath the words was an arrow pointing to the left.

"*I bet we would be there already if we could fly,*" Sophia grumbled, stretching out her wings again and accidentally bumping one of them

against Nicholas's side... again. He didn't react this time, though she had startled him earlier doing the same thing.

"We will try to fly again soon," Evelyn promised her, "But we are very close to the ball-game-place now."

"And they were having such a good season, too," Tyler joked. "I wonder if any of their players turned into dragons..."

After another few blocks, Leaf Eater took off and flew up higher than usual, beating her wings to gain altitude. Sophia studied her carefully, watching her wing movements and trying to focus on what feelings she could glean across the mental link in the hopes of figuring out something new about flying by herself. Leaf Eater turned and banked in the air to fly in a circle, looking down at something, her curiosity obvious to Sophia. But as feelings of satisfaction emanated from Leaf Eater, Sophia knew that must have meant they were at the place they were going to. Finally!

"Let us hurry!" Sophia called out, running up next to Evelyn and dancing about excitedly. She didn't wait for a reply and ignored Evelyn's mental demand for her to settle down, dashing past and running ahead a bit. The big building they were approaching had electric signs everywhere, all turned off during the day, as well as big banners for the football team that played there. She could also see people moving around up on the roof. Near the main entrance there were big TV screens too, but to Sophia's dismay, they were also turned off. She'd missed being able to watch cartoons! At least whenever her mother didn't kick her off to watch some boring show...

Sophia's excitement all but vanished on the spot as she was reminded of her mother, and she dipped her head. Memories of her mother screaming at her, calling her names, hitting her with her hands or whatever she was holding at the time. All the times her mother had gotten mad at something and taken it out on Sophia, until Sophia had learned to go hide in her room whenever she heard her mother shouting. And the one time when Sophia had shouted back and had received the worst beating of her life for it...

Sophia trembled and shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Her mother was gone and couldn't hurt her any more. She didn't have to worry about

the prod ever again. She was a big dragon now! Sophia was way bigger than her mother had been. But that didn't change what had been done to her. Even more memories came to her of being beaten, stuffed into a cage, zapped with the prod...

"Sophia!" Nicholas called out in great concern, and she heard his footsteps approaching as she sobbed, making a breathy whistling sound, her wings and fins both drooping heavily. Nicholas wasn't the only one who approached, but he did get there first, hesitantly reaching out with his head until he bumped into her neck and nosed at her, orienting himself to sit on his haunches in front of her. Reaching out with his front legs, he embraced her and held her closely against his front, extending both wings and wrapping them around her, both as a sort of secondary hug and to shield her completely. She felt him sending her feelings of safety over the mental link, mixed with his concern for her, to let her know that everything was okay, that he was there for her, that she had nothing to fear...

It wasn't just her brother, either. Evelyn was coming over too, and even Leaf Eater had landed nearby and was approaching, though she had different emotions to the others; Leafy seemed... protective? In a different way to Nicholas, too; her brother was comforting, while Leafy wanted to shield her from what was distressing her. Tyler was lagging behind, but she couldn't feel him. Francisco was worried about her too, but he was all the way at the back. Yet despite that, she could feel him trying to comfort her over their mental link; she could almost imagine him standing next to her and telling her not to worry.

She expected Nicholas to ask her what was wrong, like he always had when she cried. But instead, she just felt him press his snout against her neck as he hugged her as best he could in his dragon body. A feeling of understanding and sympathy from him washed over her. Of course he didn't need to say anything. They had a new bond. Something special. Nicholas had always told her he cared about her, but now she could feel and smell it too. And from Evelyn, it was a different sort of concern, but she felt something for Sophia too. Even Leafy. Nicholas didn't have to remind her he was there for her – she knew.

This was her family. Her new family. Her better family. A family that wouldn't try to hurt her or make her sad. A family that wanted her to be happy. Nicholas had always been so nice to her, but now... now she had Evelyn, who was like a new mom. And Tyler was... kind of like a dad, sort of? And Leafy and Francisco were her new friends. She had so much more now. Under the weight of all their silent, empathic reassurances, she knew what she had, and that she didn't have any reason to be sad.

"What was all that about?" Tyler asked. Sophia went quiet, slowly lifting her head out of the embrace of Nicholas's wings, but Evelyn answered for her.

"Something reminded her of her parents, and it upset her," Evelyn explained.

Tyler looked confused. "How did you figure that out?" he asked, but then almost immediately followed with, "Was it that mental link thing again?"

"Yes. It is not telepathy, but it can still communicate a great deal."

Sophia wasn't paying them very much attention. Nicholas kept his wings and arms around her, and Leaf Eater leaned in too, giving Sophia a gentle, reassuring nudge with her snout. Slowly, Sophia raised her head up, reaching out with her arms to try and hug her brother back, feeling him pull her closer against him reassuringly. He would always be with her. She would be safe as long as Nick was around.

"Everything okay, Sophia?" Tyler asked, craning his neck over Nicholas's body. "Are you feeling better?"

"I think I will be okay," Sophia said quietly. *"You will help keep me safe from the bad people too, right?"*

"Of course I will," Tyler replied, giving her a nod. It looked kind of silly since he moved his entire neck when he did it, but she wasn't in the mood to laugh. Gently, he waved a wing forward and urged her, "Come on, we're almost to the stadium. You wanted to see it, didn't you?"

"Yeah!" she replied eagerly. *"Ssstaaaddiiuumm!"* she said gleefully, having a little bit of an easier time with English words than she had the last few days. *"Sstaaadiiuumm!"*

"I wonder if it's too much to hope that they still sell hotdogs..." Tyler murmured out loud.

"*What is a 'hhooottddoogg'?*" Leaf Eater asked curiously.

For some reason, both Evelyn and Tyler seemed shocked by this, while Nicholas merely seemed deeply thoughtful. Sophia tilted her head; everyone knew what hotdogs were, right? "*Food!*" Sophia answered simply, "*I want one with kkeettchhuupp.*"

"I thought you couldn't speak English," Tyler said to Leaf Eater, looking and sounding skeptical.

Leaf Eater lifted her muzzle and replied, "*I never said that,*" as though it were inherently obvious. "*This language is better. Why would I speak in the two-legs' language if I did not need to?*"

"Where did you learn it?" Tyler pressed.

"*I... have always known it?*" Leaf Eater replied, doubt creeping into her voice, emotions, and scent. But only for a moment, and it soon disappeared, instead replaced by the confidence that dismissed her uncertainty. "*I am obviously a Child of the Egg! Two-legs cannot join the constellation, because they are not Children. I can, therefore, I am a Child just like you. Simple!*" She tapped her tail against the ground as she gave a glance to Sophia and Nicholas, who still were holding each other. "*This building was important to you, was it not? We should investigate it at once.*" With that, she stood and turned away, walking towards the stadium entrance.

Evelyn and Tyler gave each other a look that Sophia didn't quite understand, but they both seemed to have a lot of doubt. "*What is going on?*" Sophia asked them.

"She is a dragon... like us," Tyler reiterated what Leaf Eater said, though this time in English. "I knew it. She is a victim, as we are. But she acts so differently." Suddenly, a feeling of dread overcame Tyler, a new emotion-scent Sophia had not smelled before wafting off of him. "Is that... is that what would have happened to me if... if I hadn't fought back...?"

"I do not think we know enough to say anything about that," Evelyn asserted. "There are five of us who are nothing like her. Do not grow afraid." As Evelyn spoke, Sophia could tell she was using some of the abilities that both of the 'guiding star' dragons had, and Tyler's intense emotions seemed to fade. *"For all we know, that kind of fear is what causes it."*

Tyler spoke in an uncharacteristically quiet voice. "I am just worried... what if it happens to me? What if I can't even recognize my own family anymore?"

"You are a soldier. You face death as part of that, do you not?"

"I do... but that's not as scary as the thought of losing myself."

"Hey!" shouted a voice from behind them, and Sophia turned her head as the others all looked to see Rick standing next to the truck with its door open. "Er, sorry to interrupt. But what's the hold-up?"

Tyler and Evelyn glanced at each other once again. "Dragon things," Tyler answered. "I think we are good to go. The stadium is just ahead."

Their arrival had not gone unnoticed – especially with Leaf Eater's flyover of the stadium. The immediate area around the entrance was clear of people, but many of the windows facing the street where the group was arriving had people watching their approach. All humans, Sophia noticed, but she could sense a dragon approaching them from around the side of the building. She was just starting to appreciate how big the building really was, as well as how many people were inside of it, now that she could see it up close.

Then Sophia felt a warning from Evelyn: danger, high place, people. Sophia looked up and saw that the very top of the building had a balcony, and there were humans up there too, with guns kind of like Rick's, and uniforms kind of like the police from the station they had slept at. Three, four, five... ten... twenty-four people were up there, all with guns pointed in the group's general direction, but weren't actively aiming with them. Yet, Evelyn didn't seem afraid of them, so Sophia ducked down behind her as much as she could, peering cautiously around the form of the bigger

dragon. Nicholas froze at the warning, only seeming to relax when Evelyn sent feelings of reassurance to all of them. Leaf Eater gave their weapons a wary glance, then turned her head to look at her broken scale. She felt upset about the damage done to her 'armor', yet even despite that, Sophia didn't feel any fear from Leafy, only a sense of caution.

"Allow me," Tyler murmured to Evelyn before stepping forward slowly, keeping his wings folded back and watching the people on the balcony as he did. "Greetings!" he called out in a more cordial tone, "We mean you no harm. We have sick and injured people with us, and we have heard they can receive help here."

One of the men rested his rifle on the edge of the railing at the edge of the roof, taking a more relaxed stance, as did many of the others around him. "Wait right there," he yelled down, pulling a walkie-talkie from his jacket. Sophia saw him push a button on the side, and could even hear him talking, but nobody responded to his request even after he repeated it twice more. With a sigh of frustration, the man muttered, "Useless things..." which she was surprised that she could hear, and he put the walkie-talkie away, leaning back over the edge of the balcony. "The radios aren't working. Just stay put and have anyone who needs medical attention come to the front."

"Thank you!" Tyler called back to the man, raising a wing and saluting with it, a motion that made Leaf Eater chuckle at the sight. The man called over one of the other guards and then sent them off, while Tyler turned around to order everyone who needed help up front, with Francisco repeating it in only slightly slurred Spanish afterwards. Tyler ushered Sophia, Nicholas and Leaf Eater out of the way as the humans with them came to the front, while the armed guards from Francisco's place stayed just behind them.

"Not more law-enforcers!" Francisco grumbled. *"I had hoped we had seen the last of them."*

"Hush," Evelyn urged him in response. *"We are finally here, and your injured friends will be displeased if you cause a scene. The law-enforcers are not looking for trouble."*

Francisco scraped a claw along the ground and muttered, *"It would be the first time I have ever seen that,"* but did not press the issue further.

Even though they weren't dragons, Sophia could tell just how much hope seemed to be filling the humans up at that moment. Little whispers of "Finally!" or "Just a little longer!" or bits of Spanish that she didn't understand, but certainly sounded hopeful in tone. Even though they were dirty and exhausted, they seemed relieved.

Before anyone returned, however, another dragon joined them. Rounding the corner of the street, they were wearing a big flag that had the humanitarian organization's logo on the front, tied around their neck like a handkerchief. Sophia giggled a little; it reminded her of the way people sometimes were drawn in cartoons at a restaurant when they were going to have a big meal, and she imagined the big dragon sitting at a fancy table being brought lots of food. Tyler seemed more surprised by the dragon's arrival, though Sophia could only tell from his scent.

"Hello!" the dragon called out to them as it approached. Strangely enough they still had a single patch of skin on just one shoulder; other than that, they were just as much of a dragon as the rest of them. The dragon's excitement was obvious, with its wings fanned out and its steps quick. *"I came as quickly as I could, but I had to take the long way around. Would I be correct in assuming you are the new arrivals I was just told to come see?"*

"We are, yes," Tyler answered.

Sophia was about to lean over to Leaf Eater to ask if this was a boy dragon or a girl dragon, but it occurred to her she had easier ways to ask, sending over some thoughts: the dragon she was looking at, followed by thoughts about Nicholas, Tyler, and Francisco, and then a questioning emotion. Then, herself, Sophia and Leaf Eater, then the questioning emotion again.

Leaf Eater's response was quite simple: thoughts of Nicholas, Tyler, and Francisco came back. So it was another boy dragon! Sophia inquired further with more questioning feelings, and Leaf Eater showed her brief mental images of wings. Thoughts of Nicholas, then his wings: big, broad, spreading out far when opened up. A momentary distraction as Leaf Eater

looked at Nicholas with other emotions coming over the link: she was impressed, admiring, and other strange emotions that were new to Sophia. They were still not answering her question though, and Sophia's annoyance got Leaf Eater back on track.

Leaf Eater continued, thinking 'over' Nicholas's embarrassed feelings from the emotions Leaf Eater had just broadcasted about him. This time it was a mental image of Leaf Eater's own wings: narrower and wider than Nicholas's. A memory of exhilarating speed came to Sophia. Then, Leaf Eater thought of Nicholas once more, though she was thinking of an entirely different dragon this time, one Sophia hadn't met. But that dragon, one with big wings like Nicholas's, was twisting and turning in the air, with much more control than Leaf Eater, who couldn't keep up.

Sophia understood: the wings were how you could tell boy and girl dragons apart. Leaf Eater also added something else about scent. It was an odd series of thoughts, communicating about a scent without smelling or talking about it, but somehow she understood: boy dragons and girl dragons smelled different, too. Sophia turned her attention back to the new dragon, expecting that she had missed some of the talking, but was surprised to notice the new dragon with the neck-flag was still walking towards them. All of the mind-speak had happened so fast!

"Good. I could sense you coming, but I could only detect two of you," the dragon told them, replying to Tyler in English with a slight accent Sophia wasn't familiar with. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm not," Tyler answered, shaking his head. "All the ones who need help are these people." He gestured with a forelimb towards the crowd of humans, who were keeping back from the new dragon.

"We'll do what we can, but we are running low on many things," the dragon told them regretfully.

Feeling curious, Sophia stepped around Evelyn to get a little closer. "*What is your name?*"

"Dr. Morrison, Family Medicine," he told her. "I was and still am an aid worker, though my role here has... changed, somewhat." He gave a look

down at one of his forelimbs, moving his head to the side and tilting it to do so, then raised his gaze back to Sophia. "And who might you be?"

"Sssoopphhhiaa!" Sophia replied cheerfully.

"Ah, still in the recovery period," Dr. Morrison mused.

"Recovery period?" Tyler repeated, tilting his head.

"Yes, after being... gifted, I suppose, with our new language, it takes some time to recover and speak your first language again. Without an endoscopic camera I can't begin to truly know what has changed within the throat, but the bloody ejection after gaining the ability to speak the dragon language seems to indicate it is a rather violent part of the transformation process. I have at least determined—"

Tyler cleared his throat, making a heavy rumbling sound, and the doctor stopped before inclining his head apologetically. "My apologies for rambling. Do understand, it's a rather exciting time for anyone in biological or medical sciences. As I was saying, there is a recovery period after a subject starts to speak the dragon language, and she seems to be progressing well. It's happened to everyone we've observed so far, myself included, but the exact time when it happens seems to have no pattern at all. Much like the changes themselves, they can be fast or slow, they can spread or just pop up where they want on the body, they can start and finish anywhere..."

"Doctor," Tyler interrupted politely.

"Oh! Sorry," the dragon said with a small bob of his head. "Can I help you, Mister...?"

"Sergeant Tyler Lewis, National Guard. Delta Company, 3rd Squadron, 95th Cavalry," Tyler announced, saluting with his wing once more. "Or at least, I used to be, I don't think they'll let dragons stay in the ranks."

"Your 'friends' in the National Guard need to get themselves over here," the doctor griped. "A-S-A-P, as you would say. We are critically low on a lot of medical supplies and we have several people in critical condition who need to be transported to a real medical facility."

Tyler seemed heavily uncertain all of a sudden, but he didn't respond to Sophia's mental inquiry. "You already mentioned your supply problems. We have a few things we might be able to give you in exchange for your help."

Dr. Morrison lifted his head confidently, his wings flaring a bit, and Sophia caught a prideful scent from him. "Sergeant, no matter how my body has changed, the oaths I swore remain in place. We will provide help to those who need it, and we do not need anything given 'in exchange'. ...that said, we would greatly appreciate any supplies you can spare, given the state of affairs."

"Understood. Do you need me to try and contact them for an airlift?"

"They already know," Dr. Morrison said dismissively. "But they're taking their sweet time getting here – on foot AND by air. Do you know anything about what's holding them up?"

"No," Tyler began, and Sophia frowned; she felt deception from him. He was lying! "I don't know—"

Before he could finish or Sophia could interrupt, he turned his head when the front doors of the stadium opened. An armed group emerged, and a man at the front began pointing down the road with one hand while waving with the other, calling out "This way, please!"

Dr. Morrison began to turn. "Let's talk later, Sergeant. First, we'd better get you all inside where it's safer. I must say, whichever one of you it was that flew over earlier caused a bit of a panic." He looked thoughtful for a moment and then craned his head forward, his nostrils flaring and his eyes darting over the group. "I believe it was... you, yes?" he deduced, looking directly at Leaf Eater.

She seemed quite pleased to be recognized and puffed her chest out a little. "*I am a graceful flier, am I not?*"

"Quite, and you cast rather a large shadow from that height," Dr. Morrison added with a touch of amusement.

"We were just scouting ahead," Tyler cut in, following Dr. Morrison as he began leading the way. Together they made their way around the stadium, escorted by the armed guards whose eyes scanned every side street and

window they went by. Sophia wondered where they were going, but her pondering was answered when they reached a huge side gate that led onto the playing field of the stadium itself. It was surrounded by guards and makeshift barricades on both sides, and some of the metal in the lower middle of the gate looked misshapen and weirdly colored, like when something got bent and then bent back and didn't look quite right.

The gate was opened for them, and they were led inside. Sophia gasped: she'd seen sports stadiums on the TV sometimes but had never been to one herself. It was huge! And there were people all over, not just the groups in the seats, but also on the grassy field itself, divided into rows of tents and tables like the group at the school had been. Or at least, she thought it was a grassy field: when she walked on it, it didn't quite feel right. Was it fake grass? It didn't smell like grass.

"Before we go any further, please take a moment to wash your hands, or front feet for my fellow Afflicted," Dr. Morrison instructed, approaching a big tub of soapy water. "Walking around through a city is hardly a hygienic experience." Sophia watched him sit on his haunches so he could dunk both hands into the tub, scrubbing them together. Some big towels with the football team's logo on them had been left on a rack next to the tub, and he used one of them to dry his hands before moving aside so that the others could take their turn. "For the humans, there are hand sanitizer dispensers over there," he added, pointing with his tail.

"Doctor," Evelyn cut in as she stepped aside to let Tyler go first, "Is there any way I can check if my family is here?"

He tilted his head to one side. "Yes, certainly. I can have the others look around. What are their names?"

"Joan Crane and Pascal Archambeau," Evelyn answered. It was an odd mix of emotions that Sophia could feel and smell coming from Evelyn, and she saw Dr. Morrison's nostrils flare, picking up the scents. Concern, worry, and anticipation. "They are my son and daughter, and should have some of my extended family with them."

"I will ask around once we are inside," Dr. Morrison reassured her.

Sophia waited behind Evelyn to wash her hands as Tyler finished and headed on ahead of them. Whatever soap they were using smelled kind of weird to her, and she stuck her tongue out with a 'blegh' as she washed. Leaf Eater came up behind her and leaned in close to the tub, tilting her head and muttering something about how the container was far too small to bathe in properly, before clumsily mimicking the motions the others had made as though they were unfamiliar to her. Sophia found it greatly amusing when, after that, Leaf Eater tried to wash her feet by raising one at a time, dunking it in the tub, and then scrubbing it with her tail.

Once they entered the field itself, Sophia was pleased to see some other dragons she had sensed, but soon felt very sad when she noticed they were all sick or hurt. And none of them were as changed as her group was. One had a scaled head and limbs but a misshapen human body. Another one was missing an arm completely, and the scaled stump where it had been offered no indication if it had always been that way. The last one reminded her of Nick, with a fully grown pair of wings on a body not strong enough to support them; the doctors had brought over some tables to rest the wings on so the person wouldn't be pinned down.

Worry crossed her mind as she looked over the sick dragons. Could she help them? Evelyn had told her to ask first... but she just wanted to make them feel better. It was okay to do the pain-eating thing, right? She sent a jumble of thoughts to Evelyn accompanied by a querying feeling, and though momentarily puzzled, Evelyn soon gave an affirmative thought back. Beaming and happy to help, Sophia reached out to the other dragons and, one by one, began fixing all their aches and pains for them – except for the last one, which Evelyn got to first. She sensed vague sensations of surprise and gratitude, and only felt happier with herself.

They were brought to a cluster of people wearing the humanitarian group's t-shirts if they weren't wearing medical masks and aprons. Dr. Morrison waved a wing at them and they waved back; they must have been friends of his, or at least Sophia assumed so.

"Please form a nice orderly line, and we'll take a look at you," Dr. Morrison told them in a friendly voice. "I may not be able to administer treatment

directly any more, but I can still advise and diagnose, sometimes even better than before."

Sophia felt curiosity from most of the other dragons as Dr. Morrison approached the humans they had brought along. Only Nicholas didn't share their interest, perhaps since he couldn't watch what was happening. He seemed distracted, his emotions complicated and some of them unrecognizable to Sophia, and though she kept her attention on the medical workers, she moved closer to Nicholas and leaned on his side. She smiled as she felt him grow content, stretching a wing over her body and holding her against him.

Whatever the medical workers were doing was beyond Sophia. She'd been to the doctor before, sure, but nobody got their tongue held down by a popsicle stick or had their knees hit with tiny hammers like she was expecting. Dr. Morrison stayed behind his friends, leaning over and giving advice here and there, but it involved a lot of big words that Sophia would have had trouble saying even before she was in the 'recovery period', as he had called it.

"Doctor," someone called out to Dr. Morrison after a time, hurrying over to him. Even though the aid worker, a woman with dreadlocks, tried to whisper to him, Sophia could still hear just fine. "Something strange is happening."

"What?" Dr. Morrison inquired.

"The Afflicted patients suddenly all reported that their pain has disappeared, all at the same time, just now."

Sophia saw Dr. Morrison turn his head, looking at her with one yellow eye, and she smiled happily. "Is that so?" he murmured to the aid worker, "That sounds like rather good fortune to me."

She reached out to him with her mind as well. He wasn't nearly as bad, but he seemed to have some sort of ongoing ache in his upper chest, and she waved at him with her tail as she fixed that for him too. It was getting easier every time she did it. He exhaled deeply, and looked back to the aid

worker. "Monitor them for now, but I don't think it's anything we need to worry about."

"Yes, Doctor," the worker replied, returning to their post. Dr. Morrison began to turn to Sophia, only for another commotion to break out.

"Wait, what?" Sophia suddenly heard someone roar out angrily, and tilted her head to listen, her ear-fins fanning out reflexively. "What do you mean you won't help her?"

It was James, who was aggressively approaching one of the doctors near him. Dr. Morrison was quick to step over and intervene, simply placing one large foreleg between James and the other doctors to stop him in his tracks. "What's going on here?"

"My wife's hurt too, she needs help!" James insisted.

The human doctor who had been talking to James held up his hands. "We don't have a lot of space or supplies left. We can only take people with life-threatening or seriously debilitating illnesses."

"So what, you're just going to do nothing?"

"That isn't what I'm saying!" the doctor insisted. "We can make sure her injury is healing properly, and isn't infected or in need of greater care. We can check the splint on her leg, and give her a proper crutch instead of her improvised one. All I am saying is that we do not have X-Ray equipment here, and we must ration painkillers for the more extreme cases."

