

Two weeks after his encounter with Kel and Colby had already begun to show a bit more. His clothes still fit, but the pooch on his belly was slightly more pronounced, and considering Kel's size, he wasn't sure how he'd manage if whatever he was carrying was... big.

At one point during their late-night rendezvous, when Colby was handing off his newly purchased sleeping bag stuffed with clothes and a few plastic dishes, he got up the nerve to ask Kel about the eggs. Or at least, Colby assumed plural, because Kel had said 'eggs,' with an S.

How big were they going to get? How did someone *survive* it? What if they didn't work, or got stuck? If Colby was alone, or had to be taken to the hospital?

The more questions he asked, the more frantic they got, and soon his voice went shrill, and Kel curled his tail around Colby's leg and nuzzled his cheek.

"You'll do fine. I said 'eggs,' but I've never heard of multiples, even from another dragon. We grow fast, but with only one birth each clutch, it's no wonder our numbers are dwindling." He puffed out his chest a little. "I've sired before, so I've seen births. And even so, I'm... I'm smaller than most of the dragons I've seen so it should... also be small. Smaller."

This last, he didn't seem as sure on. It did help at least, but somewhat. Colby raised a hand to scratch at Kel's cheek in return, frowning.

"Yeah, but I've never done one before. I don't know how to have a *human* baby, let alone a dragon."

"Maybe it's in my books," Kel suggested. "Or... humans have books too, there are books on everything."

Colby sighed. "I'll look online."

So he did, along with everything else. As the nights passed, he continued to meet with Kel, lugging grocery bags and backpacks of things he thought he might need, so by the time he'd gotten his house ready- with the help of his friends, who were still concerned about this cross-country trip he'd decided to take- and found a nice family to rent it to, he'd accumulated a couple sleeping bags, pots and pans, enough clothes to last him a winter, extra soaps, books, more bedding...

Kel never complained, even if sometimes it took him a bit of heft to get off the ground once he was loaded up.

But eventually, Colby's two weeks ran out. He finished out the last day of his job, promising a return in a little less than a year, and then dropped his car off with another friend who'd promised to keep it in shape in exchange for being able to use it instead of taking the bus.

And then Colby waited until evening deepened, and slipped beyond the gate of the park where he'd been meeting Kel with one last backpack. He climbed onto the dragon's back, leaving the bag to be held in his talons, and they went aloft.

Colby hung on, and looked down at the small bulge in his belly, and hoped.

The first few weeks were about adjustment. Kel had stacked Colby's things in another section of the cave, one of the offshoots that Colby had seen the first time he'd been there. As it turned out, that section, equally warm and dry, held scores of books, but lacked bookshelves. Instead, they were stacked in towers, and in disarray around the edges and in the middle of the room with only enough space for Kel to move between them without knocking the precarious trove over.

Colby went through his things in a mishmash, most of his immediate needs pushed to the bottom of the pile once he'd realized he kept forgetting things. He had to get Kel's help for some of it, like the sleeping bag full of cookware and wrapped in clothes inside it, while his backpack and duffel bag held smaller things.

He did some rearranging during that time as well, laying out his bedding in a small section of Kel's nest- it turned out to be maddeningly comfortable and never smelled of anything but slight wet fur, dry moss and pine. The utensils and things he stacked on a split log to make a sort of ground-level shelf, while his own entertainment- mostly consisting of a huge box of batteries and an ancient Game Boy with about two dozen games sat at its own place along with the few books he'd managed to find that may help with the subject of birth.

The more time passed, the more comfortable he became, and yet equally the more discomfort he felt. It seemed like every day the weight in his belly grew larger, the fertilized eggs on the fast track to infancy. The small pooch under his navel had swelled, distending slightly more, and he could feel the oval shape if he put his hand down and pressed, especially as he lay in bed. From there, it expanded, pushing outward and upward so that the whole of his lower torso felt like a balloon.

