

"Duck down and hold onto the seams! I can't hold you in there while running like this!" Vale panted, cupping his clawed hand to the breast pocket of his vest. It was flapping around in the wind as he leapt over tree after tree, threatening to fling out the tiny furred creature that clung to its inner pocket.

"Stars' sake, you're a caravan escort and you don't have anything to hold 'min securely?!" the tiny 'passenger' shouted. Vale grimaced and glanced down.

"Dude I JUST started this job, I didn't expect my first day to include running from a-"

A shriek cut through the trees above as the deafening crunch of iron wood split the air. A wave of heat buffeted Vale's back and made him tuck his long tail closer to him. He looked over his shoulder. A wall of fire like a cascading wave about to crash upon the beach rose up above Vale's head, engulfing tree and brush alike at a breakneck pace. Without thinking, Vale lunged forward, wrapped his arms around his chest, and curled in on himself. He winced as flames lapped at his back. The sound of burning fabric alarmed him, making one of his long, floppy ears perk upright.

"Oh COME ON! Ugh- When will I learn?! WHEN will I learn not to trust cheap prices and a pretty smile?! SPECIFICALLY in that order-!"

A jab to his chin cut him out of his ranting. His tiny passenger squeezed their way out of his overbearing 'hug' of safety to push at his face.

"Can you stop wailing about your designer vests long enough to STOP. SMOTHERING ME?!" they shouted. Stunned, Vale furrowed his brows.

"Wh- I'm PROTECTING YOU, you dummy!"

"From WHAT? That thing is WAY behind us by-"

Sitting up, Vale angrily pouted down at his companion. The grass below the dragon was the only green color left in a blackened stripe of burnt foliage. It smoked and crackled. Vale's tiny passenger slowly looked around, and popped their lips.

"... Ah. I see the problem."

"Oh *do* ya?" Vale grumbled.

Another shriek in the canopy shocked Vale to his feet. He cupped his hand to his chest again, looking around.

"Just, get down in the pocket, okay?! I know it's not the most comfortable or dignified place but it's the only way I can be sure to have my hands available!" he urged. His tiny companion huffed and looked away. They looked down, subtly tucking something under their shirt. They quickly turned and scabbled into the dragon's breast pocket without complaint. Vale's ears twitched in amusement at the ticklish feeling. His coiled-up tail slowly relaxed out behind him. Despite the, well, screeching tornado of teeth and claws circling above his head, he couldn't help feel a small moment of delight at his reluctant passenger trusting his word... finally.

And then the moment of delight was cut off by an ironwood tree crashing to the forest floor and pinning Vale's tail to the burnt ground. He cried out in pain and surprise, back hunching. He yanked his hips forward, eyes widening when the tree didn't budge.

"It's stuck."

"... What do you mean 'it's stuck'?"

"Tailstuck. Possiblybroken."

"Aren't drakes supposed to have super-strength or something?! You're fine, just lift it!"

Vale grabbed the base of his tail and aggressively pulled. His words were interrupted by grunts of effort and mild discomfort.

"That's just! A stereotype! That applies to dalrunes! Lunaral drakes! Aren't that strong! We're good at, like, magic and stuff! AND, news flash! We're very, very, VERY-"

A shuddering tremor shook the ground. Vale looked up, eyes wide. Golden claws and scales gleamed in the light now filtering in through a hole torn in the thick canopy. A draconic, horned head slowly lifted from the ground, snaking from a long, golden neck. Piercing red eyes glared down at Vale, and smoke billowed from its snout. Vale swallowed, freezing stiff.

"-... *very territorial creatures.*"

Snapping its teeth, the drake lunged its head down towards Vale. He recoiled back, clutching his tail tightly. The golden drake narrowed its eyes.

"Tornar-hoten. Nurk du de salen."

"... liii. I'm sorry, one more time? You're a bit hard to understand with all that rumbling-"

The lunaral snarled and reeled back, snapping its teeth with a mighty thump of its tail. Vale stiffened and yanked his tail again, to no avail. The tiny companion in his pocket piped up, "What are you doing?! Just talk to it; you're a drake!"

Vale's brows knitted, eyes wide. He snapped his teeth, "I'm not a native speaker! I haven't spoken moon-tooth since I was a kid! Why don't YOU talk to it?!"

"I'M not a drake!"

The two's arguing was cut short as the golden drake lunged forward. Vale yelped in surprise as he was pinned onto his back, a heavy weight on his chest. His tail twisted uncomfortably, still pinned beneath the tree.

Lurching down, the golden drake snapped its teeth in Vale's face.

"SALEN! TORNAR-HOTEN! KIEEKAN, KIEEKAN!"

'Kieekan', now THERE was a word Vale knew, and it made his blood freeze into ice.