"She's still hurting! Every night I have to listen to her in pain and it tears me up inside, not being able to help. Just give us something to help her!"

"James, let it go!" his wife called out, but he wasn't listening.

"Easy, Jimmy, easy," Rick chimed in from nearby.

"*Stop*," Evelyn cut in, loudly and firmly. Sophia felt Evelyn not just sending, but *pushing* emotions of restraint out to those around her – not even just the dragons in their network. Sophia understood what Evelyn was trying to do, and did the same, taking the... thought-feelings that Evelyn was emitting, and repeating the same signals but with more strength. Crackles

came from the radios the medical staff were carrying, and James went silent.

"The doctors are trying to help," Tyler stated, craning his neck over to join in on the conversation. "They have made you a perfectly reasonable offer. Let them do their job." Chastised, James turned away from the doctors and walked away, shaking his head, muttering something about taking orders from dragons.

"*Thank you,*" Dr. Morrison told Evelyn as his colleagues returned to work. "*You and the young one are definitely different from the other Children of the Egg.*"

"*So I have heard,*" Evelyn remarked glibly. "*That man is a stubborn-pack-beast to everyone. Do not let it bother you.*"

Dr. Morrison only chuckled, a deep rumbling sound. "*I have heard far worse and still given treatment,*" he said, "*I would help if we could spare the supplies.*"

"*Is there anything you still have a lot of?*" Evelyn inquired. "*We have a good amount of simple medicine that we... took. We will be sure to give it to you no matter what, but anything you can spare for us would be appreciated.*"

"*We are up to our ear-fins in blankets,*" he told her, wiggling his ear-fins up and down for emphasis as he gestured towards them with one wing. "*Your companions are welcome to take some with them for your travels.*"

"*We are not staying?*" Sophia asked, leaning forward a little, slightly startling Nicholas with her movement.

"*If you wish, you may stay overnight. I am not the only Child of the Egg here helping to keep this place safe from the looters and thieves that roam freely now. There should be plenty of space in the outermost concourse for you to take shelter in, with some others who are not receiving treatment. Even Tyler should be able to fit inside there. The field and stands are reserved for those who we are treating and their immediate families only.*"

"*I will talk it over with the others. Thank you,*" Evelyn answered, lowering her neck a little. "*You are doing good work here. I would offer for you to join us, but I imagine you would decline.*"

"You are correct. I will remain here until the bitter end," Dr. Morrison said firmly. *"Wherever you are going, I wish you good luck."*

Even with all of the space taken up by the tents and doctors and patients, the stadium was so big that more than half the field was still available. The healthy humans in their group took up a spot in the stands, where there were so many empty seats, Sophia didn't think she could possibly count them all. Yet she tried anyway, and found herself able to keep track of them all and count way faster and higher than she could before – so high, in fact, she didn't know the words. Six hundred... hundreds?

But no matter how many seats there were, they were way too small for her, so she and the other dragons instead took up an empty spot on the field, while Dr. Morrison went back to work. It was technically outside, and still a safe place to relax a little while the doctors checked out the sick and injured people that had been following them.

Leaf Eater seemed to find the place fascinating, wedging her snout against the fake grass and sniffing, then pawing at it with one front foot a bit.

"What a strange place," she eventually said before sitting down like how dogs did. *"What is the purpose of it?"*

"What is she saying?" Nicholas asked Tyler.

Tyler gave her a curious look before replying to Nicholas's question. "She wants to know what the stadium is for." Turning his head back to Leaf Eater, he then answered, "Humans play games here."

"What kind of games?" Leaf Eater inquired.

"There are two teams, and one ball. Each team tries to take possession of the ball, and bring it to the other end of the field." He raised a foreleg to point at one end of the field, where a team logo was painted onto the fake grass.

"That seems easy, just fly there."

"Humans can't fly," Tyler reminded her.

"Oh, yes," she said absently. *"But then they could just throw it."*

"You are allowed to throw the ball, but humans can't throw it the entire length of the field, and someone is required to catch it. Or the other team might catch it in mid-air."

"Hmm! I see. You must observe many threats at the same time, and not act recklessly, or your prize gets away from you. It is like hunting!"

"That is... one way to think of it, I suppose," Tyler murmured. Glancing to Nicholas, he quietly added, "She thinks football is like hunting."

"Could we play the game?" Leaf Eater asked, leaving Nicholas feeling confused and puzzled at her comparison.

"It's... not really made for dragons," Tyler replied, trying to contain his amusement at the idea that his scent nonetheless conveyed. Sophia let out a giggle, too, trying to imagine what Leaf Eater would look like wearing a football helmet. "And besides, there are people on the field."

"There is still a lot of space. Well, if we cannot play, you should at least practice flying. You are all still beginners!"

"Let us not," Evelyn cut in sharply, stifling Sophia's momentary excitement at the chance to fly. *"We do not want to have any accidents with the humans that are here."*

Leaf Eater gave a disappointed noise and scent, her ear-fins and spinal fin flattening a bit. *"Very well. But I am going to fly, and you can watch me,"* she declared, turning around before anyone could protest and launching herself up into the air.

Sophia did watch, and very closely. The way Leaf Eater crouched down before she took off, how she spread out her wings and pulled her legs up close to her underside – there seemed to be a lot of little tricks. She looked very graceful too, clearly an expert flier, and Sophia felt jealous. She wanted to fly too! But at the mere thought of it, Evelyn looked over to her and shook her head, sending a strong negative feeling over the mental link, so Sophia sat back down grumpily to watch Leaf Eater.

"Is she okay?" Nicholas asked, tilting his head and fanning his ear-fins out to listen to Leaf Eater as she circled the inside of the stadium.

"She's fine," Tyler replied, "But she's causing a bit of a panic. The doctors and patients are all watching her."

"Yyooouurr ggiirrllffrriieenndd iiss qquuiittee ssoommmeetthhiinnngg," Francisco teased from behind Nicholas.

"She's not my girlfriend!" Nicholas insisted, his embarrassment obvious from both scent and the emotions Sophia could sense.

"Sshhee sseeemmss too tthhiinnkk sshhee iiss!"

Leaf Eater flew a circuit around the inside of the stadium before coming back to them and flying past, heading for the big goalposts at their end of the field. A moment too late, Evelyn saw what Leaf Eater was trying to do and sent her a mental command to stop. Leaf Eater lowered her legs and landed on the goalposts, trying to perch on them, but they weren't made to take so much weight and buckled beneath her.

Leaf Eater gave a startled cry, a spike of surprise and panic surging through the mental link, as she tipped over with the collapsing goalposts, spreading her wings out to try and keep balance. Both she and the posts came crashing down onto the field, making a tremendous racket, and she leaned forward and held out her front legs so that she landed on all fours.

The noise startled Nicholas, who jumped backwards and nearly knocked over Francisco. "Leaf!" he called out in worry, over the other dragon's frustrated cry of "*Be careful!*"

"*I am fine!*" Leaf Eater called back, though Sophia already knew that since she couldn't feel any pain from Leaf Eater. "*This metal tree was not as strong as I thought!*"

"*It is not a tree!*" Evelyn called out, "*And this is why I did not want you to fly around. You are lucky that no one else was nearby!*"

Leaf Eater walked back towards Evelyn, her head held low and her ear-fins drooping. "*You are right. I am sorry, Little Star. I should have listened to you.*"

"*You have scared the two-legs,*" Evelyn added. Sophia looked over towards the tents; everyone was watching them now, and she could see Dr.

Morrison bounding over as well, crossing the field way faster than any human could have.

"*Oh no! I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten them!*" Leaf Eater said apologetically, lowering her head further.

"*Just stay still and do not cause more trouble,*" Evelyn grumbled. Sophia felt bad for Leaf Eater, but she had done a bad thing. And Evelyn was being much nicer than her mom ever had been. She hadn't beaten or threatened Leaf Eater at all, just scolded her.

"Is anyone hurt?" Dr. Morrison called out as he reached the group.

"Just her pride," Tyler joked. "We're awfully sorry about that, Doctor."

"*Yes, we are,*" Evelyn agreed pointedly. "*Is that not right, Leaf Eater?*" She gave Leaf Eater a mental nudge that Sophia could feel too, and Leaf Eater looked apologetically at Dr. Morrison.

"*Yes! I am sorry. I did not mean to scare anyone or damage anything.*"

He relaxed a little. "Good. I am relieved that no one is injured. Please be careful, we are very heavy and not many things are made to support our weight."

"*I am hurt!*" Leaf Eater corrected him, and Sophia felt confusion that was echoed by the others in their mental link. Leaf Eater turned to show her side to Dr. Morrison, pointing with her tail-tip to the broken scale on her flank. "*Look! The two-legs did this to me earlier!*"

With a curious look and a fascinated scent, Dr. Morrison approached her slowly, giving the other dragons nearby time to move out of the way for him. "*I see. One of your scales is broken. I do not see or smell any blood, but the hide underneath is exposed. It is so dark that I cannot tell if it is bruised.*" Gently, he raised one foreleg and pressed a knuckle against it. "*Does it hurt when I do this?*"

"No," Leaf Eater answered proudly. "*The two-legs cannot harm me that easily, even with their explosion-projectile-weapons. But they have damaged my armor!*"

"Intriguing," Dr. Morrison mumbled quietly to himself. "It doesn't look like it was penetrated. It must be quite strong to withstand an impact like that. I wonder if..." He gently reached out with one claw and slipped it underneath the scale, only to be surprised when the whole thing fell off and onto the fake grass. "Oh! I'm sorry," he apologized, but Leaf Eater didn't seem terribly bothered.

"It was broken. This way it can grow back, and stronger," she asserted.

Delicately, he picked up the broken scale and held it close to one eye, tilting and turning the scale around to inspect it. "Fascinating..." he murmured, then turned his attention back to Leaf Eater. *"Wait here. I will get some supplies and tend to you. I do not know exactly how to tend to lost scales, but I will do my best."*

He inclined his head towards her before heading back towards the tents. Sophia could feel Nicholas asking Leaf Eater if she was okay over the mental link, and she seemed quite sure that she was fine. Sophia leaned in to get a better look at where Leaf Eater's scale had been: underneath was just rough black skin, like the kind Sophia had grown before the scales. Dr. Morrison was quick to return, pushing along what looked like a janitor's cart that had been repurposed to instead carry medical supplies. He was accompanied by a fairly young brown-skinned man wearing a face mask, who looked quite nervous to be around so many dragons at once from the way he glanced around at them.

"Fortunately for you, I have done a little bit of experimentation here and there to find out what is safe to use on dragons and what is not," Dr. Morrison mused as he pulled the cart up alongside Leaf Eater. "Though I am playing it safe whenever possible. I have not, for instance, tried to determine which painkillers are safe to use, since while the worst reaction I have seen from a disinfectant is a rash, trying to get the dosage right on painkillers is another matter entirely, and if there is any sort of severe reaction it would be difficult—"

"Doctor," Tyler interrupted.

"Ah. Yes. Rahul, soak a cloth in disinfectant for me please," he instructed, waiting for his human assistant to perform the task. Sophia knew what

disinfectant was, though she had no idea how to spell it.

All of the bottles and boxes on the cart were far too small for Dr. Morrison to use himself, so his assistant took out and prepared things for Dr. Morrison to make use of instead. Leaf Eater kept still but curled her long neck around to watch, and Sophia leaned in too, curious about what he was going to do.

First, he wiped her exposed hide with the disinfectant-soaked cloth, then took wads of white stuff from the assistant. It kind of looked like cotton balls, but there was way more of it than that. Then he took strips of a sort of meshy white fabric, before taping them in place with big clear strips of tape that the assistant measured and cut. *"How did this happen, by the way?"* he asked idly as he applied the last of the three strips, pressing it down with his knuckles.

"It was close to the big river-crossing," Leaf Eater told him. *"I was atop a look-out point, keeping a watchful eye out for danger. As I was investigating a strange disturbance nearby, I was violently attacked by some distant foe, too cowardly to face me directly! Despite such a craven strike, it did not break through my armor. But our foes revealed themselves with the noise they made, and so I was the only one who was hit, as the others moved to a safe place where I could rejoin them and proceed. Though my armor held, it was damaged and must be given time to repair itself."*

With a smirk, Dr. Morrison turned his head towards Tyler. "Is that what happened, Sergeant?"

"More or less, yes," Tyler replied with a little chuckle. "Just... embellished, slightly. She was standing on top of a building and was shot. A seven-six-two round, I'm guessing."

"I'm a family doctor, Sergeant, not a combat medic. Is that some sort of rifle round?"

"Yes, Doctor," Tyler confirmed.

"Well, this should at least keep the area clean until your scale grows back," Dr. Morrison told Leaf Eater, "Assuming that they do... I haven't yet seen it,

but it has been barely a week. For all I know, in a couple of months we will be molting all of our scales for a fresh coat!"

Leaf Eater moved her head closer to inspect Dr. Morrison's work, keeping one eye close to it, nostrils flaring as she sniffed at it. *"Yes! This will protect me while I heal. Thank you, Scale Patcher!"*

"Scale... Patcher?" Dr. Morrison asked, tilting his head to one side in bemusement.

Leaf Eater gave him a nod, as if the name needed no explanation. *"I will return to seek your services if the two-legs injure me again."*

"Well, I am glad to have been of service," he replied, before switching back to English. "Does anyone else need my help while I am here?"

Evelyn seemed thoughtful for a moment before she spoke. *"I am not injured, strictly speaking, but I would still like your advice."*

Dr. Morrison turned to her, taking a moment to dismiss his assistant, who seemed relieved to be able to stop being surrounded by dragons on all sides. *"Of course. How may I help?"*

"Prior to coming here I was staying at... an end-of-life-resting-place. I had cell-growth-disease, and I was not supposed to live much longer. Yet here I am, and I feel better than I ever have."

Dr. Morrison looked and smelled puzzled for a moment. "...do you mean cancer?" he guessed in English after a moment.

"Yes," Evelyn replied with a nod. *"It was..."* She trailed off as he leaned in towards her, holding up one wing as he sniffed closely. *"What are—"*

"Quiet, please, let me focus," he insisted. He moved his head along her body and up to her head, then withdrew and sat back. *"Apologies, but I have found that I am able to use my enhanced senses post-transformation as a better means to detect certain ailments. And, quite relevantly, I have already learned that cell-growth-disease has a very particular scent."*

"I see. And...?" Evelyn asked expectantly.

"As far as I can tell, you are free of the cell-growth-disease," he declared, causing a scent of relief from Evelyn to wash over the rest of them. "I would recommend that you get a more scientific diagnosis at some point, though I understand that that is not very easy at the moment."

"I will be sure to check in at the first Children of the Egg hospital that I can find," Evelyn remarked glibly. "Regardless, thank you. It is a great weight off my mind to know that. I have been unsure if this transformation was merely delaying the inevitable. Before all this began I had already made peace with the idea that any night I went to bed, I might not wake up in the morning, and still suspected it as we have been traveling. But now... knowing that I am no longer living on borrowed time, it opens up many possibilities."

"It was a pleasure to be of service," Dr. Morrison told her with a bob of his head. "By the way, I have put in the inquiry about your family, but have not received an answer yet. Now, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Evelyn replied, slightly surprised.

"Before this, I was talking with the Children over there," he said, indicating the half-transformed dragons with his tail. "Those who are currently conscious, at least. I do not wish to risk the use of normal anesthetics but I have found that alcohol is a somewhat potent soporific for us, and so with judicious use of alcohol-soaked cloths I..." Evelyn narrowed her eyes and gave him a firm stare, emitting an impatient scent. "Apologies. The point is that they seem to be of the opinion that you and the other Matriarch are the ones responsible for relieving them of their pain."

"Most of the credit for that must go to Ssssooppphhhiiiiiaaa," Evelyn informed him, which Sophia took as her cue to cut in.

"I can make the hurt go away!" she declared proudly. "I steal it and eat it! Then they do not hurt any more. I have done it to the others but I cannot do it to myself. But Eeeevvvvlllnnnn can do it too!"

"Thank you, Matriarch," Dr. Morrison told her cordially. "How long does it last for?"

"Um... I do not know," Sophia admitted sheepishly.

"I am not sure either," Evelyn added. "I think it is indefinite while we are present, but if we get too far away...? I cannot say for sure."

"That does present quite a conundrum," he mused. "For they have been suffering greatly due to my inability to give them any sort of sophisticated pain medication. I reserve the alcohol for only the most painful moments so that it will not have adverse long-term effects. Your presence will help them greatly."

"We cannot stay here for long," Evelyn told him regretfully.

"Why not?"

"I am looking for my family. They are still in this city somewhere, I am sure of it."

"And I'd rather not be here when the National Guard arrives," Tyler muttered. "That would not be a happy reunion."

"Not all of us have somewhere to go back to, either," Evelyn added, and Sophia saw her look back towards her and Nicholas. "We will rest here overnight, so they will hopefully at least get a good night's sleep. And bringing them with us will present great difficulty."

"Yes, they are in no shape to move, even with their pain addressed," Dr. Morrison concurred. "The complications in their transformations mean that they should remain under medical supervision. Most of them have family here as well, who are either supporting them or who also need our assistance. Some of those who have recovered somewhat may be able to go with you, but the Children of the Egg under our care are not among that number."

"Then I am afraid we will have to leave them here. We will do what we can to help as long as we are around, but after that, we will have to see how long it lasts."

"Yeah!" Sophia agreed, "I want to help them! I will eat allllllllll their pain away."

"I understand." He bowed his head to her a little. "I will tell them that it is only temporary. Thank you in any case – any relief for them is a welcome

relief."

"Of course," Evelyn replied. "I hope they recover swiftly."

Sophia hadn't realized that she was going to be saying good-bye to most of the people that had been traveling with them. It only dawned on her when the doctors finished their work and the dragons were directed to head to a different area – the 'concourse' they called it – and some of the humans came by to say goodbye. Amar in particular had been extremely grateful, approaching Evelyn to thank her profusely. Sophia had waved sadly at them with one wing; she didn't know most of them very well, but she had just been starting to get used to them being around.

But at least she and Nicholas still had her new family. Tyler had been able to fit into the covered concourse, though he had to keep his wings folded closely to avoid catching them on support pillars. After parking and securing the truck as close as they could in the parking garage, the remaining members of their group gathered together. Rick's family, James's family, and the armed members of Francisco's group were still with them, even if James seemed to be spending most of his time moping and grumbling. Unfortunately, Dr. Morrison had eventually returned to them to tell Evelyn that her family was not present at the stadium. Though she hadn't said anything beyond a simple "Thank you for looking," Sophia could feel her disappointment.

Tyler had overseen giving Dr. Morrison and his friends most of the medical supplies they'd taken from the 'hole-sailor' store. Gratefully, Dr. Morrison had given them some blankets for the humans still with them, and they had been allowed to roam most of the stadium interior to rest and refill as many water containers as they could manage in the bathrooms and kitchens there. Although the long lines of concession stands were largely abandoned, they were still operational. None of the dragons could possibly squeeze into the enclosed spaces there, but Rick was able to get in and make use of the cooking surfaces to grill some hotdogs, bringing the first one to Tyler. To the huge dragon, it was barely a morsel, so he wrapped his tongue around it to pull it from the tongs Rick was holding, surprising him,

and tugged it into his mouth to savor the taste for longer before swallowing. The rest of the meal had to come from their own supplies, but it was much easier to use the concession stand's cooking surfaces than the portable cooking stoves.

Sophia was just glad to rest after so much time spent walking, though. And flying, and swimming. As much as she wanted Leaf Eater to teach her how to fly more, she was tired.

"If I'd known you liked hotdogs so much, I would've brought some from the store you were holed up in," Rick told Tyler as he took a shank of cooked meat off the stove, holding it out on the end of the big two-pronged fork he had stuck it with over the counter of the concession stand. Sophia had wanted popcorn, but Evelyn had insisted she needed a 'real meal'.

"You wouldn't have found any, but thanks," Tyler replied. Reaching out with his tail, he curled the tip around the handle of the fork to take it from Rick; he had tried earlier to use his hands but it had been too difficult for him. Bringing it to his mouth, Tyler pulled the shank off the fork and began devouring it, casually moving his tail back to return the serving fork to Rick.

"Why not? ...oh, you ate them all before we got there, didn't you?"

"Mm-hmm," Tyler confirmed. The meat didn't last long to the dragon's massive jaws and appetite, crunching through the bones with ease. After running his tongue over his lips – or at least, where they would be if he still had them – he continued, "You'll never get real beef hotdogs in an MRE package. We sometimes call them 'Meal Rejected by the Enemy' for a reason."

Rick laughed and walked out from behind the counter towards where Tyler's harness was lying in a pile on the ground nearby to fish another haunch of meat out from it. Some padding had been incorporated into its design, but it still wasn't comfortable to wear, so he had taken it off; Sophia had heard him grumble about it tugging on his scales and pressing his spinal fin down against his back.

"I'll do yours next," Rick told Francisco, pointing to him with the big fork. "I can't hold up to your mother's cooking, but it'll do."

"*Graaacciaaass*," Francisco replied with a bob of his head. Sophia felt proud of herself for understanding that that meant 'thank you', and the end of her tail wagged a bit.

"So what's your plan? Gonna head back with the others now that your friends are safe?" Rick asked, cutting open the plastic-wrapped meat.

Francisco shook his head. "Nnooo," he began, before glancing to Tyler, who nodded. "*Tell him I will be staying with you.*"

"He'll be staying with us," Tyler translated.

Sophia already knew, but she was happy to be reminded, and Francisco gave her a pleased look as he felt her emotions.

"Really?"

"Yes, we talked it over while you were in the stadium. José wants to know if the National Park really is a safe place or not. Hopefully Francisco will be able to fly by the time we get there, so he can head back quickly to deliver the news."

"If only Joosée or Paaloomaa were in the constellation, I could talk to them from far away!"

"I sure hope it's real," Rick said, starting to cook the meat, the sizzling sound and aroma making Nicholas in particular hungrier, something Sophia picked up on easily. "It's not safe here in the city. I could split off from you and head home, but I think it's best if we take our chances outside, at least for now."

"Of course it is real. I have seen it," Leaf Eater boasted. Craning her neck over towards Nicholas and sticking her muzzle underneath his chin, she went on, *"Our haven is so much nicer than this gray, ugly place! Everything here is so small, but at the haven, there are many good places that we can settle down, build a nest, keep our eggs warm, and raise our hatchlings."*

Tyler and Evelyn coughed, while Francisco laughed at that remark, but Sophia didn't understand what was so funny about it. Warming eggs? Weren't you meant to keep them in a fridge?

"Uh... what did she say?" Nicholas asked, worried at all the conflicting emotions he was feeling from the others.

"She's, uh," Tyler murmured, "I think she likes you. A lot. She's talking about hatchlings."

"Oh," Nicholas said, and Sophia felt understanding from him. At least someone understood what that meant. Then, suddenly, he bloomed with embarrassment. "Oh," he repeated, more quietly. "L-Leaf, I'm not... we're not... I..."

"I know you are not ready yet," she crooned to him, stretching a wing over his body that Sophia shoved away with one of her own. Undaunted, she continued, "We must find a safe place for all the Children to spread their wings before bringing more into the world."

Evelyn's bemusement was replaced by pondering. *"I had not even thought of such a thing. But unless more people continue to turn into dragons, then we must continue to multiply like any other creature would."* Her thoughtfulness only intensified as she mused quietly, *"Perhaps even I could have more children in this new body...?"*

"You are a very lucky drake, Niichoollaas!" Francisco teased.