And the more it did, the more Colby realized that he was going to get bored. The weather was getting snowy all the time, to the point that the mouth of the cave would no doubt be covered by the start of the new year if it wasn't for Kel leaving every day to hunt down more game or dig for tubers or take the stockpot for water. His battery supply was going to

run low, and he couldn't go outside to save himself from the monotony of being inside, especially when his clothes were already starting to be a little tight around his middle.

He didn't keep a calendar, knowing good and well that crossing off a square each day would drive him more crazy, and instead focused on doing small things to pass the time. He started by reorganizing all of Kel's books by category, and then alphabetizing them within the categories and restacking them in neater piles along the walls, their bindings faced out so he could know the titles.

When he started that, probably sometime in late November, the growth of the eggs had been exponential. They stretched his belly with each passing day, doming it over the waist of his jeans, slowly leaving some of his button down shirts unwearable over his expanding girth. He did pack a decent amount of T-shirts, which still mostly fit, and if he was cold, he simply wore the button downs over those, left unbuttoned.

By the time he was done, however, the snow outside really had nearly drifted the cave shut; Kel had to spit globs of oily fire just to melt it enough to leave and usually brought more than he normally might have back, using a couple of Colby's leftover grocery bags. Colby didn't know how long it had been by that point, only judging based on the fact that only a few of his T-shirts now stretched enough to pull completely over his belly, and he couldn't see his feet if he tried to bend a certain way. Most of the time, he had to leave his pants totally unbuttoned or simply wear pajama bottoms pulled up under the swell and either find a shirt that fit or wear one that was too small, bunched where his belly began. Occasionally, he skipped that and wore just an overshirt, unbuttoned and hanging loose around him

The worrying thing was that once he'd finished the books, there still wasn't any *movement*. The pregnancy books Colby had brought with him said that babies usually started moving at something like four months along, and while he was sure it hadn't been that long, he wondered if what Kel said about dragons growing faster also meant that they should be moving earlier too. But they were also eggs, so how would that factor in? He tried not to think too hard about it, and instead fumbled his way through making rabbit stew.

Kel, meanwhile, acted weirdly like a doting father. He kept a sort of half-distance from Colby, as if he wasn't sure if Colby would even accept anything Kel did, but the more Colby didn't mind, and in fact welcomed Kel's hunting, or suggestions for books to read or problems to solve, the more he inserted himself into small parts of Colby's day.

Colby cooked, and Kel asked him questions about the extra leaves he put with the elk meat, or why he boiled the tubers like he did. Colby lay in the nest and Kel lay alongside him, his tail curled over Colby's legs, and eventually under the swell of his belly. Colby paced and shuffled, and rubbed that same belly as it grew heavy with Kel's progeny, and Kel edged up against him so Colby could lean into his soft fur and grumble about his back hurting.

Kel did try his best, but there was only so much he could do.

And eventually, too, the snow began to lessen. While it was still cold being so high up in the mountains, the sun burned off more and more clouds as the days passed, and more and more days passed without a single cloud in the sky. Colby did occasionally manage to shuffle his way to the mouth of the cave to bask in the sunlight, but he couldn't stay out very long, the air still nipping at his exposed skin like tiny toothed icicles.

For a little while, Colby's belly seemed to stop growing. By the book, he looked about 27 weeks pregnant, ballooned out as if he'd swallowed a whole watermelon. He could even rest said book on his belly while he read, propped up in bed. Still nothing was happening, and it took two whole weeks before something felt funny.

Colby was, by then, always in a little bit of pain. His back hurt from the weight of the eggs nestled in his belly. His legs hurt, his hips hurt. Little reminders every day that Kel's offspring was huddled inside him, growing and waiting. So when he woke with cramps low in his belly, he put them out of his mind and chewed on some mint to try and help himself out while Kel was out on his early morning hunt. But the cramps didn't stop, and in fact became worse, so that by the time Kel returned, Colby was laying on his side, blankets between his legs to try and ease the pressure. He heard the dragon's pawsteps come into the cave along with the dragging of hooves, and moaned.