"Wh-WHOA WHOA! P-please, don't kill us, what do you want?! J-just, speak a little slower! Uh-" He looked around rapidly, clicking his tongue. "Ah, **sh-shoshi!** W-wait, dammit no that's Sedah tongue isn't it-"

The golden drake snarled and reared up. Bright-orange glow shone through the thin scales on its neck as its throat bulged and rumbled with building pressure. Vale gripped so harshly at the ground that he left deep scores with his fingers.

"W-WAIT!"

He had little time to plead as the golden drake snapped its paw away from his chest and bellowed an overwhelming jet of fire upon him. Vale cried out as his body was engulfed in flames. He shut his eyes tight and quickly rolled over, clutching a hand over his chest. He couldn't trust this vest anymore to keep his passenger safe... The only thing standing between his companion and a fiery death, was his body. But even that had its limits.

Sustaining such a jet of fire at point-blank range was a different beast than catching the tail-end of a blast. Vale felt his back burning uncomfortably; the rest of his vest had incinerated upon the initial blast.

A concerned, yet still-impatient sounding voice piped up from under him.

"Just tough it out and play dead or something! You can handle this, right?!"

Vale could barely crack open his eyes.

"I'm not a pyre drake, I'm a *volt!* I can't take this much longer! What did you do to piss him off?!"

“NOTHING! I already said that!”

“YEAH *WELL* I’m starting to think you’re not being honest with me!”

“JUST get us out of here and I’ll fill you in later!”

Vale’s teeth grit together as he slowly curled in tighter on himself. His body shook. The discomfort in his back slowly drifted towards pain, and his scales began to ache.

Tail: pinned. Vests: gone. Fire: becoming unbearable. Even if he managed to miraculously hoist his tail free, this thing was four times his size and had much sharper assets than he did. If he wasn’t crushed or burned, he’d certainly be torn to shreds by tooth or claw. The only way out of this... was to be a worthy opponent to the golden drake.

And with very little volt-magic at his disposal... there was only one way to do that.

Vale tucked his head beneath him, curling as tightly in on himself as he could. ‘*I didn’t think I’d have to do this on my first day here... but quick fire makes for stronger iron.*’ He breathed deeply, mentally pushing away the roaring flames engulfing his body. ‘*Focus. Capture that feeling again.*’

Vale untucked his arms, quickly digging his claws deep into the earth. Now exposed to the fiery jet, they flinched, but he didn’t recoil. His brows knitted so tightly together that it made his skull ache. ‘*Focus. Think of your core. Stretching... reaching...*’ The earth beneath his fingers cracked. Vale tensed and pushed his muscles in his limbs, as if stretching them without moving. He felt an invisible force pulling on his chest. A familiar ache. Pressure built in his body, sending a thrum through every muscle of his chest, his back, his limbs. His blood roared in his ears, melding with the sound of the relentless flames scorching his back. He felt dizzy...

Which meant it was time.

Tensing every muscle in his limbs, Vale bore his head against the ground and sharply arched up his back. His body flashed with a bright-pink glow that engulfed him from horn to tail and startled the golden drake. The creature quickly backed up as it snapped its jaws shut. The jet of flames stopped, leaving smoke and embers in its wake. The golden drake backed into a defensive position, haunches, wings, and tail raised. Its red eyes widened at the scorched drake now enveloped in bright pink light.

And its eyes only grew wider as the ironwood tree that had pinned the tiny drake’s tail... groaned and shifted.

Back arched, limbs anchored to the earth, Vale’s body grew. His shadow overtook the patch of live grass below him that he’d shielded. The base of his tail strained and arched as it thickened, pushing with all its might against the ironwood trunk. His tail tip curled up around the trunk, trembling. Then, with a mighty cry and one last heave, he hoisted the trunk off the ground, slipped his tail from beneath it, and let it crash back into its earthy divot with a mighty ‘THUD’ that shook the trees.

The drake shot off like a bolt of lightning, into the forest. Though stunned, the golden drake shook itself back to its senses and reared its head to let out a territorial battle-cry. It scrambled into the woods after the glowing drake, smoke trailing from its nostrils.

Vale leapt deftly over fallen, mossy trees, summer-lush green gulleys, and glimmering brooks with practiced ease. His glowing body left a dazzling trail behind him. But it soon faded, leaving behind a sparkling aura around him. His hand- now completely engulfing his tiny companion in what remained of his burnt vest -cupped tight to his chest. He could feel tiny hands beating on it from under his palm, but thankfully, it wasn’t distracting enough to stop him.

Though, a quick, pinching pain to the underside of his finger was a different story.

Vale yipped and sharply drew his hand away from what remained of his vest. He glared down at his breast pocket, and the 'min that was peeking out of it angrily.