Nicholas lowered his head, pulling one wing over it to hide himself. *"I wonder,"* Evelyn continued thinking aloud, *"Do we lay eggs, now? That must be a lot easier than a live birth."*

"What a silly question!" Leaf Eater dismissed. *"You are a Child of the Egg! You should know that we lay eggs."* Leaning over, she pressed her muzzle against the base of the wing that Nicholas had spread over himself. *"And I am sure a strong and handsome drake like my Tree Nuzzler will be sure to give me a clutch of eggs with hard shells, holding beautiful and strong hatchlings!"*

Sophia had no idea why her brother was acting the way he was, more ashamed than he had ever been before; everything that was going on was intensely confusing to her. Sophia had only had scrambled eggs once in a while, but Leaf Eater must have really loved eggs to go on about them so much. But even if she didn't understand why, she did understand that her

brother felt bad in some way, so she stretched a wing over Nicholas's body protectively. "*Leave Nniicckk alone!*" she hissed at Leaf Eater.

"The poor kid's about to die of embarrassment," Tyler agreed.

Leaf Eater glanced towards Nicholas, and Sophia detected a brief bit of mind-speak between them: an apologetic feeling from Leafy, then Nick broadcasting his flustered feelings more, then Leafy sending a feeling of regret. She placed one forelimb over his as she sat next to him and said, "*We will discuss it another time,*" before bending her neck around to peer at the broken scale on her side. "*I must grow stronger first regardless.*"

"Mr. Lewis?" Nicholas asked from under his wing.

"What is it?"

"Please don't translate whatever it was she was saying to me."

Tyler gave a deep chuckle. "I think the sooner we change the subject, the better."

"Yeah," Rick muttered in agreement, turning over the meat he was busy cooking, "I don't think I want to know."

Chapter 19

Gunfire. Screams – Sophia's screams. They came from all around Nicholas, yet whenever he turned his head they sounded like they came from somewhere different.

He tried to call out for her, but no words came from his mouth. He tried to move, but he was stuck. He had to find Sophia. He had to help her!

His father's voice came from behind him, indistinct yet angry. Rising at the end, just like it did whenever Nicholas was about to take a hit from the belt. He braced for an impact that never came.

The panic of his nightmare dissipated into nothing. He was aware of a presence like Evelyn or Sophia's but so much greater and more powerful, and though he couldn't see it, its light upon his body felt somehow cold. It was an entity in his mind unlike anyone else's, though bearing a passing resemblance to Leaf Eater's. But it wasn't her. He couldn't feel her, or any of the other dragons. This was something more, greater, far more powerful.

And he was the center of its attention.

The full weight of its mental presence pressed down on him, and Nicholas could do nothing. Helplessness filled him. Was this it for him? He just wanted Sophia to be safe...

Then, he heard something. A message. In a completely different language, yet perfectly understandable to him:

"Welcome, Child of the Egg."

Nicholas still could not move – until, suddenly, the presence vanished, and he found himself thrashing against the floor of the concourse, held down by someone's bigger and stronger limbs. Multiple people were calling his name – Tyler's English "Nicholas!" was recognizable enough, as well as the "Nniickk!" from Sophia, some slurred Spanish word he didn't know from Francisco, and "Nnicchhoollaass!" from Evelyn.

And a "*Tree Nuzzler!*" from a voice he did not recognize at all – yet it had to be Leaf Eater, speaking with the dragon tongue that he now could

comprehend: all those growls, chirps, whistles and other noises suddenly had meaning to him. He tried to speak, but could only rasp hoarsely, suddenly coughing violently and wetly, his throat feeling like it was burning from within until Sophia did something to make the pain disappear. The smell of blood hit his nose and its metallic taste crossed his tongue as he gasped for breath, the air around him saturated with the scent of worry from his companions.

Their attention was chaotic. Francisco was no longer calling out for him vocally, yet Nicholas felt his concern across the mental link all the same, mixed with that of all the other dragons: Sophia's fear, Evelyn's sympathy, and a deeply protective worry from Leaf Eater. Though he could not feel Tyler's concern, he could smell it plain enough in the cloud of emotion-scents around him.

His body writhed of its own accord; it was not him consciously making those movements. With some effort he forced himself to be still, his whole body tense until he was able to relax it. "*I am all right*," he gasped out, words in a language he had not known yesterday spilling from his mouth as fluently as if he had known it all his life. He could not form English words, but his thoughts simply translated themselves into the dragons' language – his language, now – and they left his mouth as a burst of inhuman noises.

"Deep breaths," Tyler instructed him. Of all the mental presences crowding to try and aid him, Evelyn's and Sophia's felt the most comforting, his leftover fear and panic evaporating. Shaking his head, Nicholas opened his eyes, but he still could not see anything, so he closed them once again. He coughed up more blood, gasping for breath, and swallowed heavily as he slowly recovered from whatever changes had gone on within him.

Someone was nosing at the side of his head – Sophia, judging by her size and that it was almost certainly Leaf Eater who was pressing her snout against the base of one of his wings. "*Nestmate?*"

Nicholas took a heavy breath. "*I... I can understand you now. Can you understand me?*"

"*Yes! I was wondering if you were ever going to learn to talk like a Child of the Egg.*"

Fumbling, Nicholas stretched out a wing and wrapped it around Sophia's body. *"I am so happy to hear you again,"* Nicholas told her quietly. It was barely a few words in the dragon tongue, each one laden with meaning and emotion. Her words, and his, carried undertones of relief and love, expressed in the background of the words themselves – such a complex language, and yet he understood and used it perfectly. *"I missed being able to talk to you. Things are as they should be again."*

"Nicholas," Tyler called out, and Nicholas felt a huge forelimb shake his flank. "Remember who you are."

"Leave him be!" Evelyn cut in angrily.

"I just don't want to risk him being lost," Tyler murmured. Nicholas could smell a combination of uneasiness and fear from him.

Nicholas, still a little dazed, tried to send a silent mental thanks to Tyler, but he was not in Evelyn's network, so it did not reach him. *"I... I will be fine,"* he began, and tried to say Tyler's name, producing no sound. But he knew it was possible; other dragons could do it. He tensed parts of his long neck and tried to make sound, eventually finding a way to wrest a barely-intelligible "Ttttyyyyrrrr" from his... not his throat, but somewhere further down. Some sound-producing organ that two-legged creat... no, that *humans* did not have. And that he had no familiarity with, causing his words to come out slowly and slurred as he fought with his body to make sounds it wasn't designed to. He didn't even have to move his mouth or tongue to form those sounds, which made the experience even more alien. He didn't move or sound or sense like a human any more, and it was starting to creep into his thoughts.

Tyler's concern was perhaps not completely unfounded. Taking a deep breath, Nicholas spoke again with great difficulty.

"NnnniiiccchhhoooooIIlaaaaass Jjaaaaaacccckkkksssoooooonnn," he struggled to say, inhaling again before continuing. *"Seventeen, turning eighteen later this year."*

"And your family?" Tyler pressed.

"Ssssoooopppphhhiiiiiaaaa, *my junior nestmate, who is five years old. And...*" Nicholas hesitated. He didn't want to remember. He had mostly forgotten. All the pain and trauma pushed into the dark recesses of his mind as a way to cope with it, but it came flooding back. All the shouting from both parents, the beatings his mother dealt with kitchen implements and the lashings his father gave him with his belt. The emotional pain he felt every time he couldn't spare Sophia from a similar treatment, having to listen to her cry. The absolute agony of the cattle prod his father had begun using on him, to the point where he had blacked out from it on more than one occasion...

He almost felt like he was falling, and he swayed on his feet. Those cruelties were not something Children did to one another. The inflicting of such needless suffering was entirely the domain of the two-legs. Children of the Egg had to eat and consume as all living things do, but they were skilled hunters who brought a swift and merciful end to their hunts for food. They did not hurt others for their own sadistic enjoyment. The very concept of such things was itself an alien thought, something that did not belong in a Child of the Egg's head. He was not like that, he was better than that, he had never wanted to hurt anyone and never wanted anyone around him to be hurt, he was not like that, he was better than that, he was a Child of—

Nicholas snapped back to awareness with the others crowding around him and filling his head with concern once again. A moment ago he had been all but lost in the black depths of painful memories, but Evelyn and Sophia's presence in his mind acted like... shields, almost. Taking heavy breaths, Nicholas tried to focus on himself, understanding now exactly why Tyler had been so worried about him. For a moment he really had felt like he was losing his very sense of self, and even if he felt somewhat grounded once again, who knew when it might happen a second time? He panted, aware of Leaf Eater pressing herself tightly against him, yet with none of her usual amorous interest; instead, only a protective anger exuded from her mind, his nostrils filled with a similarly defensive smell from her.

"*What was that?*" she asked him. None of her usual playfulness or levity was in her scent or her emotions. "*You have memories of pain. So many. So*

much. I..." a shudder ran through her, both physically and mentally; her emotions became an unreadable mess for a second. *"My love, who hurt you?"*

Had she not seemed so uncharacteristically serious, Nicholas would have corrected her on how she addressed him. He felt claustrophobic with his body pressed up against Evelyn's side where he had been trying to sleep, and now with Leaf Eater sprawled on top of him, her limbs and wings stretched out protectively while Sophia grumbled jealously but didn't interrupt. *"My... my parents,"* Nicholas answered after a moment, trying to wriggle free to no avail. He felt trapped, and being unable to move freely bothered him. But was that from the human part of his mind, or the dragon part?

She hissed in anger, and he felt her shift about on top of him. *"These scars on your back. They did this?"*

"Scars...?" he wondered. On his back? It had to be from being hit with the belt. Or maybe it was from the cattle prod. A memory of sudden pain flashed across his mind, and by extension, everyone but Tyler's too.

Her weight suddenly left his body. *"Where are they?"* Leaf Eater demanded angrily. She burned with fury, emitting an almost overpowering scent of ozone. *"They hurt you. I will make sure they never hurt you again. They must not harm a Child of the Egg. They must not harm my love!"*

Nicholas managed to roll onto his front, on the concrete. The blanket he had been sleeping on was not underneath him; he must have knocked it aside during his thrashing. The coldness of the concrete was almost soothing in a way, but its hard, rough surface most certainly wasn't.

"Settle down," Evelyn insisted, pushing a sense of peace into the minds around her. Nicholas could no longer hear Leaf Eater's talons scraping against the concrete from her motions, but she was still smoldering with barely-restrained anger.

"They..." Nicholas began. He had to tell the truth. She would surely know if he didn't, anyway. *"They are dead."*

He didn't want to expose what Evelyn had done. It had been self-defense, for one thing, and he had no love lost for his parents after what they had done to him and Sophia. And she had been so good to them both since then, caring for and guiding them; her tone could be harsh sometimes but she never treated them with malice. Yet his very concern for her gave her away regardless, as Leaf Eater picked up on his thoughts about Evelyn, and she demanded of the older dragon, "*What do you know of them?*"

"*I killed them,*" Evelyn said flatly.

"You what?" Tyler blurted out.

"*You killed someone?*" Francisco asked at almost the same time, yet Nicholas heard them both clearly. Whereas Tyler's tone was a mix of shock and indignation, Francisco seemed only surprised, perhaps astounded or maybe even impressed that someone Evelyn's age could kill anyone.

"*Let me speak,*" Evelyn insisted, forcing... no, not forcing, merely imploring the others to remain still with her command. "*It was almost a week ago. I was still mostly a two-legs, but this thing came in first.*" Nicholas heard her tail thump against the ground, with less force than when she usually slammed it down for emphasis, perhaps to avoid making noise. What time even was it? In the shelter of the stadium concourse, he couldn't begin to guess; the cover overhead blocked the sun, so he could not judge time by its warmth on his body as he usually did. And the air was cool, but for all he knew the space they were in was air-conditioned. "*My Matriarch powers must have been developing even then, for I could sense Ssoopphhiiaa and heard... well, understood her plea for help in some way, and I knew where she was. I tried to climb over a wood-wall but it collapsed under my weight and got the attention of the property owners. We argued. I wanted to take Ssoopphhiiaa – I did not know that Nniicchhoollaass was there at first. They shot at me and hit my arm. I ducked down behind a small-metal-vehicle to protect myself. Then they hit a gas-cylinder, and it exploded – that is how my leg got injured.*"

"*All of those scars on your leg...*" Leaf Eater mused.

"*Yes. I could not walk on it until it transformed. I had had enough. I struck the small-metal-vehicle with my tail, hoping to make them run off, but I*

underestimated the strength of my tail. It hit them both and killed them." There was a brief pause, but Nicholas could feel Evelyn's stern resolve. *"I was defending myself and their deaths were not intentional, but having learned how they treated their own children, I do not regret what I did. Surely a soldier like you is not going to balk at having to kill in self-defense?"*

Another pause. Likely waiting for Tyler, but Nicholas couldn't read him any more than his pensive scent. "Sophia?" Tyler asked. "How do you feel about what Evelyn did to your parents?"

There was a spike of anger and sadness from her that would have answered Tyler's question well enough if he had been able to feel it. *"They were bad people,"* Sophia told him. *"And now they cannot hurt me or Nniicckk ever again."*

Tyler still seemed uncertain, or at least his scent did. "Nicholas?" he asked bluntly.

Nicholas took a moment to consider his words. *"Their deaths did not sadden me,"* he replied. *"If Eeeeevvvvveeeellllyynnnnn had not shown up, I might have died instead. I do not want to think about how much that would have hurt Sophia."*

Sophia whimpered softly as Nicholas felt more sadness and grief from her. *"I heard my mother say she wanted to make us fight! I do not want to fight Nniicckk!"* she moaned out, and Nicholas stretched out a wing blindly, trying to reach her and comfort her with it even as he tried to do the same with his emotions across their mental link.

Leaf Eater's anger had been tempered, but was still present. Nicholas heard a thump that he thought was Evelyn's tail, but it came from where he had last heard Leaf Eater, so it must have been her instead. Was she mimicking Evelyn's behavior? *"She did her duty as a Matriarch well if she protected others from those who would hurt them. I only regret that I am not the one who could put an end to those who hurt Tree Nuzzler and Great Mother."*

Tyler gave a long exhale. "But now these two have no parents. You have robbed them of that. I can't bear the thought of my daughter potentially having to grow up without me. I can't imagine inflicting that on someone else."

"You are a better father than theirs was," Evelyn pointed out. "Not that that is a terribly difficult task to accomplish. Having raised two children of my own and helped with their children too, I can tell you care for your own a great deal. Yet, not every parent is like that. A loving home was never on the table for those two."

With a deep rumble, Tyler finally gave in. "I suppose that is true. But that is for a court to decide."

The implications of that did not sit well with Nicholas, and he lifted his head more and spoke up. *"You do not understand. Our parents did not care for us, did not love us. Yes, things are hard for us right now, but we are better off than we would have been back at home. I am sure you are a good egg-watcher-parent, but why do you think that is?"*

Tyler pondered that briefly. "I love my daughter," he answered simply. "Everything else comes from that. I want her to be happy. I want her to be safe. To grow up strong and healthy. To live a good life. I know my wife feels the same way. No matter how many scales I grow, those feelings haven't changed."

"Yes," Nicholas agreed. *"My parents did not feel that way about either of us. But that is how I feel about my sister."* He felt a pleased feeling from Sophia across the mental link, and he smiled just a little. *"I want her to be happy, and safe, and to grow up well."* He also felt a sense of prideful approval from Leaf Eater, though he wasn't sure what to make of that.

"It sounds to me as though Nniicchhoollaass was the one who had to be the father that Ssoopphhiiaa never had otherwise," Evelyn mused. "They are doing their best with what life has given them. Instead of seeking to separate them from those who care for them, blood relations or no, you should seek to help them." With a snort, she added, *"And regardless, I think it will be a long time yet before this chaos subsides enough for law-judges to turn their attention to me – if they can even find me."* Resolute,

she went on, *"Everything I have done since I was given a second chance at life has been to help those around me – those who are deserving of it, at least."*

Tyler had nothing more to say, and after a few seconds, Nicholas felt a tail rubbing and twisting with his own. Judging by its size, it was Leaf Eater's, and she seemed to regain some of her normal temperament, despite the lingering anger he could sense from her. *"You do not need to fear any more,"* she asserted, squeezing the end of his tail with her own. *"I will protect you."*

Nicholas relaxed a little, keeping his wing across Sophia's body. As strange as Leaf Eater was, particularly her overly affectionate nature, having someone looking out for him so personally was a nice change. He felt safe, and loved, and wanted. Was this how Sophia felt when he protected her? He hoped she felt something even better. *"Thank you,"* he told Leaf Eater, gently rubbing his tail back against hers, a contented scent from him mixing with the affectionate aroma she was exuding.

But then she continued, *"I know we will make good parents! Our hatchlings will have strong scales and mighty wings!"* and he felt flustered again, lowering his head.

"By the way, did anyone else hear that voice? When you learned how to speak as a dragon?" Nicholas asked loudly and abruptly to try and change the subject.

After asking, he expected to hear 'What voice?' from them, but the first person to respond was Sophia. *"You heard it too?"* she said excitedly, rubbing herself against his side. *"I told it my name, but it did not say anything back."*

"It told me 'Welcome, Child of the Egg.' Was it the same for you?" Evelyn clarified, and Nicholas sent her an affirmative thought. Morosely, she went on, *"I remember. I thought: this is it, the doctor was wrong, the cancer finally got me and I have died in my sleep. I remember feeling regret that I would not be able to see you all the way to safety. I thought that it was the voice of God or an angel. Yet I woke up after that, and wondered if perhaps I had been sent back. I have been pondering it since."* Her tone suddenly

shifted to something much more pointed, her scent becoming stern. *"I do not suppose you could tell us more about it?"*

Nicholas didn't know who she was talking to until Tyler replied. "I do not, ma'am," he replied coldly, in the way Nicholas had come to learn meant that he was following loyalty to his old cause.

"Really? The military intelligence of one of the biggest countries on this planet does not know anything about the voices people are hearing in their heads?" Evelyn pressed.

"Even IF it did, and even IF a mere Sergeant like myself knew it, I could not tell you," Tyler simply said evasively, with an air of finality. "I can tell you that I heard the voice too. I thought I was going crazy, hearing voices in my head. I... I tried to block them out, to shout them away. I thought they would keep talking, and that my resistance was the reason why they didn't say anything else. When I came to, I spent almost an hour with the pictures of my family, asserting who I was – who I *am* – before I could put it out of my head and get on with my life." He inhaled deeply, emitting a pensive scent. "I can talk about it now, at least. I had been doing my best to forget."

When Tyler went quiet, Francisco spoke up. *"I thought it was something I ate at first, but when I spoke to Joosééé he told me he had heard it too. But I did not hear it again, so I wondered if it would simply come back later."*

"That's a good point," Tyler murmured. "Has anyone heard that voice again since?"

The consensus of the various murmurs and – Nicholas presumed – gestures was that nobody had heard it. The only one who seemed puzzled about it all was Leaf Eater, her confusion easily noticeable over the mental link.

"What are you all talking about? I have heard no such voice."

"You did not hear the words 'Welcome, Child of the Egg' when you first spoke this language?" Evelyn asked.

Leaf Eater scoffed, though the sound was more like a rough cough and Nicholas only understood its intent from her emotions and scent. *"Well, that is why. I have always been a Child of the Egg! And I have always*

spoken this way. Why would I be welcomed to the body I have always had? I am sure that my eventual offspring will hear no such voice. Don't you agree, Tree Nuzzler?"

Nicholas did not feel inclined to grace that particular question with a response, and instead asked loudly, "*What time is it?*"

"Just after dawn," Tyler answered. "So you might as well stay up instead of going back to sleep. We should help you figure out a mantra so you don't start losing your grip. We should also call Dr. Morrison over to take a look at you as well, and make sure you're all right. I went through the same thing but after all that blood and thrashing around you'd best get checked out anyway."

But Nicholas thought on that for a moment, pressing his wing closer to Sophia and squeezing Leaf Eater's tail more tightly. "*I do not think I will lose my grip,*" he said a moment later. "*I have plenty to hold onto.*"

Even had he not been told, Nicholas knew there were new people in the group. He could tell because the voices making up the idle chatter of the group following behind the truck had changed. There were too many of them for it to just be Rick's and James's families, and he didn't recognize many of the voices. While almost all of them were speaking English, he heard some snatches of some East Asian language – though he had no idea which one – and a smattering of Spanish here and there in unfamiliar tones. His own partial understanding of Spanish from school was improving from so much exposure to it, and the more he learned the more he was able to pick up additional words from context. It also helped that Francisco seemed to enjoy teaching Sophia words here and there, and Nicholas could often overhear.

In addition, it wasn't just the truck's engine that he could hear. Other cars, thankfully quieter ones, were driving along behind it, presumably belonging to people who had driven to the stadium. On the whole the group seemed to be moving a little faster, now that most of the sick and injured people had been left in the humanitarian group's care, and those that remained had plenty of seating in the available vehicles.

For all the new humans that had joined their entourage, however, there were no extra dragons. The humans were all people who either had already been treated at the stadium but had nowhere to go, or people who weren't in bad enough shape to warrant being actively tended to by the humanitarian group. Dr. Morrison had refused to join them, saying that he was needed right where he was, and he would not abandon his oath. Furthermore, the dragons who were receiving medical care needed to be kept under the doctors' supervision, so they could not come with the group. There had been two other dragons working for the humanitarian group that were of a similar mind to Dr. Morrison, and Nicholas had felt a little guilty that he couldn't be of any help to them.

But his group had to look after themselves and find safety and shelter. Tyler had been listening to the military radio again, and the news was grim: the National Guard units were preparing to enter the city the very next morning. If they didn't get out of the city today, they would be caught up in whatever happened.

As much as Nicholas wanted to trust Tyler's word that it was simply to restore order, he remembered Deputy Washington's fear that it would lead to a bloodbath, not to mention Tyler's own trepidation about how the dragons would be dealt with. Perhaps the humans among them would be treated fairly if they surrendered – but what about him? More importantly, what about Sophia? To say nothing of Leaf Eater, who he doubted would ever surrender to anyone, much less to humans.

One way or another, they had to get out, and they had to do it today.

He felt Leaf Eater's presence in his mind, simply asserting she was there, before she brushed the tip of one wing against his own. "*You seem very worried,*" Leaf Eater told him, her footsteps easily audible to Nicholas as she walked alongside him. "*So are the others. Is it because of what Wing Waver said earlier?*"

Wing Waver being Tyler, named after the salute he did with his wing. "Yes," Nicholas answered honestly.

"*And you were worried about me?*" Leaf Eater replied, sounding almost amused. "*We need not fear the two-legs. Their weapons cannot hurt us*

and we can simply fly away from them."

"*I cannot fly,*" Nicholas reminded her. "*Neither can the others.*"

She made an odd clicking sound that Nicholas likened to a disapproving 'tsk' a human might make. "*You can fly! You have wings. You merely need to use them in the right way. Perhaps you have forgotten how, like I did.*" He heard her wings unfurl and felt the air around him shift as she flapped them once, while she sent him feelings and images as she did so to communicate what she was doing. "*It is not that you cannot fly, it is that you do not fly.*"

It was technically true, yet also very unhelpful. "*How long did it take you to learn?*" he asked her.

"*I have always known how to fly!*" she asserted, and he heard her scales rattling and wings moving as she made some motion he couldn't see. "*Like all Children of the Egg should.*" Yet despite the confidence in her tone, she felt, sounded and smelled uncertain. Then, her mood shifted, and she asserted confidently, "*Yes, that is all. I merely fell out of practice. It did not take long to re-learn what I had forgotten. I just had to overcome some opposition.*"

Nicholas was confused. "*What kind of opposition?*" he asked her. Had she escaped from somewhere? Was she being held in captivity before reaching the National Park?

She gave a little snort. "*Wooden arms reaching out and trying to keep me on the ground. The trees attacked me, yet they could not stop me from reaching the sky!*" she proclaimed proudly, and Nicholas couldn't help but chuckle, his worries disappearing. She got her name for a reason, after all. But she continued, "*If I had had a Matriarch to help me remember, it would have taken no time at all! It is through their guidance and sharing of wisdom that we grow. It is part of why I admire you!*"

Nicholas felt a little confused by that sudden remark, though not surprised given how often she seemed to like praising him. "*It is?*"

"*Yes! You have so much concern for Great Mother. She is both a Matriarch and your nestmate, and I have felt how much you care for her. It is truly an*

admirable thing. Your concern for others close to you is how I know you will make a wonderful egg-watcher-parent, and a worthy mate." Nicholas would have flushed from her remark if he still had skin; instead his ear-fins wiggled and his wings flexed. Feeling his mood shift, she added, *"When the time comes."* At least the more they got to know each other, the more she was willing to respect his boundaries.