"Kel... it hurts."

Kel dropped the elk alongside the door and spat on it, frost inching over its bloodied coat, and leaned over the nest.

"How badly?" he asked, pupils wide in the relative dark.

"Bad cramps," Colby grumbled, pressing on the hard round of his belly. "They- they're moving, I can feel them... it's not Spring yet-"

He cut off as a pain shot up his spine and his stomach clenched around the movement inside.

"No," Kel said, lowering his head and nuzzling Colby's belly, then against his neck. "I think... it is the shell."

Holding his breath, Colby had to wait until the cramps stopped to blurt, "What?"

"The shell comes first, like... pre-birth. It's not done growing, but the other eggs must be gone."

"Where-" Another cramp interrupted Colby's thought. "How?"

"This one must be strongest." Kel tilted his head to indicate Colby's belly. "The other eggs probably didn't survive, and became nutrients for this one. It happens like this. As I said, no matter the eggs, only ever one birth."

Colby breathed, his stomach clamping down on itself, his hips aching, and his mind disbelieving. It... it was like twins, right? Like sometimes how a human baby absorbed its twin. Not that the thought of *that* made it any better, but the explanation did make sense.

Another cramp, and Colby groaned. "Get- my pants, my pants, I gotta do something- nhh. It- it feels like I have to-"

He held his breath, and Kel reached with his forepaws to carefully inch his claws under the waistband of Colby's pants, pulling them down and off.

Colby immediately cocked his knees and bore down on the tail end of the cramp. His belly visibly jerked, and a gush of fluid soaked the bedclothes beneath him as he yelped.

"Aah!" he cried, as Kel bent to explore the wetness.

"Smells of dragon," Kel said, sitting back. "And human. But it should only be shell."

"Shells are *hard*," Colby whined, clinging to his sleeping bag.

"Some. These are softer. Meant to be passed so that the young one can grow."

Colby let his head fall back, and Kel moved to lay next to him so he could hang onto fur and mumble with a piteous sigh. "I *hate* this."

"It has broken. It's almost done."

The cramps continued, but Kel was right. As Colby bore down on them, he felt the slip of small pieces inside him, and the goo between his legs ushered them free. The broken pieces were like thick leather, and with only a few pushes, they spilled from him. Kel bent down and dragged a few of them clear, some extra bits clinging to each other from the inner membrane. That movement also triggered something else; where his hand rested against the underside of his belly, Colby felt a push, and watched as his belly deformed around the first kick of Kel's offspring.

And the movement just got worse as the days passed. A human baby was one thing. It had a head, arms and legs. Kel's progeny- nicknamed Snap by Colby, with the way it had suddenly

decided to be rid of its shell- if Kel was anything to go by, had a head attached to a much longer neck, four limbs, a tail, *and* wings! At that, halfway through the day, Colby was exhausted just by the little dragon's shuffling, kicking movement.

Occasionally, if Colby was paying attention, he could even tell what was where. His belly moved, and its tail pressed against his navel, the head pushed down into Colby's pelvis. Or he pressed, and one of its paws pressed back, its head pushed up under Colby's ribs. For the most part, it left him drained and in bed, curled in a mass of blankets and pillows to try and stay comfortable as, once again, the dragon began to grow.

Colby's heavy belly went from looking as if he was housing a rather raucous bowling ball to looking like he'd managed to stuff himself with two, swollen from his chest down and now so big that he'd had to abandon all but his button downs and pajama bottoms completely. Thankfully he could still *move*, given that Kel was around to help him up and be a brace when the baby dragon decided to shift positions and throw Colby's balance all out of whack. On more than one occasion, it decided to push its way into a strange position that distended Colby's belly so it looked like he had the nose of a plane sticking from his torso. With that, Colby had to try and massage the dragon into a better spot, leaning against Kel and letting it hang so gravity could help. He always managed something, but not without low and pained complaints to Kel, who could only stand and act as a support while Colby did his best to fix it to his liking.