"Hey fire-breath, you're still smothering me down- ... WHOA." The now-even-tinier companion looked around Vale's form rapidly, gesturing with their free arm. "You're-! You're HUGE; could you do this the whole time?!"

Vale tried to keep his focus on rushing through the forest, but still spared glances at his passenger as he spoke.

"Well-! Yes and no, I can't just do it with a snap of my fingers... not yet, at least!"

"Can't you just FIGHT that drake now?!"

"I don't have any combat training and YOU could get caught in the crossfire! Quite literally!"

"Well what if you fight it and I run back to the caravan? Why isn't THAT an option?" they shouted up, glancing down towards a strange lump under their shirt. Vale jumped over a massive root, landing heavily beneath it. He took a moment to duck under it, thanking it silently for the shelter.

"Because," he panted, looking around. He could hear thudding footfall and cracking underbrush. "If it decides to chase you instead of me, you'll get eaten, mauled, or end up leading it to the caravan. The kids won't be able to run fast enough... I'm not risking a full-blown travesty, here. It's not worth running there for help." He looked at his singed back, and the complete lack of clothing remaining on it. The arms of his clothes were holding on by mere threads. "Even if it *has* cost me my new tops..." he snorted, sounding half-genuine.

"Well then I could hide here, and you could draw it away."

"Why do you want to split up so badly?" Vale scoffed under his breath. "Lunaral have crazy-good noses, if it's after you, it'll sniff you out before you can say 'mercy.' And I'm sorry, but I'm not looking to get someone irreversibly maimed on my first day on the job by leaving them behind."

"I can handle myself!"

"Oh yeah you were doing a GREAT job of that back there when you begged me to help you, with a drake snapping at your tail!"

"Yeah well it's different now!"

"HOW?!"

"UGH, just, nevermind! I don't need you scolding me like you're my almia!"

The tiny passenger suddenly squirmed free of Vale's pocket and hand, falling to the ground. Vale yipped and tried in vain to swipe the 'min back up, but missed at every attempt. The 'min landed with a small 'plop' and quickly grabbed their shirt, tucking something more securely under it. Vale blinked, craning his head down to get a closer look.

"... What do you have there-?"

The root above Vale's head lurched and crunched as a massive weight bore down on it. Vale barked involuntarily and quickly scooped up the 'min into his hand again... much to their displeasure. They squeaked and nipped and barked at him to let them go... but this time, he didn't listen. His soft palm firmly wrapped around the irate passenger, sealing them in his hand and muffling them. He ducked down, his tail wrapping around his legs. The forest went silent.

All Vale could hear was his own shallow breathing... and the low, tell-tale rumbling of a drake.

Vale's ears perked as the perched drake above him let out a low, whining croon. It sighed, slowly breathing in and out... as if. Calming itself? Puzzled, Vale tilted his head. *'Normally by now a wild lunaral would be tearing this forest apart for us. Why is he just sitting there?'* Vale's ears pinned. *'... This might be a terrible idea... but. It's worth a shot.'*

Vale inhaled deeply and grabbed the end of his tail. The 'crystal ball' on its end glittered, and a sparkling, round portal opened up in its glassy pink surface. Just big enough to fit his hand through. He leaned down close to his palm, opening it up enough for the 'min inside to hear him.

"Stay still, and keep quiet. You'll be safer in here if he blasts me again. I'm going to try something. Running isn't fixing this."

The 'min looked around rapidly, realizing they were being slowly placed into the drake's strange tail-bauble.

"OooOH NO you don't! You're not shoving me in that weird thing-!" they shouted.

A gold-crested head sharply lurched down over the root, practically bumping noses with Vale. He froze, wide-eyed, and glanced down at his hands. His crystal ball in one, a 'min in the other. The gold drake snapped its attention to the 'min. Vale snapped his hand into the tail bauble, pulled it out, and closed up the portal with a cheeky lopsided grin and a shrug.

"Ahah. Wwwwoops. Sorry bud, you can't have this one," he chuckled. The drake slowly narrowed its eyes, its lip curling over rows of teeth. Wisps of smoke began to waft from its nostrils. Vale shook his hands quickly. "Whoa whoa- ah, okay." He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and let his shoulders relax. Using his hands to better facilitate his communication, he began making soft, uncertain churring sounds at the drake. They didn't resonate as deeply in the chest as a wild drake... but by the curious tilt of the golden one's head, it didn't seem to matter. Snorting, the golden drake sat up. With the grace of a feline, it bounded off the root and stood proudly in front of Vale. It lifted its chin, clicking its teeth. Vale nodded and walked forward, ducking his head. The gold drake narrowed its eyes... but nodded in return. Gesturing around uncertainly, Vale crooned questioningly at the drake. It snorted and lowered its head.