"Thank you," he murmured, still flustered. *"Is that why you... picked me?"*

"Of course not, I did not know how you felt about Great Mother until she added me to the constellation with her and Little Mother," Leaf Eater explained.

"Little Mother?" Nicholas asked. Didn't Leaf Eater call Evelyn Little Star?

Leaf Eater sensed his confusion and the nature of it. *"She is deserving of the title of Mother,"* Leaf Eater asserted. *"Her light is not as bright as that of Great Mother, but last night I saw her prove that she is a worthy matriarch."* It was news to Nicholas that dragon names could change, but as he was pondering that, he felt Leaf Eater's muzzle nudge at his left side, just under the base of his wing, and he stepped to the side a little in surprise. *"As for your other question, I first wanted you to be my mate because you are a fine dragon! Such big, strong wings! I hope our hatchlings have wings as fine as yours. They will be agile fliers we can both be proud of."*

Those very same wings that had started all of this, that had earned him such scorn and hatred from his parents... yet now it was something very far from hate that they brought on him. Thoughtfully, he raised and spread them a little, earning an approving noise from Leaf Eater. *"Yes!"* she said excitedly, *"Such majestic wings!"*

Still flustered, but smiling, trying not to pay too much attention to Sophia's jealous thoughts, he flexed his wings just a little bit more. *"Oh, if only you knew how to fly with those! I would rise up into the skies and mate with you at once!"*

Nicholas spluttered and quickly folded his wings against his back, hearing Tyler burst into laughter ahead of him. *"You are a very lucky drake, Tree*

Nuzzler!" Francisco called out from far behind, only intensifying Nicholas's embarrassment.

"Leaf Eater, not now!" Nicholas hissed.

"Yes, not now," she agreed placidly, missing the point he was trying to make. *"We must first reach a safe place where the eggs can be laid and looked after. When we return to Forest Mother, we can hunt for somewhere to nest."* 'Forest Mother', Nicholas wasn't familiar with – but it had to be the third 'guiding star' at the National Park that they had been heading towards for so long.

"She's really got her heart set on you, Nicholas," Tyler teased with a deep, mirthful tone.

"I noticed," Nicholas mumbled.

Undaunted, Leaf Eater went on, *"And you are mysterious in an alluring way. Such as how you keep your eyes closed all the time. It was a shock to see them yesterday!"*

Was something wrong with them? Well... more wrong than usual? *"What did they look like?"* Nicholas asked her, glad for the opportunity to try and change the subject.

"Beautiful," Leaf Eater replied dreamily. *"A deep blue, with waves of green, like looking into the depths of the ocean."*

Her remark concerned Nicholas as he thought it over. Every time he'd heard them described, people had said his eyes were brown. Did she see colors differently? He'd heard in biology classes that animals did not see the same color ranges as humans, and though he had no idea what blue, green or brown looked like, he knew they were distinct from one another. Even Sophia could tell the difference easily. He'd heard of color-blindness, but did not know how that worked, either. *"Are you sure?"*

"Of course I am sure!" she asserted confidently. *"I could just stare into them all night long..."*

"Halt!" Tyler called out to alert the others, and Nicholas was thankful for the distraction, an emotion that only seemed to puzzle Leaf Eater. *"Look,*

over there!"

"*What is it?*" Nicholas asked.

"Ddraaggoonn," Evelyn explained, struggling a little to speak in English. Nicholas's few attempts were still a slurred mess, but Sophia was almost back to normal now, and Tyler, José and Dr. Morrison all stood as proof that it was possible to re-learn how to speak human languages with enough effort. However, Evelyn slipped back into the dragon language to continue, "*I sensed it before, but now I can see it. It looks so small. Is it a hatchling? Even Sophia has grown so much since she began changing.*"

Nicholas fanned out his ear-fins and tilted his head to try and listen out, filtering out all the background noise behind him: the truck's engine, the humans' conversations and chattering... they had gotten out of the city proper since the morning, which he could tell because he could consistently feel the sun on his body instead of having the tall buildings keep blocking it out. But out of place were noises from somewhere above him... a flag waving? No, he'd heard that sound before whenever Leaf Eater was flying, it was the sound of dragon wings, though these were smaller. But what was the squeaking sound? He quickly identified it as dragon speech, yet spoken with a high pitch. "*Egg-bearer! Egg-bearer!*" it was calling out, he realized, the voice getting fainter rapidly. "*There are Children! They are coming! I saw...*"

The voice grew too distant, quiet or both for him to hear any more, and Nicholas pondered. The voice had been above them, so it must have been flying. And the sudden change in distance meant it had flown away from them, perhaps even diving back down to ground level. For some reason he couldn't grasp, Leaf Eater was incredibly excited about whatever it was she had just seen. "*Do you sense any other dragons?*" he asked aloud in the direction he had last heard Evelyn speak.

"Yyeess," she answered immediately. "Aannootthheerr oonnee, tthhaatt wwaayy."

"North-northeast," Tyler added for Nicholas's benefit.

"He was so adorable!" Leaf Eater said with excited glee, almost completely engulfing the mental connection with her giddiness, and Nicholas heard her claws scrape on the asphalt below them as she danced in place. *"A cute little dragonet! I want to go see him! I hope my offspring will be as cute as that!"*

"What—" Nicholas began, but he was cut off as Leaf Eater leapt into the air, a gust of air blowing past him as she launched herself away with a flap of her wings.

"Me too! I want to see!" Sophia called out insistently. Nicholas heard her feet thumping on the road before she laughed and leapt into the air. He heard her wings beating, followed by a thump as she landed on the ground again a moment later; she must not have been able to remain airborne for long. She was undeterred though, and kept on going.

"Leaf Eater! Ssoopphhiiaa! Come back!" Evelyn called out to them, then grumbled. *"Fledglings have far too much energy for their own good sometimes."*

"We'd better hurry after them," Tyler told Nicholas and the others. "This seems like a safe area, but you can never be too cautious in a place like this."

"It is a very nice neighborhood," Francisco commented with an appreciative tone. Nicholas hadn't thought on it since it was harder to notice an absence of something, but he was right: they had run into far less trouble in this area for the last few hours, and he had been walking over much less detritus.

"Yes. Nniicchhoollaass, follow me." Evelyn began walking and Nicholas followed the sound of her footsteps as Tyler barked out orders to get the convoy behind them moving again. For the moment, Nicholas wasn't too worried; all he felt from Sophia and Leaf Eater was excitement.

As Nicholas followed Evelyn's brisk pace down the street, he grew concerned as the others' emotions shifted, yet it was only to surprise. Thoughts about dragons came back to him from them; had they found the other one? And there was something about a building, and the roof. Leaf

Eater still seemed very excited, reaching out to him to try and encourage him to come faster, so perhaps they had caught up to the little dragon they had seen.

It did not take long for him, Tyler and Evelyn to rejoin Sophia and Leaf Eater. All they had to do was follow the sounds Leaf Eater was making, which were accompanied by excited squeaks and chirps from what was presumably the small dragon. "*Left, Nniicchhoollaass,*" Evelyn warned him before she turned, and he followed her again.

"*Settle down!*" an unfamiliar voice called out, seemingly directed at the small dragon. He appeared to ignore the voice, however, as Nicholas heard Leaf Eater laugh and then heard him make a gleeful sound as he rapidly approached—

Something with four clawed feet and an unfamiliar yet distinctly draconic scent landed on Nicholas's back, straddling his spinal fin. It must have been the dragonet, as he could also feel what he presumed was the little dragon's underside brushing against the top of his spinal fin, and he jumped in surprise, tossing the dragonet into the air. Yet the little dragon laughed it off, and he heard Evelyn utter slurred French curses accompanied by a burst of irritation across the mental link, while Tyler merely chuckled. "Over here, little guy," Tyler said, and Nicholas heard a flap of wings. "On my back, not my head!"

"*You sound funny!*" the little one called out, and Nicholas heard more flapping sounds.

"*What is going on?*" Nicholas asked aloud.

"*I could ask you that same question,*" Nicholas heard the new voice say, from somewhere above him. Maybe one floor up? But he had grown in size so much from how tall he used to be, was that throwing off his judgment? Perhaps they were really on a third or fourth floor of whatever building they were nearby. "*You are the first dragons I have met, other than Trouble Maker.*"

Evelyn gave a snort. "*Is that really his name?*"

"It is not the name on this proof-of-hatching-document, nor what he calls himself, but it is what I have been calling him for the better part of a week," the new voice groused. *"You have quite a crowd with you. What are you doing here?"*

"We're just trying to get out of the city," Tyler answered, but got interrupted. "What— hey, you little rascal!" he called out to the small dragon with an amused tone, and Nicholas heard a gleeful sound from him as he flew off to a nearby perch, his claws scraping on something solid, probably concrete or brick.

"We mean no harm. We only came over here out of curiosity," Evelyn added. *"We saw your son and those two—"* Nicholas heard Evelyn move a wing, probably pointing with it, *"—chased after him."*

"He is my grandson, not my son, though he thinks I am his mother," the other dragon replied with an exasperated sigh – or at least an odd elongated churring sound that Nicholas took to be a sigh going by the emotion-scent that wafted down towards him, a mixture of frustration and concern. *"I did not mean to delay introductions so much."* He heard a sound almost like a wing opening, but quietly – just one of her ear-fins moving, maybe? When she spoke again, she did so in English. "Chief of Police, Jacqueline Constantine. And you are?"

"Ser—" Tyler began, but Leaf Eater had begun speaking at the same time.

"I am Leaf Eater! This is Great Mother and Little Mother, whose constellation I belong to. That is Wing Waver, at the back is Food Bearer, and this is my mate, Tree Nuzzler."

"I... see," Jacqueline answered hesitantly. Nicholas felt momentary confusion from Francisco that intensified a moment later before turning into exasperated indignation at learning what his apparent dragon name was, at least according to Leaf Eater.

Tyler cleared his throat. "Sergeant Tyler Lewis, National Guard. Delta Company, 3rd Squadron, 95th Cavalry," he tried again, and Nicholas heard him salute this time. "Evelyn, Sophia, Francisco, Nicholas... and Leaf Eater."

"You don't know her real name?"

"That is the only name I have!" Leaf Eater huffed in annoyance. "Not like all of you who have two names!"

"No ma'am," Tyler answered, ignoring Leaf Eater.

"Eexccuussee mmee," Evelyn cut in, grumbling momentarily before switching back to the dragon language for expediency. *"What did you say your name was, again?"*

"Jacqueline Constantine, Chief of Police."

"Wwee mmeett yyooouurr ssuubboorrdiinnaatteess," Evelyn forced out. "Aatt tthhee ppoolliccee hheeaaddqquuaarrtteerrss."

A burst of a surprised scent reached Nicholas's nose. "You did? How are they?"

"As well as could be expected given the circumstances," Evelyn informed her. "They hope you are all right. From what I gather, you left very suddenly."

"This is boring!" the little dragon suddenly called out, and Nicholas crouched down a little to make himself a less tempting target for him to land on.

Leaf Eater called out in surprise a moment later, and then Nicholas heard her take off again with a flapping of wings. *"I will catch you!"* she shouted as she flew off.

"You are too slow!" the small dragon retorted, and Jacqueline gave another sigh.

"Wait! Wait for me!" Sophia called out, and Nicholas heard her feet and claws against the concrete as she ran off after them, flapping her wings as she took off from the ground, followed by a loud thump moments later as she landed again.

"Trouble Maker indeed," Evelyn agreed.

"As I believe I mentioned, I am his grandmother, not his mother. He is not even one year old."

Nicholas wasn't the only one surprised; he felt and smelled it from Evelyn and Francisco as well, and caught a matching scent from Tyler. "He's awfully... mobile for a newborn," Tyler commented. "And talkative. My daughter could barely manage 'mama' and 'dada' when she was one."

"His parents – my son and his wife – live just down the street. I tried to keep the signs of my own changes hidden when they first began to manifest, so I could keep serving the city when it needed me most. But when I heard that my grandson's eyes had changed and were growing scales around them... I had to choose between my family-by-blood and my family-by-work. I drove here as quickly as I could to keep them safe, though I could barely fit into my cruiser and had to take an SUV instead, and even then I barely fit inside by the time I got here. Yet as both my grandson and I changed, he thought of me as his mother instead of his actual mother. I am the only thing that keeps him even remotely controllable, so here I am... as much as I want to go back downtown and help."

Tyler gave a low, deep, thoughtful rumble. "A difficult choice," he sympathized. "If I had to choose between my duty and my family, I would likely make the same decision as you."

"You already did, didn't you?" the Chief asked, and Nicholas heard a wing move.

"They're not my kids. My daughter is safe, far away from all of this, though I wish for nothing more than to see her again," Tyler explained. "Sophia and Nicholas are brother and sister, but none of the rest of the dragons are related. Some of the humans with us are."

Nicholas turned his head and fanned out an ear-fin. Yes, they weren't far away. The idling truck was easy to hear, and so were the other vehicles' engines, as were the low murmurs of all the people behind them talking amongst themselves. It must have been quite a sight to see so many dragons all gathered close to talk – especially after what Trouble Maker, Leaf Eater and Sophia had gotten up to. Those three were still fairly close by, and as far as he could gather from Leaf Eater's determination, she still had not caught him, and Sophia was having only partial success trying to fly.

Jacqueline gave a thoughtful sound. "You said you were at the HQ. Who did you speak to?"

"Ddeepuuttyy Wwaassshhiinnggttoonn," Evelyn answered. "Hhee ssaaiidd yyoouu lleefftt hhiimm iinn cchhaarrgee."

A relaxed scent reached Nicholas from above. "I was just checking. You cannot be too cautious. But you said you are leaving the city, correct? Where are you going? Surely you must have a plan."

Tyler replied, "We're headed for the National Park. You can sense Sophia and Evelyn, right?"

"Yes. I've been able to sense... things, for a while. I didn't know what they were, but now that they're right in front of me, I can tell it's those two. Is there another one like them?"

"Correct, there is another dragon like them at the National Park. And that's where we're going. Leaf Eater's from there, but Evelyn has been able to communicate in some fashion with that dragon we can sense – the guiding star. We'll be safe there."

"It has become increasingly obvious that this city is not a suitable place for Children of the Egg," Evelyn grumbled. "It was not made for us. We barely fit into it. Finding food, water and shelter is a challenge, to say nothing of being attacked by fools or hunted by those who blame us for this situation. It is a very different life to what I am used to, but it is the life we have been thrust into, whether we like it or not. And I prefer it to the alternative, I can say that much."

"What alternative?" Jacqueline asked.

"Death," Evelyn answered simply. "Cell-growth-disease almost ended me. But instead, now I can walk, I can run – and soon, with some practice, I can fly. When we get to the Nnaattiioonnaall Ppaarrkk it will be the beginning of a new life for me. I know that both two-legs and Children are living there together, and it will be far safer than staying here."

There was a brief pause, and Nicholas could hear the trio of dragons off down the road somewhere – though both Leaf Eater and Trouble Maker were somewhere above them. "Would it be possible for me to go with

you?" Jacqueline asked suddenly, "I can help – I know the layout of the city like the back of my hand. I can help you find a good way to get out, and maybe the National Guard will listen to the Chief of Police if they've arrived. I admit I am a little out of the loop on that front."

Nicholas felt a sudden intense unease from Francisco, though he didn't voice his concern aloud. "They're preparing to move into the city tomorrow morning," Tyler informed her. "Time is of the essence. I think we could use the help, but they might not respect the authority of an Afflicted Chief of Police. Evelyn, what do you think?"

"It would not hurt. I do not know this place well. I have simply been following the guiding star and keeping us all moving, step by step, towards the light."

Jacqueline exuded a grateful scent. *"Thank you. In that case, please excuse me for a moment. I need to tell my son about this."* A moment later, Nicholas heard a thumping sound along with her calling out, "Martin! Martin, it's safe! Come out, please!"

Nicholas tried to listen, but the first thing he heard indicating the presence of 'Martin' came a few moments later when a door opened up. "It's all right," the Chief consoled whoever it was that had arrived, "these people are friendly."

"Uh... hello," an unfamiliar male voice said. "That's, um... that's a lot of dragons."

"Where is our son?" came a woman's voice from close to the man.

"Just down the road, I can see him," Jacqueline answered. "Look over there."

"Well, call him back! I don't want him running away!" A brief pause, and then, "What is that other dragon doing? She's attacking my baby!"

"They're only playing," Jacqueline reassured her. "Martin, Silvia, listen to me for a moment."

"No! Call him back! He should—"

"Listen!" the Chief snapped at the woman who was presumably her daughter-in-law. Silvia went silent, but Nicholas felt Evelyn silently forcing her to calm down with her pacifying ability, followed by Sophia amplifying it a moment later, which no doubt had more of an effect than Jacqueline's insistence alone. He also noticed that Evelyn hadn't had to shout anything that time, like she had previously

Taking advantage of the quiet, Jacqueline went on, "These people are leaving the city. They're heading for the National Park. There is a sanctuary there for both humans and dragons."

"How do you know that? You just met these people!"

"I told you before, I can smell the emotions of dragons. These people aren't lying."

"So, what," Martin cut in, "Are you going to leave and go there?"

"You can't!" Silvia protested, "Luke only listens to you! He doesn't... he won't..." Even though she was a human, her feeling of despair was strong enough that Nicholas could pick up on it just from her tone of voice. "My baby! My own son doesn't even recognize me as his mother! He used to... he... he...!"

Martin did his best to console his wife, who was breaking down into tears. "She's right, mom," he spoke up after a few moments, addressing Jacqueline. "We need you here. You're the only way we have to keep him even slightly under control."

"I just want to go and look, and confirm that it exists and is as good as it sounds," Jacqueline insisted. "I will return as quickly as I can."

"And what about Luke?"

Nicholas heard Jacqueline grumble quietly. "I can tell him to stay here, but he probably won't. I can't even get him to stay put while I patrol the neighborhood. You might have to tie him down somewhere."

"I'm not tying up my son like he's a dog!" Martin protested. "And have you seen his teeth? I'd need steel chains to tie him down, and he'd probably just rip whatever we tied him to out of the ground! Look, mom, you're the

only reason he hasn't flown off into the sunset. If you go... he'll probably follow after you. Even with what's happened to him, he's still my son. I don't... I don't want him to..." Martin took a deep breath, his wife's sobs still audible. "I want him here, with us."

"I want what's best for him too," Jacqueline said to them both. "I've done what I can to keep this place safe, but there's only so much I can do. Who knows what those dragon-hating groups I've heard about will do if they find Luke? We need to leave, to find somewhere safe and away from the cities..."

As the Chief did her best to try to persuade her family, Nicholas felt a little uneasy. It was another family's private affairs, for one thing, and it didn't feel quite right to just be standing there listening in. But also, hearing the amount of concern and worry in the parents' voices for their transformed child was a sharp contrast to what he had gone through. What he would have given to have had a family that cared for him, instead of one that wanted to use him as an attraction in blood sports.

But was it really the same? Trouble Maker – or Luke, rather – seemed too far gone. Almost like Leaf Eater, in a way, perhaps even more inhuman. Sometimes little bits and pieces of a human life, mere fleeting glimpses, slipped through Leaf Eater's seemingly purely draconic guise. But a baby that had transformed would have had nothing to build off of. A helpless little creature incapable of doing anything but cry for help, suddenly able to talk, fly, and be self-sufficient. More than that, his small frame and nimbleness meant even the other dragons couldn't keep up with him – Evelyn sensed that Leaf Eater still had yet to catch him.

Maybe there was something that could still be done. For both of them. Some way to help Leaf Eater remember who she was, or for Luke to still learn how to... be human, really. He thought of Tyler, and all the things Tyler had said he did to remain human. Could there be more to it than that? Was there a way for a dragon to *become* human, at least partially, with the right encouragement...?

"Eeexxxccuussee mmeee?" Nicholas spoke up, taking a cautious step forward. Fortunately, he didn't bump into anything.

"What?" Silvia snapped, sounding all the more distressed. "What do you want?"

"Yyoooouuu ssshhhhhoouuullddd bboootthhh cccoommmeee wwwiiitthh uuussss."

"Why would we? We can't just leave our home and run off into the woods!"

It was difficult to say what he wanted to while still re-learning how to speak English. "Ttyyyllleerrr, ppplllleeeaaassee ttrraannsslllaatteee," he managed to force out.

"No," Jacqueline cut in, and Nicholas heard her wings fanning out, picking up a confident and authoritative scent wafting from her. "Let me do it."

"As you wish," Tyler conceded. "Nicholas, is that okay?"

"Yes," Nicholas agreed before taking a moment to collect himself. When he spoke again, he kept his sentences simple and paused between them to let Jacqueline speak. *"Your son needs you. Maybe he does not recognize you now. But maybe it is not permanent. Maybe if you can show him love, he will be normal."* Tyler had had his family to keep him from losing his humanity, and Nicholas and Sophia had had each other. And as mixed as his feelings were for Leaf Eater, he would rather have had her there than not. *"I do not know for sure that it will work. It may take a long time. But if you can stay with him, perhaps he can grow to be more like a two-legs."*

"...like a... like a human," Jacqueline finished translating. She waited a moment, but Nicholas had said his piece.

Tyler rumbled a little in thought before adding, "And if I may, ma'am, you need to get him out of here before the National Guard marches in. They won't know the difference between him playing or attacking them if he flies at them, and you've already admitted that you can't keep him restrained. You might as well take this opportunity to get him out of the city while you still can, and stay with him at the same time."

Martin and Silvia didn't say anything for a moment, with the latter sobbing softly every few seconds. "I wish all this had never happened!" she finally burst out in despair. "I want my baby back!"

Nicholas picked up a sympathetic scent from Tyler. "I would feel the same in your situation, ma'am," he told her quietly. "But we must face reality."

"Hhee iiss ssttiilll yyoouurr ssoonn," Evelyn insisted. "Wwee aarree nnoott ggoonnee ffoorreevveerr jjuusstt bbeeccaauussee wwee aarree ddrraaggoonnss."

"It's not fair," Martin muttered, taking a deep breath. "You really think they'll shoot him?"

"If they think he's aggressive, yes," Tyler replied. "He flew right over when we got here. Do you really think you can stop that from happening? And if they shoot at him and miss, do you think he'll fly away, or do you think he'll try to defend himself? He could kill someone easily. Do you want that?"

There was another pause as Martin considered Tyler's words. "God fucking damnit," he spat, sounding defeated. "Okay. Fine. Let me just... get some stuff from our home. We live just down the street. It won't take long."

"I'm sorry," Jacqueline consoled them, "But it's for the best. I came here to help Luke and I'm going to keep doing what I can to protect him. You can take my SUV, the keys are with my uniform."

Nicholas could hear the footsteps as Martin led his distraught wife away.

"Our lives are ruined either way," Martin grumbled bitterly. "The best I can hope for right now is to get us all out of this alive."

Chapter 20

While Martin and Silvia went to pack their things, Evelyn led Jacqueline, Tyler, Francisco, and Nicholas back towards the convoy that had been waiting for them. Rick had turned off the truck and was talking with James, but at their approach, Evelyn saw James glance over towards them.

"Oh, no, not another one," James mumbled, too quietly for a human to hear from so far away, but easily audible to a dragon.