Which wasn't to say that Kel didn't continue to contribute, acting more often than not as Colby's pillow or blanket, the rest of his supplies used as support for his huge belly and his legs, and pushed against his back to offer some sort of relief. But Colby still had to manage on his own when Kel went out hunting, or further down the mountain for fresh water or the new wild strawberries and huckleberries that had started to grow as the weather had warmed.

It was during one of those times that things changed. Colby had taken the chance of Kel leaving to get an escort to the cave mouth, bundled into his sleeping bag and now characteristic pajama bottoms, his massive belly left uncovered and hanging low and heavy. He'd been restless the past few days, more than usual, what with the slow churning of the baby inside him, and the weight feeling as if it was sitting right in the cup of his pelvis. Kel agreed to let him stay at the mouth of the cave, sat on a wide, flat log the dragon had put there about a month previous. While Colby sat, knees spread to accommodate the baby dragon and his own girth, Kel leapt into the air for a quick trip, a grocery bag hanging from one paw.

The longer Colby sat, however, the more pressure he felt. He leaned back, then leaned forward, rubbing his belly. Bracing himself, he managed to heave himself up onto his aching legs and lean against the wall instead, in the same fashion he had when trying to shift the

little dragon in the previous weeks. He swayed on his feet, hoping the movement would help, or let the baby get situated better, but all it did was make everything worse.

And then the cramps began. The first that Colby could feel was low in his hips, oozing across his muscles and clamping down across his entire belly.

It felt like the cramps he'd had when the egg had broken. But this time, there was no egg. There was just...

"Oh god."

Kel had gotten good at quick trips once he'd started worrying that Colby might be on the cusp of birth, but he could still be gone a couple hours or even most of the day if he was looking for something specific. Colby looked down the mountainside and into the stand of trees, squeezing his eyes shut. He should have brought radios or something, anything so that he could call for Kel if he needed to. But they had no way to communicate now that the dragon was gone, and Colby couldn't just sit there and wait in the mouth of the cave. Everything he needed was back inside, and *inside* felt so far away.

So he moved. The cramps weren't excruciating yet, nor were they anywhere close together. Colby slowly waddled his way down the rocky path, choosing his footing and hanging onto the wall as he went. Normally, it was maybe two or three minutes' walking to get to the den, but with his aching legs and back slowing his pace, not to mention his stretched and massive girth weighing on him, it took much longer. A set of cramps- no, contractions- made him stop halfway down, and then another triggered just as he made it beyond the smaller mouth of the den, but he finally got properly in, and leaned over the edge of the smooth rock outcropping that made up his and Kel's nest.

At this rate, he didn't think he could climb up into it. Instead, with a moan, he sank to his knees, belly clenching and hips on fire.

"I can't do this," he mumbled at himself, swaying in low arcs, trying to assuage the deep throb of pain inside him. "It's too big. It's too big, it hurts..."

He was alone.

Time passed, and still Kel didn't return. Colby couldn't bear just sitting where he was, either, his legs prickling with numbness and the position doing his back and his aching head no favors. In between contractions, he forced himself up to his knees, then got his feet under him and stood, braced heavily on the edge of the nest shelf. Standing there, he rode out another contraction as the weight on his pelvis pressed into him, and oh, he felt like he should push but he didn't think he could manage.

He shuddered and breathed a quaking breath, squeezed from him by the tail end of the spasm, and tried not to cry, turning into a pitiful moan instead. "Ow, ow... I c- I can't..."

But he had little choice now. He felt so full and heavy, felt as if he needed to push everything inside him out. He felt like he needed to *move*. Moving helped distract him from the clenching, breathtaking squeezing, despite the slowness with which he did it. He moved from the nest shelf across the cave to the fire pit, then back around and into the library, each step a burn in his legs and back but dull compared to the stab of each new contraction.