"Tornar-hoten. Nurk du de salen."

"Ah yes, this again... hm," he replied with a pop of his lips, clapping his hands together. Vale paused, then sighed and patted his head in mock-frustration. The gold drake snorted, quizzically quirking a brow. Vale made eye contact, shook his head, then patted it again, whining. After a long moment, the gold drake spoke again, but slowly.

"Parles. De'nt de. Luna?"

After a long moment of perking his ears back and forth in thought... Vale shook his head.

The gold lunaral rumbled a low, frustrated sound before sitting down on its haunches. It looked around, claws kneading into the dirt. It looked up at the sky, eyes searching, muzzle mouthing something silently. Then it lowered its face and grimaced. Its lips pulled strangely over its teeth as it spoke slowly. "Speak. Little. Miata."

Vale perked up with a hopeful smile.

"Ah, yes! Ah, ***kata!***"

The gold drake snorted and shifted on its feet.

"Nur Miata bad. Painful speaking," it growled.

"I'm very sorry, I know it must be uncomfortable."

The gold drake stared for a moment. Then its brows raised, and it nodded. Vale sighed and lifted a finger to his chin.

"... So. ***Salen?***" he asked. The drake narrowed its eyes, lip curling angrily. Vale gestured, looking around uncertainly. ***"Nurk du de salen? Help understand,"*** he said slowly. At that, the gold drake looked at its claws. Puzzled, it looked them over for a long few moments. Vale wondered if the drake had forgotten he was there for a moment, until it quickly turned to a branch that sported a single, golden fruit on it. The gold drake perked up, smirking. It hunched its shoulders and looked around suspiciously. Making a show of being 'sneaky', it snipped the fruit off the tree and tucked it under its

arm. It looked around anxiously again, then pretended to sneak away. After pacing a few feet, it turned and looked at Vale expectantly. He was staring in confusion, rubbing his chin. *‘Snatching a fruit? Hungry? No, ‘Salen’ doesn’t mean hungry, that’s ‘Kehto’. ‘Salen’ rings a bell...’*

Sitting up straight, Vale snapped his fingers.

“OH! Stealing? Stolen?” he asked excitedly. His tail wagged subtly behind him. Though the golden drake scoffed at the childish action, it looked at the fruit pierced by its claws. At the drake’s lack of response, Vale frowned and walked over to it. It leaned back, surprised at such boldness- and then snorted in even *further* surprise as Vale snatched the fruit from its claws. It stared at him in offense. But, Vale simply smiled and held up the fruit before making a show of tucking it under his arm.

“Salen? Dakkena?”

Brows raising, the golden drake stared at Vale. It nodded sagely, snorting. Vale did a proud little waggle of his hips before looking at the fruit he’d snatched. Glistening, amber syrup languidly rolled down the colorful gold-and-red skin. Vale’s pupils dilated. He swallowed subtly, his mouth tingling expectantly. He held up the fruit hopefully to the other drake. It snorted and waved its paw dismissively. Tail wagging, Vale immediately bit into the golden fruit. Amber syrup splashed on his muzzle as a beautifully sugary-tart scent filled his nose. His eyes fluttered, a delighted hum in his chest.

“Mmm that’s the good stuff. I didn’t know these were in season already-!”

The golden drake snorted, squinting.

“Oh right- sorry. So, someone stole something?”

Though it furrowed its brows, the drake nodded hesitantly. Vale tilted his head, chewing on a juicy piece of his pilfered fruit. His chewing slowed, brows furrowing. *‘Wait. Something was stolen. And it was chasing me... and I know I didn’t steal anything-’*

Vale’s back slowly straightened. He stared hard at the orb on the end of his tail.

“... One moment.”

Shoving the rest of the fruit between his teeth, Vale pulled his tail orb over and formed a small portal on its surface. He shot his hand in, pulled it out, and held a very startled ‘min out. They scrambled to cover their shirt, glaring over their shoulder at Vale.

“AY! You mind, bub?! Aren’t you supposed to be getting me back to the caravan? What are you gonna do, feed me to this drake?”

Vale snorted.

“Don’t tempt me. Now then. Care to give back whatever you’re hiding under your shirt?” he said casually. He didn’t take his eyes off the ‘min as he took a slow, pointed bite out of the fruit he held. The ‘min glanced around, their lips drawing tight.

“... How did you know?”

Perking up, Vale chuckled and tossed the rest of the fruit into his mouth.

“Oh, I didn’t! Until now.” He wagged his head with a smirk. The ‘min’s expression fell into an annoyed grimace.

“Uuuugh. Oldest trick in the book,” he grumbled. Vale nodded and unceremoniously wiped the remainder of the fruity syrup from his muzzle.