Though Evelyn detected a momentary scent of annoyance from Jacqueline, the police chief raised her head, fixing James with a steady gaze, clearly showing her bright blue eyes, the irises quite a bit larger than on other dragons. Her fin stood tall on the very back of her head, but rose barely an inch or two above her body from her shoulders downward, her ear-fins briefly flattening before returning to where they were previously. Calmly, Jacqueline simply asked, "Is there a problem, sir?"

Surprised at being caught, James glanced away. "No, I..." he began, then narrowed his eyes and turned back to her. "Yes, there's a problem! A big, black, scaly problem! You know we only have so many supplies, right? What should be months' worth of food will barely last us a week! If more of you keep tagging along we'll all be starving within a few days! Hell, if not for a couple lucky breaks along the way we probably would have already!"

"Jimmy, calm down—" Rick began.

"I am calm! Am I the only one worried about us all starving – or ending up being some dragon's dinner when we haven't got anything else to give 'em?"

Evelyn glared at him, but Jacqueline responded before she could. "The food supply is a reasonable concern, sir. I've been eating far more than I used to, and while I have to commend the Sergeant here for his creative equipment," she said, gesturing with a wing towards Tyler's harness, "I don't have any way to carry that much myself."

Her agreement seemed to take James off guard more than anything else. "Uh... yeah. Exactly! So... what are you going to do about it?"

"If I could direct you towards somewhere nearby where we can stock up on food, would that alleviate your concerns?"

Cautiously, he responded, "Maybe. What've you got in mind?"

"There's a grocery store nearby that's still operating. Regrettably, many stores in the city were hit by riots, and while the one close by was damaged, I've been keeping this area as safe as I can from thieves and looters. They always run away when faced with a dragon."

James raised an eyebrow. "*You've* been keeping the place safe? What are you, superman?"

"Superwoman, perhaps," she corrected him, "But no." Fanning her ear-fins out to the side, she showed him her badge, clipped to her right fin, lowering her head to make it easier for him to see. "Jacqueline Constantine, Chief of Police."

"Oh," James said, dumbfounded. "So... you're where she got to."

"In a manner of speaking. By the way, where did you get that truck?"

"It's my truck," Tyler cut in. "I can't drive it, so I'm letting them use it for now. It isn't stolen."

"Yeah!" James agreed. "Even if it were, I'd think you've got bigger problems right now."

"We do," Jacqueline concurred, then lowered her voice a little. "But one day, maybe next week, maybe next month, maybe next year, when order is restored, we'll see to it that the crimes committed during the last two weeks are properly prosecuted."

Francisco's nervousness was plain over the mental link, and Evelyn was glad that Jacqueline wasn't part of it yet. She had reason to worry, too: it had been one thing to accidentally kill Sophia and Nicholas's parents – however much they deserved it – when she hadn't expected to live much longer. But now that it was clear that the transformation had saved her life, she had to be prepared to answer for anything she had done recently.

That was, of course, assuming anyone figured out it was her, and then tracked her all the way to the National Park. She had to assume her DNA as

a mostly-human wouldn't look anything like her DNA now.

"Man, you picked a real winner this time," James grumbled, and Evelyn realized he was addressing her.

"Ddeessppiittee hheerr vveeilleedd tthhrreeaattss," Evelyn managed to say, "Sshhee wwiiilll bbee hheellppffuull."

"Like you, I need to get out of the city, if only temporarily," Jacqueline elaborated. "My son, his wife, and their son need to be escorted out of here before the National Guard marches in. To that end, I can help you with the rest of the trip. I know the city's streets like the back of my hand. If anything, I remember them even better now than before! So, I will help you get out of here using the best route possible if you let me come with you. You help me, and I help you. Is that acceptable?"

James folded his arms, looking away. "Fine. Not like we really have a choice, do we? You're all just doing your own... dragon things, we don't get any say in it." Preemptively cutting off Rick, who had just begun to raise a hand, James went on, "I don't want to hear it! Remember, we're the ones who helped 'em out at the side of the road!"

"I agree with you though, Jimmy!" Rick protested, before turning his head towards Evelyn. "You've been leaving us out of all the decisions lately. We're starting to get a bit concerned."

"Yeah," James concurred, "Sometimes I feel like this isn't in our best interests."

"And I'm worried, too," Rick added. "You all made an awful racket the other night at the stadium. Thrashin' around, coughing up blood, and then you tried to pretend like nothing happened. You're acting stranger every day, and it's making me worried."

"Exactly!" James pointed an accusing finger at Evelyn. "It's like you're trying to hide what's going on from us! How do we know we can trust you? What if one of you starts flailing around while we're nearby and crushes us or something? Or you go wild and attack us because you're hungry?"

"The seizures are a one-time thing," Tyler answered, "A complication in the transformation, but it only happens once. And trust me, you aren't very

appetizing."

"How do you know that?" James fired back, "How do you know anything about any of this? You just suddenly started speaking in tongues, for all we know you're being mind-controlled or brainwashed or something!"

Evelyn wanted to throttle the man, but if Tyler felt similarly, he didn't show it. Instead, Tyler simply remained silent for a moment before replying to James, "It is not speaking in tongues, it is another language. The dragon language. For instance, the word for human is *two-legs*."

"Great! Maybe you could have TOLD us that instead of keeping it to yourselves?" James asked rhetorically with a biting tone. "Hell if I know what you just said anyway, it's a bunch of animal noises to me. Look, we need to know what the hell is going on here if we're going any further."

Evelyn took a deep breath. As much as she felt provoked, she had to follow Jacqueline's example and not let it get to her. For a brief moment she wished she could be as carefree as Leaf Eater, still chasing after the little dragon. "Tthheenn lleett'ss ttaallkk. Lleett'ss mmaakkee aa ppllaann."

Tyler took a step forward to stand alongside her. "We need to get out of the city, and we need to do it before the National Guard advances tomorrow morning. Do you agree with that?"

Rick and James shared glances at one another. "Yep," Rick agreed, with James conceding a "Yeah" a moment later.

"Good. And if we can get the help of someone who knows the best route out, and who can also direct us towards somewhere we can get some more food, that would help us in our goal, yes?"

"I'm not arguing with that," James insisted. "Just talk to us *before* you make these decisions in the future, will you? You're our best shot at getting out of here in one piece but we don't want you making decisions for us like we're kids or something."

"We've all gotta play nice," Rick agreed. "You're good folks and I want to help you, but you need to work with us and not just herd us around like cattle."

"Understood," Tyler concurred. Taking a deep breath, he went on, "You are right. It was never my intention to exclude you. There are so many barriers between us: size, language, appearance... it is easy for us to split off into our separate groups. But we must work together. We need your help as much as you need ours."

For his part, James seemed to calm down a little. "I'm glad you understand," he said diplomatically, as close to a concession as they were likely to get.

"Thank you. While we are talking, is there anything else you want to bring up?"

"Well, there is one obvious one," Rick said. "How exactly *are* we going to get past the National Guard?"

Tyler took a deep breath and Evelyn could feel his apprehension. "That's a difficult question, but we can't really put it off much longer. Well, Plan A is that I talk to them."

"And do you really think that'll work?" James asked incredulously.

"Not really, no. But that's why it's only Plan A."

"Then what's Plan B?"

"Plan B is to pass ourselves off as a medical convoy. Which wouldn't be hard – we still have sick and injured people with us. Normally during a natural disaster when the National Guard is sent in we have to give passage to civilians seeking refuge. I don't know if this would qualify as a natural disaster... but I don't think any commander would want to risk having someone find out that he stopped a humanitarian convoy from getting to safety."

"Do you think *THAT* will work?"

Tyler tapped one foot on the ground, which made a considerable sound given his size. "I think it will get all of the humans out, but I don't think it will help the dragons," he said, gesturing towards the other dragons with his wing. "If that's the case, or if it doesn't work at all, then we'll need Plan C... we fly out."

Rick stared up at Tyler's enormous form. "Oh, geez. No offense, but I think we'll try the other idea first."

"It's not an ideal plan, given that most of us have only learned how to glide short distances thus far," Tyler conceded. "But we still have time to learn, and we do not have to fly very high, nor for very long, to make it out past their ranks. So far our scales have held up to gunfire, but military hardware is on another level entirely. I'd rather not find out how that matchup goes."

"Is there really no better plan?" Evelyn asked him. "It sounds rather like a last ditch option."

"We can't really go around them, since their positions will be spread out to stop anyone escaping, but we do know that someone can fly over – Leaf Eater did, after all. Unfortunately, she's much better at flying than we are, and I don't know if we'll be able to get high enough. The little one is another problem, but he can obviously fly well enough. We're too big to try and sneak by and there's too many of them to simply try and make a distraction. I don't see any other options."

"And simply staying put isn't an option for dragons like us," Jacqueline pointed out. "I might be fine, but Luke wouldn't be. The concern about food is valid, too – the only way we'll be able to sustain ourselves will be to get out of the cities and into somewhere we can get our own food by hunting, fishing or foraging."

"The last time I went hunting, I had a rifle, not claws," Tyler remarked, looking down at his right forelimb. "One thing at a time. We have to make it out of here first. And we definitely won't get out of here just standing around, so as soon as the other three show up, we're moving out. And our first stop will be to get more supplies."

"Other three?" James cut in.

"My son's family," Jacqueline answered. "He and his wife are still human, but his son..."

She turned her head, looking behind her up into the sky, and Evelyn followed her gaze. Leaf Eater and Trouble Maker were still flying about in the air. Sophia appeared to have gotten on top of a flat-roofed building,

and as Evelyn watched, she leapt upwards, but succeeded only in gliding to the ground.

"...okay," James muttered. "While we're waiting, tell us the route. Rick, you've got a road map, right? You'd better mark it down."

"Good idea," Rick agreed, tugging open the door to the truck. "Has anyone got a pencil?"

It had been surprisingly easy to get Trouble Maker to come along with them. All Jacqueline had had to do was announce that she was leaving, and he had flown right over, perching on her head briefly before taking off and landing nearby, occasionally rearing up onto his hind legs and peeking around in a way that reminded Evelyn of meerkats she had seen at the zoo. Even by dragon standards, he had a distinct appearance: his eyes were a brilliant golden color so bright it looked like they were glowing. Perhaps they were reflective of light like a cat's eyes? The fin on his back varied greatly in height, like Francisco's, but with very sharp transitions, giving it a spiky appearance. He had remained on his perch until the group began to move out, at which point he flew over to the truck, only to be shooed away by Tyler, concerned that the little dragon might be too heavy for the covered back part.

It had done little to deter him, and he had circled above the truck until Leaf Eater had distracted him by saying she would scout ahead and that he should come with her. The two of them flew off ahead of the convoy, giving the rest of them some peace, though it didn't do any favors to his distraught parents to see him flying off with a total stranger. They were following along in the police SUV, and had been willing to let a few of the injured members of the entourage sit in the back seats. With help from Rick, James and some others, Martin and Silvia's belongings in the trunk were instead moved to the roof and strapped down securely.

With the knowledge that they might have to fly out weighing on them, the dragons took the opportunity whenever possible to try and improve through practice, with those in Evelyn's and Sophia's network sending Leaf Eater mental requests for advice. She was all too eager to help teach them,

especially when she could lead by example and show them the 'proper way' to fly, even more so whenever it was Nicholas's turn. For Sophia and Francisco, they were free to try almost anywhere. Evelyn and Tyler, with their much greater bodies and wingspans, had to wait for areas with lots of low buildings to take off.

Nicholas, of course, had the hardest time – though he also had Leaf Eater's complete attention whenever they came to a wide enough road to allow him to make an attempt. She would perch on a nearby building, while Trouble Maker would either sit next to her or stand on her body somewhere to watch, whenever he wasn't distracted by something more interesting to him. He hadn't watched Evelyn fly because he was batting around a knocked-over trash can and making happy sounds at the noises it made, and he missed half of Francisco's second attempt to fly by standing on two legs and craning his neck up to peer in through a second floor window of a store.

Evelyn felt everything that crossed between Leaf Eater and Nicholas each time he attempted to fly: his nervousness, summoning his courage before taking off, his trust in Leaf Eater's directions... and similarly, her admiration for him and her desire to see him succeed. At first he simply tried to glide over the streets before landing, but with her guidance, he learned to beat his wings to rise higher, and how to dive lower, though he always flared his wings far earlier than necessary when making his landings – not that Evelyn could blame him.

"Beautifully done!" Leaf Eater praised as Nicholas landed in front of them. Evelyn was sure he had stumbled just a little bit on his landing, but elected to keep it to herself.

"How high was I?" he asked her, flustered from the praise, and from her hurrying over and nuzzling underneath one of his wings, tracing her way up towards his neck.

"Three times your own height!" she said proudly.

"I can fly better than that," Trouble Maker observed, looking up from the broken-off side-view mirror he had been playing with.

Nicholas gave a patient chuckle, reminding Evelyn of her younger days wrangling her own children. *"Keep at it, then,"* he encouraged, *"Otherwise I will catch up to you."*

Leaf Eater nuzzled against him a little more. *"You will out-fly him some day, my love! But only if you keep practicing."*

The little dragon laughed at them and flew off, still clutching the side-view mirror, and landing on top of a big sign nearby. Nicholas rested his head atop Leaf Eater's neck for a brief moment and said, *"It is still terrifying."*

"I know," she said simply. After all, she could feel it. *"But you do it anyway. You are a brave Child of the Egg. Another reason why I love you,"* she crooned, stretching her neck over his own and twisting her head underneath his to lick at the underside of his chin.

"Okay, okay, that's enough of that for now," Tyler called out to break it up, though he sounded amused.

"You are blocking the stone-floor-path," Evelyn added. *"Move aside."*

Nicholas murmured an apology and took a step to the side, his hip bumping into a parked car and shoving it aside. "No, east-northeast, Nicholas, not west-southwest," Tyler corrected him.

Following Tyler's directions, Nicholas and Leaf Eater stepped to the other side of the four-lane road to let the others pass by so that he could assume his usual spot in the marching order. *"I think I will take a turn now,"* Evelyn announced. *"Nniicchhoollaass, you can follow Ttyyllleerr, yes?"*

"Yes, I can," Nicholas confirmed.

"Someday you will be able to fly with me wherever I go," Leaf Eater said dreamily, sliding her tail against Nicholas's affectionately.

Evelyn chuckled to herself. In some ways, Leaf Eater reminded her of herself when she was younger – insofar as she had once been head-over-heels for a young man her age, and had been just as overly affectionate about it... by the standards of the 1930s, at least. Ah, to be young again... or perhaps to meet another dragon like her. The thought gave her momentary pause. Her husband, rest his soul, had left her many decades

ago. But now was the start of a new life, a new beginning. Perhaps, some day...?

Tyler cleared his throat. "Weren't you going to try flying?"

"*Yes, I just got lost in thought,*" she said as she cleared the memories and musings away. There would be time for such thoughts later, but only if she could make it out of this city to safety. And to do that, she would have to learn to fly.

At least the road was mostly clear. There was a divider running down the middle of it, but it was irrelevantly small compared to her enormous body. Quickening her pace to get ahead of the others, Evelyn tried to focus. She'd already 'seen' the mental images that Leaf Eater had sent to Nicholas to teach him, and she recalled them in more detail than she would have expected. Thoughts of Leaf Eater fanning out her wings were matched by Evelyn making the motions herself. She had the knowledge. All she had to do now was practice.

Breaking into a run, Evelyn launched herself off the road and into the air at a spot where the nearby buildings were only one story tall. The sign that Trouble Maker was perched on, standing on his hind legs and watching her, was far enough away that there was no risk of her hitting it. She recalled Leaf Eater's thoughts of how to beat her wings to gain altitude and mimicked them with her own wings, bringing her legs closer to her body to reduce drag. She raised her wings, spreading the 'fingers' of them apart and stretching the membranes out like sheets. Pushing her wings downward, the resistance lifted her up, scattering dust and detritus lying on the pavement nearby. Pulling her wing fingers closer together, she folded her wings so she could raise them once more with minimal air resistance and repeat the cycle.

Raise. Spread. Lower. Furl. Raise. Spread. Lower. Furl...

So simple in theory, yet even with some subconscious dragon part of her mind taking over, she still didn't have it quite right. She gained altitude, but nowhere near as much as Leaf Eater could have done in the same span of time, and then began to lose it. Accepting her failure, she held out her

wings to glide back to the ground and landed so that she could try again. As many times as it took.

Raise. Spread. Lower. Furl. It should have been easy, yet timing was everything. Her second attempt brought her higher, but again she lost altitude and was soon back on all fours on the ground. Glancing to the side, she saw that Leaf Eater had moved, now standing on a nearby building and watching. Beside her, Trouble Maker had found himself far more interested by a rooftop exhaust vent that was spinning in the wind, inspecting it closely and poking at it with a claw.

Leaf Eater sent Evelyn a silent mental inquiry: did she want some advice? Evelyn sent back an affirmative thought, and Leaf Eater's response came back, multi-layered: she wasn't raising her wings high enough. Not spreading them out as much as she could. Not lowering them enough. She needed to hold her limbs closer to her body. These and other bits of advice, all at the same time, yet Evelyn was able to grasp them nonetheless.

Armed with Leaf Eater's advice, Evelyn tried once more. Raise, higher. Spread, wider. Lower, longer. Furl, faster...

She still had room for improvement. But she rose up, higher, over the nearby buildings by a comfortable enough margin that she could hold her wings out and bank to one side, beating them again to recover a little height lost in the turn. She was flying properly! Two weeks ago she had been utterly bedridden, confined to a few rooms within a single building, and now, she had total freedom. She could go wherever she wanted! Within limits, perhaps; she didn't think she could cross the Atlantic Ocean unaided, but the whole continent was open to her now.

It was exhilarating to think about her newfound freedom, as well as exciting in the moment. Feeling the air rush past her, seeing streets and entire buildings zip past her in seconds. Not to mention that from this altitude, she could see so much, so far, making out details at a surprising distance. She turned again to ensure she did not stray too far from the group, also taking care that she did not fly too low. What would it be like when she had more practice and could fly even faster and more gracefully?

She felt a pleased emotion from Leaf Eater and some encouragement from the others in her network except for Nicholas, who seemed lost in thought.

Best not to get ahead of herself. Hubris had ended greater men and women than her. She didn't try to go any higher, but circled around, heading back once more towards the others. In theory at least, turning was simply a matter of tilting her body to bank to one side, but if she didn't do it right she could lose a lot of height, and she had to hold her wings steady as she did. She was flying high enough to see the top of a nearby water tower, and everyone below her looked so small, especially the humans behind the truck. Were they in awe, or afraid?

Turning once more, Evelyn looked ahead down the road they were taking; there was no reason not to scout ahead a little while she was up there. Yet there was little out of the ordinary that she could immediately see, for some value of 'ordinary': smashed storefronts and piles of trash bags that wouldn't be taken away for a while yet, some ripped open by scavengers. Abandoned cars, many with broken side windows, a couple of which were charred husks. No bodies, though there were dried bloodstains in some places. Evidence of other past fires in a few places, long since burned out, leaving blackened sections of buildings. Small groups of people in alleys, some looking up at her and others not; a mixture of the homeless and the roving marauders that now roamed freely.

Up ahead was the big intersection they were going to turn at. At one corner of it was a larger building than everything nearby: a hotel that rose higher than Evelyn was currently flying, with a sprawling car park beside it, with many cars still in it – most of them still intact, too. Motion caught Evelyn's eye and she saw people at the entrance holding guns, but they looked to be on guard. Guests, staff, or both, most likely. Some higher rooms had similar guards at the windows, and even a couple on the rooftop. It seemed relatively safe, despite the few bloodstains in the parking lot and one car that had its windows shot out. Perhaps the humans there had seen her, perhaps not, but they weren't pointing their guns at her so with any luck they would be able to pass by.

She was about to turn around and head back to the others when something caught her eye. A big van, pale blue almost like the eggshell of a

bird. But there were many such vehicles, surely, even if a glance at the front confirmed that the manufacturer was the one she hoped and expected it to be. Her eyes lingered on it, looking for its details, still slightly amazed by how much she could see from so far away when two weeks ago she had needed glasses to see something two feet away from her face.

She turned once again and flew until she could see the back of the van. There, on the bumper: a sticker of a ribbon bearing the words "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité." Her eyes flicked over to the license plate and read it off, and her heart skipped a beat.

Her family. Her children. They were here.

Immediately she tilted her wings to lower her altitude, aiming for an open spot in the car park, sending only a brief mental message to the others, showing them the hotel and expressing urgency on her part, yet that there was no danger nor any reason for them to panic. Her landing was not as smooth as she had hoped, as she had never landed from quite so high before, and the extra velocity caught her off-guard. Stumbling forward upon touching down, she nearly put one massive foot on a car and just barely managed to reach past it, bumping the car with her back leg instead, knocking it askew in its parking space.

Looking over to the door once she came to a stop, she saw that the men by the door had their guns drawn and pointed at her. Not that that concerned her, primarily because they were far too small of a caliber to even make a dent in her scales.

Still, it wouldn't do to cause a ruckus, so she lowered her head down to a level much closer to the humans and stayed standing where she was. "Eexxcuussee mmee!" she called out, doing her best to avoid slurring her words. She envied Tyler and Jacqueline for having already regained proper use of their voices.

When she did not attack and instead spoke, one of the men, wearing a leather jacket and jeans, lowered his gun. "Can... can I help you?" he shouted back, equal parts shocked and amazed at the sight of the dragon before him with her head held down close to the ground.

"liss tttheerree aa Jjooaann Ccrraannee hheerree?" Evelyn asked hopefully. "Oorr Ppaassccaall Aarrcchhaammbeeaaau?"

"Maybe," the man answered apprehensively. "What's your business with them?"

"Il aamm tttheeiirr mmootthheerr."

From behind her, Evelyn heard two pairs of wings closing in. Leaf Eater and Trouble Maker: she could identify them by their lights, as well as the sound of their wings, but she didn't spare them so much as a glance back. Both men seemed shocked by the announcement. "I'll check," he answered, disappearing inside, and someone else took his place by the door. Clearly they had more guards waiting inside. Two broken windows near the front of the building, covered by taped-up sheets, no doubt were part of the reason why.

Another dragon landed behind Evelyn with a much heavier impact. "Luke!" Jacqueline called out, and Evelyn finally turned her head to look behind her. Trouble Maker was smugly sitting on his haunches with a mangled exhaust vent in his jaws, the cap of it still intact enough to turn; evidently he had ripped it off and flown off with it. His ear-fins had swiveled towards Jacqueline when she called out to him, but he paid her little other attention, only just barely acknowledging his name. "*Trouble Maker!*" she yelled again when he didn't respond, "*Spit that out right this instant!*"

"*But it is mine,*" he replied, seemingly without much trouble despite the object in his mouth. But it made sense to Evelyn after a moment of thought: the noises she made to speak came from deep in her throat and weren't formed with her lips – or the edges of her mouth where her lips had once been, at least.

"*It is not yours! Drop it!*" Jacqueline commanded. Evelyn saw her approach him, and he leapt away and flitted to land on top of a nearby car in a manner reminiscent of a bird – a bird that left a large dent and deep scratches in the paint on the car's roof. He took off again, and Jacqueline chased after him, jumping into the air and beating her wings, but the little dragon she pursued was far nimbler and faster and easily sped off from her.

Evelyn couldn't help but snort in amusement. It wasn't all that far removed from having to keep her own children in line decades ago, and she was grateful that they hadn't been able to fly...

"Excuse me, uh, big spiky dragon?" a voice called out to her, and she turned her head back towards the hotel. "I found them," the man informed her, and her eyes widened. "They're on their way down."

Evelyn's tail flicked back and forth behind her with anticipation and she shuffled on the spot with excitement in a similar way to how Leaf Eater did on occasion, her wings opening and closing partly as she fidgeted. Her children. She had wanted to see them one last time before the end. The end hadn't come, but neither had they – a combination of riots and a lockdown of the city would have kept them from leaving. Her anticipation was obvious to the others, with silent inquiries being sent to her, but she focused on the doorway, every passing second seeming to stretch off into hours...