He tried leaning against the wall, breathing high and reedy through another set. He tried sitting on his makeshift log chair, knees spread and belly between them so he could rock back and forth. He even tried bracing with his back, squatting with his knees cocked outward, but that just made him feel infinitely worse.

Eventually, what felt like hours later, he just ended up leaning against the nest shelf again, eyes closed, and each contraction drawing a low moan from his throat. The pain was worse now, so bad that he couldn't even stop himself from making noise. Each shift made him aware of how big the baby dragon was, and how it curled up on itself to even fit inside him.

And then, with the next contraction, lancing pain ripped through his middle and up his back and down his legs, and a gush of fluid soaked his pajama bottoms. Immediately, the squeezing sharpened, and Colby's moan became a high-pitched cry.

"Aah- nnnh- no- I *can't*-" he pleaded, knees buckling under the new pressure. "Kel, help! Kel-"

The contraction let up enough for Colby to slide his shaking hands down his hips so he could dislodge his damp pants, and his knees likewise shook as he stepped painfully out of them. Clinging to whatever he could get his hands on, white-knuckled and squeezing blankets and moss, Colby choked back a sob. He felt the new contraction rising up, and with every fiber of he being willed it away, but it raced through him like static electricity, forcing his muscles to tense so hard, and he wanted to push so bad, but he didn't want it either.

He forced himself to keep his knees closed, but at the same time he couldn't help but bear down against the thickening feeling behind his navel and between his legs. Out, out, he needed it out but he *couldn't*.

Sweating, face dripping with tears, Colby waited for the next contraction, and bent his tired knees through the pain, held his breath and pushed. He didn't count, but it felt like dizzying ages before he relaxed, coughing on the sharp gasp the slipping feeling gave him.



He felt like he would crack in half. He felt- he reached, trying to feel anything with his fingers, but all he felt was himself, his too-hot slit stretched and waiting to bear the mass inside it. Colby whimpered, exhausted, and sank to his knees again, only half heartedly pushing when another fierce squeeze wracked his body, too tired to do more than cry.

And yet his body soldiered on. Even when he couldn't manage to push, legs numb and body awash with fire, his muscles worked, and the baby descended. Colby's stomach ached. He forced himself to push even from where he sat on the floor, and a sudden thick, stretching mass had him wrenching upward, nearly knocking his head into the side of the rock overhang.

This pain, this fullness and stretch and immediate desire to *push get it out it's coming out* was entirely new, and it ripped a ragged cry from Colby's throat before he gulped air and pushed, and felt beneath himself for whatever it was.

A small, soft and fluid-damp muzzle tip met his fingers, just inside his birth canal.

"Oh god," Colby choked. "O- oh god- it-"

He couldn't think straight. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but what he felt was *not* that. Before he could question it further, he had to bear down again, taking only a moment's pause before continuing, and again, pushing for nearly the entire length of the contraction. The muzzle slid forward aching slow, and then Colby had to stop, and it slid back, nearly as far as it had come.

"No," he pleaded, half-sobbing. "Please. *Please.*"

He pushed again, knees shaking. The little nose breached, and when Colby had to stop, stayed where it was, stretching him, heralding the mass to come. But Colby couldn't do it anymore. Besides the pain, all he felt was numb.

He fell to his knees, and with the new angle, the muzzle slipped further back inside. Wholly damp from sweat and tears and birthing fluid, Colby turned over, leaned against the nest shelf, and cried.

Colby wasn't quite sure how long it had been since he'd turned. There was still little else he could do but push, and blearily wait for the sound of Kel's return, even if he didn't think he could hear it over the throbbing of his headache. He felt- he felt impaled, stretched wide around the baby's muzzle and head, horribly tired, dazedly adrift in each contraction.