“Now then! You gonna give it back, or are we gonna be difficult about this?”

“No! I found it fair and square, it can spare one trinket!”

Frowning lopsidedly, Vale lifted the ‘min up to the golden drake’s face. It glared down at the tiny captive, its teeth glinting in the dappled forest light.

“Salennnn,” it growled.

The 'min sharply leaned back, clutching their shirt to their chest.

"Hey! P-personal space, scales! You don't need this!"

The gold drake's red eyes widened sharply. It reared its head back, smoke pouring from its nostrils. Vale's proud smirk twitched as his eyes widened.

"I really don't feel like getting torched again so please just give back whatever you took okay thank you," he said rapidly. The 'min growled over his shoulder at Vale.

"YOU don't feel like getting torched-?!"

"LISTEN, would you just give it back?! Whatever you took cannot be worth this!" he barked back. He quickly lifted his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. He took a deep breath. "Sorry, didn't mean to raise my voice, however..." Slowly, he lifted his hand from his eyes and gazed down at the tiny creature with a strange new sharpness to his gaze. The 'min leaned back, their chest tightening. For a while there... they'd forgotten they were in the grasp of a drake, not some fluffy, domesticated creature. Vale, like many of his kind, sported deep-red eyes with striking, golden sclera. His irises flickered about the 'min's form, taking in every detail. "Taking something that someone may value more than you could possibly know, just because you want it or think you deserve it more than them.... I can't turn a blind eye to that, especially with this being my first day on this job. It's my responsibility to keep travelers safe, but I *will* be telling the boss about this. Now. You can either give whatever you stole back to this drake... or I'll let them take it from you. You've made this meal, so eat it," he said slowly. He held the 'min closer to the golden drake's snout. It glared down at them and lifted up a clawed hand, sharply turning it over. It beckoned its fingers towards its palm, snorting smoke into the 'min's face. They coughed and waved their hand through the smoke, shaking their head. They looked down at their shirt, and the strange lump beneath it with a dark, furrowed glare. The fur on the back of their neck bristled.

"... Fine. But I'll be damned if I ever hire you when I make my OWN caravan."

Vale's jaw cocked to the side. *'With how sticky your fingers are, I wouldn't want you to.'* He sighed and gestured to the 'min.

"Well?"

"Yeah yeah," they grumbled, untucking something from under their shirt. Vale flinched as the gleam of a glittering golden ring shined in his eyes. He blinked to clear them, then stared curiously. The 'min' held a large ring with red and blue jewels sunken into ornately-chiseled settings. The gems were roughly cut and organic-looking. They bore no sharp edges of precision jewel cuts or fine polishing. Eyes narrowing quizzically, Vale leaned closer. The metal, though brilliant, bore tell-tale scarring from drake-fire.

"... That's a courtship token, isn't it?" he asked, looking at the golden drake. It perked up before looking away, its ears pinning back. Its extended hand curled a bit, and its free hand shuffled on the ground. A rumble resonated in its throat. Vale stood up a bit straighter and took the ring from the 'min's hands, earning a sharp noise of protest. He frowned at them and drew his tail closer, unceremoniously shoving them back into the orb at its end. Ignoring the muffled shouts, he turned to the drake and gently took their hand. He delicately placed the large ring in its palm. The golden drake wasted no time in lifting it up to its face, inspecting it with wide, searching eyes. It delicately took it between two claws, looking it up and down, touching each of the jewels in turn. After a moment, it sighed deeply and lowered one of its wings. With great delicacy for such a creature, it carefully ushered the ring onto the single digit at the crook of its wing. After checking its snugness, the drake nodded and tucked its wing back up, turning its gaze to Vale.

Vale smiled and clasped his hands together.

"Don't worry. It's beautiful craftsmanship; they're going to love it," he said softly. The golden drake blinked and looked away, jutting its lower jaw out in a pout.

"E-ak kul," it replied in quiet earnest.

The drake stood from the lush forest floor and shook itself off. Its scales glittered and cast dancing points of light on the red bark of the massive trees. Casting its regal gaze down at Vale, the drake looked him over. Its nose wrinkled at the sight of Vale's burnt clothes.

"Sooneet dul... Et..." Its lips curled awkwardly over its fangs as it forced, "-sorry for. Your skin."

Vale raised a brow and looked himself over.

"My skin? I mean, ya toasted me a little bit back there, but I'm fine, I think."

The drake shook its head and lifted a claw to what remained of Vale's vests. It hooked a claw and tugged lightly on the fabric.

"Your skin-"

With one tiny tug, the rest of the vest's threads gave up and let the scrap of cloth fall to the floor. Both drakes looked down and stared at it, silent. Vale couldn't help but snort and cover his mouth, but the golden drake looked away bashfully.