And then Pascal came into sight. Her son. Once just a tiny little baby she held in her arms in the hospital, now a man in his sixties with white hair and a sweater. She had lived so long she had seen her son's whole adult life, and even now she couldn't be more proud of him.

He wasn't alone, either. His wife, his daughter, his daughter's husband and their two children, both in their teens. And Joan, Evelyn's daughter, only a few years Pascal's senior, her curly hair clinging to the last vestiges of its color – or perhaps it was dye that was starting to wash out. She was hurrying as fast as she could with the cane held in one hand to assist with her walking, yet unlike Pascal it seemed that her family wasn't with her. At least that meant her good-for-nothing husband wasn't there for Evelyn to–

"Where is the dragon that claims to be Evelyn?" Pascal asked aloud, looking around the car park, his eyes scanning over the dragons assembled before him.

Evelyn raised a wing to get their attention while taking a step forward. "Hheerree," she announced, seeing the shock and surprise on the faces of her extended family as understanding dawned on them. "Il aamm nnoott llookkiinnngg mmyy uussuaall sseellff, bbuutt hheerree Il aamm."

"Mom?" Joan asked in a trembling voice, the hand on her cane shaking visibly.

"That's... that's impossible," Pascal declared, shaking his head. "My mother... she had only a few days to live, and that was almost two weeks ago. Whoever you are, you are not my mother."

"Ppaasscaall, iitt iiss mmee," Evelyn insisted. But she would need proof. Didn't someone still have...? Yes! To Sophia, she sent a mental image of her reading glasses, the cart they had been placed in after the chain had snapped, and then Rick, who would know where that cart had gotten to. An acknowledging thought from Sophia confirmed that she understood.

Doubt crawled across Pascal's weary face. "I... I cannot believe you without any proof," he murmured.

Evelyn couldn't help but smile. He'd always been stubborn in his own way, and she had expected nothing less of him. "Il aamm Eevveellyynn Mmaarriiee Aarrccchhaammmbbeeaaauu," she began, going on to tell him when and where she was born, what she had done in the war, where she had gone to school, and more. Already, Joan seemed to be convinced, trembling and staring at Evelyn, and Pascal's furrowed brow lost its edge with each word.

"*Found it, found it!*" Sophia called out happily to Evelyn as she bounded over, with Rick huffing and puffing as he ran after her. In her teeth was the handle of the push-cart Rick's family had been using before he had started driving the truck, and she pushed it in front of her as she hurried back to Evelyn, looking, feeling, and smelling very pleased with herself.

She stopped near Evelyn and Rick caught up, taking heavy breaths and holding a hand up in a wordless request to be given a moment. "You, ah, wanted these?" Rick eventually asked between gasps as he dug into the bag on the cart and tugged out Evelyn's reading glasses, the broken chain still hanging from the earpieces.

Pascal stared at the glasses in silent astonishment, then stepped forward and took them in one hand, looking them over. "These... these are my mother's," he said in a quiet voice, showing them to Joan, pointing to the

right earpiece and adding, "Look... they even have that scratch on the side."

"Tthhee cchhaaiinn ssnaappeedd wwhheenn mmyy nneecckk ggrreeww," Evelyn explained, slowly lowering her head down towards her children. At such a close distance, the sight of her children filled the vision of one eye, and she closed the other to better focus on them. The last time they had visited her, her vision had been far worse, and now she could see them clearly once again, filling her with pride and happiness. She could read every nuance of their expressions, every little wrinkle in Pascal's face that disappeared as he became convinced of the truth, and every quiver of Joan's hand as she listened to what Evelyn had to say. "Bbuutt aass yyoouu rreeccaall, yyoouu bboouugghhtt tthhoossee ffoorr mmyy nniinneettiieetthh bbiirrtthhddaayy."

"Mom...!" Joan called out, staggering forward until she could embrace Evelyn, using her free arm to try and hug the front of her much larger head. "It's really you...!"

Staring at the glasses for a moment longer before pocketing them, Pascal drew closer as well and hugged one of Evelyn's forelegs instead. "I'm sorry for doubting you," he apologized. "What in the name of God happened to you?"

It was going to be a long story, and she didn't want to struggle through the whole thing, so she called over Tyler to speak for her and translate, as much as she wanted to converse with her children directly. She started at the beginning: waking up one day at the hospice in a little less pain, with a little more mobility, and a strange swelling at the base of her back. Hearing the broadcast, and learning that she wasn't the only one changing. Hearing Sophia's plea for help, and rescuing her – admitting that she had unintentionally killed Sophia's and Nicholas's parents when she did. Jacqueline was still off chasing after Trouble Maker, and she could trust her children. They already knew what she had done in the Great War, after all, from the stories she had told them as cautionary tales about the horrors of war.

She gave them an abbreviated account of their journey through the city, meeting up with Rick and James and their families, heading for the guiding star in the north, all while their bodies shifted and changed every day, transforming more drastically overnight. Finding others to travel with them, and leaving some behind when they got to the stadium. The threat they faced knowing that the National Guard would soon be moving in, and that nowhere in the city would be safe when that happened, no matter how much their mission was to restore peace and order.

When she finished her tale, Pascal brought one hand to his face and took a deep breath. "I... I rather liked the stories you told us by the fireside when we were children more," he lamented, with an underlying attempt at mirth. "I was... I had thought you were dead by now. That we had missed our chance to say goodbye."

Joan was still clinging to Evelyn's foreleg. "I missed you so much... but... you never left! You were never gone!"

Bending her long neck downwards, Evelyn gave both of them a gentle nuzzle, taking great care not to press too firmly against them with her enormous size. "Il ttoolldd yyoouu Il wwoouulldd aallwwaayyss bbee wwiitthh yyoouu," she murmured. "Bbuutt wwghhaatt hhaappeenneedd ttoooo yyoouu? Wwghhaatt hhaappeenneedd hheerree? Aarree yyoouu wwweelll?"

Pascal gave a wry smile. "Even now, you're still more worried about us than you are about yourself. You never change, *maman*," he remarked, but then his expression fell and he spoke more quietly. "There were riots. If not for some other brave guests, we would have all been robbed. Then the police ordered everyone to stay inside. And then they left, and it was too dangerous to go outside at all. Mother, it... it's not any better anywhere else. Even back in France, the cities there are burning. It's the same all over the world. It's not safe anywhere."

"Stay with us!" Joan pleaded. "You... you could protect us!"

"Wwghheerree iiss yyoouurr hhuussbbaanndd?" Evelyn asked. How could he leave her alone at a time like this?"

"With Terry," Joan replied, referring to her step-son. Evelyn softened a little; Terry was unlike his father in many ways, which served to endear him to Evelyn by that fact alone. "He's a Victim, like you. I... I had to come see you. To be with you. But everyone else in my side of the family is with Terry. The phones barely work but I've tried to stay in touch. I didn't... I didn't expect two people in my family would both be changed...!"

"Wwhheerree iiss hhee?"

"He made it back home." Joan sniffled a little. "I shudder to think what would have happened if he'd been out traveling when it had happened... please, come back with us! There's more than enough space at Terry's place for the both of you. No-one will bother us out in the country. We could get out of the city with your help!"

Evelyn looked down, her ear-fins drooping. She wanted to. The chance to be with her family again, when she thought she would have to leave them without saying good-bye, was almost too good to pass up. But she could feel the presence of the others – her new family. Sophia and Nicholas seemed concerned after overhearing the request for Evelyn to leave, and Leaf Eater... well, Leaf Eater didn't seem any out of the ordinary with a curious interest in the proceedings. Francisco seemed sympathetic to her situation, yet also sad at possibly having to see her go. And though Tyler wasn't part of her network, she could still smell his emotions, a mix of empathy and longing.

"Il ccaann'tt," Evelyn answered, lowering her head. "Il mmuusstt ttaakkee ccaarree ooff mmyy nneeww ffaammiillyy." She gestured with her tail towards the other dragons behind her. "Tthheeyy nneeeedd mme."

"But we need you!" Joan protested, clinging to Evelyn's foreleg. "Mom, please!"

"We're still your family, even now!" Pascal added.

Evelyn gritted her teeth. Did she really have to choose? She still loved her family, all standing before her: children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. Even most of the ones on Joan's side she still dearly wished to see again. And they did need her. But they had each other. Nicholas and

Sophia didn't have anyone else any more – for which she was at fault. She had no doubt that Tyler could lead in her absence from a strategic standpoint, but she wasn't just a leader in that sense – she was their guiding star. One of them, anyway, though Sophia was far too young to lead. Even Leaf Eater and, to some extent, Trouble Maker seemed to look up to her, in their own ways. Francisco would probably go back to his home, but he clearly respected her, and she found it endearing.

Evelyn took a breath. She couldn't choose. No... she *wouldn't* choose.

"Ccoommee wwiiitthh mmee," Evelyn said, raising her head a little.

"Pardon?" Pascal asked.

"Wwee aarree ggooiinngg ttoooo ttthee Nnaattioonnaall Ppaarrkk," Evelyn told them, her voice reflecting the determination that swelled within her. They were going there. And they would reach it. She would ensure it. "litt iiss ssaaffee tttheerree. Ccoommee wwiiitthh mmee. Yyooouu wwiiilll bbee ssaaffee ttoooo. Il wwiiilll pprroottecctt yyooouu."

"Yes!" Joan said immediately, hugging Evelyn's leg tightly. "Yes, I will! Let me just get my things from my room!"

Pascal hesitated, but only for a moment. "We need to get out of this city sooner or later. Joining a group with dragons protecting it seems wise," he observed, then smiled and leaned in to hug Evelyn's leg once again, his voice breaking just a little. "It's good to have you back, mother," he told her quietly. "*Je t'aime mère, Evelyn.*"

"*Jee tt'aaiimmee aausssii,*" Evelyn crooned softly, filling the air around her with the scent of affection and flooding her mental link with her emotions of the same. The only thing marring the moment was knowing that her children could not feel those emotions the same way the dragons did. She wished they could, but she put it out of her mind to focus on being reunited with her children at last.

Chapter 21

"What's the situation?" Tyler asked.

Evelyn forwarded the inquiry to Leaf Eater, or at least, a general inquisitive feeling regarding what she saw. Such mental communication had rapidly become second nature to her, and as Leaf Eater sent back mental images in response, Evelyn was able to relay them back as words to Tyler in real-time, something that would have seemed impossible to her not long ago.

"She sees the two-legs' soldiers. They are spread out wide, covering all the stone-paths leading out. Vehicles and foot-soldiers. None of their formations looks notably weaker than the others."

"Not surprising, but not good for us," Tyler murmured in response.

A fleeting moment of surprise, then annoyance, and a feeling that took Evelyn a moment to interpret. *"She has been seen. They know we are here."*

"That is also not surprising. Anyone with a pair of binoculars can see her. Or us, if they look down the highway. Call her back."

Evelyn turned her head and looked back down the highway behind her as she mentally requested Leaf Eater to return. As the group got ever closer to the city limits, the size and density of the buildings got ever thinner – barely anything was bigger than two stories now, aside from the occasional church steeple. So too had the carnage thinned; no longer were they coming across bloodstains, bodies or bullet casings, merely broken glass or trash that simply looked like the street needed sweeping. Nicholas lay beside the highway close to Sophia, who was playing with Trouble Maker under the closely watchful eyes of Jacqueline, Martin and Silvia. Nearby, Francisco was taking his turn to practice flying, turning and banking yet losing altitude each time he did despite his best efforts. Evelyn was aware of the instructions Leaf Eater was sending to him, and he was improving, but still had a long way to go.

Beyond them, the rest of the convoy had pulled over at the side of the road: the military truck, Jacqueline's police SUV, Pascal's van and Joan's car, the few other vehicles of those they had picked up at the stadium, and one

additional family from the hotel that had decided to take its chances hitching on to the outbound convoy. The military truck now bore a hastily spray-painted red cross on a white background, as part of Tyler's backup plan: as promised, Jacqueline had led them to small, independent stores she knew of that were still operating and could sell them what they needed. Their owners had seemed to recognize Jacqueline even as a dragon. Evelyn had also overheard Francisco joke to Nicholas that he would have been able to show the others the proper technique for spray-painting, if only his hands weren't so large now compared to a spray paint can.

"*Are you ready, then?*" Evelyn asked Tyler without looking back to him.

"As ready as I'll ever be," he grumbled. "Here's hoping it all goes well."

They made their way past the other dragons to the military truck. Rick and James were both leaning on one side near the driver's-side door, while their wives stood nearby chatting and their children sat on the grass by the highway talking to each other. All of them looked over at the two biggest dragons approaching them, and Tyler nodded to them in respect.

"Hope I'm not interrupting. Would you mind handing me the radio?" Tyler asked.

"Sure," Rick answered, opening the truck door and climbing inside to retrieve the radio from its charging station, bringing it back out to Tyler and setting it down in front of the huge dragon. Curling his long neck around, Tyler used his teeth to grab onto the strap of his duffel bag from where it was secured to the harness he was wearing. Setting it down on the ground, he had to very carefully pinch the zipper between the tip of a pair of claws so he could pull it down, then reached in slowly with just two digits to extract his pliers, using them to work the delicate radio controls with extreme care. He brought his wings forward and used them as a makeshift windbreak, covering his head and the radio with them. It looked quite ridiculous, but it served its purpose well enough.

"I can give you a hand with that if you want," Rick offered.

"Thank you, but I can handle it," Tyler insisted stubbornly. Evelyn rolled her eyes a little, but simply settled in to watch. "There. Now please be quiet,"

Tyler instructed as he finished setting up the radio.

"Yessir," Rick answered, stepping back towards the truck.

Pressing the transmit button with a claw, Tyler kept his wings up and his head close to the radio. "Delta 6 Actual, this is Delta 3-2 Actual, come in," Tyler began, repeating his hail after a moment. Evelyn sat down as those nearby went quiet and listened in.

A voice on the radio answered before he had to repeat himself a third time. "Delta 3-2 Actual, this is Delta 6 Actual, acknowledge."

"Reading you lima charlie," Tyler replied.

The tone of the voice on the other end immediately shifted abruptly. "Delta 3-2 Actual, where the *fuck* are you, and where the *fuck* is my stolen truck? I thought you had been abducted. Were you simply AWOL? And what's wrong with your voice?"

Despite the harsh rebuke, Tyler didn't flinch. "Must be radio trouble, 6 Actual" he mused, unable to hide the deep rumbling of his draconic voice. To answer the other question, he continued, "I was in the operational zone, sir."

A single word came back, laden with frustration. "Why?"

"Rescuing wounded noncombatants, sir. I have a mixed group of eight Afflicted and twenty-six refugees here," Tyler stated, deliberately neglecting to mention that he was one of those eight Afflicted. "They are seeking safe refuge outside of the city limits."

"What—..." his superior officer began indignantly, then stopped, the line going quiet for a few seconds. "3-2 Actual, our orders – *your* orders – were and still are to contain the operational area until it has been secured. No entry. No exit. Understood?"

Undeterred, Tyler continued, "Negative, sir. Please confirm your order to prevent unarmed civilians from fleeing an imminent combat zone in a manner that would run contrary to the conventions of warfare."

Evelyn smirked a little. The commander went quiet again, but she wished in a way that she could see the look on his face. "3-2 Actual," he eventually

answered, his voice laden with anger that was on the verge of spilling over, "our standing orders remain clear: the Afflicted are to be contained on-site by whatever means necessary in the name of public safety. Understood?"

Evelyn's smirk vanished, and she listened as Tyler replied. "Affirmative, sir. What about the non-Afflicted? They are unarmed refugees."

Another pause. "They will be subject to a stop and search but may leave the operational zone," came the answer after a moment. Then, sternly, the commander added, "3-2 Actual, you will *not* be permitted to leave with them. You will be detained and questioned, and we will be taking back the truck. Delta 6 Actual, out." The line abruptly went dead as Tyler's superior terminated the call.

Tyler turned off the radio and folded back his wings with a frown. "Well, that went about as well as I could expect," he muttered, placing the radio down on the ground for Rick to retrieve.

"So, what does that mean for us?" Rick asked as he picked up the radio.

"Get everyone together, and I'll tell you," Tyler answered as he sat up on his haunches. "I'd rather not have to repeat this more than once."

As the human members of the convoy were gathered together, Leaf Eater glided in and landed near Nicholas, sitting beside him smugly. Immediately, she rested her side against his own, after sending him a mental forewarning of her intentions that Evelyn sensed over the shared mental link. Nicholas remained seated, twisting his tail with hers, and in return she extended a wing over his body and his own folded wings, the two of them seeming to have found a comfortable middle ground for their interactions. Sophia came when Evelyn called, but Trouble Maker required a little extra coercion from Jacqueline, which ended with him clambering up onto her back and perching on her head as she joined the assembly of everyone present.

"I have good news and bad news," Tyler announced to all of them. "The good news is that, so long as you present yourselves as refugees," he added with a side glance at Jacqueline, "the humans among us will be allowed past the National Guard lines after a stop and search."

"Well, that's no good," Rick protested, "I've got my rifle! Am I going to have to leave it behind?"

"Yes. But if you leave it with me, I can give it back to you later. The same goes for everyone else's weapons. You're better off not trying to carry them through, since you're supposed to be unarmed refugees. However, there is a complication."

"Great. What's that?"

"They're going to take the truck back. It's not very surprising: it's National Guard property, after all. You'll have to pick another vehicle to lead the convoy, probably Jacqueline's police SUV. You still have a road map, don't you?"

"Yessir," Rick confirmed, gesturing to the truck. "Got it on the dash. A few other folks have maps too."

"Good. Once you're past the National Guard lines you should have a clear shot to the National Park. The roads ought to be clear – if there were any obstructions, the National Guard units would have cleared them out on the way here."

"Was that the bad news?" Rick inquired hopefully.

"For you, yes," Tyler remarked with a long look towards James, who remained standing with his arms folded. "But for us..." Tyler gestured with a wing towards the dragons near him. "This is where we part. Hopefully temporarily, but we cannot follow you through the National Guard blockade. They are refusing to allow any dragons to leave the city, and are insisting that we must be contained."

Murmurs broke out among the humans immediately.

"We can't leave our son!" Silvia protested.

"But you've done so much for us!" Rick's wife called out.

"Mother, we only just got back together," Pascal bemoaned, "Do we have to leave you again so soon?"

Other protests rose up until Evelyn straightened up and called out, "Sstoop!" with enough force of will behind it to silence those around her, raising her upper body and flaring her wings for emphasis. She lowered her head and continued, "Wee hhaavee nnoo ootheerr chooiicee."

"We're not saying goodbye forever, or at least, I hope we aren't," Tyler reiterated. "We're still going to make the best attempt we can to get to the National Park," Tyler told them. "But it will be risky. We need to let you go on ahead and get past the National Guard first, so that our escape doesn't put you in jeopardy."

"But you don't have much time!" Rick pointed out.

Tyler nodded in agreement. "That's correct. We'll have to go tonight, once it's dark. And we'll have to fly, however good we may or may not be at it. If all goes well, we'll catch up to you while you're camped out for the night. If not..." he raised a wing in a salute. "Then please remember us."

Evelyn didn't need any draconic powers to see the mood shift among the humans present; even James looked down and away with a grimace. Jacqueline seemed sternly resolute, and only Trouble Maker seemed unconcerned, lying down and snoozing between Jacqueline's wing joints where her spinal fin was short and easily flattened under him. Nicholas was afraid – how couldn't he be? – and Sophia seemed afraid too just because her brother was, while Leaf Eater was reassuring them both over the mental link. Francisco, at least, seemed confident, inspecting the claws on one of his forelegs.

"Wee wiilllll bee ffiine," Evelyn proclaimed, taking a step forward. She needed to rally them; the last thing any of them needed was a sorrowful parting. "Wee goot thiiss ffaarr. Thiinnk off whaatt wee ooveerrcaame too geet heere! Thiiss wiilllll bee nootthhinngg."

"Mom...?" Joan said quietly, leaning on her cane while staring up at Evelyn's enormous body.

Evelyn turned her head and smiled at her daughter in a way she hoped would come across as more endearing than terrifying. "Thee nnazziiss coouulldn'tt killlll mee, aanndd I diidn'tt haave buulleetprooffff

sscaalleess. Il woonn't diiee hheeree. Il WIILLLL meeeett yyooouu oonn tthhee hhiigghhwwaayy. Il prroommiisse!"

Pascal gave a quiet chuckle. "That's my mother," he observed wryly. "I will hold you to that. I expect to see you again before the sun rises!"

Evelyn lowered her head close to them, and both Joan and Pascal reached out to touch her muzzle, soon joined by the rest of her extended family on Pascal's side. Around her, others said their goodbyes to people they knew, though Jacqueline had her work cut out for her persuading Martin and Silvia to go their own way; even by the time the others were getting in their vehicles and slowly driving off, or following after vehicles on foot, she was still talking to them. When Evelyn finally said her goodbyes to everyone in her family who was present, she walked over to Jacqueline to lend her a hand.

"...too dangerous!" Silvia was protesting, and Evelyn could easily smell the annoyance exuding from Jacqueline. Likely, this was ground they had already re-tread several times.

"You have to trust me," Jacqueline urged. "You need to go on alone, and we will meet back up on the way to the National Park."

"We can't leave him all alone! He's six months old! He needs us!"

"Normally, yes. However, he is a dragon now—"

"Don't say that! He's still our son! He's not some beast!"

Clearing her throat with a noise far deeper than she intended, Evelyn lowered her head once she had their attention, looking at Silvia. "Eexcuse mee. Il aagrrree wwiith yyooou, hee iiss nnoot aan aanimmaal. Ssoome daay, Il belliieeve yyooou wwiilllll geet thhrroough toooo hiim."

"Exactly! At least someone here has some sense!" Silvia moaned.

Evelyn went on, "Wwiith thaat ssaaiid, riight nnoow, hee aaccts lliike aa drraagonn. Thaataa maayy chaangee iiff yyooou shhooww hiim lloove aand caarre, buut rriigght nnoow, hee shhoould sstaay wwiith uuss."

Martin shook his head. "You can't ask us to abandon him!"

"Nnoot aabaandoon," Evelyn stressed. "Mmeerelyy aa teemmpoorraarry ffaarewweell. Hee wwiillll nnoot bee ssaafe heerre. Hee caannoot lleave wwiith yooou. Ssoo plleeaase lleet uuss taake hiim ffor nnoow."

"Once we get to safety, then we can work on having you get through to him," Jacqueline added to back up Evelyn. "But we have to get there first, and just for now, for this one night, he will be safer with us. Please."

Silvia went quiet as Martin held onto her from the side. "Let me say goodbye," she eventually said after a long period of silence.

With some cajoling, Jacqueline and Evelyn got the sleepy Trouble Maker to come down from his perch and sit down. Silvia slowly approached the little dragon, who was staring up at her curiously, watching her hands as she reached out and slowly, carefully touched his muzzle, making him stare cross-eyed at her hand, eventually trying to turn his head so he could see better. Evelyn knew herself that Silvia was in his blind spot, but she decided to hold her tongue rather than interrupt.

"Luke," Silvia whispered quietly, "Please, be safe. Mommy's waiting for you, okay? Do what Grandma Jackie tells you."

He trilled a little and nuzzled back against her hand, though Evelyn wasn't sure if he had been paying attention to what she had told him. With a defeated sigh, Silvia allowed her husband to escort her away to their car, and the three dragons watched them go.

"*She is strange. Who is she?*" Trouble Maker asked.

Evelyn detected a brief pang of grief from Jacqueline. Even knowing that he didn't recognize his birth parents, his words still stung, it seemed. Evelyn lowered her head to get his attention and answered, "*That is your egg-bearer-parent.*"

She could smell his disbelief. "*Do not be silly. My egg-bearer-parent is over there,*" he replied flatly, pointing with his tail towards Jacqueline.