Kel's voice barely broke him out of it. "-lby! Oh-"

He blinked, and then he was moving, the texture of fur and feathers under him, and then the warmth of a blanket as he laid back. Trying to focus, he lifted his head, but a contraction struck, and he pushed hard- feet braced up against that same softness and Kel's voice somewhere in front of him. "Like that, yes, keep going."

The contraction briefly halted and Colby let his head fall back. He could hear Kel adjust, and feel it where his feet were braced against the dragon's side. "Its head is out now," Kel's voice said. Colby felt pressure on his stomach, and a warm touch around the baby's head. "Again."

Colby pushed. He pushed hard, legs cocked and drawn up to keep him stretched wide. He pushed, and the baby's head flopped into the blankets between his legs. He pushed, and another searing, heavy pain throbbed within him, threatening to rip him open. He cried, and Kel shushed him.

Another feeling, this time from the outside, prodded along the infant dragon's neck where it hung from him. It stretched painfully, pushing and prodding, and Colby whimpered, trying to shift away from the sensation.

"No, here," Kel commanded instead, wrapping his tail along Colby's side. "Push. Keep going, push hard."

Colby lifted his head, straining to put his chin to his chest. Kel put his forepaws on Colby's legs to hold them wide open, pressing around the bulge of Colby's belly.

He pushed.

It stretched, and he whimpered, but Kel shushed him and he pushed again. Again- again...

"I can't," he finally gasped, letting his head fall back, face red and wet with tears. "I c- nnh, Kel-"

Kel's placid face bent over his. "Once more. As much as you can."

"I can't-"

"You can. You have to."

Colby, crying, wracked with pain, breathed. A contraction wrenched through him and he groaned, tucking his head down. He grit his teeth and pushed, and the pressure increased as Kel reached to grip the infant's neck between his jaws and pulled.

The baby's shoulders bulged from Colby, stretching him wide, and then its flattened, tiny and featherless wings. His voice, raw and jagged, bounced through the den in a weak shout, and Kel raised his own above it, "Again!" and with one last, desperate heave, the baby's back legs and tail slipped free in a gush of blood and slime, only the umbilical cord still tying them together.

Kel let go of it, nudging its face to turn it over and shoved at it with a forepaw, moss clinging to its damp fur. It snorted, coughing, and squeaked, wiggling ineffectually. Its tail slapped against Colby's legs, but he didn't think he could even manage to look at it. Everything about him still burned and throbbed, his chest ached, his legs tingling with retreating numbness.

One last small set of contractions forced a gasp from him, but this time when he bore down, a small drip of blood and fluid let the rest of the umbilical cord and placenta to pass without much struggle.

From there, Kel took over. He turned the baby over and gnawed at the sinewy cord, freeing it as Colby shifted onto his side and covered himself with a blanket. After that, Colby watched as Kel cleared some of the more manageable afterbirth away. What he did with the bloody mess, Colby didn't know, but he came back from the mouth of the cave with one of Colby's paws held in his teeth, full of snow, and put it at Colby's side before further attending to the infant.

In short order, the dragon butchered a rabbit, pulling it apart with his teeth and opening its chest, allowing the baby to eat the heart and liver as he held them in his jaws. Colby watched, fascinated that the tiny creature had so much coordination so quickly. It ate nearly the whole rabbit, then with gangly limbs and stumpy, unfeathered wings, turned to lay back down, still next to Colby's legs.

The baby was big- Colby didn't expect any different, but it was still amazing that the entire thing had been inside him. It had felt like trying to birth a Great Dane, but really, the creature was tiny when compared to its parent, and most of it looked like just neck and tail whereas its body aside from that was no bigger than a human infant's. He was especially glad it didn't have any of the horns or spines Kel had, either. In fact it was... cute, Colby admitted. Kel leaned over it, licking with his broad, flat tongue to clean the residual stickiness from its fur.

As Kel cleaned, Colby closed his eyes, and before long, fell into heavy, dreamless sleep.