"Mm. **Sooneet.**"

Vale waved his hand dismissively.

"It's okay. I can always save up for a new one."

Though it seemed puzzled by Vale's statement, the drake nodded sagely and backed away. It looked to the skies. Late-afternoon sun beamed through the treetops, which seemed a mile overhead. Vale followed its gaze. At first he didn't understand what they were looking at- but the darting shadows of massive, soaring creatures above the canopy quickly answered his question. He didn't need to see the mysterious shadows for more than a fleeting second to know what was flying overhead, towards the Dolent Flats.

"You should go join them," Vale said softly, never taking his eyes off the sky peering through the canopy. The golden drake grunted, nodding.

Sparing Vale one last thankful look, the golden drake backed away from the gnarled roots and bound to a small clearing. The muscles beneath its glittering, armored back rippled as it turned its eyes to the sky and shuffled its wings. Vale watched as, slowly, a pair of tan and amber wings unfolded from the drake's back. Time seemed to slow as the drake's wings cascaded dappled light on every surface in the clearing, and sent an amber glow onto the floor beneath its feet. A single, thudding beat of its wings sent leaves and light scattering across the clearing with a gust so powerful, Vale swore he couldn't breathe for a moment. He clasped his hands tightly in front of him. His eyes never left the drake's form as it crouched down and turned its gaze to the sky.

Then, like a bolt of liquid gold, the drake launched fluidly into the air with a single beat of its wings. Each thrust sent a shuddering gale through the air, and a pounding thrum through Vale's chest. His hands clutched painfully. His eyes traced the graceful creature's ascent into the canopy with the awe of a child seeing the dazzling colors of fireworks for the first time.

As soon as the creature broke through the leaves of the canopy... the thrumming beat of its wings vanished, and Vale was left alone in the clearing. His eyes never left the sky as he bent to pick up what remained of his vests. As he stood straight, he craned his neck to look at his barren back.

A stiff breeze blew through the clearing, rustling Vale's mane.

He shook his head, forcing his eyes away from his back. He gazed out at the forest, his eyes, and thoughts, distant.

“What do you MEAN they stole from a DRAKE?!” bellowed a tall, well-built nis. Vale flinched as the elven woman loomed over him, her booming voice making his ears tremble. He’d shifted back down to his normal height, and once more only stood about thirteen feet tall. His boss, a formidable brick wall of a woman at 15 feet, was more than a little ‘much’ when he only met her shoulders.

“I mean just that, ma’am. After running off from the caravan, they made off with a drake’s courtship token. I’m surprised they didn’t get torched or munched,” he said, letting the last part out in a mumble. The hefty nis rubbed her forehead, marching around in a circle. Everyone nearby, though they pretended to be tending to their caravans and respective load-bearing animals, kept casting the two long, curious glances. They muttered among one another, pointing and curling their tails in intrigue. Vale could tell by the twitching and perking of their long, elven ears that they were enjoying this ‘show.’

But, Vale had little time to pay the onlookers any mind as his boss closed back in on him and shook her finger at his snout.

“Ya had ONE job, and ya couldn’t even do it for a day! The professors at the academy may have squirmed you into my ranks on ‘good behavior’, but that doesn’t mean BUNK when ya can’t handle fetching a single ‘min!”

Ears pinning, Vale tilted his chin up.

“H-hey, wait just a minute! I DID fetch them-!”

“OH YEAH? Then where are they?! You’re nuder than a hatchling and they certainly weren’t riding in that burnt scrap of cloth ya used to call a vest!” she barked, shaking the drake’s ruined clothing in her fist. Vale flinched. His cheeks turned up, and his eyes began to sting. He sharply turned, grabbed his tail, brought the orb in front of him, and abruptly reached in to retrieve a very ruffled, and very displeased-looking ‘min. They glared daggers back at the drake, who didn’t seem shy about glaring back. He turned his eyes to his boss, who stood with his vests still held up, frozen, staring at the ‘min. Vale pursed his lips.

“If you’d just let me finish earlier, I would have brought him out sooner,” he mumbled with what little respect he could still muster.

“... Ya managed to retrieve them unharmed, against a territorial lunaral, and ya only took some dorky sweater vest as a casualty?” she said slowly. Vale’s nostrils flared indignantly, but he tempered his tone as he replied, “It was two vests, actually. And my back is a little torched... but yes. They’re unharmed. Just really, really pissed.”

“Damn RIGHT I am, scales-for-brains!”