Jacqueline hesitated, and Evelyn caught a scent of concern from her. In the end, however, she simply ushered the dragonet onto his feet. "*Come along,*" Jacqueline told him. "*Get your toy. We will be leaving soon.*"

Trouble Maker bounded off to retrieve his latest 'toy' – a mile marker sign he had decided to uproot from the ground for some reason. The vent fan had been abandoned a while back in favor of a sheet of metal that made a wobbling sound when he shook his head, which Sophia had found particularly amusing. Each of his old toys he had eventually left behind, but he hadn't simply tossed them away, instead looking around for somewhere to stash them carefully. Was it some draconic instinct? But Leaf Eater didn't seem to show any such inclinations, so perhaps it was just from him being so young. Putting it out of her mind, Evelyn turned to the others, seeing Tyler approaching her.

"*Ready to go?*" Evelyn asked.

"Before we do, I want to ask you something," Tyler told her, sounding and smelling oddly serious.

Evelyn regarded him calmly and nodded her assent. "*Go on.*"

"I have reconsidered. I want to join your... mental group," he said vaguely, gesturing towards her with one wing. "*The constellation,*" he added in the dragon language as a better explanation.

His request took her by surprise. "Of course," she answered, simultaneously sending out a request to the others to see if they agreed as well, getting back their approval as she kept speaking. Sophia in particular seemed delighted by the prospect of having Tyler join them. "But what changed your mind?"

Tyler looked down the road, watching the car Martin was driving head off after the rest of the convoy. "There are only dragons left here, and I am one of them. However much I may think of myself as human, however much I believe that I am human inside, my body is not. I must be willing to accept this new body, and all it is capable of." For emphasis, he raised and fanned his wings out as much as he could, an impressive sight given the sheer size of him. "I must understand it, for my own survival – and the survival of those around me – depends on it." He lifted his muzzle slightly. "I do not know why this happened to me, and not others. I do not know what will become of me, or if I will see my family again. But I do know one thing: I am Tyler Lewis. No matter how many scales I grow or how high I fly

off the ground, that will not change. Furthermore, I know you have mentioned you have a way to communicate with one another, silently and mentally. Given what lies ahead of us, such an ability would be immensely helpful."

Evelyn nodded to him in agreement. *"I understand. Then allow me. Just accept my... presence, when you feel it."*

"Thank you," Tyler told her sincerely, closing his eyes. "I have been thinking on this for a while. Whenever you're ready."

Before she could, however, Sophia beat her to the punch. She felt a giddy excitement from Sophia and then sensed the girl using her powers, and Tyler accepting a moment later, perhaps not realizing that it wasn't Evelyn. Not that it mattered – it was the same mental network either way. Evelyn felt a brief rush as his consciousness was added to the network; no longer was she limited to sensing just high-level emotions from him, but now she could pick up on more than just surface thoughts and feelings. His momentary confusion told her that it was a little overwhelming for him, but she was able to comfort him across the mental link.

Not just that, but even though he was a dragon from head to tail, she could still feel aches and pains left over from his transformation: bits of his wings that were still growing and certain parts of his insides that were changing despite his exterior seeming complete. It took only a small amount of mental effort for her to take his pain and suppress it as she and Sophia had done for the others – and each other – and she felt him relax immediately.

"That's so much better," he said with a groan, stretching his wings out wide. "I should have done this sooner."

But Evelyn shook her head. *"No, it was important that you only do it once you are completely willing to do so. It is not something to rush. It requires a great deal of trust."*

Tyler nodded to her, though Evelyn felt his agreement a moment before that. *"You are right,"* he told her, switching to the dragon language to speak. *"And I am ready to take that risk."*

Sophia stared up at all the stars in the sky above her. There were so many! In fact, it seemed like there were way more than there used to be. All the big bright ones were still there, but now she could see even more, almost completely filling in the gaps. She wasn't sure why she could see so many more; maybe it was just yet another part of becoming a dragon.

She was definitely up past her bedtime, but she didn't feel all that tired. She wasn't hungry, though; rather than attempt to carry the brightly colored food cart with them, they had eaten everything that was left in Francisco's cart, and then he had stashed it in the woods nearby in the hope that he could find it again on his way back. Quite smugly, he declared that no-one would try to get it down from the tree he had lodged it in the branches of. Now, they were merely waiting, after having spent as much time as they could before nightfall practicing flying within the city's outskirts, away from the National Guard lines they could barely pick out in the distance.

Beside her, Francisco was sitting on the ground while he drew a shape in the dirt, and she glanced down at it to see what she was meant to be looking for. Once she had gotten a good look at the completed drawing, he curled his tail around his side and pointed upwards with it, while she did her best to follow where he was indicating. "*That one is*" he began in the dragon language, then continued in Spanish, "*Aaccuuaarriioo*."

Sophia looked up at the stars, looking for the brighter ones she was meant to follow, picking out the shape that Francisco had drawn.

"*Aaccuuaarriioo*," she repeated, though she wasn't sure which bits of it were supposed to be long and which were just sounding funny because of the way people spoke after learning to speak dragon.

"*Very good! In your language I think they call it Aacquuaarriiuuss*," he went on.

"*Aacquuaarriiuuss*." Sophia tried again, having an easier time with a word she'd heard before. She'd learned quite a bit of Spanish from him in bits and pieces over time, but whenever she tried to repeat him she ended up mimicking his slurred pronunciation exactly until she practiced it more. It

wasn't the only thing she could mimic, as she'd found with a bit of practice; certain sounds and noises she was able to replicate, too.

She looked down again as Francisco drew out another shape. *"Where did you learn this? I wish school had taught me anything this interesting."*

He gave a short chuckle. *"My egg-bearer-parent. When I was little like you, she showed me the stars at night. She knew all of them. I know there are some I am forgetting. She would disapprove!"* he remarked mirthfully. *"This one is Ppeeggaassoo."*

Sophia shifted a little, looking up at the sky to try and find the shape Francisco had drawn, but she couldn't until he pointed with his tail again. *"Ppeeggaassoo. What is a ppeeggaassoo?"*

"Ppeeggaassuuss," he translated to English.

Sophia smiled and thumped her tail on the ground happily. *"I like ppeeggaassuusseess!"* she said cheerfully. *"I have seen them in books and moving-picture-shows."* She looked back down at the drawing on the ground and squinted. *"It does not look anything like a ppeeggaassuuss. It looks like an ooccttooppuuss."*

He shrugged with his wings. *"I am not the one who named it,"* he replied simply.

Sophia only was half paying attention to him, however; Nicholas and Leaf Eater were returning. Leafy had gone to scout one last time, while Nicholas had gone with her simply to get some more flight practice in. She had still felt his fear over their mental link, but it had been less than usual. Nick was finally getting used to flying...! Well, a little, maybe.

Evelyn sent them a mental image of a group of dragons and a feeling of a gathering; a request for them to all come together. Standing up as Francisco did the same, they walked over to the spot by the highway where the others were already gathered. Trouble Maker (or Nimble Wing as he called himself) was sniffing around in the bushes nearby, while Jacqueline kept an eye fixed on him.

Sophia sat by Nicholas, giving him a little mental prod to let him know she was there, and he extended his wing to curl it around her, making her

smile. Leaf Eater was leaning on his other side, but Sophia was quick to reach out and wrap her tail around Nicholas's before Leaf Eater could do so. After a brief moment of hesitation, though, Leaf Eater loosely twisted her tail around both of theirs, with complex thoughts coming over the mind-link-thing that seemed to respect Sophia's feelings towards her brother. Nicholas put a wing over each of them, and Sophia leaned on his side, content with the arrangement.

"Are we ready?" Jacqueline asked.

Tyler gave a nod. "Ready or not, we have to go soon." He cast a glance upwards at the sky, and Sophia wondered for a moment if he was looking for one of the constellations up there. "It's as dark as it's going to get. I wish it wasn't a clear night so we could have better cover, but beggars can't be choosers." He lowered his muzzle and looked around at the others. "Fly as high as you can, and then glide until you're past them. We're very dark and they won't be expecting any aerial threats, so with a little luck they won't notice us at all. If we're fast enough, it won't even matter if we're spotted – we'll be long gone by the time they get organized."

Jacqueline thrummed in thought, and Sophia saw that she was keeping her eye on Nimble Wing as she tapped one foot on the ground. "What if they have thermal goggles?"

"They might," Tyler admitted, "but not all of the Guardsmen will have them. In fact, very few will, and they won't be using regular NVGs because of the highway lights." He took a deep breath. "It's not foolproof, but this is our best shot. We – by which I mean the 3rd Squadron of the National Guard – aren't prepared for anti-air combat. They'll have machine guns and rockets they can use if they decide to, so we'll have to be fast and hope they care enough about collateral damage to not shoot at us this close to the city."

"It's not as though we have any other options," Jacqueline conceded. "Very well. I'm ready."

"What about Trouble Maker?" Evelyn asked. "You will need to keep him from flying away from the rest of us."

Jacqueline snorted and leaned closer to Evelyn, shaking her head. She said nothing aloud, and simply mimicked grabbing onto something with her hands, closing her digits as if holding onto the imaginary object tightly.

"...I see," Evelyn remarked.

"*I'm not taking any chances,*" Jacqueline said simply, frowning when she looked back over towards the dragonet. Sophia glanced over and saw that Nimble Wing was digging something up, tossing clods of dirt onto the ground behind him. "*In fact, let me take care of that now.*"

She stood up and walked away from the group. Sophia could feel that Nicholas was getting nervous again, so she leaned in and nosed at his side while rubbing her tail to his reassuringly. Also feeling the same emotions from him, Leaf Eater pressed the side of her head against his. "*Fear not, Tree Nuzzler! I will be at your side the whole way,*" she proclaimed, speaking up over the sudden squeaking protests of Nimble Wing in the background accompanied by Jacqueline's insistent "*Spit it out!*"

"*I will tell you where to go if you are going in some weird direction,*" Sophia added.

"*Yes! Just follow the lights of Great Mother and Little Mother.*"

Nicholas seemed to calm a little. "*I will, thank you. We should get this over and done with.*"

"I agree," Tyler murmured, glancing aside. Sophia followed his gaze to see Nimble Wing flailing and wriggling, but Jacqueline had managed to get hold of him and seemed to have a firm enough grasp that he couldn't get away. "As soon as the little rascal is quiet..."

It took some stern words from Jacqueline and, eventually, a forceful command from Evelyn to make Nimble Wing finally go still and be quiet – and relinquish the truffle he had been holding in his mouth. Sophia was tempted to go and take it herself, but Evelyn was keeping too close an eye on her. With the group finally ready, Evelyn took off first, crouching down and then launching herself into the air with her back legs. Tyler followed after her, then Leaf Eater with Nicholas just behind. Sophia leapt up to join them, as did Francisco, and Jacqueline hobbled back to the highway on

three legs before taking off, catching up to them several moments later with Nimble Wing hanging limply in her grasp, defeated and grumpy about the whole ordeal.

Even with how dark it was, Sophia could see just fine as they all beat their wings to get as high as they could. The ground grew further and further away, and she could see further and further into the distance, though parts that were too dark looked to her like they had no color.

And they were going so fast! If only they could have just done this from the beginning, they could have been across the whole city in no time. She thought about diving down and trying some new flying moves for fun, but a stern thought from Evelyn kept her in line and she settled for just admiring the view of the world below her. The sparse houses gave way to the woods with the highway cutting through them, and beyond that, open fields. Other big roads leading out of the city were nearby, but they all had something in common: lots of vehicles and people in uniforms blocking the way.

Despite that, they weren't the only people trying to leave. Other cars and groups on foot were stuck near the soldiers, perhaps waiting to be let through, or maybe they'd been told to stay put. In a way, it felt like they were skipping past a line by flying over.

Peering out beyond the blockade, Sophia's eyes easily followed lights straddling the highway as it snaked across the land. She could see so far from up here! She tried to look for Rick and Evelyn's family and all the others, but the glare from all the lights along the highway stopped her from seeing anything close to it clearly. She hoped they were all right.

When they got closer, Tyler held his wings level and sent the feeling of keeping them held stiffly out to the others, indicating they should do the same. Everyone but Jacqueline followed suit, and she caught on a moment later and leveled out her wings as well, keeping the little dragon under her clutched tightly against her front, murmuring soothing words to him.

How hard could it be to just keep your wings out and go in a straight line? It seemed so simple to Sophia, and so she soon found herself wishing that she had taken more time to practice gliding earlier that day. For some

reason she was losing height faster than the others, and when she beat her wings once to try and get higher, Tyler and Evelyn both immediately rebuked her mentally for making noise. She began to feel worried, and Evelyn reassured her with some transmitted feelings, but it didn't change that Sophia was dropping, and she didn't know why. Was she doing something wrong? Was she not holding her wings right? She was already fully underneath all the others, and she had to hope she could make it.

She looked down again. There were a lot of soldiers and vehicles both around the road and on it. There were tents and guards and some of them had those things people held up to their eyes to see further. Others just had goggles on, but they weren't looking up. Tyler had been right.

Sophia looked up again. Nicholas also seemed to be a little lower than the others, as was Francisco. Sophia tried to look at Evelyn's wings to see if she was doing something wrong with them, but if she was, she couldn't figure it out. The ground was getting closer when she looked down again and the people under her were getting bigger. It was still far away, though, wasn't it? Just one flap. It wouldn't hurt to just do one, and get a little more height. Just one...

She raised her wings and then pushed them down again, lifting herself up into the air, but raising her wings from their stretched-out position only made her drop further before she was able to lift herself back up, and she had to flap them a second time to get higher than she had been a few seconds ago. Nothing bad happened, and she relaxed a little, keeping her wings held out again...

"Something's in the sky!" a voice suddenly called out from below. Noise cascaded from there as voices shouted further and further across the lines of soldiers. Sophia felt panic from the others and herself panicked in turn, though Tyler and Evelyn both seemed to keep calm – the former enough to send them all mental insistence to hurry. He dived down just a little to gain more speed and zoomed forward, with some of the others doing the same.

But Sophia was already lower down. Should she dive too? No, she had to get higher first! She flapped her wings again to get higher so she could dive forward...

"Target sighted!" someone shouted below her, with similar shouts from other groups of people.

"Go! Go!" Tyler commanded and began beating his wings to gain altitude. "*Fly as high as you can!*" The noise of all of them starting to flap their wings at once was quite loud, and Sophia struggled to keep up with them.

"Hold your fire!" a voice barked, puzzling Sophia. Who would want to hold onto fire? Fire was hot, you couldn't—

A brief series of loud pops cut through the air, and something zipped upwards not far from Sophia. She panicked and flapped her wings harder to try and gain more height, but in her panic she barely got any height at all. Leaf Eater looked back at her, and sent Sophia mental instructions on how to move her wings, but she was frightened and couldn't follow them. There was so much yelling below, and another one of those bursts of noise—

A sharp pain from Francisco made her wince and cry out, but she only felt it for a moment before Evelyn managed to suppress it down to just a dull twinge. Even in just the brief moment she had felt it, Sophia knew it was from a membrane on his left wing, but a surge of confidence from him seemed to indicate he would be fine.

"I said hold your fire, god damn it!" someone yelled out in response to another burst of gunfire, and this time Tyler roared out, his pain broadcasted to the others; a broken scale and a wound on his left side.

"I'm hit, I'm hit!" he called out aloud in reflex instead of using the mental link. It felt agonizing as though a hot spike had driven through her flesh, and Sophia couldn't stop herself from screaming out as she felt the pain as if it were her own before Evelyn took care of it again. She wanted to help, but at the same time, she could barely focus, her panic overcoming her. Tyler urged haste once more through the mental link, emphasizing speed, then safety. Distance, then safety. They just had to go! They were almost clear!

There was so much noise, so much yelling. "Hold your fire!" and "Cease fire!" from so many directions. 'Cease' meant to stop, didn't it? But not

everyone had been told that yet, and from closer to them as they advanced, Sophia heard more gunfire.

This time aimed at her.

One moment, she was flying as fast as she could to catch up to the others, and the next, her left wing was aflame with pain, holes ripped through its membrane in so many places that one part of it tore completely. Screaming out in panic and pain, smelling blood, hearing humans and dragons around her yelling out as well, she fell for a few seconds before realizing she was plummeting downwards in an uncontrolled spiraling motion, and tried to flap her wings. Yet with one so heavily damaged, she veered off course and barely slowed her descent. The ground was coming up fast, and all she could try to do was aim for the open highway instead of crashing into the trees...

Unable to steer herself properly, Sophia struck one of the lamp posts beside the highway and brought it crashing down with her. Even with her wings flared out, she struck the ground hard, and shrieked in agony as her impact against the hard concrete made all of her legs hurt – especially her back left leg, which buckled underneath her and refused to bear her weight.

Sophia collapsed to the ground, hearing yelling all around her from humans and dragons alike. She could smell her own blood and feel it on her side where it had splattered from her trying to flap her damaged wing. The pain was so intense that she couldn't open her eyes, and she couldn't get back up into the air with her wing so badly hurt. She was so scared, she didn't know what to do. And something had gone wrong: she couldn't hear Nick, or Evelyn, or anyone else, not even in her mind. Alone and afraid, she began to cry, raising back her head and letting out a loud, pained roar, before inhaling and yelling out for her brother.

"NNIIIIIIICCKK!"

The first round of gunfire had sent Nicholas into an immediate panic. They were being shot at! Leaf Eater had reassured him; their scales were strong,

and could withstand whatever the humans threw at them.

And then Francisco had been hit. The wings had no scales, no protection. They weren't as safe as they thought.

Then, Tyler. Their guns were big enough, powerful enough, to break through dragon scales. They had to hurry and hope they could get out of the effective range of the guns in time...

But the final straw had been Sophia.

He had felt his sister's pain as if it were his own. Bullets shredding thin fleshy membranes, severely damaging her wing. His panic had frozen him, and he had felt the sheer rage of Leaf Eater and Trouble Maker both spilling over from a Guiding Star being attacked and hurt. In fact, Trouble Maker had suddenly thrashed and writhed so violently that Jacqueline had lost her grip on him and Nicholas had heard him fly away, while Leaf Eater roared out and turned back, swearing vengeance.

When he felt Sophia's leg break, she had broadcasted her pain far and wide – even the soldiers seemed to have been affected by it, judging by the screams from behind them. Evelyn had tried to mute it, but it was such an intense pain that she could do little to keep it under control, which made it all the more terrifying when suddenly Nicholas couldn't feel or sense Sophia – at all.

For a moment that felt like it stretched out for hours, Nicholas's head spun. His junior nestmate, gone. His guiding star, gone. Taken by the two-legs and their explosion-projectile-weapons. He shuddered in the air, starting to drop. The matriarch, Great Mother. No. No! His very mind and identity felt like it was slipping away from him, like sand through his fingers. The two-legs had taken the life of a Child! The most precious Child to him in the world!

Loud, bellowing roars of grief and mourning tore not just from his throat, but from far off in the distance, from other Children of the Egg still in the two-legs' sprawling gray dwelling-place, who had also sensed the loss of a Matriarch. Tree Nuzzler was not alone in his grief, but it did not ease his pain. The rage that had filled Leaf Eater and Trouble Maker grew within

Tree Nuzzler too, and he let out another despairing cry, of mourning and anger so intense that even the minds of Little Mother and Wing Waver could not reach him—

"NNIIIIICCKK!"

Nicholas let out a gasp, snapping out from the pit of despair he had been falling into, the fog that had been filling his mind dissipating. Sophia! She was alive!

Despite Tyler and Evelyn urging him to go forward and let them go back for Sophia, Nicholas immediately turned in the air as hard as he could, even though he dropped a few feet. He didn't care that he couldn't see. He didn't care that he was in danger. All that mattered was that Sophia was still alive. He could have flown ahead to safety and freedom...

...but he couldn't leave Sophia behind.

"SSSOOOPPPHHIIIAAAA!" Nicholas yelled as loudly as he could. *"I AM COMING!"*

Following her voice, he managed to detect her 'light' once more. The shock of her injury must have knocked her out of the mental network they shared, but her light shone once again, and he had only to look for it. With only it for guidance, he closed in on her, trying to listen for danger, but the chaos around him was so great that there was danger everywhere.

Jacqueline was yelling at Trouble Maker to try and get him to come back as Nicholas heard another burst of gunfire. Tyler, Evelyn and Francisco were coming to join him, while Evelyn yelled as loudly as she could to try and force the humans to desist, her draconic voice booming like a thunderclap, but trying to force her will on so many at once seemed to have little effect. Leaf Eater's rage was tempered by her concern for Sophia, and feeling Nicholas's worry and protective desires, she guided him towards Sophia, warning him that he was getting close to the highway.

"NNIIIIICCKK!" Sophia called out again, the breathy whistling sound of her crying serving as the guiding beacon for Nicholas. If she was on the ground and her light was that close, he had to be nearly at the ground as well. Flaring his wings, he prepared to land, not knowing how close he was,

moving his legs forwards preemptively so that the moment he touched down he began running. Despite the fact that he had misjudged it slightly and landed at a greater speed than he had expected, he stumbled forward and slowed to a stop without hurting himself.

"Sssooophhiiaa!" Nicholas called out, turning towards her. The smell of her blood sent a chill down his spine all the way to the end of his tail, and past it he picked out the coppery scent of the fear, panic and crushing loneliness that she had been feeling. He approached as quickly as he could with cautious fumbling in front of him, until he felt his foreleg touch her tail, and stopped.

She was safe. Or, rather, she *would* be safe. Having her right in front of him, feeling her scales against his, reassured him. She wasn't lost. She would make it to safety with him – he would make sure of that.

"*My leg,*" Sophia whined, a whistling noise coming from her as she cried weakly. "*It really hurts.*" He had felt it enough when she landed to know it was broken. That meant she couldn't launch herself into the air, even had her wing not been injured.

But that didn't stop him. "*Close your wings,*" he instructed, and he heard her do so. Climbing over her, he added, "*I will be your wings, if you will be my eyes.*"

Carefully, he grasped at her sides, then slid his forelegs underneath her. There was more yelling behind him; it sounded like Francisco was the only one not shouting something. He tugged Sophia to his front, reminded of when he had sat her on his lap back at home. It seemed so long ago, now, yet he clung to the memory closely, acutely aware of how he had almost lost himself when he thought his sister had died. Yet even with how much they had grown, he was still substantially larger than her. She lowered her spinal fin against her back in reflex as he held her closely, and he tensed his legs, crouching down. "*Ready?*"

She gave a small noise of assent, and Nicholas pushed off from the ground as hard as he could, sending mental messages to all the others to let them know he had gotten clear. Sophia's body dangled under his, and he lowered his back half as he beat his wings to try and ascend, bringing his

back legs around her body and hooking them together over her belly to keep her close to him so she wouldn't throw him off-balance. Evelyn roared out again to get someone to stop, and a triumphant feeling from Tyler a moment later made him wonder if she had directed the command at Trouble Maker this time so that they could make good on their escape.

He felt Leaf Eater's presence nearby as she flew alongside him as he flapped his wings to gain altitude, succeeding even with Sophia's weight under him, and despite one wing clipping a roadside lamp on the way up.

"Tree Nuzzler, you are truly wonderful!" Leaf Eater called out to him as she flew by his side. *"Great Mother, you are lucky to have such a devoted elder nestmate."*

Sophia whined in pain, and Nicholas sent a silent request to Evelyn for help, feeling her using her pain-eating abilities moments later in response. "Nniicckk..." Sophia was able to say, hanging limply in his grasp. *"...thank you."*

"I would never abandon you," Nicholas told her.

"I should have helped," Leaf Eater said as she flew alongside them, scolding herself. *"I thought only of taking revenge on the two-legs, but you remained focused on what was truly important."*

Nicholas said nothing, but lowered his head, nosing at Sophia's head. Yes, he had to agree: he did know what was truly important to him.