“*Also a little bit speciesist,*” he mumbled out the side of his mouth. The ‘min stuttered, then reeled their claws back to swipe at Vale’s snout, but they were quickly stopped by a bellowing laugh from Vale’s boss. The nis leaned back and placed a broad hand to her forehead, guffawing loudly enough to send a few nearby birds fleeing off of a folpie’s back. The lazy creature looked solemnly at its back before laying its elegant head back down on its hooves.

Vale’s boss wiped her eyes with one last laugh and shook her head.

“Haaa... you’re fired.”

“What?!” Vale yipped, tossing his hands out to the side. “Th-that’s not fair! What did I-”

“Oh no not you. Them,” she said plainly, thumbing at the ‘min in Vale’s grasp.

"WHAT?!" they barked indignantly, voice cracking. Vale's boss waved a hand dismissively.

"Ya always were a lousy scout. And now you're stealing from drakes that could get people killed? You're lucky that it was a lunaral and not a tymotsu! Half of us might be ribbons by now if it had been! YOU certainly would be, that's for damn sure!" She pointed an accusatory finger at him. "I told ya you had one more chance, and if you were ever caught breakin' our code, you were out!"

"Y-you can't get rid of me!" they crowed, grinning. "I'm indispensable, you'll never get another 'min like me to go do your scouting safely!"

Unamused, Vale's boss quirked a brow and stood akimbo, fists firmly on her hips. She looked plainly at Vale and nodded, jutting her lower lip out.

"Vale can get smaller."

The 'min bristled.

"Y-you! He'll be terrible for the job!"

"Well at least he won't go stealin' anything from other drakes," she said simply. She reached up and thumbed her nose, glaring down at the 'min. "Now. Ya gonna leave respectfully, or do we gotta get Taylor over here to make sure you don't steal anything before we get to the city?"

"NO- no. That. Won't be necessary," they said sharply, holding their arms out. "I'd rather ride in this idiot's tail orb all the way back than let that freak even look at me again," they said with a shudder. Vale's boss chuckled and rubbed under her nose with her finger.

"Good. Though, I'm not about to subject Mr. Thorn here to carrying you around for the next day or so," she said, nodding back towards the onlookers. "Git' going. Go to my caravan, now. You know where to wait."

"Yeah yeah by the stinky folpie's ass at the front of the 'van, got it," they grumbled, squirming free of Vale's grip. He blinked and let go, watching them clumsily plop to the ground. They spared him an angry look over their shoulder before scampering off on all fours, tail lashing.

Vale fiddled with his ear, looking around aimlessly.

"... So, ma'am?"

"Hm? OH right, you probably need some replacement clothes until we get back, right? I'm sure I've got an extra shirt you can wear, but I'm not sure it'll fit too well!" she bellowed, laughing boisterously. Vale smiled awkwardly, waving his hand.

"N-no that's fine! I mean, lunaral often don't wear much. I'm comfy like this, but... I did want to ask you something."

"Well? Spit it out! If ya got a question then lead with that!"

"Right. Ah, were you... serious about me replacing them? Don't 'min usually take scout jobs?"

Vale's boss put her hands on her hips, pursing her lips at him.

"Why d'ya seem so confused? You're a shifter, ain'tcha?"

"Yes but-

"And you need money now to replace your sweaters, eh?"

"Yeah-

"Then what's the problem?"

"How do you know I'll be any good at it?! I can only walk, my shifting only lasts so long, and I was just supposed to have a temporary job walking alongside the folpies and stuff to make sure they don't get spooked and run off into the woods while we're traveling! Folpie babysitting and walking are a far cry from scouting out potentially dangerous areas! If I mess up, I could get people hurt!"

"Yeah, and? That's already part of your job description."

“... I just. Think this may be a mistake. I don't know if I'm cut out for that sort of responsibility. I'm just a volt drake with basic-level spells that a newling could learn, with enough practice.”

“And having a job like this will make those basic-level spells not-so-basic-level by the time you get done with a few scouting jobs.” Vale's boss waved a hand, frowning. “Come on, Mr. Thorn. I've known you for a week and I've caught you wistfully staring into the forest when ya think I'm not looking. I can tell ya wanna get out there and explore. You were all too eager to chase our little ex-scout down to fetch them.” She stepped forward and clapped a hefty hand onto Vale's shoulder, making him flinch. He gazed up at her. Her voice and expression softened. “Just try it for a bit. I think ya might like it. And if ya don't, well, you can go back to just being an apprentice folpie-guider until the season is over.”

Vale stared hard at his boss' face, blinking slowly with glittering eyes. His mane trembled, bristling from its base up to his head. He momentarily felt the wind rushing on his face, the thrill of racing through the forest, the strange satisfaction of speaking to another drake in their native tongue...

... Well. If he could get that at least one more time, where was the harm in trying?

“... Okay, okay. You've convinced me!” he chuckled. His boss grinned widely and turned, harshly patting him on the back. He stiffened with a yelp, rubbing his sore scales with a soft hiss. Oblivious, his boss walked off, waving back at him without turning around.

“But be warned, if ya do TOO good of a job, I might like havin' ya around and ask those snobs at the academy to let us borrow ya now and then!” she laughed. As she paced away, she looked at his burnt clothes she still held in her hand. She cast a gaze over her shoulder. “And ah, replacing these is on me. We'll get you something high quality in town, I know some great folks who work some real magic with their fabric,” she said with a wink. Vale straightened up.

“Oh no no, that's not-!”

“Aaah pipe down! Of course it's necessary! Don't want you out there gettin' hurt on my watch!” she retorted, shaking her hand dismissively. “But for now, I'll get ya a shirt or something! Don't want everyone in the caravan thinking it's open season for no clothes! *Not again*,” she grumbled, looking into the distance. “Anyways. ALRIGHT FOLKS, get off yer tails and get those folpie harnessed! We're heading out in five!” she shouted, her voice carrying across the entire gathering of carts and wheeled stands. Everyone groaned and started lazily getting to their feet. Some of the other nis spared Vale curious glances, but didn't bother him. He seemed to be... elsewhere, at the moment.

The drake was rubbing his back, staring into space. Everything happened so fast, he couldn't believe he'd just adopted yet another job onto his plate. That made four, now... *‘Can I handle that many? Should I drop one...? I mean, pest control is pretty same-y. I'm sure the library can do without me. M-maybe.’* Vale sighed and stood straighter, groaning as the scales on his back shifted uncomfortably. *‘Maybe I should ask her for some scale salve. If she'd even have any.’* His brows furrowed. *‘I got really lucky that lunaral didn't give me its all. I won't always be so lucky, caravan scouts get seriously injured all the time. Am I... is this really worth it?’*

A chorus of haunting calls, far in the distance, perked Vale's ears. A stiff wind blew as the drake turned to look out over the land. The caravan was stopped on a hilltop, just barely standing above the main canopy. One could see almost endlessly into the Agium forests, and the various levels of trees cresting hundreds of feet above the ground. But the trees were nothing... compared to the monstrous monolith that stood above them, hundreds of miles in the distance. A lone peak, its top devoured by layers of cloud and mist, lay alone on the far horizon.

Dolent Flats.

The chorus rang again. Vale looked to the west, his breath catching in his throat at the flock of graceful, gliding fliers that soared above the canopy. The golden drake he'd helped was among them. They dipped and dove around each other, twirling in mid-air, diving into the trees only to burst out in an impressive spray of summer-lush leaves. They roared and hissed in jubilation, but it was their howls of unrestrained flight and joy that carried the furthest on the winds.

Vale watched them, leaning forward. His tail wagged faintly behind him, and he found himself clutching his hands together in front of him. As he watched the drakes dip and dive and twirl around one another, heading for the great peak in the distance, his chest ached. His mouth pulled into a tight line. An unwilling whine rose in his throat as he unconsciously shifted his shoulders as if preparing for flight.

His eyes drifted from the traveling drakes... to the peak. Even from so far away, he could see that the small group was not the only one heading to the mountain. Far in the distance, from any direction, he could see flocks big and small gliding their way towards the lone peak. Their scales glinted in the late afternoon sun, which cast the cloud-topped mountain in a beautiful silver light.

Vale swallowed heavily, looking down at his hands. He slowly parted them. He'd clutched so hard he left small claw-marks in the backs of his hands. His ears pinned, and he tried to gently rub the marks out.

*'... I think this caravan makes that trip **once...** at the very end of the season. It's usually just for the elites and enchanters, but maybe if I do a good enough job, they'll let me come along.'*

"ONE MINUTE, GET YOUR TAILS IN YOUR SEATS AND GET READY TO MOVE OUT!" shouted Vale's boss across the way. Vale jumped, turning to the caravans. Everyone was getting ready, and a few nixies and pitia like himself were beckoning him over.

A cool, powerful breeze swept over the hillside, carrying with it the warm scents of wild flowers and summer-kissed grasses and trees. Vale took one last look over his shoulder at the great peak in the distance. As he watched flocks of drakes disappear into the cloudline above the mountain... he made himself a promise.

'Before this year is over... that's gonna be me. I'm going to get to the top of Dolent Flats if it's the last thing I do. I'm tired of waiting.'

The wind blew under Vale, and for a moment, he felt as though he'd be carried away right with it. He closed his eyes in exhilaration, imagining the winds atop the Flats. His eyes snapped open, and he smiled brightly.

Eagerly looking over his shoulder, he waved to a nearby caravaneer and rushed over.

"Here, let me help you with that!"