Chapter 22

"Are we there yet?" Sophia whined from atop Evelyn's back.

Evelyn had already seen the sign down the road that marked the turnoff into the national park, so with a knowing chuckle, she replied, "*Yes, almost. It is right over there,*" and pointed with one of her wings.

"Really?" Sophia gasped, and began to wriggle. Evelyn crouched down to let Sophia climb off of her, the younger dragon gingerly keeping her injured leg raised so as not to put any weight on it. Sophia scampered forward awkwardly on three legs, trying to use her tail as a fourth, but she had not had nearly as much practice as Evelyn had had at the start of their journey and was still learning how to use her tail as an effective crutch.

After catching up to the convoy, they had been able to fashion a makeshift splint for Sophia from what they had on hand: tent poles and strips of cloth assembled just enough to keep her leg straight so it would heal right. Assuming that dragons healed from broken bones in the same way that humans did, that was – not that they had any idea what else they could have done. It was a pity that Dr. Morrison had not come with them, and Evelyn hoped he was still safe and well. They had gotten what sleep they could during the night, with Sophia resting against Nicholas's side to keep her weight off her injured leg, and thankfully there was no sign of any pursuit.

No doubt it was due to the National Guard marching on the city. Already, Evelyn had sensed two different dragons' lights disappear from her awareness at different times during their march. Whether they had been accidents, aggressors, or victims, she could not know, but she did know that her group had been right to leave when they did. On both occasions she had sensed the final bursts of rage, despair and pain before they suddenly vanished like a TV being turned off, and while it had merely left her feeling grim, Sophia had been far more deeply affected. Hearing Sophia cry and feeling her emotional pain reminded her of seeing young victims of war back when she was in the resistance, but this was worse. Even a child who had seen a parent die hadn't *felt* it, yet Sophia had to bear that burden even for total strangers.

Francisco had declined Rick's joking offer to duct tape up the hole in his wing, while Tyler had needed more care with what antiseptics and bandages they could assemble. The scale that had been struck had fallen off his body, which allowed them to treat his wound, but the bullet had not passed through him completely and was lodged somewhere in his side. He would undoubtedly need some sort of surgery to remove it, so all they could hope for was that a suitably qualified – and brave – doctor would be present at the national park. With any luck, they would also be able to help suture the remnants of Sophia's wing membrane back together to aid in its healing.

"Hey! I think we're nearly there!" Rick yelled out from further behind her to the other humans. The military truck had been confiscated by the National Guard, as expected, but they had at least been allowed to transfer its contents to other vehicles first. It did, however, mean that everyone other than the vehicles' drivers and the most grievously wounded or sick among them were forced to take the final leg of the journey on foot.

Soon, it wasn't just Sophia who was excited, but almost everyone present – everyone except Trouble Maker, who seemed infinitely more interested in a flock of birds flying overhead. Leaf Eater was prancing about on the grass ahead of Nicholas with eagerness, bounding to and fro as his head and ear-fins swiveled to try and keep up with wherever he could hear her. "*Come, come! You must meet Forest Mother, my love! Let us fly!*" she implored. However, Nicholas continued to walk at his steady pace, and Evelyn sensed him sending a thought of Sophia over the mental link to Leaf Eater. An eyeblink later, she replied to him with feelings of understanding.

While they were technically already on the land that made up the park, it would still take a while for them to get to the grounds proper, where the visitor center and other buildings would be, along with the people taking shelter there. But the danger was behind them now, so Evelyn did not mind the chance to enjoy an outdoor walk away from the city. The pine-forested hills they were approaching were beautiful and teeming with life, and a squirrel running up a tree trunk not far away caught Trouble Maker's eye, making him scamper over towards it as Jacqueline kept a stern eye on him. The air was clean and fresh, reminding Evelyn of the walks she took

with assistance from the hospice staff – but now, she had no need for a walker or for anyone to assist her. She could appreciate every leaf, every flower, and every blade of grass as much as she wished.

In fact, soon they would not need the assistance of the other humans as they had in the city. If one thing was clear to Evelyn, it was that dragons did not belong in the cities. The buildings were almost entirely far too small, and the spaces not meant for creatures of their size. Even the outdoor areas were poorly suited to dragons.

Out here, however, they could fly freely, forage from trees and bushes and rivers, and even hunt. Leaf Eater had begun the morning by retrieving a deer from the woods and hauling it back, insisting on allowing Nicholas to have the first bites of it before allowing anyone else to try... though the collective squeamishness about eating raw meat straight off the bone caused her no end of puzzlement. Sophia's crying at seeing the dead deer in particular befuddled Leaf Eater, who went to great lengths to remind her that it was food. She grew even more puzzled when Nicholas insisted on having it cooked and prepared, and she continued to insist that it would be most nutritious for them as it was.

It had been a sharp contrast to Trouble Maker digging into the deer corpse with gusto, causing his parents much distress in the process.

Hunting was just one more thing they would have to get used to, it seemed. They'd have to find a way to cook it themselves so that they didn't have to rely on the humans. It was a pity they didn't actually have fire breath like the dragons of myth, but perhaps they just needed to make their own tools. With a smirk of amusement, she thought of rubbing the trunks of two small trees together the same way humans would use twigs to start a fire. Maybe with a sufficiently large piece of flint...

Evelyn kept her head up, peering off into the distance to try and spot the parking lot or the visitors' center. At long last, an end to their journey. Somehow, despite everything, they had made it.

"There! Forest Mother approaches!"

Leaf Eater's cry got the attention of the dragons around her as they passed the car park for the national park, though it was clear that it was not the only place where vehicles had been stopped: further ahead, Evelyn could pick out the colorful sides of other cars, trailers, RVs and camper vans. Even an old VW Microbus, its side door open as the family it belonged to sat outside of it.

Evelyn did not need to be told that 'Forest Mother' was coming; she could sense the brilliant light of the dragon in question, though it was not as intense as Sophia's. She would have been hard to miss even if Evelyn could not sense her light: flying over the trees, she was a solid black shadow against the slightly overcast sky above. Most curiously, Evelyn saw someone riding on her back, clinging to a makeshift harness strapped around her shoulders and forelimbs. Two other dragons flew with her, though whether they were escorts or perhaps simply other park residents who wanted to greet the new arrivals, Evelyn couldn't say.

Evelyn's group halted as the new dragon approached, landing with a great deal more grace than Evelyn could have managed even with all her recent practice. She was bigger than Evelyn, but not as large as Tyler, and did not have Evelyn's spiky scales, either; her spinal fin was high at the back of her head and closer to her hips, and lower in the middle of her body. On her upper right foreleg, silvery lines in her scales briefly reminded Evelyn of her own scars and Nicholas's, before she saw that they were in the shape of a stylized flower. A tattoo from before her transformation, perhaps? The other two dragons touched down nearby but remained further back than the Guiding Star, who lowered her head deferentially to Evelyn, and spoke with a firm yet gentle, almost motherly tone.

"Greetings, and welcome," the dragon said to them, spreading out her wings as she lowered her front. At first Evelyn thought it was a sort of bow, but then she saw the man who had been riding her climb down to the ground, and once he had dismounted the dragon straightened up and turned her head slightly. Her eyes widened, her fins spreading out, as she spotted the medical tape and gauze on Leaf Eater's side. "*Leaf Eater, you are hurt!*"

Leaf Eater turned to show her bandaged injury a little more clearly. *"It is not as bad as it looks,"* she insisted, *"The two-legs' explosion-projectile-weapons caught me by surprise, but my armor is merely damaged. I met a wonderful Child of the Egg who patched it for me! He remained behind to care for several other Children. He is wise and sees to the health of those around him."*

The dragon Leaf Eater had called 'Forest Mother' relaxed visibly. *"I hope you are able to recover soon. You have done excellently in bringing the other Matriarchs here."*

"It was nothing! And I have found a mate!" Leaf Eater declared proudly, causing Nicholas to inundate the mental network with his flustered feelings. They only intensified a moment later as she embraced him from the side, draping her tail over his back and tugging him closer with it.

"You must tell me later," Leaf Eater's apparent mentor figure answered, casting a gaze over the group. Switching to English, she went on, "I am Sonita Rodriguez, and I welcome you here to this sanctuary. All are welcome here, human or dragon, as long as they do not disturb the peace."

"And I am Evelyn Archambeau," Evelyn replied, taking her time with each word. She could avoid slurring her human speech now so long as she spoke slowly; soon, she would be back to normal, just as Tyler and Jacqueline already were. "It is a pleasure to meet you, and to finally be able to put a name to the light we have been following for so long."

Sonita gave a short laugh. "I have been watching you approach from afar, gathering other lights along the way," she remarked with a glance towards the other dragons assembled with them. "I am pleased that you have made it unharmed... or, at least, intact," she quickly corrected with a glance at the bandages on Tyler's side, and Sophia's torn wing. Her gaze lingered on Sophia. "What is your name, shining star?"

"Ssoopphhiiaa!" Sophia answered happily, taking a few steps closer, awkwardly keeping her injured leg off the ground. *"Who is that?"* she asked, indicating the man with Sonita.

"This is my husband," Sonita replied, unfolding a wing and holding it out over the man in a vaguely protective manner. He had slightly dark skin, perhaps from somewhere in South America by Evelyn's guess. "These last two weeks have been a great challenge to us, but we have pulled through together."

He gave Sophia a friendly wave, which she tried to return by waving with her good wing, calling out to him with a "Hhiiiiiii!" Looking back up at Sonita, Sophia wondered aloud, "*Do you let lots of people ride you?*"

Sonita glanced back over her shoulder at the harness attached to her. "No. Only my husband. I love him dearly, and that is why. Anyone else... they make me feel afraid and uncomfortable, and I force them off in reflex." With a regretful tone, she added, "Someone was hurt that way. So only Victor is allowed on my back."

Sophia made a disappointed sound, and Evelyn gave an amused, rumbling chuckle. "You will be able to fly by yourself again once your wings heal," she pointed out.

"*How long will that be?*"

"I don't know," Evelyn admitted.

Sophia gave a high-pitched chirring noise that indicated her disappointment. "*But I cannot play or fly right now! It is not fair!*"

Evelyn gave a patient sigh and offered, "Very well then. After I get a little rest, you can climb on my back and I will take you flying. How does that sound?"

Sophia danced in place a little in excitement on her three good legs. At least she would get to fly in some way! "*Yes, please!*"

"You must all be exhausted after your journey here. Pietr," Sonita said, turning her head to address one of the dragons with her, "Please help them find an empty place to rest and set themselves up."

"*Yes, Forest Mother,*" the dragon replied in a deep voice, motioning with one wing for the group to follow him. He had a long strip of cloth – perhaps made from smaller ones stitched together – that hung loosely around his

neck. On it, Evelyn could see some of the badges the park staff would normally have on their shirts had instead been pinned to it. He must have been a forest ranger, but Evelyn would have to ask him about it later.

"Evelyn and Sophia, I would like to talk to you a little more," Sonita requested just as the entourage began to move, following the transformed park ranger.

"One moment," Evelyn insisted, turning to the others. She lowered her head down towards where her family was standing nearby. "Go on ahead, I will catch up," she told them. "It will be just like old times again."

"Our family photograph will look quite different this time!" Pascal remarked with a hint of levity. "Thank you, *maman*. We will find an open space big enough for you to join us once you are done talking."

"I'll be waiting for you," Joan agreed. "It will be nice to be able to stop and relax and not have to worry any more." She reached out with one hand, the other holding her cane tightly, and gently touched Evelyn's lowered head. In response, Evelyn gave a quiet, contented rumble and lidded her eyes slightly, before carefully standing back up and letting them leave, returning her attention to the others.

Leaf Eater remained close to Nicholas as Evelyn's family left to follow the others, telling him cheerfully about how much he was going to enjoy living in the national park. Meanwhile, the other dragon that had arrived with Sonita turned and flew off deeper into the park.

"May I join?" Tyler cut in.

"Are you a relative of one of the shining stars?"

Tyler shook his head, and raised his wing to salute. "Sergeant Tyler Lewis, National Guard. Delta Company, 3rd Squadron, 95th Cavalry," he said as he had many times before; however, catching the sudden sharp scent of displeasure and distrust from Sonita, he quickly went on, "Or I should say, ex-National Guard."

"You soldiers have caused much trouble for those trying to reach this place," Sonita informed him acidly.

"And they caused a lot of trouble for us too, myself included," Tyler replied, turning his body to show his bandaged wound more prominently, the medical tape clinging to his scales.

"I trust him," Evelyn said slowly. "He has been a great help to me. I would like him to hear what you have to say."

Sonita gave Tyler a firm look. "Very well," she conceded in the end. "I merely wish to tell you a few things that do not require your whole group to wait. Many of them look sick or hurt and I would not want to prevent them from being able to rest. There is a doctor here, he may be able to help them."

"Is he a surgeon by any chance?" Tyler asked. Sophia sent Evelyn a feeling of confusion and a lack of understanding, which Evelyn assumed was about the word 'surgeon', so she replied to Sophia with a mental image of a doctor. It was a simplification, but good enough for now.

"I do not know. You will have to ask him. He was here when this all began." Sonita took a deep breath and stared off into the trees, lowering her wing a little as her husband placed a hand against the side of her foreleg while she sat down on her haunches. "There was a lot of panic, you know. I might have fled too, but Victor kept me calm." Turning her head, she looked down at her husband and smiled, curling her neck over and downward to nuzzle at him affectionately with her snout. "*Mi vida.*"

"*Mi cielo,*" he replied to her in a soft tone, running his fingers over one of her scales.

"*Mi amor.*"

"*Mi corazón.*"

Sophia gave a chirping giggle, and Evelyn cleared her throat before their exchange could go on much longer. Sonita simply chuckled as she lifted her head and turned her attention back to the other three. "Many others left, but I did not. I remained here along with those who came from further away, or who had heard of the danger of the city. Pietr was one of the park rangers who decided to remain. He is a kind man and even as these changes gripped him, he urged everyone not to panic. It did not take more

than a couple of days for me to realize that I was different, though. I seemed to have... abilities that others did not."

"Like being able to sense us," Evelyn suggested.

"Yes. I tried to communicate with you, but the distance was so far, I could manage very little." With a smile towards Sophia, she added, "I had no idea that one of the two shining stars was someone so young."

"*I am nearly six!*" Sophia declared, thumping her tail against the ground with self-satisfaction.

Sonita gave a polite chuckle, though with her draconic throat it came out as more of a rattling sound. She continued, "I found that I had the power to help the others around me who were changing. I could ease their pain and calm their minds. As more people arrived here seeking shelter, I aided them too." A sad scent emanated from her as she tugged her wing closer to her husband. "I tried to use my new abilities to help those who had not been changed, but it hurts them and causes them to have seizures." Victor gave her a reassuring pat on the side, and Sonita took a breath. "But even my powers can only help so much. They cannot do much for one who is lost."

"Lost?" Tyler asked, tilting his head.

"*Can they not read maps?*" Sophia asked.

Evelyn, however, had an idea of what Sonita meant. "*Leaf Eater*," she said plainly.

"Yes." The sad scent from Sonita swept through the air around her. "I do not know who she was. Neither does she. I do not think anyone ever will. I had my Victor to keep me from losing my grip, but she must have had no-one. From our first meeting, she called me a *Matriarch*," Sonita said, using the dragon language's word, "and swore to protect and serve me. Sometimes when I share thoughts with her, I sense bits and pieces of who she once was and what she used to be... but like looking at fragments of stained glass or pieces of a jigsaw, it is impossible to see the greater whole. Perhaps, with time, I can put her back together... and perhaps it is not something that can be fixed."

Tyler was deeply troubled by that revelation, a fact that Evelyn could both sense and smell. "That could have been me," he muttered quietly. "Dear God, that could have been me, and then... my family..."

"But she seems so happy!" Sophia protested.

"She is," Sonita agreed, nodding her head. "And for that reason, some part of me makes me hesitate when I think of trying to help her. What if she became lost because of some great trauma? What if I make her remember and relive it? Perhaps it is better to let some things remain forgotten. Yet at the same time, perhaps she does have a family somewhere, and people who care about her. I will never know if I cannot heal her mind, but if I do, there will be no going back."

A brief quiet fell over the party, until Sonita stood up. "Excuse me, I must take care of something," she told them, looking towards the park entrance. Tyler looked around in confusion, but Evelyn simply focused for a moment and sensed a dragon approaching from the road.

"New arrivals?" Evelyn guessed.

Sonita shook her head. "A returning group," she answered. "With what supplies they have been able to take from places nearby." Giving each of them a firm look, she went on, "We must do what we can to survive out here – and in particular, our only doctor will not be able to help anyone if we do not secure medical supplies of our own."

Tyler frowned, but looked at the makeshift harness he was still wearing. "I am in no position to judge," he murmured. "We only got here from thefts of our own."

"Survival sometimes requires sacrifices," Evelyn acknowledged solemnly.

"You should find the others in your group. I will join you to talk when I am done, so please make yourselves comfortable in the meantime."

"Thank you," Tyler said as he rose to his feet. There was a small jolt of pain in his side, but Evelyn reflexively suppressed it with a momentary thought.

"Come on, Sophia," Evelyn told the smaller dragon. "Let's see our new home." She took a slow step, and Sophia moved to follow her, so Evelyn

began walking towards the river she could hear not too far away, where she could sense Nicholas and the other dragons.

A new beginning lay ahead of them now, and though she could not say for sure what it would entail, she knew it was full of opportunity.

She had an entire second life ahead of her, after all.

"...and then, Tree Nuzzler descends from the night sky towards Great Mother, answering her call for help. He does not need to see to fly so majestically! He pays no heed to the two-legs and their explosion-projectile-weapons! All that matters to him is the safety of Great Mother..."

Nicholas would have blushed if he still had any skin on his face; instead, he felt his ear-fins fanning out subconsciously. Leaf Eater had been singing his praises – sometimes literally – to anyone who would listen, regaling Pietr and some other dragons that had arrived with tales of his apparent heroics. Nicholas's attempts to downplay them had only been met with her praising him for his modesty and humility even more, so he had elected to simply remain quiet. Sophia was listening happily too, even though she had been there and was half of the subject of the stories.

He was able to sense Sonita's approach, since she was a guiding star just like Sophia and Evelyn, who were sitting nearby. Despite how flustered Leaf Eater was making him, he felt peace at last. The grass under his body was soft, the sun on his wings was warm. The rustling of the leaves of the trees was peaceful and he could hear the burbling of a stream or a slow-moving river nearby, interspersed with the occasional call of some bird or forest animal. The smell of pine needles was comforting, reminding him of Christmas, and even the very air itself smelled purer and cleaner than it ever had in the city.

It was the end of his journey, perhaps, though he would have to say some goodbyes soon. Francisco and Chief Constantine had both already talked about heading back to the city after giving it a few days for the danger to pass. Jacqueline's suggestion that they go together had been met with much consternation from Francisco, and though he couldn't be sure

whether or not she knew exactly who Francisco was, she made an honest attempt to bury the hatchet. It wasn't the time for that sort of pettiness, she had said, and as long as he was willing to try to turn over a new leaf with this new beginning, she would overlook whatever nuisance he had made of himself before for the time being.

Tyler, too, was fretting more openly about his family, and had been asking around for a map of the state. It seemed to Nicholas like it might soon just be him, Sophia, Evelyn, and Leaf Eater, at least out of all the dragons that had made it. Evelyn had been talking to her family about leaving to move to her transformed relative's ranch, but he did not know when that might happen, and she had asked Nicholas and Sophia if they wanted to come with her. Sophia had been ecstatic about the idea, and Nicholas had to admit he didn't want to be left behind. He had a feeling that Leaf Eater would follow him wherever he went.

That enigmatic dragoness had taken such a strong liking to him, and while it had unnerved him at first, her honest nature and genuine affection for him had grown on him during the last leg of their trip...

"I must find a place in our home to nest and keep our eggs safe!"

...even if she did tend to overdo it a little at times.

But in a way, it was part of her charm, for she never pressed him hard on the issue, and it was borne from sincere feelings for him. He didn't even have to speak negatively to make her desist when she made him feel uneasy; those very feelings themselves were enough to deter her from being excessive. To share such a deep and intimate mental bond with someone – even if he did have to share it with the others in the mental link – was a wholly inhuman experience. One that was worth it, despite how strange and vulnerable it made him feel at times.

Sonita landed nearby; Nicholas heard her feet thump on the ground and her wings fold a moment later. *"Forest Mother!"* Leaf Eater called out in greeting, filled with happiness to see Sonita, her tail thumping on the ground rapidly. He could feel Sophia's happiness as well, as she seemed to have taken a liking to Sonita.

"*Leaf Eater*," Sonita replied warmly. "*So, this is the mate you spoke of earlier?*"

Nicholas rose from where he was lying to sit on his haunches. "*Ah, I, I would not say that,*" he stammered, "*It is more of a... we are just, um... dating? We have not... you know. Done the thing that would make us mates.*" It did not help that he detected a scent of amusement from Sonita in response to his reply.

He sensed a forewarning from Leaf Eater that she was moving in close, so he was not surprised when he felt her snout against the base of his neck, which she began to nuzzle her way up along the length of. "*Look at him! He is a wonderful drake. Such powerful wings, such strong legs! He values the Matriarchs greatly, and he is brave and handsome. You should see his eyes! They are like beautiful blue pools of water rippling in the sunlight. I could stare into them for hours.*"

"*They are really nice!*" Sophia added. "*So pretty!*"

"*Is that so?*" Sonita asked. "*If it is not too much trouble, Nicholas, may I see?*"

From his side, Nicholas heard Sophia say, "*I want to see too!*"

"*Have you not seen them already?*" he asked.

"*Yes, but they are pretty,*" Sophia repeated.

Nicholas sighed. Having so much attention on him made him feel self-conscious, but obligingly, he opened his eyes.

And for the first time in his life, he *saw*.

Shapes.

Colors.

Light.

His mouth opened in shock as he let out a little gasp, his eyes darting around. In front of him were three big, scaled creatures, all staring at him curiously. The clearing all around them was full of grass, and beyond it were trees, and hills, with a river separating their clearing from much of

the rest of the park they were in. So many things he had only heard of and touched and smelled before, and now, could see for himself.

But his attention was focused on the other dragons. The small one had to be Sophia. His sister. He had never seen her as a human, but it did not matter. He could see her now, and he took in every detail. Her eyes were different colors, though he did not yet know what names to ascribe to them. The fin on her back rose both high and low, a wavy variation of height all down its length. He felt a brief pang of sadness at seeing her torn wing membrane and the splint on her broken leg, but they were both safe now. He would protect her. Even better now with the ability to see.

And next to her, the dragon bigger than Sophia but not the biggest one, the one with her head almost touching his, that had to be Leaf Eater. Her fin rose and her ear-fins extended as she looked at him with her head tilted, exuding a scent of curiosity. Around them were smaller two-legged creatures, with colorful garments covering their bodies, and some big metal objects that must have been cars and other vehicles stopped nearby. Humans. What he had once been.

Nicholas trembled in place and his breath caught in his throat, overcome with emotion that he couldn't stop from being broadcasted over the mental network, a complicated mixture of emotion-scents wafting from his body. Other dragons approached him with feelings of concern, and those too far away sent their worry back over the mental link. Sophia tilted her head, looking at him oddly, approaching him. "Nniicckk?" she asked, *"What is wrong?"*

"Sssoooppphhhiiaaa," he gasped out, his voice a mixture of elation and wonder. Tears came to his eyes, making his vision blurry until he blinked them away. Advancing on Sophia, he pressed his forehead to her own, staring into her eyes, sobbing tears of joy as a whistling sound came from him. He felt Leaf Eater put her wing around him in turn, and he shuddered between the two of them from the strength of his emotions. Emotions that he was broadcasting out to all of them, almost infectiously, for he could feel their happiness and care for him pouring back into him.

"I can see you... I can see you! I CAN SEE YOU!"



